

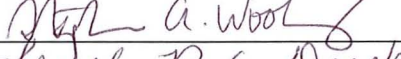
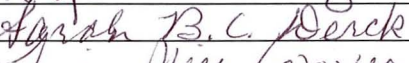
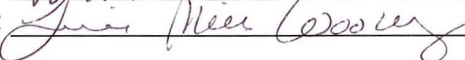
A Dialogue of Murdoch's Moral Philosophy and Creative Writing:
Transcending Barriers of the Self to See the Other

by
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Introduction

“There are, however, moments when situations are unclear and what is needed is not a renewed attempt to specify facts, but a fresh vision, which may be derived from a ‘story’.” (“Vision” 90)

Through her four philosophical works and twenty-six novels, modern English writer Iris Murdoch offers the contemporary postmodern reader a vehicle of transcendence through which they may gain a powerful sense of moral responsibility and ethical relationship with others in society.

In Chapter One of this project, the reader will be introduced to a new term, the “postmodern mystic,” coined by professor of Theology and Religious studies at York St. John University, Sue Yore (*The Mystic* 38). As will be explored in this paper, postmodern mystics are individuals who “as a way of life” are committed to being attentively present in reality. They integrate the *via contemplativa* and the *via activa* present in traditional mysticism, in a way that combats the fragmentation that characterizes many postmodern selves. In a postmodern world of constant digital stimulation and globalized communication, it is often difficult to be present in the here and now.

With the many interruptions of the contemporary world, including those produced by the digital revolution, the postmodern self’s consciousness often becomes distracted by the external world of fast-paced virtual and evanescent social media relationships. In contrast to these distractions, a postmodern mystic such as Murdoch seeks to attend to her surroundings in order to relate more fully to what is

Other¹ in society. In regards to mysticism in the traditional religious sense, it must be noted that Murdoch does not believe in God. She is a postmodern mystic who “openly embraces paradox and accepts that the Sacred² remains perennially beyond our grasp,” while at the same time she pays “clear attention to every detail of lived reality” (*The Mystic* 39). Furthermore, as the reader will see, as postmodern mystic Murdoch not only patiently attends to “every detail of lived reality,” but she also prompts her readers to do the same.

Chapter Two offers a brief biography of Murdoch. This project seeks to describe and analyze Murdoch’s integration of philosophy and literature with the narrative of mysteries and ambiguities within life. Therefore, it is important to recount her own personal narrative to see how this has impacted her intellectual project. With this in mind, key themes from Murdoch’s life such as Love, Goodness, and the disdain for dry, logical, and existential philosophy will be identified and summarized.

Chapter Three explicates Murdoch’s moral philosophy. The influence of Plato’s thought on Murdoch’s work in regard to his philosophy of exterior Goodness and his view of artists will be discussed. In relation to searching for Platonic Goodness, the influence of mystic Simone Weil’s notion of attention will also be emphasized. From this explication, focus will be given to Murdoch’s call for relationship with the Other and ethical action as opposed to autonomous individuality.

¹ Within this paper, the use of the term “the Other” denotes what is separate from and/or unfamiliar to oneself (i.e. other people, places, art, literature, nature, etc.)

² Within this paper, when the term “the Sacred” is used in relation to Murdoch’s writings, it describes the Good, which remains exterior, separate, and transcendent.

Chapter Four begins the integration of Murdoch's creative writing model with her conceptual and abstract moral philosophy model. It is the writer's intention that the reader will come to understand clearly the benefit of reading Murdoch's literature and philosophy in dialogue with one another rather than as separate projects. In an age when adherence to moral principles based on religious faith repeatedly fails, Murdoch's project offers a way of life that encourages attentiveness to concrete reality rather than what some may perceive as illusions of simple appearance in the world. For instance, issues of what is "right" and what is "wrong" may, in certain religious circumstances, appear to be black and white at first, but as one attends closer to reality, decisions, especially of moral consideration, become complicated and multi-faceted. Reference to an example of artwork within Murdoch's novel, *A Fairly Honorable Defeat*, will be used to prove the transcendent power of attentiveness in the ordinary.

Chapter Five uses a Murdochian lens of moral responsibility as a way to analyze different character relationships within two of Murdoch's novels, *The Nice and the Good* and *A Fairly Honorable Defeat*. Once this analysis is complete, the reader should recognize everyday experiences and interactions with others as opportunities for inner reflection and moral growth within his or her own life as well.

Chapter Six will discuss the problems of postmodern individuality, developing further the considerations raised in chapter One. Psychologists of the day note repeatedly that the therapeutic process has become too individualized (*Soul Searching*). Rather than providing a framework of moral responsibility and

communal relationship with other beings, therapy now often focuses on “expressive individualism” (*Soul Searching* 8). This focus of therapy unfortunately seeks to benefit the individual’s self-interest first and foremost, while often forgetting the need for healthy relationship and community.

Interestingly, Murdoch often writes of psychology and its role in relationship to philosophy; however, she never claims to take on a “therapeutic” project. Yet Murdoch was well aware of her ability to impact her reader on a personal level. For instance, she often writes about the transformative power creative literature has in regards to fleshing out abstract concepts of moral necessity, for instance in her declaration that, “there are, however, moments when situations are unclear and what is needed is not a renewed attempt to specify facts, but a fresh vision, which may be derived from a ‘story’” (“Vision” 90). With this in mind, it is my belief that when an individual reads Murdoch’s philosophy and creative literature in dialogue with one another (as he or she will in this paper), her project becomes a therapeutic aid, which better equips postmodern individuals to live morally responsible lives through rich, interior³ reflection and exterior action.

The aim of this project is far reaching. In our postmodern age of personal emptiness and evanescent relationships, the life of intentionality and attention is harder to attain, yet it is more necessary than ever. Furthermore, Murdoch asserts that “dogmatic” religion often fails to embrace the broader community within in our world. Therefore, I wish to prove that Murdoch’s secular, yet spiritually influenced,

³ Within this paper, when an individual has a rich interior life this means that the individual invests heightened attentive awareness into his or her everyday concrete experiences within reality.

vision of embodied, ethical living serves as an accessible way for individuals to use in everyday experiences when seeking the moral life. The modern moral pilgrim, free from the bonds of thoughtless obligatory action, will no longer stare at the shadows of Plato's cave, but instead leave the cave to look at the Sun, at the Good; he or she will thereby become a caring citizen equipped to engage a postmodern world so deeply in need of love and justice.

Chapter One

Iris Murdoch: The Postmodern Mystic

“Our attachments tend to be selfish and strong, and the transformation of our love from selfishness to unselfishness is sometimes hard to conceive of.”

(“The Sovereignty” 374)

The Postmodern Self: A Life of Appearance Only Rather than Reality

Our present age, often referred to as postmodernity, may be characterized as “a discourse of ironies and fragments” (“Towards a Concept” 6). The self as a stable and constant entity no longer exists. Instead, the self has been both destabilized and decentered in a world where a multiplicity of meaning causes individuals further uncertainty and leads to a rejection of universal truths, such as metanarratives (*Who’s Afraid* 63). Historically, for instance, living a moral life could be encouraged through metanarratives of religion; for example, in the Christian faith, the Bible commands us to forgive each other because of the redemptive story or “metanarrative” of forgiveness given us through the crucifixion of Christ.

Moreover, according to British cultural critic Alan Kirby, as history has progressed from the twentieth century into the twenty-first century, a new cultural phenomenon known as digimodernism has replaced its postmodern predecessors (*Digimodernism*). However, the two cultural shifts are quite closely related to one another; the deconstruction, multiplicity of meaning, and never ending interpretation found in postmodernism are now both heightened and further fragmented with the rise of technology in the digimodern age. Therefore, to avoid

confusion and for the purposes of this paper, though characteristics of Kirby's digimodern phenomenon will be used to present a picture of the contemporary self, only the more inclusive term postmodernism will be used.

Kirby's understanding of postmodernism is "inflected and shaped" by the lingering characteristics of past cultural patterns, but he places further emphasis on the technological advancement of the past couple of decades (*Digimodernism* 47). In the simplest terms, he sees "a new form of textuality" present in our contemporary world (*Digimodernism* 57). Textuality here pertains to anything from the text of a Rastafarian beanie to the text of a Hello Kitty pencil case. According to Kirby, this new postmodern form of textuality has arisen through a grouping of seven characteristics: onwardness; haphazardness; evanescence; reformulation and intermediation of textual roles; anonymous, multiple, and social authorship; the fluid-bounded text; and most relevant to this paper, electronic digitality (*Digimodernism* 52-53). In short, an individual is now confronted with an unending array of fast-paced viewer (Kirby's term for technological interaction: one is both viewer and user) interactive texts that have, more often than not, caused Westerners to become further divorced from face-to-face interaction, reflective intentional relationship, and community with others.

As individuals of the postmodern Western world become further removed from intentional community, the self's subjectivity is further heightened as his or her attention is daily immersed in and distracted by the exterior hum, buzz, and ring of technological bombardment. The "tethered self" is now "attached to its devices" and "occupies a liminal space between the physical real and its life on the screen"

("Always-On"). Electronic digitality, one of digimodernism's key pillars, now enables individuals always to be "plugged-in," creating a strange and murky realm where reality and virtual life blend. It therefore becomes more difficult for an individual to live intentionally in the present when virtual stimulation is easily accessible. As such, it becomes increasingly difficult for an individual to differentiate the real from the simulacra. Lending one's attentive awareness to concrete reality often requires an individual effort of consciousness and self-awareness rarely found in the Western world's way of life.

Subjectivity's new reliance on "the tethered self" also causes a rupture in language. Individuals have constant interaction with people through an array of social media devices (smartphones, computers, etc.) and in an array of ways (Facebook, email, Twitter, etc.). However, these forms of communication cause language to be "restricted mostly to the level of pure emotions" and largely to "modes of declaration and interrogation" using the vocabulary of a toddler (*Digimodernism* 7). Modes of speech become infantilized as this disembodied communication begins to favor virtual 'communities' (i.e. chat-rooms, etc.) over real face-to-face communities. Simultaneously an ironic correlation becomes manifest as more communication pathways then often lead to less societal connection.

Always wanting to be "plugged in," postmodern selves now "prefer to act as autonomous individuals or, on the other extreme, to work for justice on the largest global scale possible" ("Slow Down"). These binaries prove problematic because the former creates isolation, while the latter tends to be unachievable; for example, if a person seeks justice on a global scale rather than the local scale, he or she has no

foundation to build on. This is a naive approach, which hinders progress from taking firm root. People are either isolated or anonymous in a sea of globalized communication. This means that, if it has not done so already, the relative importance of local community may quickly begin to wither. After all, if we as human beings cannot reconcile relationships with those in closest proximity to us, then “how can we expect to love people in other places around the globe in deep and sustainable ways?” (“Slow Down”). A question that has long haunted missions-oriented individuals through history, it still remains a challenge in our Western postmodern society. In order to love people *deeply and sustainably* one must start with what is particular and local and then work outward from there. Yet, this has become increasingly difficult with the individualized and self-reliant cultural norms so characteristic of our current postmodern condition of fragmentation and constant stimulation.

Overall, postmodernity’s celebration of the subjective self often breaks down language and community, which then leaves individuals afloat and devoid of true intentional interaction. Presently, society presupposes falsely that if an individual lives in an “always on/always on us” device driven world, he or she “can do more, be in more places, control more aspects of life” (“Always-on”). However, instead of being present in multiple venues, individuals are, in fact, not multi-tasking, but living “in a state of continuous partial attention in which they find it difficult to ever be fully present in any particular moment” (“New Digital” 43). Sadly, this inability to be present fully in the moment means that rather than successfully building online community, individuals never inhabit any space wholly—real or virtual.

When individuals start avoiding relationships within face-to-face reality, virtual reality then tends to encourage them to remain reclusive and anonymous, thus avoiding interaction with the wider, global world. Ironically, our present world of technology, which espouses global communication, actually leaves individuals remote and isolated. In contrast to the isolation, ethicist Martha Nussbaum, in her book, *Political Emotions*, discusses bringing the Other in society into one's own "circle of concern" by learning to view the Other as connected to one's own being ("A Problem" 11). Yet, because of our present self-isolation and anonymity, this task becomes increasingly difficult.

This often-isolated self is likely to lack meaningful human interaction when bombarded by a globalized market economy where the message is given that acquiring material goods will bring happiness. Moreover, contrary to widely-held assumptions that our consumer-driven economy is *only* about conformity, people must realize that "it is actually about distinction" as well ("The Rebel Sell"). Individuals commonly buy products as a way not only to blend in with the crowd, but also to become distinguished or 'unique.' Potter states, "As long as we continue to prize individuality, and as long as we express that individuality through what we own and where we live, we can expect to live in a consumerist society" ("The Rebel Sell"). More specifically, "positional goods," or "goods that one can have only if many others do not," are continually produced in our Western society, where multitudes suffer from "influenza" ("Are You Suffering"). A vicious cycle of manufactured materialist longing and dissatisfaction becomes paramount, as one's material intake never truly brings happiness or contentment.

Therefore, to be authentically “in the world and not of it” becomes increasingly difficult for an array of reasons. As discussed earlier, individuals are now less inclined to seek “real” social interaction with others and would rather communicate through digitality and technology. Our postmodern selves are thus left in a bleak world. When void of relationship in the real, we are then left isolated and alone in a technological sea of ephemeral communication. Void of contentment, we are left competing to have more.

When individuals compete for more materialistic “contentment,” society often seeks to fulfill these superficial wants through two distinct means: the will-to-power and the will-to-pleasure. A will-to-power, which at first seeks to provide structural organization, often leads to corruption and greed; on the other hand, a utilitarian will-to-pleasure often leads to individual self-interest. The crippling effects of corruption and self-interest prevent both will-to-power and will-to-pleasure mentalities from flourishing for the greater societal good. Overall, unhealthy societal competition and a lack of empathy emerge. Thus the question remains: how can we live intentional lives of moral responsibility when everything is simulacra amidst an unjust dispersion of resources? Only a will-to-love, which seeks full recognition of others, may aid deep societal need (*The Mystic*).

In conjunction with the inability of societal structures to see and attend to the needs of others, many postmodern individuals are incapable of attentiveness to the ‘real.’ For instance, often “digital media is ubiquitous in the lives of adolescents and emerging adults” (“Sacred Space”). When digital media is ubiquitous this means that many postmodern individuals are accustomed to fast-paced constant

interaction with a screen, which thus causes short attentions. With short attention spans, postmodern individuals find it harder to reflect in solitude, silence, and meditation. Unfortunately, this also means that often people now “equate being alone with being lonely” (“New Digital” 44). Time for solitary reflection is not encouraged.

In contrast to the postmodern self’s lack of attention to the ‘real’, while studying at The Oregon Extension during the fall semester of my junior year at college, I intentionally began to seek time for reflection. This was also when I first discovered Murdoch’s writings. Students at the O.E. lacked access to most technology (phones, internet, TV, etc.) during the weekdays. It was a semester of slowing down and living outside the fast-paced current of media culture. The O.E. campus chaplain, Nancy Linton, was deeply influenced by Christian mystics. She encouraged fellow classmates and me to attend daily to our present reality. She often quoted theologian Walter Burghardt’s description of contemplation, saying we should take “a long, loving look at the real.” This practice of contemplative gaze described by Burgardt and encouraged by my O.E. chaplain enriches one’s interior life while also strengthening one’s outward faculties for societal growth. Yet sadly in most mainstream, postmodern culture, appreciation for slowly oriented attentive gaze is rarely encouraged. With this unfortunate absence of intentional contemplation the postmodern self, as described above, may stop attending to reality and therefore easily become inauthentic while living in fragmented isolation. It becomes imperative for the Western world to recognize the necessity of a mystic way of being. It is with recognition of this imperative need that novelist and moral

philosopher Iris Murdoch's work enters into the picture of the postmodern self. As the reader will see, Murdoch's writings engage her reader (the postmodern self) with a life of mystic attention that supports a rich interior life of contemplation, which then encourages an individual to take part in exterior ethical action.

The Mystic in Postmodernity

In our current age, as mentioned, Yore has coined a new term, postmodern mystic, to describe a contemporary individual capable of attentive vision (*The Mystic* 38). When used in relation to this project, the term mysticism must be understood in terms of the tripartite categorization formulated by Bernard McGinn: "mysticism as a part or element of religion; mysticism as a process or way of life; and mysticism as an attempt to express a direct consciousness of the presence of God" (McGinn qtd. *The Mystic* 30). For the purposes of this project, attention will be focused on the second category of mystical activity: mysticism "as a process or way of life."

