

Iris Murdoch: how to philosophize through literature



Final Degree Dissertation in Philosophy

Author:

Beatriz Sánchez Tajadura

Tutors:

Lourdes Flamarique

University of Navarra

Constantine Sandis

Gary Browning

Oxford Brookes University

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1. Profile of Iris Murdoch and presentation of the subject



**“Philosophy and literature are both truth-seeking and truth-revealing activities (...)
While philosophy does one thing, literature does many things.”¹**

The boundaries between philosophy and literature is an issue that has been questioned along the twentieth century. Especially since figures such as Friedrich Nietzsche in the nineteenth century, or more recently, Jean Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, produced works entering both the realm of philosophy and literature. The borders between philosophy and literature begin to blur. Thus, the question of where one ends and the other begins arises.

Recently, the figure of Iris Murdoch has seated on this subtle frontier. This thinker, whom many defined as “the most intelligent woman in England”², shows a a markedly philosophical career with philosophical works about morality, Sartre and Plato. However, she is best known for her contribution to the world of literature. Her first novel, *Under the Net* (1954), was selected as one of the 100 best English-language novels of the nineteenth century³. Later, Murdoch was considered as the twelfth greatest British writer since 1945⁴. She was also awarded with the prestigious Booker Prize for her novel *The Sea, the Sea* (1978)⁵.

Iris Murdoch was a contemporary of Ludwig Wittgenstein, Raymond Queneau or Philippa Foot, among others. She has been was one of the key figures in the literary and philosophical atmosphere in England in the twentieth century. She was born in Dublin, Ireland, on 15 July

1. Magee, *Iris Murdoch's conversation with Bryan Magee*, BBC.

2. *The Guardian*, “Age will win”.

3. Modern Library, “100 Best English-language novels of the nineteenth century”.

4. *The Times*, “The 50 greatest British writers since 1945”.

5. The Man Booker Prizes, “Iris Murdoch”.

1919, and then she moved to London, where he lived during her childhood. Later, she went to school in Bristol and, at the age of nineteen, she started her philosophy studies in Oxford. She focused on studying the classics and she was awarded a First Class Honours degree. After some time working abroad, Murdoch returned to England, this time to Cambridge, and she had the opportunity to meet the well-known philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, with whom she maintained a close friendship. After her studies as a postgraduate at Cambridge, Iris Murdoch returned to Oxford and she started teaching philosophy in St Anne's College, where she finally became a fellow.

Throughout his career, Murdoch published purely philosophical works, which include *The Sovereignty of Good* (1970), *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (1992), *Sartre: Romantic Rationalist* (1953), and an essay on the role of artists in Plato's philosophy, entitled *The Fire and the Sun* (1977). While maintaining her position as a philosopher, she developed her role as a writer. She published a total of 26 novels, 6 plays, 2 poetry collections and one short story. To the extent that, nowadays, she is becoming more renowned for her novels than for her philosophical essays. As it can be seen, philosophy and literature were closely connected throughout her life. She herself was interested in the boundaries between her work as a philosopher and as a writer, and her findings were published in the form of essays and interviews in *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature* (1997).

Thus, the problem of the relationship between philosophy and literature is embodied in Iris Murdoch. It is striking that, with a philosophical profile, Iris Murdoch employed her energies in literary novels. So far, it may have seemed that philosophy and literature in Iris Murdoch are two completely separate areas. However, the interesting question that this work tries to answer is how Murdoch's philosophy permeates her novels. In other words, in her literary stories, her philosophical ideas manifests themselves in a particular way. The question that should be asked is in what kind of way, if there is any, did Murdoch express her thoughts. It is a question about the philosophical side of her novels. And, moreover, what it is exactly in literature that attracts a philosopher so insistently.

In order to answer these questions, this paper begins with a brief interpretation of Murdoch's literature from the point of view of Wittgenstein's philosophy. Then, it continues with an explanation about why does Murdoch believe that man has lost certain concepts in his language and how, in her opinion, can they be recovered. This is, it analyzes the progressive narrowing of

philosophical language, and the reason why she proposes a recovery of these lost concepts through art. Then, it considers the moral character of Murdoch's philosophical and literary project. This is, the moral claim of her novels, and her way of thinking, which is characterized more as moral psychology, rather than as philosophy. In this moral psychology, the idea of contingency is a fundamental notion. Later, a number of recurring themes in Murdoch's literature are reviewed Murdoch. Firstly, the fantasy of the artist, opposed to realistic imagination. In this regard, Plato is mentioned as the main influence on Murdoch, both with his allegory of the cave, and with his ideas of love, truth and good. Secondly, the themes of love, pleasure and suffering are treated as their characters embody them. Finally the unreachable issue of God. This is, the question about the source of this morality that Murdoch was determined to rebuild. After this long journey through Murdoch's literature, the aim is to answer the question: why choosing literature and not moral philosophy for her ambitious project? Why does she write novels and not philosophical treatises? The following lines try to answer these questions based on Iris Murdoch, a writer and philosopher who, however, decided to choose art rather than philosophy.

2. A wittgensteinian interpretation of Iris Murdoch



“Actions don't lie, words always do.”⁶

Given the influence that Wittgenstein exerted on Murdoch, it is useful to consider Wittgenstein's theory in order to understand Murdoch's literature. In Wittgenstein's main work of his first term, the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, the world is fundamentally contingent. It is a world filled with basic possibilities or, as he calls them, state of affairs. These basic possibilities or state of affairs are not necessarily connected. In other words, there are no necessary causal connections between state of affairs. A state of affairs taking place does not guarantee that the next state of affairs will be derived from it. There is no logical view of the world. Nor is there any necessary vision for our actions. This involves a strike to consequentialism. One is not a real master of his actions, since he can not foresee all the consequences. Wittgenstein's vision introduces a strong ethical dose in the world. Where there is contingency, there is also ethics. For Wittgenstein, ethics consists in recognizing the contingency of the world and its multiplicity of states of affairs. All of them are exactly at the same level. The ethical attitude, therefore, means accepting the contingency of everything and considering it as a richness, as a precious gift. This is, according to Chon Tejedor, the ethical point of the *Tractatus*⁷.

Furthermore, in the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein argues that the main task of philosophy is to clarify concepts. Clarification involves, first, getting rid of philosophical solipsism. If concepts are confused, the philosophical dialogue becomes impossible. If two philosophers try to exchange ideas, but they do not understand each other, that leads to a lack of communication and isolation. This is an element that should be emphasized, since for Murdoch solipsism is also important. Secondly, clarification has a strong ethical sense. Understanding the world as contingent leads to

6. Murdoch, *Under the Net*, p. 257.

7. Tejedor, *Starting with Wittgenstein*, p. 89.

value in a particular way, complex, ethical.

So far, the ideas of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* that have been discussed can be summarized as:

Philosophy aims at the logical clarification of thoughts.

Philosophy is not a body of doctrine but an activity.

A philosophical work consists essentially of elucidations.

Philosophy does not result in "philosophical propositions" but rather in the clarification of propositions.⁸

At the same time, the central theme of Murdoch's novels is the search for good. Her world is full of characters that love, hate, look for the good and fall hopelessly in evil. It is this moral question that Murdoch took out of the realm of philosophy and introduced into the realm of literature. For Murdoch, as for Wittgenstein, ethics are a cornerstone of her thought.

Moreover, in Wittgenstein's view, it can be found a divided world, with some things that can be said and with other ones that can not be said, but only shown. He distinguishes between saying and showing.

In the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein considers language as a net that allows us to classify and understand reality. That is, the language orders reality according to our way of thinking. But reality always surpasses the language. Reality is beyond language, it is broader and overflows it. Language comes to handle reality but it can not completely comprehend it. For Murdoch, language is a net, while reality is an ocean. Our attempt to understand the world through language resembles a fisherman who tries to catch the sea with his net. This is what the title of her first and acclaimed novel means: *Under the net*, published in 1954 with a clear and confessed reference to Wittgenstein.

It could be said that Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* provides the interpretative key for Iris Murdoch's *Under the net*. Indeed, the novel's main character, Jake Donaghue, is a man who needs to rationalize everything around him. He seeks the causes of everything that happens in his life and confuses his linguistic and rational net with the true reality of the world. Jake tries to predict everything. In other words, Jake tries to apply general theories about reality. Abstractions, metaphysics. Jake contrasts sharply with the character of Dave Gellman, an analytical

8. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 4.112.

philosopher who is an expert in linguistic analysis and who absolutely rejects metaphysics. Dave's aim is to convince young people about refusing philosophy. When Jake begins to theorize about life, Dave cuts sharply and advises him to look for a stable employment. What really happens is simply that Dave does not want to talk about philosophy. Dave is not able to communicate anything when they talk about philosophy. Jake seems to be rather disappointed with his friend, since their philosophical conversations never get anywhere. In Jake's words: "Most of our conversations consisted of my saying something and Dave saying he didn't understand what I meant and I saying it again and Dave getting very impatient."⁹ When Jake tries to begin a conversation about Hegel and Spinoza, Dave snorts that he is talking nonsense, just as the first Wittgenstein would have said. Jake seems rather disappointed with his friend: "When Dave said he didn't understand, what he meant was that what I said was nonsense."¹⁰ And, later on, when thinking about Hegel, Jake remarks: "Hegel says that truth is a greater word and the thing is greater still. With Dave, we never seemed to get past the word; so finally I gave up."¹¹ These are Jake's thoughts at the beginning of the novel. He is a protagonist who is clearly in favor of abstract philosophy and thinking. However, as the story unfolds, his personality will change and end up looking more like Dave Gellman or Hugo Belfounder.

This last character, Hugo Belfounder, is one of the most important characters in the novel. Jake meets Hugo during a stay in a clinic where they are guinea pigs in a test for a new drug. During the time they spend alone, they have a deep conversation that will mark a turning point in the novel and that will trigger the change in Jake's personality. After leaving the hospital, Jake's life will revolve around Hugo Belfounder.

Hugo is not exactly like David, but they share aspects in common. Hugo is an intellectual who also decides to abandon theory. Hugo goes to Nottingham to learn the craft of watchmaking. Murdoch created the character of Hugo based on Wittgenstein. After meeting him, Jake describes Hugo as "a theoretician of a peculiar kind."¹² Some called Hugo an idealist, but he is definitely not. It is incredibly enlightening to read the presentation that Jake makes about Hugo, and how he perceives their conversations.

