

**A World Beneath the Net of Words:
Iris Murdoch's Novelistic Approaches to Moral Questions**

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Abstract

This thesis explores the net of words, and the fictional world beneath it, in Iris Murdoch's novelistic discourse. It focuses on five of the author's representative novels and investigates the ongoing dialogue between her literature and moral ideas, by delving into her rejection of philosophical novels, her enquiry into the nature of artistic form, her accentuation of an unselfish vision, and her negotiation with the realist tradition. It begins by arguing that Murdoch's adoption of first-person narration is one of her methods of approaching artistic truth, and is closely linked to her Platonic vision. Then, in analysing Murdoch's engagement with the Gothic form, the thesis maintains that while her moral ideas are Platonic and idea-driven, her literary aesthetics are more rational and realistic. It proceeds to problematise the antithesis of Murdoch's "open" and "closed" novels, and argues that in her fictional worlds, realism is affirmed more as the revelation of artistic truth and a way of overcoming the author's selfhood than as the reproduction of empirical reality. By probing into Murdoch's innovations in narrative form, such as adding forewords and postscripts to the story or using the methods of metafiction, the thesis highlights the issues of truth and fictionality in her artistic representation. It concludes by proposing that Murdoch's way of depicting a variety of morally burdened characters, and of integrating her novelistic form with moral concepts, helps to open up the realist novel as well as distinguishing Murdoch as an author beyond her era.

Contents

Acknowledgements	1
Declaration	2
Introduction	3
Chapter One: <i>Under the Net</i> and First-person Narration	23
1.1 The Story through First-person Narration	25
1.2 Contingency as Defeat of Self-obsession	30
1.3 “A Battle Between Real People and Images”	35
1.4 The Moral Dimension of an Unselfish Vision	37
1.5 What is the Net?	42
1.6 Form and Freedom in First-person Narration	45
Chapter Two: <i>The Bell</i> : Novelistic Representation of Power, Attention, and Goodness	51
2.1 Story of the Bell: Legend versus Reality	54
2.2 Power, Gaze, and Focalisation	57
2.3 Vision against Choice in Morality	62
2.4 “All Our Failures are Ultimately Failures in Love”	67
2.5 Murdoch’s Philosophical and Novelistic Discourse	71
2.6 The Truth-telling Voice	75
Chapter Three: Imaginative Enquiries into Art and Fantasy in <i>Bruno’s Dream</i>	85
3.1 The Narration of Dream	89
3.2 Eros and Thanatos: A False Pair and a True Pair	94
3.3 Symbolism in the Representation of Death	100
3.4 The Juxtaposition of Dream and Reality	104
3.5 Personal Fantasy in Art and Morality	108
Chapter Four: Artistic Representation of Truth in <i>The Black Prince</i>	115
4.1 Love and Art in Bradley’s Point of View	117
4.2 Who is the Black Prince?	122

4.3 Irony, Intertextuality, and Metafiction	128
4.4 Blind Fantasy versus Visionary Imagination	134
4.5 A House Fit for Free Characters	140
Chapter Five: The Moral Significance of Narrative Form in <i>The Sea, the Sea</i>	147
5.1 Story of the Modern Prospero	150
5.2 The Green-eyed Monster and the World of Magic	155
5.3 Autobiography, Diary, and Novelistic Memoir	160
5.4 The Artist versus the Saint	165
5.5 All the World's a Stage	170
Conclusion	177
Bibliography	185

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Declaration

I declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work and I am the sole author. This work has not previously been presented for an award at this, or any other, University. All sources are acknowledged as references.

Introduction

On 15th July 1919, Iris Murdoch was born as the only child in an Irish protestant family, which she later described as “a perfect trinity of love” (Haffenden 129). She moved to London in her childhood, and later studied classics, ancient history, and philosophy at Somerville College, Oxford. In 1948, she completed her postgraduate studies in philosophy at Cambridge and became a lecturer of philosophy at St. Anne’s College, Oxford. From 1953 to 1995, Murdoch published twenty-six novels, five philosophical monographs, and numerous essays, plays, and poetry collections, which established her reputation as a renowned novelist and philosopher in the twentieth century. Brought up in a family with “a very deep harmony”, Murdoch was influenced by her talented, artistic mother and her “extremely good and clever” father (129). Love serves as a key motif in both her philosophical and novelistic discourses. However, the relationship between Murdoch’s literary and philosophical stances is anything but straightforward. On the one hand, she stands against the subordination of authorial interest in fictional characters to philosophical themes; she views the imposition of form onto life as a dangerous temptation, “which is the enemy of religion and the enemy of goodness” (133). On the other hand, Murdoch reveres Kant and Plato as her “personal gods” (128), recognising Plato’s idealistic visions and denouncement of “fantastic” art, seeing “the fire of a personal unconscious mind” as inevitable in art, and calling for high ideals such as love, goodness, and attention in her own writings (127). Such an unusual integration of literature and moral philosophy endows Murdoch with a distinctive novelistic style. As Harold Bloom observes, Murdoch stands out among contemporary writers in the sense that she hides her originality in “conventional forms of storytelling”, and that “there is a perpetual incongruity between Murdoch’s formulaic procedures and her spiritual insights” (Bloom, Murdoch 2). Indeed, the relationship between art and philosophy in Murdoch’s works is often complex. Despite her endeavours to separate the two spheres and to resist the title of “philosophical novelist”, Murdoch’s novels in many ways exhibit an ongoing dialogue with her philosophy. For Murdoch, the term

“philosophical novelist” clearly restricts the scope of “novelist”, making the novel a medium of the author’s philosophical theories. It is distinguished from a notion of the novel in which philosophy and fiction are integrated in the narrative and interplay with each other.

In order to understand the complexity of Murdoch’s thoughts, one needs to return to her literary-critical debut, *Sartre: Romantic Rationalist*. Published in 1953, it was one of the earliest books to introduce Sartrean existentialism to British readers. The book serves as an investigation of both Sartre’s philosophical arguments and their influence on his novelistic narrative. The book has been seen to indicate Murdoch’s approval of Sartre’s methods; some critics even read *Under the Net* as a commentary on Sartre’s *La Nausée*, with both dramatising human existence by engaging with “the problems of contingency and necessity, the nature of the self, and the ambiguities of perception and language” (Vickery 69). However, Murdoch’s attitude towards Sartre’s methods of getting philosophy into fiction is more critical than submissive. *Sartre: Romantic Rationalist* discusses the moral ideas behind Sartre’s novelistic form and defines him as a philosophical novelist in various respects, and Murdoch rather distinguishes herself from such a narrative method. She claims that the language in Sartre’s prose is usually communicative, transparent, and instrumental. Sartre “appeals in general terms to a view of language as tool-like and communicative”; but in particular cases, he believes that the prose writer should aim to “invite a free and selfless response from his reader and in the process to commend the cause of freedom for all mankind” (Murdoch, Sartre 114-115). Sartre’s affirmation of the “careful, disciplined and reflective use of language” is contradictory to the “liberating” purposes of his prose (115). Murdoch calls Sartre’s “freedom” of language a “hasty rationalism”; that is, he “[leans] too heavily upon the word ‘freedom’” in “lending one’s imagination (as author or spectator) to a work which approves of tyranny” (116). Writers like Sartre stress the reflective use of language, the main function of which is to support the author’s philosophical framework. This is described by Murdoch as the sickness of language.

Murdoch argues that Sartre’s “interest in the novel is not only that of a

phenomenological thinker in his natural medium, but that of a sincere propagandist in a powerful weapon”; the novel is hence saturated by his “typically philosophical self-consciousness” (10). Sartre’s character, to use Murdoch’s words, is a “lonely anguished being in an ambiguous world” (7). While he likes to portray the reflective consciousness of thoughts and modes, Murdoch stresses the battle between real people and images. She criticises the telling mode in Sartre’s narrative, and prefers to use dialogues, which carry the story forward without leaving too much trace of the narrator. She also criticises philosophical novelists for imposing moral seriousness and value judgements upon characterisation. She prefers what Kant called “disinterestedness”, or what she calls the sense of “separateness” (113). In this light, she claims, in her later article, “Against Dryness”, that “*Hamlet* looks second-rate compared with *Lear*” (Murdoch, Dryness 295). She opposes the imposition of the author’s own self upon the character: one may easily identify with Hamlet, which is emotionally consoling, whereas it takes imagination and a reduction of the sense of distance to really sympathise with Lear. And once this link is established, one may acquire “a truer picture” of life as well as a respect for otherness (295).

Murdoch not only distinguishes herself from philosophical novelists like Sartre but also comments on the typical writings of the modernist novelist. It appears to her that modernists are “not usually telling us about events as if they were past and remembered”; they present the events, “through the consciousness of [their] people, as if they were happening now” (Murdoch, Sartre 53). Yet this “openness” of the narrative is different from the “self-awareness” Murdoch intends to achieve. According to her, modernists tend to turn their characters into “a chaotic flow of ideas” and further lead to “an isolated aesthetic subjectivism” (54). It is the opposite of naturalism, which is embodied in “an impoverished black-and-white objectivism” (54). For Murdoch, neither extreme can represent the real nature of human personality, and the right direction for literary creation is somewhere between the two ways.

In Murdoch’s view, the theme of philosophical novels is often connected with a serious desire to express the author’s philosophical theory. She identifies the core of

Sartre's philosophy as the affirmation of "the preciousness of the individual" and "a society which is free and democratic in the traditional liberal sense of these terms"; but she argues that there is a difference between artistic truth and rationality, and that the novel should centre on the former (77, 83). Novels guided by the latter are easily reduced to a record of the psychology of one individual or a debate between different ideologies embodied in different characters. To avoid this, Murdoch focuses on the tension between the interior and exterior worlds of the characters. She tries not to let her philosophy outweigh the storytelling; if there is any philosophy involved, it is merely material for her. She claims in a 1977 interview with Bryan Magee that "I might put in things about philosophy because I happen to know philosophy. If I knew about sailing ships I would put in sailing ships" (Magee 20). If it were sailing ships, one could probably say these were novels somewhat preoccupied with the theme of sailing. But that would not make them the vehicle for a systematic theory of sailing. Likewise, Murdoch believes that philosophy is a knowledge which she happens to possess as a novelist. It serves more as a material than a systematic theory in her novelistic discourse.

In *Sartre: Romantic Rationalist*, Murdoch reflects on the limitations of Sartre's writing and thinking; philosophical novels, as she defines them, are not what she intends to write. They are considered to be too analytical and too confined to the service of the author's philosophical and political theories. The book epitomises many of Murdoch's literary and philosophical principles. Her own first novel, *Under the Net*, was published a year later and, in a sense, embodies her own views on the literary treatment of communication, language, and consciousness. Yet these views are not fixed, but develop significantly in depth and breadth throughout her forty-one-year long novelistic career. She wrote philosophical essays along with novels; it is essential to see both discourses as complementing each other when one tries to evaluate her ideas over that period. Meanwhile, such a parallel writing process makes it likely that her critical theories and her literary practice are related, and indeed risks reducing the latter to a rigid illustration of the former. Opposed to an easy equation like this, Murdoch adopts various methods to efface authorial traces in her novelistic discourse. She tends to

displace the role of writer onto her protagonists; their endeavours to put their personal philosophy into literary practice often results in a distorted vision of reality and suffering for the people around them. Nevertheless, Murdoch's literary and philosophical writings are somehow related; concepts that are frequently discussed in her philosophy, such as power, love, and selfish attention, are also recurrent motifs of her novels.

Murdoch claims in interview that a knowledge of philosophy, like knowledge of swimming, sailing or doctoring, belongs to the "zeitgeist" of novelistic creation (Mellen 8). However, sailing and philosophy are, after all, different from each other: the former is definitive, straightforward, and easy to comprehend, whereas the latter is more ambiguous and implicit. In a narrow sense, philosophy can be seen as material for her writings: there are characters who happen to be philosophers, scenes which are depicted as moral dilemmas, or dialogues engaged with philosophical debates. But in a broader sense, the author's personal philosophy lives under the net of her novelistic discourse, making it difficult to generalise in a systematic way. Consequently, critics often disagree on the extent as well as the nature of the link between Murdoch's art and philosophy. They tend to fall into three categories: those who label Murdoch as a "philosophical novelist" and treat her fiction as a subordinate illustration of prior philosophical ideas; those who analyse her novels for their own sake, treating them more as something independent from her philosophy; and those who seek to find a reciprocal relationship between her art and morals.

The earliest Murdochian criticism includes A. S. Byatt's *Degrees of Freedom: The Novels of Iris Murdoch* (1965), which identifies freedom as the central theme of Murdoch's first eight novels, and at the same time points out her relations to Plato, Sartre, Sigmund Freud, and Simone Weil in her philosophical writings. Byatt maintains that philosophy serves as a large proportion of the framework of each of Murdoch's novels (Byatt, *Degrees* 184). In *The Disciplined Heart: Iris Murdoch and Her Novels* (1966), Peter Wolfe argues that Murdoch emphasises particularity and displays in her novels "a theoretical-descriptive approach" (Wolfe 4). Influenced by this argument,

early critics tend to call Murdoch a “philosophical novelist” and ascribe the complexity of her works to the application of metaphysical doctrines or notions (Baldanza 176; Bradbury, *Under the Net* 47). Given that art is not just an extension of philosophy, the label critics bestowed on Murdoch seems to simplify her moral tendencies and lacks a historical approach to her works from different periods. Such a mode of criticism privileges ideas by reducing literary interpretation to thematics, as if the novels are there to explore the philosophy.

The second group of critics tend to steer their attention away from Murdoch’s philosophy towards the investigation of her characterisation, plotting, and storytelling. The most distinguished critic is Lorna Sage; her article “The Pursuit of Imperfection” (1977) argues that “the most sensational twists of [Murdoch’s] plotting are in effect plots against plots, the author’s subversive response to the design of her characters” (Sage, *Pursuit* 62). After Sage, many academic monographs on similar subjects appeared, such as Richard Todd’s *Iris Murdoch: The Shakespearian Interest* (1979) and *Iris Murdoch* (1984), Angela Hague’s *Iris Murdoch’s Comic Vision* (1984), and Deborah Johnson’s *Iris Murdoch* (1987). The common ground of these books is that they locate the novels within specific literary concerns: Murdoch’s “traditionalistic stance”, or her “comic treatment of realistic and tragic subject matter”, or her relation to “female Gothic, her reading and understanding of Freud, and ... handling of love and sexuality” (Todd, *Shakespearian Interest* 120; Hague, *Comic Vision* 143; Johnson xiv). Moreover, there is a trend towards an essential breakup of the connection between Murdoch’s literature and philosophy. In *Language Lost and Found: On Iris Murdoch and the Limits of Philosophical Discourse* (2013), Niklas Forsberg claims that “these two forms of human endeavours to gain self-understanding can, and should, be challenging to each other” (Forsberg 2). Instead, Forsberg’s work gives a detailed examination of Murdochian language in the light of ordinary language philosophy. It focuses on “a general loss of concepts, the loss of a moral and political vocabulary” rather than on Murdoch’s own narrative “remedy” for such conceptual loss (119). The limitation of such a criticism is that it understates the moral dimensions of the novel by

over-stressing its literary-linguistic preoccupations, which tends to make the reading incomplete and obscure.

The third group offers a more profound and systematic study of Murdoch's philosophical and novelistic discourses, while drawing attention to her indebtedness to and correlation with other philosophers. They extend the borders of Murdochian research, for example to include the tension and fantasy in one's inner life, as suggested in Elizabeth Dipple's *Iris Murdoch: Work for the Spirit* (1982) and Gabriele Griffin's *The Influence of the Writings of Simone Weil on the Fiction of Iris Murdoch* (1993). By analysing the good and demonic characters in Murdoch's novels, Dipple expounds on Murdoch's attention to both "the eternal other of Platonic reality and traditional literary realism" (Dipple, *Work for the Spirit* 5). Griffin also suggests that Murdoch depicts a reality of "inner life", which "[transcends] immediate social and historical conditions" yet "can be subject to metonymic distortion due to the over-riding importance given to the inner self" (Griffin 43). In "Iris Murdoch and the Domain of the Moral", Lawrence A. Blum further explores the "Murdochian aspect" of morality, that is, the idea that moral agents are obliged to perceive another individual truly and lovingly (Blum, *Domain* 343). He compares Murdoch with Bernard Williams, Thomas Nagel, and Samuel Scheffler, and argues that Murdoch advocates "an identification of morality with an impersonal, impartial, objective point of view" (360). Such a moral approach was further shaped by *Iris Murdoch and the Search for Human Goodness* (1996), a critical volume including essays from philosophers, theologians, and literary critics. Edited by Maria Antonaccio and William Schweiker, the book explores Murdoch's thoughts on human goodness, and at the same time engages with themes such as the relationship between literature and ethics (Antonaccio & Schweiker xi-xii).

Following these ideas, recent works, such as Ann Rowe and Avril Horner's *Iris Murdoch and Morality* (2010) and Maria Antonaccio's *A Philosophy to Live By: Engaging Iris Murdoch* (2012), tend to enquire further into the ethical sphere of Murdoch studies, claiming that Murdoch's novels can function as a secular space for moral reflection (Rowe & Horner 1; Antonaccio, *Philosophy* 9). In *Iris Murdoch:*

Philosophical Novelist (2010), Miles Leeson includes within the scope of the philosophical novel “a discussion of morals and ethics, the role and function of society, the role of art in human lives and the development of human knowledge through personal experience” (Leeson 11). This definition develops from Murdoch’s own, yet differs from hers in the sense that she equates it with “a crystalline form that she wished to avoid as she believed it would impact negatively on narrative development” (4). Leeson probes into the history of Murdoch’s philosophy and argues that its presence in her novels is more phenomenological than linear, and that the traces of philosophers such as Plato, Freud, Heidegger, and Wittgenstein make her fiction a continual working through of her philosophy.

Despite the above criticism on various aspects of Murdoch’s writings, there has been insufficient work on the specific ways in which her narrative form constitutes a mode of imaginative thought, over and above the ideas of her moral philosophy, and there has been not enough study of the exploratory nature of her narrative form through her career. The first group views Murdoch as an author of “philosophical fabulous novels”, which often “deal with serious moral questions in a mode touched by fantasy”; the second group claims that Murdoch uses her novels to “explore artistic dilemmas” and that their complexity lies in their labyrinthine form and ambiguity in plot (Alexander 370; Heusel, *Patterned Aimless* 156). The problem is that they both impose too much upon the novels, overreaching either ethically or aesthetically. As for the third group, despite their orientation towards moral thinking, they are still extracting philosophy from the novels. The present thesis tends to build upon that of the first group, but aims in a different direction. It questions the label of “philosophical novelist” by differentiating Murdoch from Sartre and Camus, and yet it refutes the segregation between philosophy and literature by illustrating her pursuit of common themes such as love, goodness, and truth in both her art and moral philosophy. This thesis tries not to suggest that philosophy comes before the novel, or that the novel produces answers to the philosophy. Instead, it explores Murdoch’s novelistic engagement with philosophical subjects, such as the line between delusion and reality (with reference to

Plato's cave allegory), the confrontation of self and other (as the central problem in existential philosophy), and the relationship of God to Good; all of these are particularly relevant to Murdoch's moral vision. Interest centres upon the moral reasons behind her literary techniques and the interactions and overlaps between the two; it emphasises a literary engagement with philosophical concepts that does not result in the kind of "philosophical novels" repudiated by Murdoch. The following chapters are therefore able to make significant contributions to the exploratory and historical analysis of Murdoch's novels, as well as wider contributions to the ways in which we think about narrative and morality.

As is explicit in the title, my thesis looks to examine "moral questions" rather than "ethical questions". "Morality" can be defined as a systematic "standard of conduct", and ethics can be defined as "the systematic... attempt to understand rationally the evaluation of conduct" (Lee 453, 456). I argue that Murdoch's work is specifically interested in the moral dimension of literature, in exploring how human beings interact with moral frameworks, rather than in systematically considering ethical questions *per se*. Murdoch herself preferred the term "morality", putting forward the concept of "moral vision", about "how we see the world as human beings in a way that is shaped by our moral beliefs and concepts... our attitudes to the world and how we mentally respond to things we encounter in it" (Cooper & Lawson-Frost 64). I follow Murdoch's terminology because it is attuned with elements within her thinking, including her individualistic views regarding moral choices. As the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2022) argues, Murdoch "developed a unique form of Platonic moral realism not readily assimilated or even comparable to any of the dominant approaches to ethics in 20th century Anglo-American philosophy" (Blum, Stanford n.pag.). The term "morality" is also used by other Murdoch scholars, including in Heather Widdows's 2005 monograph *The Moral Vision of Iris Murdoch*. The concept of morality is preferred because it enables us to dig more deeply into the particularity of Murdoch's profoundly personal literary and philosophical vision.

What drives this research is the assumption that there are certain ways for

philosophy to get into fiction and subtly affect the novelistic narrative. On the one hand, philosophy in the novel does not have to mean the subordination of fiction to philosophical purposes; on the other hand, the novel can itself be an effective mode of moral thought. In her philosophical essays, Murdoch urges that people should abandon their selfishness and learn to live in harmony with others: “Moral change comes from an attention to the world whose natural result is a decrease in egotism through an increased sense of the reality of primarily, of course, other people, but also other things.” (Murdoch, *Metaphysics* 52). She places love and attention at the very core of her moral philosophy. These concepts not only pervade the plots and themes of her novels, but also inspire her to explore new forms of narration and characterisation. In this sense, Murdoch’s novelistic exploration of moral ideas is central to her aesthetic, which seems sometimes to clash with the aesthetics of realism that she espouses. Yet for Murdoch, the concept of realism itself is quite unconventional.

For some critics, Murdoch’s preference for writing in the realist mode “enacts a retreat into the safety of an anti-modernist position”; for others, her stance challenges the prevalent idea at the time that the novel can only revive by means of radical experiments (Leavis 136). Unravelling this problem requires an examination of the premises of realistic writing. Henry James declared that “the air of reality (solidity of specification) seems to me to be the supreme virtue of a novel” (James 12). Realism is not a narrative prototype; it is rather an approach to representing the materiality of existence. It is more of a responsive process towards a plurality of social scenes. There seems to be an unresolved tension in Murdoch’s works between the narrative unfolding of a realistic “solidity of specification” and the inward impulse towards moral generalisation. There is also a tension in modern novels in general, a struggle between what Murdoch terms “journalistic” and “crystalline” writing. In the depiction of physical settings, Murdoch visualises even the most subtle details and colours them with social and historical particularity. She tends to maintain an impersonal narration by distancing herself from her protagonists. However, literature is not a naturalistic investigation or an elimination of personality. The story is after all invented by the

author, and therefore inextricable from authorial intention. Murdoch is oriented towards realism through imagination and attention, which need to be further differentiated from fantasy and consolation.

It seems problematic that despite Murdoch's distrust of patterns and form, there seems to be a certain recurrence in her narratives: a melancholy, middle-class protagonist, dwelling in either a very busy city (such as London in *Under the Net*, *Bruno's Dream* and *The Black Prince*) or a remote manor (such as Imber Court in *The Bell* and Shruff End in *The Sea, the Sea*), who seeks a meaningful life among contingent events, falling in and out of love, and ending up in frustration and even self-hatred. In "The Romantic Miss Murdoch", Malcolm Bradbury maintains that her novels "have grown more and more formalised, so that we lose not only the sense of recognition, the sense that the problems explored here matter in life, but even the sense that these problems originate in life" (Bradbury, Romantic 293). Murdoch is in this sense accounted a modified romanticist with philosophical complexity, giving rein to form-making and fantasy, creating novels to formula (293).

Is Murdoch's formalised "fable" an opaque rendering of romantic emotions, or some extended version of realistic narrative? Does it lead to the over-stressing of individual experience and hence the idealisation of characters? To what extent is it related to Murdoch's moral beliefs? What kind of reality do her novels represent if they do not "originate in life"? These questions serve as the main topics of the thesis. It is intended as both a diachronic analysis of Murdochian fictional rhetoric and an investigation into this rhetoric's relations with her moral concepts. The thesis also explores the general, theoretical question on how narrative form integrates with the author's moral thinking. It probes the ways in which Murdoch struggles between artistic form and the freedom of characters, and how moral philosophy is taken up in novelistic discourse, by surveying her novels, philosophical treatises, literary criticism, and interviews. The indebtedness of her moral thought to her predecessors will also be explored: for instance, the ideas of Eros from Plato and Freud, suffering and attention from Simon Weil, the sublime from Kant, ordinary language from Wittgenstein, and

freedom from Sartre.

Although Plato criticised the illusiveness and irrationality of literary representation, philosophy and poetry seem to achieve a balance in Murdoch's works in a delicate way. But unlike philosophical novelists such as Sartre and Camus, Murdoch enlarged the horizon of storytelling by assimilating her moral ideas and values into novelistic creations without reducing them to rigid embodiments of philosophical propositions. Reciprocally, Murdoch's negotiation with the realist tradition is closely related to her exploration of truth. Her characters are depicted as "pilgrims" to goodness and searchers for better selves. Yet they are not driven by a preordained morality; what she aims for is not a "top-down" illustration of a conceptual scheme, but rather a "bottom-up" quest for ethical orientation. By attending to Murdoch's way of integrating art and morals, the thesis shall explore how, in a fictional world beneath the net of words, moral philosophy is engaged, in a way distinct from the idea of the philosophical novel, through the incubation of vivid characters, absorbing plots, illuminating ideas, and profound literary themes.

Many scholars have discussed aspects of the relation between fiction and philosophy, and the broad dialogue between the disciplines of literary studies and philosophy is the larger context for this thesis. In 1960, Hans-Georg Gadamer published *Truth and Method*, combining philosophical and literary concerns into the concept of "literary hermeneutics", aligned with the effort to "understand an author better than he understood himself" (Gadamer 553). In *Narrative as Rhetoric: Technique, Audiences, Ethics, Ideology* (1996), James Phelan appeals to philosophical pragmatism in order to develop his fundamental premise that narrative is rhetoric. Recently, Michael Boylan's *Fictive Narrative Philosophy: How Fiction Can Act as Philosophy* (2019) argues that professional philosophers should welcome fictive narrative philosophy, in contrast to "direct discourse philosophy", into their study because, unlike the latter, fictive narrative philosophy is always comfortable not to seek certainty (Boylan 215). Boylan pleads for a "truce" between philosophy and literature departments in universities (217), insisting that philosophy has been influenced by fiction, as well as the other way around,

as in the case of the philosopher-novelist Maurice Blanchot.

With regard to novels specifically, David Herman has recently identified six “points of contact” between philosophy and the novel: “(1) Philosophy in the novel, (2) philosophy of the novel, (3) novels illustrating or exemplifying philosophical schemes, concepts, or models, (4) novels about particular philosophers, (5) the philosophical resonance of novelistic form, and (6) polygeneric discourse in which the novelistic and the philosophical intermix.” (Herman n.pag.). My thesis focuses primarily upon the first and fifth of Herman’s points of contact. Concerning the first category, I examine how Murdoch identifies, as a novelist, with the nineteenth-century tradition of realism, depicting ordinary people in ordinary surroundings, engaged in everyday activities. Meanwhile, Murdoch is also a Platonist, who gives precedence to ideal representations of the empirical world. This results in an interesting tension in her idea of realism, which the thesis addresses through the contradictory aspects of Murdoch’s self-described realist novels. It argues that her aesthetic strategies go beyond a narrow sense of realism, focusing more on an orientation towards moral totality. The philosophical resonance of novelistic form comes to the fore, for example, in my account of Murdoch’s “net of words”, which refers to the narrative strategies she adopts in her novels. It is the artifice of representation, a net of abstraction, suggesting a tension between the real world and how it is represented in the novel. It also refers to the net of language in the Wittgensteinian sense, as explained in the thesis’s first chapter.

While my thesis does not argue for any one large-scale theory, it is inspired by theoretical writings. In *The Rhetoric of Fictionality* (2007), Richard Walsh claims that fiction is set apart from nonfiction by its use of “narrative understanding”, fiction’s “rhetorical distinctiveness” consisting in its use of “the particular as a way of *thinking* generality” (Walsh 51). Coming from a different angle, Dorrit Cohn has made a persuasive case for the distinctiveness of fiction compared with historical writing and, by extension, other modes of written discourse. Cohn’s argument is an implicit criticism of scholars like Hayden White and Dominick LaCapra, who argue that historical writing and fiction share some principles and techniques, to the point of risking an apparent

conflation of the two. These ideas offer a useful way of thinking through the respects in which Murdoch's novels offered her a unique mode of philosophical reflection. In several chapters, I discuss how Murdoch uses literary techniques to problematise the aesthetic experience and link it to the individual's particular moral experience. Jake in *Under the Net*, Dora in *The Bell* and Charles in *The Sea, the Sea* all experience epiphanies when they face moral dilemmas, attaining a sort of aesthetic purification as well as moral purification when their attention is turned towards something external and objective. But such experiences are not necessarily beneficial, and can lead to a false interpretation of their lives. For Murdoch, the depiction of aesthetic experience is a crucial part of her negotiation with moral philosophy in novelistic discourse.

In his article "Why Narrative Matters: Philosophy, Method, Theory", Mark Freeman claims that narrative is philosophically necessary, methodologically necessary, and theoretically necessary, in order to understand the experiences of people. It is philosophically necessary because we "exist in a state of self-alienation, inner otherness, and are consequently unable through conscious reflection to find the answers we seek to the questions we have about who and what we ultimately are" – narrative offers a less direct but more reliable way of answering these questions (Freeman 140). Narrative is methodologically necessary because of the way it allows us to explore the real messiness of life through the particularity of the story. It is necessary theoretically because it is through relation to "the Other" that we are able to understand our own experience (150). In all three respects this argument usefully bears upon Murdoch's novels. Through her narratives, Murdoch attempts to transcend her own self-alienation and declines to reduce the messiness of life to general principles. In doing so, as discussed in Chapter 3, she also calls for attention to the other, rather than to one's own selfish obsessions.

The thesis not only surveys Murdoch's works but also involves a study of the development of her artistic views. The order of the novels discussed in the thesis follows the order in which they were written. They are works which not only show distinctive forms but also relate to complex narrative issues. Each chapter of the thesis

explores an aspect of novelistic discourse primarily, and relates it, more circumstantially, to the aspect of moral philosophy that arises in the novel concerned. The problems of self and other, fantasy and imagination, truth and fiction, contingency and necessity will be explored. By means of these analyses, it will argue that the mode of narration in Murdoch's novels reflects her treatment of the tension between form and truth, and that the moral view behind it is more one of open-ended dialogue than a fixed formula. Her notions of the ideal artistic narrative will emerge more clearly once we rid ourselves of the idea that the novels are the instruments of a professional philosopher, and start investigating the actions of characters and the movement of plot in their own right.

This thesis has chosen to focus on five of Iris Murdoch's most celebrated novels which had an especially wide readership: *Under the Net* (1954), *The Bell* (1958), *Bruno's Dream* (1969), *The Black Prince* (1973) and *The Sea, the Sea* (1978). These novels are discussed in the order they were written in, as a cross-section of Murdoch's literary career, because this allows us to trace her development across her early, middle, and later phases. In *Iris Murdoch's Paradoxical Novels: Thirty Years of Critical Reception* (2001), Barbara Stevens Heusel reviewed different critical interpretations of Murdoch's novels and found three phases – the early stage (1954–1968), the major or mature stage (1968–1973), and the late stage (1973–1995) (Heusel, *Paradoxical* 5). The five novels chosen enable us to identify examples of the most distinctive methods used by Murdoch. *Under the Net* was Murdoch's first published novel, with interesting evidence of Murdoch's narrative methods and philosophical beliefs at an early stage. The late novel *The Sea, the Sea* has a combination of elements that are found in the other four novels. In the thesis, I also draw on Murdoch's other novels whenever possible, as well as referencing other novels from contemporaries.

This thesis is not a systematic reading of Murdoch's oeuvre. It attends to specific themes in her novelistic discourse, including first-person male narration, irony, intertextuality, and metafiction, connecting them with broader issues in literary criticism without imposing a formula for the relationship between Murdoch's narratives and moral philosophy. The thesis is not predicated upon the subordination of fiction to

philosophical purposes because the novel itself can be an effective mode for moral thought. Its central research questions are: how does Murdoch's philosophy influence her narrative choices? How do her novels become an effective medium of moral imagination? How does Murdoch integrate her novelistic form with moral concepts? How does this open up the genre of the realist novel? Are there tensions between Murdoch's idealism and realism?

This thesis focuses on Iris Murdoch, instead of choosing a multi-author approach, for several key reasons. A similar case could have been made with reference to novels by Joseph Conrad and Anthony Burgess, for instance, but a single-author approach reveals distinctive authorial characteristics most closely. Murdoch is a special case because of the specific relations between philosophy and literature in her works. As she many times claimed, philosophy and literature are separate domains. Although this is sometimes partly contradicted in her own writing, it is also the case that Murdoch conveys different views in her novels and in her philosophical writing. Literature and philosophy are not aligned but rather entangled within her works. More so than with other modern authors, it is not the agreement but the conflict and tension between literature and philosophy in her writing that makes her distinctive. Such a focus on Murdoch is a corrective to the tendency of recent scholarship to undervalue her work. Although there is small group of specialists with an interest in Murdoch, including in the Iris Murdoch Society, her novels have been given relatively little attention in the mainstream of academic literary studies.

The first novel to be discussed in the thesis, *Under the Net* (1954), is an ironic comedy, with a deeply self-conscious protagonist, Jake Donaghue. It narrates a series of picaresque adventures in London and Paris. The novel is concerned with the idea, "not of physical nature, but of our surroundings as consisting of other individual men"; the object of Jake's attention is not the vast formless natural world, but "the spectacle of human life" full of contingencies (Murdoch, *Sublime and Beautiful* 269). The novel contains philosophical sparkles which suggest the author's existential stance and indebtedness to Sartre and Wittgenstein. It not only depicts the transitions Jake goes

through but also exhibits Murdoch's views on art and morals. By a close examination of Jake's unreliable narration, chapter one suggests that there is a battle between real people and images in Murdoch's novelistic discourse. Her perspective underlies Jake's moral quests, but at the same time she maintains a separateness from the solipsistic protagonist. Moreover, Murdoch expresses her doubts about language in the novel. Influenced by Wittgenstein, she views language as abstract and ambiguous; it is beyond language to represent the contingency of surroundings and the particularity of other people. In order to loosen the constraints of the net of language, Murdoch adopts different strategies to demonstrate the tension between the form of narrative and the contingency of content. The chapter probes into Murdoch's use of a first-person male narrator (which is also frequently employed in her later novels) and explains it in the larger context of her moral philosophy. Jake's growth into a novelist is paralleled with his progress as an individual and explored with reference to Plato's Cave allegory.

The second chapter of the thesis discusses the novelistic representation of power, attention, and goodness in *The Bell* (1958). The novel deals with a basic Murdochian theme, that is, the moral tensions caused by fantasies of power. It adopts a third-person limited point of view; the focalisation of each chapter moves between its three main characters. By probing into the Gothic elements of the novel, this chapter underlines the tension between exterior reality and the inner world of fantasy, which is embodied in the characters' use and abuse of power. In the end, Dora Greenfield's act of leaving Imber Court signifies her liberation from the moral forces that would deny her artistic nature, while Michael's moral dilemma is left unsolved as he is a victim of his own dark power. The chapter also surveys the concepts of vision and choice in Murdoch's moral views, and argues that both the romance and realist elements are manifestations of her search for an ideal artistic form. It probes into the discrepancy in Murdoch's philosophical and novelistic discourses: her novel aims for an empirical method but her moral stance is fundamentally idealistic. Through a comparative study of Murdoch and Lukács's ideas of totality, the chapter explores the tension between the contingencies of realism and the formalism of ideas, abstractions, and types in the romance tradition,

as well as Murdoch's reasons for aligning herself with nineteenth-century realism.

The third chapter observes the imaginative approaches towards artistic truth in *Bruno's Dream* (1969), a novel which was shortlisted for the Booker-McConnell Prize in 1970 and which has long been categorised as one of Murdoch's "closed" novels. The chapter challenges the nature of "open" and "closed" novels and connects them to Murdoch's exploration of literary realism. The sub-plots of the characters are examined with relation to each other; the roles they play are analysed on two levels: the functional and the ethical. As the distinction between "open" and "closed" novels echoes the emphases of the realist and naturalistic traditions, Murdoch seems to deviate from the experience-oriented tradition she generally proclaims. The chapter argues that in the fictional world of *Bruno's Dream*, realism is decided not by the novel's means but by its ends. Murdoch writes in a mode of psychological realism in which the characters' thoughts, feelings, and expectations are investigated with relation to her moral realism. She treats realism as an escape from the self, and further suggests a division between selfhood and the overcoming of selfhood as opposed to the received division between the empirical real and the Platonic "Real". The synthesis between Murdoch's morals and narrative is more of a special prescription than an easy formula. Her building the story upon ideas is an assimilation of naturalism rather than a submission to it. Besides the references to mysticism, the theme of Liebestod, and the synthesis of dream and reality, the novel is abundant in metaphors and symbols, which will be elucidated in the chapter as aspects of Murdoch's enrichment of the realist tradition.

In the fourth chapter, the thesis explores the artistic representation of truth in *The Black Prince* (1973). With an ingenious structure, the novel presents within itself a narrative contestation – as if it is a re-trial of the protagonist Bradley Pearson, in which the suspect's narrative self-defence contends with the four appended witnesses' testimonies. The line between what is represented and what really happens becomes ambiguous, for the story is mediated, reorganised, and even distorted by various characters' motives. The chapter analyses this narrative contestation in relation to Murdoch's uses of irony, intertextuality, and metafiction in the novel. It focuses on the

fictionality of the story and examines Murdoch's meditations on truth and moral goodness. The chapter argues that there is a duality in Bradley's narrative identity, articulated through his reflections upon the themes of love and art; the story is told from the perspective of his past self, but is commented on the light of his present wisdom. Moreover, the chapter explores the concept of black Eros in Bradley's art and morals. It argues that Bradley strives to pursue the creative Eros and devote himself to the god of art, who is reified in the character P. A. Loxias. Through first-person narration, Murdoch examines artistic representation's accountability to truth. She adds the forewords and postscripts to Bradley's story and casts doubts on his moral pilgrimage. By distinguishing "blind fantasy" from "visionary imagination", Murdoch denounces the protagonist's embrace of the black Eros, and argues that the artist has to overcome his or her personal ego in order to obtain a truthful vision of the world.

The fifth chapter focuses on the moral significance of the novelistic form in *The Sea, The Sea* (1978). Murdoch views metaphors not merely as rhetorical devices, but also as "fundamental forms of our awareness of our condition: metaphors of space, metaphors of movement, metaphors of vision" (Murdoch, *Sovereignty* 363). *The Sea, The Sea* embodies a metaphor of fiction itself, which lies beneath the autobiographical narrative of Charles Arrowby's life. This chapter connects the artistic form of the novel with the narrator's consciousness and moral vision, exploring how reality can be distorted by personal fantasies, and how artistic form can be a false consolation. Charles claims to be a truth-seeking artist, yet he is often haunted by a grotesque sentimentality in his narration. He meets the woman he loved more than forty years ago and becomes obsessed with her, despite the fact that she is now much changed and terribly boring. He acts like a powerful "magician" and brings suffering to the people around him. By examining the gap between the narrator's self-justifications and what really happens, the chapter argues that Charles imposes his egoism upon the storytelling and in a sense tries to shape his life into a story form. His moral vision is compared to that of James, the saintly figure in the novel. By focusing on symbolism, allusion, and intertextuality in Charles's narrative, the chapter explores the multiple layers of the plot and

Murdoch's negotiation between freedom and form, life and art, and facts and fiction.

Apart from the close reading of the novels described above, the thesis also treats Murdoch's writings as a whole and seeks to draw other novels into the framework of the research. As an heir to the Western philosophical tradition, Murdoch learns from Platonism, Kantianism, utilitarianism, behaviourism, and French existentialism. By blending various thoughts in literary creation, she manages to provide an incisive view of good and evil, contingency and inevitability, religion and secularity, and the ethical dilemmas of humanity. Murdoch holds a Platonic world view which relates the complications of human relationships to the form of the Good. As a kind of mediation between illusion and reality, her novels are concerned with narrative form as well as moral thinking. For Murdoch, art is not just the imitation of personal experiences; it can invite beauty and reveal truth. Murdoch is different from Plato in that she believes in the truthfulness of represented reality. She strives to acquire an art which "pierces the veil and gives sense to the notion of a reality which lies beyond appearance" (Murdoch, *Sovereignty* 372). At the same time, there is always a tension between form and content in Murdoch's works: the "form-maker", or the novelist, tends to impose a self-conscious pattern upon the story, whereas it is also her job to maintain an impersonal voice, or an objectivity detached from the particular content. Good art, as Murdoch argues, "reveals what we are usually too selfish and too timid to recognise, the minute and absolutely random detail of the world, and reveals it together with a sense of unity and form" (371). In her novels, Murdoch strives to offer a realistic vision with compassion and exhibit "virtue in its true guise in the context of death and chance" (372). In this thesis, it is my intention to explore the ways in which Murdoch's content interacts with artistic form, and her narrative interacts with moral thoughts. As soon as one starts thinking about morality when reading Murdoch, one will notice its presence almost everywhere in her works. And to attain such a vision is, to me, the best reward of Murdochian research.

Chapter One: *Under the Net* and First-person Narration

Under the Net is Iris Murdoch's first published novel, and is viewed by some critics as her best. For example, in "The Anti-artist; The Case of Iris Murdoch", L. R. Leavis argues that the novel is "probably [Murdoch's] best" because it contains "real vitality", whereas "later novels show more traces of a ponderous thematic emphasis behind the humour" (Leavis 138). Upon publication, the novel was soon associated with the "angry" movement of the period – the plot of the novel is loosely structured, the tone satirical, the protagonist disgruntled with his status, the theme picaresque, and the social situations depicted with scorn and ironic humour. Frederick Karl claims in *A Reader's Guide to the Contemporary English Novel* that the novel "fits into the humorous pattern set by Kingsley Amis in *Lucky Jim* (1954) and John Wain in *Hurry on Down* (1953)" and that Jake Donaghue, the protagonist, is one of those popular characters who "maintains his own kind of somewhat dubious integrity and tries to make his way without forsaking his dignity, an increasingly difficult accomplishment in a world which offers devilish rewards for loss of integrity and dignity" (Karl 260). Dale Salwak further asserts that Amis, Wain, and Murdoch are "a trio of rebellious young writers" who "seemed to express similar concerns about social and cultural values, had attended Oxford, and taught for a time at provincial universities"; he categorises them together as "Angry Young Men", and claims that their characters share "a vague discontent, sometimes anger, and a yearning for someone or something out of their reach" (Salwak 296-297). In "Two Types of 'Heroes' in Post-War British Fiction", William Van O'Connor also defines Jake Donaghue as "an unsettled hero in an unsettled world", who has "a family resemblance to Joe Lumley, Lucky Jim and Billy Fisher" (O'Connor, Types 171). There seems to be consensus that *Under the Net* is clothed with an intangible net of "anger"; its hero is seen as a frustrated and purposeless wanderer in an unequal and unpredictable society.

