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The Moral Labyrinth

Iris Murdoch, Happiness and the Ethics of Art and Fiction

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Try to be one of the people on whom nothing is lost.

— Henry James, *The Art of Fiction*

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Introduction

Iris Murdoch was born on July 15, 1919, in Dublin, but grew up in England, where she later studied the Classics at the University of Oxford, a course that included Greek and Latin literature, ancient history, and ancient philosophy. From early on, Murdoch blended her love of philosophy and storytelling, creating a unique voice as both a philosopher and a novelist. She remained an active part of the Oxford philosophical community, where friendships, most notably with Mary Midgley, played a significant role in shaping her evolving views on morality and the broader questions of life.[1]

Murdoch's ideas about philosophy were formed by the major events happening in the world around her. Her time working with refugees and people who had lost their homes in Europe during and after World War II left a lasting impression on her. The suffering and confusion she witnessed made her especially aware of how vulnerable human beings can be and of the complex questions about right and wrong that arise in challenging circumstances. When she returned to Britain and to teaching at Oxford, discussions about morality were still strongly influenced by the war and its aftermath. For Murdoch and her peers, reading Sartre and the existentialists was more than an academic interest. Their work resonated with concerns and uncertainties that were very much part of Murdoch's own postwar experience. Rather than constructing oversimplified theories, Murdoch's later writing often returns to the idea that moral understanding is rooted in real-life experiences and contexts. The importance she places on concrete situations

[1] The biographical information discussed in this study is based primarily on Bradbury's account (2000) and supported by Conradi (2001), unless otherwise indicated.

and the particular circumstances of individual lives is especially evident in works such as *The Sovereignty of Good* and *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals.*

Murdoch's early interest in philosophy and literature is reflected in her first major publication as an author, *Sartre: Romantic Rationalist*, published in 1953. In examining Sartre's ideas of freedom, choice, and responsibility, she also questioned how such abstract concepts might relate to the ordinary moral dilemmas subjects faced after the war. Bradbury describes this book as

> a study of a leading philosopher of the time, the Age of Anxiety, which was also the Age of Existentialism. It is also a meditation on the nature of the novel, its close relationship to philosophy, and what the novel can do (Bradbury, 2000).

Within this context, Murdoch viewed fiction as a way to reflect on what it means to be human, namely as a means of exploring how human beings make moral choices, misread each other, and attempt to act well, even when circumstances make this difficult (Bradbury, 2000). Bradbury notes that, in the early 1950s, writers were still very much responding to the moral aftermath of the war and the tensions of the time. Many novelists were drawn to questions about freedom, responsibility, perception, the purpose of art, and what it means to live a good life (Bradbury, 2000).

Soon after, Murdoch published her first novel, *Under the Net*, in 1954, which marked the beginning of her prolific literary career. Over the following decades, she wrote 26 novels and continuously developed an approach that can be described as philosophical fiction. Her literary works display a wide variety of narrative strategies, and she often finds inventive ways to explore different themes and styles. As Bradbury observes, some are "spirited romantic fantasies or grand love stories; some seemed close to social or moral satire; others came close to a form of literary metaphysics" (Bradbury, 2000). Despite this diversity, Murdoch consistently regarded the novel as both a representation and a critique of human experience.

For this reason, Murdoch's fiction has often been described as occupying an unusual position within post-war British literature. As Bran Nicol argues,

> [h]er novels are difficult to place in any particular category (realism, comedy of manners, prose romance, metaphysical thriller, 'late modernism' (original emphasis)), seeming to constitute one all by themselves […] Murdoch has consistently taken up an unfashionable position: she is a metaphysician in an age suspicious of metaphysics, a novelist who wishes to preserve the function of literary realism in a period marked by the 'crisis of representation' (original emphasis) (1999: 1-2).

Nicol's analysis shows just how wide-ranging Murdoch's novels are, and how she always connects her playful experiments with form and irony back to questions of moral responsibility and really seeing other human beings. For Murdoch, novels are not simply artistic exercises. They offer opportunities to place characters in real-life situations, exploring how their actions, motives, and relationships shape one another. Her realism does not reflect a return to some old-fashioned moral certainty. On the contrary, her narratives describe a world without a single moral rulebook. Within these stories, moral understanding emerges from careful attention to others and their situations. A clear example appears in *The Bell*, where Murdoch demonstrates how ordinary moral problems arise within a small, closed community, where misunderstandings and complicated relationships are hard to avoid.

Additionally, in her fiction and philosophical essays, Murdoch also explores how individuals perceive others, how they deceive themselves, and how much effort moral change requires in everyday life. However, to read her stories simply as fictionalised versions of her philosophical ideas is to overlook how her characters actually live out, misunderstand, or even twist these concepts in practice. Through narrative voice and shifting perspective, and through the pressures of certain situations, the literary works reveal characters misreading one another, justifying their actions, or slowly coming to see what they have done, in ways that philosophical argument alone cannot convey. Indeed, Murdoch herself

understood the novel as a form that presents a moral view of the world, rather than as a purely aesthetic object. In a lecture at the University of Caen in 1978, Iris Murdoch stated that

> [t]he novel itself, of course, the whole world of the novel, is the expression of a world outlook. And one can't avoid doing this. 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 (Murdoch, quoted in Conradi, 1989).

Across her body of work, Murdoch's narrative style evolved further, a shift especially evident in her later works. During the 1970s, she published several major novels, including *The Black Prince*, *A Word Child*, and *The Sea, The Sea*, which brought her wider critical recognition. These works employ "complex techniques of presentation, and mix the confessional aspect of first-person narration with many other devices, like the frame-tale, as well as with an elaborate dramaturgy and stagecraft" (Bradbury, 2000).

In the later stages of her career, Murdoch's fiction turns increasingly to the ways in which personal fantasies and self-deception can limit a character's awareness of their own motives and responsibilities. The publication of *The Sea, The Sea* in 1978 was a major event in Murdoch's career. The work of fiction won the Booker Prize and brought her writing to a much larger audience. In 1987, she was honoured as a Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire for her achievements as a novelist. In her final years, Murdoch developed Alzheimer's disease, and she died in 1999. After her death, especially following the release of the film *Iris* in 2001, commentators often focused on her illness, sometimes overlooking the full range of her creative and intellectual work. As the disease worsened, Murdoch slowly lost her memory and ability to use language, and her imagination, which had been such an important part of her writing, faded too. The

end of her life, characterised by the loss of these abilities, was very different from the richness of her literary and philosophical work.

Looking at Murdoch's life and work, it becomes clear that she was less concerned with setting out moral ideas as abstract rules. Instead, she was more interested in how goodness, freedom, and love appear in ordinary choices, personal conflicts, and everyday relationships. She often returns to the complexities of moral life as individuals actually live it, with all its uncertainties, conflicts, and moments of doubt. Perhaps for this reason, her influence continues to extend across different fields. Throughout Murdoch's philosophical work, certain terms appear repeatedly with meanings that are uniquely hers. For example, when she writes about *moral vision*, she does not just refer to making the right choice or obeying rules. She means learning to see others and situations clearly and fairly. By *attention*, she describes the effort it takes to look past one's own selfish concerns and really notice what is there, especially in other subjects. The notion of *illusion* refers to how subjects, often unconsciously, deceive themselves, usually as a means of protecting their desires or avoiding uncomfortable truths. When Murdoch writes about *unselfing*, she describes a gradual process by which a person becomes less absorbed in themselves and more open to the reality of others. These ideas will provide points of reference for the analyses that follow.

Against this conceptual background, the purpose of this dissertation is therefore to examine Iris Murdoch's concept of morality alongside her fiction. While Murdoch's philosophy and fiction have both received extensive critical attention, they are often discussed either as separate fields of inquiry or in terms of direct illustration, with the novels read primarily as narrative expressions of her moral theory. Such approaches risk overlooking how the formal features of the novels themselves contribute to the ethical questions they raise. This study therefore seeks to address that limitation by considering philosophical ideas and narrative structure together. It highlights how narrative form can emphasise, refine, and occasionally disrupt moral principles. This thesis does not treat

Murdoch's fictional writings as mere examples of her moral theory but argues that her literary works are part of her ethical thinking, providing fictional spaces in which perception and fantasy are worked out in the everyday lives of characters. Moreover, this discussion pays particular attention to narrative perspective, characterisation, and the dynamics within contained social environments.

In particular, the study analyses how distinct modes of narration regulate the conditions of moral knowledge within each fictional world. The omniscient narration of *The Bell* creates distance between character and reader, allowing limitations of perception to become visible, whereas the confessional retrospection of *The Sea, The Sea* and the self-consciously literary construction of *The Black Prince* bind the reader more tightly to a self-interpreting voice whose distortions must be critically negotiated. These differences affect how illusion, self-deception, and ethical awareness emerge in each novel, making the form of narration central to the development of the characters' relation to themselves and to others.

Accordingly, this dissertation considers *The Bell*, *The Sea, The Sea*, and *The Black Prince*, three novels that deal directly with questions of morality, illusion, and narrative form. *The Bell* and *The Sea, The Sea* were chosen because they make it possible to compare Murdoch's writing at different stages of her career. In both works, the action takes place in closed settings where fantasy and moral failure become especially intense. *The Black Prince* was selected because it follows, step by step, the moral dangers that arise from art, imagination, and the narrator's attempt to shape his identity through his own narrative construction. Its metaphysical framework and unreliable narrator make it well-suited for exploring how fantasy and narrative empathy can distort moral judgment. Taken together, these novels make a coherent corpus that supports a close analysis of Murdoch's ethical concerns, while avoiding an attempt to cover her entire body of fiction.

The study is guided by several central questions: How does narrative perspective influence the presentation of moral failure and ethical growth? In what ways do enclosed social settings intensify illusion and self-deception? And how

does art function within these novels — as a source of insight or as a medium through which characters reinforce their own fantasies? This focus necessarily excludes other important works from Murdoch's extensive corpus. Rather than surveying all her novels, the dissertation concentrates on a small group of texts in order to pursue sustained analysis of their narrative structure and ethical implications. The approach moves between Murdoch's philosophical writings and her fiction, engaging the essays where they illuminate central ideas without treating them as overarching interpretative models. The discussion develops through close attention to the internal development of each novel and the interaction between philosophical reflection and literary form.

The structure of the thesis reflects this approach. The first chapter develops Murdoch's view of morality by drawing on her philosophical writings, *The Sovereignty of Good*, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, and *Why Plato Banished the Artists*. In doing so, it revisits Murdoch's critique of modern moral philosophy and elaborates her alternative account of moral vision, the notion of attention, and the practice of unselfing. More specifically, the chapter examines how Murdoch is influenced by a range of philosophical perspectives, particularly those of Plato and Simone Weil. It also introduces Murdoch's understanding of imagination and empathy, including the risks associated with *Einfühlung*, and demonstrates how these can either support attention to reality or reinforce fantasy. Likewise, it argues that, for Murdoch, morality depends on careful attention to the world as it is, rather than on personal intentions, emotional projection, or consolatory illusion.

Building on the philosophical framework outlined in the first chapter, the second chapter analyses Murdoch's novels as *moral laboratories*, spaces in which ethical concepts are explored through narrative form, emotional experience, and social constraint. Through a comparative reading of *The Bell* and *The Sea, The Sea*, this chapter, moreover, investigates how moral difficulties arise for characters living within enclosed social worlds, where relationships are intensified, and illusion is hard to escape. While both works present morality through their

characters' actions and perceptions, they differ in how openly and relentlessly they expose emotional conflict. Furthermore, this chapter explores the role of *Einfühlung* and the development of Murdoch's moral imagination in fiction. In addition, it draws attention to the fact that happiness arises indirectly through moral attention and cannot be pursued directly. A comparison of the two novels also illustrates that, in her later work, Murdoch deals with moral problems more directly, uses fewer symbols, and pays closer attention to her characters' feelings and reactions in difficult situations.

The third aim of this thesis, taken up in the third chapter, discusses how art, imagination, and narrative self-construction can mislead, with particular attention to *The Black Prince*. This chapter investigates how Murdoch's view of art is far from straightforward: she shows that art can offer real moral insight but can also mislead and foster self-deception. Owing to the text's metaphysical framework and its unreliable first-person narrator, Murdoch demonstrates how artistic genius, romantic idealisation, and narrative control can blur the narrator's and the reader's moral judgment rather than sharpen it.

In sum, this study follows the development of Murdoch's ideas about morality across her philosophical and literary works. It begins with her philosophical writings, in which she sets out her view of the moral life, and then explores how her novels present these concepts through concrete characters and situations. The final chapter turns to art and asks whether it helps human beings see more clearly or encourages illusion. In doing so, the thesis advances a reading of Murdoch in which philosophical reflection and narrative technique are inseparable, and in which her moral philosophy is not simply expressed through fiction but enacted and interrogated within it. It thus offers a nuanced picture of her place in both moral philosophy and ethical fiction.

Chapter I
The Art of Seeing: Attention and Aesthetic Experience

For a long time, people regarded science as providing absolute certainty, a view that was increasingly challenged. In this context, Iris Murdoch develops her theory of morality in opposition to what she considers to be a crisis in modern moral philosophy, especially its focus on the will, personal choice, and universal values. Rather than establishing morality in personal feelings or theoretical doctrines, Murdoch reorients moral philosophy toward the human faculty of perceiving and conceiving the world, and toward the clarity and care of one's conception of what is real. One of the most important questions raised during this period is whether absolute certainty about anything is possible at all, and how a person can know that they know something. Before René Descartes, knowledge was only one among many philosophical problems, and his introduction of the self as a thinking matter in the seventeenth century - which is no longer understood as a thinking soul anymore - marked the beginning of modern Western philosophy. At this point, an inversion occurred as knowledge became the defining feature upon which modern philosophy operated (Manufacturing Intellect, 2017: 0:46). Prior to this transformation, people knew what they knew because God and the Church had said so – *ipse dixit* - and after the collapse of this central knowledge, uncertainty reigned (Manufacturing Intellect, 2017: 1:12). As a consequence, subjects were looking for a substitutional source of authority, a way to explain the world. This is why science, which emerged and developed during the Renaissance and Reformation (Manufacturing Intellect, 2017: 1:35), was considered to be such a source for many years. Modern philosophy was intensely concerned with a theory of epistemology as a measure to distinguish between true knowledge and false

belief. Since the world itself is not stable, as the outlook changes continually, there arises the need to establish at least the tools that enable individuals to understand reality and to render these tools a stable foundation (Manufacturing Intellect, 10:28).

What followed was a shift in focus from God to the human being, including human activities, politics, social and cultural life, and psychology (Manufacturing Intellect, 22:36). Not only was scientific research increasingly focusing on these issues, but philosophy was also engaging with this area of study. However, until the eighteenth century, science and philosophy were not strictly separated disciplines (Manufacturing Intellect, 23:14). What began with Descartes and continued with Hume and Kant was a philosophical debate about the relation between objective facts of nature and subjective values, that is, a distinction between "is" and "ought". For Hume, morality does not come from reason but is limited to facts about human sentiment. Thus, morality becomes an issue of psychological facts, namely moral judgment, or what is described as "ought", becomes a matter of approval or disapproval, which is shaped by human nature (Osmola & Zaluski, 2017: 3). Hume grounds morality in human sentiment, whereas Kant argues that it is based on reason and derives from principles that are true *a priori* (Osmola & Zaluski, 2017: 4). Murdoch enters this philosophical debate by challenging both sides: On the one hand, she disagrees with Hume because he reduces morality to emotions only and on the other hand, she criticises Kant's abstract formalism for being too rule-based. In response, she proposes a moral philosophy that bridges facts and values through the quality of moral perception. She emphasises in *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* that imagination is fundamental to her moral theory:

> Imagination is an (inner) activity of the senses, a picturing and a grasping, a stirring of desire […] in everyday moral discussion as well as in metaphysics, we deploy a complex densely textured network of values round an intuited centre of 'good'. We imagine hierarchies and concentric circles, we are forced by experience to make distinctions, to elaborate moral 'pictures' and a *moral vocabulary* (original emphasis)

> […] Moral acts do not usually, and cannot essentially, rest on isolated pure arbitrarily 'willed' decisions (Murdoch 1992: 325).

Therefore, imagination creates a movement between fact and value, determining the individual's perception and interpretation of the world. Recasting imagination as what mediates between fact and value is not only a theoretical move, but it also influences how Murdoch understands literature. For her, the novel offers a setting where moral perception is tested and formed. Since narrative form guides what is shown and what is left out, it can lead characters and readers to misread others or to see others more clearly. In her writing, moral philosophy and theories of the novel cannot be separated, because fiction offers an imaginative setting in which an ethical view can be tried and assessed.

From the beginning of her academic career, which started in 1948 with a tutoring position in philosophy at St Anne's College in Oxford, Iris Murdoch was recognised as an influential thinker in debates about morality (Conradi, 2001: 371). Indeed, the central questions she deals with in her moral philosophy are: "How are we to become virtuous?" (Murdoch, 1992: 24) "What is a good man like? How can we make ourselves morally better? *Can* (original emphasis) we make ourselves morally better?" and points out that "these are questions the philosopher should try to answer" (Murdoch, 1970: 51). In this respect, her philosophy goes back to ancient Greek moral traditions, particularly the Platonic emphasis on moral vision and the Aristotelian concern with the formation of virtuous character (Antonaccio, 2022). This is exactly what she explores in one of her most influential philosophical works, *The Sovereignty of Good*, where she examines what it means to be good through her concepts of attention to the world and beauty as a gateway to moral transcendence. What is important is that, while many philosophers after World War II assume that morally correct action depends on strong will and the decision to do the right thing (Nussbaum, 2003, unpaginated), Murdoch strives to focus attention on the inner development of individuals, through which they overcome their self-fixation and can thus perceive the reality and uniqueness of other moral agents more clearly, fairly and lovingly.

In order to understand her notion of morality, it is crucial to introduce her examination of Jean-Paul Sartre and Ludwig Wittgenstein, whose concepts she identifies as offering a picture of human existence that is either too self-oriented or too norm-bound. A. S. Byatt explains that Murdoch distinguishes between two different concepts in her philosophy that hinder the ego from comprehending reality, namely convention and neurosis. In one regard, Murdoch relates the concept of convention to ordinary language philosophy – strongly influenced by Wittgenstein - which bases itself on the existing moral structure, such as social norms, and thereby oversimplifies ethical life (Byatt, 1976: 23). This can also be seen in Murdoch's own statement:

> Knowledge of a value concept is something to be understood, as it were, in depth, and not in terms of switching on to some given impersonal network. Moreover, if morality is essentially connected with change and progress, we cannot be as democratic about it as some philosophers would like to think. We do not simply, through being rational and knowing ordinary language, 'know' the meaning of all necessary moral words (1970: 28).