He [Hugo] was, in discussion, very slow. He would open his mouth slowly, shut it again, open it again, and at last venture remark. "You mean..." he would say, and then he

9. Murdoch, *Under the Net*, p. 25.

10. Ibid.

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid., p. 64.

would rephrase what I had said in some completely simple and concrete way, which sometimes illuminated it enormously, and sometimes made nonsense of it entirely. I don't mean that he was always right. Often he failed utterly to understand me. It didn't take me long to discover that I had a much wider general knowledge than he on most of the subjects we discussed. But he would very quickly realize when we were, from his point of view, at a dead end, and he would say: "Well, I can say nothing about that," or "I'm afraid that here I don't understand you at all, not at all," with a finality which killed the topic. From first to last it was Hugo, not I, who conducted the conversation.¹³

One should pay attention to Hugo's attempts to reformulate Jake's phrases. And, above all, to the fact that Jake has more general knowledge than Hugo. Later, Jake admits that Hugo was interested in everything. Hugo longed, in some way, a theory of everything. But not a theory in the strict sense of the word. Jake says forcefully that Hugo is not a theoretical or metaphysical man. He is rather interested in the real meaning of the words. Hugo himself recognizes that words fall from his mouth as if they were dead. When Jake asks if perhaps people never really communicate, Hugo answers: "Well, I suppose actions don't lie."¹⁴ It is astonishing to read Murdoch's characterization of Hugo, inspired by Wittgenstein. Somehow, Hugo contains all the evocative power of Wittgenstein's philosophy. The novel *Under the Net* is traversed, from the beginning to the end, by the disturbing presence of Hugo. The reader discovers the story from Jake's point of view, who narrates in first person. But he is unable to forget that other figure of Hugo, that appears and disappears, and that Jake describes as "an almost completely truthful man."¹⁵

This clear trace of Wittgenstein in *Under the Net* can be seen as a defense of action over theory. This interpretation is reinforced by the fact that the main character, Jake Donaghue, leaves his theoretical and abstract stance towards life and ends by assimilating Hugo Belfounder's ideas. At the end of the novel, Jake meets Hugo again and they have a second conversation. After that, Jake is able to get out of himself and has experience of Ana as a separate, independent, real person. Jake will reach reality instead of staying in his own dream. This experience will be mentioned again later in this paper. For now, it is sufficient to note that Jake's personality drifts along the novel, to look more like Hugo's. It can be interpreted that Murdoch adopts

13. Ibid., p. 65.

14. Ibid., p. 68.

15. Ibid., p. 69.

Wittgenstein's view against the more abstract ones that existed in her time.

The same rejection of metaphysics reappears at a later novel, *The Nice and the Good*, published in 1968, 14 years later than *Under the Net*. In *The Nice and the Good*, one of the most respected figures, Willy Kost, is having a conversation with Octavian's older brother, Theo. In this dialogue, Theo tries to discourage Willy about talking abstractions. For Theo, metaphysics is not worth it. There is a parallel between Dave in *Under the Net*, Wittgenstein's ideas and Theo's interventions in his dialogue with Willy. In this conversation, Theo enters the room and confesses that he has not spoken to Willy in a while. For some reason, Theo thinks he is not a good influence for Willy.

-You know why I haven't been for so long?

-Why?

-I think I'm bad for you.

Willy was drinking whisky.

-You know that's not so, Theo.

-It is. You need brisk ordinary people. You and I always talk metaphysics. But all metaphysics is devilish, devilish.

-There are no good metaphysics?

-No. Nothing about that can be said.

-Sad for the human race, since we are such natural prattlers.

-Yes. We are natural prattlers. And that deepens, prolongs, spreads and intensifies our evil.

-Come, come -said Willy.- Very few people know of these devilish theories you speak of.

-They have their influence. They pervade, they pervade. They produce illusions of knowledge. Even what we are most certain of we know only in an illusory form.

-Such as what?

-Such as that all is vanity. All is vanity, Willy, and man walks in a vain shadow. You and I are the only people here who know this, which is why we are bad for each other. We have to chatter about it. You and I are the only people here who know, but we also know that we do not know. Our hearts are too corrupt to know such a thing as truth, we know it only as illusion.¹⁶

16. Murdoch, *The Nice and the Good*, pp. 123-124.

Although Willy seems to downplay Theo's opinion, the truth is that Theo thinks that all metaphysics is devilish. Metaphysics try to fit the complexity of reality into a general theory. Or, at least, metaphysics understood in a Liberal way. Both, Theo in *The Nice and the Good*, and Dave in *Under the Net*, maintain some sort of wittgensteinian philosophy.

On the contrary, Jake Donaghue, the main character in *Under the Net*, at first is obsessed with stablishing general theories. As stated above, Jake's universe is perfectly structured through language. While Theo and Dave reject theory, language and metaphysics, Jake believes in necessity. He gets caught in the net of language. Jake remains in the realm of what can be said. But what can be said, language, is always lower than reality. Jake is not able to see beyond language and thought. He is trapped into the net of theory and abstraction.

However, Jake's personality evolves throughout the novel. *Under the Net* is the story of how Jake abandons language, theory, and the way he finally reaches reality and contingency. He learns that he can not explain or predict everything. His thought is not foolproof. At last, Jake marvels at the true reality underlying the net. The change occurs after meeting Hugo Belfounder, a character inspired by Wittgenstein. Hugo is the one who expresses these ideas about language and reality, while Jake listens carefully. Hugo states Wittgenstein's thesis about the impossibility of a universal theory. Jake collects them and writes them down in a sort of Platonic dialogue: *The silencer*. In it, Annadine, one of the two main characters, utters the following words:

*Annadine: If by expressing a theory you mean that someone else could make a theory about what you do, of course that is true and uninteresting. What I speak of is the real decision as we experience it; and here the movement away from theory and generality is the movement toward truth. All theorizing is flight. We must be ruled by the situation itself and this is unutterably particular. Indeed it is something to which we can never get close enough, however hard we may try as it were to crawl under the net.*¹⁷

Hugo Belfounder, despite being an intellectual, rejects any general theory. Against the abstract, Hugo is always interested in the particular. He tries to escape from the net. Hugo Belfounder, Wittgenstein's alter ego, appears as a anti-theoretical intellectual. However, Murdoch's *Under*

17. Murdoch, *Under the Net*, p. 91.

the net is not interesting just because of illustrating these Wittgensteinian thesis, which are negative thesis (there are things that can not be said). But it is brilliant because the novel itself seeks a positive thesis: there are things that can be shown. It should be remembered that Wittgenstein's world is a divided world. There are things that can be said and things that can only be shown. In this novel, Iris Murdoch seems to wonder how can they show what things can not be said. Both Jake Hugo develop different answers. Jake is a fiction writer. Hugo is the founder a film company that produces silent expressionist films. At the same time, he participates in a theater of mime. Both of them are offering the same answer: what can not be said can be shown through art. Art, as we shall see later, is a cornerstone in the Murdoch's novels.

Art is the protagonist in the revelatory experience that Jake lives in the Wallace Collection. When Jake faces the picture of Frans Hals, *The Laughing Cavalier*, he experiences a revelation about the world. Watching the work of art is a turning point in Jake's worldview. Something similar happens in the novel *The bell*, where the heroine, Dora Greenfield, also has a quasi-mystical experience when visiting the National Gallery. Art helps these characters to make decisions in their lives. *Under the net* affirms a conception of art as illuminating, as a catalyst of clairvoyant experiences. Murdoch's genius lies in trying to make her own novel, a literary work of art, the trigger for a change in the reader's life. How can be shown what can not be said? The reader has had the answer in his hands from the beginning: the novel. Murdoch seems to suggest that, what can not be said, can be shown through pure art. Pure art is the picture of *The Laughing Cavalier* by Frans Hals or also the novel *Under the net*.

What can only be shown is what Wittgenstein calls the mystical. Morality is a part of it. In other words, for Wittgenstein, morality falls within the scope of what can only be shown. It should be remembered that both Wittgenstein and Murdoch attach importance to ethics. Murdoch's characters have ethical dilemmas, such as how to behave with others, where the path to the good, or how to know themselves. Philosophy can be seen as the net. It would be a linguistic mesh with which we try to order reality. However, this mesh has become obsolete and useless. Both Wittgenstein and Murdoch despise the philosophy of their time. Both of them seek an alternative, an escape. They demand a more experiential and pure way to understand life. For Murdoch, this way could be art. In a narrower sense, the art that plays with words: literature. Why not philosophize through literature? Why not thinking that literature, with its images and characters, shows everything that philosophy is not able to say? Even more, why not thinking

that Murdoch's literature shows morality? This would be a purely wittgensteinian interpretation or Murdoch.

Many authors have accepted that Murdoch was seriously influenced by Wittgenstein¹⁸. Nevertheless, she has also raised a few critical concerns against aspects of his thoughts. This is the reason why, although a wittgensteinian interpretation fits perfectly with Murdoch's first novels, it is not the only interpretation or the ultimate. In other words, a wittgensteinian interpretation of Murdoch would be rather simplistic.

Against Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, with the idea of a divided world with things that can only be shown but not said, Murdoch rejects this separation. Some commentators have observed that she is opposing the disconnection between the world of knowable things and a mystic nonsensical beyond. There is not one world of state of affairs, of facts, of what can be said, and another one of morals, of mystic and existential concerns, that can only be shown. As these commentators suggest, for Murdoch there are not two realities. There is only one reality, although there may be two different struggles to discover it. Murdoch does not think that there is something ineffable, that can not be captured by philosophical language, but only in literature¹⁹. As these commentators state, this is not the reason why she gives morality a literary treatment. Her world is not divided, and neither is her language. She is against the positivist tendency of his time, that wished to turn language into accurate and verifiable, at the expense of eliminating everything that was incomprehensible. Murdoch is against this painful reduction. Although in her first novel, *Under the net*, Wittgenstein's influence is more than evident, throughout her career Murdoch rejected the separation between knowable and mystical things. For her, there are not two worlds, what can be said and what can be shown. For Murdoch, there is only one world, of which both literature and philosophy are part. Literature and philosophy just differ in their way of looking at it.

If the twenty-first century philosophy has difficulty understanding the ineffable, morality, it is not due to a divided world, but to a philosophy that “may have framed itself too narrowly”²⁰. This would be, more precisely, Murdoch's vision. Reality is not divided, but the language of modern philosophy which can not adequately explain reality. Now, what has happened to

18. Forsberg, *Language Lost and Found*, p. 76; Magee, *Iris Murdoch's conversation with Bryan Magee*.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 98.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 70.

modern philosophy for Murdoch wary of it? Why does she consider the current philosophy inadequate and tight? Why is its language unable to provide moral life to man?

3. The loss of concepts and the recovery through art



“Literature can give us a new vocabulary”²¹

Murdoch finds the recent Liberal philosophy as insufficient to explain the human soul²². She analyzes the current philosophical scene and traces its origins to Hume and Kant, who she considers the two most profound influences²³. Liberal philosophy can be seen as the union of Hume's materialistic behaviourism and Kant's solitary will. This philosophy developed historically with elements of Romanticism, until the twentieth century has inherited it. This Liberal theory of personality presents a man who is rational and completely responsible of his actions. There is nothing that transcends him. This man is alone, solitary and entirely free, as the Romanticism claimed. There is no longer a God to guide his actions, his mere reason is sufficient. The world that surrounds him is nothing but a quantity of material atoms, that he can optimistically understand and manipulate with science and technology. His language relates directly to this world, as philosophers have suggested, from Hume to Bertrand Russell. Much of this is due to their empiricism, which relates everything to the sensible world, and denies the rest. Murdoch also blames Wittgenstein for continuing this theory. His *Tractatus* followed the logical atomism of Russell. This theory connected each minimum element of language to reality. For Wittgenstein, “the world is the totality of facts”²⁴, and facts completely related to language, since each name means an object. However, Murdoch admits that, in his later work, the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein alters moderately this view²⁵.

21. Murdoch, “Against Dryness”, p. 295.

22. Ibid., p. 289.

23. Ibid., p. 287.

24. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 1.1.