Do the picaresque dimensions of Murdoch's first novel make it an angry protest against the social alienation and class privileges of the post-war era? Murdoch's later

writings prove that she was somewhat different from her “angry” contemporaries. As later critics observed, she was “not angry, but decidedly speculative” and her work was more closely “related to that of Beckett and the French existentialists and surrealists than to the eighteenth-century comic novels which Amis and Wain admired” (Bradbury, *A House* 232; Byatt, Murdoch 5). “Angry” is one of the first labels imposed upon Murdoch, and far from the last; but her distinctive moral perspectives and narrative strategies make it hard to fit her to any of them. On the surface, *Under the Net* is a comic novel about the modern twisted relationships between four main characters – Jake, Anna, Hugo, and Sadie – each of whom is in love with a person who loves another. But on a closer look, it is a fine epitome of much in Murdoch’s subsequent art and moral thought. In fact, many of Murdoch’s constantly used devices can be traced back to this novel. Its first-person male narration, for instance, is a key method in her writing, also adopted in *A Severed Head* (1961), *The Italian Girl* (1964), *The Black Prince* (1973), *A Word Child* (1975), and *The Sea, The Sea* (1978). The way Murdoch’s use of first-person perspective and a male narrator serves her literary purposes will be the main focus of this chapter.

I propose to explore a key difference between Murdoch’s early work and that of her “angry” contemporaries, which is her interest in morals rather than the political or historical manners of post-war society. Her adoption of first-person narration is itself one of her means to approach artistic truth, and is loaded with moral significance. In the novel, “under the net” is the world of reality; above it is the world of appearance. And the net itself is woven by Jake Donaghue’s hypotheses, theories, and assumptions, which are enhanced as well as embodied by the fascination with language in his first-person narration. This chapter will investigate the interrelation of Jake’s artistic and moral views, his dual role as character and narrator, the imagery of his self-centred “universe” and how it is opened up by the contingencies of life, and finally, Murdoch’s own artistic and moral pursuit through such a narrative strategy. It will also centrally explore the tension between language and agency embodied in Jake’s narration. Jake undergoes afflictions that lead him to a new moral vision; despite still being “ragged,

inglorious, and apparently purposeless” by the end of the novel, he is filled with literary creativity and feels ready for a whole new life (Murdoch, *Under the Net* 282). My reading, then, concerns the ways Murdoch’s thematic exploration of the unity of her narrator’s mind and objective reality is combined with a moral enquiry into his form-making and truth-seeking activities.

1.1 The Story through First-person Narration

Before the publication of *Under the Net* in 1954, Murdoch had already written extensively on literature and philosophy, in “The Novelist as Metaphysician” (1950), “The Existentialist Hero” (1950), “Sartre’s *The Emotions: Outline of a Theory*” (1950), “De Beauvoir’s *The Ethics of Ambiguity*” (1950), “The Image of the Mind” (1951), “Thinking and Language” (1951), “Nostalgia for the Particular” (1952), “The Existentialist Political Myth” (1952), and *Sartre: Romantic Rationalist* (1953). Murdoch’s ideas on literary form and contingency are closely linked to her moral philosophy, and her use of a first-person male narrator can be understood within this framework. By adopting a male narrator, she both exploits the presumed empowerment and self-determination of a male protagonist, and emphasises the discursive distance between the first-person narrator and the author. In Murdoch’s early novels, the retelling of one’s own story is conceived as the narrator’s self-deceiving endeavour to impose a form on contingent events, by furnishing them with plausible causation and temporal sequence. However, the reality proves intractable: the narrator tries to centre the plot on himself but his visions are constantly undermined by other people’s statements. Solipsism makes him blind to the fact that the perspectives of other characters differ from, and even contradict, his own stance. As the story proceeds, contingent events make the narrator more frustrated and agonized before he finally comes to a moral epiphany. Murdoch’s later novels develop the framework of form and contingency to the extent that the male narrator includes all other characters in his fantasy so as to satisfy his need for form. There is no clear distinction between figures in life and in art; the narrator will countenance almost anything to keep his fantasy intact, even self-

destruction (as in the case of the imprisonment and death of Bradley Pearson in *The Black Prince*).

Under the Net exemplifies Murdoch's early approach to literary creation. The story includes an articulate male protagonist, a plot guided by contingencies, and a thematic quest for truth; at the same time, it is filled with "childish merriment and jeux d'esprit" (Sagare 702). The novel is narrated by Jake Donaghue with a comic tone, relating to a sequence of things that happen to him after he becomes homeless. Similar to the protagonists of other contemporary novels, Jake is a resentful "outsider" alienated, trapped in a net (whether social, political or linguistic), overwhelmed with the burden of existence – it seems impossible for him to construct an ordered life or a satisfying relationship, however hard he tries. A self-proclaimed writer and translator, over thirty, "talented, but lazy", Jake lives by translating mediocre French novels and lodging in other people's flats (Murdoch, *Under the Net* 21). Returning from Paris to London, Jake finds that he and his distant relative Finn have been thrown out of the flat of his lover Madge. Lacking money to rent a room of his own, he begins to seek help from others, first from his philosopher friend David Gellman, then from his old lover Anna Quentin, a singer who now runs a mime theatre, and at last from Anna's film-star sister Sadie, who offers him a job as her housekeeper and bodyguard against her allegedly crazy wooer, Hugo Belfounder.

The novel then turns to a flashback about Jake's sentimental entanglement with Hugo, a rich manufacturer whom he had met in the Cold Cure Research Centre. Jake recorded his philosophical conversations with Hugo in a book called *The Silencer*; he subsequently broke off contact with Hugo out of guilt and timidity because the book distorted Hugo's ideas and was therefore a betrayal of their friendship. Back in the present, Jake accepts Sadie's job offer and then goes through a series of picaresque adventures. He looks for Hugo in various London bars, during which he meets Lefty Todd, leader of the New Independent Socialist Party. In one of the latter's revolutionary assemblies at the Bounty Belfounder studio, Jake reunites with Hugo on a Roman film set, but nothing comes of it. He later goes to France, when Madge summons him and

offers him a well-paid job. In Paris, he finds out that Jean-Pierre Breteuil, for whom he translates, has become a successful author. Surprised by the situation, Jake refuses Madge's job and then experiences a dream-like quest for Anna during the Bastille Day festivities. After coming back to London, he decides to work as an orderly in a hospital, hoping that manual work will give him a stronger sense of reality. He encounters Hugo again, who has been hospitalized after a head injury. Jake then manages to have a long conversation and an ultimate reconciliation with Hugo. He realizes that his previous understanding of others was totally mistaken, which is an epiphany as well as a lesson. He helps Hugo to escape from the hospital and sets out to create a book of his own. In appearance, Jake has returned to his situation at the beginning of the story, single and homeless; but his view of others has changed radically. He has become wiser and more mature in a moral and philosophical sense.

One of the central themes of *Under the Net* is the making of an artist. However, it does not conform to the conventions of the modern first-person *Künstlerroman*, such as James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Like Stephen Dedalus,¹ the protagonist Jake is portrayed as a self-proclaimed and self-fulfilling artist. He appears in the story as a translator, a *picaro*, an unsuccessful writer, neither rebellious nor compassionate, but just as proud, isolated, sentimental, and ambitious as Stephen. However, he is bound not by external constraints, but by his own solipsistic delusions. After a series of moral trials, Jake starts to conceive "things as they really are and not as he pleases", which might be considered one of the qualities of a real artist (52). In the case of Stephen, however, "history is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake" (Joyce 34). This announcement not only expresses a despair with history but also indicates an affirmation of self and subjectivity in the modern writer who privileges individuality over the collective. In Jake's case, everything is different. His progress is more unconscious than deliberate, but his direction is to get away from self-obsession

¹ Murdoch and Joyce share an Irish ethnicity. Born in Dublin but brought up as a Londoner, Murdoch identifies with exiles, refugees, and people who are spiritually displaced: "I feel as I grow older that we were kind of wanderers, and I've only recently realised that I'm a kind of exile, a displaced person" (White 7). Unlike Joyce, Murdoch's "Irishness" is not a strong affiliation, but rather an alienated attachment – an anguish at her native country's misfortune and a powerlessness with respect to the social and political status quo. The subject of diaspora is also invoked in *Under the Net*, through the Irish picaresque character, Finn.

and to behold things as objectively as possible.

The underlying reason is that while Joyce reacts against the classic nineteenth-century novel, Murdoch identifies with the realist tradition. Although they both create a literary protagonist, Murdoch, rather more than Joyce, resists treating her character as a spokesman for the author. Stephen's pursuit of his own vision, as Wayne Booth puts it, "is uncompromising"; his destination is "Joyce's heaven" (Booth 132). It is a pilgrimage and a disenchantment. "Disenchantment" is a term borrowed from Friedrich Schiller by Max Weber. According to Weber, "the disenchantment of the world lay right at the heart of Modernity" (Jenkins 12). It is a process by which the outer world becomes "defined, at least in principle, as knowable, predictable and manipulable by humans; conquered by and incorporated into the interpretive schema of science and rational government" (12). In Stephen's case, it is embodied in his extreme alienation from religion. But what Murdoch focuses on is the disparity between Jake's inner and outer life; she prefers to observe her character's moral judgements in life-like situations through the story. It is a process of projecting a perspective not her own (by using a male narrator) and of inviting readers to imagine that perspective (by adopting the first-person point of view). Just as Stephen's growth is a metaphor for the cultivation of a modernist writer like Joyce, Jake's progress can be seen as an echo of Murdoch's realist tendency and her moral enquiry into goodness and truth.

What distinguishes the novel from the *Künstlerroman* is not only Murdoch's deliberate distance from her male protagonist, but also the intricate integration of the first-person narration and her own moral stance. In "On 'God' and 'Good'", Murdoch suggests that "the enemy is the fat relentless ego" in the moral life and that truth is inseparable from the goodness she considers to be most straightforwardly embodied in "inarticulate, unselfish mothers of large families" (Murdoch, *God and Good* 342). The features of inarticulateness and unselfishness are an organic unity; the unselfishness of such mothers avoids judgement of others and resists abstraction from reality through language. The case is also a marginal one, however, precisely because of this self-sacrifice and silence. Contrary to such an example, the first-person narrators in

Murdoch's novels are usually wifeless and childless male professionals who are articulate and selfish, and who treat language as a way of imposing their power. Murdoch is good at describing delusions, misunderstandings, and self-deceptions; she believes that "written words are the helpless victims of man's ill will" (Murdoch, *Fire* 405). Her protagonists claim to be gifted in art, yet always feel unsatisfied with their writings; their perspective is egoistic and self-indulgent. They have typically "failed to pursue their true enthusiasms (history, languages), taking up instead jobs which palely reflect and even parody their creative and/or intellectual needs" (Johnson 5). Murdoch lets the male protagonist, who has been presumed rational, wise and powerful, tell and show us how he rationalizes his bad deeds, how he argues for his bias, how he repents in the time of punishment, and how he comes gradually to moral understanding. Her narrators' illusions, and the gender-biased assumptions of authority that underpin them, are exposed in the process. Driven by a sense of frustration, her narrators have to analyse themselves and people around them, so as to get away from the false patterns that dominate their lives. Murdoch makes them reveal in their own words the hardships they endure, as well as the destructive power of their solipsism.

In *Subjectivity and Selfhood: Investigating the First-Person Perspective*, Dan Zahavi proposes two notions of the self: firstly, self is a narrative construction which "is pinned on culturally relative narrative hooks and organized around a set of aims, ideals, and aspirations"; secondly, the self "possess[es] experiential reality", and consciousness of it is "a question of having first-personal access to one's own experiential life" (Zahavi 105, 106). Zahavi argues that the two notions are complementary, that narrators of stories should have the ability to distinguish self from nonself (114). In other words, there is a tension between the narrative self and the experiential self, which further implies an intrinsic gap between narration and truth in first-person narration. The novelistic "I" is essential in gaining insight into the reality of the story, but cannot be perceived as instituting fictional truth in the same way as an omniscient or limited third-person narrator. The narrator's status as a character and his self-awareness in the act of narration make his account potentially unreliable; the story

presented is therefore a combination of real events overlaid with his vision of them, which is likely to be inadequate and ego-ridden. Moreover, as Gillian Dooley argues, there is “a temporal distance between the narrating voice and the narrated events”, which tends towards “an unwittingly ironic betrayal of the narrator’s beliefs” (Dooley, *First-person* 135). In her novels, Murdoch not only presents how the self is constructed through narration, but also treats the self as an experiential agent; in doing so she delves into the moral issues of first-person perspective. She appeals to “contingency” in accounting for the disparity between illusion and reality, and she addresses the temporal displacement of narration, throwing it into relief by presenting other characters’ voices and bringing to light the narrator’s distortions of reality. These strategies become most prominent in her later novel *The Black Prince*, where four other subjective voices are counterpointed with Bradley Pearson’s own narration in the novel (see chapter four).

1.2 Contingency as Defeat of Self-obsession

In *Under the Net*, then, Jake is both the protagonist and the narrator; his narrative combines the perspective concurrent with his experiences in life and the retrospect from the occasion of narration. Jake’s own aesthetic and moral positions are central to an understanding of the novel. The events are all presented through his narration, and are therefore coloured by his interpretation. Jake is both the narrative’s participant “I-protagonist” and its biased and unreliable “I-narrator”; in both respects he is as fictional as other characters in the novel. At first, Jake neglects the effort to see others as they really are. He imposes his own views upon his image of others, as well as an orderly form upon the contingencies of life. He announces: “I hate contingency. I want everything in my life to have a sufficient reason” (Murdoch, *Under the Net* 26). It is hard for him to accept unexpectedness as both an artist and a person; he tries hard to maintain a regulated, objective image of life – “I would be at pains to put my universe in order and set it ticking” (9). There seems to be a filter in his mind – his egoistic vision – which makes him indifferent to other people’s concerns, as long as his own universe runs as normal. For instance, Jake believes that good women only exist in literary works,

that real women are “often inexperienced, inarticulate, credulous and simple” (31). This stereotype fits so well with his life that he never bothers to interrogate the image. Having lived with Madge for eighteen months, he does not even know that she is getting married, for he “never asked anything” (9). Similarly, on hearing about Hugo’s pestering of Sadie, Jake comes to an immediate conclusion that the girl is deceitful in this affair, because he has mystified the image of Hugo and “the idea of Hugo gone on Sadie had been extremely distasteful to me” (78). Jake conceives and organizes his life in a fixed way, which in turn defines who he is and how he presents reality. He has imposed his own pattern upon experiential phenomena.

Jake’s narration only begins after a series of unexpected events in life, which make him reluctantly turn his attention away from the self. He used to regard Finn as someone dependent on his being, observing, “I count Finn as an inhabitant of my universe, and cannot conceive that he has one containing me” (9). In the end, when Finn decides to go back to Ireland, Jake is stricken with repentance at the loss of a true friend – “I felt ashamed, ashamed of being parted from Finn, of having known so little about Finn, of having conceived things as I pleased and not as they were” (279). There is also a transition in Jake’s attitude towards Anna. As Malcolm Bradbury puts it, Anna embodies “an order of life from which Jake feels separated and which he yet feels the necessity to pursue” (Bradbury, *Under the Net* 49). In his Paris quest, Jake, caught in the mesh of delusion, struggles to follow Anna through the dispersing crowd of the Bastille Day festivities. What he looks for is a sign, a confirmation of his fantasy that “[their] embrace would close the circle of the years and begin the golden age” (Murdoch, *Under the Net* 218). When Anna makes for the Tuileries, Jake, feeling his heart leap “as the heart of Aeneas must have done when he saw Dido making for the cave”, shadows her (216). He assumes that Anna is remembering their past time together in Paris, as they often used to “go into the Tuileries gardens at night” (216). In the garden, Anna takes off her shoes, which are picked up by Jake. His pursuit becomes more urgent, but what he pursues is a phantom – he actually chases another woman who is wearing a similar white blouse. He becomes confused, mistaking appearance for reality and

illusion for being. He runs randomly, like a character in a dream, among the dark trees, statues, and couples, “like a lost dog” (219). This animal imagery intensifies the sense of his feelings and his loss of masculine command. Sitting by a tree, Jake waits hopelessly; his loss of sense of time marks a dissolution of self, not growth into knowledge. As the physical quest for Anna fails, the false image Jake has imposed on her also disappears:

I had no longer any picture of Anna. She faded like a sorcerer’s apparition; and yet somehow her presence remained to me, more substantial than ever before. It seemed as if, for the first time, Anna really existed now as a separate being and not as a part of myself. ... When does one ever know a human being? Perhaps only after one has realized the impossibility of knowledge and renounced the desire for it and finally ceased to feel even the need of it. But then what one achieves is no longer knowledge, it is simply a kind of co-existence; and this too is one of the guises of love. (268)

Jake finally learns the egotism of knowledge, as against the recognition of others as separate beings; love lies in “co-existence”. Such a progress is “clearly not only beneficial to the moral well-being of individuals, but to society as a whole” (Rowe 142). Jake is a defective inhabitant in Murdoch’s fictional world, but his unreliable narration does progress, through the pursuit of truth, towards a shedding of false images.

Jake’s artistic and moral views are ridden with ego and self-indulgence. He is contrasted in the novel with the saintly figure of Hugo, who believes that truth is inarticulate and who resists theorizing. The disparity between the two characters is physically obvious: Jake is short, slight, and sensitive, with “fair hair and sharp elfish features”, and Hugo “extremely large, both stout and tall”, with a huge head and “dark rather matted hair” (Murdoch, *Under the Net* 23, 63). Unlike Jake, Hugo is simple and honest, observant of details, and he disregards worldly success even though he “couldn’t help making money” (251). He is an embodiment of the “contingency” Jake used to hate; even his studio “is situated in a suburb of Southern London where

contingency reaches the point of nausea” (156). It is through his reunion with Hugo and because of the latter’s scepticism that Jake begins to steer his attention from himself to other people. In life Hugo is a manufacturer of fireworks and film, which, as Malcolm Bradbury observes, are instances of “impermanent and perishable art” (Bradbury, *House Fit* 242). Hugo is “interested in the theory of everything, but in a particular way”; he claims that “everything had a theory, and yet there was no master theory” (Murdoch, *Under the Net* 65). He prefers particularity to generalisation; he is an anti-theoretical thinker. Unlike Jake, Hugo refuses to impose a general form or theory on all the particularities. To use Jake’s words, Hugo “lacked both the practical interests and the self-conscious moral seriousness” of those who are usually dubbed idealists (64). Hugo is objective and detached, always focused on the details. He would spend hours asking Jake about questions of translation. Believing that there is no master theory, he is “opposed to description, even to language itself”; at one point he announces that “the whole language is a machine for making falsehoods” (68). He finds language a distortion of reality and rather believes that truth lies in action and in silence. Hence the only way of communicating, to him, is through actions.

Jake is impressed by Hugo’s insatiable desire to learn the theory behind particular processes and his refusal to find an underlying general theory which would unite these particular theories. Bradbury argues that the friendship with Hugo compels Jake to find a middle ground between theory and the inexpressible particularity of life (Bradbury, *House Fit* 243). Under Hugo’s influence, Jake has responded “to the individuality of others and to the demands of his own distinctive nature and his professional and social role” (245). It is essential for him to attend to the particular and to accept that life is often unpredictable. Hugo believes that it is futile to look for a general theory in life or in art. But his distrust of classification, of the general, explains his defective sense of himself as a causal agent. He assumes that every act, like every person or thing, is atomic; its consequences are unforeseen. His stance is problematic, but his belief that truth lies in real experiences, rather than in theory or generality, chimes with some of Murdoch’s own philosophical stance. In “Nostalgia for the Particular”, Murdoch claims

that language is based on “a world composed of recurrent and intrinsically meaningful entities” (Murdoch, *Nostalgia* 44). But it is hard to reach a total objectivity in art since its language is bound to a particular mental experience, which only speaks for itself. In “The Idea of Perfection”, Murdoch attacks the “current moral philosophy” for its imposing of “a single theory which admits of no communication with or escape into rival theories” (Murdoch, *Perfection* 299). Moral goodness, she argues, “is indefinable because judgements of value depend upon the will and choice of the individual” (301). Like Hugo, Murdoch is suspicious of general theory; she rather believes in the particularity of moral agents and moral judgements, but she also thinks that moral values cannot be inherent in objective reality. In the novel, the net of meaning is entangled with the net of language. What Jake narrates is not his particular and immediate experience in itself, but an ambiguous, one-sided, and intrinsically self-referential account of it.

Unable to develop an overall theory in life, Jake has to observe other people in a new way. Sadie’s betrayal, Finn’s unnoticed departure, the vain pursuit of Hugo and Anna – all add to the destruction of the former pattern in his life. Moreover, the fact that Jean-Pierre becomes a Prix Goncourt winner contributes to the remoulding of his attitude: “Jean-Pierre had no right to turn himself surreptitiously into a good writer. I felt that I had been the victim of an imposture, a swindle” (Murdoch, *Under the Net* 192). The situation wrenches him; again, the image he has imposed on Jean-Pierre collapses and “truth” is now apparent to him. Struck by “an indignant horror as at some monstrous reversal of the order of nature”, Jake is determined to create his own masterpiece (191). After returning to London, he goes back to Dave’s flat. For some time, he feels lassitude and despair – a bland version of the dark night of the soul. Restless, his sleep erratic, he looks at the blank, white walls of the hospital opposite Dave’s flat and has nervous nightmares. He finally decides to get a job in the hospital. It is the site of Jake’s redemption, represented as being like a church, with transepts jutting out from its main block. Jake’s moral cure, in the place of physical cure, begins. He learns the value of work. He realizes that he must be in living contact with labour.

In the hospital, Jake meets Hugo again. In their conversation Jake begins to see the truth beyond the net of his fantasies. He melodramatically thinks of himself as “Hamlet confronted by the ghost of his father” – an overage child who is overwhelmed by the truth (236). As Hugo observes, “truth lies in blundering on” and Jake’s problem is that he “want[s] to understand everything sympathetically” (257). Only after abandoning such a solipsistic view of the world can Jake gain some perspective regarding the nets that constrain him.

1.3 “A Battle Between Real People and Images”

Under the Net established Murdoch as a writer with a distinctive style and purpose, its philosophical implications and symbolism being submerged in an entertaining plot with many incidents, in which “the characters are motivated by chance or contingency as well as by their search for freedom, love and knowledge” (Murdoch, *Sovereignty* 378). Contingency brings not only plot twists but also escape from an overly orderly moral theoretical framework. The arbitrary and improbable incidents are not foregrounded in the novel, and yet they play a key role in Jake’s moral progress. Madge expels Jake from her house at the beginning of the novel, which gives rise to his looking for Anna, who further advises him to be the caretaker for Sadie, which results in his reluctant meeting with Hugo and finally the reflection of his philosophy on all the relationships around him. On the textual level, these events force Jake out of his solipsistic world, binding his choices closely to the choices and behaviours of other people. Whilst being contingent and surprising, the events do not appear as whimsical or inappropriate to the story. From Murdoch’s perspective, there is a further moral significance in adopting contingency as a plot device:

Reality is not a given whole. An understanding of this, a respect for the contingent, is essential to imagination as opposed to fantasy. Our sense of form, which is an aspect of our desire for consolation, can be a danger to our sense of reality as a rich receding background. ... Literature must always represent a battle between real people and images; and what it requires now is a much

stronger and more complex conception of the former. (Murdoch, Dryness 294-295)

For Murdoch, the incomplete accessibility of reality makes it impossible to impose an overall theory on it. The representation of reality in art therefore requires an attention to the unintegrated and the contingent, in a continual effort to transcend the fantastic and consoling aspects of artistic form. In her novels, Murdoch privileges the idea of “real people” over “images”; in other words, she tends to depict the particular experiences of people rather than having a theoretical representation of them. What she seeks is the particularity of reality, not the unity of it.

The emphasis on particularity applies both to Murdoch’s artistic views and her moral views. According to her, virtue incubates good art, and self-obsession leads to superficial storytelling. Art and morals are two sides to the same coin; “virtue is *au fond* the same in the artist as in the good man in that it is a selfless attention to nature” (Murdoch, *Perfection* 332). Such selflessness is a merit in both art and morality; one needs to overcome solipsism to be morally mature, just as an artist needs to give expression to otherness and unexpectedness, which involves being responsive to the contingent situations in life. In the novel, Jake’s growth into a novelist is paralleled with his progress as an individual; he needs to achieve this moral maturity before becoming a real artist. However, his experiences are full of disappointment and setbacks, as it is difficult to eliminate “the desire for consolation” through artistic form. In an interview with Michael Bellamy in 1977, Murdoch claimed that while art represents “a temptation to impose form”, morality “has to do with not imposing form, except appropriately and cautiously and carefully and with attention to appropriate detail” (Bellamy 50). Art and morality are aligned in their common pursuits of the uniqueness of reality. While both of them necessarily deal in form, art may indulge this tendency, while morality inherently keeps it in check. Art is viewed by Murdoch as an enterprise of image-making and image-interpreting, which is in tension with the recognition of “real people”. Therefore, artists can easily succumb to the allurements of ego (50). What Murdoch suggests is not simply that there is a temptation in art to impose form, but that form is

intrinsic to art. In the novel, Jake is a “form-maker” and Hugo a “truthful, formless figure” – the artist’s love of form is sublimated by the saint’s unselfish visions. Art cannot be silence, and neither can knowledge, or morality, for that matter; but the imposition of form can strive to be unselfish, untheoretical, and contingency-oriented.

In this respect, Murdoch identifies more with realism than with romanticism or modernism. She claims that modern writers are “heirs to Enlightenment, Romanticism and the Liberal tradition”, which has imposed on them “far too shallow and flimsy an idea of human personality” (Murdoch, *Dryness* 287). By confronting human subjectivity with a world of lifeless and meaningless objects, modernist novels tend to celebrate individuality and selfhood. As Wallace Stevens implies in his celebrated poem “Anecdote of the Jar”, modernists seek an object that would give order to the formless wilderness and dominate everything in the fictional world. Modern heroes are always lonely, powerful, and manipulative; their freedom is linked to being a “brave naked will surrounded by an easily comprehended empirical world” (289). These qualities are contrary to Murdoch’s “unselfing” philosophy. She rather concentrates on a variety of personalities and depicts “man against a background of values, of realities, which transcend him” (289). Freedom has a different character for Murdoch; it requires a respect for otherness, which involves “a new vocabulary of attention” (293). In the novel, Jake finally succeeds in seeing reality clearly after a sequence of sufferings. He realizes the truth by accepting contingencies, rather than trying to transcend them. He has been stripped of his illusions and has learned that he must escape the constricting bounds of the various fantasies that entrap him. He knows that the meaning of life does not lie in merely staying alive and idling around. Instead, it lies in exerting himself to accomplish an unselfish vision. He frees himself from his solipsistic view of the world. As the novel draws to a close, he is about to begin life anew.

1.4 The Moral Dimension of an Unselfish Vision

As a philosopher, Murdoch is significantly influenced by Plato, Sartre, and Wittgenstein, and her narrative strategies align with her moral outlook. As David Gordon observes,

there are two Platonic ideas embedded in Murdoch's moral philosophy. The first is that the human mind cannot help striving towards the world of the ideal, where transcendental truth is validated by our attempt to see the unself (Gordon, *Comedies* 127). The second is that the mind is a relentless ego which "habitually mistakes the false images of the good for good itself" so that humans are easily misled by illusory personal desire (127). In this light, when the good presents itself in various inauthentic modes, the love for the good will be displayed likewise in inauthentic ways. There is a tension between Platonic idealism and the particularism in Murdoch which I have been emphasizing. For Murdoch, the good is tantamount to an unselfish loving attention to others; however, the Platonic real is not the real of particulars, but the ideal. Platonic philosophers tend to believe that to behold the Good is to turn away from the world of appearance to the world of reality. A thing is good only when it serves "goodness"; that is, it is in accordance with the original Form. Plato separates the world of "Form", which is changeless and eternal, from the world of "particulars", which is multifarious and shifting. Thus "the unity and objectivity of morals and the reliability of knowledge" is guaranteed (Stumpf 3). Attaining the moral Good relies on the effect of education, which helps to bring about the realisation of truth, like putting sight into blind eyes. It requires a pilgrimage through different states of awareness, corresponding to different stages of the soul, from the "egoistic, irrational, and deluded" to the "aggressive and ambitious" and finally reaching to "what is rational and good and knows the truth which lies beyond all images and hypotheses" (Stumpf 5).

In the allegory of the cave, Plato asks us to "picture human beings living in some sort of underground cave dwelling, with an entrance which is long, as wide as the cave, and open to the light" (Plato 220). At first, like prisoners, we were chained to face the back wall, which stands for the lowest form of perception. We saw nothing but shadows, heard nothing but echoes, felt nothing but delusions. Our world was filled with images which are flickering, intangible, discrete, and irrational. In the next phase, we stood up, turned around, and walked with eyes lifted towards selfish desire, which is represented by the fire in front of us. All of a sudden, the old sensible world collapsed. Succumbing

to an impulse to worship, we might have mistaken the fire for the sun and self-delusion for goodness; but then we were “dragged out of there by force, up the steep and difficult path, with no pause until [we] had been dragged right out into the sunlight” (221). We emerge from the cave into the sun; and the sun is to sight as truth is to understanding. In its radiance we see the world in more precise detail of line and colour. We begin to understand why the images on the wall were so dark and blurred, how the fire cheated us with illusory reflections, and what the external world really looks like.

Plato’s allegory conveys the notion of the truth of forms by appeal to a figurative appropriation of the appearance of particulars. The fire in the allegory, as Murdoch takes it, represents “the self, the old unregenerate psyche” (Murdoch, *Sovereignty* 382). In the second phase, the warmth of the fire captivates our senses, projecting a false illusion of truth. We may settle down beside the fire, which is easier to gaze upon and cosier to sit by compared with the sun. We may be further deceived by false pleasures, and even get dragged into a world of fantasy. And this is what most characters in Murdoch’s novels do: they are neither saints nor villains, just people who easily get obsessed with a deluded worship of the self. In her own moral philosophy, Murdoch explores the transitional area between the fire and the sun. She focuses on people’s “attempt to look right away from self towards a distant transcendent perfection, a source of uncontaminated energy, a source of new and quite undreamt-of virtue” (383). The fire may be warm and comforting, but the form projected by it is temporal, unclear, and easily changeable.

Murdoch believes that moral progress can be achieved through a loving respect for others. In modern times, the conflicts between self and other have become more overt in literary works. In *No Exit*, Sartre offers an image of hell where three deceased characters are eternally locked together in a room with no mirror. No one can escape the devouring gaze of the other, hence everyone has to define his or her existence through the other’s distorted vision: “So this is Hell. I’d never have believed it. You remember all we were told about the torture-chambers, the fire and brimstone, the ‘burning marl.’ Old wives’ tales! There’s no need for red-hot pokers. Hell is – other

people!” (Sartre 45). Sartre’s allegory shows that modern interpersonal relationships are anxiety-ridden. For him, the consciousness of “self” is, to a large extent, dependent upon the observation of others, which is often distorted and torturing. However, the relation of “self” and “other” represented in Murdoch’s works is different from Sartre’s in terms of moral orientation. In “The Existentialist Political Myth”, Murdoch observes that Roquentin in *La Nausée* “is afflicted with a dreadful sense of the contingency of the world, the brute nameless there-ness of material existence”; the character aspires to reach “the world of intelligible being” by creating his own work of art at the end (Murdoch, *Existentialist* 135, 136). To this extent Jake and Roquentin share a similar life experience, but the two novels have different *Weltanschauungen* and moral aspirations. While Roquentin tries to escape from the unknowable contingencies and rise from nothing to being, Jake gives attention to this there-ness and comes to a unity with the world of contingency. Art is seen by both writers as a means towards their completeness, but the term “completeness” has a different meaning for each writer. In her essay Murdoch calls Roquentin’s story an “existentialist political myth”, in which truth is dependent on the “non-historical, non-social, and non-determined individual” (134). In contrast, Murdoch attacks this solipsistic vision. It is the task for her character to reach the “unselfing” state through loving attention.

For Murdoch, contingency plays a key role in both moral and aesthetic visions. In “The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited”, she claims that although Sartre “[looks] to art to transform the contingent into the necessary”, he has “readily sacrificed form and ‘universal significance’ to the formless and the deliberately ephemeral” in his literary practice for “a definite didactic purpose” (Murdoch, *Sublime and Good* 278-279). This seems to suggest that truths are pre-offered in Sartre’s novels, and that contingencies are made to serve an existential idea, which is in essence solipsistic and neurotic. For Murdoch, only when one understands the contingent otherness of people can one resist the temptation of bestowing meaning upon them; the liberation of the soul lies in the capacity to love others and to respect their diversity.

At first, like Sartre’s existentialist heroes, Jake believes the safest way to avoid

being gazed at or dissected is to shut himself in an enclosed space, without letting the “self” out or the “other” in. Such an egocentric view is what he holds at the point where his narrative begins. He hates intimacy, and calls marriage “an Idea of Reason”; it is destructive to his soul to unite with another person: “the substance of my life is a private conversation with myself which to turn into a dialogue would be equivalent to self-destruction” (Murdoch, *Under the Net* 34). He is “very sensitive to observation” (52). In the attic of Anna’s Mime Theatre, he feels uneasy even in the presence of “the big vacant eyes of the rocking-horse, the beady eyes of teddy bears, the red eyes of the stuffed snake, the eyes of dolls and puppets and gollywogs” (52). On the one hand, Jake regards himself the prey of devouring eyes; on the other hand, he is the enforcer of a distorted gaze. He tends to conceive others as he pleases, regardless of what they really are. His neglect of Finn, distrust of Sadie, and arrogance towards Jean-Pierre are all results of a solipsistic vision. Despite Jake’s bias towards others, what Murdoch tries to prove in the novel is not that “Hell is other people”, but rather “Which way I fly is hell; myself am hell” (Milton 107). In the introduction of *Sartre: Romantic Rationalist*, she calls Sartre’s hell allegory “a metaphysical simplification” – “an expression of desperate or insolent solipsism which left no place for love or duty or the complex network of ordinary morals” (Murdoch, *Sartre* 14).² According to Murdoch, the postulation “hell is other people” is dependent on the way we judge ourselves and the way other people have encouraged us to judge ourselves – that is to say, other people are in nature not hellish, cruel, or bad; their presence is only unbearable when we view them only as a means of self-validation. As long as our attention is turned away from “self” to “other”, we can in turn better ourselves in a moral sense.

In the novel, after two painstaking quests (one for Hugo and one for Anna), Jake comes to the epiphany that his old visions of others are nothing but delusions, “compromises and half-truth” (Murdoch, *Under the Net* 206). Being a solipsist, he had believed that the world was ordered, rational, fit for purpose, but to become an artist is to realize that it is contingent and incomplete. In depicting Jake’s epiphany, Murdoch

² This is quoted from another version of *Sartre: Romantic Rationalist*, which was published by Vintage in 1999.

alludes again to Plato's cave allegory: "The twisting halls of falsehood never cease to appal me, but I constantly enter them; possibly because I see them as short corridors which lead out again into the sun: though, perhaps, this is the only fatal lie" (206). Although in the end Jake is still more of a *picaro* than an artist, he begins to see the world from a new perspective. The old, illusory, anxiety-ridden images fade like apparitions. He begins to behold truth in the moral sense. At the same time, Jake's quest for truth and freedom is not a dogmatic pursuit of philosophical goals; it is the realism of morality that liberates the soul from fantasies.

1.5 What is the Net?

Besides her unselfing moral view, Murdoch's artistic view also has an anti-solipsistic tendency. The title of the novel is "*Under the Net*". What is the net? Who created the net? What is above the net and what is under the net? In *Degrees of Freedom*, A. S. Byatt claims that the net is "seen first as a series of social patterns, or relationships or traps from which the 'private will' seeks to escape", and then as a net of "concepts, of ideas, man-made and in one sense at least inevitable, which we use to try to describe the truth" (Byatt, *Degrees* 12). Byatt offers two images of the net: in a particular sense, it consists of the social and ethical affiliations which confine Jake's will; in a broad sense, it is constituted by the theoretical generalization of reality. I largely follow Byatt's view and argue that in the moral sense, Jake is imprisoned by the solipsistic will; and only through social relations can he obtain loving attention and free himself from the net of fantasies. I also argue that in the narrative sense, the net refers to the artistic device adopted in the representation of truth; it is more of a barrier than a trap. The representational function of the net can be traced back to Ludwig Wittgenstein, who links it to the imposition of "a unified form on the description of the world" (Wittgenstein 81). In a 1978 interview, Murdoch described herself as "a Wittgensteinian neo-Platonist" (Chevalier 92). She claims that "I was trained as a linguistic philosopher and in many ways I remain one, but for the purposes of moral philosophy I'm a sort of Platonist" (92). This suggests that she is essentially idealistic, and maintains a linguistic

approach towards morality. In Wittgenstein's allegory, the world of phenomena is like "a white surface with irregular black spots on it"; in order to describe it, we impose an arbitrary form – "a net with triangular or hexagonal mesh" – by which we examine whether "every square is black or white" (81). Wittgenstein also claims that the act of describing the world through the net is "of the completely general kind", which "will never mention particular point-masses" (83). In this sense the net is inherent in the attempt at description, which tells us more about the system of representation than about the phenomenon itself. It is generalization of a certain kind. We are above the net of representation, observing the phenomenal world which lies underneath. However fine the net is, it is a structured system; however rational or systematic the conclusion is, it does not establish a causal logic for the objects of our enquiry.

In the novel, Hugo is a spokesman for Wittgenstein's allegory. He believes that reality is "unutterably particular", that Jake's theories block him from seeing the truth under the net:

the movement away from theory and generality is the movement toward truth. All theorizing is flight. We must be ruled by the situation itself and this is unutterably particular. Indeed it is something to which we can never get close enough, however hard we may try as it were to crawl under the net. (Murdoch, *Under the Net* 91)

Here theoretical abstraction is referred to as the net; and truth only lies in the particularities, which are seen as empirical but often unfathomable and unapproachable in words. It is difficult to go beyond the net of ideas, to overcome the consoling fantasies which are innate to subjectivity, and to represent truth in its full immediacy – "truth can be attained, if at all, only in silence" (92). Jake's moral progress is therefore closely associated with the unconscious quest for the best artistic form to represent truth.

Murdoch believes that "a novel must be a house fit for free characters to live in" (Murdoch, *Sublime and Good* 286). Thus, she tries to create a variety of people in *Under the Net*: Jake the artist, Anna the singer, Sadie the actress, Dave the philosopher,

Lefty the Socialist, and Hugo the Wittgensteinian. The novel not only offers a kaleidoscope of characters, but also probes into the collisions of artistic ideologies. At first Jake is a translator, a self-taught writer who lives in “limited and protected isolation” (Murdoch, *Under the Net* 62). In the middle of writing, he meets Hugo – a “completely truthful man”, a natural Wittgensteinian who has an extreme desire for concrete specificity. Unlike eloquent Jake, Hugo despises the “vulgarity of representational pieces” (61). He tends to rephrase everything in the simplest and most concrete way; and he believes that the only way of maintaining truth is to avoid saying it: “the language just won’t let you present it as it really was” (67). By referring to the mythology of Psyche,³ Hugo tries to prove that “it is in silence that the human spirit touches the divine” (92). The act of speaking, for Hugo, is self-defeating – “the words fall from my mouth absolutely dead, and I see complete blankness in the face of the other person” (61).

Before Jake was “swallowed up completely” by Hugo’s ideas, he had managed to turn their conversations into a literary book, *The Silencer* (69). The writing process, which is described in detail, is equivalent to the imposition of the net. At first it was just a few notes, which looked very “scrappy and inadequate” (69). As “a natural writer”, Jake drew more details from his memory and added some more to make it “look intelligible”; then he revised it to make it “look a bit more elegant”, thinking that “it might as well look decent” (70). Then, he further “polished it up quite a lot”; finally, the conversations are presented “not necessarily as I remembered them to have occurred, but in a way which fitted in with the plan of the whole” (70). The book ends up as “a travesty and falsification” of what they really discussed (70). Jake also realizes himself that it is no longer a record, but rather a fiction. It is written for effect, written to impress. The philosophical sparkles in the original talk turned into self-oriented words and expressions as Jake was “constantly supplying just that bit of shape, that hint of relation, which the original had lacked” (70). It gradually develops to the state that *The Silencer* “began to constitute itself a rival. What had seemed at first an innocent *suppressio veri*

³ The mythology also appears in *A Severed Head*. The enquiry into artistic truth is a recurring subject in Murdoch’s novels.

began to grow into a very poisonous *suggestio falsi*" (73). Jake is no longer satisfied with an omission of the truth in his narrative; he begins to falsify the dialogue with Hugo in order to vivify and to dramatize, making it impressive as well as expressive in an artistic sense. This inherent limitation becomes increasingly problematic with Jake's progressive elaborations. In fact, the formation of the book is a formation of the net over their original dialogues. It is in violation of Hugo's philosophy, where truth is seen as inexplicable and can never avoid falsification when it is represented in an ordinary language. Although the title of the book is *The Silencer*, the way it is written contradicts the idea it tries to deliver. In a broad sense, the book serves as an allegory of art, which illustrates how the novel itself is constructed and narrated.

Anna's Mime Theatre is another imitation of Hugo's philosophy of silence, and another misrepresentation of Hugo's ideas. Like Hannah in *The Unicorn*, Hugo becomes a story waiting to be narrated: "His very otherness was to be sought not in himself but in myself or Anna. Yet herein he recognized nothing of what he had made. He was a man without claims and without reflections" (268). In this sense, the net in the title refers to the artifice of representation. Regarding the silent form of art as an approach to truth, Jake and Anna strive to elaborate a theory and impose an artistic form on Hugo's ideas, yet can only do so through illusion and the suspension of disbelief. Here Hugo, or the story, is what lies beyond the net in Wittgenstein's allegory; and Jake and Anna, the artists, observe him through the net. Hugo is seen by them as "a sign, a portent, a miracle"; both *The Silencer* and the Mime Theatre are "an echo, a travesty of Hugo ... in a debased medium", which "had striking points of resemblance to each other rather than to the original" (268, 93). They serve as two forms of artistic imposition. In this sense Hugo is depicted as a reification of the Platonic ideal; Jake and Anna are both secondary artists who distort the reality with obscure words or performances. Their artistic forms become theories, and so become fantasies that have deviated from their source.

1.6 Form and Freedom in First-person Narration

For Murdoch, the first-person perspective is an efficient way both to follow the narrator's moral development and to bring to light how stories are fabricated and represented. As Bran Nicol observes, Murdoch is "a metaphysician in an age suspicious of metaphysics, a novelist who wishes to preserve the function of literary realism in a period marked by the 'crisis of representation'" (Nicol, *Retrospective Fiction* 1). Compared with her modernist contemporaries, Murdoch's attention has less to do with reflection about the meaning of existence, and more to do with the nature and position of man in the new moral environment. Her moral vision is embodied in both her themes and narrative technique. She is a writer whose work combines realist narrative with metafiction, making use of fable, symbol and fantasy elements (Caserio 201). While identifying herself with the realist tradition, Murdoch also expresses her doubts about artistic representation: "the work itself may, as it were, have to invent the methods by which we verify it, by which we test it for truth, to erect its own interior standards of truthfulness" (Murdoch, *Art* 256). According to Lodge, the realistic tradition is the belief that "there is a common phenomenal world that may be reliably described by the methods of empirical history" (Lodge 40). This tradition suggests that there is an objective real independent of language, to which it relates. Murdoch adopts various ways to unfold such a fictionality. For instance, Jake's role as the narrator is reiterated in the novel: "I wanted to wait until I could present my story in a more dramatic way"; "You will hear more than enough on this subject in the pages that follow"; "I was nevertheless feeling impressed, at the point which our story has now reached" (Murdoch, *Under the Net* 20, 60, 228). By adopting the device of narratorial self-consciousness, or "foregrounding the apparatus", Murdoch shows how the narrator constructs and participates in the story. Jake's incidental asides also establish a tension between the necessity of form and the pursuit of freedom, implying that a recourse to form of some kind is inevitable in his narrative.