To understand the postmodern role of the writer under consideration, Iris Murdoch, I will stipulate that three different types of postmodern individual exist in society (Lakeland qtd. *The Mystic* 37). Firstly, as we have considered, there are postmodern individuals unaware of their isolation within consumer culture. For example, the stereotypical millennial who is unhealthily over-invested in social media relationships would fit this description. Secondly, there are nostalgic postmodern individuals who hopelessly long for what is gone. An example of this may be found in an individual who is unwilling to accept any technological conveniences of contemporary life and who instead longs for the 'old ways.' Lastly,

there are postmodern individuals who “recognize that they live in a postmodern world but are critically present in that world” (*The Mystic* 38). With this framework, it is clear that both individuals isolated in consumerism and individuals hopelessly longing for the past are often removed from relationship with that which is Other. Thus unaware of society’s pressing needs, neither is able to aid fellow human beings in their surroundings. However, the last type of postmodern individual, both critically aware of current societal problems and invested in repairing the damage caused by such problems, is able to respond to needs of the Other.

Aware of societal needs, by means of patient mystical insight, this third type of postmodern individual is now enabled to act for justice in the world. As this paper unfolds, the reader will come to understand Murdoch as clearly just such a postmodern mystic individual, who is both aware of and attentive to problems with our Western world’s damaged human condition.

Murdoch’s moral philosophy and often her fiction, too, present her own personal agnosticism. Straying from traditional doctrinal and ‘dogmatic’ religious adherence, she lacks orthodox religious belief (*A Life*). Therefore her canon exemplifies a distinctly postmodern mysticism as a way of life, rather than apprehension of God. Her conception of Goodness as exterior and transcendent remains crucial to her work; yet, it is clear that this Goodness she believes in is not God, for it is impersonal. Overall, though, Murdoch’s Goodness possesses a quality of transcendent power, which therefore enables it to be viewed as sacred.

As mentioned previously, many postmodern individuals have an “incredulity towards metanarratives” and therefore refuse moral absolutes learned from

religious narratives (*Who's Afraid* 63). With this in mind, Solle states that mystic sensibility and attention to the real must be

gained not through books, not through the authority of religious teaching, not through the so-called priestly office but through the experience of human beings, experiences...that first come to people in what they encounter in life...an experience that breaks through the existing limitations of human comprehension, feeling, and reflection. (Solle qtd. *The Mystic* 32)

The postmodern mystic seeks truth and knowledge of what is morally good not through adherence to abstract hierarchical models, but through attention to and immersion in what is concrete in life. Thus, the mystic takes on the experiential life of the particular.

Combining her philosophical framework and her creative sensibility, Murdoch therefore acts as an excellent embodiment of the postmodern mystic for our contemporary times. Her writings encourage readers to immerse themselves in everyday and seemingly ordinary moments of lived reality, such as gazing out one's window into nature. Yet, to claim that creative writing is a mystic's tool for attentive immersion into the life of the particular is "not to state emphatically that all literary writers are mystics" (*The Mystic* 42). Instead, Yore notes there are

three key discernable characteristics of a mystic-writer. First, their life is exemplified by dedication and immersion in religious traditions, the lives and works of mystical texts. Secondly, they work in a tension between pragmatism and mystery or concrete and social realities and an imaginative attempt to grasp the unseen transcendent real. Third, writers with a mystic

orientation past and present, become renowned for the forceful ways they inspire people to become more spiritually and ethically aware. (*The Mystic* 42)

Murdoch embodies all three of these qualities. Firstly, throughout her philosophical project, Murdoch draws heavily on spiritually influenced writings, most notably Christian mystic Simone Weil's emphasis on attention and also Buddhist teachings in regards to meditative spirituality. Secondly, Murdoch's philosophy relies on a pragmatic need to help others, while her literary canon seeks to creatively grasp the ambiguous mysteries and sensations of transcendence within reality. As this project unfolds, the reader will clearly recognize these first two characteristics. Once they are understood, it will be clear to the reader that Murdoch possesses the third characteristic as well: when her philosophy and literature are read together, she clearly challenges her reader to search after spiritual inner growth that will equip him or her to act ethically even in a postmodern world of heightened fragmentation.

Furthermore, the factors listed above "demarcate the writing of the mystic-writer from the writer whose work may merely entertain, titillate or facilitate an escape from the world of the everyday into the world of fantasy" (*The Mystic* 42). In regards to this latter point, literature that settles for escapism falls short of the mystic writer's true aim. In an article for *The Guardian* English writer Julian Barnes reflects:

When you read a great book, you don't escape from life, you plunge deeper into it. There may be a superficial escape—into different countries, mores, speech patterns—but what you are essentially doing is furthering your

understanding of life's subtleties, paradoxes, joys, pains and truths. Reading and life are not separate but symbiotic. And for this serious task of imaginative discovery and self-discovery, there is and remains one perfect symbol: the printed book. ("My Life")

As the reader will recognize, Murdoch's creative process serves as a vehicle to become involved imaginatively in the experiential particulars of his or her own surroundings, rather than to escape from reality into a world of fantastic illusion.

It is important to note that using the term "postmodern mystic" is not meant to differentiate the practice of mysticism in the postmodern age from the traditional mysticism of the past. Instead of practicing a different mode of mysticism, postmodern mystics take traditional practices of mysticism, such as living in "radical engagement with the Other, whether it be God, the natural world or living beings," and apply these ways of life in contemporary culture (*The Mystic* 35). Through societal action, the postmodern mystic "is also something of a prophet in that he or she calls people back to God or ethical conduct and envisages possible futures" (*The Mystic* 35). The postmodern mystic integrates the mystic life of the *via contemplativa* with a postmodern age of globalization through the life of the *via activa*. Combatting the fragmentation of the postmodern individual, the postmodern mystic seeks to reconcile the ambiguities of existence with the intrinsic seemingly mundane and hidden meanings of life not only by individually exhibiting a fresh clarity of attentive vision, but also by encouraging others to attain that same clarity.

With this ethical call towards justice, the postmodern mystic is not a spiritual recluse, but a prophetic voice who lives out an integrative life of contemplation and

action. The postmodern mystic “openly embraces paradox and ambiguity, and accepts that the sacred remains perennially beyond our grasp” while also understanding that “clear attention to everyday lived reality” is also vital (*The Mystic* 39). Solle proposes that

mysticism is a sensibility caught up with everyday life, thereby implying that the sacred exists as part of the ordinary world. [...] An acknowledgement of the immanent nature of the sacred naturally forces the mystic in postmodernity to engage with the larger social, ecological, and political issues, a move that becomes even more important within the context of globalization, wherein the knock-on effects of Western wealth on developing countries is only too apparent. (Solle qtd. *The Mystic* 39)

Here, as mentioned previously, rather than a view of the Sacred as a spiritual force in the religious sense, it should be understood in the Murdochian sense of the ideal Good. Her Good, as will later be explicated, is exterior and out of grasp, yet it is a force that draws the self out of egotistical barriers. Once apprehended through a gaze of love, the Sacred (Goodness), as an exterior force, draws the self out into the world and into relation with the Other. As seen through the earlier treatment given to the self's place in postmodernity, within contemporary life “our attachments tend to be selfish and strong, and the transformation of our love from selfishness to unselfishness is sometimes hard to conceive of;” however, Murdoch provides an avenue for her readers to begin this very transformation (“The Sovereignty” 374). Social action is prompted; postmodern mysticism connects contemplative apprehension of sacredness with active social engagement and involvement. The

interior life and the exterior life now rely on one another in a mutual relationship of give and take.

Chapter Two

Murdoch's Life Narrative: A Brief Biography

"For me philosophical problems are the problems of my own life..."

("Journal Entry" April 13, 1942)

Before delving into an analysis of Murdoch's vast philosophical and literary canon, it will be helpful for the reader to understand different experiences and influences Murdoch gained through the course of her own life. According to biographer Peter Conradi, Jean Iris Murdoch was born in Dublin, Ireland. Only a few weeks after Murdoch's birth, her family moved to London. An only child, her young years were happy and her early memories consisted "of swimming, singing and being sung to, of animals, and of wonderment at the workings of the adult world" (*A Life* 29). From an early age, she recalls having an active imagination and being immersed in the world with curiosity.

Her father, Hugh, worked fairly low down on the civil servant ladder so her middle class family lived on modest means in Hammersmith, London. Close to her parents, Murdoch recounts one of her first memories, which involved swimming towards her father on the other side of one of the salt-water baths in London. Conradi notes, "In 1997 she could still enact the excitement, fear, sense of challenge, and deep love entailed in her infant efforts slowly to swim to the other side and regain her father's protection" (*A Life* 30). This memory of water seems to have deep meaning for Murdoch. Her love for swimming and her appreciation of water may be seen throughout her literary canon. For instance, in her novel *The Bell*, the abbey's

old bell rests at the bottom of a deep lake. Out of sight, the slowly corroding bell serves as an eerie reminder of secrets within the abbey's past history.

Along with water's symbolic presence in *The Bell*, water's power is also shown in *The Sea, the Sea*, where it is a strong and constant force that ends up taking one character's life. The main character, Charles Arrowby, has retired and now lives an isolated life by the sea. He has been lusting selfishly after a past love; yet once another character drowns, Charles begins to recognize that he has been wasting away his life in lust. As the novel concludes, Charles reflects on his first love, stating, "Yes of course I was in love with my own youth. [...] Who is one's first love?" (*The Sea* 502). Ultimately, Charles recognizes that his first true love was his innocent youth, which was free from the complexities of death and moral judgment. Once again, from examples such as this, it is clear that Murdoch saw water as significant in both her memories of youth and also her published works.

As her treatment of water suggests, Murdoch's personal life deeply influenced her writings and from an early age both her parents supported her creative process and narrative imagination. In later years, she would write to Philippa Foot, explaining her relationship with her parents as "a perfect trinity of love" (*A Life*, n.4, 33). As an adult, Murdoch would tell "her friend from Somerville College, Oxford, Vera Crane that she had been 'brought up on love'" (*A Life* 48). The theme of love, so prevalent throughout all of Murdoch's writings, is evident in her own appreciation of relationships with others, especially her parents.

Brought up on love, Murdoch fondly recalled her relationship with her mother, Rene, saying that though her mother was never an intellectual companion

to her father, she and her mother were like sisters and were “always able to confide in one another” (*A Life* 62). Of her strong intellectual bond with her father she wrote:

We read the same books and discussed them; children’s books, adventure stories, then novels, history, biography, poetry, Shakespeare. We enjoyed and craved for each other’s company...I remember feeling in later life that no one else ever knew how good my father was. (*A Life*, n.12, 35)

Endowing her with relationships of both emotional and intellectual capacity from the beginning, Murdoch’s parents presented her with an image of what goodness could be. She would continue to explore these qualities of goodness through both the life of the mind and the life of experience throughout her life.

As Murdoch explored possibilities of what goodness acted out in the world could be, she never relied heavily on religious affirmation. Hugh and Rene were “liberal and free-thinking parents” who did not reject religion “but happened not to go in for it much themselves, even at Christmas and Easter” (*A Life* 57). With this in mind, Murdoch attended a private secular primary school, Badminton, in a suburb of Bristol (*A Life* 57). It was there that she would form a close bond with her headmistress, Miss Beatrice May Baker (known to her pupils as BMB), while also beginning to thrive in the life of academia.

BMB ran a strict school insisting on a regimented schedule complete with morning drills and daily exercise on top of a challenging curriculum. Murdoch “gradually settled in, and, it slowly became clear, was good at everything” (*A Life* 61). She “would ask clever questions that others might not have asked, eliciting

interesting answers” in classes each day and would consistently engage BMB with these same questions (*A Life* 61). At twelve years old, it was clear that Murdoch had an active mind, which sought to question continually rather than accepting simple answers (*A Life* 58).

As Murdoch’s time at Badminton continued, both the school’s “real virtues and its undoubted priggishness” left their mark on her. In her adult life, world-view education took an absolutely central place because, as she would later state, “teaching children, teaching attention, accuracy, getting this right, respect, truth, a love of learning: those years are so profoundly important” (*A Life*, n.26, 62).

Murdoch’s relationship with BMB can also be seen as important for her latter years with the understanding that BMB was a role model who

did not accept anything at face value but judged it by her own exacting, eccentric standards, often finding it wanting. She was critical, analytical and not to be put upon, sometimes perverse in her opinion. She believed she was using a Socratic method, trying to make the girls think for themselves. (*A Life* 66)

This understanding of BMB as both ruthlessly pragmatic and also a proponent of free thought would impact Murdoch’s lifelong understanding of everyday experience and existence as both analytical and relational.

Furthermore, through the “deep rapport” Murdoch and BMB developed, BMB saw Murdoch as both humble and determined (*A Life* 70). The two of them would often discuss “the distinctions between right and wrong. They would sit and discuss

the Good" (*A Life*, n.50, 70). BMB was fond of, and impressed by, Murdoch's philosophy of life, developed at such a young age.

As Murdoch entered Somerville College, Oxford, in 1938, life was strained due to the approaching shadow of World War II; this caused both academic and social stress: "friendships formed just before the war partook of the same intensity as did politics and love; no one, after all, knew who would survive the coming onslaught" (*A Life* 85). Intensity of life and relationships thus became the foundation of Murdoch's higher education. She entered Somerville planning to study English, but instead, switched to the study of the Classics (*A Life* 85). According to Conradi, this is perhaps due to the fact that the English tutor at Somerville, Mary Lascelles, was "hard to please" and may not have accepted Murdoch (*A Life* 85). Whatever the reason, as Murdoch immersed herself in the study of Classics, her appreciation of Plato and Shakespeare left a lasting impressions on her later works, as evidenced through her philosophy and literature.

Multiple men and some women impacted Murdoch's life romantically throughout her academic years (*A Life* 95). In an elegy to a former lover, Murdoch once wrote that the time passed at Oxford during their first year was

utterly Bohemian and fantastic—when everyone was master of their fate and captain of their soul in a way that I have not met since. Those people just didn't care a damn—and they lived vividly, individually, wildly, beautifully (*A Life*, n.1, 109).

Passionate love and intensity marked Murdoch's time at university. She was known for being independent and often resisted deeply intimate relationships, however,

two friends recall that she claimed in the summer of 1939, “I long to get married, I’d do anything to get married” (*A Life* 95). Yet, when her friends pointed out that she had received six proposals in the past term alone, she replied, “Oh, those don’t count” (*A Life* 95). Her deep love of life and romantic yearning seemed unsatisfied, even though she recounted those years of young love as “a golden time” (*A Life*, n.67, 97). It was not until 1956, when she was thirty-eight, that she finally married John Bayley, a literature professor known to be awkward and shy, yet humbly modest. The two remained married until Murdoch’s death in 1999.

After finishing her academic program at Oxford, she went on to work for the government in Her Majesty’s Treasury in London during July of 1942. Though she found Treasury work to be “a serious and interesting activity,” it was not what she wished to devote her future to (*A Life*, n.12, 137). Yet she would continue her civil service commitment for a few more years, reflecting her wish to help with London’s war effort, since “there was much in wartime London to worry a tender social conscience: one and a half million homeless by May of 1941 alone” (*A Life* 146).

As the war continued Murdoch wrote reviews, which would echo strongly throughout her later philosophical and fictional writing:

In her succeeding reviews, she notes, again, the necessity that Christianity grapple with the real world before it can win the respect of her disaffected generation. Christianity needs to condemn ‘a disintegrating capitalist society which can offer only an endless prospect of exploitation and war’, and must take sides in the choice between ‘some form of’ Socialism and Fascism, and

champion that common life which is, for the majority, 'such an all-absorbing, degrading and hopeless affair' (*A Life*, n.31, 173).

Clearly, Murdoch's words here link both her personal and academic engagement with the need for ethical action. She calls for a new, common life that is engaged with the world and enriched by everyday, ordinary experience, in order to relate better to those in need.

As Murdoch continued to help with the war effort, she left her position in London and went to work with the UNRRA (United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration) in Brussels, and eventually worked in Austria from the years of 1943 to 1946 (*A Life* 214). As her commitment to the war effort continued, she became convinced that a common dialogue of moral and ethical responsibility was needed for both religious and non-religious citizens in order to improve society. With this understanding that religion plays an important role within moral dialogue, "it is not surprising that from 1945 on she refused entirely to separate religion and philosophy" (*A Life* 233). She was beginning to see the vital role of commitment necessary for social justice and she recognized that this commitment could be found through a religious motivation. In fact, this "willingness to engage with religion is precisely what commended certain Existentialist writers to her" (*A Life* 223). Murdoch herself wrote that all humanity has an "essentially religious nature," which means everyone possesses "a certain sense of sin combined with a certain sense of beauty" (*A Life* 223). She therefore began to search for a way to relate the life of commitment found in religion with the life of meaning found in Existentialism. In

this search, Murdoch's unorthodox understanding of the religious life, which denied belief in God(s), thus began to guide her own philosophical and creative process.