25. Murdoch, “Against Dryness”, p. 288.

3.1. The loss of concepts

With this background, the moral life of Liberal man is reduced to choices and acts, since his beliefs are only behaviouristic expressions. All that matters is that his actions have an internal reference: the decision. This man is far away from a world from which he could learn morality. The Liberal theory wanted people to think of themselves freely. And it has done it, at the cost of sacrificing the world²⁶. That world, that one day was full of richness, has been dominated by scientific reason and technological manipulation. Now, the only moral value is the “right” thing to do, and the only moral virtue is sincerity. In this Liberal outlook, goodness and truth have disappeared. Or rather, the words are still used, but the concepts have been forgotten. This degradation of philosophy, which is nothing but the narrow perspective of Liberal theory, is what has brought the loss of concepts. What this Liberal man needs to heal, and to find himself as moral, is a recovery of concepts.

While philosophy speaks that rigid and ossified language, the man must seek an explanation of himself elsewhere. “Literature can give us a new vocabulary”, Murdoch claims²⁷. These forgotten concepts can be found in art and, more precisely, in literary works. Literature can provide a post-Kantian and unromantic image of human freedom and morality. Literary pictures show a renewed “density” of moral life²⁸. In a good piece of literature, these lost concepts reappear. Concepts such as good and evil, can be seen in a novel, carried out by real characters and in a real context²⁹.

3.2. A new literature

As seen, Murdoch holds a sort of duality between reality and dream. This duality is not surprising, given the influence that Plato had on her. In any case, Murdoch does not maintain that every philosophy is dream, or that all literature is reality. This would be, again, a simplistic interpretation. What Murdoch points is that the current philosophy, with its emptied concepts, does not provide enough tools to realize reality. Literature, however, can avoid this insufficient philosophy and open the window to reality. But much of literature is also dream and fantasy. What Murdoch claims is a real literature, able to love and to improve mankind morally. The

26. Ibid., p. 290.

27. Ibid., p. 295.

28. Ibid., p. 293.

29. Chevalier, *Rencontres avec Iris Murdoch*, p. 90.

essence of this idea appears perfectly in the following statements:

Our current picture of freedom encourages a dream-like facility; whereas what we require is a renewed sense of the difficulty and complexity of the moral life and the opacity of persons. We need more concepts in terms of which to picture the substance of our being; it is through an enriching and deepening of concepts that moral progress takes place. It is here that literature is so important, especially since it has taken over some of the tasks formerly performed by philosophy. Through literature we can re-discover a sense of the density of our lives. Literature can arm us against consolation and fantasy and can help us to recover from the ailments of Romanticism. If it can be said to have a task, that surely is its task. But if it is to perform it, prose must recover its former glory, eloquence and discourse must return³⁰.

With this lost eloquence, Murdoch is referring to the great literary works of Greek Antiquity and to the nineteenth century literature. Murdoch deeply admired Tolstói, as evidenced by her multiple quotes and comparisons, and, when talking about real individuals, Murdoch has in mind characters such as Levin, Kitty or Anna Karenina. They have real contingent personalities, that goes away from the dreams of necessity of Romanticism. For Murdoch, Russian writers were masters of the contingent³¹. They understood that reality is not a whole, imagination is not fantasy, and characters are not symbols. Against the “dry symbol”³² of Romanticism, literature must show the complexity of people. Thus, it will reveal their value.

The problem is that the twentieth-century novel does not contain individuals anymore. Murdoch finds this novel either crystalline or journalistic. In other words, either an allegorical object about the human being, such as Albert Camus' *The Stranger*, or a catalog of details, such as De Beauvoir's *The Mandarins*. For Murdoch, neither of these kind of novels contain real characters. The problem is that the writer of the twentieth-century is an artist frightened by technology, abandoned by philosophy, whose imagination is fantasy and whose truth is sincerity. He is a writer whose characters are perfect incarnations of Kantian philosophy and Romanticism: pure forms, symbols that do not touch the ground³³. This writer must overcome the temptation to

30. Murdoch, “Against Dryness”, p. 293.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 294.

32. *Ibid.*

33. *Ibid.*, p. 292.

fantasize. He must stop thinking that the man is purely rational and free, and dare to look at the world in its complexity. Murdoch's request resembles Wittgenstein's in the *Philosophical Investigations*: "Don't think, but look!"³⁴ The empty concepts of philosophy have killed the curiosity about the real world. The modern writer should despise the "self-centred concept of sincerity" and adopt the "other-centred concept of truth"³⁵.

34. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §66.

35. Murdoch, "The Sublime and the Good", p. 283.

4. Morality and contingency in art



“Any novelist produces a moral world and there's a kind of world outlook which can be deduced from each of the novels. And of course I have my own philosophy in a very general sense, a kind of moral psychology one might call it rather than philosophy.”³⁶

However, in the previous chapter, too much assumptions have been taken for granted. Murdoch asserted that these lost concepts can be recovered in literature. But, what does this exactly mean and how can it be done? In the following lines, the concepts of morality, art and love will be connected. These three words enclose the meaning of Murdoch's moral task: a moral regeneration through literature.

4.1. Morality

Firstly, it should be remarked that Murdoch's main interest is morality. Her novels are usually listed as moral novels. But not in a sense of fable or with moralizing tone. She does not intend to give lessons on how to behave. Rather, her novels explore the content of moral concepts that people use in their language. In moral life, the concepts of philosophy are tested. This is, the true content of the concepts that philosophers talk about can be tested in daily experience. At the same time, in order to understand the relation between philosophy and literature, it should be considered that, for Murdoch, art and morality are somehow identical. While philosophy has suffered a loss, an emptying of concepts, art can still restore them. In art, the content of the concepts can be brought back. Therefore, the artwork has a moral function. Murdoch draws a

36. Conradi, *The Saint and the Artist*, p. 1.

parallel between art and morality, since their essence is the same: love³⁷.

Yet, love seems to be a word too abstract, insufficient to determine what constitutes morality and literature. For Murdoch, to love means to recognize the reality of the other. To love is to perceive people as individuals. In other words, to love is to go beyond the limits of one's mind and discover the external reality. Art and morality are both activities of love, which means recognizing reality. Murdoch points to the particular and the individual. In this sense, she is opposing two major philosophies. First, Kant's, which preferred the formlessness of nature, rather than the particular matter. Second, Hegel's, whose abstract totality denied the individual. Against them, Murdoch opts for the particularity. Furthermore, she adds that “the most particular and individual of all natural things is the mind of man.”³⁸ With this quotation, it is easy to understand that Murdoch named her work as “moral psychology”³⁹ rather than “philosophy”. This suggests that her thinking takes thrust for the human difference. For this reason, and since she is suspicious about conceptual mastery, her philosophy has been called “anti-philosophy.”⁴⁰

Therefore, since the most particular thing is the mind of man, all Murdoch's novels focus on the mind of the characters. Murdoch does not describe external events, as the behaviourists of his time would do, but brings the thoughts of her characters. As has been said, this should be interpreted as an attempt to emphasize individuality. This “moral psychology” is an attempt to morally improve the individual, the man. In this sense, in one of Murdoch's novels, *The Nice and the Good*, the main character John Ducane explains his moral vision as follows:

*All we can do is constantly to notice when we begin to act badly, to check ourselves, to go back, to coax our weakness and inspire our strength, to call upon the names of virtues of which we know perhaps only the names. We are not good people, and the best we can hope for is to be gentle, to forgive each other and to forgive the past, to be forgiven ourselves and to accept this forgiveness, and to return again to the beautiful unexpected strangeness of the world.*⁴¹

37. Murdoch, “The Sublime and the Good”, p. 215.

38. Ibid.

39. Conradi, *The Saint and the Artist*, p. xiv.

40. Ibid.

41. Murdoch, *The Nice and the Good*, p. 191.

In this excerpt, several ideas of Murdoch's moral psychology appear. First, her pessimistic view of the moral life of man. Second, morality is seen as a task of success and error, which is settled in the field of particularity. And thirdly, the strangeness of the world that is always a source of surprises. This implies accepting reality as something external, outside oneself. This latter idea of recognizing reality is linked with the act of love. There is a connection between love, reality and the way Murdoch writes about her individuals.

Now, this connection should be explained in more detail. Art and morality were exercises of love. Also, to love means to recognize reality. Therefore, this individuality of the characters should be realistic. That is why Murdoch show ordinary characters with doubts, resentment, joy and pain. They are real people. Characters such as Charles Arrowby and Mary Hartley Fitch, in *The Sea, the Sea*, James Donaghue in *Under the Net*, Dora Greenfield in *The Bell*, or John Ducane in *The Nice and the Good*, are all ordinary people who fail in their attempt to be good. Many of them do not even pursue this goal, but they live the life of others, like Jake Donaghue, or maintain an innocence that causes more harm than good, as Dora Greenfield. They are all imperfect, just as in real life.

4.2. Contingency

At the same time, this acknowledgment of reality and this value that Murdoch gives to the individual, connects with an idea mentioned at the beginning of this work: contingency. In other words, contingency means the absence of necessity. It means that things can happen one way or the other. Contingency means accepting the multiplicity of events, the vast complexity of the world. In the literary field, contingency means turning the novel into a wide range of characters, attitudes and situations that somehow are not planned or structured. This is why the majority of Murdoch's novels are crammed with different characters. Murdoch, as a writer, tries to create the largest possible number of characters. Thus, she aspires to lose control over her own literary creation and let it flow by itself. Or, what is the same, she desires to discard necessity and respect contingency. The characters should acquire individuality by themselves, beyond the control of the writer⁴². This idea can also be found in one of her essays, where she linked the individuality of the characters with the notion of contingency. In this sense, Murdoch asserted that “a novel must (...) combine form with a respect for reality with all its odd contingent ways

42. Conversation with Gary Browning.

is the highest art of prose.”⁴³

Hence, Murdoch tries to shape a loose novel. She believed she could broaden the gulf between cause and consequence by writing novels that contain “more accident”, that are “very scattered [with] a lot of people”, in which “peripheral characters carry the story.”⁴⁴ It is no coincidence that one of Murdoch's favorite writers was Charles Dickens, whose novels can be conceived as the perfect example of contingency. Dickens's works contain a huge amount of heterogeneous elements, details and different characters. By doing this, Murdoch would conserve contingency within her art. It would make her novel seem like real life.

The concept of contingency in Iris Murdoch presents several interesting aspects. First, it should be considered that Murdoch had been heavily influenced by Sartre's existentialism. Murdoch had published the first study in English on Jean-Paul Sartre: *Sartre: Romantic Rationalist*, in 1953. Thus, as some commentators observe, the concept of contingency was already in Sartre and Murdoch assimilated it⁴⁵. For Sartre, contingency pointed to what is alien to any human meaning and, for that reason, causes nausea. In this sense, the contingent would be the strange, the unknown, everything that is not oneself. Part of this meaning permeated Murdoch's conception. But once existentialism had lost its popularity, the concept of contingency survived in Murdoch's mature works. Although it did not do it on a Sartrean sense, but in a sense that is more like Murdoch. In other words, for Murdoch, contingency involves the indescribable particularity of people. Contingency refuses to fit into our way of thinking. Or what is the same, the richness and complexity of reality, that refuses to fit into our fantasy or our simple explanations of what the world is. For Murdoch, contingency would be “the essence of personality.”⁴⁶ This means that each character must have his individuality, regardless of the will and plans of the writer. Therefore, each character in the novel is mixed with the mess and muddle of human life. As Murdoch asserted in a lecture at Washington University, “good art shows the defeat of human wishes by contingency. Bad art falsifies the world so as to pretend there is no defeat.”⁴⁷

43. Murdoch, “The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited”, p. 286.

44. Bryden, *Talking to Iris Murdoch*. Haffenden, *Haffenden talks to Iris Murdoch*. Hebert, *The Iris Problem*. Similar remarks can be found in other interviews.

