The Influence of the Writings of Simone Weil on the Fiction of Iris Murdoch

by

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A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy to the University of Leicester.

June 1989

Preface

Apart from the guidelines of the University of Leicester I have followed the second edition of the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*, eds. Joseph Gibaldi and Walter S. Achtert (1977, rpt. New York: Modern Language Association, 1984) concerning the conventions according to which I have set out this thesis. All bibliographical information is to be found in the list of "Works Consulted" (290 onwards).

The punctuation and spelling in the quotations are as in the original. I have quoted directly where possible because I find that under similar circumstances I tend to want to know what it says in the original in order be able to judge, as far as possible, the appropriateness of the comments made on the text.

Where I use the genitive case of first names ending in "s" (in Murdoch's fiction there are many cases such as Thomas, and Marcus) I have decided to add simply an apostrophe (e.g. Thomas') rather than follow that with a second "s" (i.e. Thomas's) as the former seems neater.

Acknowledgments

I should like to thank my parents, Hanna and Alfred Zielke, for their emotional and financial support while I was writing this thesis. Vivienne Young has been a real friend. George Savona provided encouragement and support (not least in culinary form), discussions on language, and a sense of perspective. He also proof-read meticulously and with unfailing good grace.

Nene College, Northampton, gave me three hours research remission during the academic year 1987-8 while I was writing up the thesis. Professor Dorothy Emmet, formerly of Manchester University, discussed issues concerning moral philosophy with me in the early stages of this thesis. Peter McKenzie of the Religious Studies Department at Leicester University kindly answered queries about religious matters. Roger Montague of the Philosophy Department at Leicester University read early drafts of my thesis and commented in helpful detail as well as offering advice in relation to the philosophical issues that form part of the thesis. He did both with patience and good humour for which I am very grateful. I am grateful to Dr. Martin Stannard of the English Department at Leicester University for alerting me to the existence of the 1984 edition of the MLA Handbook, and for making a number of helpful suggestions for the re-drafting of this thesis. I would also like to thank Dr. Ann Loades of the Theology Department at Durham University for pointing me towards a series of useful references, especially for those relating to the work of Simone Weil, *and* for sending me the manuscript of one of the articles from the United States.

My biggest thanks go to my supervisor, Dr. Lois D. Potter of the English Department at Leicester University. She introduced me to the methods involved in doing research in a concrete and helpful way at the outset of this thesis, and made constructive suggestions throughout the period in which I was writing it. Her greatest virtue as a supervisor was that she made herself readily available to discuss the progress of my research, was willing to read what I had written, and comment upon it, even at short notice, and always returned any work I had done very promptly. For all these things, and

for her general support during the writing of this thesis I would like to thank her.

For my father

who died too soon.

List of Abbreviations Used

AD "Against Dryness", by Iris Murdoch. *Encounter* 16 (1961): 16-20.

BAB *The Book and the Brotherhood*, by Iris Murdoch. London: Chatto & Windus, 1987.

BD *Bruno's Dream*, by Iris Murdoch. London: Chatto & Windus, 1969.

BP *The Black Prince*, by Iris Murdoch. London: Chatto & Windus, 1973.

EH "The Existentialist Hero", by Iris Murdoch. *Listener* 23 March 1950: 523-4.

EM "Existentialists and Mystics", by Iris Murdoch. *Essays and Poems Presented to Lord David Cecil*. London: Constable, 1970. 169-83.

FLN *First and Last Notebooks*, by Simone Weil. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1970.

FS *The Fire and the Sun: Why Plato Banished the Artist*, by Iris Murdoch. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1978.

GA *The Good Apprentice*, by Iris Murdoch. London: Chatto & Windus, 1985.

GG *Gravity and Grace*, by Simone Weil. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1976.

KV "Knowing the Void", by Iris Murdoch. *Spectator* 197 (2 Nov. 1956): 613-4.

LTA Letter to the author, by Iris Murdoch. 8 May 1981.

ME "Metaphysics and Ethics", by Iris Murdoch. *The Nature of Metaphysics*. Ed. D. F. Pears. London: Macmillan, 1957. 99-123.

NB I *The Notebooks of Simone Weil*. 2 vols. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1976. Vol. 1.

NB II *The Notebooks of Simone Weil*. 2 vols. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1976. Vol. 2.

NM "The Novelist as Metaphysician", by Iris Murdoch. *Listener* 16 March 1950: 473, 476.

NP "Nostalgia for the Particular", by Iris Murdoch. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 1952: 243-60.

PP *The Philosopher's Pupil*, by Iris Murdoch. London: Chatto & Windus, 1983.

SBR "The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited", by Iris Murdoch. *Yale Review* 49.2 (1960): 247-71.

SG "The Sublime and the Good", by Iris Murdoch. *Chicago Review* 13 (1959): 42-55.

SOG *The Sovereignty of Good*, by Iris Murdoch. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970.

SRR *Sartre: Romantic Realist*, by Iris Murdoch. Cambridge: Bowes & Bowes, 1953.

SS *The Sea, The Sea*, by Iris Murdoch. London: Chatto & Windus, 1978.

TA *The Time of the Angels*, by Iris Murdoch. London: Chatto & Windus, 1966.

TSEM "T.S. Eliot as a Moralist", by Iris Murdoch. *T.S. Eliot: A Symposium for his 70th Birthday*. Ed. Neville Braybrooke. New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1958.

VCM "Vision and Choice in Morality", by Iris Murdoch. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 1956: 32-58.

WOG *Waiting on God*, by Simone Weil. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979.

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Introduction

This thesis is concerned with the influence of Simone Weil's writings on the fiction of Iris Murdoch. More specifically, it is concerned with why Murdoch might find Weil's work so compelling, and how certain conceptual parallels in Weil's and Murdoch's moral philosophy find their expression in Murdoch's novels. I shall suggest that these parallels reveal a particular attitude towards gender roles on the part of Weil and Murdoch, and that this attitude is tied up with the specific gender roles Weil and Murdoch chose to take up in society. In making such claims about these two women's work I am adopting what Almond in "Reflections on Ethics and Gender" calls "the patriarchy thesis", maintaining that, at least with regard to white middle class women born before the end of World War II, gender difference is "the most fundamental and most fully explanatory division in human society" (51). The emphasis here is very much on *gender* difference as opposed to *sex* difference; the latter I take to refer to biological differences which are innate[1] whereas I take the former - even though linked to biological differences - to refer to a socio-cultural construct.[2] In consequence, gender traits, divided into categories of "the feminine" and "the masculine", are not characteristics inherent in women and men but rather are acquired as part of the socialization process; it follows that gender traits, while socio-culturally differentially attributed to women and men, are not specific to the two sexes respectively but can potentially be acquired and exhibited by both women and men. For the purposes of this thesis I therefore take sex/female/male to refer to the differences between women and men that have a biological basis, and gender/feminine/masculine to denote socio-cultural differences between women and men.

[1] For a discussion of sex and gender differences see Gayle Greene and Coppélia Kahn, eds., *Making a Difference: Feminist Literary Criticism* 6-12; Ann Snitow et al., eds., *Desire: The Politics of Sexuality* 105-22; The Cambridge Women's Studies Group, *Women in Society* 224-41.

[2] See Kate Millet, *Sexual Politics* 23-58.

For reasons to be detailed below, insufficient attention has been paid both to the nature of the influence of Weil's writings on Murdoch's work, and to the role of gender in Weil's and Murdoch's ethics, although both women's writings have generated a considerable body of critical response in the form of reviews, articles, books, and dissertations.[3] It is not possible, within the framework of this thesis, to provide a detailed critical account of all this material; instead, I intend to begin by indicating, as far as Murdoch's work is concerned, the nature of the relationship between author, text, and critic. I shall suggest that the parameters for the critical focus on Murdoch's writings have been largely set by her own theoretical writings. This, I shall argue, highlights some contradictions in Murdoch's views on ethics and aesthetics, against the background of which her responses to two philosophical positions, linguistic analysis[4] and existentialism,[5] and to the literary traditions of Romanticism, "the great 19th century novel",

[3] Details of these can be found for Weil in J. P. Little's *Simone Weil: A Bibliography* and the supplement to this volume (1979), and for Murdoch in Thomas T. Tominaga and Wilma Schneidermeyer's *Iris Murdoch and Muriel Spark*. Conradi mentions a new bibliography on Murdoch's work by John Fletcher (290) which does not appear to have been published to date.

[4] The term refers to "an approach to philosophy that holds that a careful study of how language is actually used, taught, and developed in everyday discourse can illuminate. . . philosophical problems. . . Its most influential exponents have been Wittgenstein, J. L. Austin, and Ryle." (Flew 188-9) See also Passmore, "Wittgenstein and Ordinary Language Philosophy" (424-65).

[5] Murdoch's interest in existentialism centres on the work of Sartre, de Beauvoir, and Camus on whom she writes in "The Novelist as Metaphysician", "The Existentialist Hero", "Hegel in Modern Dress", "Existentialists and Mystics", and in *Sartre: Romantic Realist*. Mention is also made of Kierkegaard (esp. SOG 47, 82). Sartre defines existentialism as the belief that "*existence* comes before *essence*" (*Existentialism and Humanism* 26) by which he means that "man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself" (ibid. 28). Mary Warnock's *Existentialism* provides a survey of the field; for a summary, entertaining because amazingly biased, see also Passmore 466-503.

and "the Symbolists", have to be read. Her views on these positions and traditions are reflected in her own fiction, and allow one to explore her place within literary history. They also give an indication as to why Murdoch finds Weil's work particularly congenial.

Three main critical preoccupations emerge from reading secondary material on Murdoch: one with specific, recurrent, often concrete details or ideas[6]; another one with the relationship between Murdoch's work and that of other writers, especially Sartre's[7] and Shakespeare's[8]; and a third, perhaps the major one, with the relationship between Murdoch's theoretical and her fictional writings. The method, as regards this last critical preoccupation, tends always to be the same:

> . . . the received approach to [Murdoch's] work has been to ask what is marvellous in the theory, and then to look to the books to find the shortfall. (Conradi ix)

Examples of this practice can be found in critical writings on concepts

[6] Examples of this are Betty M. Fowley's *Iris Murdoch's Use of Works of Art as Analogies of Moral Themes*; Barbara Stettler-Imfeld's *The Adolescent in the Novels of Iris Murdoch*; Lois Silver Keates' *Varieties of the Quest Myth in the Early Novels of Iris Murdoch*.

[7] The relationship of Murdoch's work to Sartre's is discussed in Diogenes Allen's "Two Experiences of Existence: Jean-Paul Sartre and Iris Murdoch"; Ben Obumseln's "Iris Murdoch and Sartre"; William Slaymaker, "An Interview with Iris Murdoch"; John B. Vickery, "The Dilemmas of Language: Sartre's *La nausée* and Iris Murdoch's *Under the Net*".

[8] See, for example, John Haffenden, *Novelists in Interview* (195-8); Andreas Höfele, "Portraits of Mr. S. W.: Shakespeare als Rätsel in Iris Murdoch's *The Black Prince* und Anthony Burgess' *Enderby's Dark Lady*"; Robert Hoskins, "'Hamlet' and 'A Severed Head'"; Richard Todd, *Iris Murdoch: The Shakespearian Interest*.

such as freedom,[9] love,[10] reality,[11] contingency,[12] enchantment,[13] and the importance of religion.[14]

In commenting on her work critics have made extensive use of

[9] See Warner Berthoff, "The Enemy of Freedom is Fantasy"; Antonia S. Byatt, *Degrees of Freedom: The Novels of Iris Murdoch*; Kevin O'Sullivan, "Iris Murdoch and the Image of Liberal Man"; D.F.Pears (ed.), *Freedom and the Will*.

[10] See Thayle Kermit Anderson, *Concepts of Love in the Novels of Iris Murdoch*; Dorothy Jones, "Love and Morality in Iris Murdoch's *The Bell*"; P. A. Packer, "The Theme of Love in the Novels of Iris Murdoch"; William E. Slaymaker, "The Labyrinth of Love: The Problem of Love and Freedom in the Novels of Iris Murdoch"; Jack F. Stewart, "Art and Love in Murdoch's *The Black Prince*"; Wolfram Völker, *The Rhetoric of Love: Das Menschenbild und die Form des Romans bei Iris Murdoch*; Peter Wolfe, *The Disciplined Heart: Iris Murdoch and her Novels*.

[11] George S. Fraser, "Iris Murdoch: The Solidity of the Normal"; Frederick J. Hoffman, "Iris Murdoch: The Reality of Persons"; Rose Ellen Mohan, *Through Myth to Reality: A Study of the Novels of Iris Murdoch*; William E. Slaymaker, "Myths, Mystery and the Mechanisms of Determinism: The Aesthetics of Freedom in Iris Murdoch's Fiction".

[12] Frederick J. Hoffman, "The Miracle of Contingency: The Novels of Iris Murdoch"; William Van O'Connor, "Iris Murdoch: The Formal and the Contingent"; Erhard Rechwitz, "Der notwendige Zufall. Die Romane von Iris Murdoch"; Susanna Roxmann, "Contingency and the Image of the Net in Iris Murdoch, Novelist and Philosopher".

[13] Bernard F. Dick, "The Novels of Iris Murdoch: A Formula for Enchantment"; Zohreh Tawakuli Sullivan, "Enchantment and the Demonic in Iris Murdoch: *The Flight from the Enchanter*".

[14] Elizabeth Dipple, *Iris Murdoch: Work for the Spirit*; Robert Kaftan, "Doubt and Self: Two Murdoch Priests"; Arlene Elizabeth Kuhner, *The Alien God in the Novels of Iris Murdoch*; Wilma Faye Schneidermeyer, *The Religious Dimension in the Works of Iris Murdoch*.

Murdoch as a source for understanding her writing. This is, in part, a function of her helpfulness in answering queries and commenting on what is said and written about her.[15] Also, her theoretical writings provide the critic with an easily exploitable set of pronouncements on ethics and aesthetics, often in antithetical form[16]: freedom *versus* enchantment (EH 524), vision *versus* choice (VCM 38-9), different types of freedom (SG 53), neurosis *versus* convention (SG 52-3; SBR 264-5), Ordinary Language Man *versus* Totalitarian Man (SBR 254-6), the journalistic *versus* the crystalline novel (SBR 264-5; AD 18), the existentialist *versus* the mystical novel (EM 171-5), imagination *versus* fantasy (SOG 84-9; FS 78-81), etc.

Furthermore, through her comments in interviews[17] relating to her own fiction Murdoch has created a profile of herself as an intensely (self-)conscious writer. She has continually emphasized the degree to which her novels are crafted, thought-through exercises working towards

[15] Peter J. Conradi in *Iris Murdoch: The Saint and the Artist* writes: "Miss Murdoch answered queries with the patient kindness for which she is known, and commented most usefully on early drafts for two chapters." (xii). Similarly, Elizabeth Dipple in *Iris Murdoch: Work for the Spirit* states: "Iris Murdoch herself talked to me once during the early stages of the book, and repeatedly, with the faithfulness and generosity which all who know her report, answered my letters and tactfully tried to keep me on a few occasions from going too far off the track." (Acknowledgements) These are just two examples of a host of critics who have approached Iris Murdoch for confirmation/verification/approval of their interpretations of her work.

[16] Murdoch shares this dualistic stance with Weil: for a discussion of dualism as a conceptual framework in Weil's writings see Bregman, "The Barren Fig Tree: Simone Weil and the Problem of Feminine Identity"; also Maurice Friedman, *To Deny Our Nothingness* (135-45).

[17] See, for example, Barrows, Bellamy, Biles, Blow, Bryden, Caen, Haffenden, Heyd, Hobson, Magee, Nettell, Rose, Slaymaker, Summers.

an ideal of authorship'[18]:

> I plan everything in immense detail before I start; the writing is the very last thing which happens. When I've got the story clear, every single word, at that point, matters. (Biles 115)

In the same interview Murdoch professed that she is "not particularly content" with her work, being "terribly conscious of one's limitations as an artist. I think I *have* improved. . . However, one's ability to improve is still extraordinarily limited." (122) Murdoch considers her writing to be governed by intentionality, to be constructed and controlled, and for this reason rejects interpretations of her work she herself did not intend:

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

Murdoch seems not to subscribe to the notion that every reading is a re-reading, every decoding a renewed encoding'[19]. She suggests a control of the text which leaves the reader nothing to do but decipher

[18] In the interview with Rose Murdoch said: "I think it's a novelist's job to be a good artist, and this will involve telling the truth, and not worrying about social commitments. I think social commitment, in so far as it interferes with art, is very often a mistake." (5). To Blow she remarked, "I don't think my portrayal of character is as good as it might be . . . For me the creation of character is the centre of the operation, and if I haven't got the characters right then the novel is going to be faulty . . ."(24). In her essays "The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited", "Against Dryness", and "Existentialists and Mystics" Murdoch explains her 'ideal of authorship' in relation to the writing of novels more fully.

[19] See Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory* 12.

her intentions yet, as I shall indicate below, she constructs her novels so as to activate reader participation. The notion that other people's readings of her fiction can be misleading (to whom? - presumably other readers) suggests that Murdoch is concerned about the influence critics might exert over the reception of her work. She is predictably dismissive of critics.[20] One result of this, it seems to me, is that critics have tended to interrogate in the main those aspects of her work which Murdoch herself highlights for prime consideration.

These do not include the issue of gender, and thus there are only a handful of studies on its role in Murdoch's work. As she has said:

> . . . I don't really see there is much difference between men and women. I think perhaps I identify with men more than with women, because the ordinary human condition still seems to belong more to a man than to a woman. . . I am not very much interested in the female predicament. I'm passionately in favour of women's lib, in the general, ordinary, proper sense of women's having equal rights. And, most of all, equal education. (Biles 119)

Murdoch does not want to acknowledge any gender difference ("I don't really see there is much difference between men and women.") while being aware of the fact that Western culture is dominated by men ("the ordinary human condition still seems to belong more to a man than to a woman"). She resolves this contradiction by "identify[ing] with men more than with women". In consequence, her "passionate" interest in "women's lib" does not reveal itself in her writings; women's issues, even women's education, are raised marginally only. Thus in *The Flight from the Enchanter* she portrays some old suffragettes; in *An Unofficial Rose* a lesbian couple appears; characters occasionally make pronouncements on women's lives as culturally conditioned. But on the whole Murdoch's

[20] In "Speaking of Writing" she said: "One never learns anything one doesn't know from critics. Any novelist worth his salt knows very clearly what is wrong with his work before it is ever published . . ." (15) To Blow she remarked: "I don't think there's very much a critic can tell me that I don't know already . . . I think there are many faults in the books." (24) It is interesting to note that Murdoch considers fault-finding rather than giving readings the primary task of the critic; it is clearly that which she reacts against.

female characters tend to be cast in the conventional moulds of femininity in Western culture such as helpless, dependent, sexy mistress,[21] boring, podgy (house)wife,[22] mother figure,[23], or virginal, unattached female.[24]

Two male critics, Gary Goshgarian and Steven Cohan, have suggested that Murdoch is a feminist. Goshgarian maintains that

> What Miss Murdoch is directly concerned with are the artificial mystiques and myths of womanhood that deny women recognition as free, independent, and contingent human beings. Her novels explore not the forthright belief in female inferiority but the subtler effects of men building fantasies around women who are turned into objects for men's romantic projections. ("Feminist Values in the Novels of Iris Murdoch" 519)

According to Goshgarian, women for Murdoch's male characters function as mirrors of the males' needs so that Effingham Cooper of *The Unicorn* and Martin Lynch-Gibbon of *A Severed Head*, for example, "solipsize a woman out of the needs to triumph over feelings of insubstantiality" (526). Women are here regarded as externalizations of male needs; if these needs are conceived of in culturally conventional terms (men needing women as mother figures, virgins, whores, goddesses, etc.), then the female characters created will correspond to certain stereotypical images of femaleness. Goshgarian appears to argue that Murdoch seeks to expose the ways in which men objectify women in relation to their own

[21] Typical mistress figures are Georgie Hands in *The Severed Head*, Diane Sedleigh in *The Philosopher's Pupil*, Jessica Bird in *The Nice and the Good*, Emily McHugh in *The Sacred and Profane Love Machine*.

[22] Ann Peronett of *An Unofficial Rose* is one such example, Hilda Foster in *A Fairly Honourable Defeat* is another; Nan of *The Sandcastle* also belongs into that category.

[23] Typical are Kate in *The Nice and the Good*, Kathleen in *The Red and the Green*, Lydia in *The Italian Girl*, Gerda in *Henry and Cato*.

[24] Lisa in *Bruno's Dream* is one example; so are Catherine Fawley in *The Bell*, Anne in *Nuns and Soldiers*, and Tamar in *The Book and the Brotherhood*.

needs by casting them in moulds which, in some cases like Hannah's in *The Unicorn* quite literally, imprison the women. If this is so, Murdoch has indeed something of a feminist program. However, given that she has said, "I'm not interested in women's problems as such, though I'm a great supporter of women's liberation. . . in aid of getting women to join the human race, not in aid of making any kind of feminine contribution" (Bellamy 133), it seems to me that her essential male-identifiedness precludes the possibility of such a program on any conscious level. On the contrary, her stance might lead her to view women in conventional and stereotypical roles.

Goshgarian himself seems uneasy with the idea of Murdoch as a feminist; after initially indicating that what he wants to do in his article is "call attention to some of [Murdoch's] basic feminist values, aims and attitudes" (519), he later on the same page talks of "Miss Murdoch's feminine analysis of the failures of love". He then drops the words "feminist" and "feminine", neither of which he defines, altogether, and proceeds to discuss Murdoch's male characters as "weak" because dependent on building up their ego through their view of women. This, too, contributes to his notion of Murdoch as a "feminist".

In his dissertation *From Fable to Flesh* Goshgarian maintains that in Murdoch's later novels there is "a *laudable* shift to a more humane tolerance toward male characters, a liberation in itself from the *dehydrating, sardonic contempt* exhibited throughout the first ten novels" (3; emphasis added). Being a feminist is interpreted as displaying intolerance towards male characters. In an interesting, perhaps not conscious, twist Goshgarian equates this supposed intolerance with novelistic ineptitude. After suggesting (see above 8-9) that men are to be blamed for the stereotyping of women,[25] Goshgarian goes on to maintain that the "evolution of her female characters from

[25] Goshgarian's assertion that men in Murdoch's fiction perceiving women "not as inferior animals, but as exalted beings" (*From Fable to Flesh* 2) strikes me as not quite accurate: many of Murdoch's females, especially the mistress figures, tend to be described rather like inferior animals characterized, for example, by their smell and the way in which they live cooped up as if in a cage or burrow (e.g. *The Sacred and Profane Love Machine* 52; *The Nice and the Good* 25; *The Philosopher's Pupil* 305-6).

fable to flesh" is paralleled by "Miss Murdoch's growing skill as a novelist" (4). Unable to decide whether he considers female stereotyping in Murdoch's novels a representation of cultural conventions exposed by Murdoch or artistic inability on her part, Goshgarian equates both the emergence of the female characters "from stereotypes of the early works" to "realistic presentations in which they are moral agents counterpoised with the Murdoch men" (3), and a greater tolerance toward male characters, with Murdoch's growth as a novelist. There is no indication that he considers Murdoch's representation of male characters a function of female stereotyping, or that the changes in her female characters might reflect socio-economic changes in the world outside the text and their effect on current stereotypes of women.

Cohan in "From Subtext to Dream Text: The Brutal Egoism of Iris Murdoch's Male Narrators" provides a more complex gender-based reading of Murdoch's use of male first person narrators than Goshgarian does. Finding that "Murdoch's preference 'to be male' is in many ways central to her art" (223) Cohan suggests:

> Her choice of male narrators allows for a playful act of male impersonation as an ironic commentary on the paradox of fiction writing. (223)

This "playful act", later described as "a confident, if teasing, assertion of negative capability", seems to engender in Cohan the desire to belittle; using words like "playful" and "teasing" is a means of reducing Murdoch to something of a "silly, frilly female", a character, in fact, quite close to some of her female creations such as Dora in *The Bell*. However, despite these implications Cohan provides some interesting comments on gender in Murdoch, noting, even if only in passing, that there are "sexist implications [in] her preferring the male over the female" and in "her identifying *him* with the human condition" (223).

Cohan's main argument is that Murdoch's first person male narrators use their narrations to impose form on their lived experience which is one of contingency.

> Sex is the great connection between the world of form, ruled by the male . . . and the world of contingency, ruled by the female. (226)

Cohan suggests that Murdoch's first person narrators are male because

First, as a narrator the male enacts the process of reconciling form (the art of telling) with contingency (the lived experience he is narrating), a problem Murdoch identifies with the male, since as a cultural figure he embodies the authority of form and yet, as a lover of women, he must either respond to the pressure of contingency - or lose his vitality. Second, as a narrator, the male cannot escape the egoism with which he tries to effect the

> compromise between form and contingency . . . each narrator allows Murdoch to satirize how the male's egoism affects the way he perceives woman in order to place a symbolic value on her. (227)

As Cohan puts it, "in this context woman is the subject matter the narrator is ordering," with love functioning as the guise for the male desire to exercise control.[26] With reference, in the main, to *A Severed Head* and *The Sea, The Sea*, Cohan gives an account of the predatory nature of some of Murdoch's male characters in relation to the women they love. He describes the brutality which these characters use when trying to impose form upon women's lives. Frequently, the men either assault and/or imprison the women in question.

Goshgarian and Cohan are the only male critics that I am aware of who have addressed the issue of gender in relation to Murdoch. Both do so by examining the male narrator figures; both reach the conclusion that from this narrator's viewpoint, as Goshgarian puts it,

> . . . the Murdoch woman embodies all that is "contingent, messy, boundless, infinitely particular" and unpredictable in life. She is the incarnation of the disturbing mysteries of life, a threat to "ordinariness,"[27] and a violent insult to his emotional stability and faith in a noncontingent world. (*From Fable to Flesh* 5)

[26] Adrienne Rich in "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" discusses how the notion of romantic love has been used to control women in patriarchal societies.

[27] Murdoch, of course, considers "ordinariness" to be characterized by precisely those attributes asigned to "the Murdoch woman" by Goshgarian (SBR 259-61).

This representation of women constitutes one of the culturally endorsed and entrenched ways of regarding females in Western society. It is a view which lacks all critical perspective on gender attribution; it suggests that the stereotyping of women prevalent in Western culture is reflected in Murdoch's fiction.

There are two extended studies by women on the issue of gender in Murdoch's work: Carol Seiler-Franklin's *Boulder-Pushers: Women in the Fiction of Margaret Drabble, Doris Lessing, and Iris Murdoch*, and Deborah Johnson's recent study *Iris Murdoch*. Seiler-Franklin makes her own biological sex the basis for her investigation of the female figures in her three writers' work: "Being a woman, I am particularly concerned with women and their condition. This is the primary reason for the present study." (13) Maintaining, in contradiction to Cohan, that "women writers today refuse to be forced to explore the world through men's eyes, neglecting their own feminine personalities" she goes on to ask, ". . . what help can female readers gain from novels they read?" (13), and then proceeds to analyse a series of female characters classified into groups of artists and intellectuals, "mere" housewives, women going mad, etc. Seiler-Franklin concludes that all these characters feel "that men do not take them seriously" because "women cannot accept themselves as women and this is the basic problem. Because they are afraid of their femininity, they are incapable of being men's equal partners." (203) For Seiler-Franklin "the huge problem of reconciling a female body with an intellectual mind is omnipresent" (204).[25]

One problem with Seiler-Franklin's study is that she starts by looking at the issue of gender from three different angles, those of the writer, the reader, and the characters in the text. Leaving the first two by the wayside, she then settles for looking at female characters alone in terms of how reflective they are of social reality without either drawing clear boundaries between fictitious characters and "the real world" or providing a theoretical framework for the positions she adopts. In consequence her study moves uneasily from one woman-centred position to another without being anchored in a way that makes clear the relationship between representation and reality.

[25] As this problem also informs Weil's position it seems surprising that Seiler-Franklin does not look at her work in relation to Murdoch's writing.

Johnson takes a different line: "I undertook the work with some misgivings, being particularly anxious to avoid what might be construed as a 'narrowly feminist' reading." (xi) One cannot help wondering (and these questions remain unresolved in the text) why she was "particularly anxious to avoid", who she assumes would "construe", and what she takes to be a "'narrowly feminist' reading". Johnson goes on to say: "I shall be experimenting with various theories of sexual difference, various possible answers to the question of what constitutes the 'feminine' in writing." (1) She begins her argument by looking at Murdoch's male narrators, the use of whom, she suggests, signals both evasion, "an ultimately false bid for the universality, the neutrality historically carried by the male voice" (12), and subversion, "undoing the repressive (patriarchal) structures encoded in language itself . . . a way of 'exposing through imitation'" (9). Asserting that "Iris Murdoch explicitly draws attention to the dialogue between her own offstage presence as female author and her male narrator who speaks front-of-stage" (52) through the narrative devices she employs, Johnson ultimately concludes - and here she resembles Seiler-Franklin's position:

> There remains an undeniable split in Iris Murdoch's writing, a split between cerebration and emotion, mind and body, philosophy and poetry, 'masculine' and 'feminine' spheres of experience and attainment. It reflects faithfully enough the divisions in our traditional Western culture. . . (112)

What these critical accounts on gender as an issue in Murdoch's writings have in common is that they point to the conventions governing gender that rule Murdoch's representation of female and male characters. The studies take for granted the attributions made (i.e. what constitutes the "typically" female and male). Johnson makes the point that "a study of Iris Murdoch's narrators should not involve a psychological study of the author" (3) but simultaneously feels compelled to point out that she has "chosen, with some hesitation, to refer to the author throughout as 'Iris Murdoch' rather than, more fashionably and impersonally, as 'Murdoch', which acknowledges the author as unquestionably major but not as specifically female" (xiv-xv). If the psychological dimension is to be avoided then biological sex as a source of interpretation, especially when loaded with cultural significances, ought not to be important. But

it is. Much of Johnson's study is devoted to sorting the masculine from the feminine, making meaningful distinctions between the author, a woman, and her male characters. It therefore becomes important to provide a theoretical framework that suggests explanations for the split discussed above.

Gender plays a role not merely at the level of character but at the level of conceptualization. This becomes evident in Murdoch's response to philosophical and literary traditions. As she started to publish theoretical texts before fictional ones I shall begin by detailing her account of linguistic analysis and existentialism, both of which she was initially attracted to, but which she rejected in favour of a Weilian position. Murdoch's essays of the 1950s, especially "The Existentialist Hero" (1950), "The Novelist as Metaphysician" (1950), "Nostalgia for the Particular" (1952), "Vision and Choice in Morality" (1956), and "Metaphysics and Ethics" (1957), as well as *Sartre: Romantic Realist* (1953) detail the reasons for her simultaneous rejection of linguistic analysis and existentialism.

As a moral philosopher Murdoch takes issue with linguistic analysis for abandoning "the mental event" (NP 243) as the basis for investigating morality which is, instead, examined by way of "sets of identifiable activities" (VCM 37) consisting of a behavioural and a linguistic component which are "(under the heading of behaviour) acts and choices, and (under the heading of language) choice-guiding words together with arguments which display the descriptive meaning of these words" (VCM 38). Murdoch maintains:

> We have got used to the idea that the region of personal 'experience' or 'consciousness' resembles the silence of the law in the *Leviathan*. Here, *anything* may go on, it doesn't matter what, so long as the public rules are not broken; and what goes on is of no interest except to the individual. (NP 243)

The basic reason for this development is, according to Murdoch, the desire of linguistic analysts to bestow on their discipline "the prestige and neutrality of logic" (VCM 33). This is, in part, a function of

regarding philosophy as a science (SOG 27).[29] Murdoch dissociates herself from such a view of philosophy:

> . . . what is at stake here is the liberation of morality, and of philosophy as a study of human nature, from the domination of science. . . Science can instruct morality at certain points and can change its direction, but it cannot contain morality, nor ergo moral philosophy. (SOG 27)

Science cannot contain morality because it cannot deal with that which is not accessible to empirical investigation, reason, or logic, i.e. "the inner life" such as thoughts and dreams. Murdoch insists:

> Such mental events are *there*, God sees them,[30] and they are just as compact and determinate as physical events, though possibly harder to describe. (NP 246)

Murdoch suggests that "mental events" are difficult to describe because of the nature of these events, and the nature of language. Of the former she says:

> . . . thoughts have, as it were, a life and dynamic of their own. They are not always, or not altogether, under our conscious control. They emerge unexpectedly, they become hazy or clear for no apparent reason. They display a sense of direction which may go beyond what the conscious mind can account for. (NP 249)

It is for this reason that a distinction has to be made between "the clearness of experiences" and "the exactness of concepts" (NP 255). What goes on inside the individual is "inexhaustibly fertile for subsequent comment" (NP 258); "what kind of exploration of my experience I choose to attend to" is a matter for the individual to decide upon *after* the event (NP 259). All verbal utterance is a retrospective superimposing of

[29] A parallel desire re literature is apparent in the work of Northrop Frye who writes, "Everyone who has seriously studied literature knows that the mental process involved is as coherent and progressive as the study of science. A precisely similar training of the mind takes place, and a similar sense of the unity of the subject is built up." (*Anatomy of Criticism* 10f)

[30] From a methodological viewpoint it is worth noting that Murdoch here does not produce a rational argument but instead affirms a belief.

a structure upon the inner event.

Language itself is bound up with context (SOG 32-3). It is "far more idiosyncratic than has been admitted" (SOG 33). Its contextuality undermines the notion that it is "impersonal and exact" (SOG 34) and therefore a more obvious object of a quasi-scientific investigation:

> The notion of privileged access to inner events has been held morally suspect because, among other things, it would separate people from 'the ordinary world of rational argument'. But the unavoidable contextual privacy of language already does this, and except at a very simple and conventional level of communication there is no such ordinary world. (SOG 33)

Murdoch defends the inner life, its privacy, subjectivity, non-availability to scientific enquiry, which she considers to be the basis of the moral self, against a view proposed by linguistic analysis that reads morality in terms of overt, publicly available, scientifically analysable behavioural acts and utterances as they occur at a given point in time. Where linguistic analysis locates moral difference at the level of difference in choice of verbal utterance or behavioural action Murdoch locates it at a point preceding either of these, at the level of "conceptual difference", a difference in *Weltanschauung* (VCM 51-2).

Murdoch recognizes the problems inherent in her defence of the "inner life" as significant for the self as a moral being. For one thing, the idea of a difference of inner disposition "is unpopular in so far as it makes impossible the reduction of ethics to logic" (VCM 43). Secondly, to the extent that such differences exist they are incompatible with the notion of "universal rules" concerning morality (VCM 43-6). As Murdoch says, "There are kinds of moral outlook which it seems pointless to crush at all costs into the universal rules formula" (VCM 46). She describes these outlooks, which she considers to be present in "certain idealist views, certain existentialist views, certain Catholic views" (VCM 47), as follows:

> I have in mind moral attitudes which emphasize the inexhaustible detail of the world, the endlessness of the task of understanding, the importance of not assuming that one has got individuals and situations "taped", the connection of

> knowledge with love and of spiritual insight with apprehension of the unique. (VCM 46)

A third problem is "that views which emphasize 'particularity' and 'inexhaustibility' will involve inability to describe and specify and hence breakdown of communication" (VCM 49). She counters this by saying that "language has limitations" (VCM 49), and that whilst striving to extend its boundaries, we must be prepared to accept its limitations.

Murdoch's plea concerning the importance for ethics of the subjective, the inner life, that which cannot necessarily be observed, charted, encapsulated in verbal expression or accessed by consciousness, the particularity and non-universalizability of individual experience, constitutes a contrast to linguistic analysis which can be read in terms of the difference between *the symbolic* and *the semiotic* as described in the work of the theoretician Julia Kristeva. The value of this work for the present study resides in the fact that Kristeva combines an analysis of different types of discourse with an analysis of gender formation. In her work *the semiotic* refers to utterance anterior to the acquisition of language when enunciation is governed by unconscious processes and instinctual drives, when it does not refer to an extrinsic signified object and therefore possesses a heterogeneity or indeterminacy in relation to meaning which detracts from the possibility of universalizing the significance of the utterance (Kristeva, *Desire* 132-6). It is repetitive and rhythmic rather than linear and logical, its meaning essentially private because not based on a shared system of communication. As *the semiotic* governs utterance at the point when the infant experiences the mother as an extension of self[31] it is "maternally connoted" (Kristeva, *Desire* 133). *The symbolic*, on the other hand, is associated with the acquisition of language, with consciousness as opposed to the unconscious, the understanding of the differentiation between sign and signified (i.e. it introduces the differentiation between subject and object, self and other); it is "induced and imposed by the social realm" (Kristeva, *Reader* 102), and operates "a system of verbal communication that is increasingly logical, simple, positive, and stripped of stylistic, rhythmic, 'poetic' ambiguities" (Kristeva, *Chinese*

[31] See Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering* 61-2.

Women 31). It signals the entry into a shared system of communication and public meaning. *The symbolic* is paternally connoted through the contemporaneity of the acquisition of language and the acquisition of a conscious awareness of the separate presence of the father who intrudes upon the dyadic undifferentiated relationship between mother and child.[32] Both *the semiotic* and *the symbolic* are present in the adult language user's utterances as dispositions which, depending on the kind of discourse engaged in, are dominant or suppressed:

> Language as a social practice necessarily presupposes these two dispositions, though combined in different ways to constitute *types of discourse*, types of signifying practices. Scientific discourse, for example aspiring to the status of metalanguage, tends to reduce as much as possible the semiotic component. On the contrary, the signifying economy of poetic language is specific in that the semiotic is not only a constraint as is the symbolic, but it tends to gain the upper hand at the expense of the thetic and predicative constraints of the ego's judging consciousness. (*Desire* 134)

There is an equivalence between Kristeva's sense of how scientific discourse constitutes itself, and Murdoch's sense of how linguistic analysis operates. By the same token, there is equivalence between what Kristeva describes as poetic discourse and what Murdoch wants to see reinstated in philosophy as an area of investigation. Kristeva's *symbolic* shares the attributes Murdoch discusses in relation to linguistic analysis, i.e. they are both predicated upon the social, logical, linear, a scientific model of enquiry, the rule of the word, and of men[33] whereas *the semiotic* and Murdoch's ethics privilege the unconscious (this meaning, in Murdoch's case, "the inner"), the private, the pre-linguistic, that which resists logic, public and shared meaning, the non-linear. Murdoch indicates the gulf between these two positions in the area of "meaning" by saying,

[32] Chodorow, 70-1.

[33] All linguistic analysts appear to be men.

> This movement [in philosophy away from "the inner life"] occasions a certain haunting sense of loss[34] which might be investigated further; a sense too of an unbridgeable gulf between the "meaning" which is investigated by linguistic analysis, and the "meaning" involved in poetry, or investigated by psychoanalysis, which seems inextricably linked with experience. (NP 243)

The difference alluded to here, mirrored by Kristeva's original investigation of subject positions in language which made use of psychoanalytic theory to illuminate changes in poetic language,[35] is precisely that of *the symbolic versus the semiotic*, of scientific versus poetic discourse,[36] of privileging the extrinsic, conscious and publicly observable over the intrinsic, privately experienced, and unconscious. Murdoch insists:

> Phenomena such as "thoughts" and "symbolic experiences"[37] must find their place too in any philosophical description of the mind. (NP 260)

Using Kristeva's work in this context is useful because it points to the gendered nature of the opposition set up by Murdoch: the distinction

[34] Alice Jardine in "Opaque Texts and Transparent Contexts" considers "loss", "loss of identity, loss of truth, legitimacy, knowledge, power - loss of control" (100) as the defining characteristic of modernity (the fathers of which are "Freud, Nietzsche, Marx" 100-1) and that which "the Western/White/Male all-too-Human subject" has to come to terms with. One could argue that Murdoch's male-identifiedness articulates itself through the adoption of the same position.

[35] The text in question is *Revolution in Poetic Language*.

[36] Compare this with Murdoch's view that "scientific language tries to be impersonal and exact and yet accessible for purposes of teamwork; and the degree of accessibility can be decided in relation to definite practical goals. Moral language which relates to a reality infinitely more complex and various than that of science is often unavoidably idiosyncratic and inaccessible." (SOG 34) Moral language here becomes a kind of *semiotic* utterance.

[37] Murdoch does not, of course, use "symbolic" in Kristeva's sense here.

she makes between linguistic analysis and her own brand of ethics amounts to the difference between an ethics based on a privileging of what is associated with the feminine versus one associated with the privileging of the masculine. This differentiation, as I shall show, operates in all of Murdoch's work, is, indeed, one of its characteristics.

To summarize: Murdoch rejects linguistic analysis because, considering philosophy a science, it investigates morality in terms of linguistic and behavioural choice rather than in terms of an "inner life". In fact, she considers science (associated with *the symbolic*, the masculine, that which forms the methodological basis of linguistic analysis) subordinate to arts (associated with *the semiotic*, the feminine, her own ethics):

> It is totally misleading to speak, for instance, of 'two cultures', one literary-humane and the other scientific, as if these two were of equal status. There is only one culture, of which science, so interesting and so dangerous, is now an important part. But the most essential and fundamental aspect of culture is the study of literature, since this is an education in how to picture and understand human situations.[38] We are men[39] and moral agents before we are scientists. . . (SOG 34)

Murdoch's rejection of existentialism, as I shall now go on to indicate, operates along somewhat different lines from that of linguistic analysis. According to Murdoch, existentialism provides us with an image of the self in the modern world, a world without God that is understood to be contingent. As Sartre puts it, "there is no sense in life *à priori*" (*Existentialism and Humanism* 54). Without an external *telos* or reference point each individual becomes the centre, "sees the meaning of the world as a function of the consciousness of the individual" (EH 523).[40] The

[38] This is what women writers, according to Jane Spencer, were supposed to be good at (*The Rise of the Woman Novelist* 20-2).

[39] It is worth noting that Murdoch always uses the term "men" in its generic sense even when discussing issues that directly concern *her*.

[40] Given this emphasis on "the consciousness of the individual", one can understand why Murdoch found at least some aspects of existentialism appealing.

self becomes the sole arbiter of value, competing against other selves and their values. All have to rely on their selves as sources of meaning as there is no external guarantor of the "correctness" of anyone's position (NM 476). Given this situation the individual can choose between two stances: courage and action, or giving in to despair and inaction. If he chooses the former he will find himself engaged in constant battle with other selves who also want to assert their values; choosing the latter will leave him in a state of *angoisse*. Either way he is essentially lonely; the "loss of an actual common background" (SRR 30), held together by an external source of value such as God, makes him a solipsistic being.

Under these circumstances there is the danger that the individual will cope with his understanding of the world as contingent by indulging in a consoling self-deception which will fulfil his yearning "for logical necessity in the order of the world". Such self-deception constitutes what Sartre calls "mauvaise foi". What saves the existentialist from falling prey to it is his major virtue: sincerity, "remembering that we are surrounded by other free beings" (EH 523), freedom here referring to "the mobility of consciousness, that is our ability to reflect, to dispel an emotional condition, to withdraw from absorption in the world, to set things at a distance" (SRR 42-3). This freedom is obtained through the continual preoccupation with the self in the attempt to liberate it from insincerity and illusion, i.e. "mauvaise foi". According to Murdoch, in Sartre's representation of the world, value - including moral value - is created through a process that starts with reflection followed by choosing an action; it is through the choices the individual makes[41] that he confers meaning on the world around him.

Murdoch appreciates Sartre's "last ditch attachment to the value of the individual" (69) but she rejects his notion of "the *sovereignty* of the individual consciousness" [emphasis added], his view that "you are free, therefore choose - that is to say, invent. No rule of general morality can show you what you ought to do" (*Existentialism and Humanism* 38). Equally, she rejects the "imaginative solipsism" of

[41] Murdoch, of course, rejects linguistic analysis for precisely the same reason: the emphasis on moments of choice.

Sartre's individual which she describes as a function of the alienation of the self from his environment. She criticises Sartre's inability to see emotion as a creative force,[42] and his view of the imagination as a tool of self-deception or *mauvaise foi*. She agrees that, given the state of contemporary society, a "reflective revolt" is necessary and endorses Sartre's rejection of "his own society with its inheritance of meanings" but does not think that a perpetual preoccupation with the self is the answer. Rather:

> . . . the only way to regenerate the imagining spirit is to join it to the world of action. (SRR 67)

In Sartrean terms the world is peopled by selves expressing their consciousnesses and struggling for dominance in the sincere belief that their values are valuable. His "inter-subjectivity" (*Existentialism and Humanism* 45) marks a competitive rather than a co-operative stance; the individual, responsible not only for himself but "for all men" (ibid. 29), chooses both for himself and mankind. In this context "being for others" or *être-pour-autrui*, the consciousness of how others perceive us, presents the temptation to succumb to the image the other has of one, thus allowing that other to dominate one:

> Our consciousness of how other people label us . . . and how they see us, is often very acute. This concern is our *être-pour-autrui* . . .
>
> . . . To see ourselves through the eyes of another is to see ourselves suddenly fixed, opaque, complete; and we may well be tempted to accept such a valuation as our own, as a relief from the apparent emptiness of self-examination. On the other hand if we disown that which we apprehend the other as seeing, the experience may be distressing or maddening. (SRR 59)

The existentialist *hero* will fight such being fixed by another. In the Sartrean world of continual competition for supremacy there is no possibility of an equilibrium: to allow another consciousness space would mean to admit the validity of its values and thereby undermine one's own. Doubting others means not having to doubt oneself. Genevieve Lloyd in *The Man of Reason: 'Male' and 'Female' in Western Philosophy*

[42] See Sartre, *Sketch for a Theory of the Emotions*, esp. 77-91.

sums up this argument as follows:

> The power struggle becomes a struggle between competing 'looks'[43] . Only one of the antagonists . . . can be a looker; the other must be looked-at. If the looker is a 'subject', the looked-at turns into an 'object' . . . What I am aware of through that experience is not myself as a subjective being, but rather an objectified self - the 'self-for-others'. There is for Sartre no possibility of reciprocal recognition between transcendent selves. (94)
>
> . . . it is this experience which yields the Sartrean other. 'The Other is in Principle the One that looks at me.' . . . The look of the other fixes my possibilities. By denying my transcendence, it denies my freedom . . . This is the state of slave consciousness . . . (94)
>
> My very existence as a self-conscious being, for Sartre, depends not just on the fact of the other's recognition, but on what kind of self the other recognizes me as being: 'As I appear to the Other, so I am.' (95)

Lloyd, in analogy to de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* (16-8), translates this confrontation into the dynamic governing relationships between women and men:

> . . . with respect to relations between the sexes, one sex is, as it were, permanently in the privileged role of looker; the other is always looked-at[44] . . . Women have themselves submitted to constitute a permanent Other. (96)
>
> The condition of being female is interpreted . . . as a permanent state of Sartrean 'bad faith', in which women connive at being turned into objects, denying their transcendence. (97)

Sartrean philosophy, as interpreted here, puts a very negative slant on women's position in Western culture; to accept such a view would, indeed, be "distressing", and the way forward, if one is not actively

[43] For both Murdoch and Weil a vocabulary of vision is of great importance; Murdoch's moral philosophy is based on this (see SOG 3, 31, 33, 37, 40-3), and it is of similar importance to Weil (see Van Herik, "Looking, Eating, and Waiting in Simone Weil").

[44] John Berger discusses this phenomenon in relation to art in *Ways of Seeing* 45-7.

going to combat such a view from within the philosophy, has to be to reject it. Which is what Murdoch did. If one looks at the last three chapters of *Sartre: Romantic Realist* it becomes clear that Murdoch's ultimate rejection of Sartre's philosophy results from its failure to express her experience of the world - her experience of it *as a woman*. Positing the individual as at the centre of things, as free to make choices, as subject and agent in his world, is based on a vision of the world that excludes women. Through her rejection of existentialism[45] Murdoch defies a philosophy which takes the male, and male experience of the world, as norm.

This becomes even more obvious when one looks at Murdoch's responses to Sartre as a novelist. In *Sartre: Romantic Realist* she accuses him of treating the novel as "a powerful weapon" (9), using it as an "influential tool" to serve his "philosophical self-consciousness", thus "displaying to us . . . the structure of his own thought" (17). In other words, what the reader is given by Sartre is the representation of Sartre's reflecting consciousness. Further,

> What Sartre requires from art is analysis, the setting of the world in order, the reduction to the intelligible . . . (SRR 75)

Sartre's interest in issues rather than people is, according to Murdoch, "not appropriate for a novelist". His "impatience, which is fatal to a novelist proper, with the *stuff* of human life", marked by the failure to apprehend "the absurd irreducible uniqueness of people and their relations with each other", ultimately prevents Sartre from writing a great novel (75).

Murdoch pits "the *stuff* of human life" against Sartre's didacticism, drawing a distinction between "proper" novel writing and philosophizing which is echoed in an interview of hers with Magee, tellingly entitled "Iris Murdoch on *natural novelists* and *unnatural philosophers*" [emphasis added]. There she characterizes philosophy as "more like a science", "unnatural", intended to "clarify", attracting minds that "stick to problems", relating to "deep structures of belief and knowledge". It "is argument", a "narrowly intellectual activity", trying to "exclude

[45] In her interview with William Slaymaker Murdoch firmly denied being an existentialist (425-6).

emotional appeal". Philosophers, Murdoch says, have tended to "be polemical about art in a rather fruitless way", regarding it as "a minor issue". In contrast to philosophy, novel writing is "often mystification", the novel "entertains", is "for fun", is "to do partly with playing roles. It is to do with masks and roles and pretending and imagining. In this sense, I think literature is very natural; it is very close to ordinary life." (533) It is about "defeating the formlessness of the world", and as such not impersonal.

The dichotomy between writing novels and writing philosophy, aligning the former to ordinary life, emotionality, mystification, pretence, and nature, and the latter to the intellect, clarity, structure, "unnaturalness" considered synonymous with civilization, argument, and absence of emotion,[46] comes very close to ideas about gender divisions as projected perhaps most sharply in Victorian writings such as Ruskin's "Of Queens' Gardens" where women and men are represented as inhabiting complementary spheres.[47] Within the above conventions of gender divisions philosophy would be associated with the masculine and novel writing with the feminine. Interestingly enough, Murdoch regards philosophy and novel writing as complementary (Rose 9) but at the same time finds philosophy very alien. Ultimately she gave it up. In her view

> Philosophy is a counter-natural activity that goes against the bent of the human mind whereas art goes with the bent of the human mind. There's a myth in Plato about the world being pushed one way by God for a certain period, then God lets go and it rolls back in a natural way. I feel that philosophy is pushing the cosmos in a direction which is unnatural to it, and then when you let go you're back in art and you heave a sigh of relief and you're flowing with the current and you're careering down the river. (Blow 20)

The equation between philosophy and God points by analogy to the manner in which the male determines the female, the way in which

[46] For Murdoch, philosophy is clearly associated with what Kristeva describes as *the symbolic order*.

[47] See Showalter, "Feminist Criticism in The Wilderness" 28-9.

philosophy/God/the male looker manipulates and fixes the world/the cosmos/the female looked-at. Given Murdoch's gendered attitude towards philosophy and novel writing, and given the distinctions she makes between Sartre's didactic form of writing and her notion of the "proper novelist", Sartre's failure - from her viewpoint - as a novelist is at least in part a function of his taking the male as norm. Her "proper novelist" is wedded to life and does not use his (in this case one ought really to say "her") writing for the expression of some abstract ideal or principle: "The novelist has had his eye fixed on what we do, and not on what we ought to do or must be presumed to do." (SRR 8) S/he is free from rationalism - and, of course, rationalism, the domain of reason, has tended to be considered male territory.[48] Against Sartre, the writer of masculine intent, Murdoch posits and favours the *implicit understanding*, the *blessed* freedom from rationalism, the *anticipation of the philosophers' discoveries* (SRR 8; emphasis added). Value for Murdoch lies in the immersion in life, in its acceptance rather than its manipulation. This she shares with Weil.[49]

To summarize: Murdoch rejects linguistic analysis because it reduces morality to those phenomena that can be empirically investigated and therefore ignores "the inner life"; she rejects existentialism because it projects a male-centred view of an inter-subjective world which emphasizes action, responsibility, free will, choice, agency all of which women have shared in only marginally, if at all. Murdoch's criticism is partly based on her assertion that the individual, an "obscure system of energy" (SOG 54), needs to be presented with a "technique for exploring and controlling [her or his] own spiritual energy" (SBR 255) which neither linguistic analysis nor existentialism provide.

In the light of Murdoch's demand that a technique for dealing with "spiritual energy" ought to be found and represented it is perhaps not

[48] See McMillan ch. 1 (1-15), Grimshaw 38-49, or Lloyd 2-9.

[49] See FLN 364.

surprising that in her critique of Romanticism[50] she turns to philosophers from the period, especially Immanuel Kant[51] and G. W. F. Hegel rather than to poets or novelists. Murdoch, by her own admission, uses the term "Romantic" in a "somewhat narrow sense" (SBR 257), generally speaking pejoratively, in order to distance herself from what the term connotes for her. Romantic writing, epitomized for Murdoch in the work of Dostoevsky, Melville, Emily Brontë, and Hawthorne, "give[s] the impression of externalizing a personal conflict in a tightly conceived self-contained myth" (SBR 258). Sir Walter Scott and Jane Austen, two writers Murdoch mentions who are traditionally considered part of the Romantic period if one takes this period to cover 1789-1830 (Marilyn Butler, *Romantics, Rebels, and Reactionaries* 8), Murdoch considers to be "un-Romantic" (SBR 257-8) because they portray a range of characters who do not seem to be expressive of the writer's self.[52] Murdoch thus does not use the term "Romantic" to refer to the writing of a particular historical period but to writing which exhibits the "cult of personality" (SBR 261) or self.

Murdoch's starting-point for her attack on Romanticism is Kant's theory of art as expressed in his *Critique of Judgement*. There he distinguishes between the appreciation of beauty and the experience of sublimity. Beauty, for Kant, is a matter of form (69) and independent of any interest (50). While beholding beauty "the mind is in *restful* contemplation, and [remains] in this state" (94). Beauty occasions immediate pleasure (224), appeals to the imagination and to understanding (58) which are "in harmony in the appreciation of a

[50] For discussions of Murdoch's relationship to Romanticism see Peter Conradi, *Iris Murdoch: The Saint and the Artist* 272-4; Daniel Majdiak, "Romanticism and the Aesthetics of Iris Murdoch"; Margaret Scanlan, "The Machinery of Pain: Romantic Suffering in Three Works of Iris Murdoch"; Zoreha T. Sullivan, "Iris Murdoch's Self-Conscious Gothicism".

[51] Murdoch considers Kant (and Plato) her "personal gods" (Haffenden 199).

[52] Butler gives an indication of the actual range of Romantic fiction and prose (*Romantics, Rebels, and Reactionaries* 155-77).

sensuous object" (SG 43). What constitutes the beautiful, although *subjectively* experienced (*Critique of Judgement* 75), transcends the subject by virtue of the demand inherent in the judgement of something as beautiful that this judgement be "deemed valid for everyone" (56). Beauty is associated with quality (91). "Emotion is quite foreign to beauty" (68). Beauty is "the symbol of the morally good" (223). It does not, for Kant, result in moral activity.

In contrast, "true sublimity must be sought only in the mind of the judging Subject" (104):

> . . . it is the disposition of soul evoked by a particular representation engaging the attention of reflective judgement, and not the Object, that is to be called sublime. (98)

Feelings of sublimity are occasioned by *quantity* (91), limitlessness (90), formlessness (93). Nature "in its chaos, or in its wildest and most irregular disorder and desolation, provided it gives signs of magnitude and power" (92), "shapeless mountain masses towering one above the other in wild disorder, with their pyramids of ice, or. . . the dark tempestous ocean" (104) excite the "double mode of representing an Object as sublime", i.e. mathematically and dynamically (94). The fact that the vastness of such natural objects cannot be comprehended by the imagination striving to envisage them in their totality constitutes the mathematically sublime (102). This failure, displeasing though it is, gives rise to a particular kind of self-consciousness; it creates an awareness in the beholder of "a faculty of mind transcending every standard of sense" (102):

> Therefore the feeling of the sublime in nature is respect for our own vocation, which we attribute to an Object of nature by a certain subreption (substitution of a respect for the Object in place of one for the idea of humanity in our own self - the Subject); and this feeling renders, as it were, intuitable the supremacy of our cognitive faculties on the rational side over the greatest faculty of sensibility. (106)

As "human nature does not of its own proper motion accord with the good, but only by virtue of the dominion which reason exercises over sensibility" (124) it is only from the experience of sublimity that moral activity can result rather than through beholding the beautiful.

Murdoch takes issue with Kant for separating art from morals through the distinction between the beautiful and the sublime. She derides Kant's view that the sublime is "only occasioned by natural objects"[53] because such a limitation allows for moral activity only *vis-à-vis* the "non-historical, non-social". Whereas, in her view,

> What stuns us into a realization of our supersensible destiny is not, as Kant imagined, the formlessness of nature, but rather its unutterable particularity; and most particular and individual of all natural things is the mind of man. (SG 51-2)

Murdoch wants to retain the notion of the sublime as occasioned by beholding things outside the self but wants to *extend* what can give rise to such feelings beyond nature to art objects, people, the detail of everyday existence. She rejects Kant's view of the moral individual as being rational, self-sufficient (*Critique of Judgement* 129), and admiring of self.

Comparing Kant's theory of art with Hegel's theory of tragedy, Murdoch comes to the conclusion that although Hegel "makes social and historical and concrete what Kant offered as abstract, non-historical, etc." (SG 49) the individual is still portrayed as alone in the universe:

> There is only one being in the Hegelian universe, the whole which cannot allow anything outside itself and which struggles to realize all that is apparently other. This is Hegel's gift to the Romantic movement, and one from whose effects we have not yet recovered. (SBR 250)

Given Murdoch's criticism of Romanticism for presenting the individual as an isolated being it is not surprising that she praises "the great nineteenth century novel" because to the writers who for her epitomize that novel (Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, George Eliot, Henry James, and Leo Tolstoy[54]) "society is real and the human soul is pretty

[53] As she writes in "The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited", "Who, one might say, cares what sort of emotion Kant experienced in the Alps?" (250)

[54] Murdoch refers to these writers on numerous occasions including the following interviews: Biles 121, Bryden 434, Caen 80-1, Rose 11, as well as in the articles: SBR 257, SG 48, TSEM 158.

solid too: the mind, the personality are continuous and self-evident realities" (EM 169).

> There is in these novels a plurality of real persons more or less naturalistically presented in a large social scene, and representing mutually independent centres of significance which are those of real individuals. (SBR 257)

"The great stays of the nineteenth century", "religion, reason, and work" (EM 170), are presented by Murdoch almost like a holy trinity.[55] She maintains that in the nineteenth century there was a clear division between the world of politics and the world of morals (EM 170) which the advance of technology has broken down. In contrast to the isolated Romantic individual, characters in the nineteenth century novel are presented as socially and historically imbricated, inhabiting "a house fit for free characters to live in" (SBR 271).

Murdoch's "great nineteenth century novel" forms a striking contrast to the Symbolists, especially as represented by the figure of T. S. Eliot. Against a background of "God, Reason, Society, Improvement and the Soul . . . being quietly wheeled off" (EM 172-3) and "the deep confidence . . . gone" (EM 173),[56] a preoccupation with form, the artist's "temptation" and "consolation" (SG 55), takes over. A fear, familiar from Murdoch's representation of Romanticism, of "the real existing modern world, full of real messy modern persons, with individual messy opinions of their own" (SBR 260), coupled with a sense of the loss of a unified world (TSEM 155), a dislike for "untidy lives" (TSEM 158), and a sense that one needs to understand one's own limitations (TSEM 154), all lead Eliot to a rejection of "the 'stuff' of our liberal world" (TSEM 158), a continual concern with the referential character of words (TSEM 156),

[55] She says of them, "What a wonderful trio, and how remote they seem now." (EM 170) In *The Time of the Angels* Eugene Peshkov's icon of "the Trinity represented as angels" projects a trio seen in a rather similar way, "They knew that all was not well with their creation. Perhaps they felt that they themselves were drifting quietly away from it." (53)

[56] This is what W. B. Yeats expresses in "The Second Coming" when he says, "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;. . ." (*Michael Robartes and the Dancer* 19)

and with categorical precision (TSEM 156). This he shares with the Symbolists:

> What they wanted were small, clean, resonant, and self-contained things of which the image or symbol was the type. (SBR 259)

"Art was 'not to mean, but to be'" (SBR 259). Instead of "history, real beings, and real change, whatever is contingent, messy, boundless, infinitely particular, and endlessly still to be explained" (SBR 260) the Symbolists, according to Murdoch, manifest a preoccupation with language, "the thing", "the institution", or "the dogma" (SBR 261). In this context

> One might say of the Symbol that it is an analogon of an individual, but not a real individual. It has the uniqueness and separateness of an individual, but whereas the real individual is boundless and not totally definable, the symbol is known intuitively to be self-contained: it is a making sensible of the idea of individuality under the form of necessity, its contingency purged away. (SBR 260)

And whilst maintaining that "the invention of . . . symbols is a part of our ordinary, literary activity as human beings" (Caen 77) Murdoch suggests that the problem with Eliot is that he "does *not* say that what we should attend to outside ourselves is other persons" (SBR 264). Murdoch rejects the representation of the individual as a solitary being (her criticism of Romanticism and of existentialism), the notion that s/he is moved to moral activity solely by contemplating Nature, and a preoccupation with form (her criticism of symbolism).

Murdoch's over-riding concern with the individual as a moral being, and her belief that the individual's state of mind determines her or his perception of the world at large, informs her own fiction. The most important thing which the novel can reveal is "that other people exist" (SBR 267): "we judge the greatest novelists by the quality of their awareness of others" and "the novel has got to face the special problem of the individual *within* the work" (SBR 266).

She considers herself a "realistic novelist":

> . . . what I'm trying to do is to imitate nature and hold the mirror up to the world and do those things which are in fact so

> frightfully difficult to do, to create characters who are like real people. (Caen 74)

The realism Murdoch refers to is not "photographic naturalism" (FS 84); she is, in fact, not interested in material reality *per se* which she takes for granted. Rather, it has to do with a particular attitude, a "non-sentimental, non-meanly-personal imaginative grasp of the subject matter" (FS 84), and as such with morality.

Morality, Murdoch maintains, is "a form of realism" (SOG 59) in that it is about being realistic about other people rather than fantasizing about them (SOG 65-6). Realism in this sense constitutes "a moral achievement": it amounts to the "ability to perceive reality" which means understanding "the separateness and differentness of other people" (SOG 66). It is precisely this which Murdoch refers to when she calls herself a "realistic novelist".

