

4. HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS

It may be argued that characters and ideas are what make up a novel. The story was already discarded by Modernists and has since been looked upon as the simplest device to keep the reader's attention through an appeal to his curiosity – that lowest motif for reading. E.M. Forster in *Aspects of the Novel* holds a similar view on the latter, but at the same time he recognizes the worth of the story. The greatest characters, however extraordinarily drawn become uninteresting unless they are thrown into interaction with other characters, because only then do they become alive. The ivory tower of ideas and resolutions remains closed and illusory like a theory never put into practice.

Iris Murdoch's characters may resemble each other from novel to novel to the extent that they are sometimes regarded as types rather than individuals. However, the roles and relationships in which they are cast are of infinite variations, thus driving the lesson home that it is not individuals in a vacuum but their contingent interplay that constitutes the constant flux of life.

Despite critical speculation to the contrary, Murdoch is adamant about being a realistic writer. In her view 'it is realism which makes great art great.'¹ She ascribes art a serious role which stems from the fundamental insight art affords. 'In the enjoyment of art and nature we discover value in our ability to forget self, to be realistic, to perceive justly. We use our imagination not to escape the world but to join it, and this exhilarates us because of the distance between our ordinary dulled consciousness and an apprehension of the real.'² The way she portrays the relationships between the characters in her novels does not seem to contradict the on-going debate about the nature of her realism on either side. The realistic revival in the post-war years accommodated the first three of Murdoch's novels comfortably within the tradition. Later, however, already during the 60s, with more symbolism, more unexpected twists to her plots and more spiritual experiences of her characters, the critics became increasingly suspicious. Was this realism?

Ever since the 60s and much more vocally in the last ten years, British literary critics have been worried about the lack of experimentation in the British novel. With the emergence of the post-modern novel the literary scene has diversified and attacks on realism have followed. Ardent post-modernists reject realism outright, unveiling it as subservient to the ruling ideology. The post-modern emphasis on experiment and departure from realism lands Murdoch between two millstones: she is not experimental enough for post-modernists and, on the other hand, seems to be too experimental for realism.

Frederic Jameson, speaking from the viewpoint of radical historicism, looks at a detailed realistic description as a form of programming, as having 'a purely connotative function in which a wealth of *contingent* details – without any symbolic meaning – emit the signal, "this is reality", or better still, "this is realism".³ The rich detail in the Murdoch novel cannot help emitting this signal quite unmistakably.

An interesting explanation of how to see realism even in the 'unrealistic' twists in Murdoch's novels is proposed by Suguna Ramanathan in *Iris Murdoch, Figures of Good*: 'I suggest that these improbable possibilities which she chooses to present are actually externalisations of the endless combinations, often mutually exclusive and contradictory, that lie at the bottom of consciousness. Anything and everything may be entertained there; behaviour is regulated and made decorous only through socialisation. Exclusions, choosing, acting in certain ways rather than others, are constructs placed over a seemingly bottomless, surging inner sea. It is this innermost, interior seascape that Murdoch is disclosing; it is therefore hardly surprising that it seems unrealistic to the socially conditioned consciousness.'⁴

Besides the realistic detail human relationships are Murdoch's main link with reality. Whereas her plots or individual episodes reach into fantasy, symbolism or allegory and fit ingenious patterns, she achieves the contingency, which she considers so important in novel writing, by putting her characters at the mercy of real enough pitfalls of personal involvement. They may be orchestrated by the author's hand, but, unless they make clichés, this is not much different from the randomness of events in real life. Murdoch's inventiveness does not allow her situations to become clichés. The reality is our reality, firmly rooted in our time, with the details of life styles, attitudes and problems of today, but also with an undercurrent of unanswered questions as old as mankind.

Murdoch's commitment to the problems of human relationships was already shown in her book on Sartre, where she points out Sartre's lack of interest in this side of the human situation. 'Sartre by-passes the complexity of the world of ordinary human relations which is also the world of ordinary moral virtues ... The loss of sense in human relations is asserted rather than displayed; there is no tormenting entanglement of misunderstanding between Sartre's characters. They bump into each other in an external fashion; they are deeply involved with each other. If not analysed they remain impenetrable ... The novel, the novel proper that is, is about people's treatment of each other, and so it is about human values.'⁵ The quotations amply illustrate the link Murdoch makes between moral philosophy, human relationships and novel writing and prove sufficiently that human relationships therefore play more than a random or supplementary role in her own novels.

Murdoch's interest in human relationships may best be seen in the light of her moral philosophy and her conception of how morality works as argued by her in *The Sovereignty of Good*.

'Moral tasks are characteristically endless not only because "within", as it were, a given concept our efforts are imperfect, but also because as we move and as we look our concepts themselves are changing. To speak here of an inevitable imperfection, or of an ideal limit of love or knowledge which always recedes, may be taken as a reference to our "fallen" human condition, but this need be given no special dogmatic sense. Since we are neither angels nor animals but human individuals, our dealings with each other have this aspect; and this may be regarded as an empirical fact or, by those who favour such terminology, as a synthetic *a priori* truth.'⁶ In the same book she demonstrates by an example the legitimate existence of 'internal struggle' as a moral activity. It cannot be by chance that the example draws on a relationship, a relationship of a mother-in-law to her daughter-in-law and the very example implies that more often than not our moral activity is related to the others around us. Essential to moral activity is attention, in the same example specified as attention to the other person. The mother-in-law who originally dislikes her daughter-in-law, though never showing her dislike, comes to see her differently by conscious, positive attention – by looking.

