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Iris Murdoch's "Learning Protagonists" : Toward Contingency, Responsibility and Reality

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IRIS MURDOCH'S "LEARNING PROTAGONISTS": TOWARD CONTINGENCY, RESPONSIBILITY AND REALITY

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This thesis is submitted as a creditable and independent investigation by a candidate for the degree, Master of Arts, and is acceptable for meeting the thesis requirements for this degree. Acceptance of this thesis does not imply that the conclusions reached by the candidate are necessarily the conclusions of the major department.

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INTRODUCTION

For over thirty years Iris Murdoch has continuously provided entertaining and thought-provoking novels. This prolific Irish-born English novelist has also sparked contention and controversy. She is accused of overtly manipulating her characters, placing them in extreme and implausible situations, sacrificing the realism which she admires and espouses. The world of literary criticism remains divided regarding their evaluation of Murdoch's intentions and achievements. While some steadfastly deny her a place among writers of the first rank, others proclaim her the greatest author writing in England today.

Because she was born in Dublin and raised and educated in London, both Ireland and England claim Murdoch among their ranks of renowned writers. She remains conscious of her Anglo-Irish ancestry in her fiction, often through the presence of a minor character from Ireland; in addition, she has devoted one novel to the Easter uprising of 1916 (which occurred several years before her birth). However, the majority of her settings and characters revolve around London. Murdoch studied the "classics" (Greek and Latin literature, history and philosophy) at Oxford, graduating with first class honors in 1942 (Current Biography 269). After college she worked for the British Treasury and then The United

Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration, helping to place refugees (269). She returned to academic life in 1947, the recipient of a "studentship" in philosophy at Cambridge (269). She later became a Fellow and a tutor in philosophy at Oxford (269).

At some point during this time Murdoch began writing fiction, although her first published book was nonfiction. Sartre: Romantic Rationalist (1953), brought Murdoch recognition as a philosopher and expressed her belief that existentialism encouraged solipsism (which she saw as a threat to modern man). According to Rubin Rabinovitz, Murdoch wrote and destroyed five novels before publishing Under the Net in 1954 (8). Since that time, Murdoch has published twenty-three novels, four plays, three books on philosophy, a book of poetry, a libretto for an opera, and numerous essays. Her primary concern in her essays is the role of art in life, and the characters in her novels often debate this issue. All of her works reflect a concern with form in the modern novel and with what she perceives to be the relationship between life and art. Murdoch believes that art is illusion, a reflection of life, yet art can also illustrate aspects of life, such as myths and illusions. As Zohreh Sullivan observes, "The movement of her characters away from romantic solipsism and abstraction towards the messy, the contingent, and the ordinary is paralleled by Murdoch's philosophical and fictional theories" (55). Within her novels, Murdoch's subject matter generally deals with the protagonist's

search for self-fulfillment and love, a quest which brings the protagonist to a new awareness of the conflict between illusion and reality, and the need for acceptance of the uncontrollable randomness of life.

In six of her novels, Iris Murdoch chose the male protagonist to function as narrator and tell his own story. The novels which use this narrative technique include: Under the Net (1954), A Severed Head (1961), The Italian Girl (1964), The Black Prince (1973), A Word Child (1975), and The Sea, The Sea (1978) (Cohan 222). In all six novels, the narrators experience self-discovery which leads to the shedding of illusion. They recount their personal development and record their progression from self-centered egoists, deluded about themselves and others, to more fully integrated individuals, aware of the necessity of moral responsibility and the unavoidable nature of contingency in life.

The egoism of the first person narrators is readily established. These men attempt to be in control of their lives, or mistakenly believe that they are, yet their behavior and assumptions blind them to reality. During an interview with Michael Bellamy in 1976, Murdoch explained the reasoning behind her repeated use of self-deceived narrators:

> "I think that people create myths about themselves and are then dominated by the myths. They feel trapped, and they elect other people to play roles in their lives, to

> be gods or destroyers or something, and I think that this mythology is often very deep and very influential and secretive, and a novelist is revealing secrets of this sort." (138)

Murdoch often employs allusions to classical myth, but more commonly she is concerned with the myths that people create and impose upon others and upon themselves. For example, in A Severed Head, the characters who make the acquaintance of Honor Klein--a homely anthropology don--are guilty of erroneous presumptions. They view her as a power figure, intelligent, superior, and removed from everyday human involvement, never suspecting her incestuous relationship with her half-brother. By such means, Murdoch shows the human tendency to view people and situations as we desire them to be, instead of what they, in reality, are.

Although Murdoch makes use of other character types, foremost among these is the deluded, egocentric narrator, the character Frank Baldanza calls "the learning protagonist": "the deficient, somewhat bumbling male protagonist who undergoes a learning experience that forces him to confront the reality of other persons" (84). Murdoch's narrators must acquire insight about moral responsibility by learning from their own struggles. Prior to changing, the narrators are frequently blind to the sacrifices others make for them, and even fail to see others as individuals who have lives and relationships beyond their

interaction with the narrators.

The nature of Murdoch's themes and her background in philosophy--she taught philosophy at St. Anne's College at Oxford for fifteen years (Current Biography 269)--suggest a deliberate integration of philosophy and fiction, but Murdoch denies that she is a "philosophical novelist":

> "I have definite philosophic views, but I don't want to promote them in my novels or to give the novels a kind of metaphysical background . . . I mention philosophy sometimes in the novels because I happen to know about it, just as another writer might talk about coal mining; it happens to come in." (Biles 116)

Perhaps the above statement was an attempt during an interview to downplay the emphasis the critics were giving to the philosophy in her novels. As Donna Gerstenberger has pointed out, "critical reception of Murdoch's novels has been dominated by those who insist on reading them for their philosophical statements or, in more recent years, for their elaborate mythic patterns" (14). While philosophical speculation and mythic patterns are significant elements of her work, it is important not to overlook the other aspects of Murdoch's fiction: unique characterizations, subtle social commentary and vivid descriptions.

It may also be possible that Murdoch is unaware of how dominant the presence of philosophy in her novels may appear to her

readers. A.S. Byatt notes that Murdoch is preoccupied "largely with the relations between art and morals, both of which she sees as, at their best, sustained attempts to distinguish truth from fantasy, particularly in the presentation of a sufficiently complex image of the human personality, and to find out what we mean by, what we really hold to be, 'Good'" (Murdoch 6). Although Byatt was referring to Murdoch's philosophical writings (essays, books, lectures) the statement holds true for her novels as well.

Murdoch's first person narrators suffer from a lack of moral referents. They frequently attempt to isolate themselves from or to deny or ignore the world of contingency which they cannot control, and are generally enmeshed in myths about themselves and other people, but they are forced to realize that their substitute world of illusions ultimately breaks down. Despite her use of mythic patterns, Murdoch considers herself essentially a realist in the tradition of the English novel (Bellamy 139). She believes she has been influenced by the novels of "Jane Austen, Dickens, Dostoevsky, Tolstoi [and] James" (Biles 121). Some of her works have been called twentieth century comedies of manners and compared to Jane Austen's novels. In particular, Murdoch admires the way in which nineteenth century novelists created vividly realized, individual characters that seem to be independent of the author (Gerstenberger 18). For example, a reader remembers Miss Havisham in Dickens' Great Expectations, not

a thinly disguised version of the author.

Like Dickens, Murdoch uses a large cast of recognizable character types which, however, usually have enough idiosyncrasies to individualize them. The reader may expect "witty eccentrics, amoral refugees, diabolical manipulators, yearning women, learned recluses, precociously dangerous adolescents, pathetic outcasts, and muddled male intellectuals" to appear regularly among the cast of characters (Widmer 21). Not every novel contains a representative of each character type, but the aforementioned list aptly covers Murdoch's pool of characters. There are also exceptions--characters who defy such categorization, and characters who may belong to several of the categories. Additionally, it is also perhaps important to remember that Murdoch is a writer who makes use of that which she knows--she worked for the civil service, she worked with displaced persons during World War II, and has had careers as a housewife and a philosophy professor as well as a writer--these occupations and areas of experience often turn up in her novels which are enhanced by her first-hand knowledge.

However, one of the most controversial aspects of Murdoch's fiction is her decision to forego first-hand experience in order to create male narrators/protagonists. When questioned about her recurring use of male narration, Murdoch explained that she finds a certain freedom as a novelist in using the male voice:

> "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 a woman. Writing mainly as a woman may become a bit like writing with a character who is black, or something like that. People then say, 'It's about the black predicament.' Well, then, if one writes 'as a woman,' something about the female predicament may be supposed to emerge." (Biles 119)

Ironically, Murdoch's attempt to avoid being prejudged as a woman writer concerned only with "the female predicament" has led to charges of female chauvinism. Some critics, such as Kingsley Widmer, find Murdoch's male narrators to be offensive stereotypes. While acknowledging that women are frequently the target of Murdoch's "contemptuous wit," he complains that "there seems to be an insistent cerebral delight in catching out her male protagonists--most often English upper-middle class intellectual men with the sexual and moral perplexities of middle-age--in their comic-horrific muddles" (16). Steven Cohan adds, "Though her own remarks may try to direct readers away from a feminist perspective of her narrators as males, it underscores their voices, creating what is in effect a subtext to her irony that helps illuminate why her narrators are repeatedly men, not women" (223).

It seems unlikely that Murdoch is unleashing some deep-seated feminist vengeance against middle-aged men:

> "I'm not interested in the 'woman's world' or the assertion of a 'female viewpoint.' This is often rather an artificial idea and can in fact injure the promotion of equal rights. We want to join the human race, not invent a new separatism." (Biles 119)

As will be seen, the women in her novels are not portrayed less harshly than the men. She works with a variety of characters who possess both strengths and weaknesses.

Since it is a seriously flawed narrator/protagonist who experiences the transformation (from self-centered egoist to a new awareness of the reality of others and of contingency), attaining the reader's sympathetic interest in such a protagonist may be difficult. For example, the narrator in The Black Prince falls in love with a young woman and runs away with her. After he is notified of his sister's suicide, he consummates his passion for the woman under unusual circumstances. The scene is neither tender nor is it particularly violent (which might at least make it understandable as a reaction of sorrow or outrage at the tragic waste of his sister's life). In fact, the perverseness of the scene may horrify the reader, yet that reaction is tempered by knowledge (that the narrator does not deserve his ultimate fate--to be framed for a murder and imprisoned) and empathy (because the reader knows everything the narrator has endured). Murdoch's control of distancing between the reader and the first person

narrator requires a subtle balancing act between sympathetic identification and objective analysis. Murdoch strives to provide the ironic detachment necessary for the reader to appreciate the meaning and frequently the comedy in the protagonist's situation, while not alienating the narrator from the reader's sympathy. Without this careful balance, the reader is likely to tire of a self-important, dislikeable narrator, and toss the book aside, thereby missing the narrator's progression.

In his text The Rhetoric of Fiction (1961), Wayne C. Booth states that "the sustained inside view leads the reader to hope for good fortune for the character with whom he travels, quite independently of the qualities revealed" (246). Jane Austen used this technique, although in third person narration, in her novel entitled Emma. While Emma treats her father with the utmost courtesy and love, she also displays rude behavior to others. Her self-centeredness blinds her to the reality of certain situations and circumstances. Austen expressed the opinion that few would like the character of Emma, other than Miss Austen herself, but Booth believes that by telling the story from Emma's point of view, Austen "insures that we shall travel with Emma rather than stand against her" (245). Murdoch seems to rely on the same technique as Austen, although evaluations of her success differ, as has been pointed out.

While it is true that the narratives in the novels to be

discussed could be viewed as narcissistic self-indulgence on the part of the narrators, it is also true that their narrations/ autobiographies reveal a significant development as they recognize their illusions. The change each narrator experiences forces him to confront himself, to reflect on his life, and to realize the narrowness of his self-absorbed and self-deceived former way of life. At all times, Murdoch uses these first person narrators to develop her themes: the dangers of solipsism, the need for acceptance of moral responsibility, and the need to accept our radical human contingency. ("Contingency" is a significant word in Murdoch's work, representing the quality of total randomness, accident and chance which unavoidably permeates life). An analysis of Murdoch's first person narrators and their relationships with the other characters illuminates the nature of the development, growth and change of these narrators and ultimately clarifies her themes.