Although Murdoch criticizes Romantic philosophers for their portrayal of the self as rational, agentic, and isolated, she shares with Romantic writers such as Coleridge, de Quincey, Hogg, Keats, and Wordsworth an interest in individual consciousness and how it operates. In Romantic fiction, especially the Gothic variety such as Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* or Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*, this preoccupation is expressed through the representation of "problems of *consciousness*, of vision and perception" (Jackson 51). These can be associated with dreams, *doppelgängers*, *trompe l'oeil* effects, mistaken identities, etc., all of which are present in Murdoch's fiction. They reflect an interest in "'character' dispersal and fragmentation" (Jackson 86) which is an aspect of the destabilized sense of self evident during the Romantic period. This destabilization surfaces in descriptions of sightings, material (in the "real", empirically observable world) and immaterial (in dreams and visions), of the self or an ideal other that can be interpreted as an externalization of the self.[57] Examples of this phenomenon in Murdoch's fiction are Michael's dream in *The Bell* (79-80) and Harry's dream about his father in *The Good Apprentice* (253). Other

[57] Such sightings are described in chapters one and five of *The Castle of Otranto*, for example, and parodied at the beginning of chapter ten of *Nightmare Abbey*.

types of character dispersal include the feeling of inhabiting different and discrete roles, an interest in siblings and twins,[58] a sense of others being like oneself but different,[59] or characters being split into a good and a bad self.[60] Mistaken identities in Murdoch's work frequently centre on the sexual identity of characters.[61]

The tenuous relationship with empirical reality which these games with identity portray foregrounds "the impossibility of definite interpretation or vision" (Jackson 49). But where in Romantic fiction such destabilization of meaning may remain unresolved (as in Hogg's *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*) so that the reader is left in a state of hesitation concerning the interpretation of the narrated events (Jackson 26-9), Murdoch refutes such a non-thetic stance by returning the reader to a "normal"/normative world in which the "problems of consciousness" are explained as problems of perception, the result of egotistic fantasies. The "inexhaustibility of the world and

[58] Murdoch has said, "The point about twins. . . and siblings, which is important perhaps just in a minor sense. I am an only child, and this may affect my interest in brothers and sisters; and I notice that Sartre, in *Les Mots*, says the same thing. He says that he, as an only child, has also had this great fascination with twins - the lost, other person whom one is looking for" (Caen 77) There are numerous siblings in Murdoch's fiction: e.g. Annette and Nicholas Cockeyne in *The Flight from the Enchanter*, Donald and Felicity in *The Sandcastle*, David and Luca in *The Sacred and Profane Love Machine*.

[59] This is especially the case with brothers in Murdoch's fiction, e.g. the Lusiewicz brothers in *The Flight from the Enchanter*, Otto and Edmund in *The Italian Girl*, Henry and Cato, Marcus and Carel in *The Time of the Angels*, Nigel and Will in *Bruno's Dream*. Murdoch tends not to portray sibling relations *between sisters*. The only notable exception, Bettina and Ilona in *The Good Apprentice* are notable because, unlike the brothers, they are not shown *interacting*.

[60] The most obvious examples are Julius and Tallis in *A Fairly Honourable Defeat*, and Misha Fox and Calvin Blick in *The Flight from the Enchanter*.

[61] Both Biscuit and Christopher in *A Word Child* are presented as sex-indeterminate so that Hilary mistakes them as a man/a woman respectively. Pearson in *The Black Prince* mistakes Julian for a young man.

the individual" rather than something *uncanny*[62] needing a supernatural or psychological explanation is offered as a solution to the transgressions of the stable boundaries of identities within the text. The *uncanny* thus remains explainable, and therefore, ultimately, unthreatening.

The self in Murdoch's fiction is a fixed entity:

> Man is not a combination of an impersonal rational thinker and a personal will. He is a *unified being* who sees, and who desires in accordance with what he sees, and who has some continual slight control over the direction and focus of his vision. (SOG 40; emphasis added)

Murdoch's preoccupation with self does not take the form of wanting to "parade" (Schenk 135) it, for the purposes either of self-abasement or self-aggrandizement, as is the case with certain Romantic writers such as Byron[63], but rather has the function of revealing the delusion any individual suffers from who sees the self as central:

> Self is as hard to see justly as other things, and when clear vision has been achieved, self is a correspondingly smaller and less interesting object. (SOG 67-8)

Murdoch's self-obsessed characters[64], who begin by interpreting everything in terms of their own needs, gradually, even if only temporarily, learn that the world has no pattern, and that other selves with equally justifiable claims exist. Murdoch's preoccupation with "the inner life" is intended to reveal what the self is "really" like (the mimetic project) at the same time as offering instruction concerning the

[62] Freud discusses this notion in "The Uncanny" (*Art and Literature* 339-75).

[63] See H. G. Schenk, "The Cult of the Ego" (*The Mind of the European Romantics* 125-51).

[64] Examples are Jake in *Under the Net*, Edmund in *The Italian*, Blaise in *The Sacred and Profane Love Machine*, Edward in *The Good Apprentice*.

development of a particular moral attitude.[65]

Such instruction is offered to the reader both through the plots of Murdoch's novels and through the narrative strategies she employs. The lesson to be learnt is that the essential characteristic of the world and individuals is unpredictability. Murdoch "teaches" this to her readers by undercutting their expectations. Not all her novels drive towards closure, for example.[66] Nor is everything that occurs given a rational explanation.[67] Alternative viewpoints are presented and the reader has to decide which is the appropriate one.[68] In other words, the reader is not allowed a passive consumption of the text but is activated; her or his authority as an arbiter of given narrative situations is invoked and then destabilized, thus revealing his/her preconceptions concerning narrative development and calling them into question.[69] Such destabilization of authority is also effected through the use of multiple narratives, limited viewpoints such as that of a first person narrator, or a third person narrator who is "homodiegetic" (Rimmon-Kenan 95), i.e. participates in the events of the story. The

[65] Murdoch for this reason maintains that "art is far and away the most educational thing we have" (FS 86); however, because "the statements made by art escape into the free ambiguity of human life" (FS 87) its educative effect cannot be controlled.

[66] The outcomes of *The Book and the Brotherhood*, *The Sea, The Sea*, and *A Severed Head* are indeterminate in that they do not project a "guaranteed future path".

[67] The recurrent appearance of the gypsy in *The Sandcastle* is never explained, nor the sea monster Charles observes in *The Sea, The Sea*.

[68] This is especially poignant in the case of the multiple endings of *The Black Prince* where, among other things, the nature of the editor, Loxias, is never revealed.

[69] Elizabeth W. Harris discusses how reader expectation can be undercut through narrative structure in "Duplication and Duplicity: James Hogg's *Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*".

"extra-diegetic" narrator (third person, omniscient),[70] familiar from the fiction of the mid-eighteenth and nineteenth century (e.g. Henry Fielding, Eliza Haywood, Jane Austen, George Eliot), who maintains a dialogue with the reader over the heads of his or her characters, comfortable in the assumption that s/he and the reader share a sense of reality and values which transcend the individual, has become an impossibility in an age in which reality is no longer regarded as "a given whole" (AD 20). What Murdoch says *à propos* of novel writing in the twentieth century is true of her own work as much as of certain Romantic writers such as Hogg and Mary Shelley: "[The author] won't, now, describe his characters from the outside; he will describe them from consciousness. . ." (Magee 535).

In Gothic fiction (e.g. Ann Radcliffe's *The Italian*) the notion of a unified self is questioned because:

> Its images [which] project an evil or disturbing environment, and though no specific moral need be pointed concerning the corruption of the present order or the desirability of rejecting authority, the subliminal frame of reference is felt to be a breakdown of control, both in the psyche and the state.[71] (Butler 157)

Murdoch portrays such a breakdown of control in the psyche in novels such as *The Unicorn* and *The Sea, The Sea* the plots of which bear a strong resemblence to what Butler has called "the commonest of all plots of the eighteenth century Gothic novel" involving

> . . . a frail protagonist in terrible danger. She (more commonly than he) is placed in a hostile, threatening, mysterious environment, usually so prodigiously large that it dwarfs her;

[70] The narrator who "is omniscient and has absolute authority. . . discourages reader participation" (Jackson 33).

[71] Butler comments on Shakespeare entering "his golden age in the theatre" (21) in the Romantic period. among other things his plays, of course, deal with the (temporary) breakdown of control in the psyche (e.g. *Hamlet*) and the state (e.g. *The Tempest*, *Lear*, etc.). One similarity between the Romantics and Murdoch is the pronounced interest in Shakespeare.

she is made prisoner; she is threatened by individuals who should protect her, parents and parent-figures.[72] (Butler 29)

Murdoch's novels also contain frequent descriptions of "Gothic aspects of nature" (SG 49) such as moors, mountain ranges, swirling rivers and waterfalls, the sea, atmospheric settings in fog. Although Murdoch has said that "as a would-be realist" she "would not like to be labelled as a Gothic writer" (Caen 85), she accepts that her depiction of London[73] can be considered Gothic, "a sort of Piranesi London" (Caen 85).

Murdoch shares with certain Romantic writers, especially those concerned with the workings of the imagination, and with writers of Gothic fiction, a preoccupation with individual consciousness, the aspect of self which defies scientific investigation[74] and is traditionally female 'territory'.[75] This, I shall now go on to suggest, is one of the reasons why she finds it difficult to create separate characters who are different from herself. Nonetheless, the kind of novel she most wishes to write is the novel described by Mikhail Bakhtin as *polyphonic*:

> The essence of polyphony lies . . . in the fact that the voices remain independent and, as such, are combined in a unity of a higher order than in homophony. (21)

The democratizing principle underlying polyphony, "to affirm someone else's "I" not as an object but as another subject" (14), is one - in theory - shared by Murdoch. However, as she has pointed out, it is extremely difficult to "create a real character who is not oneself" (SBR 269).

[72] One of the few men who ever gets imprisoned is Simon in *a Fairly Honourable Defeat*, and what is noticeable about him is that he is the effeminate partner in a homosexual relationship.

[73] Such descriptions of London occur in *Bruno's Dream*, *Nuns and Soldiers*, *The Flight from the Enchanter*, and *Under the Net*.

[74] Keller in "Feminism and Science" discusses the notion of science as a masculine domain (esp. 114-7).

[75] See Foster 1-3, Jehlen 210, Taylor Mill 13.

To understand why this kind of creation is difficult for Murdoch it has to be remembered that what Murdoch admires about the nineteenth century novel is its portrayal of the individual *as part of society*, that is as having a public and a private self. These two aspects of the self certainly co-exist in the nineteenth century novel, and where one predominates over the other, some reason is implicitly or explicitly offered. In Jane Austen's novels, for example, where the private and domestic dominates, this is presented as a function of the kind of individual portrayed: middle and upper-middle class women in predominantly rural or small town settings who would have led an essentially private life centering on the home. Austen's representation of these women's lives coincides with the reader's notion of what their lives might have been like. In other words, there is a congruity between the author's representation and the reader's expectation.

Where the focus is on a wider range of social classes, as in some of the novels of Sir Walter Scott, Dickens, or George Eliot, for example, difference in class background is, among other things, expressed through a differential use of language. Again, this constitutes a coincidence between authorial representation and reader expectation that people from different class backgrounds will use language in a different way both in terms of what they express and how they express it.

Where nineteenth century novels focus on representations of the individual's life within a community, commonly a small town, community life is given space: Bulstrode's Machiavellianism in *Middlemarch* and the electioneering in Harriet Martineau's *Deerbrook*, for example, are portrayed as part of the individual's public self which is also the self in society. In the same way, the working lives of individuals such as Mrs. Poyser's running of the dairy in *Adam Bede* or Tess's work on the farm in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* are sketched in such a way as to give the reader the sense of a lived reality where the public and professional self occupies the space one would expect it to have "in the world outside" the text. This is, in part, what makes the characters in the nineteenth century novel seem like "real" people, existing independently from their author (SBR 257) as Murdoch describes it. Implicit in this is not just the notion that characters have several roles (as private and public selves) but also that their relationships

with other people operate along a continuum of degrees of intimacy: they will have very close relationships with some people, know others only superficially and in specific contexts, and others still hardly at all.

But the world of Murdoch's novels looks rather different. The collapse of the discrete and complementary spheres of the private and the public which govern the nineteenth century novel into a single overlapping one where the personal is the political[76] finds only a very limited expression here; rather, Murdoch has dealt with this development by shutting out the public arena in favour of private scenarios. This is particularly problematic in her novels because they centre on the urban professional middle class in contemporary Britain, much of whose time is, of course, spent working or doing work-related activities. Murdoch's male characters are frequently civil servants,[77] doing office jobs,[78] schoolmasters, priests, or psychoanalysts. All these jobs are extremely work-intensive, demanding more than a nine-to-five attendence; yet, even if we "encounter" these characters in their place of work[79] we get no sense of their professional selves: what they do or think in relation to their work is simply not represented. Their relations to others, even at work, are virtually always on the level of the private,[80] and all tend to

[76] For a discussion of the problematic of the personal being the political see Waugh 36-7.

[77] Examples range from John Rainsborough in *The Flight from the Enchanter* to Octavio Gray in *The Nice and the Good*, and Hilary in *A Word Child*.

[78] This is work Murdoch is familiar with having been a civil servant herself for a time (1942-4), working for the Treasury.

[79] This happens with most of Murdoch's working males such as Mor in *The Sandcastle*, but is particularly pronouned in *The Nice and the Good* and in *A Word Child*.

[80] This makes quite a difference to a more recent trend, especially in films like *Broadcast News* but also in novels such as Doris Lessing's *The Diaries of Jane Somers* which pays close attention to the individual's relation to her or his work rather than simply using the work situation as a backdrop for the representation of private relations.

be of a rather similar degree of intensity. This may be a function of Murdoch's ideal of writing a novel which centres on "peripheral characters", which is "more scattered" in its representation of character (Caen 81). Such a democratizing move, however, denies what is probably the experience of the reader, namely, that relationships with certain individuals (parents, partners, friends, children) occupy a more significant part of one's life and perception than others; people are not all equally important to us. It follows that both the almost complete privatization of the individual, and the lack of differentiation in terms of degree of intimacy of relationships in Murdoch's fiction, must strike the contemporary professional middle class reader as "unrealistic" because of the denial of two vital and significant aspects of daily experience in the phenomenological world. Other contemporary writers of realistic fiction wishing to concentrate on the private[81] tend to motivate the absence of the professional in their middle class characters' lives by placing them in a context unfamiliar and exceptional to the characters: they tend to be on holiday or on leave or something of that sort. Murdoch by and large does no such thing[82]: her characters' public lives are supposed to be going on while the story is told. To summarize: one main difference between Murdoch's writing and the nineteenth century novels she admires is that because realism is for her associated with a moral, perceptual, "inner" stance, and because this is what she wants to represent in her fiction, she largely ignores the public and professional selves of her characters, which are so vital in creating the illusion of "rounded characters", of the individual *in society*, in the nineteenth century novel.

Two developments associated with this difference have gone hand in

[81] Examples are Alice Thomas Ellis' *Unexplained Laughter* and Alison Lurie's *Foreign Affairs*.

[82] The two most noteable exceptions to this are *The Sea, The Sea* and *The Black Prince*; in both cases the central character retires to the coast in order to be on his own and write. That, at least, is the intention.

hand in Murdoch's fiction: in some of her earlier novels[83] Murdoch still transcends class boundaries[84] and raises specific party political issues.[85] Also, these novels are governed by a sense of the possibility of development and improvement of the central characters.[86] This finds its structural expression in a drive towards a "happy ending", resolution and closure, and one might argue that in some respects she is closer here to her ideal of the nineteenth century novel than in her later work.

In her later novels, from *The Nice and the Good* (1968) onwards, Murdoch's focus is increasingly on social networks that are exclusively middle class. Where in Jane Austen's work the contemporary reader might find this acceptable as it seems to "mirror" the relative social segregation associated with that period, an absence of any interaction with people who are not white, middle class, and well educated, seems increasingly anachronistic in the Britain of the 1980s.

Murdoch's later novels tend also to deny the possibility of improvement and resolution; her earlier optimism gives way to a sense of psychological reality which precludes such linear progress. The philosophical basis for this, and its fictional expression will be discussed more fully below. At this juncture I simply wish to indicate one other development in her fiction: Murdoch's novels have increased in lemgth, not only because the amount of space given over to representing

[83] This is true of *Under the Net*, *The Flight from the Enchanter*, *The Italian Girl*, and *The Time of the Angels*.

[84] In fact, she operates a latter day "upstairs, downstairs" system in which servants (*The Italian Girl*, *The Time of the Angels*), dressmakers (*The Flight from the Enchanter*), and shop keepers (*Under the Net*) play a role.

[85] This is particularly the case with *Under the Net* which investigates a similar political scene, the (demise of the) left in the first decade after WW II, to that discussed in Doris Lessing's *Golden Notebook*, though not nearly as extensively.

[86] This is the case with Jake in *The Flight from the Enchanter*, as well as Edmund in *The Italian Girl*, and Martin in *A Severed Head*.

reflecting selves has increased[87] (interiority has become more and more foregrounded), but side by side with this has emerged an increasing focus on the world of concrete detail. Again, the implications of this will be discussed more fully below. For the moment it is important to emphasize that the embeddedness in differential social networks and a concomitant belief in the possibility of progress for the individual which characterizes Murdoch's earlier novels has given way to the representation of a not necessarily interactive coexistence in the novel of a more introspective self next to a material world of concrete detail, the description of which occupies an increasing amount of space in the later novels.

I would suggest that the reality Murdoch strives to represent is neither predominantly a material nor a social one; the former is taken for granted and harnessed to a specific moral purpose, the latter remains uninvestigated. The reality Murdoch is interested in, her "reality of persons", is a psychological reality, the reality of the "mental event", the "inner life". Everything else is subordinate to that. Because this "inner life" is one which exists in the first instance purely for the individual to whom alone it is directly accessible,[88] the private individual portrayed by Murdoch exists only secondarily as a social being; the inner life plays at least an equal, if not the dominant, part in Murdoch's fiction.

There exists, then, a contradiction in Murdoch's concerns as they relate to the novel: on the one hand she admires the social and historical imbrication she considers to be characteristic of the nineteenth century novel;[89] on the other, her main preoccupation is with

[87] As Murdoch said to Simon Blow, "The reflective things I want to say now come in more in quantity and more naturally, so that the books are more reflective. . . The reflections I produce, which are now more voluminous than they used to be, are very much the reflections of the characters." (24)

[88] In so far as this is possible given that the "inner life" has an unconscious as well as a conscious component.

[89] Waugh comments that "it is precisely the quest for history, agency, and self-conscious identity, as aspects of relationships with socially situated others, which has motivated much women's writing in the twentieth century" (31). It is also noticable in women's writing of the nineteenth century, e.g. George Eliot's and Mrs. Gaskell's.

representations of the "inner life" which, even if socially and historically determined, is represented in her work as separate from those dimensions because concerned with issues that, on the whole, transcend immediate social and historical conditions. One implication of Murdoch's privileging of the reality of the inner life is that because it is not open to several independent observers, to empirical investigation, it in effect refuses the "consensus aesthetics" (Waugh 23) associated with realism. What G. S. Fraser calls "the solidity of the normal" is guaranteed through Murdoch's representation of "physical reality" (Fraser 48), but even this can be subject to metonymic[90] distortion[91] due to the over-riding importance given to the inner self. Murdoch's notions that "fantastic things happen all the time in ordinary life" (Caen 74), that "one knows awfully little about other people", that "there's a kind of enormous jumble on the top, and what exactly is underneath is very obscure" (Caen 80) all allow for her conjoining the fantastic and the real.[92] Fantasy, it has to be remembered, is associated for Murdoch with the self: the fantastic is for her not a function of supernatural events[93] but of the inner life of the individual.[94]

Although Murdoch's concern with individual consciousness is shared by the modernists she distances herself from many of the writers

[90] For a discussion of the relationship between metonymy and realism see Lodge 73-81.

[91] Jackson discusses the extent to which metonymic distortion is an aspect of the fantastic (41-2).

[92] As Murdoch has said to Hobson, "In real life the fantastic and the ordinary. . . are often indissolubly joined together. . . and I think the best novels explore and exhibit life without disjoining them."

[93] Jackson discusses the shifts in literary history from the conjoining of the fantastic with the supernatural to an association of the former with psychological factors (54-60).

[94] Thus she said to Bellamy, "I think real people are far more eccentric than anybody portrayed in novels. Real people are terribly odd, but of course they keep this secret. They conceal their fantasies. Obviously, people don't tell most of the things that they think to anyone, not even their psychiatrists. Human beings are very odd and very different from each other. The novel is a marvellous form in that it attempts to show this. I think it does explain people to themselves in a way." (137)

who epitomize modernism such as James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and T.S. Eliot.[95] Nonetheless, she shares some of their narrative strategies and concerns. According to Lodge

> Modernist fiction is concerned with consciousness [*sic*!], and also with the subconscious and the unconscious. . . A modernist novel has no real 'beginning', since it plunges us into the flowing stream of experience with which we gradually familiarize ourselves. . . its ending is usually 'open' or ambiguous, leaving the reader in doubt as to the final destiny of the characters. (45-6)

Being plunged *in medias res*, especially through conversational openings,[96] as in the novels of Ivy Compton-Burnett,[97] is something with which the reader of Murdoch's novels is as *au fait* as with indeterminate endings. Murdoch, like the modernists, is concerned with what might be called "the mind"; however, unlike the modernists, Murdoch does not interrogate the nature of "the mind" *via* the linguistic structures she uses to represent it. Indeed, she is not interested in the mind as a mechanism to be portrayed by a form that reveals this mechanism like a technical drawing. Here she differs from Woolf, for instance, who in "Modern Fiction"[98] suggests that "the mind receives a myriad impressions - trivial, fantastic, evanescent. . .":

> Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end. . . Let us record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall, let us trace the pattern, however disconnected

[95] See Biles 121, TSEM.

[96] See *An Accidental Man*, *A Word Child*, *Nuns and Soldiers*, or *The Book and the Brotherhood*.

[97] Murdoch has said that she does not want to be compared to Ivy Compton-Burnett (Caen 85).

[98] "Modern Fiction" was first published as "Modern Novels" in the *Times Literary Supplement* 10 April 1919: 189-90.

> and incoherent in appearance, which each sight or incident scores upon consciousness. (*The Common Reader* 189-90)

Woolf's notion of recording "atoms as they fall upon the mind" finds its expression in the 'stream-of-consciousness' technique[99] which she considers appropriate to the twentieth century.'[100] The "real, true, and convincing" (Woolf 421) character for Woolf as for realist novelists depends on a consensus aesthetics involving the author's and the reader's perception of life.'[101] It has nothing to do with the moral purpose that informs Murdoch's representation of character. Woolf's mimetic intent is related to a phenomenological conception of how the mind operates, Murdoch's to a moral one. Woolf regards the perception of character as historically grounded; the situation that the modernists responded to is summarized by Bradbury and McFarlane:

> Modernism is. . . the one art that responds to the scenario of our chaos. It is the art consequent on Heisenberg's 'Uncertainty Principle', of the destruction of civilization and reason in the First World War, of the world changed and reinterpreted by Marx, Freud, and Darwin, of capitalism and constant industrial acceleration, of existential exposure to meaninglessness or absurdity. It is the literature of technology. It is the art consequent on the dis-establishing of communal reality and conventional notions of causality, on the destruction of traditional notions of wholeness of individual character, on the

[99] William James coined this phrase in *The Principles of Psychology* where he wrote of the way in which mental activity or consciousness operates, "*In talking of it hereafter, let us call it the stream of thought, of consciousness, or of subjective life.*" (233)

[100] In "Character in Fiction" Woolf suggests that character, represented by the figure of Mrs. Brown, "can be treated in an infinite variety of ways, according to age, country, temperament of the writer." (*The Essays of Virginia Woolf III* 421)

[101] Woolf maintains, "The writer must get into touch with his reader by putting before him something which he recognises, which therefore stimulates his imagination, and makes him willing to co-operate in the far more difficult business of intimacy." (*The Essays of Virginia Woolf III* 431)

> linguistic chaos that ensues when public notions of language have been discredited and when all realities have become subjective fictions. (27)[102]

One of the main responses to the sense of chaos and destruction, which in the absence of any transcendent reality renders "content" meaningless, is a preoccupation with form. Murdoch finds "the familiar Bloomsbury slogan" of art "for its own sake" intolerable (SOG 41); art, she contends, is "for life's sake" (SG 54), it has a moral purpose.[103]. What the art object is meant to reveal, among other things, is the underlying process by which it was created, the moral stance that informs its mimetic representation. It is in this sense only[104] that Murdoch accepts (TSEM 154) T. S. Eliot's notion of the "impersonality of the author", expressed in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" as, "The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality" (17). The same criticism Murdoch made of Romanticism as failing to picture the individual as a self-in-relation is renewed in this context. Modernism "with its emphasis on formal autonomy, identity as transcendence of history through *symbol* (Eliot, Yeats), and self as a construction of language (particularly in Joyce and Conrad)" (Waugh 79) finds its expression in a literature of separation. It is for this reason that Murdoch dissociates herself from it. Her concern is with the self in relation; in her novels she portrays how individual consciousness functions in people *as moral beings*, and the effect this has on their perception of reality, rather than the social and historical conditions in which her characters operate. Yet, as one can see in nineteenth century novels such as *The Mill on the Floss* or

[102] Waugh describes how this context affects Woolf's texts (*Feminine Fictions* 88-9).

[103] Murdoch suggests that great art improves its consumer morally not through didactic intent but accidentally (SG 54-5).

[104] Eliot himself read the notion of the "impersonality of the author" in terms of a "process of depersonalization" in the services of history ("Tradition and the Individual Talent" 14-7), locating oneself "among the dead" ("Tradition" 15).

Oliver Twist, it is that social and historical specificity'[105] which makes for the particularity of the characters, and it is, perhaps, the lack of such specificity which contributes to the limitations of Murdoch's characters,'[106] and which sets her apart from the nineteenth century novelists she admires.

Murdoch takes the "reality of persons" for granted - she does not, by and large, question the 'solidity' of her characters'[107] as is the case in, for example, Muriel Spark's *The Comforters* or Philip Roth's *Zuckerman Unbound* where the characters foreground their (potential) fictionality. This is one of the traits of postmodernism.'[108] Characters like Charles (SS) or Bradley Pearson (BP) may worry about *how to represent themselves* but not about *whether or not they are 'real'*. The reader may be invited to consider *what reality* the characters inhabit but not whether or not the characters are 'real'. As Stern puts it:

> . . . realistic fictions are erected on firm ground which reveals no epistemological cracks, and . . . when such cracks appear, they are not explored but transformed into the psychology of characters: realism doesn't ask whether the world is real, but it occasionally asks what happens to persons who think it isn't. (*On Realism* 31)

[105] George Eliot takes women novelists to task for failing to provide such specificity ("Silly Novels by Lady Novelists" 303-4).

[106] Murdoch herself has said to Ronald Bryden, "I wish I could create more different kinds of character. There are certain recognisable types in my novels, perhaps five people who tend to recur, and each time I vow that I'll invent somebody completely different." (434)

[107] There are exceptions to this: one is the figure of the "editor" in *The Black Prince* whose name, Loxias, another name for Apollo, recalls the muses. Weil mentions him as "the Oblique - the Mediator" (NB II 582); the name is derived from *legein* = to speak out. Loxias in his foreword and his afterword represents himself as Pearson's muse. He also draws attention to the issue of his identity which remains unresolved. Is he Apollo, or a character in a fiction, Pearson's or Murdoch's invention? Loxias most obviously exhibits the self-referentiality which characterizes postmodernist fiction. (For a further discussion of this figure see Caen 78, Conradi 187-194).

[108] See Ihab Hassan, "Pluralism in Postmodern Perspective" 505.

In Murdoch's world there is not even a separation or fragmentation[109] of the role of the author, character, and reader in terms of their attitude relative to the text, and the world; as moral beings they are all, from her viewpoint, subject to the same demand, "to see the world [that is, people] as it is", as separate and different from the self.

Murdoch's belief in the separateness and differentness of others, including characters in fiction, is, according to Waugh, typical for women writers of this century. Waugh argues that women writers[110] in the twentieth century have not associated themselves strongly with death fantasies such as Barthes' "death of the author", or the death of the subject, because their experience of themselves, historically and socially, has been radically different from that of men.

> Subjectivity, historically constructed and expressed through the phenomenological equation self/other, necessarily rests masculine 'selfhood' upon feminine 'otherness'. The subjective centre of socially dominant discourses (from Descartes's philosophical, rational 'I' to Lacan's psychoanalytic phallic/symbolic) in terms of power, agency, autonomy has been a 'universal' subject which has established its identity through the invisible marginalization or exclusion of what has also been defined as 'femininity' (whether this is the non-rational, the body, the emotions, or the pre-symbolic. (*Feminine Fictions* 8)

The result is that "in the dialectical relationship between traditional humanism and the post-modern anti-humanism emerging in the 1960s, women continue to be displaced." (9) Women have thus been perpetually in a position of having to discover "a coherent and unified feminine subject" (9), an identity of their own, which is not a reflection of "the male gaze".[111] Waugh maintains:

[109] See Hassan 504-8.

[110] There are some postmodernist women writers such as Kathy Acker and Christine Brooke-Rose.

[111] See E. Ann Kaplan, "Is the gaze male?" in *Women and Film: Both Sides of the Camera* 23-35.

> Much women's writing can, in fact, be seen not as an attempt to define an isolated individual ego but to discover a collective concept of subjectivity which foregrounds the construction of identity *in relationship*. (10)

Waugh's description of twentieth century women's writing seems to me appropriate. From early novels such as Virginia Woolf's *To The Lighthouse* to Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook*, to, perhaps most prominently, women's science fiction (e.g. Zoë Fairbairns' *Benefits*, Sally Miller Gearhart's *The Wanderground*, Suzette Haden Elgin's *Native Tongue*, Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaiden's Tale*) what is stressed is *difference* between women and men, *separateness* to the point of discrete spheres for each, and the attempt to create a sense of self through placing the self in relation, often to other women. Waugh says:

> . . . it seems to me that it is the gradual recognition of the value of construing human identity in terms of relationship and dispersal, rather than as a unitary, self-directing, isolated ego, which has fundamentally altered the course of modern and contemporary women writers. (12)

This last aspect is highlighted in the number of novels dealing with women's friendship that have appeared, particularly in the 1970s, such as Fay Weldon's *Female Friends*, or Marilyn French's *The Women's Room*. Murdoch's novels, too, portray individuals whose identity is forged in relationships though, and this needs stressing, the identity she aims to discover is a moral one foregrounding as virtues traits characteristically associated with an ideal of femininity as self-denying, other-oriented, nurturant.

To the extent that the nineteenth century novel projects the subject as *agent*, capable of controlling and directing *his* own life, that protagonist is essentially expressive of *masculine* experience. Women's, most particularly middle class women's, economic dependence on men alone militated against their acquiring a sense of being autonomous and self-directing. But in women's writing of the nineteenth century, particularly in the work of George Eliot, heroines such as Maggie Tulliver see their lives as governed by duties and obligations to familial and social networks which undermine self-determination and agency on the part of the self. As a result of not having had independence and a sense of

control in the nineteenth century, women in the twentieth century have no unitary subject to fragment or mourn the loss of; rather, "the desire to become subjects" (Waugh 12) is likely to prevail.[1][2] Even where a history of disintegration and despair is detailed, as in *The Golden Notebook*, Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*, Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*, or Verena Stefan's *Shedding*, it tends to reflect a movement or metamorphosis towards re-birth as a new, unified subject.

It may be as a function of this quest for a unified subject that Murdoch does not question certain basic structures such as the solidity of her characters or the referentiality of language. Despite maintaining that language is historically grounded (SOG 32-3) and "idiosyncratic" (SOG 34) Murdoch believes that the "precise" use of language is something that can be learnt (Appleyard 20) and is vital for the subject in relation, "our human fabric depends on [words]" (SOG 34). Murdoch, in consequence, is not concerned wth language *per se* but with its *usage*. Emphasis is on content rather than on form, refining it for the purposes of communication rather than denying the possibility of communication. This constitutes another means of foregrounding the self in relation rather than in isolation.

This is certainly the case with Murdoch. The subject she wishes to represent is the individual whose psychic energy is harnessed to a moral purpose. Murdoch's attempt to discover techniques for such a directing of psychic energy and metaphors by which to express such processes has led her to Weil's work.

In the following chapters I shall therefore concentrate on detailing the ethical position which links Weil's and Murdoch's work. Central to this position are "selflessness", the notion of "knowing the void", and the concept of "attention" all of which will be discussed in turn. The meaning of these stances in Weil's and Murdoch's moral philosophy will in part be established through an investigation of the role gender plays

[1][2] Waugh writes, "Once women have experienced themselves as 'subjects', then they can begin to problematize and to deconstruct the socially constructed subject positions available to them, and to recognize that an inversion of the valuation of 'maleness' and 'femaleness' will not in itself undermine the social construction of 'masculinity' and 'femininity'." (25)

in their ethics, for it is noticable that Weil is the only *female* philosopher whose influence Murdoch has acknowledged, and, furthermore, that the stances advocated by the two women, particularly selflessness and paying attention, are traditionally associated with femininity. In the following chapter I shall therefore outline the contexts in which Weil and Murdoch produced their work in order to indicate how their respective sense of self informs their writing.

In the subsequent chapters I shall analyse the concepts of selflessness, knowing the void, and attention by first discussing how they feature in Weil's writings and then how they find expression in Murdoch's fiction. For this analysis I shall make use of a number of psychoanalytic approaches, invoking the works of Freud, Kristeva, Chodorow, and Greenfield, among others. Kristeva's and Chodorow's work is of particular importance because, in common with other feminist psychoanalysts, they have reworked psychoanalytic concepts in order to provide a more comprehensive framework than Freud did for understanding women's psychosexual development. Greenfield's work, based on Jungian analysis,[113] suggests a way of reading Murdoch's male characters. Any theoretical framework used for textual analysis points to its own parameters by highlighting the fact that it privileges a particular set to the world in relation to the text. A psychoanalytic framework seems appropriate for this thesis as it offers explanations concerning the psychosexual development and attitudes of the individual. These are important for the construction and perception of gender, which, in my estimation, is a key factor in Weil's and Murdoch's moral stance.

Weil and Murdoch are familiar with Freud's work.[114] Murdoch thinks that moral philosophy ought to "speak significantly of Freud" (SOG 46), and has acknowledged getting "all sorts of ideas from him" (Haffenden 202). One of these is the unconscious, part of the "inner life", in which Weil[115] and Murdoch are interested. Both women consider psychoanalysis

[113] Murdoch dismisses Jungian analysis because it deals with patterns and archetypes (Haffenden 206) both of which are *anathema* to her although, of course, they are readily identifiable in her writings.

[114] For Weil on Freud see, for example, *Simone Weil: Lectures on Philosophy* 90-8. Murdoch writes on Freud in SOG 46-55 and FS 37-43.

[115] See *Lectures on Philosophy* 90-8.

to be of importance for morality for this very reason. Weil maintains:

> . . . in reality psychological consciousness and moral consciousness are one and the same. . . All absence of moral awareness is the result of an absence of psychological awareness. All bad action is an action which implies a repression; every action which does not imply it is good. (*Lectures on Philosophy* 98)

Whether or not one agrees with Weil's view of repression it is clear that Freudian thought plays a role in her ethical stance. The same is true of Murdoch who considers writing a therapeutic process. She has suggested that "to do philosophy is to explore one's own temperament" (SOG 46), and said that

> Any novelist who has been writing for a long time has in a sense psychoanalysed himself.[116] He can see what he's up to. He can see all sorts of things which he's not going to tell anybody else about himself and which he'll conceal from his reader, and all sorts of obsessional things and so on.[117] (Caen 89)

In her fiction Murdoch frequently details dreams,[118] and is concerned with how individuals appear to arrive at decisions subconsciously. Psychoanalysts appear in her fiction.[119] She discusses notions central to psychoanalysis such as narcissism (e.g. PP 188).

Psychoanalytic method is, in some respects, similar to that of

[116] Murdoch discusses Freud's view of art and the artist in FS 37-43.

[117] Murdoch's auto-analytical stance clearly refers to herself; yet, she keeps using male pronouns. If one considers this in the light of her preoccupation with the accurate use of language one is led, once again, to the notion of her male-identifiedness.

[118] There are numerous examples of dreams scattered throughout her work. In *The Philosopher's Pupil* alone references to dreams are made on 172, 200, 243, 287, and 373.

[119] Examples are Monty in *The Sacred and Profane Love Machine*, Francis in *The Black Prince*, and Thomas in *The Good Apprentice*.

literary criticism in that it attempts to make sense of a text narrated by (usually) a single author. In this thesis I shall use psychoanalytic theories in two different but related ways: to analyse Weil's and Murdoch's theoretical and fictional texts, and to offer an explanation of a shared attitude towards gender underlying these texts.

Instead of scanning the entirety of Murdoch's *oeuvre* I have decided to focus on two novels in the chapters on selflessness, knowing the void, and attention. Thus in the chapter on selflessness I shall discuss *Bruno's Dream* (1969) and *The Sea, The Sea* (1978); in the one on knowing the void *The Time of The Angels* (1966) and *The Good Apprentice* (1985); in the one on fictionalizing attention *Bruno's Dream* and *The Black Prince* (1973). *Bruno's Dream* is discussed twice because it is unique among Murdoch's novels in that it attempts to detail mystical experience (through the figure of Nigel) as well as representing the problem of the split between a sexual and a spiritual identity (through the figures of Lisa and Diana) which dominated Weil's life. As such the text appears to offer an extended comment on Weil's position. I shall deal with this latter issue in the chapter on selflessness while concentrating on the figure of Nigel in the one on attention. The conclusion will focus on *The Philosopher's Pupil* (1983) and *The Book and the Brotherhood* (1987). Other novels will be referred to.

Giving fewer texts more attention not only replicates Murdoch's notion concerning the importance of attention to detail but also expresses my view that her moral position has broadened and crystallized over time but not fundamentally changed. As I shall indicate in the various chapters ideas expressed in the later novels can also be found in her earlier work, at times *verbatim*.

I have devoted two chapters to the notion of attention, splitting the subject into its theoretical and fictional components. Attention is the main concept Murdoch has consistently referred to as adopted from Weil (e.g. SOG 34). It denotes the technique and the attitude Murdoch considers essential for the development of the moral self, and is thus crucial to Murdoch's ethical stance. Through attention the moral individual can come to know the void. In order to reach this state selflessness has to be exercised. Attention is what effects this. In the

conclusion I shall link Weil's and Murdoch's attitudes to gender to the conflicts and contradictions these generate in their writings.

Chapter 1: "One is never oneself."

Murdoch became interested in Weil's writings "in the 1950s" and was "certainly influenced" by her[1] (LTA). During that period Weil's work, which had not appeared in book form during her lifetime,[2] was gradually gaining recognition both in and outside France[3]. The first book to appear in French, *La Pesanteur et la Grace* (1947), edited by Weil's friend Gustav Thibon (GG xxxvii), contains a selection of writings from Weil's *Notebooks*, which she entrusted to his care (GG xii) before leaving France for exile in the United States in 1942. The posthumous publication of this work was followed by *L'Enracinement* (1949), *Attente de Dieu* (1950), *La Connaissance Surnaturelle* (1950), the first volume of her *Cahiers* (1951), *Intuitions Préchrétiennes* (1951), *La Condition Ouvrière* (1951), *Lettre à un Religieux* (1951), and *Cahiers II* (1953). This means that the majority of works by Weil initially published centre on religious subjects, stemming from the period after her conversion experience in 1938.[4] Correspondingly, the works first translated into English[5] were the ones dealing most prominently with religious matters, i.e. *Waiting on God* (1951) published as *Waiting for God* in the same year in the United States, *Gravity and Grace* (1952), *The Need for Roots* (1952), *Letter to a Priest* (1953), and *The Notebooks of Simone Weil* (1956). While Weil's work had enjoyed the support of the existentialist

[1] Murdoch has asserted many times that she was influenced by Weil; see SOG 1-45, esp. 34, 50; Caen 77; Haffenden 34; KV; SBR 256.

[2] For articles that appeared during Weil's lifetime, especially in *Cahiers du Sud*, see Little, *Simone Weil: A Bibliography*, esp. 15-26.

[3] This is evident from the bibliographical accounts which Little (1973, 1979) but also Abbott White (181-94) and Coles (167-70) provide.

[4] For details see Krailsheimer (130-40), or Cabaud (160-5, 168-72).

[5] According to Fiedler (39-40) several of Weil's essays had previously appeared in the journal *Politics*, most notably "The Iliad: or, The Poem of Force" (Nov. 1945).

Albert Camus[6] in France, it was the "unlikely pair" of the "elder statesman T. S. Eliot" and the "eternal sophomore Leslie Fiedler" (Stoneburger 402) who through their introductions to *Waiting for God* (Fiedler) and *The Need for Roots* (Eliot) introduced Weil to an English speaking public.[7]

Without going into the details here of "what 'packaging' has meant for the truth in Simone Weil" (Abbott White 182) it is worth emphasizing a point made by Susan Sontag; namely that, given Eliot's status as "the 'king' of letters" in the early 1950s, "*anything* that had a preface by [him] commanded attention". Through this association with Eliot "people thought of [Weil] as a very original kind of Catholic mystic" and therefore, "the tendency was to interpret everything [of Weil's] from a religious perspective" (qtd. in Abbott White 183).[8] While this final statement may seem somewhat exaggerated,[9] it is important in the present context because Murdoch was impressed by Weil *as a religious figure*:

> She is a very *religious* person - that struggle [between self and unself] *is* religion. (I think she helped me to see what religion *is*.) (LTA)

I shall return to the significance of this statement later. For the present it is worth noting that Murdoch, who read Weil's work "mostly in

[6] Comments on this are made by Sutherland (81). Camus, as editor of the "Espoir" Collection at Gallimard, was responsible for the publication of several of Weil's early works including *L'Enracinement* of which Georges Bataille wrote a review.

[7] There is now a Weil Society in America, details on which can be found in Coles (170); for details of the papers given at the annual meeting of the society see Springsted, *Simone Weil and the Suffering of Love* 138-40.

[8] Weller Embler provides an interesting reading of the essentially critical attitude to Weil Eliot manifests in his preface to *The Need for Roots* which Embler relates to Eliot's "nothing in excess" philosophy.

[9] As Little's bibliographies on Weil show, quite a lot of writing has been devoted to aspects other than the religious one.

French" (letter to the author, 1 Sept. 1988), wrote,

> I think I know almost all her published works. I especially like the *Notebooks*, *La Source Grecque*, *L'Attente de Dieu*, *Pensées sans ordre concernant L'Amour de Dieu*, and her political tract *L'Enracinement*. These [are] also most important, I think, for her thought. But wonderful stuff everywhere. . . (LTA)

Again one can see the emphasis on the writings that focus on religious matters.

Murdoch's interest in Weil's work has to be read against a twentieth century background in which religion (as a socializing force) has become marginalized. Murdoch's lament,

> We live in a scientific and anti-metaphysical age in which dogmas, images, and precepts of religion have lost much of their power (AD 16)

together with her belief that metaphors "are fundamental forms of our awareness of our condition" (SOG 78), leads her to suggest that "the loss of a moral and political vocabulary" (AD 18) must be counteracted.

> We need more concepts in terms of which to picture the substance of our being; it is through an enriching and deepening of concepts that moral progress takes place. Simone Weil said that morality was a matter of attention not of will. We need a new vocabulary of attention. (AD 20)

Murdoch here points to the one concept - attention - which she acknowledges[10] "borrowing" from Weil (SOG 34). She has also admitted a more general influence:

> . . . of course I owe a great debt to Simone Weil, who is a marvellous thinker, and who opened my eyes to many things and set me onto various paths which I have followed since. (Caen 77)

Murdoch admires in Weil's writings

> Her passionate Platonism, her *wide* deep intellectual grasp, her unsentimental clear thought about God, the Greeks, etc. A clear

[10] When asked about concepts other than attention Murdoch might have "borrowed" from Weil she replied, "Can't immediately think of any particular concept with a name." (LTA)

light. Her interest in Eastern philosophy. (LTA)

Murdoch is interested not only in certain philosophical positions of Weil's but also in the quality of her mind,[11] in how her mind works.[12] She is thus concerned with Weil as an intellect rather than as an individual. She writes, "I don't know a great deal about her life, only the general outline" (LTA), and has not read biographies on Weil such as Pétrement's (letter to the author, 1 Sept. 1988).

Weil appears to offer Murdoch concepts appropriate for this century in which to talk about moral issues. These concepts, especially that of attention, have a moral purpose in that they suggest to Murdoch "techniques for the purification and re-orientation of an energy which is naturally selfish" (SOG 54). Murdoch wants concepts for such techniques which are "philosophical" rather than "psychological" (SOG 54) because psychological ones aim at making people "workable" whereas what she thinks such techniques ought to do is make people "good" (SOG 51). Weil seems to Murdoch to provide concepts for this purpose.

Murdoch's interest in Weil's work has not led to a critical interrogation of it which, given that her relationship with Weil's writings was one of "total love at first sight" (LTA), is not surprising. Murdoch has not entered into any of the critical debates concerning, for example, Weil's status as a Christian,[13] the contradictions in Weil's

[11] The quality of Weil's thinking has been remarked upon, among others, by Van Herik, "Simone Weil's Religious Imagery" 261; Vetö, "Uprootedness and Alienation" 383 and "Simone Weil and Suffering" 275; Stoneburger 402; Coles, *Simone Weil: A Modern Pilgrimage* 6. Weil herself lamented that the quality of her mind prevented people from paying attention to what she had to say (letter to her parents of 18 July 1943, *Seventy Letters* 196-7).

[12] Murdoch admires thinking generally, perhaps a function of her preoccupation with states of individual consciousness. She said, for example, "I find [Freud], as a thinker, enormously exciting, he's full of insights." (Caen 87) She has also said of herself that she is "a reflective person" (Blow 24).

[13] See, for instance, Frenaud, "Simone Weil's Thought in the Light of Catholic Theology"; Grumbach, "The Vestibule State of Simone Weil"; Roche, "Catholicisme et Catharisme; Taubes "The Absent God"; Uellenberg, "Nihilismus und Gläubigkeit"; West, "Simone Weil".

writings.[14] Weil has, in a sense, become for Murdoch, the "nourishment" which she wanted to be for others (FLN 244), here a source of intellectual "nourishment".[15] Murdoch has found in her writings ideas and positions which accord with her own vision and which have helped her to clarify her moral stance.[16] Murdoch's concern has been with those writings by Weil which deal with states of mind, individual consciousness, rather than, for example, her political works. Apart from her review of Weil's *Notebooks*[17] Murdoch has not specifically written about Weil. Yet, as is clear from the critical responses to Murdoch's work discussed below, and as I hope to demonstrate in the following chapters, elective affinities with Weil's work are pervasive in Murdoch's writings.

Given Murdoch's interest in Weil's work, and given that she is the only female philosopher Murdoch refers to, it is surprising that the relationship between their writings has so far remained largely unexamined. A. S. Byatt is one critic who has devoted some space to *the idea of suffering* as represented by Weil and Murdoch. In *Degrees of Freedom: The Novels of Iris Murdoch* (1965), still one of the best studies on Murdoch's work, Byatt discusses the notion of *uprootedness*[18] as manifested in *The Flight from the Enchanter* (1955), especially in the

[14] See Jennings, "A World of Contradictions"; Springsted, "Contradiction, Mystery and the Use of Words in Simone Weil".

[15] Murdoch talks of "just being moved by such deep radiant *thinking*" as Weil's (LTA).

[16] One could argue that Loades' comment on Weil's reading of the Eucharist, "she provided an interpretation of the sacrament with which she could manage" ("Eucharistic Sacrifice" 45) is true of Murdoch's relation to Weil's writings - though the consequences are not, as they were for Weil (ibid. 43), disastrous for Murdoch.

[17] The article in question is "Knowing the Void".

[18] The most immediately relevant section in Weil's *The Need for Roots* is on 41-5. See also Vetö, "Uprootedness and Alienation in Simone Weil", esp. 390-1.

character of Nina, an East European refugee who lives in continual fear of being deported from England and eventually commits suicide. Of her Byatt says:

> Nina is. . . Miss Murdoch's attempt to portray the social effects of Simone Weil's concept of 'malheur' or affliction; . . . she belongs rather with the afflicted - the slaves, refugees, uprooted, despised[19] - studied by Simone Weil, than with Simone Weil's own spiritual search. (45-6)

In fact, Weil saw herself as belonging to the afflicted, as I shall indicate below, and is thus closer aligned to Nina than Byatt would suggest. Murdoch has continued to be interested in the issue and effects of uprootedness; in most of her novels there is at least one character belonging to that category.[20] What unites these characters is their inability to re-establish intimate connections with other people once they have been deprived of their primary rootedness in a culture and country.

Byatt also discusses Weil's concept of "gravity" in relation to *The Bell* (1958):

> . . . the idea of gravity as a symbol for that which is simply mechanical in our lives is related to the thought of Simone Weil, who uses it in that sense, and opposes it to supernatural grace. (77)

In chapter two of this thesis I shall look more closely at the dynamics of the human psyche as indicated by the notion of gravity.

Byatt writes most extensively on the connection between Weil's and Murdoch's work in her comments on *The Unicorn* (1963) which she reads in terms of necessity and suffering. She suggests that one cannot understand this novel unless one has read Weil (205) because

[19] Gollancz, on the basis of his own experience in a concentration camp, suggests that people do not respond to those in affliction by despising them (109).

[20] Examples are Jan and Stefan Lusiewicz (*Flight from the Enchanter*), David and Elsa Levkin (*The Italian Girl*), Willy Kost (*The Nice and the Good*), the Count (*Nuns and Soldiers*). Murdoch herself apparently lived with such a person, Franz Baermann Steiner (Summers).

> The difficult idea of redemptive suffering derives clearly from the thought of Simone Weil, where it is the culmination of the idea of the transfer of evil. (160)

It may be because Byatt chooses to focus on the "degrees of freedom" which Murdoch's characters have or imagine they have that her discussion of Weil's influence on Murdoch centres on the idea of suffering (which has to do with *lack* of freedom) and related concepts. A number of other relevant issues such as notions of good, God, love, and selflessness, important in this context, remain unexplored. Byatt does not deal with the question of *why* Weil's writings should be able to exert an influence on Murdoch.

But Byatt is an exception among critics in that she gives a reasonably extensive account of Weilian thought in Murdoch's work. Most investigations of Murdoch's writings make only passing reference to the importance of Weil's work for hers.[21] One typical example is Elizabeth Dipple's study, *Iris Murdoch: Work for the Spirit* (1982), where one, from the title at least, would expect to find some discussion of Weil.[22] However, Dipple maintains that Weil's influence on Murdoch is related to an "early working-out of her ideas" whereas Murdoch's "argument with Plato" defines her "mature apprehensions" (ix-x). Asserting that "the influence of Weil was elsewhere done extremely well" (she refers to Byatt's *Degrees of Freedom*) Dipple takes Weil's significance "as assumed" (x). While accepting Weil's importance for Murdoch's writings, Dipple relegates that influence to an "early" rather than a "mature" period in Murdoch's development thus dismissing its significance.[23] She couples Murdoch's maturity as an artist with her engagement with Plato.

[21] There are numerous examples of this, e.g. Anderson 4, 5, 8; Bellamy 32-5; Birdsall 5; Heusel 7, 15, 16; Keates 22; Lenowitz 185-6.

[22] Especially because by 1982 Weil was a well-established writer, a fact to which the existence of the American Weil Society testifies. Coles gives relevant details in *Simone Weil: A Modern Pilgrimage* (170); so does Springsted in *Simone Weil and the Suffering of Love* (138-40).

[23] Bellamy, in contrast, suggests that Weil is the philosopher who "had the most crucial effect on Murdoch's view of man" (32).

Dipple's distinction between Murdoch's early and mature work suggests a linear development in Murdoch's thinking that I wish to question. My argument is that although Murdoch's philosophical stance developed over time, and through her engagement with a number of philosophers, writers, and systems of thought, the overall effect was cumulative rather than successive. In her most recent novels *The Book and the Brotherhood* (1988),[24] and *The Good Apprentice* (1985) Murdoch is as concerned with ideas such as 'good-for-nothing-ness', 'the void', and selflessness, as in her earlier novels. All of these ideas are also prominent in Weil's work.

Other critics have regarded Weil's influence on Murdoch as relatively minor compared with that of male philosophers and writers. Typically, Barbara Stevens Heusel writes:

> The ideas of Plato, Weil, and Wittgenstein. . . pervade the mature novels; she invokes Weil indirectly and refers directly to the other two, with references to Wittgenstein being particularly abundant. (15)

Although Heusel concedes that "to Weil [Murdoch] is indebted for her understanding of 'the will', the importance of the word 'attention', and the distinction between death and suffering" (16), she goes on to say, "I contend. . . that Wittgenstein's influence on Murdoch is pervasive; Plato's work is elemental. . . Weil gives her useful tools for decribing her ethical imperative." (16) Weil is here relegated to the position of handmaiden, helpful as far as the 'mechanics' of writing are concerned.

David Beams suggests that in reading Murdoch we can do without Weil.

> Here is an image of love [*felix culpa* for *The Bell*] that should perhaps be derivable without the benefit of Miss Murdoch's papers or Simone Weil. Or, on the literary side, it might suffice to know T. S. Eliot from whom, rather than Simone Weil, the lesson of discipline, detachment, dispossession, descent may be familiar. (12)

What Dipple, Heusel, and Beams have in common is that - even when they

[24] A new book by Iris Murdoch, *The Message to the Planet* will be published by Chatto and Windus on 2 Oct. 1989.

acknowledge the importance of Weil's writings for Murdoch's work - they still omit her from their critical enquiries in favour of the male pillars of Western and British culture. There is not a single critical study that I am aware of which looks predominantly at the influence of a female writer or philosopher on Murdoch although she herself has invoked names such as George Eliot and Jane Austen,[25] quite apart from Weil. Where Weil's influence is examined it is done exclusively in terms of concepts such as freedom, necessity, and suffering without any reference to the subject position Weil inhabits, and which informs her theoretical stance.

Of the recent critical assessments of Murdoch, Peter Conradi's book *Iris Murdoch: The Saint and the Artist* (1986) deals most diversely with Weil's influence on her. His writing indicates that he, unlike Beams, does not consider his readership to be unfamiliar with Weil. Thus he writes:

> In the 1950s Murdoch began to read the great French mystic Simone Weil, whose influence on the novels A. S. Byatt has discussed in *Degrees of Freedom*. It is Weil's strength that she does not, unlike Sartre, sentimentalise the position of being radically denuded and outside society. (13)

In the course of his study Conradi includes half-page discussions on power, love, affliction, suffering, and attention as they relate to Weil's and Murdoch's writings. He usually points out that particular ideas in Murdoch's fiction are attributable to Weil without, however, necessarily elaborating on the nature of these. Thus, in connection with "attention", he simply says:

> Murdoch has called, citing Simone Weil, for a 'vocabulary of attention'. . . and while it is other persons who are the worthiest objects of such skill, the natural world is always well-attended. (46)

Conradi proceeds to give a number of examples of how, in her fiction, Murdoch "attends" to the natural world. The reason for his method appears to be that he wishes to read Murdoch's novels independently of

[25] On George Eliot see TSEM (152-60); Austen is referred to in Biles (121).

her theoretical work. As he puts it:

> I would plead for a gentle detachment of the work from the theory, so that the reader can surrender to the experience of the work - its detail and authority - without rushing back panic-stricken to the full safety of the ideas. (255)

On one level such a detachment has become increasingly difficult: as the titles of her last three novels indicate (*The Philosopher's Pupil, The Good Apprentice, The Book and the Brotherhood*), her preoccupation with ideas feeds directly into her fiction. What is more, if one is to consider the influence of Weil's writings on Murdoch's fiction, one cannot do so without looking at Murdoch's non-fictional work, as it is there that she not only discusses Weil's influence but also expounds her ethical position in concentrated form.

However, before examining Weil's and Murdoch's non-fictional and fictional writings, some introductory remarks have to be made concerning the socio-historical context in which both women grew up. Not much is known about Murdoch's private self[26] beyond the kind of facts that can be gleaned from any writers' dictionary but, as regards Weil, the proliferation of biographies on her[27] alone suggests a continued preoccupation with her life among her readership. Critics disagree about whether or not Weil's work ought to be read in the light of her life,[28] yet they appear to agree that she tried to live her life in accordance with her thought.[29] Indeed, on reading secondary texts about Weil it

[26] Summers' "The Lost Loves of Iris Murdoch" is to my knowledge the only article dealing exclusively - in every sense of that word - with Murdoch's private past.

[27] They include Davy (1951), Perrin and Thibon (1953), Tomlin (1954),Cabaud (1964), Rees (1966), Anderson (1971), Pétrement (1976), Hellman (1982), Bell (1984), Springsted (1986), Coles (1987).

[28] Rees, for example, suggests that one can dissociate Weil's life from her thought (*Sketch* 43-4) but Uellenberg argues the opposite ("Nihilismus der Gläubigkeit" 446).

[29] See, for example, T.S. Eliot in his preface to *Need for Roots* (vi); Rosenfeld 599; Embler 51-2; Godman; Grumbach 166-7.

becomes clear that, where an attempt is made to separate her life from her writings it is done from a desire to preserve the integrity of Weil's writings from "her abnormal experiences and her abnormal behaviour"[30] (Rees, *Sketch* 44), and "to warn the reader against premature judgment and summary classification - to persuade him to hold in check his own prejudices and at the same time to be patient with those of Simone Weil" (Eliot, preface to *Need for Roots* v). What is more, it is also clear that some aspects of her life such as her conversion experience have been more widely and consistently discussed than others such as her "eating disorder".[31] This is, of course, in part a function of the existence of Weil's "Spiritual Autobiography" which addresses the former issue but not the latter. But it is also dependent on the extent to which aspects of Weil's life might or might not give rise to controversy (as is the case with her anti-semitic attitude[32]), the extent to which there exist 'conventions' within which to interpret aspects of her life,[33] and the extent to which all readings of her life are of necessity biased in some way, simply because someone tries to establish a pattern where there may be none.

Early writers on Weil[34] tried to promote Weil's work (mainly the

[30] This judgment, shared by Oates, seems to me too harsh though Anna Klein's position (Coles 27-9) is perhaps overly timid.

[31] This is the term "agreed upon" by Coles and Klein (35) to describe Weil's condition.

[32] Fiedler in "Simone Weil: Prophet out of Israel", Zadovsky Knopp in "The Carnal God: Simone Weil's Anti-Judaic Perspective", Oates in "May God Grant That I Become Nothing" (153-4), Jennings in "A World of Contradictions" (131-2), and Watkins in "Simone Weil: Antisemitism and Syncretism" discuss the problematic of Weil's position *vis-à-vis* Judaism.

[33] The 'conventionality' of Weil's mystical experiences is borne out by Krailsheimer's *Conversion*, especially in its conclusions (152-64).

[34] Typical examples are Godman (1950), Braybrooke (1951), Blumenthal (1952), Grumbach (1952), Svobodova (1954), Tracy (1954), Epting (1955), Fitzgerald (1965).

religious writings) through combining a "potted" history of her life with an exposition of some of the central ideas in her writings. Their stance was, on the whole, adulatory. There were however, even in the 1950s and 1960s, critical voices whose line of attack centred on Weil as a person. T. S. Eliot's preface to *The Need for Roots* ascribes to her "a difficult, violent and complex personality" (v) suffering from an "excess of temperament" (vii).[35] Joyce Carol Oates, writing twenty-five years later, considers her "touched with a pernicious kind of madness" (148). Fiedler's scathingly sexist remark that Weil was "obviously marked even [though young] for the extreme comic role of our civilization: the old maid" (37) probably remains unsurpassed; it ignores the point made by Loades that "sexual virginity [can have] significance as a symbol of revolution against coercion" ("Simone Weil - Sacrifice" 131).[36]

Gender has clearly played a role in the assessment of Weil's life and thought but it is in the main in more recent work on Weil, especially by women writers,[37] that gender has been foregrounded as a significant aspect of how Weil's writings are read. Most of these women critics (Oates is a noteable exception) take the line that there is no point in "condemning Weil as a 'case'" (Bregman 92); rather, her life and work express "an aspect of human experience with which many women grapple" (Van Herik 81). Weil's position - even if that of "a sick, desperate, broken woman" (Oates 158) - thus becomes representative of women's experience in Western culture:

> If Weil's thought implicitly expresses a particular sensitivity to women's situation, it also criticizes the situation in which women are cultural symbols for the edible, split into vulnerable

[35] There is an interesting overlap between these judgments of Weil and Showalter's discussion of how intelligent, frustrated women between 1890 and 1914 were regarded (*The Female Malady* ch.s 5 and 6).

[36] Isak Dinesen's short story "The Blank Page" highlights the possibility of interpreting sexual virginity as an expression of resistance (*Last Tales* 99-105).

[37] Jeffrey Eaton apart, writers such as Bregman, Cliff, Van Herik, Loades, and Murray have been mainly responsible for this development.

> and devouring, impure and nourishing. This criticism is that the situation is impossible. (Van Herik, "Simone Weil's Religious Imagery" 278)

Weil's representativeness for women's experience in Western culture is a function of her (and everywoman's) inheritance of that tradition's symbols (though not necessarily the use Weil puts them to[38]). Weil's specific need to "derive as rich a significance as possible from any one image" (Little, "The Symbolism of the Cross" 175) translates into an "enactment of biblical text" in her life (Loades, "Simone Weil - Sacrifice" 122) which ultimately conduces to her death. Weil's "dualistic style" (Bregman 94), for which, according to Elshtain, she is "indebted to classical philosophic anthropology, a hierarchy on top of which perched the rational soul" ("Vexation of Weil" 202), can be read in two ways: 1) it militates against Weil in so far as it aligns her with a negative image of the feminine and what it connotes, as opposed to the positive one associated with the masculine;[39] it also reinforces the notion of detachment of mind from body, and individual from collective. 2) It can serve as a "vehicle for protest" against "the crippling of feminine identity through enclosure in self - - and family" (Bregman 113). In other words, it is possible to read Weil's work and life both as colluding in and as protesting against traditional paradigms of femininity.

Whichever line one takes on Weil, it seems impossible now to ignore either the issue of gender or her actual life. This returns one to the need to look at the socio-historical context in which she operated. Feminist criticism as far back as Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) has pointed to the importance of the social,

[38] Loades in "Eucharistic Sacrifice" and Oates in "May God grant" have pointed out the problematic in Weil's appropriation of religious vocabulary.

[39] This dualism can be traced back to the Pythagorean "table of ten opposites" (Aristotle, 986a, trans. Ross) which opposes "limit/unlimited, odd/even, one/plurality, right/left, male/female, resting/moving, straight/curved, light/darkness, good/bad, square/oblong." For a discussion of the meritocrity involved see Burkert 51-2.

historical, and economic existence of women's lives for determining the images they project in the cultural products they create;[40] in this century, for the purposes of this study especially after the second Women's Liberation movement,[41] much emphasis has been placed on the material conditions which fuel women's creativity.[42] Weil herself wrote a number of texts relating material conditions to individual consciousness, and seeing the two as inextricably linked.[43] In view of this it seems appropriate to examine Weil's and Murdoch's writings in the light of their personal backgrounds, and I shall now move on to highlight what appear to be the relevant factors in this context.[44]

The material conditions governing Murdoch's and Weil's lives were, in many respects, rather similar. Born within a decade of each other (1919 and 1909 respectively), they grew up in well-to-do middle class families. Both fathers were professionals, Murdoch's a civil servant, Weil's a doctor; both their mothers remained at home after marriage, taking on the traditional bourgeois role of housewife. Murdoch and Weil were the only female children in their families, Murdoch being an only child, Weil having one brother, nine months older than herself. Both the Murdochs and the Weils were at a remove from the country and culture in which they lived because of their ties to another one. The Murdochs came to England from Ireland, a fact whose significance has been highlighted by Murdoch:

> . . . I grew up as a Londoner, and it's only lately that I've imagined how strange that was . . . I feel as I grow older that

[40] It is worth remembering here that Murdoch herself rejects those literary and philosophical traditions which ignore social and historical particularities.

[41] See, for instance, Newton and Rosenfelt (xv-xx) in *Feminist Criticism and Social Change*.

[42] The best known earlier example is, of course, Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1928).

[43] They include *L'Enracinement* (1949), *La Condition Ouvrière* (1951), *Oppression et Liberté* (1955), *Ecrits Historiques et Politiques* (1960).

[44] Recent work by writers such as Coles, Van Herik, Murray does the same though with different emphases from mine.

> we were wanderers, and I've only recently realized that I'm a kind of exile, a displaced person. I identify with exiles.[45] (Haffenden 200-1)

As Murdoch feels alienated from English society by virtue of her Irish descent so Weil was alienated from French society by virtue of her Jewish background, a fact whose importance was brought home to her very drastically when her family had to leave France for New York in 1942 to escape persecution by the Nazis.

