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An Apocalyptic Imagery—Iris Murdoch's Moral and Artistic Goodness in Major Fiction

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ABSTRACT
When many other 20th century English novels focus on social documentary, Iris Murdoch, attaches more concerns with an extraordinary reality: modern industry corrupts human beings' moral sensibility. Adopting the myth and archetypal criticism as the theoretical basis for the study, this paper intends to analyse classical themes and explore Iris Murdoch's understanding of moral and artistic goodness.

Keywords: *social documentary, moral sensibility, moral and artistic goodness*

1. INTRODUCTION

According to Northrop Frye, the Greek word for revelation, apocalypsis, has the metaphorical sense of uncovering or taking a lid off, and similarly the word for truth, Aletheia, begins with a negative particle which suggests that truth was originally thought of as also a kind of unveiling, a removal of the curtains of forgetfulness in the mind[1]. In modern world, there are portentous events in both social and natural orders: plagues, wars, famines, great stars falling from heaven. But for those who persist in the faith, an eventual transformation of the world into a new heaven and earth must be realized. Therefore, we notice that the Book of Revelation seems to be emphatically the end of The Bible; but it is indeed a remarkably open end. It contains such statement as "Behold, I make all things new" [1]. Then the apocalypse begins in the reader's mind as soon as he has finished reading, a vision that passes through the legalized vision of ordeals and trials and judgments and comes out into a new world.

Milton suggests that the ultimate authority in the Christian religion is what he calls the Word of God in the heart, which is superior even to The Bible itself, because for Milton this "heart" belongs not to the subjective reader but to the Holy Spirit. That is, the reader completes the visionary operation of The Bible by throwing out the subjective fallacy along with the objective one. The apocalypse is the way the world looks after the ego has disappeared. God, we are told, made a "good" world; man fell into a bad world and the good one vanished; consequently human creativity has in it the quality of re-creation, of salvaging something with a human meaning out of the alienation of nature[1]. At the end of the Book of Revelation, with such phrases as "I make all things new", we gain the promise of a new human and earth, a new realm of thought—true good. So, Frye has in his The Anatomy of Criticism a particular organization of myth and archetypal symbols in literature—apocalyptic world. This apocalyptic world, the heaven of religion, presents in the first place, the categories of reality in the forms of human desire which indicates human beings' hope and spiritual pursuit.

From Iris Murdoch's own moral and artistic ideas, we may have acquired some picture of the kind of novelist she attempts to be and certain concepts she tries to convey: through enchantment and attention, her pursuit is still in process. It also indicates the whole human world's hope and ideal: Murdoch is still questing, questing for her perfection—the reality of Good.

2. MORAL AND ARTISTIC IDEAL—THE REALITY OF GOOD

According to Murdoch, the concept of good is tightly related to the concept of attention: good should be the focus of attention when a virtuous intent co-exists with some unclarity of vision. In *The Sovereignty of Good*, she establishes Good as the most pervasive and unifying of moral concepts but also one of the most difficult of definition. Thus, in terms of the true good, Plato's moral philosophy which believes that good is faraway and that people's task is to transform themselves, to control selfishness and to experience a very long process of conversion. This concept is so aspiring and giving glimpse of a religious aspect to Murdoch, "Plato uses the image of the sun to explain good. The moral pilgrim emerges from the cave and starts to experience the real world through the

sunlight, and last of all can look at the sun itself"[2]. Murdoch drawing on Plato's analogy of the cave, tries to describe persons lost in illusions. if they want to become morally better, they'd better turn and struggle from the cave and in order to see the world at last. Murdoch tries to discuss the process of attention to moral goodness through the assumption "that such attention will bring with it a sense of where goodness and truth and reality are, that they are neither subjective nor arbitrarily open to the election of the will"[3]. William Schweiker once comments that "Murdoch pictures the moral life as the conversion of the self to the real guided by some object of attention, a conversion which entails the redirection of psychic energy"[3].Since the attention conveys an idea of a just and loving gaze projected upon an individual reality, yet this form of perception instead of unimpeded freedom, is what Murdoch notes the characteristic and proper mark of the active moral agent. The moral life is about a process of perfecting a person through attention to what is real. The core of consciousness is undoubtedly attention, and its essential object should be the reality of the individual. The path directed to the good involves focused attention to details, self-denial, removal from the centre of life, and well-informed that there is no end in sight, no reward, nothing to be attained: "the route to creative truth is equally arduous and involves the same goals: discipline, self-denial and failure" [4]. To Murdoch goodness is related with the efforts to see the unself, to react to the real world in the light of a virtuous consciousness, therefore, it is a form of reality:

In Murdoch's fictional world, she is still in the process of pursuing this kind of goodness through different people and their different life experiences. Her power figures enchant others, and the enchanted others try to cast attention. In fact, they all lack love. The unutterable particularity is something to which Murdoch returns again and again. She accuses modern writers of being unwilling to record chaos and contingency and of desiring "significance completely contained in itself", not writing of what is feared: "history, real beings, and real change" [5]. Life is made of muddle, and good art records the contingencies. She says we must respect contingency and learn a new respect for the particularity of "the now so unfashionable naturalistic ideal of character" [6]

Nothing is ever simple and straightforward in Murdoch's world, and especially goodness appears to be both rare and hard to picture. Though hardest for the artist to describe successfully, the good is a recurrent theme in Murdoch's world, which reflects her deep moral concern and persistent artistic pursuit.

3. THE NEED FOR ATTENTION

Attention expresses the "idea of a just and loving gaze directed upon an individual reality" [2] and this is a main lesson Murdoch's writing aims to teach. In her major novels, the protagonists to some extent are trapped in the fantasy, either enchanted by demonic power, or trapped by the miserable reality and loses self. Therefore, all need this "loving attention" [2] to survive.

Murdoch has explores profoundly "master and slave" relationship in The Flight from the Enchanter. Nina and Annette are both Mischa's spiritual slaves. They always want to isolate themselves from the society and blindly respect the powerful soul. Nina is the Murdoch's extreme example of the uprooted. She is Murdoch's attempt to portray the social effects of Weil's concept of affliction; she has her moment of apprehension of the spiritual facts involved in her suffering at the moment of her death, but she belongs rather with the afflicted—the slaves, refugees, uprooted, despised. Nina's nightmare before her suicide symbolizes the way in which Nina is seen as a victim in two ways. She sees herself floating through a forest from her sewing machine. She is tied to her sewing machine as to a crucifix. The machine is seen as one of a series of incomprehensible machines in the book which are means of enslavement. She finds herself trapped by the cloth spilling forth from its jaws, that proceed to eat, first the cloth, then Nina. The cloth is finally found to be "a map of all the countries of the world"[7]—in all of which she is stateless, here we could feel Murdoch's echo to Weil's study of the need of the community to provide a place for people to live in. Murdoch believes the individual is always a part of society. He should be responsible to others as well as to himself. The freedom means respecting the independent being of others and subordinating other's freedom to one's own is a denial of freedom itself. He should be someone, to have roots and not to be anonymous. Therefore, Nina lacks this kind of attention. She is willing to be slave and cannot see clearly her own state of living. Trapped by powerful soul, she is not able to cast the just and loving gaze to Mischa and rescue herself out of the trap. Nina is defeated and her suicide is the tragic end of lacking attention. The almost same experiences also happen to Annette. Annette is the first of one of Miss Murdoch's most distinctive trains of character-types—the reckless, amoral, suicidally inclined adolescent girl who is obsessed by older man. To Elizabeth Dipple, Annette is "one of a series of Murdoch's uninteresting caricatures of the still adolescent girl, who always and destructively loves the most powerful male"[4] . Iris Murdoch sees Annette's weakness as a failure of love. Love is imperfect with the absence of equity; if the lover sees himself as being either above or below the object of his love, the result is master-slave relationship. Therefore, one achieves balanced love through attention, a term Miss Murdoch borrows from Simone Weil. Attention consists of the accurate apprehension of another person's reality; this is why the word "see" is so often important in Iris Murdoch's fiction. As slavery is opposed to love, opposed to attention is fantasy, which is an imperfect type of observation in which a person imposes his own fixed image of the beloved on the real one. One who fantasizes falls in love with an imaginary person whom he himself has created, with fantasy, is a form of self-love and it is doomed failure. Tailors himself fit the fantasies of the potential slave until he achieves domination. This is enchantment, and the slave is trapped by his own fantasies as well as by the spell cast by the enchanter. Annette therefore typifies this model. Her nearly fatal attraction for Mischa makes her feels she is in "a daze of beatitude"[7]. While in his presence: "she felt, and with it a deep joy, the desire and the power that enfold him, to comfort him, to save him"[7]. As the perfectly enchanted product of her society, Annette never really knows, who the enchanter is, and cannot draw a just loving gaze to him. Therefore, she can never flee from him. The

metaphor of the train as an objective correlative for her fantasizing mind is the most dominant symbol in her life. It is the machine that has controlled her actions in the past and will do so in the future:

Within the action of the novel Annette is trapped in her enchanted "train" no matter where she goes, and though she tries to cross the barrier occasionally, her precious charm such as her jewels, her dressmaker, her photograph of her brother, are always there to shield her. When she does realize her genuine aloneness and symbolically throw her jewels into the river, she loses all reason to exist and needs to stage her suicide, but even then her parents arrive and whisk her off to Europe and security, on yet another train where Annette once again looks at life the way she always will: "She looked upon them all enchanted, lips parted and eyes wide. It was like being at the pictures […] And while Annette looked at the world, Marcia looked at Annette, and Andrew looked at Marcia"[7]. What a splendid tableau with which to end the story of the Cockaynes! Perpetually in a state of utter inaccessibility, frozen and enchanted by the sight of the cold otherness of the other. Their unreachable beings relate to each other in what is almost a parody of Murdoch's definition of love: love is real only one accepts the "otherness" of the other people[8]. Annette never pays attention to others and is tending to accept the self-love. Therefore, she has to return to parents and begin a new journey.

In *A Severed Head*, the first-person narrator Martin Lynch-Gibbon also undergoes a difficult lesson that forces him to come to accept and to love the otherness of other people and his enlightenment is reflected in the experience of other characters as well. Due to the lack of attention to others, at the beginning of the novel he makes just those errors in his relationships with others. According to Murdoch, the life is full of contingency and shapelessness, but Martin is shown as creating his own patterns and forms. However, a series of unexpected blows or drives lead to his own moral development by destroying the abstract patterns. As what I have analyzed above, Martin is a prisoner in the Cave, and is living in the illusion that his love to Honor is true. However, when he falls on his knees and prostrates himself, ending in the oriental posture of Proskinesis, Marin, who thought he had no religion, who has deified shadow-loves—all romantically egotistical projections of himself—is now completely abject before Honor, primitive every incarnate [8]. Only when she mocks him—"what would you do with me if you had me?"[9]—does he realize that he is absurdly not her equal. Therefore, according to Murdoch, love is imperfect when this equality is absent. Because Martin still blindly respects and loves Honor—a false image created by himself, his chances of survival seem slight, and his chances of escaping the Cave and becoming good seem almost nonexistent.

The novel *The Black Prince* has a subtitle: "A Celebration of Love" and in fact what happens to Bradley, from one point of view, is that he is saved as an artist, However, Bradley seems to be too self-obsessed to pay attention to others. As Elizabeth Dipple has pointed out, "Priscilla's death, longing in building and harrowingly well-prepared for, is inevitable as in Nina's"[4]. In both cases, cries for help go unheard by a central character; both Rosa and Bradley are so self-absorbed that, as Bradley puts it: "I had not got a grain of spirit to offer to any other person" [10]. He lacks any sense of either Priscilla's or Francis's reality. When Priscilla is dead, Bradley in conversation with Francis realizes that the truth of the matter, "Priscilla died because nobody loved her"[10].

When Bradley crazily loves Julian and brings her to the seaside, he believes he has found out the true love. In fact, nothing is simple in Murdoch. Any character in a novel by Murdoch who feels that his or her life has a necessary, nonaccidental form, or that he or she has had a vision of truth or reality is almost certainly deluded [3]. In her philosophical work, Murdoch has several times spoken of the human tendency to "deform" reality by seeing it through egocentric fantasy. As A. S. Byatt has noted, Murdoch likes to use image of a "machine" for the unconscious operation of the psyche, and has written of what she sees as "true and important" in Freudian theory: Murdoch is particularly interested in "the psychological system to which the technical name of sado-masochism has been given. [3]