After her work with the war effort ended, Murdoch arrived at Cambridge in 1947 (*A Life* 261). Here she began to dispute well-known philosophers of the time, such as Wittgenstein, because she believed they lacked a fascination with the undeniable mystery of the world. Murdoch was not "casual," nor did she "lack discipline," but rather "she was simply interested, as philosophers once in the golden age were, in everything on earth" (*A Life* 268). Immersed in the life of particular experience, she had no patience for the life of analytical and logical constructions alone. She once wrote in her journal, "For me philosophical problems are the problems of my own life," which shows that she sought to study philosophy as a part of her own life narrative (*A Life* n.43, 269). This fact also explains why the study of philosophy also propelled her creative writing; she sought to flesh out the narratives of her fictional characters in regard to a philosophy of life as well.

Murdoch noted that philosophy was driest when morality was "treated as a subject dealt with by various technical devices (emotive utterance, imperatives, etc.)" (*A Life* 303). She also saw the picture of "the moral agent reduced to an isolated will and intellect choosing afresh from ex nihilo, moment by moment" as "not merely excessively individualist, but [also] inaccurate and wrong" (*A Life* 303). Instead, Murdoch sought a philosophical framework for the life of humanity that would place the life of interiority, found within the mind, in relation to the life of exterior action prompted through bodily experience. She wanted a way of life that would encourage interior moral growth in order to prompt exterior societal action.

Her life project had therefore begun; as the reader will see, the integration of philosophy, creativity, and her own personal experience would continue to drive her work.

Chapter Three

Murdoch's Moral Philosophy

“How can we make ourselves better? It is a question moral philosophers should attempt to answer.” (“The Sovereignty” 364)

Leaving Plato's Cave of Selfish Illusion through Moments of 'Unselfing'

As noted in the last chapter, Murdoch's philosophy evolved because of her deep wish to integrate the life of abstract reason with the life of concrete reality. She wanted to create a frame of reference that each individual could use in order to begin a moral pilgrimage in search of what is good.

Murdoch's philosophy is Platonic in nature; in regards to moral philosophy she writes, “We are closer now to Plato than we have been in many previous centuries” (“Consciousness-I” 175). She ascribes the search for moral perfection to an exterior Goodness outside of concrete reality. Furthermore, Murdoch's philosophy is a call for the Platonic moral pilgrim to seek out an ethical life. She writes, “How can we make ourselves better? It is a question moral philosophers should attempt to answer” (“The Sovereignty” 364). In answer to this question, she suggests that moral pilgrims must strive to leave Plato's cave in search of closer relationship with transcendent beauty and goodness. Though individuals will never be able to transcend fallible human nature and enter completely into being good completely, they may work continually towards becoming better in a practical, ordinary, day-to-day sense. Murdoch writes, “When Plato wants to explain Good he uses the image of the sun. The moral pilgrim emerges from the cave and begins to

see the real world in the light of the sun, and last of all is able to look at the sun itself" ("The Sovereignty" 376). Good, which exists exterior to human and concrete reality, lies beyond the confines of the cave; therefore, humanity must strive to leave the cave and seek out this alternative Good.

Notably, Murdoch was agnostic; she writes, "I assume that human beings are naturally selfish and that human life has no external point" ("The Sovereignty" 364). With this in mind, Murdoch's Good is not God; rather, it is impersonal. Furthermore, Murdoch concedes, when we are attempting to envision the Good, "by opening our eyes we do not necessarily see what confronts us. We are anxiety-ridden animals. Our minds are continually active, fabricating an anxious, usually self-preoccupied, often falsifying veil, which conceals the world" ("The Sovereignty" 369). Stated plainly, humanity is encumbered with self, and therefore only through vision reoriented toward the Good does one become a 'better' person. This is because the Good is an "absolute for-nothingness"; since it is striving for nothing of self-gain, the Good is completely involved with improving that which is Other ("The Sovereignty" 375). Ultimately, the Good is not swayed or jaded by ego or any other selfish desire.

Furthermore, though Murdoch lacks belief in God, this treatment of the Good as lasting and exterior allows her to resist hopelessness even amidst the "existential crises" of modernity and postmodernity, the breakdown of language and fragmentation of the self. Many individuals in the past century have given in to more helpless worldview. For instance, in an iconic piece of early modernist prose, writer Hugo von Hofmannsthal states, "I have lost completely the ability to think or to speak of anything coherently" (*Chandos Letter*). This piece of prose is a work of

fiction, though many academics believe it to be semi-autobiographical; it seems Hofmannsthal's struggle to communicate coherently is due in part to the despairing emotions surrounding fin-de-siècle Vienna. As the letter continues, through the character of Chandos, von Hofmannsthal reflects on humanity's past. More specifically, he references ancient wars and past violence. While doing this, he is reminded of the rats that were poisoned earlier in his basement cellar:

There was a mother, surrounded by her young in their agony of death; but her gaze was cast neither toward the dying nor upon the merciless walls of stone, but into the void, or through the void into Infinity, accompanying this gaze with a gnashing of teeth! [...] the soul of this animal bared its teeth to its monstrous fate. (*Chandos Letter*).

With a bleak view of human history's violence and bestiality, it is easy for an individual see the human perspective as akin to that of the mother rat. Particularly if one no longer believes in God, one may see only a bleak void or a violent end when confronted with death.

In contrast to this despairing outlook, Murdoch proposes an exterior Goodness that still exists to re-orientate one's attention away from humanity's inner, "anxiety ridden animal" self, and towards supportive relationships with others in society. In order to resist Hofmannsthal's bleak paralysis when confronted with death, and to envision Murdoch's more hopeful reality, an individual must be stripped of self-preoccupation. This occurs in a moment of what Murdoch terms "unselfed" attention to what is beautiful. Beauty may be rare at times in life, but for Murdoch its presence still provides individuals with moments of calm re-orientation

of vision. For Murdoch, “Beauty is the convenient and traditional name of something which art and nature share, and which gives a fairly clear sense to the idea of quality of experiences and change of consciousness” (“The Sovereignty” 369). Beauty and ‘unselfing’ are not synonymous, but they are strongly correlated. If something is beautiful, it is also cause for unselfed contemplation; likewise, if one has the ability to ‘unself,’ it is because something beautiful lies in his or her gaze.

To understand further Murdoch’s terminology of ‘unselfing’ it may be helpful for the reader to relate her idea to those in 20th century existential philosopher Martin Buber’s writings. Buber famously spoke of two relationships present in our world. An individual may attain either an ‘I-It’ or an ‘I-Thou’ connection with objects in our phenomenological existence (*I and Thou*). Within ‘I-It’ relationships, an individual holds no intrinsic, meaningful connection to that which is Other. This connection objectifies relationships and other things in existence are seen as worth only what they can offer. In contrast, ‘I-Thou’ relationships occur when meaningful connections with what is Other are realized through recognition of a sacred Being or ‘God.’ When this happens one’s authentic self emerges, for “the real self only appears when it enters into relation with the Other” (Buber adj. “Martin” 467). When an ‘I-Thou’ connection is realized, “the circle of self is broken by what is other” (“Martin” 467). Yet, as shown through Hofmannsthal’s *The Lord Chandos Letter*, as a breakdown of language and community occurs, it becomes harder to see deep connection in the world. Furthermore, as discussed in Chapter One, postmodern inabilities to differentiate between what is simulacra and what is real, also make it harder to attain I-Thou relationships. Buber writes, “Isn’t the communal life of

modern man bound to be submerged in the I-It world?" (*I and Thou* 96). Buber, like Murdoch, sees that as history progresses, rather than becoming closer to a meaningful reality in the present, many individuals drown in a sea of I-It relationships.

With this mutual understanding, Murdoch and Buber seek a framework of relationship which encourages humanity's strong bond not just with other people, but with the whole world. Murdoch is unable to accept "Buber's memorable distinction between the I-Thou and the I-It relation," because it "seems too simple and exclusive" ("Martin" 478). Murdoch feels that Buber's distinction between 'I-It' and 'I-Thou,' which only exists in an orthodox religious sense, leaves little room for ordinary connections within lived reality. Murdoch writes:

Our pilgrimage (in the direction of reality, good) is not experienced only in high, broad or general ways (such as in increased understanding of mathematics or justice), it is experienced in all our most minute relations with our surrounding world, wherein our apprehensions (perceptions) of the minutest things (stones, spoons, leaves, scraps of rubbish, tiny gestures, etc. etc.) are also capable of deeper, more benevolent, more just (etc. etc.).

("Martin" 474)

Buber's understanding of 'I-Thou' remains more "broad or general" because it relates back to God as absolute. However, Murdoch's idea of connection with what is good may be found in more subtle, everyday experiences. Therefore, in reference to Buber's work, the reader should realize that Murdoch, like Buber, seeks to reconcile individuals to our inherent human desire for connection—we are relational beings.

The reader should understand that these two writers are also very different because Murdoch presents meaningful unselfed connection to reality as far more attainable than the 'I-Thou' connection of Buber's writings.

This tendency of Murdoch to emphasize unselfed connection in ordinary reality also brings us to her break from many other contemporary existential and analytical philosophers. This break occurs, as noted previously, because of her increasing frustration at the lack of time many philosophers have given to assessing the importance of the interior life and the ambiguity within reality. Too many philosophers have spoken of human agents as rationally autonomous selves capable of acting in a world which is clearly perceived; yet, human existence is perpetually ambiguous and mysterious. Therefore, instead of dryly analyzing reality, Murdoch seeks to observe the world closely through mystic attentiveness, which recognizes and studies the mystery of life.

Simone Weil states that mystic attention "consists of suspending our thought, leaving [awareness] detached, empty, and ready to be penetrated by the object; it means holding our minds within reach of this thought" ("Reflections" 49). Murdoch, like Weil, sought to empty herself of ego, thereby allowing exterior objects to penetrate her reality and bring her into relationship with the world. With this emphasis on the life of attention, Murdoch's discussion of 'unselfing' becomes essential in her writings, since it is the ability for the inner life of the mind to become fixed on something exterior, which then brings one into relation with the Other. Furthermore, as mentioned in reference to Buber, rather than seeing moments of 'unselfing' as few and far between, Murdoch claims these moments of

'unselfing' are found in ordinary, lived reality; one must only be present and attentive in order to see them. She writes:

I am looking out of my window in an anxious and resentful state of mind, oblivious of my surroundings, brooding perhaps on some damage done to my prestige. Then suddenly I observe a hovering kestrel. In a moment everything is altered. The brooding self with its hurt vanity has disappeared. There is nothing now but the kestrel. ("The Sovereignty" 369)

A seemingly mundane moment is now transformed into a moment of transcendent gaze at what is beautiful. Furthermore, when an individual undergoes a moment of gaze directed at unselfed beauty, he or she will see the world without barriers of the "anxiety ridden" self since the "proper apprehension of beauty is joy in reality through the transfiguring of desire" ("The Fire" 425). Once desires are transfigured away from selfish motivations and towards a clear vision of beauty within reality, then appreciation of life's more ordinary moments may begin.

The character of Morgan in Murdoch's novel *A Fairly Honorable Defeat* also offers a wonderful example of unselfed attention:

She stood staring up at the sloping walls of grass and flowers on either side of her. She began to see more detail, more and different flowers hidden in the grassy jungle. Flowers which the scientific farmer had long banished from his fields lingered in secret, dazing with their variety the drunken bees who crawled laboriously among the stems, buzzing as they walked with sheer exhausted joy. Small wild rose bushes scattered the slope with circles of papery luminous pink. Deeper pink of willow herb and white of flowing

nettles and purple of self-heal, trailed over by bryony came back to Morgan from very far away, out of childhood, out of distant classroom innocence.

Tufted vetch, wood vetch, wood blotting papery rose. She plucked a leaf and crushed it and smelt the cool quick odor on her hands. (*AFHD* 169)

Morgan, attending to the beauty around her, has left a realm of self-consciousness in favor of immersion in the natural world. Later in the same scene, Morgan remarks, “Something is good...Something is. This [nature] is” (*AFHD* 172). Morgan, momentarily leaving petty anxieties and selfish attachments aside, is able to attend to her experiential world. She is loving the good that exists all around her.

From passages such as the one above, the reader sees Murdoch’s ability to attend to beauty in seemingly insignificant moments. In relation to her creative writing, Murdoch writes, “when we speak about seeing the Good, or loving the Good, we may also be speaking seriously of ordinary things, people, works of art, as being good, although we may also be aware of their imperfections” (“The Sovereignty” 376). Goodness as a whole exists outside of our reality, but aspects of goodness exist in apprehension of beautiful—yet imperfect—parts of everyday reality. In contrast to “the self, the place where we live” which “is a place of illusion” instead “Goodness is connected with the attempt to see the ‘unself,’ to see and to respond to the real world in the light of virtuous consciousness” (“The Sovereignty” 376). Once the moral pilgrim obtains heightened awareness in the world, he or she will move past the world of appearance further into reality, and therefore become better able to act in his or her relational world.

From Isolated Autonomy to Relationship With Others

Murdoch's frustration with the existentialist remains constant, because the existential agent represents a particular kind of moral and intellectual blindness and self-deception. As Murdoch puts it:

A simple-minded faith in science, together with the assumption that we are all rational and totally free, engenders a dangerous lack of curiosity about the real world, a failure to appreciate the difficulties of knowing it. We need to return from the self-centered concept of sincerity to the other-centered concept of truth. We are not isolated free choosers, monarchs of all we survey, but benighted creatures sunk in a reality whose nature we are constantly and overwhelmingly tempted to deform by fantasy. ("Against Dryness" 293)

As this passage suggests, Murdoch believes that to view individuals as isolated will create a false picture of humanity.

Murdoch views humanity's postmodern condition as the worst combination of the tendencies of our historical predecessors. Influenced by the age of Enlightenment, many postmodern selves are certain of a trust in science to answer questions of existence; little consideration is given to the enigmatic facets of life. Ironically, though postmodernism is viewed as throwing out beliefs in metanarratives, science has begun to creep up as the consistent answer to ambiguities. On the other side, influenced by the Romantics, many postmodern people view themselves as autonomous agents distanced from (and perhaps above) the mysteries of the world. Think for instance of German painter Casper David

Friedrich's iconic work, "Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog" (1818): the man stands above the clouds separated from the world's cloudy atmosphere.

Murdoch disagrees with this view of individuals as fully capable independent agents. In fact, theologian Stanley Hauerwas states, "Man for Miss Murdoch, is defined by his inability to bear reality. [Post]modern man's understanding of himself is far too grand"; it is as if the human agent stands above with a magnifying glass to sort out reality ("The Significance" 31). Both these ways of thought—the rational enlightened intellect and the autonomous, Romantic individual—have led certain people to deliver moral attitudes from a seat of authority separated from experience.

In fact, this perception of reality is far from accurate. Murdoch argues that, rather than studying or analyzing the world clearly, postmodern selves under these strands of influence are placing Enlightenment's naïve trust in rationality and Romanticism's naïve trust in the isolated self together, creating a fantasy picture of the postmodern self as fully autonomous and capable of finding objective truth ("Against Dryness" 287). Furthermore, in light of this unhealthy combination of rationality and autonomy, the postmodern individual may be tempted to embrace a solipsistic view of life. However, instead, we as human beings must recognize our selves as grounded in reality through relation with other people.

Therefore, Murdoch seeks a re-orientation of human vision, one that will encourage the life of imagination⁴ rather than the life of deluded fantasy

⁴ Within this paper, the use of "imagination" in reference to Murdoch's project denotes a certain kind of freedom found when one's consciousness is heightened.

(“Imagination”). As noted by Murdoch, “Simone Weil said that morality was a matter of attention, not of will. We need a new vocabulary of attention” (*Against* 293). As will be explored later, Murdoch sets out, through her creative process, to help explain a new vocabulary of attention necessary for our postmodern condition.

Murdoch’s re-orientation of consciousness from isolated autonomy to relational interconnectedness also adds a new component of transcendent quality, eschewing the dry logic of many of her contemporary philosophers. In his preface to Murdoch’s collection *Existentialists and Mystics*, polymath George Steiner writes of Murdoch’s work, “Properly grasped, the ‘mystical’ pursuit of the Good, of perfect unison with moral truths, arises out of a rootedness in common humanity, in ‘ordinary’ being” (Preface xiii). Far more attuned to concrete reality than many of her philosophical contemporaries, Murdoch sees mystic attention as a holistic relational process that neither Wittgenstein’s ‘language games’ nor Sartre’s existential angst can offer. Her phenomenological grasp of reality is rooted in a life of interior contemplation and external action rather than abstract principles or solitary, momentary actions of the will.

Murdoch appreciates Weil’s mystical attention, using it “to express the idea of a just and loving gaze directed upon an individual reality. I believe this to be the characteristic and proper mark of the active moral agent” (“The Idea” 327). Weil writes, “There is real desire when there is an effort of attention [...] Even if our efforts of attention seem for years to be producing no result, one day a light that is in exact proportion to them will flood the soul” (“Reflections” 46). This mystic effort of

With this new awareness an individual is better able to perceive and express truths inherent within existence.

attention may be agonizing at times as the soul must, with a just and loving gaze, wait patiently to be flooded with apprehension and appreciation of what is Other than self. Acting as a mystical moral pilgrim in the world requires, at times, long periods of suffering and waiting in order to envision what is Good.