For both women the male members of their families were important for their early intellectual development. Murdoch reports: "My father was an extremely good and clever man, and we used to discuss books when I was very young, the *Alice* books and so on." (Haffenden 200) Cabaud in his biography of Weil cites the following two incidents about Simone and her brother André:

> . . . there were intellectual contests with André. They learnt Racine by heart, and in the evening they would challenge each other to recitations of whole scenes. The one who 'dried' up got a smack from the other.
>
> [André] had taught himself to read, and one day he decided to teach Simone, who was then six, as a birthday present for Doctor Weil . . . On New Year's Day, 1915, André said in front of his father: 'Go on, Simone, read the newspaper to Papa!' 'Papa' was astonished. Simone was actually able to read, although slowly. (18)

Neither Murdoch nor Weil talk about their mothers in an intellectual context though both seem very fond of them.[46]

Murdoch and Weil attended élite educational institutions in their countries, Somerville College, Oxford, and Newnham College, Cambridge, in

[45] Elsewhere Murdoch has even said, "I'm profoundly Irish and I've been conscious of this all my life, and in a mode of being Irish which has produced a lot of very distinguished thinkers and writers." (Caen 93)

[46] Murdoch talks of "my darling mother" (Haffenden 200). André Weil told Malcolm Muggeridge that Weil tried very hard to live up to her mother's notion that she was her "mother's thing" (674).

Murdoch's case, and the Lycée Henri IV and the École Normale Supérieure in Weil's. Both subsequently became teachers of philosophy but whereas Weil taught in schools and the equivalent of the WEA (Workers' Educational Association) Murdoch taught at university level only. Both women combined their careers as teachers of philosophy with another one of at least equal importance; Weil was a political activist, and Murdoch is a novelist.

Murdoch and Weil experienced World War II as young adults and found themselves in foreign countries involved in war-related work. Murdoch joined the wartime relief operation UNRRA (United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration) in 1944, and worked with refugees in Belgium and Austria. Weil, together with her parents, left France for New York in 1942, and then at the end of that year went by herself to London to join the French Resistance movement there.

Weil died of the cumulative effects of starvation in 1943 at the age of 34.[47] She had never married and had had no children. Murdoch married an eminent Oxford don, John Bayley, in 1956; they have no children.

Two things emerge from these comparisons:

a) Weil and Murdoch were born into a socio-historical period that allowed women ways out of their "traditional" roles as wives and mothers through their access to education and the possibility of subsequent careers. World War II made necessary the employment of women in war-related activities[48] and, from a geographical viewpoint alone, increased women's mobility which in turn widened their experience. Women were making inroads into traditionally male preserves and success within these was at least in part a function of how effectively women could integrate themselves into these worlds.

b) Both women experienced multiple alienation: as women in male-dominated professions; as cultural aliens coming from outside the country they were brought up in and then moving on to yet another country, even if for a limited period of time.

[47] For details see Pétrement 535-8.

[48] This was in many ways a replication of events during World War I (see Ray Strachey, *The Cause* esp. 337-85).

In a sense the opportunities afforded under a) of necessity led to the experience of alienation, and with that to the sense of being an outsider. In the case of Weil and Murdoch an awareness of being an outsider, of having to engage with the notion of otherness, did (and continues to) exist, creating a conflict for the two women. In the following pages I shall look at how each of them dealt with and resolved this conflict, proposing that they did so by on the one hand suppressing their sexual selves, i.e. trying to be "neutral" in terms of their sexual identity, and, on the other, adopting a personal philosophy that endorsed and positively reinforced attributes traditionally assigned to women.[49] I shall suggest that it was at least in part because of their similarity of approach to a shared problem - how (not) to be a woman in a man's world - that Weil's writings had an influence on Murdoch.

"Intrusion into the male sphere" is what Murdoch shares with Weil. But where Murdoch maintains a strict separation between the private and the public, the personal and the professional (in interviews, for example, she virtually never talks about herself), Weil conflated private and public; she enacted in her personal life the maxims she set up in her writings. Murdoch's entry into male domains was through her work in the Treasury (as Todd in *Iris Murdoch* puts it: "she followed her father into the Civil Service" 16), her work with UNRRA (like many such "job opportunities" for women this, too, was a function of the war), becoming an academic at Oxford University, and teaching in a virtually all-male subject. Weil's entry into male domains came through being an activist in the trade union movement[50], through working on farms and in factories, through a short-lived participation in the Spanish Civil War and in the French Resistance movement in exile in London during World War II, as well as through the kind of writings she produced. In both

[49] Ellmann has devoted a whole book, *Thinking about Women*, to discussing these.

[50] Murray comments upon how unusual this was for a middle class woman in 1928/9 ("The Jagged Edge" 16).

instances the women were brought face to face with the problem of how to accommodate being female in these contexts. Murdoch, as I have suggested above, did so by arguing with what she found, existentialism and linguistic analysis, on their own terms, accepting the methods but rejecting the content. This could be considered a compromise designed for survival. In Weil's case things worked out rather differently.

What comes across in all accounts of Weil is the degree to which she was what might be called a "front-liner", somebody who not only wanted to be in the thick of things but also wanted to be *active*[51] there. She was prepared to take high risks,[52] especially as regarded her own person.[53] This desire for high-risk activity was coupled with great selflessness and, for various reasons to be discussed below, with constant frustration. These three things, the desire for active service without regard to self, general selflessness, and frustration, seem to me to be at the centre of a continual gender-based conflict which Weil experienced throughout her life and to which she eventually succumbed.[54]

[51] Van Herik comments upon the discrepancy between her thought and her life in this point ("Looking, Eating, and Waiting" 79).

[52] To Maurice Schumann she explained this by writing, "Any really useful work, not requiring technical expertise but involving a high degree of hardship and danger, would suit me perfectly. Hardship and danger are essential because of my particular mentality. . . That is a necessary condition before I can exert my capacity for work. . . It is unfortunate to have that sort of character; but that is really how I am, and I can do nothing about it; it is something too essential in me to be modified." (*Seventy Letters* 156-7)

[53] See Pétrement 228-9, 271, 273, 274.

[54] Loades, on the contrary, suggests that towards the end of her life Weil "had begun to realize that there were resources by which to live" but that Weil's beginning understanding of "an alliance between matter and real emotions" rather than their dissociation came "too late" ("Eucharistic Sacrifice" 52).

Weil died, in the final analysis, of starvation (Pétrement 526-8).[55] I would like to suggest that one way of reading her death[56] is as the culmination of a life-long attempt to come to terms with the conflict detailed above, and that Weil simply abandoned the fight in the last stages of her life.

The young Weil[57] was, by all accounts, a competitive child, desirous of contest and achievement. Cabaud in his biography of her cites many instances where she engaged in intellectual combat with her brother (18). Weil considered her brother a genius and felt intellectually overshadowed by him, a factor which made her feel very insecure according to her "Spiritual Autobiography":

[55] There has been some discussion as to whether or not Weil could be described as anorexic (e.g. Loades, "Simone Weil -Sacrifice" 132; Van Herik, "Looking, Eating, and Waiting" 81-4; Coles, *Simone Weil: A Modern Pilgrimage* 26-35). The advantage of such classification is that it points to the gender specificity of Weil's condition as it "rarely occurs in males" (Colman 143), thus reinforcing the appropriateness of a gender-based reading of Weil's life/thought. The one diagnostic criterion seemingly absent in Weil's case but crucial in terms of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* (DSM-III) is "an intense fear of becoming obese" (Colman 145).

[56] Loades reads Weil's death in terms of an "active reinterpretation" of biblical text ("Simone Weil - Sacrifice" 122).

[57] Weil's history, especially as regards her religious and sexual life, has an analogy in Wollstonecraft's *Mary*. Mary, prompted by "her sensibility" searches for "an object of love" which is "not to be found [on earth]" (5). "Her character early became singular and permanent. . . [she was] the slave of compassion." (7) "Her benevolence, indeed, knew no bounds; the distress of others carried her out of herself. . .", "her Creator was almost apparent to her senses in his works" (10), "she sat up . . . *conversing* with the Author of Nature" and "eagerly desired to commemorate the dying love of her great benefactor" (11). "In order to be enabled to gratify herself in the highest degree, she practised the most rigid economy, and had such power over her appetites and whims, that without any great effort she conquered them so entirely, that when her understanding or affections had an object, she almost forgot she had a body which required nourishment." (12) Mary, like Weil, actively practises charity, she is disappointed in friendship (8), she has an extreme, physical dislike of her husband (15, 17, 39), who has been forced upon her, and ultimately looks forward to entering heaven "*where there is neither marrying*, nor giving in marriage" (68).

> At fourteen I fell into one of those fits of bottomless despair which come with adolescence, and I seriously thought of dying because of the mediocrity of my natural faculties. The exceptional gifts of my brother, who had a childhood and youth comparable to those of Pascal, brought my own inferiority home to me. I did not mind having no visible successes, but what did grieve me was the idea of being excluded from that transcendent kingdom to which only the truly great have access and wherein truth abides. I preferred to die rather than live without that truth. After months of inward darkness, I suddenly had the everlasting conviction that no matter what human being, even though practically devoid of natural faculties, can penetrate to the kingdom of truth reserved for genius, if only he longs for truth and perpetually concentrates all his attention upon its attainment. He thus becomes a genius too, even though for lack of talent his genius cannot be visible from outside. Later on, when the strain of the headaches caused the feeble faculties I possess to be invaded by a paralysis which I was quick to imagine was probably incurable, the same conviction led me to persevere for ten years in an effort of concentrated attention which was practically unsupported by any hope of results. (WOG 17)

I quote this passage at length because it is extraordinarily expressive of Weil's desire to enter the world inhabited by her brother André from which she felt herself debarred. It also illustrates the conflict of being (un)like the other which Weil experienced. One way of conceptualizing this conflict is in terms of some of the ideas on expulsion and rejection examined by Kristeva in *Revolution in Poetic Language* as they seem pertinent to Weil's representation of her spiritual past.

The exclusion which Weil talks about presupposes the possibility of inclusion, the possibility of oneness, at the same time as constituting the point of differentiation, "the key moment shattering unity" (*Revolution* 147). Therefore "its law is one of returning, as opposed to one of becoming; it returns only to separate again immediately and thus appear as an impossible forward movement" (147). This "impossible

forward movement" is in part expressed in Weil's later perseverance "for ten years . . . practically unsupported by any hope of results." Weil's desire to be included, as the above passage demonstrates, was, even in the terms in which she conceives of "the kingdom", fantastical as well as out of the question. She could not be André, she could not become other. Yet her desire for inclusion in the symbolic order she sets up through her idea of the "kingdom of truth" is such that she is willing to make the quantum leap "no matter what human being . . . can penetrate to the kingdom of truth", thus subverting the symbolic order she herself has constructed (it does not, after all, take genius to become part of it). Implicit in this, "the economy of the subject bound up with those fantasies that [dissolve] the symbolic" (*Revolution* 149-50), is what Kristeva calls "the *jouissance* of destruction" (150); the desire to subvert that which excludes constitutes an act of aggression not only against the excluding but against that which is excluded (it defines itself through the excluding), i.e. against the self. Such aggression, in so far as it expresses a recognition of the existence of the other, that from which you are excluded, affirms the existence of this other. A "dialectical heterogeneity" (*Revolution* 155) is created which, through its dialogic nature, its perpetual positing of exluding and excluded, can result in stasis; "it ensures . . . a *threshold of constancy: a boundary*, a restraint around which difference will be set up . . ." (160) Moving beyond this "dialectical heterogeneity", according to Kristeva, means either "[placing oneself] under the law of the father" (156) - here, becoming like André which is impossible - or constantly returning to rejection, suffering, shattering (*Revolution* 156). In other words, Weil constructs a narrative of her life that sets her up in a no-win situation: obliteration of the self, or constant suffering. She found herself attempting to combine the latter with the former as is evident from the following account by Pétrement:

> As for the plans Weil had already formed, her whole conception of what she wanted to do with her life, it was - as she herself later said - a great misfortune to have been born a female . . . Her family would chaff her affectionately about her wish to be treated as a boy, and she too made jokes about it. Her parents called her "Simon", "our son number two", and "our *cagne* boy."

> [also spelt *khâgne* = school] When Simone wrote to her mother while at the Lycée Henri IV, she even went so far as to speak of herself in the masculine gender and to sign her letters "your respectful son." . . . It should be said furthermore that Mme. Weil had tried to develop masculine virtues in her daughter instead of a feminine personality. (27)

What is worth pointing out here is the underlying acceptance of socio-culturally endorsed forms of gender stereotyping with its implication of an inevitability of destiny based on sex, i.e. the notion that one has to be a particular sex to be able to be and do certain things. This acceptance of specific gender roles may well be at the root of Weil's ultimate failure to come to terms with her self.

From early on Weil was "determined to be a man as much as possible" (Pétrement 28);[58] this desire was supported by her parents, especially her mother.[59] Her materially comfortably off parents (able, for example, to finance prolonged stays in hotels during vacations and during their flight from France in 1941) could indulge Simone to the extent of giving money to destitute people and for good causes whenever Simone requested that (Pétrement 93, 416). Their indulgence of Simone was in part a function of her unwillingness to expand energy upon looking after herself, her rejection, on moral grounds, of concern with the material aspects of life, and her parents' resultant sense that Weil was incapable of taking care of herself. Pétrement indicates[60] that Mme. Weil would go with her daughter to wherever she had been posted as a teacher and help

[58] This desire seems to have stayed with Weil; Pétrement reports that in 1937 Weil in a letter to her parents describes how a young Franciscan near Assisi "told me the story of a woman in the fifteenth century who had gone up there dressed as a man, had been admitted as a Franciscan, and had lived there for twenty years. They discovered her real sex only after her death, and the Church then beatified her. If I had known this story before going up, who knows whether I might not have provided a new version of it?" (307)

[59] See Bregman 97-9.

[60] For a summary see Van Herik, "Simone Weil's Religious Imagery" 267-8.

her find accommodation and settle in (80). She also used to send her food parcels and give her money.[61] Whenever she had over-exerted herself, Weil would return to the bosom of her family to recuperate, often holidaying with them. She was devoted to her parents; Pétrement reports her having said to them on leaving them in New York to come to London in 1942: "If I had several lives, I would have devoted one of them to you, but I have only one life." (489) She wrote regularly to them throughout her life and, aware of their concern for her, kept secret from them her physical condition and deterioration to the very end.[62]

Much in Weil's background is common to women inflicting starvation on themselves.[63] Typically, according to Lawrence (*The Anorexic Experience* 11), anorexia occurs among women in their teens and twenties who come from affluent middle class Western backgrounds. ". . . not only are the families of anorexics usually materially quite comfortable, but they are normally very caring and concerned as well . . . the families we come across are families who take their responsibilities seriously and want the best for their children" (Lawrence 60). This caring attitude, apparently, manifests itself particularly in the relationship between mother and daughter with the mother often being "too good" (63), anticipating the daughter's needs to the extent that the latter never has to assert them.[64] But expressing one's needs

[61] Pétrement cites evidence for this on 81, 97, 99, 152-4.

[62] André Weil told Malcolm Muggeridge that the news of Weil's death was "completely unexpected. To the point that since I knew that the lady who had sent me the cable, Mme Closon, had had some mental problems at one time, I wondered whether this was a fantasy." (674)

[63] See Van Herik, "Looking, Eating, and Waiting" 81-4.

[64] Compare André Weil's statement, "It had always been necessary for my mother to be around her as much as possible to see to it that she fed herself, even in days when rations were not talked about." (679) with Kristeva's comment, "food is the oral object (the abject) that sets up archaic relationships between a human being and the other, its mother, who wields a power that is as vital as it is fierce" (*Powers* 75-6). Refusing food can thus be interpreted as a resistance to the power of the mother.

> . . . is fundamental to acquiring a sense of power, of ability to act on and in the world, rather than being a passive spectator. Further, the ability of the mother to allow the child to experience her separateness is essential for the baby to develop a sense of self and autonomy.[65] (64)

Pétrement's account of Weil's relationship with her mother describes it as one where each was constantly concerned and preoccupied with the other. It has to be remembered in this context that Weil put herself through a series of privations which did not arise from *necessity*; they were not the consequence of real material needs but constituted a working out of emotional and intellectual responses to particular situations.[66] Her parents seem to have supported the ideological stance Weil adopted of "suffering with those who suffer" and "understanding through first hand experience", and acted as a safety net for her (Pétrement 153). This did not diminish the real physical agonies Weil suffered while working in factories and on farms but psychologically it must have made quite a difference: after all, any hardship she endured she suffered *voluntarily*; it was endable if not through her own choice then by her parents' decision if or when she became too weak to maintain control over her own life. Weil, of course, tried to maintain control over her own life and did so partly by simply not telling her parents how she really was during crisis points in her life. Her parents, however, knew what her life was like. Weil, in the end, created a double bind by on the one hand putting herself in situations that were anxiety provoking for her parents and, on the other, reassuring them that things were fine. "Forcing" her parents to find out the "truth" of

[65] Alice Miller in *The Drama of the Gifted Child* provides a vivid account of what happens when a child is not allowed to express her/his needs.

[66] Weil believed in doing violence to oneself as part of "training the animal in oneself" (NB II 425). She maintained, "Methods of violence directed against the self are only admissible either when they emanate directly from the reasoning faculty, or else when they are forced upon one by some irresistible impulsion; but then it is not the self whence the violence actually proceeds. The first and most necessary form of violence done to the self consists of carrying out, in fact, what one clearly represents to oneself as being one's duty." (NB II 425-6)

her situation for themselves, Weil ensured their permanent attention. This, according to Lawrence, is typical for anorexics; when mothers and daughters are very close, the mothers are unable to resist the demands their daughters make on them and feel continually responsible for them. The daughters, by not looking after themselves, behave as though they need total care and the mothers find themselves consenting "to a kind of union with their daughters which amounts to a life's work" (69-70).

The result of such a problematic child-parent relationship is that "the sense of self and ability to form relations with others are likely to be more fragile and impaired" (Lawrence 72). An impaired sense of self and a difficulty in forming relations with others are both in evidence as regards Weil. Weil appears to have had an intense need for affection and friendship (Pétrement 222-3); at the same time she hated being an "object of desire" (ibid. 221), and seems to have had no purely emotional relationships in her life. From Pétrement one gets the impression that Weil's friendships tended to be intellectual enterprises dominated by Weil's current intellectual preoccupations. Where ideological differences reached a certain level friendships finished (Pétrement 70-2). In her relationships with other people Weil was extremely sensitive, thus easily hurt, and defensive. To Father Perrin, "the Dominican priest who became her friend and counsellor in 1942 when she was waiting in Marseilles for a boat to take her and her parents to America" (WOG vii), she wrote:

> I think that except you, all those human beings for whom I have made it easy to hurt me through my friendship, have amused themselves by doing so, frequently or occasionally, consciously or unconsciously, but all of them at some time or another. Where I recognized it to be conscious, I took a knife and cut out the friendship, without however warning the person in question. (WOG 40)

Although immediately after this passage Weil provides a rational explanation as to why people tend to hurt each other, and despite her injunction to herself to love those who hurt her (FLN 340), it seems that she was unable to translate the intellectual appreciation of this problem into a greater degree of emotional tolerance towards her friends.

Weil's emotional sensitivity was coupled with a revulsion towards physical contact which manifested itself from childhood onwards (Pétrement 11). Such revulsion obviously has an alienating effect in interpersonal relations; its impact can be seen in the way in which Pétrement records the very few occasions when Weil actually did become physically demonstrative with her (194, 228).

Weil was ill at ease with the physical side of life.[67] One wonders if the awkwardness and clumsiness which interfered tremendously with the physical tasks she set herself were the result of a rejection of her self as a physical entity rather than an innate lack of motor skills; she certainly strove to reduce the importance of her body in her life to a minimum, keeping its size small by not eating, setting herself tasks that ignored her bodily limitations. She deprived herself of physical comforts, or indeed, necessities, whenever she was allowed to, rejecting food, heat, forsaking her bed for the floor.[68] This kind of behaviour, according to Lawrence common among anorexics (20), is associated with what she calls "a rather over-developed moral sense" (17): because "we are all encouraged to regard self-denial as a 'good' thing" and "self-indulgence is almost universally seen as a sign of moral weakness" (33), and because "the physical side of human nature is regarded as inherently sinful and impure" (34):

> . . . in the pursuit of moral worthiness, women must find a way to dissociate [themselves] from [their] bodies. (34)

Thus "anorexia satisfies the moral need for self-denial" (35). And indeed, if one looks at Weil's reasoning concerning her activities one finds that its main thrust is presented by her as a moral one. At Puy, for example, she did not heat her room because she believed that the unemployed could not afford heating (Pétrement 81). In London she refused to eat more than what she took to be the ration dealt out to

[67] In NB II she wrote, "The revolutions of the soul are disturbed by what enters into the body and what comes out of it - food and sex." (609)

[68] See Pétrement 81, 97, 99, 152-4.

French people back home (ibid. 513).[69]

Another reason for Weil acting as she did may have been her sense of powerlessness and lack of control over her own situation.[70] Throughout her life she was not only dependent on others for the realization of her plans but also found herself thwarted by those she appealed to for help in her endeavours, due to their estimation of her abilities. She was watched over covertly and overtly as a protective measure by relations and friends. Typically, she got virtually all her farm and factory jobs through connections, people high up in institutional and/or social hierarchies whom she or friends of hers knew (Pétrement 224, 253). Later, in exile in London, there was a complete rejection of her plans for the formation of an organization of front-line nurses; similarly, her desire to be sent on a mission to France was not fulfilled. She was judged to be unfit for such an undertaking because of her physical clumsiness, her Semitic appearance, and her over-zealousness in action (Pétrement 514, 515, 516-7). These rejections in London coincided with a time when "she was sure that affliction and a certain kind of death were her vocation" (ibid. 516).

It is possible to suggest that this ultimate resignation had been foreshadowed by Weil's entry into Christianity, which she characterized as follows:

> . . . the conviction was suddenly borne in upon me that Christianity is pre-eminently the religion of slaves, that slaves cannot help belonging to it, and I among others. (WOG 20)

Embracing Christianity on realizing that it is "the religion of slaves"

[69] Weil, in fact, came to resemble the figure of Petra in Stephen Spender's play *Trial of a Judge*, a saintly Communist figure, who is killed by the fascists. His killers say of Petra:

> Inferior of physique, he coughed
> His guts out, whilst about the room he crept
> And wove his plots from sterile cleverness.
> To judge from books and papers spread around,
> Petra was like an angel, without food
> Existing singly from his light of mind. (17)

[70] Loades comments on this in "Simone Weil - Sacrifice" 131.

and categorizing herself as a slave, Weil accepted the role of the slave, the 'looked-at' in Sartrean terms, thus allowing herself to be fixed by other people's gaze; in other words, her entry into Christianity could be viewed as marking the beginning of the end of her attempts to defy others' definitions of herself.

Weil's gradual defeat on an actional level (i.e. her physical inability to work on farms, in factories, as part of the working class, trade union, and political movements) coincided with her placing increasing value on her intellectual abilities, and her movement towards a philosophical and religious position expressive of the typical experiences of being a victim: a sense of powerlessness, helplessness, suffering, and passivity. This can be read as an attempt by Weil to reconcile her experiential and her theoretical position.[71] Her attempts to undertake demeaning jobs and join the front-lines of the Spanish Civil War and World War II had been actively resisted. Significantly, she fought against having to confine herself to what she was best at, using her mind and writing, and regarded these activities as stop-gaps during periods when she was unable to engage in action. This attitude helped to promote a rift in Weil; having been marked out as a great achiever at an early stage in her life (Cabaud 25-6), a common feature among anorexics (Lawrence 52), Weil failed to live up to these expectations on an actional level.[72] Yet she was desperate for recognition, and wanting to be active was a function of her responding to her own needs rather than

[71] Murray, slightly uncharitably, suggests that Weil "felt the need to rationalize [her] phobias and make them a part of her religious development" (26).

[72] Part of her dilemma was her internalization of the over-riding importance of deeds over words in Christian religion. Thomas à Kempis makes the point that "at the Day of Judgment, we shall not be asked what we have read, but what we have done" (*The Imitation of Christ* 31). At the same time, Weil developed a complex attitude to action, considering "good action" only "that which one cannot do otherwise than do" (NB I 96) but also insisting that "we do not rise through our acts, but solely through our contemplation of God" (NB II 436). She also maintained, "'Doing good.' Whatever I do, I know perfectly clearly that what I am doing is not 'good.' For what I do cannot possibly be good, from the mere fact that it is I who do it. Only he does good who is good; he who is not good cannot do good. And 'God alone is good.'" (NB II 417)

those of others.[73] Pétrement reports, for example, that Weil was pleased when a mission she herself had volunteered to carry out but for which she had been rejected because of her unsuitability was cancelled: "She was jealous of a danger that she wanted to keep all for herself." (517) In the last stages of her life Weil manifested a similar attitude towards her intellectual work:

> What preoccupied her during these days when she felt her chances for living rapidly waning was the thought of the truths she had spoken and which it seemed to her had not been heard, and perhaps never would be . . . In one of her July letters she implies that nobody pays enough attention to her ideas. She is certain that there is in her "a deposit of pure gold that must be handed on."[74] (Pétrement 534)

Weil's frustrations at an actional level influenced her thinking. While working in factories she had become keenly aware of the total dissociation of thought and action in manual labour, turning men into slaves of the machines they no longer understood, reducing them via the rhythm of the machines to a moment-by-moment existence and killing all ability to think (Murdoch has captured this in her descriptions of Rosa Keepe's work in the factory in *The Flight from the Enchanter*). Weil drew the conclusion that "what lowers the intelligence degrades the entire man" (Pétrement 232). Weil described the effect of working in factories:

> After my year in the factory [1934-5] . . . I was, as it were, in pieces, body and soul . . . What I went through there marked me in so lasting a way that still today when any human being . . . speaks to me without brutality, I cannot help having the impression that there must be a mistake . . . There I received

[73] Witness her desparate plea to Maurice Schumann, "I beseech you to get for me, if you can, the amount of hardship and danger which can save me from being wasted by sterile chagrin. In my present situation I cannot live. It very nearly makes me despair. I cannot believe it is impossible to get me what I need. It is unlikely there is so much demand for painful and dangerous jobs that not one is available. And even if that is so, it would be easy to make one." (*Seventy Letters* 156)

[74] This is taken from Weil's letter to her parents, dated 18 July 1943 (see *Seventy Letters* 196-7).

> forever the mark of slavery . . . Since then I have always regarded myself as a slave. (WOG 19-20)

Immediately after this period Weil went on holiday with her parents and had a conversion experience which turned her towards Christianity. Her description of that event indicates that she saw Christianity as the spiritual or religious expression of her sense of being a slave. Weil had come to see herself as part of an oppressed, powerless group and, in identifying herself with that group, accepted her position as a victim, as someone who was controlled rather than in control herself. Embracing Christianity at this point was the "logical" conclusion.

Weil recorded two other "contacts with Catholicism which really counted" (Pétrement 215) - mystical experiences she underwent in a state of mental and physical exhaustion, a state where she was clearly "out of control". One took place in Assisi where she spent a couple of days in 1937. There, in the chapel of Santa Maria degli Angeli, where Saint Francis had often prayed, "something stronger than I was compelled me for the first time in my life to go down on my knees" (WOG 20). The other experience occured during the Easter week of 1938 while she was staying at Solesmes. At the time she was suffering terribly from headaches but when attending the liturgical services she found that "by an extreme effort of concentration I was able to rise above this wretched flesh, to leave it to suffer by itself, heaped up in a corner, and to find a pure and perfect joy in the unimaginable beauty of the chanting and the words" (WOG 20). According to Weil, "the thought of the Passion of Christ" entered her then; in the defeat of the flesh by the spirit she saw the reflection of Jesus on the Cross.

During her days at Solesmes Weil met an Englishman[75] who introduced her to the metaphysical poets. Of these she liked George Herbert[76] best; her favourite poems, apparently, were *Love (III)* [*Love bade me welcome*], *Discipline*, *Bitter Sweet*, *The Collar*, *Dialogue*, *Justice*, *Denial*, *Affliction*, and *Redemption* (Cabaud 169). Many of the titles speak for themselves;

[75] The person in question was Charles G. Bell (see *Seventy Letters* 102).

[76] Diogenes Allen has discussed the similarities in Weil's and Herbert's religious stance in "George Herbert and Simone Weil".

they give expression to the intense personal struggle of the individual vis-à-vis the will of God. The direct address that Herbert employs in his confrontation with God and the recurrent use of dialogue form impress upon the reader the unmediated personalized quality of the relationship of the anguished soul to God. It is perhaps for this reason that Herbert's poetry struck a chord in Weil[77] whose anti-dogmatic approach to religion was hostile to mediated or symbolic expression of spiritual experience. A direct naked confrontation reflected her inclination to introspection at times of crisis as well as verbalising the conflicts she must have felt in the face of her inability to realize, from a purely physical viewpoint, what she intellectually conceived of.

Weil's most cherished poem was *Love bade me welcome*. She wrote to Father Perrin that during one of the recitations of this poem "Christ himself came down and took possession of me":

> . . . I had never foreseen the possibility of that, of a real contact, person to person, here below, between a human being and God. (WOG 21)

Weil continued to have mystical experiences and visitations in the years 1940-1 (WOG 24).

It is difficult to know what to make of these experiences. Weil herself was well aware of "the power of suggestion that is in prayer" but said that "God in his mercy had prevented me from reading the mystics, so that it should be evident to me that I had not invented this absolutely unexpected contact" (WOG 22).

Perhaps the most striking feature that links all of Weil's religious experiences is her sense of the imposition of another will upon hers, the abdication of responsibility in favour of a passive, receptive attitude in which Weil stopped being an agent. Many of these religious experiences occured at times of high emotional, physical, and mental stress in Weil's life, as did her final starving of herself to death. One could therefore suggest that both at the times of these experiences and in the final months of Weil's life "issues about autonomy, independence and self-esteem had come to a head" (Lawrence 49), and that at those

[77] Van Herik also points to the importance of the imagery (looking and eating) as a source of appeal for Weil ("Looking, Eating, and Waiting" 78-9).

times Weil had "given up trying to pretend to be independent.[78] The struggle to make sense of life as an autonomous adult[79] [had] been abandoned" (Lawrence 73).

As Weil began to face her powerlessness her attitude towards her writings changed. She had always been an avid preserver of those writings - for example, she asked friends to look after her manuscripts before she left for the United States (Pétrement 462). Now she stopped claiming the "authorship" for what she wrote and described herself instead as instrumental, as a tool used to express certain truths which exist independently of her.[80] In a harrowing letter to Father Perrin she wrote:

> If no one consents to take any notice of the thoughts which, though I cannot explain why, have settled in so inadequate a being as myself, they will be buried with me. If, as I believe, they contain some truth, it will be a pity. I am prejudicial to them. The fact that they happen to be in me prevents people from paying any attention to them.
>
> . . . I should like you to transfer the charity you have so generously bestowed upon me to that which I bear within me, and which I like to think is of far more value than I am myself. It is a great sorrow for me to fear that the thoughts which have come down into me should be condemned to death through

[78] In NB II Weil wrote, "'Identification'. . .: we are born in order to 'identify' ourselves. Sin consists in identifying oneself with what is not God. One is never oneself. One is always something else. There is no egoism. But this something else has got to be God. Only in this way can one really be oneself." (483)

[79] Against the notion that autonomy (even if not in the extreme form to which Weil wished to take it) is an indicator of maturity Waugh posits that "The definition of self through relations with others, identity as mutually defined, and the centrality of primary affectional relationships are not, in fact, pathological positions, but essential for the survival of the human race." (44) See also Grimshaw, "Autonomy and Identity in Feminist Thinking" (Griffiths 90-108).

[80] This is as common a position for mystics (see ch. 4) as it is for the Romantic artist (see M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp* 187-225).

contagion of my inadequacy and wretchedness. I never read the story of the barren fig tree[81] without trembling. I think that it is a portrait of me. In it also, nature was powerless, and yet it was not excused. Christ cursed it.

. . . But who knows if those thoughts which are in me are not sent, partly at any rate, so that you should make some use of them? They can only be destined for someone who has a little friendship for me, and friendship which is true. Because as regards other people, in a sense I do not exist for them. I am the colour of dead leaves, like certain insects which go unnoticed. (WOG 46-7)

A number of things are striking here: the notion of having been a passive recipient of the *truth* coupled with a sense of the complete inadequacy of the self as a vehicle to spread this truth which is resolved through a dissociation of mind and body; Weil describes her mind as filled from without and above ("thoughts which have come down into me") and therefore no personal merit attaches to Weil for having these thoughts. Yet they are the only aspect of herself that Weil considers to be valuable. She sees herself as a person as completely disregarded by other people and worthless ("I am the colour of dead leaves, like certain insects which go unnoticed."). She appears to have felt that the only way she could get people to attend to her ideas was by dissociating them from herself. At the same time, by suggesting that she herself was not the author of her ideas but merely an instrument through which *the truth* was spoken she gave up as a source of self-validation the only part of herself of which she thought highly. She was extinguishing herself.

[81] Loades has pointed out affinities in use of imagery between Weil and Sylvia Plath ("Simone Weil - Sacrifice" 126-7); Plath uses the image of the fig tree in *The Bell Jar*, saying, "I saw my life branching out before me like the green fig-tree in the story. from the tip of every branch, like a fat purple fig, a wonderful future beckoned and winked. . . I saw myself sitting in the crotch of this fig-tree, starving to death. just because I couldn't make up my mind which of the figs I would choose. I wanted each and every one of them, but choosing one meant losing all the rest, and as I sat there, unable to decide, the figs began to wrinkle and go black, and, one by one, they plopped to the ground at my feet." (80)

Lawrence in *The Anorexic Experience* provides some interesting comments on the way in which anorexics handle the relationship between their bodies and minds. She suggests that as the purposes of enduring physical hardships of an ascetic nature (such as Weil put herself through by refusing food, heat, proper beds etc.) are concerned with "freeing the soul out of the prison of the body", and as within Western culture women in pursuit of validating themselves must try to find ways of dissociating themselves from their bodies, anorexia can be regarded as an expression of the mind-body dualism being taken literally (34).[82] As suggested above Weil, towards the end of her life, seems to have seen no other way of ensuring that notice would be taken of her writings than to separate them from the physical entity that constituted herself. And, as one can see, this worked.

Why? Dale Spender in *Man Made Language* makes the point that

> The taboo on public writing for women has in essence been to exclude them from writing - for men! The dichotomy male/female, public/private is maintained by permitting women to write for a private audience (which can be extended to encompass other women) but discouraging them from writing for a public audience, that is men . . . regardless of the form *their* writing takes. (192, 193)

Weil's writing by its very nature was for a public, i.e. in Spender's terms a male, audience, because it addressed itself to organizations and issues dominated by men, such as governments, trade unions, philosophy, politics. Although many of these writings were published during her lifetime she was heard only by a small number of friends and like-minded people.[83] However impersonal in terms of style her essays on social, political, and philosophical issues were, they were still very much *her* writings, produced at a time when she had not yet turned to Christianity and could not claim divine inspiration as the source of her

[82] See also Bregman, "The Barren Fig Tree: Simone Weil and the Problem of Feminine Identity".

[83] See Fuerth Sulzbach, "Simone Weil: Primitive Christian" 345, or Godman, "Simone Weil" 67.

ideas. Therefore, an audience which accepted these writings had also to accept that their writer was young and female. By projecting herself as purely instrumental in relation to her later work Weil avoided this particular problem and (predictably?) she is better known as a mystic and writer of religiously inspired texts than as a writer of political treatises.[84]

Denying her authorship, describing herself as a tool, was, on one level, Weil's way of "rationalizing" (i.e. making acceptable) her writing. Additionally she invoked as her source one of the most powerful archetypal male images - God. And she bequeathed her work to two men, Gustave Thibon and Father Perrin. Thus it became a virtually all-male concern.[85] In effect, Weil gave to patriarchy what she considered to be its own[86] and in so doing ensured the survival of her work. The result of this complex process is perhaps most vividly illustrated in the introduction Thibon wrote for *Simone Weil As We Knew Her*. Thibon there "confirms" that Weil's writings were not hers:

> . . . it is no longer she who pronounces these words; it is the Spirit from above, into whose submissive instrument her body and soul are transformed; at those times of supreme inspiration the hand which writes and the mind which thinks have become nothing but a "link between mortal and immortal", an impersonal intermediary through which "the Creator and the creature exchange their secrets". (3)

[84] Springsted, *Simone Weil and the Suffering of Love* 4.

[85] After her death her work was promoted by writers such as Camus, Fiedler, and T.S. Eliot. Although a number of notable women writers have since made pronouncements on her, there is - as yet - little discussion concerning what Stevie Smith, Elizabeth Hardwick, or Joyce Carol Oates (to name a few) had to say on her.

[86] G. M. Tracy's opening sentence to "Simone Weil: A Mission in Charity" is, "The first reaction in approaching Simone Weil, in making contact with her, *even though that contact is made through the mediation of her foremost admirers - Gustave Thibon and Father Perrin* - is to shrink back within oneself, to recoil at the very outset." (97; emphasis added). Did she, after all, not "profit" enough "from her contact with that wise and well-balanced mind" of Gustave Thibon (T.S. Eliot, preface to *Need for Roots* xi)?

With this romantic description of Weil's role she is turned into a link in "the great chain of men"[87] For, as Thibon goes on to say:

> . . . she confided the greater part of her writings to our special care, and she gave them to us, not just as a deposit, but as a possession which she asked us to use as we saw fit. (7)

Patriarchy here not only reclaims its own but absorbs it through a process of assimilation. Thibon suggests (8) that his and Perrin's knowledge of Weil enabled them "to judge from within", "to distinguish what is essential from what is accidental" which is vitally important as "the greater part of Simone Weil's work came to us in the rough, without being shaped and prepared for publication". Inspired by a male authority (God), refined and processed by men (Thibon, Perrin), Weil's work became "acceptable" through a process of self-extinction she herself initiated. It prompted Thibon to the following comments:

> . . . it was Plato himself who said sadly of the written word: "Its father [*sic*!] is no longer there to defend it." But in that case does not the task of its defence devolve upon the friends of the "dead father", upon those to whom he confided what was in his heart and who dispose of his inheritance? (8)

Weil, who had always been a high risk taker, here took the risk of her work being treated by those to whom she had entrusted it in such a way as to change it beyond all recognition. But what did she have to lose? It is quite possible that her writings would have been completely lost if she had not done what she did; by setting specific people a specific task, to take care of her work, and by choosing people who were socially acceptable to carry out this work, Weil made a positive attempt to save her writings. This paid off.

What we see in the case of Weil is an initial attempt to enter male domains in competition with men (first her brother, then men in the various organizations and movements that she joined) through the denial of her female self. This denial takes the form of a dissociation of mind from body, and a retreat into the traditionally female role of instrument through which the spirit speaks. This goes together with a

[87] Freely adapted from Arthur O. Lovejoy's *The Great Chain of Being* (1933).

certain "feminization" in her writings, an overt embrace[88] of the values of a New Testament Christianity. Accepting traditional gender attributions, Weil never learnt how to be a woman in a man's world.

Murdoch, in contrast, solved this problem in part by keeping her private and public selves completely separate, by limiting her activities to doing what she herself had confidence in being able to do well, and by taking on male systems of thought on their own terms. She appropriated control where Weil abdicated it. At the same time in her philosophy we also find traits of New Testament Christianity, traits closer to traditional expectations of female than male behaviour.

In the following chapters I shall look at some of the aspects of this philosophy, namely, self-effacement, knowing the void, attention, detachment, preoccupations with power structures, authority and institutions as well as the relation between self and other as they occur in Weil's and Murdoch's work.

[88] Weil maintained that she had always acted in a Christian manner (WOG 41-2).

Chapter 2: Selflessness

Central to Weil's and Murdoch's philosophical stances is the notion of selflessness. In Weil's case it is linked closely to the evolution of her attitude towards religion. As already indicated Weil in a very conscious manner practised a disregard for her self[1] both as a spiritual and a physical entity from a very early age. Her theoretical framework for this stance was most fully developed and expressed in her writings on religion in the early 1940s.

Weil takes as her starting point the idea of divine Creation as renunciation:

> God could create only by hiding himself. Otherwise there would be nothing but himself. (GG 33)

She conceives of the Creation as possible only through God's absence, through His voluntary withdrawal which she interprets as "the most marvellous testimony of perfect love" (NB II 403). This love can be met only in the same terms: "We must reply to the absence of God, who is Love, by our own absence and love." (NB II 404) In other words, Weil's idea of selflessness is, in the first instance, based on a dialectic of love as it operates between God and His creature:

> Creation is an act of love and it is perpetual. At each moment our existence is God's love for us. But God can only love himself.[2] His love for us is love for himself through us. Thus, he who gives us our being loves in us the acceptance of not being. Our existence is made up only of his waiting for our acceptance not to exist. (GG 28)

Weil appears to maintain that God and his creation cannot co-exist within the same space: the presence of one means the absence of the other.

Through superimposing Virginia Woolf's depiction in *A Room Of One's Own* of why male writers represent women as inferior to men the

[1] See 78, 80 in this thesis.

[2] For a discussion of the idea of God loving only himself see McPherson, Friedman, Frenaud esp. 367-71, Blumenthal.

possibility of reading Weil's dialectic of love in gendered terms is brought into focus. Such a reading seems appropriate as Weil herself tended to represent the relationship between God and His creature in gendered terms (see FLN 141, 146, 287-8). Woolf notes the "looking-glass" function women have had for men, the necessity that women should reflect their glory, with the result that, in a sense, men writing about women are really writing about themselves (ch. 2). Given that God's relation to his creatures is mediated through the Word, the Bible, a book, Weil's description of the relationship between Creator and created (which in itself contains notions of hierarchy and dependency) parallels Woolf's of the relationship between male author and female character. One could, by extension, suggest that Weil's acceptance of the one relation signals a possible internalization of the other, or, indeed, came about as an expression of her conception of gender relations. Weil talks of God's need for his creatures:

> The presence of God. This should be understood in two ways. As Creator, God is present in everything which exists as soon as it exists. The presence for which God needs the co-operation of the creature is the presence of God, not as Creator but as Spirit. (GG 33)

The assertion of this need is, of course, also a form of self-assertion on the part of the believer in that God's need of his creatures validates their existence.[3]

According to Weil "we possess nothing in the world . . . except the power to say 'I'. That is what we have to give to God - in other words, to destroy." (GG 23) The destruction of the "I" which serves to make way for God is what Weil calls "decreation". Through our decreation God can re-enter this world. In the relationship between God and his creature absence is the source of presence, self-effacement brings the other into

[3] In the poem "A Vision (*thinking of Simone Weil*)" Adrienne Rich depicts Weil's vision as self-referential: "What is your own will that it can so fix you
why are you forced to take this test
over and over and call it God
why not call it you and get it over
you with your hatred of enforcement
and your fear of blinding?" (*A Wild Patience has Taken Me This Far* 50-1)

being.[4] Selflessness, then, is both purposeful and other-directed; it is a function of relationships between things and/or persons (GG 36) rather than an expression of a particular sense or non-sense of self. It rests on the premise that we accept as given that the other cannot exist unless we absent ourselves; if we accept and act upon this we take this relationship as being *necessarily* so, and, as Weil calls it, "obey the relationship of things" (GG 43). Our actions are then predicated upon an obedience to necessity, we cannot do otherwise. Similarly Murdoch in *The Sovereignty of Good* talks of the need for the absence of self so that the other can be ("We cease to be in order to attend to the existence of something else, a natural object, a person in need." 59), and of selflessness being the ability to see "the things of the world in their true relationships" (92).

Insofar as God's relation with his creatures is an expression of Love it is, according to Weil, the model for all other love relationships. These should by analogy be based on the absence of self. Given that "among human beings, only the existence of those we love is fully recognized" (GG 56), and given that others' existence needs space, a space not filled by us, "to love purely is to consent to distance, it is to adore the distance between ourselves and that which we love" (GG 58). In friendship proper, which constitutes a love relationship, two people consent "to be two and not one, they respect the distance which the fact of being two distinct creatures places between them" (WOG 135). This, however, is only possible if the two people involved are desirous of maintaining each other's autonomy, do not wish either to please or to command (WOG 133-6).[5] Friendships based on need are, according to Weil,

[4] See Taubes, "The Absent God" esp. 7, 10.

[5] Weil appears to consider all love relationships as they are - as opposed to how she thinks they ought to be - as expressions of self-assertion on the part of the lovers (for a "ghoulish" description of this phenomenon see FLN 284-5). Where attachment includes a sexual dimension selflessness or "detachment" can be achieved only if "one can kill sexuality" (FLN 287) which is of the same nature as attachment.

not friendships because need is always expressive of self.[6] Weil arrives at a position where selflessness is the expression of love[7]; loving implies respect for the autonomy of the other and goes together with the voluntary decreation of self.

All love, according to Weil, is an image of the love shown by God for His creation through absenting Himself. For human beings the ability to withdraw the self has to do with understanding that we are not the centre of the world but co-exist with others (people, things). Because we are spatially at the centre of our world we imagine our selves to be at the centre of *the* world, thus imitating God:

> Just as God, being outside the universe, is at the same time the centre, so each man imagines he is situated in the centre of the world . . .
>
> We live in a world of unreality and dreams. To give up our imaginary position as the centre, to renounce it, not only intellectually but in the imaginative part of our soul, that means to awaken to what is real and eternal, to see the true light and hear the true silence. (WOG 98)
>
> To empty ourselves of our false divinity, to deny ourselves, to give up being the centre of the world in imagination, to discern

[6] From this viewpoint, Maggie Tulliver's renunciations in *The Mill on the Floss* never amount to absolute selflessness in the Weilian sense as even her desire to renounce is a function of conflicting needs between which she makes a choice. Her over-riding need is one for roots, regarded by Weil as "the most important and least recognized need of the human soul" (*Need for Roots* 41). Weil also maintained that "It is necessary to uproot oneself. To cut down the tree and make of it a cross, and then to carry it every day. . . We must be rooted in the absence of a place. . . To uproot oneself socially and vegetatively. To exile oneself from every earthly country. To do all that to others, from the outside, is a substitute (*ersatz*) for decreation. it results in unreality. But by uprooting oneself one seeks a greater reality." (GG 34) Maggie is ultimately not capable of uprooting herself; her need for independence is in conflict with her need to belong, especially to Tom.

[7] Loades writes that "whenever Weil approached a possible relationship which might be life-giving to her she was clearly terrified that the relationship equally likely might involve her in something other than the mutual respect she rightly valued" ("Eucharistic Sacrifice" 50).

that all points in the world are equally centres[8] and that the true centre is outside the world, this is to consent to the rule of mechanical necessity in matter and of free choice at the centre of each soul. Such consent is love. The face of this love which is turned towards thinking persons is the love of our neighbour; the face turned towards matter is love of the order of the world, or love of the beauty of the world which is the same thing. (WOG 99)

Responding to the mere existence of something beautiful or a person, giving this person or object our full attention not out of need but in acknowledgment of their existence, that, for Weil, is love, equals renunciation of self.[9] Love of our neighbour and love of beauty both feed on "creative attention" for, by accepting the existence of others, we imitate God's act of creation. The yardstick for this is the extent to which we can let someone or something be without wishing to change them, or wishing that they did not exist.[10] As soon as we seek to alter something or wish for it not to be, the self imports itself into the situation and our love becomes impure.

Weil's impulse in her conception of the relationship between things appears to be an extremely democratic and egalitarian one until one begins to realize that there is something for which there is no place in her construct: the self. Correspondingly in *Gravity and Grace* we find statements such as: "The sin in me says 'I'."; "It is because of my wretchedness that I am 'I'."; "Everything without exception which is of value in me comes from somewhere other than myself . . . Everything without exception which is in me is absolutely valueless . . . everything

[8] This corresponds to Murdoch's desire to create novels that are de-centred, i.e. have peripheral characters only (Caen 81).

[9] In Kant's theory of art the beautiful occasions love, the sublime respect (*Critique of Judgement* 119). Only the latter leads to moral activity but also, and here is one of the reasons of Murdoch's objections to Kant's views, back to the self (SOG 83) whose reasoning faculty is now admired (*Critique of Judgement* 106, 108).

[10] Murdoch gives an example of this in *The Sovereignty of Good* when she talks about learning Russian (89).

which I appropriate becomes valueless immediately I do so." (27)''

Weil is aware of the problematic of such a sense of self which, within her system of thought, is associated with affliction. In *Waiting on God* she says: "In the case of someone in affliction, all the scorn, revulsion and hatred are turned inwards." (67) Those afflicted "are in no state to help anyone at all" (65) because affliction "little by little . . . [makes] the soul its accomplice, by injecting a poison of inertia" (67):

> This complicity impedes all the efforts he might make to improve his lot; it goes so far as to prevent him from seeking a way of deliverance, sometimes even to the point of preventing him from wishing for deliverance. (67)

This seems to describe Weil's life, her negative sense of self and low self-esteem gradually making her turn against herself beyond the point of recovery.[12] It is precisely this which constitutes the danger in an ideological position that advocates selflessness.[13] A recognition and acceptance of one's narcissistic needs may be vital for the survival, both literal and spiritual, of the individual. Not just that; the consent to the absence of the self, which is a kind of death,[14] if exercised by everyone to an equal degree, would presumably result in a complete void.[15]

[11] Kristeva discusses the relationship of abjection and the self in relation to "the message of Christ" with its "interiorization of impurity" (114) and its related sense of being "divided and lapsing" (118) in *Powers of Horror* esp. 113-20, 127-8.

[12] There are numerous instances of self-abasement in Weil's writings including WOG 3, 24, 39; FLN 354; *Seventy Letters* 30-1, 35, 141, 158, 169. For a discussion of "the abjection of self" see Kristeva, *Powers of Horror* 5-6.

[13] Murdoch, whose yardstick tends to be "the ordinary" (e.g. SOG 14, 29, 38, 83), assumes that the danger of self-annihilation will be counteracted by "ordinary balanced human nature" (letter to the author, 1 Sept. 1988).

[14] See Charles' statement on 111 in this thesis.

[15] This might constitute a return to the state prior to the existence of God's creation.

Where Weil in her conception of selflessness begins with a consideration of the nature of an other, God, Murdoch starts with a particular notion of self, and uses that as the basis for advocating selflessness. She asserts "that human beings are naturally selfish" (SOG 78), a function of her agreement with Freud's interpretation of the self:

> He sees the psyche as an egocentric system of quasi-mechanical energy, largely determined by its own individual history, whose natural attachments are sexual, ambiguous, and hard for the subject to understand or control. Introspection reveals only the deep tissue of ambivalent motive, and fantasy is a stronger force than reason. Objectivity and unselfishness are not natural to human beings. (SOG 51)

Given this view of self the moral philosopher has to "suggest methods of dealing with the fact that so much of human conduct is moved by mechanical energy of an egocentric kind" (SOG 52).

> In the moral life the enemy is the fat relentless ego. Moral philosophy is properly . . . the discussion of this ego and of the techniques (if any) for its defeat. In this respect moral philosophy has shared some aims with religion.[16]
> (SOG 52)

The problem with the "fat relentless ego", according to Murdoch, is that "the self, the place where we live, is a place of illusion" (SOG 93). We use the self to create fantasies about the world whose nature - "aimless, chancy, and huge" (SOG 100) - we cannot cope with. The moral task of the individual is "the attempt to pierce the veil of selfish consciousness and join the world as it really is" (SOG 93).

Murdoch's advocacy of selflessness thus stems from an understanding of the centrality of the self in the individual's perception and its deluding nature as well as a particular vision of what it means to act in a moral way. Murdoch, like Weil, connects a selfless attitude with love which, "in its everyday manifestations" (SOG 75), is

> . . . normally too profoundly possessive and also too

[16] Gindin offers a critique of this representation of the self in relation to the world.

'mechanical' to be a place of vision. There is a paradox here about the nature of love itself. That the highest love is in some sense impersonal[17] is something which we can indeed see in art, but which I think we cannot see clearly, except in a very piecemeal manner, in the relationships of human beings. (SOG 75)

This paradox is the result of using the one word "love"[18] to refer to a number of different responses to our environment and other people. Of our love for other people Murdoch says:

> Our attachments tend to be selfish and strong[19], and the transformation of our loves from selfishness to unselfishness is sometimes even hard to conceive of. (SOG 91)

Weil maintains that attachment *per se* is an expression of selfishness because it is associated with the creation of illusion:

> The reality of the world is the result of our attachment. It is the reality of the self which we transfer into things. It has nothing to do with independent reality. That is only perceptible through total detachment. (GG 13)

In the *Notebooks* she suggests:

> It is attachment which produces in us that *false reality* (ersatz form of reality) connected with the outside world.
> We must destroy that ersatz form of reality in ourselves in order to attain to the true reality. (NB I 313)

For Weil, more austere and uncompromising in her attitudes than Murdoch, love - if we are to call it that - is synonymous with selflessness; for this reason she rejects all love save that which consents to distance, the autonomy of the other. Murdoch in her philosophical writings also projects an ideal of love:

[17] Weil discusses such "impersonal love" in FLN 282-4.

[18] Treating love as a unitary concept may be a function of a need inherent in individuals for whom, according to Murdoch, "the search for unity is deeply natural" (SOG 76).

[19] The same thought is expressed by Weil in FLN 285.

> Love is the tension between the imperfect soul and the magnetic perfection which is conceived of as lying beyond it . . . And when we try perfectly to love what is imperfect our love goes to its object *via* the Good to be thus purified and made unselfish and just. (SOG 103)

This reads remarkably like Weil's "pure love of creatures is not love in God, but love which has passed through God as through fire"[20] (GG 57). But Murdoch recognizes that the "everyday manifestations of love" are for the most part unlike this ideal; rather, they manifest varying degrees of selfishness.

Murdoch's novels frequently portray obsessional relationships in which one person's love for another is simply expressive of a specific need rather than a sense of the reality of the other.[21] One example of this is the love Hilary Burde of *a Word Child* has for his sister Crystal. The text suggests that Hilary's childhood experiences ("I had a cosmic furious permanent sense of myself as victimized." 19) result in a fundamental insecurity dealt with by ill-fated attempts at absolute commitment (to the two women he loves and kills as well as his sister), possessiveness, and a concomitant need to contain and make safe through control. Hilary fails to understand the separateness of individuals; typically, he says: "She [Crystal] was my first conception of a human individual. (Crystal was part of me.)" (18) He describes their relationship in terms reminiscent of that between Heathcliff and Cathy in *Wuthering Heights*[22], a relationship equally doomed:

[20] For a discussion of the significance of the idea of purification within a religious context that takes gender into account see Kristeva, *Powers of Horror* 17, 97-103.

[21] Examples of such relationships, which are frequently one-way, are Jake's and Hugo's (*Under the Net*), Mor's and Rain's (*The Sandcastle*), Cato's and Joe's (*Henry and Cato*), George's and Rozanov's (*The Philosopher's Pupil*), Bradley's and Julian's (*The Black Prince*), etc.

[22] To the extent that Murdoch considers Emily Brontë's novels "Romantic", "externalizing a personal conflict" (SBR 258) her own novels, where they resemble Brontë's texts, can be analysed in the same light.

I simply was her. I had to have her there, like God. And by 'there' I mean again, not necessarily in my presence. I needed to see her regularly but not very often. She just had to be always available in a place fixed and controlled by me. I had to know, at any moment, where she was. I needed her sequestered innocence, as a man might need his better self to be stored away separately in a pure deity. (60)

Rather like Hannah of *The Unicorn* Crystal is incarcerated and imprisoned by her brother to serve his needs, and as with Hannah, her life is almost destroyed by this.

Crystal seems selfless in that she puts up no opposition to Hilary and his plans for her life, even on the most mundane level. Her selflessness is reinforced by her not having an independent voice within the text: the story is told in the first-person from Hilary's viewpoint. Thus the reader does not know whether Crystal is simply overwhelmed by Hilary's monstrous ego and is psychologically incapable of standing up to him, or whether her lack of resistance results from an understanding of his needs and a willingness to relinquish her self to make space for his. Whichever the case might be, Hilary and Crystal enact one of the traditional dramas of male/female relationships in which the woman as repository of male moral worth ("my better self") is isolated on a pedestal from which she is unable to descend without his help.[23] It is worth noting in this context that the examples of selfless love offered by Weil and Murdoch in their respective theoretical writings tend to be female; Weil chooses Electra[24] and Murdoch mothers-in-law,[25] mothers of retarded children or women who look after "tiresome elderly relation[s]" (SOG 103), "inarticulate, unselfish mothers of large families" (SOG 53).

Murdoch's fiction appears to bear out Weil's tenet that

[23] In *The Subjection of Women* John Stuart Mill maintains, "Women cannot be expected to devote themselves to the emancipation of women, until men in considerable number are prepared to join them in the undertaking." (145)

[24] WOG 140-1, FLN 32, 323.

[25] Murdoch centres one article on the example of the mother-in-law (see SOG 1-45, esp. 17-24, 31-3, 37).

> Love needs reality. What is more terrible than the discovery that through a bodily appearance we have been loving an imaginary being. It is much more terrible than death, for death does not prevent the beloved from having lived.
> That is the punishment for having fed love on imagination. (GG 57)

The Sea, The Sea is devoted to the exploration of this dilemma. Charles Arrowby, the first person narrator of his tale, becomes obsessed with the idea of making a life with a childhood sweetheart, Hartley, whom he encounters by accident upon retiring to a seaside village. His attempt to "repent of a life of egoism" (1) turns into a replay of the infant's primary attachment to his mother. The impossibility of re-achieving this relationship is at the centre of *The Sea, The Sea*.

Charles, who has never married, has devoted his emotional and sexual life to a series of relationships with women such as Rosina and Lizzie whose attachments to other men he set about breaking up. The only other type of relationship he has had was with Clement, an actress much older than himself and a mother figure to him. Charles analyses his relationship with women in the following terms:

> I had always run to women as to a refuge. What indeed are women *but* refuges? And sometimes it had seemed that to be held close in a woman's arms was the only and perfect defence against any horror. Yes, they had, so many of them, been perfect to me, and yet . . . after a while . . . one leaves a refuge. (170)

The wording here is telling: the question, "What indeed are women *but* refuges?" fixes women not as persons in their own right with needs of their own, as other, but as sources of fulfilment for the needs of the questioner. The same is evident in the phrase "to be held" which makes Charles the passive recipient of a quasi-maternal care. It recalls Chodorow's description of the first stages of the infant's life, a period of "undifferentiation", "a stage of *absolute* primary narcissism, which is marked by the infant's lack of awareness of a mothering agent" (61).

> The infant's behaviour . . . is fundamentally egoistic, in that it ignores the interests of the mother: "We come nearest to it with the conception of egoism. It is in fact an *anarchic, egoistic* way of loving, originally directed exclusively to the mother; its

> main characteristic is the complete lack of reality sense in regard to the interests [both libidinal and ego-interests] of the love-object." (ibid. 62)

Charles' ability to "leave the refuge" appears to declare him adult, i.e. as having moved beyond the stage of early primary dependence, but, as Freud explains, "the notion of something irreplaceable, when it is active in the unconscious, frequently appears as broken up into an endless series: endless for the reason that every surrogate nevertheless fails to provide the desired satisfaction" (*On Sexuality* 236). It fails because it is only a surrogate, not the real thing, the mother herself.

Women with whom one is in an actual relationship can shatter the illusion of the mother surrogate by asserting their own needs. This, initially, does not pertain to the relationship between Charles and Hartley. When Charles chances upon her his old love for her is reawakened. She has been married to another man for decades. In the initial absence of any communication between them he begins to create a fantasy around her in which she features as "a pure substance of my being" (170), "my alpha and my omega" (186), "beautifully innocent" (303). His memory of their childhood relationship, again reminiscent of *Wuthering Heights* (cf. 85), sees him and Hartley as an undivided whole: "We were each other." (78), "We were one, and only that mattered." (80) As Hartley resists Charles' attempts to "rescue" her from her current existence it becomes clear that even as a child and adolescent he never saw Hartley as other, as a separate human being with needs of her own who was destined to leave him for this very reason. Their split occured at the time of her sexual awakening - their relationship never developed into a sexual one because, as Hartley puts it, "we were too much like brother and sister" (216). Charles' interest in Hartley is not predominantly a sexual one; he is pleased when he finds that her changed appearance (she is throughout described as not particularly attractive) does not interfere with his love for her. And, of course, it would not if what he is looking for is a mother-surrogate rather than a sex object. His ability to share a bed with the dying Clement, 19 years older than himself, to the very end testifies to Charles' love being predicated upon things other than sexual attractiveness.

What Charles wants is to regain the paradise, the "sinless world" he seemingly lost when Hartley first left him:

> It was an unspoilt world, a world of truly simple and pure pleasures, a happy world, since my trust in her was absolute. (203)

Charles convinces himself that Hartley, "my beginning and my end" (77), was responsible for his fate, his faithlessness to other women, and in so doing yokes her together with his mother:

> Perhaps all my love affairs have been vicious attempts to show Hartley that she was right after all. But she was only right because she left me. You die at heart from a withdrawal of love. My mother's threats of such a withdrawal made me utterly vulnerable to Hartley's crime. Hartley destroyed my innocence, she and the demon of jealousy. She made me faithless. (84)

Yet when Charles sees Hartley again he also feels that "all the goodness of my life seemed to reside there with her" (85). Fantasizing about "the absolute nature of the bond between myself and Hartley" (185) he proceeds with his attempt to get her to re-join him: "I had to rescue Hartley, and 'rescue' was indeed now at last plainly the word, the very word I had longed for" (201). Charles convinces himself that Hartley still loves him. He ignores all evidence to the contrary and refuses not just his friends' and relations' but also Hartley's own assertion that he is caught in a dream, in unreality. Charles decides that Hartley has lost all sense of freedom (334) and that he must help her regain this sense. Certain that once she has regained it she will join him, he imprisons her in his house. He views himself as "a beneficient being powerful for good" (113). As such, "I could produce, I could bestow, good . . . I had the power to transform, to raise up, to heal, to bring undreamt-of happiness and joy" (113). Used to being "lord and king" (189) in his relations with women, Charles wants to use the power inherent in that position to "remember everything, to relive everything, to establish ourselves together as one being, one being that ought never to have been divided" (215). He repeatedly casts himself in the role of God, gazing at her "like some god reassembling her beauty for my own purposes" (221), and imagining that: "My act, my will would create a new family." (325) He wants to "renew" Hartley as if he were God (361) because: "She has

always been with me and she is coming home to herself . . . I gave her the meaning of my life long ago, I gave it to her and she still has it. Even if she does not know she has it, she has it." (362)

Charles' words are reminiscent of those of Frankenstein who, in contemplating the creation of his monster, says: "A new species would bless me as its creator and source; many happy and excellent natures would owe their being to me. No father could claim the gratitude of his child so completely as I should deserve theirs." (Shelley 54) During the period of Hartley's imprisonment at Charles' house while he is trying to "recreate" her (222) in his image, the house acquires the atmosphere of a "charnel house" (313). Charles and Hartley get locked into the mutually destructive process he has initiated. He, like Frankenstein, turns into a monster, a monster of egotism. There is a partial recognition of this in Charles when he says of himself: "Monsters do not have families." (420) And, of course, Frankenstein ends up bereft of family just as his monster is left without one.

Hartley, during the period of her imprisonment, becomes not just a version of Frankenstein's monster but also comes to resemble "the madwoman in the attic", Bertha Mason. Rosina functions as a kind of latter-day Jane Eyre, who rather than simply turning away in horror puts Charles on the spot by asking, "what are you going to do about that woman? You can't collect a half-crazy female at this stage of her life. You can't keep her like a mad thing on a chain." (315) Charles sees Hartley as mad simply because she does not want what he considers appropriate for her, because she remains other and beyond his control. She recognizes this, pointing out: "You don't understand people like me, like us, the other ones. You're like a bird that flies in the air, a fish that swims in the sea. You move,[26] you look about you, you want things. There are others who live on the earth and move just a little and don't look - " (330-1).