Moreover, real and fictional spaces are juxtaposed in the novel. During his moral pilgrimage, Jake experiences two quests, both ending in vain: for Hugo in a London night and for Anna in a Paris festival. Landmarks, streets, and buildings of the two cities

are interwoven into Jake's narration, along with dream-like images and surrealistic expressions. Jake's first quest for Hugo is almost a traveller's guide to London streets and pubs; there is a strong sense of place in its lines. His routes and whereabouts, the buses he takes and the parks and gardens he traverses, the change of colours in the sky as he walks through different locations, the contractions of darkness and brightness, are all depicted with great detail and precision. The depiction of Jake's surroundings adds credibility to the story, but more importantly, draws a contrast between the solidity of the world and his inward emptiness. His sense of rootlessness is shown, after the fruitless hunt for Hugo, in Jake's realization that his "previous pattern of life was gone forever" (127). He eavesdrops on Sadie and Sammy's plans to make a film out of his typescript, and then undergoes a spellbound experience in the Wallace Collection. As Jake sits "facing the cynical grin of Fan Hals's *Cavalier*", the fictive character magically converses with him: "An entertaining story, said the Cavalier, I applaud your decision [to get back the typescript]" (136, 137). Here Jake's biased vision is ironized by the artistic work and gives rise to a distorted apprehension of reality; his moral choices are also determined by this vision.

Jake's depiction of his later reunion with Hugo is also endowed with dream-like features. It is set in Hugo's film studio – a verisimilar temple on the edge of "ancient Rome" – where there is a New Independent Socialists' gathering. For Jake, the sense of reality is reduced by the artificial city; he feels that he is looking at Hugo "out of another world" (161). Soon after their meeting, the place is blown to pieces by the policemen: "as in a dream the brick and marble skyline vacillating drunkenly while there was a slow crescendo of cracking and splintering and rending" (168). In this setting, Lefty Todd and his fellow revolutionists are like theatrical players, who are peripheral to the main plot, sponsored by Hugo, and end up causing farcical scenes. They assemble in the studio, with Roman pillars, walls, temples, and toga-wearing soldiers, yet their seriousness towards the cause is ridiculed when Lefty later "fights like a wild cat" with the police force (166). Despite the fact that Lefty plays the role of a hero, he is no hero. This episode adds comic and surrealistic features to the novel, and at the same time

suggests the fictionality of the form.

Jake's last encounter with Hugo in the hospital is key to the transition in his worldview. Hearing from Hugo the refutation of his illusions, Jake begins to realize that he has misjudged people around him all along. His old belief was that Sadie loved Hugo, and that the latter was in love with Anna, whom Jake also loves; but the truth is that Jake loves Anna, who loves Hugo, who loves Sadie, who in turn loves Jake. These twisted love relations are depicted as frantic and self-willed: while Hugo keeps calling Sadie and insanely bursts into her flat to steal her belongings, Sadie locks Jake inside the flat after hiring him as her caretaker. After everything is brought to light, Jake feels his "very memory images altering, like statues that sweat blood" (268). It is a painful but necessary process. At last Jake returns to Mrs Tinckham's shop. In the physical sense, there is a return to where he was when the novel began: homeless, jobless, moneyless. But in the spiritual sense, he has become a better man with a clearer and less selfish worldview. Seeing his old manuscripts, Jake feels his hands tremble like those of a water-diviner. He decides to find a room of his own and write a book. He senses, in a moment of vision on a bus, that "through this shaft of nothings we drive onward with that miraculous vitality that creates our precarious habitations in the past and the future" (275). Yet his epiphany is different from that of the existentialist; it is outward rather than inward. At last, Jake discovers that Maggie the cat has given birth to four different kittens: one tabby, one tabby and white, and two Siamese. Instead of trying to find a rational explanation from genetic theories (as he would do in the past), Jake merely takes it as a mystic phenomenon in life:

"Well," I said, "it's just a matter of ..." I stopped. I had no idea what it was a matter of. I laughed and Mrs Tinckham laughed.

"I don't know why it is," I said. "It's just one of the wonders of the world."
(286)

A loving attention to the particularities in life is assented to in these closing sentences. Murdoch's once-isolated protagonist proclaims the continued vitality of life; he takes

the first step out of the net of his abstractions constructed by language and solipsism. And this quest for truth and freedom will be long and painstaking.

Although Murdoch rejects the title “philosophical novelist”, her views on literary language and form are closely related to her moral philosophy. It is a dynamic integration in which neither sphere absorbs the other. Language, as Murdoch claims in “Salvation by Words”, “has limitations”, and it is the author’s job to use literary techniques to extend its boundaries (Murdoch, *Salvation* 239). She argues that great art, “by introducing a chaste self-critical precision into its mimesis, its representation of the world by would-be complete, yet incomplete, forms, inspires truthfulness and humility” (240). For Murdoch, the net may distort reality by trying to frame it, and yet it also has a compensating quality in literary creation. It is necessary to find a balance between the form of representation and the integrity of content. And it is her literary aspiration to speak the truth. In *Under the Net*, Murdoch not only depicts the transitions Jake goes through, but also shows the subtle relation of art and morals within his experiences. By probing Jake’s spiritual progress, the novel insists that real people in the real world are often unpredictable and uncontrollable, that reality often lies in contingencies. The adoption of the first-person point of view invites us to identify with Jake’s story. Yet he is neither an authorial mouthpiece, nor a non-fictional autobiographical “I” in his own right; his narration is as much an object of the fiction’s rhetoric as the characters are. Moreover, Murdoch is interested in the mystical aspects of human consciousness and maintains a degree of distance from her male narrators (Lazenby 1-2). She wants the novel to reveal, perhaps a more ambitious aim than simply to explain, the mysterious nature of such men and their reality. She prefers “real people” to “images”, particularity to generalization, a higher awareness of good and truth to a false consoling ego. She invents complex, free characters in order to show the various facets of reality. At the same time, Murdoch does not aim to be a God-like writer. Instead, she enters into the fictional world through the first-person narrator, following his footsteps, and observing his moral judgements in life-like situations. She also follows his pondering on the relationship between self and other, and advocates an unselfish vision in both life and

art. The analysis of Murdoch's narrative devices hence involves both an alignment with her narrator and a detachment from him.

The theme of *Under the Net* is explored further in Murdoch's later first-person point of view novels: the protagonist's self-centred vision gives rise to his fantasies about others, which are embodied in his biased narrative; after going through several defeats in life, he finally realizes that what he grasps is a distorted version of truth, a kind of theoretical abstraction, and that truth can only be reached through a loving attention towards particularity and otherness. This theme is developed throughout Murdoch's writing career, in parallel with a more complicated plot and a more critical voice. While *Under the Net* is optimistic towards Jake's moral change as well as his promise as a truth-seeking artist, Murdoch's later novels, such as *The Black Prince* and *The Sea, the Sea*, are more ambiguous about the protagonist's progress from appearance to reality. In fact, the story beyond the point of moral change is emphasised in both novels, inviting certain questions: is the protagonist's moral vision permanently bettered or is it just transient? What is the relationship between being a good man and being a good artist? In Murdoch's later novels, the making of the truth also becomes a thematic focus: is artistic truth as straightforward as empirical truth, or contingent truth? What are the imaginative approaches towards truth? Taking these questions into consideration, it might seem that *Under the Net* is not "realistic" enough, as Jake and Hugo's philosophical stances are conveyed too unimpededly in the dialogues and monologues. Moral progress is generally more complicated than the novel suggests, and the form of development may sometimes look more like a spiral or even a reversal. Nevertheless, Murdoch's literary debut demonstrates her ingenuity in creating original characters and intriguing plot, her mastery of humorous and expressive language, and the profundity of her thinking on art and morals. Its title displays the tension between the world of reality and the realm of novelistic discourse, which is further examined in various ways in her subsequent works.

Chapter Two: *The Bell*: Novelistic Representation of Power, Attention, and Goodness

Published in 1958, *The Bell* is described by Murdoch as “the best of my earlier novels” (Todd, *Discussions* 192). As William Van O’Connor observes, the publication of *The Bell* saw Murdoch “emerge as probably the best of the young novelists” (O’Connor, Murdoch 42). This novel explores many recurrent Murdochian themes, such as the self and the other, individual and community, Good and God, imagination and fantasy, form and freedom, and most importantly, power. The novel is formally very different from *Under the Net*. Instead of using an ego-ridden first-person narrator, *The Bell* adopts a third-person limited point of view, in which the focalisation of each chapter moves between three characters – Dora, Toby, and Michael. The focus of the novel shifts accordingly from the presentation of an individual ego to the display of different personalities and visions. While *Under the Net* discusses the entangled relationships around the protagonist Jake, *The Bell* places more emphasis upon the differing moral attitudes of each individual. Moreover, the story in *Under the Net* is developed through dialogues and Jake’s interior monologues, whereas *The Bell* is notable for its long descriptive paragraphs on the characters’ spiritual status. It seems that Murdoch’s centre of interest has changed from “story” to “people”, from narrative events to the presentation of different perspectives in narration.

Murdoch’s shift of style in *The Bell* is linked by some critics to her adoption of Gothic romance. In “Solipsistic Sexuality in Murdoch’s Gothic Novels”, Dorothy Winsor claims that *The Bell* “has a strong Gothic subplot”; through the legend of the old bell, Murdoch implies that solipsism is dangerous and explores the way in which primitive sexuality can mutate into eros (Winsor 122). The novel is set in a “traditionally Gothic environment”, and explores both the characters’ spiritual growth and its physical manifestation in their experience of “the outer world” (125). Bran Nicol maintains that the novel fundamentally juxtaposes the rational with the irrational; that is, the characters live in a rationalistic community but their stories are filled with Gothic

conventions (Nicol, *Curse* 106). They have “[imposed] a dramatic narrative on chance events” and created “a personal fable” which is a surrender to “romantic imagination” (105, 109). By surveying the narrative pattern of these artist-figures, Nicol criticises their “animistic sensibility” and argues that elements of Gothic romance in the novel qualify its realism (104, 106). In a more recent essay, Avril Horner develops Nicol’s stance, arguing that Murdoch experiments with the Gothic form in order to examine the nature of evil and to “draw attention to the seductive power of narrative” (Horner 71). In *The Bell*, she argues, the story takes place in “a symbolic liminal space”; it exploits a characteristic Gothic device in presenting an image of “the subject in a state of deracination, of the self finding itself dispossessed in its own house, in a condition of rupture, disjunction, fragmentation” (73; Miles 3). Influenced by old legends and superstitions, the characters tend to misdirect their emotional power and become “fantasy-mongers” in their own narrative (Horner 82).

According to these critics, the novel presents a tension between exterior reality and the inner world of fantasy, which is integrated within a Gothic form. Indeed, the plot centres around a central symbol – the bell – and the thematics of romanticism are also prominent in the story, from the celebration of rural life and nature to the emphasis on individuality and self-expression. The same tendency can also be detected in Catherine’s schizophrenia, Michael’s prophetic dreams, and Dora and Toby’s peculiar love-making inside the ancient bell. These features not only manifest the neuroses and inner conflicts of the characters, but also serve Murdoch’s own exploration of humanity in extreme situations or contingencies, such as incest, adultery, or paedophilic desire. In this period of her literary career, Murdoch’s engagement with the romance tradition is at its most self-conscious. Winsor suggests that *The Bell* marks the beginning of Murdoch’s Gothic period, along with two other novels, *The Unicorn* and *The Time of the Angels* (Winsor 112). Nicol notes that “the ‘geography’ of the novel – isolated ancient buildings surrounding a deep lake – plays on gothic conventions”, and relates it to the similar “gothic quality” of *A Severed Head*, *The Unicorn* and *The Time of the Angels* (Nicol, *Retrospective Fiction* 54-55). If one compares the above novels, one

finds that they all centre on a symbolic image: in one case a mysterious bell but more usually a powerful character (Honor Klein, Hannah Crean-Smith, Carel Fisher), a God-like Prospero figure who drives the plot and who imposes upon others, creating moral jeopardy by taking advantage of their innocence or impotence. These novels also all involve a series of unusual events concerning sexuality, horror, death, the fall from innocence, and supernatural phenomena. But at the same time, there is a historical and geographical precision in their narration: the depiction of London houses and streets, the Thames, the British Museum, the National Gallery; the detailed religious doctrines and services in Imber and the Gaze community; and the historically grounded settings in the aftermath of the Second World War. Similar traits can also be found in *The Flight from the Enchanter* (1956), where Mischa Fox's solipsism might be traced back to the loss of homeland caused by the war. Despite the elements of fantasy, then, these stories are still about a set of characters "presented in a large social scene, and representing mutually independent centres of significance which are those of real individuals" (Murdoch, *Sublime and Beautiful* 271).

What, then, are the reasons behind these novels' Gothic form? Do they manifest Murdoch's fundamental allegiance to romance narrative? Or do the Gothic elements serve deeper realist intentions? This chapter examines these questions as well as the unanswered questions in Horner's essay. Horner poses a series of questions concerning Murdoch's philosophising of power in the narrative: "what makes emotional power a corrupting moral force and how can complicity with this be avoided? In what ways do narratives ('personal fables' as well as those to be found in the novels) exert power over us? ... In what sense is the novel, like the bell, a 'truth-telling voice'?" (Horner 76). This chapter juxtaposes the romance dimensions of *The Bell* with Murdoch's moral interests in power, attention, and goodness. It argues that the novel embodies a tension between Gothic romance and a more contingent, realist narrative mode, which is rooted in the tension between Murdoch's philosophical and novelistic concerns. While her moral theories are Platonic and idea-driven, her literary aesthetics are more rational and realistic. The chapter aims to treat the moral terms in the novel as dynamic notions

rather than an achieved scheme; their meanings are surveyed in both its ethical and novelistic idioms. The chapter also explores the particular ways in which the novel constructs its various focalisations to explore the characters' moral visions. In *The Bell*, Murdoch endeavours to enlarge the scope of her characterization, by adding more peripheral characters, by replacing the "man-god" with goodness distributed in her subject matter, and by presenting a variety of personalities with multiple narrative perspectives. Her inquiries into entangled relationships, solipsism, and moral dilemmas essentially aim at a literary "truthfulness". As a follower of the Anglo-Russian tradition of nineteenth-century realism, Murdoch strives to present real people in real life, with depth and insight, rather than a typical, single character who dominates the story in the romance mode. By comparing Murdoch's practice with the account of realism offered by Lukács, the chapter clarifies Murdoch's distinctive use of the novel as a medium through which to seek and reveal the truth.

2.1 Story of the Bell: Legend versus Reality

The novel begins with Dora's return to her manipulative husband Paul Greenfield, an art historian who is working on some fourteenth century manuscripts in Imber Abbey, after her six-month extramarital affair. She moves to Imber Court, a lay community affiliated to the Abbey, and makes acquaintance with Michael (a former schoolmaster who has lost his post for "pederasty"), James (a religious man, the spiritual if not actual leader of the Court), Catherine (a pious young woman preparing to join the Abbey as a nun), Nick (Catherine's libertine twin brother, victim of Michael's paedophilia), and Toby (a boy visiting Imber before entering Oxford as an engineering student). Paul tells Dora a fourteenth-century legend associated with the Abbey bell: a nun broke her vow and fell in love with a young man. She refused to confess her sin, so the Bishop "put a curse on the Abbey"; the giant bell "flew like a bird out of the tower" and drowned itself in the lake (Murdoch, *The Bell* 42). The lovers also ended up dying an unnatural death, with the man falling down the Abbey wall and breaking his neck and the nun committing suicide in the lake.

Dora is oppressed by the Gothic legend and the obsessive religious services in the Court, as well as Paul's contemptuous attitude, and she flees back to London; but she later decides to return to Imber and take revenge on "the spiritual ruling class" (194). Meanwhile, Toby has discovered a large bell under the lake while swimming. Dora and Toby, who see themselves as "outsiders" of the community, plan to drag the medieval bell from the mud, hide it in secret, and substitute it for the newly-purchased bell, which is due to arrive the following week. Determined to "play the witch" in the holy community, Dora embraces Toby in the mouth of the retrieved bell, which causes a booming sound to echo across the lake (199). The whole incident is discovered by Nick, who then forces Toby to confess to James before the new bell's installation. Their plan of mischief ends in miscarriage; yet on the day of the ceremony, the new bell mysteriously plunges into the lake on its way to the Abbey. Catherine, as if enchanted, walks into the heart of the lake to drown herself. It turns out that she had secretly loved Michael all along; the fall of the bell, to her, became an echo of the ancient curse, an omen of punishment. Although her life is saved, she suffers a mental collapse. Nick also commits suicide at last, as a sort of revenge against Michael's sexual harassment when he was a schoolboy under his care. The community breaks up. Feeling that she now has "the capacity to live and work on her own", Dora finally makes up her mind to leave Paul and pursue her career in art (314).

The legend of the bell epitomises the Gothic elements of the novel. The medieval bell which is retrieved from the lake is depicted as "a thing from another world", a world of myth and romance (220). It is dark, abandoned, decayed; through the centuries, it has become a horror story of which no one knows the authenticity. At the same time, the bell has a heavily symbolic meaning for the characters in the novel. On her first night at Imber, Dora feels that "in telling her the story [Paul] had released in himself the desire for her which had been quiescent before. The violence of the tale was in him now and he wanted her love" (44). It seems that the erotic spiritual energy of the nun passes on through the legend, making Dora its new prey in the modern community. The bell, then, symbolises a return of the repressed; but it also possesses a darker power.

According to the legend, the old bell sometimes rings from the bottom of the lake, conveying to the ears of the recipient a portent of death. In the novel, Michael constantly finds himself in a Gothic nightmare – he “was awakened by a strange hollow booming sound” and saw “with extreme clarity” that the nuns “were taking a corpse out of the lake” (78). The thought that the nuns had murdered someone horrifies Michael, infusing him with “an overwhelming sense of evil” (79). As it turns out, the ringing of the bell does portend death. When Michael was awakened by the real sound of the old bell, he “had been dreaming about Nick”, who later kills himself (223). While that sense of impending evil is associated with Michael’s sins in the past, the death of Nick implies a triumph of the legend and a confirmation of the bell’s power (223).

Sexuality and death are two prominent themes in the Gothic tradition. In the novel, the pairing of the old and new bell blurs the distinction between the real and the imaginary; the characters’ personal fables are integrated into the narrative itself. In the legend, the nun’s lover fell and broke his neck when he tried to climb over the wall of the nunnery. In reality, Toby climbs the same wall to get inside the Abbey, in a state of confusion about his own sexual orientation, having been unexpectedly kissed by Michael. What awaits him is not the angry Bishop, however, but an amiable nun who invites him to try the swing in the cemetery. The legend diverges from reality, yet gives an impression that it still disturbs the minds of the inhabitants in Imber. Later in the novel, when Catherine reveals her passionate love for Michael, her figure and the figure of the sinful nun merge into one. The fall of the new bell into the lake arouses Catherine’s guilt and prompts her to self-destruction. She has lived her life inside the legend; she is unable to distinguish facts from fantasy.

The ancient bell, along with the bishop’s curse, continues to haunt the community. Its austere, daunting power persists in the voice of other bells, calling for religious conformity and denying any individual expression. To Dora, the bell is dark, mysterious, and as devouring as a monster. Non-religious and liberal-minded, she joins the Imber Court reluctantly and soon finds herself unable to adhere to the community’s ritualized lifestyle. She has to attend the service when the bell rings; it is an authoritative voice

demanding obedience and self-surrender, which is anathema to her free artistic nature. Instead of relying on religious ideas, Dora rather values “the conception of fatality” and depends “upon the knowledge of her instant ability to whisk away” (12, 10). Her escape from the relationship with her husband Paul echoes that of Nora in *A Doll’s House*. Both are depicted as a naive “child wife” wedded to a powerful husband who is much older, jealous, sophisticated, and judgemental (10). Overwhelmed by her husband’s authority, Dora “conspicuously lacked self-knowledge” and felt “as if she were merely a thought in his mind” (40). Her life after leaving Paul suggests how Nora might live after leaving the “Doll’s House”. In fact, they both have “no other life to escape into”; without financial and intellectual independence, they are still inside the trap – an ideological labyrinth that has long accompanied them (12). Staying with Paul at Imber, Dora is further oppressed by the voice of the bell; she has to go through more adversity in order to achieve a more radical change.

2.2 Power, Gaze, and Focalisation

As the narrator of the legend, Paul appropriates the story’s power and uses it against his naïve wife. But the spiritual energy of the bell also governs the Gothic storyline of the novel itself. As E. J. Clery points out in “The Genesis of ‘Gothic’ Fiction”, certain tropes of romance, including supernatural elements, can serve as allegorical references to social reality (Clery 25). The oppression and power plays of real life are magnified by Gothic fiction into the dark energies of fantastic narrative. Clery, analysing Prince Alfonso’s transformation into a spectral giant in *The Castle of Otranto*, argues that in Gothic novels, “fantasy is the natural outgrowth of the violent appropriation of power” (26). In Murdoch’s novels of the late fifties and early sixties, power serves as a key motif. She claims in “Against Dryness”:

It is curious that modern literature, which is so much concerned with violence, contains so few convincing pictures of evil. Our inability to imagine evil is a consequence of the facile, dramatic and, in spite of Hitler, optimistic picture of ourselves with which we work. (Murdoch, Dryness 294)

In her novels, the Gothic is adopted as a form to imagine and depict violence and evil; the demonic power is illustrated through narratives of legends and myths. The latent sense of supernatural horror accompanies the everyday hunger for power, surrender to power, or expansion of power, in human affairs. It includes religious power, sexual power, spatial power (as in a haunted house), technological power (as in Michael's "empowerment" to purchase the mechanical cultivator), and power in relation to parents, spouse, or society. In her novels, the social and cultural "other" serves as a major subject matter; the physical, psychological, and moral reasons defining the other, along with the fear and prejudice toward the other, are brought to light. Murdoch has a strong interest in power and otherness in her writing. She likes to present humanity in relation to social taboo and to explore morality in the extreme situations that can quickly erupt.

As Murdoch once observed, power relations in her novels are often "mixed up with notions of redemption and other religions [*sic*] notions" (Rose 26). In *The Bell*, "power" is used to describe the appearances of the Abbess (as "one of the most powerful"), James (who has an "open powerful face"), and the young, innocent Toby (as "casual, powerful, superbly naked, and charmingly immature") (Murdoch, *The Bell* 85, 134, 77). "Power" is also used to describe the bell. The retrieval of the old bell, which is extremely large and heavy, is for Dora "a magical act of shattering significance, a sort of rite of power and liberation" (211). In the novel, the two bells form an eccentric twinning. The old one is oblivion, cursed, linked with disloyalty and death, whereas the new one is referred to as "truthfulness, simplicity, a quite involuntary bearing of witness" by James in his sermon (139). They indicate two driving forces for the characters – a yearning for goodness and a surrender to restless inner desire. It astonishes Dora when the new bell's name "Gabriel", given by Catherine, coincides with the inscription "I am the voice of Love. I am called Gabriel" on the old one (221). At that point, the two bells, along with the two opposed principles of goodness and desire, are joined together in "Love".

The notion of power is embodied not only in the moral struggle of the characters

dwelling in Imber Court, but also in the juxtaposition of the enclosed religious community and the alluring modern life in London. The Abbess calls the Court a “buffer state”, a kind of intermediate between the ideal, holy Abbey and the world, “a reflection, a benevolent and useful parasite, an intermediary form of life” (81). In the novel, the contrast of spaces is surveyed in relation to a contrast of values. There is a tension between the spiritual and the secular, the rational and the neurotic, the pious nuns and a group of “sick people” who crave order but cannot bear an ascetic life, and thus constantly feel “disturbed and hunted by God” (81). The characters try to practise Christianity in their lives and work but it turns out that Imber is far from a Utopia for them. The dark spiritual energy is repressed but unsettled, driving Michael to kiss Toby and Catherine to subvert her religious vocation. The fact that the evening service at Imber takes place in “a shabby derelict pitiable drawing-room, harbouring an alien rite, half sinister, half ludicrous” reflects the fragile and superficial order of their faith (34).

At Imber, Dora is forced to cover her head in the chapel, forbidden to decorate the room with flowers, warned not to discuss people’s past lives, and pressed to embrace her “traditional tasks” as a woman (71). The Imber community’s power over her is reinforced by its religious doctrines, which make her feel “a certain new sense of inferiority” (133). What is worse, Dora lives under the constant gaze of other members of the community. Imber greets her “in rows of faces arrayed in judgement” (22). She is not only constantly stared at by Paul, who asserts that her misbehaviour has “diminished [her] permanently in [his] eyes”, but also covertly observed by the whole community (41). Living at Imber infuses her with “a vague sense of social inferiority”:

Often it seemed to her that the community were easily, casually even, judging her, placing her. ... the sense that the judgement occurred without their thinking about it, that it happened automatically, simply as it were by juxtaposition, was still more distressing. (133)

Like a prisoner in a panopticon, Dora has to accept discipline and acquire self-regulation under the gaze of surveillance. The panopticon is of course a prison structure

introduced by Jeremy Bentham and adopted by Michel Foucault in his *Discipline and Punish* as “a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power” (Foucault 201). With its power of ongoing surveillance, the panopticon strengthens the social forces influencing the prisoners and coerces their behaviour accordingly. To use Foucault’s words, she is in an institution which “automatizes and deindividualizes power” (Foucault 202). She is caught up in the prayers, the rituals, the ceremonies, even the daily conversations. She has to be behaviourally “regularized” in order not to be the “other”; if not, she will be punished by the overwhelming gaze. This observation-correction scheme at Imber conflicts with Dora’s free spirit. Unable to bear the “horrible feeling of being watched and organized”, she flees to London and seeks consolation in the National Gallery (Murdoch, *The Bell* 185).

In the novel, there are two descriptions of Dora looking at herself in the mirror – when she is told the legend of the bell and when she decides to run away from Paul. On the first occasion, the person in the mirror is described as vital, “bold”, “unknown to Paul”, and determined that “no one should destroy her” (45). It is, to her, a process of establishing an independent self against the power of oppressive forces. On the second occasion, she “looked at herself gravely” in the mirror, as if in “a half-waking fantasy”, and found it hard to “focus her eyes properly upon the stupefied face of her image” (182). Her “self” is being chipped away by the devouring, judging gaze. In the National Gallery, Dora feels that her “self” is effaced, but in a beneficial way, when she is in front of the art works. She marvels with gratitude at the pictures. They are “something which her consciousness could not wretchedly devour, and by making it part of her fantasy make it worthless”; they are “something real outside herself, which spoke to her kindly and yet in sovereign tones, something superior and good whose presence destroyed the dreary trance-like solipsism of her earlier mood” (190-191). The Gothic episodes in *Imber* are partly incubated by Dora’s fantasy and augmented in her pattern-seeking mind. In the presence of these great art works, she feels re-oriented towards real concerns in the real world. Paul becomes a “vague external menace” whose power

over her is displaced by her attention to something real and perfect (190).

There are also several passages in the novel which record in great detail the physical images of Paul, Michael and James in Dora's eyes: in the bizarrely decorated Long Room when she first arrives; during James's sermons; in the common room; and at lunch (33, 134, 194, 239). The roles of observer and observed are reversed on these occasions. When she returns to Imber from the National Gallery, Dora chooses not to join the community when they gather to appreciate a Bach recital on the gramophone. She feels like "an escaped prisoner", overwhelmed with the urge to "shake the flimsy doors off their hinges, drowning the repulsive music in a savage carnivorous yell" (193). She seizes the opportunity when it comes to her; with Toby, she plots to ridicule the community with the ancient bell. What Paul used to frighten her with now becomes her weapon against him. The "spiritual ruling class" finally become a "people under a spell", surveyed by Dora "as an enchanter surveys [her] victims" (194).

Dora is one of the three characters (along with Toby and Michael) who are the centres of internal focalisation in the novel's third-person narration. By adopting this technique, rather than following a single perspective or ranging more freely in omniscient narration, the novel enables the reader to develop a comparative sense of these characters' minds and points of view. In this way it is possible to contextualise Dora's experience of entering the community as an outsider, subject to Paul's manipulative power, and enduring the imposition of Imber's religious practices upon her life. It also offers us a chance to put together parallel story lines as we follow the incidents marking the growth of Dora's moral attitudes. Nicol, in "The Curse of *The Bell*", compares the logic of the novel to that of a detective story. Its readers have to piece together "the tantalizing fragments" and evaluate the facts on the basis of their "selection, organization, *interpretation*, on the part of the narrator" (Nicol, *Curse* 103). Nicol argues that the "natural tendency towards 'narrativization'" makes one "apply the logic of art to life" (104). Hence "personal fables" are created, and chance events are given a symbolic meaning. Through shifting internal focalisation, the novel shows how different characters dwell in the world of mind. Each narrativizes experience in

negotiation with their moral perspectives.

This shifting focalisation also informs our understanding of the peripheral characters whose spiritual lives are not focalised, by allowing us to see the impositions of power and the surveillance of the gaze from the position of both subject and object. The gaze in *Imber* is pervasive and indiscriminate. It is a felicitous coincidence that the words “power” and “stare” appear in the novel twenty-three times each. The representation of power runs in multiple lines through the plot. On the one hand, the focalisation upon Dora, Toby, and Michael indicates how each is caught up in a subjective romance of power, sexuality, and death. On the other hand, the objective narration records all their experiences of others and actions upon others in an unbiased voice, leaving the moral evaluation of their stories in the hands of the readers. In this sense the narrative is both reliable and unreliable – a mixture of authorial realism and character romance, facts and fantasies, an objective account and a neurotic angle of vision. For the other characters, although the story is not narrated from their own perspectives, the dark manifestations of power are equally real: James is always regarded by Michael as a threat to his leadership; Nick is regarded as an unpleasant outcast who lives “a life of dissipation”; and Catherine is regarded by Dora as a “figure under the net”, enslaved to sanctity and forbidden to have any desires (Murdoch, *The Bell* 111, 72). In this sense the Imber members are all both prisoners and guards of the panopticon, contributing jointly to its mechanism of power and gaze.

2.3 Vision against Choice in Morality

The Gothic aspects of *The Bell* are closely linked to Murdoch’s narrative of power. Tammy Grimshaw claims that the characters’ struggles with power relations are in essence a struggle between form and contingency. The exercise of power “occurs when [one] attempts to impose form”, whereas the recipient’s flight from it suggests a “re-entry into the world of contingency – a realm where [his/her] freedom can unfold” (Grimshaw 80). There is a binary opposition, in Grimshaw’s view, between form and freedom, the powerful and the powerless. Similarly, Nicol maintains that *The Bell* has

a “complex dualistic structure” which aims to draw parallels between the rational and irrational worlds (Nicol, *Curse* 106). He further argues that as Murdoch’s philosophy is rationalist, it is unsurprising that the novel ends with a triumph of rationality (107). Nicol views Michael’s final decision to be a school teacher as a defeat of his romantic imagination. He has escaped from the “animistic ‘significance-world’” and comes to a “more rational response” to reality (110). Grimshaw and Nicol both assert a dichotomy between the romance and realist elements of the novel, and classify the trajectories of the characters accordingly. I would argue that the two sides are not as antithetical as this; in fact, they intermingle in the story, and both are manifestations of Murdoch’s search for an ideal artistic form to accommodate her characters and her moral ideas. Moreover, although the narrative of Gothic power is a moral as well as aesthetic issue, the characters’ exercise of power is not simply a moral preference for form over a surrender to irrationality. It derives not from direct moral choices, but from a more complicated moral vision. Therefore, the roles of the powerful and the powerless can be altered or even reversed with a change of vision.

In her essay “Vision and Choice in Morality”, which was published two years before *The Bell*, Murdoch declares that the nature of human beings is a matter of moral vision, rather than moral choice. She argues against the behaviourist idea that moral life is “a series of overt choices which take place in a series of specifiable situations”, and rather defines it as primarily a “total vision of life ... [shown] continually in [one’s] reactions and conversation” (Murdoch, *Vision* 77, 80-81). She divides human activities into two kinds: the overt actions which include one’s conversation and storytelling, and the introspective practices, such as one’s “private stories, images, inner monologue” (80). She then proposes that the moral insights lie beyond these moral performances, which “may show openly or privately as differences of story or metaphor or as differences of moral vocabulary betokening different ranges and ramifications of moral concept” (82). According to Murdoch, the complexity of moral visions gives rise to a variation of narratives upon the same event, which in turn links to the moral agent’s recollection, choices, inclination, and desires. In other words, the set of narratives of an

imagined tale is related more to the narrator's visions than choices; one's moral perspective plays a key role in one's mediation and representation of the vast, contingent, mysterious world.

As the covert storyteller behind the scene, Murdoch articulates her own moral ideas in *The Bell* in implicit dialogue with the perspectives of Dora, Toby, and Michael. She presents their different moral attitudes and reactions to the legend of the bell and the seduction of ego and desire. At the same time, she stresses the multiple facets of each character's moral vision, amidst the uncertainties of human life. In an interview with Harold Hobson in 1962, Murdoch refused to view fantasy and realism as separate elements of her narrative: "In real life the fantastic and the ordinary, the plain and the symbolic, are often indissolubly joined together ... the best novels explore and exhibit life without disjoining them" (Hobson 7). Irrationality, exhibited in the fantasies of power in the novel, is seen by Murdoch as an innate part of the moral life, and she carefully observes this ambiguity of human nature. The powerful character to Dora is her husband Paul, while to Nick and Toby, it is Michael. However, the two men are totally different in their traits and disposition. If Dora's perspective focuses on how the oppressed fight against an outward power, then Michael's perspective is more concerned with a complex inward struggle against an unwilling degeneration into the "oppressor".

Michael is depicted as a man with a gentle temperament, compassionate and self-sacrificing. Having inherited Imber Court from his family, he decides to establish a religious community in it, with an expectation of both providing shelter for the "unhappy souls" and discovering "pattern and signs" in his own life (Murdoch, *The Bell* 83). However, surrendering himself to God does not assure him inner peace; as he later finds out, "those who hope, by retiring from the world, to earn a holiday from human frailty, in themselves and others, are usually disappointed" (86). Michael craves form and order, which is manifested in his character as a fear of contingency. But his life is always filled with the unknown and the unpredictable. In the novel, religious benevolence and disruptive passion both serve as essential components of Michael's

spiritual character, and determine his erratic course through life. His paedophilic love, he feels, “came from so deep it seemed of the very nature of goodness itself” (105). But in reality, it deprives Toby of innocent happiness and partly leads Nick to self-destruction.

In the Michael-centred perspective, a different kind of power from the Dora-Paul entanglement is presented. Michael is surely an abuser of power; he brings misery to Nick and Toby, whether with or without self-awareness. But he is also subject to the power of others (of James and the Abbess), and to the burden of his own past self. Unlike Paul, Michael is not a character without empathy for the “oppressed”. He is pious, sympathetic, and would never speak abusive words or force his ideas upon another person. He appears in many ways devoted to religion. His everyday prayer and the surrendering of himself to God make him believe that “there existed truly that living God in whom all pain is healed and all evil finally overcome” (80). On the other hand, his “evil” deeds to Nick and Toby originate from his nature, that is, his pederastic desire. He is aware that his desire conflicts with his beliefs and would destroy his dream career as a priest; yet he “felt, strangely, no guilt, only a hard determination to hold to the beloved object, and to hold to it before God, accepting the cost whatever it might be” (105). It arouses a strong moral conflict within him, which is strengthened by the realization that the “beloved object” suffers from his sexual attentions. Michael fantasizes that God’s will must be behind “such a spring of love” and that “there must be a way in which it could be made a power for good” (157). He intends to conceal his love, believing that it is “in no way menacing”; but the harder he tries to suppress it, the more strongly it bursts out (102). His love ultimately turns out to be a powerful destructive force.

Michael also suffers in the process of exerting power. He is a powerful character who never gets what he wants – his pederastic love involves an abuse of power which cannot be exercised without hurting the recipient. It is a version of “moral masochism”, which Freud explains as the “ego” being punished by the “superego”, and producing an “unconscious sense of guilt” (Hanly 280). It causes the subject “a certain amount of

suffering” as well as providing a powerful sense of satisfaction (280). In Michael’s case, his desire correlates with the “ego” and his religious belief constitutes the “superego”; when the latter is overwhelmed by the former, it ruins “the prospects which open out to him in the real world” (283). In this sense, Michael is a victim of his own dark power. He is not a natural villain, and his sufferings are real when the secret is brought to light.

The novel does not provide a solution to Michael’s moral dilemma, partly because it is more than a moral issue. It is not as straightforward as Dora’s problem; there are complex psychological reasons behind such a power relation. What Murdoch provides instead is a version of the story from Toby’s perspective, making it more complete and more rounded. Like Dora, Toby is treated as a visitor to Imber; unlike Dora, he tries to merge into the community at first – “he was fired by the dramatic idea, new upon his horizon, of the monastic life” (Murdoch, *The Bell* 47). Toby is amiable, intelligent, ready for the hard work of the community; he is also ready for “the renewal of his faith” and willing to entrust himself to authority (143). Toby recognises Michael “as a spiritual leader” of Imber; having been kissed by him, the boy feels it as “a tremendous revelation” and is led to wonder anxiously “whether he was a natural homosexual” (153, 174). He reacts against this idea by climbing over the nunnery walls, peeping at the nuns, and making love to Dora. The order in his heart is shaken; he is forced to ponder over hidden desire, power, and passion. It seems to Toby “that since everything was so muddled, anything was permitted” (176). Unlike Dora, who intentionally chooses to be an outsider, Toby tries to fit in but is painfully disillusioned. The “powerless” Toby lays himself open to the unequal relationship, or prepares himself to succumb, because he is seeking love and truth, and thinks that power accrues to him from Michael’s desire. Toby’s obsession with power is fortified by Michael’s misleading behaviour; when both parties fall prey to their fantasies, an abusive relationship seems inevitable. According to Murdoch’s claims in “Vision and Choice in Morality”, parables and stories can “incarnate a moral truth which is paradoxical, infinitely suggestive and open to continual reinterpretation” (Murdoch, *Vision* 91). The ambiguity of Murdoch’s narrative about Michael and Toby derives from her understanding of the particularity

and inexhaustibility of the world. Her imaginative exploration of the moral region, with all its paradoxes and complexities, is informed by a scrupulous attentiveness to reality.

2.4 “All Our Failures are Ultimately Failures in Love”

As David Gordon observes, Murdoch “finds the danger of egoism not in the crudest human expressions but in what are generally considered the highest – religion, love, art” (Gordon, *Fables* 9). In *The Bell*, the themes of religion, love, and power are linked together. The plot of the novel integrates engagement with and divorce from religion, masochism and domination in love, and the loss and gain of power. Religion provides the characters with a kind of authoritative form, which satisfies their desire for order. Yet instead of seeing, through God, the degrees of goodness, the characters are tortured by their own fantasies of religious power. Love is also linked with false visions. The power relations in love are associated, for Murdoch, with the notion that “people are often looking for a god or ready to cast somebody in the role of a demon” (Rose 25). She claims in the same interview that love is one of the main subjects of her novels, and that she is “a kind of Platonist” (as mentioned in the previous chapter) who believes that sexual energy “is connected with [the] sort of worshiping and extension of power”, whereas real love opens out to “a world where we really can see other people and are not simply dominated by our own slavish impulses and obsessions” (25-26). Here Murdoch has divided love into two notions: the lower part of love, the self-serving Eros, the “slavish impulses” and sexual energy which give rise to abuses of power; and the higher form of love, love in an open world, love which transcends the dark force of sex, either heterosexual or homosexual, serving as the key to escape self-obsession. This divided nature of love helps explain the moral behaviour of her demonic characters; the obsessional side of their spiritual energy brings about a failure in both love and morality.

In Murdoch’s novels, love appears in a wide range of manifestations – marital love, brotherly love; familial love; self-love; love for art, nature and God; and love in the forms of adultery, fetish, incest and worship – Murdoch’s characters are noted for abruptly falling in and out of love. In *The Bell*, Michael’s love towards Nick and, later,

Toby is the most intriguing and the most problematic. His love seems to be selfless and honest. He merely “felt hope for [Toby], and with it the joy that comes from feeling, without consideration of oneself, hope for another”; meanwhile, love repays him with “an ecstasy of protective joy” (Murdoch, *The Bell* 153, 156). However, his love, once expressed, becomes destructive to the recipient. It is ultimately not as sublimated as he declares; it is a mixture of Eros, egoism, and the sense of superiority. He knows that Toby’s admiration for him is a fantasy, yet he “could not help catching, from the transfigured image of himself in the boy’s imagination, an invigorating sense of possibility. He was not done for yet, not by any means” (153). Here love becomes a mirror of his own charm and power. It satiates the dark force in his sexuality – it is a collusion with power, not a sublimation of it. A. S. Byatt maintains that love is an ambiguous notion in the novel; it is “both a dangerous loss of purity and exercise of power, and a necessary part of humanity” (Byatt, *Degrees* 83). In Michael’s case, love is perceived as a pure, benevolent energy which is unharmed to the boy; yet the practice of it turns out to be dangerous and slavish. On the other hand, it is hard to decide whether there is such a clear distinction between the two energies, or whether the kind of unselfish, non-sexual, Platonic love of Murdoch’s moral ideas would be instructive in real life. Robert Sternberg argues that passion (strong physical or emotional desire) is a necessary component of “complete love”, and that an intimate relationship, to some people, remains a means to express power (Sternberg x, 61). Love is exclusive, sensual, and sometimes unequal, as the novel reveals through Michael’s story. Although Murdoch treats love as a double-layered issue in her moral philosophy, she presents the failures and frustrations of an ambiguous love in her novel, suggesting a gap between the abstraction of moral theory and the contingency of real life. Nonetheless, Murdoch’s fiction should not be seen as a rival to her moral ideas. It rather provides a different way of thinking about such ideas, one that is complementary to her philosophical perspective.

Murdoch does offer some response to the moral problem of false visions of religion, love, and power. She stresses in her writings that “attention” is the required approach towards reality. The first step towards getting rid of fantasy involves respect and

attention to others. Such attention, or loving gaze, is a requisite of goodness. In “The Sublime and the Good”, Murdoch proposes that “love, and so art and morals, is the discovery of reality” (Murdoch, *Sublime and Good* 215). She believes that attention is the opposite of fantasy. She borrows the concept “attention” from Simone Weil, who connects it with an effacing of the self (Weil 128). It is a hard and painful process to walk away from fantasy and perceive others as they really are, and thus “suffering” is also a necessary part of “a completer form of attention” (129). Weil further suggests that “the way of ascent, in [Plato’s] *Republic*, is that of degrees of attention”, and that “absolutely pure attention is attention directed to God” (527). This bears resemblance to Murdoch’s claims that “if God exists, he exists necessarily, we conceive of him by noticing degrees of *goodness*” (Murdoch, *Metaphysics* 396). Both philosophers agree that to reach the Platonic Form is to sublimate “self” through “attention”. In *Sartre: Romantic Rationalist*, Murdoch also criticises Cartesian philosophers’ “insistence on the supremacy of the cogito” (Murdoch, *Sartre* 62). It is a recurring idea in Murdoch’s novels that the attention to others is often accompanied by love and goodness whereas self-obsessiveness leads only to suffering and neurosis. Attention is the means to eliminate fantasies of power; and acquiring it involves the spiritual energy of an unselfish love.