In another regard, she speaks of neurosis when referring to the totalitarian man, specifically that "[he] sees the world, and his life, as a dramatic myth, who requires his life to have an absolute form and purpose" (Byatt, 1976: 23). Murdoch explains,

> [e]xistentialism, in both its Continental and its Anglo-Saxon versions, is an attempt to solve the problem without really facing it: to solve it by attributing to the individual an empty lonely freedom, a freedom, if he wishes, to 'fly in the face of the facts' (original emphasis). What it pictures is indeed the fearful solitude of the individual marooned upon a tiny island in the middle of a sea of scientific facts, and morality escaping from science only by a wild leap of the will. But our situation is not like this (1970: 26).

Murdoch considers the existentialist concept, which has no place for the idea of transcendental goodness, to be excessively isolated from the world and criticises

Sartre's perception of others because existentialism inherently denigrates the existence of others, focusing on the individual's freedom and consequently lacking an understanding of sympathy. She also illustrates these theories, which she uses as tools to examine her characters and their motivations, in her fiction, and an example of this dichotomy can be found in the fictional figure of Michael Meade in *The Bell*,

> who—with his sense of destiny in his call to the priesthood, his sense of patterns and portents in his life, his imaginative vision of moral situations when he falls in love with Nick as a boy, or impulsively kisses Toby—is tempted towards a neurotic vision (although he ironically fails Nick by a contrary recoil into self-protective convention) (Byatt, 1976: 23).

Furthermore, based on aesthetic and ethical considerations, Murdoch believes that the 19th-century novel is superior to that of the 20th century (Byatt, 1976: 12). Byatt argues that in *Against Dryness*, Murdoch opposes the modern novel, which she describes as either "crystalline" or "journalistic": On the one hand, the totalitarian man has no interest in individual human beings and is more interested in the general human condition, and therefore writes crystalline, symbolic novels that appear as closed forms and do not contain realistic characters modelled on the 19th century (1976: 12). On the other hand, ordinary language philosophy produces journalistic texts that appear as „large shapeless quasi-documentary object[s]" because they have their focus on social behaviour and avoid metaphysical dimensions (Byatt, 1976: 12). Rejecting the existentialist's idea of radical freedom and pushing back against the language focused approach on ethics, Murdoch argues for a more substantial self: Human beings have a rich inner life that is constantly shaped by their attitudes, perceptions, desires, attachments, beliefs, experiences and most importantly the focus of their attention. As she sees it, whenever an individual faces a moral choice, he brings his whole self to that choice, that is, his internal baggage, his past experiences and the ways of seeing the world. Hence, she advocates for a more realistic and nuanced way of seeing the individual and the world and tries to introduce a kind of moral

psychology, a way of understanding the self that would play a central role in ethical considerations. According to Murdoch, the individual must work on genuine objectivity and unselfishness, as they do not come naturally. Consequently, in order to become a good person, one has to fight his own nature because "human[s] are naturally selfish" (Murdoch, 1970: 76; in this respect, her view recalls Hobbes's account in *Leviathan*, where human beings, driven by fear and the basic need for self-preservation, are naturally inclined towards self-interest rather than sociability, undermining the possibility of a peaceful coexistence).

At this point, it is important to introduce her concept of moral reality, which involves three interconnected aspects: other subjects, the Platonic Good, and metaphysics. As a first step, Murdoch stresses how difficult it is to see others accurately and to understand their individuality, because human beings are trapped in their own selfishness and self-centred fantasies. In Murdoch's view, "[t]he problem is to accommodate inside moral philosophy, and suggest methods of dealing with the fact that so much of human conduct is moved by mechanical energy of an egocentric kind. In the moral life the enemy is the fat relentless ego" (1970: 51). Accordingly, Murdoch borrows her concept of unselfing from Weil, asserting that an individual can set aside the ego in order to attend to the reality of other agents (1970: 101). This understanding of other subjects comes in degrees because the individual is always striving toward a more complete understanding of other fellow beings. On this basis, Murdoch extends the idea of clear-sightedness to objects of attention, such as art and nature, and argues that they can serve as sources of moral inspiration when perceived without the distorting influence of the ego.

In a further step, Murdoch sets aside simple or functional explanations and instead proposes a concept of goodness inspired by Plato. Like Plato's idea of the Good, Murdoch understands goodness as an objective and transcendent standard, which is not produced by the individual will, but toward which moral understanding is oriented. In Murdoch's account, goodness is not only an abstract ideal that helps people to orient themselves morally in the world, but is also

intrinsically linked to the individual's perception of fellow human beings: Murdoch believes that subjects who perceive others through this ideal of goodness, that is, seeing them justly and attentively, learn to love them more completely, and that engaging with certain individuals can likewise cultivate a better apprehension of this ideal (1970: 36). Furthermore, she acknowledges the imprint of Christian belief of God on her interpretation of goodness and considers it a source of moral energy which transcends the inherent psychological limitations of the individual, namely egoism, illusion, limited attention, emotional bias, or moral isolation (Murdoch, 1970: 54-55).

As a third step, she illustrates metaphysics as the human attempt to develop a more comprehensive view of reality, the universe, and humankind's place in it. For Murdoch, metaphysics thus represents a valid and morally important endeavour, since the individual's comprehension of reality is never morally neutral and has to be shaped by moral sensibility (1970: 19-21). Moreover, metaphors are significant in her metaphysics, as they are not merely decorative features of language but essential to the individual's understanding of reality (Murdoch, 1970: 21-22). She often frames the Good through images of ascent and struggle. These metaphors point to an inner moral effort, or a sense of reaching upward, and they suggest that moral perception is demanding and achieved through difficulty. Metaphysics itself evokes the image of establishing a sophisticated system to comprehend humanity's place in the universe, since it concerns the part of philosophy that seeks to understand existence and knowledge. Metaphors, within this framework, influence people's interpretations of Murdoch's ideas about moral reality and how they should act as moral agents within it.

Her philosophy does not give as much significance to the human being's actions as Immanuel Kant's moral theory, which locates moral value in acting from a good will and for the right reasons, in accordance with universal principles. Instead, Murdoch emphasises how subjects apprehend what it implies to be a moral agent. Murdoch's focus shifts on the individual's inner activity, in particular

perception, thought and fantasy, which she illustrates through the example of M and D in *The Sovereignty of Good*: The mother-in-law progressively alters her perception of her daughter-in-law without any real change in her behaviour but in her attitude and in the way she perceives her, which is a moral event in itself. Murdoch writes,

> [a] mother, whom I shall call M, feels hostility to her daughter-in-law, whom I shall call D. M finds D quite a good-hearted girl, but while not exactly common yet certainly unpolished and lacking in dignity and refinement. D is inclined to be pert and familiar, insufficiently ceremonious, brusque, sometimes positively rude, always tiresomely juvenile. M does not like D's accent or the way D dresses. M feels that her son has married beneath him (1970: 16-17).

After progressively changing her perception, M's way of seeing her starts to alter:

> M […] is an intelligent and well-intentioned person, capable of self-criticism, capable of giving careful and just attention to an object which confronts her. M tells herself: 'I am old fashioned and conventional. I may be prejudiced and narrow-minded. I may be snobbish. I am certainly jealous. Let me look again.' Here I assume that M observes D or at least reflects deliberately about D, until gradually her vision of D alters. […] D is discovered to be not vulgar but refreshingly simple, not undignified but spontaneous, not noisy but gay, not tiresomely juvenile but delightfully youthful, and so on (Murdoch, 1970: 17).

Hopwood claims that, at first, the mother-in-law is driven by jealousy and therefore draws a distorted picture of D, viewing her as a noisy, vulgar girl (2018: 495). This unreal vision is shaped by M's selfish emotions, which prioritise safeguarding her son rather than an attentive focus on D's individuality. On closer reading, M uses simply a friendlier word choice in her second portrayal of her daughter-in-law because her attitude changes, as she starts to view her more "justly and lovingly" (Murdoch, 1970: 22), which might be due to the fact that she begins to listen to her attentively or simply because she begins to make an effort to notice the qualities of D that her son appreciates (Hopwood, 2018: 495). Hence, M

perceives D more accurately, in the sense that she comes "closer to the way that an ideally virtuous agent would see her" (Hopwood, 2018: 494). Contrarily, Hopwood asserts that M's new perception of D could also "turn out to be a fantasy in its own right [which] could be motivated primarily by unwillingness to see her perfect son as having made any kind of mistake" (2018: 496).

To answer this question, one would need to know M well as an individual. From Murdoch's perspective, even if this change is not visible to others, it must be considered an important inner process. Accordingly, perception, thought and fantasy play a significant role in Murdoch's moral agency, leading to her idea of "the fabric of [moral] being" (1970: 21), which underlies the subject's choices and reveals his true moral character. As a result, an individual is always in the process of becoming in moral terms. This suggests an ongoing formation of moral character that often occurs beneath the surface. The idea is close to the German concept of *Bildung*, which refers to the slow moral development of a person's character over time. What is more, Murdoch does not reject the role of action, but she places it within a broader context of perception and understanding: simply doing the right thing is not sufficient; a moral agent must also learn to see what is right. The author places particular emphasis on the concept of attention, an idea she adopts from Simone Weil and characterises it as a "just and loving gaze", freed from personal prejudice and romantic idealisation and "directed upon an individual reality", as shown in the example of M and D (Murdoch, 1970: 33). Byatt explains that, in Weil's view, attentiveness constitutes "the constantly renewed attempt to see things, objects, people, moral situations, truly as they are, uncoloured by our own personal fantasies or needs for consolation" (1976: 9). From this perspective, attention is a necessary condition for ethical behaviour. Although Murdoch does not explicitly theorise empathy, her account of moral attention depends on an imaginative attentiveness to the reality of others, which becomes especially significant in aesthetic experience and narrative understanding.

Murdoch's reading of Simone Weil contributes to her development of a more Platonic view of morality and the connection between it and mysticism. Consequently, Murdoch adapts Weil's concept in her own way, moving away from the thoroughly religious aspect of it, that is, to make oneself receptive to truth and God, and grounds attention instead in a more practical application in the realm of everyday morality (1970: 101). Central to Murdoch's attention is the recognition of the other person's humanity, individuality, and needs, which necessitates a perpetual effort to defeat one's own illusions and biases. This raises the question: What exactly hinders the human being from cultivating this kind of loving attention? Murdoch explains, "I can only choose within the world I can *see* (original emphasis), in the moral sense of 'see' which implies that clear vision is a result of moral imagination and moral effort" (1970: 35-36). In other words, a subject cannot attend to another subject's reality if he is not even aware of it, thus failing to understand that attention is required in the first place.

However, even if recognising the necessity, an individual's self-centredness and fantasies may obstruct him from engaging with the reality of the other individual. For instance, consider a person who repeatedly betrays his partner by secretly cheating on him. When confronted, the partner explains exactly why this behaviour is hurtful, helping the other subject understand their wrongdoing. If he acknowledges that a relationship is built upon trust and loyalty and admits that he is wrong, then the problem does not lie in his failure to see what he is doing or why it is morally wrong. Nevertheless, his recognition remains abstract, as his attention is fixed upon himself and not on his partner's reality. As Hopwood writes, "[i]t seems to be a 'fact of life' […] that sometimes people really do see the morally relevant facts before them quite clearly and still fail to act in accordance with them" (2018: 479). Murdoch highlights,

> [b]y opening our eyes we do not necessarily see what confronts us. We are anxiety-ridden animals. Our minds are continually active, fabricating an anxious, usually self-preoccupied, often falsifying *veil* (original emphasis) which partially conceals the world. Our states of consciousness differ in quality, our fantasies and reveries are not trivial

> and unimportant, they are profoundly connected with our energies and our ability to choose and act (1970: 82).

Finally, even if one makes a sincere effort to be attentive, one's own prejudices and habitual perceptions can still blur one's view of others. Murdoch depicts this whole process as a moral exercise and stresses that by being constantly attentive, even if one may not be successful, one progressively restructures the fabric of one's own being. Therefore, understanding comes in degrees, a point that recalls the gradual move from illusion to clear vision described in Plato's *Republic*.

This leads to the question of whether an individual can be helped to develop what Murdoch calls disciplined attention. Indeed, Murdoch suggests "techniques for the purification and reorientation of an energy which is naturally selfish" (1970: 53). One way is contemplation, which focuses on goodness, just as Weil's prayer focuses "attention [on] God which is a form of love" (Murdoch, 1970: 53-54). She maintains that

> God was (or is) a *single perfect transcendent non-representable and necessarily real object of attention* (original emphasis); and I shall go on to suggest that moral philosophy should attempt to retain a central concept which has all these characteristics […] God, attended to, is a powerful source of (often good) energy is a psychological fact. It is also a psychological fact, and one of importance in moral philosophy, that we can all receive moral help by focusing our attention upon things which are valuable: virtuous people, great art, perhaps […] the idea of goodness itself (Murdoch, 1970: 54-55).

Hence, Murdoch presents attention in secular terms. If God is understood as the highest being who helps individuals to move beyond the self through prayer, then Murdoch suggests that attention can also be trained through art and nature. In her view, taking pleasure in beauty can clear the mind of self-centred concerns and help subjects see things more realistically and with greater accuracy. Murdoch points out that,

> what is perhaps the most obvious thing in our surroundings which is an occasion for 'unselfing' […] is popularly called beauty […] [which] is the convenient and traditional name of something which art and nature share, and which gives a fairly clear sense to the idea of quality of experience arid change of consciousness (Murdoch, 1970: 82).

As she puts it, aesthetic experience, either in nature or in art, has the power to "unself" the subject, that is to purify him of his "selfish energy". She illustrates this process with an example:

> I am looking out of my window in an anxious and resentful state of mind, oblivious of my surroundings, brooding perhaps on some damage done to my prestige. Then suddenly I observe a hovering kestrel. In a moment everything is altered. The brooding self with its hurt vanity has disappeared. There is nothing now but kestrel. And when I return to thinking of the other matter it seems less important. And of course this is something which we may also do deliberately: give attention to nature in order to clear our minds of selfish care (1970: 82).

Thus, she perceives beauty as "the visible and accessible aspect of the Good" which "itself is not visible", arguing that it is "a centre of focus or attention" (Murdoch, 1970: 68) as it is capable of directing the individual's attention toward something that cannot be shaped by personal desire. In fact, the joy derived from aesthetic experience reveals the value of the subject's ability to forget himself, to judge fairly, and to be realistic (Murdoch, 1970: 88).

Likewise, Murdoch explicitly aligns this view with Plato's concept of the Good "as the source of light which reveals to us all things as they are" (1970: 69) because he considers "beauty [as] the only spiritual thing which we love immediately by nature [and] treats the beautiful as an introductory section of the good" (1970: 40). This position may appear controversial, given Plato's well-known suspicion of art. However, his critique is not directed at art simply as such, but at mimetic representation, which he considers to be a copy of a copy and therefore particularly distant from truth. According to Murdoch, art and

philosophy are connected in Plato's writings, and Plato's negative view of art goes beyond art itself. It is not just artists who fall prey to selfish fantasies and a lack of moral sensibility. Rather, there is a line between fantasy and reality that implies a profound distrust of human nature since humans are inclined to seek comforting delusions rather than painful truths. In this sense, Murdoch implies that all individuals, like the prisoners in the cave described in the *Republic*, are in search of the light. Firstly, she develops her notion and proposes that "the appreciation of beauty in art or nature […] is a completely adequate entry into (and not just analogy of) the good life, since it is the checking of selfishness in the interest of seeing the real" (Murdoch, 1970: 63). Moreover, Plato who "speaks more than once of the artist's inspiration as a kind of divine or holy madness from which we may receive great blessings [and] constantly and emphatically accuses artists of moral weakness or even baseness" (Murdoch, 1977: 2), consequently confines art at the lowest level of knowledge, also known as *eikasia* or *phantasia*, since "[it] is always bad for us in so far as it is mimetic or imitative […] lead[ing] even good people to indulge secretly through art feelings which they would be ashamed to entertain in real life" (Murdoch, 1977: 5-6).

Therefore, as a second step, Murdoch elaborates his view and proposes a distinction between good and bad art, between "liberated truth-seeking creative imagination" and "egoistic fantasy" (1992: 321):

> [G]ood art […] affords us a pure delight in the independent existence of what is excellent. Both in its genesis and its enjoyment it is a thing totally opposed to selfish obsession. It invigorates our best faculties and, to use Platonic language, inspires love in the highest part of the soul [… it] reveals what we are usually too selfish and too timid to recognize, the minute and absolutely random detail of the world, and reveals it together with a sense of unity and form. This form often seems to us mysterious because it resists the easy patterns of the fantasy, whereas there is nothing mysterious about the forms of bad art since they are the recognizable and familiar rat-runs of selfish day-dream. Good art shows us how difficult it is to be objective by showing

> us how differently the world looks to an objective vision (Murdoch, 1970: 83-84).

Thus, the philosopher draws a clear distinction between imagination and fantasy. In Murdoch's view, imagination sustains careful attention to reality, while fantasy reshapes the world according to the subject's egoistic desire. The conditions under which Murdoch believes art can be truthful have been widely discussed by critics. Bran Nicol argues,

> [t]he artist has a duty to portray the world as it is; his or her vision must not be distorted by the need for self-consolation. The creation of 'free' characters, desirable in order to restore faith in human difference, is achievable only through the *love* (original emphasis) of an author for all aspects of the surrounding world. Characters must be more than just extensions of their creator's structure of thought, they must be portrayed as independent individuals (1999: 7).

Indeed, Murdoch acknowledges good art as an attractive and accessible mediator of goodness and truth, offering the individual a transformative experience of transcendence, since, building on Platonic philosophy, she seems to regard the human soul as intrinsically unstable and thus requiring healing (1977: 37).

What is more, this representation is directly linked to Plato's concept of Eros, which is understood as a dynamic force that leads the soul to goodness. Murdoch writes,

> Plato's Eros is a principle which connects the commonest human desire to the highest morality and to the pattern of divine creativity in the universe […] it is the desire for good and joy which is active at all levels in the soul and through which we are able to turn toward reality (1977: 33-34).

Interestingly, she reshapes Plato's Eros and uses it in her account of love, which Hopwood points out is central to her notion of morality (2018: 478). In fact, Murdoch argues that "[w]e need a moral philosophy in which the concept of love, so rarely mentioned now by philosophers, can once again be made central" (1970:

45). To support her argument, David Velleman claims that "[l]ove is a moral emotion precisely in the sense that its spirit is closely akin to that of morality" (1999: 341). In his reading of Murdoch, he interprets love not as a desire to sacrifice everything for another individual but rather as moral attention, that is, seeing the person as they truly are. His argument is closely interconnected with Murdoch's statement:

> 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? Should an unhappy marriage be continued for the sake of the children? […] The love which brings the right answer is an exercise of justice and realism and really *looking* (original emphasis) (1970: 89).