45. Gordon, *Iris Murdoch's Fables of Unselfing*, p. 104.

46. Murdoch, “The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited”, p. 271.

47. Murdoch, Lecture at Washington University in St. Louis, p. 173.

However, this recognition of contingency and individuality is the greatest challenge of the writer. Inevitably, the artist shapes contingency. This is because the artwork is not the same as reality. The artwork has form, intention, has a human scent. An artist that resembles contingency in a work of art is, in the end, a paradox. Since all art is shaped, how to introduce contingency? One of Murdoch's commentators, John Sturrock, notices this difficulty: "The awkward thing for a novelist who wishes to represent contingency is that, as represented, a contingency is no longer contingent but a willed and explicable event ordained by the novelist who can but accept the role of an unseen god."⁴⁸ Still, at the same time Sturrock admits that Murdoch's diffusion techniques can somehow allude to contingency. For instance, one of her fictional devices to represent contingency consists in naming things and characters with their proper name. In Sturrock's words: "Murdoch is a great namer of names in her books, because a proper name is the very type of a singular, essential term, not to be conjured away by some theory of descriptions."⁴⁹ But though Murdoch is a writer with great precision in language, it should be considered what has been said about contingency. This is, producing contingency in a work of art is always a difficulty. The writer's hand, her intention and thoughts are always involved. There is this contradiction between Murdoch's theory and her practice. In other words, contingency can never be fully expressed in a work of art.

Yet, contingency can be expressed by approximation. Some authors have noticed that, although Murdoch, as a writer, is not able to obtain pure contingency within his novels, she can get very close with literary techniques. In other words, Murdoch tries to express the experience of the particulars, which is the artist's truth, indirectly⁵⁰.

She does so by filling the literary scene with multiple characters and tangling the plot to the point of losing control over it. In fact, Murdoch conceived a novel as "a house fit for free characters to live in."⁵¹ Although, as it has been said, this contingency is never complete. By the very nature of art, there is always an artist hiding behind, organizing the plot. In this sense, it should be remarked that Murdoch has two sides. On the one hand, essays such as *The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited* and *Against Dryness* show Murdoch's ambition to create autonomous characters living outside her. Some critics have labeled this aspiration of autonomy in the characters as Liberal. For instance, Swinden observed that Murdoch's characters serve to an

48. Sturrock, "Reading Iris Murdoch", p. 151.

49. Ibid., p. 150.

50. Gordon, *Iris Murdoch's Fables of Unselfing*, p. 19.

51. Murdoch, "The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited", p. 286.

ideal of freedom, tolerance and autonomy that is genuinely Liberal. At the same time, Swinden argues that Murdoch “does not succeed in representing their opaque reality because her highly developed sense of pattern, of design, prevent her from doing so.”⁵² What she does achieve, Swinden adds, is the purpose of enriching the moral concepts with which people talk about themselves and the others. This is, from Swinden's point of view, Murdoch fails in representing contingency, but achieves a richer language for moral.

Besides Swinden's opinion, it is obvious, and Murdoch herself came to recognize it once, that as a writer she was not successful in creating autonomous characters. John Ducane, O'Finney, Mrs. Tinckham, Rosina or Ben Fitch are not easy to remember outside the frames in which they are enrolled. After reading one of Murdoch's novel, one remembers the issues raised there. But the characters as such do not stand with strength and shine. In this regard, although it can be said that Murdoch attempts to represent contingency and, in addition, to enrich moral concepts, she only successfully achieves the latter. What, it also must be said, is not a trivial gain.

52. Swinden, *Unofficial Selves: Character in the Novel from Dickens to the Present Day*, p. 257.

5. The fantasy of the artist



“I was the dreamer, I the magician. How much, I see as I look back, I read into it all, reading my own dream text and not looking at the reality.”⁵³

Around these ideas of contingency and individuality, Murdoch draws a profile of how a good artist should be. This will help to understand what Murdoch is looking for when she sits down and starts writing. For her, the good artist is the one who is able to recognize reality outside himself.

5.1. Fantasy and imagination

In this regard, Murdoch opposes two concepts: fantasy and imagination. Most of the writers are unable to see things in their independence. They usually turn things into extensions of their thought, of their interests and obsessions. The writer who is carried away by his fantasy does not capture reality as such, but stays in his own mind. His characters are extensions of himself. At no time he sees reality, nor acknowledges the particularity. He is unable to go out of himself, and therefore he can not love. The writer who fantasizes instead of imagining is trapped between the limits of his personal obsessions. Imagination, on the contrary, is the activity of love. The artist who imagines looks at the world as it is, and recognizes the individuality of other minds, other than his own. This writer is able to get out of himself and reach the other. Love implies recognizing the “otherness”⁵⁴ and, in literary art, that recognition is called imagination, not fantasy.

53. Murdoch, *The Sea, the Sea*, p. 499.

54. Murdoch, “The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited”, p. 216.

In Murdoch, as in Plato, love is the force that allows men out of themselves. Love is the hammer that destroys solipsism by reaching the other. Loving others means overcoming individuality. Thus, love is a fundamental concept in Murdoch's worldview. Without love, it is impossible to understand her literature. Murdoch is a writer who is fascinated by love and, therefore, by the chief obstacle to this love: the tendency to draw others into the net of our self-centered fantasy. In other words, to love others implies to forsake the self. For Murdoch, the ego is the major barrier to reaching a virtuous consciousness. As some authors have remarked, this can be related to Simone Weil's destruction of the "I"⁵⁵. Not without coincidence, Murdoch began to read the French mystic Simone Weil in 1950, whose influence on her novels has been remarked⁵⁶. In fact, Murdoch has called Simone Weil's *Need for Roots* "one of the very few profound and original political treatises of our time."⁵⁷ So, clearly, Murdoch is adapting Weil's destruction of the "I" to the literary field. This is, Murdoch is experimenting with its fictional possibilities rather than assuming it as a doctrine of life. In this sense, Murdoch's moral vision is less masochistic than Weil's. The recognition of the other as real, through art, is an act of morality. This is the point where reality, love and morality connect as three inseparable elements.

Also, Murdoch follows Plato in identifying the Good with the real. To love the good is the main ideal for Murdoch. In her literary scenery, the reader immediately notices that she gives more importance to the quest for good than for the love relationships between characters. The love between them is subordinate to their desire to become good people. Murdoch seems to suggest that, to be able to love truly, one must first be good. Only the good man is capable of loving others. This is, for Murdoch, the love of the Good is the most sublime ideal. This can be interpreted as a strong sign of Platonism, since she prefers the love for the ideal of goodness rather than the love for the individual. Thus, the solipsism she fears most is her own imaginative activity as a writer⁵⁸. In short, she fears the solipsism of a bad artist who fantasizes instead of imagining.

5.2. The fantasy of the artist

In her most award-winning novels, *The Sea, the Sea*, Murdoch materializes the figure of the bad

55. Gordon, *Iris Murdoch's Fables of Unselfing*, p. 9.

56. This influence has been discussed in *Degrees of Freedom*, by Byatt.

57. Conradi, *The Saint and the Artist*, p. 19.

58. *Ibid.*, p. 22.

artist. *The Sea, The Sea* is a tale of obsession, loss of innocence and pursuit of pure love. In this novel, Murdoch extends her investigation of the quest for the good, the difficulties of being trapped inside one's thoughts, and the role of art in order to understand one's life. The statements with which this chapter begins belong to the main character of the novel, Charles Arrowby, a wealthy and celebrated playwright who, at the end of his career, retires to live alone in a solitary house.

Charles retires to Shruff End, a wet house in the coast, to write his memoirs and try to become a good man. Somehow, he feels that he has lived selfishly and, when he starts writing, he has the yearning to regain loss innocence. In the nearest town, Charles meets Hartley, the love of his youth who broke his heart and ended his innocence. From that moment, Charles believes that Hartley will make him regain his innocence. Charles follows the old Hartley and begs her to spend the rest of her life with him. However, meanwhile, Charles continues mistreating the friends that come to visit him. He persists in his despicable behavior, manipulating the weak Lizzie, and treating his friend Gilbert as a servant. He tries to separate Hartley from his husband, Ben Fitch, although Hartley does not want such thing and repeatedly implores Charles to leave. Still, Charles's obsession prevents him from seeing that Hartley does not want to leave Ben and that she suffers a mental imbalance. Charles is blinded by a dream, a fantasy. This blind artist writes the following letter to his idealized beloved:

My dearest Hartley, my darling, I love you and I want you to come to me. (...) In many ways my life in the theatre now seems like a dream, the old days with you the only reality. (...) I never conceived of marrying because I knew there was only one woman that I would or could marry. Hartley, think about that, believe it. I have waited for you, although I never dared to hope that I would ever see you again. And now, fleeing from worldly vanities, I have come to the sea, and to you.⁵⁹

The infatuation towards Hartley is actually a dream, but to him it seems reality. This duality between reality and dream appears repeatedly in the novel. It is a commonplace in Murdoch, who is presenting the mind of an artist who fantasizes, instead of imagining, and who at the same time admires Shakespeare. It should be mentioned that, for Murdoch, Shakespeare is the maximum model of a true artist, someone who sees the world in its reality and represents it as

59. Magee, *Men of Ideas*, p. 143.

such. By contrast, Charles Arrowby only fantasizes and everything he sees is an extension of his desires.

Whereas in other of her novels, *The Black Prince*, Murdoch uses the symbolism of *Hamlet*, in *The Sea, The Sea*, she makes some sort of comparison with *The Tempest*. As stated before, Murdoch writes contemplating who for her is the supreme artist: Shakespeare. He is the good artist and, at the same time, Murdoch tries to dig into the core of all good art: “the pilgrimage from appearance to reality.”⁶⁰ Also, as some authors have observed, there are links between *The Sea, The Sea* and Proust's *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu*. Both works are centred on the desire to recapture time through art, and they share as main themes the obsessive love and a journey out of illusion.⁶¹ However, only *The Sea, The Sea* gives so much significance to the figure of the bad artist.

To understand the importance of Murdoch's bad artist, one should first pay attention to the way the story is narrated. Charles Arrowby tells the story in first person. The reader contemplates the scene through Charles's cloudy eyes. Some authors have remarked that Murdoch's style in *The Sea, The Sea* can be situated within the context of postmodernism⁶². There are several elements that are typical of a postmodern aesthetic. For instance, Murdoch openly shows the fictional condition of the text. She tries to make the reader aware of what is reading is fiction. There is a meta-literary jump. Although this is not an exclusive feature of postmodern fiction, there are other aspects that reinforce this theory. *The Sea, The Sea* pretends to be Charles Arrowby's diary. He is the narrator and, by the kind of things and behaviour he shows, the reader can easily perceive that Charles is not someone to trust in. He is giving a version of events that does not match reality. The reader only has access to what is perceived by Charles. But to discover reality, the reader has to make an effort. Murdoch requires an active reader.