In *The Bell*, the idea of attention is constructed and examined through Dora and Michael’s unusual love relation, which only begins after Dora has escaped from Paul’s manipulative love. Her endeavour to leave Paul is futile at first as she finds herself oppressed by his absence as much as by his presence (Murdoch, *The Bell* 7). She decides that the problem of their marriage is that she has surrendered her “self” to him. Therefore, she strives to build an equally powerful self by acting against his will, hoping to establish that no one can judge or “place” her. Dora becomes more and more dramatic throughout the process. She flees to London in order to punish Paul’s indifference, yet cannot help returning to him more discontented and frustrated. She later makes love with Toby and plots to prank the religious community; yet it is problematic that all her actions are at bottom oriented towards Paul, and are much less self-assertive than she

thinks. Dora ends up with nothing but “remorse and rage” (265). What is worse, her plot with the bell, conceived as a rebellion against power, ironically makes Toby the victim of her sexual power. Returning violence for violence does not help Dora; she fails to gain freedom simply by reversing the power relations. On the other hand, the epiphanic moment Dora experiences in the National Gallery, when her heart is “filled with love for the pictures, their authority, their marvellous generosity, their splendour”, represents a moment of true freedom (190). Such an artistic authority is not about overpowering or taking over, but exists rather as an external fact for its own sake, either to be appreciated or not. It helps to displace the fantasies of power from Dora’s mind (though only temporarily). The path Dora chooses in the end, her return to an artistic career, suggests that she turns her attention towards external reality. She learns to swim, tries to appreciate classical music, cooks for Michael, and keeps Imber Court in order after all the others have gone; Paul’s power over her fades away as she pays less attention to him. For the first time, she felt like “an independent grown-up person”, an equal to everybody else (301). This independence is achieved not by taking revenge, but by an unselfish attention to reality.

After the main action of the plot has been resolved, Dora develops a new love towards Michael. This time her love is non-sexual and unselfish, “with a quiet undemanding hopelessness” (310). Knowing that their time together will end soon, Dora still loves him quietly and non-possessively; for her, Michael’s “very inaccessibility was consoling” (310). Michael also feels free to live with Dora, as he does not have any sexual desires for her. He begins to understand that “the patterns which he had seen in his life had existed only in his own romantic imagination” (308). Only when he is in a state of selfless love can he feel truly free. At last, love is no longer a moral burden for Michael; his dark energy dissolves and his attention is oriented towards reality. Michael has been told by the Abbess that “all our failures are ultimately failures in love” (235). Indeed, Imber is filled with characters who are enchanted by sexuality and power – Paul, Dora, Michael, Nick, Toby, and Catherine – just like the nun and her lover in the legend. For these characters, the “failure in love” is intrinsically

a moral failure. As the novel indicates, the right way to defeat their obsessive fantasies, and gain freedom from power, is through giving attention; to love is to suppress the self and attend to the other. It occurs when an individual begins to see another person clearly by paying just attention. Love, for Murdoch, involves “knowing and understanding and respecting things quite other than ourselves” (Murdoch, *Sublime and Beautiful* 284). Such a knowledge and recognition of otherness is the path towards an unselfish vision.

2.5 Murdoch’s Philosophical and Novelistic Discourse

The relations between reality and fantasy, form and freedom, and love and attention are explored in *The Bell*, and are all connected to the central theme of power. At one stage, Michael claims that “the good man is without power”; and it seems that all the catastrophes in the novel are rooted in the use and abuse of power (Murdoch, *The Bell* 85). But power itself is not depicted as an evil thing; it is, to use Murdoch’s words, “a function of will” (Murdoch, *Darkness* 193). It is problematic that while the notions of love, attention, and power are discussed in the novel within a provisional, contingent, and realistic context, they seem to be more absolute, deterministic, and ideas-driven in Murdoch’s moral formula. In other words, there is a disparity between Murdoch’s moral philosophy and literary aesthetics: her novel adopts an empirical method and aims for a realist treatment; but her stance on morality is fundamentally Platonic and idealistic. The relation between the two is not one of simple incorporation or differentiation; it is more nuanced and more obscure. The form of the novel, for Murdoch, not only explores people’s spiritual energy through allegories and metaphors, but also reveals the dangers of rigidly applying moral notions to real life.

For instance, belief in God is understood by Michael as a selfless attachment which incubates goodness, but this moral schema is so abstract that its exercise leads to conflict and confusion. Michael argues in his sermon that goodness requires self-knowledge, which is linked to the ability to “use what energy we really possess in the doing of God’s will” (Murdoch, *The Bell* 203). Knowing the good becomes the premise of doing the good; and evil is bred by ignorance, or the lack of knowledge. Goodness,

in this way, “goes with exploring one’s personality and estimating the consequences rather than austere following the rules” (205). One has to fully understand one’s own being before beginning to understand God’s will; and goodness builds on the process of discerning imperfection and evil. Michael’s belief is closely linked to his moral dilemma: on the one hand, God had made him who he is, including his pederastic tendency; on the other hand, to follow his personality does not make him a good person – his love brings to others more pain and disaster than comfort or happiness. He seeks help from the Abbess, who interprets goodness as “an overflow”, a “generous and sincere” intention which allows imperfections (235). According to the Abbess, God does not assure goodness, any more than generate evil. Faith simply points out a way towards a higher and better self. Michael is one of those the Abbess calls “a kind of sick people”; he has founded the religious community in order to escape from his past sin (81). Yet for him, there is an unresolved tension between God and Good: “the service of God must mean a loss of personality”, whereas self-knowledge is the requisite for goodness (82). At last, after the death of Nick and the collapse of Imber Court, Michael decides that “there is a God, but I do not believe in Him” (308). Knowing that goodness is a matter of loving attention, he begins to live in peace with his spiritual energy, no longer enforcing it as power or evading it for his faith.

In appearance the Imber community is destroyed by an unexpected scandal; but the conflicts inside it were already deeply rooted, and surface in several ways in the novel, from the torment of Michael to the retrieval of the ill-omened old bell. It is fundamentally destroyed by its own “sick people”, with their various fantasies of power. The relationship between God and Good is investigated in the novel through three groups of characters: the non-religious (Dora, Paul, Nick), the half-religious (Michael, Toby, Catherine), entangled between the “desire for God” and their inner desires, and the religious (James, the Abbess and nuns). For the firm believers, God is the ultimate good and the ultimate truth. James proposes in his sermon that the passage towards a virtuous life is “from outside inward”, that is, the good man lives by a certain law or principle set by God; his knowledge comes not from subjective experience, but from a

“perfection” which is objective, “external and remote” (131-132). For him, the will of God is perfect and unquestionable, which “will make all for the best” (132). Nevertheless, as the novel presents it, the application of this religious notion to life does not end “for the best”, but brings mental conflicts even to the devoted Catherine.

In the novel, Catherine and Nick are characterised as a complementary pair. The twins resemble each other in appearance, but represent contrasting personalities. Catherine, resolved to dedicate the rest of her life to a nunnery, is “everything a woman should be – lovely, gentle, modest, and chaste” in the eyes of Imber Court (139). She is linked with the image of the new bell, as both will shortly “cross the lake and enter by that gateway” to the Abbey (136). Nick, on the other hand, is akin to the old bell, sinful, mysterious, portending violence and death. He is like a fallen angel, injured by his relationship with Michael when he was a schoolboy. He comes to Imber for Catherine, but is unwelcome because of “his capacity to make mischief”; he stays in the Lodge with Toby, who is sent to “keep an eye on [him]” (49-50). Unlike her untamed twin, Catherine surrenders herself to the divine power, and sees it not as something optional or alterable, but as something naturally good, something to be taken for granted. In the meantime, she has the energy and vigour of a young girl: Michael finds her “sitting on the ground” with her skirt “hitched up towards her waist and her two long legs, crossed at the ankle, ... exposed almost completely to the sun” while Nick fixes the lorry (207). Although called a “little saint” by the community, Catherine seems not to have a choice of her own; she explains to Dora that “There are things one doesn’t choose, ... [which] are often the best things” (138). Entry into the nunnery seems to be a decision which transcends her will. Though the community think of her as holy and innocent, she “often [dreams] about drowning”, which turns out to be prophetic for herself as well as for the new bell (138). She chooses a different spiritual path from Nick: she has a strong faith in divine power, and has prioritised it over her personal desire. When the new bell arrives, Nick sabotages its installation in the Abbey, intending to stop Catherine from shutting herself, along with her desires and her vitality, in a nunnery. But for her, the fall of the bell is a judgement upon her long-repressed love for Michael, and leads to a

mental breakdown. Before trying to drown herself in the lake, Catherine confesses to Dora that “God has reached out His hand. A white garment cannot conceal a wicked heart” (276). Personal feelings and fascinations, which are emphasised by Nick, are seen as “wicked” by Catherine. Drowning in the power of spiritual authority (the Abbess) and social expectations (from the Imber community), Catherine can only lose her sanity, like Bertha Rochester in *Jane Eyre*. Faith does not bring her inner peace, as real life is much more chaotic than the formulae of religious doctrine. The novel depicts a scene where Catherine reads a passage from the Revelations of Julian of Norwich to the community. It asserts that “Faith is grounded in God’s word”, which “shall be saved in all things”; those who have no Faith “shall be condemned to hell without end” (159).

In the Imber community, Michael and Catherine are appointed as godparents of the new bell, yet they both suffer from a clash between faith and inner desires. They seem to suffer less from the desires themselves than from their failure to repress them with faith. In Murdoch’s moral philosophy, God is more of a moral concept than a religious concept. She defines God as “non-contingent, non-accidental”, conceivable by reference to “degrees of goodness”, and “given body by that general perception and experience of the fundamental, authoritative (uniquely necessary) nature of moral value” (Murdoch, *Metaphysics* 396). The idea of God provides for a vision of goodness as something we discern, rather than invent, in ourselves and the world. It provides people with a place to ground their spiritual energy. However, *The Bell* suggests that the manifestations of God’s will, in the form of religion, sometimes impose upon individuals in ways that make moral goodness unapproachable. Such a disparity also arises because love is perceived as a more ambiguous notion in the novel than in her philosophy, as the cases of Michael and Dora suggest. This difference is rooted in the different forms of philosophical and novelistic discourses. In her interview with Bryan Magee in 1977, Murdoch points out that while philosophical argument “aims to clarify and to explain”, literary narratives focus on world as “sensuous, fused, reified, mysterious, ambiguous, particular” (Magee 4, 6). Novels have an innate ambiguity; moral notions are clarified and generalized in her philosophy, but are problematised and

re-examined in her fictional worlds. As Murdoch argues, “it is the directness of philosophy which strikes us as unnatural, the indirectness of the story as natural” (12). As a master of both discourses, Murdoch is intrinsically both a Platonic philosopher and a novelist who intends to write in a realist narrative mode.

Murdoch constantly refers to Plato’s Cave allegory in her moral works (Chevalier 90). What has distanced humans from reality, for Murdoch, is not original sin, but rather a lack of clear vision. It is a defect in human nature, either for artists or non-artists, that they easily get stuck in fantasy, which is described by Plato as the lower stage of the soul, “a state of vague image-ridden illusion”, self-centred, irrational, and delusive (Murdoch, *Fire* 389). Murdoch further draws a distinction between imagination and fantasy. The former can be creative, visionary, and just, through which writers are inspired to “[go] beyond technique in art to produce a kind of completeness” (401). The latter, for which “egoism is the most general name”, only leads to “obsession, prejudice, envy, anxiety, ignorance, greed, neurosis”, all of which “veil reality” (426). Here the “reality” referred to is the ideal reality of Platonic forms, rather than mere empirical reality. With egoistic energy, people tend to impose stories upon personal experience and dwell in the imposed fantasy. Instead of engaging with the distinctiveness of other people, they rely upon fantasy as a protection against chaotic reality. Such a strongly egocentric psychological state both makes one feel important and blocks one from new knowledge. For Murdoch, fantasy incubates solipsism and falseness in the moral sense; its defeat requires a moral effort. In *The Bell*, she strives to maintain an impartial vision as the narrator, and at the same time probes into the dangers of fantasy from the characters’ perspectives. She has to play with the unconscious forces, like playing with fire, in order to present an all-round image of artistic truth. Hence the novel seems like a combination of realism and romance, contingency and arrangement, objectivity and self-indulgence. Murdoch uses novelistic discourse to engage with the inexhaustible world of reality, and in doing so seeks to speak in the voice of truth.

2.6 The Truth-telling Voice

In an interview with Magee, Murdoch declares that “philosophy and art are both truth-seeking and truth-revealing activities” (Magee 11). However, because of its natural connection with unconscious forces, literature is “often criticised for being in some sense untruthful. ... [for imputing] some kind of falsehood, some failure of justice, some distortion or inadequacy of understanding or expression” (11). Her comments suggest that it is vital for the writer to distinguish imaginative creation from fantasy, to seek truth and avoid the “untruthful” in the depiction of characters and the narrative of events.

Murdoch believes that fantasies of power not only cause moral tensions, but also bring about solipsism in novelistic discourse. She uses D. H. Lawrence as an example and argues that “many of Lawrence’s characters are not self-determined people, they are Lawrence-determined people” (Bigsby 102). The protagonists are often projections of the author whereas other characters are deliberately ridiculed or depicted as less “interesting and curious” so as to contrast the hero’s personalities (Todd, *Discussions* 185). Instead of displaying a variety of people, the novel is “compelled to communicate a more personal, unique statement”; it ends up focusing on a single person’s joys and sorrows, ups and downs, and how outward realities are internalized (Bellamy 45). In this sense the characters become subject to the author’s tyranny. The novel is infused with egoism and fantasy when the author projects him- or herself on the story rather than imaginatively engaging with other personalities. Murdoch, on the other hand, has a preference for realist writers. She compares Leo Tolstoy to Lawrence and concludes that the former creates “characters who have got such inner strengths that they seem to be self-determined, ... they are entities on their own” (Bigsby 102). The characters are conceived as independent from each other yet dynamically related to each other; most importantly, they are not coerced by the author. They are equal to the protagonists in the sense that they are not belittled or flattened. To Murdoch, “morality, goodness, is a form of realism. ... the chief enemy of excellence in morality (and also in art) is personal fantasy”, thus it is the author’s duty to maintain a perspectival distance from the work of art (Murdoch, *God and Good* 347-348). To “unself” in writing is, for Murdoch, the

precondition for defeating fantasy.

Murdoch attacked modernist modes of writing in a series of interviews. She treats the fantasy-imagination division as one of the basic distinctions between modernism and realism. The former emphasises the hero over the plot, whereas the latter imitates all sorts of people, whose characteristics are built up gradually as the plot thickens. The former is “soft, messy, self-indulgent” whereas the latter “has the qualities of hardness, firmness, realism, clarity, detachment, truth” (Meyers 226). The sense of reality is reduced when the novel is built upon the author’s ideas or abstractions rather than open, life-like characters. Although Murdoch associates modernist writing with a surrender to personal fantasy, T. S. Eliot argues in “Tradition and the Individual Talent” that the poet should maintain a “historic sense” in narrative, rather than writing “merely with his own generation in his bones” (Eliot 37). It requires “a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality” (39). Eliot treats the emotion of art as impersonal, which echoes with Murdoch’s ideal of artistic impersonality. Therefore, what Murdoch attacks is not all modernist tenets, but precisely the celebration of egoism in its narrative.

Overstressing the author’s power also leads to what Murdoch calls “dramatic simplicity” (Murdoch, Sartre 63). She argues that the morality in modernist novels is often expressed in a single narrative line, and the protagonist is “always succeeding”; whereas realist writers like Tolstoy “portray the complexity of morality and the difficulty of being good” (Meyers 226, 224). Interior monologue is the culmination of this modernist tendency – the “monologue” is often illusory and ego-ridden. Self-development is emphasised and tends to be foregrounded against a confining family, social, and cultural background. Murdoch believes that realism, on the other hand, is more “impersonal” in narration and thus freer from the author’s will; its form is determined by its content. Although writers cannot help but imprint their own personalities on their writings, realist writers extract the imaginative force from them and apply it in novelistic form (Haffenden 127). With imagination, one can “fuse together things which are highly dissimilar” and “see similarities in their connections”, thus no longer sticking to a certain type of personality (Biles 57). A good novel,

Murdoch argues, is a combination of moral judgement and poetic freedom.

Does the elimination of authorial fantasy necessarily make the novel a “truth-seeking and truth-revealing” activity? It is problematic that although Murdoch opposes authorial presence in the novel, her moral vision itself serves as the background for her own novelistic discourse, and hence makes it idea-driven. In terms of aesthetic, her stance might be described as more naturalistic than realist. According to Donald Pizer, in his introduction to *American Realism and Naturalism*, the realistic aesthetic “demanded that the subject matter of contemporary life be objectively depicted, no matter how ‘unliterary’ the product of this aesthetic might seem to be” (Pizer 6). It is not just about odd characters, contingencies, and geographical details; it is in essence an objective representation independent of presupposed moral concepts. Realism espouses a bottom-up logic in which the particulars and the actualisation of existence take priority over abstractions; the content precedes the idea. On the other hand, naturalism turns its attention to the primitive and irrational (8). Its affinity with realism is qualified by a top-down mode in which overarching ideas inform the whole narrative perspective. Charles Walcutt also defines literary naturalism as an experimental mode established by Zola, in which “the writer must begin with reality, even though reality must be seized through a temperament and transformed by that temperament into a work of art” (Walcutt 42). In this sense, Murdoch’s novelistic practice has more affinities with naturalism than with realism. This also explains why some critics find that over her career her novels grew increasingly formalised, as if there is a certain pattern for the character’s moral growth, a deterministic force informing the storytelling (Bradbury, *Romantic* 293). Murdoch does apply her own moral ideas in her fiction, through her choices of both novelistic form and thematic moral tensions. In this sense, the aesthetics of *The Bell*, for example, can be seen as naturalistic in the novel’s cultivation of a particularity of observation guided by and oriented towards a thematic moral argument against fantasy. The characters go through their obsessions with power, their entrapment in fantasies, their frustrations of love, their reversal of attention, and

their progress towards goodness.⁴ The moral scheme applied in the narrative, although imagination-oriented, defines and predetermines her artistic interest; her artistic imagination springs from and is nourished by her moral ideas. The temperament of her novels is naturalistic in the sense that, to use Zola's words, "the reality of the scene and the personality of the novelist are no longer distinct" (Walcott 42).

Be that as it may, Murdoch's conception of realism is itself an ideal, not a practical principle. In practice, her synthetic approach to the novel proves effective rather than damaging; and it might be said that the avowed recognition, in naturalism, of a necessary tension between the objective and subjective, is itself already an unacknowledged feature of realism. For Murdoch, realism is intrinsically linked to the feature of moral totality. When asked by Magee about whether "philosophy has been damaging to art" in Marxist theory, Murdoch maintains that "there is a more intelligent and liberal Marxist view of literature as deep analysis of society"; she uses Georg Lukács as an example and affirms his distinction between realism as "an imaginative exploration of social structure" and naturalism as a "trivial or sensationalist copying" (Magee 16-17). In doing so, she also affirms Lukács's favourable view of nineteenth-century realists, "in that they told us deep important truth about society" (17).

In *The Historical Novel*, Lukács links realism to the presentation of "the real, substantial, infinite and extensive totality" (Lukács, *Historical Novel* 104). There is an objective truth, a historical consciousness in art that supersedes the concreteness of fact and matter. The lack of it would result in arbitrariness of circumstances and events, as well as a failure to reflect social totality. Lukács criticises the bourgeois ideology of mechanical materialism and subjectivism and claims that artistic form should be guided by a dialectical totality. In this way the artistic reality emerges in interaction with the author's consciousness. Murdoch is similar to Lukács in the sense that she also seeks a totality. She claims in "On 'God' and 'Good'" that "goodness" in Western philosophy has been gradually replaced by "the idea of rightness", which is "a natural outcome of the disappearance of a permanent background to human activity ..., whether provided

⁴ Or failure to reverse their attention, which results in self-destruction, as in the cases of Nick and (less absolutely) Catherine.

by God, by Reason, by History, or by the self” (Murdoch, *God and Good* 343). There is an ideological “totality” behind particular activities, the neglect of which depreciates the function of human will and makes goodness “rare and hard to picture” (342). This totality, for Murdoch, is a moral interpersonal totality. It transcends the material terms of naturalistic generalisation or abstraction, and is worth presenting in art and philosophy.

The link with Lukács helps make sense of Murdoch’s conception of her own realist affiliations. At the same time, her different emphasis from Lukács’s social-historical totality suggests that the conception of totality is an informing idea, not an objective given. Murdoch divides twentieth-century literature into the “crystalline” and the “journalistic” – the former starts with “a small quasi-allegorical object”, that is, the typical, and ends up as moral allegory, whereas the latter focuses on “a large shapeless quasi-documentary object” and results in “pale conventional characters” and “some straightforward story enlivened with empirical facts” (Murdoch, *Dryness* 291). She decides that in terms of representing the truth, the crystalline works better than the journalistic; however, overemphasis upon well-formedness only leads to literary “dryness” which is defined by her as “smallness, clearness, self-containedness” (292). Realism, to both Lukács and Murdoch, is not an aesthetic totally based on facts and independent of authorial intentions. It is closely related to the author’s “view of the world, the ideology or *weltanschauung*” which determines the principles that underpin literary works (Lukács, *Meaning* 19). Lukács views this ideology as itself socio-historically determined rather than derived from the author’s own beliefs, while Murdoch integrates her unselfing moral worldview into her novels. The moral philosophy serves as a “totality” behind her storytelling, endowing her with a distinct narrative style.

The Bell embodies Murdoch’s complex approach to realistic writing more fully than her earlier novels. Murdoch admits that she has “coerced” some of her early characters (Biggsby 116). For instance, she used first-person narration in *Under the Net* to reduce her presence as the author. But the novel is still centred on Jake’s own moral struggles. Minor characters, such as Finn and Madge, are depicted as types – impotent,

servile men and materialistic, pretentious women, whose behaviours in life are quite predictable. It seems that they play their roles so as to assist Jake's final moral revelation. Characters in *The Bell* are less "dry" in this sense; the characters' behaviours are supported by their experiences and moral stances, which are clarified gradually in the unfolding of the plot. Murdoch may define them in relation to various fantasies, but she refrains from prioritising one character's moral stance over another; nor does she belittle any of them in their roles. The plot emerges out of characterisation, rather than dictating it. At the same time, the adoption of multiple perspectives in the novel helps to avoid focusing on a single protagonist's moral struggles. It can be seen as a way to balance the distribution of narrative power. The stories of Dora, Toby, and Michael are related, but independently displayed and given an equal importance. Here the internal focalisation is used to insist upon their perspectives, to juxtapose different subjectivities, and to delve into a variety of inner lives.

Meanwhile, the moral interpersonal totality of Murdoch's narration gives a sense of "design" to the novel, reflected in devices like parallel scenes and paired characters. First of all, there is a clear antithesis between Michael and James. Their sermons reflect different views on God and goodness, both beginning with the phrase "the chief requirement of the good life" (Murdoch, *The Bell* 131, 200). James is a former missionary, a firm advocate of order and discipline, devoting himself "wholeheartedly to the call of religion" (84). Acknowledged by Michael as the "unofficial leader" of Imber Court, he is confident in asserting that goodness is a matter of faith and independent of any sense of personality (85). It is described as "something outside us", like the bell, as a symbol of "candour"; and the way to acquire goodness is to work "from outside inwards" (132). His ideas draw upon Christian moral doctrines in which God equals truth, truth equals goodness, and the "good man lives by faith" (132). In his sermon, goodness is exterior, plain and unquestionable. Michael's sermon, on the other hand, emphasises personality and inner capacities. It suggests an uncertainty about high ideals; for Michael, "One must perform the lower act which one can manage and sustain: not the higher act which one bungles" (201). Hence the knowledge of one's inner energy,

which is capable of both good and evil use, serves as a basis for the performance of God's will. For Michael, goodness works "from inside outwards, through our strength", using our spiritual energy just as the mechanism of the bell uses the energy it acquires from gravity (204). In a general sense, Michael and James's views on goodness are both idealistic; their difference lies in the involvement of personality in faith and goodness. Such an antithetical representation of their characteristics and principles is clearly more designed than contingent. This antithesis of characterisation is favoured by Murdoch and almost becomes a defining feature of her fiction: similar pairs include Jake and Hugo in *Under the Net*, Danby and Miles in *Bruno's Dream*, Bradley and Arnold in *The Black Prince*, and Charles and James in *The Sea, the Sea*. The duality of their moral views, as well as their practice of them in life, fleshes out Murdoch's recognition of a moral totality.

The novel also deploys repetitions and parallels, including the juxtaposition of the old and new bells, the doubling of legend and reality, Michael's repeated dreams, Catherine's attempt to drown herself like the guilty nun, and Nick forcing Toby "to play exactly the part which Nick himself had played thirteen years earlier" (295). It is worth noting that the synthesis of Nick and Toby's confessions is an expression of Michael's perspective, which only reveals some of the facts. Nick's last "sermon" to Toby is rather compassionate towards Michael as well as implicitly introspective; he condemns the boy for "destroying a man's faith, undermining his life, preparing his ruin", which suggests Nick's own regrets for earlier deeds (259). Yet this awareness aggravates his pain and makes his behaviour peculiar in the eyes of others. On the one hand, he cannot forget or forgive the harms Michael did to him; on the other hand, he feels he has betrayed Michael's love and trust and he pities what Michael has suffered. Moreover, there is authorial design in the symbolism of the bell, the distribution of focalisation, and the multiple layers of plot structure: the community members are outsiders to the Abbey, just as Dora and Toby are outsiders to Imber Court; their lives and actions are not just segregated by the convent or estate walls, but by their separate moral energies and visions. They dwell in different mental worlds and perceive different facets of

reality. The novel both begins and ends in Dora's focalisation; after her struggles with power relations, she becomes free at last, like the butterfly she rescued and set free from the carriage in the first chapter, ready for a new passage of life. At her last return to Imber, "the windows seemed to Dora a little dark and blank, like the eyes of one who will soon be dead" (315). The surveilling gaze, which was once overwhelming in the community, dies with the waning of power. The bell in the Abbey still tolls, but "already for her it rang from another world"; it becomes part of her faded past, and "tonight she would be telling the whole story to Sally" (316).

Murdoch once claimed that "literature is soaked in the moral, language is soaked in the moral, fictional characters swim in a moral atmosphere" (Murdoch, *Art* 254). Her moral ideas pervade her literary writings, from the defeat of power and powerful ideas to the search for an objective truth in novelistic form. Although *The Bell* is viewed by many critics as a Gothic romance, the romantic elements are more a novelistic strategy than the dominant mode of the narrative; they are all embedded in Murdoch's presentation of moral concerns about attention, love, and goodness. Attention to the fictional rhetoric of the novel brings to light the moral visions behind the characters' choices; the process of reading is hence a process of decoding the narrative, of unravelling the myth and diagnosing its powerful characters, of drawing out a loving attention. As Murdoch argues, "morality, goodness, is a form of realism" and all art "is the struggle to be, in a particular sort of way, virtuous" (Murdoch, *Sovereignty* 59; *Black Prince* 181). In calling herself a realistic novelist, she is pursuing her view that the ability to perceive reality is an ability to understand "the separateness and differentness of other people" (Murdoch, *Sovereignty* 66). More fundamentally, she is asserting that morality is an objective matter of truth in a Platonic sense. One of the chief aims of the Murdochian realist novel is to provide a "non-meanly-personal imaginative grasp of the subject matter" and therefore an attention to the real world beyond oneself (84). Although there seems to be some tension between her fiction and the conventional aesthetics of realism, this is in pursuit of a moral interpersonal totality. Murdoch's way of depicting a variety of power-burdened characters, and of integrating

her novelistic form with moral concepts, opens up the potential of realist fiction and distinguishes her as a writer beyond her era.

Chapter Three: Imaginative Enquiries into Art and Fantasy in *Bruno's Dream*

In *The Bell*, Iris Murdoch explored how a person's past experience affects their present narrative, which further interacts with their aesthetic and moral choices. Through the perspectives of Dora, Michael, and Toby, the novel underlines the tension between external reality and the characters' inner lives. Yet compared to the first-person narrative in *Under the Net*, its multiple focalisation gives rise to a stronger sense of structure and a lesser degree of humour and comic irony. Elizabeth Dipple has argued that *The Bell* was written with a narrowly predetermined purpose in mind (Dipple, Murdoch 242). Miles Leeson also maintains that the confined community and controlled characters presented in *The Bell* suggest that Murdoch deliberately sought to create a "closed" novel (Leeson 87). This strategy "serves the fiction well and allows a much more naturalistic approach to emotion and the development of the individual" (88). Critics seem to link the novel with a certain type of writing, a "closed" narrative which predicated an antithesis between the form of the story and the freedom of the characters. This issue has continued to be discussed and developed in relation to Murdoch's later novels. In 1969, Murdoch published her twelfth novel, *Bruno's Dream*, which, along with *The Good Apprentice* (1985), was included by Harold Bloom in *The Western Canon* (1994). Like *Under the Net* and *The Bell*, the novel investigates grand topics such as love, death, religion, and human values as both novelistic themes and moral concepts. The subject matter is characteristically twofold: the revealing of entangled relations in real life and the progression towards goodness in the moral sense. However, the sense of a "closed" form is intensified by its stylistic difference from the two earlier novels, in that the storyline is more mythlike and sometimes other-worldly. There are recurrent depictions of symbolic images and free-flowing fantasies; the characters seem to be drawn to a distorted reality which consoles as well as destroys their lives.

Despite the complexities of the novel's form and narrative, the criticism on *Bruno's Dream* seems quite reductive. In his 1969 book review, Walter Allen criticised

Murdoch's formulaic methods of setting moral tests for the characters and dramatizing their discrepancies "before and after the ordeal of the test" (Allen 5). He claims that the novel's twists and turns, as well as its "closed, cozy circle of characters", are merely parts of "a clumsy piece of narrative machinery" in the "Murdoch formula" (5). Likewise, Frank Kermode claims that the novel conforms to "a basic game with the unstated rules", even while the dialogues are "easy, surprising, symbol-concealing" and the plot "obscured by a plausible mist of contingent detail" (Kermode, *Bruno's Dream* 23). As Kermode suggests, Murdoch seems to have succumbed to a certain habit, through which her ideas of moral progress are easily expressed. The freedom of plot and characters, which Murdoch acclaims in her essays, is thus problematised. Later critics continue to see *Bruno's Dream* as a "closed" novel, and to assert that the form is more mechanical, the theme more mystic, and the characters less free or autonomous than those in more "open" novels, such as *Under the Net* and *The Nice and the Good*. A. S. Byatt argues that *Bruno's Dream* serves as a reflection of Murdoch's monistic ideas; its focus is "constantly deflected from the action, the physical world, loves and deaths, to the statements: God is Death, All is One" (Byatt, *Degrees* 266). Peter Conradi also defines *Bruno's Dream* as a "closed" novel (Conradi, *Saint* 122). The characters are categorised by Conradi into "the Cave" ones and "the Sun" ones, according to the moral levels they reached at the end. The novel is thus interpreted more as a moral apologue or a myth constructed around a certain philosophy than a comic form of its own.

The reason for such flat criticism is rooted in Murdoch's own claims about "closed" and "open" novels. In interview with Frank Kermode in 1963, Murdoch admitted that she swayed between either illustrating "a closely coiled, carefully constructed object, ... wherein the story perhaps suggests a particular, fairly clear moral", or describing "the world around one in a fairly loose and cheerful way" (Kermode, *Interview* 10). There is a tension between form and freedom in her narrative, which results in "closed" novels and "open" novels, according to which option she favoured at any given time. The former start with ideas while the latter start with experiences; they differ both in

their focus and their conceptual framework. Murdoch further explained in a 1968 interview that in the closed novel, her “own obsessional feeling about the novel is very strong and draws it closely together” whereas in the open novel, “there are more accidental and separate and free characters” (Rose, 22). In her opinion, characters are likely to be trapped by the plot if the author’s imagination originates in a metaphysical conception, and it tends to develop into a pattern or a myth. Despite approving of the freedom that the open novel gives its characters, she finds that *Bruno’s Dream* “turns out to be the other kind, unfortunately” (23). There seems to be a tension between what Murdoch advocates and what she writes. *Bruno’s Dream*, unlike *The Bell*, is objective in its narration, yet its characters seem to be subordinate to a mythlike story. Their illusions, dreams, and meditations jointly constitute the subject matter of a novel constructed around philosophical reflections on love and death.

Murdoch’s division between “open” and “closed” novels seems to correspond to that between the traditions of realism (empiricism) and romance (idealism). The distinction is decided by, and decides, whether the narrative is derived from particulars or abstractions, whether the plot is forwarded by empirical verisimilitude or conceptual logic, and whether symbolism emerges out of the narrative or determines it. In Murdoch’s interviews, Charles Dickens and D. H. Lawrence are constantly invoked as examples of the experience-oriented and idea-oriented novelist respectively, further consolidating the distinction of realistic and romance writings. In a 1977 interview with Michael O. Bellamy, as touched on in the previous chapter, Murdoch claims that Dickens has “a universality of interest”, whereas Lawrence focuses on “something local, ... a smaller, more personal world” (Bellamy 45). It seems counter to the current argument that Murdoch associates Dickens with the universal, and Lawrence with the local. For Murdoch, however, Dickens has a “great confidence in a unified civilization”, hence his characters dwell in “a big, universal human world”; in contrast, the local vision of Lawrence makes his characters both more “personal” and more “provincial” (45). In the 1982 interview with Christopher Bigsby, Murdoch maintains that in contrast to Dickens’s “self-determined” characters, Lawrence’s characters are often “Lawrence-

determined”, which are essentially “aesthetic faults in the work” (Biggsby 102). In the 1991 interview with Jeffrey Meyers, Murdoch identifies Dickens’s works as having the “qualities of hardness, firmness, realism, clarity, detachment, justice, truth” and Lawrence as an author of “soft, messy, self-indulgent work of an enslaved fantasy” (Meyers 226).

Either the story gives rise to the idea or the idea drives the story. Murdoch approves the former and prefers to write that way, yet feels that in some of her novels, “[her] characters get cramped by [her] story” (Rose 22). Such a division seems problematic in Murdoch’s actual narrative practice, however. As a representative example of Murdoch’s “closed” novels, *Bruno’s Dream* has a certain mysticism in its ideas, but a mixture of fantasy and realism in its story. Although the narration is loaded with symbolism, the plot is hardly mythologically centred. There is a realistic focus on the motivations, processes, and results of the character’s internal actions; there is a consistency in the portrayal the character’s thoughts, feelings, expectations, and attempts to rationalise their consciousnesses. To this extent it is character-driven, rather than form-driven, and embodies the traits of both Murdoch’s “open” and “closed” writings.

What are the reasons behind the allegories and patterns of the novel? Why is there a gap between Murdoch’s ideals and practice? How are the characters and symbolism developed and represented in a Murdochian realism that is “more phantasmagoric than naturalistic” (Bloom, *Novelists* 445)? This chapter argues that in the fictional world of *Bruno’s Dream*, realism is contested, not by the novel’s means but by its ends. Although her methods may be problematic, Murdoch challenges the traditional dichotomy of the empirical real and the Platonic “Real”, the realm of ideas. In her fictional world, realism is affirmed more as the revelation of artistic truth and overcoming the author’s selfhood than as the reproduction of empirical reality. It is, as she once claimed, not “what it is to look at the world”, but the “distance and otherness” that the artist maintains in her observation of the world (Magee 23). In other words, the novel’s aesthetic end outweighs its imitative end. Murdoch’s artistic realism interacts with her moral realism,

as for her, “this particular kind of merciful objectivity is virtue” (30). This chapter aims to problematise the binary nature of “open” and “closed” novels, and argues that there is an ongoing battle between art and fantasy both in Murdoch’s moral views and in her novelistic discourse. In *Bruno’s Dream*, I suggest, Murdoch strives to bring out the dynamic of the two forces through the discussions of God, good and Liebestod. Finally, I argue that the construction of Murdoch’s story upon ideas is more like the assimilation of an overarching theoretical framework with attention to scientific objectivism in literary naturalism than it is a submission to romance. The investigation of *Bruno’s Dream* will therefore be twofold, both thematically and formally, with a focus on the key features of its narrative – duality in characterization, symbolism in plot, and ambiguity in narrative rhythm.

3.1 The Narration of Dream

As the title suggests, *Bruno’s Dream* is concerned with “dreams”, not only the particular dreams of Bruno, but also the narration of dreams as meaningful experiences. With a third-person point of view, it probes into the minds of different characters and examines how narrative imagination comes into play in the retelling of dreams as well as personal memories. Bruno, Danby, Nigel, Adelaide, Miles, and Diana all take turns as the novel’s central character. In a general sense, the novel involves the stories of three widowers, Bruno, Danby, and Miles, along with their losses and gains in the journey of life. It begins with Bruno waking up on his deathbed. A man in his eighties, Bruno has outlived his wife Janie, his mistress Maureen, his daughter Gwen, and his daughter-in-law Parvati. The dead stay young and real in his mind, “immersed in [his] consciousness like specimens in formalin” (Murdoch, *Bruno’s Dream* 7). Yet his memories of the past are fragmented, indistinct, muddled, and dreamlike. His room has a dim and otherworldly ambience, in which his own sense of time gets more and more vague. Bruno has many regrets in life – disappointing his father, cheating on his wife, being estranged from his children. He fights against death, and in retrospect, lingers on his guilt and fantasises an alternative ending. Outside his dreamland, Bruno is a lover of stamps and

spiders. His daughter-in-law Diana and her sister Lisa often come to him to offer comfort and companionship; but he often confuses them with his deceased relatives. As time passes by, Bruno grows more and more animal-like in his appearance. At the end, his stamp collection is washed away in a Thames flood, along with his deepest secrets and regrets. He dies in a fantasy of self-redemption.

Bruno's son-in-law Danby is lying in bed with Adelaide the maidservant when the novel begins. Having inherited the old man's printing business, Danby leads a hedonistic life full of wine, dance, and women. He visits Bruno's son Miles as a peacemaker for Bruno, but is attracted first to Miles's wife Diana, then to her sister Lisa. He never denies or finds excuses for his desires, nor feels any guilt in flirting with the women. His confusion of dream and reality is different from Bruno's. After the death of his wife, Danby "held it for gospel that Gwen had been reality and his subsequent life had been a dream" (135). He is obsessed with a dream life with sensual pleasures and few cares; his past, the memory of Gwen, is rather a reality to which he could not return. Danby later drifts into an absurd duel with Adelaide's violent cousin Will, where, under the threat of death, he feels loneliness and a yearning for love in the "inaccessible real world" (270). At last, Lisa comes back to him, like a miracle in the dream, and accepts his courtship. What he imagined with sentimentality and scarce hope actually becomes realised.

Bruno's son Miles, in contrast, is a poet who spends most his life waiting for an inspiration and a masterpiece. He is sensitive, melancholy, and genteel, while at the same time sceptical and world-weary. His late wife Parvati, who died in a plane crash in her pregnancy, "had made all other women impossible for him" (55). Drowning himself in depression, Miles is apathetic to his devoted second wife Diana. He also resents his dying father Bruno for his prejudice against Parvati. He later falls in love with Lisa for her likeness to Parvati, yet finds that his "poetry angel" has gone away and that his rejection of reality brings him nothing but suffering. Life is much harder than what he dreams. After Lisa's masochistic decision to kill their love, partly out of her early asceticism and partly for the sake of Diana, Miles experiences great pain and

disillusionment, from which “the angel of death” materialises (256). He creates poetry out of the suffering and hears in it “for the first time his own voice speaking and not that of another” (257). His vision of the world has changed after letting go of the memories of Parvati; the barrier between him and reality has vanished. The past is merged into his art, not in the form of loss and pain, but as a deep and calm knowledge of life. Miles is ultimately reconciled with Bruno, Diana, and most importantly his past self.

As critics have suggested, the narrative arc of *Bruno's Dream* is relatively tightly constrained compared to Murdoch's earlier novels. It follows a simple line that records the physical and psychological quests of Bruno, Danby, and Miles, and dramatizes their struggles between dream and reality. They have different personalities and belong to different worlds: Bruno “goes through life in a dream” with guilt and regret, Danby is depicted as “a contingent person”, unruly and comic, and Miles is subject to “a force of necessity”, which makes him a figure of masochism (7, 57, 53). Their interactions with the others as well as with their environment are presented in parallel with the depiction of their internal joys and pains. They seem to act within a pre-planned life course. At the same time, the novel has, to use Bloom's words, “a near-Shakespearean faculty for intricate double plots” (Bloom, *Novelists* 446). There is not only a parallel between the sub-plots of Danby and Miles, but also a contrast of dream and reality, fantasy and fact, past and present in its narrative. The identities of the characters are also organized dualistically – husbands and wives, masters and servants, hedonists and masochists, the living and the dead – a structure that coincides with the dualistic nature of Murdoch's philosophical thinking. There is also an overall mysticism beyond this duality, which is embodied mostly in the character of Nigel, who, like a go-between, mysteriously knows everybody's secrets and calls himself “God”. The representation of Nigel resists assimilation to a realist reading of the novel. His figure is mystic, uncanny, and in many cases surreal as represented from both his own and other characters' perspectives.

Frustrated in his career as a stage actor, Nigel works at the Royal Free Hospital and later becomes Bruno's personal caretaker. Unlike his violent and imprudent twin

brother Will, Nigel is calm, restrained, observant, and compassionate. He caresses Bruno when the old man is haunted by nightmares of death. He stops Diana when she is about to end her life with a bottle of sleeping tablets. However, beyond the image of an honest, hardworking attendant, there is a deeper layer in the characterization of Nigel. He is depicted as an “all-seer”, “a looker-on at inward scenes”, an invisible observer of other characters’ stories, whose own motives seem both serene and inscrutable, as when he informs on Danby’s affair with Adelaide and instigates a duel between Danby and Will (Murdoch, *Bruno’s Dream* 25, 81-82). Under his vision, the secretive conversations and behaviours of Danby and Bruno, Adelaide and Will, and Miles and Lisa are presented in an impersonal way. The appearance of Nigel is often linked with something divine and inexplicable in the eyes of these characters. For Bruno, he is “soft padding Nigel with the angel fingers”; he “flutters like a moth, filling the room with a soft powdery susurrus of great wings” (2, 75). For Adelaide, he is an estranged cousin, “cool, vague, abstracted”, as if “living in another world” (43). For Danby, he is “in touch with the transcendent”, embodying “a hostile presence, a thin sardonic judging angel” (29, 230). For Diana, he is a “menacing and uncanny” figure who plays the role of God and turns her life into “a dream, ... a nightmare, with nothing clear” (222, 227).

The mystic representation of Nigel, along with the symbol-ridden stories of the widowers, seems to prove that the novel’s ideas dominate its plot. The perspective of Nigel is obscure and surrealistic. He seems not to belong to external reality, but to be himself a product of dreams and fantasies; his language defies logic. There are several dreamlike scenes in the novel, especially in chapters three and nine, where Nigel’s mystic visions are focalised and expressed uncannily. In his room Nigel rotates and falls in a “concentric universe”; the “holy city” turns with him, “spins motionless upon a point extensionless”, until time creeps “out of the dreamless womb” and brings out sound and light (24). In Nigel’s view the city of London is holy, the Thames sacred. Images and metaphors, signs and symbols, form bridges between the conscious and unconscious mind. Nigel judges and punishes, peers into people’s lives and suffers their pain. His own existence seems to be elsewhere. He wanders at night and walks on the

pavement “barefooted”, while “the prayers rise up about him hissing faintly, like steam” (81). He throws flowers into the Thames – “a river of tears bearing away the corpses of men” – as an offering to the dead; he is “a god, a slave, ... a sufferer in his body for the sins of the sick city” (82). It is unsurprising when, later in the novel, Nigel tries to redefine and even replace God in his conversations with Diana:

I am God. Maybe this is how God appears now in the world, a little unregarded crazy person whom everyone pushes aside and knocks down and steps upon. Or it can be that I am the false god, or one of the million million false gods there are. It matters very little. The false god is the true God. Up any religion a man may climb. (224)

Here Nigel seems to disregard the orthodoxies of religion; the lines between the divine and the secular, the true and the false, the ruler and the ruled are blurred in his narrative. The image of God is linked to an undistinguished form, “little”, “unregarded”, and “crazy”. It seems that the more Nigel suffers, the more clearly he observes and the closer he is to God. His attention is always elsewhere, either on others or on his surroundings; he is a figure without self.