As Murdoch delves into discussion of patient human attentiveness to the Good and relationship with others she admits, “We are dealing here with many difficult metaphors” (“The Sovereignty” 384). For now, apart from beauty and the Good, in order to understand further Murdoch’s re-orientation of consciousness, the reader must also understand the importance of Love:

When true good is loved, even impurely or by accident, the quality of the love is automatically refined, and when the soul is turned towards Good the highest part of the soul is enlivened. Love is the tension between the imperfect soul and the magnetic perfection, which is conceived of as lying beyond it. (“The Sovereignty” 384)

One must, with a bond of love, ‘unself’ by attending to what is beautiful in order to begin a transcendent search for goodness.

Lastly, in relation to the Good, Murdoch states, “Goodness is connected with the acceptance of real death and real chance and real transience and only against the background of this acceptance, which is psychologically so difficult, can we understand the full extent of what virtue is like” (“The Sovereignty” 385). It is difficult to accept the finality of death—one may be tempted to stare into the void with a “gnashing of teeth” just as Hofmannsthal’s rat does; however, instead of

giving in to the Angst of the Existentialist, an individual must accept the void if he or she wishes to live a moral life in search of the Good.

This acceptance of death is vital, because it “is an acceptance of our nothingness, which is an automatic spur to our concern with what is not ourselves” (“The Sovereignty” 385). Embracing mortality requires humility, and thus as Murdoch notes, “the good man is humble...humility is a rare virtue and an unfashionable one and one which is often hard to discern” (“The Sovereignty” 385). This idea of humility, though not new in discussions of what it means to be virtuous, may be seen as a direct influence on Murdoch from Weil. Weil writes that the virtue of humility is “far more precious than all academic progress” for it shows us that which is Other in society (“Reflections” 47). Unfortunately, in existence, individuals do not often strive for humility. Yet, Murdoch observes, “the humble man, because he sees himself as nothing, can see other things as they are” (“The Sovereignty” 385). Emptied of self, the Murdochian moral pilgrim can now envision the world clearly.

At the same time, somewhat paradoxically, Murdoch states that the moral pilgrim sees “the pointlessness of virtue” (“The Sovereignty” 385). Murdoch does not view virtue as a bad quality, but rather she sees it as only a means towards an end. The pursuit of virtue can become a paradox: if one is virtuous only for virtue’s sake one never truly becomes virtuous, for then one is caught up in prideful attempts at attaining virtue. For instance, martyrs may struggle with the motivation to act in a virtuous manner, but the hope is that the martyr’s actions take place because he or she believes in a cause greater than his or her own gain. The martyr

fights against his or her own ego in attempts to sacrifice for a greater cause, which therefore means the motivation is something more than simple virtue; instead, the martyr strives to be a humble citizen working for a just cause. In reference to this discussion of virtue, Murdoch writes, "Of course virtue is good habit and dutiful action. But the background condition of such habit and such action, in human beings, is just a mode of vision and a good quality of consciousness. It is a task to see the world as it is" ("The Sovereignty" 375). With this reflection, Murdoch suggests that one must, in a sense, live out virtue as a seamless way of life, rather than simply "gain" virtue. Rather than a call simply to envision the world through clearer perception, Murdoch calls the moral pilgrim to a task that will prompt one to act in the world, where one will seek justice in the midst of the human condition's messiness rather than remaining distant.

Therefore, it is clear that humility, not virtue, should be the moral pilgrim's highest aspiration. Murdoch refers to Weil again as she concludes her essay "The Sovereignty of Good Over Other Concepts:"

Simone Weil tells us that the exposure of the soul to God condemns the selfish part of it not to suffering but to death. The humble man perceives the distance between suffering and death. And, although he is not by definition the good man, perhaps he is the kind of man who is most likely to become good. ("The Sovereignty" 385)

Humans are imperfect. We can never attain complete goodness. However, with a Murdochian recognition of the Good as existent in the world, an individual's selfish ego will be condemned to death. As such, the moral pilgrim will be humbled and

thus most fully equipped to help others in his or her local society and eventually the world at large.

Citizenship as More than Obligation: The Need for a Vocabulary of Love

Murdoch's ethical objective is clear. She wishes to find a new vocabulary for our postmodern condition that will encourage each person to re-orient his or her vision away from self and instead towards the Other in society. Ethicist Martha Nussbaum speaks in her book *Political Emotions* of how individuals must seek to bring others in to his or her own "circle of concern," stating, "we must seek a way to connect our life of emotion with that which is distant or other" ("A Problem" 11). This task of Nussbaum's is precisely what Murdoch seeks to accomplish. Murdoch seeks to bring the Other into each person's own circle of concern so that we may each become moral agents of change in the world. The reader is then brought full circle, for this task may only be achieved, as Murdoch and Nussbaum both agree, through a gaze of unselfed love at what is beautiful.

Both Murdoch and Nussbaum see the importance of recognizing humans as inter-connected relational beings. Therefore, Murdoch believes the existential isolated 'choosing self' is more autonomous in a negative way than actual relational human agents are. An active human agent in the world does not choose through a cut-and-dry decision to 'focus' simply on objective reality. Rather, human agents relate to each other and society at large through Murdoch's recognized moments of unselfed attention. Beings do not simply direct attention flippantly in the world;

instead, incremental steps of patient vision allow one to focus and relate to wider “circles of concern.”

Murdoch believes the above point is an important clarification to make because this means that “differences look less like differences of choice, given the same facts, and more like differences of vision...we differ not only because we select different objects out of the same world but because we see different worlds” (“Vision” 82). Since Murdoch has explained what factual objects of existence (good art, literature, nature, other people, etc.) people should envision, she also tells us *how* to envision these objects. She does this because the more people view the world as similar, rather than different, the more individuals may relate to one another and bring others into their own circle of concern.

In discussing clearer vision, Murdoch emphasizes her realistic understanding that people will not always possess a fluid clarity of vision, declaring, “it is very well to say that one should always attempt a fully understood and precise description, but to say that one can always be confident that one has understood seems plainly unrealistic” (“Vision” 90). Clearly, it is naïve to assume one shall always be perfectly humble, and therefore in cases “where the attempt fails...the virtues of faith and hope have their place” (“Vision” 90). Even if one does not necessarily envision reality clearly, one should still strive continually for clarity of sight.

A famous example in reference to this very notion comes from Murdoch’s essay “The Idea of Perfection,” where she discusses the relationship between a Mother-in-law (M) and her daughter-in-law (D). M dislikes D and thinks that she is “lacking in dignity and refinement”; however, M still outwardly treats D kindly and

respectfully ("Idea" 312). Everything occurring in regards to M's feelings is only an internal process, because M

is an intelligent and well-intentioned person, capable of self-criticism, capable of giving careful and just attention to an object which confronts her. M tells herself, 'I am old-fashioned and conventional. I may be prejudiced and narrow-minded. I may be snobbish. I am certainly jealous. *Let me look again.*' ("Idea" 313)

M, humbly recognizing her own imperfection, therefore begins the internal task of attentively envisioning D in a more clear and unbiased light. With this re-envisioning, "M observes D or at least reflects deliberately about D, until gradually her vision of D alters" ("Idea" 313). Furthermore, to reinforce the understanding that D has taken no action in changing M's opinion of her, Murdoch clarifies that D is completely absent from M's life: the entire change of vision takes place because of M's internal process.

As Murdoch calls her reader to reflect on this internal process, she begins to discuss how the deterministic behaviorist will see no change in what M has done, because no external behavior has changed. M, despite her dislike for D, has treated D well since the beginning of their relationship; yet Murdoch is adamant that of course change has occurred. The false view of M's individuality as defined by external 'movements' must be discarded, because "the analysis makes no sense of M as continually active, as making progress, or of her inner acts as belonging to her or forming part of a continuous fabric of being" ("Idea" 316). True moral action comes not from a simple choice to act, but *first* from internal strivings for true vision:

What M is *ex hypothesi* attempting to do is not just to see D accurately but to see her *justly* or *lovingly*. Notice the rather different image of freedom, which this at once suggests. Freedom is not the sudden jumping of the isolated will in and out of an impersonal logic complex, it is a function of the progressive attempt to see an object more clearly. (“Idea” 317)

A slow re-orientation of vision has taken place. Individuals do not overtly choose how to act, but instead must *continually seek* interior moral improvement. Notably, “M is engaged in an endless task” (“Idea” 318) and “as soon as we begin to use words such as ‘love’ and ‘justice’ in characterizing M, we introduce into our whole conceptual picture of her situation, the idea of progress, that is the idea of perfection” (“Idea” 318). According to Murdoch, perfection, for humanity, is only the ability to progress continually towards clearer vision and thus towards the Good. We are fallible beings who will never be able to be completely good and therefore we must constantly and humbly *look again*.

M has taken it upon herself to envision the Other justly and lovingly.

Murdoch’s project remains clear. She wants

a moral philosophy that can speak significantly of Freud and Marx, and out of which aesthetic and political views can be generated. We need a moral philosophy in which the concept of love, so rarely mentioned now by philosophers, can once again be made central. (“On ‘God’” 337)

Murdoch, yearning for a way of life that gives interior reflection its just due, seeks for this path of aesthetic attention in harmony with ethical relationship.

Summarizing Murdoch's project of moral philosophy, Nussbaum reinforces the true task of a Murdochian moral pilgrim:

the Murdochian argument is sound: the inner world is relative to normative assessment, and it makes a difference to our conception of what we should be like as citizens, even where it doesn't make a difference to any actual conduct. In our other significant roles in life we readily grant this, granting that imaginative M is better than dutiful M, that the parent who really loves is better than the parent who simply does all the right things [...] Why, then, would we suppose that in one of our most important roles in life, that of citizen, an empty shell is all we need to be? ("How Love" 394)

In a postmodern world where selves are often treated as autonomous and empty, Murdoch shows us that in order to live justly we must seek to relate with the Other and to do so we need a vocabulary of love gained through a rich interior life. We need to encourage loving and just citizenship in the world as opposed to empty dutiful action that holds no intrinsic relationship to societal needs. Moreover, this vocabulary is offered through Murdoch's appreciation for and investment in the world of creative imagination.

Chapter Four

Transcendence Through Creative Sensibility

“Philosophy is prompted by amazement, by being amazed at what ordinary folk take for granted.” (“Wittgenstein and the Inner Life” 280)

The Particulars of Existence and an Individual’s Life of Imagination

At the end of Chapter Three, a reference from Nussbaum’s book *Political Emotions* reminds the reader that individuals must be more than just empty shells in order to act lovingly and justly in the world. In our postmodern condition, this message needs to be emphasized more than ever. As noted, the self in postmodernity tends to be characterized as fragmented and empty. We live in an age where many people lack a full interior life largely due to a lack of attention and imagination. A world of often infantilized, fast-paced stimulation through digital and virtual entertainment causes people, as previously stated, to live “in a state of continuous partial attention in which [people] find it difficult to be present in any particular moment” (“New Digital” 43). Many postmodern individuals lack the ability to concentrate deeply on the present seemingly ordinary moments throughout their lives. Often, this inability to become aware in the present then disconnects postmodern individuals from what should be their interconnected relationships with other beings.

Responding to this postmodern problem of disconnection, Murdoch seeks to bring her readers back into a state of present awareness. Furthermore, she greatly encourages not only the life of attention, but also of imagination. She understands

that “the packaged service of increasingly perfected technology reduces our ability to think and imagine ourselves” (“Imagination” 330). Yet, to imagine oneself is vitally important, for it enables a person to envision his or her own capacity for relationship with others more clearly. Once we are able to envision the world, only then are we able to take moral action. However, individuals must be wary of the dangers of falling into realms of fantasy rather than imagination. When an individual gives in to fantasy he or she regards the inner life as a “dream, lacking identity and definition” (“Imagination” 348). This is a serious problem because “instead of bringing the individual into relationship with society, fantasy causes the individual to hold onto ‘fake illusory concept’ rather than reality” (“Imagination” 348). Fantasy supports barriers and inhibitions of the ego while the life of the imagination releases the ego from barriers of selfish desire.

It is through Murdoch’s own life of imagination that her moral philosophy and creative process are able to engage in the same quest, the quest of the postmodern mystic. As noted in Chapter One, it is important to remember that “an acknowledgement of the immanent nature of the sacred naturally forces the mystic in postmodernity to engage with larger social, ecological and political issues” (*The Mystic* 39). Therefore, a postmodern mystic such as Murdoch seeks not only to reconcile herself with the sacred, but also to reconcile others to this sacredness through engagement with the broader social sphere. For that reason, her philosophy becomes deeply engaged with the particular experiences of everyday life. In her journal Murdoch once wrote, “Like Wittgenstein, Sartre, by diminishing the inner life, over-privileged the first person. Neither thinker sufficiently respected—or

allowed themselves to be touched by—the Other” (*A Life*, n. 49, 269). One is, once again, confronted with the problems of analytical and existential philosophers: neither dealt with the true reality of being and existence as life lived in relationship to others.

The Existential beliefs, most notably of Sartre, but also of Nietzsche, fail to recognize the self’s submersion in the experiential world. Murdoch writes, “Sartre concentrates attention on the individual consciousness, and its immediate mental behavior, and what emerges is a non-historical, non-social, and non-determined individual. A solipsistic picture” (“Political Myth” 134). The isolated will of the existentialist poses a mind-body dualism where the mind falsely assumes a superior hierarchical role to that of the body. This, to Murdoch, is an insufficient view of life; as she puts it, “we might compare Sartre’s method, from this point of view, with that of the logical analysts. They look at the moment to moment character of consciousness in order to delineate the concepts used in talk about the mind” (“Political Myth” 134). With this understanding, it is clear that the existentialists and logical analysts not only fail to recognize relationship with other beings, but they also fail to acknowledge the messiness found within life.

In relation to the false dichotomy of mind and body present in Western thought, Murdoch views Wittgenstein’s language games as problematic:

It is as if [Wittgenstein] were at least feeling bound to envisage the muddled nature of the human condition and hastily put it inside the confines of philosophy (logic). That indeed is the problem. How much of human doing can be analyzed, formulized, philosophically? (“Wittgenstein” 276)

Murdoch believes that Wittgenstein's philosophical project was not 'in touch' with actual experiential existence; we are, as humans, immersed in a world of multiple and various relationships. Instead of being confined to describing the world from an analytical, removed viewpoint, Murdoch sought to describe the world in a way that would bring the muddled, varied nature of existence to the attention of each individual. She writes, "philosophy is prompted by amazement, by being amazed at what ordinary folk take for granted" ("Wittgenstein" 280). Therefore, she uses her literature as a creative vehicle through which ordinary people and philosophers alike can once again be amazed at the mysteries of the world.

In order to be amazed at the world, Murdoch uses her creative talents. In an interview with philosopher and broadcaster Bryan Magee, Murdoch states, "philosophy aims to clarify and to explain, it states and attempts to solve very difficult highly technical problems and the writing must be subservient to this aim" ("Literature" 4). On the other hand, "literature struggles with complex problems of aesthetic form, it tries to produce a kind of completeness" ("Literature" 5). As Murdoch sees it, however, though philosophy and literature are quite different, they "are both truth-seeking and truth-revealing activities" ("Literature" 11). Overall, the difference is summed up with Murdoch's clarification that "philosophy does one thing, while literature does many things" ("Literature" 12). Through literature's varied representation of "many things" it exposes the daily particulars of human existence.

In a more general, aesthetic sense, along with literature's ability to represent life's particulars, Murdoch states that 'good art' (visual, auditory, etc.,) does the

same. Good art is necessary because it presents the viewer or reader with the particulars of everyday experiences while also ascribing to them a new sense of meaning by revealing the sacredness inherent within a form. Through the mystic act of attention and a new re-orientation of vision one must learn to become attuned to and immersed in the particulars of reality's everyday experiences. Murdoch writes, "if indeed we consider how contemplation may discover (or create) an immediate form within its objects we may even feel it possible to re-establish the significance of the world by turning all experience into contemplation" ("Nostalgia" 55). An individual must learn the act of attentiveness in order to recognize the significance of complexities within the everyday. From significant extraordinary moments in life to seemingly ordinary daily relationships with art, nature, and fellow beings, each of these variants create the multi-faceted realm of existence. We must, particularly as postmodern emptiness threatens the self's rich interior life, attend to the aesthetics of daily life.