CHAPTER 1

UNDER THE NET -- JAKE DONAGHUE: THE DIFFICULTY OF SELF DISCOVERY

In an effort to tidily categorize Murdoch's first person narrators, Angela Hague accurately describes them as "comic characters who inadvertently reveal their own egotism and obsessive fantasies to the reader" (63). This process is often enhanced by the narrator's dual involvement in the novel as both the narrator and the protagonist, but in five of Murdoch's six first person novels the narrator and protagonist is also the pseudo author. Hague feels that, to varying degrees, these novels have a self-reflexive quality which lends itself well to the introspection the narrators undergo, thereby increasing the realistic qualities of the novels (62). Jake Donaghue, protagonist, narrator and author of Iris Murdoch's first published novel, Under the Net, serves as a model for her other first person narrators.

Many of Murdoch's leading ideas are already present in Under the Net, and a comparison of this work with her other first person novels shows a consistency in themes (Byatt, "Shakespearean" 92). Jake explains that his reason for writing Under the Net is somewhat of an apology for his behavior in his friendship with Hugo Belfounder. He states that his "acquaintance with Hugo is the central theme of this book" (Under the Net 53), yet the book is

more about what happens to himself in his on again-off again quest to find Hugo. This indicates Jake's self-centeredness and the self-reflexive quality of his narrative. However, through the examination and sharing of his feelings with the reader, Jake is gradually brought to a new self-awareness.

Jake had earlier published a book--The Silencer--based on his philosophical discussions with Hugo. In describing Hugo, Jake says, "I had the feeling that I was meeting for the first time an almost completely truthful man" (61), which indicates Jake's fascination with and potential for illusion regarding Hugo. When Hugo inherited the family munitions plant he changed it into a fireworks factory. The beauty of a fireworks display relies on explosive fragmentation, a symbol of the uncontrollable elements of life and Hugo's ability to live with contingency. Hugo not only accepts contingency, to a certain extent he pursues it, changing careers, friends and environment. Hugo is a self-actualized and self-realized individual, in contrast to Jake's futile efforts to control his environment.

The titles for both books, Under the Net and The Silencer, came from Jake's interpretation of his discussions with Hugo. Hugo spoke of language as a net which attempts to encompass reality--an impossible feat: "The language just won't let you present it as it really was" (59). Hugo believes in actions, but as a writer, Jake believes in the importance of trying to communicate with words.

Murdoch elucidated this dilemma during an interview with Frank Kermode:

> "The problem which is mentioned in the title is the problem of how far conceptualizing and theorizing, which from one point of view are absolutely essential, in fact divide you from the thing that is the object of theoretical attention. And Hugo is a sort of non-philosophical metaphysician who is supposed to be paralyzed in a way by this problem." (65)

Jake recounts their discussions in The Silencer, but because he is relying on his memory and he also does some retouching, he knows that he had altered the truth, the reality of the actual conversation. Above all, Jake is ashamed at having written and published The Silencer unbeknownst to Hugo.

The Silencer, Jake's only completed and quasi-original work, received little recognition when published. Jake earns his living by translating French novels into English, a task which is a continual source of frustration for him since he is a writer and thinks he could do better than the material he translates. Jake prides himself on being an intellectual, and detests his employment of translating what he feels are inferior works. He so despises being reduced to this position that he does not even bother to read the books anymore. Jake believes that popular novelists are

selling out, and in his shortsightedness he fails to see that they may have potential for improvement.

Under the Net begins with Jake's return from a business trip to Paris. He unexpectedly learns of his impending eviction, which thrusts him into the unsettling state of change. Finn, his quiet roommate and companion, suggests that they seek temporary lodging from their friend Dave, but upon his arrival at Dave's, Jake senses that his presence would be more welcome if he were merely a visitor and not a house-guest. Dave, a Jewish philosopher and teacher, recommends that Jake get a real job, but Jake misunderstands his intentions:

> "To save my soul," I said.
>
> "Not therefore!" said David scornfully. "Always you are thinking of your soul. Precisely it is not to think of your soul, but to think of other people." (Under the Net 26-27)

Jake does not yet grasp the importance of other people, he does not want to be tied down by relationships.

Jake searches for an old girl friend when trying to find a more suitable home. (Jake had met Anna Quentin and her sister, Sadie, when they were performing a "sister act." Anna had continued singing when Sadie became successfully involved in films.) Jake discovers that Anna has abandoned singing in favor of running a mime theatre. A change in her nags at him, reminding

him of someone else. Jake tries to recapture their former relationship, but Anna tells Jake:

> "Love is not a feeling. It can be tested. Love is action, it is silence. It's not the emotional straining and scheming for possession that you used to think it was." (40)

Her use of the word "silence" catches Jake's attention, but it is not until later that he realizes that the ideas which Anna had expressed were actually Hugo's.

Anna recommends that Jake check with her sister, since Sadie is in need of someone to occupy her flat. When making arrangements with Sadie, Jake is numbed to hear that she wants him to be her bodyguard to keep away Hugo Belfounder. (Sadie is now under contract to the movie studio Hugo established after getting out of the fireworks industry.) Sadie claims that Hugo is in love with her and has been pestering her with phone calls and uninvited visits. Jake suspects Sadie of lying, perhaps out of envy for her sister, or maybe to make him jealous. While Jake can picture Hugo in love with the romantic Anna, he cannot image Hugo begging and demanding Sadie's attention. Sadie's intelligence and ambition intimidate Jake because of his own passive unproductivity.

On the first and only day which Jake guards Sadie's apartment, he is enraged to discover that he has been locked in. Several comical and often drunken episodes precede and follow this

situation, as Jake engages in futile activities in an effort not to be taken advantage of by those who have stolen one of his translations to further their own careers. (Sadie is forming a movie company and plans to use Jake's translation of a French novel as her first production.)

Because his translation was stolen, Jake has no respect for the possessions of those involved; also, since he is not the original author of the manuscript he has no legal rights and feels powerless. Jake breaks into apartments, searching for the manuscript, and even steals a movie star dog hoping to barter for the return of the translated novel. Individual efforts to offer Jake some compensation, monetary and otherwise, puzzle Jake; he cannot fully comprehend such actions until he attains further awareness of his illusions about people.

Jake receives another shattering blow when a display in a bookstore window informs him that the popular French novelist whose work he translates has just been honored with a high literary award for his latest novel. The realization that this author has written a good novel has a disquieting impact on Jake:

> It was only then that it struck me as shocking that my predominant emotion was distress. . . . Since it was impossible to treat with Jean Pierre cynically it was impossible to treat him with at all. Why should I waste

> time transcribing his writings instead of producing my own? (170-171)

As long as Jean Pierre was producing mediocre novels Jake felt no urge to prove that he could do better. He now comprehends that the stolen translation must have also benefited from Jean Pierre's improving technique, which explains why someone might steal it. Instead of looking forward to reading the new book, Jake angrily resolves never to translate the prize-winning novel. This decision will mean another drastic change in his life.

Unable to find Anna or Hugo, Jake sinks into depression and passivity. Finn has disappeared, and no one has made an attempt to regain possession of Marvelous Mars--the canine hero of the silver screen which Jake had earlier kidnapped in an effort to negotiate for the return of the stolen manuscript. Jake lies on a cot at Dave's staring out the window at a hospital wall. Then one day he gets up, dresses, goes to the hospital and gets a job as an orderly--something Dave always used to suggest. Jake feels a sense of accomplishment at the end of the work day, and can imagine a time in the future when he will work physically for part of the day, and then write during the remainder of the day.

Jake scans the newspapers daily for some clue to the whereabouts of Hugo and Anna. When he unexpectedly locates Hugo, Jake anxiously inquires about Hugo's response to The Silencer, Hugo's relationship with Anna, and Hugo's reaction to his severed

friendship with Jake. Jake learns that Hugo was puzzled by Jake's disappearance but he accepted it. Hugo also read The Silencer but found parts of it difficult to comprehend; he did not recognize his own ideas reshaped in the book (similarly, he had not realized the significance of Anna's mime theatre--she was carrying out his theory that only actions, not words, can encompass reality). Jake slowly grasps that Hugo loves Sadie--Sadie loves Jake--Jake loves Anna--Anna loves Hugo. (Such tangled and interwoven relationships become the norm in Murdoch's other novels.)

The end of the novel finds Jake much the same as in the beginning, once again homeless, but Jake has learned of "the individuality of persons and of the need to conceive things as they really are and not as he pleases" (Bradbury 52). He uses the last of his easily obtained money (from gambling, gifts and theft) to purchase Marvelous Mars and guarantee the dog a well deserved retirement in the company of someone who has grown to love him. Jake is no longer seeking to escape commitment and responsibility, he is trying to become the person he wants to be--the writer emerging from his ongoing journey of self-discovery:

> In particular, two things have altered for the better; he has developed from being a translator, a literary hack, a man who sees words and ideas as separate things, to being creative in his own right; and he has developed from

having "shattered nerves" to being able to encounter life and loneliness. (Bradbury 48)

The new book Jake has written, Under the Net, proves that he is no longer a stifled writer and human being. Jake initially failed to see others as individuals and mistakenly viewed himself as the detached controller of others. Jake's egocentric character dominates his narration as he struggles to understand the other characters. For instance, two minor characters, Mrs. Tinckton and Finn, are observers who seem to know quite a bit about Jake, but Jake knows little about them. The only time Jake recognizes their value is when he needs information or comfort.

Murdoch believes that "goodness at every level of sophistication demands the ability to face life and be truthful, and the ability to be honest and faithful and loving, and the ability to give help" (Brans 46). These moral objectives are achieved in Under the Net as Jake confronts reality and purges himself of his past illusions which had inhibited him from living fully.

The publication of Under the Net was met with immediate popularity. Elizabeth Dipple credits its success to its "literary relationship to Beckett and Queneau [Jake has books by both authors], which Murdoch has always readily acknowledged, the concurrence of English novels in a kind of post-World War II renascence by very clever novelists such as Kingsley Amis and John

Wain, and extraordinary narrative pacing" (134). Rubin Rabinovitz feels that the success of Under the Net lies within the novel: "the reader is surprised and amused by the incidents in the book . . . moreover, whether he understands the philosophical overtones of the novel or not, the reader feels at the end of the novel that Jake has somehow gone on to a better life, learned something and improved. The reader puts down the novel with a sense of satisfaction and not irritation" (46).

CHAPTER 2

A SEVERED HEAD -- MARTIN LYNCH GIBBON: FROM COMPLACENCY TO UNCERTAINTY

Although Murdoch returns to the first person narrative in her fifth novel, A Severed Head, the comic antics of Jake Donaghue's life are not a part of Martin Lynch-Gibbon's. Instead of fighting back as Jake attempts to, Martin passively gives in, but he retains his cynicism as a shield. Martin physically surrenders to the control of the other characters after the first blow to his ego undercuts his previous grasp on reality. Martin slowly and painfully discovers that things are not as they seem, and he struggles to accept and adapt to the contingency of life.

Martin writes of a series of events which jolted him from his false sense of complacency and forced him to recognize the separate lives and identities of his friends and family--people with whom he felt an intimate bond--and during the course of his experiences he learns the truth about their relationships. He begins his narrative with a description of himself and his mistress enjoying an early Christmas celebration. As they chat, Georgie asks how Martin's wife, Antonia, is doing with her analysis. It is clear by Martin's reply that Antonia is not emotionally unstable or stressed, she merely views the procedure as something of a frolic.

This leads to a discussion of the analyst, Palmer Anderson--a close friend of Martin's and Antonia's--and also a discussion of Palmer's sister, Honor Klein. Georgie perceives that Martin has a particular fascination with Palmer, and she comments, "The trouble with you, Martin, is that you are always looking for a master" (7), the first hint that Martin has imposed the myth of a power figure on Palmer. Georgie was a student of Honor Klein's in anthropology, and she adds that Honor also has a primitive quality of raw power.

The first chapter establishes the relationships between the major characters as Martin, and to a lesser extent, Georgie, view them. He reflects on his love for his wife and his mistress in terms of possession: "I possessed Antonia in a way not totally unlike the way I possessed the magnificent set of original prints by Audubon which adorned our staircases at home. I did not possess Georgie. Georgie was simply there" (8-9). Martin clearly portrays himself as comfortable and pleased with his arrangements. He feels in control of his life and of the people in his life. For instance, Martin explains to the reader how Georgie had become pregnant the previous spring and they had terminated the pregnancy, but Martin was obviously thinking only of himself and maintaining the equilibrium of his marriage and lifestyle.