Nigel’s behaviours are puzzling, his language absurd, yet he penetrates through appearances and sees everyone’s secrets. His uncanniness and other-worldliness are expressed in his own vision as well as other characters’ sense of him. He seems to belong to a metaphysical realm, a world of Ideas, rather than the intelligible and physical world in which other characters dwell and struggle. William F. Hall’s essay on the novel suggests that it presents an antithesis between eastern and western consciousnesses, in particular, the sacrificing “Bodhisattva” and the impotent “dying god, fisher king”, embodied in Nigel and Bruno (Hall 439). Richard Todd also notes that “Bruno has been seen as representative of Western consciousness”, whereas the mystic Nigel represents “a less aggressive, less acquisitive, more resigned Eastern consciousness” (Todd, *Shakespearean Interest* 43). I would argue that although Nigel has an affinity to eastern religious philosophy, he is derived more from Murdoch’s

moral idealism, which is in essence a development and critique of western post-war philosophy. The mystic representation of Nigel seems to violate the norms of realistic writing, yet for Murdoch, realism is defined more by its purpose than by its subject matter; her approach to moral goodness is integrated with her artistic views. Moreover, there is a tension between personal fantasy and artistic imagination in Murdoch's view of reality. In her discussion of virtue and goodness, Murdoch argues that to be a truth-teller is to "silence and annihilate the self" and that imagination is "the ability to join truth to form, the overcoming of obsession and fantasy" (Murdoch, *Existentialists* 228; Notes 8). Artistic truth, as she tries to show in *Bruno's Dream*, relates not only to a faithful and detailed representation of the real, but also to a deep yet ordinary intention to go beyond selfish fantasy and explore personality across a wide range.

3.2 Eros and Thanatos: A False Pair and a True Pair

In the novel, the features of realism and fantasy are depicted as parallel aspects, which not only permeate the novelistic discourse but also convey a moral significance. There is a mixture of realistic and mysterious elements in the characterisation, but this is essentially different from a romanticised presentation. For the characters, different apprehensions of experience lead to different narrations of reality. For instance, Nigel is eccentric and ghostly but he also instantiates the anxieties of existence and faith in the modern age. His perspective is as intelligible as it is realistically motivated.

In a deeper sense, Nigel personifies Murdoch's idealism and mysticism beyond the ordinary and intelligible world. The novel conveys the tension between art and fantasy both through its uncanny representation of Nigel and through its metaphysical interpretations of love and death. Murdoch tries to transcend the narrative of empirical details, using myth to evoke the idealistic realm. In his essay on myth and mysticism, Hans Jonas addresses the tension between the "objective representation of reality" and the "subjective realization of stages of being" in religious experiences (Jonas 315). He distinguishes between myth and mysticism on the basis that the former is an embodiment of objective representation", which "generally precedes the mystical stage,

... an internalized version of the same motif” (315). According to Jonas, myth and mysticism imply different forms of narration used to invoke the same religious motif; reality is either presented externally as a myth or interiorised and made into a subjective and mythical symbol. Jonas further explains that myth is “a projection of an existential reality”, a kind of representation which “seeks its own truth in a view of things” (315). In this sense, the narrative of myth is connected with the desire to seek unity under the net of appearances and experiences. As a writer who is dualistic in her thinking, Murdoch shows a mastery of myth and mysticism in her novels; her narrative is often filled with the kind of representations described by Jonas. She is described by some critics as a “magician”, a myth-maker who employs different devices and “transforms them into literary correlatives of the author’s philosophical vision” (Kuehl 347). This use of myth coincides with her philosophical position, in which metaphysics works as a guide to morals. At the same time, it manifests the openness of Murdoch’s understanding of realism; she is interested in the exploration of moral subjects in a mystical dimension and the pursuit of transcendental morals beyond common experiences, and so myth is brought into relation with the realist texture of her novelistic discourse.

There is a myth of “Liebestod”, or love-death, in Murdoch’s work, which is closely related to her treatment of love as a moral energy. *The Bell*, for example, ends with Nick’s suicide as an act of revenge upon Michael’s powerful and egoistic love. *Bruno’s Dream* further focuses on the interplay of the forces of love and death. In Bruno’s dreams, the dead and the alive are reunited by love, just as, in Miles’s retrospection, the past and the present are connected in the search for love. Liebestod first appears in the novel as the theme of the long poem Miles has written following the death of his beloved Parvati, and is linked to the twin drives of Eros and Thanatos in his poetic narrative. He had felt that in his poetry “Eros had changed into Thanatos, and now even the face of Thanatos was veiled” (Murdoch, *Bruno’s Dream* 56). As a widower, he is tortured by bereavement and becomes addicted to pain, shutting himself in solitude and melancholy and refusing other kinds of love, such as that from his new wife Diana. As

a poet, he struggles between the compulsion to repeat his past experience and the anxiety of being unable to “change into art and into significance and into beauty the horror of that death” (53). He sees love and death, which entwine in his thoughts and his narrative, as both “a false pair and a true pair” (179) – false, in the sense that the two energies oppose each other. Love unifies whereas death divides; love brings vitality whereas death imposes stillness; love portends genetic continuation whereas death portends extermination; to love is to seek completeness whereas to die is to enter into an everlasting silence and loneliness, “sans everything”. But they are also a true pair, in the sense that there is an ultimate moral consummation in love and death as they both contradict selfhood. Love, then, is like death, which “refutes induction. There is no ‘it’ for it to be all about” (7). Moral judgements are avoided in the novel’s narratives of hedonism and infidelity. There is no superiority or inferiority in matters of love; the values of each life are equal, and the boundary of self and other is effaced in the domain of love as in death.

For Miles, reality is located in particulars rather than immediate feelings; he obsessively writes three volumes of his *Notebook of Particulars*, trying to catch in words the particular status of an empirical detail. What he ignores is that the particulars are fleeting, changing with his feelings and emotions – “the anemones, the strength of whose rather thick thrusting stems had struck him yesterday, now seemed to him just a bunch of rather vulgar flowers, pert faces with frilly collars” (145). There is no way for him to give a definitive account of an ephemeral experience. Meanwhile, the endeavour to retain the particularity of his memories of Parvati has directed Miles’s life to suffering, remorse, and self-pity. When his feelings for Lisa can no longer be repressed, Miles comes to the realization that the old love has become a “moral barrier”, while he himself is “a morass, a swamp, a jungle” (180). He used to see Parvati’s death as that of his “poetic angel”; but now “that angel was without power to help him” (180). He is troubled not only by worldly relations and obligations, but also by his own eagerness to present an immortal love in his poems. His own love could not transcend death, even though he had not relinquished the memories of Parvati. It rather brings out in him an

inclination towards masochism.

Miles's sufferings are essentially expressions of his Eros. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Sigmund Freud defines Eros as the "life instincts" and Thanatos the "death instincts", "one constructive or assimilatory and the other destructive or dissimilatory" (Freud 43). Freud believes that Thanatos subsumes Eros and that the death drive ultimately supersedes the pleasure principle. However, in Murdoch's philosophy, the energy of love is connected more fundamentally to goodness than death. She believes that "good is the magnetic centre towards which love naturally moves"; to love is to give attention to the other being, which is an essential step towards diminishing personal fantasies (Murdoch, *Sovereignty* 384). In the same sense, Murdoch claims, love is a driving force of artistic reflection and ultimately leads to the discovery of reality. *Bruno's Dream* is filled with death and bereavement, in which love serves as a healing power for the living. The two forces work separately and wrestle with each other, not only in life but also in narrative. Love plays a pivotal role in Miles's poetic creation; he has fantasized an artistic world which is pure, clear, and well-protected. After the first visit to his dying father, he feels "defiled" and "back in that awful world of stupidity and violence and muddle" (Murdoch, *Bruno's Dream* 111), yet it actually opens his heart to the world. He was impotent in seclusion, no matter how hard he worked on his *Notebook of Particulars*. His encounter with Bruno – a steer of attention towards the external world – inspires Miles to write again, after a hiatus where his obsession with death had held him captive to the ambiguous and the illusory in representation.

Liebestod also serves as the keynote of Bruno's deathbed meditations. Bruno recalls his childhood love of God, his marital love for Janie, and his short-term flings, and wonders whether it was "only in the presence of death that one could see so clearly what love ought to be like" (287). Bruno is both egoistic and masochistic; he constantly finds excuses for himself, yet constantly tortures himself in guilt. His narrative is neither specific nor systematic, but more imaginative and ruminative, ending with delirious murmurs like "Poor Bruno, poor Bruno, poor Bruno ..." or fancied forgiveness like

“Bruno, I forgive you. Please forgive me. I love you, dear heart, I love you, I love you, I love you” (15, 36). His memory is a memory of emotions, of pleasure, distress, lust, and repentance; sometimes it is a memory of sensual experience, like a sound or a smell, which arouses a series of other memories. When “it all went back to the beginning”, Bruno hears his mother calling him “Little Bear”, which summons further memories of his lost innocence, as well as the subsequent accusations from his resentful wife and unsympathetic son (27). Moments of the past are recollected, not in sequenced units, but in chaotic fragments. Bruno’s thoughts roam from, for example, recalling the words of his dying father, to a particular memory of his courtship and marriage. He pictures Janie when they were first married, then wearing different clothes, attending different occasions, playing different social roles, and suddenly shifts to the discovery of his affair and the death of Janie and Maureen (12-13). Not only is Bruno confused and pained by his free-floating fantasies, but his memory is also subject to the alteration, cover-up, and reconstruction of certain facts. Life and death are mixed, sometimes even confused in his dreams; he often mistakes Lisa for Gwen and Diana for Parvati. He is driven by Eros to revive and recreate and by Thanatos to seek consolation and redemption. In his retrospection, Bruno claims that “God is all sex. All energy is sex”; when death finally comes, he “felt no sexual desire any more. The fear had killed it” (96, 287). Bruno’s perspective, although unreliable, reflects not only his own anxiety and nostalgia, but also the mixture of fantasies and facts in the novelistic discourse.

The influence of Liebestod is felt by both Miles and Bruno in their memories. Diana, on the other hand, is a victim of these forces in her present life. She met Miles in his bleakest days and was attracted to his melancholy. Since their marriage, she has become a housewife whose only duty is to love and look after her husband. Yet for both Miles and Diana, the dead Parvati has never really gone away; although “absent”, she is “not forgotten” (87). Like “a moth that wanted to be burnt by a cold cold flame”, Diana has devoted her life to healing Miles’s wounds, yet has never entered his heart (59). The dead still rule the living and the present is overwhelmed by the past. Diana consoles herself with Miles’s fidelity and lives willingly under the authority of Thanatos; but

when Miles's love for Lisa is disclosed, her sacrifice and selflessness become futile. It later turns out that Lisa also secretly loves Miles. To end the pain of this love triangle, Diana decides to end her own life, to "be the preserver of love: his love, hers, Lisa's", and with the hope that Miles would remember her as much as he remembers Parvati (222). After being "saved" by the "false god" Nigel, Diana begins to visit Bruno regularly and enjoys playing the healer again. She mystically falls in love with the dying old man – a love that is painful, disinterested, hopeless, "like loving death itself" (291). Her life is given meaning by this love; it makes her complete, good, and free from her worries about Miles and Lisa. It is another form of Liebestod, but one in which love dominates.

Diana's falling in love with the moribund Bruno resembles Dora's falling in love with Michael at the end of *The Bell*: both of them know that the love is doomed to be profitless and painful, the beloved unresponsive, yet they are devoted to loving and looking after the impotent Bruno and the distressed Michael. For Diana and Dora, such a love represents something external, unselfish and unerotic, bringing them to a better understanding of reality. To some extent, their attention is re-directed from a lower, obsessive love to a higher form of love. In the two novels, the images of Diana and Dora are contrasted with Lisa and Catherine – the aspiring "saints" who lead a disciplined, ascetic, self-denying life until their submission to sexual energy. There is a plot twist in both novels, where Lisa ends up having a hedonistic life with Danby, and Catherine is stricken by a mental breakdown after expressing her passionate love for Michael. The progression of Diana and Dora towards goodness and unselfing also suggests Murdoch's dualistic view of love. To quote from the closing lines of the novel, Diana "lived the reality of death and felt herself made nothing by it and denuded of desire. Yet love still existed and it was the only thing that existed" (293). In the physical sense, love is linked to a fleeting experience and offers false consolations. But as an ultimate Platonic ideal, love grows with an unselfish attention that transcends death and exists eternally.

3.3 Symbolism in the Representation of Death

The novel's allegories of love-death, together with the uncanny depiction of Nigel, fill out Murdoch's mysticism. The novel shows, as Nigel declares, that "Love is death. All is one" (25). The two forces seem to be mixed together in an undifferentiated manner, depriving each other of meaning and depth. The novel presents the ordinary deaths of Janie, Maureen, Gwen, Parvati, and Bruno, which are made mystical in their connections to love and morals. Some critics have likened Bruno's dying experience to Tolstoy's *Ivan Ilyich*.⁵ However, Murdoch maintains in "The Sovereignty of Good" that *Ivan Ilyich* fails to illustrate "a juxtaposition of pointlessness and value" in real death, which should be invigorating rather than tragic (Murdoch, *Sovereignty* 372). What she tries to depict, against the suffering and thrills of death, is a moral perception of death:

All is vanity. The only thing which is of real importance is the ability to see it all clearly and respond to it justly which is inseparable from virtue. Perhaps one of the greatest achievements of all is to join this sense of absolute mortality not to the tragic but to the comic. Shallow and Silence. Stepan Trofimovich Verkhovensky. (Murdoch, *God and Good* 372)

The phrase "Shallow and Silence" refers to the farcical characters Justice Shallow and Silence in *Henry IV, Part 2* (1600). In the conversation with Silence, Shallow reflects on the fleeting nature of time and exclaims that "death, as the Psalmist saith, is certain to all; all shall die" (*Henry IV, Part 2* III.ii, *Shakespeare Volume 9*, 57). Stepan Trofimovich Verkhovensky, on the other hand, is a character in Dostoevsky's novel, *The Possessed* (1871). As an idealistic intellectual, Stepan is estranged from his violent, revolutionary son Pyotr; on his deathbed, Stepan tried to retell his past memories, but often "sank into delirium and at last lost consciousness" (Dostoevsky 596). Murdoch alludes to Shallow and Stepan Verkhovensky in her explanation of death, not only because of the comic absurdity

⁵ Mark Luprecht in "Death and Goodness: *Bruno's Dream* and 'The Sovereignty of Good over Other Concepts'" (Rowe, Anne & Avril Horner 113-125); David Gordon in *Murdoch's Fables of Unselfing* (Gordon 1995, 141).

embodied in the two characters, but also to declare her affinities to Shakespeare and the nineteenth-century realist tradition. There seems to be a comic dimension in her vision of death, which is often combined with a moral profundity; for Murdoch, to see and respond to death virtuously may be best done through comic form. In *Bruno's Dream*, Gwen's death, from a heart attack after jumping into a river to save a boy who already knows how to swim, is described by Danby as "comical" (Murdoch, *Bruno's Dream* 10). But this apparently meaningless death is not without value. Gwen actually died of "the attempt to be virtuous" (Murdoch, *Sovereignty* 371). Compared to the romantic death, which is often melodramatic, stylised, and "prettified", such a vain yet virtuous death offers greater meaning in both artistic and moral senses. It is not a subject-oriented "experience" of death, but an imitation of the ideal death in the Platonic sense of "ideal", which is in essence opposite to the grandiose romantic "ideal".

Murdoch's exploration of transcendental concepts, along with her artistic representations of Liebestod, seems to result in an imposed pattern on her narrative. There seems to be a Murdochian moral choice behind every decision her characters make, a Murdochian moral progress behind every step they take. Thus, death is related both to the obliteration of being and to the impossibility of representation. The idea is embodied in the mediocrity of Miles's long poem on the death of Parvati and the perplexity of Bruno's retrospection in the presence of death. Neither of them can escape the "sickness of the language", as it is described in the title of the third chapter of *Sartre: Romantic Rationalist* (1953). The narrative, or anti-narrative, of death reflects the influence of Wittgenstein on Murdoch's moral philosophy – "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent" (Wittgenstein 7). For her, the attempt to describe the logical form of the world is vulnerable to the limitations of language. Such a Wittgensteinian moral view has a strong effect upon her writings.

In his review of *Bruno's Dream*, Frank Kermode argues that its myths are "delicate and unobtrusive" (Kermode, *Bruno's Dream* 21, 23). He further points out that there is a contradiction between Murdoch's novelistic theory and her practice (22). Indeed, the

novel seems to fall into a certain pattern, which is manifested in qualities such as the duality of its characters, its thematised ambiguity of language, and the mysticism in its depiction of love and death. All these suggest that it has the features of a “closed” novel, and that there is a moral thesis that reigns over the story. However, this is in essence not contradictory to the representation of experience and the real. What dominates the story is not an existentialist or mythical idea, but rather a Platonic moral ideal, which is in line with Murdoch’s vision of realistic writing. In the narrative, personal fantasies are unravelled through an attention to goodness and the transcendental real. As Bran Nicol observes, Murdoch “uses mythic allusion to mystify rather than simplify”, using a wide array of intertextual references (Nicol, *Retrospective Fiction* 8). Her purpose is not to offer a solution, but to show the problem. Unlike the literary naturalists whose appeal to scientific methods both privileged observation and imposed a hypothesis, she addresses the questions of representation through symbolism and mysticism. As it is impossible to construct a novel without giving it a form, so is it impossible to analyse Murdoch’s narratives without interpreting her morality. The connection between her novels and her philosophy results not merely in a moral message, but also in a noticeable sense of artistic form.

Murdoch’s narrative imagination is embodied in the novel’s mystic elements, its symbolism, and her treatment of novelistic time and space. There are two layers of symbolism in *Bruno’s Dream*. On the textual level, there are multiple symbolic images, among which the “old red dressing gown” and “a fly struggling in a spider’s web” are the most prominently mentioned (Murdoch, *Bruno’s Dream* 14, 93). The former is a symbol of age, decadence, and even death, while the latter is associated with Bruno’s own grip on an illusory past. Hanging on the door of a dim, dusty bedroom, the red gown occupies both Bruno’s sight and his mind when he is awake. It is a reminder, mocking his impotence as a dying man on the bed; Bruno wonders how it will remind people of him after his funeral. He once manages to put it on with great effort, yet it seems quite pointless to do so. At his last breath, Bruno sees that “the dressing gown had moved forward towards him and was standing at the foot of the bed” (288). It is an

embodiment of death at this point – the representation of a transcendental concept. The spider is also a key image in Bruno’s seclusion. As a lover of spiders, Bruno looks more and more like a spider as he grows weaker and weaker. He is described as having “a huge bulbous animal head attached to a body shrunken into a dry stick” (107). Bruno also behaves like a spider, “spinning out [his] consciousness” until the “compulsive chatterer” and the “idle rambling voice” are muted by death (286). Despite his pain and suffering, Bruno cannot let go of his past. He hears “the sound of a fly struggling in a spider’s web” when he is worrying about meeting Miles; the struggling fly appears to be an allusion to his upset mind (93). He sees the same scene again just before his death and asks Diana to put both the fly and the spider in a mug. Like a God he gazes upon them, and sees himself “at the centre of the great orb of [his] life” (286). He holds his past till the end, only to find out that he has “lived [his] life in a dream and now it is too late to wake up” (286). This allusion to the spider and its web indicates that death has constantly haunted Bruno. There is a repetition of opening sentences in the first and last chapter – “Bruno was waking up” – suggesting a circle of narrative as well as a circle of life (1, 281). The idea of dream is transferred from his sleep to his waking life; he is haunted not by nightmares but by his own fantasies.

On the thematic level, the novel uses symbolism to examine the problems of representation, both in its intertextuality and in its adoption of the dream form. Bruno becomes more and more animal-like in his seclusion, linked not only to the spider, but also to a “monster” and an “insect” – he envisions himself as “a monster, animal-headed, bull-headed, a captive Minotaur” (5). He appears, to Danby, as a “monster-headed moribund old man imprisoned in the smelly twilit box”, and from Adelaide’s perspective he is “awfully hideous, ... like one of the monsters [in Will’s drawings]”; his “thin legs” remind her of “the legs of an insect” (116, 46, 250). In contrast to the likeness of Nigel and God, the likeness of Bruno and animals indicates his isolation and alienation from human relations. Like the alienated salesman Gregor Samsa in *The Metamorphosis*, Bruno suffers from both internal and external conflicts. He is categorized by people around him as the near-dead, the immobilised, the other; his

alienation is a product of “their assumptions, their thoughts which no longer ended in him but sped away past him into that unimaginable time when he would no longer be” (4-5). The change of physical form from man to animal is linked with the decay of both body and mind, and his isolation from the outside world. Moreover, Bruno’s sense of alienation is intensified by internal focalisation, which, as in Kafka’s writing, reveals the continuing human thoughts and feelings within such an alienation. Both stories use absurd, impossible imagery to evoke the anxieties of their protagonists.

3.4 The Juxtaposition of Dream and Reality

Critics have suggested other thematic layers to *Bruno’s Dream*. For instance, Lisa M. Fiander interprets the novel with reference to the fairy tale of Sleeping Beauty and argues that Miles is most attracted to Lisa when she is asleep or absent, as that best satisfies his fantasies of an impeccable love (Fiander 94). In this sense both *Bruno’s Dream* and the Brothers Grimm’s tale reflect upon the false expectations in romantic relationships and the difficulties in realising true love. In *Iris Murdoch: The Shakespearean Interest*, Richard Todd links the novel instead to *King Lear*, arguing that Murdoch and Shakespeare both achieve “the supreme artistic feat of conducting suffering and death without offering a false consolation” (Todd, *Shakespearean Interest* 43). He analyses the characters’ failures in the rationalisation of death and suffering, and argues that death is solitary, contingent, ruthless, and tragic (67). I would suggest, however, that the “sleeping” and dying aspects of *Bruno’s Dream* are connected more with *The Tempest* than with Sleeping Beauty and *King Lear*. The novel contains a thread of intertextual allusion to the play, running through its depiction of imaginative experiences and its challenges, to conventional notions of representing the real. Like Prospero, Bruno sways between his past and present, between public and private worlds, paying the price for his former preoccupation. Bruno’s equation of life with a dream, that “death was waking up”, echoes Prospero’s observation that “We are such stuff as dreams are made on; and our little life / Is rounded with a sleep” (Murdoch, *Bruno’s Dream* 286; *The Tempest* IV.i, Shakespeare *Volume 33*, 62). Prospero’s sorcery is his

art, through which he takes control of the wilderness and sets up a new order on the island; yet the cheerful spirits and performances that he creates are essentially illusory, fleeting experiences, like dreams. There is a deeper metaphor of the dramatic illusions that the playwright creates out of the real world in which he lives. Like the spirits he summons, Prospero is a made-up character on the stage, and will “melt into air” when the literary dream comes to an end, or when life is “rounded with a sleep”. In the same way, Bruno can be seen as a sorcerer who tries to give form and order to his fragmented memories. The imaginary and the real are mixed in his interpretations of the past; his actions resemble Prospero’s imposition of his own authority. On the other hand, as one of the *dramatis personae*, Bruno himself belongs to Murdoch’s mystification of reality; his whole life belongs to one of her artistic “dreams”. The novel ends when his life journey comes to an end; his fall into eternal sleep marks our awakening from the novelistic narration – when reality takes its place.

As the novel’s title implies, it is both a dream and principally concerned with dreams. The meaning of the word is twofold: it is a kind of experience and the representation of such an experience. There is always a narrative gap between what happens and how it is interpreted, and this is especially true in the form of dream narrative. Barbara Hardy argues that dream, or dream narrative, is linked with the desire to escape, and often ends up as a mixture of fantasy and realism. But within the form of dream, “a wide range of disturbing, irrational experience” can be examined and represented (Hardy 19). Moreover, dreams project the dreamer’s imagination and inner conflict; dream “probes and questions what can be static and too rational stories about past, future and identity, and in the process is itself steadied and rationally eroded” (19). Narrating dreams in a novel is problematic because dream functions like a scale, with reason and truth on one end, and imagination and fabrication on the other. An overemphasis upon either would break the balance and end up being either too banal or too allegorical. In Bruno’s dream, Murdoch navigates between these poles and creates an intriguing juxtaposition of dream and reality.

It seems that nearly all the characters in the novel, central or peripheral, have

indulged themselves in “dreams”, or fantasies, at some point. The most obvious is Bruno, comforting himself on his deathbed with his dreams of the past. Unlike Bradley in *The Black Prince*, whose published narration is challenged by the postscripts “narrated” by other characters, Bruno is rather authoritative in his private stories; his memories are selective, fractional, self-centred, but remembered with self-accusation. All his efforts move towards a belated moral reconciliation with others, having been a mediocre son, a disloyal husband, and an opinionated father. He groans and moans, seeking partly to construct a unified image of the self through past experiences, partly to solace himself by imposing meaning upon life at its end. Danby, in contrast, just wants a hedonistic lifestyle. He yearns for true love but is convinced that “life energy” should be “cheerful stuff” (Murdoch, Bruno’s Dream 16). Miles, with his detestation of human relations, the failures in his career, and his obsessive study of particulars, relates everything to the blow of Parvati’s death. Will, a former actor, lives upon the fantasy that Adelaide will remain pure and truthful as she was in the past; both Adelaide and Diana indulge in daydreams where their lovers are loyal, responsible, and loving.

Fantasies are nourished throughout the novel with different purposes; the unapproachable is idealised, and stories are invented and adopted as consolations. Other than the mythical god-figure Nigel, perhaps the only character who is truthful to herself is Auntie, a has-been actress who gibbers in Russian and claims that she was a Russian princess – everybody calls her “gaga” until her memoirs of the Czarist court prove valuable material for the historians. Richard Todd argues that although Auntie’s perspective is “dismissed” by the narrator, the references to her story suggest a “respect for the contingent” as well as “an admission of a kind of authorial skill” (Todd, *Shakespearian Interest* 60). The omniscient commentary upon the stories after Auntie’s death is described by Todd as “Murdoch’s contemplative interest in getting contingency into art – and almost as constituting her admission that at a certain level it cannot be done” (60). In this sense, there is a deliberate ambiguity in the representation of Auntie, which supports the sustained juggling of realism and fantasy in Murdoch’s narrative. Auntie is also the only person who notices Nigel’s street-wandering and window-

peering at night, and who reacts to him simply by “[smiling] mysteriously and [going] on knitting” (83). In contrast to the fanciful, dreamy Bruno, Auntie embodies those “inarticulate, unselfish mothers of large families” to which Murdoch refers, and is good and truthful in the narration of her reality (Murdoch, *God and Good* 342).

Besides the dreamy qualities of the novel’s characterization, the conflicts in the plot are also connected with fantasies and are depicted comically, as best represented in the duel between Danby and Will. Murdoch brings the “pistols” onto the stage, as it were, in chapter five, in a casual conversation, not to fire them until chapter twenty-seven. The idea of the duel is absurd to Danby – to fight for a girl he does not love – but he still accepts it because “it seemed somehow to belong to the other order of things, the legal, the necessary”, something opposite to his flighty life energy (Murdoch, *Bruno’s Dream* 232). The actual process of the duel brings Danby an epiphany: he awakens from his fantasies as he envisions “himself lying dead on the bank of the Thames with Will’s bullet in his heart” (238). Danby then realizes that death is anything but romantic, and that reality is anything but consoling. Other moral conflicts occur between Miles and Lisa, regarding the possibility of extramarital love, and between Nigel and Will, regarding jealousy and sibling rivalry. The answer Murdoch offers is consistent with her moral philosophy: that rivalries arise from false expectations of the relationship, and that to defeat these fantasies requires the process of unselfing. As she argues in “On ‘God’ and ‘Good’”, the moral agent needs to avoid “the tissue of self-aggrandizing and consoling wishes and dreams which prevents one from seeing what is there outside one” (Murdoch, *God and Good* 347-348). Reality is absent when one seeks consolation in one’s dreams; the progress to unselfing is important both for the fictional characters and for the author herself.

Another dream quality of the novel is that it is hard to pinpoint the temporality of the storytelling. While the spaces in the novel are systematic and specific, the sense of time is often opaque and disrupted. Locations are described in pairs – London and Calcutta, Stadium Street and Kempsford Gardens, Chelsea and Battersea – with highly symbolic references. Both Lisa and Nigel choose to join the Save the Children Fund in

Calcutta so as to flee from “the sinful London and the flooding Thames”; Lisa has “lost [her] instinct of self-preservation” in Kempsford Gardens, which is a prison to Miles under the appearance of an “old-fashioned manor house”; Battersea witnesses Gwen’s death and later serves as Danby’s retreat from Stadium Street where the demanding and dying Bruno resides (Murdoch, *Bruno’s Dream* 1, 279, 61). Spatial divisions can be interpreted as reflections of moral tensions and divisions of the old and the new, the past and the present. However, the temporal line of the story itself is much more ambiguous. It begins in Bruno’s curtained bedroom, where the boundaries between light and darkness, waking and sleeping, chaos and restfulness are indistinct. Bruno, in his seclusion, is infused with memories. People come and go; stories are told and retold. The first and last chapters of the novel have the same opening sentence, “Bruno was waking up”, indicating the narrative circle of a dying journey – was it real? or was it just his last dream (1, 281)? Time is reduced to a symbol, especially for a man who easily confounds life with dream. Although the novel adopts the past tense, the time being narrated is multiple – that of retrospection and memories, that of fantasies and dreams, that of present and future. There is a short sketch of Adelaide and Will’s life after marriage in chapter thirty, in which their future over many years is foretold. Time seems to be out of joint, as if the narrative rhythm is accelerated by the approaching of Bruno’s death. Yet such a dislocation of time does not reduce the credibility of the stories; it rather enhances the mysticism explored in the novel. The ambiguity in narrative rhythm is also consistent with the representation of transcendental experiences – “Out of the dreamless womb time creeps in the moment which is no beginning at the end which is no end” (24). The characters are obsessed with seeking a consoling pattern in chaotic life. Death marks the end of all the sound and fury; or to offer an alternative interpretation, it suggests an awakening from dream and a return to reality.

3.5 Personal Fantasy in Art and Morality

Having explored Murdoch’s dualistic characterisation, the manifestations of Liebestod, and the symbolism and dream qualities in her narrative, it is necessary to examine how

these literary practices interact with her moral philosophy. Where does the prevailing mysticism in the novel originate from? And how can idea-based approaches to writing serve a realistic end? After *Bruno's Dream*, Murdoch published two philosophical essays, "On 'God' and 'Good'" (1969) and "Existentialists and Mystics" (1970), which may serve as a reference for her idealism and mysticism during this period. There are some common keywords in both essays – personal fantasy, self, components of goodness, approaches towards truth, but the former essay is oriented more towards philosophy and the latter more towards art. In "On 'God' and 'Good'", Murdoch begins by investigating the problems of contemporary moral philosophy; she criticizes the over-optimism of existentialism and the detachment from moral judgements in ordinary language philosophy. She calls existentialism a "Luciferian philosophy", as the moral agent is transformed from Kantian Reason and Hegelian History to "an isolated principle of will", a vision of the "self" divorced from external reality (Murdoch, *God and Good* 338). Ordinary language philosophy, on the other hand, treats the agent as "an isolated will operating with the concepts of 'ordinary language'", in which the concept of moral judgement is generally overlooked (339). In Murdoch's view, human ego, which prevails in both philosophies and which is defined as "an egocentric system of quasi-mechanical energy" in Freud's works, is the enemy of moral goodness (341). It is her aim to expound on the ego and find means for its defeat.

In "On 'God' and 'Good'", Murdoch strives to establish a moral philosophy that helps the agent make good and virtuous choices, against his or her innate selfishness. She examines the function of prayer in religion, and views it as "an attention to God"; it inspires an energy "which overcomes empirical limitations of personality" (344). Likewise, to be morally good is to find an object of attention that works against personal fantasy. Murdoch reflects upon the ideas of unity, transcendence, and perfection, and proposes that "goodness is a form of realism" in the sense that its attention is not to the self, but to an outward reality (347). She finds the idea of "a really good man living in a private dream world ... unacceptable", and further argues that "the chief enemy of excellence in morality (and also in art) is personal fantasy" (347-348). In this sense, the

realism in Murdoch's moral philosophy and the realism in her artistic views are joined together, as both are directed towards an "unsentimental, detached, unselfish, objective attention" (353). It is essential for the artist to fight against the "irresistible human tendency to seek consolation in fantasy", both in moral vision and in narrative form (353). Murdoch then observes that great artists, like Shakespeare and Tolstoy, have an "unselfish attention" and thus the ability to envisage and narrate "real things" without succumbing to personal fantasies (353). To her, this is what realism truly means – not just a depiction of the real, but a state of mind free from fantasy and illusion.

In order to fully understand the artistic agent, Murdoch divides the "self" into the good and the bad, the upper part and the lower part. She places Good at the very centre of her moral philosophy and treats it as a realistic term which can "rescue thought about human destiny from a scientifically minded empiricism" (358). She proposes to change "loving God, a person" into "loving good, a concept", as the former is less realistic and occasionally gives consolation and encouragement to the lower part of the soul (358). Murdoch argues that great art captures the unselfish image of the Good. The literary realism she asserts is focused on the process of perceiving it; it is inseparable from the escape from the self. In this sense, the division of selfhood and the overcoming of selfhood has replaced the division of the ideal and the empirical real. The idea of realism is connected with "the idea of transcendence", which is "to some extent mysterious" (348-349). For Murdoch, what truly matters is not the particular experience of a subject matter, but the apprehension of such an experience. Hence "the sense of separateness in the temporal process" is valued in her writings (348). The focus of her realism is shifted from the accurate, detailed, and creditable representation of the subject matter to a process or an orientation outward from the self; both its theme and its narrative are linked with the idea of Good.

In "Existentialists and Mystics", Murdoch further claims that art is paradoxical in itself as it entails "a conceptual apparatus which partly has the effect of concealing what it attempts to reveal" (Murdoch, *Existentialists* 221). Artistic truth is often incomplete and hard to obtain because of the complex nature of artists themselves – they attempt

to conceal as well as reveal their subjectivity. Murdoch believes that there is an uncritical “protective symbolism” in art, which works “to clothe our metaphysical nakedness and in general to cheer us up” (221). She then asserts that different methods of attentiveness to and pursuit of truth were adopted by novelists in the nineteenth and twentieth century. She praises nineteenth-century fiction as solid, just, and reasonable, novels in which “the mind, the personality are continuous and self-evident realities” (221). On the other hand, Murdoch divides the “recent novel” into two kinds: “the existentialist novel”, with independent characters of strong will-power, a waning confidence in “religion, reason, and work”, and a sense of the “anxious modern consciousness”; and “the mystical novel”, instances of which “reintroduce the old fatherly figure of God behind the façade of fantastical imagery or sentimental adventures in cosy masochism” (223, 225, 226).

According to Murdoch, there are “characteristic defects and temptations” behind each manifestation (226). The former tends to depict god-like man, who lives in a realistic social setting, but sometimes seems unfamiliar and unnatural. The latter tries to replace religion with a moral goodness, yet focuses too much on the spiritual rather than the real world, lacking the “virtues of sincerity and courage” (226). Murdoch divides the characters as well as novelists into two types: existentialist, individualistic heroes as in the works of “D. H. Lawrence, E. Hemingway, A. Camus, J. -P. Sartre, K. Amis”, and mythic, obsessive figures created by “G. Greene, P. White, S. Bellow, M. Spark, W. Golding” (225, 226). The two kinds of novels are both products of their societies, representing different responses to the changing world. Again, Murdoch uses the phrase “Luciferian pride” to describe existentialist optimism. As “the first and immediate expression of a consciousness without God”, its narrative is constructed around a free, powerful, god-like figure (226). In comparison, the mystical narrative is set against a moral background where God is gradually replaced by the consciousness of science. The hero, or anti-hero, is too humble and anxious to boastfully declare himself as the centre; he is more “frail, godless, and yet possessed of genuine intuitions of an authoritative good” (227).

Murdoch's claims may seem bewildering due to her intermingling of literary terms and complex philosophical concepts; and yet there appears to be a tension between personal fantasy and representation of reality in both existentialist and mystical novels, embodied respectively in the egoistic and masochistic inclinations of their characters. What is Murdoch's own stance? How is the issue of God and Good addressed in her literary practice? For one thing, the two narratives need not be an either-or choice, and nor should they be reduced to an antithesis between styles of writing. For Murdoch, they are both "continuations of a nineteenth-century tradition, ... with intelligibly traditional assumptions about virtue" (228). In "Existentialists and Mystics", after an examination of the art works of the modern scene, Murdoch argues that literature should attend to the basic yet proper human needs, the need for food and for shelter, as premises for a further appeal to goodness. She defines her position as "a militant liberalism, ... a doctrine of human rights, ... a naturalistic unhistoricist untheoretical theory which is closer to Mill (or even to Zen) than to Marx" (231). The term "untheoretical theory" is suggestive, even while it presents Murdoch's artistic position as intrinsically contradictory. It is a theory as well as an untheory, with an ongoing battle between idea and experience, fantasy and realism, form and freedom. For her, goodness is a quality that should be placed in the foreground, whether in morality or in art. What she values are the immediate effects that literary works have upon the human soul, and the ways they interact with the good qualities of human life. In order to achieve this, the artist needs to remove "the illusory backgrounds" and prioritise a "response to a deep and ordinary human need" (233). On the other hand, Murdoch points out that "human beings need fantasies. The novelist is potentially the greatest truth teller of them all, but he is also an expert fantasy-monger" (233). For Murdoch, there is an unresolvable paradox in art: to reach the state of goodness means to fight against the temptation of personal fantasies, which are innate to subjective experiences. In the realm of artistic activity, it is the job of the "truth-teller" to bring out this dynamic relation of realism and personal fantasy, not only in a thematic sense, but also in the mode and language of representation.

In her own works, Murdoch seems to affirm neither the man-god of metaphysical novels nor the self-diminishing narrative of mystical novels. What she admires is nineteenth-century realism, a tradition in which the characters need not be egoistic to be independent, or masochistic to be Good. Their moral struggles are presented as a natural and ordinary part of life, with “a deep relaxing of tension” and a strong belief in “God, Reason, and Society” (224). In the narrative sense, Murdoch maintains that the modern writer should continue to work “as a truth-teller and as a defender of words” (232). The writer’s understanding of virtue, religion, and human society should be portrayed objectively and truthfully. In *Iris Murdoch: The Retrospective Fiction*, Bran Nicol observes Murdoch’s reaction to the general “gulf between language and what it represents” in post-war literature (Nicol, *Retrospective Fiction* 11). He argues that Murdoch is largely indebted to Plato and Wittgenstein – both in her approach to the concepts of the True and the Good, and in her attempts to find a suitable means of expressing suffering (14). For Murdoch, there is always a tension between language and reality: reality is represented through language, yet linguistic form can be idea-driven and easily reduced to a personal fantasy. As Nicol argues, such a tension is reflected in Murdoch’s works as “contradictory ... between the realist faith in referentiality and a counter-conviction about the fundamental inaccessibility of reality through language” (18). Murdoch explores ways to overcome the questions of representation in classic realism, and to avoid the false consolations of pattern-making. She criticises metaphysical works in which reality is modified by the author’s reflections on existence, freedom, and choice; in her works, artistic imagination is adopted to overcome the gulf between language and reality. On the one hand, there seems to be a transcendent idea that guides the storyline and sometimes makes it mythlike; on the other hand, the story is itself grounded in a moral philosophy to which realism is intrinsic.

Murdoch’s discussions of existentialist and mystical novels, as well as her investigation of personal fantasy in art and morality, are integral to her perception of realist writing. In *Bruno’s Dream*, the issue of personal fantasy is brought out

dynamically in the novel's characterisation, plot, and novelistic discourse. The distinctions between "open" and "closed" novels are problematised in Murdoch's literary practice, working as complementary features of a narrative which is driven by the Platonic "ideal". The juxtaposition of dream and reality in Bruno's experience not only serves as a thematic exploration of personal nostalgia, but also brings out significant ethical and moral meanings in the novel. The two contrary narrative forces of dream and reality can be included within the more profound forces of fantasy and realism. In her essay "Art is the Imitation of Nature", Murdoch declares that "art is an attempt to achieve omnipotence through personal fantasy" (Murdoch, Art 251). She defines the "the unconscious mind" as both the "enemy" and the "source" of art (252). The story is in essence a mode of consciousness, a process of arranging contingent events with an evaluative language; however, one has to overcome the illusory aspects of the unconscious mind, so as to present the reality objectively, impartially, and truthfully. This conflicted nature of art carries through to the conflicts between idea and experience, abstractions and particulars, and form and freedom. In Murdoch's novelistic discourse, these antitheses are not synthesised dogmatically, but rather negotiated by the author and treated as effective and dynamic components in her truth-seeking activity. Moreover, moral concepts such as God, Good, love and death are explored and expressed in a comic form. Murdoch strives to create a realistic narrative, yet often starts with a metaphysical idea in her structuring of the characters' moral progress. Although this approach seems problematic, from Murdoch's perspective it serves artistic truth in the realist mode. These considerations are reconciled in her call not only for a diminishment of selfish obsessions, but also for a loving attention to the other, in both art and morality. With a distinct mysticism and symbolism, *Bruno's Dream* epitomises Murdoch's attempt to explore a new method for literary realism.

Chapter Four: Artistic Representation of Truth in *The Black Prince*

Published in 1973, *The Black Prince* is the fifteenth of Iris Murdoch's twenty-six novels. Different from all her other writings, the novel is composed not only of a three-part story, but also two forewords and six postscripts "written" by the *dramatis personae* (including the "author" Bradley Pearson and the "editor" Loxias), which occupy around one-eighth of its whole length. It breaks the frame of traditional story-telling and makes Murdoch a participant in the contemporary metafictional innovations of postmodernism, at least in the eyes of many critics, who have explored the aspects of self-reflexiveness, playfulness, and subjectivity in the novel, with a focus on the relationship between fiction and reality in the activity of representation. In *Iris Murdoch: The Retrospective Fiction*, Bran Nicol claims that "the predominance of the quest for knowledge is symptomatic of what [he sees] as the overall epistemological basis of Murdoch's fiction" (Nicol, *Retrospective Fiction* 88). In this reading, Bradley Pearson, as the primary narrator, combines story-telling with reflections on life and truth (95). Nicol argues that the truth revealed in the novel is "fictional" and "subjectively constructed", and that Murdoch's adoption of postmodern self-reflexiveness coexists uncomfortably with her resistance to postmodernism (104-106). He finds it symptomatic of this tension that in her own comments on the novel, Murdoch tended to "discuss a postmodern text in a realist discourse" (107). In a later essay, Nicol refers to *The Black Prince* as Murdoch's "most 'experimental' and postmodernist novel" and proposes that Murdoch turned to experimentalism to break from the realism which had infused many of her earlier novels (Nicol, *Mannered Realism* 22, 23). Similarly, Mine Kilic analyses the novel's deviations from traditional narrative form, its references to "the influence of a constantly changing society and of television infested with its fast succession of the [*sic*] commercials", and its "prevailing disbelief in language"; and he comes to the conclusion that it is "a fictional reflection upon the aesthetic and moral problems of the postmodern world written in a postmodern fashion" (Kilic 139, 142). Sara Karbalaei also claims that the novel stages a conflict between realism and modernism; the plot is

“textually and chronologically fragmented”, the setting is unrealistic, the characters “cannot be summarized into a single coherent image”, and the novel mixes modes of narration, alternating between omniscient and first-person narrators (Karbalaei 94, 98, 103, 104). She affirms that the novel “is undoubtedly a postmodern metafiction”, drawing attention particularly to the “playful discourse” of the postscripts (106).