The Aesthetic Experience as Transcendent: Steiner in Dialogue with Murdoch

In the context of a discussion of aesthetic appreciation and apprehension, the reader is probably curious as to how Murdoch's philosophy can be so overtly Platonic. After all, in Plato's *Republic*, he banishes the artists. Plato, a dualist, considered the life of the mind to be vastly more important than, and thus superior to, the life of the body. He wished to separate the two, so the mind could reach its highest potential and become closest to the true reality of perfect forms; in Murdoch's words, "Plato pictures human life as a pilgrimage from appearance to

reality” (“The Fire” 387). For Plato, “the intelligence, seeking satisfaction, moves from uncritical acceptance of sense experience and of conduct, to a more sophisticated and morally enlightened understanding” (“The Fire” 387). He viewed the artist as a fabricator of lies, as one who creates simple appearances instead of bringing an individual into fuller relationship with concrete reality.

For Plato, art and the artist are condemned “to exhibit the lowest and most irrational kind of awareness, *eiksaia*, a state of vague image-ridden illusion,” and “in terms of the cave myth this is the condition of the prisoners who face the back wall and see only shadows cast by the fire” (“The Fire” 390). However, in Murdoch’s philosophical framework, Plato’s view of artists aligns with her idea of ‘bad art’ and the ‘bad artist.’ The bad artist is interested in what is “base and complex” instead of what is “simple and good.” These are the artists who give in to illusion and fantasy (i.e. Kinkaid), instead of imagination. Contrasted to the experience of viewing bad art, Murdoch argues that when an individual attends to good art, “the good (better)⁵ man is liberated from selfish fantasy” and “can see himself as others see him, imagine the needs of other people, love unselfishly, lucidly envision and desire what is truly valuable” (“Imagination” 331). The moral pilgrim, when attentive to good art, is unselfed while beginning to recognize what is truly valuable, such as the personal and societal needs of others.

When one understands that Plato’s concept of art matches Murdoch’s concept of bad art, the two can now be seen as similar: both see good art as a

⁵ Murdoch believed that no one could attain complete ‘goodness’ in life; therefore, to be ‘good’ in this context means that the individual is becoming better and becoming closer to ‘goodness’ through apprehension of the aesthetic.

transcendent vehicle towards relationship with the sacred or an opportunity for religious experience. In actuality, Plato's Demiurge is the master craftsman and thus the good artist, who has shaped the world of human phenomenological experience and also the world of ethereal unattainable forms. Both Plato and Murdoch believe attentiveness to good art is essential in regards to moral development. Murdoch writes, "The beautiful in nature (and we would wish to add in art) demands and rewards attention to something grasped as entirely external and indifferent to the greedy ego" ("The Fire" 417). The soul, in attentive, loving gaze at objects within reality, begins to reach out towards transcendent goodness.

With this journey of the soul, the individual's moral pilgrimage has begun. In contemporary society it is imperative to understand the task of Murdoch's project. Her mystic moral pilgrim journeys through the postmodern world steadily searching to become better. Too often now, postmodern selves lack a just and loving attentive gaze; Murdoch's moral project is more necessary than ever. As Murdoch herself describes its desired results:

Good art, thought of as a symbolic force rather than statement, provides a stirring image of a pure transcendent value, a steady visible enduring higher good, and perhaps provides for many people, in an unreligious age without prayer or sacraments, their clearest experience of something grasped as separate and precious and beneficial and held quietly and possessively in the attention. ("The Fire" 453)

As noted, Murdoch is not religious in the orthodox sense. She has no belief in a personal God and does not want her idea of the transcendent Good to be confused

with such doctrines. However, as a postmodern mystic, Murdoch recognizes society's need for a religious motivation towards seeking out goodness:

there is a 'moral consciousness'. This is how morality leads naturally into mysticism and has a natural bond with religion. (By religion I mean a religious attitude and form of life, not a literalistic adherence to a particular dogma). There can no doubt be a mysticism of the extreme aesthetic.

("Notes" 301)

Murdoch's use of mystic attention and religious faith is, as McGinn notes, "a process or way of life" (*The Mystic* 30). As a way of life, Murdoch's mysticism recognizes that primary interactions with what is Other (art, literature, nature, other people, etc.) in everyday life evoke "a feeling of otherness, of good as exterior and apart" and this "moves the viewer" ("Thick Ethical" 409). As an agnostic, no transcendent reality exists for Murdoch, but a *feeling of transcendent otherness* still exists during these unselfed moments of apprehension directed at what is Other. This feeling simply requires an individual to patiently attend to the object of one's gaze, in order to feel this transcendent "otherness."

George Steiner, another agnostic, also discusses finding transcendent meaning through apprehension of an aesthetic work. His project adds further clarity as we seek to understand what Murdoch hopes to achieve through her creative process in our postmodern condition. In an interview with Bryan Magee, Murdoch states, "We enjoy art, even simple art, because it disturbs us in often deep incomprehensible ways" ("Literature" 10). Steiner's project begins with recognition of this same incomprehensible essence existing beyond the aesthetic work (music,

literature, the visual arts). He begins his book *Real Presences* stating, “experiences of aesthetic meaning...infer the ‘necessary possibility’ of [the] ‘real presences’” (*Real Presences* 3). This possibility of ‘real presence’ requires that one admit to an enduring ‘otherness’ evoked through the aesthetic, which always lies beyond our concrete grasp. In this sense, we, as viewers, recognize our own inability fully to comprehend the emotions evoked in our meeting with a work.

Steiner’s transcendent otherness may be equated with Murdoch’s philosophical idea of the Good as something exterior and transcendent. She believed “that as moral beings we are immersed in a reality which transcends us and that moral progress consists in awareness of this reality and submission to it” (“Vision” 96). With Steiner Murdoch agrees that an individual must meet with a work through primary, not secondary, interaction: remove the critic and finally “interpretation is, to the largest degree, lived” (*Real Presences* 11). Steiner seeks primary interaction in order for an individual to be placed in relationship with that otherness of the aesthetic experience. Similarly, Murdoch wants the postmodern individual to be grounded in his or her phenomenological existence by attaining clarity of vision which seeks to aid, rather than judge, the Other.

In Steiner’s search for transcendence he, like Murdoch, realizes the devastation that human kind has witnessed in recent history. While drawing on twentieth century disasters (for instance, the Shoah), Steiner references “the political bestiality of our times, the social injustice, the rape of the natural world” (*Real Presences* 225). Presently, humanity is in a “twilight of being” where the world is dark and we lack a coherent language to experience and describe our revelry in

the beauty and art around us (*Real Presences* 232). In agreement with Steiner, Murdoch similarly states:

We live now amid the collapse of many [...] structures, and as religion and metaphysics in the West withdraw from the embrace of art, we are it might seem being forced to become mystics through the lack of any imagery which could satisfy the mind. (“The Fire” 463)

The postmodern Western world increasingly lacks orthodox religious aesthetics. We are “withdrawing” from the appreciation of good art and consequently we are beginning to lose sight of the basic necessity for a strong interior life of reflection. This means we are also beginning to lack motivation for social justice and action; for as we know all too well, without an inner richness, we are only empty shells void of true vision. Yet, as Murdoch states, mystic attentiveness may still save us, even in an age when the world appears to lack space and time for a rich interior life of reflection and introspection.

Furthermore, Murdoch emphasizes that it is important not only that we recognize a situation where good art may appear, but also that “*How* we see a situation is itself, already, a moral act” (“Imagination” 315). The entire process of more clearly envisioning the aesthetic is difficult. An individual must exercise Murdochian incremental steps of moral vision. We must, like M, say “*let me look again*” as we take it upon ourselves to relate better in our phenomenological existence (“The Idea” 313). Likewise, Steiner suggests that works such as Rainer Maria Rilke’s *Duino Elegies*, where Rilke “cries out to the Angels,” suggest a presence beyond initial grasp that make an individual’s “process of understanding a moral

act" (*Real Presences* 90 & 210). Steiner, like Murdoch, has stressed our ethical responsibility, as relational beings, to seek out that 'otherness' which cannot be fully reached or comprehended.

In the same vein as Murdoch, Steiner discusses the importance of creative inspiration as a means towards hope and meaning in this world. Creativity is, after all, the "life-breath" of humanity (*Grammars* 259). Where invention falls short, creativity prevails. Steiner insists, too, that this creative achievement or great aesthetic mastery comes from creation "ex nihilo" with a recognition of "the enormity of death," for these aesthetic works evoke empathetic recognition of our human condition's decay (*Real Presences* 209). With regard to this ex nihilo creative force, Murdoch asserts:

the mysterious imaginative power of the artist, creation *ex nihilo*, the attentive waiting for the response of the unconscious power, is not remote from moral imagination, it is like, or is, prayer. Here we can experience the force and movement of imagination in conscious waiting and periods of attention. ("Imagination" 323)

Born out of nothing, for both Steiner and Murdoch are agnostic, good art enlivens the senses in a way that causes apprehension of the aesthetic to become a meditation for an individual who humbly recognizes the sacred transcendence of the Other.

For Steiner, liberation from hopelessness comes by one of two means for people in our world today: "One way is that of authentic religious beliefs for those open to them. The other is that of the aesthetic" (*Grammars* 259). Thus, belief in God

is a viable means for combatting the power of death, but it is *not* the only means. Like Murdoch, Steiner recognizes that humble and loving apprehension of what is beautiful also enables an individual to transcend barriers of the selfish ego, entering into a higher meaning which leads an individual to act justly as he or she travels along the path of the moral pilgrim. Our postmodern self may be faced with an incredulity towards the metanarratives of orthodox faith and our emotions may be hardened from the “banality of evil” we face daily in our world, yet Steiner and Murdoch find transcendent liberation from death through the creative process and apprehension of beauty in aesthetic work (“Eichmann”). Steiner writes, “It is the production and reception of works of art, in the widest sense, which enable us to share in the experiencing of duration, of time unbounded” (*Grammars* 259). Aesthetic experiences call the viewer beyond what is immediately felt towards potential for something transcendent, and thus enables him or her to stand firmly, even in “the face of personal extinction” (*Grammars* 259). This power of the aesthetic is found nowhere more fully than in Murdoch’s philosophical and fictional canon.

Murdoch’s call for mystic attentiveness to the aesthetic is truly a vehicle towards transcendent meaning in our postmodern reality, filled as it is with hopelessness. Steiner’s project, which stresses the transcendent power of aesthetic beauty, clearly reinforces the task of Murdoch’s own work in both creating and attending to good art. The “incremental steps of vision” she describes so carefully offer the postmodern self an ability to mystically transcend the bleakness of our age in humble search for exterior transcendent beauty. This is Murdoch’s aim. This is

her secular—yet spiritually influenced—spur towards something bigger than oneself.

The Transcendent Beauty Found Within Murdoch's Treatment of the Aesthetic



References to great works of visual art are commonly in Murdoch's novels. In the case of *The Nice and the Good*, sixteenth-century Italian painter Angelo Bronzino's "Venus, Folly, and Time" (1546) plays a central role in the life of the novel's characters. Within the painting:

Venus is beautiful, as is Eros, an adolescent boy whose embrace would be more appropriate for a lover than son. His hand is on her breast, and he is about to kiss her parted lips. Although Pleasure (Folly) is about to strew them with roses, an apparently sweet young girl with the body of a griffon offers gifts in her reversed hands: in one, a honeycomb; in the other, the sting of her own tail. She is Deceit. Above them all, Time and Truth draw back a blue curtain and frown disapprovingly. In the background Jealousy tears her hair. ("Venus" 18)

The painting, complex in imagery and dense in metaphoric layering, becomes a reference point for re-orientation of consciousness for one of the novel's characters, Paula.

Paula studies the painting, but her interaction with the work has been affected by her ex-husband's warped appreciation of the piece:

Paula, who had been walking at random through the rooms, stopped dead in front of Bronzino's picture of "Venus, Cupid, Folly, and Time." Richard's special picture. "There's a real piece of pornography for you," she could hear Richard's high-pitched voice saying. (*The Nice* 150)

At first Paula views the painting falsely through the secondary gaze Richard has imposed upon her. Therefore, she is unable to view the painting as anything other

than what her ex-husband sees: the painting is a symbol of vain, selfish, erotic Eros “while the old lecher Time himself reaches out a long and powerful arm above the scene to bring all sweet things to an end” (*The Nice* 151). Paula and Richard have had an unhappy marriage, full of Richard’s continual unfaithfulness. The marriage has finally come to an end due to an affair, for the first time, on Paula’s part. At this point in the novel, as she reflects on the painting, she cannot overcome her own selfish barriers of anger and bitterness in regards to the marriage’s collapse. With this barrier in her way, the allegory of love presented through the painting only evokes in her the same personal feelings of angry bitterness: the Love presented to her through the work is vain and wretched.

Bronzino’s allegory of love presented in “Venus, Folly, and Time” has now become a symbol for the novel’s plot as a whole since “the moral dilemma of love thematically unites all of the characters” (“Venus” 21). Therefore, “Paula’s contact with [the painting] becomes emblematic of the entire novel” (“The Visual” 160). When Paula comes into contact with the painting for the first time in the novel she observes the painting as “a classic denunciation of love as foolish and fleeting” (“The Visual” 164). At first she only observes the painting for its overtly sexual, or as Richard suggests, “pornographic,” nature. Therefore, she seems to disregard the painting, as a degrading representation of love manifested through Eros.

However, near the novel’s end, Paula interacts with the painting again and this time “looks at the painting more profoundly” (“The Visual” 165). Instead of meeting with the work through clouded vision because “she had appropriated Richard’s highly subjective view of it,” this time she attends to the painting through

unselfed primary vision ("Venus" 22). She sees the intrinsically transcendent force of Love carried through the work. Originally, Paula viewed Cupid's lips resting lightly upon Venus's as representative of "the long still moment of dreamy suspended passion before the spinning clutching of descent" (*The Nice* 151). However, with this second viewing of the work, Paul no longer sees this as the precursor to a descent into selfish, erotic love; instead she now sees the apparent "tenderness of Venus and Cupid" ("Venus" 22). Paula recognizes the truth of the human condition represented through this aesthetic masterpiece: one is never able to be completely perfect or Good.

Through this second meeting of Paula with the work, she understands that human Eros has its place within the bonds of love. As novelist, Murdoch "knows that human life is always somehow self-fulfilling, but she does not, therefore, condemn it; rather, she makes it the way to goodness" ("Venus" 21). To use a Murdochian metaphor, Paula has decided to *look again*, and see the painting in a new "light." With this second thoughtful and *attentive* encounter with the painting, Paula is accepting her humanity. Paula is also accepting her inability to become fully Good. No matter how purely one seeks to love that which is other, one always falters. With a clear understanding of this, "her conclusion is fittingly personal" ("Venus" 22). Paula reflects, "How like Richard [...]it all is, so intellectual, so sensual" (*The Nice* 347). Richard has always been someone who imposes his own values on Paula and she has now finally realized this. With this understanding, Paula's true vision of her relationship with Richard "admits a new appreciation of truth" as she agrees to a reconciliation in their relationship with his promise that he will strive to remain

true, though he will inevitably fail (“Venus” 22). Lies and deceit will occur, but time is not an old lecher; rather, time is the bearer of truth—a truth that humans are flawed beings, only capable of striving towards perfect love and goodness.

Therefore, through a risk of future failure always remains, “Paula and Richard have made a good beginning; they have looked attentively at both Bronzino’s allegory and one another” (“Venus” 23).

The novel concludes with love triumphing as a whole in a “highly comic” conclusion (“The Visual” 166). At the end, Bronzino’s aesthetic masterpiece, as thematic emblem, possesses the transcendent quality necessary for both Steiner’s and Murdoch’s recognition. In “Venus, Folly, and Time” Bronzino accepts the enormity of death because in one sense the artwork possesses the “dreadful [...] face of love, its blank face” which offers nothing but inhibitions of the selfish ego immersed in vain Eros; yet, on the other hand, it is a masterpiece born ex nihilo (*The Nice* 375, qtd. “Venus” 22). This is because out of nothingness human love has come, and for all its flaws, it is a love that may carry one further along the pilgrimage towards goodness.

Bronzino’s painting, as every great aesthetic masterpiece should, brings its viewer into ethical relationship with the Other. Murdoch describes art’s great power:

Art is a great international human language, it is for all. Of course art has no formal ‘social role’ and artists ought not to feel that they must ‘serve their society’. They will automatically serve it if they attend to truth and try to produce the best art (make the most beautiful things) of which they are

capable. The connection of truth with beauty means that art which succeeds in being for itself also succeeds in being for everybody. (“The Fire” 461)

Bronzino, as artist, managed to create a beautiful aesthetic work that, centuries later would enable Paula to seek just reconciliation with others. The connection of truth and beauty in the painting has transcended time in a way that enables it to be an accessible vehicle for anyone willing to attend patiently to it.