This opening chapter already provides grimmer topics than those present in Under the Net: adultery, psychoanalysis, and the abortion of Martin's and Georgie's baby. In the second chapter,

Martin expands on his description of himself and his family. He takes pride in his character, which he explains as "morose, something of a recluse, something indeed of a philosopher and cynic, one who expects little and watches the world go by" (15). Martin once again reveals his egoism, romanticizing an image of himself. He earlier spoke of his wife as a possession, but he expects faithfulness and honesty from both Antonia and Georgie, even though his double standard allows him to deceive them. Antonia does not know about Georgie, and Martin has told Georgie some half-truths regarding the success of his marriage. While Martin recognizes himself as the selfish partner in his marriage, he is insensitive to Georgie's position--she must share her lover with his wife, cannot meet with him in public, and can nurture no thoughts of a future beyond that of their current clandestine liaison.

Martin is forty-one, and Antonia is five years older--a fact which is continually brought up when they, and others, probe their relationship. He mentions that she has occasionally been mistaken for his mother, and both she and Palmer later remark that she has been a mother figure to him. Although Martin cherishes his wife, he explains that his relationship with Georgie allows him to rediscover himself, adding, "Meanwhile it was important to me, even very important, that Antonia should think me virtuous; and, with that degree of self-deception which is essential to a prolonged and

successful masquerade, I even felt virtuous" (20). Martin initially succeeds in his role of the virtuous husband, one that garners him much sympathy when Antonia announces that she is in love with their friend and her analyst, Palmer Anderson.

Prior to receiving Antonia's news, Martin relates the tranquil pattern of his life. He considers himself a wine merchant, continuing on a small scale the family wine business established by his grandfather; yet, with the work of his able assistants, Martin functions more as a figurehead for the business. This frees him to continue researching and writing in his true area of interest: military history--a reflection of his regimented, conservative lifestyle. He feels that if he had dropped his amateur status when he was a young man, he could have become a successful military historian. Martin's brother and sister, his only remaining family, have no connection with the family business. His sister lives in London and makes appearances throughout the novel; her neatly dressed figure and precise manner are the epitome of organization and control in opposition to the jarring events taking place in Martin's life. Martin's brother, Alexander, who resides at the family's country house, later becomes more enmeshed in the acitivities.

Martin is stunned to learn that his wife is having an affair with their best friend, but the reader has no sympathy for him because of his affair with Georgie. His relationship with

Georgie has spanned the last two years of his eleven year marriage with Antonia; Martin, therefore, is guilty of greater deception, but for the time being his friends and family treat him as "poor Martin." When traveling to his family home for the Christmas holiday, Martin dreads being met by his sister, Rosemary: "like most people whose marriages have failed she had a sharp appetite for news of other failed marriages" (35). Upon his arrival, she does indeed seem to relish discussing his marriage, but Martin becomes quite annoyed when Rosemary tells him how Antonia had sent his brother a letter conveying the news of their break up:

> "By the way, Alexander's dreadfully cut up about you and Antonia . . . I happened to be there when he opened her letter," said Rosemary. "I've never seen him so shaken . . . Anyhow all I'm saying is, be kind and tactful to Alexander, be specially nice to him." (37)

Martin is struck by the irony of Rosemary's request and dryly wonders why it is necessary "To console him for my wife having left me" (38). This scene alerts the reader to some sort of history, which Martin is unaware of, between Antonia and Alexander. Other hints at the nature of their relationship are overlooked by Martin, who still is enveloped in a mist of self-deception. Martin even lies to his brother when Alexander asks if he was ever unfaithful, in an effort to sustain the myth of his former way of life.

Even though Antonia is living with Palmer, she and Palmer persuade Martin to maintain some semblance of their former close friendship. Palmer finds an apartment for Martin, and Rosemary and Antonia discuss furnishings and drapes. When Antonia is sharing this information with Martin, he experiences a sudden awareness while observing her: "I looked at her again and saw her sharply for the first time since our rupture as a separate person and no longer a part of myself" (49). Antonia speaks of her concern for Martin and how she, or rather, they, will never let him go. Martin finds the prospect of such a relationship unnatural: "I was their prisoner, and I choked with it" (53).

As a favor to Palmer and Antonia, Martin meets Honor Klein--Palmer's sister--at the train station. Although he had met her previously, he agrees with Antonia that neither of them had really "noticed her" (51). Martin incorrectly assumes that she must be "harmless" (51). He recalls his disappointment that she shared none of her half-brother's charm and good looks. As Martin waits at the station, peering through the heavy fog, he unexpectedly recognizes her:

> It was not a very pleasant face: heavy, perceptibly Jewish, and dour, with just a hint of insolence. The curving lips were combined with a formidable straightness and narrowness of the eyes and mouth . . . Her narrow dark eyes, which seemed in the strange light to be shot

> with red, had the slightly Oriental appearance peculiar to certain Jewish women. There was something animal-like and repellent in that glistening stare. (55)

Honor's presence makes everyone uncomfortable. All of the characters share the common bond of having imposed the myth of a power figure on Honor Klein.

Feeling somewhat recovered from the initial dissolution of his marriage, Martin seeks comfort from Georgie. She welcomes him, but accurately analyzes Martin's motives, "I suspect you of wanting to play the virtuous aggrieved husband so as to keep Palmer and Antonia in your power" (66). He claims that the opposite is true, that if Antonia knew of their relationship she would force him to share all aspects of it with her and he could not bear that. Georgie accepts this, and he gratefully invites her to see for the first time the home he had shared with Antonia. When they are there, Martin hears someone at the door. He assumes it to be Antonia, and in his panic he hurriedly pushes Georgie out a side door. Martin then discovers Honor Klein in the hallway, and Georgie's purse and books conspicuously on the hall table. The unexpected visit by Honor Klein embarrasses Martin and leads to his "fall from virtue" in the eyes of others.

Martin futilely attempts to find Georgie, knowing that she must be quite distraught. Depressed, he calls on Antonia and Palmer, and discovers that they now know and approve of his

relationship with Georgie. Martin cannot tolerate hearing them talk of it, and a confrontation with Georgie reveals that when Dr. Klein had approached her after the incident, it had been a relief to tell her:

> "I would never have blown the gaff of my own accord. But when Honor Klein came like that it was like a message from the gods. I couldn't have told lies then, I would have died of it!" (84)

Honor, true to her name, roots out the truth in the intertwined relationships, revealing further deception. She releases Georgie from the burden of her secret, but when Antonia meets Georgie and tries to welcome Martin and Georgie as a couple, Martin and Georgie's relationship is further estranged. Honor steps in again when she introduces Georgie to Alexander, Martin's brother.

Martin feels completely out of control, and in a drunken state he lashes out at the woman whose interference has been his downfall and the cause of unease among others. Martin physically attacks Honor Klein in the wine cellar of her brother's house. She aggressively defends herself until he comes to his senses. In the days that follow, Martin struggles with his conscience and tries to arrive at some course of action. Martin takes long walks through the London mists and drinks excessively in an effort to escape his "fear of being alone" (138). When he suddenly realizes that he is in love with Honor Klein, Martin decides to tell her of his

feelings. He travels to her home and walks in on her in bed with her half-brother.

The discovery of the incestuous relationship between Honor and Palmer brings on the jumbled denouement. According to A.S. Byatt, Martin's witness to and knowledge of the incest gives him "a power over Palmer that he has not had" (Degrees of Freedom 106). Martin recognizes how grossly he has misjudged Honor and Palmer and deluded himself, and their role as power figures diminishes. Fascinated, Martin reads about incestuous relationships in anthropology and mythology. Although Martin shares his knowledge of the relationship with no one, the tangent relationships fluctuate as a result. Antonia turns up at Martin's apartment in a state of hysteria, while Martin observes:

> I stood, hands in the pockets of my dressing-gown, watching her cry. I pitied her, but only as an unconscious extension of my own dilemma. "So Honor Klein is there," I said. "I hate that woman," said Antonia. "She was supposed to be going back to Cambridge, but there she still was and now she's actually living in the house. She gives me the creeps." (A Severed Head 142)

Martin remains primarily concerned about himself, and necessarily leery of everyone. Palmer is afraid that Antonia will find out the nature of his relationship with his sister, while Antonia fears he may discover her long-standing relationship with Alexander, her

former brother-in-law. Antonia becomes even more hysterical when Alexander announces his engagement to Georgie, Martin's former mistress. An unhappy Georgie attempts suicide when she finds out about Alexander and Antonia.

Martin receives each additional event in a numbed state of shock. He finally learns of the long-term affair between his wife and his brother when Antonia exuberantly chats about their decision to marry. She and Alexander apparently thought that Martin had always known, and that he had simply chosen to behave in the discreet manner of a gentleman. When she realizes he had been completely unaware, she reprimands him:

> "You are such a dreamer, Martin," said Antonia. "You like to dream along without facing things. Well, you must face things now. And do stop being so sorry for yourself." (184)

Martin refrains from informing Antonia of the situation between Honor and Palmer, which shows that he is not vindictive and he is becoming morally responsible. He is finally confronting life without the benefit of blinders, free of his self-imposed deceptions, but he is still in love with Honor. He waits at the airport to watch Honor and Palmer depart for the United States, and is only mildly surprised to see them accompanied by Georgie.

The novel ends with Honor showing up at Martin's apartment shortly after he returns from the airport. She explains that

Palmer and Georgie are now involved, and she and Palmer have ended their relationship. Martin realizes that "at last we were treating on equal terms" (204). He asks what sort of chance a relationship between them will have, and Honor replies, "You must take your chance" (205). Martin accepts this, aware of the instability and contingency of reality, but choosing it over living a life surrounded by falsehoods.

Some find the union of Honor Klein and Martin implausible because it demands such a drastic change in the characters. Throughout the novel Honor is compared to Medusa, a Gorgon from Greek mythology whose stare could turn the beholder to stone. When Honor refers to herself as a severed head, she indicates a realization that she is both repulsive and fascinating (Rabinovitz 30), and Martin approaches her with these mixed feelings. The title and textual references to severed heads reflect an ancient image which Freud interpreted as a symbol of the male fear of castration (Byatt, Murdoch 27). However, not everyone agrees with Freud's interpretation. Sartre believed that the image conveyed a fear of being observed (27). (Linda Kuehl points out that Honor "embodies the Sartrean individual--sovereign, self-realized, inviolable" (96).) Murdoch skillfully plays different viewpoints against each other within the context of a drawing-room comedy. Peter Conradi compares A Severed Head to restoration comedy, citing its "over-plotted, dazzling, witty sexual imbroglio," but also the

manner in which the novel "shows us that love is war and power-play, and power-play and war are love" (Saint and Artist 94). This type of outlook allows for acceptance of the ending of the novel--the promise of a romantic relationship between Honor and Martin.

Linda Kuehl voices a common complaint when she states, "Murdoch's characters suffer from too much potential, too much contingency, too much eccentricity" (102). However, Kuehl is among the minority when she protests that a romantic involvement between Martin and Honor is impossible (105), and that A Severed Head fails because Murdoch sacrifices character for form (106). In an interview with Frank Kermode, Murdoch admitted that she had given in to myth in A Severed Head (64); still, others would consider this quality either an attribute or a minor flaw. Richard Todd finds A Severed Head a "cunning comedy in a virtuoso manner, with ever extending sexual variation and a skilled use of repetition" (49). Frank Baldanza believes it an advance over her earlier work: "This work is distinguished from its predecessors in one way because the structure is so tightly woven, the texture is so thick with patterning, that it represents a neatness of carpentry unequaled by the earlier works" (94).

Although A Severed Head differs from the earlier works in its greater reliance on myth and gothic elements, Murdoch's basic objectives remain the same. Like Jake in Under the Net, Martin is

forced to realize that he has no control over people's emotions and their lives; the only control he has lies in his decision whether or not to accept people for what they are and what they have to offer. As Ruth Heyd summarizes in her interview with Murdoch, "acceptance of external reality, of the unique even eccentric characteristics of one's friends, without a desire to impose one's code or preferences upon this reality, is essential to Miss Murdoch's thought" (140).

CHAPTER 3

THE ITALIAN GIRL -- EDMUND NARRAWAY: THE PROBLEM OF THE DETACHED OBSERVER

In The Italian Girl, as in A Severed Head, Murdoch works with the relationships of a grown family and a brother and sister who are outsiders, as were Palmer and Honor. Although A Severed Head had some gothic elements, The Italian Girl has strong gothic qualities--an isolated, dimly lit house in the country, a secluded pool hidden by the overgrowth of lush vegetation, heated arguments, eerie sounds in the night, strange situations, and violent deaths.