These responses to *The Black Prince*, stressing its qualities of self-reflexiveness and metafiction, link the novel with “an emerging ‘art of the surface’ which reacted against the ‘surface-depth’ model of interpretation so central to the modernist aesthetic” in the 1960s and 1970s (Nicol, *Retrospective Fiction* 106). With the metafictional notes and discussions, the novel self-consciously draws attention to its writing process and its own fictionality. Published in an era where many novels were deliberately self-conscious, *The Black Prince* seems to have an affinity with what Larry McCaffery calls the “new fiction”, novels that “tended to present themselves self-consciously as invented entities and insisted on the fact that all forms of art are merely another of man’s subjective creations” (McCaffery 76). Terms like “reality” and “truth”, McCaffery argues, are fictional abstractions; the nature of storytelling is examined and mocked with “a self-reflexive irony” (76). In *The Black Prince*, reality and truth become both abstract and plural; and the tension between life and art runs throughout the novel’s discourse. On the one hand, the novel is based on Bradley’s memories of the past, with the purpose of defending himself against the charge of murdering Arnold. It is intended to be an autobiographical, realistic narrative of his personal history. On the other hand, its forewords and postscripts are at odds with the reliability of Bradley’s narration to the point where the reality of the novel evaporates. The fictionality of the story is manifested not only in its self-reflexiveness, but also in the character P. A. Loxias, who serves as both a real figure and an imaginative, abstract symbol of the god of art. In this sense the novel offers to represent (fictionally) real events, but in an artistic form that intrinsically collapses the distinction between fact and fiction.

What, then, is Murdoch’s purpose in adopting such a labyrinthine narrative form? What does she achieve by confounding the reality of the novel with the irreconcilable

accounts of its own *dramatis personae*? This chapter aims to work these problems out by closely examining the ironic, intertextual, and metafictional aspects of the novel. It starts from an analysis of ironic twists at the textual level, and moves on to a thematic enquiry into the gap between subjective and objective reality in Bradley's narrative. After elaborating the thematic implications of the "Black Prince", the chapter will investigate how Murdoch's moral views on fantasy and imagination are dramatised in her novelistic practice. As the narrator, Bradley adopts the strategies of intertextuality and metafiction to rewrite his personal history, but he often mistakes personal fantasies for imaginative capacities, treating them as the driving force of his art. With the forewords and postscripts, the novel highlights the issue of truth in artistic representation, and at the same time avoids over-simplifying or being dogmatically conclusive. This chapter argues that *The Black Prince* is not a deviation from Murdoch's ideas of realistic writing: with its ambiguous plot and open structure, it rather embodies Murdoch's treatment of the novelistic form as "a house fit for free characters to live in" (Murdoch, *Sublime and Good* 286). The chapter concludes by focusing upon the fictionality of the story, and the way Murdoch's views on the ideal and empirical real are subtly intertwined in her novelistic discourse.

4.1 Love, Sex, and Art in Bradley's Point of View

In *The Black Prince*, Bradley Pearson is given three identities: the protagonist of the story, the first-person narrator, and the author of *The Black Prince: A Celebration of Love* – an autobiographical book which partially coincides with the text of the novel. Self-styled as "wisely artful and artfully wise", Bradley is a Platonic writer who seeks to acquire truth and self-knowledge by creating "reportage" on his past experiences; love and art are the two central themes of his book (Murdoch, *Black Prince* 11). On the one hand, Bradley decides to "inhabit [his] past self" in the storytelling; on the other hand, he reflects on the events and characters "in the light of [his] later wisdom" (11). The account and judgement of his "past self" are often at variance with what he later indicates to be the facts. Such variance in Bradley's narrative not only gives rise to

ironic plot twists but also opens up multiple readings of the story.

The story Bradley narrates is firstly, “from a salient point of view, the story of [his] relations with Arnold and the astounding climax to which these relations led” (29). It begins with Bradley’s retirement from the tax office. An unsuccessful novelist in his late fifties, Bradley is determined to get away from the hustle and bustle of city life and retreat to a seaside cottage, Patara, to write his masterpiece. However, his plan is delayed by the unexpected visit of Francis Marloe, the brother of his ex-wife Christian.⁶ He then receives a phone call from his writer friend Arnold Baffin, who says that he “may have just killed Rachel” with a poker (28). Bradley goes over and takes the role of mediator for the married couple. Contingencies then come one after another; Bradley has to delay his departure from London as he gets more and more entangled in his relations with Arnold, Rachel, Marloe, Christian, and his sister Priscilla, who is on the verge of mental collapse. As novelists, Bradley and Arnold are friends as well as rivals: the former is serious, high-brow, “sadistic” in his art, whereas the latter is entertaining, productive, and commercially successful. Bradley criticizes Arnold for writing light-hearted and sketchy dramas of everyday life. According to Bradley, Arnold piles up “a jumble of ‘details’” and reproduces “oddments out of life” in his works (49). They are essentially a journalistic reproduction of empirical details, lacking in imagination and depth, in the form of “a congeries of amusing anecdotes loosely garbled into ‘racy stories’ with the help of half-baked unmeditated symbolism” (51). In contrast, Bradley believes that real art requires the visitation of divine possession; it only “comes out of endless restraint and silence” (50). For him, the writer works as a vessel, an instrument, a mouthpiece; the ultimate goal is to tell the truth through art. In his foreword, Bradley asserts that his own book aims to reveal “the austere outline of truth” by exploring what lies beyond “the superficial and ‘exciting’ aspects of this drama” (11).

Bradley’s love for Julian, abrupt, full of passion, serves as another theme of his narration. After a tutorial session on *Hamlet*, Bradley becomes sexually attracted to

⁶ Richard Todd and A. S. Byatt both point out that the name of Francis Marloe serves as a Shakespearean joke – a combination of “Francis Bacon and Christopher Marlowe”, the two “chief ‘contestants’ in the foolish debate over Shakespeare’s identity” (Byatt 1965, 275; Todd 1979, 30).

Julian, Arnold and Rachel's youthful and eccentric daughter, who is thirty-eight years younger than him. It turns out that the girl also admires him and craves his love. After their confessions to each other, Bradley and Julian escape to the seaside cottage which Bradley rented for his retirement. Almost immediately Bradley learns that his sister, Priscilla, has committed suicide, but delays returning to London and keeps the news from Julian in order to be with her. This fact is exposed when Arnold arrives to put an end to the relationship, as is Bradley's real age and his affair with Julian's mother. The girl returns home in desperation, but later sends Bradley a letter, which is interpreted by him as a text written in coded language. His hope of retrieving her is rekindled, but before he can make the next move, he receives a call from Rachel, who has killed Arnold with the same poker Arnold had used at the beginning of the novel. Bradley tries to help her cover up the crime, but accidentally leaves his fingerprints on the murder weapon. Convicted as the murderer, he is sentenced to life imprisonment. Bradley dies of cancer several years later, having finished his masterpiece in prison with the encouragement of the mysterious P. A. Loxias, who edits and publishes the work.

Bradley's narrative of his pursuit of art runs in parallel with his romantic love story. According to Bradley, his love and sexual passion for Julian is accompanied by a certain Platonic revelation. He suffers from extreme pain, crying and vomiting in public, when he believes that his love will never be gratified. After learning that Julian loves him back, Bradley reports that he "felt like a cave-dweller emerging into the sun. She was the truth of my life" (285). The romantic energy of his love and the creative energy of his art are merged into one; love brings him "a previously unimaginable power which I knew that I would and could use in my art" (209). Bradley experiences "an overwhelming sense of reality", of "being at last real and seeing the real. The tables, the chairs, the sherry glasses. The curls of the rug. The dust: real" (209). Moreover, according to Bradley, he achieves a certain self-salvation through the power of his attraction to Julian. If the first half of the story is the characterisation of a solipsistic, prejudiced, self-centred Bradley, the second half can be seen as the cultivation of a

morally good Bradley. At first, he feels “totally alienated and changed and practically discarnate” in the face of such a fierce love; with Julian “the world was made, ... she was the world and I touched her everywhere” (206, 208). He then enters into a state of ecstasy and believes that through love he can see everything with precision. For Bradley, “love brings with it a vision of selflessness”; he is “dazed by emergence from the cave” and starts to behold the world with a new, unselfish vision (210, 208). Bradley’s attitude and behaviour to other people are altered too. He finally accepts his colleague Hartbourne’s invitation for lunch; his hatred towards Roger and Marigold – Priscilla’s ex-husband and his mistress – is changed into an appreciation of their love and happiness. Under the influence of his overwhelming desire for Julian, Bradley seems to replace his former prejudices with devotion and compassion for others. In the end, he becomes a scapegoat for Rachel’s crime. Partly out of guilt and partly out of his love and desire for Julian, Bradley accepts the unjust sentence of the court. Beyond his fleeting sufferings, he has acquired “a truthful vision” and dies in a state of self-salvation (391).

According to his own narrative, Bradley seems to have accomplished a pilgrimage from the cave to the sun, from appearance to reality. But has the power of love dispelled his solipsistic fantasies, or is this itself just one of his many fantasies? Narrated in the first-person, the story is coloured by Bradley’s own judgements and understandings; it becomes more like a moral allegory than a truthful recording of his past. It looks suspiciously like an artefact of narrative identity, which is described by Dan McAdams as “an internalized and evolving story of the self that provides a person’s life with some semblance of unity, purpose, and meaning” (McAdams 100). The impulse to construct one’s experience as a story of the self is a basic ordering principle that imposes upon the content and structure of the narration, directing the selection of events, the processes of meaning-making and self-exploration, and the voice and tone of the storytelling. McAdams argues that narrative identity is driven by a deep psychological urge to make meaning out of life; it is the premise on which “the person reconstructs the personal past (chapters gone by) and anticipates the future (chapters yet to come)” (100).

Moreover, this urge “explains what the social actor does, what the motivated agent wants, and what it all means in the context of one’s narrative understanding of the self” (103).

In *The Black Prince*, however, there is a tension in Bradley’s narrative identity: the stories are told from the perspective of his past self but are combined with his retrospective knowledge. In the foreword, Bradley claims to “inhabit my past self and, for the ordinary purpose of storytelling, speak only with the apprehensions of that time, a time in many ways so different from the present” (Murdoch, *Black Prince* 11). He notes, though, that his present wisdom “will not be absent from the story. It will to some extent, in fact it must, ‘irradiate’ it” (11). Accordingly, the storytelling is sometimes interrupted by long paragraphs of self-reflection, especially when Bradley addresses his “dear friend” P. A. Loxias and speaks directly about the falsities in his judgement. In other words, the narrative juxtaposes two contrasting versions of the narrator’s selfhood – the irrational, egoistic, reckless old Bradley, and the calm, unselfish, remorseful new Bradley.

Such a duality of narrative identity produces a sense of incongruity in the novel. The meaning of the story is no longer single and conclusive; it is filled with paradoxes and ambiguities. Bradley appears in the story as a solipsistic and uncaring person. The description of his flat can be seen a metaphor of the state of his mind – “a sunless and cosy womb my flat was, with a highly wrought interior and no outside” (22). He detests intimate relationships, and regards other people unsympathetically, as intruders and trouble-bringers. For instance, Francis is depicted as “ill-omened”, and described as “coarse, fat, red-faced, pathetic, slightly wild, slightly sinister, perhaps a little mad”; Christian is called a “diminisher”, a “spoiler” who only brings “disorder into my life” (26, 25). For Bradley, “out of sight out of mind is a charter of human survival” (25). When the desperate Priscilla turns to him for help, the first thing he feels is “blank dismay and instant fear” that he might get involved in any of her mess (72). His only sister is described by him as “pitiful and ugly”, “boring and empty”, “as rigid as a corpse”; he even claims that “I did not even want to have to be sorry for Priscilla. ... I

simply did not love her enough to be of any use to her” (74-75). Bradley sees other people with prejudice and contempt, and his own life is damaged by such a selfish attitude. As Bradley retrospectively reflects, he tends to “defend [himself] by descriptions and tame the world by generalizing” (82). In his own evaluation of the perspective of his earlier self, the representation of Priscilla is “superficial”, and she is “crippled and diminished by [his] perception itself” (81, 82). In the light of later events, Bradley realizes that her agonies are deep and real, that his deliberate negligence has added reasons to her resort to suicide. He treated Priscilla as an unimportant person in his life and a peripheral character in the plot, which is centred on his pursuit of art and love. Within his self-reflexive comments, the egotism that he hides “behind a mound of words” is brought to light and itself treated as a subject of his narration (82).

4.2 Who is the Black Prince?

In his narration, Bradley’s identity changes with the development of his consciousness and self-knowledge; his narrative is a work in progress. From Bradley’s perspective, love erases his prejudices and reveals the real world in detail and precision. However, this “godly” love is in fact ambivalent towards other people’s pain and doom. In order to keep Julian in his possession, Bradley is apathetic towards Priscilla’s death and neglects his duty to arrange her funeral in London. Instead, he blames his knowledge of the fact upon the circumstance of Francis’s discovery that he is at Patara, seeing the telephone call as “a pure accident, a mere contingent by-product of [his] carelessness”, and feels his disregard of it “was scarcely distorting the real course of events at all” (325-326). His self-serving attitude suggests that he is driven not by a truthful vision of love, but by a darker, more corrupt, and more egoistic energy: the “black Eros”, to use his own words (235).

Many critics have pointed out that the title of the book, *The Black Prince*, which has the same initials as Bradley Pearson, refers in part to the black Eros which overwhelms his love and art. The black Eros can be contrasted with Platonic love, in which there is no expectation of a reward. But what is it exactly? How does this black

Eros affect Bradley's narrative? A. S. Byatt observes that the "Black Prince" is "a composite god-demon in the novel. ... He is Shakespeare and Hamlet. He is Love and Death, and Art" (Byatt, *Degrees* 271). According to Byatt, Bradley's love for Julian embodies his masochistic tendencies (269). Elizabeth Dipple argues that for Bradley, the black Eros works as a creative energy, which "connects to the ethical demands of truth-telling" (Dipple, Murdoch 42). This "creative Eros", however, can easily be corrupted by the artist's "inattention", "which is typical of most works of art and the bane of the impulse towards good" (42). By comparing the dominant ideas in Bradley's and Arnold's art, Dipple argues that Murdoch represents Bradley's progress towards understanding that true joy springs from selflessness and from an individual's integration with the real world (43). Peter J. Conradi, identifying the black Eros with "the deep dark struggles between good and evil", also maintains that "the action of the novel teaches Bradley a loving tolerance learnt only through his seizure by Eros and concomitant access to a greater openness" (Conradi 236, 256). Critics seem to agree that there is a progress in Bradley's vision of art, which is accompanied by a moral transition in his life. The black Eros impels Bradley's creativity in art; it is joined with a loving attention towards others, making Bradley succeed in his artistic representation of the ultimate truth (Dipple, Murdoch 42). However, while Bradley does achieve a certain progress in morality and art, it seems problematic to view him as a totally purified, unselfish person or a totally enlightened, ideal artist. In fact, Bradley is still somewhat fantasy-ridden at the end of his life; the black Eros, which enchants him in life, also imposes an influence on his art in a more subtle and elusive way.

The idea of the black Eros can be clarified by reference to three contexts: the symbolism of the Post Office Tower, the novel's intertextuality with *Hamlet*, and the duality of its characterization of P. A. Loxias. Like the "black towers of Lots Road power station" in *Bruno's Dream*, the Post Office Tower is frequently mentioned in *The Black Prince*, serving as a symbol of the protagonist's sexual energy. In *Bruno's Dream*, the Lots Road power station is visible from the window of Bruno's bedroom. The image that "the chimneys of Lots Road power station towered above, suitable extensions of

that murky infertile earth” recurs through the narrative, symbolising Bruno’s erotic illusions and physical infertility on his deathbed (Murdoch, *Bruno’s Dream* 19). Visible from the front door of Bradley’s flat, the tower is depicted as a “serene austere erection” when it first makes its appearance (Murdoch, *Black Prince* 22). On his first walk with Julian, Bradley “saw the Post Office Tower, and it was as if I myself were as high as the tower, ... I was tall and erect” (136). When Bradley engages in physical intimacy with Rachel, the image of the Post Office Tower keeps hovering in his mind. Although blocked by the neighbouring house, it seems to be “haloed with blue sky, aslant and looking in at the window”, making Bradley “sexually excited” and evoking in him a mixture of disgust, fear, and guilt (140). After Arnold has found out about their affair, Bradley and Rachel meet again. When Rachel complains about her dead-end marriage and her unspent “fire and power”, Bradley asks her to look at the Post Office Tower, which is “very hard and clear, glittering, dangerous, martial and urbane” (182). Later, after Bradley comes to the realization of his love for Julian, he invites the girl on a date in the revolving restaurant at the top of the tower, in which “being so high above the ground and yet still connected to it” he experiences a “quiet and perhaps outwardly imperceptible shuddering” (238). His “sense of being absolutely in the right and longed-for place is fixed and guaranteed by every ray in the universe” (239). Like an omniscient observer, the Post Office Tower is involved in Bradley’s romantic relations, witnessing his secretive desires and inner struggles. Through it, Bradley’s erotic energies are reified and vividly expressed, and given a sort of externalised moral authority.

The novel Bradley creates under the inspiration of the black Eros, entitled *The Black Prince: A Celebration of Love*, can be seen as a portrait of the artist as an old man, and of his moral pilgrimage in love relations. Not only does the novel’s title allude to *Hamlet*, but its representation of Bradley himself in many ways resembles Shakespeare’s soliloquising, tragic hero. There are direct references, such as “Words, words, words”, “To a nunnery go and quickly too. Farewell”, and “Alas, poor Yorick” (199, 269, 328). Bradley falls in love with Julian in the tutorial on *Hamlet*, where he interprets Hamlet as Shakespeare’s alter ego and concludes that the author “is speaking

as few artists can speak, in the first person yet at the pinnacle of artifice” (199). Such an interpretation invites application to the reading of Bradley’s own story. With his first-person discourse, Bradley treats his old self as an alter ego and, as in his reading of Shakespeare, “passionately expose[s] himself to the ground and author of his being” (199). Bradley sees himself emulating Shakespeare’s act of literary creation as “a wild act of audacity, a self-purging, a complete self-castigation in the presence of god” (200). By exposing the authorial “sinful consciousness” in the protagonist and giving full play to “the eloquence of direct speech”, Bradley pursues such a redemption in his art; at the same time, this aspiration itself invites readers to meditate on the truthfulness of his account of events in his life (199).

Bradley identifies with Hamlet, both in his entanglements with the black Eros and in his rhetoric of self-reflection. He also identifies Julian with Hamlet; the girl not only bears a masculine name but also dresses like a man on many occasions. On their first meeting in the novel, Bradley mistakes Julian for a slim young man, who is “dressed in dark narrow trousers, a sort of dark velvet or corduroy jacket and a white shirt”, tossing fragments of papers into the path of the cars (54-55). She appears under “an uncertain vivid yet hazy illumination, wherein people walked like spirits, bathed in light and not revealed” (54). In Bradley’s description, the ambience is dreamy, Julian’s behaviour is melodramatic and her costume theatrical; more specifically, she herself partly resembles the Black Prince. During their tutorial, Julian tells Bradley that she played Hamlet at school. He asks her to describe the costume, then feels “sexually excited” as he looks at her legs and smells “her sweat, her feet, her breast” (206, 202). After the lovers have run off to Patara, Bradley’s first attempt to make love with Julian ends in failure. The girl then changes into the costume of the Black Prince:

She was dressed in black tights, black shoes, she wore a black velvet jerkin and a white shirt and a gold chain with a cross about her neck. She had posed herself in the doorway of the kitchen, holding the sheep’s skull up in one hand.
(328)

Julian's cross-dressing as Hamlet ignites Bradley's passion; he violently tears off her clothes and finally manages to make love to her. Later, when Julian asked what made him behave so vigorously, Bradley answers: "The Prince of Denmark, I suppose" (329). There seems to be a link between his sexual energy and his artistic obsession with *Hamlet*; the Black Prince becomes an embodiment of the black Eros. It may also suggest that Bradley's earlier claim that Shakespeare was homosexual aligns with his own repressed homosexuality. In any case, Bradley's erotic energy for the cross-dressed Julian stimulates the creative energy he needs to write his masterpiece. He feels as though he "was speaking through her, through the pure echoing emptiness of her being, hollowed by love" (331). Here, as in his account of Shakespeare's creativity, Bradley "transmutes his private obsessions into a rhetoric" and "makes the crisis of his own identity into the very central stuff of his art" (200). According to Bradley's Freudian interpretation of the play, Hamlet, who "identifies Claudius with his father" and "Ophelia with his mother", falls in love with his mother and therefore unconsciously wishes his father's death (195).⁷ Bradley claims that the reason why Ophelia fails to save Hamlet is that "pure ignorant young girls cannot save complicated neurotic over-educated older men from disaster" – a prophecy of his own fruitless love with Julian (196). Being himself "neurotic", "over-educated", and "older", the Hamlet-Bradley identifies Arnold with his Claudius-(step)father and strives to triumph over him in art.

As Bradley observes, with reference to Trinitarian theology, "the black Eros which had felled me was consubstantial with another and more secret god" (235). After his book is completed, he claims again in the postscript that "the black Eros whom I loved and feared was but an insubstantial shadow of a greater and more terrible godhead" (390). It seems that there is a higher, mythical force beyond Bradley's black Eros in his artistic creation, which is embodied in the character P. A. Loxias. Self-described as the author's alter ego, Loxias is the mysterious literary editor and agent for Bradley's book. His real identity remains ambiguous throughout the novel. In the postscripts, Francis claims that Loxias is Bradley himself "in a thin disguise"; Rachel thinks that his name

⁷ Bradley's reading of Hamlet echoes with Ernest Jones's ingenious book, *Hamlet and Oedipus*, which was published in 1949 and offers a Freudian criticism centred upon the idea of Hamlet's Oedipus Complex.

is “a *nom de guerre* of a fellow-prisoner” of Bradley, “a notorious rapist and murderer” who has killed his “successful fellow-musician” (401, 407). Bradley reveres him as the source of literary inspiration, calling him “my dear friend and mentor” and conversing with him throughout the narrative (108). There is a link between Loxias and Apollo, the violent god who flayed Marsyas alive after their music contest. In the tutorial with Julian, Bradley describes Shakespeare as “the god’s flayed victim dancing the dance of creation” (199). For him, the image of the great artist is linked to the flayed victim in anguish. Later in the novel, when Bradley goes to the opera with Julian, the music and performance are so compelling that Bradley feels “I was that sword of agony, I was that pain. ... I was to be gilded and then flayed” (258). The myth, which involves death for the sake of art, is in a sense a hypertext to Bradley and Arnold’s literary contest. Murdoch herself elucidated the connection in the interview with Simon Price in 1984, pointing out that “Bradley is somehow destroyed by art; he’s also destroyed by the black Eros, whom I identify in a way with Apollo. But the voice of Apollo is very much there – a cold, ambiguous voice” (Price 154). In a later interview with Richard Todd, she confirmed that “Mr Loxias is Apollo, he is the god of art and the inspirer of the artist. And one is here to imagine him ... coming back to the earth and making himself mortal and incarnate” (Todd, *Discussions* 187). Loxias being one of the Greek names for Apollo, and the initials “P. A.” suggesting “Phoebus Apollo”, this “notorious rapist and murderer” is also the god of light, truth, music, and poetry. His is the cold and ambiguous voice that gives Bradley the literary inspiration he has long waited for. Throughout the novel, Bradley as narrator pauses from time to time to pay homage to his muse, and Loxias is the addressee of these self-reflexive meditations. For Bradley, “The luxury of addressing [Loxias] directly is the fulfilment of a desire which is itself one of the subjects of the book” (Murdoch, *Black Prince* 80).

On the other hand, the characterization of Loxias problematises the issue of truth in Bradley’s narrative. There is a tension between Loxias as a character in the novel and as an abstract symbol of the god. In the postscript, Bradley addresses Loxias as “the crown of my quest. ... I was seeking you, I was seeking him, and the knowledge beyond

all persons which has no name at all” (391). Being both “you” and “him”, Loxias co-exists as human and divine, making Bradley’s narrative ambiguous and even unrealistic. Bradley sets out to write his masterpiece with Loxias as his companion in prison. As a musician, Loxias is the kind of artist Bradley wanted to become, capable of anything, even murder, to defend his art. As the god of truth and light, he infuses Bradley with the keen desire to seek artistic truth and self-knowledge in his narrative; but are these two the same, or at odds with each other? Bradley inhabits his past self and creates a fable of moral pilgrimage, where love consoles him and makes him believe that the world may be seen in a new light. But the interruptions of his present self, inspired by Loxias, constantly remind us that the past self is an artistic representation. Bradley has two narrative identities, one as a participant in the events of the story and the other as the artist upon whom we depend for the information.

4.3 Irony, Intertextuality, and Metafiction

Elizabeth Dipple points out that there is a double persona in Bradley’s authorial voice: “the unflayed (i.e. the pre-trial) BP as the primary narrating voice and the flayed (i.e. imprisoned with P. Loxias as teacher and companion) BP as the second voice” (Dipple, Murdoch 113). She argues that the novel has an “anti-formal impulse”, based on Murdoch’s belief that formlessness can lead to truth (115). In the novel, there is a tension between Bradley’s autobiographical voice, which resists any artificial strategy and pattern, and his engagement with the creative Eros and ultimate devotion to the god of art. The intended “reportage” is turned into a work of art; the mythical character of Loxias embodies Bradley’s artistic craft and creativity. In the editor’s foreword, Loxias claims that “Man’s creative struggle, his search for wisdom and truth, is a love story. What follows is ambiguous and sometimes tortuously told. Man’s searchings and his strugglings are ambiguous and vowed to hidden ways” (Murdoch, *Black Prince* 9). As a writer who searches for “wisdom and truth”, Bradley “tortuously” adopts strategies to expand the means of representation and the boundaries of meaning. Under the influence of “Apollo-Loxias”, Bradley becomes an artful storyteller; the artistic aspect

of his book can be seen in its features of irony, intertextuality, and metafiction.

As Bradley reflects in his imaginary “conversation” with Loxias, “The novel is a comic form. Language is a comic form, and makes jokes in its sleep” (81). He strives to achieve “an elegant complexity” in the narrative through irony, which he conceives as a “tactful sense of proportion in the selection of forms for the embodying of beauty” (81). Irony provides “a sort of momentary artificiality” through which to “offer a diagnosis” of the relation between beauty and truth (81). In Bradley’s book, irony is closely related to the juxtaposition of two perspectives of narration; his reflection upon the characters and events with hindsight not only generates a reversal of the meaning of events, but also establishes a framework for dramatic irony. Thus, Bradley interrupts his narration just before the depiction of his fateful tutorial to Julian, to declare: “As I now approach the first climax of my book let me pause, dear friend, and refresh myself once again with some direct converse with you” (183). The following survey of his relationships with Rachel, Arnold, Priscilla, and Christian underlays the representation of events with a discourse of self-analysis, providing deep psychological reasons for his recent actions. Bradley describes his infatuation with Rachel as “de-individualized” by her emotional love letter; there is no love between them, only a mixture of “vanity and anxiety” derived from “the darkness of [his] egoistic pity” (184, 185). He examines his feud with Arnold in life and in art, ending with the announcement that “I will forbear to characterize [Arnold] further here, as I can already hear the venom creeping into my tone” (187). He refers to his feelings towards Priscilla as characteristic of sibling relationships, “being caught in such a spider’s web of love and hate, rivalry and solidarity” (187). His continued entanglement with Christian, on the other hand, is described as a “massive invasion” of his “artist’s soul”, and he decides to display a “cool amused indifference” towards her for the “final exorcism” (188, 189).

Bradley creates a double voice in the narration of his past story, so that an ironic effect is achieved whenever it reveals an underlying meaning in contrast to the surface meaning of the text. He also uses irony pervasively as a technique of characterisation, as when Priscilla asks her brother to go to Roger’s house and retrieve her jewels just

after showing her contempt for “such an empty materialistic world” (87); or when Rachel boasts “how united I am with Arnold and how happy we really are” and is then given the letter which discloses Arnold’s love for Christian (361); or when Francis, after questioning Bradley’s obsession with the Post Office Tower and calling him “a repressed homosexual” and “neurotic”, admits that “I am neurotic and I am homosexual and I’m bloody unhappy about it” (153). The irony communicates Priscilla’s broken self-esteem, Rachel’s vanity in her marriage, and Francis’s feelings of inferiority and alienation. Daniel O. Nathan, discussing the relation between irony and intention, observes that there is a radical twist involved: “the straightforward literal meaning is precisely the opposite of the appropriate, so-called intended, meaning” (Nathan 184). The implicit intentionalism of irony, he argues, requires a “larger extralinguistic and situational context, a context that includes the author’s background and intention” (185).

It should be noted that Nathan’s own stance in the article is in a sense anti-intentionalist. Noting the dangers of the intentional fallacy, he appeals to “an idealized, hypothetical author ... who can be held responsible for everything in the text, being aware of all the relevant context, conventions, and background assumptions” (183, 199). In Bradley’s book, the ironic device and the context of his authorial intention work dynamically to undermine each other. On the one hand, he represents himself as “a timid conscientious person full of sensitive moral scruples and conventional fears” in life, who adopts an ironic, self-reflexive, and sophisticated tone in his art (Murdoch, *Black Prince* 144). On the other hand, his obsession with artistic form dominates his behaviour in life and is often itself the beginning and end of his thoughts and emotions. As Bradley himself remarks, “I wanted to talk to Francis about myself, but I could only talk in riddles” (152). The communications in his life are often confounded by indirection, which itself becomes a dubious motif of his narration; his testimony in court, he says, is so “surrounded by [his] own prevarications and lies that it was never seen to stand out with its own self-guaranteeing clarity” (384).

As art can impart the truth, it can also be used to mystify and conceal the truth. With the device of irony, the meaning of the text becomes more open, layered, and

ambiguous. In *The Black Prince*, it is also combined with a high degree of intertextuality, which intensifies the double-voicing. As Julia Kristeva argues, intertextuality involves transposing one system of signs into another (Kristeva 59-60). Consequently, the meaning of the text is “always plural, shattered, capable of being tabulated” (60). In *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, Linda Hutcheon identifies intertextuality as a characteristic feature of postmodernist writing. She suggests that in opposition to the modernist notion that art is “a closed, self-sufficient, autonomous object”, postmodernism opens up the meaning of the text by situating itself in “the ‘world’ of discourse, the ‘world’ of texts and intertexts” (Hutcheon, *Poetics* 125). She presents intertextuality as the subversion of modernism, achieved through “the ironic inversions of parody: art’s critical relation to the ‘world’ of discourse” (140). In this sense, the issue of truth is problematised as the story is constantly and deliberately grounded in other fictional texts rather than an empirical reality. At the same time, the meaning of the text is deepened through its connection with the meaning of other texts. This chapter has already explored how Bradley’s story alludes to *Hamlet* and to the myth of Apollo and Marsyas. It also has an intertextual relation with *Rosenkavalier*, the comic opera Julian invites Bradley to watch, in which the protagonist falls in love with a woman much older than himself and eventually abandons her for a girl who is young and beautiful. Like Bradley’s story, *Rosenkavalier* explores the themes of Eros, lies, infidelity, and ageing in love relations with a huge age gap. The music of the opera, which Bradley describes as “a cold fire” burning his heart, makes him feel “gilded and then flayed” (Murdoch, *Black Prince* 257, 258). Being so sympathetic towards the Marschallin’s “inevitable loss of the beloved”, Bradley is unable to bear the emotional tempest, and leaves halfway through the opera, vomiting on the street. The effect of this piece of art on him is long-lasting. According to Loxias’s account in the postscript, *Rosenkavalier* occupies Bradley’s mind as he lays dying:

‘*Rosenkavalier.*’ After that he was silent for a while. Then, ‘How did it end? That young fellow – what was his name –?’ ‘Octavian.’ ‘Did he stay with the Marschallin or did he leave her and find a young girl of his own age?’ ‘He

found a young girl of his own age and left the Marschallin.’ ‘Well, that was right, wasn’t it.’ Then after a while he turned, still holding my hand, and snuggled down as if to sleep. And slept. (415)

There are three layers of intertextuality between *Rosenkavalier* and Bradley’s story. Firstly, Bradley can be interpreted as Octavian, in the sense that he abandons the older woman Rachel for the younger Julian. Secondly, he can be interpreted as the old and fooled Marschallin; both of them are occupied with illusory expectations of love, and both end up being abandoned by their youthful lovers, Octavian and Julian. Thirdly, there is a further, much more figurative and tendentious sense in which Bradley refashions Julian as the Marschallin whom he abandons for Loxias – as it is the only “right” choice for him as an artist. In the postscript, Bradley calls the prison cell, which he inhabits together with Loxias, a “quiet monastery” (391). He claims that “I sought you long and in sorrow, and in the end you consoled me for my life-long deprivation of you by suffering with me” (391). This remark suggests that for Bradley, the fated person is Loxias, not Julian. He describes the experience of watching the opera as “an occasion for personal fantasy, the outrush of hot muddled emotions, the muck of my mind made audible”, which conforms to his recognition of the violent, irrational god of art (257). However, such a reading ignores the fact that he did not abandon Julian; she left him. Bradley’s own unreliable re-interpretation of the opera manifests that he seeks to recuperate his life story under the banner of art.

In the artistic representation of his life experience, Bradley consciously includes *Hamlet*, *Rosenkavalier*, and the myth of Apollo as hypertexts of his narrative. At one stage, he reflects that “The wicked regard time as discontinuous, the wicked dull their sense of natural causality. The good feel being as a total dense mesh of interconnections” (125). As an artist, Bradley views things around him as interconnected components of his work. These interconnections, however, are not those of “natural causality”. In his narrative, the external world is represented as loaded with omens: before the fateful tutorial with Julian, he senses that “the room, the wall, trembled with precision, as if the inanimate world were about to utter a word”; on the morning when Julian leaves

him in the seaside village, he notices that the light presents the room “in a ghastly way”, in which “the furniture was humped shapelessly about [him] like sleeping animals” (193, 341). For Bradley, all the contingent events of his life lead up to his destined tragedy. By depicting them in a mythical way, he asserts his own sense of narrative identity over the mere appearances of the facts.

Bradley’s narrative conveys a strong sense of form: his two involvements in the domestic violence of the Baffins at the beginning and the end; Priscilla’s two attempts to commit suicide with the sleeping pills; Hartbourne’s endless phone calls to invite Bradley out, all starting with the same sentence, “Hartbourne here” (as in pages 85, 129, 192, 213); and the periodic address to Loxias as “my dear friend” throughout the novel. There are also recurrent descriptions of certain images as important symbols in the narrative: the Post Office Tower as Bradley’s black Eros; and the broken water-buffalo lady statue as a constant reminder of Priscilla’s broken self-esteem, bothering and torturing her until death. Moreover, Bradley often prefigures how characters will fit into the storyline, with similarly-structured sentences such as “Since Rachel Baffin is one of the main actors, in a crucial sense perhaps the main actor, in my drama I should like now to pause briefly to describe her” and “At this point it is necessary for me to give some account of my sister Priscilla, who is about to appear upon the scene” (33, 68). With the knowledge of how everything goes and ends, Bradley cultivates a general pattern in both the subject matter and the rhetorical discourse of his narrative. Despite his claim to be presenting events in the moment, inhabiting his past self, the book he creates is, in a way, a book on the process of artistic composition, in which the narrator consciously draws attention to the fact that it is a work of art; in short, the book embodies the features of metafiction.

Linda Hutcheon argues that postmodern metafiction “not only is self-reflexively metafictional and parodic, but also makes a claim to some kind of (newly problematized) historical reference” (Hutcheon, *Poetics* 40). That is to say, there is a tension between historical facts and artistic fabrications. Hutcheon views metafiction “as [one] of the discourses by which we construct our versions of reality”, but at the same time history

is problematised and called into question by the narrative (40). Hutcheon believes that postmodernism is reflexively concerned with narrative (not just fiction), and her arguments therefore resemble those put forward by White and LaCapra, as discussed in the Introduction.

One of the earliest critical studies of metafiction was Patricia Waugh's *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* (1984). She defined metafiction as "fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality" (Waugh 2). While there were critics who "tended to see such literary behaviour as a form of the self-indulgence and decadence characteristic of the exhaustion of any artistic form or genre", Waugh pioneered critical attention to the "positive aspects of fictional self-consciousness," the extent to which "metafictional writers, highly conscious of the problems of artistic legitimacy, simply sensed a need for the novel to theorize about itself" (10). Murdoch treated "fictionality as a theme to be explored", but her "formal self-consciousness is limited" (19). Waugh notes how Murdoch, in *The Black Prince*, describes "professional artists who self-consciously explore... formal problems: Iris Murdoch's own dilemmas," and "seems to be exploring the two sides of her fictional dilemma through their embodiment in the two writers in the novel, Pearson and Baffin" (118)

In *The Black Prince*, Bradley offers a self-reflexive account of his personal history. The events are presented as his actual past, not a work of imagination. Yet they are avowedly artistically fashioned, some highlighted and some excluded, in order to serve the central theme, "a celebration of love" (Murdoch, *Black Prince* 21). The process of rewriting and representing them is in essence a process of fiction-making; in this sense the boundary between truth and falsity is not so absolute. Bradley's narrative is composed of both historical materials and fictional devices; it suggests both the referentiality of life and the autonomy of art, without distinguishing between them.

4.4 Blind Fantasy versus Visionary Imagination

The Black Prince uses unreliable first-person narration, not just to problematise the report of events, but also to examine artistic representation's accountability to truth. Bradley himself employs irony, intertextuality, and metafiction as narrative strategies and draws attention to the process of his storytelling. The story turns outwards towards other texts so as to extend its own meaning; it also turns inwards upon itself to produce a "tortuous" novelistic discourse. As Bradley points out in the postscript:

Art is a kind of artificial memory and the pain which attends all serious art is a sense of that factitiousness. Most artists are the minor poets of their little world, who have only one voice and can sing only one song. (381)

Bradley strives to go beyond his "little world" and explore the complexity of reality in a larger context. His authorial reflections supplement his narrative; the meaning of the story is deepened through reference to other cultural texts. However, despite all the devices aimed at enlarging his "voice", Bradley's song is still self-oriented. The world Bradley inhabits, depicted however openly or extensively, is a world confined to his personal preoccupations, a reality which is processed by his black Eros. He presents a moral pilgrimage which begins with a submission to black Eros and ends with a celebration of love. Even in prison, Bradley declares himself grateful for the knowledge love brings him; he believes that a "truthful vision finds the fullness of reality everywhere and the whole extended universe in a little room" (391). However, this evaluation needs to be set against Julian's view in her postscript, that "erotic love never inspires art. Or only bad art" (410). What Bradley sees as true love ironically enchants him, giving him delusions and false expectations in life and art. In the eyes of his heroine, the masterpiece is "a literary failure" (411).

It is important to recognise that there is a distinction between Bradley's adoption of metafiction in his narrative, in which the text self-consciously reflects upon itself, and Murdoch's adoption of metafiction in the larger frame of the novel, in which the postscripts are added to give an all-round vision of the reality of Bradley's story. The image of Bradley, as a fictional character in *The Black Prince*, is multiple: he is the

great artist inspired by the god of black Eros, as he appears in his own account; he is also a delusional writer, deceitful friend, repressed homosexual, and selfish lover, as depicted by the four *dramatis persona* postscripts. In an interview with Conradi in 1983, Murdoch suggests that Bradley “can be seen as a minor artist whom the god rewards and comforts for his patient zeal and longing” (Conradi 239). Bradley is Platonic in many ways; he is a self-declared cave-dweller who is taken into the sun by an ideal love for Julian. In the foreword, Bradley announces, “Good art speaks truth, indeed is truth, perhaps the only truth” (Murdoch, *Black Prince* 11). There is a Platonic notion of truth, against “the superficial and ‘exciting’ aspects” of empirical truth, revered as “the only truth” by Bradley (11). He aims to grasp this ideal image of truth and reproduce it through the rhetorical strategies of his art. At the same time, Bradley presents himself as an artistic “martyr” – a “saint” who prefers to “[wait] mutely” rather than “profane the purity [of art] with anything less than what is true” (12). He believes that “divine power” exercises itself upon the vessel of a truth-seeking artist, that he is “under orders” in the activity of writing, as if the story is told not by himself but by a higher force (126). Bradley’s ideas resonate with Plato’s views of divine afflatus theories where the process of poetic creation is seen as a kind of possession. Seeing the black Eros as a source of inspiration, Bradley claims that “a great dark wonderful something ... magnetically connected with me: connected with my mind, connected with my body, which sometimes literally shook or swayed under that tremendous and authoritative pull” (190). For him, the truth of art and the truth of life are essentially one. He equates the cultivation of his art with his goal of achieving moral perfection in life. Bradley has turned his past into a fiction and patterned it upon his ideal art works, *Hamlet* being one of them. Julian, seen as the Black Prince, is “idealized” and in some sense becomes, as he claims in the postscript, the book itself: “She somehow was and is the book, the story of herself. ... From this embrace she can never now escape” (389). For him, Julian becomes exclusively a Platonic Idea in his art; their love is eternally preserved in the novelistic world. However, Bradley’s work does not even address Julian herself, who has become irrelevant.

Love may have increased Bradley's self-knowledge and inspired him to finally write his book. But it does not make him a great artist, or at least not the sort of artist Murdoch approves of. According to Murdoch, goodness in art, as well as in morals, requires both an elimination of the self and a loving attention to others. In a 1951 interview with Bryan Magee, Murdoch distinguished "blind fantasy" from "visionary imagination" in art: the former leads to "some kind of falsehood, some failure of justice, some distortion or inadequacy of understanding or expression"; the latter makes the artwork "sensuous, fused, reified, mysterious, ambiguous, particular" (Magee 11). Murdoch then identifies the bad artist as "[giving] way to personal obsession" and "[constraining] his characters to suit the plot or to suit his own judgements and his theme", whereas the good writer is a "just, intelligent judge" who can "combine form and character in a felicitous way" (28). In her 1978 article, "Art is the Imitation of Nature", Murdoch further claims that "imagination, as opposed to fantasy, is the ability to see the other thing, what one may call ... nature, reality, the world" (Murdoch, *Art* 255). For Murdoch, artistic imagination involves the overcoming of one's self, the elimination of fantasy, and a recognition and respect for otherness. It is "a kind of freedom, a renewed ability to perceive and express the truth" (255). In contrast, fantasy is linked with self-indulgence, irrationality, and falsehood. It is derived from the unconscious mind. In "The Fire and the Sun: Why Plato Banished the Artists", Murdoch explains the state of fantasy in the Platonic scope as:

The bright flickering light of the fire suggests the disturbed and semi-enlightened ego which is pleased and consoled by its discoveries, but still essentially self-absorbed, not realising that the real world is still somewhere else. ... Plato and Freud mistrust art for the same reason, because it caricatures their own therapeutic activity and could interfere with it. Art is pleasure-seeking self-satisfied pseudo-analysis and pseudo-enlightenment. (Murdoch, *Fire* 423)

For the cave-dwellers, the light of fire may give satisfaction and consolation to their

ego, tricking them into believing that the shadows on the wall are the real world. It gives rise to the bad art Plato detests, which only offers “pseudo-analysis” of reality and brings “pseudo-enlightenment” to the soul. Murdoch argues that “To overcome egoism in its protean forms of fantasy and illusion is automatically to become more moral” (425). In this sense, the good and the real are combined. In order to acquire a truthful, just view of reality, the artist has to overcome the personal ego and replace it with a “visionary imagination”. In *The Black Prince*, Bradley transforms his personal experiences in the name of a higher truth; yet he embraces the black Eros, which is self-centred, rather than the creative energy of Murdoch’s “visionary imagination”. In a larger sense, he mistakes the fire for the sun and the swaying shadows for reality. Under the influence of selfish Eros, his love is turned into a kind of possession – his obsession with Julian even makes Bradley indifferent to the death of his own sister. This love is in essence a self-love; his endeavours to write a deeply meaningful story end up becoming a falsification of the past. Bradley uses language to defend himself and artistic abstractions to build a fictional world. He has never left the cave.