However, Velleman connects love to a disciplined vision but misinterprets "really looking" as looking at what Kant calls the rational will (1999: 343-344). As a consequence, for him, "really looking" means to notice a human being's rational side, the part that makes him a moral agent. This is the same feature an individual pays attention to when he respects someone: respect becomes the basic response to this rationality, and love can be seen as a more profound version of the same value (Hopwood, 2018: 482). Velleman explains, "[r]espect checks our empirical motives – in particular, the motives in whose service we might be tempted to put the person to use" whereas "[l]ove disarms our emotional defenses; it makes us vulnerable to the other" (1999: 360-361). While this account helps clarify how love can function as a form of moral vision, it remains limited from a Murdochian perspective, as it restricts attention to the individual's rational nature rather than extending it to the whole individuality of the other subject (Velleman, 1999: 361).

More fundamentally, Murdoch's theory cannot be understood solely in rationalist terms, as she considers herself to be a Platonist. She explains her concept of love, identifying it with Plato's Eros in the later chapters of *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, where she writes,

> I have taken here the image (concept) of Eros from Plato. 'Eros' is the continuous operation of spiritual *energy* (original emphasis), desire, intellect, love, as it moves among and responds to particular objects of attention, the force of magnetism and attraction which joins us to the world, making it a better or worse world: good and bad desires with good and bad objects. It gives sense to the idea of loving good, something absolute and unique, a magnetic focus, made evident in our experience through innumerable movements of cognition. Good represents the reality of which God is the dream. It purifies the desire which seeks it. This is not just a picturesque metaphysical notion. People speak of loving all sorts of things, their work, a book, a potted plant, a formation of clouds. Desire for what is corrupt and worthless, the degradation of love, its metamorphosis into ambition, vanity, cruelty, greed, jealousy, hatred, or the parched demoralising deserts of its absence, are phenomena often experienced and readily recognized. If we summon up a great energy, it may prove to be a great demon. People know about the difference between good and evil, it takes quite a lot of theorizing to persuade them to say or imagine that they do not. The activity of Eros is orientation of desire. Reflecting in these ways we see 'salvation' or 'good' as connected with, or incarnate in, all sorts of particulars, and not just as an 'abstract idea'. 'Saving the phenomena' is happening all the time. We do not lose the particular, it teaches us love, we understand it, we *see* (original emphasis) it, as Plato's carpenter sees the table, or Cézanne sees Mont Ste Victoire or the girl in the bed-sitter sees her potted plant or her cat (Murdoch, 1992: 496-497).

This, in turn, raises the question of whether Murdoch's notion of Eros is oriented toward the love of particular individuals or toward a higher love of the Good. According to Hopwood, the answer is both (2018: 486) because these dimensions of love are intrinsically linked. Indeed, Murdoch claims that "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" (1970: 100). On this account, love for a particular individual is never autonomous, but always mediated by goodness,

which purifies desire, while attentive focus on the individual simultaneously leads him to a clearer apprehension of the good. This reciprocal movement between love of a specific individual and an orientation toward goodness is revealed in Murdoch's account of romantic love: Eros functions as a kind of moral energy that can rupture the self and redirect attention beyond the selfish ego.

Contemporaneously, Murdoch suggests that desire has a double role, as it is capable of moral transformation and can easily degenerate into unpurified illusion. Plato links the experience of sexual love to moral education through his account of Eros, whereas Murdoch treats love as the highest form of moral awareness. As Hopwood observes, love in Murdoch's philosophy highlights that the self is not the centre of the universe (2018: 478). Consequently, love, when understood fully, draws the subject away from fantasy and toward a reality that resists domination. Firstly, in Murdoch's terminology, the concept of attention is associated with the concept of goodness, and like Simone Weil, she attributes a central role in morality to the experience of love. Eros as a liberating force is described as "sublimated love, love of the highest kind, educated and transformed, ennobled and dispassionate desire [...] Falling in love causes a rupture within the self" (Conradi, 1989: 203). This rupture within the self leads to a destabilisation of the ego, and the individual's focus of attention is directed outward. Secondly, the author interprets the challenge of moral life as a matter of energy transformation (Murdoch, 1992: 24). Energy flows, has a source and a destination, and for Murdoch goodness is the ultimate source of moral energy, an absolutely binding concept, as she writes, "[g]ood is above the level of gods or God" (1992: 475). Nevertheless, Murdoch accepts the idea of God as the name of a source of energy that benefits humans and teaches them love, while she insists that goodness itself is not a personal agent.

In Murdoch's account, love starts from the lover. The lover, seen as an imperfect human being, directs attention toward the object of love. The object is desired because it appears to embody a perfection that the lover has not yet reached. This longing of the imperfect for perfection is always a longing for

completeness or unity, in line with Neoplatonic conceptions of the Good as a source of attraction for all that is lacking. Murdoch seems to suggest that this longing is a sort of inner work of human beings themselves because, although humans may naturally be capable of love, developing it is their own decision and achievement; thus, falling in love always brings "a loss of self" (Conradi, 1989: 202), which challenges the self to surpass its own self-enclosure. Within Murdoch's framework, the good comes from within the human subject rather than from a divine source, because the good itself has no agency. Therefore, it must be a human accomplishment, as the idea of goodness itself is unable to love. Unlike Weil's example of a loving God, the good is a "concrete universal" (Murdoch, 1970: 29): neither a person nor a consciousness, but something not of this world, but rather attached to it. In this sense, Murdoch understands morality as *sui generis*, as though it has a source beyond ordinary human life, yet it still shows up within how agents experience and judge moral matters. She adopts Plato's idea of the Good, which she reinterprets as a concrete universal and as an unconditional moral claim that guides every rationally thinking human being. What lies behind the concept of the good is an ideal toward which the individual strives because he is capable of perceiving this claim.

This is how Murdoch imagines purified romantic Eros to operate: Love springs from intense longing, but in order to build a lasting relationship, it is necessary for this longing to evolve into a form of respect and attentive appreciation, hence, the object of love, in Kantian language, must be treated as an end and not as a means in himself (Hopwood, 2018: 490). However, when falling in love, the individual is suddenly confronted with a completely different reality, while he is constantly tempted to turn the other subject into a mere projection of his own fantasy (Murdoch, 1977: 36). The philosopher exemplifies what she calls the "de-realiz[ation of] the other" (Murdoch, 1977: 36) particularly in *The Sea, The Sea*, where the protagonist Charles Arrowby builds a sophisticated fantasy around Hartley, a lost adolescent love who is already old and had been married for several years. In order to rescue her from a life that he imagines to be unhappy because she lived it without him, he kidnaps and confines her in his house. As

Hopwood explains, "[f]aced with an object that cannot be fully possessed or assimilated, the ego creates for itself an object that can be possessed —a dream image or fantasy that gradually comes to substitute for the real person" (2018: 491).

What is noteworthy from Murdoch's perspective is that the same impulse can lead either to illusion or to genuine concern for others: On Hopwood's reading, when Charles initially encounters Hartley again after several years, his ego no longer occupies a central position, since he longs to act in her best interests (2018: 491):

> I woke up next morning to an instant sense of a changed world. The *awful* (original emphasis) feeling was less, and there was a new extremely anxious excitement and a sheer plucking physical longing to be in her presence, the fierce indubitable magnetism of love. There was also a weird hovering joy, as if I had been changed into the night into a beneficent being powerful for good. I could produce, I could bestow, good. I was the king seeking the beggar maid. I had power to transform, to raise up, to heal, to bring undreamt-of happiness and joy (Murdoch, 2019: 128-129).

Hopwood explains that, even if Charles is already starting to create a dream world around Hartley in this passage, the lines also contain traces of a possible form Charles's love might have taken, had he been able to realise or to be interested in her concrete reality (2018: 492). As a consequence, the main character does not understand till the end that what Hartley and her husband, Ben, might have felt for each other is sexual attraction. It is a shock for him to realise that this couple could have existed independently, having feelings and dreams that Charles is unaware of. Charles leaves "no room for the thought that Hartley might actually be happier with someone else" (Hopwood, 2018: 492), thus failing to purify his spiritual energy or Eros.

If imagination is treated as central to moral attention, the next question is how imaginative engagement operates in aesthetic experience and in encounters

with fictional worlds. For Murdoch, moral failure is not mainly about weak will or poor choices. It is a failure of perception: a distorted way of seeing others, shaped by fantasy, self-focus, and the projection of one's own concerns onto them. Without some form of imaginative responsiveness to others, Murdoch's portrayal of morality would therefore remain incomplete. Empathy, insofar as it contributes to apprehending other people as individual, real, and morally significant subjects, can be understood as an implicit condition of moral attention. According to Theodor Lipps (1909: 222, cited in Ercolino, 2018: 244), "there are three fundamental sources of knowledge: perception, introspection, and empathy". While Murdoch explicitly foregrounds perception and introspection as being essential to her moral theory, she does not connect her concept explicitly to empathy. Nonetheless, empathy may be understood as the imaginative capacity that underlies the disciplined attention that Murdoch describes, enabling the subject to move beyond solipsistic vision. In this sense, Lipps's portrayal helps to clarify an aspect of Murdoch's philosophy that is present in her work but not treated as a main topic.

Empathy is a concept employed across a wide range of contexts, making it difficult to obtain a comprehensive definition of its meaning and function. In line with Heidi L. Maibom, empathy can be defined as the capacity to understand another person's thoughts and emotions through a combination of cognitive perspective-taking and emotional responsiveness, thereby situating it between cognition and emotion (Maibom, 2020). It involves an effort to comprehend and to *imagine* (my emphasis) how the other subject feels in light of the experiences, emotional states, character traits, and perspectives that shape their outlook (Goldi, 2014, cited in Maibom, 2020: 40). The role of *imagination* (my emphasis) is therefore central, as it is impossible to apprehend another individual's situation without imaginatively engaging with it. In Murdochian terms, empathy is therefore not valuable as an emotion in itself, but insofar as it contributes to a more just and reality-directed perception of others.

The moral relevance of empathy is already articulated in the Scottish sentimentalist tradition. Thinkers such as David Hume and Adam Smith understand empathy, which they call sympathy, as foundational to concern for the suffering and well-being of others (Maibom, 2020: 76). While both acknowledge its ethical significance, they differ in their accounts of how imagination operates within empathic response. For Hume, on the one hand, empathy is not a direct sharing of emotion, but a process mediated through association: Observing another individual's situation or emotional expression produces an idea of their feeling, which may develop into a similar response based on one's own past experiences (Maibom, 2020: 77-78). Therefore, "moral judgment consists in approbation or disapprobation, both of which are passions" (Maibom, 2020: 82), as "reason is and ought to be the slave of passions" (Hume, cited in Maibom, 2020: 83).

Smith, on the other hand, regards imaginative projection as indispensable to empathy (Maibom, 2020: 56). By exercising imagination, the subject adopts the other's perspective and imagines what he would feel in that situation In Smith's view, empathy depends on whether an individual shares another agent's felt emotion. This helps to explain why empathy matters for moral judgment, since sharing an emotion may lead the observer to see the action that caused it as good (Maibom, 2020: 79). Nevertheless, Smith insists on the necessity of an "impartial spectator", constructed through projection, to overcome a selfish perspective and judge actions properly (Maibom, 2020: 79). As Maibom notes, both Hume and Smith base moral judgment on empathy, but they disagree about how far empathy can motivate action. In her reading, Smith holds that empathy, mediated by the impartial spectator, can be sufficient for moral motivation. Hume, in contrast, regards empathy as too weak unless it is supported by other passions (Maibom, 2020: 80). Murdoch's moral philosophy differs from both views by rethinking the role of empathy in moral discourse. Empathy might be viewed as morally important when it helps an agent to see others more fairly. Nevertheless, it may also mislead moral judgment when it is formed by fantasy or self-interest.

Despite this, contemporary empirical research indicates that perspective-taking, in particular, can have a significant moral impact by promoting prosocial judgments and behaviour (Maibom, 2020: 88-89). Through empathy, individuals may respond to what happens to others as if it were happening to themselves, thereby extending their concern beyond their self-interest. This can lead to a wider awareness of other subject's actions and experiences, which may then prompt the individual's moral sense. Once again, this emphasis on empathy's capacity to activate moral awareness foregrounds the central role of imagination in empathic engagement, as it is through imaginative perspective-taking that such responsiveness becomes possible.

Additionally, the roots of empathy can also be traced back to the German tradition of aesthetics, especially to the work of the art historian Robert Vischer, "who suggested that experiencing it was central to appreciating objects of art" as "we are 'feeling into it' in some sense (Maibom, 2020: 104). In fact, the original term *Einfühlung* implies "an active involvement of the imagination with some object of art", whereby the subject projects itself into the object in order to explore the feelings that arise from this engagement (Maibom, 2020: 105). While this process is initially formulated in aesthetic terms, Maibom argues that *Einfühlung* gains broader importance through the study of Theodor Lipps, who maintains that it plays a central role not only in aesthetic experience but also in understanding others:

> Aesthetic experiences are experiences that are predicated on our ability to resonate internally with external objects. More precisely, we have certain experiences upon being perceptually presented with an object, and the content of those experiences is projected onto the object and experienced as if it belongs to it (Maibom, 2020: 105).

Moreover, according to Lipps, it is also possible to imaginatively project oneself into the inner life of another agent and to experience a corresponding emotion, regardless of whether the other's emotion is real or merely imagined (Maibom, 2020: 106). If an empathic response arises independently of whether the other's

emotion is real, there appears to be no need to strictly distinguish between real subjects and fictional characters. This connects to Murdoch's central question of whether imaginative engagement of this kind can contribute to moral improvement.

In this context, aesthetic experience provides a setting for empathy to be exercised and refined. Some contemporary accounts attribute a broader moral significance to aesthetic experience, treating empathic imagination as a capacity that may extend beyond art and into moral life. Maibom writes,

> [a]rt is believed to do more than simply provide aesthetic pleasure or entertainment. It can bring us closer to the truth, widen our horizons, and teach us to be better people. It does so by showing us new ways of thinking, feeling, acting, and living. Because art exercises our empathy, it may be that it makes us better at empathizing with people, and other living beings, in real life in addition to fiction. It could help us grasp genuinely different perspectives, understand what it is like to experience certain things, feel things we have never felt before, and so on. Moreover, given the central role empathy appears to play in morality, aesthetically evoked empathy may even improve our moral agency (2020: 120-121).

In fact, what Maibom articulates in this passage is in line with Martha Nussbaum's assertion that "good literature helps us expand our empathy, thereby developing our moral imagination" (Nussbaum, cited in Maibom, 2020: 121). Fiction enables the reader to view the world from different perspectives and to gain a direct experience of the realities of the various characters, shaped by multiple circumstances, and which would otherwise remain inaccessible. In *Cultivating Humanity*, Nussbaum connects the cultivation of moral imagination to an increased attention to the needs and individuality of others, claiming that "[i]t is impossible to care about the characters [of Dickens and Eliot] and their well-being in the way the text invites, without having some very definite political and moral interests awakened in oneself" (1997:104, cited in Keen, 2007: xviii).

If, for Murdoch, moral understanding depends on disciplined attention to reality, then empathy produced by fiction should be judged not just by how strongly it moves the reader, but by how reliably it helps them to perceive others. It is precisely this question of reliability that has been increasingly taken up within narrative theory. Suzanne Keen questions the idea that novel reading reliably produces empathy that leads to prosocial behaviour, arguing that empathic responses differ widely and can be unstable. She asserts that "[w]hile a well-regulated person may experience empathy that leads to sympathetic concern and altruism in real life, another individual may become distressed by exposure to another's condition" (2007: 3). On this basis, Keen challenges the idea that novel-induced empathy leads to moral progress, even though she acknowledges empathy as a common feature of novel reading that often arises through character identification (2007: 86). She writes,

> [c]haracter identification often invites empathy, even when the fictional character and reader differ from each other in all sorts of practical and obvious ways, but empathy for fictional characters appears to require only minimal elements of identity, situation, and feeling, not necessarily complex or realistic characterization (Keen, 2007: xii).

As such, empathic responses depend on contextual and narrative conditions, including the narrative situation, genre conventions, and the level of emotional intensity (Keen 2007: xi; 44; 79; 93–94; 130). They do not arise automatically from any narrative technique but result from a variable interplay between the reader and the text. Nevertheless, Keen notes that some narrative techniques seem to make empathic engagement more probable than others, particularly those that provide the audience with access to a character's mind: first-person narration or internally focalised third-person narration (2007: 87; 97).

This dynamic lies at the core of Iris Murdoch's *The Black Prince*, as the reader is given access to the protagonist's inner life through first-person narration. Although narrative devices that provide insight into the fictional figure's mind are often associated with affective response, Murdoch's fiction complicates this view

by exploring how such access may also lead to ethically troubling reactions. Close character identification does not necessarily guarantee moral awareness, but may lead to distorted forms of empathy, selective identification, or even align the reader with ethically questionable perspectives. Murdoch's insistence on moral vision and unselfing thus casts doubt on the ethical reliability of empathic identification produced by narrative empathy.

A more theoretical perspective of this mechanism is offered by Stefano Ercolino through his concept of negative empathy, which helps to explain how strong emotional involvement can occur without necessarily leading to moral understanding. In Ercolino's account, the "potentially regressive" character of negative empathy refers to the way aesthetic experience allows the reader to make room for repressed, unsettling, and ethically problematic emotions without being bound to direct consequences in the real world (2018: 246). Drawing on Freud's theory of catharsis, Ercolino argues that the identification with suffering or morally compromised literary characters permits readers to engage with earlier or suppressed emotions within the protective space of aesthetics because

> [their] suffering is mitigated by the certainty that, firstly, it is someone other than [them] who is acting and suffering on the stage, and, secondly, that after all it is only a game, which can threaten no damage to [their] personal security (Freud, 2001b: 306, cited in Ercolino, 2018: 250-251).

Consequently, since this engagement unfolds within fiction, regression does not appear to be problematic but can be seen as an integral feature of aesthetic experience. Therefore, negative empathy involves a temporary suspension of the reader's ability to judge morally when adopting the perspective of a negative character, something that would be unacceptable and unmanageable outside the novel. Within the aesthetic context, the reader may briefly surpass what Ercolino, drawing on Morton, describes as the "barrier of decency", which in real-life situations "would constitute an almost impassable obstacle in order to empathize

with—and ultimately feel sympathy for—flesh-and-blood monsters" (Morton, 2011: 320, cited in Ercolino, 2018: 250).

In Ercolino's view, this process is mediated by what, following Jauss, he terms cathartic identification (2018: 248). Jauss defines cathartic identification as

> the aesthetic attitude, already described by Aristotle, that frees the spectator from the real interests and affective entanglements of his world, and puts him into the position of the suffering and beset hero so that his mind and heart may find liberation through tragic emotion or comic relief (Jauss, 1982: 177, cited in Ercolino, 2018: 248).

The "protective distance" that characterises catharsis is therefore not opposed to empathy but essential to it (Ercolino, 2018: 248):

> We can empathize with [negative characters] only if there is a safety distance between them and us. If we fully empathized with them, that is, if we experienced the same emotions and shared the same thoughts they live through, we would be presumably paralyzed by terror and would never be able to feel any pleasure for not sharing their fate, let alone aesthetic enjoyment (Ercolino, 2018: 249).