The Italian Girl opens with the narrator's return to his childhood home for his mother's funeral. Edmund Narraway (narrator/ protagonist) has mixed feelings about showing up after his mother's death. It has been six years since his last visit: "My mother's existence here had been the reason for my not coming. Now her nonexistence would provide an even stronger reason" (12). Edmund's mother, Lydia, had created disharmony in his life since he was a child. He recalls how she took turns possessively cherishing him and his brother, Otto. Her dominant presence overshadowed their father and influenced every facet of their lives. As a young man, Edmund had physically escaped his mother by moving away, while his brother continued living at home. Edmund credits his

mother--who insisted that everyone call her Lydia--with the destruction of everything she touched. He cites his brother's ruined marriage as an example.

The cast of characters is sketchily revealed because Edmund has been so distant he does not know much about them. Also, since Edmund has no intention of staying, his narrative gives only a cursory view of those he encounters: Maggie--the last of a series of Italian nursemaids with whom he had grown up; Otto--his large, filthy, frequently besotted brother; Isabel--his unhappy sister-in-law; Flora--his beautiful niece; Levkin--an apprentice in Otto's stone masonry workshop; and Elsa--David Levkin's mysterious and half-crazed sister. When Otto bursts into uncontrollable laughter at the funeral, Edmund renews his determination to leave as soon as possible: "There was no dignity, no simplicity in these lives. In a few hours, thank God, I could leave them forever" (27). Edmund's visit has primarily been sparked by greed, curiosity, and an innate sense of duty, but after speaking with his brother, he becomes so uncomfortable that he no longer cares if he has been included in the will.

Edmund's profession as an engraver aptly reflects his need for precision and control in his life. Against his wishes, Edmund's family reaches out to him. Isabel is the first to approach him, and Edmund informs the reader:

> I was a little nervous of the note of appeal in her voice. I did not want any display of Isabel's emotions. I had no wish to hear her confessions and complaints. In any case I knew it all but too well. (32)

Edmund tries to speak to her in a positive manner about her life. In the course of the conversation, both Edmund and Isabel admit to being selfish. Edmund says he is like his father, but Isabel points out that unlike his father, he is free of Lydia. She adds, "We are all prisoners here" (33). Edmund impatiently points out, "Even if you were imprisoned you are much more free now. And you can be free at anytime you choose to be" (34). Lydia angrily responds:

> "You know as well as I do that one can be imprisoned in one's mind. Here we've all been destroying ourselves and each other to spite Lydia. . . . Lydia's departure makes no difference to that." (34)

When Edmund finally succeeds in maneuvering to the door of her room, she pleads,

> "You are the only person who can heal us. . . . You are the assessor, the judge, the inspector, the liberator. You will clear us all up. You will set us in order. You will set us free." (36)

Edmund's only thoughts are that he wants no part in any of it, and he anxiously escapes from the room.

This conversation is followed by another one with a philosophical Otto, which also distresses Edmund. As he emerges from the workshop, he is met by Flora, who also expresses a need to talk to him. She leads him through dense vegetation to a spot where he had spent many solitary hours as a child. It is not the setting but Flora's announcement which succeeds in thwarting Edmund's determined plans to leave. Over the lull of the waterfall she guardedly reveals the news of her pregnancy. Edmund's self-deceived assumption of her innocence makes it difficult for him to accept such a shock. While Edmund struggles to come to terms with the subject, Flora states her intentions: "'You can find me a doctor in the South who would do the operation and you can lend me the money for it.' She spoke fiercely and coldly, wiping her tears away" (52). Edmund futilely attempts to talk Flora out of having an abortion, but she agrees to meet with him in the morning to discuss the matter further.

Edmund is awakened toward dawn by what he thinks must surely be an apparition of Lydia moaning on the lawn. Intrigued, he approaches the figure and realizes that this woman must be the apprentice's sister, whom he has not yet met. Edmund finds himself strangely attracted to Elsa, and, unsatisfied with their brief encounter, he follows her back to the summer-house where she and her brother are living. Elsa tells Edmund that she has something to show him: "After all you are the brother. And we have waited

for you a long time" (60). She throws open the door to the next room, revealing Otto, asleep in all his gross grandeur. After telling Edmund of her family history--they are Russian Jews who fled from persecution in their country--Elsa joins Otto on the bed. Edmund is observing the sleeping pair when Levkin gleefully enters the room. Echoing the earlier words of Isabel and Elsa, he now asks Edmund, "For you will stay with us now? You will stay and help us?" (65). All of these appeals indicate how the characters have placed the myth of a savior on Edmund. They are hoping that he can set straight their muddled lives. Edmund finds Levkin irksome and heads back to the main house, "I wanted to forget Otto and his greasy enchantress, they were no business of mine" (60).

The events of the morning cause Edmund to miss his meeting with Flora: "It seemed to me that I had undergone some sort of dubious enchantment, I had been, almost as if purposely, captured by magicians" (71). When he searches for his niece, he can find her nowhere. Her disappearance makes Edmund feel that he, too, is now "a prisoner of the situation," yet, "I realized with alarm that I wanted to stay" (72). This marks quite a change in Edmund; he not only has become concerned about someone other than himself, he has chosen contingency over his more precise and impersonal lifestyle. Edmund feels sorry for his family, but he does not fathom that the complete truth still lies unrevealed beneath the surface of these people.

Isabel, Flora, Elsa and Maggie--the Italian housekeeper, force Edmund to deal with his repressed sexuality. Isabel and Flora mock him about his celibate lifestyle. After Flora returns from having an abortion, she acidly informs Edmund that Levkin was the father, and then angrily says:

> "There's nothing more to stay for. The show's over. You've been living in a monastery, haven't you? Now your head's turned because you've seen some real women. Well, go back to it, go back to your crippled life. Leave real living to people who are able for it." (99)

In anguish, Edmund crushes her to him, and Levkin--who has been eavesdropping--opens the door to view the scene. Flora breaks free and dashes out the door, while Levkin stays behind to taunt Edmund.

At Levkin's suggestion, Edmund approaches Isabel with the topic of Flora's pregnancy and abortion, and to his great shock, she reveals that she not only knew about the situation, but that she, too, is having an affair with Levkin. Edmund is surprised by his reaction to the news: "I was scandalized, horrified. I was also, I had just realized, and the realization was sobering, jealous. I felt excluded" (109). He retreats to the kitchen and the company of the only other excluded person, Maggie, but she does not give him the sympathy and understanding he seeks. Edmund suddenly realizes that he cares about Maggie's opinion of him, and he asks if anyone would benefit if he extended his stay. She

startles him by suggesting that he might benefit. Edmund, although hurt by her bluntness, sees the truth in her statement and resolves to himself to "stay because of some need of my own" (116).

Edmund makes another attempt to reach out to Flora, who wants nothing further to do with him. She no longer views him as the benevolent uncle of her childhood but sees him as just another muddled human being, perhaps even more so than the rest of them since he has failed to actively take part in life. She advises him when he apologizes to her, "I think you'd better wake up to yourself" (121). Flora proceeds to make a scene, hurling accusations, cruelly cutting off Maggie's hair and confessing all to her father. An enraged Otto stomps up the stairs to confront Isabel and, in an effort to shield Isabel, Edmund takes a punch from Otto which knocks him out for the night.

When Edmund awakens the following day, things seem to have returned to normal. Elsa and David have left, and as Otto speaks with Edmund, he sighs, "They were insane-making for all of us. They are fairies, angels, demons" (129). He ashamedly wonders at how he could have been so oblivious to the effect on Flora. Edmund soothes him, thinking "I felt disenchanted myself, as if Otto's blow had knocked all the remains of pretension out of me" (129). Before he leaves the room, Otto hands Lydia's will to Edmund, and Edmund learns that his mother left her entire estate to the Italian

housekeeper, her "beloved and faithful friend, Maria Magistretti" (130).

The will forces the family to recognize Maggie's existence as an individual. Edmund reflects, "I certainly now, and with a fresh sharpness, saw Maggie as a separate and private and unpredictable being" (132). When she meets with the family to inform them of her plans, they are shocked by the change in her appearance. Edmund acknowledges that "Maggie has acquired, what she had never had before, an exterior. She was no longer invisible" (133). Gone is her dark uniform and her plain appearance, replaced by an attractive hair style, white shoes, and a red dress. But Otto, Isabel, Edmund and Maria have barely begun their stilted conversation before Flora bursts into the room with Elsa. Once again, chaos breaks out. Elsa pleads with Otto, while Flora proclaims her hatred for all of them and runs from the room. Maggie tells Edmund to follow Flora; both Edmund and Maggie fear that Flora will harm herself. Flora heads to the secluded pool, but instead of drowning herself, she scales the rock wall near the waterfall, throwing rocks at Edmund to prevent him from pursuing her. Edmund emerges from behind the waterfall and sees Maggie standing near the pool. Together they return through the dense vegetation and discover that Isabel's room is on fire.

Isabel, initially to spite Lydia and then out of habit, kept a roaring fire in her room. (Lydia had always used dim or

low-powered light bulbs because of her intense fear of fire; this also reinforces her "dark" influence on the family). When Elsa frantically appealed to Otto, her long gown caught on fire. Otto later told Edmund that Elsa was completely engulfed in flames and died before he could do anything to save her.

The outbreak of fire symbolically frees the family from the past, and the death of Elsa makes the others behave in a more purposeful manner. A grieving David returns to Russia, Isabel returns to her father's home--where she will have David's child, Otto returns to his work, Flora returns to look after her father, Maggie--now Maria--returns to Italy, and Edmund plans to drive her there. All of the characters determine their own future plans, free at last from the destructive patterns which had ruled them for so long (Wolfe 205). With the possibility of a blossoming relationship between Maria and Edmund, the novel closes. Edmund has discovered that his previous simple and isolated lifestyle was illusory and incomplete. He fails in his efforts to help others, but his attempts to do so lead him from his former self-centeredness (German 70). It was only when Edmund was tested in relation to other human beings that he was forced to face his own weaknesses and faults, and could, therefore, no longer sit in judgement but became an active participant in life by recognizing his freedom to explore his options.

Edmund's frequently befuddled development is similar to that of the previously discussed first person narrators and Murdoch again works with the familiar character types and themes--the unfulfilled older woman (Isabel), the angry young woman (Flora), the artificial woman (Elsa), the natural woman (Maggie), the enchanter figure(s) or outsider(s) (David and Elsa Levkin), the philosopher (Otto), and, of course, the muddled narrator who struggles with his self-awareness and social conscience. However, although the same elements may be present, most critics agree that in this novel, the sum of the various parts does not create a successful whole. In a chapter of his book, The Disciplined Heart: Iris Murdoch and Her Novels, Peter Wolfe examines The Italian Girl and regretfully gives the verdict with which most critics concur:

> Practically every scene includes farcical or melodramatic elements; they are, in fact, so closely enmeshed into the structure that without them there would have been no execution of plot. Any novel that takes raw sensationalism as its motive principle cannot be regarded as serious literature. The Italian Girl's lack of dramatic plausibility renders it the author's weakest novel. (208)

Even though Maggie is the girl of the title, her minor role lacks the development necessary to make the change in Edmund believable. The characters of Otto, Elsa and Levkin are also weakly developed.

The contrast between the brothers fails because Otto is either speaking nonsense or revealing deep insights, he is never simply a person. During an interview in 1968, Murdoch commented, "I think it's not a very successful book . . . I think Otto and Edmund and Isabel are quite real, but Maggie and the Russians are not real enough to carry the plot" (Rose 13-14).

Although The Italian Girl has stronger gothic elements and a greater emphasis on freedom, it still clearly bears some resemblance to A Severed Head. Both are domestic novels, exploring the relationships of an extended family, both have the self-deceived narrator, yet it is perhaps the repetition of minor themes and occurrences which create a staleness in The Italian Girl that was not present in A Severed Head (Rabinovitz 36). For example, both have a scene involving the severing of a woman's long hair, an oedipal relationship and theme, abortion, hints of a possible homosexual relationship, the dichotomy between two brothers, and endings which focus on the promise of a romance between the narrator and a woman for whom he had previously felt no desire. Wolfe attempts to explain the relative weakness of the novel:

> The Italian Girl was imperfectly conceived in the image of A Severed Head, and, despite its substructure of sound moral doctrine, never stimulated the author's best efforts. The strain of concentrated effort that produced

> four novels, a play and a long philosophical article ("The Ideal of Perfection") within four years is evident in The Italian Girl. (208)

On a more positive note, both novels were successfully dramatized (Todd 49), but an examination of the two novels clearly reveals that The Italian Girl is a skeletal novel in comparison to the more fully developed A Severed Head. However, putting aside the question of relative success of the novel, it is still clear that Edmund is another of Murdoch's first person narrators who transcends his illusions. True to the notoriously varied critical response that Murdoch's novels elicit, one critic, Frederick Hoffman, has even praised The Italian Girl as an "exemplary work" (17) which well illustrates the metamorphosis by which "one person's view of another is slowly and appropriately changed" (18).