Some authors note that Charles has the pretention to identify his narration with the reality of things. In this sense, Dipple remarks the egoism inherent in Charles's over the form which his writing will take⁶³. At first, he refers to his writings as a diary, memoirs, or a philosophical journal, but later he comes to describe it as a novel or a story. Charles tries to force reality to fit into his tale. He does so without being aware, since he is not capable of recognizing reality as

60. Murdoch, *The Fire and the Sun: Why Plato Banished the Artists*, p. 14.

61. Moden, *Illusion and Reality in the Fiction of Iris Murdoch*, p. 35.

62. Moden, *Illusion and Reality in the Fiction of Iris Murdoch*, p. 33.

63. Dipple, *Work for the Spirit*, p. 275.

such. Charles asserts: “So I am writing my life, after all, as a novel! Why not? It was a matter of finding a form, and somehow history, my history, has found the form for me⁶⁴.” His cousin James warns that a story is not the same as reality: “You've made it into a story, and all stories are false⁶⁵.” However, Charles fails to understand him. Since Charles is unable to deal with reality, he consoles himself by condensing his life into an art work. He selects aspects of his past in order to build the story of “Charles and Hartley”. By writing his memoirs, he can contemplate and control what he thinks his life has been. Yet, he is incapable of distinguishing between language and reality.

At this point, one comparison should be noticed. Although *The Sea, The Sea* is one of Murdoch's last novels, it still maintains elements of her first work *Under the Net*. As it has been mentioned, another of Murdoch repetitive characters are the saint and the artist. The saint is a person who is able to reach reality. He is usually respected by other characters, as if he were some sort of god. The saint appears in the novel as a secondary figure who wants to be unnoticed but who, at the same time, is impossible to ignore. In the case of *Under the Net*, the saint is Hugo Belfounder. In *The Sea, the Sea*, the saint could be James Arrowby, Charles's cousin. Both saints are associated with Buddhist elements, a doctrine for which Murdoch always felt respect and reverence. On the other hand, the artist is usually an unsuccessful and contradictory character who tries to reach goodness, without success. The artist often is, if not the protagonist, one of the main characters of the novel. In *Under the Net*, the artist is Jake Donaghue, whereas in *The Sea, the Sea*, the artist is Charles Arrowby. Both Jake and Charles are first-person narrators, both try to write about their own lives, and they finally open a small door in their personal fantasy to reach reality. Many similarities can be traced in the two novels, although there is a period of twenty-four years in between.

After this comparison, one must return to the type of narrator that Charles Arrowby is. He is a first-person retrospective narrator, always selective and partial. But, why does Murdoch choose him to tell the story? One possible answer would be that, by using this literary technique, Murdoch wants to question what is meant by realism. Although she is within the realist tradition, she is always aware of its unreality. Murdoch always questions the reader about the distinction between reality and fiction. This question is already present in his first novel, *Under the Net*. The clash between the characters of Jake Donaghue and Hugo Belfounder put this

64. Murdoch, *The Sea, The Sea*, p. 153.

65. Murdoch, *The Sea, The Sea*, p. 335.

question to the fore. However, I will mention another phrase from the novel that also draws attention for its explicitness. This is Mrs. Tinckham, the owner of the kiosk when Jake runs for cover whenever things go wrong. Mrs. Tinckham is a worldwide confessor. She listens the unfortunate who will tell her their problems, always shrouded in smoke snuff and cats. On her, Jake observes: "She lives in a world of other people's dramas, where fact and fiction are not clearly distinguished."⁶⁶ This comment, which could easily pass unnoticed, becomes important for two reasons. The first is that it points back to the nagging question of Murdoch for the difference between fiction and reality. The second is that it shows that this question squarely permeates her first novel, and so it does until the last one. This question about reality and fiction causes Murdoch's work to be filled with contradiction, mystery and irony that the reader should unravel. Paradoxically, her being aware of the artificiality of the text allows Murdoch to create an artwork that represents the formless and contingent world with more accuracy than a traditional novel.

For Murdoch, as for Wittgenstein, there is always a gulf between reality and narration. Or, what is the same, between reality and language, between reality and the net. It seems that Murdoch wants the reader to notice that narrative is not natural. As some authors follow, she has produced a text that draws attention to the process of interpretation, making the reader think about what the reality of the tale would be⁶⁷. The reader should draw his own conclusions from the partial and oriented story he holds in his hands. It seems as if Murdoch were looking for the reader's own unselfing as well as that of the characters.

Also, this literary technique can be seen as an expression of irony. Irony is present in almost all Murdoch's novels, as one of her main literary tools. The unreliable narrator is a sign of this irony. Six of her novels are narrated throughout this way: *Under the Net*, *A Severed Head*, *The Italian Girl*, *The Black Prince*, *A Word Child*, and *The Sea*, *The Sea*. It is deeply ironic that Charles Arrowby unwittingly subverts his meanings and makes the reader doubt his reliability. As some commentators observe, the aim is not only to create an unreliable narrator, but a narrator who conveys the gap of understanding between himself and the author/reader, as well as what the author believes and wants the reader to believe⁶⁸.

66. Murdoch, *Under the Net*, p. 20.

67. Moden, *Illusion and Reality in the Fiction of Iris Murdoch*, p. 33.

68. Gordon, *Iris Murdoch's Fables of Unselfing*, p. 82.

With the narrative technique of *The Sea, The Sea*, Murdoch reaches the limit of irony. A writer can not use an internal narrator in a more absolute way as she does with Charles Arrowby. Perhaps this is why, as Gordon notes, Murdoch would not return to experience this technique in later novels⁶⁹. Except, perhaps, in *The Philosopher's Pupil*. Whatever the reason, the fact is that in *The Sea, The Sea*, Murdoch uses an internal unreliable narrator who, at the same time, is an example of a bad artist. Charles Arrowby can be considered as a sample of Murdoch's recurring figure of the artist. At the same time, he as a narrator is an evidence of Murdoch's postmodern aesthetic, that goes on challenging realism and invites the reader to distinguish between what the story tells and what reality is.

69. Gordon, *Iris Murdoch's Fables of Unselfing*, p. 88.

6. Plato's influence on Murdoch



“Murdoch is a mystical, a Platonic, rather than an existentialist novelist.”⁷⁰

From her careful philosophical education in Somerville College, Oxford, Murdoch acquired an enormous influence from Plato. She shares with the Greek philosopher a worldview where love, truth and goodness are cornerstones. At the same time, both Murdoch and Plato uphold the supremacy of reality over appearance. This is to awake from dreaming to achieve the real world. This transcript of the myth of the cave can be found in the background of almost all Murdoch's novels. For the Irish writer, this awakening from the appearance to reality is a journey that takes place in art.

However, it should be remembered that Plato's position towards art was not very benevolent. For Plato, art was a degraded copy of reality. In particular, the Greek philosopher rejected poetry. Poetry, as a variety of art that uses words, was a degradation of reality as well. This platonic idea clashes with Murdoch's position, at least at first glance. To solve this dilemma, one must peer into Murdoch's main text on Plato, *The Fire and the Sun: Why Plato Banished the Artist*. In light of the ideas presented there, one takes another perspective of these platonic ideas.

Murdoch's literature is a parade of artists. In almost all her novels, the reader finds writers, painters, actors or movie directors. In her most popular novel, *The Sea, the Sea*, the main character Charles Arrowby is an example of one of these artists. Overall, Murdoch distinguish between the bad artist, who fantasizes, and the good artist, who reaches reality. In this case, Charles Arrowby would be a bad artist. On the contrary, the archetype of the good artist, for

70. Conradi, *Preface Existentialists and Mystics*, p. xxv.

Murdoch, would be Shakespeare.

As a playwright, Charles is an artist. As a playwright who fantasizes, he can be considered a bad artist. Certainly, Charles is the kind of artist that Plato would expel from his Republic. The Greek philosopher believed that art was nothing but a bad copy of the copy. In other words: if the visible world was a reflection of the world of ideas, then art was a copy of that reflection. Art would be even further from the reality of the world of ideas. It would be necessary a complete explanation of Plato's theory of art to clarify this point. However, it is enough to say that, for Plato, art was bad mimesis. In other words, art was personal fantasy that distorted the reality of things. As a writer with a clear affinity for Plato, Iris Murdoch tried to solve this dilemma⁷¹. She pirouetted in an attempt to keep, at the same time, Platonic philosophy and art. The art that Plato condemned is, to Murdoch, an example of bad art and fantasy. This bad art only reflects a “small personal world in which we remain enclosed”⁷², just as it happens to Charles Arrowby. Murdoch limits Plato's criticism to this kind of art, while trying to save good art. Good art liberates and expands the vision of reality. In Plato's theory, good art would be contemplation of the ideas. It should be remembered that, for Plato, the so-called ideas were the true reality. Thus, good art is saved from Plato's fire. Not without reason, Murdoch has been called a “mystical and Platonic” writer and philosopher⁷³.

But Murdoch was not a perfect follower of Plato. For the Greek, the ideas were universal concepts, that could be captured with reason. For Murdoch, however, reality does not reside in such abstract concepts, but in particular things. At this point, Plato and Murdoch differ. For Plato, good art, if any, should represent abstract ideas. For Murdoch, it must show particularity. But for both, Charles Arrowby would be a bad artist. More precisely, it seems that Murdoch presents him as an example of bad artist. Charles is unable to get out of his fantasy and realize that Hartley is not the love of his life, but a demented elderly. The question is whether Iris Murdoch, as an artist, captured the individuality of Charles Arrowby and the reality of the character. Had she succeeded, she would indeed be an example of what she sees as a good artist.

Paradoxically, the protagonist of Murdoch's first novel, *Under the Net*, is also a writer. James Donoghue is a bad artist who copies the works of other authors. Also, he is a bad person. He

71. Murdoch, *The Fire and the Sun: Why Plato Banished the Artists*.

72. Magee, *Conversation with Iris Murdoch*.

73. Conradi, “Preface”, p. XXV.

does not live his own life, but lives “in other people's vices”⁷⁴. He takes advantage of the emotional deprivation of his girlfriend, Magdeleine, to live at her house without paying the rent. He does not care that she cheats on him with another man, as long as he can live in the house. James himself confesses, in an internal monologue: “I hate living in a strange house, I love to be protected. I am therefore a parasite”⁷⁵. Finally, Magdeleine leaves James and he starts looking for another house. He reminds Anna Quentin, a girl that was in love with him, and he returns, again, to take advantage of her weakness. He tries to convince her to give him shelter. This is just the beginning of a series of manipulations. Everything seems to indicate that, as Charles Arrowby, James Donaghue is not going to live a real life, and neither true love. It is surprising, therefore, to find the following passage at the end of the novel, written by an innocent Iris Murdoch in her first literary work:

I had no longer any picture of Anna. She faded like a socerer's apparition; and yet somehow her presence remained to me, more substantial than ever before. It seemed as if, for the first time, Anna really existed now as a separate being and not as a part of myself. (...) I felt toward her a sense of initiative which was perhaps after all one of the guises of love. Anna was something which had to be learnt afresh. When does one know a human being? Perhaps only after one has realized the impossibility of knowledge and renounced the desire for it and finally ceased to feel even the need of it But then what one achieves is no longer knowledge, it is simply a kind of co-existence; and this too is one of the guises of love.⁷⁶

James, the bad artist, experiences the reality of Anna. In this revealing passage, Murdoch shows the man going out of his cave to the real world. Not coincidentally, James had just written his first novel, by himself, without copying others. It is curious to note that the novel was entitled *The Silencer* referring to Wittgenstein. But, in any case, what the end of *Under the Net* denotes is hope in a protagonist who can love humanly, imperfectly. It is hope in an artist who can reach reality.