Moreover, the cathartic effect of identification is amplified by the transformative power of language itself, which shapes and directs affective response without compelling action (Ercolino, 2018: 251-252). Drawing on Gorgias, Ercolino notes that *logos* has the power "to stop fear [phóbon], to remove sorrow, to create joy, and to augment pity [éleon]" (Gorgias, 1982, 8, cited in Ercolino, 2018: 251). Ultimately, cathartic identification is ethically ambiguous, as negative empathy does not inherently determine moral outcomes due to the fact that it flourishes in the protected sphere of aesthetic experience (Ercolino, 2018: 252). Indeed, as Ercolino observes, such identification can be orchestrated in manipulative ways, potentially leading to antisocial effects rather than ethical insight (2018: 252).

From this perspective, the concept of negative empathy helps explain how direct insight into the minds of ethically compromised fictional figures can create an emotionally charged involvement without fostering greater ethical awareness

in the reader. Read alongside Murdoch's moral philosophy, Ercolino's account illuminates how imaginative engagement may generate intense emotional involvement without fostering clearer moral vision. The very capacities that enable attention to others, namely imagination and empathy, may, when undisciplined, sustain illusion and self-absorption rather than unselfing. From this perspective, negative empathy provides a conceptual framework for understanding how fiction can draw readers into ethically compromised viewpoints without securing genuine moral awareness.

This chapter has examined the key philosophical ideas central to Murdoch's moral philosophy, focusing on attention, unselfing, and a disciplined imagination directed at the individuality of others. At the same time, the discussion of empathy and aesthetic engagement with fiction has complicated the application of her thought by showing how the same capacities that support moral perception may also mislead the subject into illusion, especially within fictional narrative. In the following chapter, Murdoch's fiction is explored through novels that construct enclosed social settings that foreground moral conflict. In *The Bell* and *The Sea, The Sea*, characters are confronted with the limits of their ethical understanding as their attentive perception of reality brings their egoistic illusions into question. Hence, these novels will be read as moral microcosms in which Murdoch's philosophical ideas are tested in narrative form. In chapter three, Murdoch extends this experiment beyond the level of character to engage the reader directly. In *The Black Prince*, the problems of imagination and empathy are radicalised through the narrative form itself, questioning the moral authority of empathy and the possibility of truth in fiction.

Chapter II
The Novel as Moral Microcosm: Ethical Tensions and the Struggle between Illusion and Reality in *The Bell* and *The Sea, The Sea*

> If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel's heart beat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence. As it is, the quickest of us walk about well wadded with stupidity.
>
> George Eliot

Murdoch's fiction consistently represents her philosophical theory that morality and, by broader extension, happiness, are not something to be directly pursued or calculated but appear indirectly through ethical awareness. In the opening chapters of many of Murdoch's novels, her characters appear to be profoundly unhappy and isolated, largely because they focus on their own desires and needs. This recurrent representation reflects her ethical perspective that true happiness comes from self-transcendence, which implies overcoming selfish desires and moving toward a thoughtful, responsible awareness of both reality and others. In this context, the present chapter considers *The Bell* and *The Sea, The Sea* as moral microcosms that illuminate the ethical tensions between illusion and reality in the protagonists' pursuit of both moral development and genuine happiness. *The Bell*, published in 1958, and *The Sea, The Sea*, published in 1978, were written twenty years apart

and nevertheless illustrate two different but connected stages in Iris Murdoch's fiction.

The Bell may be read as a moral study of a small religious community, examining how daily interactions and relationships become a space for ethical testing and transformation. The omniscient third-person narrator allows the reader to view the fictional characters with a certain sense of irony and critical distance, making visible both their moral limitations and their capacity for development. By contrast, *The Sea, The Sea* adopts the form of a confessional journal, aligning with the tradition of the psychological novel, in which the first-person narrator, Charles Arrowby, constructs a self-absorbed and often unreliable record of his own experience. The novels differ in their narrative techniques, which define the readers' moral perceptions. In *The Bell*, third-person narration supports an external moral vision detached from the ego. In *The Sea, The Sea*, first-person narration confines both the reader and the narrator within an illusion, thereby embedding ethical myopia within the form of the novel.

Through the contrast between an omniscient and a confessional mode, Murdoch shows that the very act of narration becomes a test of moral vision, a point that will be revisited in the third chapter in a different theoretical context. Both novels fit within Murdoch's own view of the novel as a form that studies the conflict between illusion and reality. In each case, the fictional world operates as a concentrated moral laboratory: Imber Court in *The Bell* functions as a closed moral community in which self-deception is slowly unveiled, while Shruff End in *The Sea, The Sea* becomes a psychological stage where the protagonist's egoistic illusions collapse under the pressure of reality. Consequently, the following analysis will first consider how Murdoch explores self-deception and the struggle for ethical understanding through the character of Dora Greenfield, before turning to Charles Arrowby's confrontation with the destructive nature of egoism and the limits of self-knowledge.

2.1 *The Bell*: Moral Growth and the Limits of Illusion

In *The Bell*, Murdoch argues that pure happiness is not something one can aim at directly, as it tends to arise as a by-product of ethical self-reflection and careful attention to others, rather than from the pursuit of personal gratification. Like George Eliot in *Middlemarch*, Murdoch portrays the religious community of Imber Court as a moral microcosm that tests the individual's capacity for self-knowledge within a tightly knit social world. In both novels, moral understanding develops through daily contact with others rather than through solitary reflection alone. In *Middlemarch*, characters learn the hard way that their ambitious aspirations and romantic ideas about themselves often mislead them. In *The Bell*, the religious community at Imber Court works in a similar manner, since living closely together forces its members to confront their weaknesses, misunderstandings, and unrealistic expectations. The community offers no clear answers or spiritual certainty, demanding that its members examine their motives and take responsibility for their actions, and confronting them, through everyday interactions, disappointments, jealousies, and acts of kindness, with the difficulty of acting responsibly and honestly in ordinary life. Rather than providing comfort or definitive moral conclusions, Imber Court brings to light how easily good intentions fail and how much effort it requires to remain truthful and attentive to others under the pressures of modern social life. Moral awareness, in this context, is not achieved through isolation or retreat, but through continued engagement with the tensions and limitations of communal life.

Through the fictional character of the Abbess, Murdoch describes the lay community as being for those

> who can live neither in the world nor out of it. They are kind of sick people, whose desire for God makes them unsatisfactory citizens of an ordinary life, but whose strength or temperament fails them to surrender the world completely; and present-day society, with its hurried pace and its mechanical and technical structure, offers no home to these unhappy souls (2019: 84).

This passage is central to Murdoch's idea of spiritual in-between states and the difficulties that come with serious moral introspection. The people she describes are not physically sick but morally displaced, suspended between ordinary life and the desire for a higher moral ideal. Although they aim to act in line with what is good, they the lack self-discipline, emotional balance, or supportive context needed to sustain it. Their unhappiness stems from both personal inadequacy and social fragmentation, suggesting that Murdoch views contemporary life as hindering enduring moral thought. This conflict unfolds not in unusual circumstances but in everyday social life, which Murdoch presents through a realist narrative form.

In this respect, Murdoch's view resonates with Eliot's exploration of moral realism in Middlemarch, in which the ordinary world itself becomes the stage for ethical discovery. Indeed, *The Bell* and *The Sea, The Sea* can be seen as belonging to the realist tradition, in the sense in which Byatt explains it, arguing that "Iris Murdoch's technical interest in nineteenth-century 'realism' (original emphasis) is an interest in the recreation of a fictional world in which separate individuals meet, change, communicate" (1976: 21). Byatt further comments that

> *The Bell* seems to me arguably Miss Murdoch's most successful attempt at realism, emotional and social—the tones of voice of the members of the religious community are beautifully caught, the sexual, aesthetic and religious passions and confusions of the three main characters, Dora, Michael, and, to a lesser extent, Toby, are delicately analysed with the combination of intellectual grasp and sensuous immediacy of George Eliot (1976: 33).

Moreover, omniscient narration functions as a moral instrument, mirroring the "just and loving gaze" (Murdoch, 1970: 33) that Murdoch associates with true moral vision. The reader is therefore invited to perceive how moral progress emerges through imperfection, error, and the gradual training of attention.

According to *The Sovereignty of Good*, moral attention, understood as the practice of perceiving others and the world truthfully, represents the highest form of freedom. Such freedom, rather than the pursuit of personal satisfaction, makes lasting happiness possible (Murdoch, 1970: 65). In *The Bell*, Imber Court becomes the place where characters who feel alienated from both modern society and monastic life look for moral grounding. Yet, this process remains complex and imperfect. Through the intertwined stories of Dora Greenfield and Michael Maede, Murdoch shows that happiness is found in the arduous, fallible work of facing moral struggles, caring for others, and seeking what is good in a conflicted world.

Murdoch's use of moral microcosms in *The Bell* and *The Sea, The Sea* thus heightens internal conflict, forcing characters to confront ego, self-deception, and the consequences of their actions. Despite differences of temperament and setting, both Dora Greenfield and Charles Arrowby occupy the centre of these ethically charged environments. Their stories affirm Murdoch's belief that happiness arises not from the satisfaction of desire but from ethical maturity, that is, the capacity to look beyond the self and to recognise the reality of others. As she writes, "[t]he self, the place where we live, is a place of illusion" (1970: 91); therefore, moral growth, and hence happiness, depend on dismantling that illusion.

The narrator introduces Dora Greenfield not through immediate dialogue or action, but through a retrospective third-person perspective that offers an overall picture of her emotional and moral disorientation. The opening sentence, which states that "Dora Greenfield left her husband because she was afraid of him" and "return[ed] to him for the same reason" (Murdoch, 2019: 1), establishes an atmosphere of moral ambiguity that shapes Dora's early position in the novel. From the outset, her life is marked by fear, dependence, and repetition, patterns

that reveal both her limitations and her latent potential for change. This uncertainty is sharpened by the opposition between Dora and her husband, Paul Greenfield. Dora is characterised as impulsive, defined by a sensuous temperament and attraction to immediacy and beauty that contrast with Paul's austere intellect, emotional rigidity, and desire for order. The fact that Dora "spent her money on big multi-coloured skirts and jazz records and sandals" suggests both aesthetic vitality and youthful thoughtlessness, as well as a tendency toward self-illusion (Murdoch, 2019: 1). Paul, by contrast, exemplifies another form of illusion: the attempt to master reality through intellect, discipline, and emotional control.

Dora's early efforts to define herself show uncertainty rather than a clear direction. The narrator's observation that Dora returns to Paul "for the same reason" she left him (Murdoch, 2019: 1) reveals a pattern in which fear and dependency determine her choices, so that reaction is mistaken for autonomy and impulse for freedom. This symmetry highlights a repetition in her behaviour, as her attempts at independence repeatedly collapse into dependence throughout the story. While studying art in London, Dora meets Paul, an emotionally reserved scholar specialising in medieval art (Murdoch, 2019: 1–2). Their connection appears to arise more from coincidence or circumstance than from deliberate intent. Paul's financial stability and refined manners imply that he is a sensible, though imperfect, choice for Dora, given her uncertainty. Although Murdoch never explicitly states that Dora marries Paul because she lacks the confidence to refuse, this impression resonates throughout the narrative's presentation of her passivity and emotional doubt. Murdoch's portrayal further encourages the reader not to judge Dora but to understand her as morally immature. In this respect, Dora recalls Dorothea Brooke in *Middlemarch*, whose early marriage to Edward Casaubon is influenced by her moral aspiration and emotional misjudgment, and an imbalance of power in their relationship.

Within this context, Dora's pursuit of pleasure and aesthetic enjoyment distracts her from negative emotions, such as fear, guilt, or dissatisfaction in her marriage, rather than giving her real independence. This becomes evident after she

leaves Paul, when her initial feeling of relief is quickly undermined by the recognition that she has "no other life to escape into" (Murdoch, 2019: 7). Her retreat into pleasure, "drinking and dancing and making love and spending Paul's allowance on multi-coloured skirts and sandals and jazz records" (Murdoch, 2019: 7), reveals that her apparent happiness is another form of captivity. The plain declaration, "[t]hen in early September she decided to go back to him" (Murdoch, 2019: 7), reflects how little agency she shows, transforming decision into habit and action into repetition. Consequently, through this restrained account of ordinary life, Murdoch underlines the ethical significance of Dora's everyday actions. Dora appears to act, yet remains trapped and chooses without fully acting. These early experiences thus lay the groundwork for the novel's central moral question: freedom, responsibility, and the gradual growth of moral awareness.

When Dora finally arrives at Imber Court, she does so not out of conviction but fatigue. As Sarah Perry observes, "[h]aving fled Paul, the husband she fears and desires, Dora at last concluded […] that 'the persecution of his presence was to be preferred to the persecution of his absence', and has come to seek him out at Imber" (2019: ix). Paul, described as "Casaubon-like", sits absorbed in his manuscripts, awaiting her arrival (Perry, 2019: ix). From the start, Imber Court offers Dora no closure; instead, it places her in a different kind of confinement, determined by restraint, discipline, and emotional control. Dora's moral development, therefore, begins not through obedience to the community's spiritual order, but through her refusal to accept its cold and formal demands. This pressure becomes visible in small, apparently polite exchanges. When Mrs Mark proposes, "I feel sure you'd rather be treated like one of us, wouldn't you, and keep the rules of the house?" (Murdoch, 2019: 60), the invitation conceals an expectation of conformity. A similar attitude is expressed in her comment that they "never have flowers in the house" (Murdoch, 2019: 60), which implies the community's suspicion of beauty, spontaneity, and emotional expression. This ethical code is reinforced by the refusal to address personal history: "[W]e never discuss our past lives here. That's another little religious rule that we try to follow. No gossip […] Curiosity that is idle soon degenerates into malice" (Murdoch,

2019: 63). Although presented as a safeguard against gossip, the rule reflects a broader avoidance of self-examination. As Perry remarks, "Dora finds a lay religious community composed of people who have fled reality – only to find, of course, that wherever they go, there they inescapably will be" (2019: ix). Imber Court maintains its sense of moral order by suppressing emotions rather than by encouraging understanding of personal experience.

The novel's Gothic symbolism, moreover, intensifies this tension. Indeed, *The Bell* is full of secrets and, as Perry notes, most striking of which lies beneath the lake, where "the old abbey bell lies full fathom five, having supposedly flown out of its tower in distress at a lover's tragedy" (2019: ix). While Imber itself appears "dreamlike", Murdoch's attention to psychological and social detail remains precise: "The effect of this acute attention among the strangeness and symbols of Imber […] is startling" (Perry, 2019: xi). Perry argues, Gothic feeling "does not precisely run counter to realism, but rather amplifies it" (2019: x), intensifying the conflicts Dora faces in her daily interactions there. At first, Dora reacts to life at Imber Court through everyday gestures: she is sarcastic, avoids communal routines, and resists being drawn fully into the life of the community. These responses do not yet demonstrate moral clarity, but they illustrate her unease with a setting that limits emotional expression and personal freedom. Dora's interest in colour, aesthetics, and feeling, often dismissed by others as frivolous, places her at odds with the community's emphasis on restraint and discipline. Furthermore, in the Gothic setting of *The Bell*, Dora's small acts of defiance invite the reader's sympathy rather than condemnation. In fact, Perry observes that "transgression seems a virtue: our sympathies are with the devil" (2019: xiii). Dora's refusal to conform completely to Imber Court's expectations is therefore not only a sign of immaturity but a reaction against a way of life that suppresses emotion and individuality. Even so, Dora's resistance does not yet change how she acts. Rather than reflecting on her position within the community or the effects of her behaviour, she withdraws or moves on. When life at Imber becomes uncomfortable, her solution is not to confront it but to leave.

At this stage of the novel, Dora longs to escape the religious lay community and to embrace a world that matches her temperament, where she can be spontaneous, creative, and unafraid to express her feelings. She goes back to London, where she feels like herself again (Murdoch, 2019: 199). However, her return to Noel, the very man with whom she betrayed her husband, indicates that she still mistakes desire for freedom. By turning back to pleasure, Dora refuses to view her actions as having serious moral implications, withdrawing once again into self-deception. Murdoch's description of this scene captures both the sensory appeal of this experience and the emptiness of such indulgence:

> He kissed Dora and went away down the stairs singing. When he had gone she sat for a while on the floor, sipping her replenished drink and enjoying the sense of sheer present physical being which the dance had given her. Then she got up and went to the kitchen and opened the fridge. A delicious meal seemed to be pending. She took out several kinds of salami […] Dora, who liked her meals to tail away in a series of small treats, looked at the scene with satisfaction […] She felt extremely gay (2019: 203-204).

This fleeting escape, however, is interrupted by Paul's sudden phone call, bringing her back to the feelings and responsibilities she wanted to avoid. While she listens, the distant song of a blackbird emerges, a small detail with great impact, as her "sense of unreality returned" and "[s]he no longer wanted to stay and have lunch with Noel" (Murdoch, 2019: 205). The blackbird's song creates an unexpected moment of emotional awareness and pure beauty, opposing the shallow pleasure Dora seeks. In Murdoch's moral vocabulary, this moment of attentiveness represents a fleeting glimpse of what she elsewhere calls "the obedience to reality" (1970: 39). The beauty of the blackbird's song affects Dora because she listens to it simply as a sound and not as something connected to her own wishes or fears. For a moment, she becomes aware of a world outside herself, much like Murdoch in her kestrel episode discussed in the first chapter, and thus experiences unselfing through the sound of the bird. Unlike her later emotional identification with the bell, this moment does not rely on *Einfühlung* or imaginative fusion. Instead, it

creates a distance from her ego and from the illusions that have defined her perception.

The blackbird's song offers a momentary release from illusion that takes a fuller form in Dora's visit to the National Gallery, one of the most emblematic episodes of *The Bell*, where Dora's encounter with art shows how aesthetic experience can lead toward moral vision. Standing before the paintings, Dora undergoes an encounter that transcends pleasure and becomes an act of moral perception. Murdoch writes,

> Dora was always moved by the pictures. Today she was moved, but in a new way. She marvelled, with a kind of gratitude, that they were all still here, and her heart was filled with love for the pictures, their authority, their marvellous generosity, their splendour […] 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 (2019: 207-208).

Notably, this passage translates into narrative terms Murdoch's argument in *The Sovereignty of Good*, as described in Chapter I, where she maintains that

> [t]he appreciation of beauty in art or nature is not only (for all its difficulties) the easiest available spiritual exercise; it is also a completely adequate entry into (and not just analogy of) the good life, since it is the checking of selfishness in the interest of seeing the real (1970: 63).