Hartley's temporary self-abandonment does not lead her to lose sight of the reality of her situation: for her their love was "something childish", "it isn't part of the real world", "it's pointless, it's

[26] Murdoch associates a vocabulary of movement with self-assertion, one of vision with selflessness (see SOG 3, 15, 22-3, 36-7).

irrelevant, it's a dream" (280). When Charles eventually decides to let her go he is reminded of his first separation - that from his mother - and loss: "And I thought at one moment: why, it's just like it was *then*. I've done everything I can for her, everything. And she's just leaving me." (343) After Hartley's departure, as Charles tries to make sense of what happened, he comes back twice to the question: "Who is one's first love?" (476, 502).

Charles' attempt to recover his early relationship with his mother through the figure of Hartley aligns him with the men described in Freud's "A Special Type of Choice of Objects Made by Men". According to Freud, certain men need specific "necessary conditions for loving", the most important of which is that "the person in question shall never choose as his love-object a woman who is disengaged . . . but only one to whom another man can claim right of possession as her husband, fiancé or friend" (232). Hartley, of course, is married. A second but not necessary condition is that the woman loved "is in some sense or other of bad repute sexually, whose fidelity and reliability are open to some doubt" (232). Hartley's husband, we find and Charles discovers, has suspected her of pre-marital relations throughout much of their married existence. Freud also suggests that jealousy is necessary for this type of lover (233), and, of course, Charles himself admits to being possessed by jealousy. In terms of the behaviour of the lover towards his object Freud says that the relationship is conducted "with the highest expenditure of mental energy, to the exclusion of all other interests; they [the loved ones] are felt as the only people whom it is possible to love" (234). Charles quite early on in the novel asserts that Hartley was "My first love, and also my only love. All the best, even Clement, have been shadows by comparison. The necessity of this seems, in my own case, so great that I find it hard to imagine that it is not so with everyone. *On n'aime qu'une fois, la première.*" (77) According to Freud,

> What is most startling of all to the observer in lovers of this type is the urge they show to *'rescue'* the woman they love. The man is convinced that she is in need of him . . . He rescues her, therefore, by not giving her up. (234)

Freud explains such behaviour by suggesting that in the case of these lovers "the libido has remained attached to the mother for so long, even after the onset of puberty, that the maternal characteristics remain stamped on the love-objects that are chosen later" (235).

The *rescue-motif* is significant because Charles sees his role *vis-à-vis* Hartley in this light. Freud suggests that the *rescue-motif* is tied up with the child's desire to repay his mother for giving him life: "When a child hears that he *owes his life* to his parents, or that his mother *gave him life*, his feelings of tenderness unite with impulses which strive at power and independence, and they generate the wish to return this gift to the parents and to repay them with one of equal value." (239) The desire to repay takes the form of the desire to give the mother a child in return (240-1). Charles' desire to reunite Titus, Hartley's adopted son who thinks he may be Charles' child, with Hartley could be read in that light. Freud goes on to say:

> Under the laws governing the expression of unconscious thoughts, the meaning of rescuing may vary, depending on whether the author of the phantasy is a man or a woman. It can equally mean (in a man) making a child, i.e. causing it to be born, or (in a woman) giving birth oneself to a child. These various meanings of rescuing in dreams and phantasies can be recognized particularly clearly when they are found in connection with water. A man rescuing a woman from the water in a dream means that he makes her a mother, which in the light of the preceding discussion amounts to making her his own mother. A woman rescuing someone else (a child) from the water acknowledges herself in this way as the mother who bore him . . . (241)

The dominant image of water in this paragraph is replicated in the title of *The Sea, The Sea*, a book which Charles, who remains childless in the text, personifies as "the *libellus*, this creature to which I am giving life and which seems at once to have a will of its own" (2). This relationship of author/creator/father to text/creature/child is of course one of the well-established metaphors for literary production pertaining, in this instance, not just to Charles and that for which he cannot find a name - his journal, diary, memoir, or story as he variously calls it -

but also to Murdoch and her novel. Significantly, Charles sees his text as "my own dream text" (499) thus linking it to his unconscious in a direct way. Drowning and rescuing occur repeatedly in the novel; Titus drowns, Charles very nearly drowns; most importantly, Charles keeps thinking or dreaming of Hartley drowning. Once he runs after her when he thinks she might have drowned, in a bid to rescue her. In his mind his relationship with her is associated with his mother. In terms of the relationship between Murdoch and the novel one could argue that she rescues Charles in that she fabricates his rescue by James from the sea and also keeps him alive to tell his tale "acknowledging herself in this way as the mother who bore him".[27]

The question arises, why discuss this text in such terms in a chapter on selflessness? To answer this it is necessary to return to Murdoch's philosophical writings. In "The Sublime and the Good" we find Murdoch agreeing with Weil's notion of love: "To love purely is to consent to distance, it is to adore the distance between ourselves and that which we love." (GG 18) Murdoch says:

> Love is the perception of individuals. Love is the extremely difficult realisation that something other than oneself is real. (51)
>
> . . . we may fail to see the individual because we are completely enclosed in a fantasy world of our own into which we try to draw things from outside, not grasping their reality and independence, making them into dream objects of our own.[28]
>
> Freedom is exercised in the confrontation by each other . . . of two irreducibly dissimilar individuals. Love is the imaginative recognition of, that is the respect for, this otherness. (52)

At the same time as asserting this ideal Murdoch is also keenly aware that

> Our attachments tend to be selfish and strong, and the transformation of our loves from selfishness to unselfishness

[27] Murdoch's husband John Bailey maintains that her novels are "very much her children" (Summers 22).

[28] This is very much the case with Charles.

> is sometimes hard even to conceive of. (SOG 91)

This, according to Murdoch, constitutes the reality of human existence. Unselfishness is not only hard to conceive of, it is - if achieved - difficult to sustain. Charles momentarily acts unselfishly by letting Hartley go but at the end of the novel he is once more busily engaged in writing his fiction, creating his text, deeply absorbed in his attempts to understand himself, which Murdoch in her philosophical writings describes, in keeping with her view of reality, as only another form of delusory obsession with self:

> 'Self-knowledge', in the sense of a minute understanding of one's own machinery, seems to me, except at a fairly simple level, usually a delusion . . . (SOG 67)

Charles' statement, "knowing how blind I was did not make me see" (426) underlines this. His limited understanding of himself, his momentary flashes of enlightenment concerning other people, soon succumb to yet another fiction he creates which temporarily helps him to make sense of the world. And that, according to Murdoch, is what we are like as human beings. Selflessness is the ideal, that which Murdoch's philosophy prescribes - selfishness, the real, is that which her fiction depicts.

Where Murdoch's egocentric characters inhabit - appropriately - the centre of her novelistic stage, frequently as first person narrators, her selfless characters are either secondary or peripheral,[29] thus signalling formally their semantic significance. In *The Sea, The Sea* we encounter one of Murdoch's prototypes of the selfless man, Charles' cousin James, who "partners" Charles just as Tallis does Julius King in *A Fairly Honourable Defeat* or Anne does Gertrude in *Nuns and Soldiers*. James (who resembles Matthew in *An Accidental Man*) is a middle-aged orientalist and military man, used to discipline and interested in Buddhism. James fits rather neatly Murdoch's description of the "mystical hero":

> The virtue of the mystical hero is humility . . . [he is] trying to discipline or purge or diminish himself . . . [he is] the new version of the man of faith, believing in goodness without

[29] Murdoch has pointed out that "an *unexamined* life can be virtuous" (SOG 1; emphasis added), and that anonymity attaches to goodness in individuals (SOG 52-3).

> religious guarantees, guilty, muddled, yet not without hope . . . he must be at least forty-five by now, and represents a last shadowy hangover from the vanishing era of religious beliefs. (EM 175-6)

Within *The Sea, The Sea* James is the person most willing and able to stand up to Charles and cut through his fantasies. He is also the most obviously disinterested party in that he does not gain anything by intervening in Charles' life. He is the one who spells out to Charles the nature of his undertaking in trying to "rescue" Hartley:

> I won't call it a fiction. Let us call it a dream. Of course we live in dreams, and even in a disciplined spiritual life, in some ways especially there, it is hard to distinguish dream from reality. (335)

Charles subsequently finds that James' "'discussion' had helped me to see certain things more clearly"[30] (338). James' intervention helps Charles decide to release Hartley. James also rescues Charles from the sea when he is about to drown, a metaphor, to some extent, of James' rescue of Charles from drowning in his ego. James is the person who explains Charles to himself. In the final conversation between the two characters before James dies he tells Charles: "You've built a cage of needs and installed her [Hartley] in an empty space in the middle." (442) James explains Charles' obsession with Hartley by analogy to religion:

> The worshipper endows the worshipped object with power, real power not imaginary power, that is the sense of the ontological

[30] In her novels Murdoch tries to indicate the variety of situations, objects, and persons that can act as catalysts for moral change and a move towards greater selflessness. Among these "intermediaries" or "*metaxu*" - to use Weil's vocabulary ("Metaxu. Every representation which draws us toward the non-representable." NB I 233) - are conversations with others as portrayed here (see, for example also Midge's conversation with Edward in *The Good Apprentice* 465-71, 485-6).

> proof[31] . . . But this power is dreadful stuff. Our lusts and attachments compose our god. And when one attachment is cast off another arrives by way of consolation. (445)

Charles responds to this with "I always thought that goodness was to do with loving people, and isn't that an attachment?" followed by "All this giving up of attachments doesn't sound to me like salvation and freedom, it sounds like death." (445)[32] This is one of Charles' characteristic moments of insight where he speaks the truth without properly understanding it.[33] James has been advocating Weil's notion that "attachment is a manufacturer of illusions and whoever wants reality ought to be detached" (GG 14):

> The reality of the world is the result of our attachment. It is the reality of the self which we transfer into things. It has nothing to do with independent reality. That is only perceptible through total detachment. (GG 13)

Weil suggests that detachment is a way of killing oneself (GG 15) which is what Charles dimly discerns as James' meaning. The problem for Charles is whether or not he will be able to move beyond ego-riddled forms of attachment. In a momentary flash of enlightenment quite early on in the novel Charles "sees", without being able to act upon it, that his encounter with Hartley offers him the chance to relive the experience of his primary narcissistic attachment to his mother but with the outcome of accepting her separateness:

> Was this new detached generosity, I wondered in passing, a first symptom of that changed and purified form of being which the return of Hartley was going to create in me? Was Hartley, seen

[31] James here expresses Murdoch's stance that "any religion or ideology can be degraded by the substitution of self, usually in some disguise, for the true object of veneration" (SOG 101).

[32] The death referred to here is, of course, metaphorical and does not constitute the physical extinction of the self. It is the kind of death Weil talks of in NB I 60-1, 218-9, and GG 15.

[33] Waugh has pointed out that attachment is, in fact, necessary for the survival (physical and psychological) of the individual (*Feminine Fictions* 44), and, in a sense, Weil's fate, her resistance to attachment and concomitant premature death seems to bear this out.

> not touched, loved not possessed, destined to make me a saint? How strange and significant that I had come precisely *here* to repent of my egoism! Was this perhaps the final sense of my mystical marriage with my only love? (138)

The opportunity affords Charles nothing - he is too intent upon the possibilities of what he can gain even as he considers his "detachment". James, aware of Charles' limitations, suggests, "it may even be your destiny to live alone and be everybody's uncle like a celibate priest" (443).[34] In other words, given the impossibility of moving altogether beyond the needs created by the primary attachment to the mother, it may be preferable to shun all attachments and follow Weil's prescription: "Do not allow yourself to be imprisoned by any affection. Keep your solitude." (GG 60) Charles temporarily attempts this towards the end of the novel but ultimately acknowledges:

> We must live by the light of our own self-satisfaction, through that secret vital busy inwardness which is even more remarkable than our reason. Thus we must live unless we are saints, and are there any? There are spiritual beings, perhaps James was one, but there are no saints. (482)[35]

Charles opts for "ordinariness", accepting without regret that he is subject to his psyche.[36]

James is no saint. His history, in so far as it is revealed to the reader, indicates that he is a man trying to move beyond attachment but susceptible to failures. His story of his failure to keep a Tibetan servant of his[37] alive through raising his own " bodily warmth by

[34] James' legacy to Charles, which is what James himself learnt from, among other things, the death of his sherpa (whom he called Milarepa) echoes Milarepa's words quoted by Weil, "This is the way for you to follow after my death: Reject everything that egoism makes seem desirable, if it is harmful for other creatures." (FLN 360)

[35] Weil considered sanctity "the minimum for a Christian" (*Seventy Letters* 175) but also said that this century required a new type of saint (WOG 45-6).

[36] Charles resembles Danby, the *homme moyen sensuel* described in *Bruno's Dream* (135).

[37] The name of this servant, Milarepa, is that of a Tibetan poet quoted repeatedly by Weil both in NB I/II and FLN.

mental concentration" (446) testifies to that. As James says: "It was my vanity that killed him . . . The payment for a fault is automatic . . . I relaxed my hold on him . . . I lost my grip" (447). There is the suggestion that something similar happened in relation to Titus' death. Charles remembers: "James's reaction to Titus's death had been 'it ought not to have happened', almost as if he felt that it had been his own fault. But then if it was his fault it was my fault . . . And of course my vanity had killed Titus just as James's vanity had killed the sherpa. In each case our weakness had destroyed the thing we loved." (471) The one case where James appears to have succeeded is in the saving of Charles from drowning.

James' death suggests that he has moved beyond selfish attachments. On his final visit to Charles he tells him: "You know that some Buddhists believe that any earthly attachment, if it persists until death, ties you to the Wheel and prevents you from attaining liberation." (446) Charles subsequently realizes that James' last visit was his attempt to break his bond with Charles, and that James' death, as reported by his Indian physician, was the expression of James having achieved a state of non-attachment. The doctor writes to Charles: "Mr. Arrowby died in happiness achieving all. I have written for cause of death on the certificate 'heart failure', but it was not so. There are some who can freely choose their moment of death and without violence to the body can simply by simple will power die. It was so with him." (473)

The Sea, The Sea exemplifies Murdoch's notion of the mystical novel:

> What is characteristic of this novel is that it keeps in being, by one means or another, the conception of God. Man is still pictured as being divided, but divided in a new way, between a fallen nature and a spiritual world. I call these novels mystical . . . because they are attempts to express a religious consciousness without the traditional trappings of religion. (EM 173-4)

The Sea, The Sea would suggest that man's fallen nature is a function of his needs, first apparent in his relation to his mother, needs to which consciousness has access only through the scrutiny of one's behaviour in the attempt to understand the mechanisms that govern one's interactions

with other people. From such scrutiny the individual has to arrive at a position where, instead of becoming obsessed with the self or reliving fantasies of "infantile omnipotence" (both Charles and James are seen to be subject to these), the direction of attention has to be turned outwards, away from self. This is what religion can teach us according to Murdoch.

The turning of the attention outwards, away from the self, is something portrayed in another prototype of Murdoch's, an imitation of Weil, the unattached selfless woman who attends to others. One such example is Lisa in *Bruno's Dream*. At the centre of that novel, like one of his favourite animals, spiders (spiders are one of Murdoch's recurrent symbols), is Bruno facing death, reviewing his past and present. Grouped around him are a number of people whose inter-relationships form the other main concern of the text. Among these is Lisa who, in a sense, represents a fictional version of Weil.

> Lisa had made a very different start in life. She read Greats at Oxford and got a first. She went to teach in a school in Yorkshire and joined the Communist Party. (61)
>
> . . . when next heard of she had become a Catholic and joined the order of the Poor Clares . . . After a few years Lisa emerged from the Poor Clares and the Roman Catholic Church and went to live in Paris. She came back to England with tuberculosis and stayed with Miles and Diana during her convalescence. She got a teaching job in the East End . . . in some vague yet evident way Lisa did need looking after . . . Lisa was graver, gaunter, darker than Diana . . . She was nervy and reticent and silent and solitary though she sometimes talked philosophy with Miles and was more ardent than he to complete the argument . . . (62)
>
> . . . in the holidays [she] did voluntary work for the local probation officer . . . She seemed a cold dewy yet wilting flower. (63)

Lisa, poor Lisa, had come to be an occupation . . . as she had been long ago in Diana's childhood, when Lisa's idealism and lack of common sense had constantly landed her in scrapes which Diana had had to deal with. Diana was devoted to her

> sister and enjoyed both admiring and patronizing her, and had always been helped and supported by Lisa's return of unquestioning love. (87)

It is easy to see the parallels between Weil's and Lisa's lives. The élite education, preoccupation with catholicism and philosophy, the school teaching and voluntary work during the vacation, the illness and seeming dependence of Lisa on her sister Diana, a mother substitute who appears to fulfil the role Weil's mother had, all make for an easy comparison. But Murdoch does more than "re-create" Weil - she provides an image of someone like her with one crucial difference: Lisa, in contrast to Weil, confronts love in her life rather than turns away from it.

Initially, the impression given of Lisa is one of selfless devotion to others. This is most immediately manifest in the role she plays as mediator between the dying Bruno and his son Miles, Diana's husband. After Miles, who has been estranged from his father since his marriage to an Indian woman ten years previously, has botched up the attempt at reunion requested by Bruno, it is Lisa who suggests that she and Diana go to Bruno to try and redeem the situation between father and son (113). It is she rather than Diana who is able to overcome the horror of Bruno's changed appearance and treat him as an ordinary human being. As Diana puts it: "Lisa was good in these extreme places, she had the knack." (126) What constitutes this "knack" and marks the togetherness of Bruno and Lisa is "the intensity of the girl's attention to him" (117). It is something Diana is unable to give to Bruno at this point in the story. Lisa, so the text appears to suggest, is able to give Bruno such unselfish attention because "She was not as other women, she was a kind of religious. After all, she had actually been a nun for several years and the experience had marked her with a coldness and a separateness." (148) What seems to distinguish Lisa from the other women in the text is, it emerges, the absence of a sex life. This to Diana makes her "a doomed girl":

> 'Lisa wants death,' she had said to Miles. 'She certainly wants to suffer,' Miles had replied. 'That isn't quite the same thing.' 'She's a mystic,' Diana had concluded. 'She wants to be nothinged.' 'She is certainly a masochist,' Miles had agreed. (88)

Diana here speaks of the self-effacement just discussed in relation to Charles and James. Significantly, Miles, the essentially selfish person, interprets Lisa's stance in a negative light[38] whereas Diana does not import value judgments into the situation. The dialogue could have had Weil as its subject. But its subject is Lisa, and the novel goes on to reveal that her desire "to be nothinged" stops at a certain point.

This point is reached when Lisa is confronted with declarations of love, first from Danby, Bruno's son-in-law, and then from Miles. Danby had been married to Bruno's daughter Gwen who died attempting to rescue a child from the Thames. In view of Freud's association of a woman rescuing someone or something from drowning with the idea of giving birth, one might suggest that the woman who drowns while trying to rescue signifies her own inability to give birth, her "barrenness".

In Danby's memory Gwen was always "alien" to him, utterly different (134-5). This difference, reflected in Lisa when she comes to visit Bruno (133), which made Gwen like "a visitation from outside" (134), marked Gwen off from the *homme moyen sensuel* to which Danby reverted after her death but also turned their love into something "barren" in that it yielded no "fruit", meaning offspring. Danby conceives of his relationship with Gwen as "reality" and his later life as "dream" but, "he had decided that, like most other people, he was not made for reality . . . He could not now, without Gwen, even conceive of any possibility other than the dream life of the *homme moyen sensuel* which to the tips of his fingers he so absolutely was." (135) "Dream", it would appear, is ultimately the stuff that life is made of.

Danby's sense of the relationship between dream and reality mirrors Weil's as detailed in her *Notebooks* where she states, "Reality is *only* transcendent. For all we are given is the appearance." (NB II 361; my emphasis).[39] And: "Attachment is nothing else but an insufficiency in the

[38] The difference in attitude to Lisa's position manifested by Diana and Miles can be found in the critical reception of Weil who is considered either self-destructive and a masochist (Miles' view) or self-effacing in a saintly manner (Diana's attitude). Compare, for example, Bregman 95-6, 101-8 with Vetö's "Simone Weil and Suffering".

[39] "Reality" is here defined as a life of selflessness, a higher order moral existence, whereas "dream" is the expression of "unreality" as self-centredness and moral mediocrity. Neither term touches upon material conditions or the phenomenological world as such; both refer to a psychological state.

feeling for reality." (NB II 365) Danby, thinking of Gwen as utterly different from himself, accepts, in a sense, her reality. Weil maintains that "reality represents for the human mind the same thing as good" (NB II 365). Both have to do with un-selfing and accepting the other as other. This, because it generally goes against the human grain, is difficult. "A test of reality," Weil says, "lies in the fact that it is harsh and stony. Joys are to be found therein, but not pleasures." (NB II 369)[49] So we find that being with Gwen was for Danby "the sort of strain upon his nature of which he became so conscious afterward", and that in settling back into his old self he felt "the pull of gravity which . . . had something rather reassuring about it" (135). Weil asserts: "Existence is but a shadow of reality." (NB II 410) and, ". . . reality for man lies within this world" (NB II 374). Gwen provided Danby with an insight into a life of "reality", reality here referring to that acceptance of otherness and concomitant suppression of self which, inseparable as they are in both Weil's and Murdoch's philosophy, are associated with goodness and transcendence. Indeed, Gwen at one point is described as follows:

> Even when he was married to her he [Danby] had suffered, as a soul might suffer in the presence of its God simply from an apprehension of a difference in substance. Gwen was intense and high and spiritual. Danby loved her moral intensity with physical love . . . Gwen had loved him profoundly, meditating upon his unlikeness and their mutual impossibility, enclosing his separateness in the sweep of her love and brooding over it as a saint might brood secretly upon the wounds of the stigmata which unknown to his fellows he ever conceals in the folds of his robe. (17)

This, even to the final rather florid sentence, is "pure Weil" in its description of a love relationship based on the recognition of otherness and separateness. But whereas Gwen might be a saint suffering in an almost physical sense, Danby is not a saint; reality, for him, is in this

[49] For Weil joy is "the fullness of the sentiment of the real" (NB I 222); it is as such an expression of detachment and selflessness. Pleasure, by contrast, "is the illusion that there is some good attached to one's own existence" (FLN 358).

world, and trying to be better than he actually is was a strain. Again, Weil provides an explanation: ". . . real good can only come from outside ourselves, never from our own effort. We cannot under any circumstances manufacture something which is better than ourselves. Thus effort truly stretched towards goodness cannot reach its goal . . ." (GG 41) because "All absolutely pure goodness completely eludes the will. Goodness is transcendent." (GG 40) In other words, Danby cannot be a good person without the help of Gwen, or possibly Lisa; bereft, he sinks back to his former level of self.

Gwen's drowning seems to signal the difficulty of a woman like her (and Lisa is one such type at the beginning of the novel) living in this world. This is borne out by Lisa's "fate". She begins "life" within the novel as "a religious", "a mystic" who appears to have no sexual existence. In this she resembles Gwen, and because of this Danby is attracted to her. What he envisages in a relationship with Lisa is the possibility of re-entry into the "reality" which Gwen embodied for him. Although the novel presents this to us as fact - i.e. as readers we have simply to accept that Danby and Gwen's relationship was as represented - this representation comes quite close to Charles Arrowby's fantasy about Hartley in whom, he thought, all *his* goodness resided. We are, in fact, back with the woman as icon, as the repository of moral values, familiar from Victorian literature.

In *Bruno's Dream* perhaps more starkly than in some of Murdoch's other novels[41] "masculine total selfishness" (46) is contrasted with feminine selflessness. For Danby pursues Lisa for his own ends, namely to be redeemed once more from his state of moral sloth. Even if this is a "worthy" motive it is still essentially self-related.

The same is true of Miles' pursuit of Lisa. Miles has been, metaphorically speaking, rooted to one spot by his inability to come to terms with his first wife's death. He had been very much in love with her:

[41] Other novels that explore the contrast between masculine selfishness and feminine selflessness are *The Italian Girl*, *An Unofficial Rose*, and *The Sacred and Profane Love Machine* whereas the reverse can be seen in relationships such as that of Morgan and Tallis in *A Fairly Honourable Defeat*. The latter occurs relatively rarely in Murdoch's fiction.

> But falling in love involves also an enlivening and magnifying of the greedy passionate self. Such love will envisage suffering, absence, separation, pain, it will exult in these: but what it cannot envisage is death, utter loss. (179)

Miles' possessive, selfish love of Parvati stultified his ability to write poetry. When he falls in love with Lisa he has a sense that her exalted moral state may enable him to come to terms with Parvati's death and write poetry again. In a moment of insight in a church[42] he understands his "general mediocrity" and his "moral barrier" of selfish attachment. His fleeting understanding is soon clouded again:

> A human being is a morass, a swamp, a jungle. It could only come from somewhere far beyond, as a dream, as a haunting vision, that image of the true love, the love that accepts death, the love that lives with death.
>
> Lisa, he thought, Lisa. I cannot and I will not give you up . . .
>
> But he knew, with a deeper spasm of despair, that the deity to which he prayed was his own poetic angel, and that that angel was without power to help him now. (180)[43]

Lisa, it transpires, has loved Miles for many years but, unlike him, has not acted upon this love out of respect for his marital situation. As soon as they have declared their loves to each other she tells Miles that having told is "a sort of death warrant" (161). Lisa decides that their love can remain "uncontaminated" only if they kill it, that living it would introduce their selves into the situation, and taint their love

[42] Being in a church is another *metaxu* used by Murdoch. Other examples can be found in *A Word Child* (380-4) and in *The Good Apprentice* (444-7).

[43] Angels are part of the traditional religious symbolism which Murdoch rejects. They tend, in her novels, to signal delusion and fantasy on the part of those who use them - as Miles does - as images. This is because Murdoch associates angels with the idea of a "neo-Kantian Lucifer" who, when "he gets a glimpse of real death and real chance,. . . takes refuge in sublime emotions". Kant, looking for something outside the self as a source for the moral will, was "led back again into the self, now pictured as angelic, and inside this angel-self his followers have tended to remain" (SOG 82-3). Murdoch uses angels both as an index of outdated religious imagery and of the cult of self.

with selfishness. Its purity is guaranteed through its death. In denying herself and Miles the possibility of living out this love Lisa is "not sacrificing anything for Diana and you. I make the sacrifice to my own love. I can't, with so much love, do anything else." (214-15) Miles, we know already, wants a muse and thinks that Lisa will ultimately prove the source for his poetic inspiration. As for Danby so for Miles: "Lisa was just an angel of memory, a reminder of loss." (231)

Her departure transfigures Lisa into a source of inspiration; coming to terms with her loss allows Miles to come to terms with Parvati's loss. Indeed, he "experienced his loss as if it were one loss, blankly and without consolation" (255-6), and as he begins to deal with this his self-centred view of Lisa crystallizes:

> He knew now that Lisa was an impossibility and had to be an impossibility. That was indeed her role, her task, her service to him . . . Indeed in his thought she was already changing. The girl whom he had known for so many years, the sick girl, the deprived one, the silent one, was already being obscured by something else. A tall cold angel, chilly and strong, as a steel shaft, seemed to be materializing, never more to leave his side. The angel of death, perhaps of Parvati's death.
>
> . . .
>
> Miles started writing poetry. (256)

Lisa is aware of the "use" to which Miles puts her. She tells Danby: "Miles feels I'm in a nunnery or dead. His peace depends on seeing me as unattainable, as an angel." (279)[44] Any transformation on her part will, she knows, upset Miles. But Lisa has changed in the course of the novel. Again, she says to Danby: "That - experience - with Miles altered me. Maybe for the worse, time will show." (278) Lisa does not want to go away or be alone any more. Her sense of herself as a sexual being has

[44] This is one instance of two separate characters in a text using the same symbolism and thus remaining undifferentiated, metaphorically speaking. They are meant to be very different individuals, yet that difference does not translate itself on a verbal plane and despite all other explanations of this phenomenon that one might give it also signals one of the problems Murdoch has with creating different characters.

been awakened. Being "only a woman" (279) she wants "warmth and love, affection, laughter, happiness, all the things I've done without. I don't want to live upon the rack." (280) Lisa understands Danby's view of her: "You imagine I'm good. But those self-denying years prove nothing." (280) There is, it appears, no essence.[45] Lisa, in the end, makes a choice, a "coldly sane, *self-interestedly* sane" one. Sexuality triumphs over spirituality. At least, this is how it appears to Miles and Diana:

> A Lisa in India would have become a divinity. A Lisa sitting in Danby's car with an arm outstretched along the back of the seat . . . was fallen indeed. Miles said venomously, 'Well, she had chosen the world and the flesh . . .' (290-1)

As Lisa changes from spiritual into sexual being her appearance changes too:

> It seemed to Diana that Danby and her sister were scarcely sane. They both seemed to be drunk with ecstacy. The physical change in Lisa was so great that Diana could scarcely recognize her as the same person. She looked not ten but twenty years younger and more beautiful than she had ever looked in her life . . . Had she and Danby been to bed together? Lisa's appearance left the matter in little doubt. (289)

Miles' disbelief in Lisa's transformation casts him in the role of Brabantio at the discovery of Desdemona's love for Othello with Miles' responses couched in expressions gleaned from Shakespeare's play. "For nature so preposterously to err . . ." (289) is just one of several quotations from *Othello* and *Hamlet* that occur in the text,[46] and point to the problem which appears to be at the base of the novel, man's - or, perhaps one really has to say 'woman's - divided nature as perceived by men who feel betrayed by her. Nigel's comment, "every man is betrayed by his mother" (202) provides a psychoanalytic underpinning of the text and

[45] Lisa's "conversion" highlights in an almost shocking manner Murdoch's notion that selflessness is not something to be arrived at but to be struggled towards (SOG 43-4), never wholly or permanently achieved (SOG 93).

[46] Compare also 180, 202.

links it to *The Sea, The Sea*. Having to come to terms with female sexuality, finding the angel, muse, or mother leaving the pedestal for a more earth-bound, sexually based existence, appears to be difficult to accept for those who have erected the pedestals. As Mary Jacobus puts it:

> Reaching beyond the sanctuary, transgressing the boundaries of womanhood (*womanhood*: the sacred hearth, at once home, womb and tomb; something being stilled into silence, for the burden of womanhood is also the burden of the mystery) - the movement becomes an exit from the sacred into the profane. In this scheme, woman as silent bearer of ideology (virgin, wife, mother) is the necessary sacrifice to male secularity, worldliness, and tampering with forbidden knowledge. She is the term by which patriarchy creates a reserve of purity and silence in the materiality of its traffic with the world and its noisy discourse. (*Women Writing* 10-11)

Murdoch portrays her characters as divided beings. What Danby says about himself holds for them all: "He felt obscurely the dividedness of his being, the extent of what was gross, the littleness and value of what was not." (231) Murdoch does not question this dichotomous position but rather underwrites it in her text. Diana's fate, as much as Lisa's, reveals the notion that you live either as a spiritual or a sexual being. At the end of the novel the two women have reversed their roles. Diana's potential for selflessness, spirituality, and goodness, having been signalled throughout the events by her understanding that she is "not anything" (78), that "one's thoughts and feelings are not all that important" (90), is realized in the final stages of the novel when, having once more lost Miles to his selfish preoccupations and Danby to Lisa, Diana takes on Lisa's role of visiting Bruno and actually comes to love him, which, given his nearness to death and his unavailability as a sexual object, constitutes a completely selfless love. As Lisa, once secularized, changed, so Diana changes:

> Diana felt herself growing older and one day when she looked in the glass she saw that she resembled somebody. She resembled Lisa as Lisa used to be. (292)

This change also affects her relationship with her environment. Becoming nothing herself, transformed by Lisa and Danby into a mother figure (290), Diana begins to see the relationship between love and death:

> She tried to think about herself but there seemed to be nothing there. Things can't matter very much, she thought, because one isn't anything . . . She 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)

The death of another, Bruno, teaches Diana about the death of self. It also is suggestive of the spiritual/sexual dichotomy set up in the text. It could be argued that Murdoch in *Bruno's Dream* offers the reader a comment upon Weilian notions of the relationship between love, death, and self which accepts Weil's basic tenets. The people around Bruno fall into three categories among which the characters shift:

I) the selfless, spiritual types: Lisa, Gwen, Parvati;

II) those with either no real sense of self or an understanding of the limitations of their selves: Diana, Danby, Adelaide;

III) those with a misguided or inflated sense of self: Nigel, Miles, Will.

These groupings reveal a sexual bias: the "top level" is inhabited by women only, moreover, women who are not of this world. Two of them are dead, the third is considered "doomed" and "in love with death" until she chooses to live out her sexual self and, in terms of the above hierarchy, literally falls. The "middle ground" is inhabited by both women and men. They are all essentially harmless and hurt others, if at all, mainly by default rather than design. The third category is inhabited exclusively by men; all three characters, whom I shall look at in grater detail in chapter five, impose their selves on the outside world in direct and oppressive ways: from Nigel's bondage games with his brutish twin Will, to Miles accepting Diana's servitude, to Will's violent behaviour towards Adelaide. They (especially Nigel and Miles) sometimes have moments of insight and/or benevolence but these become diluted by their inflated senses of self which occlude other visions.

I do not wish to suggest that Murdoch holds such a strictly gendered view of the relationship between selflessness and selfishness, or that this division recurs in quite that form in her other novels. But it is rather striking here. So is the fact that all the characters

experience the split between spiritual and sexual, and that, moreover, this split constitutes an unbridgeable gulf. Selflessness appears to mean living divorced from any attachment, inhabiting "a vast place of loneliness" (291). Its ultimate meaning is death, the death that Weil lived out. In *Bruno's Dream* nobody dies like that. What gets in the way, what finally stops Lisa from becoming "nothinged", is the self, the desire for "ordinariness" which implies attaching some value to the needs of the "I". These, so Murdoch suggests, appear to be sexually motivated, a function of the desire to recover the oneness felt in relation to the mother in early infancy. Characteristically, and as in *The Sea, The Sea*, the characters of *Bruno's Dream* all remember their childhood as a golden age, a happy time, particularly in relation to the mother.[47] The experience of separateness remains traumatic, undergoing it equals knowing the void. In the following chapter I want to examine that experience and its significance in Weil's and Murdoch's writings.

[47] Bruno thinks of his parents in this way (6); so do Danby (17) and, in a sense, Will (202).

Chapter 3: Knowing The Void

In her review of Weil's *Notebooks* Murdoch suggests that Weil fits the "conception of the philosopher as one who perceives the unity[1] in different branches of knowledge and offers out of his own meditation thereon a lesson for his age" (KV 613). A function of this perception of unity is an "obsessive circling round certain ideas," one of which is the notion of "the void":

> [Weil's] concept of 'the void', which must be **experienced in the achieving of detachment**, differs from the *angst* of popular existentialism, in that *angst* is usually thought of as something which circumstances may force upon a man, whereas experience of the void is a spiritual achievement, involving the control of the imagination, that 'restorer of balances.' (KV 613)

What emerges from *The Notebooks* - and this is where the expression "restorer of balances" becomes important - is that Weil's model of the psyche assumes that it functions in a manner similar to that of, loosely, energy in the universe. Weil who had a profound interest in science and scientific reasoning[2] knew about the laws of thermodynamics[3] and uses these, especially in *The Notebooks*, to explain the moves of the psyche.

Basically, the *law of conservation of energy* or *first law of thermodynamics* states that "energy can neither be created nor destroyed but only changed in form" (Bloomfield, *Chemistry and the Living Organism* 55). The law of conservation of energy "tells us that the total quantity

[1] It is important to note that Murdoch homes in on the concept of unity here as she not only believes in a shared "dream of unity" as part of the human condition but also suggests that morality "display[s] to us a sort of unity" (SOG 94) through a hierarchy of values of which the Good is the highest (SOG 94-5).

[2] See, for instance, part I of *On Science, Necessity, and the Love of God* (3-86) which is devoted to various aspects of (the nature of) science, mathematics, physics, etc.

[3] See, for example, NB I 139, or *Lectures on Philosophy* 84.

of energy remains unchanged" but "tells us nothing about the quality of that energy" (Bloomfield 55). What we do learn from it, and what is important in relation to Weil's representation of the psyche, is that a) energy cannot be created, and b) that because the total amount of energy remains unchanged it is "not natural" to have a void. Another important factor is that "all naturally occuring processes tend to go in one direction" (Bloomfield 55), namely *down*. This implies "a general tendency for all substances to reach a state of lower energy". Such a state can be counteracted by adding energy (example: water runs downhill but can be pumped uphill). However, it is not energy levels alone which determine the direction of spontaneous processes; a further factor is "the amount of randomness or disorder of the system" or *entropy*: "All spontaneous reactions go toward a condition of greater randomness, greater disorder, and greater entropy." (Bloomfield 56) Entropy, according to the *second law of thermodynamics*, increases. Energy has to be added to "counteract the natural drive toward increased entropy" (Bloomfield 58). In tune with this Weil states in *Gravity and Grace:*

> *All the natural* movements of the soul are controlled by laws analogous to those of physical gravity. Grace is the only exception.
>
> We must always expect things to happen in conformity with the laws of gravity unless there is supernatural intervention. (1)

Weil suggests that "the source of man's moral energy is outside him, like that of his physical energy (food, air etc.)" (3). Force or energy, so Weil maintains, is "on the side of baseness" (2). Therefore:

> A situation which is too hard degrades us through the following process: as a general rule the energy supplied by higher emotions is limited. If the situation requires us to go beyond this limit we have to fall back on lower feelings (fear, covetousness, desire to beat the record, love of outward honours) which are richer in energy. (7)

For Weil all "base feelings (envy, resentment) are degraded energy" (8). This degraded energy is the equivalent to the notion that all naturally occuring processes tend to move "downwards". Weil distinguishes between "base" and "noble" or "higher" emotions, considering the former to be the ones towards which we naturally gravitate, the latter those which -

through an outside input of energy - we work towards. We cannot create the energy necessary to be good (NB II 531). Danby (BD), for example, was temporarily made a better person through Gwen, who provided the necessary external source of energy for this; without her he could not sustain the effort. Just as Danby reverted to a lower moral level after Gwen's death, a level characterized by a higher degree of self-relatedness, so, according to Weil

> The soul, like a gas, tends to occupy the whole of the space left open to it. If a gas were to withdraw and leave a void, this would be contrary to the law of entropy . . . Each one spreads himself as much as he is able.
> To stop, to check oneself is to create a void in oneself. (NB I 198)

This is an almost impossible situation to achieve. Given that our natural tendencies are towards lower levels of energy, towards baser feelings, and given that the self naturally takes up all the space available to it:

> To accept the void in ourselves is supernatural. Where is the energy to be found for an act which has nothing to counterbalance it? The energy has to come from elsewhere. (GG 10)

Essentially, according to Weil, human beings are subject to the "laws of the world" and therefore react against any empty space by filling it. In this respect they are like mechanical beings, responding automatically to any gravitational pull. A void, in so far as it is created, can be endured only for a short period of time:

> Man only escapes from the laws of this world in lightening flashes. Instants when everything stands still, instants of contemplation, of pure intuition, of mental void, of acceptance of the moral void. It is through such instants that he is capable of the supernatural. (GG 11)

Voids come about through "external violence". They are experienced in the face of "sudden death, betrayal, absence of one we love, sudden loss of something to which our thoughts for the future were attached" (NB I 198). The voids created under such circumstances can be filled from two

directions, from the self (internally) or from outside (God, grace, externally).

The self, according to Weil, uses a whole series of means of filling the void in order to re-establish an equilibrium. Chief of these is the imagination which provides structured fantasies offering consolation and compensation. To the extent that we use our imagination to counteract a void we remove ourselves from God and Good. To the extent that we allow ourselves to experience certain situations we come to know the void and move closer to goodness. According to Weil we experience the void if we

a) do not use all the power at our disposal (GG 10),

b) love truth and accept death (GG 11),

c) desire without an object (GG 13),

d) leave aside beliefs such as those in immortality, in the utility of sins, in the providential ordering of events (GG 13),

e) are deprived of the future (NB I 136),

f) accept suffering (NB I 227),

g) renounce the fruits or rewards for our efforts (NB I 227),

h) accept the impossibility of a situation without trying to resolve it (NB I 153, 198).

Weil suggests that we come into being through God absenting himself from the world, creating a void to be filled by us. In order to make possible God's re-entry into the world we have to de-create ourselves, accept the void and resist filling it with the help of our imagination. This implies self-effacement. Knowing the void therefore means effacing the self. In the realm of morality this takes the form of acting from necessity without seeking reward, doing and being good for nothing; in the spiritual realm it takes the form of not imagining what God is like, accepting a blank instead of some sort of representation.

Both these ideas find expression in Murdoch's work. In *The Sovereignty of Good* Murdoch, acknowledging Weil's influence (50), describes the self as a "system of energy", a "mechanism" whose source of moral energy lies outside the self.

> The psyche is a historically determined individual relentlessly looking after itself. In some ways it resembles a machine; in order to operate it needs sources of energy, and it is predisposed to certain patterns of activity . . . One of its main

> pastimes is day-dreaming. It is reluctant to face unpleasant realities . . . It constantly seeks consolation, either through imagined inflation of self or through fictions of a theological nature. (78-9)

Murdoch's equivalent to Weil's "imagination, the filler of the void," is "fantasy, the proliferation of blinding self-centred aims and images, . . . itself a powerful system of energy" (SOG 67). Against this system Murdoch sets the idea of "the good" which in her moral economy takes the place of God as the transcendent Other[4] towards which the individual should turn for moral inspiration in a godless age.[5] "The Good" can be represented through instances of goodness but has no history of an immediately and generally recognizable representation like that of the Christian God as a father figure with flowing beard and robes.[6] Murdoch describes "the good" as "non-representable and indefinable" (74):

> The Good has nothing to do with purpose, indeed it excludes the idea of purpose. 'All is vanity' is the beginning and the end of ethics. The only genuine way to be good is to be good 'for nothing' in the midst of a scene where every 'natural' thing, including one's own mind, is subject to chance, that is, to necessity. That 'for nothing' is indeed the experienced correlate of the invisibility or non-representable blankness of the idea of Good itself. (71)

Again, one can hear Weil's voice: "The good which we can neither picture nor define is a void for us." (GG 13) As Weil portrays human beings as subject to necessity and death so Murdoch says: "Goodness is connected with the acceptance of real death and real chance and real transcience . . . the acceptance of death is the acceptance of our own nothingness" (103).

[4] See "On 'God' and 'Good'" in SOG, esp. 53-64.

[5] Hebblethwaite in "Feuerbach's Ladder" (esp. 153-9), Mitchell in *Morality: Religious and Secular* (esp. 66-9, 78), and Vance in "Iris Murdoch's Serious Fun" (423-4) discuss the good as a secularized representation of God in relation to Murdoch's work.

[6] For a discussion of the representation of goodness in the figure of Jesus see Sutherland, *God, Jesus and Belief* 150-62.

Weil defines "void" as a state "*when there is nothing external to correspond to an internal tension*" (NB I 147; also in FLN 159)). This corresponds to Murdoch's description in SOG 102-3. The internal tension (or, imperfect soul) finds nothing external corresponding to it because good is unrepresentable (GG 100), and all we know about God is that He is what we are not (GG 110). Any correspondences between the internal tension and something external are extensions of the self filling the void and express self-related needs.

Knowing the void for both Weil and Murdoch thus refers to a state in which, for a very short period of time, one is able to "unself" oneself and accept nothingness rather than project fantasies on to the external world for consolatory purposes. This state is "unnatural" in that it goes against the fundamental gravitational tendencies within the self. Weil and Murdoch believe that self-relatedness can be counteracted only from the outside or by directing one's attention towards an other; Weil associates this external input with divine grace, Murdoch with a striving towards the good which focusses away from the self. Good and God share similar attributes for Weil and Murdoch; they are non-representable and transcendent.

I want to go on to indicate how this idea of knowing the void finds expression in Murdoch's fiction, examining its moral dimension in relation to *The Good Apprentice*, and its spiritual dimension in relation to *The Time of the Angels*. Both novels deal with the same issues: religion, power, the role of fathers, the influence people have on each other's lives. Indeed, perhaps somewhat tongue-in-cheek, she has one of her characters in *The Good Apprentice* say of another character: "She's an artist. She keeps saying the same thing without repeating herself." (66) Although this is true of Murdoch, it is also important to note that whereas *The Time of the Angels* is centrally concerned with religion in a godless age *The Good Apprentice* considers the nature of the good in this age. Two things to be remembered here are a) that Weil and Murdoch believe that the world is essentially subject to chance and that any patterns we perceive we ourselves create by way of consolation, and b) that facing the nothingness of the world is a quasi-Sisyphean task. Knowing the void, whilst characterized as a spiritual achievement, is therefore not the endpoint of some spiritual development but rather

something reached momentarily, fragmentarily, endlessly to be striven towards.

At the centre of a number of people's lives in *The Time of the Angels* is Carel Fisher, a parish priest without parish[7] who has been moved to this situation by his bishop in order to render Carel, who no longer believes in God, harmless to any community. In his old parish Carel had begun to manifest what is termed "eccentric behaviour":

> He became a recluse, refused to see callers or to answer letters . . . He introduced curious variations of his own into the ceremonial of his services and even into the liturgy. He began a sermon by saying, "And what if I tell you that there is no God?" and then left his congregation to fidget uneasily during a long silence. He once conducted a service from behind the altar. He was given to laughing in church. (33-4)

Pattie O'Driscoll, Carel's black servant and mistress, from whose perspective the reader is initially introduced to Carel's spiritual crisis, thinks that he is "losing his faith" (34), "a soul in hell" (35):

> In any case Pattie knew that what frightened Carel did not belong to the material world even in the sense in which pink elephants did.[8] (35-6)

In conversation with his younger brother Marcus for whom, since the early demise of their parents, he has functioned as a father figure, the nature of Carel's spiritual crisis emerges. Carel asserts that "there is no God" (182), and suggests that to say so "would be the most religious statement that could be conceived of" (183). In this Carel approximates Weil's assertion that

[7] Cato of *Henry and Cato* is in a similar situation to Carel (see *Henry and Cato* 22-3). For a discussion of those two figures see Kaftan, "Doubt and the Self: Two Murdoch Priests".

[8] This is a good example of Murdochian realism in that it invokes material reality (taking it for granted) at the same time as pointing to the fantastic element which, as part of a shared linguistic usage, inhabits a world where the realistic and the fantastic are continuous. But "realism ends where a continuity between the private and the public, the symbolical and the referential, can no longer be established" (Stern 84). This is what Pattie is here arriving at.

> Of two men who have no experience of God, he who denies him is perhaps nearer to him than the other . . .
> We have to believe in a God who is like the true God in everything, except that he does not exist, for we have not reached the point where God exists. (NB I 151)

Correspondingly Murdoch suggests in *The Sovereignty of Good* that "there is, in my view, no God in the traditional sense of that term; and the traditional sense is perhaps the only sense" (79). What renders Carel's statement "there is no God" the most religious one one can make is the fact that it, in Weil's and Murdoch's terms, acknowledges the unimaginability of God, that it accepts the impossibility of creating an image of Him.

Suggesting that there is no God implies, of course, the existence of a void, an emptiness where the traditional image of God was before. This emptiness is very difficult to bear. Carel calls it "the truth" and says of it to his brother: "And though I may tell you, you will not retain it in your mind because it cannot be borne." He also suggests that Nietzsche may have known this truth but was driven mad by "his failure to hold it in contemplation" (183). Knowing the truth, it would seem, is one thing; what you do with this knowledge is another. What becomes clear is that it is impossible to live with this truth, the understanding of the void.

Predictably, perhaps, Carel too is incapable of coming to terms with this truth, i.e. not imagining some graspable alternative to the emptiness perceived, and precisely at this point "goes astray". He says to Marcus:

> The disappearance of God does not simply leave a void [and this is, of course, what Weil would have us believe] into which human reason can move. The death of God has set the angels free. And they are terrible.[9] (185)

Carel, in tune with Weil's and Murdoch's representation of the psyche as a closed system of energy which cannot accept a vacuum, fills the void

[9] This is one example of the way in which Murdoch uses the symbol of the angel to indicate delusion about the nature of the universe in the individual.

he has perceived with what he calls "the angels"[10], echoing Miles' (ab)use of symbolism (see 120, 224-5 in this thesis):

> There are principalities and powers. Angels are the thoughts of God. Now he has been dissolved into his thoughts which are beyond our conception in their nature and their multiplicity and their power. God was at least the name of something which we thought was good. Now even the name has gone and the spiritual world is scattered. There is nothing any more to prevent the magnetism of many spirits. (185)

For Carel the disappearance of god as a unitary principle signals the entry of evil into the world.

> "If there is goodness it must be one[11]," [he says].
> "Multiplicity is not paganism, it is the triumph of evil, or rather of what used to be called evil and is now nameless."[12] (185)

Carel is caught, and this is his spiritual undoing, in the "dream of unity" (SOG 94) which, though natural, is unrealizable. One way of reading this "deeply natural desire for unity" is, of course, in terms of the desire to return to the pre-Oedipal dyadic union with the mother.

In *The Sovereignty of Good* Murdoch asserts that goodness is "absolute for-nothingness" (92), and associated with "*perfection* (absolute good) and *necessary existence*" (61). It has "nothing to do with purpose" (71):

> That 'for nothing' is indeed the experienced correlate of the invisibility or non-representable blankness of the idea of Good itself. (71)

Accepting Platonic idealism, Murdoch discusses the good in terms of

[10] See 30, footnote 55, and 119, footnote 43 in this thesis.

[11] In SOG Murdoch argues for goodness as a unitary concept (55-8).

[12] The Pythagorean table of opposites associates multiplicity with the female, the unitary with the male (see 67, footnote 39 in this thesis). Irigaray in "The Sex Which is Not One" (esp. 103-4) discusses the relationship between multiplicity and the female.

"relationship and hierarchy" (95), suggesting: "We are not usually in doubt about the direction in which Good lies." (97) This, however, does not lead her back to an exact definition of goodness:

> The undefinability of Good is connected with the unsystematic and inexhaustible variety of the world and the pointlessness of virtue. (99)

Carel rejects all these notions. In a passage that amounts to a critique of Murdoch's position, intended, perhaps, by the author to be seen as misguided, he argues:

> Suppose the truth were awful, suppose it was just a black pit, or like birds huddled in the dust in a dark cupboard? Suppose only evil was real . . . Who could face this? The philosophers have never even tried. All philosophy has taught facile optimism, even Plato did it. Philosophers are simply the advance guard of theology. They are certain that Goodness is there at the centre of things radiating its pattern. They are certain that Good is one, single and unitary . . . Only a few of them really feared Chaos and Old Night, and fewer still ever caught a glimpse . . .
>
> There is only power and the marvel of power, there is only chance and the terror of chance. And if there is only this there is no God, and the single God of the philosophers is an illusion and a fake.[13] (184-5)

Carel's argument, in Weil's and Murdoch's terms, goes wrong in a number of ways. For one thing, he tries to explain the void in terms of an image, "the birds in the cupboard", and concepts from the Old Testament (chaos, old night) which give his representation of the void a particular twist inherent in the language he employs; he also associates goodness with a pattern which amounts to projecting his need for structure onto the concept he discusses and dismisses. He thus reveals how he is trapped in his own mind, and the way in which his psyche fashions his imagination and "warps" his perception. He (mis)takes the existence of chance as a reason for the impossibility of goodness. Thus

[13] Carel's words compare interestingly with a section from Aristophanes' *Birds* quoted by Weil in NB II 377.

he says to Marcus: "Our subjection to chance even more than our mortality makes us potentially spiritual. Yet it is this too which makes spirit inaccessible to us." (186)

> We do not know the truth because as I told you it is something that cannot be endured. People will endlessly conceal from themselves that good is only good if one is good for nothing . . that is why goodness is impossible for us human beings. It is not only impossible, it is not even imaginable, we cannot really name it, in our realm it is non-existent. The concept is empty. This has been said of the concept of God. It is even more true of the concept of Good. (186)

In terms of Weil's and Murdoch's philosophy Carel has understood the nature of God and the Good but draws the wrong conclusions from that. He thus comes to exemplify the notion that human beings cannot endure the truth, that they compensate for the void by pouring imaginative energy, fantasy, into that space. Carel's knowledge of the void translates itself into a fantasy where the angels, God's thoughts, fill the void, and good is regarded as an impossibility.

The person closest to Carel in terms of an understanding of his spiritual position is the bishop who, again in conversation with Marcus, offers a sympathetic reading of Carel's behaviour though ignorant of the consequences Carel has drawn from his understanding of the truth. The bishop tries to screen Carel from accusations of madness. Suggesting that "belief is such a personal thing" (100) he maintains:

> . . . we have to consider this time as an interregnum . . . mankind is growing up. The particular historical nature of Christianity poses intellectual problems which are also spiritual problems. Much of the symbolism of theology . . . is, in this scientific age, simply a barrier to belief. It has become something positively misleading. Our symbolism must change . . . Those who have come nearest to God have spoken of blackness, even of emptiness. Symbolism falls away. There is a profound truth here. Obedience to God must be an obedience without trimmings, an obedience, in a sense, for nothing. (101-2)

Especially in the second half of this quotation the bishop espouses a Weilian position as expressed, for example, in *Gravity and Grace*:

"Obedience is the only pure motive, the only one which does not in the slightest degree seek a reward for the action, but leaves all care of reward to the Father who is in secret and who sees in secret." (43) Carel's problem is that for him symbolism does not fall away but that he is prompted to substitute one set of symbols for another. God and goodness are replaced by the birds in the cupboard and the angels'[14] which become associated with evil.

On one level Carel becomes the victim of the medium through which he expresses himself and whose nature is essentially symbolic, i.e. language. Carel repeatedly refers to the fact that we can neither imagine nor *name* good. His at times rather florid description of his spiritual state, the fact that he is given to metaphorical representation, points to the importance of language in his perception. That which we cannot name induces fear ("the terror of chance"). Carel cannot cope with it. It is in this light that we can make sense of his behaviour, his becoming a recluse, refusing all forms of communication, endlessly playing Romantic music. Carel lives out the wordlessness and darkness he has encountered in his understanding of truth.

Whereas for Carel his understanding of the void is a spiritual problem, it is, for his brother Marcus, in the main, an ethical one. Marcus is engaged in writing a book on *Morality in a World without God*. He is intent on "the demythologizing of morals" because:

> Deprived of myth, religion might die, but morals must be made to live. A religion without God . . . represented . . . the half-conscious realization that the era of superstition was over. It was its too possible consequence [the one drawn by Carel], a morality without Good, which was the really serious danger. Marcus's intention was to rescue the idea of an Absolute in morals by showing it to be implied in the unavoidable human activity of moral evaluation at its most unsophisticated level, and in doing this to eschew both theological metaphor and the crudities of existentialism which was the nemesis of academic philosophy. (77-8)

[14] In *The Time of the Angels* Murdoch explores the problem of religious symbolism most concretely through the fate and reading of Eugene Peshkov's icon.

This, and the subsequent paragraph (not reproduced here), read like a program for Murdoch's *The Sovereignty of Good.* Indeed, Marcus echoes Murdoch's philosophical stance not just in this but also in the conclusion he comes to in abandoning his book: "It might be that what he wanted to say about love and about humanity was true but simply could not be expressed as a theory." (249) Murdoch says in *The Sovereignty of Good*: "Instances of the facts. . . which interest me and which seem to have been forgotten or 'theorized away' are the fact that an unexamined life can be virtuous and the fact that love is a central concept in morals." (1-2)

Marcus is portrayed as the mediocre but sincere man who shies away from the knowledge which his intellect enables him to comprehend. When Carel offers to "initiate" him into his thoughts Marcus finds that:

> He felt dread of him. Almost involuntarily he said in a low voice, "I'm not sure that I want to hear now." (183)

In a similar vein the bishop's interpretation of Carel's plight induces misery in Marcus:

> Behind the Bishop's tolerant psychological small-talk, behind his worldly aphorisms, there opened a black scene, as if the walls had rolled away to reveal the trough of the heavens, dark, seething with matter, riddled with void, and without any intelligible principle of organization. (129)

Marcus is another example of someone who cannot cope with the structurelessness of the void; against it he posits, in Carel's presence rather feebly, "ordinary morality", "ordinary decent conduct" (185). He needs others to believe on his behalf:

> He did not believe in the redeeming blood of Jesus, he did not believe in the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost, but he wanted other people to believe. He wanted the old structure to continue there beside him . . . (103)

Marcus' book also reflects his need to believe in some structure or hierarchy of values, again replicating ideas familiar from *The Sovereignty of Good*. The following passage is a "quotation" from Marcus' book:

> If the idea of Good is severed from the idea of perfection it is emasculated and any theory which tolerates this severance,

> however high-minded it professes to be, is in the end a vulgar relativism. If the idea of Good is not severed from the idea of perfection it is impossible to avoid the problem of 'the transcendent'. Thus the 'authority' of goodness returns . . .[15] (128)

There is a level at which the two brothers Carel and Marcus represent the choices the individual has in "an age without God"; the choice appears to be between believing in the reality of evil or the reality of good. Carel opts for the former and in so doing sets himself up as a power figure. "Self-obsessed" and "neurotic" as one of the other characters describes him, he accepts no authority other than his own and imposes himself and his will on those around him. In so doing he becomes harmful to these people. As a new kind of god he seeks to fashion them in the image he wants them to have. This is especially true of the two women he has sexual relations with. Pattie the servant fulfils for him the role he is supposed to have for Marcus, i.e. as a retainer of the old religion (He says to her at one point: "Your faith matters to me, Pattie, it's strange." 168) Elizabeth, his daughter by his younger brother's wife, is locked into an incestuous relationship with him. Pattie, Carel's "sugar-plum fairy", and Elizabeth, his "swan princess", are both incarcerated by Carel's power over them, Elizabeth literally through agreeing to a charade of invalidism, and Pattie psychologically through her sense of his having made her "real" through his love. Carel's acceptance of evil thus signals the end of all morality, a recognition of no authority other than his own, and an understanding of life based on power and pain. Marcus, in contrast, opts for an acceptance of good. In a sense he chooses simply a different mode of filling the void, a more obvious one, perhaps, even. Through this choice he remains essentially harmless; he does not impose himself on anyone but rather is imposed upon. His need for structure, a closure of the void, renders him gullible and exploitable by people like Leo who, also in search of a structure and boundaries from an initial position of despair and sense of immorality, use those who do not set them limits. At least, and unlike Carel, Marcus does no active harm to anyone. Which

is precisely the point which Stuart in *The Good Apprentice* finally reaches as the lowest common denominator of what doing and being good is about.

At the centre of *The Good Apprentice* is Edward Baltram, guilt-ridden because of a friend's death for which he feels responsible. In the aftermath of this death Edward engages in a quest for redemption which induces him to work through his relationship with his father. The novel starts with a drug-induced experience which to the onlooking giver of the drug, Edward, seems like the achievement of a mystical state. His friend Mark, drugged up, has "a happy journey":

> He looked like a wide-browed, huge-eyed god. He was a god, he had become divine, he was experiencing the Good Absolute, the vision of visions, *the annihilation of the ego.* (1)

This experience, like Carel's knowledge of the void, leads to Mark's death; there is, in fact, no return from the annihilation of self. And, appropriately, the rest of *The Good Apprentice* is given over to exploring not the Good Absolute but the Good Relative which equals, on one level, the distance between theory and practice, between knowing about and living this knowledge.

A number of people in *The Good Apprentice* know about good and its relation to the self. One of these is Thomas, a clinical psychologist who practises psychoanalysis. He understands the machinations of the soul including his own relation to this understanding. He realizes that knowing about the mechanics of the inner life gives him a certain power over people to guide and direct them and he enjoys having this degree of influence. Thomas' insight into the human psyche and his profession as counsellor place him in the role of observer and commentator, at a remove from the action and people he surveys. He acts as a kind of god.

Those who come to him want help, guidance, clarification. By receiving them in his space, then giving them the space to speak and, in a sense, absenting himself from the scene both through letting the other speak and through talking to that other in a professional capacity, Thomas enacts the relationship of God and his creation in its Weilian interpretation. Thomas' ability to detach his private from his professional self is highlighted by the fact that even his own relatives "use" him as a therapist without feeling compromised by this.

Thomas is interested in the idea of death as an expression of selflessness. Significantly (because it points to the removedness of Thomas' position from those around him), one of his speeches is heard by another character on television. In this programme Thomas explains that

> The so-called "death wish" is not something negative, but one of our purest instincts. Every religion requires us to die to the world. Death has always been, in the wisdom of the east, the image of the destruction of the ego. Nirvana, the cessation of all selfish desire, the release from the . . . wheel of illusory passions, is pictured as nothingness . . . Death is the death of the ego . . . the destruction of the body is the image of the liberation of the soul. And the liberation of the soul is the aim of true psychology. Death is the best and only picture we have of the fuller, better life for which, in our darkness, without understanding, we somehow yearn and strive. Death is the centre of life. (257-8)

Thomas outlines two types of death, a physical and a spiritual one. The latter corresponds to the state Weil describes as "detachment" and which she sees as an alternative to suicide (GG 15). It is a metaphorical death, the expression of self-effacement, the creation of a void, the decreation of self. In Weil's terminology this leads to "reality", in Thomas' it leads to "life". For Thomas it is associated with "the cessation of all selfish desire", Weil sees it as

> The extinction of desire (Buddhism) - or detachment - or *amor fati* - or desire for the absolute good - these amount to the same: to empty desire, finality of all content, to desire in the void, to desire without any wishes. (GG 12-3)

The Good Apprentice presents a detailed account of only one of Thomas' professional relationships, that with Edward. Thomas the analyst is portrayed as an astute observer and skilful manipulator. Through procuring an invitation to Edward's biological father Thomas engineers a situation whereby Edward can "enact a mythical drama" (37) - concerning father-son relationships - which may, and does, provide the catalyst for the change necessary for Edward to move beyond his state of affliction. Edward describes his situation in terms reminiscent of Weil's (and, of

course, Murdoch's) image of the psyche as mechanical, subject to gravity and thermodynamic rules:

> I'm *done* for. You know how if an aeroplane engine stalls at a certain moment it can't rise, it must crash by its own weight, no power can raise it, it's just a heavy dead thing bound to fall back to earth. My engines have failed, I've *got* to fall, I've no energy left, one way or another I'm done for. (67)

Edward's description here mirrors Weil's comments on the damaged self (GG 24-7); she considers destruction of the I from outside, i.e. without one's choosing, as a source of extreme affliction. In Edward's case the I, as Thomas points out, is not quite dead because Edward's imagination is still busily filling up the void by creating images of his situation. Therein lies his chance of survival, and Thomas proposes to use what energy is left in Edward (as this energy can be directed) to help him help himself. In an eloquent speech in which Thomas invokes the Freudian representation of the psyche[16] he explains to Edward the process he is undergoing:

> Your picture of yourself, your self-illusion, is in the process of being broken . . . You say you have no energy, that you are using mine, it isn't so. Your unconscious mind rejoices in the defeat of your proud ego, its malicious pleasure floods you with demonic energy . . . [Your grief is] a defensive system of mutually supporting falsehoods instinctively produced to defend your old egoistic self-image which you cannot bear to lose . . . an act of will is needed here, an act of well-intentioned *concentration* . . . [you must] redirect that strange energy . . . Truthful remorse leads to the fruitful death of the self . . . (71)

Thomas eventually finds himself in a situation not dissimilar to Edward's. The choices with which he presents his patient, he himself is made to face:

> Sometimes, because of a catastrophe, a bereavement or some total loss of self-esteem, our falsehoods become pernicious, and we

[16] Freud represents the mature psyche as a three-tiered system consisting of id, ego, and super-ego or ego ideal.