In a similar way, the main character of Murdoch's *The Bell*, the charming and innocent Dora Greenfield, has a revealing experience when looking at a Gainsborough's picture at the National

74. Murdoch, *Under the Net*, p. 14.

75. *Ibid.*, p. 24.

76. *Ibid.*, p. 268.

Gallery. In this moment of the novel, Dora is overwhelmed by events. She is unable to see what to do and she decides to flee the religious community of Imber Court, where she has been locked for too many days. When she enters the National Gallery and contemplates Gainsborough's painting, she has a feeling of being out of herself. She is reaching reality. That revelation that the artwork makes her recover the vision of reality. From that moment, Dora will know what to do.

Dora was moved by the pictures (...) It occurred to her that here at last was something real and something perfect. Who had said that, about perfection and reality being in the same place? Here was something which her consciousness could not wretchedly devour, and by making it part of her fantasy make it worthless. Even Paul, she thought, only existed now as someone she dreamt about; or else as a vague external menace never really encountered and understood. But the pictures were something real outside herself, which spoke to her kindly and yet in sovereign tones, something superior and good whose presence destroyed the dreary trance-like solipsism of her earlier mood. When the world had seemed to be subjective it had seemed to be without interest or value. But now there was something else in it after all.⁷⁷

This “something real and something perfect” that Murdoch mentions is truth, reality, which are somehow the same. When Dora abandons her subjective viewpoint through the painting, she is touching truth, which is reality. This action of getting out of the self is what ennobles men. It makes them better, they improve, they are closer to the good. Thus, art in Murdoch has a moral function. Art connects men with reality. And with that connection, they morally improve.

It is in her main philosophy work, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, where Murdoch outlines her conceptions around art. Besides what has been said, one should notice that Murdoch does not reject metaphysics. But she inseparably links it to art and truth. In some way, she repudiates metaphysics in an abstract and theoretical sense, as Wittgenstein had done. However, she understands metaphysics in a different manner. The expression of conceptual connections that takes place in art is a picture of metaphysics. As she states:

Truth is something we recognise in good art when we are led to a juster, clearer, more

77. Murdoch, *The Bell*, p. 190.

*detailed, more refined understanding. Good art explains truth itself, by manifesting deep conceptual connections. Truth is clarification, justice, compassion. This manifestation of internal relations is an image of metaphysics.*⁷⁸

Hence, with her defense of art, Murdoch circumvents the problem posed by Plato. While Plato despised the artist's work, Murdoch draws a distinction between bad art and good art. Only the latter, good art, has a moral function. So, to Murdoch art is essential for her moral regeneration project. Not coincidentally, Murdoch is a twentieth century writer, who lives in a postmodern era. As postmodern, she is unable to reject art. For her, art is still a releasing and clairvoyant power for man. With this recovery of art, and this distinction between good artist and bad artist, Murdoch retains Plato's ideas while she maintains hers. Murdoch undertakes a defense of the figure of the artist in a world with a lack of moral and where men are far from reality. Her defense of art as an access to truth is basically a way to recover the lost concepts. In art, truth is shown and the content of the concepts is brought back in depth.

78. Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, p. 321.

7. Love, pleasure, suffering and dreams



As well as the figures of the good and bad artist, and the decisive role of art, there are other recurring elements in Murdoch's literary landscape. Love, suffering and being trapped in a dream are also crucial elements in order to understand her viewpoint.

7.1. Inability to love

As in *The Sea, the Sea* and *Under the Net*, in almost all of Murdoch's novels a recurring issue is the characters' inability to love. Murdoch presents people looking for love who end up frustrated. Some pursue for a life's partner and they end up finding infidelity. Others are betrayed by their own friends. Most do not know themselves, and therefore fail in their goals. Some search for God and after a while they discover that they have only been looking for themselves. In all cases, Murdoch's characters try to attain love and reach out what is higher.

Nevertheless, they are unable to reach it. Just by looking to her characters, one notices that Murdoch has an originally pessimistic conception of man. For her, "human beings are naturally selfish and human life has no external point or *télos*."⁷⁹ But her characters are not only wretched by nature. So they are because they do not have moral references to guide them. Murdoch's collection of characters is undoubtedly a portrait of man in the twenty-first century. This man that has lost his values, who all he has are emptied words, like "love", "truth" or "loyalty". Murdoch already complained that, with Liberal Philosophy, words had lost their meaning. They are still used, but men no longer know what they mean. Philosophy seems to be unable to recover these mislaid notions. These concepts remain in his language but he no longer know their meaning. Thus, this man confuses love with infatuation, or love with pleasure.

79. Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, p. 76.

7.2. Pleasure and suffering

In this regard, Murdoch's characters try to find love and end up confusing it with pleasure. Hedonism is a theme that runs throughout the work of Murdoch. Many of these apparent lovers are actually hedonists. For instance, Murdoch shows how Charles writes countless pages about the correct way to eat oranges for breakfast⁸⁰, or takes notes about his muscle stretching⁸¹. In a similar manner, in *The Nice and the Good*, Murdoch exhibits Octavian and Kate, apparently the only happy and stable married couple in the novel. However, this happiness is based on an unpleasant sincerity. Kate has relationships with other men and she tells everything to Octavian, who tolerates it, and even enjoys it, since it produces him some kind of erotic pleasure. Their apparent happiness finally produces a horrible sense of perversion. The love of this couple is nothing but hedonistic pleasure. It is another kind of fantasy. They think they are happy, but it is just a dream. Katie's words sound hollow when she exclaims: "Love is the most wonderful thing (...) Octavian is great. He has such a divine temperament (...) I think being good is just a matter of temperament."⁸² Katie's love is just pleasure, and her goodness is only joy. But she does not know it, since her concepts are forgotten. She stays in the surface, and does not reach reality.

In the novel, love and hedonism are mingled with suffering. In *The Nice and the Good*, Katie and Octavian are counterbalanced by another character, Willy Kost. In the past, Willy profoundly experienced evil. He is a survivor of Dachau concentration camp and, since then, he seems incapable of recovering. Sarcastically, Willy talks about staying in Dachau as a period of his life when he learned "how to keep warm by rubbing against a wall, how to be almost invisible when the guards came round and how to have very very long sexual fantasies."⁸³

However, though wounded and desolate, Willy is more into reality than Katie and Octavian. Murdoch seems to suggest that suffering has more capacity than pleasure to put ourselves in reality. Suffering, even a bad, is more real than the hedonistic pleasure. Willy understands actual evil, while Katie and Octavian only know physical pain. They are nice, but not good. This is a crucial distinction in Murdoch's worldview. While the nice stays on the surface, the good reaches reality. It not only reaches, but it is reality. The good can only be good if it is real. The

80. Murdoch, *The Sea, the Sea*, p. 62.

81. *Ibid.*, p. 102.

82. Murdoch, *The Nice and the Good*, p. 122.

83 *Ibid.* p. 273.

nice, however, remains within the limits of pleasure, fantasy, ego and language. Katie and Octavian are nice characters, while Willy have touched reality through suffering.

Another character, John Ducane, is one of the most respected characters of the novel. He is considered by others as a good man. Willy is precisely who says that Ducane is the spitting image of the just man⁸⁴. However, Ducane is bothered by this comment and he decides to laugh it off. He does not perceive himself as such. Ducane also commits infidelities and passes through states of extreme confusion.

Moreover, Ducane recognizes that he does not feel sorry for Willy's suffering. Ducane is the only character who perceives that suffering has a power to reach reality. Ducane does not despise Willy. Quite the contrary, Ducane pities himself for not having experienced such a deep suffering, which has placed Willy in reality. Murdoch tells in the following sentences the moment when Ducane realizes that Willy's suffering is something that he can not comprehend.

Then he [Ducane] knelt down in the crisp dry beech leaves, leaning his arms on the warm shaft of the tree. He was not thinking about Willy, he was not being sorry for Willy. He was being infinitely sorry for himself because the power was denied to him that comes from an understanding of suffering and pain. He would have liked to pray then for himself, to call suffering to him out of the chaos of the world. But he did not believe in God, and the kind of suffering which brings wisdom cannot be named and cannot without blasphemy be prayed for.⁸⁵

Ducane longs reality, albeit suffering. He acknowledges that lives in the appearance, in a world of falsehood where he is unable to attain love. Ducane considers praying God, but he is a man without faith. In the last lines of this extract, Murdoch opens a door that she never dares to cross: God. But before getting into this field, it is helpful to make a brief compilation of ideas.

7.3. To love a dream

A Severed Head is one of Murdoch's most popular novels, published in 1961. Its main themes are the failed marriage, adultery and incest among well-educated and high status characters. It is

84. Ibid., p. 183.

85. Ibid., p. 54.

interesting to mention this novel this point, since it also raises the question of idealized love between characters. Once again, Murdoch explores the question of love in the twentieth-century. As Charles Arrowby in *The Sea*, *The Sea* did with Hartley, in *A Severed Head*, Martin idealizes his love for Honor Klein. Not in the same sense, though. While Charles does so seeking his own redemption and recovery of innocence, Martin has just emerged from a failed marriage and feels attracted to Honor as a mysterious and unattainable woman. In both cases, however, the question of love is questioned. Are they characters who really love? Or are prisoners of their own minds? Do Charles and Martin love someone real, or do they love their idea of Hartley and Honor? Murdoch shows how both Charles and Martin have not left his mind. They still live in the theory, in language, in the cave.

One can trace a parallel between Jake Donoghue of *Under the Net*, Charles Arrowby of *The Sea*, *The Sea* and Martin Lynch-Gibbon of *A Severed Head*. The three of them are anti-heroes main characters. They are fallible, insecure, selfish in some way. As it has been said in this paper, Jake Donoghue considers himself as a “parasite”⁸⁶ that lives in his friends's houses. In a similar manner, Martin Lynch-Gibbon states that in every marriage there is a selfish and an unselfish partner. He confesses that he “early established [himself] as the one who took rather than gave.”⁸⁷ In *A Severed Head*, Martin discovers that his wife, Antonia, is cheating on him with her psychoanalyst, Palmer. Palmer breaks Martin and Antonia's marriage. Trying to deal with this situation, Martin takes the role of submissive child who obeys the orders of his parents. Displaying his immature personality, rather than exploding with anger, Martin does such things as serving wine in Antonia and Palmer's bedroom.