Dora's response to the artwork goes beyond simple aesthetic pleasure. Her impulse "to go down on her knees before it, embracing it, shedding tears" (Murdoch, 2019: 208) indicates that she experiences the Gainsborough painting as a form of spiritual revelation rather than a casual observation. As Byatt argues, "Dora[']s] vision in the National Gallery [represents] a moment of truth where Gainsborough's portrait of his children is an image of Iris Murdoch's idea of the

recognizable authority of the Good" (1976: 22). Byatt's interpretation further reinforces the moral importance of this episode: the painting is not only valued for its beauty but conveys a "moral lesson" that helps Dora to view reality more clearly. This scene completes Dora's aesthetic education and redirects her attention back to the reality of her own life. After this experience, Dora realises that "[h]er real life, her real problems, were at Imber" (Murdoch, 2019: 208). The insight gained through her encounter with art does not transform her character or dissolve her habitual ways of responding, but it briefly illuminates where her responsibilities lie. Dora returns to Imber not because she is afraid, but because she comprehends that she cannot escape her marriage or the situation she has left behind. She further understands that running away to London has not solved anything. Although she still does not know what she should do, she accepts that she must face Paul, the community, and the consequences of her choices.

After her return, Dora persuades Toby to help her carry out her plan to recover the old bell of Imber Abbey (Murdoch, 2019: 217). The bell has lain for years at the bottom of the lake, buried in mud and largely forgotten. According to the legend, "one of the nuns had a lover […] The Abbess called on the guilty nun to confess, but no one came forward […Thus, the bishop] put a curse on the Abbey, and as the chronicler puts it, the great bell flew like a bird out of the tower and fell into the lake" (Murdoch, 2019: 40). From the beginning, the bell is therefore linked to sin and punishment and bringing it back to the surface may be read as disturbing something the community has long preferred to leave alone. Just as the bell has remained hidden in the lake, certain past actions and personal conflicts within the community may also have been left unsaid. Consequently, for Dora, recovering the bell seems a way of making these tensions visible. The decision to exchange the new bell for the old is not conceived as mischief, but as a deliberately unsettling gesture, one that allows her to act against the community's restraint without openly confronting it. As Dora explains, "[a]fter all, and after her own fashion, she would fight. In this holy community she would play the witch", imagining that "it would be wonderful, it would be like a real miracle, the sort of thing that makes people go on pilgrimages" (Murdoch, 2019: 217–218).

By then, Dora regards the plan as justified and necessary. The gesture gives her a sense of agency and allows her to oppose the community without submitting to its rules. However, what follows soon exposes the limits of this response. Dora begins to recognise that she has not considered how the act might appear to others or what effects it could have beyond her own intentions. As Murdoch explains:

> What appalled her was the idea, coming to her now fully for the first time, that this abortive fantasy would be reported, or misreported, in the newspapers and perhaps do great harm to the community. Dora knew that if she had reflected more carefully on her plan she would have seen that it was bound to get publicity and bound to look, to the outsider, ludicrous or sinister. Its triumphant witchlike quality existed for her alone. Even Toby, she realized, had cooperated to please her […] She could not do it alone, and in any case her desire to do it had vanished [...] Dora's heart swelled with remorse and rage (2019: 292).

Dora's change of mind begins when she thinks about how the plan might appear beyond her own excitement. What had felt necessary and exhilarating now looks different once she considers that it could be reported, misunderstood, and cause harm to the community. This act no longer seems "like a miracle" (Murdoch, 2019: 217) in itself, but risky and potentially damaging. She realises that the "triumphant witchlike" quality of this gesture (Murdoch, 2019: 292) existed only in her mind, in the intensity of her own feeling. Dora further understands that Toby cooperated mainly to please her, rather than because he agreed with the plan. Thus, instead of the satisfaction she had longed for, Dora feels remorse and anger. The plan no longer seems bold or celebratory, but exposed, confirming Murdoch's claim that "[t]he self, the place where we live, is a place of illusion" (1970: 91).

Nevertheless, her remorse does not lead her to abandon the plan. She carries on with it, but the bell ceases to be merely part of a scheme and becomes the centre of her action. As Murdoch describes,

> [s]he had communed with [the old bell] for too long and was under its spell. She had thought to be its master and make it her plaything, but

> now it was mastering her and would have its will […] a thrill of terror and excitement went through her, a premonition of the act before she consciously knew what the act would be […] Dora was so astounded, so almost annihilated at the wonder of it, and by the sheer noise, that she was oblivious of everything except her task of keeping the bell ringing (2019: 294-295).

Indeed, in accordance with Lipps's theory of empathy, Dora experiences the bell as something awe-inspiring and overpowering, as if it had its own will because she imaginatively projects her affective state upon the object and then perceives it as belonging to it. In other words, it is a transportation into and fusion with the artwork (Maibom, 2020: 106), which Murdoch, however, intensifies to foreground how easily imagination can turn into self-absorbed fantasy when the subject's identification erases the distance necessary for attentive perception. In contrast to empathetic imagination, where the subject is not "*completely* (original emphasis) identified with an object of art" and "we don't lose ourselves in it entirely" (Maibom, 2020, 106), Dora is fully absorbed by the bell, as "she [is] oblivious of everything except her task of keeping the bell ringing". Hence, Dora, who engages with the bell out of a desire for self-dramatisation because she wants her act to be meaningful, fails to unself herself, unlike in her previous encounter with the paintings in the National Gallery.

At this crucial point, Murdoch deliberately exposes the limits of such absorption. Byatt observes with regard to the bell itself,

> [t]he bell […] seems to me the weakest part of a fine novel, because it is so much more patently contrived as a narrative device than […] the use of the house, abbey and lake, in *The Bell* itself, to suggest the divisions between conscious and unconscious, secular and spiritual worlds. The bell is an emblem […] as I have suggested elsewhere, its moment of action, when Dora rings it, is a substitute for a real action, in the real world inhabited by the characters. Dora beats it to 'tell the truth' (original emphasis) — but the truth she has to tell has nothing really to do with the bell. The connexion is the novelist's (1976: 34).

Byatt's critique clarifies what is at stake in this scene. The ringing itself feels to Dora intense and almost sacred, but it does not involve any engagement with the moral agents surrounding her. She focuses only on the bell, on its sound, and the sensation of ringing it, while the rest of the community slips out of her mind. Instead of speaking, listening, or responding to anyone, she remains absorbed in this aesthetic object. In this moment, Dora treats the bell as if it possesses its own force and authority. She invests it with the emotions that drive her action and then experiences those emotions as coming from the object itself. Furthermore, the bell seems powerful and commanding because it carries her excitement and fear back to her in intensified form. This excitement allows her to feel involved and important without having to speak honestly to anyone or consider how her behaviour affects them. She can thus enjoy the sense of drama without facing the consequences. By contrast, in the gallery, she looks at the painting as something separate from herself, something that does not depend on her feelings. In the case of the bell, however, that separation disappears. Dora becomes absorbed in the physical act of raising it and in the thrill and tension it produces. What fills her awareness is not the presence of others or the demands of a shared world, but the intensity of the moment she is creating.

In the final chapter of *The Bell*, Dora reaches a decisive moment, beginning to take responsibility for her past choices and recognising the possibility of a different life beyond her troubled relationship with Paul. Murdoch writes,

> she had decided that there was no point in her returning to Paul, at any rate at present. She would only run away again. It was inevitable that Paul should bully her and that she should vacillate between submitting through fear and resisting through resentment. She was plain that things were mostly her fault and that she should never have married Paul at all […] She felt intensely the need and somehow now the capacity to live and work on her own and become, what she had never been, an independent grown-up person (2019: 332-333).

After this reflection, Dora understands that returning to Paul would mean repeating what has already happened. She would have to fear him, submit to him,

and would leave him again out of resentment. She neither imagines that Paul would change his behaviour, nor that reconciliation would improve their marriage. Dora therefore decides not to return to him for the time being. For his part, Michael, whom Murdoch portrays as Dora's moral counterpart, does not try to persuade her to change her decision. Neither does he advise her to forgive Paul, nor does he interpret her situation as something she deserves because she is guilty or needs to be punished. Instead, he encourages her to pursue "a way of life which had dignity and independence" (Murdoch, 2019: 334), leaving open the possibility that she might one day return to her husband, but only if she can stand beside him as an equal. Murdoch highlights that Michael's response takes Dora seriously as an agent who must make her own decision rather than forcing her to fit into a fixed set of moral rules or an easy solution:

> [Michael] felt, in the case of Dora too, that there was little point in forcing her willy-nilly into a machine of sin and repentance which was alien to her nature. Perhaps Dora would repent after her own fashion; perhaps she would be saved after her own fashion (2019: 335).

Following Michael's advice, Dora agrees to leave London and to begin painting again. This gives her something to work at and a reason to structure her time. She also decides to speak to Mother Clare, directly acknowledging the community she had kept at a distance. These actions demonstrate that Dora is no longer acting on impulse or seeking dramatic gestures, but is beginning to live in a more settled, purposeful way. *The Bell* closes by presenting Dora as she begins to move toward this new way of life. Michael's comparison of her "turning towards life and happiness like a strong plant towards the sun" (Murdoch, 2019: 341) captures a slow and ongoing change rather than a sudden break with the past. Dora does not resolve her difficulties, and she does not reach a final state of happiness. Even if her future remains uncertain, she is no longer trapped in the pattern that defined her earlier life.

Where Dora may react to difficulty by withdrawal or acting on impulse, Michael Meade, the homosexual headmaster of Imber Court, faces difficult

situations, exercises restraint, and reflects before acting. Hence, he functions as Dora's moral counterpart, not by instructing or judging Dora, but by showing another way of dealing with the same pressures she tries to escape. This difference is visible in Michael's attitude to work. The narrator explains that

> [i]t was the quality of the work which mattered, not its results. As there was something symbolic, and indeed sacramental, in their withdrawal from the world, so their methods of work should share that quality. Honest spades were to be permitted (Murdoch, 2019: 95).

Michael is not concerned with distinction or recognition, but with carrying out ordinary tasks carefully and straightforwardly. The image "[h]onest spades were to be permitted" points to plain, physical work done without flourish or self-dramatisation. This differs from Dora's earlier behaviour, which tends to be striking and emotionally charged, but often leaves the consequences for others unconsidered.

Significantly, Michael's self-control is mostly tested not in his work but when he is confronted with desire. This happens when he sits in the car beside the sleeping Toby, a boy under Michael's supervision at Imber Court:

> As Michael looked at him, and then returned his gaze to the road, he had a very distinct impulse to thrust his hand into the front of Toby's shirt. The next instant, as if this thought had acted as a spark, he had a clear visual image of himself driving the Land-Rover into a ditch and seizing Toby violently in his arms […] He really must control his imagination. He was surprised that it could play him such a trick (Murdoch, 2019: 167-168).

Nothing happens, but Michael recognises how quickly the thought has taken hold and how urgently it must be resisted. In fact, Perry argues,

> [d]esire is expressed in terms so persuasive the reader urges on acts that we know can only be catastrophic […] *touch him* (original emphasis), we think: *go on* (original emphasis), watching Michael Meade do noble battle against desire in the seat of his car and willing him to lose (2019: xiii).

The struggle is therefore not only Michael's, as the reader is encouraged to share the pressure of the moment and the pull of the forbidden act.

More crucially, Murdoch does not portray Michael as free from desire, as he later crosses a boundary by kissing Toby, but he nevertheless does not deny what has happened and does not remain silent about it. He apologises immediately (Murdoch, 2019: 170), thereby acknowledging his mistake rather than trying to protect himself, and reflects that "[t]o say no more about it would be to leave the boy in a state of unrelieved anxiety and tension" (Murdoch, 2019: 178). He further shows himself to be concerned about the consequences of his behaviour when contemplating that "[o]ur actions are like ships which we may watch set out to sea, and not know when or with what cargo they will return to port" (Murdoch, 2019: 179), which leads him to approach Toby again and to admit, "I did something foolish and wrong […] it was a wrong action" (Murdoch, 2019: 183–184).

Likewise, Byatt's account of Murdoch's "machinery of behaviour" sheds light on Michael's actions: "Only unremitting attention to what lies outside the mechanism can save human beings from being entirely controlled by this psychic machinery. Thus, Michael Meade is caught in the […] *machinery* (original emphasis) of guilt and repentance" (1976: 25). This machinery can be seen in the sequence of Michael's actions: the impulse in the car, kissing Toby without consent, the sense of guilt and his apology. From this perspective, Michael's inner conflict, his wrongdoing, and his way of handling problems reveal how he serves as Dora's moral mirror. Notably, Dora often leaves difficult situations before addressing their outcomes, while Michael confronts them and takes accountability for his choices. For Murdoch, moral responsibility is not pure or certain, but lies in facing uncomfortable situations, admitting wrongdoing, and responding directly to others rather than avoiding them. Together, Dora and Michael exemplify two contrasting ways of responding to moral pressure: Dora through impulsive escape, and Michael through restraint and responsibility. Murdoch returns to this contrast with greater psychological complexity in *The Sea, The Sea*.

2.2 *The Sea, The Sea:* Moral Vision and the Prison of the Self

While *The Bell* examines life within a disciplined religious community through an omniscient third-person narrator, *The Sea, The Sea* unfolds through Charles Arrowby's first-person narrative voice. In this novel, the reader does not observe events from the outside but sees everything through Charles's diary, where he often intervenes and justifies his behaviour. Early in the novel, Murdoch presents the moral microcosm through Charles's personal retreat to the seaside. After leaving his successful career in the theatre, he moves to a remote house called Shruff End on the English coast to seek solitude. Born in Stratford-upon-Avon, Shakespeare's hometown, and a well-known theatre director, Charles views his life as a stage performance. He compares himself to Prospero in *The Tempest*, imagining that he will renounce power and retreat from the world. Yet he does not actually stop trying to control what happens around him; he continues to manipulate situations and to treat subjects in his life as actors in the play he is directing. Described by the popular press as a "tyrant" and a "power-crazed monster," he announces, "I shall abjure magic and become a hermit: put myself in a situation where I can honestly say that I have nothing else to do but to learn to be good" (Murdoch, 2019: 2). The statement sounds humble, but it already reveals his theatrical self-awareness and his tendency to turn even moral reform into a performance.

While Charles describes Shruff End as "mysteriously damp […] exposed and isolated" (Murdoch, 2019: 12), he feels "completely sane and free and happy for the first time in [his] life" (Murdoch, 2019: 3). However, the isolated house soon becomes a setting dominated by his fixation instead of the peaceful and self-disciplined life he wanted to lead there. As Moss observes, "Charles Arrowby in

The Sea, The Sea (1978), a retired playwright and stage director, forces on the world – in what he believes to be a serene withdrawal from it – a distorted version of the egoism he thinks he has relinquished" (1986: 228). Furthermore, "[t]he novel comes to us in the form of a journal – an almost-maybe memoir" (Johnson, 2019: xii), and since it is Charles who decides what to include and how to describe it, the reader is compelled to see everything through his perspective. Indeed, the protagonist comments that he "could write all sorts of fantastic nonsense about [his] life in these memoirs and everybody would believe it" (Murdoch, 2019: 88). Thus, within this moral microcosm, Charles "slowly and irrevocably ruin[s] his life and the lives of those around him" (Johnson, 2019: xiii). Johnson writes,

> [h]e tries to escape to the coast, but everything he has ever known […] follows him there, sometimes in weird, almost ridiculous moments of coincidence. The house by the sea could almost be seen as some underworld place of judgement where everything we have done is paraded before us, all of our decisions gone over again and again. Charles is offered, if not retribution, then an opportunity to make better decisions. Of this he is incapable (2019: xiv).

Importantly, from the outset of the novel, Murdoch portrays Charles as a man used to giving orders and controlling others, describing him as "a dictator" (2019: 41) and "very prone to jealousy" (2019: 43). When he asks himself whether he has "abjured that magic, drowned [his] book and forgiven [his] enemies" like Prospero in *The Tempest* (Murdoch, 2019: 44), he casts himself in the role of a dramatic hero who has renounced power. At the same time, he presents Mary Hartley Smith as his lost childhood love, "the most important thing in his life" (Murdoch, 2019: 88), whom he believes he is destined to recover. At the heart of this conviction lies Charles's memories of their childhood relationship: "when we were about twelve the emotions began […] and we loved each other, we lived in each other […] we were each other […] it was extreme and pure" (Murdoch, 2019: 90). In his memory, their relationship exists in a secret world hidden from ordinary life, where everything feels intense and untouched by reality. He goes on to recall that

> we were going to marry when we were eighteen […] There were many caresses, but we did not make love […] we would be protected by love. We experienced our innocence and we did not think it would be difficult to be good […] We lived in paradise […] Ours was already a suburban countryside, but it was as lovely and significant to us as the Garden of Eden […] she had the wisdom of the innocents and we conversed as angels (Murdoch, 2019: 91-92).

Nevertheless, matters become complicated when Hartley chooses not to wed Charles. He maintains that "[o]ur marriage was a fixed and certain mark […] if our parents had known and had agreed, or if we had done battle for our love, the very publicity of the plan would have made it more binding, more real" (Murdoch, 2019: 94). Hence, to Charles, Hartley becomes a lost Eden, embodying purity, innocence, and an imagined happiness he yearns to regain. By imagining her in this way, the protagonist stops seeing Hartley as a real woman with her own thoughts and choices and turns her into an image from his past. Instead of paying attention to who she is now, he clings to the image of her he formed years ago, refusing to accept that she has changed. Indeed, this reduction of love to obsession exemplifies what Moss identifies as central to Murdoch's fiction: "obsession is Iris Murdoch's meat and drink, her alpha and omega. And love is the most common and demonstrable form of it. Its monumental ability to uplift or destroy, to transform or kill, is notorious" (1986: 228). Accordingly, Charles's love for Hartley gives him a sense of purpose and drives his actions. Yet it distorts his moral judgment, leading him to behave in ways that harm both himself and those around him. By viewing Hartley as the embodiment of paradise, he seeks to restore a lost innocence that exists only in his imagination rather than to search for authentic love. Moss' observation that Murdoch often creates characters who are "monsters and magicians, often indivisible" (1986: 228) underscores Charles's paradoxical nature: he is both morally blind and capable of causing harm, and a figure whose personal desires drive how the literary work explores morality and emotion.

Moreover, Charles believes that his new house by the sea will help him to see things more clearly. In fact, he describes himself as having "come near to the great light-source and [being] ready to speak about [his] first love" (Murdoch, 2019: 89), suggesting that solitude has brought him closer to some kind of personal insight. Referring to Plato's *Allegory of the Cave*, he further insists, "[t]he light in the cavern is daylight, not fire. Perhaps it is the only true light in my life, the light that reveals the truth" (Murdoch, 2019: 91). Nevertheless, this sense of clarity does not last. Rather than gaining a more balanced view of his past, Charles becomes increasingly absorbed in his memories of Hartley. The house that he hoped would give him peace soon becomes a place where he spends his days thinking about Hartley and imagining further encounters. Instead of keeping him attentive to the present, his solitude gives him time to dwell on old memories and reshape them into something larger than life. In this way, the literary work depicts how easily a desire for self-improvement can turn into self-deception, as Charles confuses his private fantasies with truth.

This conflict becomes especially palpable when Charles unexpectedly meets Hartley again in the seaside town. He describes this scene in detail:

> Hartley's face, which now seemed absolutely white, expressed such an appalling terror that I would have felt terrified myself had I not been engaged in some urgent almost mechanical search for 'similarities' (original emphasis), for ways to blend the present with the far past […] the shape of her face and head and the look of her eyes conveyed something untouched straight from the past into the present (Murdoch, 2019: 130).