> are forced to choose between some painful recognition of truth and an even more frenzied and aggressive manufacturing of lies. (72)

In Thomas' case the catastrophe lies in discovering his wife's having had a long-term affair. Thomas has always regarded his wife as an "absolute" (83), and in consequence paid little attention to her, investing his energy in his professional activities. As he understands the problematic of his growing need for his patients (82), and considers himself at times "a charlatan", "an amateur", certainly not "a scientist" (81), Thomas wants to divest himself of his patients and retire. Only in relation to his job, however, can Thomas apply his knowledge:

> We practise dying through continual destruction of our self-images, inspired not by the self-hatred which seems to be within, but by the truth that seems to be without; such suffering is normal, it goes on all the time, it must go on. (82)

Thomas is able to look at his work in this light because his emotional commitment is less significant than his rational view. He regards his patients "with a more detached emotion which [includes] curiosity" (83). The real test comes when his own emotions are involved, in relation to his wife and, simultaneously, suffers a loss of professional self-esteem, which - although he has always been a sceptic - occurs when he has to realize that one of his patients has been leading him up the garden path.

Thomas, like Edward, responds to his wife's infidelity by taking flight, "fleeing out of the mess of here to the purity of elsewhere" (83), to his country house. His garden of Eden is partially spoilt by the arrival of a serpent in the form of his truth-bearing patient who appears to tell him of his deceit. Thomas decides to retire from his job; he forgives his wife, thus filling the "great void where his love for Midge had been" (423). His effort of concentration at his country residence has led him to recognize his inattention to Midge which in turn makes it possible for him to forgive her. His possibly temporary ability to unself himself leads to a reconciliation with his wife. His final attention to her, however, reads less like an acknowledgment of her otherness than like an attempt to "make safe" as Hilary did with his

sister in *A Word Child*. Godlike he watches over her, knows her every move ("He tracked her, like a keeper tracking a sick animal." 496), even the ones she considers secret, and from so doing derives a sense of security. He is no longer taking any risks. Yet being able to do and cope with that is a function of accepting otherness.

Thomas represents one choice available to those who want to help others in a godless world. Where the priest stood between God and self and acted as mediator in that relationship Thomas stands between self and self. Both institutionalized religion and psychoanalysis constitute an attempt to introduce clarity and understanding between a supposedly known (in both cases the/a self) and a supposedly unknown quantity (God, unconscious). Thomas arrives at the conclusion that psychoanalysis can reveal only very little:

> He felt that his general understanding of human psychology had broken down. Where the individual mind is concerned the light of science could reveal so little; and the mishmash of scientific ideas and mythology and literature and isolated facts and sympathy and intuition and love and appetite for power which was known as psychoanalysis [or institutionalized religion?] and which of course did sometimes 'help people', could make the most extraordinary mistakes when it left the paths of the obvious. (496)

Thomas realizes that he chose his profession because of its "proximity [to] religion" which for him is a "forbidden fruit" (81). Its seductiveness lies in the way in which the "confessional mode" (so akin to certain religious practices) between analysand and analyst allows the latter to set himself up as all-knowing, godlike. Appropriately, Thomas is at one point described as "a mediator, an enabler of the gods" (19). Relinquishing this role in his professional capacity does not, however, stop Thomas from exercising it in his personal life. His reconciliation with his wife is initiated through his assuming the role of priest, hearing her confession, forgiving her. This is, certainly, how she interprets it (487-8).

Through the figure of Thomas *The Good Apprentice* appears to suggest something of the limitations of psychoanalysis that place it in the same

position as institutionalized religion.[17] Both seem to act as "fillers of the void" through their intimation that they can offer understanding, knowledge, a pattern that makes sense of human activity. As such they are presented as suspect and self-consoling. An attempt to portray an alternative to this is made through the figure of Stuart, the opposite to Thomas who functions like Tallis in relation to Julius King in *A Fairly Honourable Defeat*. Just as Julius is fascinated by Tallis whom he finds difficult to understand, so Thomas is interested in Stuart.

Stuart is the Weilian figure in *The Good Apprentice*. He tries to live the convictions he holds which are very like Weil's own as well as embodying some of the views presented by Murdoch in her theoretical work. Stuart believes in the individual's ability to distinguish between good and evil (28), in the importance of "serious thinking" which is aligned to "justice and truthfulness" (28); he is afraid of the loss of "our language", "our souls", "our sense of truth", "ordinary reality", "our sense of direction, our knowledge of right and wrong" (30). He has decided to, as Thomas puts it, "apprentice himself to goodness" (138) which to him means leading a "dull", "orderly", "ordinary", "altrustic" life (142). At the beginning of the text we find Stuart, like Weil a child of well-to-do middle class parents who has just given up his privileged education and ends up deciding to become a schoolmaster, wanting to do good but not quite knowing how and in which role and, in the absence of any clear notion of what to do, waiting for a sign. He would like to be "a sort of obscure parish priest" (139) but, apart from the fact that he recognizes the meaninglessness of religion in contemporary society, he also, like Weil, rejects institutionalized religion and considers the notion of a personal God an "anti-religious idea" (140). Similar to Carel Fisher, Stuart considers it his destiny to "live alone as a priest in a world without God" (52). But Stuart's understanding of the absence of God does not lead him to despair as it

[17] Peter L. Berger in *The Noise of Solemn Assemblies* discusses the problematic of the socio-psychological dimension of institutionalized religion in North America which prevents the individual from confronting the Christian message (e.g. 114-23). The church as a social formation, akin to Weil's "Great Beast" (GG 144-9), provides a religious "fantasy" rather than a religious "reality".

does Carel; Stuart does not interpret this absence as an affirmation of the reality of evil. Rather, he has dedicated himself to goodness:

> He wanted to be able to be a place of peace and space to others, he wanted to be invisible, he wanted to heal people, he wanted to heal the world, and to get into a situation where this would be something simple and automatic, something expected and every day. (53)

One is reminded here of the things Weil wanted - the desire for invisibility, altruism. But Stuart shares Weil's problems:

> He knew how awkward and conspicuous he was, how he embarrassed people, exasperated them, unnerved them, frightened them. He lacked charm. He was often aware when he entered a room how much he disturbed the atmosphere and broke the tempo. This made it important to find a *place* where he needed no persona, and awkwardness would become something unimportant, taken for granted. Perhaps it would pass off, he was young and could learn. Besides all men are mocked, Christ was mocked. (53)

This is reminiscent of Weil whose awkwardness and conspicuousness which rendered her unsuitable for the tasks she wanted to fulfil have been much commented upon.[18]

In accordance with his sense that he is "under obedience" (245) - a term which echoes all the way through Weil's work[19] - Stuart evolves a set of rules concerning his life; he feels that in order to avoid entering the "machine" of "corruption" he has to live "simply and be alone" (139). Like Weil he rejects "ordinary attachments, intimate friendships or relationships, what's usually called love" (145):

> To love without entanglement, that, for him at any rate, meant celibacy. (53)

What we have here is, of course, a replication of an idea familiar from

[18] See, for example, Pétrement 244, 245, 270-2, 514-5.

[19] Weil describes obedience as "the only pure motive, the only one which does not in the slightest degree seek a reward for the action" (NB I 150). Obedience should be the response "to necessity and not to force" (NB I 150); it should be "obedience to God" of which Christ as man is the perfect example (NB II 394).

Bruno's Dream, namely, that sexual relationships ground the individual in a life devoid of innocence (significantly, Stuart relates celibacy to "some more positive conception of innocence", 53) and potentially corrupting - again, it seems that a choice has to be made between a sexual and a spiritual life with the latter being understood as a life dedicated to goodness.

Stuart is shown to be able to remain free of entanglements. Indeed, one of his virtues is his ability to achieve "separated stillness" (49), associated for him with

> . . . a kind of lightness, an escape from gravity, an available levitation to a higher viewpoint, a removal from time, wherein huge and complex awarenesses could be contained in seconds. (50)

Stuart, in fact, has "an instinctive craving for nothingness which was also a desire to be able to love and enjoy and 'touch' everything, to *help* everything" (55). The same is, of course, found in Weil (NB I 291-2) but whereas her spirit was agitated by her perceptions Stuart represents an idealized, calm version of the good person. The words most frequently used to characterize him are "white" and "blank". Thomas, for example, describes him thus (83). This description matches perfectly Stuart's desire "to be nothing, to have nothing, to be a servant" (140). Blankness and whiteness are one way of naming the nothingness Stuart aspires to.

Stuart, in a sense, wants to be a void: when it is suggested that he is in love with death[20] this has to be interpreted as the expression of self-effacement. With two people Stuart actually succeeds in becoming such a void, Midge and her son Meredith. Midge, who falls in love with Stuart's separateness and authority as she sees it, at one point accusingly says to him:

> You set yourself up as something amazing - you've created this sort of - vacuum - all round you - you can't complain if afflicted people rush into it. (367)

And, so the text would suggest, whilst it may be possible to make resolutions in relation to yourself or to act "instinctively" in a good

[20] This is, of course, the same position as the one Miles adopts towards Lisa in *Bruno's Dream*.

way as Stuart seems to be able to do, this does not free one from the consequences of being a social entity. Attempting to be or do good does not automatically result in good - and does not do so because there are always other people involved. Midge's falling in love with Stuart initially causes a series of problems as it jeopardizes his relationships with two other people, Midge's son Meredith and his own father, Harry, Midge's lover until then. At the same time Stuart's effect on Midge, "the killing of her ordinary life, the annihilation of her instinctive desires, the sense of utter deprivation which had been too a kind of unearthly joy" (491-2), fleetingly leads her to the desire to be good like and with Stuart (371-2), and ultimately returns her to her family.

Everyone represents Midge's desire to be good "the Stuart way" as a dream, an illusion, from Stuart himself to Harry, Edward, and Thomas. The reader is not given any real indication as to whether or not Midge has done the right thing (although it is suggested that her son has suffered a lot from her desertion and might recover as a result of her return); what we - that is, the readers - are given instead is something straight from labelling theory; people accept the labels suggested to them and act upon those if sufficient pressure is exercised on them. Edmund the bastard in *King Lear* will always be and act the bastard, and patriarchy has a vested interest in maintaining this stance; similarly, Midge's return to her family, urged on by a chorus of male voices telling her of the unreality of her vision, is in the interests of a patriarchial system which contains female desire/sexuality and idealizes the family unit in the service of patrilineage. Midge remains the standard "put upon" woman who is unable to choose for herself. It is never made clear whether or not her return to the family is the best possible thing for *her* to do. But Stuart's mere existence is shown to have consequences - and ones he cannot legislate for.

Another important factor in this context is that Stuart rejects all theories. He has no theory about himself:

> The notion of explaining himself, even of knowing himself, was alien to Stuart, and he had never framed any theory of the sort which was so natural to the mind of Thomas. (444)

The comparison is important for it is in conversation with Thomas that Stuart expresses the idea that while there is nothing wrong with

thinking, and ideas are important, "one soon comes to the end of psychology, and there's no point in detailed theories about morals" (143). This is because theory is about the creation of pattern which in itself is an illusory activity (Thomas at one point sees the difference between himself and Stuart in terms of holiness which equals patternlessness, and magic which equals pattern-making; 83). What is more, theories are always about *something*. Thomas' Freudian notions of personality contain various levels of self but no area of selflessness; neither super-ego, ego, nor id correspond to the nothingness Stuart wants to achieve in a direct way. The other reason for rejecting theory has to do with Stuart's desire to *do* good as opposed to merely *be* good; living in the world means inter*action*.

In the first instance Stuart achieves a position where he rejects theory but does not *do* anything. This rejection finds a rather poignant expression in a discussion with Thomas. Thomas, a theorist (a position which in itself is expressive of his need to fill the void), Carel-like suggests to Stuart:

> There are principalities and powers, fallen angels, animal gods, spirits cut loose and wandering in the void, they have to be reckoned with . . . (145-6)

To which Stuart replies:

> I'm against fallen angels like I'm against dramas and mysteries and looking for *masters* and *fathers* and - . . . (146; emphasis added)

I shall return to the relationship between fathers and theory later; for the moment it is simply significant to remember that Stuart rejects theory in those terms.

As he is not *doing* anything, Stuart becomes the subject of assorted other characters' concern and suggestions. Stressing the importance of education and teaching children about goodness, Stuart finally decides to undergo teacher training. In the face of various pressures, including the penultimate point made in *The Good Apprentice* (there *are* good things but we all have different conceptions of what they are; 522) Stuart, whose idea of goodness has remained vague ("Stuart could only formulate his 'aim' in negative and exceedingly general terms. He wanted to avoid being bad. He wanted to be good." 245), makes a decision which is, perhaps, the

result of realizing: "No one can avoid muddle, . . . no one can avoid corruption, the pure dedicated life is an illusion . . ." (521). Stuart decides:

> You can teach language and literature and how to use words so as to *think*. And you can teach moral values, you can teach meditation, what used to be called prayer, and give them an idea of what goodness is, and how to love it - . . . (520)

It is worth remembering here that both Weil and Murdoch were teachers. What is more, in a recent interview Murdoch vocalized precisely the concerns about language, education, and morality fictionalized in *The Good Apprentice*:

> Teaching children clear, accurate and precise English is the most important training we can give them. It helps them to think and to distinguish truth and falsehood; . . . (Appleyard 20)

Three things come together in Stuart's apprenticeship to goodness: the desire to *do* as well as be good, the rejection of theory, and an understanding that living in society means that one cannot legislate for the consequences either of one's existence or one's behaviour. This, however, does not amount to a condemnation of the good person to literal or metaphorical immobility - and in that sense *The Good Apprentice* registers a shift in Murdoch's position from some of her earlier work. In *The Sea, The Sea* we still have Charles Arrowby's decision to try and live as "a celibate priest" (460) aligned to eastern mysticism; his cousin James, whose flat he inherits and whose instructions Charles tries to internalize, is presented to the reader as a Buddhist of sorts. But Stuart states explicitly: "I'm not concerned with the east. I'm western. It's got to be done differently here." (140) This replicates a position Murdoch adopted in a recent interview:

> . . . Murdoch herself almost became a Buddhist at one period; she studied and learned meditation. But then she decided that, as a European, "if we are going to be saved, we must be saved by Christ, not Buddha". (Appleyard 20)

"Saving" people or helping them is, in a sense, precisely what *The Good Apprentice* and also *The Time of the Angels* are about. A number of characters in both texts are in need of being saved. And what they turn

to initially is father figures. *The Good Apprentice*, indeed, opens with an appeal to a father:

> I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, father I have sinned against heaven and before thee, and am no more worthy to be called thy son. (1)

Preoccupation with father figures is at the centre of both texts. I shall now look at the significance of this preoccupation and its relationship to the idea of knowing the void in the light of psychoanalytic theories concerning the role of the father.

Both in *The Good Apprentice* and in *The Time of the Angels* the reader is presented with three "real" fathers (with "real" here signifying not biological fatherhood but individuals fulfilling a fathering role which may but need not involve biological fatherhood) as well as the symbolic father figure of God hovering somewhere in the background. In *The Good Apprentice* we have Thomas McCaskerville, the analyst, Harry Cuno, a novelist, and Jesse Baltram, the artist; in *The Time of the Angels* there are Carel Fisher, the priest, Marcus Fisher, headmaster and writer, and Eugene Peshkov, the caretaker. Their importance for the texts is in part determined by the role they play in other characters' lives and by how they are perceived by these characters. These perceptions can usefully be played off against the role of the father figure as delineated within psychoanalytic theory. There the father is associated with the break-up of the original mother-infant dyad in which the mother is considered an extension of the self and the self as a result is experienced as unitary (Chodorow 61). The mother at this stage functions as the primary love object of the infant and is associated with total merging and dependence. However, the mother's comings and goings result in the infant's gradual perception of the mother as separate from itself; acknowledging this separateness equals the intrusion of the reality principle into the infant's life, and its discovery of difference (Mitchell, *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* 385-7). The resultant anxiety about the fulfilment of its needs (after all, the mother is not always at hand though the infant is still dependent on her for the fulfillment of its needs) "triggers the development of ego capacities which can deal with and help ward off anxiety" (Chodorow 69). Thus the child's ego boundaries begin to grow and it learns to

acknowledge those of its mother. By comparison the father with whom there is no primary physical bonding is always perceived as a separate entity.

For both the female and the male child in the Oedipal phase maternal authority is superseded by paternal authority which, in relation to a masculine attitude, assumes the role of lawgiver (through the prohibition to act upon the desire for the mother) and, in relation to a feminine attitude, assumes the role of lover and protector (through the identification with the role of the mother in the father's life). The father's active intervention in the mother-infant dyad results in the child's renunciation of its primary love object, the mother. The outcome of the Oedipus complex is either an identification with the father or with the mother depending on the masculine or feminine sexual dispositions of the child (Freud, *On Metapsychology* 371-3). This identification, expressive of our early choice of love object, is internalized and forms the *super-ego* which consists of "the precept: 'You *ought to be* like this (like your father).' It also comprises the prohibition: 'You *may not be* like this (like your father) - that is, you may not do all that he does; some things are his prerogative.'"

> This double aspect of the ego ideal derives from the fact that the ego ideal has the task of repressing the Oedipal complex; indeed, it is to the revolutionary event that it owes its existence . . . The super-ego retains the character of the father . . . (*On Metapsychology* 374)

The internalization of the identification with a parent is important because it signals an abstraction from identification depending on the concrete presence of that parent to an identification even in the absence of the parent. This mental event indicates the advancement of the individual's intellect. The ego-ideal, then, is "the heir to the Oedipus complex":

> By setting up this ego-ideal, the ego has mastered the Oedipus complex and at the same time placed itself in subjection to the id. Whereas the ego is essentially the representative of the external world, of reality, the super-ego stands in contrast to it as the representative of the internal world, of the id. (*On Metapsychology* 376)

The super-ego is associated with the inner state of the individual, with his conscience. Freud maintains:

> It is easy to show that the ego ideal answers to everything that is expected of the higher nature of man. As a substitute for a longing for the father, it contains the germ from which all religions have evolved . . .
>
> Religion, morality, and a social sense - the chief elements in the higher side of man - were orginally one and the same thing . . . they were acquired phylogenetically out of the father-complex: religion and morality through the process of mastering the Oedipus complex itself, and social feeling through the necessity of overcoming the rivalry that then remained between the members of the younger generation. (*On Metapsychology* 376-7)

This last point will be investigated in slightly more detail below; for the moment it is important to remember that "we may characterize the archetypal masculine as an *intrusive, active* principle that pushes the development of consciousness out of the primal undifferentiation and unity with the mother . . . this male principle is *mental* rather than material, pertaining to activated spirit, intellect, and will. In short, those aspects of the psyche that we characterize as ego are traditionally identified with the masculine." (Greenfield, "The archetypal masculine" 189) They begin "by an act of negation . . . the denial of being identified with the primal, maternal feminine, to say, 'I am *not* that.'" (Greenfield 189-90) The state of the world, initially given, is transformed and eventually a new order is imposed, that of the law of the father:

> Male generativity is thus identified with the creation of structure and oppositions and is not purely a matter of physical impregnation. (Greenfield 190)

However, these notions concerning the father pertain, in the first instance, to a symbolic, in a sense 'ideal' father; in reality men are likely to be at different stages of ego development irrespective of whether or not they are biological fathers (Mitchell 394-5). This means that discrepancies are bound to exist between an ideal desired father and the actual father one has.

Greenfield states:

> Since the archetypal masculine is identified with the ego, it is given conscious expression in myth as various male figures who represent the ego at different stages of development. All of these figures . . . incorporate to some degree all of the principles . . . which distinguish the ego: will, intelligence, activity, intrusiveness, and generativity. In myth . . . these abstract terms are given meaning through their embodiment in . . . characters. The boy, Don Juan, and the trickster show us the ego in its early stages of development, while the hero, the father and the wise old man represent later stages of development. (191)

This description provides convenient categories with which to classify the various male figures in Murdoch's fiction, here, specifically, in *The Good Apprentice* and *The Time of the Angels*. It also allows us to see why the biological fathers in the novels may be inadequate to notions of the ideal father.

In both novels there is a young man ("young and beautiful but . . . not powerful enough to be threatening [to women]"; Greenfield 194) in search of a father. The father's significance resides in the fact that he is

> . . . the first person the child loves on a purely mental/spiritual basis, because unlike the mother the father was not bodily united with the child and is not an immediate source of nurturance. The father principle is important for the child at later stages of its development, however, because of his significance as (1) the word, and (2) power or authority. (Greenfield 202-3)

Greenfield goes on to point out that "the father often makes his first appearance in myth cycles as the word or Logos, i.e. divine intelligence". As the word is important for the development of consciousness because "the learning of language is the child's first step in starting to think", and as the word allows the "freeing of thought from one-to-one concrete associations" and the manipulation and recombinations of different concepts, thus providing the foundation for creative thought,

> . . . the word . . . imposes order and makes distinctions in the chaos of primal, unconscious thought, and, in the form of law, . . . (203)

The father principle is thus associated with the imposition of the law, a law created by the father. What is more, "The power of the masculine is also the power of authority that makes the word or law meaningful." (204)

Greenfield maps out a cycle whereby the boy develops a strong ego by breaking away from the mother and identifying with the father; he then has to internalize the law imposed from without in order to become a father himself in time. This move is analogous to the child's development through the Oedipal complex to its resolution at which point the super-ego takes over from the father. On the way to becoming a father himself the boy may pass through a trickster or hero phase. The relationship between the trickster and the father is described as follows:

> The trickster represents the infancy of consciousness, mobility, the penis, and the transformation of nature; the father figure encompasses the roles of creator, lawgiver, impregnator, and master. Whereas the father is the lawgiver, and stands for order or even repression, the trickster is the lawbreaker who represents the expression of instinctual desires. [In relation to women] the masculine as a father is a protector, benefactor or owner whose protectiveness may become restrictive and whose power may overwhelm . . . the trickster. . . is a liberator through the force of his expressiveness, but may also be a deceiver, seducer, or thief . . . the trickster is also the son who overthrows the authority of the father in the name of freedom and transformation . . . (Greenfield 192)

In Greenfield's cycle the authoritarian father counters the lawlessness of the trickster and restores order but if his law becomes too repressive a new revolution occurs.

In *The Time of the Angels* and *The Good Apprentice* there are two boy/trickster figures: Leo Peshkov, and Edward Baltram, whose search for a father figure in the above, ideal sense of that term expresses a need, as Edward puts it, for "someone in authority" (438-9).

Leo is represented as a clever juvenile delinquent who robs and deceives all those willing to let themselves be exploited by him. This is especially true of the two father figures with whom he has dealings in the text: his biological father Eugene whom Leo blames for having rendered him homeless, and his mentor Marcus. In both cases Leo repeatedly transgresses by lying and stealing, always in the hope that he will, as a consequence, not only be attended to but punished. Marcus recognizes this mechanism perfectly well, describes it even as sado-masochism (20), but fails to act as the authoritative lawgiver Leo wants him to be because of his own emotional investment in the situation. Leo is stuck in that stage of development where he still needs a concrete direct lawgiver; his sense of there being no absolute values (73) is not derived from the position of the "wise old man" (to use Greenfield's terminology) but is the result of an arrested ego development. Although he says at one point:

> I want to train myself in immorality, really get these old conventions out of my system, so whenever I have a chance to tell a lie I do so. (73)

he has, in fact, never properly internalized the moral conventions he talks about and his desire finally to do so is expressed in his willingness to submit himself to the rule of Muriel when he discovers he cannot fool or tell lies to her. It is as if he senses that he has failed to develop appropriate ego boundaries because he has not had the external help necessary to achieve these. Marcus and Eugene have failed him in equal measure because they have been too selfish and too selfless respectively to fulfil the role of the ideal father figure. Marcus has too much ego to see through that veil and, in consequence, Leo's lies, and Eugene has not enough ego to offer Leo the resistance necessary to create the friction that will result in Leo's ego development. Instead Leo is left feeling:

> I'm not anything. I can never make you understand it's all meaningless to me, it's *nothing*. (125)

Whereas both Marcus and Eugene have a certain amount of emotional investment in their relationship with Leo, Muriel does not and in consequence can act like a substitute father to Leo. He fittingly compliments her with the words:

> I think you're a marvel. You're somebody very special. You're a free woman, free, like a man. I'll be your cavalier. You'll set me tasks. Like knights and ladies. (75)

The analogy Leo draws is imperfect in that the lady is one on whom the knight projects what he then acts out. She has the power only of a symbol. But what it expresses is Leo's need to be "under orders", to be contained by rules and tasks. The unapproachability of the lady matches the absoluteness of the lawgiving father, Muriel's being "free like a man" turns her into a masculine figure. The authoritative stance Leo attributes to her makes her for him a lawgiver. To the extent that Muriel fulfills Leo's needs for containment through law he transfers what love he has upon her, "mends" his ways to please her.

Muriel, however, is in love with Leo's father Eugene, the exact opposite for her to her biological father Carel. The latter functions throughout, and for all those he comes in contact with whose inner feelings are revealed to the reader, as the lawgiver, an authoritarian absolute figure. Typically, Muriel feels in relation to him:

> She was frightened of Carel, she was frightened of disobeying Carel. But she was even more frightened of something else, of an isolation, a paralysis of the will, the metamorphosis of the world into something small and sleepy and enclosed, the interior of an egg. She felt as if Carel had tried to recruit her for some diabolical plot, or rather to hypnotize her into a sense of its inevitability. She had needed the roughness, even the absurdity, of Leo to persuade her again of her own existence as a rational independent creature. (149)

Here the authority of the father threatens to be overpowering and permanently infantilizing; and, true to Greenfield's description, the trickster figure (Leo) intervenes to facilitate the woman's growth towards independence. But Muriel does not choose to follow the trickster; her need for nurturance fastens onto Eugene ("I must talk to Eugene, Muriel said to herself. But her image of talking to Eugene was of being held very closely and tightly in Eugene's arms." 150). He becomes the emblem of the loving protective father figure:

> She had uttered Eugene's name to herself, perhaps she had uttered it aloud. I will go to him now, she thought, and I will

> tell him everything. I will lay my head against him. All will be well. (144)

The woman's needs prove to be the trickster's undoing. She cannot help him, or be the surrogate father (or, indeed, mother), because she herself still needs the father. At the end of the text we find the trickster up to his old tricks again (ch. 23), exploiting others, deceiving them, unredeemed. The implication appears to be that, at least in the first instance, the lawgiving father is necessary for the development of the boy's ego. The super-ego, which, according to Freud, is "a grade of ego, a differentiation within the ego" (*On Metapsychology* 367), has its origin in the "identification with the father" (*On Metapsychology* 370), and is itself the origin of the moral sense (*On Metapsychology* 376-7), cannot come into being and take over the place of the lawgiving father unless that father has been there in the first instance. In other words, the individual's development of a moral sense is related to the growth of his or her ego; where this growth has been arrested the individual will not be able to acquire a moral sense. Such appears to be the case with Leo.

Edward's fate in *The Good Apprentice* is different from Leo's in a number of ways. For one thing, he has two fathers (rather than a father and a mentor), one present, one absent. The present father is his stepfather Harry who, after the deaths of two wives is, at the time the events in the novel happen, embroiled in an affair with the wife of Thomas, the analyst. He is described by Thomas as a romantic (429), and, indeed, Harry views his relationship with Midge in terms that turn it into a romantic fantasy rather than reality. Revealingly he considers himself "a transforming god" (254) in Midge's life; his desire for "chaos" and "violence", "a final advance through the carnage" (344), coupled with his fear of Thomas (399) and his vision, subsequent to the affair with Midge becoming public knowledge, of going to Thomas and asking his pardon in order to be forgiven and reconciled with him, as well as, lastly, a dream in which he has a "frightful animated image of Thomas as dangerous and old which had horribly clasped to itself the appearance of a father" (255) - all these things give Harry the mark of a trickster figure which renders him unsuitable for the role of lawgiving or, indeed, protective father. For, typically, in Murdoch's

fiction the "real" father figures have no fathers themselves, have no sense of a higher instance than themselves. This is true for Thomas who at one point thinks that for him "there could be no authority, no magisterial healer" (364); it is also true for Jesse, and for Carel who says of himself, "When I celebrate mass I am God." (187)

Edward's absent father is his biological one, Jesse Baltram, a famous painter who gave up Edward's mother before Edward was born. Edward has never spent any time with Jesse and in the absence of any real sense of what his biological father is like has woven a myth around him which gains significance after the death of his friend Mark. In the wake of this death Edward begins to feel two things: he wants to be wanted and he wants to be forgiven. For both these things to be effected, especially the latter, he needs someone in authority. Thomas, to whom Edward goes to talk about his situation, tells him:

> I don't think I can forgive you . . . There's something else I can do, but not that. We need priests, we miss them and will miss them more, we miss their power . . . We shall have to reinvent God . . . (69-70)

The "something else" is the procurement of an invitation for Edward to Jesse's house which Thomas effects without Edward's knowledge. Thomas does so from an understanding not only of Edward's "resistance to the force of Thomas's will" (73) but also because he knows that "only strong love can heal" (77). He reasons:

> God is a belief that at our deepest level we are known and loved . . . But the therapist is not God, not even a priest or a sage, and must prompt the sufferer to heal himself through his own deities, and this involves finding them . . . Each person is different . . . The 'myth' that heals is an individual work of art. (77)

In Edward's case the healing begins with his sense of being summoned by his biological father which in turn is initiated by his going to a séance. Realizing that this summons "must have come out of [his] mind" (75) Edward nonetheless decides to respond to it. Initially, two things happen at Seegard, Jesse's abode, where Edward goes: a) his view of his biological father as an absolute authority is reinforced by his stepmother's and stepsisters' attitude towards Jesse, and b) Edward is

fitted into the daily routine of Seegard while he is supposedly awaiting Jesse's return in such a way as to exhaust him physically. This makes it impossible for him to remain continually mentally preoccupied with Mark's death.[21] He is not even given an opportunity to talk about it. His meeting with Jesse signals the beginning of a real change in his situation for he has to realize that even though Jesse at one point had the aura of an absolute authority he is now in a state of mental and physical deterioration that makes him dependent on others rather than being able to help them.

Jesse still has moments of lucidity, however, and during these he makes the contact with Edward necessary for Edward to begin to heal. In a scene reminiscent of Lear's meeting with Edgar, Edward on one occasion encounters Jesse out on the fens (230-5) and in the course of their conversation manages to tell Jesse of Mark's death and his need for Jesse to forgive him (which the latter does). In an encoded exchange Jesse sees Edward as successor to himself:

> '. . . But you will live. You will be - all right. You're wearing my boots.'
>
> 'Yes, I came without any, they fit perfectly, I hope you don't mind.' (234)

Edward as the heir accepted by his father cherishes this father in return:

> Of course Jesse was his father. But he was, as if now filled up to the brim, so much more: a master, a precious king, a divine lover, a strange mysterious infinitely beloved object, the prize of a religious search, a jewel in a cave. It was as if . . . Jesse had gently, almost imperceptibly, imparted himself. Edward felt his heart bursting with reverence and love. (296)

The romantic vocabulary Edward uses to describe Jesse is expressive of the symbolic value that his father has for him - it is also indicative of the fantasy element in their relation which ultimately has to be purged for Edward to become a good person. The love relationship between Jesse and Edward which for much of the time exists in the form of a

[21] Weil, of course, had much to say on the numbing effect of physical labour as in WOG 19.

projection on Edward's part is finally perfected when Edward finds Jesse's will which tells him that Jesse has left everything to him, his "dear much loved son" (482):

> The will had performed its only good important task of *reminding* Edward, for he had always known it since the first moment when he had opened the bedroom door, that his father knew him and loved him. (483)

The last words echo, of course, Thomas' musings on the need for a strong love to heal and the significance of God as a symbol for the individual's need to be known and loved.

Where Edward has a father who can play the role of God for him Leo is not so lucky. His own father lacks the attributes of God, resembles, in fact, Christ rather than God, and is, in that sense, the embodiment not of absolute authority but of pure affliction. As Stuart (GA), mirroring Weil (WOG 63-78), puts it:

> He [Christ] has to mean pure affliction, utter loss, innocent suffering, pointless suffering, the deep and awful and irremediable things that happen to people. (147)

The trouble is, though, that "the consequences of anything can go on and on" (GA 311), and in Leo's case the consequence of having a father closer to Christ than to God is not only that in true 'family-romances'-fashion (Freud, *On Sexuality* 221-5) he creates aggrandizing fictions about his father (70-1) but also that it leaves him with a need for someone who can be God in his life, a lawgiving father. The one person within the novel who comes closest to such an image, Carel Fisher, is also the one person Leo never encounters.

Edward's healing proceeds along two lines: a) the persons whom he invests with the authority to absolve him from his guilt (his father Jesse and his dead friend Mark's sister Brownie) are taken from him, and he therefore has to learn to do without them, and b) he finds himself in situations where, without realizing that this is the effect he is having, he helps other people resolve their own dilemmas. The most striking example of the latter is his encounter with Midge subsequent to her affair with his father Harry coming to light. In the course of a conversation that proves to be a turning point for them both he not

only convinces her that her love for Stuart is an illusion but also suggests that she can effect the changes she wants in her life:

> You can go on changing your life, you can do lots of good, after all what's stopping you, what's stopping any of us from doing lots of good -' Edward paused for a moment, impressed by the idea he had just uttered . . . (470)

Both Midge and Edward subsequently begin to internalize this idea. In Midge's mind Stuart later functions as God while she herself becomes the figure of Adam, whereas Edward appears as part of ordinary life rather than myth:

> Stuart had seemed so authoritative, so complete, something lethal making all her previous existence worthless, inspiring that terrible craving, that pain, which could only be alleviated by his presence and feared like death itself the possibility of banishment. Edward . . . appeared here on the side of the ordinary world where absolute choices between life and death did not take place, where reason, gentleness, compassion, compromise brought viable ways of life. (486)

After the extremes comes the life of ordinariness:

> She would cook and clean the house and bring in flowers, aware that all the good things she felt sure she was destined to do would perhaps after all turn out to be the dull old familiar things, the duties of her family and her home. (490)

Midge here makes a choice for what is termed "reality" or "ordinariness" which is underwritten by Murdoch through the other characters' moves towards "ordinariness" too. Stuart in the end decides to become a schoolmaster, Thomas retires, Harry translates the fantasies with which he has invested his love life into bestselling novels. Behind this "ordinariness" lies a conservative politics more pronounced in *The Good Apprentice* than in *The Times of the Angels* in which Pattie, who has a "doing-good" vision of herself similar to Midge's, ends up going to work in an African refugee camp, thus turning her fantasy of her alternative self into reality.

The Good Apprentice expresses more directly than *The Time of the Angels* a point made by Harry that "life is a whole, it must be lived as a whole, abstract good and bad are just fictions" (91). This echoes

Murdoch's stance in "Existentialists and Mystics" where she suggests that what is needed (here she moves away from her former preoccupation with concepts) is "some more fundamental thinking about a proper quality of human life, which *begins* at the food and shelter level" (179). Murdoch, it would seem, is moving away from abstraction too. What does this have to do with the notion of the void?

The Time of the Angels and *The Good Apprentice* have a number of characters who are made to face the void, are confronted with a reality that is random and chancy. In the face of this they have two possibilities, either to see things in terms of patterns or to see them as subject to chance. As Edward towards the end of *The Good Apprentice* puts it when he is reflecting on what has happened to him:

> Of course I'm thinking about it in two quite different ways . . . In a way it's all a muddle starting off with an accident . . . all sorts of things which happened by pure chance. At so many points anything being otherwise could have made everything be otherwise. In another way it's a whole complex thing, internally connected, like a dark globe, a dark world, as if we were all parts of a single drama, living inside a work of art.[22] Perhaps important things in life are always like that so that you can think of them both ways. (517-8)

The texts suggest that how one thinks of important things is a function of one's needs at any point in time. In this context the need for the lawgiving and forgiving father and, indeed, the desire to play the father figure, are associated with the need for pattern at the stage when the individual finds it difficult to accept randomness, the void. It is here that Judith Van Herik's study on *Freud on Femininity and Faith* is useful in explaining some of the issues involved.

Briefly, Van Herik points out that "the relationship between gender and religion is mediated by his [Freud's] critical themes of illusion and renunciation" (18). According to Freud socialization and civilization are based on the progressive renunciation of instinctual wishes, the

[22] This is one example of Murdoch's use of theatrical, self-referential metaphor in a vein familiar from Shakespearean plays. Here the allusions operate on at least three levels represented by the globe which may at once be universe, head, or (Shakespeare's) theatre.

replacement of the pleasure principle as the governing motive for the individual's behaviour by the reality principle (Freud, *Civilization, Society and Religion* 183-241). The pleasure principle is associated with wish-fulfilment, the senses, and the maternal, whereas the reality principle is associated with renunciation, the intellect, and the paternal. Thus when the infant comes to recognize the predominance of paternal over maternal authority as it enters the Oedipal phase it is, according to Freud, progressing:

> . . . this turning from the mother to the father points . . . to a victory of intellectuality over sensuality - that is, an advance of civilization, since maternity is proved by the evidence of the senses while paternity is a hypothesis, based on an inference and a premiss. (Freud, *The Origins of Religion* 361)

The individual has to move not merely from mother to father but then beyond the father to a position where "that external coercion" represented by the father has to become "gradually . . . internalized" (Freud, *Civilization* 190) so that, ultimately, the super-ego which takes over the role of the father in the individual's life becomes completely impersonal:

> The course of childhood development leads to an ever-increasing detachment from parents, and their personal significance for the super-ego recedes into the background. To the imagos they leave behind there are then linked the influences of teachers and authorities, self-chosen models and publicly recognized heroes . . . The last figure in the series that began with the parents is the dark power of Destiny which only the fewest of us are able to look upon as impersonal. There is little to be said against the Dutch writer Multatuli when he replaces the *Moira* [Destiny] of the Greeks by the divine pair '*Logos and Ananke*', [Reason and Necessity]; but all who transfer the guidance of the world to Providence, to God, or to God and Nature, arouse a suspicion that they still look upon these ultimate and remotest powers as a parental couple, in a mythological sense, and believe themselves linked to them by libidinal ties. (*On Metapsychology* 423)

In these terms Leo and Edward's search for a father figure represents an arrested development of the psyche.[23] As Leo never finds the father figure which will facilitate his move from living in accordance with the pleasure principle to accepting the reality principle he remains stuck in what might be described as a limboland between the pre-Oedipal and Oedipal phases. Edward, on the other hand, finds this father figure, and is ultimately able to live a moral life independent of a law-enforcing father.

Thomas and Carel, having understood the nature of the void, choose to play the role of father which depends on an acceptance of an illusory system that grants others and themselves a certain amount of wish-fulfilment. As analyst and priest they encourage others' dependence on themselves as paternal figures and identify themselves with pattern-providing systems of belief. Appropriately Thomas, even as he decides he must retire from his job because he is becoming dependent on his role as analyst, sees himself as analogous to a number of mythological figures, part of the history of a cultural tradition:

> . . . first of all I must retire from all this, I must *let it go*
> . . . Magic must come to an end. Of course Theseus must leave Ariadne and Aeneas must abandon Dido, Athens must be saved, Rome must be founded, Prospero drowns his book and frees Ariel, and the Duke marries Isabella. And Apollo tames the Furies. (364)

In relation to his wife Midge Thomas continues in his confessor role; Carel, by comparison, and in analogy, sets himself up as an alternative God. What both men demonstrate is Freud's point concerning the difficulty of regarding certain powers as impersonal, Murdoch's and Weil's notion of the difficulty of facing the void. What, indeed, it reveals is that knowing the void is one thing, living it quite another.

The person who comes closest to living the knowledge of the void is Stuart. His rejection of a search for fathers and masters is central to this for, as was suggested above, the search for the father is associated with a particular stage of the development of the psyche beyond which the individual has to move in order to achieve a certain

[23] Hebblethwaite comments on this in "Feuerbach's Ladder" 143-4.

kind of moral maturity. Stuart, in fact, offers an interesting explanation for his ability to be detached:

> Perhaps this separateness, this cutoffness, this determined not-mindingness had to do with the absence of his mother, the earliest truth in his life, the absence of complete love together with the haunting idea of it not as a real possibility but as an abstract, an invisible sun giving light but no warmth . . . He did not often think of his mother . . . But now when [his mother's image] came to him in the empty church he somehow connected it . . . with his conception of himself as a sort of 'religious' man with a dedicated destiny: that or nothing, that or smash, and since not smash or nothing, then that. (444-5)

Stuart is presented as understanding the impossibility of the return of himself to the pre-Oedipal dyadic union with the mother. Of the available consequences to be drawn from this recognition, a) living without love entirely, b) destroying (himself) with despair, c) dedicating himself to a life devoted to others, a life of giving love in an impersonal fashion, he chooses the last, and in so doing is given, within the text, the status of the morally mature person. At the same time he himself appears to take on the role of the mother, not only through his wanting to be invisible (53) but by being the "sun giving light but no warmth", i.e. offering enlightenment, goodness, and truth but no passion. Midge, for example, who wants warmth from Stuart, not only says that she has felt "rays" emanating from him (369) but also, when he fails to respond to her declaration of love, accuses him of being cold (407), i.e. "the sun that gives no warmth". With Stuart the pleasure principle has given way to the reality principle and, in that sense, Edward rightly says of him, "Perhaps he's got no unconscious mind." (521) for the pleasure principle is associated with the unconscious. The text would suggest, however, that rather than not having an unconscious mind, Stuart has successfully repressed his instinctual drives and renounced the pleasure principle. When Midge describes Stuart as "like a man with no father" (207) she is, in effect, pointing to the same thing, for Stuart has moved beyond the father.

It is thus possible to fuse Weil's and Murdoch's notion of the void with Freudian ideas concerning the development of the psyche. In Weil's

and Murdoch's terms knowing the void means understanding the patternlessness of the world. This constitutes the reality principle both for them and for Freud. Religion and psychoanalysis (and, of course, Freud did not view psychoanalysis in this light), indeed any theory, for theories are attempts to suggest patterns by which the world might be understood, are fillers of the void, failures to face the true nature of the world. Fillers of the void are fantasies, or in Freudian terms, illusions: "What is characteristic of illusions is that they are derived from human wishes." (*Civilization* 213) One such illusion is the belief in a personal God because it maintains "a conviction of the persistence of the pleasure-granting parental object" (Van Herik, *Freud* 68) thus prolonging the childhood relationship to the father in the adult. And, just as Freud suggested that illusions hinder cultural advance (Van Herik, *Freud* 162) so Weil and Murdoch would argue that fantasy hinders moral advance. The blank face of goodness, the void, is recognized only in a state of illusionless-ness, in a state not governed by the desire for wish-fulfilment. Given that in Freudian theory wish-fulfilment is associated with femininity, and that filling the void is associated with wish-fulfilment, both Weil's and Murdoch's moral philosophies in this respect constitute a repudiation of femininity. Moving beyond the father does not mean fatherlessness but the internalization of what the father stands for, the seamless identification with the paternal so that this is absorbed into the psyche in the form of the super-ego. What has been rejected or renounced is the maternal; as Van Herik suggests: "[in terms of Freudian theory] femininity represents fulfilment in renunciatory culture" (200), and the desire for fulfilment, which is also the desire for self-consoling patterns and theories, is what the individual has to move beyond in order to achieve maturity.

There is, then, a sense in which the desire for pattern, for theory, for fillers of the void, can be read as continued presence of the pleasure principle in the individual's life which constitutes - in Freudian terms - an immature set to the world. Murdoch and Weil, in their moral philosophy, would appear to agree with this. In Weil's case, of course, there is also evidence of the rejection of the pleasure principle in her immediate life in her attitudes to physical contact, food, warmth, and other forms of physical comfort.

Living the void, an almost impossible proposition, on the other hand, entails the acceptance of the reality principle, the renunciation of wish-fulfilment, detachment from the parents. This is something which, according to Van Herik, *feminine* women cannot achieve, at least according to Freudian theory, for "femininity and attachment to the father are correlative; masculinity precludes attachment to the father" (135). One could therefore suggest that Weil and Murdoch in their detachment from father figures as far as their moral philosophies are concerned adopt a masculine rather than a feminine attitude.

At the beginning of the discussion of *The Good Apprentice* I pointed out that that text explores the distance between good as a concept and good as a lived reality, that it is about the relationship between theory and practice. In fact, what Murdoch seems to indicate is that abstract knowledge of the good is achieved quite easily; one of the characters depicted as living out his fantasies most emphatically is Harry Cuno, yet on a number of occasions he also reveals his abstract understanding of the good. He is, in fact, rather like Marcus of *The Time of the Angels* in this respect. How can one come to live the good?

Both Thomas and Stuart early on in the novel offer Edward advice which is intended to help him move beyond his self-obsession and advance towards the good. Thomas suggests that "an act of well-intentioned *concentration*" (71) is needed, while Stuart advises him to "read good novels" (44), "try to sort of pray", "look at something" (47). What both men seem to indicate is that Edward needs to change his attitude, re-direct his attention. In the following chapter I shall look at attention as the underlying process for the mental attitude and behaviour which Weil and Murdoch consider essential for the good person.

Chapter 4: Conceptualizing Attention

Murdoch's search for a technique by means of which one might harness the individual's spiritual energy to a moral purpose combines with her subscription to Weil's view that morality is "a matter of attention"[1] (AD 20) leading Murdoch to suggest that "we need a new vocabulary of attention" (AD 20). She has tried to establish such a "new vocabulary" in her work, freely acknowledging her "debt to Simone Weil".[2]

In Weil's vocabulary "attention" refers to a particular spiritual disposition which is closely related to her mystical experiences. These she had at times of total concentration, induced by hearing religious chants or services, or by reciting religious poems (see 84-5 in this thesis) or prayers. In the *Notebooks* she refers to the "Power of the *name* of the Lord." (NB II 431) A certain kind of language has an hypnotic quality which heightens the attentiveness or potential submissiveness of a perceptive individual. Weil talks of the "power of suggestion that is in prayer". Pattie's relationship to language in *The Time of the Angels* comes to mind:

> She liked poems that resembled songs or charms or nursery rhymes, fragments that could be musically murmured. (28)

Weil and Pattie respond to a language whose dominant characteristics point to the stylistic rather than the semantic as the source of meaning. It is the rhythmic, repetitive nature of this language that affects them. For both Weil and Pattie this language comes into effect at a time when they feel not in control of themselves and when their sense of identity is threatened. What does this signify?

In Kristeva's differentiation between two different kinds of "signifying dispositions", the *semiotic* and the *symbolic* (see 17-8 in

[1] Dr. Ann Loades has alerted my attention to the existence of a doctoral thesis by D. Harwell on "Attentive fruition, Simone Weil's Vocation of Attention: Ils porteront des fruits dans l'attente" (Strasbourg, 1959). I was unable to get hold of this thesis through inter-library loan.

[2] See SOG 34, 40, 50; Caen 77.

this thesis), the semiotic relates to the utterances made by the infant at the stage of her life when she is still in dyadic union with the mother. This disposition is characterized by echolalia, "rhythms and intonations anterior to the first phonemes, morphemes". It produces "'musical' but also nonsense effects", and "does not yet refer . . . or no longer refers . . . to a signified object for a thetic consciousness" (*Desire* 133). It is therefore essentially heterogeneous as far as establishing "meaning" is concerned. The semiotic disposition is disruptive due to the elusiveness of its meaning and posits the utterer, according to Kristeva, not as a "transcendental ego" but as a "subject-in-process". The language Weil responded to emotionally and physically[3] can be characterized as semiotic thus betraying Weil's sense of herself as a "subject-in-process" with an unstable identity. Roudiez, one translator of Kristeva's work, makes a relevant comment on the notion of the subject-in-process:

> . . . the subject is "questionable" (in the legal sense) as to its identity, and the process it undergoes is "unsettling" as to its place within the semiotic or symbolic disposition. (*Desire* 17)

What this describes is a veering between the maternal (semiotic) and the paternal (symbolic) which may bespeak both a subject-in-process and a subject-in-crisis.

This is of direct relevance to Weil's situation in that she had her first mystical experiences when she had come to see herself as a slave. One aspect of seeing oneself as a slave is, of course, the obliteration of an identity of one's own, at least on the surface. Identity, in so far as it is present, is the identity of the powerful other whose property one becomes (de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* 96-7, 110-1). Slavedom in that sense assumes a kind of merging, with the slave being absorbed into the estate of the other. It is not surprising, therefore, that Weil should have found a discourse containing a strong semiotic component appealing; it was, after all, expressive of her sense of self.

From 1937 on Weil's life became more unsettled for a number of reasons: her health grew more precarious and the effects of World War II eventually started to take their toll. The threat to the lives of Jews

[3] See, for example, WOG 20; *Seventy Letters* 140-2.

which led her parents to seek exile in the United States became more prominent. Weil could not find a niche for herself. It was against this background that she worked out her religious position and wrote her "Spiritual Autobiography". Both Kristeva's notion of the subject-in-process, and some of the ideas put forward by Michel de Certeau in *Heterologies* in his discussion of the speech of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century mystics are helpful for the understanding of Weil's position at that time of crisis.

De Certeau says of these mystics that they were "for the most part from regions or social categories which were in socio-economic recession, disadvantaged by change, marginalized by progress, or destroyed by war". This resulted in their ambitions being "redirected toward the open spaces of utopia, dream, and writing" (84). In a sense, this is what happened with Weil. Her Jewish background was of significance for her sense of self, even if, or, particularly as, it functioned as a source of dissociation.[4] De Certeau points out that among the mystics converted Jews featured prominently:

> The "new Christians," or converted Jews, in whose features their contemporaries saw only the mask of the Excluded, remained close in many ways to the Jewish tradition (the tradition of the *gespaltene Seelen*, divided souls, whose cleaved lives created a hidden interiority) . . . (84)

In a context of "socio-political instability" with its "fragmentation of its frames of reference" (87) mystical speech is an expression of "the search for a common language" spoken from a place of exile where

> The act of utterance becomes separated from the objective organization of statements. And it lends mysticism its formal characteristics - it is defined by the establishment of a place (the "*I*") and by transactions (*spirit*); that is, by the necessary relation between the subject and messages. The term "experience" connotes this relation. (89)

De Certeau describes mystical texts in terms of a cleavage that

[4] For a discussion of this see Jennings, "A World of Contradictions" (esp. 131-2), or Zadovsky Knopp, "The Carnal God: Simone Weil's Anti-Judaic Perspective".

separates the said from the saying, turning the speaking "I" into an "empty site", and making the speaker instrumental rather than agentic in relation to the utterance. Mystical texts also "operate a closure" in that they speak only to those "resolved", that is those who believe. "Preaching to the converted" is, of course, one way of minimizing possibilities of attack and the associated threats to self. It is thus, in a sense, a defensive move, born, perhaps, out of a feeling of destabilization.

Paradoxically,

> The "I" is "formed" - by its act of willing *nothing* or by (forever) *being incapable of doing* what it wills - as a "desire" bound only to the supposed desire of a Deity. (92)

In other words, the speaker, "under orders" as Murdoch might write, or "in obedience" to necessity as Weil might put it, is impelled to utter that for which he claims no authority of his own but which comes to him from an external source, God.

> In every case . . . divine utterance is both what founds the text, and what it must make manifest. That is why the text is destabilized: it is at the same time *beside* the authorized institution, but outside it and *in* what authorizes that institution, i.e. the Word of God. (92)

Here we have the convergence of Kristeva's characterization of the semiotic and de Certeau's description of mystical speech: both are expressive of destabilization. In the former case this destabilization is a function of the elusiveness of the meaning of the utterance, in the latter it relates to the destabilization of the speaker's identity, the invocation of the authority of an other who is absent and whose presence is unverifiable. Kristeva asserts on the level of language what de Certeau here suggests on the level of verbal communication. The two come together in Weil's writings, especially the "Spiritual Autobiography" and the *Notebooks*, indicating Weil's sense of herself as destabilized.[5]

[5] See, for example, FLN 182 where Weil talks of the personal and impersonal aspects of the self in relation to humility; FLN 230-1 where she gives an extraordinary account of "the animals within me"; FLN 261.

One way of counteracting the effects of this sense of self-in-process is to turn away from the self and fasten onto something else . In this context attention becomes important because it is the attitude of attention that enables the self to effect such a move.

Weil suggests in *Waiting on God* that "man can only fix his full attention on something tangible" (122). Prayer constitutes one such "tangible" object of attention. For Weil the function of all religious practices is, in fact, that they present something "tangible" to the mind on which attention can be fastened. As one might expect, many of the great religions and mystic writers recommend the use of some verbal concept symbolizing God as an aid in the spiritual life. In *The Upanishads* we read:

> There are two ways of contemplation of Brahman: in sound and in silence. The sound of Brahman is OM. With OM we go to the End: the silence of Brahman . . .
>
> Even as a spider reaches the liberty of space by means of its own thread, the man of contemplation by means of OM reaches freedom. (6.22; 102)

Similarly, the seventh chapter of *The Cloud of Unknowing* suggests that provided one's "naked intention" is directed towards God alone a short word like "god" or "love" will suffice to fasten one's attention on Him in meditation.

In both cases words are seen as a means to an end; they perform the twofold task of excluding other thoughts from the mind, and of directing it towards the words in question and what they signify. For Weil these efforts were initially associated with the desire to overcome physical "weaknesses" in herself (WOG 20). After Weil had learnt the poem "Love" she "used" it to overcome headaches (WOG 21). She also learnt "Our Father" in Greek and developed the habit

> . . . of saying it through once each morning with absolute attention. If during the recitation my attention wanders or goes to sleep, in the minutest degree, I begin again until I have once succeeded in going through it with absolutely pure attention. (WOG 23-4)

Weil characterized these exercises of attention, or prayers, by saying:

To pray is to pay attention to something or someone other than oneself. Whenever a man so concentrates his attention - on a landscape, a poem, a geometrical problem, an idol, or the True God - that he completely forgets his own ego and desires, he is praying. Choice of attention - to pay attention to *this* and ignore *that* - is to the inner life what choice of action is to the outer.[6] In both cases, a man is responsible for his choice and must accept the consequences, whatever they may be. (Auden, *A Certain World* 306)[7]

The dualisms or splits Weil invokes here (mind/body, different objects of attention, self/other) are indicative of the destabilized subject discussed above. The emphasis placed on choice and responsibility in the last passage quoted appears to resemble an existentialist stance[8] but, in fact, for Weil there is only one single, initial choice to be made. Attending to God means effacing the self (see 94-5 in this thesis). This is achieved through absolute attention:

> Attention alone - that attention which is so full that the 'I' disappears - is required of me. I have to deprive all that I call 'I' of the light of my attention and turn it on to that which cannot be conceived. (NB I 179)

Freedom for the individual lies in the one initial choice[9] of either

[6] Compare SOG 35-40.

[7] This is a condensed version of the argument put forward in "Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God" (WOG 51-9).

[8] Several critics have commented on the relationship between Weil's work and that of the existentialist Albert Camus (see Dunaway, "Estrangement and the Need for Roots"; Little, "Albert Camus, Simone Weil, and Modern Tragedy"; Sutherland, "Simone Weil and Albert Camus"). Martin in "Simone Weil and Existentialist Commitment" suggests that Weil's work shows "the creative fidelity involved in existentialism" (9). She herself wrote to Jean Wahl, "I will not hide from you that the 'existentialist' line of thought appears to me, so far as I know it, to be on the wrong side . . . on the side of force." (*Seventy Letters* 161)

[9] Vetö describes this as "le choix primordial" (52) in "L'Attention selon Simone Weil".

giving or withholding this attention.

> Attention is intimately related to desire - not to the will, but to desire. (Or more precisely to consent; it constitutes consent . . .) (NB II 527)

The logic of Weil's position here is the logic of the subject-in-process, the destabilized subject. The need to renounce an "I" that cannot assert itself, that is alienated from itself and its context, is translated into a desire of un-selfing whose motive, God, is not manifest but posited as a belief. A dialogic situation is created in which an absent other assumes the role of reference point. It is possible to argue that the dialogue is between self and self,[10] that the system represented is one of utter self-referentiality for only others who believe too, or are willing to suspend disbelief, can subscribe to the notion of a "true" dialogue in terms of discrete, unconnected entities engaged in exchange.

What the destabilized self ultimately appears to desire is a merging with God to the point of obliteration of self. To the degree that the individual desires God (over whom the individual has no control), and consents to pay full attention to Him, the self is diminished and ultimately annihilated in the union with God. Such a union can be achieved through mystical prayer.[11]

Weil's experiences of mystical prayer exhibit a pattern of successive stages. Initially, there was the overwhelming feeling of being compelled to adopt a supplicant position (the kneeling at Assisi). Intellect and will appear to have been suspended *vis-à-vis* some external force. Weil read her response not as a matter of choice but of obedience to necessity. No deliberation took place. The self was no longer in

[10] Indeed, Weil says that "it is impossible, by definition, to know that God commands a particular thing" (NB II 418). She asserts the same in FLN but resolves it with "we can regard it as certain that God wishes us to do everything that we believe is in conformity with his will" (FLN 150). There is no proof, extrinsic to the self, that the other exists.

[11] Prayer may be "la forme suprême de l'attention" (Vetö, "L'Attention" 55) but it is at the same time just one of many ways in which attention manifests itself (see "L'Attention" 53-5).

control. This was followed by intentional, willed attempts of "unselfing", the purpose of which was to free the mind from the prison of the body and its demands. Subsequently, pure exercises of attention, free from all exterior motive, were performed, and, finally, a stage was reached where attention made Weil receptive for the actual encounter with Christ.

Of these stages the first one was perhaps the most significant as a signal of change in Weil; given that she was a highly intellectual person, having to accept the suspension of the intellect in order to accept God's existence must have been a major step in a new direction.[12] What this direction might be is suggested in *The Cloud of Unknowing*:

> All rational beings, angels and men, possess two faculties, the power of knowing and the power of loving. To the first, to the intellect, God who made them is forever unknowable, but to the second, to love, he is completely knowable, and that by every separate individual. (63)

Paul in his letter to the Corinthians insists:

> Knowledge puffeth up, but charity edifieth.
>
> And if any man think that he knoweth any thing, he knoweth nothing yet as he ought to know.
>
> But if any man love God, the same is known of him. (8; 1-3)

In the *Bhagavad Gita* Krishna says: "Only by love can men see me, and know me, and come unto me." (11:54, 95) Weil herself quoted Valéry: "A thing understood is a thing falsified." (NB I 84)

The implication appears to be that if one accepts that God is wholly other it follows that he is beyond reason. If he could be intellectually comprehended he would no longer be wholly other. As the mind of the individual enables understanding only within its own specific frame of reference, as soon as we can grasp something with our mind this thing becomes "falsified". This "falsification" may not be deliberate; rather, it is inherent in the nature of the mind. In consequence God cannot be approached intellectually; what, instead, is needed is "a simple attention of the mind and a humble, self-forgetting action of the will" (Happold,

[12] In WOG (28-9) and *Letter to a Priest* (58-63) she defends the intelligence, "the most precious [faculty] of all after love", against censure either from the Church or the State.

Mysticism 73).

Weil conceived of spiritual progress as a function of the quality of attention. With reference to Plato's cave myth she said:

> The way of ascent, in the *Republic*, is that of degrees of attention. The eye of the soul is this attention. (NB II 527)

In relation to prayer attention appears to comprise two elements, a passive and an active one. The passive one consists of a state of complete receptivity on the part of the individual, achieved in the main through the suspension of the rational faculty in readiness for the spiritual experience. Weil described this as follows:

> During the acts of prayer and contemplation, the whole soul should become still and suffer the void in order that the supernatural part alone can be active - active in a gratuitous way, suspended to the highest point of the soul's gathered-up energy. (NB II 358)

The active element consists of the deliberate focussing of the mind, making its choice of what to attend to. Although potentially all things can be the object of attention, the highest degree of attention, according to Weil, has only one object:

> Absolutely pure attention - attention which is nothing but attention - is attention directed to God; for he is only present to the extent to which such attention exists. (NB II 527)

Implicit in this is that "attention should always be directed towards the object, never towards the self; it comes from the self" (NB I 128).

While the attention is to be trained towards the object to the extent that the "I" disappears, it must "consist of a contemplative look and not one of attachment". In other words, one must not try to assimilate the object of attention or introduce any form of emotion because "Attachment manufactures illusions, and anyone who wants to behold the real must be detached." (NB II 334)

What is the relationship between attention and action? According to William James, the two are causally related:

> If, then, you are asked, '*In what does a moral act consist* when reduced to its simplest and most elementary form?' you can make only one reply. You can say that *it consists in the effort of attention by which we hold fast to an idea* which but for that

> effort of attention would be driven out of the mind by other psychological tendencies that are there. (*Talks on Psychology* 186-7)

James' definition focusses on the process underlying a moral act rather than on the content which informs it. The problem with this definition is that the idea one holds fast to might be a thoroughly evil one, and other psychological tendencies such as feelings of guilt might make it difficult to maintain it. However, if one desires the expected outcome of this idea badly enough one may well be persuaded to pursue it even if it is completely immoral. Clearly, something more than simply holding fast to an idea is needed to ensure *moral* action. James shares with Weil the notion that moral action depends upon the effort of attention. But whereas in his case attention can be fixed on any idea, Weil believes that absolute attention can only have one object - God, with quite specific effects:

> The attention turned lovingly towards God . . . has the effect of making certain things impossible . . . There are certain forms of behaviour which would cast a shroud over this attention were they to manifest themselves, and which such attention renders correspondingly impossible. (NB II 504)

This is because

> The light of attention abolishes certain inclinations and rouses others from a state of inertia . . . There remains a system of inclinations to which man has nothing else to do but yield himself.
>
> Man has never anything else to do but to yield himself to inclinations . . . but the attention changes them. (NB I 289)

Weil called this effect which attention has on the inclinations of the individual "the non-active action of prayer in the soul". Attention in its pure form affects man in such a way that he cannot but commit right acts:

> It is impossible to do harm to others when one is acting in a state of prayer - provided that it be genuine prayer. (NB II 508)

Weil concedes that in order to arrive at such a state a learning process has to be gone through (NB II 545). Once one has consented to

attending to God the attention has to be trained so that it does not stray.[13] As one's ability to attend increases so too does the degree to which one acts from necessity:

> We should do only those righteous acts which we cannot stop ourselves from doing, which we are unable not to do, but, through well-directed attention, we should always keep on increasing the number of those which we are unable not to do. (NB I 150)

It follows that ultimately "we should pay attention to such a point that we no longer have a choice" (NB I 204).

For Weil, action is a matter of will and choice only if the individual chooses not to attend to God or pays imperfect attention. If, however, he chooses not to assert his self and succumbs to God, this affects his moral behaviour by changing the situation from "my will be done" to "thy will be done"; ultimately, a point is reached where the two are synonymous. This point is analogously illustrated by Murdoch in *The Good Apprentice* when Stuart contemplates his relationship with Christ:

> Christ was pure essence . . . something which was everywhere, yet simple separate and alone. Something alive; and he himself was Christ. The identification was unanalysed and instinctive, something obvious, where 'not I but Christ' was interchangeable with 'not Christ but I', experienced sometimes as a transparency and lightness, the closeness, even the easiness, of good. This progressive absorbing of the Holy One, as if after a while Stuart might forget his name, went on of course without reference to 'Christianity' . . . (52)

Attention such as this, according to Weil, brings forth a "transubstantiation of energy":

> The transubstantiation of energy consists of this, that in the case of evil there comes a moment when we cannot accomplish it, and in the case of good, one when we cannot do otherwise than

[13] As Vetö points out, "[l'acte originel de l'attention] ne se fait pas en un seul coup et pour de bon: c'est une opération sans cesse renouvelée qui nous rend continuellement disponibles à la réalité extérieure et contre laquelle notre moi ne cesse de se révolter" ("L'Attention" 50).

accomplish it. (NB I 278)

At this point action is not only subordinate to attention but causally dependent on it.