Bradley’s narration is ultimately, but only partly, Murdoch’s novel. As Loxias playfully points out on the last page of the novel, “it has even been suggested that Bradley Pearson and myself are both simply fictions, the invention of a minor novelist” (Murdoch, *Black Prince* 415). Bradley is a middle-aged writer whose narration is filled with philosophical remarks, but he is in no way a spokesman for Murdoch, nor is his moral and artistic perspective a reproduction of her own. For one thing, Bradley’s aspiration is to write “a vast novel ... wherein a hero not unlike myself pursued, amid ghostly incidents, a series of reflections about life and art” (62). He tries to produce in his narrative “a statement which might be called my philosophy” (62). He wants to be the kind of writer that some critics consider Murdoch to be – though a classification that she refuses – a philosophical novelist. Bradley’s work is fundamentally self-centred, in part because his art is the product of his philosophy. His version of the past is subordinated to a narrative design that is not only fictional but also the deterministic expression of his premises. Bradley habitually loads the contingencies of his life with

philosophical significance; the plot is filled with such reflective impositions. After finding out about Roger's affair with Marigold, Bradley sees people shooting pigeons and links their fate not only to that of Priscilla, but of all humanity: "What an image of our condition, loud report, the poor flopping bundle upon the ground, trying helplessly, desperately, vainly to rise again" (107). Later in the novel, driving to Patara with Julian, he is overwhelmed by a pessimistic feeling about their love, and observes that "the future had passed through the present like a sword. [They] were already, even eye to eye and lip to lip, deep in the horrors to come" (307). These metaphysical remarks exemplify Bradley's imposition of meaning on his personal experience. As Bradley admits, his pen is invaded by "the very darkness of [his] own personality" (108). There is a closed, fixed relation between his art and his philosophy, which produces biased, self-centred, and teleological storytelling.

In the novel, Bradley is not the only person who succumbs to the "blind fantasy" of his narrative. During his trial for the murder of Arnold, the newspapers depict Bradley as a bitter, envious, monstrous writer who has slain Arnold out of resentment for his success. It is another motivated representation of reality, with a force of its own; under the onslaught of the journalists Bradley finds himself looking "different, older, hook-nosed, more grotesque", and has to "live the new being" (381). In Christian's postscript, Bradley is a lunatic and spiteful ex-husband who invented the love story with Julian "to veil his loving me" (395). In Francis's postscript, Bradley becomes a homosexual with an Oedipus Complex; his story suggests an "ill-concealed love for me" and a triumph of "his perverted tendencies" (401). For Rachel, Bradley is an immoral man and inferior writer, "unfulfilled" in life and "frustrated" in art, who "was of course in love with me" and whose story is a "dreamy-fantasy-nonsense" (406, 407). Julian criticizes the book for its "unstudied personal emotions" and "immediate judgments", arguing that the author wrongly "[identified] his Eros with the source of art" (409, 410). On the one hand, these postscripts reveal other facets of the reality and put Bradley's perspective in question. On the other hand, they also display the bias and unreliability of other characters. The tones in the postscripts coincide ironically with the personality

of the characters in Bradley's story – Christian as a materialistic widow, Francis as a gay psychologist, Rachel as a resentful housewife, and Julian as a would-be writer herself, whose eloquence and incisiveness serve to rival his own. To an extent they conform to, rather than subvert, Bradley's representation. As participants in the events, the other characters cannot keep an objective distance from their narratives either. The postscripts, which are included by the editor, Loxias, have the quality of self-undermining, just like Bradley's own narrative. In consequence, readers are no nearer to the truth itself, the possibility of which has been comprehensively ironized. But while the truth of the story becomes increasingly problematic, this itself advances Murdoch's own pursuit of artistic truth, which incorporates the novel's fictionality.

4.5 A House Fit for Free Characters

As an artist, Bradley is captivated by the shadows of fire and makes images to console his ego. His emotions may be real, but his vision of truth and his moral conversion are illusory. While most critics agree that Bradley is an unreliable narrator, they disagree on whether or not he really killed Arnold. Elizabeth Dipple believes that Bradley only commits a "symbolic murder of Arnold" by ripping up the latter's entire oeuvre (Dipple, Murdoch 143). David Robjant argues that "Bradley is more than capable of denying reality where this does not suit him, as with Priscilla"; it can be seen as "Murdoch's dark central joke" that he did kill Arnold in reality (Robjant A187, A193). Bradley poses a question in the novel: "what can one do but try to lodge one's vision somehow inside this layered stuff of ironic sensibility, which, if I were a fictitious character, would be that much deeper and denser?" (Murdoch, *Black Prince* 81) This metafictional moment connects with two broader questions regarding the tension between truth and fantasy in Bradley's narrative. If he really is innocent, does that make everything he tells truthful? If he is the murderer, does that require us to reject the entirety of his narration as a lie? It seems to me that the death of Arnold is an issue which Murdoch intentionally made ambiguous. The answers are unavailable because ironizing the versions of all the characters does positively imply a definitive account. However, what really matters is

not the distinction between truth and falsehood within the fiction, but the overall fictionality of the narrative and the meaning it conveys. It is impossible to determine the degree of truthfulness of Bradley's book, just as it is impossible to decide whether he received a marriage proposal from Christian, whether he has a repressed homosexual love for Arnold, or whether he really spends his last years living together with the god of truth. Whatever readers decide to believe about the represented events, the novel draws within itself an exploration of the realm of art, in which (for us, rather than for Bradley and the *dramatis personae*) the particular fact no longer matters in itself, as the question of factual truth is transcended by the question of a higher, ideal truth.

In Murdoch's novel, Bradley's text is placed within the larger framework of Murdoch's narrative, in which the nature of art is explored and brought into focus. Peter Lamarque, in "Truth and Art in Iris Murdoch's *The Black Prince*", distinguishes between the two types of truths involved in fictional narrative – internal truth within the confines of a literary work, and "truth proper, as it might be revealed through fiction" (Lamarque 210). He argues that while most novels only present the former, *The Black Prince* explores the relationship between the two kinds of truth, by means of the character of Bradley (222). Lamarque also proposes two criteria for the presence of truth in art works: "objectivity as against fantasy and particularity as against theory" (222). In the novel, "internal truth", which can be seen as the empirical truth of particular events, is replaced by "truth proper", or the general truth about the nature of fiction and of human Eros. Bradley's obsessiveness with forms and theories inevitably gives rise to his fantasies, making his version of artistic truth problematic. For him, art becomes a shield, made for recuperative interpretation and for self-defence. As his narrative alternates between retelling his experience and patterning it with his philosophy, the events presented, and the reality of the moment, are veiled by a dreaming ego.

The novel includes an episode in which Bradley chases Julian's balloon in a fanciful state of mind, which echoes Jake's fruitless quest for Anna in Paris in *Under the Net*. On the night when Bradley leaves Arnold's house after having an affair with

Rachel, he notices that Julian is sitting in the window, “like an image upon a tomb”, flying a big white balloon (Murdoch, *Black Prince* 121). Filled with guilt, he walks back home and finds the loose balloon coming towards him “like an errant moon, mysterious, invisible to all except myself, the bearer of some potent as yet unfathomed destiny” (123). For a moment it seems almost within reach, but it flies further away as he runs towards it, as if it is alive. Bradley’s experience is similar to Jake’s as he chases after Anna in the Tuileries gardens: “As I looked at her, her face seemed suddenly radiant like a saint’s face in a picture, and all the thousands of surrounding faces were darkened” (Murdoch, *Under the Net* 213). Ultimately, both the balloon and Anna vanish into the trees like the wind. What the two artistic protagonists pursue, beyond the balloon or Anna, is a more elusive sign. They both represent their surroundings as dreamy, their minds as enchanted, and their purpose as hard to articulate. The two scenes encapsulate the concern of both novels with the problems, in a first-person perspective, of the human quests for love and art.

Under the Net and *The Black Prince* also show Murdoch’s preference for middle-aged, well-educated, egoistic male character-narrators. She once observed that “the danger of [first-person narration] is that it’s harder than to create other characters who can stand up to the narrator, because they’re being seen through his eyes” (Chevalier 81). In this respect, *The Black Prince* is an advance upon *Under the Net*, because of its more thoroughly incorporated ironic form. The dual nature of Bradley’s narrative identity, speaking for both the past and the present self, itself disassembles the novel and foregrounds the ways its plot and narrative are arranged. His stance as the narrator is further interrogated by the forewords and postscripts. The story is more rounded in the sense that other characters stand up for themselves and present reality through their eyes. With such an innovative form, Murdoch achieves “a more balanced story” and “the added pleasure of animating all sorts of different characters” in *The Black Prince* (81). In a 1977 interview with Michael O. Bellamy, Murdoch claimed that “people create myths about themselves and are then dominated by the myths. They feel trapped, and they elect other people to play roles in their lives, to be gods or destroyers or

something” (Bellamy 53). She then declares that “the novel is a marvellous form in that it attempts to show this. ... a novelist is revealing secrets of this sort” (53). Bradley can be seen as such a myth-maker. His eagerness to be the truth-seeking artist and to complete his masterpiece makes him over-interpret signs in life. As an author, Bradley tries to impose form on his surroundings through the manipulation of words; his formulation of the story is in tension with the material. Bradley’s visions of *Hamlet*, *Rosenkavalier*, and the myth of Apollo and Marsyas are the templates in his search for an ideal artistic form, and drive the wilful patterning of his own life. The novel revisits the quest for the hidden meaning under the net of words; but its strategy is rather to step back, to frame and ironize that quest within layers of metafictional reflexiveness.

According to Richard Todd, *The Black Prince* explores “the ‘requirements’ for non-consolatory form, insofar as these are exemplified in Shakespeare” (Todd, Shakespearian Interest 29). This exploration draws together the allusions to *Hamlet* in Bradley’s passion towards Julian’s “androgyny”, in his “highly masochistic” vision in the narrative, and in his sexual liberation through a “confrontation with Eros-Hamlet” (30-31). Todd argues that both Bradley and Murdoch celebrate *Hamlet* as an exemplary depiction of the relations between “the form of art and the contingency of character, between ‘images’ and ‘real people’”; they both want to “[bring] about a real and not fictitious sense of freedom” in their works of art (38). Like Bradley, Murdoch reveres Shakespeare as a creator of the ideal artistic form. But instead of seeing Hamlet as the author’s alter ego, Murdoch believes that the greatness of Shakespeare lies in his detachment from the characters he creates. She addresses Shakespeare as “the most invisible of writers, ... the most un-Romantic of writers” who displays in his narrative “free and eccentric personalities” who are “quite separate from himself” (Murdoch, *Sublime and Good* 275). For Murdoch, the great artist seeks the energy for literary creation through attention to the outer world, not to the inward. In comparison, Bradley’s art is inspired by the inward energy of black Eros. He aims to speak in the voice of truth yet cannot overcome his subjectivity as an interested party. He suggests in the foreword that the book is “reportage” of his life, devoid of any later judgement

and knowledge, speaking the truth in its simplest form. What he fails to see is that, to the extent he does refrain from importing later “wisdom”, it only makes his “reportage” more distorted by the fantasies of the moment, as opposed to the retrospective fantasy that does, inevitably, impose upon his self-centred narrative.

However, the ambiguities in this novel are in essence different from the subverted meanings and rejection of depth characteristic of the postmodern mode. The effect of ambiguity arises from the novel’s complex ironic layers, through which multiple meanings and perspectives are expressed. They are rooted in the fact that the story is mediated through a character who is sceptical about his own bias, even as he performs it. As Bradley reflects philosophically, there is a huge gap between “the self-knowledge which we gain by observing ourselves objectively and the self-awareness which we have of ourselves subjectively”, making it impossible for him “ever to arrive at the truth” (Murdoch, *Black Prince* 189). Even this wisdom, however, participates in the self-absorption that guarantees he cannot overcome the limitations of his own point of view. Murdoch’s own artistic strategy, rather than confining the story to only one perspective, places Bradley’s novel inside a larger structure and a larger metaphor for the process of fictionality. She opens a window for readers, through which the motives and spiritual energies of the narrator are themselves central to the fiction’s rhetoric. Bran Nicol observes that *The Black Prince* has a form “which emphasizes the fictionality of a work in order to present what is true, a process which offers ‘a diagnosis’ by a sort of momentary artificiality” (Nicol, *Retrospective Fiction* 96). Bradley’s own “diagnosis” is subordinate to Murdoch’s “diagnosis”, which involves unveiling the fictionality of the novel. Hence the novel itself avoids the lure of authoritative narration that seduces Bradley himself, and so accommodates an objective truth that transcends the ambiguities of the fictional particulars. Bradley’s death as a character, indeed, symbolises the failure of his authority as a narrator. The story eternally escapes his embrace.

Compared to Bradley and the *dramatis personae*, P. A. Loxias is a more truth-seeking and truth-telling artist, with his cold, objective voice, his incorporation of the

competing narrative perspectives of the postscripts, and his own relative detachment from the events of the story. Loxias also helps Murdoch herself maintain a distant, detached perspective in the depiction of Bradley's story. The world of the novel is kept at a distance, created out of "an imaginative effort based on the desire to picture realistically the reality of the reality outside me (her)" (Forsberg 155). Murdoch establishes a tension in *The Black Prince* between the truth and how fiction represents the truth; she advances a realism grounded not just in the sense that the plot speaks of truth, but also in the novel's attention to the fictionality of literary representation. Bradley is presented as a realistic person, but also as an unreliable narrator and as a self-willed author seeking his own ideal of moral and artistic perfection; beyond Bradley's self-reflexive narrative, the four postscripts play an important role in foregrounding the fictionality of Murdoch's text, as does the function of Loxias as literal editor and figurative deity. The novel puts Bradley on trial not just for the murder of Arnold, but also as an author and champion of artistic truth. At every point, the novel gestures simultaneously towards its represented events and characters, and towards the fictionality through which those representations must be read. Hence, for example, Bradley's self-defence competes with the four witnesses' versions of the story. In one sense, the conflict of narratives calls into question every aspect of Bradley's narrative authority, which is to say the entire main body of the novel, while in another sense, these counternarratives are also necessarily co-dependent with the existence of Bradley as a real person and of his life story, however contested the facts may be. In a way, the novel succeeds in being both metafictional and realistic.

With an ingenious structure, Murdoch effaces the traces of her own voice and lets the story speak for itself. By highlighting the fictionality of Bradley's narrative, Murdoch explores the making of the fiction and the conception of truth in art. The novel's irony and comic form bring to light what is hidden in the playfulness of language. Through intertextuality, the boundaries of meaning are expanded, compounding the possibilities of interpretation. Through metafiction, the artifice of the story itself becomes material for its thematic questioning of the status of novelistic

discourse. The multiple forewords and postscripts relativize the main text of the story and qualify Bradley's own discursive power. Although it may seem too sweeping to include all these formal strategies within the scheme of realism, *The Black Prince* shows that Murdoch's realist conception of her own writing is exceptionally expansive. Her essential commitment is that as long as the artist is equipped with an "unsentimental, detached, unselfish, objective attention" towards the outer world, reality "can be looked at and loved without being seized and used, without being appropriated into the greedy orgasm of the self" (Murdoch, *God and Good* 353). The self-conscious form of *The Black Prince* serves the purpose of representing Bradley's story justly and objectively. Peter J. Conradi views the novel as at once "a superb thriller, a black book about marriage, a dark book about authorial rivalry, ... a reflective book about love" (Conradi 234). At the textual level, Bradley's ironic, intrusive voice opens up the possibility of multiple interpretations and readings of his story; but at the level of narrative form, the novel further explores the kind and degree of truth in the artistic representation of life. It draws attention to the fictionality of art, but in Murdoch's eyes this move is not in opposition to realism; rather, it is a sublimation of realism, and she pursues it in the realm of the higher truth of ideas.

Chapter Five: The Moral Significance of Narrative Form in *The Sea, the Sea*

The Sea, the Sea, the nineteenth of Murdoch's twenty-six novels and winner of the 1978 Booker Prize, integrates motifs from many of her other works. Charles Arrowby, narrating in the first-person, is an anti-hero just like Jake in *Under the Net*, or Bradley in *The Black Prince*. In a sense, it is the story of Bradley in a parallel universe – what would have happened if he had caught the train for Patara, the seaside cottage he had rented for retirement, before Francis Marloe called to visit. Both Bradley and Charles are depicted by Murdoch as middle-aged intellectuals, whose literary pursuits are juxtaposed with their pursuits of unruly love relations. Bradley falls in love with a girl nearly forty years younger than himself, while Charles madly pursues a childhood sweetheart whom he lost contact with fifty years ago. The two protagonists are also differentiated, in the sense that Bradley writes to defend himself, reflecting constantly on events as an observer, whereas Charles, by adopting a diary form, speaks for his own enchanted state of mind. At the same time, Charles resembles the authoritative Michael in *The Bell* and the fantasy-ridden Bruno in *Bruno's Dream*, whose past mistakes are reflected in the form of nightmares and heighten the Gothic elements of those novels. In both *The Sea, the Sea* and *The Bell*, Murdoch links the psychologies of the characters with the settings of the stories: Shruff End and Imber Court both serve this purpose as isolated spaces far from the bustling cities. Both novels weave magical hints into their narratives of power relations, and both offer a highly ambiguous, open ending.

The Sea, the Sea is composed of three sections – “Prehistory”, “History”, and “Postscript: Life Goes on”. It has been interpreted by critics from various angles, including feminist, romance, Gothic, Freudian, comic and mystic. Regardless of the label they give it, most critics stress the novelty of its form and try to link it with the moral progress Charles has accomplished by the end of the novel. For instance, Katherine Weese suggests it is a novel that experiments with postmodern narrative but is still anchored to realism (Weese 630). Weese adopts Tzvetan Todorov's concept of the fantastic to analyse the novel's construction of gender roles with a Gothic plot. She

argues that the fantastic devices and impossible events are “not resolved into the uncanny, but [Murdoch] sets [them] squarely within our historical world” (631). Weese connects the novel with the women’s movement of the 1970s and views Charles’s story as embedded in “the larger story of society’s patriarchy, its subordination of women to male authority, and its circumscription of female identity to the domestic realm” (635). There is a “journey out of the cave ... toward a definition of femininity not bound by the conventions of the classic Gothic plot”, where the fantastic elements are employed in order “to dismantle the patriarchal real” (634). Despite Charles’s relapse in the “Postscript” section, Weese argues that he “has put to rest his monstrous masculinity, his patriarchal world view” at the end of the novel (647). Bran Nicol also tries to establish a link between the novel’s content and its form. He categorizes it as a “first-person retrospective novel”, which gives an illusory impression of the narrator’s autonomy by using Charles as its “author-narrator” (Nicol, *Anticipating* 192). Nicol argues that Charles “exists as a person composing a novel in both a fictional world and the ‘real’ world”, in the sense that he both serves as the subject of the story and as an analogy to the actual author (191). By comparing *The Sea, the Sea* to *À la recherche du temps perdu*, Nicol notes that the first-person retrospective form in both novels fuses the author-narrator’s “experiencing and narrating selves, ... past and present”, and that Charles’s obsessions with his past derive from the desire to impose a form on his present life (200). For this reason, *The Sea, the Sea* “tells of a Proustian quest for truth, to which Charles’s narrative project is central”; the lessons of the protagonist’s quest enable him to shun solipsism (197).

Both Weese and Nicol have focused on the novel’s moral aspect and investigated its relation to novelistic form. They both argue that there is a moral pilgrimage, through which Charles breaks with his past self and turns his attention towards an enlightened way of life. However, both critics seem to neglect the question Charles himself poses at the very beginning: “To repent of egoism: is autobiography the best method?” (Murdoch, *The Sea* 3). In the novel, Charles cultivates an autobiographical self to purify his old, power-crazed self; for him, autobiography is “something both personal and

reflective” (3). His life-writing, however, is embedded within the larger framework of the novel. It is problematic that Charles neither abandons egoism in life nor strictly adheres to the rules of autobiographical narrative in his writing. Compared to other narrative forms, autobiography is both more self-oriented and more engaged with details and facts than with fictional ideas. Yet being a retired theatre director and playwright, Charles is obsessed with the styles of storytelling; his craving for power is not only reflected in his manipulative behaviour towards others, but also in his imposition of form upon his own life. Instead of acquiring a good and just vision of reality, Charles succumbs to his egoism, treats people around him as stereotypes, and enacts the growth of a “rapacious magician” (45). Both his life and his discourse are fantasy-ridden.

What, then, are the objectives of his autobiographical narrative? How is the development of Charles’s consciousness related to his choice of narrative form? How should we distinguish between his narrative and Murdoch’s own novelistic discourse? To answer these questions, we need to examine the formation of Charles’s egoism, analyse his use of artistic form to interpret his life, and then return to the context of Murdoch’s writing. This chapter follows Weese and Nicol’s footsteps and investigates the moral significance of narrative form in *The Sea, the Sea*. It argues that beneath the autobiographical narrative of Charles’s life lies a submerged metaphor of fiction itself. Charles is both the non-fictional, retrospective narrator and the unreliable form-maker; his story is both documentary and fictional. The chapter also argues that Charles not only imposes a pattern on the contingent events in his life but in many ways tries to shape his life into a story form. His narration moves from autobiography, which is retrospective and to some extent detached, into an interpolated narrative in diary form, in which narration and action are reciprocally involved with each other. By probing into the features of symbolism, allusion, and intertextuality in Charles’s narrative, the chapter reveals the multiple layers of the plot. It then examines the novel’s unconventional structure and open ending, and casts doubt on Charles’s moral progress. The chapter concludes with an exploration of how the negotiations between freedom

and form, life and art, and facts and fiction serve as a critical component of Murdoch's writings.

5.1 Story of the Modern Prospero

Charles Arrowby, over sixty, is a retired actor, director, and playwright. After nearly forty years pursuing the “trickery and magic of art” in the theatre, he decides to retreat to the seaside cottage, Shruff End, for the sake of peace and solitude (29). Sitting by the window with a view of the sea, Charles sets out to write an autobiography of his “well-known self” – his life’s experience of being “wifeless, childless, brotherless, sisterless”; his worldly fame as a director of Shakespeare’s plays; his “insignificant and dull” parents; his beautiful but bothersome mistresses; and his enthusiasm for food and culinary art (29, 59). The process of writing runs in parallel with Charles’s search for an ideal artistic form. Claiming that “there is no need to separate ‘memoir’ from ‘diary’ or ‘philosophical journal’”, he starts with a journalistic account of his past life and daily routines and develops it into a dramatization of events from his egoistic angle of vision (2). His narrative is divided into three parts – “Prehistory”, “History”, and “Postscript” – according to the time sequence. The “History” section succeeds the “Prehistory” when Charles’s youthful lover, Hartley, who is now an old, unattractive woman, suddenly appears in the village. Egoism stops Charles from admitting the failure of their past relationship; the assumption that she is married to an abusive husband ignites his desire to rescue, or rather recapture, her. After “gazing in a dazed way at Titian’s painting of *Perseus and Andromeda*” in the Wallace Collection, Charles decides to imitate the heroic Perseus by “liberating” the chained Hartley from Ben, the “hateful tyrant” (171). Ironically, he tricks Hartley to come to Shruff End and confines her in his bedroom, regardless of her fierce protests and episodic hysteria.

What follows, according to the fantasy-ridden Charles, is that the house is crowded by annoying visitors as Whit weekend approaches, including his old mistress Lizzie, his Buddhist cousin James, his homosexual colleague Gilbert, his old love rival Peregrine, and Hartley’s adopted son Titus. On the one hand, Charles sees these people

as intruders in his life. On the other hand, his visitors are crucial to the recognition of his morally untenable position. Defeated by Hartley's hysterical scream in front of the group, Charles reluctantly returns her to Ben, but is still filled with the hope to retrieve her one day. Later, Charles is pushed into the sea by the vengeful Peregrine and is magically saved by James. The near-death experience does not wash away Charles's obsessions; he decides to adopt Titus to enhance his connection with Hartley. However, the poor boy drowns in the sea, which is partly Charles's fault as he deliberately encourages Titus to swim in the dangerous spot. After that, Hartley and Ben decide to move to Australia together. James also dies, in a very mystical way, as if he willingly chooses the time of his death. Charles's egoism continues, as the name of the third section suggests – "Postscript: Life goes on". He returns to London as James's heir and resides in the latter's apartment, which is full of oriental antiques and Buddhist objects. Charles's story ends with the accidental breaking of a "demon casket" which is said to be used by the lamas to "keep demons prisoner" – "whatever was inside has certainly got out. Upon the demon-ridden pilgrimage of human life, what next I wonder?" (172, 502).

The Sea, the Sea explores the use and abuse of power in love relations. One of the most prominent vehicles for this exploration is the novel's allusions to *The Tempest*. Born in Stratford-upon-Avon, Charles chooses to have a career in the theatre "of course because of Shakespeare" (29). He is famous for playing the great magician Prospero, with Lizzie in the role of Ariel. The manipulative temper of the magician continues in Charles's real life; he admits that "absolute power" makes him into "the most corrupt of men" and gives him a "reputation for ruthlessness" (37). For Charles, the theatre is filled with obsessed people, from directors and actors to audiences. Dramatic art "must create a factitious spell-binding present moment and imprison the spectator in it" (36). Immersed in such an environment, he uses theatrical magic to create fantastic effects and entrance audiences. In the "Prehistory" section, Charles declares his intention to "abjure magic and become a hermit"; he believes that the medium of literature, different from the theatrical art which is full of lies, is "on the side of the truth" (2, 33). He

identifies with Prospero, not only in the sense that they are both powerful “magicians”, but also because he sees retirement as a kind of self-exile.

However, Charles asks himself: “Have I abjured that magic, drowned my book? Forgiven my enemies? The surrender of power, the final change of magic into spirit? Time will show” (39). He is a self-proclaimed modern Prospero but, in fact, the two “magicians” mismatch in many ways. There is a fundamental distinction between Charles’s attempt to abjure magic after retirement, and Prospero’s use of magic while he is a hermit, renouncing it before he returns Milan to take up his worldly duties. For Prospero, the power of magic is only essential when he lives in the desolate, uncivilised island; it is a power of reclusion, a power in private. For Charles, by contrast, magic is linked with public, worldly power, and to retire is to give up his personal obsessions with the past. In this sense, Charles confounds reality with his symbolic interpretations of it through the intertext of *The Tempest*. He uses the story of the magician to recount his own life, and in turn directs his life as a story of magic; his narrative ends up loaded with ambiguities and mystification.

For one thing, the role Charles plays in his love affairs is fantasy-governed. He sends a flirtatious letter to Lizzie right before leaving for the seaside, expecting to manipulate her feelings as he did in the past. He checks in the post office for weeks, and when Lizzie’s reply finally arrives, he confesses to having been “less than frank with this diary” (41). He calls the letter “a sort of test, or game, or gamble” which derives from his vanity; what he declines to admit is that deep down, he is still addicted to the role of a magician (41). He summons Lizzie to Shruff End, sabotages her friendship with Gilbert, and controls her just as Prospero controls Ariel. What he seeks is not a mistress, but a servant, or a slave. In fact, the development of their relationship is depicted in parallel with his experiences as a director, as if their love relation is the extension of their theatrical roles:

[Lizzie] fell in love with me during *Romeo and Juliet*, she revealed her love during *Twelfth Night*, we got to know each other during *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Then (but that was later) I began to love her during *The Tempest*, and

(but that was later still) I left her during *Measure for Measure*. (49)

Life and art are joined together in Charles's narration. His account of reality is full of references from the theatre. For Charles, Lizzie is "the most spiritual, most curiously accurate Ariel"; he repeatedly addresses her as "my Cherubino, my Ariel, my Puck, my son" (50, 190). The role of Prospero/Oberon makes him fall in love with Lizzie, and once the theatrical magic comes to an end, his love also disappears. Yet his obsession with power does not end with it. He tells her about Hartley, knowing that nothing would reduce his control over her as "the lord and the king" (189). It seems as if his life has turned into a play, in which Lizzie is assigned the role of a servant and must act as he directs. Just before almost drowning in Minn's Cauldron, Charles hears Lizzie's voice singing "*Full Fathom Five*" in the distance, accompanied by the sound of the restless sea. It is an uncanny moment in which the drowning in reality and the shipwreck in the play overlap with each other.

In Charles's affair with Rosina, the power relations of *The Tempest* are ironically reversed. Not only does Rosina's family name, Vamburgh, possibly evoke the word "vampire", her appearance, according to Charles's description, also bears a resemblance to such a mythical creature. She appears in the novel as a vigorous and devilish character whose "squinting eyes sparkled at me with malign intensity", with a "huge and moist" mouth, long fingernails "like little spears ... painted a dark purple", and "slightly irregular long, white teeth" (104, 105). In order to take revenge on Charles for his disloyalty to her after having destroyed her marriage to Peregrine, Rosina sneaks into Shruff End in the middle of the night, breaks the green vase, and haunts him like a ghost. As Charles stares at her face, it is as if it "vanished, became a hole, and through the hole I saw the snake-like head and teeth and pink opening mouth of my sea monster" (105). The image of Rosina is linked to the spiteful Caliban; Charles enslaves her just as Prospero enslaves Caliban, making her an unwilling subject of his power. Unlike the docile Lizzie, Rosina condemns Charles's tricks as a "sorcerer" and wishes for his "desolation and ruin" (109). Unable to forgive Charles's abandonment, she is consumed by madness and dedicates her life to destroying the magician. In the end, she escapes

the role of Caliban by steering her attention away from Charles. After learning that Peregrine has attempted to kill Charles for her sake, Rosina reconciles with her ex-husband and joins in with his political activities in Ireland. She not only breaks free from Charles's control but in a sense reverses the power relation. Offered the role of Calypso in the film *Odyssey*, Rosina is aligned with the powerful and insightful nymph who takes the hero prisoner on her island. Yet she refuses the role, which makes Charles very "impressed" (435). It convinces him that life is different from a play after all, that Rosina has outgrown the stereotype of her role in his narrative.

If Lizzie and Rosina are unfree servants to the magician, Hartley, on the other hand, plays the role of the heroine in Charles's play. The presentation of Hartley in the novel is puzzling as she seems to be both the naïve young girl in Charles's memory and the old timid woman who is married to a mediocre war veteran – the two identities often merge into one in Charles's vision of reality. Hartley debuts in "Prehistory" as a schoolgirl, with whom Charles had shared the most passionate yet unsexual relationship. However, when he went to the drama school in London, she unexpectedly ended the relationship and vanished from his life. Stricken by the "demon of jealousy" and a fierce agony, he felt that the past was "befouled" and that his mind was left "no place to rest" (84). For Charles, Hartley had destroyed his innocence and made him "faithless"; she was "a part, an evidence, of some pure uncracked un-fissured confidence in the good which was never there for me again" (84). The trauma of first love deprives him of trust in marriage and the ability to pursue happiness. When Hartley reappears in the village, the image of a wrinkly old woman takes over the gentle and vigorous face, yet still conveys "something untouched straight from the past into the present" (114). It reignites the magician's romantic fantasies. Charles views Hartley as "the light in the cavern, ... the light that reveals the truth" (79). He anticipates a progress towards truth and goodness through her, even as he succumbs to obsession and exerts his own power to impose fantasy. Determined to resume his lost love and innocence, Charles lifts the curtain on a new play. The incarceration of Hartley is full of dramatic intensities: Charles uses Hartley's adopted son Titus as a lure, accosts her in the car to Shruff End,

hides the car and sends the driver away, and writes a provocative message to Ben even before Hartley realises that she is imprisoned. The process, as he recollects it, is like “a whole history of mental drama, vast developments, changes, checks, surprises, progresses, revulsions, crises. ... History, drama, change it did indeed contain” (297). Charles is used to creating suspense and dealing with crisis, as he did all the time in the theatre. However, as visitors arrive unexpectedly at Shruff End, the plot of his drama grows out of his control. Charles’s rescue mission turns into an imprisonment of the heroine against her will; the plan of elopement ends unfruitfully.

5.2 The Green-eyed Monster and the World of Magic

Charles’s blurring of life and fiction is also reflected in the novel’s intertextuality with Titian’s *Perseus and Andromeda*, a painting which epitomises the plot of the “History” section. It consists of three figures – the heroic prince Perseus, the suffering beauty Andromeda, and a vicious sea monster. In Charles’s interpretation, it resembles his own mission (as Perseus) to rescue Hartley (as Andromeda) from the chains of marriage with the “monstrous” Ben. Inspired by the painting, he returns to Shruff End and tries different ways to convince Hartley to run away from her husband. In a sense, his behaviour is guided by his own egoistic misreading of the story of the painting. In the meantime, Charles interprets Rembrandt’s *Titus*, which hangs opposite Titian’s painting in the gallery, as alluding to Hartley’s adopted son Titus, and begins to appropriate the boy as his own heir. But things turn out differently from the fictional works. Hartley is not a damsel-in-distress, and Titus is not a son whom Charles can take for granted; both of his endeavours end in failure. His heroic cause is ironically characterised as “fighting for a phantom Helen” by James, and as “the quest of the bearded lady” by Rosina (353, 433). The novel offers an exploration of the nature of artistic illusion; Charles is a man who inhabits fictions, who mixes art with his experiences in life and compels other people to play along. The performance he envisages, the well-plotted play, collapses in both cases, however, with the outbreak of Hartley’s hysteria and with Titus’s sudden death. Charles is forced to abandon his role as rescuer and father. The moral progress

he anticipates from the very beginning of his narration, his attempt to see and do good, turns out to be a surrender to enchantment.

To use James's words, Charles has made his life "into a story, and stories are false" (335). The aim of truth-telling in Charles's autobiography is complicated by his creative agency and the anxiety of self-expression. He imposes an artistic form on his life, creating stories of an elderly magician or a heroic liberator, which in turn shape the image of his narrative self. The stories project his personal desires and the discourse he unfolds is self-reflexive. He gives in to egoism and turns his autobiography into a combination of history and literature, experience and imagination, and non-fiction and fiction. Charles's writing is not just about a random selection of people and things, because he writes with an anticipation of the future, and this leads to a falsification of his stance towards life. He tries to live in a well-designed story, but as James points out, his stories are far from real. In this sense, the novel presents two worlds: the world of magic, which Charles dwells in and narrates about, and the world of reality, which can be discerned between the lines. On the one hand, Charles's narrative serves as a mythological construction of the self, formed through and by references to other art works. On the other hand, the novel abounds in symbolic images and irony, which expose the reality beyond the net of Charles's untrustworthy storytelling.

In the novel, symbolic images are often given a double meaning, one sense attributable to Charles's intention and another indicative of something more profound. According to Charles, the sea is not all peaceful and idyllic; he is "excessively frightened" by the vision of "a monster rising from the waves", with "a kind of crested snake's head, jealousy eyed, the mouth opening to show teeth and a pink interior" (20, 19). He tries to find reasonable explanations for such an image, ascribing it to the illusion of an eel or the side-effects of the LSD he took in America a few years ago. Later in the novel, after he pays a visit to Hartley and Ben's house, the image of the sea monster reappears. Sitting on a rock and burning with jealousy, Charles watches the sea intently and reflects, "What was I looking for? I was looking for that sea monster" (130). In this case, the monster seems to become a counterpart of Charles's psychology. It is

something beyond ordinary perception, something wild, secretive, unexplainable, and alien. It alludes to the demonic energy Charles tries hard to suppress. Later in London, he encounters the image again in Titian's picture of *Perseus and Andromeda*. The sea dragon, from whom the hero rescues the graceful, naked Andromeda, has a very similar "fanged open mouth" to his sea monster (171). At the end of the "History" part, when Charles reflects on his experience of near-drowning in Minn's Cauldron, he fantasises that "the monstrous sea serpent had actually been in the cauldron with me" (466). With "terrible teeth, a black arched neck ... green luminous eyes", the monster witnesses his dying until James magically stands on the water and lifts him up (466).

The image of the sea monster accompanies Charles throughout his narration, showing itself in the form of apparitions and dreams. What it stands for is quite ambiguous. It is presented in the novel as both a psychological fantasy and a powerful symbol. For Charles, it can be interpreted as his fear of the unknown sea, or his jealousy towards Ben, or the frightful image of female sexuality, or his evil deeds in the past which almost kill him. In "Narrow Escapes: Iris Murdoch", Howard Moss views the sea monster as a symbol of obsession. He argues that "Charles creates a drama, complete with a sea monster and an apparition, out of the sheerest flimsy" (Moss 228). Moss observes that there are many "natural enigmas of life" in Murdoch's works, as "the veil of reality must be torn apart to get beyond ordinary perception" (231). Such symbolism serves to remind the characters "of a reality deeper than any they can arrive at, no matter how much they are driven by virtue to love or by demons to harry one another" (231). In Moss's view, the sea monster "possesses the key to mystery, the possibility of another life: visible, magnetic, but fated to be unknown, with its own laws, needs, and patterns" (232). In *Iris Murdoch: The Retrospective Fiction*, Bran Nicol also interprets the monster as a key element in Charles's progression from the world of appearance to reality (Nicol, *Retrospective Fiction* 138). The experience of dying in the whirlpool forces him "to descend into the underworld of his own unconscious and confront whatever compels him before emerging into the light" (138). In this sense the monster is linked to a transcendental reality at odds with Charles's worldly obsessions.

I would argue that for Charles, there is not “another life”, nor does he emerge into the sunlight or obtain a better view of the world. The sea monster, an uncanny image, rather stands for his violent, unsettling desires in life. It further embodies the driven energy of Charles’s narrative, which is also dark and fantasy-ridden. Peregrine tells Charles, “you’re old and done for, you’ll wither away like Prospero did when he went back to Milan, you’ll get pathetic and senile” (Murdoch, *The Sea* 399). In order to fight against a “pathetic and senile” life after retirement, Charles seeks power and domination through writing. He has been a “magician” all along; the life by the sea boosts his ego rather than reduces it. The past Charles is still there, ready to create trickery and cast spells on people around him.

Shruff End, the house where Charles lives, is another key component of his world of magic. Like the image of the sea monster, the setting of the novel is highly symbolic. Charles once describes Shruff End as “my cave”, which he has reached “bearing the precious thing that has come with me, as if it were a talisman which I can now unwrap” (4). He later refers to actors as “cave-dwellers in a rich darkness which they love and hate”; the theatre is “a place of obsession”, where “I myself have always worked (and worked others) like a demon” (34). Retreating to the seaside, Charles aspires to leave behind the obsessive life of his past in his “cave”, which has an intertextual allusion to Prospero’s cell. There is a mysterious inner room on each floor of Shruff End; the rooms are “the chief peculiarity of the house, and one for which I can produce no rational explanation”; each “has no external window, but is lit by an internal window giving onto the adjacent seaward room ... These two funny inner rooms are extremely dark, and entirely empty” (14). The one upstairs, which is right opposite to Charles’s bedroom, is further described as “cell-like” (190). Rising one evening from his seat at the writing table, Charles feels “impelled to look towards it” and sees his own face “reflected in the black glass as in the mirror” (18). Moreover, the stairs lead to an upper landing where there is “a rather odd area with an atmosphere all its own. It has the expectant air of a stage set. Sometimes I feel as if I must have seen it long ago in a dream” (17). There is a link between the enclosed rooms and the creative energy deeply rooted in

Charles's mind. The black glass mirrors his inner self; the stage-like space reaffirms his attachment to the theatre and the old times when he had full control over the actors and the performances of the drama. His craving for power never really fades away. The entanglement with Hartley is a drama he directs in real life.

Charles claims that he is haunted by apparitions in Shruff End. At one point, when writing in the drawing room, he "looked up and was for a moment perfectly sure that I saw a face looking at me through the glass of the inner room" (68). He is also haunted by nightmares. When he makes up his mind to take Hartley captive, he dreams of her as "a ballet dancer" who is "dressed in a black tutu and a head-dress of sparkling diamonds and black feathers", when suddenly "a prince also dressed in black came and carried Hartley away, and her head hung back over his shoulder as if her neck was broken" (147). Yet in the dream he "stayed there still thinking, how wonderful that I'm young; I had a bad dream and thought that I was old" (147). Both Hartley and he remain young and energetic in Charles's dream. She is taken away from him by the Black Prince, who can be seen as either Ben or a personification of their years of separation. Deep down, Charles knows that the relationship was dead the moment she left him; there is nothing he can do to retrieve the person in his memory. But he is not really concerned about Hartley so much as the waning of his power because of old age. He is so pleased with his dream youthfulness that reality itself seems to him like a bad dream.

Charles pursues Hartley as if she is still the young girl from forty years ago, but what he really seeks is his own lost youth and innocence. After eavesdropping on the quarrels of the Fitches, Charles dreams again – "I found a new secret room at Shruff End, and a woman lying dead in it" (199). The image of death intensifies after Charles finally takes Hartley prisoner; in one of his nightmares she has "hanged herself with one of her stockings from the cast-iron lamp bracket, climbing up onto the table and casting herself off" (309). Waking up puzzled by the vivid vision, Charles peers into Hartley's room through the doorway. He then remembers the face he had previously seen in the room's window, realising it would be at the height of someone who had hanged herself in there. At that point Hartley's face in his dream overlaps with the face

which has haunted him. He is gripped by “dread and a terrible fatalism; and bitter grief”, as if he “had wakened some sleeping demon, set going some deadly machine” (310). For Charles, it is a confrontation with the demon inside himself, a moment when dreams and reality are merged into one. It is ironic that in his narration, Charles has convinced himself that all his “life in the theatre now seems like a dream, the old days with [Hartley] the only reality” (204). He believes that Hartley is “a woman locked up inside her own nightmare” as she refuses to resume the old times with him (230). In fact, Hartley is locked up in the inner room – a nightmare resulting from his own delusions. Charles needs Hartley’s life without him to have been but a dream, but then why does he still have nightmares after she comes back into his life? Dreams in the novel not only give expression to Charles’s fantasies but also signify his deeper repressed thoughts, desires, and worries. They serve to remind readers of the world of reality, beyond the magic, twisted world of Charles’s narration. Shruff End is more than a physical setting for the story in the sense that it stands between nature (the unpredictable sea) and civilisation (the populated village). It provides Charles with shelter and protection, and offers a private space to grow his desire and obsessions. The presentation of Shruff End manifests Charles’s state of mind and his vision of the world. It has a similar function to the chamber in which Bruno lies dying in *Bruno’s Dream*, or the Gaze Castle that entraps Hannah in *The Unicorn*: all these novels intertwine psychology and geography in their narrative, and depict, along with the real world, a world of myth and magic.