CHAPTER 4

THE BLACK PRINCE: THE OBSESSIONS OF BRADLEY PEARSON

The Black Prince's narrator differs somewhat from the preceding first person male narrators. Jake, Martin and Edmund relate their development from an illusory state to one of increased awareness, and the reader accepts them as reliable narrators. However, in The Black Prince, Murdoch offers the reader the possibility that the truth may be other than what the narrator states. The inclusion of postscripts written by four other characters which present alternate points of view serves to shake the reader's trust in the narrator's portrayal of reality. Within the novel itself, the protagonist, Bradley Pearson, shows himself to be a more introspective, self-conscious writer than the previously examined narrators by periodically pausing to analyze events, people, his own feelings and actions, and to philosophize about art and truth.

The Black Prince opens with two forewords, one by a supposed editor of the novel, and the other by the supposed author, Bradley Pearson. The editor acknowledges that he has only made the acquaintance of Bradley in the years following the events described in the novel, so he was not a witness to the escalating crises Bradley experienced. Bradley's foreword establishes his

personality and background. He writes in a purposeful, sincere manner, as one who has transcended his former illusions: "I shall judge people, inadequately, perhaps even unjustly, as I then judged them, and not in the light of any later wisdom" (11). Bradley's parents were merchants owning and running a small paper shop, and his only surviving family member is his sister, Priscilla. Bradley sums up his life as having been "sublimely dull, a great dull life" (15). He conveys his sense of failure and his continued obsession with being a writer. Over the past 33 years he has written and published three books. At the age of 58, having just retired from his civil service job as an Inspector of Taxes, Bradley now looks forward to having the time and financial stability to write. He feels that he has one more work in him, a great novel, his masterpiece. He has rented a cottage in the country and is making arrangements to leave his apartment in London when a series of disruptions prevents him from continuing with his plans.

The novel begins with Bradley debating the best way to open the novel. He decides to relate the story according to the actual sequence of events, even though he feels it would be more dramatic to start elsewhere. This, and similar examples interspersed throughout the novel--where (to use Wayne Booth's terms) he "tells" instead of "shows" the story--indicates Bradley's preoccupation with the truth and his self-conscious writing style. While Bradley is preparing to leave his home, an unexpected visitor gives him some

unpleasant news. Bradley responds to the doorbell and discovers his former brother-in-law, Francis Marloe, standing in the doorway, informing him of Bradley's ex-wife's return to London. Bradley adamantly professes his desire to have nothing to do with her; he recalls to himself that, "She brought, what I detest, disorder into my life" (25). It is evident that Bradley is another Murdoch narrator who cannot cope with the contingent. He cherishes his solitude and has few friends. Instead of avidly pursuing his writing vocation, Bradley has spent the greater part of his life working at his civil service job. Although he has continued to write in his free time, he claims to have destroyed most of it because it was inadequate.

Francis is seeking a favor from Bradley, asking Bradley to intervene with his sister on his behalf. Bradley attempts to stress his contempt for Francis and for his sister Christian--Bradley's former wife, when the telephone rings. A distraught Arnold Baffin--Bradley's protege, rival, and best friend--begs Bradley to come to his home immediately; Arnold fears he may have accidentally killed his wife, having struck her with a fireplace poker during a drunken dispute. Bradley promises to come, and although alarmed, he secretly delights in the situation, and justifies his reaction to the reader:

> We naturally take in the catastrophes of our friends a pleasure which genuinely does not preclude friendship.

> This is partly but not entirely because we enjoy being empowered as helpers . . . But there is a natural tribal hostility between the married and the unmarried. I cannot stand the shows so often quite instinctively put on by married people to insinuate that they are not only more fortunate but in some way more moral than you are. (28-29)

Bradley's observations may arouse some hostility in the reader, but it may also be conceded that there is a quiet truth in what he says. Contrary to what he claims, Bradley finds himself very uncomfortable at being privy to the secrets of the Baffins' marriage once he arrives at their home. He shows reluctance, even fear, at being present during such a personal matter. Bradley's discomfort and hesitation serve two functions: indication of his withdrawal from human interaction on a personal level, and foreshadowing of the final climax when the scene is repeated with a reversal and a much more gruesome outcome.

Although A Severed Head and The Italian Girl are also novels of domestic turmoil, Murdoch strikes closer to the negative, messy side of human relationships in The Black Prince. She continues to use humor and irony to lighten the turmoil of emotions, but there is a sharper edge to some of the observations of our society. For instance, Bradley observes at a point early in his narrative that, "Of course men play roles, but women play roles

too, blanker ones. They have in the play of life, fewer good lines" (34). (This recalls Murdoch's statement in an interview that she identifies the basic human condition to be that of a man (Cohan 222).) The Black Prince also has numerous trenchant observations on the perplexities of marriage and middle-age.

When Bradley attempts to calm the hysterical Rachel Baffin, he recalls the Rachel he has known: "Rachel 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 to him" (The Black Prince 34). With her swollen, bruised face and streaks of blood from the matted cut in her head, Rachel vows to Bradley that she will never forgive her husband:

> "A woman does not forgive this ever. She won't save a man at the end. If he were drowning, I'd watch . . . All men despise all women really. All women fear all men really . . . I won't save him at the end. I'll watch him drown. I'll watch him burn." (40-41)

Upset, Bradley assures her that he realizes she does not really mean all that she is saying. Before she sends him away, Rachel turns her wrath on him, "And I won't forgive you either for having seen me like this with my face bruised to pieces and heard me talk horridly like this" (41). She promises that tomorrow she will act as if nothing had happened, and when Bradley speaks with Arnold, he supposes that they will resume their normal routine. Bradley

marvels at this but dismisses it with the thought, "A marriage is a very secret place" (42).

After he informs Arnold of Rachel's physical condition and her frame of mind, Bradley and Arnold discuss their different writing styles. Bradley's criticism of Arnold's work--Arnold is a popular novelist--mirrors the criticism Murdoch commonly receives. Bradley feels that Arnold writes "too much, too fast" (51). Arnold accuses Bradley of agonizing too much over his own writing, "You romanticize art. You're a masochist about it, you want to suffer, you want to feel that your inability to create is continuously significant" (50). (Murdoch returns to this argument periodically throughout the novel.) In his own defense, Arnold claims that if he wrote less frequently his work would not be better, there would only be less of it. Bradley advocates his own method of writing and of destroying that which is mediocre. At a later point, Arnold scornfully characterizes Bradley's outlook: "Finish nothing, publish nothing, nourish a continual grudge against the world, and live with an unrealized idea of perfection which makes you feel superior to those who try and fail" (172). Bradley's procrastination or inability to create anything seems similar to Jake's stalled career in Under the Net. Both narrators must work through and shed their illusions before they gain perspective on their lives and accept moral responsibility and contingency; only then are they able to write.

On his way home from the Baffin's, Bradley encounters their daughter, Julian. After first mistaking her for a young man, Bradley recognizes her and they converse briefly. Julian asks to meet with him to discuss literature; she claims she wants to be a writer like him, not like her father. Bradley tries to beg off, and then grudgingly agrees to spare her some time. The following morning he writes a letter of apology to Arnold and Rachel for witnessing the havoc of their spat. He also writes to Julian, giving her a recommended reading list and an encapsulated lecture on art. Murdoch makes greater use of the epistolary technique in The Black Prince than she did with Martin's few letters in A Severed Head. Bradley repeatedly writes letters feeling that "A letter is a barrier, a reprieve, a charm against the world, an almost infallible method of acting at a distance" (63), and Bradley desires to keep people at a distance. The other characters also find letters a successful means of communicating, or perhaps they simply comply with Bradley's preference for this mode of communication. Later in the novel he refuses to answer his door and speaks only to certain people who telephone.

As Bradley completes brief notes to Francis and Christian, the doorbell rings. Bradley's sister bursts into tears when he opens the door. He asks her what is wrong, and, egoist that he is, declares, "Oh, you are upsetting me so!" (71). When Priscilla announces that she has left her husband, Bradley can only think of

himself, "I felt blank dismay, instant fear for myself. I did not want to be involved in any mess of Priscilla's. I did not even want to have to be sorry for Priscilla" (72). Priscilla immediately heads to a bedroom to lie down and tries to explain her frustration to Bradley. "He can do anything he likes and I'm so lonely, oh so lonely--And I put up with it because there was nothing else to do" (72). Bradley anxiously attempts to placate her:

> "Of course, you're unhappy, all married people are unhappy . . . 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." (73-74)

Bradley's callousness does nothing to ease Priscilla's state of despair. Chaos breaks out again when Priscilla announces that she has taken an overdose of sleeping pills; simultaneously Francis is at the door and Rachel is on the phone. Julian and Rachel quickly arrive to lend their assistance. When the pills make Priscilla sick to her stomach, she is out of immediate danger. Rachel takes the opportunity to gloatingly inform Bradley that the Baffins encountered Christian (Bradley's ex-wife) on their way to Bradley's

apartment. After the Baffins had explained the circumstances to her, Christian had felt that it was best to postpone her visit, so Arnold had accompanied her to a nearby pub. Overwhelmed, Bradley flees the house, leaving the others to cope with Priscilla.

Part of Bradley's frustration with Priscilla stems from the fact that she fails to shake herself from her self-pity and take charge of the situation and her life. Instead, she unproductively whines and cries, having given up long ago, and lacks the capacity to make a positive change. Priscilla allows herself to be destroyed by her unsuccessful marriage, unable to break from her pattern of the over-dependent woman. In his book, Iris Murdoch, Frank Baldanza comments on the character of Priscilla: "One might almost think the author cruel in her delineation of the type, if the portraiture were not so relentlessly convincing" (172). Murdoch succeeds in creating a character with whom the reader sympathizes and yet easily tires of, as do the other characters in the novel. Elizabeth Dipple observes that "it is hard to stay comfortable in this world, hard to sustain the human sympathy that Murdoch's novels tell us it is our duty to show" (90). Although Bradley recognizes his responsibility in taking care of Priscilla, it is a task that he does not want: "A simple hard obligation to do this remains with me, a palpable thorn in the flesh of my versatile egoism" (The Black Prince 125).

When Rachel meets and hears about Priscilla's crumbling marriage and sanity, she tells Bradley that Priscilla should get angry instead of bemoaning her situation. This crucial ingredient of "fire" ultimately separates Rachel's actions from those taken by Priscilla--Priscilla commits suicide, Rachel takes revenge. Bradley misjudges what Rachel is capable of; he is, instead, intimidated by the self-control and success of his former wife, Christian. Bradley refers to Christian as a "demon lover" (92) and categorizes her with similar women he has known, ". . . predatory women, Christian, Marigold [the mistress of Priscilla's husband], my mother: the destroyers" (109). Bradley's distorted perception of these women reinforces his self-deception.

Christian provides a refreshing contrast to Priscilla and Rachel. Although older than these two, Christian has an elegance and dignity which they could never achieve. She also has learned to laugh at the world and to accept contingency:

> "Women my age can look damn silly when they're being really serious, but in a way, because we've less to lose, we can be wiser, too. And because we're women it's our part to sort of help people to spread a bit of warmth and caring around the place." (168)

Christian's strength comes from several factors: a vivacious and adventuresome nature, economic solvency (the estate of her second

husband left her wealthy), and a maturity she has gained from her experiences.

Julian, Rachel's 20-year-old daughter, shares Christian's attitude in regard to having little to lose by taking chances. Julian impatiently searches for a career and fulfillment. She epitomizes the impetuousness and resiliency of youth. Bradley's love for Julian transforms him, he feels a surge of power, removed from trivial daily annoyances and self-assured in the promise of his forthcoming work of art.