Despite this conclusion Weil seems to have been unable to decide which of the two - attention or action - was the more significant. At the beginning of the *Notebooks* she presented the problem in the form of a question:

> Action is like [an] elevator on an aircraft. But perhaps it is only able to lower or not to lower, and is unable to raise? Perhaps only attention is capable of doing the latter? (NB I 53)[14]

Weil then came to the conclusion:

> Just as each minute of attention - even of an imperfect kind - directed towards the higher causes one to rise a little, so likewise does each act carried out with the same attention. (NB I 303)

Later, after she had read the *Bhagavad Gita*, Weil decided:

> At the heart of the question concerning the merit attaching to works lies the following truth - which Arjuna failed to recognize, namely, that we do not rise through our acts, but solely through our contemplation of God. (NB II 436)

The *Bhagavad Gita* states that man is driven to perpetual action by the forces of Nature (3; 5) and that he cannot achieve supreme perfection by refraining from action (3; 4). It is the spirit in which the action is performed that decides if a man attains what is called "the Supreme" (3; 9/ 3; 17-19). Every person has a task in life and it is his duty to carry out this task; if he is destined to reach perfection via the *karma yoga*, the path of action, he has the obligation to follow it:

> And do thy duty, even if it be humble, rather than another's, even if it be great. To die in one's duty is life: to live in another's is death. (3; 35)

In order to attain the Supreme the path of action has to be followed in

[14] Murdoch uses a similar image for Edward's dilemma (GA 67). See 141 in this thesis.

a specific way, namely, in a state of personal detachment:

> Set thy heart upon thy work, but never on its reward. Work not for a reward; but never cease to do thy work. (2; 47)
>
> In the bonds of works I am free, because in them I am free from desires. The man who can see this truth, in his work he finds his freedom. (4; 14-15)

This same notion of detachment, freedom from desires, not seeking of rewards, as the guiding spirit for action and ultimately salvation is found in Weil's writings. She suggests that attention should not be directed with a view to finding a solution but, rather, that it should be purely contemplative:

> Wrong way of seeking. The attention fixed on a problem . . . We must not want to find . . . It is only effort without desire (not attached to an object) which infallibly contains a reward. (NB I 169)
>
> Detachment consists of doing whatever one does, not with a view to a good, but out of necessity, and taking the good only as an object for the attention. (NB II 546)

Action thus can result in a reward only if it is informed by the spirit of detachment. This is the essence of the Christian message in the New Testament.

> Labour not for the meat which perisheth, but for that meat which endureth unto everlasting life, which the Son of man shall give unto you: for him hath God the Father sealed. (St. John, 6; 27)

The parable of the Good Samaritan testifies to the same notion.

Attention and action clearly are not two independent entities. Among mystic writers there appears to be a tradition of describing the progress of the soul towards union with God in terms of a hierarchy with right action featuring as the "lower mystic way" and attention or contemplation as the "higher" one. In *The Cloud of Unknowing* the active life, consisting of "good and honest physical works of mercy and charity", is considered "good", while the contemplative life is regarded "best", mainly because charity is regarded as of this world whereas contemplation points to the life beyond. The *Bhagavad Gita* contains a similar statement:

> But the man who has found the joy of the Spirit and in the Spirit has satisfaction, who in the Spirit has found his peace, that man is beyond the law of action. He is beyond what is done and beyond what is not done, and in all his works he is beyond the help of mortal beings. (3; 17-18)

The man of action is, however, not dismissed completely; provided he acts in the right spirit he will be saved, too:

> If thou art not able to practise concentration, consecrate all thy work to me. By merely doing actions in my service thou shalt attain perfection. (12; 10)

In the *Upanishads* action is considered the first step towards eternity:

> Into deep darkness fall those who follow action. Into deeper darkness fall those who follow knowledge . . . He who knows both knowledge and action, with action overcomes death and with knowledge reaches immortality. (49)

The New Testament, however, does not conceive of action and faith in terms of a hierarchical order; rather, the two are seen as interdependent:

> Not everyone that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven. (Matthew; 7, 21)

Two different issues appear to be at stake. One of them is the relationship of action and attention. On this point Weil adopts the stance that action is secondary in that it depends on attention to give it direction. Provided the individual has decided to attend to God his actions are determined by the degree to which he is able to attend. Instead of going through a process of conscious deliberation the individual is supposed to know intuitively and without any form of intellectual mediation how to act. Action becomes a mere reflex.

The other issue concerns the question of how the highest - the union with the Godhead - can be achieved. Here Weil's position is somewhat different. Action, though an integral, and in Christian terms necessary, part of attention, is subordinate to the latter, and as such does not further spiritual progress:

> The attitude which brings about salvation is not like any form of activity . . . It is the waiting or attentive and faithful

> immobility which lasts indefinitely and cannot be shaken. (WOG 128)

On a spiritual level attention is essentially passive, immobile.[15] Man cannot effect his own progress. Progress, according to Weil, comes from an external source:

> I have not the principle of rising in me. I cannot climb to heaven through the air. It is only by directing my thoughts toward something better than myself that I am drawn upwards by this something . . . What draws one up is directing one's thoughts toward a veritable perfection. (NB II 434)

The individual has control only over his effort of attention. He has no influence on the consequences, cannot will specific outcomes. Only the degree of attention is the function of his effort. This effort is initiated by faith. The attempt to be absolutely attentive is, for Weil, connected with the belief in God.

> Attention, taken to its highest degree, is the same thing as prayer. It presupposes faith and love. (NB I 205)

Faith provides the directive force for attention:

> It is an orientation of the soul towards something which one doesn't know, but whose reality one does know . . . So I turn my attention towards this thing about which I know simply that it *is*, but about which I haven't the least idea *what* it is. This effort of attention, empty of all content, may last several minutes. Then (if all goes well) the thing comes to me. I recognize, with absolute certainty, that it is indeed that. This empty form of reality has become a certain definite form of reality, ever real to me. (NB II 333-4)

Thus, in a spiritual sense, attention has the function of making real, beyond doubt, what was previously known but not fully grasped:

> Attention is what seizes hold of reality, so that the greater the attention on the part of the mind, the greater the amount of real being in the object. (NB II 527)

Increased attention leads to a decreased sense of self and a

[15] Note that in FLN Weil says that "it is the mark of inferiors that they are made to wait" (141).

correspondingly increased sense of reality of the beheld in the eye of the beholder. It is in the light of this automatic balancing process that the relationship between progress and attention has to be understood:

> Real progress will be precisely proportional to the total amount of genuine attention which is brought to bear upon it . . . (NB I 287)

Attention, for Weil, is associated with the notion of obedience to necessity, with obligation:

> Attention alone is voluntary. And it *alone* forms the subject of an obligation. (*Letter to a Priest* 60)

Until 1937 she considered the nature of this obligation a moral one, derived from the Christian ideals of charity and compassion which she had adopted as a basis for her own behaviour although not certain of the existence of God. Her conviction that morality and theology are two separate entities[16] made it possible for her to operate along the lines of Christian maxims even without faith in God. Indeed, Weil believed that charity and compassion were as important as faith and that an atheist who was charitable would be saved like any other believer. For her, charity implied faith:

> All those who possess in its pure state the love of their neighbour and the acceptance of the order of the world, including affliction - all those, even should they live and die to all appearances atheists, are surely saved . . . Charity and faith, though distinct, are inseparable . . . Whoever is capable of a movement of pure compassion towards a person in affliction (a very rare thing anyway) possesses, maybe implicitly, yet always really, the love of God and faith. (*Letter to a Priest* 36)

After 1937, once Weil had begun to have mystical experiences, attention became a strictly religious concept, denoting the intimacy with God during states of contemplative attention:

[16] See *Lectures on Philosophy* 171-2.

God is the source of light;[17] this means to say that all the different kinds of attention are only debased forms of religious attention. It is only of God that one can think with the fullest possible attention. Conversely, it is only with the fullest possible attention that one can think of God. Those who are incapable of such an attention do not think of God, even if they give the name of God to what they are thinking of. But if they realize that they are not thinking of God and really desire to do so, grace helps them to concentrate their attention more and more . . . It is by desiring God that one becomes capable of attention. (NB II 515)

Attention thus has the potential of bringing about the spiritual experience which provides knowledge of God, and replaces, in Weil's religious economy, the application of the intellect and the need for empirical evidence. Weil repeatedly emphasized the total powerlessness of the individual whose only choice was either to attend to God or not. Once attention to God had been consented to the quality of this attention determined everything else. Attention provided spiritual insight, behavioural guidance, a renewed, different sense of reality, a value system, and, ultimately, the salvation of the individual.

Weil's notion of attention *per se* lacks a religious bias and can therefore be applied to both religious and non-religious contexts. This is, perhaps, why the concept holds such an attraction for Murdoch. It has to be remembered that Murdoch does not consider herself a religious person in the sense of believing in any religious dogma (Weil, too, abhorred the latter;[18]) however, she values in religion its capacity for spiritual guidance.[19]

[17] In FLN Weil describes the case of the water scorpion which moves towards the light of a lamp, and even when almost completely overcome by the heat of the lamp "expend[s its] last flicker of vital energy to drag themselves a little closer to it". She ends with, "Father, grant me this", asks, in other words to be killed by the light that is God (174).

[18] Weil explains her rejection of dogma in WOG 18-9. For a discussion of her "vestibule state in relation to the Church" see Grumbach.

[19] See Bellamy 134.

Murdoch's writings are permeated by a tension born out of the realization that religion has lost its significance in the modern world (AD 20) and a concomitant conviction that an adequate substitute has to be found. In linguistic analysis and existentialism, the two philosophical positions Murdoch came to reject, the image of modern man as a moral being, according to Murdoch, rests on the relationship of the three points of a triangle: will, choice, and action. Murdoch analyses this image as follows:

> It is behaviourist in its connection of the meaning and being of action with the publicly observable, it is existentialist in its elimination of the substantial self and its emphasis on the solitary omnipotent will, and it is utilitarian in its assumption that morality is and can only be concerned with public acts. (SOG 52)

To Murdoch the idea of total self-sufficiency on the part of the moral agent, the notion of the sovereignty of the individual, is unrealistic. From her viewpoint such a conception ignores the fact that people are social beings, leading a life in which self-assertion is not always the optimal strategy and where survival depends on interaction. Furthermore, this position ignores the theories of Freud and Marx which contradict the idea of the autonomous individual exercising total control by virtue of his will.

For Murdoch, the philosopher has certain obligations which include moral guidance:

> What is a good man like? How can we make ourselves morally better? *Can* we make ourselves morally better? These are questions the philosopher should try to answer. (SOG 52)

In attempting to clarify these issues the philosopher has to make use of the central images and metaphors which human beings use to represent how they understand their existence (SOG 77). As these images and metaphors are culturally loaded and imbued with value judgments the philosopher cannot remain neutral in his moral guidance (SOG 78). In Weil Murdoch found a philosopher not afraid of committing herself to moral values and standards who expressed strong convictions in evaluative, directive, and prescriptive terms. Weil could "speak significantly" of Marx and Freud, was aware of the role of the

individual as a social being and, perhaps most important of all, the direction her moral guidance indicated was away from the self. Attention is the central technique for defeating the ego.

Murdoch delineates her "new vocabulary of attention", based on Weil's later works (after 1937), in *The Sovereignty of Good*. There she postulates:

> Moral philosophy is the examination of the most important of all human activities, and I think that two things are required of it. The examination should be realistic . . . Secondly, since an ethical system cannot but commend an ideal, it should commend a worthy ideal. (78)

Murdoch describes morality as an activity associated both with the real and the ideal. Against the notion of morality based on choice as advocated by, for example, linguistic analysis, Murdoch posits:

> . . . the notion of "moral being" as self-reflection or complex attitudes to life which are continuously displayed and elaborated in overt and inward speech but are not separable temporally into situations. Here moral differences look less like differences of choice, given the same facts, and more like differences of vision. (VCM 40)
>
> On such a view, it may be noted, moral freedom looks more like a mode of reflection which we may have to achieve, and less like a capacity to vary our choices which we have by definition. (VCM 55)

The acquisition and exercise of this mode of reflection constitutes moral activity for Murdoch. As with Weil the individual is considered as having the freedom to fix his attention on whatever he likes. He can choose to attend to himself or something outside the self. For Murdoch, in analogy to Weil's thinking, there is no question about the choice for the moral being:

> The direction of attention is, contrary to nature, outward, away from self which reduces all to a false unity, towards the great surprising variety of the world, . . . (SOG 66)

Virtue is dependent on "seeing clearly". The "fat relentless ego" which obscures such vision by distorting reality to serve its needs is "the enemy of the moral life".

> I can only choose within the world I can *see*, in the moral sense of 'see' which implies that clear vision is the result of moral imagination and moral effort. (SOG 37)

This effort consists in the focussing of attention away from the self[20].

Like Weil, Murdoch describes attention as a learning process with an ideal end-point which is never reached. She talks of attention as "our daily bread" thus emphasizing our dependence on it in order to exist:

> The task of attention goes on all the time and at apparently empty and everyday moments we are 'looking'; making those little peering efforts of imagination which have such important cumulative effects. (SOG 43)

This task, "the endless aspiration to perfection which is characteristic of moral activity", implies that

> The moral life . . . is something that goes on continually, not something that is switched off in between the occurrence of explicit choices. (SOG 37)

The notion of continuity expressed here is diametrically opposed to the view of morality held by linguistic philosophers. It reiterates Weil's contention that "attention insists on there being a duration" (NB II 531).

What is achieved by such a continual effort of attention? Murdoch asserts that when "we cease to be in order to attend to the existence of something else, a natural object, a person in need" (SOG 59) we reach a point where "attention is rewarded by a knowledge of reality" (SOG 89). Since reality is difficult to bear, the individual has to carry on the task of focussing his attention in the right direction "to prevent it from returning surreptitiously to the self with consolations of self-pity, resentment, fantasy and despair" (SOG 91). If we succeed in attending to reality in an unselfish manner we are morally active. But what is the relationship of this type of activity to our everyday existence? Murdoch like Weil believes that our inner disposition determines our behaviour. But unlike a chess computer, for example, we do not have to go through all the basic motions at every instant when we make a decision about how to act; rather, our inner bias impels us to

[20] See Vetö, "L'Attention" 50.

act in a specific way. This inner inclination, so Murdoch suggests, is determined by what we attend to. If we attend to the self we will act in a self-related manner, if we attend to something outside ourselves this will determine our action. This may mean acting against the demands of the self but the importance of the latter is diminished to the extent that we gain a clearer perception of reality. Thus the whole individual is involved in moral action. We do not live in a piecemeal fashion moving from situation to situation in a purely chronological manner; rather, there is a coherence in the way in which we behave which is derived from the quality of our consciousness. This conception of the individual is one that comes from *Gestalt* theory: the sum being greater than its parts, man cannot be viewed as a series of individual acts or choices but has to be understood in terms of his "inner vision". The task "to come to see the world as it is" constitutes the foundation of his moral existence: "our ability to act well 'when the time comes' depends partly, perhaps largely, upon the quality of our habitual objects of attention" (SOG 56). Murdoch relates action to attention in exactly the same way as Weil did: "If I attend properly I will have no choices and this is the ultimate condition to be aimed at." (SOG 40) Unselfish perception ensures appropriate behaviour: "By the time the moment of choice has arrived the quality of attention has probably determined the nature of the act." (SOG 67) The continual work of attention envelops the individual in "structures of value" which decide his behaviour: "When I deliberate the die is already cast. Forces within me which are dark to me have already made the decision." (SOG 36) Emphasis is thus placed on the inner life. Here Murdoch moves towards a quasi-religious picture of man. She confirms this analogy:

> Religion normally emphasizes states of mind as well as actions, and regards states of mind as the genetic background of action: pureness of heart, meekness of spirit. (SOG 83)

However, these states of mind are only one aspect of religion. For Murdoch as a non-believer mysticism, as described, for example, by W. H. Auden, offers a closer analogy to her view of moral philosophy:

> Toward my immediate experience, what is required of me is neither faith nor doubt but a self-forgetful concentration of my attention upon the experience which is only mine in so far as

> it has been given to me and not to someone else. The *I* is only truly itself when its attention to experience is so intense that it is unaware of its own existence. (*Understanding Mysticism* 381)

Through the notion of self-forgetful attention Weil exemplifies for Murdoch an ethical position which fuses morality and mysticism. That way, in this century, salvation lies. Murdoch believes:

> Morality has always been connected with religion and religion with mysticism. The disappearance of the middle term leaves morality in a situation which is certainly more difficult but essentially the same. The background to morals is properly some sort of mysticism . . . (SOG 74)

The sort of mysticism Murdoch has in mind is the Weilian one, translated into a non-religious moral context. Where Weil wanted to experience the reality of God Murdoch wants the reality of this world to be accurately perceived. Both demand an internal process of self-negation:

> And if the quality of consciousness matters, then anything which alters consciousness in the direction of unselfishness, objectivity and realism is to be connected with virtue. (SOG 84)

What, according to Weil and Murdoch, alters one's state of consciousness is prayer. Murdoch regards prayer as "a device for the purification of the mind" and able to "induce a better quality of consciousness" (SOG 83). Only a certain kind of prayer, however, can bring about such an alteration. Significantly, Weil does not acknowledge the different types of prayer (of petition, devotion, intercession) commonly distinguished within religious communities. For Weil the only genuine prayer is pure attention (GG 106). Prayer is thus a state of mind rather than an interaction with a personal God. Murdoch shares this view:

> Prayer is properly not petition, but simply an attention to God which is a form of love. (SOG 55)

Prayer thus interpreted can provide a model of mental conduct for the non-believer. Murdoch has pointed out the possibility of an activity akin to prayer that could, in a secular age, take over the role previously occupied by prayer:

> In Christianity the practice of prayer is so important, and people who don't believe in a personal God and can't, as a consequence, talk to Him lose a very important activity, which can perhaps be regained if one uses a technique of meditation. (Bellamy 134)

In *The Sovereignty of Good* she had already suggested:

> I think there is something analogous to prayer, though it is something difficult to describe, and which the higher subtleties of the self can often falsify; I am not here thinking of any quasi-religious meditative technique, but of something which belongs to the moral life of the ordinary person. (69)

What she was thinking of was attention.

One of the functions of prayer, according to Weil, is the channelling of energy. Murdoch, who describes people as systems of energy irrationally applied and erratically released (SOG 51-5), makes use of Weil's thermodynamic model of the psyche as well as the Freudian notion of sublimation of libidinal energy in her discussions of morality. With the help of attention the energy within the individual which is naturally selfish can be purified and reoriented. Characteristically, Weil puts this in terms of restraining the self:

> When we think on God with attention and love, he rewards us by exercising upon the soul a constraint which is exactly proportional to that attention and love. (NB I 259)

Murdoch stresses the importance of language as part of the re-orientation of attention and the self:

> We need more concepts in terms of which to picture the substance of our being; it is through an enriching and deepening of concepts that moral progress takes place. (AD 20)

Here learning is associated with the acquisition and/or alteration of verbal concepts. The more restricted the understanding of the latter the more constrained is the perception of the world. Only a rich multi-levelled vocabulary can reflect the diversity of the world and thus approximate to reality. A limited understanding of verbal concepts produces a uniform simplified vision of reality. In *The Sovereignty of Good* Murdoch argues that

> Learning takes place when . . . words are used, either aloud or privately, in the context of particular acts of attention. We learn through attending to contexts, vocabulary develops through close attention to objects, and we can only understand others if we can to some extent share their contexts. (32)

Language has to be attended to both in a passive and an active sense. The passive aspect consists of receptivity towards the subtleties of verbal concepts and their contexts. The active element is related to the actual verbal (re-)production of both concepts and contexts. Carelessness in either area leads to a distortion of reality which in turn affects the individual's social existence:

> This dependence of language upon contexts of attention has consequences . . . Human beings are obscure to each other, in certain respects which are particularly relevant to morality, unless they are mutual objects of attention or have common objects of attention, since this affects the degree of elaboration of a common vocabulary. We develop a language in the context of looking . . . (SOG 33)

The centrality of attention for the inner development of the individual prompted Weil to say:

> The development of the attention ought to be the sole object of education. (NB I 251)
>
> The education of the attention - that is the chief thing. (NB II 545)[21]

For Murdoch this education begins with language. It is worth noting here that Weil, of course, used the *Greek* version of "Our Father" when she exercised her attention. Murdoch has used the idea of learning a foreign language as an example of how one can develop one's attention (SOG 89). So has Weil (WOG 57). In Murdoch's novels good characters often know several languages (one example is Brownie in *The Good Apprentice*), and moral progress is marked by the desire to learn a new language (again,

[21] Weil reiterates this in WOG 51-9, summarized by Vetö as "le métier d'éducateur et de directeur spirituel n'est-il pas, en tout premier lieu, l'art d'aider à développer la faculté d'attention?" ("L'Attention" 55).

in *The Good Apprentice*, Edward at the end goes off to study Russian).

Given the importance Murdoch attributes to language, writers, whose *raison d'être* are words, have a special status within society. As they relate reality via the medium of language, they are directly engaged in the process of concept-formation. This, according to Murdoch, constitutes the basis for their central status in culture:

> . . . the most essential and fundamental aspect of culture is the study of literature, since this is an education in how to picture and understand human situations. (SOG 34)

Though there may be various ways in which a writer can go about portraying human situations, Murdoch recognizes only one determining principle shared by all the major aspects of cultural life:

> Literature, morals, and politics must all concern themselves with reality. (SBR 270)

Reality is not only to be the subject of each of these areas but it is also to govern the agents within them. Murdoch says:

> I have used the word 'attention', which I borrow from Simone Weil, to express the idea of a just and loving gaze directed upon the individual reality.[22]. I believe this to be the characteristic and proper mark of the active moral agent. (SOG 34)

The moral agent has to suppress the self in order to achieve a vision which allows him to perceive the world including others as it/they really is/are. The same is true for writers and artists. Therein lies the connection between arts and morals:

> Art and morals are . . . one. Their essence is the same. The essence of both of them is love. Love is the perception of individuals. Love is the extremely difficult realization that something other than oneself is real. Love, and so art and morals, is the discovery of reality. (SG 51)

Reality can only be discovered through "unsentimental, detached, unselfish, objective attention" (SOG 66).

[22] I take it that "individual reality" here refers to the specificity of the otherness of other people. But at the same time how the moral agent relates to other people is indicative of how he ought to relate to the world at large.

Attention is the key to reality. Once reality has been perceived in the light of attention by the artist he has to translate it into his medium in order to communicate it. In doing so he faces an unsolvable dilemma inherent in the diametrically opposed natures of reality and art respectively. Reality, being random, chancy, particular, and inexhaustible, is essentially unpatterned. What pattern it appears to have is an imaginary one imposed by selfish dreaming. Art, on the other hand, relies on form or pattern in order to turn its subject into a finite self-contained object. The essence of art is form. Consequently it lends itself to the distortion of reality. To give form in such a way that it reveals reality rather than obscures it is very difficult, probably impossible. Murdoch herself, in her attempt to create novels that represent reality, has produced many highly patterned texts (e.g. *Under The Net*, *The Italian Girl*, *The Sacred and Profane Love Machine*, *The Bell*, *A Severed Head*, *The Unicorn*). Art, according to Murdoch, represents:

> a temptation to impose form where perhaps it isn't always appropriate . . . Morality has to do with not imposing form, except perhaps appropriately and cautiously and carefully and with attention to appropriate detail, and I think that truth is very fundamental here. Art can subtly tamper with truth to a great degree because art is enjoyment. People persist in being artists . . . because it's a marvellous activity, a gratification of the ego, and a free, omnipotent imposition of form; unless this is constantly being, as it were, pulled at by the value of truth . . . the artist may be simply using art as a form of self-indulgence. So I think in art itself there is this conflict between the form-maker and the truthful, formless figure. (Bellamy 135)

Not only can art distort reality by imposing form; the very fact that something is an artefact removes it from reality. It can never be reality, only a mediated version of it. It must approximate to the real without ever actually arriving there.

This is why Weil, like Plato, took a very harsh line concerning literature. Weil saw literature as fiction and therefore unreality; both - as is mirrored in Murdoch's equation of unreality with selfishness - generate immorality. Weil suggests that writers have become associated

with the function of spiritual guidance, especially from the nineteenth century onwards but that they are, by and large, incapable of fulfilling such a function because of their mediocrity. This mediocrity is not their fault and cannot be remedied, but:

> . . . what can and ought to be corrected, in view of this very irremedial immorality, is the usurpation by writers of the function of spiritual guidance, for which they are totally unsuited. (*On Science, Necessity and the Love of God* 163)

Only writers of the greatest "genius" avoid committing the immoral act of fictionalization, the creation of unreality. They alone can initiate an awareness of truth, the just perception of reality:

> There is something . . . which has the power to awaken us to the truth. It is the works of writers of genius, or at least of those with genius of the very first order and when it has reached its full maturity.[23] They are outside the realm of fiction and they release us from it. They give us, in the guise of fiction, something equivalent to the actual density of the real, that density which life offers us every day but which we are unable to grasp because we are amusing ourselves with lies. (Weil, *On Science* 162)

Weil here adopts a position which is at odds with Murdoch's. Murdoch considers the ability to see reality as it is a moral one, and reading the work of a great artist may enhance the reader's moral vision.[24] But this is not the same as suggesting that writers have a role as spiritual guides. Murdoch agrees that there are many mediocre artists by which she means that they act as a veil between reality and the reader as they project egocentric fantasies onto the page. It is the writer's task to

[23] Weil defines "the maturity of genius" as "conformity to the true relations between good and evil". She equates immorality with having no genius, and says that "the source of genius is beyond the scope of our efforts" (*On Science* 163). In other words, genius is not acquired but developed.

[24] Murdoch maintains in FS that "art is far and away the most educational thing we have" (86).

strive against that impulse. Weil actually holds writers responsible for what she calls "the disaster of our time", the dissipation of value:

> The fate of words is a touchstone of the progressive weakening of the idea of value, and although the fate of words does not depend upon writers one cannot help attributing a special responsibility to them, since words are their business. (*On Science* 168)

What Weil demands of writers is this:

> Writers do not have to be professors of morals, but they do have to express the human condition. (*On Science* 168-9)

Only writers of genius, according to her, are able to fulfil this requirement:

> As for all other writers, unless they have a philosophical bent in addition to a literary one, which is rare, their conception about life and the world and their opinions on current problems can have no interest at all, and it is absurd that they should be called upon to express them. (*On Science* 163)

Murdoch might just count among the exempt few.

Although Murdoch shares many of Weil's notions she does not - and, being herself a writer of fiction, probably cannot - arrive at the same conclusions as Weil. In *The Fire and the Sun: Why Plato Banished the Artists* she examines the reasons behind Plato's mistrust of art, attempting to arrive at a more positive outlook concerning the role of the artist in society. According to Murdoch Plato's objections to art are "fundamentally religious" and derive from the same assumption that led to the command that no graven images should be created. Underlying both is not only the fear that man by creating such images attempts to emulate the divine, thus mocking it, but also that the images lead the beholders astray by confusing the appearance with the real. Only the mental faculties, not the eye, can reach the soul; the senses should not presume to take on the function of the mind. Man must strive after truth; truth is expressive of reality, the opposite of which is appearance:

> Art makes us content with appearances, and by playing magically with particular images it steals the educational wonder of the world away from philosophy and confuses our sense of direction

> toward reality and our motives for discerning it . . . Form in art is for illusion and hides the true cosmic beauty and the hard real forms of necessity and causality, and blurs with fantasy . . . Art objects are not real unities but pseudo-objects completed by the fantasizing mind in its escape from reality. (FS 66)

What Plato, according to Murdoch, neglects to point out is that both philosophy and art use metaphors or images. In other words, both mediate reality via some, often visually oriented, aid. Plato, in fact, himself created some of the best known images such as that of the social beast or the cave myth. Drawing on that last image, Murdoch suggests that the bad man and the bad artist both live, like the prisoners in the cave, in a state of illusion perceiving only shadows on the wall. This inability to distinguish reality from illusion is not their fault and they become blameworthy only when, having been led outside and perceived the truth, they deliberately turn their backs on it:

> The prescription for art is then the same as for dialectic: overcome personal fantasy and egoistic anxiety and self-indulgent day-dream. Order and separate and distinguish the world justly. (FS 79)

It is hard to resist the temptation to read the cave myth as used above in terms of a desire to return to the womb, and a demand, on Murdoch's part, to resist the temptation to return to the original state of union with the mother that denied the reality principle.

If this demand is met, Murdoch suggests, good art may be produced which, by presenting the beholder with a reality independent of and separate from himself, can have the same effect as religion:

> Good art, thought of as a symbolic force rather than statement, provides a stirring image of a pure transcendent value, a steady visible enduring higher good, and perhaps provides for many people, in an unreligious age without prayer or sacraments, their clearest *experience* of something grasped as separate and precious and beneficial and held quietly and unpossessively in the attention. Good art which we love can seem holy and attending to it can be like praying. (FS 76-7)

The writer, like artists in general, more than just perceiving the world objectively, has also the task of representing it as such. Again, reality itself must impel him to create, reality must take over and the self must be eliminated. The denial of self, achieved through attention, is the mark both of the good artist and the good man.

The artist's just perception and representation of reality may inspire other people to see as he has seen. Art objects can therefore be educational. But they must not set out to edify:

> Of course art has no formal 'social role' and artists ought not to feel that they must 'serve their society'. They automatically serve it if they attend to truth and try to produce the best art of which they are capable. (FS 86)

Art must not be didactic. Didacticism is based on formalization, on the desire to communicate one ultimate meaning in terms of which the world can be interpreted. Reality, however, according to Murdoch, is not unified and categorizable in the way that didactic writing portrays it to be.

The main difference between Weil and Murdoch in their interpretation of the meaning of "attention" is that Murdoch, lacking Weil's religious convictions, is not as exclusively theistic in her view of attention. Where Weil renounces the self, with the help of attention, in favour of God, Murdoch suggests the renunciation of self in favour of reality. In this context

> . . . the task of moral philosophy has been to extend, as poets may extend, the limits of language, and enable it to illuminate regions of reality which were formerly dark. (VCM 49)

It could be argued that some of Weil's descriptions of attention draw a parallel between the attending individual and the infant crying for food; the idea of permanent faithful immobility, which both makes a virtue out of necessity and justifies the desire to revert to a state of helplessness, is suggestive of regression[25] whereas Murdoch's position is "more mature" in Freudian terms in that it favours, in a direct way, the reality principle. Weil's initial moral stance as detailed by her in her "Spiritual Autobiography" was, in Freudian terms, a mature, adult one,

[25] See Freud, *Civilization* 201-5.

independent of a father figure as law giver, expressive of an impersonal super-ego. Of course that autobiography represents a re-construction of Weil's spiritual life, an attempt at a cohesive continuous narrative "fabricated" retrospectively, but the mere fact that Weil chose to read her own experiences in those terms validates the interpretation given here. What appears to have followed was a gradual surfacing of the desire to return to an infantile state of helplessness, passivity, receptivity, dependence, acceptance, and being nurtured, having one's physical needs catered for.[26] This was characterized by Weil's willingness to suspend her intellectual faculty[27], her renewed receptivity to a language whose features connect with what Kristeva describes as the semiotic and which is related to the pre-Oedipal mother-child dyad, further by her conception of selflessness as the complete loss of identity. It was also reflected in her notion of "attention" as an attitude of complete passivity, waiting, being taken over, and her view that any resultant action was the expression not of self and will but other ("not I but Christ"), achieving physical comfort through attention (if I wait long enough without wanting - because wanting causes unpleasure when not fulfilled - the "mother" will come, tend to my needs, and all will be well). In fact, Weil's description of Christ coming to her during one of her mystical experiences reads like the mother coming to the child's cot, her loving gaze turned upon the infant:

[26] In FLN Weil repeatedly uses the image of the infant waiting to be taken care of and fed to describe the relation between the soul and God (230, 233, 325-6, 360). She maintains that "everything we get for ourselves by our own will and our own efforts . . . is absolutely without value" (143). Therefore, "Make no effort, remain motionless, beseech in silence." (306) "The soul cries for the things it wants like an infant which has not yet learnt to walk. This is the first stage of becoming like a child again. But nobody attends. It cries and cries in an unheeding world. When it is too tired even to cry, it looks. . . Impotent desire detaches itself from its objectives and turns back on itself. Then the idea of pure, unconditioned good . . . enters the soul. . . If the soul cleaves to the idea of pure good, it begs never again to have to choose." (222)

[27] Weil says, "The will and the discursive intelligence which makes plans are adult faculties. We must use them up. We must destroy them by wearing them out." (FLN 326)

> Moreover, in this sudden possession of me by Christ, neither my senses nor my imagination had any part; I only felt in the midst of my suffering the presence of a love, like that which one can read in the smile on a beloved face. (WOG 21-2)

An unknown something appears to acquire the attributes of the mother in relation to which Weil arranges herself. Her sense of separation (such as the infant is supposed to experience when it first becomes aware of the mother as a discrete entity) and need for attention and nurturance which is not automatically satisfied as well as her realization that she is not self-sufficient, all these are translated into an attitude where "attentive and faithful immobility which lasts indefinitely and cannot be shaken" finally "brings about salvation". Here is the child that will not be disappointed and will not get up and walk away from the cot.[28]

Weil's and Murdoch's theoretical writings deal with attention as an ideal attitude. In Murdoch's fiction, however, "reality" in the sense of the individual's limited ability to pay sustained other-directed attention is represented. Failures of attention become as significant as unselfish efforts of concentration. In the following chapter I shall look at the fictionalization of the concept of attention in Murdoch's novels.

[28] In FLN Weil increasingly talks of waiting in perfect immobility; need (especially vegetative need) is suppressed with the formula "I don't see the necessity" (233, 312) and a resolute refusal to take control is justified by pointing to the worthlessness of any effort of one's own, and by saying, "by patience, exhaust God's patience" (FLN 306). That God will take care of the individual who believes this Weil is certain of, "The symbolic connection is clear. But is there a literal connection? At present this problem is beyond me." (FLN 307)

Chapter 5: Fictionalizing Attention

Murdoch fictionalizes the notion of attention in three different ways: through plot and characters, through her style of writing, and through certain demands she makes on the reader. I shall begin by looking at the content of the novels, specifically *Bruno's Dream* and *The Black Prince*, then go on to discuss their construction and consumption.

Nigel Boase in *Bruno's Dream*, who manifests attention in a variety of ways, is of special interest because he constitutes the male equivalent to Weil, a counterpart to Lisa, in the novel. He has mystical experiences like Weil; at the end of the novel - in contrast to Lisa - he decides to renounce his love and try to become a better moral person by going to India to work for the *Save the Children Fund*; he attends to others' needs, especially Bruno's, in a practical way as Weil did;[1] he lives frugally like her.

Nigel is also the figure considered most fantastic and ambiguous by critical writers on *Bruno's Dream*. For Pamela Marsh he is one of "two allegorical figures with shifting identities" ("Lights in the Shadow" 11); H. Kaye calls him "a mystical peeping Tom", "half potty, half prescient, and half pansy" ("Delight and Instruction" 19-20). An anonymous reviewer in *Time* describes him as "a forbearing homosexual nurse . . . the enigmatic character . . . who stirs the emotional chemistry of others into molecular groupings and regroupings" ("Hanging by a Thread" 84-5). To Granville Hicks he is a "mystic of sorts" ("Literary Horizons" 32), and for William F. Hall he represents "eastern consciousness" ("*Bruno's Dream*: Technique and Meaning in the Novels of Iris Murdoch" 430). These descriptions indicate the elusiveness and ambiguity that are essential aspects of the figure of Nigel.

Unlike the other characters Nigel is not introduced by an "objective" description from the omniscient narrator's viewpoint but *via* a series of subjective accounts from different characters. First, with Bruno contemplates the routine events of his day-to-day existence to which Nigel is essential: ". . . then it would be supper brought by Nigel, and then talk with Nigel and then settle down for the night by Nigel." (2)

[1] See, for instance, Pétrement 56, 59, 79, 101.

The threefold repetition of his name indicates Nigel's importance for Bruno which is a function of his attending to Bruno in a practical sense. Bruno's associations with Nigel are pleasant: "Soft padding Nigel . . . he was so good with pillows and helping out of bed, he was so gentle." (2) Bruno, reduced to a state of infantile helplessness and dependence, relies on Nigel as a child on his mother. The words "soft", "padding", "angel fingers", "good", and "gentle" all evoke images of ideal maternal care, describing Nigel in terms traditionally associated with a female rather than a male figure. At the same time, expressions such as "soft padding" and "angel fingers" give the impression of an etherial being, of lack of (human) substance; the celestial reference, adjectives and adverbs used create an atmosphere rather than an image of a human being. This effect of non-solidity is heightened by the information that "Nigel was not really a trained nurse, he had just been an orderly or something" (2). His excellence at looking after Bruno can therefore not be interpreted as an expression of professional skill. He is also no relative of Bruno's and therefore under no familial obligation to him. This raises questions concerning his motive for caring for Bruno.

The generally positive image of Nigel created through Bruno's musings is disturbed by a remark Danby has made about him that Bruno reflects on: Danby considers Nigel to be unreliable. Danby considers Nigel in the main in terms of his function as "Nigel the Nurse", saying "He is terribly good with Bruno. It's almost uncanny." (21), and that he is "sweet and perfectly harmless" (22). Danby, in fact, does not take Nigel very seriously and is essentially unconcerned about him beyond recognizing his indispensibility as regards Bruno.

A third subjective account of Nigel comes from his cousin Adelaide, Bruno's housekeeper and Danby's mistress. She was once in love with Nigel but was rejected by him. Now she is afraid of him:

> She no longer had any tender feelings about Nigel, though he still occasioned obscure and unnerving emotions. She could not forgive him for having been so calmly unresponsive to her undignified and unambiguous appeal. He had changed too, and she felt almost a little frightened of him. He seemed to be living in another world. (43)

Adelaide does not understand Nigel's motives and behaviour. From her viewpoint only "an odd sort of man wants to be a nurse" (this statement reveals her trappedness in certain kinds of gender stereotyping); she thinks he knows all about sex (which makes him not an innocent but rather a potentially evil man), and she suspects him of taking drugs (as proof of this she points out a change in Nigel's face which, according to her, is gradually becoming "lop-sided"). Adelaide sees Nigel as "a demon", "bad", giving her "the creeps". She describes him in emotionally charged, largely negative terms such as "odd" and "terrifying". Her response could be read as a function of her incomprehension at his sexual rejection of her; it is also associated with his apparent transgression of gender boundaries. Like Bruno, Adelaide produces an atmospheric image of Nigel rather than a substantive one. Danby, in contrast to Adelaide, is completely unthreatened by Nigel. He sees him as "a bit mystical" and flippantly dismisses Adelaide's accusations with "I rather like demons, actually" (22).

In chapter three Nigel finally makes his appearance. The central event of this chapter, narrated by an omniscient author and through Nigel's consciousness, is a mystical experience Nigel has in his room.[2] Immediately prior to that he has been listening to Danby and Adelaide's conversation about himself, sitting outside Danby's bedroom "cross-legged" like an Indian god. His movements as he goes from there to his own room are described as "silent", "elegant", "gliding". His noiselessness gives the impression of a shadow, his movements resemble that of an apparition or a cat. Cats are, of course, among other things, associated with the spiritual, also the satanic, and are symbols of liberty, unrestraint, as well as supposedly having several lives.[3] Nigel in his various "incarnations", in his coming and going as he pleases, as well as his affinity to the spiritual, is throughout the novel compared to cats, especially in his movements which seem feline in their

[2] Murdoch has written of other instances where characters have mystical experiences, or feel they do, e. g. *Henry and Cato* 26-8, *A Fairly Honourable Defeat* 164-6.

[3] See *Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable* under the entry "cat".

smoothness, soundlessness, and gracefulness. Cats as animals of prey belong to the night; Nigel, too, is associated with night-time activity, preying on others, spying on them as when he wanders around London or listens to Danby and Adelaide, or trapping them as he does his twin brother Will. Nigel's knowledge of what goes on around him, which can seem spooky, is not due, however, to some mystical intuition but to eavesdropping. This voyeuristic interest in people is obviously not the same as Weil's notion of attention. At the same time it has to be pointed out that Nigel engages in it neither exclusively for self-gratification nor in order to use the knowledge he gains against those whom he observes.

In his room Nigel induces his mystical experience by rotating in a dance. His room is dark, he himself is dressed in black, only a single candle is burning. The whole of ordinary reality is literally "blacked out", thus allowing total concentration on the inner experience. What Murdoch attempts to give fictional shape to is the process by which complete inward attention can be achieved. By rotating, Nigel becomes the centre of gravity within a whirling universe, he turns into the focal point of his own environment and becomes the gateway to the beyond: "Nigel turns and turns, thin as a needle, thin as a straight line, narrow as a slitlet through which a steely blinding light attempts to issue forth into the fuzzy world." (24) Literally, Nigel is dancing in front of a candle whose single light can be glimpsed as he rotates. This motion in front of the light creates the impression of a world with blurred contours, a "fuzzy world". On a metaphysical plane Nigel appears to become the instrument through which the divine penetrates into the world. This process replicates the notion of self-effacement in order so that God can make contact with the world, as expounded by Weil in *Gravity and Grace* (35-7).

As Nigel speeds up his rotating motion he appears to work himself into a trance. His consciousness is filled with OM, the sacred word of eastern mysticism whose significance has already been mentioned (see 172 in this thesis). Murdoch develops this myth in her description of Nigel's mystical experience. OM is the beginning of the world, "black undivided round devoid of consciousness or self". This resembles a pre-natal state. From it creation proceeds:

Nigel has fallen upon his knees. Kneeling upright he sways to its [the candle's] noiseless rhythm song. In the beginning was Om, Omphalos, Om Phallos, black undivided round devoid of consciousness or self. Out of the dreamless womb time creeps in the moment which is no beginning at the end which is no end. Time is the crack. Darkness upon darkness moving, awareness slides from being. . . . An eye regards an eye and there is light. (24)

For Nigel the preconscious state of non-duality has sexual connotations; his attention is fixed on Om Phallos rather than just Om. "Om Phallos" through its reference to the symbol of masculine power sets up a counter-image to the notion of the undifferentiated state as associated with the feminine and the maternal. And power, as I shall indicate below, is what Nigel's mysticism is about. It is also the reason why, in the end, he is not a saint figure. It is worth noting that there is a long-standing tradition of seeing the spiritual in relation to the sexual in mysticism,[4] a fact discussed by Weil herself. She describes her mystical encounters with Christ in terms reminiscent of the sexual act, using expressions such as "Christ entered me". For her the sexual act constitutes the attempt to achieve a union of opposites, woman and man, who were originally one. Thus the sexual act is born out of the urge to return to the primal state of undivided oneness. The same urge is the foundation of mystical experiences. This is perfectly legitimate:

> To reproach mystics with loving God by means of the faculty of sexual love is as though one were to reproach a painter with making pictures by means of colours composed of material substances. We haven't anything else with which to love. One might just as well, moreover, address the same reproach to a man who loves a woman. (NB II 472)

In this context Weil considers the cult of the phallus (NB II 470-3), the cult practised, in a sense, by Nigel; what is interesting is that she interprets undifferentiation wholly in masculine terms. She suggests that in a child desire is without an object (one could read this as a version of Kristeva's polymorphous perversity - the infant's undirected

[4] See de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* 679-87.

diffused experience of pleasure, not predominantly associated with the genitals):

> . . . it [the child] is unattached; it is oriented, and yet not towards anything in particular; it is oriented gratuitously. The ancients believed that during childhood the semen circulates . . . throughout the whole body . . . No doubt in their minds this circulation of the semen throughout the whole body went hand in hand with this non-specifically oriented form of orientation . . . [this belief] is certainly bound up with the conception of the state of childhood as being identical with that state of immortality which is the gateway to salvation. Instead of being emitted outside the body, the semen is emitted within the body itself . . . Man, by emitting his semen within himself, begets himself. Here we certainly have the image . . . of a spiritual process. Whence the psychological analogy between mystical states and amorous ones. The transposition of this image in relation to God, provides the notion of the Father and Son - God begetting himself eternally. (NB II 470-1)

The female remains unconsidered. In Weil's religious economy there is no place for her.[5]

There is, of course, a contradiction between Weil's notion of mystical union and her insistence, already discussed (see 99 in this thesis), on detachment and separation. Indeed, she points out that, because of its sexual basis, the urge towards undifferentiation can result in the "wrong" attitude, one of attachment rather than detachment. Through detachment the individual seeks union via the extinction of the self; attachment, on the other hand, constitutes the indulgence of selfish desires:

> There is a world of difference between the mystic who violently turns toward God the faculty of love and desire the physiological basis of which is sexual energy, and that false imitation of the mystic, who leaving its natural orientation to this faculty, and providing it with an imaginary object, labels this object with the name of God. (NB II 472)

[5] This is not to say that elsewhere Weil does not write of women in relation to religion (see FLN 267-8, 338). But it is quite rare.

It is difficult to retrace Weil's imaginative leap here; on the one hand, there appears to be the impulse to return to the childhood state of desire without an object,[6] on the other, it can read like a fear to acknowledge that which she desires: making "unreal", by not naming, the creation of an understandable enough taboo. Love thy father is, after all, a problematic injunction.

The moment of separation, the creation of duality, is predicated upon time: "Time is the crack." Temporality implies division, overcoming it leads to oneness. Murdoch re-creates the moment of encounter, of recognition of other and self, in a quasi-Lacanian manner in terms of vision: "An eye regards an eye and there is light." This constitutes the meeting-point of deity and mystic. At this point Murdoch shifts from Nigel's consciousness to the description of the deity, masculine, "squatting huge", "brooding on self". The image, which may be only an extension of Nigel's mind, is reminiscent of Indian Buddha statues, immobile, serene, totally turned inward.[7] The complete composure and indifference of this being is reminiscent of Gloucester's "As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods;/They kill us for their sport." (*King Lear*, IV.1, l. 36-7):

> His idly stirring foot may crush a million million while he scratches, fidgets, brushes away a myriad buzz of littlenesses whose millennia[8] of shrieking are to him the momentary humming of a gnat which between two fingers he idly crushes as he squats still and broods on self. (25)

In this terrifying picture man is not even killed for sport but in a reflexive gesture of utter indifference. The very fact of the existence of this image in Nigel's mind also suggests why he cannot be a truly good person. He is unable to see God as nothing, to understand his

[6] In FLN Weil speaks of "unconditioned desire" as the desire not directed at a particular thing, and says that only such desire ought to be directed towads God, "the unconditioned being" (143).

[7] This is the state Weil herself wants to achieve (FLN 222).

[8] In the original: "millenia".

unrepresentability. An image is invariably worked with; Nigel works with his.

The novel returns to Nigel's consciousness: his perceptions are forming a pattern ("the mountainous black is waning, the screaming is swelling into a harmony") - of Love and Death ("both oned and oneing in magnetic joy") as angels chasing each other. This seems to be the point where the mind - unable to bear too much reality - creates a pattern, an attachment. Here Nigel turns from a true into a false mystic, whose attention cannot be sustained. It is also possible to suggest that this "failure of the attention" happens much earlier, at the moment when eye meets eye.

Nigel's vision recedes, turning into a single "blinding point of light" which then becomes the silence preceding ultimate union: "The colourless soundless silence vibrates and sways. He is near." (25) Murdoch describes the union as follows:

> His wide open eyes see nothing, he, Nigel, the all-seer, the priest, the slave of the god. Time and space crumble slowly. He is near, He is near, He is near. They fold and crumble. Love is death. All is one. (25)

Where spatial and temporal dimensions creating the division betwen god and man cease to exist undifferentiation is achieved. Self is absorbed into the Godhead.

The return to reality, that is the world, is unpleasant. As attention fades the effort to sustain the moment of union sets in. But "the presence is agony, punishment, stripes, the extended being tortured into a single point. Annihilation. *All is one.*" (25) The state of unification cannot be sustained except through death. Nigel, spent after his mystical experience, retains a heightened sense of reality:

> Later, far away in another world, an old man calls out, calls out, then weeps alone in the dark slow hours of the night. With magnified precision Nigel hears the calling and the weeping. He lies prostrate upon the floor of the world. (25)

Nigel, unable to achieve permanent union with the divine, is himself a forsaken person and in his state of exhaustion unable to help Bruno. This has happened before:

> [Bruno] did not like to call out at night . . . Even if he did call Nigel did not always hear, did not always come. Once in extremity he had shouted so loud that Nigel must have heard, but he did not come. Perhaps he was not there at all . . . He knew so little really about Nigel. (14)

Murdoch in this chapter attempts to retrace the steps the mystic takes from the initial effort of attention, to the renunciation of the world and the journey into the void between this world and the beyond, to the attentive prayer and calling of his name, the recognition of Him and corresponding nothingness of the self, the journey towards union through chaos and silence, and the ultimate annihilation of the self in union with Him.[9] Murdoch's narration alternates between Nigel's mind and his physiological condition. The description of the latter is analogous to the different stages of the sexual act from the initial arousal through gradually intensifying excitement to the plateau stage preceding the climax to the final state of exhaustion. This analogy is particularly apparent towards the end of Nigel's experience:

> The colourless soundless silence vibrates and sways . . . Nigel trembles, pants and shudders. His wide open eyes see nothing . . He is near, He is near, He is near. All is one.
>
> Nigel clutches his heart. He gasps, he groans, he reels. (25)

As we have seen (205-6 in this thesis), this analogy, according to Weil, is not only legitimate but appropriate. If one accepts that the sexual act, particularly in its traditional conception, has to do with the gratification of the self which is seen in differential terms for men and women (i.e. the male wants to possess, the female to surrender) then the mystical experience allows the mystic to adopt a "female" position in relation to this experience, that is surrender the self, independent of one's biological sex. Nigel, in this reading, again presents himself as aligned to the female. Danby intuitively appears to understand something of this for, when he and Adelaide talk of Nigel's sexuality, Danby says: "I intuit an interesting and unusual specialist in our Nigel." For Danby, so heterosexually oriented that he is unaware of

[9] For a detailed analysis of these individual steps see William Johnston, *The Inner Eye of Love* esp. pt. III.

Nigel's love for him, Nigel's sexuality would, of course, be "unusual".[10]

The description of Nigel's mystical experience in chapter three is connected with what happens in chapter nine where Nigel - not for the first time - walks around London late at night observing people through their windows. Everything he perceives acquires religious significance and becomes part of the ritualistic interaction with God:

> He has seen men prostrated, writhing, cursing, praying . . . All through the holy city in the human-boxes people utter prayers of love and hate. (81)

As Nigel watches, London becomes transformed, associated with Jerusalem where people come on pilgrimage to do homage to God, "These are the glories of his night city, a place of pilgrimage, a place of sin, a place of shriving." (81) Nigel appears to become dissociated from the reality around him. He is not one of the men struggling on the ground but "a looker-on at inward scenes". He becomes "unpersonned".[11] He sees everything with a "telescopic eye". Murdoch describes him from a limited third person viewpoint, representing Nigel's consciousness of himself as at once god and man, a Jesus figure. This is foregrounded in the description of his movements:

> Nigel glides barefoot, taking long paces . . . Unpersonned Nigel strides among them with long silent feet and the prayers rise about him . . . Nigel strides noiselessly, crossing the roadways at a step, his bare feet not touching the ground . . . (81)

Nigel appears to move within material reality without, as it were, being subject to its laws - rather like Jesus walking on water. The analogy to Christian myth is, in fact, extended through notions of Nigel suffering for the sins of the world:

> Nigel, a god, a slave, stands erect, a sufferer in his body for the sins of the sick city. Nigel lies on the damp pavement and

[10] Murdoch has delineated homosexual relationships elsewhere (e.g. Simon and Axel in *A Fairly Honourable Defeat*) where she "wanted to portray a happy homosexual relationship" (Caen 76). In 1964 she also produced an article entitled "The Moral Decision about Homosexuality" where she defended homosexuality as a matter of human rights.

[11] Spelling as in the original.

sighs for the sins of the world. (82)

. . . Nigel smiles . . . the tender, forgiving, infinitely sad smile of almighty God. (84)

Parallel to the evocation of Christian myth, aspects of eastern mythology are explored and enacted. Nigel has the vision of a procession under way to sacrifice to Siva. He himself goes to the Thames - which has become "the sacred river" - and makes an offering of flowers. In Nigel's consciousness and behaviour the elements of various religions combine. His perception "up any religion a man may climb"[12] is as true for the people around him as it is for himself. Man can turn anything into an object of worship in order to raise himself. Man can come to God via any religion provided he pays the right kind of attention.

The scenes portrayed in chapter nine seem bizarre mainly because of the discrepancy between what goes on in Nigel's mind and his external behaviour. Typically, a passer-by is described as manifesting the incomprehension and fear anybody would feel coming upon Nigel: "A man passes by him on the pavement in the darkness, turns and pauses, stares . . . The man hesitates, retreats, flees." (81) The reader's sympathy is with the man. Throughout this chapter Murdoch switches from the description of the observable and realistic to Nigel's heightened sense of perception. The continuous use of the present tense allows for a seamless transition between the two. This technique reveals that in Nigel's mind the distinctions normally made are no longer relevant. Both immediate reality and the simultaneous state of timelessness in Nigel's consciousness are indicated. Appropriately, Nigel overhears a conversation concerning Wittgenstein between Lisa and Miles in which one of them says, "If by eternity is understood not endless temporal duration but timelessness, he lives eternally who lives in the present." (83) In tune with this notion, both chapters three and nine which explore metaphysical reality[13] are separated from the rest of the novel

[12] This is, of course, familiar from the discussion of SS (see 110-1 in this thesis).

[13] By "metaphysical reality" I mean an experience of reality which "goes beyond the laws of nature" (OED). This says nothing, however, about the "truth value" of Nigel's experiences, i.e. whether or not it is all "in his mind". The chapters are, in my view, deliberately written in such a way as to produce an element of hesitation (typical for the literature of the fantastic) in the reader.

by a change to the present tense.

William F. Hall offers an interesting interpretation of chapter nine where he likens Nigel's experience to the progress of Buddha:

> Nigel alone at night progresses through the stages passed through by Buddha (in the tale of his "Great Struggle") the night before his enlightenment: "He [Buddha] acquired in the first watch of the night knowledge of his previous existence, in the second watch the divine eye of omniscient vision, and in the last watch understanding of the chain of causation. He experienced perfect enlightenment at the break of day. Then for seven days
>
> . . . the Enlightened sat motionless - sat motionless in bliss". . And so Nigel from this point on in the novel is characterized for the most part by his smile of ineffable bliss, a perfect example of what is known as the "man of realization". (437)

Hall concludes:

> Nigel - as well as being quite a recognisable and credible hippie figure from the world of contemporary fact - is a living example and extreme exponent of the two major related notions of the myth that are of particular significance for understanding the novel: that God manifests himself in the infinite individual forms of existence and that if one accepts this notion as fact then it is clear that "lover, beloved, and love are one, for in the world of unity all can be one" . . . (438)

Hall's argument, though attractive, has limited validity. Chapter nine does not portray one individual experience Nigel undergoes which would justify its interpretation as an analogy of Buddha's "Great Struggle". Rather, it highlights a habitual type of behaviour in Nigel, namely, observing and listening to others unbeknown to them. He assumes the role of "peeping Tom" but not with the intention of seeking personal gratification through watching others. He is enacting a metaphysical role. As he walks through London he gains information about people and, through that, power over them. Nigel's smile of "bliss" is open to a variety of interpretations: it could be drug-induced (Adelaide suspects him of taking drugs), it could be sheer joy (on the occasion when Nigel

engineers the duel between his twin brother and Danby this is certainly the case). Nigel does not appear to be a hippie figure: he holds down the responsible job of looking after Bruno well, he does not seem to share the values associated with hippiedom such as free love, non-violence, etc. He is a loner rather than belonging to any community. Whether he takes drugs or not remains unclear: his perceptions on occasion resemble those of someone "on a trip" but they might equally be a function of his mystical experiences.

Hall's concluding remarks appear to be the most appropriate ones: the events of chapter nine, if not simply dismissed as bizarre, fantastic, and unrealistic, can most easily be understood in terms of Nigel's mysticism. He can see reality and reads it in terms of its religious significance. He is simultaneously part of it and beyond it. If one remembers how Weil, after her first mystical experiences, was able to "invoke them at will", viewing the world from a position permeated by mystical sensibility, then Nigel's experiences seem more coherent and credible.

Up to chapter nine Nigel manifests three types of attention: a practical one (nursing Bruno), a spiritual one revealed in his mystical experiences, and one of observant attention in watching others. Does this make him either a true mystic or a truly moral person? The ultimate test of this lies in Nigel's actions.

According to Weil and Murdoch action must relate to attention as obedience to necessity. The individual must be impelled to act - unselfishly - in response to his understanding of reality. Action must be the actualization of divine inspiration or detached attention to reality. Only when it is not the expression of will or egocentric fantasies does action testify to the moral integrity of the agent. As Bergson puts it:

> . . . the ultimate end of mysticism is the establishment of a contact, consequently of a partial coincidence, with the creative effort which life itself manifests. This effort is of God, if it is not God himself. (cited in Woods, *Understanding Mysticism* 360)

Nigel acts decisively on three different occasions. The first of these occurs when Nigel tells Danby that Adelaide has stolen a stamp

from Bruno's collection to give to Will. Bruno is very distressed about the loss. Nigel's telling has a number of consequences. Under the accusation of theft from Danby Adelaide is able to vent her feelings about being used by Danby whose mistress she has been without his having any serious interest in her. This event signals the end of their relationship. Both come to see their relationship in its "proper light", as one of mutual convenience without any long-term perspective. In the wake of this realization Adelaide eventually clarifies her feelings concerning Will who has wanted her for years.

On the second occasion that Nigel acts decisively he ties up his twin brother Will in order to tell him about the relationship between Adelaide and Danby. Nigel knows that Will's response to his revelations will be impulsive and violent and therefore restrains him physically before talking to him. Will initially feels betrayed by Adelaide but the reality of this other relationship in Adelaide's life also forces him to recognize the falseness of his image of her:

> I trusted her absolutely. I thought she had no other life . . . And she loved me so much when she was a girl. And so pretty. And so innocent. . . . She belonged to the beginning of our life when everything was good . . . I felt she'd kept the early part somehow, kept our childhood, kept it for me. Kept it all fresh, all pure.[14] (202-3)

Will is compelled to realize that Adelaide is not someone on a pedestal removed from this world but that she is a person capable of changing, with a life of her own. Will decides to dissociate himself from Adelaide which prompts her to recognize her love for him. Murdoch provides a happy ending for them.

Adelaide and Danby are put into a position of having to review their lives by Nigel's intervention. In both instances this occurs under the threat of loss, Adelaide's potential loss of Will, and Danby's of his life as he faces a duel with Will. Will, too, is made to review his situation. All three of them, Adelaide, Danby, and Will, are induced to face the

[14] Will has the same problem here as Charles had re Hartley, and Hilary re Crystal. It is notable that all these love relationships have a (quasi)incestuous element.

degree of unreality or distortion of truth which governs their lives. Each is made to acknowledge the separateness and substantiality of another person who has hitherto existed only as an extension of their own minds and desires. Will has to come to terms with the real Adelaide, Adelaide understands that she saw Danby as part of a dream and took Will for granted, Danby realizes that he should not have had a relationship with Adelaide as he was not emotionally committed to her. Danby's feelings of guilt affect his view of Nigel whom he used to regard as "sweet and harmless" but now perceives as "a hostile presence, a thin sardonic judging angel" (230).

Nigel's last decisive act within the text is to prevent Diana from committing suicide. He tells her that Danby loves her sister Lisa. As with the other characters Nigel compels Diana to face reality. But whereas with the others Nigel's revelations acted as catalysts to propel them into reflection and action, in Diana's case Nigel offers her a vision, a way of perceiving the world in an unselfish manner:

> You must not be resentful. You must not be angry with them. There must be not a speck of resentment, not a speck of anger. That is the task, that is *the* task. To make a new heaven and a new earth. Only you can do it. And it is possible, it is possible. (225)

Nigel suggests to Diana that she should forgive Miles and Lisa without judging from a superior detached position of knowledge:

> Let them trample over you in their own way. . . . Their pride has its little necessities. See and pardon. . . . Each loves himself more. Their love for themselves and for their own lives left them no other way. They have sacrificed nothing. They have just decided to do what will make them flourish. (225-6)

Nigel is proved correct in this estimation. Miles' return to his work, Lisa and Danby's relationship, Adelaide and Will's marriage are all expressions of Nigel's perception that

> A human being hardly ever thinks about other people. He contemplates fantasms which resemble them and which he has decked out for his own purposes.[15] (226)

[15] Compare Murdoch's statement in "Metaphysics and Ethics", "Man is a creature who makes pictures of himself and then comes to resemble the picture." (122)

Nigel, in fact, sets out to rectify the distortion of reality which prevents people from living honestly and - to some extent - happily. His missions are shown to be successful though his methods are, at times at least, dubious. His bondage games with his brother, even if in a good cause, his attempts at bargaining when telling Danby about the stamp, his spying on other people, all seem suspect within a bourgeois morality that values motives and methods at least as much as results. This discrepancy between means and ends is yet another of Nigel's ambiguities. His statement to Diana concerning how he knows what he knows resolves the issue of his ambiguous nature only in part:

> 'How do you know all these things?'
>
> 'Because 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.' (224)

The emphasis here is placed on result. Nigel is successful in his attempts to make people face reality. What is more, he does so (unlike, for example Stuart in *The Good Apprentice*, or Lisa) without attaching the people involved to himself; in a sense, he sets them free.

When Nigel is asked what his motives for his actions are his answers pander to the views of the questioner. This involves the distortion of his own reality, the negation of his true self. Will, for example, sees Nigel as "a crazy pervert" who "ought to be in a bin" (198-9). Nigel makes no attempt to defend himself. His reply to Will's question as to why he is telling him about Adelaide and Danby is, "Just craziness." By saying this Nigel conforms to Will's categorization of him, reducing his own role in accordance with Will's pre-conceived notions. The event is not primarily about him; if he wants to achieve anything he has to diminish his own function so as not to become the object of contemplation. The easiest way to accomplish this is to conform to the image of himself already existent in Will's mind. Attention tends to focus on what is unexpected and new: if Nigel acts according to what others perceive as the usual pattern he avoids becoming himself the object of attention.

To Diana Nigel explains his role differently but with a similar effect. While telling her some of the truth he also invokes the element of craziness, of madness. A mad person cannot be taken seriously, has by virtue of his madness which places him outside the ordinary and makes him "other" the licence to disrupt, to act outside convention. If he is dismissed, he can simply be seen as outside the bounds of the ordinary but, if taken seriously, he puts a question mark to all that is conceived of as ordinary or norm. Again, as with Will, Nigel does not desire to become the object of attention, but wants Diana to review her situation which she does. At the end, when she suggests that he has just talked nonsense to her, he replies: "Of course, of course - I'm the nonsense priest of the nonsense god! A false doctor is not a kind of doctor, but a false god is a kind of god, Diana." (227) Again Nigel advocates the end over the means; it is more important that we get there than how we get there.