Instead of reacting to her fear, he studies her features, searching for signs of the girl he once loved. Thus, Charles is concerned less with why she looks terrified than with finding proof that the past is still present. Crucially, his first reaction is to rebuild the image of Hartley that he has preserved in his memory. Even though she tells him that her marriage was happy, he does not believe her and begins to imagine a different explanation, asking himself

> [w]hat was I going to do, how was I going to manage myself for the rest of my life now that I had found Hartley again? […] She must have spent her life regretting that she had not married me […] there was no doubt that I must now somehow contrive to devote the rest of my life to Hartley (Murdoch, 2019: 137-138).

Rather than listening to what she says about her life, he convinces himself that she has always regretted losing him and decides to dedicate himself to her. He even imagines that "[p]erhaps I would indeed, through her and through our old childish love, now irremediably chaste, be enabled to become what I had hoped to become when I came away to the sea, pure in heart" (Murdoch, 2019: 139). In this way, Hartley becomes part of his plan to change himself, not an individual with her own wishes and experiences. As Moss argues, "Charles imbues [Hartley] with qualities and emotions the text doesn't support; only his desire creates them" (1986: 229).

This logic extends even to his visit to Hartley and her husband, as Charles does not simply observe how they live. He decides that their marriage must be unhappy because they do not behave the way he expects them to, asserting that "if they *had* (original emphasis) been very happy together, they would both instinctively have wanted to *show off* (original emphasis) this happiness to the intruding outsider" (Murdoch, 2019: 149-150). He thereby applies his own rule, namely that if they do not openly display their happiness, then it cannot be genuine. Thus, the protagonist continues to idealise her the following day:

> I saw a woman who looked like Hartley creeping along by the wall on the far side of the street […] I say 'creeping along' (original emphasis) because that was part of my first vision of her as an old woman, before I knew who she was, and it was this 'old woman' (original emphasis) image that I was seeing now (Murdoch, 2019: 151-152).

Due to the description he provides, it becomes evident that Charles responds less to what he actually sees than to the picture of Hartley he created many years ago. He does not make an effort to consider her present situation or what might explain her movements. Instead, he immediately interprets what he sees as confirmation of the story he has invented about her life. In both encounters, Charles reacts

primarily to his own expectations. He assumes that her marriage must be unhappy because it does not correspond to his idea of happiness, and he reads her appearance according to the fantasy he has maintained since they were young. Hartley becomes someone he adjusts to suit his long-held image of her, shaped more by his memory of the past than by the woman standing before him.

In addition to this, even though Hartley asks him not to visit her without warning again and refuses his help with her runaway son, Titus, Charles twists these moments to fit the narrative he has already invented about their relationship. He writes to Lizzie, a former lover, claiming he is no longer interested in a romantic affair, believing that he "had in some spiritual sense actually married Hartley long ago and was simply not free to look elsewhere" (Murdoch, 2019: 159). Since he does not feel jealous about Lizzie living with Gilbert, he convinces himself that he has changed. Indeed, he reflects:

> Was this new detached generosity, I wondered in passing, a first symptom of that changed and purified form of being which the return of Hartley was going to create in me? Was Hartley, seen not touched, loved not possessed, destined to make me a saint? (Murdoch, 2019: 159).

In the course of these interactions, the narrator illustrates how Charles's moral development is inseparable from his flights of imagination. On the one hand, Murdoch demonstrates that Charles's memories and his desire for Hartley keep him absorbed in the past and influence the way he judges the present. On the other hand, she reveals that the protagonist's failure to separate the present from the past makes him unable to confront reality completely. Another example is given, when he reflects upon old pictures of Hartley and himself and realises that "the images were too terrible, too agonizing, because of the overwhelming smell of youth and happiness which emanated from them" (Murdoch, 2019: 180). Here, Murdoch points out that human beings are often captivated by what cannot be regained and that such an obsession obscures moral perception, as analysed in the earlier chapter. His fixation on the photographs further illustrates what Hopwood

terms the creation of a "dream image" that replaces the real person: "[f]aced with an object that cannot be fully possessed or assimilated, the ego creates for itself an object that can be possessed —a dream image or fantasy that gradually comes to substitute for the real person" (2018: 491).

Significantly, despite the lack of evidence, Charles describes Hartley's husband, Ben, as "a hateful tyrant" (Murdoch, 2019: 176) and treats this as a fact. Simultaneously, he places himself in the role of Hartley's rescuer and resolves to win back his adolescent love, stating that

> I had failed to defend her from a lifetime of unhappiness. How I would cherish her, how console and perfectly love her now […] I reviewed the evidence and I had very little doubt about what it pointed to. Hartley loved me and had long regretted losing me […] She did not love her husband […] She was probably afraid of her husband; but she was much more afraid of her old love for me, still alive, blazing away there like an underground oil fire (Murdoch, 2019: 182).

It is important to emphasise that, although Charles presents his pursuit of Hartley as a duty to protect her, his view of the situation rests on what he wants to believe. He therefore convinces himself that he is acting out of care, yet his conclusions are based more on his own hopes and suspicions than on what Hartley actually says or does. Even when Charles admits his uncertainty, noting that "[f]ear said that if anything were to go terribly badly wrong now I should lose my mind. Reason said that the evidence was not conclusive and could be read in other ways" (Murdoch, 2019: 183), he does not change course. He recognises that the facts could be interpreted differently, but he continues to choose the version that suits him best. As a consequence, Charles is torn between moments of doubt and his determination to pursue the story he has created. Even though he briefly listens to reason, he ultimately follows his desire. His decisions are defined less by what is happening around him than by the future he imagines with Hartley.

Notably, if Dora's visit to the National Gallery changes the way she sees herself and the world around her, Charles does not undergo a similar shift. In *The*

Bell, standing before the paintings, Dora stops thinking about her own worries and begins to pay attention to something outside herself. The experience allows her to stop focusing only on her desires and to look more carefully at the choices she has made. Charles, however, does not experience such a transformation. When he visits the Wallace Collection in London, the paintings do not lead him to question himself. Rather than looking outward, he turns inward and uses the works of art to support his own memories and hopes. Instead of helping him see more clearly, the images draw him deeper into his private story. Faced with paintings that remind him of his past, Charles reflects,

> so many of my women were there; only not Hartley […] I had always run to women as to a refuge. What indeed are women *but* (original emphasis) refuges? […] after a while … one leaves a refuge. Hartley was different, she travelled with me, I had never seen her as a place of safety. She had come inside the circle of myself and was within me, a pure substance of my being, like nerves, like blood (Murdoch, 2019: 196).

The passage reinforces and intensifies Charles's idealised image of Hartley. Although he calls her different from the other women he dismisses as short-term refuges, he still views her through his own longings. For this reason, he cannot find the happiness he seeks: he remains absorbed in himself and unable to recognise Hartley as a separate person. In clinging to this imagined version of Hartley for so long, he may have closed himself off from the kind of relationship that could have made him happy.

The Wallace Collection scene is important because, rather than helping Charles look beyond himself, the paintings lead him back into his own memories. When he stands before "Rembrandt's picture of Titus" and "Titian's Perseus and Andromeda" (Murdoch, 2019: 197), he does not focus on the works as they are. Almost immediately, they call up images of "the sea monster", "the stars", and "holding Hartley's hand in the cinema over forty years ago" (Murdoch, 2019: 197). Thus, instead of looking at the paintings attentively, Charles slips back into old memories once again. He narrates,

> [s]ome workmen were doing something or other downstairs, hammering a lot, flashing lights swarmed and receded [...] I found myself searching my mind [...] when I had lain out on the rocks and seen the ultimate cavern of the stars [...] It was the changing lights in the Odeon cinema where I used to go with Hartley as a child! [...] I was gazing in a dazed way at Titian's picture of Perseus and Andromeda [...] the terrible fanged open mouth of the sea dragon, upon which Perseus was flying down head first. The sea dragon did not quite resemble my sea monster […] the memory [...] was suddenly more disquieting than it had ever been since the first shock of its appearance. I turned quickly away and found myself face to face with, directly opposite, Rembrandt's picture of Titus. So Titus was here too. Titus and the sea monster and the stars and holding Hartley's hand in the cinema over forty years ago (Murdoch, 2019: 197–198).

Jumping from "hammering" to "flashing lights" to the "sea dragon" and finally to Titus and Hartley, the passage may be seen as proof of how quickly Charles's thoughts move from the present moment to memory. Past and present merge, and the paintings become triggers for his fantasy. His experience further echoes Lipps's concept of *Einfühlung*, as he projects his own feelings into the artwork, experiencing it as part of himself (Maibom, 2020: 105). Yet this projection does not lead him to reconsider his assumptions. The paintings do not challenge his view of Hartley; he turns them into further evidence that she needs saving and that he is the one who must do it. Although this aesthetic immersion might resemble what Murdoch calls unselfing, it moves in the opposite direction. The paintings, rather than lessening his self-absorption, seem to strengthen it. Art does not draw his attention outward toward something independent; it becomes material for his fantasy. By contrast, Dora's identification with the bell makes her ring it, thus prompting decisive action and changing the course of events. Whereas Charles's involvement with aesthetic beauty increases his self-isolation, Dora's engagement reduces it. Comparing these two scenes highlights that imagination can work in two ways, as mentioned in the previous chapter: it can either make a subject cling more tightly to a false picture of reality or help them begin to see things differently.

Importantly, the protagonist in *The Sea, The Sea*, continues to confuse what is real with the version of reality he has invented for himself. He turns what he sees into part of a story constructed by his own memories and desires. When he thinks about Hartley, he shifts from the paintings to old memories, then from those memories to fantasies about what their love once was and could be again. For Charles, therefore, Hartley is not simply a woman living her own life; she becomes a symbol of lost youth and perfect love. He sees her as something pure and untouched rather than as a human being who has aged, changed, and made her own choices, as he contemplates,

> Hartley was not a 'new woman' (original emphasis), she was the oldest strongest longest thing in my life […] that 'old bag' (original emphasis) was for me the dearest of all beings and the most precious and unspoilt creature in the world (Murdoch, 2019: 214).

Nicol similarly observes that "[Charles] is not attracted to Hartley physically or for her mind; he wants her because she is an embodiment of a lost world of innocence" (1999: 130). This recollection reflects what Murdoch warns against, specifically the tendency to shape others according to one's own wishes. Charles does not try to view Hartley as she is; he continues to fit her into the role he has already written for her.

On top of that, his own words expose the contradiction which lies at the heart of his desire: "I wanted, in the time that was left to us, to console her as a god consoles. But I also wanted increasingly, and with a violence which almost burnt the tenderness away, to own her, to possess her body and soul" (Murdoch, 2019: 215). Hence, he shifts between presenting himself as her saviour and treating her as something he must control. His longing is not simply to love her but to fix her within his narrative and prevent her from slipping beyond his reach. This way of thinking leads him to spy on Hartley and her husband, and when he overhears their quarrel, he takes it as a confirmation that she is unhappy, just as he had expected. Even so, his response highlights the hollowness of his pursuit, as he contemplates that this is "exactly the evidence which I wanted, I seemed to be

distracted with grief and fear and a kind of nausea now that I had it" (Murdoch, 2019: 231). In fact, this piece of "evidence" does not ease his mind but further amplifies his unease, underscoring his inability to see Hartley as she really is. As Moss argues, "Hartley stirs Charles's passion for rescue […] he is transformed into the knight (an elderly party) freeing the imprisoned maiden (an old bag)" (1986: 229).

Against this backdrop, the appearance of Hartley's adopted son Titus reinforces Charles's fantasy-driven distortion. With Titus' arrival, his obsession deepens, and he starts to imagine himself as part of their family. In fact, he immediately begins to view himself as a substitute for Titus' father, creating a fantasy in which the three of them are together in France, declaring, "I *would* (original emphasis) make her happy, I would. I would make him happy and successful and free" (Murdoch, 2019: 305). He therefore believes that he alone can make her happy through his actions. Hartley, however, rejects his attempt to control her. Even if Charles tries to reunite Hartley with her son after his two-year absence, the narrator observes that "her moment […] was now over, and the cruel husband-dominated time whose slave she was had driven even Titus out of her head" (Murdoch, 2019: 316). What matters in this passage is not that Hartley appears trapped, but that Charles continues to speak of her as if she were a prisoner whom he must save.

The protagonist similarly describes Hartley's situation as if she were confined in Plato's cave, telling Titus that he wants "to let [his] mother out of that cage", thereby presenting himself once again as the hero who must save her (Murdoch, 2019: 318). Simultaneously, he imagines himself as a theatre director preparing to "pull the whole bag of tricks down on her head" (Murdoch, 2019: 319). Paradoxically, instead of freeing Hartley, he imprisons her against her will in his home, which represents the culmination of his obsession. The fact that Charles tries to manipulate others and situations at Shruff End suggests that he indeed did not abjure his magic, because he is occupying the position he wanted to abandon: being a stage director. Yet it might be seen as rather ironic that, while

he thinks he controls events, he restricts Hartley's freedom and distorts the whole situation.

In general, Shruff End functions as a moral microcosm because each character who enters Charles's property challenges his fantasies and tries to confront him with reality. As Tucker explains,

> [a]s the rapacious magician of the London stage, he had long confused illusion with reality. Worse, his so-called retirement has turned his fantasy-governed inner world outward, and Hartley, a figure of his dream world, becomes his reality. The illusions he once thought he controlled on stage now control him (1986: 386).

As such, Tucker contends that, while Charles worked as a theatre director, illusions were part of his profession, and that the same dynamic now determines his life offstage. At Shruff End the conflict between fantasy and the real world becomes more intense and more visible, as Charles begins to treat the individuals who enter his house not as agents in their own right but as roles within the play he is staging However, the other fictional figures in *The Sea, The Sea* challenge Charles's illusion about his love for Hartley in different ways. Rosina describes it as "imaginary" (Murdoch, 2019: 212). Hartley herself tells him, "I suppose I love you, I've never forgotten you, and when I saw you I felt it all again, but it's something childish, it isn't part of the real world" (Murdoch, 2019: 327). James asks whether rescuing her might be considered a morally justified action, and even Titus shows distress as a result of Charles's attempt to keep his mother imprisoned. Although each of them questions his version of events, Charles refuses to listen. Rosina's later accusation, "you're living in a dream world, a rather nasty one [… Titus] will vanish out of your life like everything else has done, because you can't grasp the stuff of reality" (Murdoch, 2019: 368–369), states openly what the others have been indicating throughout. Because of this, Shruff End can be called a moral laboratory, as Charles's moral vision is tested in practice. Every time reality contradicts him, he chooses fantasy. The repeated clashes between his interpretation and the responses of others demonstrate, in concrete situations, Murdoch's philosophical claim that fantasy prevents genuine attention to other

people. While the others see the consequences of his actions, Charles continues to cling to his story, treating Hartley as if she belonged to him and were the key to his happiness.

Most decisively, when his cousin James arrives at Shruff End, Charles immediately feels that his self-constructed fantasy is under threat. He admits that "[h]is presence in the house would change everything, even the kettle. I could not tolerate or manage James here, I could not continue to run my life with him upon the scene" (Murdoch, 2019: 376). What troubles him is simple, because James cannot be directed or absorbed into his plans. Unlike the other fictional figures, he does not respond emotionally or defensively; instead, he questions Charles directly about his motives. In fact, James serves as the voice of reason, which is made evident earlier in this work of fiction, when Charles describes his long attachment to Hartley, and James interrupts him:

> [Y]ou may be deluding yourself in thinking that you have really loved this woman all these years. What's the proof? […] Perhaps it's something you've invented now […] Another thought I have is that your rescue idea is pure imagination, pure fiction. I feel you cannot be serious. Do you really know what her marriage is like? You say she's unhappy, most people are (Murdoch, 2019: 205).

By asking for proof and questioning whether his cousin has recently invented his feelings, James refuses to accept his rescue plan unquestioningly. He does not deny that Charles cares for Hartley, yet he points out that his cousin is using his own emotions as evidence about Hartley's marriage and life. As Conradi argues, "[a]ll attachments are vulnerable and finally impermanent, and the best love would be unpossessive" (1989: 247), an assertion that James underscores in his last conversation with Charles:

> You've built a cage of needs and installed her in an empty space in the middle. The strong feelings are all round her – vanity, jealousy, revenge, your love for your youth – they aren't focused on her, they don't touch her. She seems to be their prisoner, but you don't harm her at all. You are using her image, a doll, a simulacrum, it's an exorcism.

> Soon you will start to see her as a wicked enchantress. Then you will have nothing to do except forgive her and that will be within your capacity (Murdoch, 2019: 519).

Accordingly, the warning James had given about the dangers of fantasy is brought into question when Charles attempts to keep Hartley at Shruff End, with James intervening as a moral counterpoint. He engages Peregrine, Gilbert, and Titus to discuss the matter openly and settle it in a rational way:

> You have got a difficult and, as far as I can see, fairly urgent decision to make and if you would only consent to talk to us we could help you to make it in a rational way, and we could also help you to *carry it out* (original emphasis) in a rational way. You must see that you need help, you *need* (original emphasis) it (Murdoch, 2019: 389).

Thus, James presses Charles to view the situation accurately for what it is, arguing that it is an invention of his own mind and challenging his belief that it is morally right to "rescue" Hartley without her consent (Murdoch, 2019: 392–393). Reality intervenes when Hartley starts shouting and banging on the door, demanding to be released (Murdoch, 2019: 394). In that moment, Charles can no longer maintain his idea that he is indeed protecting her. Hartley's protest confirms that she is being held against her will, and what he calls a rescue appears plainly as imprisonment. Nonetheless, Charles does not change his consciousness out of his conviction that Hartley, even after being brought back to her husband, would return to him. Nor does he understand the harm he caused, and he continues to imagine a future in which she recognises that she belongs with him. Peregrine's comment that he will "wither away like Prospero did when he went back to Milan" (Murdoch, 2019: 467) brings him down to earth. Once the storm is over, Charles, like Prospero, remains powerless, alone and without anyone to control.

Only through Titus' death does Charles begin to confront the truth. Reflecting on his failure to protect Hartley's son from the dangers of the sea, he comprehends that

> the possession of Titus […] was somehow the point, the pure gift, that which the gods had really sent [him], along with so much irrelevant packaging[.] That was what [he] should have grasped, that and not the chimera […] My vanity destroyed him. It is a matter of causality. The payment for faults is automatic. I relaxed my hold and he lay dead (Murdoch, 2019: 538-539).

As a consequence, Charles starts to grasp the ethical impact of his egoism. He admits that his fixation on Hartley made him careless and distracted. While he could have paid attention to Titus as a real and vulnerable young man, he treated him as part of his larger fantasy. He also acknowledges that Titus' death was not a tragic accident and that it was his own negligence. For the first time, therefore, he recognises that his actions had real consequences, as he reminisces,

> [w]hen did I begin to relax my hold upon Hartley, or rather upon her image, her double, the Hartley of my mind? Have I relaxed my hold, did it happen before, or is it only happening now, when I can look back over the summer and see my acts and thoughts as those of a madman? (Murdoch, 2019: 574-575).