Rather than escaping into a fantastic world of love as a perfect illusion, the painting instead presents love realistically as both beautiful and imperfect. Murdoch declares, “Love is the extremely difficult realization that something other than oneself is real. Love and so art and morals, is the discovery of reality (“The Sublime” 215). This realistic view of love as a difficult process rather than perfect communion, is necessary in order to become immersed in concrete, lived reality. As one critic explains:

when looked at closely not one of the characters in the novel or painting, arouses unambiguous sympathy or admiration. In some profoundly moral way they are faintly sinister, all making compromises that are almost indefinably corrupt [...] it is our secretly un-idealistic hedonism and selfishness what we should recognize and live with. (“The Visual” 167)

In both Paula as viewer, and Murdoch’s own audience as readers, we understand ourselves humbly in relation to that which is other. Contrary to Wittgenstein’s attempts, Murdoch as synthesized the power of words and images (“The Visual” 166). Thanks to Murdoch, our experiences may be meditated upon “in two distinct ways, verbally and visually: checking each other out and contemplating each other

so as to reveal certainties in common and truths which are distinct" ("The Visual" 166). Furthermore, it is through her critical mindfulness and artistic sensibility that Murdoch is able to present fluidly this dialogue of verbal and visual.

In concluding this chapter, it is beneficial to note literary critic Maria Greenwood's statement, "The technological age itself will not destroy humanity—a distinct possibility according to Iris Murdoch—as long as we continue to think, to look, to read and even to copy, freshly, originally, creatively" ("The Visual" 167). Bronzino's masterpiece of sixteenth-century Renaissance art has been endowed with new meaning and inspiration through Murdoch's creative re-envisioning of it for the contemporary viewer. With her mystic attentiveness, she has enabled her own characters (and readers) to view it lovingly and justly with a heightened consciousness so rare in our postmodern time. The reader profoundly understands that we are transient beings who, in the constant face of death, seek the reconciliatory power of human and fallible love. Though human Eros is imperfect it still encourages an individual to seek further relationship with others; this Eros, if attended to properly, may lead one to possess deeper and fuller relationships.

In summation, Murdoch, a postmodern mystic, has, through her creative process, offered a transcendent vehicle for any reader willing to attend to her work. Moreover, in relation to Paula's experience with Bronzino's masterpiece, Murdoch has clearly shown that

good art which we love can seem holy and attending to it can be like praying.

Our relation to such good art though 'probably never' entirely pure is

markedly unselfish. The calm joy in the picture gallery is quite unlike the pleasure flutter felt in the saleroom. ("The Fire" 453)

By presenting us with an example of the particulars within everyday life, such as attending to artwork in a museum, Murdoch has shown her readers that moments of unselfed attention and gaze at the Other discussed in her philosophy are often possible through seemingly normal moments attended to within day-to-day reality.

Chapter Five

Murdoch's Novels: Her Creative Process in Dialogue with Her

Philosophy

“Art is about the pilgrimage from appearance to reality.”

(“The Fire and the Sun: Why Plato Banished the Artists” 456)

Murdoch's Emphasis on the Life of the Particular within Reality

As noted in Chapter Three, Murdoch considers morality to be relative, rather than universal. Morality and thus ‘moral attitudes’ do not exist in the sense that every decision is absolute (“Vision” 84). Differences between what may be ‘right’ and what may be ‘wrong’ vary depending on the situation. Therefore, rather than assuming that all life’s moral decisions are universal, Murdoch seeks to present life in the particular since this emphasizes that choices depend on the vision gained through each scenario.

As discussed in Chapter One, Yore noted the “three discernable characteristics of a mystic-writer” (*The Mystic* 42). Mystic-writers must be dedicated to the study of sacred works, they must seek a balance between pragmatism and mystery, and they must be spiritual and ethical guides for their readers. On top of these characteristics Yore adds that a “wondrous appreciation of beauty in art or the natural world parallels and overlaps religious faith and spiritual fulfillment” (*The Mystic* 42). This parallel then makes it seem “natural that mysticism and beauty find expression through the arts,” and “although language ultimately fails to express the

sacred adequately, this does not mean that the effort should discontinue" (*The Mystic* 42). Murdoch recognizes that language has its limits, but she sees the capability language holds to help readers see the particulars of moral choice in everyday situations.

Therefore, as a postmodern mystic, Murdoch takes it upon herself to explain why the base for decisions involving moral action is often not clearly discernable within life. Her creative literature uses language to show that one should not seek falsely to explain away morality as universally applicable in the same way amongst different situations, because this simplifies the world too much. In a lengthy passage from her essay "Vision and Choice in Morality" Murdoch observes:

There are people whose fundamental moral belief is that we all live in the same empirical and rationally comprehensible world and that morality is the adoption of universal and openly defensible rules of conduct. There are other people whose fundamental belief is that we live in a world whose mystery transcends us and that morality is the exploration of that mystery in so far as it concerns each individual. ("Vision" 88)

As explored previously, Murdoch belongs to the latter type of individual, who views the world as pregnant with transcendent meaning beyond human understanding. She believes that it is our task, as citizens of the world, to quest after this transcendence constantly in search of what is good. Murdoch believes beauty is transcendent, because beauty causes an individual to become unselfed in humble recognition of what is other than self. Understanding this crucial Murdochian view enables the reader to recognize transcendent beauty within Murdoch's own creative

literature. Her literature causes an individual to become more wholly immersed in present reality and therefore, as the reader will see, it prompts the moral action of re-orientated vision in our experiential world.

Existence, our world, the human condition: all these variables are particular and thus a moral consciousness must strive for truer vision amidst a multi-faceted field of life experiences, and as such “there are times when it is proper to stress, not the comprehensibility of the world, but the incomprehensibility” (“Vision” 90). Rather than accepting only bare conceptual propositions or abstract, philosophical thought from intellects, we should encourage fellow readers and writers to embrace necessary ambiguity through creative imagination. We, as individuals and as a communal whole, are faced with these daily ambiguous mysteries in relation to art, to nature, to ourselves, and to others within society. These multiple relational experiences often encumber our vision, and therefore we, like Murdoch, must be careful not to lose sight of that which is sacred and good. We must seek continually the life of the humble moral pilgrim who strives painfully through a re-orientation of heightened conscious awareness to envision the world more clearly with a just and loving attentive gaze.

In order to stay on the moral pilgrim’s path, postmodern individuals in particular require reminders of that which is good. This brings us directly to Murdoch’s creative canon, because “stories provide, precisely through their concreteness and consequent ambiguity, sources of moral inspiration which highly specific rules could not give” (“Vision” 91). A story may be laid out concretely (i.e., specific characters and settings), yet these stories deal realistically with the

ambiguities and mysteries of existence in a relatable way that the abstraction of philosophy is unable to do.

Of course, it should be noted that just praise has been given to Murdoch's creative canon throughout her career. Her novels are works of literary genius that stand alone, apart from their philosophical appeal. It is not at all that Murdoch's novels must be read with a Murdochian philosophical lens applied, but rather that, when this is done, a fuller picture of Murdoch as a postmodern mystic is revealed.

Famously and throughout her career, Murdoch denied the inherent connections visible between her philosophy and her literature. For instance, she once stated in an interview that, "I see no 'general' role of philosophy in literature" and "I think as soon as philosophy gets into a work of literature it becomes a plaything of the writer, and rightly so" ("Literature"19). Like many critics, I simply do *not* believe this is the case, agreeing with Jessy E.G. Jordan that "while some may argue, especially in light of Iris Murdoch's interviews, that her intellectual projects should be kept separate, others have suggested that we should be wary of Murdoch's own often cryptic and contradictory remarks" ("Thick Ethical" 402). As Jordan notes, Murdoch's projects seek, using different means, after the same human necessity: a necessity for attentive gaze at particulars of everyday life.

Throughout her philosophical ruminations, Murdoch stresses tirelessly the importance of the particular. She requires that her readers understand the varied components and complexities of life. Jordan writes of this necessity:

A vital component for understanding what Murdoch was up to as a novelist is understanding her view of the entanglement-illustrating aspect of literature.

The novel was a place where Murdoch could performatively demonstrate what she discursively articulated in her philosophical works about entanglement—how continuously and imperceptibly we build ‘up structures of value around us.’ (“Thick Ethical” 413)

Murdoch illustrates the everyday particulars discussed in her philosophic work by creating pictures of those entangled experiences and relationships within her literature.

Along with presenting life in all its particular entanglements, Murdoch also fleshes out characters who embody the metaphorical language used in her philosophy. Within Murdoch’s novels, “the pursuit of goodness, though complicated, has been traced in almost all of her twenty six novels. It is her chief preoccupation in the later novels like *The Nice and the Good* [and] *A Fairly Honorable Defeat*” (“Epitome” 132). Murdoch’s obsession with goodness finds its way into her novels as she portrays a variety of characters immersed in everyday realities. Through their relationships certain characters seek selfish gain, others seek only virtue for virtue’s sake, while still others seek to reach beyond petty human failings towards unselfed humility. Some characters are led astray by the difficulties of life, while others emerge triumphant through a painful re-orientation of vision. Ultimately, just as in real life, many individuals fail and a few prevail.

The Nice and the Good (1968)

“Happiness [...] is a matter of one’s most ordinary everyday mode of consciousness being busy and lively and unconcerned with self. To be damned is for one’s ordinary everyday mode of consciousness to be unremittingly agonizing preoccupation with self.” - Willy (*The Nice* 193)

Typical of Murdoch’s novels, *The Nice and the Good* is composed of a vast cast of characters and relationships. And again as usual in her works, the ‘plot’ of the novel is not the driving force within the work; rather, the complexity rests heavily on character relationships. Through her characters, “she ventured to examine moral life, a complex subject that has ceased to be of much interest to most of the contemporary world” (“Epitome” 131). Yet, as the reader will now recognize, Murdoch commonly (if not always) uses these character relationships to present her own philosophical framework for living a moral life.

The Nice and the Good begins as a thriller with the suicide of a civil servant, Joseph Radeechy. John Ducane, the legal advisor with the company, then sets out to investigate the death. A plot of magic and blackmail unfolds as Ducane further explores the life of his deceased co-worker, yet this is only a minor element in regards to the character development underway within the novel. Parallel to the investigative plot line, complex romantic relationships between multiple characters also unfold. As these relationships unravel, contemplation of questions of love, niceness vs. goodness, and humility take center stage as individual characters struggle to live moral lives.

The first of these relationships is between Kate and her husband Octavian who each possess a “careless magnanimity” towards day-to-day living (*The Nice* 16). As the novel begins the pair is “happily married and spontaneous in their efforts to cause happiness in others” (*The Nice* 16). Kate and Octavian appear to be content, but in reality problems lie beneath the surface of their relationship, because they lack a depth of interior reflection necessary to attain ‘goodness.’ Both Kate and Octavian are unable to see past initial moments of happiness and contentment. This means that though they are “happy and relatively harmless hedonists [they] think of themselves as ‘good’ without approaching any standard but that of the ‘nice’” (“Venus” 21). Kate thinks “good is just a matter of temperament in the end,” and she believes that “yes, she shall be so happy and good too” (*The Nice* 130). Kate consistently believes goodness is an easy virtue to attain and therefore lacks the strength truly to re-orientate her vision towards a life of goodness. In the end, she is only nice.

Discussion of virtues such as ‘niceness’ and ‘goodness’ appear early in the novel as Kate and Octavian first discuss these two moral attributes when they talk about their friend Ducane. Mentioning him, Octavian says, “Ducane is so nice,” to which Kate responds, “He’s so good.” Unsure of what the distinction between niceness and goodness is yet, the reader recognizes that this is, of course, a vital moment in the narrative. The reader then questions, what does it mean to be nice? What does it mean to be good? If goodness truly is of a higher value than niceness, does John attain this quality? In answer to this question, Murdoch presents us with

the daily moral growth found in John's interior life and also the consequences of this growth as seen in his exterior actions.

Ducane, the "father of truth" within the novel, serves as the moral 'center' of the novel and by the end clearly represents a Murdochian moral pilgrim who strives for clarity of vision ("Venus" 20). Near the novel's start, Ducane is misled. He thinks, "I alone of all these people am good enough, am humble enough, to be a judge" (*The Nice* 76). As Ducane observes both the murder investigation and his friends' actions around him, he becomes further self-absorbed and proudly views himself as better than others. Yet, Ducane still questions his own point of view in this matter:

What Ducane was experiencing, in this form peculiar to him of imagining himself as a judge, was, though this was not entirely clear in his mind, one of the greatest paradoxes of morality, namely, that in order to become good it may be necessary to imagine oneself good, and yet such imagining may also be the very thing which renders improvement impossible...To become good it may be necessary to think about virtue, although unreflective simple people may achieve a thoughtless excellence. (*The Nice* 77)

Ducane, as Murdoch's moral pilgrim, recognizes the pointlessness of virtue when virtue is sought only for the sake of being virtuous. It is that Catch-22 whereby in order for one to be virtuous one must not strive for virtue, but instead truly live a life unencumbered by the ego-ridden self; in the end, one must be humble and this is a very difficult task. Far from truly attaining goodness, Ducane is still bombarded by prideful ego.

In another romantic entanglement within the novel, Kate and Ducane have a strange Platonic relationship. Attracted to one another, the two have embarked on a romantic relationship, while Octavian knows, but does not care. As the novel continues, Ducane begins to ponder breaking off his relationship with Kate, because then he would “be able to attend properly to the needs of other people. After all he was not in love with Kate. He adored Kate and could be made happy by her, but he was not really in love with her” (*The Nice* 104). Therefore, Ducane breaks the relationship tie, thinking that then “he could live more fully in the world of other people, more able, because more happy, to give them his full attention” (*The Nice* 104). With a rich interior life of reflection, Ducane has sought moral action; he understands his relationship with Kate as vain and shallow Eros, and therefore seeks to end it gently in a way that will enable him better to attend to the deep needs of the Other.

However, after Ducane makes this decision, he immediately begins to think of another romantic interest, Jessica. Yet, before he becomes caught up with pursuing another relationship, he reflects, “as things are at the moment, I am no good to anyone. I can’t think about anybody but myself” (*The Nice* 104). The reader, familiar with Murdoch’s M and D situation, recognizes that Ducane has decided to *look again* and re-envision the world in a humbler way. He recognizes that a relationship with Jessica would not be the just course of action in the present, because he is currently unable to focus on anything but himself. Once again, embarking on Murdoch’s life of the moral pilgrim, Ducane chooses a path of suffering in order to seek a moral life. He chooses the difficulty of being alone on his path towards ethical living for, “moral

improvement must inevitably involve suffering" (*The Mystic* 178). Though suffering should never be the end point of re-orientation of vision, it is certainly often a by-product.

Continuing with the novel's theme of suffering, the groundskeeper, Willy Koster, takes a central role. Greatly influenced by her contemporary European scene, Murdoch often presents the reader with a character, such as Willy, who is a Holocaust survivor. Murdoch's treatment of characters such as Willy "exemplifies the importance of acknowledging that suffering for some, such as for those who endured the Holocaust, is a part of a reality that needs, on the one hand, to be overcome, but on the other, that must not be idealized" (*The Mystic* 179). Willy, who has lived through the "bestiality of our times," still seeks faintly a fate that may be full of goodness (*Real Presences* 225). In regards to what he believes this 'goodness' might look like, Willy speaks of happiness, stating:

Happiness [...] is a matter of one's most ordinary everyday mode of consciousness being busy and lively and unconcerned with self. To be damned is for one's ordinary everyday mode of consciousness to be unremittingly agonizing preoccupation with self. (*The Nice* 193)

In agreement with Murdoch, his creator, Willy understands that ridding oneself of ego is a necessary process and the means by which he may attain a happiness he feels he has never known. Willy thinks, "Why should he not even make a dash for happiness? Was it too late? Had the past really broken him?" (*The Nice* 191). Seeking to overcome the past, Willy wonders if humanity can strive towards

something better even in this broken reality; can we strive for wholeness? For goodness?

Murdoch's answer is a resounding yes. Yes, we can *and should* continue to strive for a better world, even as we remember that we shall never embody being fully Good—that will always be exterior to us. In a pivotal passage Willy states to Jessica:

We are not good people [...]. All we can do is constantly to notice when we begin to act badly, to check ourselves, to go back, to coax our weakness and inspire our strength, to call upon the names of virtues of which we know perhaps only the names. We are not good people, and the best we can hope for is to be gentle, to forgive each other and to forgive the past, to be forgiven ourselves and to accept this forgiveness and to return again to the beautiful unexpected strangeness of the world. (*The Nice* 205)

Willy recognizes that questing after the Good, the mystic moral pilgrim will never fully attain it; however, if we as postmodern individuals accept the beauty and terror of mystery in existence, we may keep pushing forward. With incremental steps of vision that bring us in to focus on a clearer reality, the postmodern mystic may humbly begin to seek love, justice, and relation with the other.