Nigel helps people to see reality but this does not include the reality of his own self. As a result an air of insubstantiality surrounds him. His movements support this, so does his association with darkness and night - a time of obscurity and vagueness. It is further highlighted by repeated suggestions that he and his twin Will are really one and the same person, representing different aspects of a single personality. Adelaide's memory of the twins, for example, is blurred: " she was haunted now by a vision of a slim dark-haired boy about whom she could not decide whether he was Nigel or whether he was Will as he used to be" (43). Nigel himself says to Will:

> You are the other half of myself, a weird brutish alien half, doubtless a lesser half, but connected to me by an ectoplasmic necessity for which love would be too weak a name. (199)

There is, of course, a sense in which what Nigel says is literally true. They are twins, Nigel, negating himself, is more spiritually inclined than Will who tends to assert his will by being violent and impulsive. Adelaide, however, points out that "they are not identical twins" (21). They do not come from the same ovum which destroys Nigel's argument concerning an "ectoplasmic necessity". Nonetheless, Danby, for example, just before his duel with Will, perceives them as a unit:

> . . . it had seemed to Danby that the twins, whom he now connected together into one agency, were instruments of a fate, directed against him, and yet indubitably his. (229)

There is also the incident where Nigel tries to persuade Diana that they have met before; Diana, however, is sure that the person she met was Will (225). And, finally, in a letter to Danby Nigel himself underlines his insubstantiality by writing: "Since in a sense Nigel never really existed, he probably casts no memory image as he casts no shadow." (269) Again, the remark about casting no "memory image" or "shadow" is perfectly correct as the reader discovers. Danby and Adelaide, for example, ultimately have the impression of unknown forces having affected their lives, and Diana reflects:

> Her resentment . . . had utterly gone away. They will flourish and you will watch them kindly as if you were watching children. Who had said that to her? Perhaps no one had said it except some spirit in her own thoughts. (293)

For all these people Nigel never really exists because they never see him as a whole real person in his own right. He is merely an extended facet of their imagination, part of their pattern yet without pattern himself. As he says to Bruno: "I exist to be imposed upon." (94) Yet to each of these people he reveals a part of himself. To Bruno he speaks of his relationship with God of whom he says: "It doesn't matter what He's made of." (96) God, according to Nigel, has to be regarded as wholly other, without personal fantasy. Nigel tells Bruno that he loves God because He makes him suffer. Clad in the slangy phrase "I dig suffering", this has the ring of masochism. But Weilian mysticism provides another reading. Weil proposes that the realization of the otherness of God from man generates suffering as it opens up a void between God and man. Man longs for union with God but this can only be achieved through the annihilation of self which might occur temporarily in mystical prayer and will happen in death. As Nigel says: "I worship. Prayer is worship. Being annihilated by God." (97) Weil points out that man cannot assume any active role in this process:

> We have to cross the infinite thickness of time and space - and God has to do it first, because he comes to us first. (GG 81)

Nigel echoes this when he says, "real worship involves waiting. If you wait, He comes, He finds you." (97)

Nigel's worship, however, is flawed. His combination of mysticism and sexual energy creates a personal fantasy in which death equals the consummation of the sexual act: "When I think of death I think of a jet black orgasm." (97) This, as Bruno both exemplifies and points out, is not the reality of death. There is no self-gratificatory element in death; its true nature can be perceived only in a mood of detachment, of unconsoled contemplation. The notion of the "jet black orgasm", by comparison, is a comforting dream. At the point where Nigel indulges this dream he leaves the path of Weilian mysticism and becomes a victim of his desire to be united with God. He is no longer the true mystic; the egocentric element in his religiosity takes over.

This egocentric element is highlighted in a more immediate way during the conversation between Nigel and Will concerning Adelaide and Danby. Here a rather nasty side of Nigel is displayed in a macabre game between him and Will that has been part of their interaction since childhood. The game is one of power and domination. While Will always tried to dominate and subjugate Nigel through brute force, Nigel retaliated by applying his mind to devise schemes that would overpower Will simply by taking him by surprise. Such is the case in this scene where Nigel has managed to tie Will up so that his bed acts both as a securing and torturing device. Through restraint and maltreatment Nigel is able to force Will to listen to him. Nigel explains his manoeuvre as a prudential measure:

> If you get treated like this it's your own fault for being so violent. That's something which you would have understood years ago if you had been capable of thinking. Of course violent men get put into cages and stretched on racks by men who are less violent but more clever. It's the only way to make them listen. (197-8)

It is also, of course, a way in which "clever" men can exert power over those physically stronger than themselves at the same time as retaliating for any physical violence suffered at their hands. For Will the whole affair is just one more attempt on Nigel's part to assert his power and superiority as he has done since childhood:

'The violent men do listen in the end, because it's to their advantage. You remember that time when we were ten and I hung you up by your wrists from the scaffolding on the building site because you wouldn't do as I wanted?'
'Yes, and I remember what I did to you after you let me down!'
'All right, but you also did what I wanted.'
'And damn stupid it was too. . . . (198)

Getting people to do what *he* wants them to, being able to manipulate them, is something Nigel is fascinated by. Will feels, seemingly justly, persecuted by Nigel, sensing behind the pretence of simple retaliation an air of malice, a deliberate wilfulness which is evil:

> 'You've always persecuted me.'
> 'In self defence. And also a little because you need me. You need me as the brute needs the angel, as the tender back needs the whip and the suppliant neck the axe.[16] Any juxtaposition of brutish material and spirit involves suffering.' (199)

The metaphors Nigel chooses to illustrate his point are significant: from the protective he moves to sadistic victimization, and the killing of the innocent. While his first point, self defence, is understandable given Will's violent nature, the other two testify to Nigel's attraction to sadism.[17] They indicate neither a "good spirit" nor a "rectifying force" but rather, the violent use of power. Nigel ties Will up not merely to "educate" or "subordinate" him but also to indulge himself in the role of castigator without licence. As a result what he does can have harmful effects as easily as beneficial ones.

When Nigel recommends that Will think about how he will revenge himself on Danby he says: "'You know the truth now, and that gives you

[16] Compare Weil's comments, "The act of kneeling. Supplex et supplicium. To kneel is to offer oneself for whipping, beheading, or any punishment; it is to place oneself most conveniently for the sword. At the same time it is to put oneself near the thing that gives life, so that one is available for being engendered by pity. This gesture is related to the two symbols which in antiquity were the attributes of divinity and royalty, sword and phallus." (FLN 206)

[17] Murdoch discusses sado-masochism in SOG 68-9.

power over both of them." (202) Truth, for Nigel, is not associated with enlightenment but with power. When truth becomes the instrument of power, however, it loses its moral force. Exerting power via truth is an abuse of the latter. And Nigel induces Will to do just that because Will, as Nigel himself suggests, is temperamentally and intellectually unable to channel his energies in a morally appropriate way. Nigel, always one step ahead of his brother, uses him for his own designs.[18] This becomes apparent in the duel scene between Will and Danby set up by Nigel (ch. 27). Danby does not want to have a duel but Nigel tells him that Will wants to go through with it at any cost which, the reader knows, is basically what Nigel wants. As Nigel finally intervenes to save Danby he says: "I think I've been in heaven" (239). The meaning of this phrase is clarified in a letter Nigel later writes to Danby. There he declares his love for Danby but also says that he will go to India to work for the Save the Children Fund because his situation is hopeless. His hopelessness is not, as one might expect, derived from a feeling that Danby will never return his love - Nigel believes that potentially anyone can love anyone - but from his understanding of himself:

> But what made me go away was not simply my sense of the improbability of the conceivable, but my knowledge that my very great love was a very great destroyer. If I had been the saint that I could be I would have loved you and stayed near you and done you no harm at all . . . As it is, the unpredictable force of that immense angelic thing, once let loose from its dark concealment,[19] would have dragged us - where? I know not, but down. (269-70)

[18] Nigel himself draws an analogy between himself and Will and Old Hamlet haunting Hamlet as a ghost by telling Will not to punish Adelaide. As Old Hamlet's ghost says to Hamlet, "let not thy soul contrive/Against thy mother aught. Leave her to heaven/And to those thorns that in her bosom lodge/To prick and sting her" (Act I, Sc. v) so Nigel says to Will, "And don't try to hurt Adelaide. Leave her to heaven and to those thorns that in her bosom lodge to prick and sting her." (BD 202)

There is also an analogy between Nigel and Will and the brothers George Colwan and Robert Wringhim of James Hogg's *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*.

[19] Here again we have an angel image indicating delusion (not in the clinical sense).

In the light of this confession Nigel's actions acquire a new dimension. Did he not systematically attempt to isolate Danby from his social environment by 1) alienating Adelaide from him, 2) approving Bruno's reconciliation plans concerning his son Miles so that the latter might take Danby's place in Bruno's affections, 3) estranging Diana from Danby by telling her about Danby's love for her sister Lisa, and, most importantly, 4) arranging the duel where Danby might have been killed? All this could be read as the carefully conceived plan of a jealous mind operating from the principle "If I can't have you nobody else shall."

Nigel understands that although capable of being a moral person he cannot turn his mysticism into a positive force where his own emotions are involved. Truth, in order to be simply a source of enlightenment for him, has to be detached from any personal interest. Where it is not, as with Danby, it becomes an instrument of power. As Nigel says in relation to the duel:

> To have you both before me pointing loaded pistols at each other was the acting out of a fantasy. And how absolutely, when it came to it, you were both of you clay in my hands. How easy it proved to make you do exactly what I wanted! But I must not think about my godlike power - that way lies the possible-impossible torment which I have determined to end. (270)

Nigel's problem, unlike that of the others, is not his fantasy about other people so much as his fantasy about himself. From childhood on he has perfected the art of overpowering and manipulating others; where his physical prowess proved insufficient he devised clever schemes. Being perceptive he was able to observe others accurately and to use the knowledge thus gained with maximum efficiency. At what stage he developed this into a myth about himself as a god is not clear.[20] But the temptation, clearly, is to see how far he can go. The duel between Will and Danby is a near miss. As an event it functions as a catalyst for Nigel coming to see the limitations of his power. He is not as yet so engrossed in his fantasy as to be unable to rectify or alter his

[20] There is an analogy here to Carel Fisher, not only in terms of seeing the self as godlike but also in terms of an association between reality and pain made by both Nigel and Carel.

perception of himself. Peter Jones in *Philosophy and the Novel* points out:

> At the planning stage of a project a man exercises maximum control over his ideas; moreover, it is often *only* at this stage that he retains such control. The possibilities we imagine have all and only the properties we ascribe to them in imagining them; they are entirely our creations. But this total freedom is dangerous; for while it may pander to our egoistic desires for dictatorship, it discourages recognition of what the actual world is like, and may induce a man to surrender completely to his imagined world. (33)

Nigel just escapes this surrender by realizing the danger of using knowledge for the purposes of acquiring, exercising, or maintaining power. He decides to reject his own image of himself as a godlike person. What saves Nigel is that throughout the novel he has only ever played at being god without completely identifying with the role. To the people around him he has pretended omniscience (Bruno, Danby, Diana, Will all marvel at his knowledge). He has shocked them with revelations which were the function not of divine insight but of careful, practical attention intelligently used. Pretence is, in fact, an important aspect of Nigel's life. The reader is told that he has been an actor, and during the duel Danby has the impression of taking part in a play. All this calls into question even the genuineness of the mystical experiences described in chapters three and nine. Interestingly enough, in many mystical writings warnings against false mystics are uttered. *The Cloud of Unknowing*, for example, in sections 45, 52, and 53 warns against false contemplatives who, through sheer effort, induce physical and mental states resembling contemplation without actually partaking in its spirit.[21] The physical manifestations of Nigel's experiences bear a certain resemblance to these.

Not only because of this but also because of the means he employs to achieve his ends Nigel cannot be called a truly attentive, moral person. He violates a code of ethics which stipulates that you should

[21] This is, of course, what Murdoch describes in relation to Charles' cousin James in SS.

not restrain a person forcefully and/or against his or her will (as he does with Will and Diana), that you must respect a person's privacy which includes not reading his or her letters or listening to private conversations, that you should treat others as your equal and not exploit or manipulate them. The truly moral person does not attend to others in the active, searching, scheming way that Nigel does, neither does he exploit the "fruits" of his attention for selfish purposes.

There is a conflict between what Nigel achieves and how he achieves it. If one accepts Murdoch's notion of action and attention being related to each other through necessity and obedience (SOG 40) it follows that actions are fundamentally unintentional as they are not the result of rational consideration but of being impelled by one's attention. Nigel, however, acts as a result of the attention he has paid only in so far as he makes use of the knowledge gleaned from this activity in a deliberate and considered way. His actions are thus the outcome of a combination of moral inspiration and a desire for power.

In *The Sovereignty of Good* Murdoch asserts that the degree to which an action - hence its outcome - is moral depends on the ability to attend properly. Therefore, and Murdoch is here in harmony with Weil, right attention supposedly equals right action which in turn equals right results. The question is whether this equation is necessary and inevitable. By the time Murdoch came to write *The Fire and the Sun* she had somewhat modified her view. In that volume she suggests that being virtuous in one area of life does not necessarily mean that you are equally virtuous in another. Being able to attend properly therefore does not mean that your actions will match the quality of your attention (84). Nigel, for instance, manifests the right type of attention but at the point where this should be converted into action in an automatic fashion, i.e. from a spiritually understood necessity, he interpolates his will which drives him to test his "godlike" power, his ability to manipulate.

At the same time he is not "a lost soul". His good acts suggest that he is capable of being a moral person. But he, like everyone else in the novel, is a fragmented being, embodying Murdoch's notion that people are "complex" and "opaque". In the course of *Bruno's Dream* more and more aspects of Nigel's personality are revealed, many of them conflicting.

Thus Murdoch counteracts what in "Vision and Choice in Morality" she describes as "assuming that one has got individual and situations 'taped'" (46). This is, of course, one way of getting the reader to pay attention. It subverts the notion that people are fixed, static, unchanging entities who can be known.

The representation of Nigel is not only a function of Murdoch's conception of personality as fragmented but also of her perception of reality as conjoined with the fantastic (Hobson 28). Nigel is one of Murdoch's "odd", ultimately unknowable characters, not in the sense that Angela Carter's Fevvers in *Nights at the Circus* is, where the reader is left wondering whether or not her wings are part of her body or artificial, but in the sense of revealing a split between the self as an "ordinary" human being and as a god-like figure. Jackson maintains that "the fantastic is a mode of writing which *enters a dialogue with the 'real' and incorporates that dialogue as part of its essential structure*" (36). In the case of Nigel the reader can take the split self to be an expression of Nigel's consciousness, rejecting the possibility that he has an actual "telescopic eye", for example. By attributing the split to Nigel's consciousness the reader is returned to the plausible (see 33-4, 43 in this thesis).

In *Bruno's Dream* Murdoch exhibits the varieties of attention people can pay through the figure of Nigel as well as a number of other characters. One of these, Miles, is of special interest as he seems to be an embryonic version of Pearson. Early on in *Bruno's Dream* Miles is engaged in writing a *Notebook of Particulars*, his way of filling the void left by the death of his first wife, Parvati. He is "simply learning to look", trying to describe things *in detail*, while, just like Pearson, waiting for "the great things" to happen, for "the god" to appear who will transform him into a writer. Prior to Parvati's death he had written poetry, afterwards he produces one long poem reflecting the *Liebestod* (see SOG 82). For Miles this poem is connected with survival, self-preservation in the face of death (53), and in that sense a cop-out in that it "prevented him from seeing what he ought to have seen and what he had never allowed himself afterwards to see, the real face of death" (53). His subsequent notebook appears to be an attempt to un-self himself by paying attention to detail. The loss of Lisa (120-1 in this

thesis) finally engenders the "ordeal" Miles, like Pearson in *The Black Prince*, has waited for. Miles withdraws into a "condition of remote dream-like helplessness" (253). Finally "seeing" Parvati's death leads to an infantilized state which results in a "re-birth" of Miles, not, however, as a "good person" but as one now in the hands of another power, a "great other" (foreshadowing, perhaps, Pearson's Loxias - see 47, footnote 107 in this thesis). He writes poetry just like Pearson in the end seems to write his book, and like Pearson he is once more removed from the world, averting his gaze from what helped him through his crisis. It is never made quite explicit what it is Miles now refuses to look at, whether it is Diana or the deaths he has had to cope with.

In *The Black Prince* the focus is on the relationship between attention and reality. *The Black Prince* is one of Murdoch's structurally most complex novels.[22] At the centre of the text are a number of events that take place in the 59th year of the life of the protagonist, Bradley Pearson. They culminate in Pearson being accused and convicted of murdering his friend and fellow writer, Arnold Baffin. These events, themselves divided into three stages, are embedded in a system of forewords and postscripts, all of which are connected through the narrator's consciousness. This consciousness links the Pearson of those events with the Pearson at the time the book is written.

> The consciousness darts back and forth in time like a weaver and can occupy, when busy with its mysterious self-formings and self-gatherings, a very large specious present. (169)

Through consciousness the mind perceives reality and at the same time mediates it. This mediation includes the possibility of distortion as consciousness is associated with selective attention and the creation of meaning through the imposition of pattern. Thus consciousness serves both the perception of reality and its distortion. It has to be emphasized here that Murdoch is not interested in the representation through language of the structure of consciousness *per se*. What she explores is how consciousness operates in the individual as a

[22] Murdoch has just adapted BP as a play (first performance: Aldwych Theatre, London, 25 April 1989). In the play the character of the editor has been eliminated.

(potentially) moral being. This is what distinguishes her from the modernists.

Only through paying attention (SOG 65-6) and a concomitant suppression of self can the perception of reality approximate truthfulness. The detachment necessary for the just perception of reality is difficult to achieve and maintain with respect to others. In connection with the self it is almost impossible. Pearson as an author attempts it nonetheless, making his self the object of his investigation.

Writing after the events Pearson tries to re-create both what happened and his consciousness as it was at the time of the events. He says in his foreword:

> Although several years have now passed since the events recorded in this fable, I shall in telling it adopt the modern technique of narration, allowing the narrating consciousness to pass like a light along its series of present moments, aware of the past, unaware of what is to come. I shall, that is, inhabit my own past self and, for the ordinary purposes of story-telling, speak only of the apprehensions of that time, a time in many ways so different from the present. . . . And I shall judge people, inadequately, perhaps even unjustly, as I then judged them, and not in the light of any later wisdom. (xi)

Pearson assures the reader that he does this in the interest of truth. The question which immediately arises, though, is how can he 1) remember what he was like at the time, 2) not let subsequent developments occasion a "re-reading" of the earlier events, 3) ensure that his present perception of his past self is not a distortion of that past (self)? In short, how can he hope to separate past and present in such a way as to convey yesterday's reality as it was then? One is tempted to agree with what one of the other characters later tells him:

> Only the insane think that there are planes which are quite separate from other planes. It's all a muddle, Bradley, it's *all* a muddle. (305-6)

Apart from this inseparability of sequences there is the fact that, as Pearson points out,

> The natural tendency of the human soul is towards the protection of the ego. The Niagara-force of this tendency can be

> readily recognized by introspection, and its results are everywhere on public show. (149)

This egocentric tendency is vividly described by Weil in *On Science, Necessity and the Love of God*:

> . . . the substance of our life is almost exclusively composed of fiction. We fictionalize our future; and, unless we are heroically devoted to truth, we fictionalize our past, refashioning it to our taste. We do not study other people; we invent what they are thinking, saying, and doing. Reality provides us with some raw material, just as novelists often take a theme from a news item, but we envelop it in a fog in which, as in all fiction, values are reversed . . . (161-2)

Pearson's story certainly is a fictionalization in the value-free sense of that word, a creation of a work of art out of material provided by reality. How far is it also fiction in terms of invention and distortion on his part? He is not unduly worried about this question, working from the assumption that the artist is revealed for what he is by his product:

> Men truly manifest themselves in the long patterns of their acts, and not in any nutshell of self-theory. This is supremely true of the artist, who appears, however much he may imagine that he hides, in the revealed extension of his work. (xi)

As artist and object are identical in this instance a mutual illumination and revelation is assumed.

According to Murdoch the just perception of reality depends upon the quality of attention. In looking at Pearson's relationship with reality I shall begin with him as he was at 58. There he identifies himself first and foremost as a writer and a "seeker of truth". He has published little. He believes that to achieve genius attention has to be paid unwaveringly: "In art, as in morality, great things go by the board because at the crucial moment we blink our eyes." (xiii) The creation of a work of art arises from necessity: "No man has the right to exercise divine power. All that one can do is to wait, to try, to wait again." (xiii) Pearson believes absolutely in his calling, portraying himself as an artist of high principle: "I have, I hope and I believe, kept my gift pure." (xii) Rather than compromise for the sake of fame he has waited,

silently, for the moment of truth to arrive. This picture of the solitary person engaged in a never-ending task, reminiscent of Casaubon in George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, is underlined by Pearson's description of himself as "a devotee of silence", "cheerful, a solitary but not unsociable, sometimes unhappy, often melancholy", living "without drama" but with "unfailing purpose".

When Pearson retires he discovers that he has "no thoughts at all". Vainly he tries to counteract this inability to write. He resolves to go away and live by the sea in "literal silence" (a theme picked up again by Murdoch in *The Sea, The Sea*) in order to beckon the muses. He thinks he will be a great writer once he has undergone some ordeal, the nature of which he cannot intuit. At the end of his foreword he sums himself up as follows:

> Though I am a creative person, I am a puritan rather than an aesthete. I know that human life is horrible. I know that it is utterly unlike art. I have no religion except my own task of being. (xviii)

Pearson here identifies himself as a self-willed, self-reliant individual with an aversion to life. According to Weil self-centredness such as is manifested here arises from a lack of religious vision and is one of the greatest dangers for writers. Unlike religious persons the writer has no exterior source of inspiration:

> . . . all priests, in virtue of their profession, speak in the name of the saints and look to them for inspiration and try to imitate and follow them, and principally the one veritable saint, who is Christ . . . A writer, on the other hand, has only himself to fall back on; he may be influenced by a number of other writers, but he cannot draw his inspiration from them. (*On Science, Necessity and the Love of God* 164)

Self, in Weil's spiritual economy, cannot authenticate itself; as I suggested in relation to Weil's "Spiritual Autobiography" (see 34-5, 86-7, 89-91 in this thesis), her sense of inferiority leads to her invoking an other as the source of her writing which validates her work. While in her case this other is religiously inspired, for Murdoch this other takes the form of reality or truth, understood in a non-religious fashion. Attending properly to reality will result in inspiration.

Pearson's foreword, in fact, contains the reason why he has not been successful as a writer. He has not lacked attention, that is obvious; his failure is not one of having blinked at the wrong moment but of having withdrawn from the source of inspiration, reality. Having led a solitary life, he has cut off his only link with reality by leaving his job and now wants to finalize this process by complete retreat. Instead of immersing himself in the reality of the phenomenal world he has gradually retired from it, and eventually finds himself completely unable to write.

Pearson, however, does not see this causal relationship. Saying that "for myself, I have no theories"[23] (xviii) he nonetheless adopts a definite separatist stance:

> Being a real person oneself is a matter of setting up limits and drawing lines and saying no. I don't want to be a nebulous bit of ectoplasm straying around in other people's lives. That sort of vague sympathy with everybody precludes any real understanding of anybody. (25)

Pearson fails to realize that the choice is not simply between separation and sympathy but that there is also a third option, empathy. For him there is only one maxim: "Life and art must be kept strictly separate if one is aiming at excellence." (176)

What this means becomes clear in a conversation between Pearson and Arnold Baffin.[24] Arnold, in the field of literature, represents, as Pearson puts it, his "estranged, alienated *alter ego*". He writes easily and quickly, publishing a book per year, and has become famous. His approach to life is diametrically opposed to Pearson's. Where the latter shrinks from reality, Arnold regards it with a spectator's curiosity.

[23] Here Murdoch indicates how exactly the same stance can have radically different results in two different people. Both Stuart (GA) and Pearson supposedly have no theory about themselves; where Stuart just endures this "void" Pearson fills it with different versions of himself.

[24] Multiple readings of the names Arnold and Bradley are possible. Murdoch explains the "private origin" of Pearson as a name in Biles 124-5. Bradley could also be a reference to A. C. Bradley, the critic and Shakespearean scholar, or to F. H. Bradley, the philosopher. Arnold could be a reference to Matthew Arnold.

Unlike Pearson he does not disapprove of people. He attempts to explain to Pearson the necessity for curiosity:

> 'But Bradley, you mustn't reject people, you mustn't just write them off. You must be curious about them. Curiosity is a kind of charity.'
>
> 'I don't think curiosity is a kind of charity. I think it's a kind of malice.' (26)

Arnold's perception is later underwritten by a letter Pearson has from his ex-wife Christian in which she tells him that curiosity indicates interest in another person. Pearson, however, interprets curiosity as a malevolent form of intrusion in other people's lives. When Arnold tries to point out that knowledge of detail is important and cannot be had except through curiosity Pearson retorts that art is not about detail:

> 'Why pile up a jumble of "details"? When you start really imagining something you have to forget the details anyhow, they just get in the way. Art isn't the reproduction of oddments of life.' (26)

Pearson believes that art crystallizes truth, "Art isn't chat plus fantasy. Art comes out of endless restraint and silence." (26) Pearson has an anal-retentive, joyless attitude which condemns the artist to non-creation. Arnold sees Pearson's view as part of his self-theory:

> 'You're such an agonizer, Bradley. You romanticize art. You're a masochist about it, you want to suffer, you want to feel your inability to create is continuously significant . . . Thinking of yourself as a "writer" is part of your trouble. . . .' (26-7)

Pearson feeds on abstractions about himself which remove him from reality. This is uncovered as his story unfolds.

Just when Pearson is about to retreat from the world completely to beckon the muse he is drawn back to reality by three middle-aged women: Rachel, Arnold's wife, Priscilla, Pearson's sister, and Christian, his ex-wife crowd into his life simultaneously, appealing for help and emotional support. Rachel and Priscilla appeal to Pearson from a position of helplessness whereas Christian turns to him from a position of inner strength. Pearson's response to them all is the same: disgust at their display of emotion. He attempts to get rid of them, leaving them to be dealt with by his former brother-in-law, Francis. Pearson is, in

fact, incapable of dealing with other people: confronted with their problems he turns away saying he is about to leave, doesn't want to know, is about to write a great novel. His thinking is dominated by abstractions and clichés whose underlying realities he does not even begin to perceive. His mysogynistic view of Rachel is that she

> . . . was an intelligent woman married to a famous man: and instinctively such a woman behaves as a function of her husband, she reflects, as it were, all the light on him . . . One doesn't expect such a woman to have ambitions . . . Rachel was (in a way in which one would never think this of a man) a 'good specimen', a 'good sort'. One relied on her. There she was. (12-3)

Rachel challenges this view, inviting Pearson to take a look behind the curtain. She tells him what she feels:

> A married woman has no dignity, no thoughts which really stand up separately. She's a subdivision of her husband's mind, and he can release misery into her consciousness whenever he pleases . . . Well, perhaps I'm just describing how it is with me and Arnold. I'm just a growth on him. I have no being of my own. I can't get at him. I couldn't do so even by killing myself. It would interest him, he'd have a theory about it. He'd soon find another woman he could get on with better, and they'd discuss my case. (142)

Pearson is unable to cope with what is revealed to him. He rejects it as "tosh", telling Rachel that she is "raving" and "upsetting" him, and that what she says is "unworthy, unkind and also completely dotty". When Rachel thereupon accuses him of having "naive views about human nature" he retorts: "When you *will* something a simple formulation is often the best. Besides, morals is simple." (146) But "morals", according to Murdoch, is a question not of willing but of attention. Willing is essentially a self-centred activity, namely the actualization of patterns in one's mind. Rachel had hoped to establish an identity of her own by having an affair with Pearson but he cannot deal with this, either psychologically or physically. Not having had sexual contact with a woman for a very long time he feels alarmed by the prospect. He is not

simply impotent; he completely rejects the separate reality of the woman he is with.

The same is true in relation to Priscilla. Again, Pearson rejects any involvement in the reality of her existence:

> They [Priscilla and her husband] both very much wanted children, but were unable to produce any . . . I did not want to know. I could see that Priscilla was unhappy, her life was boring and empty, and Roger was not a rewarding companion. I did not however want to know about this either. (46)

When Priscilla turns up at his flat Pearson is forced to acknowledge her. But his sole concern is the inconvenience she might cause him, despite his realization that she would not have turned up except under exceptional circumstances. Again he is unable to take the display of emotion with which he is suddenly confronted (46). Pearson's sympathy for his sister is virtually non-existent; he expresses it only when it can serve to alleviate his own state. He tells Priscilla that it is all "pure fantasy", that she cannot simply leave her husband, that at her age and with her education she has no choice but to return to him and must therefore control herself:

> Stop, please. I'm not doing you any good by listening to your complaints. You're in a thoroughly nervous silly state. Women of your age often are. You're simply not rational, Priscilla. I daresay Roger has been tiresome, he's a very selfish man, but you'll just have to forgive him. Women just have to put up with selfish men, it's their lot. You can't leave him, there isn't anywhere else for you to go. (49)

Pearson's conception of a woman's existence does not include any rights on her part. There is no question of equality or assertion of self. Women are secondary - and all the same. He frequently talks in abstract generalizations about them, seeing them in terms of roles they have:

> Some women, in fact in my experience many women, have a sort of 'abstract' quality about them. Is this a real sex difference? Perhaps this quality is really just unselfishness. (34)

For Pearson part of the traditional role of the female is to be giving, submissive, unselfish. He is trapped in these gender attributions just as much as the female characters are represented as being. Priscilla's

complaint is similar to Rachel's: "I gave him my life. I haven't got another one. A woman has nothing else." (104) And, of course, neither of these women has ever had a life of her own. Without jobs, heterosexually oriented in a heterosexual world, they validate their lives solely in terms of male approval, have been socialized into an existence where men function as providers and resource pools from which the women receive. In that sense, many of the middle-class, middle-aged women Murdoch portrays still inhabit a world of Victorian values. This remains true even for Murdoch's latest book, *The Book and the Brotherhood*, where one of the central preoccupations is with a series of unsatisfactory heterosexual and homosexual relationships. Virtually none of the women in that text receive any validation by the men in their lives, yet this is what they are represented as craving most. And, as none of them have jobs, that particular source of alternative validation is denied them.

Pearson and Arnold share a dismissive, undifferentiating attitude towards women. Rachel *is* treated as an appendage by Arnold who, as Pearson at one rare point of lucidity realizes, "has no conception of what he has done, of what she looks like now, of what she feels like now" (20). Pearson is ready enough to go along with Arnold's facile way of explaining Rachel's responses in terms of a menopausal crisis:

> At the age she's reached women always become a little bit odd. It passes, I imagine. I suppose they sort of review their lives. There must be a sense of loss, a feeling of final parting with youth. A tendency to be hysterical isn't too uncommon, I suppose. (24)

Pearson agrees, wanting to be convinced by Arnold: "'It's just a mood,' I said. 'Women have moods.' The agonized voice I had heard upstairs already seemed remote." (23) Pearson deliberately rejects the reality he is confronted with, in this case the reality of a certain type of female existence. One, perhaps slightly crude, reading of this would be that in terms of power structures Rachel (and women in this text in general, Christian apart) are in a condition of powerlessness whereas the men by simply ignoring the women's and, up to a point, their own emotional needs have, not merely from an economic point of view, relative power. If Pearson sided with Rachel or Priscilla he would align himself with the weaker side, and, if he himself did not want to be associated with

powerlessness, would have to be the relatively most powerful male around. In other words, status is, in part, derived from who you align yourself with, and Pearson, already insecure because he is not successful as an author, cannot, psychologically, afford to side with the women.[25] Rachel, however, does not give up and, when finally driven into a corner by Arnold's infidelity and Pearson's lack of support, turns her aggression outwards against those who made her life a misery. Priscilla, on the other hand, turns her aggression against herself.

Pearson's failure to deal adequately with the reality of others is also evident in his relationship with Christian who is not the "submissive" type and thereby instantly becomes a threat to Pearson's ego. To him she is one of the "predatory women", "the destroyers" (81). Significantly, his mother, too, for Pearson, belonged to that category. Within their marriage Christian presented Pearson with a challenge of reality he was unable to cope with:

> At first I saw her as a life-bringer. Then I saw her as a death-bringer. Some women are like that. There is a sort of energy which seems to reveal the world: then one day you find you are being devoured . . . She brought, what I detest, disorder into my life. She was a great maker of scenes. In the end I detested her. (4)

Pearson lives in a world whose differentiation is based on power structures; like William Golding's Pincher Martin he appears to believe that either you eat or you are eaten.[26] Unable to assert himself within this economy he decides quite simply to withdraw. Pearson adopts the wrong strategy out of a lack of self-perception. As he says at one point:

[25] Andrea Dworkin in *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* gives an account of the relationship between power structures and gendered identification (48-51).

[26] Weil characterizes human relations in the same way (FLN 284-5). Weil equates self-centredness with the desire for food (intake); Murdoch's egocentric characters such as Hilary and Charles are depicted as obsessed with food, what they eat and where they eat it.

> What sort of picture of me has my reader received? I fear it must lack definition, since as I have never had any strong sense of my own identity, how can I characterize sharply that which I can scarcely apprehend? (113)

Self-knowledge, as Murdoch has pointed out (SOG 67-8), is difficult to achieve. Pearson's lack of self-knowledge is not, however, the mark of a good, selfless person but one of a person unwilling to acknowledge his self and its limitations. Rather than see his self justly he prefers not to see himself at all. In this respect he is contrasted sharply with Francis Marloe, the social failure, who, knowing himself, can let others be and offer them sympathy.

Francis is the only person who attempts to induce Pearson to see his own reality beyond simply telling him that he lives in a dream world. He suggests to Pearson that he is a repressed homosexual, and neurotic. Pearson violently rejects this. Yet the reader feels that Francis is correct, and that Pearson's protestations are simply a self-protective measure. His relationship with women is clearly disturbed: he is unable to have "normal" heterosexual relationships, he generalizes about women, either ignores or detests them. He feels threatened by them and the prospect of sexual intercourse with them. He desires and achieves sexual intimacy only on one occasion, when he sees a woman, Julian, dressed as a man; in a state of despair and aggression which he vents through near-rape, he tries to assert himself and bind Julian to him, like a dog marking his territory. While Pearson does not allow his consciousness to acknowledge what he is told by Francis, the latter admits to himself his own homosexuality and neuroticism, suffering correspondingly:

> I *am* neurotic and I *am* homosexual and I'm bloody unhappy about it. Of course you don't know yourself, lucky old you. I just know myself too bloody well. (122)

Francis is unhappy despite knowing himself. His goodness and generosity (and, of course, these are limited; he is a crook and a cadger, too) go unrecognized. He has no rewards:

> I've given so much love to people - I really can love people, I can, I let them walk all over me - but nobody's ever loved me, . . .

> I just want to serve and help people and be good to everybody . . . (122)

Although Francis suffers he does not seek consolation through fantasy; his perception of reality is clear. He accepts the truth about himself and is thus able to be morally active, attending to others.

This is exactly the reverse of Pearson who retreats from reality into his mind. Rachel describes him as a "thinking person", and he himself says to Arnold, "I live in my head" (88). His comments to Priscilla that he "knows *of* horrors" and "*of* joys" reveal his removedness from direct experience. He tries to establish his self by theorizing about it. In this sense, as well as in his dislike of women, mess, disorder, he is, in fact, a man totally given over to what, in Kristevan terms, one might call the symbolic. As such he is male-identified. His life is one continuous attempt to keep the semiotic at bay, to avoid the kind of disruption he identifies with women.

Pearson's most important theory of himself is that he is "an artist". His whole sense of identity depends upon that notion. His image of what it means to be an artist is idiosyncratic and specific. He rejects, for instance, Arnold's way of being an artist, his casual openness and interest in people, and his unrestrained productivity. Only *his* way of being an artist is acceptable to Pearson. He tends to talk in unsupported, abstract generalizations about the condition of being an artist, thus establishing himself as a member of an - albeit imaginary - artistic community. Typically, he says things such as:

> I had never wanted children of my own. Many artists do not. (31)

> However I felt, as we artists can feel, the proximity of enlightenment. (37)

> What does he fear? is usually the key to the artist's mind.[27] (56)

> I felt, as artists so felicitously sometimes do, 'under orders'. (97)

> An artist in a state of power has a serene relationship to time. (156)

[27] Elsewhere Murdoch has said the same of the philosopher (see Haffenden 203).

Through this image of himself as artist Pearson regulates his relationship with reality. As he says:

> We often make important moves in our lives in a de-individualized condition. We feel suddenly that we are typifying something. This can be a source of inspiration and also a way of excusing ourselves. (150)

Pearson attempts to impersonate - unmoved by any spirit - his conception of the artist and uses it to excuse himself, saying to Arnold: "I couldn't destroy anybody . . . All I care about is getting my book written. There is a book. I care about that absolutely. The rest is rubble." (139-40) Pearson fails to appreciate that it is exactly because all he cares about is his writing that he destroys people.

He can only gain inspiration for his book by attending to reality. The opportunity to do so comes when he falls in love with Arnold's daughter Julian who, felicitously for Pearson, agrees with *his* version of the notion of *the artist*, considers Arnold's writing "facile", and sees Pearson as her "philosopher" and "guru". Pearson is completely overwhelmed by his emotions for her:

> It is after all an astounding phenomenon and for most people it is the most astonishing event that ever happens to them: more astonishing, because more counter-natural than life's horrors! (169)

Murdoch considers philosophy to be counter-natural (Blow 25), Pearson applies this term to love. Why? Both demand and provoke the elimination of the self. In Pearson's case a complicated series of changing self-images occurs subsequent to his falling in love which ultimately lead back to his old self. Initially, there is the sense that he is enacting a role, he talks of feeling "totally alienated", "practically discarnate". The new experience becomes the focus towards which he has been moving all his life. His new identity as lover imposes the pattern on his existence which now appears to have been there forever. He feels elevated to the position of "some sort of god" (170), a feeling frequently experienced by Murdoch's characters in love and always, through the wording alone, indicative of a misconception, an illusion about the state they are in. Witness Harry and Midge's perceptions in *The Good Apprentice* (94, 168, 172, 258). Just like Harry in relation to

Midge, or Charles in relation to Hartley, Pearson feels like a god engaged in the act of creation: creating a new Julian, fashioning her in his image.

Indeed, Pearson's new and his old role appear to merge. There is something Faustian in the way in which he now has a sense of being endowed with unimaginable creative power:

> The deep causes of the universe, the stars, the galaxies, the ultimate particles of matter, had fashioned these two things, my love and my art, as aspects of what was ultimately one and the same. They were, I *knew*, from the same source. It was under the same orders and recognizing the same authority that I now stood, a man renewed. (172)

This renewal is marked by what Pearson describes as "an overwhelming sense of reality, of being at last real and seeing the real" (173). But this sense of reality is derived from Pearson's *contemplation* of being in love, is therefore, again, "in his mind".

Pearson also develops a "vision of selflessness", of being a man "dedicated to a secret task". What he desires is to worship at a distance, to savour the knowledge of his love in silence. The return for this would be the ability to create:

> Out of this *silence* I would forge my power. Yes, this was a yet clearer revelation and I held on to it. I would be able to create because I would be able to keep silent. (176).

It is clear that Pearson proposes to continue his habit of non-engagement with reality although under a different banner. Whereas before he was a martyr for art, he now wants to be one for love. Crucially, he reveals the extent to which he misses the point in his lament:

> Ah, even once, to *will* another rather than oneself! Why could we not make this revelation a lever by which to lift the world? Why cannot this release from self provide a foothold in a new place which we can colonize and enlarge until at last we will *all* that is not ourselves? (174)

The point, according to both Weil and Murdoch, is, of course, that one must not will, and that the only appropriate, that is morally acceptable action, is related to necessity and obedience, to being "under orders"

but *not* under orders from the self. Pearson fails to appreciate that willing as a function of the self is a method for imposing the self on the world, a fact revealed by his use of the term "colonize". Wanting to will others is wanting to be God, an impossible aspiration:

> This need to be the creator of what we love is a need to imitate God. But the divinity towards which it tends is false . . . (GG 57)

The distortion of reality occasioned by Pearson's falling in love is so strong that when he sees his sister crying in a state of utter hopelessness he completely misreads the situation:

> They were, they could not but be, tears of pure joy, a miraculous portent of my changed state. All of me, material and spiritual, all my substance, all my humours, was composed of the ecstasy of love. (188-9)

Pearson finds that his love saps his energy; he is tormented by its obsessive quality:

> Is it not insane to concentrate one's attention exclusively on one person, to drain the rest of the world of meaning, to have no thoughts, no feelings, no being except in relation to the beloved? What the beloved 'is like' or 'is really like' matters not a fig. (204)

As Pearson passes through various stages of love his old world is re-made:

> On the first day I was simply a saint. I was so warmed and vitalized by sheer gratitude that I overflowed with charity . . . I could *almost* have forgotten her, as perhaps a mystic forgets God, when he becomes God. (204-5)
>
> On the second day I began to need her . . . Self was reviving . . . She was, on the second day, absent. (205)
>
> [On the third day] I woke with a clear head . . . Reason . . . was once more at its post . . . But in a rather specialized role and certainly not in that of a consoling friend. (206)
>
> I had acquired a dimension of suffering which would poison and devour my whole being, as far as I could see, for ever. (208)

Pearson keeps relating his experiences to mysticism. He describes his falling in love in terms of qualities which William James in *The*

Varieties of Religious Experience defines as characteristics of mysticism: 1) ineffability - the experience defies expression, 2) noetic quality - new states of consciousness carrying a sense of authority into the time beyond the immediate experience, 3) transience - the experience does not last, 4) passivity - feeling of being in the grasp of a superior power (366-8). Pearson talks about the impossibility of describing his feelings adequately (169), points out his sense of having at last acquired true vision (171) which will enable him to deal with his problems (176), and feels "under orders" from someone else (172). His experience certainly does not last.

Falling in love is a potential turning-point in Pearson's life. Plato, upon whose notion of ideals Weil and Murdoch base some of their ideas concerning the effect of attention, describes in *The Symposium* the ideal process Pearson might undergo:

> . . . he will first fall in love with one particular beautiful person and beget noble sentiments in partnership to him. Later he will observe that physical beauty in any person is closely akin to physical beauty in any other person, . . . The next stage is for him to reckon beauty of the soul more valuable than beauty of the body; . . . by gazing upon the vast ocean of beauty to which his attention is now turned, [he] may bring forth beautiful and magnificent sentiments and ideas, . . . (92-3)
>
> . . . in that region alone . . . will he be able to bring forth . . . true goodness, because he will be in contact not with a reflection but with the truth . . . (95)

To arrive at being a moral person the attention has to be turned outwards but in Pearson's case suffering the void leads to a return to the self. Unable simply to contemplate, he wants to possess. Arnold has exactly the same experience as Pearson when he falls in love with Christian, Pearson's ex-wife (212).

Pearson tells Julian that he is in love with her at a point where he has decided that nothing will come of this relationship. He, rightly, declares the whole thing a fantasy:

> I endlessly *imagined* talking to you about it, but that just belonged to the fantasy world. I can't talk love to you in the

> real world. The real world rejects it. It's not that it would be a crime so much as - absurd. (222)

Julian, however, is not part of his "dream world". She does not accept what he says and instead impresses upon him her reality:

> You say you're just concerned with yourself. All right. I'm just concerned with myself. And you did start it. You can't just stop it now when *you* decide to. I'm an equal partner in this game. (223)

Unfortunately for Pearson, at the moment where he is, perhaps, at his most perceptive with respect to reality, the reality of another forces him to sustain and pursue a fantasy, something which could have been prevented if he had kept silent about his love as he intended. This is the point where Nigel Boase in relation to Danby in *Bruno's Dream* wisely kept his distance realizing that the unleashing of the "black Eros" would drag him down. By voicing his feelings Pearson has lost control over the situation and given Julian the opportunity to feed his solipsistic dreams: "In my chess game with the dark lord I had made perhaps a fatally wrong move." (212) Pearson tends to invoke some higher authority as a means of abdicating his responsibility for dealing with reality (270, 271, 281). In his procrastinations and emotional immaturity he resembles one of the meanings of the phrase "the black prince", namely Hamlet to whom Julian is also likened. As Hamlet was obsessed with sexuality, with "getting it right" (a very Murdochian phrase), with "being under orders" from an immaterial spirit, his "father", so Pearson is obsessed and delays. Pearson's invocation of an absent authority also resembles an appeal to a father figure. Ultimately, Pearson's fearful narcissism renders him incapable of attending to others. He identifies the men around him solely in terms of their function or profession, categorizing them as Arnold the fellow writer, Francis the doctor, Hartbourne the office chap, and classifies the women as either submissive, therefore insignificant, or predatory, therefore to be avoided. He forfeits his one chance of altering this mode through Julian by turning her into an abstraction.

Pearson is one of Murdoch's more spectacular versions of the man incapable of paying attention to others. Whenever he is faced with the choice of acting in his own or someone else's interest he puts his own

first, justifying this abdicating of his responsibilities by invoking the dark forces he is supposedly subject to, an essentially unidentified god (in a sense, his unconscious) who, depending on circumstances, Pearson sees either as "black Eros", or some dark muse, or a god of suffering. These forces or demons which prompt him to act in specific ways Pearson considers to be in part extra-terrestial, in part aspects of his psyche. He believes that there is no "triumph of good" in the world because human nature is in essence egoistic. People, he asserts, do not desire "genuine goodness" because it is an impediment to their self-centred preoccupations:

> The burden of genuine goodness is instinctively appreciated as intolerable, and a desire for it would put out of focus the other and more ordinary wishes by which one lives. (149)

In Pearson's estimation the will, fed by egoism, is what motivates the individual. Consciousness is dark and, so Pearson believes, not influenceable in the direction of goodness:

> How can such a thing be tempered with and improved, how can one change the quality of consciousness? Around 'will' it flows like water around a stone. Could constant prayer avail? Such prayer would have to be the continuous insertion into each of these multifarious units of one recurring pellet of anti-egoistic concern. (155)

Pearson is unable to make the leap from this understanding to applying it to his own situation. In this he resembles many of Murdoch's characters who, though intellectually appreciating a position that comes close to Weil's and her notion of being moral, are unable to translate the vision they have into lived experience. Pearson, unable to believe in the improvability of mankind, considers that what saves the individual is his socialization into a culture which imposes rules, duties, and sanctions:

> That human beings can acquire a small area of unquestioned obligations may be one of the few things that saves them: saves them from the bestiality and thoughtless night which lies only a millimetre away from the most civilized of our specimens. However, if one examines closely some such case of 'duty', the petty achievement of some ordinary individual, it turns out to

> be no glorious thing, not the turning back by reason or by godhead of the flood of natural evil, but simply a special operation of self-love, devised perhaps even by Nature herself who has, or she could not survive in her polycephalic creation, many different and even incompatible moods. (80-1)

This negative view of mankind leads Pearson to a position where he does not even attempt to be "good". The only people he thinks capable of being good are "saints". Throughout the novel he generalizes about "good men" and saints: they "would identify with everything", "would be nobody's spoiler", "would not be constantly preoccupied with maintaining their façade".

Pearson is aware of the possibility of alleviating evil by a more conscious or attentive approach to life. He realizes that individual responsibility exists, applicable both to the artist and the moral agent, and that this responsibility takes the form of a continuous effort to act consciously. Where this effort is not made (as he fails to make it in relation to the women around him), evil

> . . . is the product of a semi-deliberate inattention, a sort of swooning relationship to time . . . Most artists, through sheer idleness, weariness, inability to attend, drift again and again . . . This is of course a moral problem, since all art is the struggle to be, in a particular sort of way, virtuous. There is an analogous transition in the everyday proceedings of the moral agent. We ignore what we are doing until it is too late to alter it. We never allow ourselves quite to focus upon moments of decision; . . . We allow the vague pleasure-seeking annoyance-avoiding tide of our being to hurry us onward until the moment when we announce that we can no other. (154-5)

Pearson allows himself to drift through inattention, justifying himself successively in terms of his art, his love, and finally, his suffering. All of these are self-consoling fantasies designed to elevate him to the level of a godlike being. His inattention becomes the reason for his ultimate imprisonment: imprisoned by self, he is, in the end, literally imprisoned, his separation from reality made physically manifest.

When arrested for the murder of Arnold, Pearson is, for once, overtaken by a reality not of his own making. He soon learns to convert

this into a manageable idea: the trial for the murder of Arnold is now his "real ordeal". Pearson feels a certain amount of guilt both in relation to his sister's suicide and to Arnold's murder but "uses" it as a means of celebrating his love for Julian. He is spared any punishment for feeding this love on the imagination as his conviction for the murder of Arnold prevents any further encounters with the reality of Julian. Imprisoned physically as well as psychologically he is left attending to the patterning of his memories with the help of his imagination. He chooses "love" as the all-explaining all-responsible superstructure:

> My love for Julian had somehow brought about [Arnold's] death . . . my responsibility for it I was prepared to lodge forever in the mystery of my love for Julian and her love for me. That was part of it. But I also felt something like this, that the emergence of my life out of the quietness into public drama and horror was a necessary and in some deep sense natural outcome of the visitation with which I had been honoured. Sometimes I thought of it as a punishment for the failure of my vow to keep silent. Sometimes, shifting the idea only very slightly, it seemed more like a reward. Because I loved Julian something huge had happened to me. I had been given the privilege of an ordeal. (335-6)

To the end Pearson deludes himself about the "ordeal" he needed. Only once - when he thought he had lost Julian - did he see another person as separate and independent of himself. All else was fantasy. Out of this one experience he gains the strength to write. He dimly realizes this but is unable to understand it:

> When I thought earlier that my ability to love her *was* my ability to write, my ability to exist at last as the artist I had disciplined my life to be, I was in the truth, but knew it only darkly . . . It [the book] has come into being as true art comes, with absolute necessity and absolute ease. That it is not great art I daresay I am aware. What kind of thing it is is dark to me as I am dark to myself. (337)

As before he feels managed by some divine power, an obscure godhead:

> I felt that every single thing that was happening to me was not just predestined but somehow actively at the moment of its occurence *thought* by some divine power which held me in its talons. At times I felt almost as if I were holding my breath in case some tiny movement of mine should interfere with the course of this divine possession. (337)

In prison Pearson appears to have some mystical experience which enables him to gain a clearer vision of himself. He is unable to convert this knowledge into moral behaviour as he is now permanently deprived of a social context in which to exercise his morality. He cannot redeem his failings.

Pearson is Murdoch's "totalitarian man", a phrase she used to describe individuals totally given over to neurosis and dramatizing their situation into a myth. He suffers from an inferiority complex that manifests itself in an obsession with not losing face. In crucial situations his over-riding concern is frequently the degree of dignity and style with which he manages to meet them. Arnold, in contrast, is one of Murdoch's "ordinary language men", given over to convention and recognizing no metaphysical reality beyond himself. Where the latter is self-confident and extravert, the former is anxious and preoccupied.[28] Pearson as an individual is aligned to a symbolic disposition and Arnold to the semiotic.

One way of reading the text is, of course, in terms of an externalization of Murdoch's preoccupation with her own way of writing and her notion of what an artist ought to be and do. *The Black Prince* has been called "Iris Murdoch's *Hamlet*"; the discussion Pearson and Julian have about *Hamlet* indicates the reasons for this. In this discussion Pearson argues that in *Hamlet* Shakespeare meditates upon the problem of his own identity, producing a new "rhetoric of consciousness":

> He has performed a supreme creative feat, a work endlessly reflecting upon itself, not discursively but in its very substance, a Chinese box of words as high as the tower of Babel, a meditation upon the bottomless trickery of consciousness and the redemptive role of words in the lives of

[28] Murdoch discusses both types in SBR 253-6.

> those without identity, that of human beings. *Hamlet* is words, and so is Hamlet. (164)

This, one could argue, is exactly the case with *The Black Prince*. It too, as a text, is "words", and so is Pearson who as a character in fiction not only lives entirely in his mind, but is also the product of Murdoch's consciousness and, as shall be indicated below, exists in part as a fictitious externalization of Murdoch, a re-creation of self, consciousness commenting upon consciousness. More complicated still (and perfectly in tune with the complex, embedded structure of the novel), this consciousness is also reflected in the character of Arnold. What *The Black Prince* in a sense represents is both an externalization and personification of the Faustian sigh: "*Zwei Seelen wohnen - ach - in meiner Brust.*" These two souls find expression in the creation of Arnold and Pearson. Appropriately, Pearson maintains:

> Being is acting. We are tissues and tissues of different personae and yet we are nothing at all. What redeems us is that speech is ultimately divine. (164)

Murdoch, too, appears to make "the crisis of [her] own identity the very central stuff of [her] art" (BP 164). This crisis revolves around the question of how to write, whether it is better to produce loosely structured "journalistic" novels as Arnold does or tightly structured "crystalline" ones like those Pearson admires.[29] As two other characters, Rachel and Francis, suggest to Pearson:

> 'So, you see, the real drama is between you and him. I'm just a side issue as usual.' (Rachel - 145)
>
> '. . . the source of emotion is you and Arnold, you're crazy about each other -' (Francis - 122)

Pearson himself keeps commenting on their obsession with each other saying that Arnold "sometimes seemed like an emanation of myself, a strayed and alien alter ego" (152).

What Pearson says in relation to Shakespeare's writing of *Hamlet*, within this reading of *The Black Prince*, applies to Murdoch in equal measure:

[29] Murdoch discusses both kinds of novels in AD.

> He is the tormented empty sinful consciousness of man seared by the bright light of art, the god's flayed victim dancing the dance of creation. The cry of anguish is obscure because it is overheard. It is the eloquence of direct speech, it is *oratio recta* not *oratio obliqua*. He is speaking . . . in the first person and yet at the pinnacle of artifice. (164)

Murdoch in *The Black Prince* speaks both in the first person and, given the externalization of her self as writer into *two male* figures, at the pinnacle of artifice. Arnold and Pearson share between them a number of aspects of Murdoch's self. Both are writers. Arnold publishes a book a year and is famous - in a sense, like Murdoch. He writes loosely, with much attention to detail and symbolic significance. He likewise gave up his teaching job to write. Arnold's first book, *Tobias and the Fallen Angel*,[30] appears in title to be an analogy to Murdoch's *The Bell* which is in part about the relationship between a teenager named Tobias and a religiously committed homosexual man, the "fallen angel". Pearson represents Murdoch's interest in philosophy but also says:

> Time has not been given me in which to become a philosopher, and this I but in part regret. Only stories and magic really endure. How tiny one's area of understanding is art teaches one perhaps better than philosophy. (xiii)

Murdoch has written in similar terms:

> One doesn't have enough time, and it's philosophy that I give up . . . It really needs a lifetime of thinking about nothing else . . . (Rose 9)

> Sophistry and magic break down at intervals, but they never go away and there is no end to their collusion with art . . . art, like writing and like Eros, goes on existing for better or for worse. (FS 88-9)

> Art is . . . far more [educational] than its rivals, philosophy and theology and science. (FS 86)

Pearson like Murdoch opts for art instead of philosophy without

[30] Weil states, "A true painter, through paying attention, becomes what he looks at. And while he is in this state his hand moves, with the brush attached. This is even more clearly seen in Rembrandt's drawings. He thinks Tobias and the angel, and his hand moves." (FLN 361-2)

abandoning philosophy completely. He wants to tell the truth in some compact form, a "crystalline" text.

Critics have commented upon the fact that Murdoch has tended to veer between the two types of novel-writing represented by Arnold and Pearson,[31] either having large numbers of characters in loosely structured settings, or tightly structured myth-making settings with a small number of characters. Murdoch herself has noted:

> I see there's a kind of alternation between a closed novel, where my own obsessional feeling about the novel is very strong and draws it closely together, and an open novel, where there are more accidental and separate and free characters. (Rose 12)

Murdoch wants to create "accidental", "peripheral" characters but also has a tendency to produce myth and pattern which gets in the way of this goal. Unlike Pearson, who would rather keep silent than produce something imperfect, Murdoch publishes at a steady rate and is, in this respect, more like Arnold who says:

> I believe that the stuff has some merits or I wouldn't publish it. But I live, I *live*, with an absolutely continuous sense of failure. I am always defeated, always. Every book is the wreck of a perfect idea. The years pass and one has only one life. If one has a thing at all one must do it and keep on and on and on trying to do better . . . I do not believe that I would improve if I wrote less. The only result of that would be that there would be less of whatever it is. And less of me. (139)

This is quite close to a comment Murdoch made to Stephanie Nettell:

> One has possibly got a rather limited ability to create characters . . . Of course, everyone is hoping to write a better novel each time. Whether it's possible for me to improve I don't know - perhaps I'm not capable of anything more than I've done - but one goes on hoping - . . . I should hate to be alive and not able to write a novel. (66)

Arnold's counterpart to this last remark is, "for me writing is a natural product of *joie de vivre*" (139). He and Murdoch (Blow 24) also share a

[31] See Emerson 21-2, Sage 61, Scanlan 69.

defensive attitude towards critics. Arnold, talking to Pearson, offers an explanation for this:

> You, and you aren't the only one, every critic tends to do this, speak as if you were addressing a person of invincible complacency, you speak as if the artist had never realized his faults at all. In fact most artists understand their own weaknesses far better than the critics do. Only naturally there is no place for the public parade of this knowledge. If one is prepared to publish a work one must let it speak for itself. It would be unthinkable to run along beside it whimpering "I know it's no good". One keeps one's mouth shut. (138-9)

Arnold's writing more closely resembles the type of novel Murdoch prefers to write while Pearson's notions of the novel correspond to her more immediate inclinations. This becomes clear when one looks at how Murdoch's novels have evolved over time as regards form. Her early novels such as *Under the Net*, *The Sandcastle*, *The Bell*, *A Severed Head*, *The Italian Girl*, and *The Time of the Angels* tend to be "crystalline" and tightly structured whereas her later ones such as *An Accidental Man*, *Nuns and Soldiers*, and *The Book and the Brotherhood* are "journalistic" and sprawling. With Pearson Murdoch also shares other, more personal characteristics such as being strongly affected by music (Hobson). Like Pearson she reads few contemporary novels. Like him she believes that life is essentially comic, and that the novel is a comic form.[32]

Murdoch is, in a sense, playing a complex game with the reader. Pearson, a fictitious character, in nineteenth century fashion tries to convince the reader that he is "real". The reader knows that Pearson is a fictitious character. At the same time, within the framework of the text, other characters' postscripts call into question not just what Pearson asserts (another Chinese box effect, consciousnesses reflecting upon consciousness) but also his very existence:

> I hear it has been suggested that Bradley Pearson and myself [P. Loxias - the editor] are both simply fictions, the invention of a minor novelist. (364)

Loxias is a name for Apollo, the god of light, reason, and prophecy

[32] See, for example, Biles 117, Haffenden 204.

associated with the muses. The editor as muse? Both fictions of Murdoch? Murdoch a "minor novelist"? The reader is given plenty of material to play around and free-associate with. The degree of the reader's attention will decide what s/he makes of it all.

From the reader's viewpoint both Nigel and Pearson can be read as being only one half of a character, or as having *alter egos* in Will and Arnold or Loxias respectively. As characters their ability to perceive reality with just attention is marred by their identity problems. Both suffer from delusions of grandeur and see themselves as god-like. Nigel derives this sense of himself from his ability to observe other people and his general attentiveness to them. Pearson derives it through abstracting his experiences into self-elevating fantasies. Both lose their grip on reality, and as they begin to mistake their fantasies for reality start to cause damage to others around them. Nigel, aware of this tendency, decides to fight it; Pearson, overtaken by events beyond his control, has no such chance.

Murdoch's novels in general tend to demonstrate the notion of attention as a never-ending task through their representation of greater or lesser failures of attention. Frequently, such failures have disastrous consequences: Rosa Keepe's failure to listen to Nina in *The Flight from the Enchanter* results in Nina's suicide. Similarly, Pearson's failure to attend to his sister results in hers. At the same time, the ability to pay attention does not necessarily result in good: the Abbess' advice to Michael in *The Bell* does not lead him to take the necessary steps to prevent Nick's death; Tallis' realization that Julius King was in a concentration camp is of limited consequence for *A Fairly Honourable Defeat* unless one takes a Weilian line on it and argues that he represents the afflicted person's inability not to be destructive to others as a result of what has been done to him.

The ability to attend demonstrates the goodness of the person who can pay attention. It also indicates the "for-nothingness" of that ability. Virtue here is very much its own reward but failures of attention frequently lead to "punishment". Failures of attention are, of course, a form of solipsism which, so Murdoch suggests in her novels, eventually leads to complete isolation from reality and society as is the case with Pearson, Misha Fox of *The Flight from the Enchanter*, and

Hannah of *The Unicorn*. Social integration, on the other hand, is achieved through the effort to see reality as it is.

> One might start from the assertion that morality, goodness, is a form of realism. The idea of a really good man living in a private dream world is unacceptable . . . he must know certain things about his surroundings, most obviously the existence of other people and their claims. The chief enemy of excellence in morality (and also in art) is personal fantasy: the tissue of self-aggrandizing and consoling wishes and dreams which prevents one from seeing what is there outside one. (SOG 59)

This, according to Murdoch, is true for anyone, including the writer. In this respect, according to Murdoch, art is more effective than philosophy and theology because it allows for the ambiguity of the whole person. Not being subject to the same rigorous methodological requirements as philosophy and theology, and not being prescriptive, it can establish a more direct contact with reality:

> Of course the statements made by art escape into the free ambiguity of human life. Art cheats the religious vocation at the last moment and is inimical to philosophical categories. (FS 87)

Art can thus explore those regions in human life which are the most ambiguous:

> Philosophy and theology have to reject evil in the course of explaining it, but art is essentially more free and enjoys the ambiguity of the whole man; . . . (FS 72)

This is important as it points to one of the ways in which Murdoch as a writer attempts to attend to reality, namely, through the setting up in her novels of ambiguities which disrupt the linear narrative and demand the reader's involvement in a process of decision-making about the nature of "reality" and "truth". The reader is thus required to pay attention beyond the absorption of a continuous narrative. It is important to remember that Murdoch considers ambiguity and contradiction an essential aspect of reality. So does Weil:

> The contradictions the mind comes up against - these are the only reality: they are the criterion of the real. There is no

> contradiction in what is imaginary. Contradiction is the test of necessity. (GG 89)[33]

The reason why there is no contradiction in what is imaginary is that the imaginary has to do with creating patterns, projecting unitary visions. Weil explains it thus:

> Man's great affliction, which begins with infancy and accompanies him till death, is that looking and eating are two different operations. Eternal beatitude is a state where to look is to eat. (GG 90)

This metaphor is expressive of conflicting desires, "having one's cake and eating it". The essential difference between the two operations is that one, looking, is about maintaining separateness, the other, eating, is about absorption into the self. Holding on to these contradictory impulses one gains detachment:

> When the attention has revealed the contradiction in something on which it has been fixed, a kind of loosening takes place. By persevering in this course we attain detachment. (GG 89)

Murdoch, as a writer, tries to follow this course by setting up ambiguities and not providing the reader with all the clues that will, with attentive reading, enable him or her to give a definitive account of what happened. In this respect she differs from, for example, writers like Agatha Christie, who demand attention in the form of clue-seeking from the reader.

I would like, briefly, to look at *how* Murdoch sets up contradictions and ambiguities, the disruptive elements within her novels. She does not disrupt linguistic and grammatical structures, in other words, she does not disrupt her texts at the level of language even though she occasionally sets up situations that would allow for the disruption of the symbolic order (language). One such example occurs in *A Fairly Honourable Defeat* where Morgan at one point is piecing together two letters from fragments she has found.

[33] For a detailed discussion of the relationship between contradiction and mystery see Eric O. Springsted, "Contradiction, Mystery and the Use of Words in Simone Weil" where he argues that Weil uses the term "contradiction" to refer to paradox, incommensuration, and mystery (2).

> She began to pick up pieces and look at them and let them flutter down again: *really remember our life together?* was Tallis, *even our innocent childhood* was Hilda, *and by a family bond I mean* was Tallis, *warned by your casual treatment of* was Hilda, *to buy you an engagement ring* was Tallis . . . (347)

There are a number of stylistic ways in which Murdoch could deal with this fragmentation from a formal viewpoint; what she chooses to do is to impose a clear order, not only through the use of italics to distinguish the bits from the letters from the rest of the text but also by alternating bits from Tallis' letter with bits from Hilda's thus eliminating the random element potentially present. Murdoch makes no use of the opportunities she herself creates for disrupting the structure of language. Language, to her, is sacrosanct as is clear from her interview with Bryan Appleyard, for example. Disruption enters her novels at the semantic level, and does so in a number of ways.