Charles comes to distinguish between the real woman and the version he had invented. It is noteworthy that in his statement, he distances himself from the illusions that once seemed justified. The question is no longer how to win Hartley back, but when he started to loosen his grip on the image he had created. Moreover, by admitting, "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" (Murdoch, 2019: 583), Charles openly admits that he reshaped reality to suit his desires. Rather than viewing the world for what it is, he imposed his own meaning upon it. However, this confession does not undo the harm he has caused, but it brings to light that he is starting to recognise how his imagination, which once made him feel powerful, prevented him from seeing things as they were.

2.3 Conclusion

Taken together, across *The Bell* and *The Sea, The Sea*, Murdoch creates tightly structured moral microcosms in which illusion and ego are sharply confronted by reality. Within these self-contained moral worlds, Imber Court for Dora Greenfield and Shruff End for Charles Arrowby, the protagonists are forced to examine the limits of their fantasies. Murdoch's juxtaposition of Michael Meade and James Arrowby as moral mirrors underscores the ethical dimensions of both novels, as the tension between illusion and ethical insight exposes the challenging movement from fantasy to understanding reality and others. Moreover, these microcosms are not designed as escapes but as ethical laboratories that enhance the impact of fantasy and provide a controlled environment for developing moral awareness.

At the outset, Dora and Charles illustrate how the ego is caught up in illusion. Inhabiting a world of playful rebellion and apparent independence, Dora remains largely insensitive to the consequences of her behaviour. Charles similarly retreats to the seaside in search of freedom but ends up trying to gain control over the atmosphere in his home and over Hartley, whom he continues to see through the story he has invented about their past. He presents himself as an artist, a director, and even a moral authority, and in doing so, he avoids recognising how selfish and insensitive he has become. He uses his imagination to reinterpret events in his favour, keeping his self-image intact and preventing him from seeing the truth. In both novels, Murdoch shows that illusion can feel comforting, and learning to see others without reshaping them to fit one's own desires might be difficult.

In contrast, Michael and James embody what a more responsible way of living looks like. Michael is portrayed as someone who regularly puts others'

needs before his own. He considers his actions seriously and makes an effort to behave honestly and to avoid all kinds of excess. Although he is aware of his weaknesses and inner conflicts, he does not excuse himself or deny his mistakes. On the contrary, he accepts responsibility and attempts to behave with care toward others. Through Michael, Murdoch conveys that happiness does not come from simply getting what one wants, but from holding back one's impulses and thinking about how one's actions affect others. His path demonstrates that a life guided by moral attention involves not only effort and struggle but also a foundation of peace and integrity. In this way, Michael stands in stark contrast to Dora, who only begins to learn how to see others more justly and to assume responsibility.

In a similar way, James Arrowby in *The Sea, The Sea*, illustrates most clearly what Murdoch's moral outlook looks like in practice, largely because he does not seem to chase after happiness. Unlike Charles, he is not guided by a need to control others or to relive the past. When Charles begins to act irrationally, James does not lose his temper and encourages him to discuss the matter openly to find a practical solution. He neither involves himself emotionally nor imposes his will on Charles. James does not seek to control circumstances for his own benefit but accepts events as they unfold and allows others to make their own decisions. Through this, he stands in stark contrast to Charles, who seeks to manipulate those around him.

The difference between these characters intensifies the clash between illusion and reality. Dora and Charles act according to their wishes and the stories they invent about their lives, while Michael and James try to view situations as they are and respond without imposing their own desires on others. In *The Bell*, Dora grows by admitting her mistakes and deciding to live independently, following Michael's encouragement to take responsibility for her life and her work. Her development highlights the struggle between acting on impulse and learning to consider the effects of one's choices. In *The Sea, The Sea*, Charles's change is more complicated. At first, he believes he can control both Hartley and the story of his life. As time passes, however, his plans fail, his fantasies collapse,

and he is forced to face the fact that others cannot be formed to fit his desires. In each novel, moral awareness does not arrive suddenly. It develops slowly, through difficult encounters with others and the painful recognition that one's own version of events might not match reality.

Murdoch's depiction of these moral microcosms underscores the interpersonal basis of ethical attention. The moral commitment of Michael and James, whose clarity of judgment, restraint, and attentiveness highlight the ethical implications of the protagonists' fantasies and compel Dora and Charles to confront their illusions, reinforces this idea. Serving as counterparts and guides, Michael and James reveal the distortions, shortcomings, and consequences of self-absorbed desire. By showing how these characters clash, Murdoch implies that real change comes with recognising that it is senseless to try to control others or to imagine them to be what they are not.

In conclusion, in these small, isolated moral worlds, Dora and Charles have to face the fact that the stories they have told themselves about their lives and others do not hold up. They do not change in the same way or at the same speed. Dora slowly admits her mistakes and takes responsibility for what she has done, while Charles only begins to understand himself after his actions have led to harm and loss. Yet he does not fully break with his earlier habits to reshape reality according to his desires. Importantly, the way Dora and Charles change in fits and starts reflects what Conradi sees as central to Murdoch's view of moral life:

> Murdoch is wholly of our time in her insistence that 'truth' cannot be secured. There are short glimpses of clarity and insight but the single Big Truth (original emphasis) is always illusory. Conceptual mastery falsifies and all strategies of possession are mocked by time. Her genius has been to marry such a sense of truth-as-infinite-regress with a notion of 'towardness' whereby it is, incidentally, containable within the traditional novel […] Murdoch's [fiction] is suspicious of all absolutes, especially those of 'self-realisation', and despite showing that moral

> change is in some sense goalless she does not evacuate it of meaning:
> on the contrary, she reconstitutes it (1989: 262).

Murdoch expresses this in how they experience art: In the National Gallery, Dora is momentarily unselfed through the paintings. She stops thinking only about her own wishes and gives her attention to the artwork in front of her. Unlike when she rings the old bell, which embodies the concept of *Einfühlung*, in which she merges with the object and loses distance, this earlier encounter preserves the separation between herself and what she sees. Charles, by contrast, never experiences unselfing. In the Wallace Collection, he responds to the paintings through a form of *Einfühlung* that strengthens his own point of view, links the artworks to his memories of Hartley, and turns them into part of the story he is telling about his life. Whereas the others reshape reality according to their own desires, Michael and James respond differently. Through their actions, Murdoch suggests that happiness does not come from getting what one wants, but from stepping back, listening carefully, and allowing others to act freely. These moral microcosms, therefore, become places where the characters are forced to confront the consequences of their behaviour and to accept that love and art require honesty and the willingness to give up self-deception. As Murdoch writes, "[i]f we are ever to know the Good, we must forget ourselves" (1970: 66).

Chapter III
From Language to Love: Art, Perception and Empathy in *The Black Prince*

> Human beings need fantasies. The novelist is potentially the *greatest truth-teller of them all*, but he is also an expert fantasy-monger.
>
> Iris Murdoch

Taking up Murdoch's claim that the novelist is both a truth-teller and a fantasy-monger, *The Black Prince*, published in 1973, can be read, building on the theoretical framework developed in the earlier chapters, as Iris Murdoch's most detailed study of moral illusion in art and self-interpretation. Where *The Bell* and *The Sea, The Sea* analysed fantasy and ego in everyday life, *The Black Prince* foregrounds how language, narrative voice, and aesthetic sensibility influence the reader's moral understanding. In this way, the novel tests the limits of ethical judgment by immersing the reader in a morally questionable perspective. This literary work focuses on the character's inner thoughts, feelings, and lived experiences, which align with Murdoch's psychological realism. It presents a social setting that reflects modern life, and it portrays its fictional figures through close attention to their thoughts and motives, helping the reader understand their desires and self-perceptions. In this fictional text, moral failure emerges as an ordinary part of everyday life rather than as an exceptional or sudden event. More precisely, it develops gradually from ordinary desires, self-serving explanations,

and control over the narrative, all of which can seem persuasive when viewed from a single perspective. Indeed, *The Black Prince* is written as a memoir by Bradley Pearson, a writer who has never achieved success. He writes his account from prison while awaiting his trial on a murder charge, beginning by explaining how he was arrested and then describing the events that, in his version of the story, led to Arnold's death. Throughout his narrative, Bradley repeatedly interrupts himself in order to justify his choices and present his actions as reasonable. However, his account is followed by four postscripts written by other characters, who comment directly on his story, correct details, and question his motives. By describing the same events differently, they expose inconsistencies in Bradley's narrative and encourage the reader to question how far his version can be trusted.

Accordingly, this novel can be read as a strong study of negative empathy because it offers deep insight into a morally questionable consciousness and actively seduces the reader into accepting it as credible. The unreliable first-person narrative voice deceives the reader into believing the narrator is a suffering, innocent character. Thus, Bradley uses the transformative power of language to portray his actions as misunderstood and forced upon him by circumstance, leading the reader to see him as the story's victim. Moreover, he can be described as an "auto-illusionist" because he not only distorts reality but also fully believes in his own innocence, which makes the narrative more persuasive. Murdoch renders Bradley's justifications ethically unconvincing at a critical distance, yet uses them to direct the reader's affective response towards the limits of empathy as a moral guide. Hence, *The Black Prince* exemplifies how negative empathy is mediated by inner focalisation and discursive persuasion in the narrative. The reader accepts Bradley's account not because they share his ethical convictions but because they are constantly exposed to his voice, which makes his viewpoint feel familiar.

Significantly, such close identification with the protagonist is sustained precisely because the story is fictional. The reader follows Bradley's account, knowing that no real intervention is required outside the novel. As discussed in

the first chapter, catharsis does not make the reader morally better but creates a temporary distance from everyday responsibility. The audience can share the viewpoint of a morally flawed narrator without having to interrupt him, argue with him, or bear the consequences of his behaviour. Bradley's story draws the reader in not by proving that he is innocent, but by allowing close emotional involvement while freeing them from real-life consequence. Unlike the kind of attention described earlier, which demands careful and honest engagement with reality, catharsis permits intense feeling without requiring a reassessment of one's sense of right and wrong. For this reason, empathy in this context proves morally unstable, since it may lead the reader to suspend judgment and to imaginatively engage with a narrator whose perspective is misleading. Murdoch deliberately exploits this instability in order to question the roles of art, love, and narrative within illusion. At this level, *The Black Prince* can also be read, as Conradi suggests, as "something like an artistic manifesto on its author's part" because it tests Murdoch's moral and aesthetic positions through its own narrative form (1989: 230).

The Black Prince is introduced by an editor's foreword that, from the very start, makes unclear who owns the story, who can be trusted, and who is in charge. The editor, who can be identified as the "dear friend" (Murdoch, 1973: 9) Bradley refers to when telling his story, presents himself as its publisher and as directly involved in its narrative. This "dear friend" could also be read as indirectly inviting the reader to view the course of events from Bradley's perspective. Indeed, the editor states, "[h]e needed someone to believe him and someone to believe in him. He found me, his alter ego, at the time needful" (Murdoch, 1973: 9). Thus, he defends his involvement not by providing proof that the protagonist is innocent, but by claiming that people had to believe him. This moves the emphasis from evidence to trust, treating trust as a form of support. As Martha Nussbaum (2003) observes in her introduction, "its editor, P. A. Loxias, is a proxy for the god Apollo himself. (Loxias is one of Apollo's common epithets.)". Conradi's account of Murdoch's own reflections on Apollo helps to explain why this opening detail

matters. Murdoch understands Apollo not only as the god of art but also as linked to what she calls the "black Eros" which is associated with destruction and violence:

> What happens to Bradley, from one point of view, is that he is saved as an artist, taught 'the pain and final joy gained from loss of self and loving attention to the world'. From another point of view the 'flaying' he undergoes in the book destroys him, and at Caen she reminded her audience that Apollo, as a rapist and violent murderer, is by no means simply to be regarded as a 'good' figure. He is a figure of ambiguous power […] Bradley at the end can be seen as a minor artist whom the god rewards and comforts for his patient zeal and longing (Caen, 1978, cited in Conradi, 1989: 188).

Read in this light, from the very outset of the novel, the power that Murdoch attributes to art is not framed as a guarantee for goodness or truth but as inclined to danger and desire, leading to unclear moral situations. In fact, Loxias' foreword implies that artistic creation is both compelling and dangerous, capable of rendering painful experience attractive:

> Man's creative struggle, his search for wisdom and truth, is a love story […] art gives charm to terrible things is perhaps its glory, perhaps its curse. Art is a doom. It has been the doom of Bradley Pearson. And in a quite different way it is my own […] Every artist is an unhappy lover. And unhappy lovers want to tell their story (Murdoch, 1973: 9-10).

As previously argued, Murdoch's understanding of art is fundamentally ambivalent. On the one hand, Murdoch argues that "the appreciation of beauty in art or nature […] is a completely adequate entry into (and not just analogy of) the good life, since it is the checking of selfishness in the interest of seeing the real" (1970: 63). On the other hand, she agrees with Plato that art can be dangerous because it can lead individuals "to indulge secretly through [it] feelings which they would be ashamed to entertain in real life" (Murdoch, 1977: 6). This double

character helps to explain the editor's foreword: Art remains morally ambiguous because it is driven by Eros, understood by Murdoch, inspired by Plato, as the "orientation of desire" (1992: 497). Loxias' words reflect this instability of Eros itself, when he asserts that, "[e]very artist is an unhappy lover", insofar as artistic creation may lead either to "liberated truth-seeking creative imagination" or to "egoistic fantasy" (Murdoch, 1992: 321).

However, the second foreword, written by Bradley, challenges this paradoxical view of art, as he maintains his story to be a work of good art that represents the truth (Murdoch, 1973: 11-12). Recalling Murdoch's differentiation of good and bad art, where good art is able to unself the individual, also Bradley believes to have unselfed himself, by declaring to have become a man of greater wisdom and generosity (Murdoch, 1973: 11). When he claims that, "works of art, and thus whole lives of men, are spoilt by blinking and moving quickly on" (Murdoch, 1973: 13), he draws on Murdoch's concept of attention as an exercise in becoming morally good and artistically great. According to this view, genuine attention to detail and to the world is only possible when the moral agent learns not to blink and move too quickly on. Nevertheless, his self-depiction contrasts with his later statement: "Sometimes I saw myself as an ageing Don Juan, but the majority of my conquests belonged to the world of fantasy" (Murdoch, 1973: 15). Thus, the portrayal of himself remains ambiguous, inviting the reader to question the reliability of his narrative.

It is precisely this ambiguity that sets the stage for his main narrative, subtitled *A Celebration of Love*, where Bradley's understanding of truth is constantly brought into question. Conradi argues that this subtitle is centred on the Platonic Eros and its connection to artistic and moral insight, and he consequently divides the narrative into three sections (1989: 185): Bradley's liaison with his friend's and literary peer's daughter Julian Baffin, with whom he claims to have fallen in love; then his confession of love and the reactions of the other literary characters; ultimately leading to a runaway love and Arnold Baffin's rapid intervention. Conradi's structural framework makes it easier to understand

Bradley's account of love and truth, and his view that art can shape the meaning of both. Building on this framework, the analysis is organised into three stages that trace the narrative's development.

Bradley Pearson introduces himself as a fifty-eight-year-old retired tax inspector and unsuccessful writer, who nonetheless considers himself to be an artist. He repeatedly states his intention to leave London for a certain time to be able to write a masterpiece, but his departure is always postponed, and the destination is intentionally kept secret. The narrative does not open with a retreat into solitude as in *The Sea, The Sea*, but with Arnold's phone call, in which he announces that he has killed his wife. From the opening pages, Murdoch places the main character in a situation which requires attentiveness to others, instead of granting him the solitude he seeks. Additionally, the following opening encounter between Bradley Pearson and Arnold Baffin establishes the contrast between them as writers. Bradley describes him as someone who produces one book each year, a prolific writer of popular fiction who rarely disappears from public view (Murdoch, 1973: 22). Although Bradley admits that he helped start Arnold's career, he defends himself by saying he is not envious of Arnold's success because "it seemed to [him] that he achieved success at the expense of merit" (Murdoch, 1973: 29). Accordingly, Bradley regards Arnold's writing as mediocre. In this way, by presenting himself as superior to Arnold, he explains his own lack of success by viewing popularity as evidence of artistic weakness.

His defensive attitude is not limited to art but extends to his understanding of other people as well. Bradley first misleads Arnold about the identity of his brother-in-law, Francis Marloe. He later mentions, in an offhand way, that Francis lost his job as a doctor because of irresponsible behaviour that he says he "is not interested [in]" (Murdoch, 1973: 48). In this respect, this detail suggests that he maintains an emotional distance from his own actions, thereby evading responsibility. Bradley makes this attitude explicit by stating that

> [b]eing a real person oneself is a matter of setting up limits and drawing lines and saying no. I don't want to be a nebulous bit of ectoplasm straying around in other people's lives. That sort of vague sympathy with everybody precludes any real understanding of anybody (Murdoch, 1973: 48).

It is therefore not surprising that Bradley's emphasis on limits and distance also defines his conception of art, which opposes curiosity and attention to detail. This point of view becomes more evident in his debate with Arnold over the creation of fiction. For Arnold, the essence of being a writer lies in close attention to concrete detail, consequently, he asserts that writers should know people and understand the situations and circumstances in which they act. By contrast, Bradley does not frame curiosity as a means of understanding but as intrusive. He considers art to be a matter of imagination rather than perception and insists that attention to detail leads to superficiality rather than to truth. According to Bradley, in the absence of imagination, writing is reduced into two flawed modes: On the one hand, an excess of "stupid details" and on the other hand, "empty dreams" (Murdoch, 1973: 49). He maintains instead that "[a]rt comes out of endless restraint and silence" (Murdoch, 1973: 50). Importantly, as A. S. Byatt notes, Bradley demonstrates a strong sensitivity to the demands of artistic perfection, but he is also "driven by a sense of destiny, of direction, of a source of power" that shifts ambiguously between "art, love, or fantasy" (1976: 36-37). Arnold disputes this position, asserting that Bradley idealises art and treats suffering as a way to justify his inability to write. Nevertheless, Bradley holds on to his view, insisting on being "an artist, that is […] a dedicated person" rather than a writer and rejects Arnold as someone who "wrote too much, too fast", calling him "a talented journalist" (Murdoch, 1973: 50).

This contrast is further reinforced by Bradley's secrecy and the sense of mystery surrounding him. Although he tells Arnold about his upcoming departure for Italy, he keeps his destination secret, since Arnold also plans to travel there as well. By keeping his destination a secret, Bradley implies that art is something that

requires distancing oneself from others rather than connecting with them. Additionally, Bradley quotes Shakespeare and acknowledges the ethical problem in his own stance, admitting, “I am, I fear, one of those who, according to Shakespeare, are ‘fit for treasons, stratagems and spoils’” (Murdoch, 1973: 50-51). Crucially, this statement illustrates that he already knows his behaviour to be problematic, since the idea of himself as an artist is connected to manipulation, which will strongly influence his perceptions and actions throughout the narrative.