As much as he wishes to be, Willy is not reconciled with this resolution to love, to forgive, and to reconcile. The terrors of the past still haunt him daily. Later in the novel, Mary asks Willy if he learned anything through his experience in Dachau. In his response, he claims:

Very few ordeals are redemptive and I doubt if the descent into hell teaches anything new. It can only hasten processes which are already in existence, and usually this just means that it degrades. You see, in hell one lacks the energy for any good change. This indeed is the meaning of hell. (*The Nice* 295)

Willy has lived through hell on earth, a hell which serves as the antithesis to Murdoch's transcendent Good. Far from enabling the sufferer to seek out goodness, in hell one lacks the energy and is therefore unable to seek good, moral change.

Though Willy remains pessimistic, he eventually recognizes his hell for what it is: only a deluded shadow on the cave wall, which distracts the pilgrim from a world bathed in goodness. Willy states, "We are shadows, Mary, shadows" (*The Nice* 295). Self-aware, he understands his own existence as just a shadow, the empty shell of what the life of a moral pilgrim could be. At rock bottom and bitter as he recognizes this truth, Willy is unable to venture out from past tragedies into present opportunities of moral growth.

Juxtaposed with the moral resignation of Willy, Ducane remains true to the pilgrim's moral task. Committed to truer vision, throughout the narrative Ducane continues to search for clearer vision of the world. Nearing the novel's end, a pivotal scene takes place. Pierce, the son of a close friend, swims foolishly into a cave just as the tide rolls in. Without spending a moment to think of his own safety, Ducane tries urgently to rescue Pierce. While in the cave, Ducane ponders his own death:

I wonder if this is the end...How tawdry and small it has been. He saw himself now as a little rat, a busy little scurrying rat, seeking out its own little

advantages and comforts...If I ever get out of here, I will be no man's judge.

Nothing is worth doing except to kill the little rat, not to judge, not to be superior, not to exercise power, not to seek, seek, seek. To love and to reconcile and to forgive, only this matters. All power is sin and law is frailty.

Love is the only justice. Forgiveness, reconciliation, not law. (*The Nice* 329)

Once out of both the literal and figurative Platonic cave of shadows, Ducane will enter back into reality with a reorientation of vision. He will no longer judge others, but instead seek to love, forgive, and reconcile. Furthermore, Ducane wishes to kill the selfish egotistical rat (similar to Hofmannsthal's mother rat) within him; this deep wish shows the reader that he no longer sees himself as important and therefore will learn to see others as they truly are. He is, indeed, Murdoch's moral pilgrim: in light of the Good, ready to seek relationship with others.

Only now, with his new ability to discern what is good, is Ducane ready to seek relationship with another character, Mary. The two become engaged: "It is the nature of love to discern good, and the best love is, in some part at any rate, a love of what is good. Ducane was very conscious, and had always been conscious, that he and Mary communicated by means of what was good in both of them" (*The Nice* 359). Ducane, now with clarity of vision, is able to form a healthy relationship with Mary. They recognize one another for their goodness, which then, in turn, brings out the goodness in themselves. Ducane notes feelings of being "very conscious," just as Murdoch in her philosophy stresses the importance of conscious awareness of others. Therefore, Ducane's unselfed awareness has occurred not through a lack of

consciousness, but a heightened consciousness and awareness of his experiential reality.

Through the character of John Ducane, the reader recognizes how one can maintain the life of a Murdochian moral pilgrim (the humble individual) within the context of the real world. However, as a mystic in the postmodern era, Murdoch also recognizes the unjust suffering within the world and the damage this can do to a person such as Willy. Yet all must strive for further sight and understanding of what is just, through a gaze of love at what is beautiful in the world so that one may be unselfed. For only through this process of being unselfed may an individual therefore see himself or herself as 'nothing' and in turn truly see others with clear vision.

A Fairly Honorable Defeat (1970)

“Human beings set each other off so. Put three emotionally fairly clever people in a fix and instead of trying quietly to communicate with each other they’ll dream up some communal violence...It’s all egoism of course.” – Julius (*AFHD* 393)

The second novel under consideration, Murdoch’s *A Fairly Honorable Defeat*, like *The Nice and the Good*, explores themes of virtue, love, justice, and clarity of vision. Throughout the novel, devious “puppet master” Julius King seeks to break apart the close relationships of numerous characters. As the reader will see, Julius both succeeds and fails in this endeavor. And again, as is typical of Murdoch’s novels,

the characters and relationships created serve not only as plot devices, but also as symbols for larger meaning.

The first of these symbolic characters, Rupert represents the virtue of love misdirected by egoism. Rupert, immersed in academia, is a moral philosopher who has a “deep age old confidence in the power of goodness” (*AFHD* 329). However, it is “not that he located this goodness in himself,” for “it was very much exterior to him” (*AFHD* 329). Rupert sees himself as loving that which is good: he thinks, “the top of the moral structure was no dream, and he had proved this by exercises in loving attention: loving people, loving art, loving work, loving paving stones, and loving trees. This had been his happiness” (*AFHD* 330). The reader therefore assumes Rupert understands his own morality clearly, for he appears to love the particulars of existence deeply. However, he has a downfall. Rupert’s view of love is rooted in self-importance.

During a pivotal scene, Julius argues with Rupert, stating that “helping others” and “letting oneself be imposed upon” always have motive (*AFHD* 206). Furthermore, Julius continues, “Anything of this sort which does not proceed from self-interested motives is rare to the point where I take leave to doubt whether it exists at all!” (*AFHD* 206). At first, Rupert denies having selfish motives while seeking a life of goodness; yet, when Julius leaves, Rupert is filled with self-doubt, reflecting, “Was it true that he believed himself to be virtuous?” (*AFHD* 208). For the first time, Rupert is confronted with his own, egotistical pride. He is concerned with being virtuous, but he is not concerned with what this virtue truly requires: actively

helping others. He is pre-occupied with self. Claiming to love relentlessly, his love is tainted by pride in his virtue.

For instance, Rupert and his sister-in-law, Morgan, begin an affair behind the back of his wife, Hilda, because he thinks he can love people “freely” without harmful cost to others. Tricked by Julius, the two think they have received love letters from each other. In reality, Julius has written the letters in order to dupe the two into embarking on an affair. After this, Rupert and Morgan’s belief in loving freely without being bound to each other becomes a problem not only for Rupert, but for Morgan as well. Morgan states to her naïve nephew, Peter, “I’m going to love people. That’s what I mean by living differently. That’ll be my new way of life. I’m going to be free and love people” (*AFHD* 194). However, soon after Morgan says this, she rejects Peter cruelly.

Incredibly misdirected, Morgan and Rupert believe they can love one another recklessly. The two mistake obsessive infatuation with each other for true, meaningful Eros. As Murdoch’s philosophical writings point out, one should love what is beautiful because it calls one out of his or her selfish preoccupations and motivations. In unselfed loving gaze at objects in the world, one is emptied of selfish motivation. Juxtaposed with this just concept of loving, Rupert and Morgan seek to love each other because they seek ego-centered attention and momentary comfort, without caring about how this may negatively impact others (i.e., Hilda).

Rupert recounts his supposedly magnanimous love by writing about it “in a formal half-disguised way, as if it were a secret in his philosophy book” (*AFHD* 330). Aloof from the real world, Rupert conceptualizes his love and therefore distances

this action from grounded reality. He is reflecting only on the appearance of his infatuation with Morgan, rather than on how this infatuation will impact complex relationships within concrete reality negatively. As previously noted, true unselfed love is not easy to attain; it takes a painful reorientation of vision to gaze with love attentively at that which is beautiful in this world. After all, to be unselfed is to die to self.

In the end, rather than establishing the loving and carefree commitment Rupert and Morgan have hoped for naïvely, Hilda discovers their immoral conduct with Julius' intervention. Afterward, Julius states to Tallis:

Human beings set each other off so. Put three emotionally fairly clever people in a fix and instead of trying quietly to communicate with each other they'll dream up some communal violence...It's all egoism of course. They will do the most dreadful things to each other rather than seem to be made a fool of or seem not to be in control of the situation. (*AFHD* 393)

Julius, aware of communication problems presented in our postmodern world, could serve as an aid, a mystic moral guide, like Murdoch herself, but instead he is vindictive.

With this vindictive nature, Julius then tells Tallis, "You see, it all hinges upon letters. [...] Yes. Human beings should be awfully careful about letters. They are such powerful tools. Yet people will write them, in moments of emotion, and other people will fail to destroy them" (*AFHD* 371). Julius' opinion about the danger of letters becomes truer as history progresses; now postmodern selves, unlike these characters created in 1970, have the ability to create permanent, passionate

“letters” through an array of platforms (texts, emails, messages, etc.). Filtered through a lens of social media, messages leave our hands constantly, and often end up in the wrong hands. As referenced in regards to Kirby in Chapter One, as a cultural majority in the Western postmodern world, we are beginning to rely on evanescent textual and digital communication to represent ourselves rather than face-to-face interaction. With this understanding of “letters” as even more dangerous in our postmodern age, Rupert and Morgan’s own naïveté is clear: they each let a false representation of truth guide them into dishonesty. Morgan, Rupert, and Hilda all fall prey to emotional trickery. They are unable to recognize their own lack of control and selfish inhibitions. Rupert and Morgan should have realized that neither of them ever sent letters to one another, but distracted by illusions of flattery, they never humbly admit their failings.

When speaking to Tallis, Julius says of Rupert, “Rupert didn’t die of drowning. He died of vanity” (*AFHD* 394). Tragically, Rupert dies because he cannot admit defeat honorably, and instead mourns in depression and pity, mixing sleeping pills and alcohol. He dies and therefore loses his true beautiful “object” of love, Hilda, who has always cared for others more than her own well-being (*AFHD* 356). This relational muddle within the novel ends tragically. Characters encumbered by self are unable to conquer selfish desires. At this point, the novel’s presentation of the human condition appears hopeless; we are selfish, anxiety, and ego-ridden selves; however, new hope of unselfed love is delivered through other character relationships.

Julius is the plot's antagonist—a man who seems to wish others ill. Yet, as is typical of Murdoch, she challenges her readers to view Julius from a perspective that extends him sympathy. Readers are challenged to *look again* at Julius and, perhaps, even allow him into their own circle of concern. Nearing the novel's end, the reader finds out that Julius, like Willy from *The Nice and the Good*, is a Holocaust survivor. He has had to endure the most horrible tragedies our postmodern world has seen. As Tallis and Julius are eating dinner together, Tallis spots the blue numbered tattoo on Julius's arm. It is revealed that Julius spent the war in Belsen.

Knowing about the fragmented, cruel life Julius endured, the reader should ask whether we are meant to forgive his deceitful ways. The answer is yes; we must forgive him. Forgiving Julius does not mean his actions are justified, but at least now we can understand why his worldview and perspective are warped. Midway through the novel, Rupert states to Julius that "spirit is ambiguous...but goodness isn't" (*AFHD* 205). Though misled in the end, Rupert believes in the power of an exterior goodness. In this same conversation, Julius bleakly states, "To be really gentle and selfless with moral impunity one would have to be God, and we know He isn't there!" (*AFHD* 206). Julius shares with Murdoch his creator, a disbelief in God, yet unlike her, he also disbelieves in an exterior driving Good force; this greatly separates the two. He sees the human condition as much more helpless and fragmented, whereas Murdoch sees the sacred, saving transcendence of beauty as manifest within our broken, postmodern condition.

Perceiving our human condition as only hopeless brokenness is exactly what Julius purports through his immoral, unjust actions. With Julius' action it is indeed

true that “man is a creature who makes pictures of himself and then comes to resemble the pictures” (“Metaphysics” 75). Julius creates a picture of himself in a world of cruelty and so he embarks on choices that inevitably shape the world into his preconceived conceptions. Talking to Julius midway through the narrative, Rupert exclaims, “You make human beings sound like puppets,” to which Julius coolly responds, “But they are puppets, Rupert. And we didn’t need modern psychology to tell us that” (*AFHD* 206). Julius sees the world as a picture of despair so he, as “puppet master,” creates a picture or “play” of the world just as he sees it. This causes Julius’ reality to be different than the reality of Tallis, because his vision is different; it is a bleak reality saturated in the illusions of the cave. Therefore, once healthy relationships now crumble and fall apart under his deceitful influence. Morgan and Rupert realize their wrongdoing too late and Rupert dies. And though Julius is clearly in the wrong, he is still delusional. He lives in a fantasy realm where he acts as savior.

As Julius and Tallis part ways for the last time, Julius lingers for a moment before departing and says, “You concede that I am an instrument of justice?” (*AFHD* 397). All these relationships have been through hell, someone has died, and yet Julius still views his own actions as justifiable. Julius is the ‘bad’ artist, deluded by a fantasy world he has created, in which he is the keeper of justice. In actuality, he has failed to interact with others with a truly just and loving attentive gaze. Instead, he has given into simulacra of what justice is.

Juxtaposed to Julius’ false goodness, however, the reader may see Tallis ultimately as Murdoch’s beacon of goodness within this plot:

In most of [Murdoch's] novels there is a marginal character who is a saintly figure and paradigm of good. Such a person being self-effacing is almost invisible, powerless, and hardly occupies the center stage of action either in life or in the novel. He continues doing good quietly according to his understanding of it, in a world becoming increasingly amoral and even immoral. ("Epitome" 132)

Tallis has not taken center stage within most of the plot line. He and Morgan, having been separated for years, they are no longer in communication and now Tallis tries tirelessly to take care of his dying father.

When Tallis and Morgan do finally confront one another in regards to their failed marriage, Tallis tells Morgan that someday she will realize she loves him. He says, "You are the dreamer. I took you on forever. That's what love is about. Forever" (*AFHD* 258). True love is something that, though difficult at times, must be worked at painfully and given attention. Tallis "knows that freedom is not a virtue" and therefore people are not able to live 'freely' ("Good Versus" 6). Instead of loving freely, which implies love is 'easy,' Tallis knows that "loving people is often burdensome and unrewarding, and that Morgan's understanding of love is hopelessly self-centered and only operates when she is feeling happy" ("Good Versus" 6). This is why Tallis calls Morgan's talk of 'loving freely' "such sickening rot" (*AFHD* 194). In a way that both Rupert and Morgan are unable to comprehend, Tallis understands the commitment to love virtuously as bound in relationship to other beings. Humans are not separated freely choosing wills who may concentrate their efforts only when it is convenient; rather, we are beings in constant relation

with one another—relation that requires calm attentiveness and painful re-orientation, for which only Tallis seems willing to work for.

Notably, Tallis' life has been far from easy. In the same conversation where the reader learns that Julius survived Belsen, we also learn Tallis' sister was raped brutally and killed at the young age of fourteen (*AFHD* 396). He has lived through the effects of one of the worst crimes imaginable; yet, unlike Julius, he is able to orientate his inner life and exterior actions towards an exterior Good that he still believes exists in the world.

Unlike the disillusioned Julius, Tallis takes it upon himself to care for and help those around him. Most importantly, Tallis still believes in hope. Reflecting on his neighbors in his apartment complex, "he thought for a moment of the Sikh and of the Pakistanis upstairs, who had come, no doubt, with hopes, for who can prevent the human heart from hoping, from their troubled lands into this alien milieu of poverty and racial tension and petty crime" (*AFHD* 407). In a reflection of his interior life, he still thinks about the well-being of others in society. He possesses a broad and growing circle of concern.

Tallis is still human and, as such, experiences exhaustion. While trying to help his son and also thinking about how to tell his dying father that his father's diagnosis is terminal, he reflects:

For the rest, he seemed to have nothing left. No experiences, no certainty. Had there been any certainty? There had been experiences. He remembered something, like a kind of light, nothing with form. Perhaps that had been a dream too. He never knelt down now, that act of homage to elsewhere had

become impossible, would have seemed obscene. [...] Any act of prayer would be superstitious now. But sometimes he caught hold of things, edges of tables, sides of doors, books, the bakelite handles of knives. Caught hold on them and held them tight, not so as to perform any act himself, but so as to immobilize himself for a moment to be, if that were possible, perhaps acted upon, perhaps touched. (*AFHD* 408)

Filled with a strong sense of emptiness at times, he is still open to this transcendent feeling of goodness in that which is other. The revelation of an exterior goodness is perhaps unfathomable, yet still palpable. Throughout the novel, the reader has seen the constant “unglamorous” and “passive” character of Tallis (“Good Versus” 1). He has never been extremely interesting and though “it is a commonplace observation that good characters are the most difficult for an artist to make interesting,” (“Good Versus” 2). Murdoch has managed to allow Tallis’s subtle, humble aspiration towards goodness to remain constant throughout the narrative’s progression. In a world mostly devoid of perfect love, Tallis still manages to hold firm to some semblances of hope.