One device Murdoch employs is multiple readings of one event or set of events. In *The Black Prince*, for example, the reader is presented with a series of postscripts which give subjective readings of the events of the novel in contradictory terms. Everyone has different theories about who Pearson was in love with, for example. At the end of the novel Rachel and Julian represent their relationship with Pearson as described by him in the course of the novel in terms which are at odds with Pearson's description (355 and 359 respectively). In *The Sea, The Sea*, too, there is a postscript in which Charles busily re-reads the final events of his time by the sea.

Another device Murdoch uses to reveal the contradictions within her characters is multiple letter writing. Thus Jessica of *The Nice and the Good* makes a number of attempts to write to John Ducane to explain her feelings (218-20). Similarly, Martin Lynch-Gibbon in *A Severed Head* writes a number of different versions of the same letter to Honor Klein trying to explain his behaviour (142-5).

Murdoch also relates dreams as a means of disrupting the reader's sense of reality. In *The Bell*, for example, she begins chapter six with the sentence: "Michael Meade was awakened by a strange hollow booming sound. . ." (79). The reader, "accepting" that Michael has entered "reality", takes for real what happens until the sentence "He turned

about and found himself still in bed." (80) reveals that Michael has, indeed, been dreaming. The disconcerting revelation that what Michael has just seen was a dream forces the reader to re-read the text as dream text, points the reader's attention to the (sometimes close) relationship between dream and reality. The surprise effect of learning retrospectively that Michael was having a dream heightens the reader's sense for the need of attentive involvement with the text.

Another device Murdoch employs to engage the reader's attention is to present a conversation where the identity of the speakers is not immediately revealed so that the reader has to try and make some sense of what is being said without fully understanding the context. This is true of those novels of Murdoch's which begin *in medias res* such as *Nuns and Soldiers* or *The Book and the Brotherhood* where explanatory comments are offered after the beginning of the text. Yet another ambiguity which Murdoch likes to set up relates to how sexual identity is perceived through naming. Julian of *The Black Prince* turns out to be a girl, Alex of *The Philosopher's Pupil* is a woman but Emma turns out to be short for Emmanuel, Hilary in *A Word Child* is a man. Her characters, and with them the reader, are frequently unable to make out whether someone is a man or a woman as happens to Pearson when he first meets Julian.

Perhaps one of the most effective ways in which Murdoch engages the reader's attention is by involving her characters in endless series of extreme and conflicting perceptions and situations, each of which the characters tend to experience as the endpoint of a development. A hallmark of Murdoch's fiction is the frequency with which characters become completely convinced of something only to experience the exact reverse half a page later. Certainty is continually undermined. A typical example occurs in *The Red and the Green* where on one page Andrew rhapsodizes about the engagement to his supposed childhood sweetheart he is about to effect ("He saw himself suddenly in the future, a strong *pater familias*, ruling his womenfolk and his children with a benevolent firmness." - 163), only to be turned down by this same woman immediately afterwards. In *The Italian Girl* Edmund resolutely fails to recognize the maid as an individual, seeing a series of female servants as undifferentiable providers of comfort without even being able to

remember their names, then suddenly, at the end, realizes that he has loved her all along (one is left to wonder in exactly what capacity he marries her - as mother surrogate, or as an autonomous individual). Rapid summaries of individuals' life histories in Murdoch's novels also serve the purpose of indicating radical shifts in position.

This can make the "inexperienced" reader of Murdoch's fiction feel uncertain and frustrated. It is never clear who or what one is meant to identify with, or take as a standard of sorts. The "experienced" reader, on the other hand, is simply "wary", understanding the temporality of any move or decision a character might make. And yet, there is "a carrot" to this "stick": Murdoch's overall moral framework has certain fixed parameters. Turmoil within relationships, the essence of her fictional private world, does not usually result in severance. Married couples, unless death parts them as with Guy and Gertrude in *Nuns and Soldiers* or Hilda and Rupert in *A Fairly Honourable Defeat*, remain yoked together even if separated. Witness Jean and Duncan in *The Book and the Brotherhood*, or Morgan and Tallis in *A Fairly Honourable Defeat*. Divorce happens, if at all, outside the text. Abortions are always regretted (again, Morgan is one example, Tamar in *The Book and the Brotherhood* another). From this point of view, Murdoch's novels express what Morgan says *à propos* of Turner's paintings, "passionate turmoil held in perfect immobility" (203) The immobile framework is the moral position which holds the novels together and draws lines at representing the real possibility of divorce, for example. Interestingly, once readers have grasped this they are, in a sense, free from having to pay attention to the details of the novel, immersing himself and identifying with what is going on at every step along the narrative path. They can instead identify with the moral position offered by Murdoch as the framework and view the text from this more detached perspective. Most likely, however, readers will veer between attachment and detachment, paying attention where the text feeds into their ego system and failing to do so where their selves do not seem to be addressed.

Murdoch uses all these devices for a number of reasons. For one thing, as stated above, she considers ambiguity and contradiction inherent aspects of reality, and regards the representation of reality as her business as a writer. Secondly, she wants to make the reader pay

attention to what is happening in the text. Thirdly, the effect of these contradictions and ambiguities serves to undermine the certainties of the reader making her or him aware of *how* she or he categorizes the world, what is taken for granted. In so doing, Murdoch does not, however, disrupt the structures by which the world is perceived; she does not question the tools but how they are used.

One final and rather interesting device Murdoch uses to question set notions of reality is the importing of "the uncanny" or "fantastic" into her fiction. Thus in *The Book and the Brotherhood* Lily, the descendent of a witch, believes in the possibility of snails being used to communicate with an absent person; she and her lover Gulliver are, in the end, reunited because he finds a snail at a railway station, she one in her bedroom. Yet, throughout the text, other characters dismiss the idea of witchcraft and the belief in supernatural powers, or, closer to home, Lily's grandmother's ability to work magic. In *The Good Apprentice* Edward watches Ilona dance and gets the impression that she dances with her feet off the ground (156-7). Frequently, in Murdoch's novels, people believe things that are not true (several people consider themselves responsible for Jenkin's death in *The Book and the Brotherhood*) while things that are true are dismissed as untrue. In *Bruno's Dream* the reader learns eventually that a minor, seemingly dotty character, Nigel and Vill's aunt, whom nobody believed, was indeed of Russian descent and knew about Czarist times (263).

It could be argued that through these devices Murdoch attempts to represent the reality of people's consciousness, the way in which the individual's mind works. Her attention to this kind of "mental" or "inner" reality is matched by the way in which she describes the material world in her novels. I have already noted the increasing length of her novels. One reason for this is her increasing attention to material detail. The reader is given long descriptions of the weather, landscapes, houses, what people wear, what they eat. If one looks at these descriptions it is possible to distinguish, roughly, two different types. The following passage from the beginning of *The Philosopher's Pupil* is a good example of the first type of description:

> It was raining hard. The malignant rain rattled on the car like shot. Propelled in oblique flurries, it assaulted the windscreen,

> obliterating in a second the frenetic strivings of the windscreen wipers. Little demonic faces composed of racing raindrops appeared and vanished. (1)

The language of this passage indicates that although we are given a description of the weather, the words used point beyond that referent to another set of signifieds. The adjectives "malignant" and "demonic" suggest negative forces, the words "shot" and "assault" evoke notions of violence, and terms such as "rattle", "flurries", "frenetic", and "racing" all point to agitated commotion, turbulence. Beyond merely notating the weather this passage offers a particular reading of the rain, a reading which needs a context to suggest its significance. What, indeed, is signified beyond the fact of the rain here is the inner disposition of one of the central characters, George, who is drunk and in a state of violent agitation. Furthermore, the passage signals the state of the relationship between George and his wife Stella, who are in the process of having a quarrel; the passage also points to immediate developments: George indirectly assaults Stella by driving his car into a river, nearly killing her. Thus, as well as notating the real through giving details of the weather, the passage is firmly embedded in the "semiotic structure of the narrative". I borrow this last phrase from an essay in Roland Barthes' *The Rustle of Language* to which I shall return shortly.

Before doing so, however, I want to give one example of the second type of description one finds in Murdoch's novels:

> Gulliver had come down first to breakfast and had eaten a boiled egg. Duncan had eaten fried eggs and bacon, collecting them from the hot-plate on the sideboard. Gulliver now blamed himself for having bothered Annushka to get him a boiled egg. He would have liked eggs and bacon better, he now decided. However he was wearing his dark-blue double-breasted Finnish yachting jacket and felt good. Gerard had eaten a piece of bacon with fried bread. Jenkin was at the sideboard helping himself to eggs, bacon, sausage, fried bread and grilled tomatoes. In the old days there had used to be kidneys too, and kedgeree. Lily had eaten some toast with homemade gooseberry jam. Tamar had toyed with a piece of toast and rapidly vanished. Everyone had had coffee except for Lily who asked for tea. Rose, who got up

> very early and never ate breakfast, had had her early tea with Annushka. (BAB 228)

This passage in its description of what people eat lacks a dimension of secondary referents that the passage on the weather had. There are innumerable ways in which one can describe food. By simply using nouns such as "egg", "bacon", and "sausage" Murdoch reduces the interpretative nature of language to what appears to be a "*direct* collusion of a referent and a signifier" (Barthes, *Rustle* 147). It goes without saying that, in a sense, here too one needs the larger context of the novel as a whole to verify this statement; for the present I shall simply assert that which character had what kind of eggs for breakfast is not relevant to the development of the plot as a whole or the semiotic narrative.

If we accept this proposition the question arises, what is the function of descriptive passages of the second variety in Murdoch's fiction? It is in this context that Barthes' essay "The Reality Effect" is useful. Starting from the notion that descriptions appear to contain elements that are "superfluous" and "filling" in relation to the text as a whole, he asks what the point of such "insignificant notations" might be and suggests:

> The irreducible residues of functional analysis [i.e. those "insignificant notations" such as the eggs in the above passage] have this in common: they denote what is ordinarily called "concrete reality" (insignificant gestures, transitory attitudes, insignificant objects, redundant words). The pure and simple "representation" of the "real," the naked relation of "what is" (or has been) thus appears as a resistance to meaning; this resistance confirms the great mythic opposition of the *true-to-life* (the lifelike) and the *intelligible* . . . (146)

The "true-to-life" which defies meaning is an analogy to Murdoch's notion of life as random and chancy. What is called "the intelligible" here has to do with imposing meaning, making patterns. Barthes goes on to suggest:

> All this shows that the "real" is supposed to be self-sufficient, that it is strong enough to belie any notion of "function," that its "speech-act" has no need to be integrated into a structure

> and that the *having-been-there* of things is a sufficient principle of speech. (147)

This self-sufficiency has a potentially disruptive character in relation to narrative since:

> Semiotically, the "concrete detail" is constituted by the *direct* collusion of a referent and a signifier; the signified is expelled from the sign, and with it, of course, the possibility of developing a *form of the signified*, i.e., narrative structure itself. (147)

What "saves" realistic literature is the fact that these details do not constitute the whole of the text. More than that:

> . . . just when these details are reputed to *denote* the real directly, all that they do - without saying so - is *signify* it; [they] say nothing but this: *we are real*; it is the category of "the real" (and not its contingent contents) which is then signified; in other words, the very absence of the signified, to the advantage of the referent alone, becomes the very signifier of realism: the *reality effect* is produced . . . (148)

This, I would suggest, is what happens in Murdoch's descriptive passages of the second type; their function is to create the "reality effect" that Barthes talks of above. In so far as they are able to do so (and, given that she has to work through an expressive medium, i.e. language, which necessarily operates at a remove from "concrete" reality and experience), Murdoch could be said to achieve what she sets out to do, i.e. represent reality, paying attention to it in all its detail. This, in a sense, constitutes a form of unselfing on the part of the author; presenting the reader with ambiguities, on the other hand, could be read as an attempt on the part of the author to unself the reader.

The increasing use of detail in Murdoch's fiction, mirroring her philosophical concern with the inexhaustible particularity of the world, goes hand in hand with the foregrounding of traditionally feminine attributes in her philosophy. Attention is to be devoted to the particular, detail increasingly crowds Murdoch's narratives. Naomi Schor's study of the history of the detail in art and literature, *Reading in Detail: Aesthetics and the Feminine*, reveals that "the detail is gendered and doubly gendered as feminine" because it is "bounded on the

one side by the *ornamental*, with its traditional connotations of effeminacy and decadence, and on the other, by the *everyday*, whose 'prosiness' is rooted in the domestic sphere of social life presided over by women" (4). The detail has a history of being associated with the feminine, excess, and formlessness (Schor 15, 16, 22) which goes back to the Pythagorean table of opposites where "unlimited", "plurality", "female", and "bad" are all aligned.

In earlier novels attention to detail manifested itself in detailed descriptions of mechanical processes such as the retrieval of the car from the river in *The Sandcastle* (94-9) or that of the bell in *The Bell* (214-23). In both cases a metaphorical reading of the incident was possible. The kind of material detail which dominates Murdoch's later novels comes from the domestic, essentially feminine sphere: it ranges from preoccupations with the details of a room (e.g. PP 57) to descriptions of food (e.g. SS 55) and cloth (e.g. GA 135). This kind of detail does not offer itself for an obvious metaphorical reading. According to Schor, "the attention required by details acts as a break [*sic*] on perception" (17). By analogy, in the novel attention to detail acts as a brake on plot development. If attention is devoted to detail which adds nothing to the plot as such (e.g. who eats what kind of eggs), then that attention can be read as amounting to an effort of concentration *for nothing*, devoid of extrinsic reward. It becomes a self-referential exercise which points to the process, highlights the reader's (in)ability to focus. It resembles Weil's recital of "Our Father" in Greek. The creation of the reality effect is thus associated with moral purpose which is the crucial element in Murdoch's novelistic endeavours. Detail here "subverts an internal hierarchic ordering of the work of art which clearly subordinates the periphery to the center, the accessory to the principal, the foreground to the background" (Schor 20). In so doing detail aids Murdoch in giving a "truthful" account of reality.

This raises an interesting issue because it indicates a contradiction which Weil describes as follows:

> We know by experience that truth is always and only universal and that reality is always and only particular, and yet the two are inseparable; they are indeed one and the same. There is no

escape from this. (FLN 269)

This contradiction, because it is "unavoidable", is, for Weil, an "opening into the transcendent" (FLN 269), a mystery. Murdoch presents this mystery in a Platonic reading of the particular and the universal in relation to the virtues when she writes:

> Plato sometimes seems to imply that the road towards the Good leads away from the world of particularity and detail. However, he speaks of an ascending as well as a descending dialectic and he speaks of a return to the cave. In any case, in so far as goodness is for use in politics and in the market place it must combine its increasing intuition of unity with an increasing grasp of complexity and detail. . . This double revelation of both random detail and intuited unity is what we receive in every sphere of life if we seek for what is best. (SOG 96)

Here we have an analogy to the contradiction Murdoch expresses between the desire to represent formlessness (detail) and the need to do so through form (unity). Form and content, too, are inseparable, are one and the same: the text, the work of art. Murdoch's writing reflects this contradictory position without being able to resolve it.

Conclusion

Murdoch believes that moral philosophers should attempt to answer the question, "How can we make ourselves better?" (SOG 78), and suggests that techniques for dealing with our psychic energy which improve the self morally must be found. These might correspond to "the techniques of religion, of which the most widely practised is prayer" (SOG 55). But, she asks:

> What becomes of such a technique in a world without God, and can it be transformed to supply at least part of the answer to our central question? (SOG 55)

It is partly this combination of philosophical enquiry and religious quest[1] which accounts for Murdoch's interest in Weil who, according to Murdoch, believes that:

> Spiritual progress is won through meditation: a view which is in contrast (and some may think a welcome corrective) to contemporary English ethics with its exclusive emphasis on act and choice, and its neglect of the 'inner life'. (KV 613)

Weil's concept of "attention" provides Murdoch with a means of dealing with the "inner life" which suggests how the individual can attempt to become a better person. Central to this is the notion of self-effacement, of a continuous attempt to expel the self which is *of necessity* seen as a source of fantasy, distortion of truth and reality. Weil came to regard the self as an interpolation between God and his creation which had to be withdrawn in order to make possible God's re-entry into the world:

> . . . I can easily imagine that he loves that perspective of creation which can only be seen from the point where I am. But I act as a screen. . . . I must withdraw so that God can make contact with the beings whom chance places in my path and whom he loves . . . I am not the maiden who awaits her betrothed, but the unwelcome third . . . If only I knew how to disappear there would be a perfect union of love between God and the earth I

[1] Hebblethwaite maintains that "Murdoch is consciously secularizing the religious concepts she uses" ("Feuerbach's Ladder" 158).

tread, the sea I hear. . . . (GG 36)[2]

Murdoch sees the self as screening reality, denying accurate perception to oneself and, by implication, to those whom we present with our view of the world. Weil's triad God-self-creation is thus mirrored by Murdoch's reality-self-other.

Murdoch suggests that the only way to avoid being "blinded by self" (SOG 100) is to "look right away from self" (SOG 101) with the "attention" which she describes as "a just and loving gaze . . . directed upon an individual reality" (34). Love here functions not as an emotion by which another individual is "absorbed" into the self, a source of union between self and other, but a way of acknowledging the other's separateness. For Weil virtually any form of love is essentially self-seeking, intent upon merging with the other. Therefore all attachment is to be avoided. "Attention" becomes a way of guarding against attachment and achieving detachment. Murdoch's fiction increasingly seems to subscribe to the same notion. The choice appears to be between leading a moral life governed by selflessness which is solitary and devoid of sexual contacts, a life, in fact, of the spirit rather than the flesh, and leading a life of the flesh which, so it would appear, automatically condemns the individual to moral mediocrity. This is borne out by Murdoch's literary examples of persons leading a moral life such as Lisa and Diana in *Bruno's Dream*, Stuart in *The Good Apprentice*, and Jenkin Riderhood in *The Book and the Brotherhood*. Weil, interestingly enough, associates carnal abstinence with "indifference" (*Letter To A Priest* 67-9) to which Christ attached "a certain virtue". Indifference facilitates detachment and therefore just perception. It is the mark both of God and of the moral being:

> We should be indifferent to good and evil but, when we are indifferent, that is to say when we project the light of our

[2] Murdoch has commented on this, saying "The total obliteration of your present being would mean that the world would exist and not you. This is an idea that Simone Weil expresses - that you want the world and God to be alone together and to remove yourself - and it makes sense to me. I think that in this sense death is happening all the time, and not that one soldiers on through life and then there's something terribly special at the end, which seems to me to be an old-fashioned religious mythical idea." (Haffenden 207-8)

> attention equally on both, the good gains the day. This phenomenon comes about automatically. (GG 107)

The problem is that while we may be able to legislate for ourselves we cannot thereby legislate for others; the effect of our indifference upon other individuals depends on them as much as on us. Murdoch's representation of this phenomenon is less optimistic than Weil's. In *The Philosopher's Pupil*, for example, George finds it impossible to come to terms with the indifference of the father figure in his life, Rozanov. He rails against this dismissal of his self, against the destruction of his fantasies about the role he plays in Rozanov's life, resorting to violence as a means of getting Rozanov to pay attention to and acknowledge him. In so doing he manifests the needs of the self that Weil is at pains to deny. Murdoch seems to accept that the self is not so easily eradicated. Indeed, an early optimism concerning the possibility of moral self-improvement reflected in the "happy endings" of novels such as *Under the Net* and *The Italian Girl* has given way to a position that emphasizes the unendingness of the struggle for improvement, and the limitations of self (see Haffenden 208).

The concept of morality which Murdoch, in concordance with Weil, proposes as a means of trying to improve the self is a passive, attitudinal rather than a dynamic, actional one. Murdoch does not associate moral action with conscious explicit choice (SOG 36-8); rather, it constitutes a *response* that evolves out of an attitude of passive, unselfish attention. As Weil says:

> We should do only those righteous actions which we cannot stop ourselves from doing, which we are unable not to do . . . We should not take one step, *even in the direction of what is good*, beyond that to which we are irresistibly impelled by God, and this applies to action, word, and thought. (GG 39)

Through attention, through the denial of the impulse to merge the self with its environment, we come to know what Weil and Murdoch call "the void", the unbridgeable gulf between self and other which can be endured only to a limited extent and in an attitude of detachment. For Weil the void is associated with the separation between God and his creation, for Murdoch it has to do with perceiving the essential

randomness and chanciness of the world, facing the fact that there is no pattern to it.

Murdoch may be secularizing a religious vocabulary gleaned from Weil but she also considers herself a religious person. Weil maintains that she "always adopted the Christian attitude as the only possible one" (WOG 16); Murdoch, while insisting that she is "not a Christian", professes:

> I don't feel that religion departed from my life when God the Father departed. I used to think that when God the Father went it was the end of religion for me, but I have learnt better. I feel now that I don't have to have this image or to believe in a personal God in order to have religion. . . (Caen 77)

Neither Weil nor Murdoch believes in a personal God but both subscribe to the notion of Christ as a symbol of affliction and in that context suggest that the only appropriate way to consider Christ is not as *Christ Risen*, which they regard as one of the self-consoling fantasies propagated by the Christian religion, but as *Christ on the Cross*. For Weil Christ's affliction and forsakenness on the cross signals God's love (He gave His Son) and the for-nothingness, rewardlessness of Christan attitudes.[3] Murdoch states in *The Sovereignty of Good*:

> Few ideas invented by humanity have more power to console than the idea of purgatory. To buy back evil by suffering in the embrace of good: what could be more satisfying, or as a romantic might say, more thrilling? Indeed the central image of Christianity lends itself [to] just this illegitimate transformation. The *Imitatio Christi* in the later work of Kierkegaard is a distinguished instance of romantic self-indulgence on this theme . . . (82)

The same belief finds expression in Murdoch's fiction which contains a number of examples of individuals, often religious figures, who do not believe in God, at least not in a personal God, but who value Christ as a symbol. Thus Father Bernard in *The Philosopher's Pupil* tells Rozanov that he does not believe in God but lives and breathes Christ (185-7).

[3] See GG 79-83, and WOG 63-78.

When Rozanov suggests that "Christianity is a cult of suffering " Father Bernard retorts: "Not if Christ didn't rise it isn't. And it is essential that he did not rise. If he be risen then is our faith vain." (188) Father McAlister of *The Book and the Brotherhood* shares this notion:

> Christ on the cross made sense of all the rest, but only if he really died. Christ lives, Christ saves, because he died as we die. The ultimate reality hovered there, not as a phantom man, but as a terrible truth. (540)

He also believes that there is no God (540). I shall discuss below the significance of this shared belief of Weil's and Murdoch's in the impersonality of God on the one hand and the importance of Christ on the cross on the other.

For the present I want to point out what seems to me to be the major difference between Weil's and Murdoch's work, namely, the fact that Weil relates the ethical to the political whereas Murdoch relates it in the first instance to the personal. Weil and Murdoch share a system of ethics which is based on the notion of the "overcoming of one's narcissism" (Sadler, *Personality and Religion* 130). Weil's attempt to defeat the narcissistic core manifests itself most prominently in the radical elimination of the personal from her life, the refusal of all attachment. Her ethical stance is transformed into a political position, the primary concern of which is not the private interpersonal domain but the relationship between the individual and the socio-political formation to which s/he belongs. In *The Need for Roots* and in *Oppression and Liberty* Weil adopts an impersonal theoretical discourse[4] typically associated with the idea of a political program, and at the same time expressive of an ethics of detachment as the means of moral improvement. Her ethical position is closely aligned to the notion of social and political change.

Murdoch, on the other hand, tends to bypass issues of social and political change in favour of a discussion of the relationship between the personal and the moral. In this sense she is subject to the same

[4] Van Herik points out that "even in her posthumously published notebooks one rarely finds the personal marks that she would consider to be in the way." ("Looking, Eating, and Waiting" 58)

accusation she levelled at Kant, and for that matter Sartre, namely the failure to portray the individual as socially and historically imbricated. Typically, where in her fiction she raises political issues they become submerged by the interpersonal concerns that remain the primary focus. The clearest example of this is her novel *The Red and the Green* which deals with the 1916 uprising in Ireland. The initial two chapters of that novel provide the reader with a kind of popular history lesson concerning the relationship between Ireland and England[5] expressed through the history of one of the characters, an Anglo-Irish British Cavalry officer, and through an after-tea conversation among a number of different members of the officer's family. Much of the presentation of the historical dimension occurs as straight 'O'-level history textbook narration. To give but one example:

> English government in the eighteenth century was the most civilized government in history. Fear of the French put an end to eighteenth-century civilization. Perhaps it put an end to civilization. It certainly put an end to the Irish parliament. Ireland was really becoming an independent country, the great landowners thought of themselves as Irish. (41)

And so it goes on. This attempt to provide a historical context to the events in the novel is quickly succeeded by the foregrounding of personal relationships and conflicts. The political dimension of the novel, when not actually "forgotten", is assimilated into the text through images and metaphors familiar from Murdoch's other novels. This obscures the particularity of the social and political reality portrayed. When Murdoch, for example, writes:

> England had destroyed Ireland slowly and casually, without malice, without mercy, practically without thought, like someone who treads upon an insect, forgets it, then sees it quivering and treads upon it again. (216)

the experienced reader of Murdoch's fiction is instantly reminded not only of Nigel's vision of God (BD 25) but also of Edward's idea of his destruction of Jesse (GA 358-9).

[5] Murdoch considers *The Red and the Green* "a historical novel" which provides "a good textbook for understanding Ireland" (Caen 92).

Such recurrent images are frequently employed in Murdoch's writing.[6] One of the most prominent of these is the inclusion in virtually every novel of a tower; all the novels set in London from *Under The Net* to *Henry and Cato* and *The Good Apprentice* make reference to the Post Office Tower. In *The Red and the Green*, *The Sandcastle*, and *The Sea, The Sea* there are Martello towers or other towers of some description. The effects of such recurrences are manifold: for one thing, they mark out "Murdoch territory"; for another, patterns are created that could be suggestive of archetypes. The question whether Murdoch herself perceives the world in terms of such recurrences or whether she sees reality as mapped by them in the perception of others with herself in the role of faithful reporter remains unanswered. But the particularity of the fictional world created is diminished so that a novel with a supposedly strongly political basis like *The Red and the Green*, for example, does not seem significantly different from one like *The Sacred and Profane Love Machine* which lacks such a basis.

In the same way that the political gives way to the personal in *The Red and the Green* the personal takes over from the political in other novels by Murdoch. In *A Fairly Honourable Defeat* the issue of racial minorities is repeatedly raised in connection with the "good" person in the text, Tallis Browne,[7] who is seen to help and tolerate the otherness of people from different racial backgrounds to his own. But the issue remains unexplored. One of the base lines of the novel, for example, concerns the gradual integration of the Sikh living above Tallis into British society. In two or three short paragraphs the Sikh's fate is hinted at, most interestingly perhaps in the following one:

> Tallis enquired about the dispute at the bus depot about the turban. It appeared to be over. The men had got used to their outlandish fellow worker. The Sikh was now happily united with

[6] Angela Downing in "Recursive Premodifications as a Literary Device in Iris Murdoch's *The Sea, The Sea*" provides an interesting account of the recurrence of specific linguistic patterns in Murdoch's writing.

[7] For a discussion by Murdoch of the significance of Tallis as a character see Caen 75-6.

> his fellow males in an attempt to sabotage a campaign for women bus-drivers. . . . [Tallis] had heard the story of the Sikh's life. It was not a happy one. (396)

Here, very briefly, Murdoch offers a glimpse of an idea that plays a large role in Weil's political writings, namely, that oppression breeds oppression, but she does not offer any analysis or comment upon the situation. There are numerous other instances of that kind. In *The Philosopher's Pupil* there is a young Irishman who feels he has no country, and there is some limited discussion of the Irish situation (122-4). In *The Book and the Brotherhood* the dilemma of a long-term middle class unemployed person, Gulliver Ashe, is discussed (esp. 135-9). Fortunately, Gulliver manages to pull himself together and in the end marries a well-to-do woman who came into money through unwittingly marrying an heir who came into his fortune shortly before dying. In the same novel the reader is also presented with a case of "the corruption of the innocent and young" through sex and pregnancy: Tamar who decides to have an abortion is thereby not only permanently tainted, she is also described as suffering horrendously from psychological after-effects and wishing that she had not had the abortion. Though this is in some respects a moral or psychological dilemma, the fact that abortion is regulated through the law of the land also makes it a political issue. Murdoch makes some inroads into what might be termed contemporary social and political issues[8] but in a strictly limited way; the personal in relation to ethical considerations remains her sphere.

Although Murdoch tends to leave the socio-political implications of her fictions unexplored she is clearly aware of their existence and importance. *The Book and the Brotherhood* is, among other things, about the creation of a text the content of which amounts to a political theory which at least one character sees as potentially revolutionizing its readers. But this strand of the novel runs alongside another one which details the failure of the writer of this potentially revolutionary

[8] Very few of Murdoch's non-fictional writings are directly concerned with social and political issues. They include "The Moral Decision about Homosexuality" (*Man and Society* 1964), "Political Morality" (*Listener* 21 Sept 1967) which deals with Vietnam, and "Socialism and Selection" (*Black Paper 3*, 1975).

book as a social and moral being, portraying him as a destructive individual on an interpersonal level. It has to be remembered here that Murdoch's truly "good" characters are always described as being "devoid of theory" (this is a description of Kathleen from *The Red and the Green*, 256); theorizing is out of place with them as Julius says about Tallis (*A Fairly Honourable Defeat*, 362); they do not have a theory about themselves (Stuart in *The Good Apprentice*, 444).

Murdoch's privileging of the personal over the political in relation to ethics may be explained in two ways: one is the genre which she employs, the novel, which as a form is associated with the foregrounding and exploration of the personal[9] (Weil, in contrast, writes non-fiction); the other is her sense of the dissociation of theory and practice, a sense perhaps, too, that the personal is the political, that ultimately only the education of the individual can effect desirable social and political changes. Her writings, in tune with her ethical demand that people ought to pay attention to the details of the world, move from the particular to the general, never privileging theory over practice or the group over the individual.

Despite these differences Weil and Murdoch share a moral vision centred on selflessness, detachment, and attention to others as the basis for moral progress. One way of explaining this shared vision is by looking at the relationship between gender and attitudes to moral dilemmas as analysed by Carol Gilligan in *In a Different Voice* which details her research on this relationship. For her investigation she takes as her starting point Chodorow's study of the establishment of gender identity in children which states that as children up to at least the age of three tend to be looked after almost exclusively (and almost universally) by their mothers:

> For boys and men, separation and individuation are critically tied to gender identity since separation from the mother is essential for the development of masculinity. For girls and women, issues of femininity or feminine identity do not depend on the achievement of separation from the mother or on progress

[9] See Watt, *The Rise of the Novel* (ch. 1), Van Ghent, *The English Novel* (4), Spencer, *The Rise of the Woman Novelist* (20-2).

of individuation. (8)

A masculine gender identity is established through separation and detachment while a feminine gender identity is based on attachment. Gilligan suggests that as a result " male gender identity is threatened by intimacy while female gender identity is threatened by separation" (8).

According to Gilligan, this difference in the process of achieving gender identity is reflected in the way in which women and men respond to moral dilemmas. Gilligan found that men tend to be concerned with the rights of the individual, with "doing the right thing" on the basis of rationality and an abstract principle of justice, whereas women tend to view moral dilemmas in terms of the obligation of care and responsibility they feel within relationships:

> The moral imperative that emerges repeatedly in interviews with women is an injunction to care, a responsibility to discern and alleviate the 'real and recognizable trouble' of this world. For men, the moral imperative appears rather as an injunction to respect the rights of others and thus to protect from interference the rights to life and self-fulfilment. (100)

Men, in this representation, tend towards self-expression while women tend towards self-sacrifice.

If one compares Gilligan's findings with Murdoch's and Weil's moral philosophy one cannot but conclude that these two writers propagate the female moral imperative, as detailed in Gilligan's studies. The key terms of their philosophy, such as "attention" and "self-effacement", mirror Gilligan's description of the female moral attitude. The implication of this is that Weil and Murdoch essentially propose a philosophy which perpetuates an already existent female attitude towards morality, or at least one more obviously associated with women than men.

The implications of this philosophy are worth considering. It constitutes an attempt to validate and elevate to a universal principle of moral conduct (this moral philosophy is meant, after all, to apply to *both* men and women) what is basically the female position and experience in Western culture. For women that suggests a continuation and intensification of their already existent situation but - given the demands for selflessness - this does not include the progression

towards a "recognition of the need for personal integrity" (Gilligan 166). Personal integrity is here not achieved through the acceptance of the self and its needs (which are rejected) but through the moral attitude adopted. For women this moral philosophy implies remaining in and perfecting the state of complete other-orientedness they are socialized into anyway.

For men, on the other hand, it implies the education towards the female moral position and is therefore much more radical in its demands than the conventional education toward morality, as outlined by Gilligan. It implies not suppressing those attributes considered feminine. Within this representation of gender and moral development, women, because of their gender-identity related socialization towards responsibility and care, should find it much easier to attempt to live in accordance with Weil's and Murdoch's ideal of morality than men whose socialization towards self-expression and the preservation of personal integrity demands a complete change if they are to follow the ideals of self-effacement and attention to others. Murdoch's moral philosophy, while perpetuating a *status quo* for women, has thus quite radical implications for the male position in Western culture. If we accept that women are already being socialized into an attitude which is expressive of Weil's and Murdooch's moral philosophy then one conclusion to be drawn is that their philosophy is about unselfing the other, educating those who read their writings, especially men - who, from a perspective of gender, constitute the other - towards self-effacement.

This is not to say that either Weil or Murdoch see themselves as feminists. On the contrary. They do not on the surface identify with women. They do not offer an overtly woman-centred program for change that inscribes women into the culture they are part of. Reference to sexual difference is eradicated rather than foregrounded. Van Herik talks of Weil's "disinterest [*sic*] in addressing women's special social jeopardy" ("Looking, Eating, and Waiting" 80); Bregman maintains that "for Weil, who was always in solidarity with all oppressed people, 'women' did not exist as a group" (92). In this she differs radically from Simone de Beauvoir, a contemporary of hers (Pétrement 51-2) who, perhaps because she became interested in existentialism, a philosophy which advocates the preoccupation with self, could engage in the

exploration of the relation between the sexes. In Weil's case "her attempt to avoid viewing herself or being viewed as a woman" (Bregman 102) leads to a denial of that aspect of herself as was the case with another aspect of herself, her Jewishness (Zadovsky Knopp 120). Weil, then, is no feminist any more than Murdoch, who has emphatically rejected a feminist stance (Caen 82-3).

The fact that neither Weil nor Murdoch see themselves as feminists does not, however, preclude the possibility of *feminist readings* of their texts. There are several ways in which this can be done; one might look at what motivates the production of a text, or a specific kind of text, or at how such a text might be read, or at the uses to which it might be put. Biographical criticism such as we get in, say, Ellen Moers' *Literary Women*, or in some of the more recent readings by women of Weil's work (e.g. Cliff, Murray, Van Herik) addresses the interface between women's lives and their texts, revealing the context in which Weil and Murdoch write, and the significance that the specificity of their experience as women might have on their writing. One could, making use of French feminist theory, the work of Cixous and Kristeva, bias such a reading towards "biological criticism" (Showalter, "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness" 17), stressing the importance of the body as a source of imagery and structure in writing (Showalter 18). Weil's frequent presentation of her thoughts "in an unsystematic and fragmentary form" and her "obsessive circling round certain ideas" as Murdoch describes it (KV 613), the relationship between her eating disorder and her reading of the Eucharist (see Loades, "Eucharistic Sacrifice") as well as her food-related imagery, lend themselves to such a reading. A further type of feminist reading might entail the appropriation of ideas presented by Weil and/or Murdoch for a revision of, for example, Christian spirituality from a feminist perspective as Jeffrey Eaton does in "Simone Weil and Feminist Spirituality". One might also suggest, as I have done in this thesis, that it is possible to detail a gender bias in Weil's and Murdoch's work which revalues traditional attributes of femininity, making them the very basis of moral conduct.

This is not to say that such a revaluation is desirable. Indeed, in Weil's case it - at least indirectly - led to her death. The demand for

one says, "When once the whole of one's desire is turned towards God one has no desire to eat when one is hungry." (FLN 318) is another. Selflessness to the point of self-annihilation raises the question of the desirability of socializing women into selflessness, and indeed of absolute selflessness as an ideal. As Virginia Woolf wrote of "the Angel in the House":

> She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult arts of family life. She sacrificed herself daily. If there was a chicken, she took the leg; if there was a draught she sat in it. . . Above all - I need not say it - she was pure[10]. . . I did my best to kill her. . . Had I not killed her she would have killed me. ("Professions for Women" 59)

Murdoch's view is that "ordinary balanced human nature" would prevent self-extinction, and that Weil's concept of attention "would involve a certain control of the operation" of selflessness (letter to the author, 1 Sept. 1988). Such might be the case in Murdoch's fiction but was, indeed, not the case with Weil herself, or Christ who is an important symbol for them both. Although Weil says, "one must give one's life for those one loves, but one must not kill oneself" (FLN 331) there are clearly instances where the two cannot be very easily disentangled.

Weil and Murdoch do not occupy feminist positions but they can be identified in terms of how, as women and writers, they are situated in society. Weil and Murdoch as heterosexual women are male-identified (see 7, 71, 75-6, 88-91 in this thesis). In *Reinventing Womanhood* Carolyn Heilbrun suggests that women in Western culture have only limited access to power and knowledge; where they gain access to these male-dominated spheres they do so "by accepting the status of honorary male" (39) and come to conceive of themselves "not as an outsider but rather as an insider among men" (39). This is especially true for the generation of women Weil and Murdoch belong to. Heilbrun cites a study by Margaret Hennig of a group of women who "made it" in the male professional world

[10] Weil talks of the Virgin as "the perfectly pure creature" (FLN 338). She also says, "One must acquire energy from worldly things, but not allow one atom of it to be used for worldly things. Literally, it is total purity or death." (FLN 348) Purity here is not associated with fear of direct contamination but with the possibility of unification with God.

which highlights certain characteristics common to these women's background. They were all born between 1912 and 1929, matured in the 1930s and 1940s, had "close ties to another cultural heritage", were first born, an only child, and had close relationships with their fathers: "The father was the role model; the mother, while regarded with affection, was tolerated as "a mother" in a generalized way: the daughter had no intention of repeating her pattern of life." (50) The subjects of Hennig's study had, as children, a strong preference for adults, did not especially like women in general, did not marry until they were past their middle thirties, and did not have children (48-52). Quite a few of these characteristics are manifested by Weil and Murdoch too.

The position of "honorary male" carries with it a number of implications. It suggests that the male position is favoured over that of the female; adopting it is a way of underwriting it, acknowledging its supremacy, and accepting the sterreotypical views of the masculine and the feminine - after all, why else acquire such a role? The problem for a woman, however, is that this demands the suppression of at least some of her identification with the female, specifically the feminine without at the same time unsexing herself; even if, like Weil, one adopts male clothing, the biological basis of one's sex remains and cannot but shape one's awareness. This is particularly the case if the woman in question is heterosexual and remain defined as female relative to the men around her, which puts her into a continual double-bind of being like a man in terms of status but not being a man biologically speaking. The (heterosexual) woman who adopts the role of "honorary male" must, in consequence, find herself in constant conflict in relation to the male world: through adopting this role she endorses a particular masculine position and rejects its opposite feminine one, yet she is not a man and is at least biologically bound to some identification with women. What, in terms of Weil's and Murdoch's writings, are the implications of this?

In both women's writings identification with the feminine *and* with the masculine find expression at the levels of content and style. Identification with the feminine is reflected in their philosophy in so far as it advocates selflessness and attention; in Weil's abdication of responsibility for being the authority behind her writings as expressed in her letters to Father Perrin (discussed in chapter three); in

Murdoch's *semiotic* disruption in her fiction (to use Kristeva's terminology) of the semantic rather than of the structures of language itself (see 44-5, 252-4 in this thesis); in the introduction of various types of ambiguity, and in her use of *detail* as the means of conveying the idea of attentive focussing. These are discussed in chapter five. Identification with the feminine is also highlighted through the repeated merging of identities in Murdoch's work where the role of the individual as a moral being absorbs the discrete identities of author, character, and reader, where moral purpose subsumes class and gender difference at the level of intellectual preoccupation. Weil's and Murdoch's focus on the "inner life" (women's space) and their privileging of attitude over action are both expressive of this specific cluster.

At the same time, there are a number of ways in which dissociation from the feminine (and, by implication, association with the masculine) is signalled. Weil, interested in the Catholic variety of Christianity, dismisses the cult of the Virgin Mary, for example. She had no female *confidantes* equivalent to, say, Father Perrin or Thibon: her intellectual life was shared with men rather than with women. To some extent at least Weil rejected her physical projection of femaleness, wearing men's clothes, eating so little that her body did not outwardly betray a female form. She saw herself in competition with men, not women. Murdoch's dissociation from the feminine, apart from her belief that women ought to "join the human race", and her rejection of the Women's Liberation movement, her lack of interest in "female issues", is revealed in her representation of women in her fiction, especially in her more recent writings. Earlier novels included powerful unconventional women like Honor Klein in *A Severed Head* or Emma Sands in *An Unofficial Rose*. Lately, however, women who are presented as leading independent lives are portrayed fairly unsympathetically. Two examples, Elspeth Macran and May Baltram from *The Good Apprentice*, should suffice to make the point. Murdoch's single women are on their own not by choice but because of some unfortunate embittering experience that has turned them into sour acrimonious beings. The "other" type of single woman from Georgie Hands of *A Severed Head* to Diana of *The Philosopher's Pupil* is the "kept" woman, the mistress of a married man. Murdoch's single women are usually not financially self-sufficient.

I would disagree with Goshgarian that Murdoch in her writings merely explodes stereotypes of femininity/femaleness which are the result of a male perspective on women. Suggesting that Murdoch reads the world from a male perspective (which is not the same as saying that she has only this perspective) fits in well with seeing her as an "honorary male". But she has been too dismissive of women in general in interviews to warrant the notion that her fiction simply reveals the adoption of a male viewpoint. What other explanation might one offer?

Murdoch's hostility to "emancipated" women has become more overt in her recent fiction. Elspeth Macran is rather disparagingly described as a writer of "Women's Lib journalism" (GA 216). In *The Philosopher's Pupil* we get "a few young things" ineffectively playing at being a women's support group. More importantly, there is no real suggestion of female bonding in Murdoch's work, not between mothers and daughters, not between friends. On the contrary, *The Book and the Brotherhood*, for example, is full of failures of such bonding or female support. Lily, for example, in a sense destroys Tamar who approaches her for woman-to-woman advice by telling her to have an abortion which Tamar later comes to regret. Tamar's mother Violet, an illegitimate child herself and full of resentment and bitterness, does all she can to destroy her daughter's happiness. Midge makes a point reiterated by other female characters:

> Men always think women flock together at such times [bad ones]. No one has been near me, it's like having scarlet fever. (GA 465)

Female bonding based on equality and support, though its potential existence is recognized, does not occur in Murdoch's fiction. If there is a bonding it exists because the women involved have a specific relationship to a particular man or set of men. This is true for May, Ilona, and Bettina Baltram of *The Good Apprentice* as much as of Rose and Jean of *The Book and the Brotherhood*. It is always associated with weakness rather than strength - and no wonder, perhaps, if it exists solely as a response formation, and as one related to men. Heilbrun maintains that:

> Women writers, like successful women in male-dominated professions, have failed to imagine autonomous women characters. With remarkably few exceptions, women writers do not imagine

> women characters with even the autonomy they themselves have achieved. (71)

Women in Murdoch's fiction do not bond from a position of strength. Neither Honor Klein of *A Severed Head* nor Stella of *The Philosopher's Pupil* have obvious female friends - rather, they form allegiances with various men. This, of course, fits in perfectly with Heilbrun's suggestion that one of the things which characterizes women who are "honourary males" is their lack of bonding with other women.

It is worth mentioning in this context that Murdoch's dissociation from the feminine in her writing finds its perhaps most interesting expression in her portrayal of mother-child relationships. Significantly, in the lives of Murdoch's fictional adults the mother as an important figure is mostly absent (her own mother is still alive). Where the mother is remembered it is either as a domineering figure (see, for example, Gerard's memory of his mother, BAB 56-61) set against a gentle but ineffectual and therefore betraying father, or as an angel figure all sweetness and light (as, for example, Will's or Danby's memory of their mothers, BD). Mothers in these characters' memories are something of the past, associated with childhood. Where mothers exist in the characters' lives into adulthood their relationships to their children, both male and female, tend to be problematic and unsatisfactory. They tend to be the "*not* good enough mothers" such as Alex (PP), or Violet (BAB), or May or Midge (GA). One could argue either that Murdoch does not consider satisfactory relationships between mothers and children at the stage when the children have become adults to be part of real life or reality (despite the fact that she represents hers with her mother as idyllic; Haffenden 200), or that she considers unsatisfactory ones more interesting to portray, or that what these portrayals signal is her problematic relationship to the feminine as a result of adopting the role of "honorary male" because achieving that role involves at least partial detachment from the feminine. The fact remains that there is no satisfactory mother-child relationship in her fiction in which the child is an adult. Only the fantasy relations to the mothers, filtered through the memory of her characters, give a positive - distorted - image of the "good enough mother".

From a psychoanalytic viewpoint one might suggest that Weil's and Murdoch's moral philosophy reveals an acceptance of the impossibility of the return to the original mother-child dyad which itself is characterized by merging to the point of undifferentiation between self and other. This phase, it will be remembered, is associated with the absence of the reality principle which forms the basis of an understanding of the separateness of self and other. Although a number of characters in Murdoch's fiction, such as Charles (SS), yearn for a return to a state of undifferentiation, Murdoch portrays this as the yearning for a self-centred fantasy to come true, and suggests that it is doomed. Within her philosophical writings the condemnation of fantasy as egotistic and the perception of reality as self-denying can be read as the representation of a moral stance which expresses a successful move beyond the desire for undifferentiation that stems from early infancy. The same can be applied to Weil's advocation of detachment. The rejection of the mother and attachment thus becomes part of a certain maturation process which demands the acceptance of the notion that detachment is desirable and expressive of maturity.[11]

By adopting the position of "honorary male" heterosexual women, in a sense, cast themselves out into a no-person's land. The identification with women, for social reasons, has to remain as partial as the identification with men, for biological reasons. The "honorary male's" desire is in the direction of identification with men. Women are fairly easily dismissed. But because the identification with men has obvious limits for this woman, the "honorary male" remains on the threshold, on the edge of the territory she desires to inhabit. To be able to bear this (if she is not to retreat or leave behind any identification with the female whatsoever) one thing she can do is *elevate to a virtue the notion of detachment* which then validates her position. It is perhaps this problematic, the issue of how to be an "honorary male", that constitutes the primary bond between Weil and Murdoch. For in Weil's writings Murdoch must have seen something of her own predicament, found an echo to her situation, namely, the continual struggle between self-assertion and self-denial inherent in the position of the heterosexual

[11] Waugh in *Feminine Fictions* argues against this (44).

"honorary male".

Before going on to the question of how identification with the masculine is represented in Weil's and Murdoch's writings it is worth noting here that the "good" persons in Murdoch's fiction tend to be represented as either androgynous or, as having homoerotic tendencies[12]. This is as true of Christopher in *A Word Child* as it is of Tallis and Stuart, for example. The "good" person in Murdoch's fiction, whether male or female (examples of the latter are the Abbess in *The Bell* or Lisa at the beginning of *Bruno's Dream*, or Anne in *Nuns and Soldiers*), is not powerful or effective or, most importantly in this context, sexually active. In the case of the male characters a degree of "feminization" is involved, whereas the opposite is not true of the good women, i.e. they are not "masculinized" as part of being "good". This seems to support the notion that Murdoch elevates qualities traditionally associated with a feminine stance to the principle on which moral conduct ought to be based for men and women alike. The "feminization" of men in the service of equality in social interactions is familiar from women's writing of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century such as Olive Schreiner's *Story of an African Farm*, Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*, and Dorothy Cowlin's *Winter Solstice*. But whereas Woolf in *A Room of One's Own* presents androgyny[13] (the harmonious co-presence of the masculine and the feminine (93-4) in every individual's mind) as an ideal desirable for both women and men, Murdoch represents it as a one-way system, affecting men rather than women. Where men have to achieve a feminization (along traditional gender lines) as part of becoming moral beings, women do not have to acquire masculine traits but rather suppress their femininity in so far as it is linked to sexual activity. As one might expect, then, men in Murdoch's novels who are described as very "masculine" like Julius King, or George in *The Philosopher's Pupil*, or Harry in *The Good Apprentice*, and women who are represented as very

[12] It is perhaps worth noting that Weil appears to have been opposed to homosexuality. Her question, "Does the *disgusting* nature of homosexuality actually proceed from *the fact* that it represents a degradation of some higher possibility?" (emphasis added) suggests that she accepted that "chastity as a self-fertilization on the part of man . engenders a higher form of energy", an idea taken from Plato. (NB II 578)

[13] For a discussion of Woolf's representation of androgyny see Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own* 263-97.

"feminine" like Georgie Hands in *A Severed Head* lack moral integrity and are revealed as self-obsessed. The implication seems to be that a pronounced gender-specific sexual identity is associated with a failure in moral striving. What underlies this is, perhaps, the notion that an individual who foregrounds sexual identity through his or her self-presentation implicitly indicates a need for attachment.[14]

The problem with both Weil's and Murdoch's position, as indeed with Woolf's, is that "femininity" and "masculinity" are not considered as cultural constructs and that gender attribution as such does not become a subject of investigation; femininity and masculinity are instead treated as "given", fixed in the same way that the biological sex is. Typically, in Murdoch's fiction, where mistaken sexual identity frequently occurs (women being mistaken for men and *vice versa*), it functions as a decoy for revealing the beholder's obsessions rather than as a basis for interrogating gender difference. Moral improvement on the part of the beholder goes together with seeing people as they are - female or male - returning them to fixed categories. It is perhaps worth noting here that the sexual identity of the "good" persons in Murdoch's fiction is not questioned; nobody mistakes Lisa for a man, or Tallis for a woman. Sexual identity and sexual activity are two different issues in this context, and Murdoch uses her games with sexual identity to reveal both the role of fantasy and the role of socialization into particular cultural norms concerning external attributes such as clothes, hair styles, names etc. in the formation of the characters' and the readers' expectations.

To turn to the issue of the "honorary male's" identification with men, what Weil's and Murdoch's writings share is the attempt to work out their relationship to both "the father" and "the word" - and I put both terms in inverted commas to signal the metaphorical dimension attached to these. Throughout Murdoch's fiction we find a preoccupation with "the

[14] Weil maintains, "One can project sexuality upon any kind of object: . . . God (but in this case it won't be the true God). Or one can kill sexuality and effect a transmutation of the energy it contained. This operation is what detachment is." (FLN 287)

father"[15] - as power figure, as law giver. Often these fathers are not the biological fathers of those characters obsessed with them but are father figures in the sense that Greenfield (see ch. 3) uses the term. They are males endowed with a position of authority. Early examples are Hugo Belfounder (*Under the Net*), Misha Fox (*The Flight from the Enchanter*), Demoyte (*The Sandcastle*). More recent ones include Guy Openshaw (*Nuns and Soldiers*), Rozanov (PP), Jesse Baltram, Thomas, and Harry Cuno (GA), and Crimond and Gerard (BAB). Father figures, in fact, abound in Murdoch's fiction. They tend to have two functions, either to lay down the law and/or to save/forgive those who sees them as "fathers". But, of course, as symbols they are doomed for symbols are expressions of the fantasies of the self.

What these father figures reflect is the needs of the individuals obsessed with them. In the course of the novels these individuals invariably find themselves confronted with the fact that their notions of these figures are fantasies. In Murdoch's earlier novels what tends to emerge is that the authority of the father figure is not one inherent in him - he is not God after all - but that authority is invested in him by the obsessed individual. The father figure is thus "unselfed" through being made "ordinary", through having his authority represented as something that is not an inextricable part of him but can be withdrawn by the obsessed individual as the latter develops a more "mature" attitude towards the father figure. Essentially this means that he becomes independent of the law giver and, possibly, turns into a law giver himself. I use "himself" here advisedly; the central relationship to the father figure is often that of another male (Jake-Hugo, Mor-Demoyte, Edward-Jesse, George-Rozanov, Duncan-Crimond). When the "father" is seen as a power figure, his authority is predominantly that of the law giver.

However, the father figure can also have another role, that of protector and saviour. It is in this role that Murdoch's more recent father figures have been most prominent. Striking examples are, of course, Jesse Baltram and Rozanov. In both cases what the obsessed

[15] In "A House of Theory" Murdoch identifies "the resistance to the nineteenth-century father-figure in his many guises" (18) as a source of moral energy.

"sons" most ardently desire is to be attended to and forgiven by their fathers. In both cases the attention finally granted frees the sons from their preoccupation with the fathers. Their sense of identity, dependent on the attention given by the father, is established through such contact which at the same time dissolves the spell under which the have been. Thus when Edward leaves Seegard, after having discovered Jesse's will making him, "his dear much loved son", his heir, the final sentence reads: "The enchanter's palace was already beginning to fall to pieces." (484) Similarly, George is reported to be a different man at the end of *The Philosopher's Pupil*; his change was initiated by a letter Rozanov sent him, a letter intended to sever all relations between them but which George reads as Rozanov finally responding to him, attending. Murdoch appears to suggest that fulfilling this need sets the individual free.

Not only are George and Edward set free by the experience of attention from the father; the end of their obsession is also marked by the actual death of the father figures. Death, in fact, as is stated in *Henry and Cato,* functions as "the great teacher" in Murdoch's fiction, signalling the end of all illusion. Fathers' deaths (rather than those of mothers) occur frequently in her novels: Bruno, Guy, Jesse, and Rozanov, are just a few of the many. There are two aspects to these deaths. On the one hand, they represent a biological necessity. Aging and dying are natural processes. From a psychoanalytic viewpoint, and this constitutes the second aspect here, detachment from the father signals the coming of age of the psyche, the completion of its development. As May Baltram laconically puts it:

> Men have to kill their fathers. Life has to go on. (GA 241)

George (PP) finds himself enacting this process. Not believing in a personal God, given that this god in Christian religion bears the traits of the "father figure", thus constitutes a killing of the father. The priests in Murdoch's fiction who do not believe in God have effectively done this.

Leo Peshkov, when asked by Muriel if he likes his father, says:

> Fond of him? Haven't you read your Freud, girl? . . . You know all boys hate their fathers. Just like all girls are in love with them. (TA 70)

This distinction is understandable; a man who kills his father can take over the father's position.

But what about women who kill the father? In other words, why do Weil and Murdoch reject a personal God? In part, of course, this is the function of a historical process of demythologizing religion.[16] But it can also be read in psychoanalytic terms by returning to the issue of the maturation of the psyche. Since "honorary males" are, in fact, women, they can never occupy the place of the father, they can approximate to him only to a limited extent. If, however, he is replaced by an impersonal entity, endowed with his qualities while lacking his masculine appearance, the situation changes - this new entity becomes a point towards which the women can move and, even if this entity takes on the characteristics of a Platonic ideal, it is still something ultimately reachable and completely identifiable with, even for women. Unselfing the other (here: depriving God of His traditional masculine guise) is thus one way by means of which the female self can enter a religious economy that demands a striving towards an Other which now is part of a continuum that validates the female self. The "creation" of an impersonal God, or a "Good" which is like God but lacks the paternal image, means that rather than substituting one sexual identity for another we are presented with a blank, not an androgynous being but a being beyond sex and gender.[17] We therefore have a continuity not just between a female self and this new entity but also the possibility of the same continuity for male selves, a fact partly explored in Murdoch's fiction through some of the good, "fatherless" characters like Stuart, or Jenkin (BAB). While God as an entity becomes depersonalized in Weil's moral vision and replaced by "the Good" in Murdoch's, the structures of which this entity is part are not themselves questioned. The belief in

[16] See George Steiner, *In Bluebeard's Castle* (36-48); Hebblethwaite, "Feuerbach's Ladder"; Taubes, "The Absent God".

[17] This differs from Murdoch's "good" person who has androgynous qualities if male but is feminine if female. "Good" persons of either category abstain from sex.

Platonic ideals involves, of course, the belief in hierarchies, and, in the same way that Murdoch does not disrupt linguistic structures in her writings, so Weil in *The Need for Roots*, for example, does not do away with the notion of a hierarchical society. For both women morality is tied to hierarchy but not to male figureheads.

The unselfing of God is problematic, especially in relation to the notion of indifference. God's indifference to man, which Weil regards as the expression of supreme justice and which is mirrored in Murdoch's fiction by man's (the father figures') indifference to man, is difficult to bear.[18] Murdoch's novels are full of the disappointments and frustrations of characters obsessed with father figures. Father figures fail one. Rozanov fails George, Harry fails Stuart. They fail through not seeing or not acting upon the needs of the sons. They fail because as human beings they are represented as only - if at all - partially good. They, through their very being, say: "There is no God." This is not so difficult to bear where the father figure has the saving and protecting role. The death of that father in Murdoch's fiction occasions predominantly strong grief. Witness Gerard's response to his father's death (BAB), or Edward's at Jesse's (GA). The death of the father figure who has been a law giver, however, is more problematic, especially when it coincides with a point where no one else can take over that role in a just way.[19] One response is that of Carel Fisher who feels moved beyond good and evil. This is also true of Leo (TA), and of George (PP). There seems to be the suggestion that the freedom experienced, the lawlessness that results from the death of the law-giving father, can be contained only by the emergence of a new order; otherwise structurelessness leads to the breakdown of morality.

This brings us to the issue of "the word", here understood both as law and text. It is noticeable that in Murdoch's fiction it is always men

[18] See Hamblin, "Simone Weil's Theology of Evil, Love, and the Self-Emptying of God".

[19] This replicates Murdoch's search for a "working philosophical psychology" (SOG 46) to "fill the philosophical void" (SOG 47) which will reinstate value, and order in people's lives after the demise of God the Father.

who are engaged in the task of writing a great book,[20] usually a philosophical book, that comes out of considering philosophers who have shaped Murdoch's own thinking. All her characters writing philosophical texts refer to Plato, Kant, Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Plotinus. Murdoch's ambiguous attitude towards philosophy and the writing of philosophical texts (see 25 in this thesis) finds expression in her fictional philosophers frequently (like her) abandoning their pursuit - this is true of Hugo Belfounder as much as of Rozanov. Yet in her most recent novel, *The Book and the Brotherhood*, there is also the belief in a new "good book", Crimond's work, that will revolutionize our moral thinking. After all, it happened at least once in Western culture with the Bible - why not again? *The Book and the Brotherhood* affirms Murdoch's belief in the book and the word, the text or speech, as the ultimate source of change and improvement. At the end of the novel Gerard, another father figure in the text, is busily engaged in preparing to write an answer to Crimond's book and Crimond himself is already in the process of writing a new and different book. These exchanges, it would seem, signal the possibility of change.

At the same time there is no suggestion that good thinking and moral goodness go together. All the philosophizing father figures are portrayed as morally inadequate, incapable of responding to others' needs, self-obsessed. Crimond and Rozanov, again, are prime examples of this. They pay tribute to Murdoch's notion that we are specialized creatures, able to be good in limited ways only. The truly good characters in her fiction are not the ones who produce great books, or, indeed, anything.

The ineradicability of the individual's needs has gradually become more foregrounded in Murdoch's fiction. Thus we find in *The Philosopher's Pupil*:

> To say he [George] was a narcissist was to say little. We are mostly narcissists, and only in a few, not always with

[20] One way in which Elspeth Macran's article on May Baltram's "memoirs" in *The Good Apprentice* is used is to reveal how women betray each other. In Murdoch's novels women certainly do not produce "great works" - a form of self-directed irony on the part of Murdoch?

> felicitous results, is narcissism overcome (broken, crushed, annihilated, nothing less will serve) by religious discipline or psycho-analysis. (73)

Jenkin asserts that the healthy ego does a job and should not be destroyed (BAB 128). The fulfilment of George's need to be attended to by Rozanov liberates him from his obsessions; Edward, once forgiven by Jesse, regains his sense of self.

Associated with this issue of the ineradicability of the needs of the individual is the relation of theory and practice, ideals and life. This is one of the preoccupations of Murdoch's last three novels: *The Philosopher's Pupil*, *The Good Apprentice*, and *The Book and the Brotherhood*. In all three cases parts of the titles focus on what one might call the younger generation, those who will occupy the place of the fathers. Indeed, the focus is not just on the younger generation but also, echoing Murdoch's subscription to the need for hierarchical structures, on the supremacy of the individual over the group. In the first two novels mentioned this is signalled through the singular "pupil" and "apprentice". The last novel explores the failure of a group to function as a group other than for financial purposes. The brotherhood, which, in fact, contains brothers and sisters, relates to Crimond, the father figure engaged in producing the new "good book", as the sons do to the father in the primal horde described by Freud in *The Origins of Religion*:

> . . . in primaeval times primitive man lived in small hordes, each under the domination of a powerful male. . . . The strong male was lord and father of the entire horde and unrestricted in his power, which he exercised with violence. All the females were his property - wives and daughters of his own horde . . . The lot of the sons was a hard one . . . Their only resource was to collect together in small communities, to get themselves wives by robbery, and, when one or other of them could succeed in it, to raise themselves into a position similar to their father's in the primal horde. . . .
>
> The first decisive step towards a change in this sort of 'social' organization seems to have been that the expelled brothers, living in a community, united to overpower their

> father and, as was the custom in those days, devoured him raw. (324-5)

It is easy to see the parallels between this passage and the events of *The Book and the Brotherhood* where Crimond rules the roost, has in effect turned his back on the brotherhood, thus expelling them as a unit (he interacts with some of the more father-like sons such as Jenkin and Gerard, but on a one-to-one basis), and takes a female, Duncan's Jean, "belonging" to someone else in the horde, which incenses the brotherhood and ultimately leads to their rebellion. Crimond's violence in his interactions with people is also foregrounded through his repeated physical attacks on Duncan, the most "physical" of the "sons", and his desire for duels and a violent death. The way in which the brothers attempt to overpower Crimond, as is the custom *these* days, is by considering the withdrawal of their financial support. Crimond, however, proves unassailable on this level, and change comes about not as a result of a collective act but through the different actions of a number of individuals. The death of the good male figure, Jenkin, and the corruption of the good female character, Tamar, leaves no Christ figure to inherit the position of the father. As Gerard says towards the end of the novel to Rose:

> I wish you wouldn't keep talking about "we" - just speak for yourself - you keep on imagining there's some kind of brotherhood, but we're scattered, we aren't a band of brothers, just solitary worried individuals, not even young any more. (559)

Murdoch, like Weil, presents neither the collective nor the community as a viable source for effective action. Both see the individual as the source of salvation for society. Murdoch's wholesale attack on contemporary society in *The Book and the Brotherhood*, her most politically engaged text since, perhaps, *The Red and the Green*, ultimately subscribes to a conservative view of history which believes in the greatness of the individual. And, although there is also, as with Weil, the notion that it is necessary to have a "law", a "good book" that will influence people's perceptions and moral stances (this is, of course, what fuelled Weil to see her work as valuable), Murdoch's fiction

suggests that life is led at the level of the individual and his or her day-to-day concerns.

In fact, Murdoch's last novels have focussed more sharply on the separateness of theory and practice, on the fact that life has to go on being lived *while* the "good book" is being written, and it is at this mundane, practical level that solutions for moral dilemmas have daily to be found. It could be argued that this constitutes a "new realism" in Murdoch, an understanding which Weil tried to live but ultimately, and to her cost, found impossible because of the high standards she set for herself. Murdoch has reached a point which Weil might have come to had she lived longer. Murdoch's "new realism" was given poetic expression by her in the final sentence of "Existentialists and Mystics":

> Perhaps the best that can be said, and that is indeed a great deal, is that the writer can and will in the end resemble the Buddhist master who said that when he was young he thought that mountains were mountains and rivers were rivers, then after many years of study and devotion he decided that mountains were not mountains and rivers were not rivers, and then at last when he was very old and wise he came to understand that mountains are mountains and rivers are rivers.

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