Julian's parents are outraged to discover the nature of Bradley's relationship with their daughter. When Arnold reproaches Bradley, he rationalizes, ". . . you are, perhaps, reaching the age when men make asses of themselves" (280), but Arnold still blames Bradley for involving Julian. The restrictions placed on Julian by her parents encourage her rebellion, and she escapes to Bradley. They leave town, driving to the cottage Bradley had earlier rented as a retreat for writing. Initially, Bradley is unable to consummate his love for Julian, but after he learns of Priscilla's suicide, he returns to the cottage, where he finds Julian dressed as Hamlet and virtually rapes her (Hamlet had been a recurring topic of study and discussion between Bradley and Julian.)

The arrival of Arnold at the cottage ends the couple's new-found bliss. Julian is distraught to learn that Bradley had lied to her about his age, and that he had not told her about his

sister's suicide. Arnold also gives Julian a letter from Rachel. Julian leaves the cottage later that night, and Bradley returns to London to find her and to deal with Priscilla's funeral. While trying to learn Julian's whereabouts from Rachel, Bradley discovers that in her letter Rachel had told Julian about a time when Rachel and Bradley had been intimate. Rachel calmly chats on as Bradley is horrified at the one-sidedness of what Julian has heard. (The entire incident consisted of a brief, awkward meeting in Rachel's bedroom.) Rachel appears to have adopted a matter-of-fact attitude, and she attempts to convince Bradley of the folly in his actions:

> "You can't make yourself into a new person overnight, however much in love you feel you are. That sort of love is an illusion, all that 'certainty' you were talking about is an illusion. It's like being under the influence of drugs." (359)

Bradley vehemently denies this. He becomes flustered and confused about what did happen and rummages through his desk, pulling out a letter from Arnold. The doorbell rings and Bradley thrusts the letter at Rachel as he goes to the door. A changed Rachel faces him when he returns. Her smug confidence in her marriage and Arnold's love vanishes when she learns of Arnold's love for Christian, and the awareness of such betrayal stuns her. Rachel

later strikes Arnold with the same fireplace poker he had used on her at the beginning of the novel.

Bradley accidently implicates himself when, in a flustered state, he cleans up the site of the murder, erasing all traces of Rachel's fingerprints and leaving his own. In his postscript he tells how he made up various stories at the trial; in an effort to clear Rachel and protect the others he succumbed to the myth of a savior. By the time he explained the truth no one would believe him. In prison Bradley finds peace of mind through the catharsis of writing and achieving the completion of his long-awaited work of art.

Postscripts written by Christian, Francis (Christian's brother), Rachel and Julian deny Bradley's version of the truth. In a final postscript the editor points out that these four postscript writers attempt to show that Bradley was in love with them, portraying themselves as the unwelcome objects of Bradley's fantasies. Their postscripts prove them to be as self-serving as Bradley depicted them. He had earlier observed, regarding himself, "The natural tendency of the human soul is towards the protection of the ego" (182), and the others are trying to accomplish this protection through the opportunity the editor provided. (The editor reveals that Bradley died shortly after completing the book, so any sort of counter-claim is impossible.) Postscripts aside, Bradley's reliability as a narrator is challenged throughout the

text in regard to his ideas about art, and the discriminating reader must choose what to believe and what to dismiss (Biles 124, Dipple 116).

Murdoch frequently alludes to parallels between a work of art and a particular novel, such is the case with her use of Hamlet in The Black Prince. Bradley identifies with Hamlet's dilemma and sees himself as a type of twentieth century Black Prince. In A Severed Head, there was a hint of a homosexual attraction between the narrator (Martin) and his friend (Palmer); the idea of homosexuality is more overt in The Black Prince. Bradley flippantly labels Hamlet a homosexual and several characters feel that underlying homosexuality explains Bradley's relationship with Arnold and the ensuing relationship between Bradley and Arnold's wife and daughter. The only other male main character, Francis, is a neurotic homosexual who depends on Bradley. Murdoch plays with these ideas so that the reader must determine the nature of Bradley's love for Julian--he initially mistakes her for a boy and he makes love to her when she is dressed as Hamlet. All of this complicates the reader's perception of Bradley. Yet, Bradley is a victim. Whether he is a latent homosexual does not matter, whether he is too old for Julian does not matter, what does matter is how the characters pass judgment on him and Bradley's reaction to these judgments. If Bradley is indeed homosexual or has an exaggerated crush on Julian which is rooted in fantasy and a desire to

recapture his lost youth, then he would have failed to transcend his illusions. Murdoch, in ending the book as she does, implied otherwise.

Bradley is not a saintly hero and although his narrative is subjective, his constant goal is to tell the truth. Lack of attention and care for his sister during her breakdown and his comical blunders show him to be full of human error, and he pays a price for his actions; he has suffered but he has loved. Bradley has developed beyond his illusions, while the other characters have sought protection in expanding theirs, thereby shielding themselves from reality. The writing of his autobiographical work of art is based not in ego but rather in Bradley's profession of love and all that comes in the contingency of its wake. His acceptance of contingency, and therefore, imperfection in life and in art is the reason he was finally able to complete his book.

Many readers consider The Black Prince Murdoch's finest work. Peter Conradi notes, "The writing throughout is electric with energy and power. The characterization is assured; its people, in all their awfulness, frailty, sadness and ordinary human incompleteness, are real to the reader" (Saint and Artist 184). In comparison with Murdoch's previous first person point of view novels--Under the Net, A Severed Head and The Italian Girl--the characters are more firmly drawn and play more developed roles, especially the women (excepting Honor Klein in A Severed Head).

Richard Todd commends The Black Prince as "virtuoso in its technical self-consciousness, in the way in which it challenges its own text-reliability" (74):

> Thematically, it represents a remarkably brilliant self-imposed challenge, since it is undoubtedly the most solipsistic of her novels: her theme, however, has constantly involved attention to the dangers of solipsism. (75)

While Murdoch's warning against solipsism has been the primary theme in her earlier first person works, it is intensified in the three first person novels she wrote in the 1970's--The Black Prince, A Word Child, and The Sea, The Sea. The actions and personalities of the narrators in these later works make them increasingly dislikeable, which in turn demands greater care in control of distancing so that the narrator/protagonist is not alienated from the reader's sympathy; if the reader loses interest in the narrator's progression from solipsism to moral responsibility and acceptance of contingency, then Murdoch's purpose is lost.

CHAPTER 5

A WORD CHILD -- HILARY BURDE: CONFRONTING CONTINGENCY

The Black Prince, A Word Child, and The Sea, The Sea all show Murdoch's continuous experimentation with technique to enhance her characters, plots and themes. In The Black Prince experimentation is evident in her inclusion of the forewords and postscripts which complicate a reader's response and which introduce a significant ambiguity into the novel, an ambiguity of the sort frequently encountered in life. The form of A Word Child also comments obliquely on its subject. The story is told within the frame of a journal, broken into days of the week, indicative of the narrator's regimented lifestyle. For example, Hilary Burde--the narrator, author and protagonist of A Word Child--dines every Thursday night with the Impiatts and spends every Saturday evening with his sister. Friends are assigned a specific day (which leaves Sundays and Wednesdays open), and Hilary devotes the remainder of his leisure time to avoiding unscheduled visits by staying in bed, going to the movies, taking long walks in inclement weather, drinking in subway pubs or riding the underground system.

Similar to a younger version of Bradley Pearson, Hilary also works for the civil service in London. Physically unlike the previous first person narrators (they have generally been pale,

fair-haired and of slight build) Hilary is tall and strong, with dark, curly hair. He has been unable to shake off the stigma of his lower class upbringing, and has an impulsive, violent nature. Hilary's appearance is reminiscent of the waif he once was; his suit is worn and wrinkled, his shirt soiled and frayed, and his socks mismatched.

Hilary is not as self-conscious in his writing style as Bradley was; there are no long discussions regarding the role of art in life and the nature of truth, or the best manner in which to tell his story. Only infrequently does he pause in his narrative to provide brief passages of commentary. One such example occurs early in the novel as Hilary explains his friendship with the Impiatts:

> As I may sometimes seem in what follows to mock the Impiatts let me here make it clear once and for all that I thoroughly liked them both, as we often do those whom we mock. I thought they were decent people and I admired them because they were happily married, quite a feat in my estimation. (7)

Like Bradley, Hilary is suspicious of marriage.

Hilary finds the Impiatts an entertaining couple, yet their ceaseless teasing of Hilary often seems a cruel game. Laura Impiatt energetically searches for people and activities to keep her life from becoming staid. Like Rachel Baffin in The Black

Prince, Laura surrenders her education and career to become a devoted housewife. Freddie Impiatt is one of Hilary's superiors at work. Hilary plays the role of the witty, unconcerned rascal while at the Impiatts' home, but at work he becomes absorbed in the mechanical, methodical nature of the job. His office-mates also find great satisfaction in teasing him, and although he despises them, he stolidly refuses to accept the bait.

The most important person in Hilary's life is his sister, Crystal. He describes them as "oned in love" (14). Their mother, a prostitute, died when they were quite young and they never knew their fathers. Hilary was sent to an orphanage and only allowed to visit Crystal occasionally at their Aunt's house. As a child, he became increasingly destructive until a schoolmaster helped him realize that he was clever and could excel:

> I discovered words and words were my salvation. I was not, except in some very broken-down sense of that ambiguous term, a love child. I was a word child. (21)

He later elaborates:

> Someone once said of me, and it was not entirely unjust, that I read poetry for the grammar. As I have said, I never wanted to be a writer. I loved words, but I was not a word-user, rather a word-watcher, in the way that some people are bird-watchers. (28)

Hilary's linguistic abilities paved the way to a better lifestyle and he planned to take Crystal with him as he ascended the social hierarchy.

To Hilary, Crystal is a homely and ignorant woman who is naturally, completely devoted to him. Hilary returns her love, and although his descriptions of her are often cruel in their perceptions, he sees her as a gentle, innocent and loving person. Elizabeth Dipple comments that "the permanence of his attachment somewhat softens the brutally realistic descriptions he gives of this plain, podgy, uneducated, naive and generous lower-class woman" (213). Hilary controls Crystal's life and is uncertain about allowing her to marry one of his underlings at work: "I may have seemed in these pages (so far: and there will be no improvement) to be a monster of egoism, but I was just capable of willing Crystal's happiness as something separate from my own" (A Word Child 68). He sees her as such a part of himself that he is oblivious to the reality of her dull life. Hilary may sincerely want only what is best for Crystal, but he is still very much the bully because he must try to maintain control over all of life's contingencies, including his sister's life. As D.W. Jefferson comments, even Crystal is "subject to his arbitrary, inflexible, often pointless restrictions" (51).

Crystal and her boyfriend may adhere to Hilary's rules, but the others enjoy goading and provoking him. His girlfriend, Tommy

(Thomasina), tries to convince him that they should marry. Hilary copes with these minor irritations until he receives the news that the man he wronged in the past is now going to be his boss. The grasp Hilary has managed to enforce over contingency eludes him as he increasingly becomes a victim of fate.

Hilary reveals the details of the past circumstances which led to his current way of life. After obtaining a teaching position at Oxford, he fell in love with Anne Jopling--devoted wife of the man who had assisted in gaining Hilary his position. When Anne attempts to end their affair, Hilary's unchecked anger results in a car crash which kills Anne and ends his hopes for a career in teaching.

Hilary is shocked to learn of Gunnar Jopling's return to his life after living with the nightmare of guilt for adultery and wrongful death for twenty years. After consulting with a friend, Hilary realizes that he can not give in to the urge to run away. Even though he can rationalize that both he and Gunnar need to come to terms with the past, simply passing Gunnar's new wife in the hallway upsets him so that he wonders if he can function at all:

> . . . I must do everything in order as I had always done. I must go regularly to work. I must keep to my "days." I must not become a madman walking about London and living on the tube. (150)

The situation becomes more complicated when Lady Kitty, Gunnar's new wife, approaches Hilary to discuss the matter with him.

Lady Kitty convinces Hilary to make the first move in reconciling with Gunnar. She admonishes him when he shows surprise at hearing that Gunnar has thought of him all these years (on the surface, Gunnar has experienced a publicly successful career): "You've been a sort of huge mythological figure to both of us for years . . . Do you imagine you are the only person involved?" (194). She wishes for Gunnar to be able to see Hilary as "a human being, an ordinary person, not a sort of ghost or demon" (194). Hilary bitterly adds, "An ordinary unhappy unsuccessful man" (194). Having the accident suddenly become part of everyday conversation after not talking about it for so long leaves Hilary with an unsettling feeling.