Finally, in her depiction of Tallis, the reader recognizes Murdoch’s ideal moral pilgrim as one “who refuses to judge others, and who realizes it is never possible to know other persons well enough to judge them” (“Good Versus” 8). At the novel’s conclusion, when multiple characters wonder why so many have been left hurt, Tallis does not “speculate about the guilt of any person” (*AFHD* 443). Rupert is dead. Julius is still disillusioned. Many are hurt and relationships are

damaged; yet Tallis remains attentive to a mission of justice. He still pursues attention to, and care of others.

Though not all character relationships in the novel have been discussed, the character analysis done in this paper clearly reveals that Murdoch's philosophical concepts are deeply engrained in her literature. Due consideration to the plot and characters of *A Fairly Honorable Defeat* aptly reveals what happens to those who fall prey to misdirected love, selfish ambition, and the guise of false virtue (i.e., freedom), as a result of which they are all, except for Tallis, unable to reach out towards a transcendent Good, or to bring that which is other into their own circle of concern.

Murdoch once wrote, "imaginative prose literature...is par excellence the form of art most concerned with the existence of other persons" (Murdoch qtd. "Good Versus" 11). Presented with the particulars of everyday existence and ordinary relationships with others, "readers may contemplate, and in doing so perhaps become more tolerant in their dealings with non-fictional persons, whose minds they cannot read" ("Good Versus" 11). Through the creative process expressed in a medium such as a novel, individuals can come to understand the human inability ever to know another person fully. Much like good visual art which is worthy of our attentive gaze, there is *always something transcendent* about another being. Even when people are interwoven with our own spatial and temporal existence, we may never know all there is to know about another; therefore, rather than judge, we should seek to see them more clearly. We should let growth of inner life shape and enrich our exterior action by taking the chance to *look again* and see

others in a new *light* like the M and D story reminds us. For when we challenge ourselves to re-envision others with a forgiving and reconciling attentive vision, rather than differentiating ourselves, we will be able to relate to them better.

The postmodern world challenges our ability to see others for their humanity. Rather than unselfed relationships, postmodern selves are often bombarded and distracted by technologies that commonly encourage one to seek new, fleeting stimulation continually. Rather than encouraging contemplative, attentive gaze at others in society, our bonds to community are often weakened by technology, because our globalized, technological world also threatens our idea of rootedness in what is present. However, Murdoch brings her readers back into attentive awareness of present reality. In reference to good art, Murdoch writes, “art is about the pilgrimage from appearance to reality” (“The Fire” 456). Her philosophical project produces a vocabulary of love directed at what is Good, and her creative ability to transfer this vocabulary into a realistic narrative, enables her readers to move from appearance toward reality. Our postmodern world may appear to be hopelessly devoid of meaningful connection, but if we truly attend to the world, we may see reality with a fresh unselfed vision that allows our circle of concern to open further.

Chapter Six

The Therapeutic Component of Murdoch's Project

“Plato often speaks of the soul as being sick and in need of therapy. Both Plato and Freud wish to heal by promoting awareness of reality.” (“The Fire” 418)

Everyday Social Responsibility in Our Postmodern World

From the character analyses in Chapter Five, the reader now recognizes Murdoch's creative ability as a means by which to present human moral responsibility within day-to-day, human interaction. Furthermore, from this explication, the reader also recognizes the character of Tallis as the epitome of a Murdochian moral pilgrim: one who never seeks to judge, but humbly accepts an ethical responsibility to view people in their full humanity, while seeking to help others. His way of life is unencumbered by barriers of the ego. With this understanding, he becomes Nussbaum's caring citizen as well. Therefore, Murdoch's “many difficult metaphors” of love, beauty, truth, justice, and humility found in her moral philosophy have been transformed into everyday, concrete examples of how these attributes and virtues may be enacted.

This creative transformation from abstract thought into concrete reality is necessary in order for Murdoch's role as a postmodern mystic be fulfilled. Traditionally, as noted earlier, “writers with a mystical orientation past and present” are “renowned for the forceful ways they inspire people to become more spiritually and ethically aware” (*The Mystic* 42). Murdoch's moral philosophy does inspire her reader to become further attentive to the Other; however, her ability to

present the life of the particular in her novels enables her readers to relate the fictional narrative to the narrative within their personal lives. This ability of the reader to connect with her creative writing, in particular, provides a way by which fragmented individuals in the postmodern age may better attain a rich, inner life of contemplation, along with a just, outer life of action.

The reader sees more clearly why a citizen must not be an “empty shell” in our current world; however, postmodern individuals often do not understand the importance of an inter-connected, relational life. As mentioned in Chapter One, driven by a consumer-based economy and living in a technology-enhanced, globalized world, many selves become further isolated and in need of a prompt to work outward. Postmodern selves, often sick in trenches of self-involvement, need encouragement and a better way to connect with others. Given this necessity, it seems a therapeutic approach may be useful. In regards to Murdoch, Yore notes:

The more emotive, imaginative, and intuitive language in literary and poetic writing counterbalances the more scientific or technical jargon of the social sciences. Creative writing is also a way of surviving psychologically and spiritually as well as being a response to a life spent in pilgrimage. (*The Mystic* 42)

In this age of postmodern sickness, Murdoch’s creative writing avoids the “technical jargon” of specific, therapeutic approaches by presenting ordinary moments in the everyday as examples of relationship with others.

Within her personal life, Murdoch wrote of the intersection of philosophy and psychology. For instance, in an excerpt referenced in Chapter Two, Murdoch

writes, “For me philosophical problems are the problems of my own life...Reading Sartre or [Gabriel] Marcel, we say: yes, that rings a bell. I recognize that and that’s how I work, is it?...Is this psychology?” (*A Life* 269). Self-reflective and deeply aware of her own struggles, Murdoch’s work offers a therapeutic avenue for her to process occurrences within her own day-to-day life.

As mentioned previously, along with her personal journals, Murdoch often discusses the social sciences in regards to her moral philosophy. Particularly, she relates psychology’s aims of moral improvement to the very similar goals pursued by moral philosophy. She often refers to psychologists such as Freud and Jung. For example, Murdoch notes:

Plato often speaks of the soul as being sick and in need of therapy. Both Plato and Freud wish to heal by promoting awareness of reality. Only Freud holds that we grasp reality through the ego and not through the ‘critical punishing agency’ of the ideal; whereas Plato holds that, above a reasonable egoism, there is a pure moral faculty which discerns the real world and to which sovereignty properly belongs. (“The Fire” 418)

Murdoch understood, like her philosophical and psychological predecessors, that the soul needs aid. It is not solely our postmodern age that has needed a healthy unification of the body and mind. As seen through her treatment of Plato, further call for an individual to be grounded in reality has always been a necessity.

However, in our postmodern age of fragmentation, the divorce of mind and body is more severe than ever. Postmodern selves commonly lack the ability to ground themselves in the present through attentive awareness. Thus Murdoch mentions

Plato's quest for the soul's healing through his belief in exterior Good and perfect forms, as well as Freud's psychoanalytic study of the self's desires. From the Classical era of philosophy to the modern era, there is clearly an active relationship and dialogue between philosophy and psychology. Furthermore, as Murdoch mentions, Plato sought healing in references to ideal Good, whereas Freud saw reality as composed of a punishing, reasoning ego.

Murdoch elaborates on Freud's thoughts a little after the quote above, writing, "Freud bars the way to the top and gives the ego the right to supreme control" ("The Fire" 419). Freud's construction of the ego creates barriers which block the ethical responsibility Murdoch encourages from taking place. It is important to note that Murdoch never claimed to be a psychologist or therapist; yet, as emphasized in Chapter Five's conclusion, her work offers a viable means for the postmodern moral pilgrim to transcend barriers of the ego and inhabit a wider circle of concern. Sharing goals that are similar to those of a therapist, "in [Murdoch's] fiction, she preferred to focus her energies on changing individual consciousness and the development of individual virtue through her 'moral fables' or 'parables'" (*The Mystic* 40). Therefore, though the relationship of author to reader still lacks the personal and conversational relationship of therapist to client, her creative writing and her moral philosophy seek to enrich the inner life of her readers.

In regards to this re-orientation of consciousness, Murdoch's philosophical project encourages mindfulness, while her treatment of characters within her novels serves as a dialogue to engage the reader's own personal life. With this

understanding of her work, a therapeutic component begins to emerge from the reader's interaction with her texts. In his book, *Soul Searching: Why Psychotherapy Must Promote Moral Responsibility*, contemporary American therapist William Doherty discusses why a moral vocabulary is necessary for contemporary individuals seeking therapy. Doherty writes, "therapists since the time of Freud have overemphasized individual self-interest, giving short shrift to family and community relationships" (*Soul Searching* 7). Unlike many therapists and intellectuals of her time, Murdoch does not ignore the relational aspects of being, but instead encourages individuals to flourish within various forms of communal interaction. Furthermore, she wants an individual's unselfed attention focused in the direction of Platonic Good so that he or she may humbly see and respond to the needs of others.

As mentioned, her creative works bring her abstract moral principles down into concrete everyday reality. This is especially important in a postmodern world where people tend to turn inward towards self-need as opposed to turning outward for exterior commitment. As Doherty writes from his therapeutic perspective, "I have seen too many parents 'move on' from their children, too many spouses discard a marriage when an attractive alternative appeared, and too many individuals avoiding social responsibility under the rubric of 'it's not my thing'" (*Soul Searching* 10). Therapy has embraced a trend in which people are encouraged continually to take care of inner needs *rather than* attending to the needs of others. Doherty views this postmodern understanding of self as "expressive individualism" where "responsibilities to others are reduced to responsibility to self" (*Soul*

Searching 8). Murdoch, though she calls for a healthy, inner life of self, also recognizes moral responsibility to others as part of interior growth. As seen through examples such as that of M and D, Murdoch recognizes that an interior life must be more than an empty shell, if thoughtful, exterior action is to emerge.

Doherty talks of “re-envisioning psychotherapy as a moral enterprise” that promotes “moral responsibility” (*Soul Searching* 14). This therapeutic aim again matches up clearly with philosophical and ethical aims such as the ones sought by Murdoch. Doherty sees psychotherapy’s potential for change because he views psychotherapy as “an ideal moral laboratory,” since

Moral reflection involves not abstract principles but moral sensibilities honed through dialogue with others. Moral issues, in the final analysis, are not so dissimilar from the other life issues addressed in psychotherapy. Therapists help clients to better understand themselves and other people and to be good to themselves and other people, but they traditionally steer clients away from using moral language to describe their experiences and their choices, and they refrain almost entirely from using moral language themselves to challenge clients’ actions that might harm other people. (*Soul Searching* 18)

Like Doherty, Murdoch recognizes the need to gain a broader moral vocabulary, and then to use that vocabulary when we are in dialogue with others. Both discuss ideas such as love, justice, truthfulness, community, caring, and other moral attributes; however, both recognize the need to place these ideals in concrete dialogue with the real lives of people. Doherty, a therapist, places them in dialogue with his clients.

Murdoch, the creative author, transfers her philosophical language of moral abstractions into concrete reality through her novels. She does this by placing characters in dialogue with one another and by allowing her characters' interior dialogues to arise. These techniques, though different than a therapeutic dialogue with a client, seek the same end: recognition that moral responsibility to others is prevalent in everyday interaction. For instance, in *A Fairly Honorable Defeat*, Rupert and Morgan's affair shows a level of self-involvement unhealthily present in current society. As Doherty states, he has seen "too many spouses discard a marriage when an attractive alternative appeared" (*Soul Searching* 10). Rupert and Morgan are led astray by their own, selfish infatuation and forget about the commitments they have to others (such as Hilda); after all, "morality is a communal as well as personal affair" (*Soul Searching* 38).

In regards to morality as a personal affair, further overlap between Murdoch's project and Doherty's therapeutic project continues to emerge through comparison. Doherty writes:

The exploration of moral issues in therapy does not occur mainly inside the head of the therapist playing moral philosopher or moral judge. It occurs in the heart of the therapeutic dialogue: in conversations in which the therapist listens, reflects, acknowledges, questions, probes, challenges—and in which the client is free to do the same and to develop a more integrated set of moral responsibilities. (*Soul Searching* 37)

In reference to Murdoch's philosophical works, obviously she is the moral philosopher who presents a way to understand moral responsibility to others. Yet,

when readers take her philosophy and see it at work within her novels, they are able to begin listening, reflecting, questioning, and challenging their own beliefs in regards to moral responsibility. Furthermore, the individual reader is able to compare the characters' moral growth to his or her own life narrative. For instance, when Ducane faces the imminent force of death he begins to reflect on his own, moral outlook. The ideal Murdochian moral pilgrim, he begins to recognize his place in the world not as one who judges, but as one who seeks to help others. Likewise as the reader experiences Ducane's fear and inner moral dialogue, he or she may reflect on his or her own, moral worldview.

Lastly, Doherty shows that "psychotherapy has the resources to contribute to the formation of a new cultural ideal in which personal fulfillment will be seen as part of a seamless web of interpersonal community bonds" (*Soul Searching* 22). Psychotherapy has the ability to help clients see personal existence as deeply tied to relationship with others. Murdoch does the same. Through his therapeutic perspective, Doherty sees that inner and outer synthesis in therapy will help clients be better equipped to serve the world (*Soul Searching* 109). This understanding of the therapeutic process once again matches up with what Murdoch seeks to do.

Murdoch embodies the life of a postmodern mystic: one who has a rich interior life and who is also attentive to reality in a way that prompts necessary, exterior, just action to occur. Moreover, as a novelist, Murdoch's external action becomes manifest through her creative process. She seeks to aid others in society by offering them a means to reflect on life's moral dilemmas, in order to grow through the process of reflection and action. As Julian Barnes states, "when you read a great

book, you don't escape from life, you plunge deeper in it" ("My Life as"). Therefore, Murdoch becomes an example of her own good artist, who moves her reader from realms of "appearance to reality" ("The Fire" 456). The Murdochian reader is also her pilgrim. At first, the reader may see life through appearances of selfishness, anxiety or fear, but then after immersion in a dialogue of her philosophy and creative work the reader (pilgrim) begins to envision reality more clearly. After all, it is a daily task to see the world as it truly is.

Conclusion

Envisioning Life Beyond the Television Glare

Through the process of analyzing both Murdoch's moral philosophy and her creative literature, it is my hope that the reader now recognizes her contribution not only to the world of academia, but also to the personal lives of ordinary people. Critical and thoughtful in both her philosophy and her literature, she enables her reader to seek out a richer life of patient attentiveness to present reality.

Murdoch's reader is challenged to think of abstract, metaphorical language and how it truly pertains to everyday interactions in his or her personal life. Concepts such as Love, Beauty, Humility, and the Good now play an integral part in both the reader's interior growth and his or her exterior action. Her reader is prompted to seek a life of heightened mystic awareness and self-reflection in order to attend more fully to others in society. As Murdochian readers, we are now able to embrace a wider circle of concern than perhaps previously attainable. We should have gained a clearer vision of ourselves in relation to the world. Therefore, through Murdoch's encouragement to seek a humble, attentive life, we are enabled to transcend barriers of the selfish ego.

We are those postmodern individuals most capable of leaving our cave of virtual illusions and evanescent relationships in search of the Good. With guidance provided by the postmodern mystic sensibility of Murdoch, we as readers are able to unself' with a loving gaze at what is Other. With this in mind, it is probably no coincidence that contemporary American writer, Annie Dillard echoes Murdoch

when presenting us with an apt example of Plato's allegory of the cave. In her meditative work, *For the Time Being*, Dillard writes, "the blue light of the television flickers on the cave wall" (*For the* 33). As the scene unfolds, Dillard, as the narrator, confronts a man who cannot bear to spend time outside of the cave. In contrast to this man who is glued to the television's glare, Dillard is slowly able to spend more time in "the real world" because she takes time—"a little every day"—*incrementally attending to and envisioning concrete reality* (*For the* 33). Just as Murdoch encourages her readers to *look again* and envision reality in a *new light*, Dillard, with a mystic orientation, seeks to leave the Platonic postmodern cave of media bombardment and white noise, in order to attend to our present and concrete reality.

It is no longer the flicker of the fire but the glare of the screen which tricks the moral pilgrim into seeing a superficial, evanescent appearance instead of lasting, concrete reality. We are at a point in history where individuals are too often swayed by ephemeral desires shaped by self-interest. In a postmodern Western world of continual, technological bombardment, it often becomes hard to concentrate. It becomes more difficult simply to slow down, reflect, and strive for a richer and more humble orientation of vision. Inhibited by barriers of the self, cynicism quickly becomes a refuge for cowards. When only attending to selfish inhibitions, citizens are unable to aid others ethically.

Much of postmodern life has become too fast paced, and the line between what may be 'right' and what may be 'wrong' is often blurred; with this recognition, Murdoch understands a deep societal need to attend to reality. She truly sees that

our society is sick and in need of healing transformation. Finally, she understands that many postmodern individuals need a fresh vision of life which may be attained through the attentive process of reading a story.

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