She has described it as a chief enemy to clarity of vision, whether in art or morals and sees a masochistic interest in suffering as a secret form of egoism masked as self-denial. *The Black Prince*, who is an object of love and terror, is a composite god-demon in the novel; he is Apollo, the god light and art, but also the cruel god who punished the faun, Marsyas, by flaying him for daring to compete with him as an artist. "He is Shakespeare; he is Love and Death, and Art"[10]. Francis Marlowe points out that Bradley first meets Julian in the narrative when she is dressed in such a way as to be mistaken by Bradley as a boy, that he reveals himself to have fallen in love with her after a tutorial on the play during the course of which it transpires that she had once played the part of Hamlet, and that he achieves sexual intercourse for the only when she has, for a joke, dressed up in the costume of Hamlet. Perhaps, it is true, as both A. S. Byatt and Richard Todd have pointed out, Julian's androgyny shows her to be the "master-mistress" of Bradley's passion. It could be argued that Bradley's love for Julian is partly a love for Death. Murdoch comments in the essay "on God and Good" that "the idea of suffering confuses the mind and can masquerade as purification. It is rarely this, for unless it is very intense indeed it is far too interesting. Plato does not say that philosophy is the study of suffering, but he says it is the study of death" [10]. Has Bradley been released to write a good novel by some real experience of death?

In the novel, Bradley feels that "she (Julian) had filled me with a previously unimaginable power which I knew that I would and could use in my art"[10]. Bradley's remarks on Hamlet stand in a close and interesting relationship with what Murdoch herself seems to believe. Murdoch has commented on T. S. Eliot's view, saying that the true artist should be impersonal, emptied of self, "the lover who, nothing himself, lets all things be through him" [2]. One of the criteria for "good art" is that it should be impersonal in the way in which it avoids projecting its creator's personal obsessions and wishes. In this achievement lies the ability to present reality, and the consumer of art must show sufficient "moral discipline" in order to apprehend reality.

It is left to Bradley to account for why Hamlet is second-rate compared with The King Lear. Bradley suggests that in

Hamlet Shakespeare reveals himself in what is tantamount to a "personal obsession":

His vision of Hamlet enables him to arrive at a conception of Shakespeare's "special style" and to say that though Shakespeare is "the king of masochists" what saves him is that "his god is a real god and not an Eidolon of private fantasy" [10]. Shakespeare's art in Hamlet is, according to Bradley, supreme because it has arisen from a genuine apprehension of reality, an apprehension so rare that it allows Shakespeare to invent, through the power of love, "language as if for the first time"[10]

In speaking of Shakespeare's obsession, Bradley reveals plenty of his own. His "silence", his self-effacement, in morals and writing, are related to the ideal of impersonality—as is his preoccupation with selflessness of Shakespeare's vision. Murdoch has argued that the most difficult thing to see or represent truthfully or clearly is the distinct separate being of other people.

As A. S. Byatt has pointed out, Murdoch herself has said that "what does he fear?" is the key to the philosopher's mind. Bradley knows the difficulty of seeing people clearly. He allows Priscilla to die, out of his obsession with his own self-renewal in his passion for Julian. But he is able to note, objectively, that she "was a brave woman. She endured unhappiness grimly with dignity" [10]. In the same way, at the end of the book, his attitude to Julian has its ambivalences. There is clear sense in which his "work of art", the novel containing Julian, is not an impersonal objective vision of her, or of reality, but an act of domination and possession: "she somehow was and is the book, the story of herself. This is her deification and incidentally her immortality. It is my gift to her and my final possession of her. From this embrace she can never escape" [10]. He can say to Julian, "art cannot assimilate you nor thought digest you"[10]. Her separation guarantees her reality. Bradley reveals that the Shakespearian ideal of the relationship between the form of art and the contingency of character, between "images" and "real people", fails him as an artist, and he also reveals by means of his illusions how it fails him as an artist. Therefore, through a series of separation and initiation, Bradley, at the end of the novel, feels, during his trial, that he has been privileged enough to have ordeal which is in some way a guarantee of true vision and may come nearer to the good vision. Then, to achieve ultimate reality or goodness both in art and morals, it is necessary to break the egoism, by directing attention to the otherness of the other. This is the lesson Murdoch wants to convey by the works discussed in this section.

4. CONCLUSION

The centuries of humanism have nourished an unrealistic conception of the powers of the will: we have gradually lost the vision of a reality of ourselves. Twentieth-century obsessions with authority of the individual, the "existential" significance of subjectivity, are surely misguided, for the individual cannot be a detached observer, free to invent or reimagine his life. The consequences of trying to do so are repeatedly explored in Murdoch's fiction. The meaning and value within themselves and their greatest social and political challenge is the exercise of consciousness through specific decisions that affirm and dignify the reality of other persons. How best to respect the "reality" of others, that is, how best to live morally is an issue that emerges in Murdoch's fiction again and again.

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