In a letter to Kitty, Hilary claims, ". . . you are the only person to whom I can speak. I have carried this thing silently and alone all these years and the burden has not become less" (220-21). He makes no mention of Crystal and he has yet to truly realize the sacrifices she has made for his actions, but as he walks to her apartment he reflects on the drab quality of her life and how insensitive he has been. Hilary's realization that he has fallen in love with Lady Kitty creates a feeling of even greater uncertainty in himself and his perceptions of those around him. When he arrives at Crystal's home he proceeds to tell her of

his love for Kitty and his brief meeting with Gunnar, to which she repeatedly responds, "I don't want you to see him" (248). Hilary, quite worried by her reaction, questions her behavior, and she reveals a need to talk about the accident. Crystal relates the sequence of events as she had experienced them and shocks Hilary with the news that Gunnar had made love to her after hearing of Anne's death. Hilary is outraged, "You've changed the past" (253), but he is also forced for the first time to see Crystal as an individual. However, Hilary remains skeptical of Crystal's confession, thinking she may have invented it--the desperate fantasy of a virgin approaching middle-age.

No longer able to tolerate Gunnar's presence at the office, Hilary gives notice of his resignation, unaware that the people he works with have assumed otherwise--Hilary learns that they believe him to be in love with Laura Impiatt. (He later finds out that he had served as a front for a year-long affair between Laura Impiatt and his lodger, Christopher, but even Christopher and Laura believe that Hilary is in love with Laura.)

Gunnar and Crystal have a long talk, against Hilary's wishes, and they are both able to release the imposing memory of the past. Kitty asks Hilary to stay in London and befriend Gunnar, and, since Gunnar is unknowingly unable to have children, she wants Hilary to impregnate her. Hilary sees the impossibility of this and shudders to himself, "I felt the chill touch of an inevitable

doom: nothing dramatic, only the slow blundering crushing force of the many circumstances which every day announce impossibilities in human lives" (347).

When Kitty joins Hilary for their final meeting along a jetty by Kitty and Gunnar's home, Hilary sadly explains the impossibility of trying to be lover and friend. With the insight Hilary has obtained he attempts to dismiss their hopes for each other by saying that "all human emotions are full of illusion" (369). He knows that they cannot share a future. Suddenly, Gunnar emerges from the fog and attacks Hilary. Kitty comes between them to halt the fighting, but she is accidentally swept over the edge of the dock and as a result, dies of exposure.

Hilary tells of his own near death in the river, trying to save Kitty, in a chapter which has no heading: "It was later, later, later. There were no more days" (377). Hilary has abandoned his attempts to control contingency. He unexpectedly learns that his friend Clifford has committed suicide, and this is the final blow to his remaining illusions. He stops into a church and cries "tears of vain tenderness and self-pity" (378). Elizabeth Dipple cites Hilary's relationship with Clifford as a clear example of Hilary's solipsism: "Hilary's concentration on himself, his refusal to read other people or see them whole, and the narrow possessiveness of his love are the constituent elements of his destructiveness" (220).

Hilary determines not to drag Crystal down with him this time. He does not tell her of his witness to Kitty's death and the circumstances, nor does he tell her about Clifford's tragic death (Crystal loved Clifford for his kindness to her). Hilary recalls how Crystal had suffered for his involvement with Anne's death:

> How profitless it had all been I could now very clearly see. Repentance, penance, redemptive suffering? Nothing of the sort. I had destroyed my chances in life and destroyed Crystal's happiness out of sheer pique, out of the spiteful envious violence which was still in me. (A Word Child 381)

Hilary's observations show that he does now see Crystal as a separate individual, and that he is not placing new illusions on himself by ignoring his basic feelings. Since he has begun to change, other changes will follow at a more gradual pace. Peter Hawkins points out Hilary's development as a strong example of Murdoch's use of "crisis to shatter illusion, life and limb, thereby giving her protagonists the opportunity to become someone new, to see reality in a different and often more painful light" (127).

The final two chapters of the novel take place on Christmas Eve--when Crystal gets married--and Christmas Day, when Tommy once again proposes to Hilary. Hilary succeeds in transcending his illusions and breaking the rigid patterns which were ultimately

useless in bending contingency to his will. He encourages Crystal's marriage and is considering undertaking marriage himself. Now that he has been freed from the crippling secret of his past, Hilary can also accept the possibility of change as a positive influence.

Hilary is contrasted throughout the novel with Crystal's boyfriend, Arthur. Arthur's humane and sensitive outlook glaringly points out that which has been lacking in Hilary's personality, but Hilary is making an effort to change. As he realizes at an earlier point in the novel when someone slips him some LSD, "Forgiving equals being forgiven" (298). He applies this insight when he tries to forgive himself for his past actions and behavior, and is finally able to allow himself to find a modest amount of happiness and fulfillment.

Murdoch draws parallels between Hilary's life and J.M Barrie's Peter Pan to create an extended analogy throughout the novel. Elizabeth Dipple believes that this analogy points to Hilary's basic problem, his "inability to break out of the basic patterns of his lonely, unloved boyhood" (216). Hilary is the recalcitrant boy not wanting to grow up and face the problems of the ever-changing reality. He is often rumpled and poorly dressed, and the women in the novel are attracted to his vulnerability. Hilary has always dreamed of taking Crystal to a better place, their concept of Never-Never land. Hilary also meets with Kitty by

a statue of Peter Pan in a park, and his office tries to stage the play as their yearly production.

At times, Murdoch suggests the difficulties of seeing reality through descriptions of the weather. In A Severed Head Martin was often walking in fog; similarly, Hilary is often caught in dense fog, rain or snow. Hilary's comment on himself, "I was back where my childhood had condemned me to be, alone, out in the cold without a coat" (269), reflects his class-consciousness and his inferiority complex which causes him to believe that he will eventually be found wanting and cast out. He is overwhelmed to discover that women like Anne and Kitty, with their backgrounds and lifestyles, are attainable, yet, he does not expect such relationships to last. Elizabeth Dipple's comments on the personality of the narrator seem just:

> Like Bradley Pearson in The Black Prince or Charles Arrowby in The Sea, The Sea, Hilary Burde is, for many if not all readers, a maddening and negative character on whom Murdoch so riskily projects her fiction and to whom she gives over the entire substance of her text. He is painfully dislikable, but has a Byronic, grim self-perception, and almost romantic aura which can draw some readers and which certainly has significant power over all the women in his story. (212)

Dipple also feels that the rapid narrative pacing of the novel assists in gaining Hilary some sympathy from the reader (212).

A Word Child is frequently overlooked, or only briefly examined, in criticism which deals with Murdoch's novels. Elizabeth Dipple applauds its merits, but feels that A Word Child pales in comparison to other novels Murdoch wrote during this period of her career. However, when D.W. Jefferson refers to A Word Child as "one of the most original and powerful of her novels" (51), he is acknowledging the qualities of the novel which have been too quickly dismissed, and perhaps will be more closely examined at some future time.

CHAPTER 6

THE SEA, THE SEA -- CHARLES ARROWBY: REPENTING OF EGOISM

Like Hilary, Charles Arrowby, the narrator and protagonist of The Sea, The Sea, is also burdened with an unresolved relationship from the distant past. Unlike Hilary, Charles has led a vibrant, extroverted life. A successful theatre director, he has recently retired and left London, taking up solitary residence in his newly acquired, isolated home--Shruff End--perched along the rocky cliffs of the sea.

In his writing style Charles resembles Bradley Pearson of The Black Prince, only Charles' narrative often rambles. The Sea, The Sea is sometimes Charles' diary, other times his memoirs, and occasionally the cookbook he has thought about writing. He mentions the role of theatre in life, but does not discuss the function of art to the extent that Bradley does. Charles expresses the thought that his book will be his attempt to "repent of egoism," yet he ironically questions if an autobiography is indeed the best means of pursuing such a goal (3).

Charles introduces himself as one who is accustomed to and impatient with the annoyances which accompany celebrity status:

> Yes, yes I am Charles Arrowby and, as I write this, I am, shall we say, over sixty years of age. I am wifeless,

> childless, brotherless, sisterless, I am my well-known self, made glittering and brittle by fame. (3)

Charles convincingly tells of how little he misses his former way of life; he does not glorify his career. He shuns company at his seaside retreat, and of the villagers he comments, "No one, thank God, has attempted to befriend me" (25). He accepts their "mild hostility" toward him as an outsider, yet, it is also obvious that Charles takes pride in having achieved a social status which sets him aside from ordinary people.

Even though Charles is clearly egocentric, he writes with candor:

> As actor, director and playwright I have of course had my full share of disappointments, of lost time and lost ways. My "successful" career contains many failures, many dead ends. All my plays flopped on Broadway for instance. I failed as an actor, I ceased as a playwright. Only my fame as a director has covered up these facts. (37)

Cushioned by fame, Charles does not lack self-assuredness when dealing with others. He continues to try to control people as he did when he was the director and they, the actors. His friends and colleagues are beginning to rebel now that he has retired, but Charles has difficulty relinquishing the power he has brandished for so long.

Charles tosses out various names and relationships in his narrative which indicate the nature of the myths he has imposed upon others and himself--the fairytale marriage of his Aunt and Uncle, and their son James (whom Charles always envied), Clement (Charles' first and most significant mistress), and other friends and lovers. Charles admits to knowing few successful marriages (sharing the skepticism of Murdoch's other first person narrators regarding marriage). He alludes to his "long-lost love," Mary Hartley Smith--Hartley, as the only woman he would have married. (Hartley had thwarted their secret plans to marry by leaving town, and shortly after, married someone else.) Yet, the central emphasis of his book is originally focused on Clement: "I must write about Clement. She is the main theme" (68). What develops, however, is Charles' attempt to regain the adolescent love he had and has for Hartley, an illusory memory which he has never set aside. (This is similar to Jake's initial purpose and the resulting plot of Under the Net; he intends to write about Hugo, but the narrative describes the situations and people Jake encounters in his often simultaneous search for a home, Anna, Hugo, and self-fulfillment.)

As a young man Charles had escaped to London to pursue a career in the theatre: "From the guileless simplicity of my parents' life, from the immobility and quietness of my home, I fled to the trickery and magic of art. I craved glitter, movement,

acrobatics, noise" (29). Just as he had sought to work in a world of illusion, Charles assumes that leaving the theatre will mean living in reality. Zohreh Sullivan aptly summarizes Charles' character as "an obsessive romantic pursuing an unending series of self-generated illusions" (56), a description which holds true for all of Murdoch's first person narrators.

Charles' narrative tells of uninvited visitors who shatter his illusive peace. The most obtrusive of these is Rosina, a vindictive, cast-off lover. She succeeds in haunting Shruff End and frightening Charles. Rosina jealously and angrily warns Charles against pursuing other women, and from her own experience with Charles she berates him, "You want women but you are never interested in the people you want, so you learn nothing" (108). The truth of this observation is verified when Charles discovers that Hartley lives in the village and he attempts to recapture the past.

Charles tries to befriend Hartley and her husband and does not understand their refusal of such a relationship. He dismisses the boundaries of social class, occupation and lifestyle; his eye is on the prize, Hartley, and his only concern is how to obtain it. The open hostility of Hartley's husband puzzles Charles, even though all he can think about is how to get Hartley away from this man. During a discussion about women with his friend Peregrine (who was married to Rosina at the time of her affair with Charles),

Peregrine explains to Charles that his problem lies in the fact that Charles despises women. Charles denies this, "I don't despise women. I was in love with all of Shakespeare's heroines before I was twelve" (162). To which Peregrine responds, "But they don't exist, dear man, that's the point. They live in the never-never land of art, all tricked out in Shakespeare's wit and wisdom, and mock us from there, filling us with false hopes and empty dreams" (162). This indicates Charles' difficulty in perceiving the difference between illusion and reality, art and life. Throughout the novel Charles struggles with his inability to see Hartley as she truly is, the reality of the woman, her situation and the choices she has made.