In the novel, Murdoch arise the problems of psychoanalysis, the Oedipus complex and love relationships between siblings. This is how Murdoch suggests a sexual temptation between Palmer and his sister, Honor Klein. Again, Honor is associated with Buddhist elements, as was the case with Hugo Belfounder in *Under the Net* and James Arrowby in *The Sea*, *The Sea*. This is how Martin begins to lose interest in his wife, Antonia, and her infidelity relationship with Palmer, and begins to feel attracted to Honor. When this happens, the relation between Antonia and Palmer begins to weaken. It seems that Martin was the third element that gave energy to their unfaithful relation. Meanwhile, Martin begins to turn Honor in an object of idolatry. For him, Honor is the unattainable object of his love. In a similar way, but much more pronounced,

86. Murdoch, *Under the Net*, p. 24.

87. Murdoch, *A Severed Head*, p. 18.

Charles Arrowby loves Hartley in *The Sea, The Sea*. As Honor comments, Martin has made her an ideal love. The title of the novel refers to this. The severed heads were the idols of savages in the tribes. The savages worship them, but the heads were unreachable. In this sense, Honor Klein explains Martin:

*I am a terrible object of fascination for you. I am a severed head such as primitive tribes and old alchemists used to use, anointing it with oil and putting a morsel of gold upon its tongue to make it utter prophecies. And who knows but that long acquaintance with a severed head might not lead to strange knowledge. For such knowledge one would have paid enough. But that is remote from love and remote from ordinary life. As real people we do not exist for each other.*⁸⁸

As Honor says, the love that Martin feels for her is not a real love. Martin is trapped inside his dream. Honor is the severed head to which the novel refers. The vast majority of Murdoch's characters love in this fantasized way. If the reader only looks to the characters, he would say that the concept of love in Iris Murdoch is an empty concept. It is a selfish and artificial love that never faces reality. There are very few characters who are able to love in the true sense of the word. Therefore, it can be said that Murdoch has a very pessimistic vision of love. At least, the love that exists between people. However, she keeps a Platonic ideal of love, that leaves the selfish appearance and reaches reality. But this just and ideal. Typically, her characters get caught in a fantasy they call love, but that is not such thing. They have forgotten the real meaning of the word. They still use the word, as many of us do, but what they call love is no longer real love.

Moreover, to a deeper understanding of what does this real love mean, one should consider again this opposition between dream and reality. Love is only love if it implies recognizing the reality of the particular. On the contrary, a fantasized love is an individual obsession that remains in the realm of theory. Thus, when Honor realizes that Martin holds feelings for her, Honor compels him to choose between dream and reality. Reality is identified with the love for his wife Antonia. Dream is Martin's sudden fascination with Honor.

-Return to reality -she [Honor] said.- Return to your wife, return to Antonia. I have

88. Murdoch, *A Severed Head*, p. 225.

nothing for you.

-My marriage to Antonia is over -I said.- Palmer is right. It is dead.

-Palmer spoke out of his own conventions. You are not a fool. You know that there are many ways in which your marriage is alive. In any case, do not think that this is more than a dream. -And she repeated- Return to reality. -Yet still she did not dismiss me.⁸⁹

Nevertheless, how will Martin be able to choose reality? He tries to see himself, but he is so blind that he can not see beyond the fog⁹⁰. His choice is between choosing Honor or Antonia. In the last sentences of the novel, Murdoch forces Honor and Martin to the limits of their dream. In that final conversation, Martin faces the crossroads and he knows he has to choose. Again, the irony reappears, and so do the nice smiles between Honor and Martin. Their smiles are nice, “glowing with insolence”⁹¹, but not good. The reader wonders if the dream will succeed, or if Martin will be able to open the door to reality. It seems that he will when he doubts that one can have a relationship with a severed head, this is, with an idealized woman. Martin admits that he hardly knows Honor. He does not know anything about the real Honor, he is just aware of his fantasy. Nonetheless, Martin finally tries to turn his dream into reality. In this sense, he hopes that Honor will still be there when they wake up.

I [Martin] said- We have lived together in a dream up to now. When we awake will we find each other still?"

I came round the bed and stood near to her [Honor]. I worshipped her closeness. I said- Well, we must hold hands tightly and hope that we can keep hold of each other through the dream and out into the waking world.

As she still would not speak I said- Could we be happy?

She said- This has nothing to do with happiness, nothing whatever.

That was true. I took in the promise of her words. I said, "I wonder if I shall survive it.

She said, smiling splendidly- You must take your chance!

I gave her back the bright light of the smile, now softening at last out of irony.

-So must you, my dear!⁹²

And with this exclamation, *A Severed Head* concludes. This ending can be interpreted in many

89. Murdoch, *A Severed Head*, p. 224.

90. There is a parallel between Martin's inner disorientation and the fog covering London.

91. Murdoch, *A Severed Head*, p. 252.

92. *Ibid.*

ways. However, there are reasons to understand that Martin wants to reach reality. But it does so with a naive hope in living a real love with an idealized Honor. When Honor mentions that this has nothing to do with happiness, it is because she knows that happiness is linked to reality, while, in the dream, happiness will be just individual pleasure, hedonism. As Murdoch observes⁹³, Wittgenstein mentions happiness in his *Notebooks*: “the happy life is good” and “the end of art is the beautiful, and the beautiful is what makes happy.” Art connects men to reality. That is the reason why “this has nothing to do with happiness”, since they are living a dream, not reality. Murdoch suggests this when he notices of their nice smiles, full of irony and falsehood. Nevertheless, a hollow remains open. It is a last hope that, perhaps, Martin discovers that his dream was never the reality he intended.

Now, the previous lines have explored the concept of love in Murdoch, as it is shown in her novels. However, the plots are diverse and the characters are so as well. Thus, a brief compilation of ideas should be made. In the lines above, it has been said that man seeks love, and love is such if it is directed to reality. Love is what enables men to be good. In other words, only through love men attain goodness. Murdoch characters seek love and goodness, but they are incapable of doing it. They are characters who live locked in their individualism and personal fantasies. Love and goodness are part of reality. This implies that they are unreachable for those who live in the dream, in appearance. Those who remain watching the shadows, without leaving Plato's cave, are unable to see the sun. That getaway from the cave takes place only through love. Becoming good means loving more reality than oneself. In other words, to love reality leads to goodness. These previous sentences are decisive in order to understand Murdoch's approach. Then, if in loving reality the man becomes good, the next question is precisely about that good. What does the Good mean? Where does it come from? What is its purpose?

93. Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a guide to morals*, p. 33.

8. Good and God



“God is a task. God is detail. It all lies close to your hand.”⁹⁴

Martin and Ducane, as most of Murdoch's characters, do not have a God to believe in. Or, if they believed in God at some point, they have lost their faith. The next step in the question of reality and the good, points to God. Not coincidentally, the word “good” is derived from the word “God”. So, if Murdoch is a moral writer, one should examine the link between good and God.

However, in this field, Murdoch prefers to remain silent. Or rather, her silence has a particular nuance. As already mentioned above, Murdoch differs from Plato in being a philosopher of particular things. For her, reality does not reside in abstract concepts, but in the particular. She chooses contingency. So, the God that can be traced in her novels is a God of minute, present, close things. Perhaps this is the reason why Murdoch's novels do not show no long and brainy conversations on the subject of God. Quite the contrary, God seems to be a secondary issue, which goes unnoticed. So, the only thing that can be done is to draw conclusions from her shy approaches. In this sense, I would argue that, although she never says it directly, Murdoch seems to suggest that, without God, any man can have a true concept of what the Good is. In other words, God is precisely who gives meaning to the concept of good. One of the quotes where she approaches this idea is the one that says: “The background of morals is properly some sort of mysticism.”⁹⁵ This mysticism that she mentions can be related to Wittgenstein's mysticism, which one can not put into words. So, if this “mysticism” refers to God, then without God there can not be real goodness. Murdoch approaches these ideas in his philosophical essay *The*

94. Murdoch, *Under the Net*, p. 258.

95. Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, p. 72.

Sovereignty of Good but, again, she does not claim these ideas so explicitly. Moreover, what is beyond doubt is her main moral concern. And, traditionally, moral has been related to religion.

To delve a little deeper into the question of God in Murdoch, one should browse another of her novels. *The Bell* is the one that most dangerously approaches this query. Here, Murdoch shows the religious community of Imber, a group of people who live withdrawal from the world, under the precepts of Christianity. One of the founders, Michael Meade, is a homosexual who denies his feelings focusing on religion. It is not easy, though. He goes through real hardship when he feels attracted to two of his companions, Nick Fawley and Toby Gashe. Michael believes to be sick and perverted⁹⁶ and tries to turn his tendencies towards God. The novel explores the different motivations that lead Imber's members to leave society and devote themselves to a religious life. However, the focus is on the characters, not in God. Throughout the novel, God only appears as a vague reference. The characters mention him, some even read passages from the Bible, but none go deeper into his beliefs. Murdoch's interest seems to be more anthropological than theological.

Still, it should be remembered that Murdoch calls for a return to the particular. She does not deny God, but she first places the particular. As it has been mentioned in this work, the most particular thing for Murdoch is the mind of man. Perhaps this is the reason why the highlight is on the individual characters, in their minds, and in not abstract religious concepts. In this regard, two clearly opposing opinions on morality in *The Bell* appear. In the Sunday sermon, James Tayper Pace and Michael Meade hold different positions. For James, the moral man is one who obeys the mandates of the divine law. He should not look to the circumstances or the consequences, but the only important thing is the divine precepts and confidence in God. It is an act of absolute surrender, a man who blindly trust in God. As some authors have observed, the man of faith who James refers to has a strong resemblance to the judge Wilhelmus, prototype of man living in the ethical stage, according to Kierkegaard⁹⁷. Since the beginning of his sermon, James opposes the interest in his own personality to interest in reality. The ideal of the good life is to live without self-images. If man is sinful, why delving into his nature? Some have pointed out that this opinion is the same as Murdoch's, but without identifying it completely⁹⁸. This ideal of good life without self-knowledge is what James preaches in the Long Room, when delivering

96. Murdoch, *The Bell*, p. 161.

97. Mauri, *Ética y literatura*, p. 47.

98. O'Connor, *To Love the Good*, pp. 268-269.

the weekly talk:

*The study of personality, indeed the whole conception of personality, is, as I see it, dangerous to goodness. We were told at school, at least I was told at school, to have ideals. This, it seems to me, is rot. Ideals are dreams. They come between us and reality, when what we need most is just precisely to see reality. And that is something outside us. Where perfection is, reality is. And where do we look for perfection? Not in some imaginary concoction out of our idea of our own character, but in something so external and so remote that we can get only now and then a distant hint of it.*⁹⁹

On the other hand, the main character Michael Meade holds a very different opinion. He stands for exploring one's personality rather than merely following divine rules¹⁰⁰. James rejects acting just because it abstractly seems to be a good act, if it is contrary to the degree of knowledge that oneself has. It should be taken into account that Michael Meade is a repressed homosexual who lives true shrines within the religious community. He fell in love with a newcomer to the community, Nick Fawley, and during the novel Michael will not help kissing young Toby Gashe. Therefore, when talking about knowing oneself to avoid temptation, Michael's words are tinged with personal experience, with suffering. He sees himself as a fallen angel, as "what the world calls perverted."¹⁰¹ On the contrary, James does not know anything evil, "a result perhaps of a considerable pureness of heart."¹⁰² So, with this background it is easier to understand Michael's words:

To live in innocence, or having fallen to return to the way, we need all the strength that we can muster, and to use our strength we must know where it lies.