'The moral life ...is something that goes on continually, not something that is switched off in between the occurrence of explicit moral choices. What happens in between such choices is indeed what is crucial. I would like on the whole to use the word "attention" as a good word and use some more general term like "looking" as the neutral word. Of course psychic energy flows, and more readily flows, into building up convincingly coherent but false pictures of the world, complete with systematic vocabulary ...Attention is the effort to counteract such states of illusion.'⁷

Attention to others also helps to reduce the importance of the self, which is the pinnacle of existentialist thought and again contested here by Murdoch: 'Self is hard to see justly as other things, and when clear vision has been achieved, self is a correspondingly smaller and less interesting object.'⁸ The inflated Kantian and later existentialist self, the 'free, independent, lonely, powerful, rational, responsible, brave' man-god also finds his way, though in a less god-like form, to Murdoch's novels, where, enmeshed in the net of opaque and contingent relationships, he is shown for the accidental man in the chaotic world of today.

Murdoch believes that understanding between individuals is difficult because 'we can only understand others if we can to some extent share their contexts. (Often we cannot.)'⁹ This is the result of the imperfect means of communication that are at our disposal – words. 'If the common object is lacking, communication may break down and the same words may occasion different results in different hearers ...Human beings are obscure to each other, in certain respects which are particularly relevant to morality, unless they are mutual objects of attention or have common objects of attention, since this affects the degree of elaboration of a common vocabulary.'¹⁰ Amply demonstrated in her novels, this is a line of argument where Murdoch seems to be at one with post-modernists.

Important to Murdoch's moral philosophy is also her concept of freedom. She demands a moral definition of freedom as opposed to a purely political one. In her early review of *Freedom of the Individual* by Stuart Hampshire¹¹, she proposes that freedom is not only how we choose, using the machinery of will-desire-belief-reason, but also what we choose in order to act rightly. The choice is aided by perceiving what is real and this in turn will be influenced by our own imagination. Here, too, and significantly so, Murdoch populates the thus created world with other people to be considered. 'The formulation of beliefs about other people often proceeds and must proceed imaginatively and under a direct pressure of will. We have to *attend* to people, we may have to have *faith* in them, and here justice and realism may demand the inhibition of certain pictures, the promotion of others. Each of us lives and chooses within a partly fabricated world, and although any particular belief might be shown to be "merely fantastic" it is false to suggest that we could, even in principle, "purge" the world we confront of these personal elements. Nor is there any reason why we should.'¹² She concludes that any ideal theory of freedom must be penetrated by the suggestion of the authority of the Good.

The concept of the Good lies at the heart of Murdoch's moral philosophy and it 'reigns sovereign' over all other concepts. In spite of that it remains elusive, always beyond our grasp, distant, very much like the Sun in Plato's Myth of the Cave. 'Good is non-representable and indefinable. We are mortal and equally at the mercy of necessity and chance. These are the true aspects in which all men are brothers.'¹³ The concept of Good is difficult to understand because it has many false doubles manufactured by people to make their moral tasks easy. The Good has a unifying power and in its light we can see the hierarchy of all the other concepts. Explaining Plato, Murdoch argues that 'the mind which has ascended to the vision of the Good can subsequently see the concepts through which it has ascended (art, work, nature, people, ideas, institutions, situations, etc., etc.) in their true nature and their proper relationship to each other. The good man knows whether and when art or politics is more important than family. The good man sees the way in which the virtues are related to each other.'¹⁴ That this remains hypothetical is due to the immense variety of the world and our inability to encompass it.

Regarding the concept of Love, which is most relevant to the treatment of human relationships in her novels, Iris Murdoch claims that the temptation to equal Love and Good should be resisted. Love is often self-assertive, 'capable of infinite degradation and is the source of our greatest errors.' On the other hand, 'love is the tension between the imperfect soul and the magnetic perfection which is conceived of as lying beyond it ... And when we try perfectly to love what is imperfect our love goes to its object *via* the Good to be thus purified and made unselfish and just. The mother loving the retarded child or loving the tiresome elderly

relation ...Its existence is the unmistakable sign that we are spiritual creatures, attracted by excellence and made for the Good.¹⁵

The emerging paradox is a complex one and this is where in Murdoch's opinion art may help to elucidate the nature of love. 'That the highest love is in some sense impersonal is something which we can indeed see in art, but which I think we cannot see clearly, except in a very piecemeal manner, in the relationships of human beings. Once again the place of art is unique.'¹⁶ True to this assertion, every one of Iris Murdoch's novels examines the two aspects of love in their endless varieties as well as their non-existent boundaries.

All these concepts and particularly the unifying concept of Good permeate moral philosophy which is based on human experience and covers the whole of our mode of living. Moral philosophy means taking sides and reflections on moral life mean making choices. Characteristically, the questions Murdoch asks again involve other people and the relationship to them and not merely the self with its selfish concerns. 'Should a retarded child be kept at home or sent to an institution? Should an elderly relation who is a trouble-maker be cared for or asked to go away... The love which brings the right answer is an exercise of justice and realism and really *looking*. The difficulty is to keep the attention fixed upon the real situation and to prevent it from returning surreptitiously to the self with consolations of self-pity, resentment, fantasy and despair.'¹⁷

The aim of this brief and of necessity limiting excursion into Iris Murdoch's philosophy was to ascertain the extent to which human relationships are instrumental in the formulation of some of her concepts and thus support my assumption that they play an important part in her novels, too. At the same time, however, we should heed Murdoch's warning: 'As soon as philosophy gets into the novel, it ceases to be philosophy; it becomes a plaything of the writer.'¹⁸