During a chance encounter with his cousin James, Charles surprises himself by informing James of his intentions to rescue Hartley from a bad marriage, and then asks for James' reaction. James warns him, "you may be deluding yourself in thinking that you have really loved this woman all these years" (178). Charles ignores James' sensible advice, and when Rosina is prepared to launch her next assault he once again unexpectedly surprises himself by telling her the truth about his love for Hartley. Rosina is amused and accuses Charles of having "delusions." She had been with Charles when he had first recognized Hartley, and she cannot fathom what Charles sees in an "ordinary," "mousy and dull,"

"old bag" (184-186). Meanwhile, Charles thinks of regaining his innocence through Hartley:

> I felt tenderness, pity, a deep desire to cherish Hartley, to protect her from any more pain or any more harm, to indulge and spoil her, to give her everything that she wanted, and to make her eternally happy . . . But I also wanted increasingly, and with a violence which almost burnt the tenderness away, to own her, to possess her body and soul. (186)

When Charles finally meets with Hartley, she tries to impress upon him the importance of him leaving her alone, but Charles fantasizes about being with her and what their life will be like. Hartley weakly explains why she ran away from him all those years ago, "I didn't want you to be an actor . . . It wasn't just anything, oh don't upset me so, we were too much like brother and sister and you were so sort of bossy and I decided I didn't want to [marry you]" (216). Hartley also explains the underlying problem in her marriage--her husband believes that their adopted son (now grown and not heard from for two years) is Charles' son, and possibly even the son of Charles and Hartley since she was absent from her husband at that time.

Charles passes his days consciously waiting for something to happen--waiting for Hartley to stop by again, or waiting for an opportunity to rescue her. When her son, Titus, unexpectedly shows

up at Shruff End, Charles encourages him to stay, "He was a clever attractive boy and I was going to do my damnedest to get hold of him. To get hold of him and then of his mother" (261). When Charles does lure Hartley to Shruff End with the promise of seeing Titus, he is shocked at how little the mother and son have to say to each other.

Charles keeps Hartley hostage, locking her in an upstairs room and trying to convince her to make a positive change in her life--regardless of whether or not her plans include him. While this is the peak of Charles' obsession, he has at least become capable of wanting what is best for Hartley and Titus, even though he has difficulty seeing their lives as separate from his own. Hartley admits to Charles, "Yes, I suppose I love you, I've never forgotten you, and when I saw you I felt it all again, but it's something childish, it isn't part of the real world. There was never any place for our love in the world" (280). Titus had earlier described his mother as a "fantasist," but she also seems to be a fatalist, feeling that she cannot alter the pattern of her life and that she is to blame for everyone's problems. The following morning Charles begins to realize that Hartley does not want to be saved, and that missing the opportunity to be married to a famous man is not one of her regrets in life. He recalls Peregrine's words on marriage, "the spouse who feels guilty, even irrationally, is endlessly the victim of the whims of the other,

and can take no moral stand" (162). Hartley had surrendered to her husband out of guilt over something which had never happened. Titus had been despised and mistreated by his father, and his mother had remained helpless in protecting and defending him.

During the night Charles dreams that Hartley has committed suicide in the next room. As he awakens from the nightmare, slowly distinguishing reality from dream, he reflects upon his recent actions: "What was I doing, or rather what was happening to me? . . . I was totally vulnerable and helpless. I had lost control of my life and of the lives with which I was meddling" (310). James calmly takes charge of the situation at Shruff End when he arrives the following day. He organizes the other uninvited guests to convince Charles to return Hartley to her home. When this mission is accomplished, James rationalizes with Charles, "Time can divorce us from the reality of people, it can separate us from people and turn them into ghosts. Or rather it is we who turn them into ghosts or demons" (352). Charles is not yet ready to accept this truth, that the Hartley of his dreams is only a fantasy, separate from the person. As Rosina had earlier pointed out, Charles fails to learn from his experiences.

Charles escapes the revelry of his guests to devise his next plan to save Hartley from herself and her husband. While he is thoughtfully staring into Minn's cauldron--a deep, rounded hole in the rocks where the sea powerfully churns--someone pushes him

in. Charles later regains consciousness after being rescued and revived by James, and suspects Hartley's husband as his would-be assassin. Before the household has fully recovered from this event, they are shaken by the accidental drowning of Titus. Charles is shocked further when, under James' guidance, Peregrine confesses that it was he who pushed Charles. (Charles' affair with Rosina had broken up her marriage with Peregrine.)

An invitation to Hartley's home for tea succeeds in breaking down more of Charles' illusions. He witnesses their contentment and wonders, "What had given them that calm satisfied look? The terrible answer came to me: Titus's death" (429). Charles next discovers that Rosina and Peregrine are reunited. Rosina flippantly tells Charles, "I can't imagine why I got so attached to you. I think it was your own illusions of power that fascinated people, not personal magnetism. We were just duped by your conceit" (434). She also tells Charles that she had spent some time with Hartley's husband, and describes Hartley as a "lucky woman" to be married to such an "attractive" man. For the first time Charles realizes that Hartley may actually have been drawn to her husband, not marrying him out of pity or desperation.

Charles still clings to his dream of being reunited with Hartley, but when she and her husband move to Australia he sees the pointlessness in tracking them down and disrupting their retirement. The news of James' death leads to Charles' return to

London. In his postscript he tells of the new pattern of his life. Charles makes James' apartment his new residence and goes through the motions of meeting with friends, yet he is a changed man. He is now aware of the true impact of Clement in his life:

> Clement was the reality of my life, its bread and its wine. She made me, she invented me, she was my university, my partner, my teacher, my mother, later my child, my soul's mate, my absolute mistress. She, and not Hartley, was the reason why I never married. (484)

Clement was much older than Charles and her experience, fame and contacts in the theatre invaluably assisted in establishing Charles' career. Because of Charles' delusion about Hartley it was not until this point in his life that he realizes all that Clement was to him.

The conclusion of Charles' diary rambles on, fragmentary, brief entries where he alternately denies and accepts the manner of events he has experienced. He is kind and giving to people, no longer the tyrant and bully he once was. For instance, he encourages hesitant actors and directors, and sees to it that his secretary's mother is placed in a good nursing home (he also pays for her care). In this manner, Charles finds the self-satisfaction which had remained elusive while he was living behind the constant veil of illusion. His actions prove him to be morally responsible and able to cope with contingency.

Two of the more enigmatic aspects of the novel involve Charles' sighting of a sea monster--perhaps a projection of that which is negative in Charles, or possibly a manifestation of his obsessive egoism--and the pervasive presence of Tibetian Buddhist practice and beliefs through the character of James. Peter Conradi observes, "The law governing the book is karma, called by James 'spiritual causality,' by which we pay inexorably for every thought as well as every action" (Saint and Artist 233). Just as Charles is giving up the magic of the theatre (and eventually his illusions), so, too, is James trying to renounce the spiritual magic which detracts from his "quest for virtue and wisdom" (242). Yet he returns to these "tricks" he learned in Tibet when he finds Titus, rescues Charles and wills his own death. It becomes apparent that James' purpose in seeking out Charles was to complete his mission for this incarnation by resolving the tension between them and assisting Charles in his time of crisis. Having done what he could (both men felt responsible for Titus' death), James moves on in accordance with his belief system.

After comparing the struggles of Charles and James, Elizabeth Dipple points out that Murdoch often uses Plato's myth of the cave in her fiction (through situation or dialogue) to dramatize the nature of her narrators' illusions. (Murdoch considers herself a Platonist and has written a book which explains Plato's reasoning in banishing the artists.) Dipple concludes:

"The difficulties of attaining light and the sad distance of the human mind from the greatest object of its desire are the subject of this subtle novel" (305). Similarly, Rosalind Miles generalizes that the majority of Murdoch's characters "have to settle for far less than full happiness: they have to take what they can get and console themselves with that" (147). While both of these viewpoints are accurate, they also suggest a negative outlook, instead of Murdoch's intention of portraying simply the reality of life and the importance of continuing to strive for perfection. When discussing her concept of freedom during an interview in 1983, Murdoch responded, "I would connect it [freedom] with ideas like sanctity or moral perfection, things which you cannot get, but which are ideal goals which are very important in human life" (Slaymaker 432). In regard to her own work process, Murdoch has commented that the main reason any novelist continues writing is in an effort to "try to correct in it [the new novel] the mistakes of her last [novel]" (Davie and Crutchley 96).

Charles and James, and all of Murdoch's characters, are, as she has said, "representations of persons who are imperfect" (Slaymaker 431). In her philosophical writings Murdoch has repeatedly worked with "the question of perfection, of the nature of truth, of whether there can be said or seen to be any transcendent good outside human imperfections and vanities, in some way beyond the operations of time, chance and necessity, which can

be a meaningful object of contemplation" (Byatt 17). These ideas are also present in The Sea, The Sea. As Charles' postscript trails off he remarks:

> What an egoist I must seem in the preceding pages. But am I so exceptional? We must live by the light of our own self-satisfaction, through the secret vital busy inwardness which is even more remarkable than our reason . . . the light of self-satisfaction can illuminate the whole world. (482)

Just as James did not die a defeated man, Charles' diary does not conclude in a pessimistic manner. For instance, Peregrine's step-daughter has persistently offered herself to give Charles a child. While Charles has steadfastly declined, he has agreed to meet with her for lunch, and as any reader acquainted with Murdoch's radically contingent fictional world knows, anything can happen. The important point is that Charles is no longer placing demands on people and he may yet enjoy a loving relationship, which all of Murdoch's first person narrators seek; if not, he will continue to find fulfillment in assisting others.

CONCLUSION

Those who have an appreciation for Iris Murdoch's fiction often share the sentiments Richard Todd expressed when he remarked, "it does seem to be the case that the first-person narration suits not just Murdoch's technical gifts but the presentation of her themes in novel form" (74). That Murdoch continues using and experimenting with this point of view suggests that it does indeed serve her purposes well. In A Philosopher's Pupil (1982), Murdoch again returns to a first person narrator, but because the narrator is the omniscient Nemo and not her more familiar "learning protagonist," the novel was not included in this study.

The publication of The Nice and the Good in 1968 marks a subtle turning point in Murdoch's literary canon. In an interview with W.K. Rose that year, Murdoch said that the novels written prior to The Nice and the Good (such as Under the Net, A Severed Head and The Italian Girl) were concerned more with freedom, whereas her emphasis has changed to the importance of love. Rosalind Miles elaborates on this theme in Murdoch's novels: "the importance of love, the scarcity of it, and the desperate difficulty, if not impossibility, of even approximating to its rigorous demands" (147). Even so, the idea of freedom evidently continues to be significant in Murdoch's fiction, particularly in light of her learning protagonists' progression in freeing

themselves from their illusions about love, themselves and the nature of reality.

During an interview with William Slaymaker in July of 1983, Murdoch was asked to clarify her viewpoint concerning freedom and art. Instead of seeing freedom as an unfettered state, Murdoch explained that it deals more "with self control, with just understanding, with the liberation of people from irresponsible motives" (426). This is clearly the type of freedom advocated in her novels. Her first person narrators initially have lost "their freedom through neurosis or obsession" (427). The narrators shed their illusions "through self-knowledge" and the acceptance of the reality of other people and situations. Good art assists in the process of awareness by allowing people "to see many aspects of human life in detail, and all kinds of particular things, instead of being trapped inside their own fantasy, which is one of the opposites of freedom" (427). Murdoch emphasizes that art is only one of other possible "routes to liberation," but it plays a role in all of her first person works.

The Nice and the Good is also a turning point in Murdoch's development in another way. It established a tendency toward making the form more complex by using a developed analogy with a major work of art (such as Hamlet in The Black Prince, Peter Pan in A Word Child, and, to a lesser extent, The Tempest in The Sea, The Sea). Murdoch often refers to specific works of art--operas,

poems, plays or novels--to suggest parallels or to intensify her irony. Those who do not appreciate this technique and her mastery of it, or who simply dislike the narrators and the presentation of their stories, would likely concur with Kingsley Widmer's complaint that Murdoch began a monotonous trend in her fiction over a decade ago. He prefers her earlier work, and finds Murdoch's novels of the seventies limited in subject matter. Widmer states that Murdoch's later novels "could be viewed as variations around one issue: aging male egoism" (31). He sees her protagonists as becoming "more obsessional, her moral dialectics sometimes over-insistent, claustrophobic" (31). However, the books written and published during this time have received the most critical acclaim. The Black Prince received the James Tait Black Memorial prize in 1973, The Sacred and Profane Love Machine earned the Whitbread prize in 1974, and The Sea, The Sea won the Booker prize in 1978.

Iris Murdoch has persisted in the midst of mixed reviews, accusations that her plots are not realistic enough, that her characters are not round. Such readers ironically demand plausibility and consistency when Murdoch is showing us that we are unique individuals, possessing quirky habits, struggling to see others as separate human beings and coping with the uncontrollable aspects of life. As Rubin Rabinovitz declares, "for her thoughtful characterization, for her unpredictable inventiveness, and for her intelligent and compassionate ideas she deserves the reader's attention and respect" (46).

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