(...)

Self-knowledge will lead us to avoid occasions of temptation rather than to rely on naked strength to overcome them.

(...)

*This is the wisdom of the serpent.*¹⁰³

99. Murdoch, *The Bell*, p. 131.

100. *Ibid.*, p. 205.

101. *Ibid.*, p. 99.

102. *Ibid.*, pp. 116-117.

103. *Ibid.*, p. 204.

Yet, apart from these two moral positions, the interest of Murdoch appears to shift to her main character, Dora Greenfield. Dora is an uneducated and young lady, who symbolizes innocence. While other characters seem to be much deeper and thoughtful than her, it is Dora's psychological lightness what keeps her looking outward. That exteriorisation that made her banal at the beginning of the novel, will eventually connect her with reality and with others. As some authors have noted, what is perceived in the novel is psychological isolation¹⁰⁴. Each character is isolated from others by personal barriers. Murdoch seems to suggest that the barriers that separate us from others are within oneself.

At the same time, the question of the reality of life in the Imber community arises. Innocent Dora begins to wonder about the religious motivations of the other characters. She also starts asking whether that God is real or not. This question is mentioned in a conversation between Dora, and Noel, her lover. While Dora is a girl without faith but quite tolerant and open to others, Noel is the most clearly atheist character. In this sense, when Dora asks Noel about God, he answers denying him.

-Never forget, my darling, that what they believe just isn't true.

-(...) No, I suppose it isn't true. But there's something decent about them all the same.

-They may be nice -said Noel- but they're thoroughly misguided. No good comes in the end of untrue beliefs. There is no God and there is no judgement, except the judgement that each one of us makes for himself; and what that is is a private matter.¹⁰⁵

For the first time in the novel, it is suggested that the God of Imber community is part of the dream. If it is not real, then it is not true. At the same time, it can not be good, since for Murdoch, goodness is irretrievably linked to reality. So, is this God real or not? Murdoch does not give the answer to this question until the end of the novel. And the answer seems to be affirmative. It is a false God. Their faith was a dream. However, she refers to the character's God. It was an image, a false idol, a fantasy. Murdoch does not deny that there is a real God outside, but seems to affirm that the community of Imber lived in a fantasy. This is shown in the last pages, where Michael Meade, deeply hurt by the death of Nick Fawley, feels that his faith in

104. Mauri, *Ética y literatura*, p. 58.

105. Murdoch, *The Bell*, p. 186.

God has been broken. As a narrator, Murdoch reflects: “Real faith in God was something utterly remote from all that. (...) The pattern which he had seen in his life had existed only in his own romantic imagination.” So, Murdoch distinguishes between Imber's God, which is a fantasy, and the real God, that could be somewhere outside. To the question of the reality of God, Murdoch does not answer categorically. She stays in agnosticism, as she actually admitted in multiple interviews. This is manifested in his characters's behavior. For instance, when Michael wakes up from his fantasy, he proclaims: “There is a God, but I do not believe in Him”¹⁰⁶. He can not know him. He feels hurt and betrayed.

The question of God in Murdoch comes until this limit. This is the border where morality becomes theology. At this point, Murdoch does not write anything more. All that she shows is that Michael experiences real suffering, like Willy Kost. From there, all that remains is to continue to love reality, and to be good. But the last question, about the nature of the good, about the real existence of God, remains unanswered.

Moreover, Murdoch's novel is reoriented in another direction. Before resolving the question of God, Murdoch conveys the message that men should abandon personal solipsism and open to others. This openness to others is an openness to reality, which can be performed through love. Murdoch defends imaginative (not fantasy) openness to reality. As some authors postulate, the triangle imagination-love-relationship with others is the central element of morality in *The Bell*¹⁰⁷. So now, the title of the novel is better understood. Imber Court's bell is the most powerful symbol of the novel. The bell symbolizes morality. Therefore, on the edge of the old bell one can read the inscription: “*Vox ego sum Amoris, Gabriel vocor*”¹⁰⁸ (I am the voice of love, my name is Gabriel). The bell is morality, and her voice is love.

While false love relationships stain all links of the inhabitants of Imber, and while they all talk of morality and being unable to reach it, the bell remains mired in the deep lake. It is a special moment in the novel when Toby Gashe and Dora Greenfield, casually the two most innocent characters, rescue bell and place it back in the belfry. The voice of the bell is the voice of love. Murdoch is saying that the key to achieve goodness is being able to love. At this point it is where Murdoch's message ends. When one tries to continue further and ask about the origin of

106. Ibid., p. 308.

107. O'Connor, *To Love the Good*, p. 267.

108. Murdoch, *The Bell*, p. 272.

that goodness, about God, Murdoch keeps her mouth shut. A every answer is redirected to men, to the particular, to contingency. For her, all metaphysics is embedded in the concrete things.

In this sense, one should remember Wittgenstein's thoughts, carefully collected in Murdoch's first novel, *Under the Net*. This essay began with this work and it also concludes with it, since Murdoch's ideas about God that are found throughout all her literary production, are already alive in her first work. Under the slogan "actions don't lie, words always do"¹⁰⁹, Wittgenstein's alter ego, Hugo Belfounder, expresses his opinion on the subject of God.

Hugo: -Every mand must have a trade. Yours is writing. Mine will be making and mending watches, I hope, if I'm good enough.

-And what about the truth? -I said wildly.- What about the search for God?

-What more do you want? -said Hugo.- God is a task. God is detail. It all lies close to your hand. He reached out and took hold of a tumbler which was standing on the table beside his bed. The light from the door glinted on the tumbler and seemed to find an answering flash in Hugo's eyes, as I tried in the darkness to see what they were saying.

-All right -I said- all right, all right, all right.

-You're always expecting something, Jake -said Hugo.

-Maybe -I said.¹¹⁰

Although Murdoch wanted to dilute the influence that Wittgenstein exerted on her, the truth is that Wittgenstein's ideas pervade Iris Murdoch's literary work. If one ask about God, Hugo Belfounder will answer that there is nothing but contingency. There is no need to expect anything else. Everything is here, close to our hand. If there is a God, then God can only be a task, a handful of details. There is not an abstract God that nurtures morality. For Murdoch, art is the only window of salvation to man's moral life. As George Steiner remarked, "art is our supreme 'clue to morals'"¹¹¹. Both focus the spirit towards love. As he observed, Murdoch's moral programme is similar to the one in Neo-Platonism, in Augustine and in Dante's *Paradiso*. However, in the Irish writer there is a formidable difference. Murdoch does not postulate the existence of God. On the contrary, she fights for a morality of love, of individualised reciprocity whose bases are very similar to those of rational humanism.

109. Murdoch, *Under the Net*, p. 257.

110. Murdoch, *Under the Net*, p. 258.

111. Steiner, *Foreword Existentialists and Mystics*, p. xv.

9. Final conclusions



At this point, from the summit of the question of God, one must descend back to realism. After this trip through the novels of Iris Murdoch, the initial idea should be recovered. To understand the meaning of these characters, it should be remembered Murdoch's conception of art. This is, that art is the clue to access truth and to really understand the human person.

The artist must overcome his obsessions and reach reality. Only when the artist silences himself, he can contemplate nature. This is the first step towards good art. Also, it is the first step towards morality, since the artist has a moral duty. Creating a work of good art implies a moral responsibility, since good art improves men morally. This does not mean that the artist's task is to serve society¹¹². He does not have a duty to society. On the contrary, the artist's duty is to art, to truth telling, to reach reality. Or, in the case of the writer, to produce the best literary work of which he is capable. If it reaches reality, it would be good art. The artist's duty is not directly with morality, but with good art. In other words, good art depicts reality, and then improves the man morally. However, this is just a consequence, not the artist's main aim. The work of good art is an exercise of morality. This is why the good artist is the good man. On the contrary, the bad artist would live in a "private dream world"¹¹³. The good man is a humble man, since he can cancel the interest in himself to inquire about the world. He is a man whose virtue is tolerance, because he accepts the reality of the other as different and as as real as himself. At this point, morality, goodness, good art and reality are identified.

Now, it should be recovered the question with which this essay began, about the philosophical side of Murdoch's literature. Under the light of everything said, it is noteworthy that her novels

112. Magee, *Iris Murdoch's conversation with Bryan Magee*.

113. Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, p. 57.

are not philosophical theses in the mouths of characters. This is not the right way to understand her literature. If Murdoch had made such thing, she would be an example of what she understands as a bad artist. Conversely, Murdoch attempts to draw real people, independent from the writer. As some authors have formulated, Murdoch seeks to build a realistic mirror in which the reader can look at himself and feel recognized¹¹⁴. In that mirror, the concepts that philosophy lost can be brought back, and they can be placed in their context. This is, the context of real people behaving morally good or bad.

But her literature does not serve a moral purpose. For Murdoch, moral improvement is a consequence of good literature, but not its aim. The sole aim of literature is to produce the best literary work possible. For Murdoch, the best literary work is the one which is realistic. That would mean that it is a piece of good art. However, a good piece of literary art has a further consequence: the concepts that were forgotten are shown again. But this is a further consequence, and not something that the writer should look for. As it has been said, the intention of the writer must be further back: to create the best novel he can. Only then, if that novel is a work of good art, the reading is an exercise of remembering lost concepts. This can be compared to the Platonic “anamnesis”¹¹⁵. Murdoch seeks that his reader regains the moral concepts that philosophy lost. This is the reason why, at the beginning of this essay, it was mentioned that literature can bring a new vocabulary. But, again, when writing, Murdoch does not think about moral purposes. The only purpose of a writer is to write the best novel that he is able to. Moral consequences are such, consequences, and not purposes.

To conclude, it should be said that literature can philosophize, but not by presenting theses. While philosophy seeks for truth in a “direct and discursive” way, literature does it in “artful and indirect” manner¹¹⁶. Although it may seem obscure, fiction is not untruthful. The inference from this is what some commentators have suggested: that Murdoch's novels can be seen as philosophical “in the same sense that nearly all works of literature are philosophy”¹¹⁷. If what has been said is understood, there is no point in asking for the number of philosophical theses that Murdoch expressed in his novels. As a writer, her only purpose was to write the best novel she could. That's all. At this point her words make sense: “The artist's duty is to art, to truth-

114. Forsberg, *Language Lost and Found*, p. 80.

115. *Ibid.*, p. 61.

116. Magee, *Conversation with Iris Murdoch*.

117. Forsberg, *Language Lost and Found*, p. 224.

telling (...), the writer's duty is to produce the best literary work of which he is capable"¹¹⁸. And then, later, it comes the assumption that good art and morality are identified. It is a further consequence that good art morally improves the man. Only if a novel is good art, which for Murdoch means realistic, can morally improve the reader. And for it to be real, it must first be guided by love. Love is the common source. Love is the essence of all goodness and all art. From this point of view, it can be understood that Iris Murdoch chose literature and not philosophy as a tool for her moral project. For Murdoch, only art is capable of representing reality, guided by love, and morally improve the man. As a good art, literature can recover the concepts that philosophy has lost. More precisely, literature can be the path to morals. This is the reason why she decided to write novels, rather than philosophical treatises.

118. Magee, *Conversation with Iris Murdoch*.

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