5.3 Autobiography, Diary, and Novelistic Memoir

Charles intermingles the narrative of his personal history with the recording of his day-to-day life; his literary activity develops in parallel with his moral activity, resulting in a confusion of past and present, dream and reality. This form is central to the twofold function of symbolism in the novel, in which an interpretation from Charles’s narratorial point of view is often undermined by a meaning implied in the authorial discourse. Charles believes that he is the saviour of Hartley from the sea monster, that his love is “the great light-source” which can help him “reach the outside world” (77).

But we are invited to see him instead as the green-eyed monster, jealous of other people's happiness, and as the cave-dweller who is tricked by the false light of his own fantasy. Deborah Johnson claims that Charles's "childhood regrets and resentments" result in confusion about truth and illusion in his narration; he is "divided from his luminous present" (Johnson 47). She argues that Charles lives in "Prospero's cell where the truth may be learnt and the illusions of power (the illusions of theatre) are finally relinquished" (90). Distracted by an "obsessive grudge against the past", Charles becomes only "slightly wiser", and "settles eventually for a partial truth, an incomplete illumination" (47, 91). What Johnson overlooks is that there is a mismatch between Charles's presentation of himself and what is implicit in the narrative. He identifies with Prospero in the sense that they both wield magical power and inhabit an isolated cell; even the "little secret inlet below the tower" at Shruff End echoes the "filthy-mantled pool" beyond Prospero's cell (Murdoch, *The Sea* 6; *The Tempest* IV.i, Shakespeare *Volume 33*, 63). However, in a deeper sense, Charles's retirement from the theatre alludes to Prospero's decision to drown his magic book and retire to Milan at the end of the play, not to his earlier exile and practice of magic on the island. Charles is determined to renounce his identity as a magician when the novel begins; yet retired life only makes him more obsessed with his magic. Such a misaligned allusion to *The Tempest* serves as a crucial ironic reversal of Charles's narrative.

The form of that narrative is itself a factor in the dissonance between what really happens and Charles's representation of his life. At the beginning of his account, Charles decides to adopt the form of "autobiography", in order to "repent of egoism"; he aspires "to do the deep thing, real analysis, real autobiography" (Murdoch, *The Sea* 3, 175). He also frames the work as an ongoing "diary", and as a "memoir" of his past life and events to date – provisionally presenting "these ramblings as rough notes for a more coherent account" (2). All three narrative forms, regardless of their differences, deal with historical and factual materials, and are supposed to be detailed, accurate non-fiction. According to Roy Pascal, the form of autobiography not only requires features of truthfulness to the facts, but also "involves the reconstruction of the movement of a

life, or part of a life, in the actual circumstances in which it was lived” (Pascal, Design 9). He distinguishes “autobiography” from “autobiographical novel”, arguing that while the former records “something known, the author’s present position”, the latter “demands a narrative structure much more coherent and firmer than the autobiography, a sequence of symbolical events, and a significant climax” (174-175). Moreover, the autobiographical novelist represents “spiritual growth” as well as measurable experience (174). In *The Sea, the Sea*, Charles’s narrative begins by emphasising autobiography’s accountability to fact. In the “Prehistory” section, Charles tries to order his past life into meaningful events and, by recounting them, to “repent of egoism” and acquire self-knowledge. With respect to the present, he intends to write “*pensées* against a background of simple descriptions of the weather and other natural phenomena” (Murdoch, *The Sea* 2). His observations of the outer world, like his retrospective account, is founded upon empiricism.

A striking feature of the “History” section, however, is its increasing dramatization of the events. With its six bulky parts, the “History” depicts Charles’s fight for Hartley and his final flight from the world of illusions. In the end, enlightened by his pious cousin James and stricken by the death of Titus, Charles gives up control of Hartley and his obsession with lost innocence. This section becomes increasingly novelistic in its adherence to a strong dramatic structure, with exposition (reencounter with Hartley in the village), conflict (the marriage of Hartley and her refusal to elope), rising action (imprisonment of Hartley in Shruff End), climax (release of Hartley and drowning in Minn’s Cauldron), falling action (death of Titus and Hartley’s fleeing to Australia), and resolution (reconciliation with the past and the arrival of the seals). In his writing, Charles himself draws attention to his gradual abandoning of the form of autobiography. In part three, after his confrontation with Ben in Niblett, Charles decides that he is writing a record of current events, in the form of “a continuous narrative without too many reversions to the present tense” (153). The events are hence arranged with a stronger sense of narrative structure, subordinating his intentions for “a sort of memoir and a sort of diary” (153). He does not describe this form of personal history as

autobiography, but as a novel:

So I am writing my life, after all, as a novel! Why not? It was a matter of finding a form, and somehow history, my history, has found the form for me. There will be plenty of time to reflect and remember as I go along, to digress and philosophize, to inhabit the far past or depict the scarcely formulated present; so my novel can still be a sort of memoir and a sort of diary. (153)

Here Charles tries to combine two opposite modes of writing: history and the novel. He adopts the novelistic discourse for the sake of imposing a form on his experiences, despite the implication that he is fictionalising, which is contradictory to the mode of autobiography. Charles thinks he can have it both ways; in part four he confirms that his “diary writing” has transformed into a “novelistic memoir”, but that everything he writes is “accurate and truthful” (239). He believes that the writing is “more deeply reflected and more systematically remembered than it would be if I were continuing to write a diary” (239). Distracted by his own egoism, he does not recognise that the form itself involves artifice. For Charles, a “novel” can present the truth better than a “diary”, or “autobiography”: “Even a middling novelist can tell quite a lot of truth. His humble medium is on the side of truth” (33). But the form of a novel licenses his pursuit of a more coherent and stronger structure in the material of his direct experience, and this structure, deriving from his imagination, or rather fantasy, is imposed upon other characters’ lives. What he disregards is the limits of his creative agency; his efforts to impose novelistic form extend beyond the narrative to the ongoing events themselves. He becomes a magician in both art and life – the two parts reinforce each other.

For the author-narrator Charles, self-knowledge serves as the primary motive of his writing. Yet as Pascal points out, autobiography “postulates a pre-occupation with the self that may, and often does, deteriorate into vanity, complacency, self-indulgence” (Pascal, *Design* 180). Due to Charles’s egoism and his obsession with the past, the reality he presents is limited, circumstantial, and even falsified. Charles’s narrative imposition does not just concern the degree of truth in his life-writing, but also the tense,

voice, and mode of his narrative. In “Prehistory”, Charles adopts an interpolated narration; that is, the recording of his experiences alternates with the unfolding events. Charles refers to immediate events mostly in the past tense; he uses the present tense to describe his current feelings or phenomena in the outer world as he writes. The alternation of past and present tense foregrounds the fragmentation of the story and the feedback loop between his agency and writing. It seems that Charles has two voices: one speaks for the participant in events and the other for the self-conscious literary writer. The effect when the event and the narrative become simultaneous, when his two voices meet and merge, is particularly uncanny:

It is time for bed. Behind me is the long horizontal window, several feet up in the wall, which gives onto the ‘inner room’. As I rise I am impelled to look towards it, seeing my face reflected in the black glass as in a mirror. (Murdoch, *The Sea* 18)

It is physically impossible for Charles to both write sitting at the desk and rise to face the glass behind him. Here the present tense compounds different temporal relations, leading to a tension between the narrated and the act of narration. More generally, it is used to draw attention to the artifice of narrative. Charles spends several months writing his autobiography; his life goes on in parallel with his act of narrating. On the one hand, the “errors” he makes in life testify to his detached treatment of himself as a character in the story. On the other hand, his writing of the present, both as its narrator and as the central actor in it, is driven by his recollections of the past. He sees his life as a sequence of narrative acts and there is no present independent of his narrative integration. In other words, he gets lost between the forms of “autobiography” and “diary”.

Pascal observes that there is “a formal difference between diary and autobiography”: the former, “however reflective it may be, moves through a series of moments in time”, whereas the “latter is a review of a life from a particular moment in time” (Pascal, *Design* 3). Charles’s narrative can be seen as a mixture of both forms – a recollection of his past life in a particular moment (his retirement) as well as a

recording of the present, which moves through a temporal sequence (Prehistory-History-Postscript). He adopts a past tense in his autobiographical account and a present tense in the recordings of everyday life; yet the two modes often overlap with each other. Charles asks Hartley at one point – “Hartley, have you no sense of the present tense, can’t you live in the present?” (Murdoch, *The Sea* 329) In fact, he is the very person who gets lost in time. The acts of writing and his experiences in life are intertwined together. His narrative integrates not only the materials of his diary but also his philosophical journals and direct quotation from his letters. In a sense Charles’s narrative is a deep projection of his consciousness: the narrative proceeds as events happen, the succession of which is unexpected; the recordings of his feelings and reactions are temporally immediate but not representationally immediate. The events are entangled in the contexts of narrative form inherited both from his lifelong self-narration and from his intertextual investments, manifested in his compulsion to find prototypes in other art works, such as *The Tempest* and *Perseus and Andromeda*.

5.4 The Artist versus the Saint

Heather Ingman defines the central focus of the novel as an ageing man who “attempts to fashion a coherent identity through narration” (Ingman 202). She argues that in terms of the relation with Hartley, Charles is more of a King Lear figure, craving power despite the fact that he has claimed to leave it behind (205). He cannot bear “genuine solitude” and is therefore reluctant to “embark on a life review” (205). His capture of Hartley is interpreted as an attempt to “freeze time” and to “recapture youth, innocence, and an authenticity lost in the intervening years” (205). Charles is not driven merely by his reminiscences of innocence, however, but mainly by his artistic temperament – an urge to express himself and to impose form upon contingent events. In particular, Charles wants to include Hartley in his narrative and make her a subject to his power. As an artist who writes about his personal history, Charles has to construct a narrative self; but his “stories” can never be wholly his alone, as the image of himself must be shaped using the relations with others and the different kinds of narrative emplotment

they enable. In his re-composition of his relationship with Hartley, Charles “kept trying to trace the similarities, to build connections between the young face and the old, the old face and the new”, with the belief that she desires to return to the past as much as he does (Murdoch, *The Sea* 156). He attempts to bring the girl from the past into the present in such a way that the two images of Hartley lose their distinctness. At the same time, Charles deliberately omits the physical signs of ageing in describing himself. What he tries to restore is the “pure passion” from their “burning youth” (88). Despite this denial of time, it is through the temporal form of stories that Charles constructs a self-image and achieves self-expression. His egoism and obsession with power are manifested not just in the role he plays in life, but more importantly, in the role he plays as a narrator. He suggests from the very beginning that his writing is driven by the impulse to impose a pattern on life – a good life, he expects, with his solitary reflections by the seaside. Believing that he “can only reflect about the world through reflecting my own adventures in it”, Charles views narrative as a medium of a truth centred upon himself as protagonist (3). He settles beside the sea to meditate on the past, and find out whether he will become morally better when the old way of life is abandoned. He wants to “learn to be good” because there is “nothing else to do”; his urge to record life derives from his urge to control his surroundings and shape them into “word pictures” (2). One of the dangers of form-making is that it can also be a source of fantasy, especially when the past is processed to meet the ends of the present; yet Charles aggravates this risk by framing his own memories and experiences within broader literary contexts.

Although Charles claims that he is “on the side of truth”, there is fantasy inherent in his borrowing from *The Tempest* and creation of counterparts of the roles in the play within his own narrative (33). His interpretation of Titian’s painting also badly affects his decisions in life. As he wanders around the Wallace Collection in London, reality and artistic fictions are mixed and confused in Charles’s mind; the images of his old lovers are merged with the figures in the art works:

Then it began to seem that so many of my women were there; only not Hartley. ... Lizzie by Terborch, Jeanne by Nicolaes Maes, Rita by

Domenichino, Rosina by Rubens, a perfectly delightful study by Greuze of Clement as she was when I first met her ... There was even a picture of my mother by Reynolds, a bit flattering but a likeness. (170)

The images of the women in Charles's memory merge with types evoked in the works of art. With the temperament of a bad artist, he too readily imposes form upon life and reduces other people to characters. In his childhood, Charles revered Uncle Abel and Aunt Estelle as "godlike beings"; in adulthood, with fame and power, he develops a liking for playing the role of "god" for others (59). In her letter, Lizzie addresses Charles as "a sort of rapacious magician", whose retirement was incomprehensible: "like God retiring, you're too restless" (45). Obsessed with power, he controls other people in life just as he directs them on the stage. However, Charles cannot find any portrait of Hartley in the gallery; she is at that point the only woman who remains independent of his power. The years she spent in his absence are like a sore upon Charles's egoism. His desire to capture Hartley in his life is in parallel with his effort to include her in his narrative. He "wanted, in the time that was left to us, to console her as a god consoles"; moreover, he "wanted increasingly, and with a violence which almost burnt the tenderness away, to own her, to possess her body and soul" (186). In order to build a heroic image of himself, he fantasises that Hartley is a damsel-in-distress and Ben is a jealous, hateful tyrant, thereby giving himself a just excuse to exercise his power.

In contrast to the power-obsessed Charles, his cousin James Arrowby is a saintly figure who plays a key role in convincing him to release Hartley. Despite Charles's reluctance to admit it, his cousin had a profound impact on the formation of his character and the decisions he made in life. Charles was envious of James from childhood, for having a much more leisurely and comfortable life than him. The idea that James had a similar hostility towards him "entered [his] mind as a dart" and "is still sticking there somewhere" in the narrative present (69). He has an uncanny feeling about his relation to James, claiming that "one of us must inhabit the real world, the other one the world of shadows" (57). Early in the novel, while writing his portrait of James, Charles looks up and sees an apparition through the glass of the inner room. The

vision appals and paralyses him, making him reconsider the nature of the mysteries in life – “Perhaps I have been surrounded by little gods and spirits all my life, only the magic of the theatre exorcized or absorbed them” (69). It seems possible that Charles has long inhabited “the world of shadows”; only the exercise of theatrical magic has allowed him to take “little gods and spirits” for granted and hence remain unaware of his situation. The sea monster, which is from the world of shadows, only becomes visible to Charles in his reclusion. By comparison, James is on the side of the “real world”. In fact, James is the one who once warned Charles of “people who end their lives in caves”, foreshadowing the latter’s confusion between reality and personal fantasy (4). After learning that Charles is writing his memoirs, James is wise enough to point out that “we cannot just walk into the cavern and look around. Most of what we think we know about our minds is pseudo-knowledge” (175). Even before Charles mentions anything about Hartley, James warns him of the danger of obsessive attachments and lusts, claiming that “the heroes at Troy fought for a phantom Helen” (175). He believes that Charles’s uses of power in life and art derive from the same dark energy.

James serves in the novel as both a substantial and a symbolic figure. He is a pious Tibetan Buddhist who seems to have transcended obsessive attachments in life. He maintains a cold, incisive voice in his advice to Charles, helps the latter solve his problems, and helps him out of a muddled situation. What happens in Minn’s Cauldron, according to Charles’s account, replicates the dramatic scene in Titian’s painting, with James as his saviour in the role of Perseus. James creeps down on the rocks “like some sort of beast”, then stands on the water and lifts Charles out of “the churning whirlpool”, even as the black sea monster appears, “very close, reared over me and quite unmistakable in the dim light, its head and neck for a moment outlined against the sky” (468, 466). The description of this near-death experience as something uncanny suggests an identity between what literally happens and the interpretation of reality within Charles’s symbolic world. Greek mythology is grafted upon present events. Charles is pushed off the cliff, and Peregrine later confesses to doing so in revenge for

Charles's sabotage of his marriage with Rosina. In this sense, Charles is paying for his own misdeeds in the past. The sea monster is his old egotistical self, still haunting him, dragging him deeper into illusion and preventing him from gaining a just vision of the world.

In their conversation after the drowning, James suggests that most people have "attendant demons", and explains the Tibetan Buddhist concept of "bardo" to Charles; the souls of the dead, awaiting rebirth, "wander in a sort of limbo, not unlike the Homeric Hades" (384). In order to be free of the cycle of reincarnation, they have to abandon "the Wheel ... of attachments, cravings, desires, what chains us to an unreal world" (385). For Charles, the "attendant demon" is his obsession with power, which not only brings him affliction but also distorts his narrative. After the restoration of his memory inside Minn's Cauldron, Charles experiences a sort of epiphany in life – "as if the sky had opened and a stream of white light had descended" (470). However, the news of James's death arrives before Charles decides to follow up on his cousin's mystic power. According to the Indian doctor, James had passed away of his own free will in order to release himself from the Wheel. He dies in quietness and enlightenment, smiling, even leaving the door open for the doctor to collect his body. It is unclear whether James is really a holy being who can transcend death, or whether this version of him is a myth serving the needs of Charles's narrative. Elizabeth Dipple identifies James as a spokesman of eastern mysticism, in opposition to Charles's "rationalist western mind, so separated from the real but eerie power mystical thought can project" (Dipple, Murdoch 295). James is insightful and prophetic, as if he has a "palpable connection with some other realm"; but as Dipple points out, both Charles and James "set out on the dangerous road to goodness", and both end in failure (291, 296). Dipple argues that religion is another form of obsession, complementary to Charles's worldly obsessions. James overestimates the power of this religious magic, which leads to the death of his friend, Milarepa, when he fails in his tricks to generate enough heat to keep them both alive in the snow. In this sense, the novel unfolds through both examples "the difficulties of attaining light and the sad distance of the human mind from the greatest

object of its desire” (305).

Although James admits to having misused magic in religion, it seems excessive to call him a “magician” who “secretly practises [power]” and surrenders himself to “demonism”, as Dipple does (296). After all, we only know James through Charles’s presentation, in which his individual ego dominates the stage and inflects every aspect of the narrative. As with the symbolism of the sea monster, Charles’s representation of James can be viewed as a symbolic incarnation of the uncanny dimension of his own experience. On the last pages of the “History” section, Charles claims that he now lives in peace with the pains and losses in his life, no longer attached to or troubled by his past self. He concludes from James’s death that “religion is power, it must be, and yet that is its bane. The exercise of power is a dangerous delight” (Murdoch, *The Sea* 474). He views James’s renunciation of his obsession with religious power as equivalent to his own sense of repenting his egoism, and goes to sleep on the rock with a new vision of the world. The next morning, four seals appear in the water, almost within touching distance, playing cheerfully, “looking up at [him] all the time” and seeming to affirm his sense of resolution (476). Charles appears to have given up his fantasies and his power game. It would be a perfect ending to his story; but his life goes on beyond the narrative.

5.5 All the World’s a Stage

The novel does not end with the epiphanic moment after James’s death, but rather ambiguously, with a continuation of the diary form. Charles’s life goes on after his “novel” comes to a resolution. In the “Postscript”, Charles reverts to recording his everyday life, now in James’s old flat, which is filled with innumerable Buddhas. After returning to London, Charles is surrounded again by visitors and invitations from his old life. But, having learned from his experience at Shruff End, he seems to be wary of rousing his power-crazed inner monster again. Is Charles no longer an egoistic person? His reflections on the past are insightful, but also quite cynical. In the last pages, Charles admits that the diary is “a façade, ... which hides the inward ravages of jealousy,

remorse, fear and the consciousness of irretrievable moral failure” (483). He believes, nonetheless, that this narrative form is a necessary consolation in his life, providing him with “a little ersatz courage” (483). Looking back on his vain pursuit of Hartley, Charles concludes that “one surrenders power in one form, and grasps it in another” (500). On the last page, his agreement to have lunch with Angie – a teenage fan who offers to bear him a child – forebodes the beginning a new round of enchantment and struggling.

According to Dipple and Peter Conradi, the title of the novel, *The Sea, the Sea*, echoes the “Thalassa, thalassa” in Xenophon’s *Anabasis* and the “La mer, la mer, toujours recommencée” in Paul Valéry’s “Le cimetière marin” (Dipple, Murdoch 299-300; Conradi 293-294). “The sea, the sea” is firstly the relieved cry of the Greek mercenaries, who, exhausted and home-sick from the Persian wars, finally arrive at the Black Sea. Dipple argues that this allusion “indicates Charles’s initial mood as he smugly delights in his new solitude and the work of art he will finally form of his erratic life” (Dipple, Murdoch 299). What is unknown to Charles is that the retirement by the sea does not mark an end to his egoistic life. “The sea, the sea” also alludes to the line in Valéry’s poem: “the sea, the sea, forever restarting”. This poem is set in a graveyard overlooking the Mediterranean; the sea starts and restarts, unaffected by the poet’s meditations. In the novel, there is also an “attractive *cimetière marin*” in the nearby village, where “the tombstones carry carvings of sailing ships, decorative anchors, and strangely eloquent whales” (Murdoch, *The Sea* 13). This allusion suggests, according to Dipple, that “the work of art is a limited thing whereas the reality it imitates, the whole human being, is infinite and always in motion” (300). In other words, there is a gap between narrative and life; and, as for the Greeks, difficulties and challenges are not over even when the drama seems resolved. In Charles’s case, his narrative concludes, but the difficulties in his life are evidently ongoing.

Dipple’s reading leads to a further question: if a work of art is only a limited imitation of reality, how can it serve as a medium of truth? To answer this, we need to distinguish between Charles’s identity as author-narrator and as protagonist of Murdoch’s novel. Charles himself is a bad artist who confuses dream with reality,

fantasy with facts. In his autobiography/diary/novelistic memoir, artistic form is treated as a form of consolation, which is closely linked to his exercise of power in life. As James reflects, “Our lusts and attachments compose our god. And when one attachment is cast off another arrives by way of consolation” (445). Tormented by lust, angst, and awful jealousy, Charles borrows the stories of *The Tempest* and *Perseus and Andromeda* to console himself, and thus, while writing about his life, distorts reality. At the same time, Charles is the fictional protagonist of *The Sea, the Sea*, the last of Murdoch’s six first-person narratives. Like Murdoch’s other egoistic, boastful characters, such as Jake Donaghue and Bradley Pearson, Charles is fantasy-ridden in his life and narrative. But the representation of him explores the misuse of form as a consolation and the hazard of personal fantasy in both moral and artistic activities. There is a wholeness in his character and a coherence in his development; the story serves this exploration of character and psychology rather than offering to be realistic in itself. Through the representation of Charles’s inner life, the novel shows that art can achieve a kind of truth, at least to the extent that the artist is not driven by personal fantasies. Reflecting on his egoistic life in the theatre, Charles declares:

Emotions really exist at the bottom of the personality or at the top. In the middle they are acted. This is why all the world is a stage, and why the theatre is always popular and indeed why it exists: why it is like life, and it is like life even though it is also the most vulgar and outrageously factitious of all the arts.

(33)

This quote suggests that the everyday life of engagement with the world is all performance, like theatre, and that the only authentic emotions lie beneath or transcend this level of being. For Charles, this is a rationale for his retirement into seclusion, as if the private mind is uninvolved in this falsehood. However, retired from the obsessive world in the theatre, Charles enters into a more obsessive world in life. At the end of “Prehistory”, when he reflects on the memories with Hartley, Charles confesses that “the demon of jealousy befouled the past and left my mind no place to rest” (84). He

then observes that “Jealousy is perhaps the most involuntary of all strong emotions. It steals consciousness, it lies deeper than thought. ... it discolours the world” (84). Such introspection forebodes his surrender to the demon of jealousy after the reunion with Hartley in the “History” section. In this sense, the authentic emotion is not truth either; it lies deeper than thought, but it is all the more powerful as a source of fantasy for that reason.

In his conversation with Charles, James incisively points out: “if there is art enough a lie can enlighten us as well as the truth. What is truth anyway? What truth?” (175) He seems to suggest that artistic truth is not about the rigid, journalistic replication of the real, but is involved with a higher sense of reality; even a “lie”, if it is artful enough, can serve as enlightenment. In 1978, the year of the novel’s publication, Murdoch delivered a paper, “Art is the Imitation of Nature”, in a symposium on British writing at the University of Caen, France. The paper investigates how reality is reproduced in the medium of art. Murdoch firstly probes the idea of imitation, or “mimesis”, discussing the reasons why Plato detests art: he regards art as “irrational emotion”, concerned with “unreflective imitations of trivial, particular things”, and so opposed to “rational reflection – for instance, measurement” (Murdoch, *Art* 245). Murdoch claims that Plato is right in identifying the source of art, that it is “very much to do with accident, with contingency, with detail, with self-expression, with trickery of all kinds, with magic” (247). She argues that art is like a dangerous road, full of illusions and pitfalls; and if its destination is truth and enlightenment, the artist’s job must be to fight against the magical nature of art itself:

Art is a battle with obsessive unconscious forces and in this sense Plato was right to say that the enemy is the unconscious mind, although of course the unconscious mind is also the source of art and the paradox is that if there are no unconscious forces there is no art. (252)

Here the “unconscious forces” are what Plato condemns as the dangerous delusions with which art colludes in the process of imitation. On the one hand, art derives from

irrational emotions; it is fundamentally mimetic of the world of senses. On the other hand, the artist has to find ways to overcome “obsessive unconscious forces” in order to avoid reducing art to a form of consolation. Murdoch further aligns art with two aspects of spiritual energy: an imaginative force that helps to investigate moral notions in a contingent, lifelike context, and is complementary to her philosophical discourse; and a fantastic force in which the egoistic, irrational emotions take charge, loading the story with false images and personal obsessions. She distinguishes between the “daemonic source” and a purified, “divine source”; and she is optimistic that through the force of imagination, the artist can achieve a “sense of distance and otherness” as well as “a renewed ability to perceive and express the truth” (246, 255). Moreover, by remaining detached from personal fantasies, the artist can invent in the novel “the methods by which we verify it, by which we test it for truth, to erect its own interior standard of truthfulness” (256). In Murdoch’s view, imagination is the key to turning the agent’s attention away from the self, towards the larger concerns of the external world. And by means of a visionary imagination, art can actually direct us towards truth.

In *The Sea, the Sea*, Murdoch’s enquiry into the nature of art is embodied in three ways: the ironic reversal of symbolism in Charles’s narrative, the novel’s resistance to closed form, and its intertextuality, not only with the art works discussed above, but also with her other novels. Firstly, as this chapter has argued, the plot of the novel has multiple layers, presenting both the world of magic and the world of reality in ways inviting symbolic interpretations. Murdoch problematises the issue of truth in Charles’s autobiographical narrative, but beyond that Charles tacitly criticises his misuse of power in imposing his own private symbolism upon life. Secondly, there is a high degree of openness in the novel’s structure, and it is peppered with ironic and witty remarks on narrative form. Near the end of the “Prehistory” section, for example, Charles boastingly declares, “really I could write all sorts of fantastic nonsense about my life in these memoirs and everybody would believe it! Such is human credulity, the power of the printed word” (Murdoch, *The Sea* 76). More playfully, he ends the note by saying that “I trust this passing reflection will not lead anyone to doubt the truth of

any part of this story” (76). Such a comment serves as both a reminder of Charles’s unreliability and an enquiry into truth in the form of life-writing. The reader’s attention is also drawn, if only temporarily, to the fictionality of Charles’s story, as well as the difference between his communicative aims and Murdoch’s. Moreover, Murdoch’s higher imaginative authority is embodied in the open ending of the novel. Charles’s moral progress in the “History” section is undone by his own diaries in “Postscript”, suggesting a gap between life and narrative. Charles ends his narrative by renouncing his past fantasies, yet the “attendant demon” remains at large in his life.

Last but not least, *The Sea, the Sea* has intertextual links with Murdoch’s other novels. For instance, Charles is a friend to Will and Adelaide Boase, two characters in *Bruno’s Dream*. The interactions between these characters contribute to the metafictional features of *The Sea, the Sea*. Honor Klein, the powerful figure from *A Severed Head*, is also mentioned as an established dramatic role in the novel – “unfortunately [Rosina] was never able to play Honor Klein” (73). In fact, *A Severed Head* had been adapted for the stage in 1963, long before *The Sea, the Sea* was completed, making it indeed “possible” for Rosina to have played the role of Honor. It is worth noting that both the examples of the Boases and Honor Klein work specifically in relation to the magical world of the theatre that Charles inhabits. Here the boundary between fictional and real worlds is blurred. We conceive of these characters as existing both inside the pages of their respective novels and within the larger scope of a fictional world encompassing Murdoch’s whole oeuvre. In these ways Murdoch strives to make the novel “art enough”, to achieve some enlightenment on the nature of art and secure another kind of truth through the dubious medium of Charles’s storytelling.

Compared to Murdoch’s other novels, *The Sea, the Sea* pays more attention to its fictive nature at the same time as it explores psychological and mystical themes, resulting in an especially allusive and multi-layered story. Through the vehicle of Charles’s autobiographical narrative, it explores the relation between his inner experiences and the outer world. Charles strives to impose an artistic form on the contingent events of his life, drawing upon other literary texts and myths to create a

fiction of himself that in turn becomes the basis for his behaviour. The material and narration of his story reciprocally interact. What the novel unfolds is not just a moral allegory about Charles's obsessions and fantasies, but more importantly, an examination of the moral significance of his investments in narrative form. As the tenor of Charles's own presentation is qualified through allusions, irony, symbolic connotations beyond his control, and the dissonance between narrative modes, a new vision of our relation to the real is investigated and brought to light. Beneath the layer of Charles's unreliable narrative lies Murdoch's exploration of the nature of novelistic form and the danger of power and obsession in both life and art.

Conclusion

In the preface to *The Saint and the Artist*, John Bayley wrote: “[Murdoch] was a Prospero, a word magician, a spinner of plots and stories, and yet she was also a philosopher and a Platonist, a sober and exact thinker and theologian” (Conradi xi). A “word magician” and an intelligent philosopher, Murdoch was one of the most prolific writers of the twentieth century; yet it is hard to classify her in relation to the trends of contemporary writing, for she defies modernism, criticises philosophical novels, and claims to adopt a kind of realism in her novels. There is a link as well as a tension between her realist literary theories and her Platonic, idealistic moral philosophy, which makes her narrative distinctive and labyrinthine. By a close examination of *Under the Net*, *The Bell*, *Bruno’s Dream*, *The Black Prince*, and *The Sea, the Sea*, this thesis has drawn out the complexities of the dialogue between philosophy and literature in Murdoch’s novelistic discourse. The novels have been addressed chronologically, each analysed for its key narrative strategies and in parallel with Murdoch’s philosophical texts of the same period. However, the thesis never intended to extract Murdoch’s philosophy conceptually from her novels or to treat her fiction as literary illustration of ideas. The focus was on how the author’s philosophy influences her narrative techniques, and how the novel itself becomes an effective medium of moral imagination. In Murdoch’s novels, the narrator’s artistic pursuit is often juxtaposed with the individual’s moral progress; the line between fact and fantasy is often blurred and leads to an imposition of form onto characters’ lives. The thesis not only explicated the components of Murdoch’s storytelling, such as viewpoint, voice, and tempo, but in a deeper sense, delved into the intertextuality of her representation of language, paintings, music, and the moral visions behind them. Moreover, it moved beyond particular novels and reflected on narrative and morality in a wider context.

One of the key problems discussed in the thesis is the role which Murdoch’s philosophical perspective plays in her fiction, or the extent to which her novelistic discourse is philosophical. Differing from critical views that her literature and

philosophy combine with each other, the thesis has argued that the author's moral views interact with the narrative in a more subtle way. It has been suggested that her ideas are not expressed through the agency of her characters; instead, she treats the novel as itself a different way of thinking. For one thing, Murdoch tends to distance the philosophy of her intelligent, solipsistic, middle-aged male narrators from her own. Their ideas of good art, along with their own pursuit of it, are often undermined by Murdoch's narrative. In *Under the Net* and *The Sea, the Sea*, both Jake and Charles engage in unfruitful quests for old lovers, seeing them as signs of truth, but encountering instead their own illusions. In *The Black Prince*, the authenticity of Bradley's narration is overturned by the foreword and the postscripts by the dramatis personae; whether or not he kills Arnold remains ambiguous at the end of the novel. The philosophical ideas of these characters are ironised by their behaviour and their narrations. They are in no way the spokesmen of Murdoch's philosophical views.

However, on the representational level, the influence of Murdoch's philosophy upon her novels is not without trace. In interview with Bryan Magee in 1977, Murdoch pointed out the distinction between "a recognisable style" and "a personal presence" in literary narrative (Magee 9). She believes that a writer should ideally have "a recognisable style but no presence", and she tries to avoid "a personal presence" by freeing the characters from her abstractions (9). Yet her moral philosophy delicately affects the novelistic strategies she adopts. As argued in the foregoing chapters, these include her pairing of artistic and saintly characters (such as Jake/Hugo and Charles/James), her comic tone, her Shakespearian concerns, the particularity of the London settings she depicts in accurate detail, the allusions to visual arts and cross-references to her own works, and her refusal of straightforward closure (such as the foretelling of the future in *Bruno's Dream*, the postscripts in *The Black Prince*, and the narrative reversal in *The Sea, the Sea*). Moreover, Murdoch stresses the idiosyncrasy of personality in her often-eccentric characters, thus affirming the artistic commitment to maintain an "unsentimental, detached, unselfish, objective attention" towards others (Murdoch, *Sovereignty* 353). Her characters are endowed with diverse and abundant

inner lives, often markedly remote from her own. In *The Bell*, she changes the focalisation in each chapter so as to give full attention and recognition to multiple individual characters, not only offering different perspectives upon reality but also making it easier to imagine Dora's Gothic fantasies, Toby's youthful curiosity and desires, and Michael's inner struggles. In *Bruno's Dream*, on the other hand, the focalisation of Nigel's mystic, uncanny vision presents the image of a figure without "self". He participates in the sufferings of other characters; his attention is properly directed to others and his own existence is always elsewhere. In both novels Murdoch presents selfhood as caught up with the obsession with power, and connected to Eros, dreams, myths, and fantasies, all impeding a just vision of reality.

Murdoch's aesthetic strategies go beyond a narrow sense of realism, incorporating such devices as metaphor, symbolism, and intertextuality. She claims in "The Fire and the Sun" that good art "provides a stirring image of a pure transcendent value ... the metaphor of vision so indispensable in discussions of aesthetics and morality" (Murdoch, *Fire* 453). She aligns aesthetics and ethics as kinds of value, holding that art can draw our attention away from the ego-ridden subject and towards a transcendental sense of the good and the real. Within her novels, Murdoch alludes not only to great literary works but also to other art forms such as music, painting, crafts, and architecture – as embodied, for example, in the portrayal of Imber Court in *The Bell*; the Post Office Tower, water-buffalo lady, and *Rosenkavalier* in *The Black Prince*; and Shruff End in *The Sea, the Sea*. The references to Titian's *Flaying of Marsyas* and *Perseus and Andromeda* respectively in the latter two novels serve to dramatize as well as deepen the meaning of their plots. Moreover, Murdoch likes to place her characters in the National Gallery when they are stuck in a moral dilemma: Dora Greenfield, escaping temporarily from the surveillance gaze of the Imber community, is moved and brought to an epiphany in front of the paintings there. As an observer of great works of art, Dora is engaged in "something real and something perfect, ... something superior and good whose presence destroyed the dreary trance-like solipsism of her earlier mood" (Murdoch, *The Bell* 190-191). Art is apprehended as a transcendental reality in Dora's

moral life, but whether it imparts an understanding of objective reality or is merely the illusion asserted by Plato remains open to discussion in the novel. In many cases, artistic form is misused by Murdoch's characters and deters their moral development. For instance, Charles Arrowby's reading of *Perseus and Andromeda* enables rather than corrects his obsession with Hartley. In this sense art itself is neither good nor evil; it is the moral agent who decides how to perceive it. And it is the focus of Murdoch's novels to display such a problematic relationship between the ethical value and representational truth of art.

Murdoch's ambiguous feeling towards artistic forms stems from her philosophical thinking on form and freedom. According to Murdoch, not only does the obsessive ego need to be stressed in characterisation, but the artist also needs to recognise the tendency to generalise reality into a single pattern. She uses the Platonic Cave allegory to illustrate the false consolation form can offer to the mind: the illusions by the fire are understood as projections of human egoism – an abstract impression of reality rather than the reality itself – which console as well as chaining the prisoners in the cave. At the same time, Murdoch argues that form should not be repudiated indiscriminately in art. She defines the artist's worst enemy as “the cosy dreaming ego, the dweller in the vaults of *eikasia*”; the bad artist indulges himself in fantasy and gratifies the lower part of the soul, whereas “the highest art is powered by the force of an individual unconscious mind” (Murdoch, *Fire* 455). She aligns the lower and higher parts of the soul, counter-intuitively, with the ego and the unconscious mind. It is possible for artists to attain the higher ideals of art; they can “contemplate the real world (usually veiled by anxiety and fantasy)”, as long as they possess a “non-meanly-personal imaginative grasp of the subject-matter” and maintain a loving attention to it (456, 459). Murdoch often depicts her characters, such as Jake Donaghue, Miles Greensleave, Bradley Pearson, and Charles Arrowby, as keen writers. They strive to make progress from ignorance to knowledge in the face of experience. Impeded by their self-centred visions, their pilgrimage from appearance to reality ends, to varying degrees, in failure; but in

representing such a painstaking process, Murdoch herself delves into the nature of fictions and draws attention to the fictionality of the story.

Unlike her artist-characters, Murdoch strives to overcome the authorial “anxiety and fantasy” of form, despite her recognition that it is not easy work. Her first book, *Sartre: Romantic Rationalist*, ends with a rather pessimistic note on the attainment of realist writing without abstract form:

[Sartre’s] inability to write a great novel is a tragic symptom of a situation which afflicts us all. We know that the real lesson to be taught is that the human person is precious and unique; but we seem unable to set it forth except in terms of ideology and abstraction. (Murdoch, Sartre 120)

In her twenty-six novels created in the following forty-three years, Murdoch never stopped seeking to shed light upon this predicament, and to negotiate the tension between the form of art and the freedom of characters. It has always been a central ambition of her novels, especially the five explored in this thesis, to attend to the uniqueness of characters and to recognise the multiple versions of reality perceived and processed by different individuals. This commitment underlies the critique of the solipsistic first-person narrator in *Under the Net*; the attention to the inner lives of peripheral characters in *The Bell*; the avoidance of a romanticised presentation of death and the stress upon contingent reality over against abstract retrospections in *Bruno’s Dream*; the exhibition of alternative artistic truths in the postscripts to *The Black Prince*; and the dangers of imposing a literary form on one’s life revealed in *The Sea, the Sea*. In her inquiries into the tension between form and freedom, Murdoch strives to maintain an objective, impersonal voice; this in itself gives rise to a “recognisable style”.

Murdoch aims to include “whatever is contingent, messy, boundless, infinitely particular, and endlessly still to be explained” in her novelistic discourse (Murdoch, *Sublime and Beautiful* 274). She believes that the capacity of the novel needs to be enlarged, and that form should be combined “with a respect for reality with all its odd contingent ways” (286). Contingency is used as a tool not only against the character’s

false fantasising or theorising of reality, but also against the reader's recognition of a familiar storyline. For instance, in *Under the Net*, the plot is led forward by contingent events, from Jake's sudden falling into a state of homelessness and joblessness to his unexpected meeting with Hugo in the hospital. In his narration, contingency works as a reminder of reality and leads to a certain moral growth. Jake's illusions in relationships, such as his obsession with Anna and his guilt towards Hugo, are exposed by the unpredictable course of reality. In *Bruno's Dream*, contingency is used to subvert the presentation of human suffering and death in a consoling way, prettified or sublimated into meaning. The death of Gwen from a heart attack after jumping into the river to save a boy who already knows how to swim seems almost comical. The flood of the Thames at the end abruptly washes away Bruno's years-accumulated stamp collection, along with his secrets, regrets, and unachieved redemption. The novel presents a tension between the desire for reconciliation with the past, and the relentless, inevitable call of death. In *The Sea, the Sea*, the unexpected visitors to Shruff End at Whit weekend play a crucial part in the rescue of Hartley and the partial reawakening of Charles's moral sensibility. Their detached view of the situation serves as a contrast to Charles's egoistic projection upon reality. In Murdoch's novels, contingency is used as a device to balance conventional impositions of novelistic form. It can be seen in her tendency to depict characters who easily fall in and out of love, her attention to the complexity of situations following characters' random choices, and her portrayal of nature as shapeless and unruly. Although the representation of contingency is itself an artifice, it is adopted by Murdoch to indicate the unpredictability of reality and to stress the moral significance of artistic form.

Along with the analysis of specific strategies in Murdoch's novelistic discourse, the thesis has examined how her notion of realism fits within her moral and aesthetic principles. In her critical essays and interviews, Murdoch constantly emphasises her alignment with the literary tradition of nineteenth-century realism – its depiction of unidealized, ordinary subjects, its focus on what is, rather than what consoles us, its rejection of stylised presentation, and its moral inclination towards the real, the good,

and the truth. This is, to her, the mode that best represents free, contingent, independent characters against a credible social scene. She argues in “Against Dryness” that “prose must recover [from the ailments of Romanticism] its former glory, eloquence and discourse must return”; and she “would connect eloquence with the attempt to speak the truth” (Murdoch, *Dryness* 294). There is a larger world beyond the solipsistic presentation of reality in romantic and modernist writings, which Murdoch equates with “dryness (smallness, clearness, self-containedness)” (292). She conceives of realism, by contrast, as the revelation of different facets of truth and the overcoming of authorial selfhood. Murdoch sees Shakespeare as a great realist; she admires his imaginative power to create characters who “are entities on their own and ... relate to each other in a free way” as well as his presentation of “a very strong moral world” (Biggsby 102-103). In order to meet this standard, it is necessary for the subject matter to be non-consoling and impersonal. Such a notion of realism encourages Murdoch to adopt irony and intertextual strategies, to distinguish fantasy from imagination, to draw attention to the narratives of the *dramatis personae*, to describe the unfamiliar and uncanny, and to include contingent events in her narrative. Furthermore, it is closely related to her concern for the very nature of fictional genres, their fictionality. In a sense, she uses the form of the novel to question representation itself. In her novels, especially those with a first-person point of view, Murdoch probes into the tendentiousness of narrative and imagery, and the elusiveness of artistic truth. One of her motifs is the idea of form as an artifice tending to delude and to fictionalise. For instance, in *The Black Prince*, P. A. Loxias is presented as an abstract symbol of the god of art who blurs the distinction between fact and fiction. The forewords and postscripts frame and foreground Bradley’s personal investment in his narrative and novel-making. In *The Sea, the Sea*, Charles Arrowby’s introspective commentary on the artistic form he adopts, his experimentation with “memoir”, “diary”, and “philosophical journal”, reveals the constant bias of his point of view in his representation of events. In both cases, readers are indirectly offered a larger vision through attention to the fictionality of the narrative.

In this sense, Murdoch's view of realism stretches the term considerably, and focuses more on an orientation towards moral totality than on empirical facts and details.

The thesis has treated Murdoch not only as a productive novelist with an ingenious style but also as an innovator within the realist tradition, whose literary theories are bound up with reflection upon her own practice. While the thesis has maintained that Murdoch's novels interact with her moral vision and can be studied collectively, it has not suppressed the historical developments in her thought. Murdoch's artistic views and her moral vision are both subject to nuanced changes over the long period of her writing career, as can be seen, for example, in her transition from the existentialist indebtedness of her early novels to a more liberated and more open tone in the later ones. The thesis has not sought to generalise these literary qualities into a theoretical unity, but rather to explore her works circumstantially and diachronically. Through a close reading of five representative Murdoch novels, the thesis has examined the tensions between language and agency, form and freedom, self and other, and idealism and particularism in her novelistic discourse, and has investigated their dialogue with her moral philosophy. It has maintained that the moral idea enters into Murdoch's novels in a subtle and multi-dimensional way, and that Murdoch's diversified practices in novelistic form are in harmony with her exploratory realistic aesthetics, her reflection upon human complexities, and her truth-seeking approach to art and morals.

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