Before Bradley’s relationship with Julian is introduced, Murdoch places him in a situation that requires affective response and ethical responsibility, namely the arrival of his distressed sister, Priscilla. While the protagonist is preparing to leave London in order to write, she arrives to seek comfort because of her unhappy marriage, and because he is the only living relative she has. Bradley, however, responds by judging her: He contrasts himself with Priscilla by stating that “I am an educated and cultivated person through my own zeal, efforts, and talents. Priscilla had no zeal and talents and made no efforts” (Murdoch, 1973: 67). In doing so, he refuses to acknowledge her suffering and regards it as her personal failure. More tellingly, Bradley admits that he “[does] not want to be involved in any mess of Priscilla’s and [does] not even want to have to be sorry for [her]” (Murdoch, 1973: 71). By generalising his sister’s condition and claiming that “all married people are unhappy” (Murdoch, 1973: 73), the protagonist overlooks her individuality, avoids engaging with her feelings and thoughts, and shows little compassion for her situation.

The main character is aware of his limits, nonetheless his attention remains directed on himself, even though the following confession underscores his honesty: “I was suddenly deeply frightened by the possibility of having my sister on my hands. I simply did not love her enough to be of any use to her, and it seemed wiser to make this plain at once” (Murdoch, 1973: 74). In addition to this, when Priscilla attempts to kill herself for the first time, Bradley presents himself to be rather passive, not knowing what to do and narrates this episode in a comic and chaotic way, with several characters arriving and no one taking full

responsibility. Indeed, he treats this situation as a disturbance which impedes his writing and, immediately afterwards, addresses Loxias, reflecting on himself as an artist instead of focusing on his sister's health. Bradley writes,

> [t]his direct speaking is a kind of relief […] There is an element of confession […] a relief to be able to stand back, even to admit failure […] I feel a calmness, a sense of having done my best […] There are moments, I know, when I must seem to you like a sort of monomaniac […] Perhaps any artist must be such a maniac, one who feels that he is God […] Art […] is telling of truth, and is the only available method for the telling of certain truths (Murdoch, 1973: 79-80).

What is important is not responding to his sister's need but "having done [his] best" by reflecting and confessing.

Seen in this light, being an artist allows Bradley to justify his way of seeing without questioning or changing it. This point is supported by Bradley's comment:

> When I think of my sister I feel pity, annoyance, guilt, disgust and it is in the 'light' (original emphasis) of these that I present her, crippled and diminished by my perception itself. How can I correct these faults, my dear friend and comrade? (Murdoch, 1973: 82).

In reality, he is perfectly aware of his distorted perception of Priscilla. Yet, by asking how to correct it, Bradley places his own problem in the foreground. He makes the situation about himself and fails to address his sister's pain, leading the reader to empathise only with his difficulty. Through the phrasing of "dear friend and comrade", he also opens a space for the reader, implicitly trying to make him his accomplice. In this way, the reader is asked to understand him rather than to judge him. As a result, the episode is unsettling, as Bradley's thoughts may provoke discomfort or even disgust, yet the reader may still be impressed by the apparent truthfulness of his insight. The audience understands him without approving but nonetheless empathises with Bradley's struggle rather than with

Priscilla's suffering. He ends his reflections addressed to Loxias and, indirectly, to the reader by stating that irony lies at the centre of his writing (Murdoch, 1973: 80-81). Irony is presented as a way to tell the truth in a world that is both comic and painful. Through irony, Bradley is allowed to speak in an honest way about suffering and failure, while keeping himself emotionally and morally distant from those who suffer. Bradley later insists that "[w]e care absolutely about that with which we can identify ourselves. A saint would identify himself with everything. Only there are, so my wise friend tells me, no saints" (Murdoch, 1973: 108). Thus, for the protagonist, care depends on self-projection, a mechanism already discussed in chapter one of this thesis. Caring can be understood as seeing aspects of oneself in another agent. This is possible only when a person can imagine their own experiences in the other's situation, which can then lead to genuine concern for the other subject. Bradley cannot identify with Priscilla's suffering, a limitation that renders him incapable of either caring for her or saving her.

After having defined Bradley's character in the last pages, it is clear that he takes truthfulness seriously and that art is central to how he understands himself. Artistic creation is not only his vocation, but the lens through which he judges himself and others. As he places primary importance on presenting what he sees as truthful in his writing, he treats ethical responsibility toward others as a secondary concern. This pattern manifests itself again in Bradley's liaison with Julian Baffin, where love functions as an instrument for his *magnum opus*. Yet, before he falls in love with her, he involves himself with her mother, Rachel, a situation that already anticipates the way Bradley understands love, since he does not take his involvement with Rachel seriously. Significantly, he admits later to Loxias, that "[v]anity and anxiety had involved me with Rachel, and envy (of Arnold) and pity and sort of love and certainly an intermittent play of physical desire" (Murdoch, 1973: 184). By contrast, Rachel asks him to commit himself to her: "[W]e must have an alliance which is forever. Nothing else will do, and only *you* (original emphasis) will do" (Murdoch, 1973: 128), which is, however, a demand that he finds too limiting. Consequently, he aestheticises the situation and

asserts that "[o]ne of the many respects, dear friend, in which life is unlike art is this: characters in art can have unassailable dignity, whereas characters in life have none" (Murdoch, 1973: 123).

Moreover, when he stresses that he cannot feel guilty because it would disrupt his artistic genius, Rachel's touch challenges his ability to hold that stance. He then reframes the moment as material for art, asking, "[h]ave I not just been speculating whether Rachel's sweet, unexpected affections might not set free the talent which I had so long known of, believed in, and nursed in vain?" (Murdoch, 1973: 143). What follows is that Bradley anticipates the reader's judgment and tries to forestall it. He imagines the reader's interpretation of his motives, particularly that he uses morality to hide his sexual desire (Murdoch, 1973: 143) and, therefore, explains:

> I would like to make it clear that any explanation along these lines is not only over-simplified and 'coarse', it is also entirely wide of the mark […] I was not such a shallow fool as to, imagine that a trivial sexual release would bring me the great freedom for which I had sought, nor had I in any way confused animal instinct with godhead. And yet, so complex are minds and so deeply intermingled are their faculties that one kind of change often images or prefigures another of, as it seems, a quite different sort (Murdoch, 1973: 143-144).

Through this defence, Bradley presents himself as a reflective character in order to persuade the reader to accept his logic and apparent honesty rather than to judge his behaviour, thereby exercising control over his story. His appeal to mental complexity may convince the readership, but it turns his responsibility into an explanation. This stress on a rule-based morality is captured by Conradi in his description of Bradley:

> What distinguishes Bradley from anybody else in the tale is guilt and spinsterishness. He is the most censorious and repressed of the books' many egoists. He calls himself to Rachel 'pre-permissive' and adds that

> ‘one *doesn’t* (original emphasis), with one’s best friend’s wife’ and indeed he doesn’t. He tells Rachel priggishly that ‘morals is simple’ and is shown as trying – and failing – to live by these simplicities (1989: 192).

In contrast to Murdoch’s view that morality rests on careful and loving attention, Bradley treats ethics mainly as a set of restraints. By viewing ethics as a simple matter, he avoids examining his own motives and facing the consequences of his actions.

It is not surprising that, when he fails to follow this principle, he later admits his actions were “blameworthy” (Murdoch, 1973: 188), and then turns to a discussion of the limits of self-knowledge:

> There is thus an eternal discrepancy between the self-knowledge which we gain by observing ourselves objectively and the self-awareness which we have of ourselves subjectively: a discrepancy which probably makes it impossible for us ever to arrive at the truth. Our self-knowledge is too abstract, our self-awareness is too intimate and swoony and dazed (Murdoch, 1973: 189).

By foregrounding the limits of knowing oneself, the protagonist claims that no one can explain what human consciousness is made of (Murdoch, 1973: 189). Hence, Bradley himself frames the self as an incomplete artwork that needs to be shaped through art or love and not through moral responsiveness or attention to others:

> [A]lmost all our natural preoccupations are low ones, and in most cases the rag-bag of consciousness is only unified by the experience of great art or of intense love. Neither of these was relevant to my messy and absent-minded going-on (Murdoch, 1973: 190).

This is precisely the point at which Julian enters the narrative as a kind of aesthetic resolution.

It is within this framework that Bradley's relationship with Julian does not begin as a romance, but with his interpretation of *Hamlet*. When she asks him why Ophelia could not save Hamlet, he answers in a way that anticipates and excuses his own failure: "Because, my dear Julian, pure ignorant young girls cannot save complicated neurotic over-educated older men from disaster, however much they kid themselves that they can" (Murdoch, 1973: 196). Seen in this way, Bradley's reading indicates that he does not perceive Julian as someone who could unself him, but rather as someone who inspires him through love. Thus, from the outset, this way of speaking establishes an unequal relationship between them. Bradley frames Julian's youth and innocence as an ideal image, and this framing leaves her with little power over him. She is not positioned to question his self-focused view or to change what happens next. Notably, Byatt, Conradi, and Nussbaum draw attention to the fact that Bradley's way of interpreting serves to excuse and protect himself, rather than to change how he understands either other moral agents or his own actions (Byatt, 1976; Conradi, 1989; Nussbaum, 2003).

Within this dynamic, the novel suggests that Bradley loses control over his narrative for a short time, as Conradi writes,

> [t]he action of the novel teaches him a loving tolerance learnt only through Bradley's seizure by Eros and concomitant access to a greater openness. The point is made at the moment of his falling in love. Both he and Julian have been seating in his hot, needlessly stuffy flat, when he opens the window, and lets in, as it were, contingency: 'a massed-up buzz of various noise filled the room, cars, voices, the endless hum of London's being' (1989: 202).

In this very moment, something changes, as the main figure opens himself to the world and lets in the reality around him. This opening, nevertheless, proves fragile. Bradley soon reabsorbs the outside world and returns to controlling his narrative through his own way of seeing and imagining things. When Julian mentions having played Hamlet once, Bradley does not engage with her understanding of

the role but asks her to describe the costume she wore. While she speaks, he closes the window and

> the London buzz became indistinct, something internal, something in the mind, and we were alone in a warm small thingy solitude. I stared at the girl. She was dreamy, combing her layers of greeny-golden hair with long fingers, seeing herself as Hamlet, sword in hand (Murdoch, 1973: 201).

Bradley leaves Julian no chance to unsettle him because her image is constructed by his fantasy. His attention becomes focused on his perception of her, but not in a Murdochian way, as Bradley treats her as a kind of muse. Additionally, Murdoch describes the transition from openness to enclosure so smoothly that the reader is inclined to perceive it as natural. Ultimately, the audience is immersed in Bradley's perspective, this closeness, however, serves as a form of negative empathy as it restricts the reader's capacity to perceive Julian as an individual beyond the role his fantasy allows her to be.

This interplay between love's capacity to move beyond the self and its distortion of moral perception is made explicit by Conradi, who argues that

> [t]he novel makes no sense unless we grant that this love is, like all great love, totally compelling and real to its protagonists, *as well as* (original emphasis), like all but the 'highest' states of consciousness, illusory. The 'illusions' of love are by no means valueless. Its reality might be said to lie in the fact that it involves an apparent loss of self in the lover and a concentration on the reality of someone other than oneself. Its unreality follows, in that such keen insight should be democratised, spread more evenly. Erotic love provokes tunnel vision and makes the rest of the world invisible […] Eros is thus a sophist, teaching a vital truth but a partial one (1989: 202-203).

For the protagonist, love does not widen his moral attention. Instead, it acts like a strong filter that keeps Julian sealed inside a beautified, self-centred fantasy, and the novel invites the reader to share that point of view.

Crucially, Bradley stresses the ineffability of love: Falling in love is the most unbelievable experience in a lifetime, precisely because it contradicts what human beings come to expect from life, that is, violence and suffering, and he is careful to distance this feeling from sexual desire (Murdoch, 1973: 205). What the main character does, however, is to describe love in a way that resists ethical criticism. He draws attention to love's complex nature but does not try to explain its meaning; Bradley's aim is again to suspend the reader's ethical judgment. Thus, he argues that "like the experience of bereavement, the experience of love is usually, like a dream, *forgotten* (original emphasis)" (Murdoch 1973: 205). Through the comparison with bereavement, love is presented as an event one goes through, not a relation one keeps. Like grief, love is characterised as a strong but short-lived feeling that does not rely on a sustained attention to the beloved person as an individual.

Yet beneath this rhetoric of transcendence, Bradley depicts love as fated and almost divine, while simultaneously pursuing desire and pleasure without emotional involvement, describing himself as being "in paradise" (Murdoch, 1973: 206). This paradoxical state he finds himself in also defines his perception of Julian:

> I felt that I was, at every instant, creating Julian and supporting her being with my own. At the same time I saw her too in every way as I had seen her before. I saw her simplicity, her ignorance, her childish unkindness, her unpretty anxious little face. She was not beautiful or brilliantly clever. How false it is to say that love is blind. I could even judge her, I could even condemn her, I could even, in some possible galactic loop of thought, make her suffer (Murdoch, 1973: 207).

Against the common claim that love is blind, Bradley still sees Julian's flaws clearly. His idea of love is projected only in his mind, rather than described as a connection between two people, as it depends on the protagonist's imagination instead of her individual reality. From this perspective, love works as a form of imaginative control, a setting where Julian is formed by his own consciousness. Bradley's idea of love is self-absorbed and possessive, a point illustrated when he states that

> [s]he had filled me with a previously unimaginable power which I knew that I would and could use in my art […] my love and my art […] were, I *knew* (original emphasis), from the same source […] I could never never never tell my love […] It was enough happiness to love her (Murdoch, 1973: 208-209).

The fact that he does not want to confess his feelings to Julian can be read as further evidence of his absorption of love into art and his avoidance of engaging with the real Julian. In effect, love stays limited to the self, where Bradley can reduce it to an aesthetic object and keep it under his control. Consequently, Bradley's experience of love reflects Conradi's earlier remark that "Eros is thus a sophist, teaching a vital truth but a partial one" (1989: 203), as love appears to be selfless and other-directed, but remains confined to his fantasy. The reader thereby shares his imagined reality and mistakes it for moral insight.

At first glance, when Bradley appears more open-minded and caring toward the other characters, readers may take this as an early step toward moral growth; yet Nussbaum points out that this reading is misleading:

> There are […] many indications in the novel that Bradley has the Murdochian vice of blinding egoism, that his love is a fantasy. Although love initially makes him overflow with feelings of love and generosity toward everyone else in his surroundings, these generous feelings are quickly supplanted by the pain of anxiety, by jealousy and possessiveness (Nussbaum, 2003).

This contrast is also reflected in the novel's use of imagery. When Bradley walks together with Julian through the streets right after having been emotionally affected by the aesthetic performance of *Der Rosenkavalier* in the Royal Opera House, his reaction demonstrates the connection between his desire, an emotional overstimulation, and the age difference observed by Wilby:

> The most famous reference to singing in [Murdoch's] oeuvre must be when Bradley Pearson in *The Black Prince* attends a performance of *Der Rosenkavalier* and is physically sick from the attack on his emotions of the voluptuous and sensuous voices of the two soprano singers. This directly leads to his declaration of love for Julian Baffin, who, like Octavian in the opera, is a generation younger than her lover (2019: 111).

In addition to this, the description of the street scene after the opera visit reinforces the way Bradley's aesthetic idealisation of love becomes a means of egoistic self-deception. After leaving the opera in a state of nausea, he steps into a reality that is dark and dirty, full of neglect and ruin. Murdoch writes,

> [w]e passed between two lorries loaded with milky white boxes of dark cherries and came out into the open. It was becoming dark, lights had come on revealing the sturdy elegant military outline of the vegetable market, resembling a magazine, a seedy eighteenth-century barracks, though quiet at this time and sombre as a cloister. Opposite to us the big derelict eastern portico of Inigo Jones's church was now in view, cluttered up with barrows and housing at the far end the coffee stall referred to by Julian. Some mean and casual lamp-light, itself seeming dirty, revealed the thick pillars, a few lounging marked men, a large pile vegetable refuse and disintegrating cardboard boxes. It was like a scene in some small battered Italian city, rendered by Hogarth (1973: 262).

It is worth mentioning that Murdoch compares the scene to a city painted by William Hogarth and alludes not only to a spatial disharmony but also to Bradley's emotional distress. The reference draws on Hogarth's illustrations of eighteenth-century London, which often depicted moral decline and the corruption present in everyday life. It is a key reference because Hogarth painted London itself and not Italian cities. Italy, which is commonly associated with classical beauty, is contrasted by Hogarth's moral satire and decay. Murdoch deploys this opposition to expose that Bradley mistakes aesthetic idealisation for moral insight, when it is, in fact, illusory. Consequently, Bradley misreads the aesthetic rupture triggered by the performance in the opera as an occasion for unselfing. Nonetheless, Murdoch makes clear that his apparent self-transcendence is deceptive, since it does not lead him to recognise the reality of other human beings, especially Julian, but reinforces an idealised image of her.

Read in this context, Murdoch uses the reference to Hogarth in order to anticipate the course of Bradley's story. Like the protagonist of *A Rake's Progress*, Bradley appears to become a better version of himself, as love seems to open him up toward the other characters of *The Black Prince*. First, he is more loving and generous, but, as in Hogarth's series, it is only an apparent and short-lived illusion. In *A Rake's Progress*, Tom Rakewell is an upstart who tries to gain social prestige through money. Nevertheless, by substituting virtue with wealth, he violates the prevailing moral order and is punished. Similarly, Bradley makes a comparable mistake when he treats aesthetic experience and love as justifications for his immoral actions. The protagonist presents himself as innocent and gives the impression of growing ethically, yet he wants only to be the master of his own narrative through his persistent aesthetic self-justification. In particular, the full extent of his moral corruption, namely using Julian as an instrument, abandoning Priscilla, and Arnold's death, becomes only visible retrospectively. As a consequence, his imprisonment and death end his control over the narrative, and force the reader to see the moral course of his actions, as in the final plate of Hogarth's series.

Significantly, although this love feels real to Bradley, he wants to confine it within his imagination but nonetheless speaks to Julian about it: "I endlessly *imagined* (original emphasis) talking to you about it, but that just belonged to the fantasy world. I can't talk love to you in the real world. The real world rejects it" (Murdoch, 1973: 263). In contrast, Julian does not want to be objectified and insists on her reality as a real suffering human being and as his equal (Murdoch, 1973: 265). She interprets the situation as a game he is playing because he shows little interest in what she thinks, which supports the assertion that his love is egoistic (Murdoch, 1973: 265-266). Nonetheless, Bradley insists that their love, which he says has no place in reality, rests on the large age gap between them, because he is nearly sixty and she is only twenty, and he acknowledges this difference as morally troubling (Murdoch, 1973: 267). Thus, he lies about his age to break down what he perceives as the greatest obstacle between them. The other characters' responses also reinforce the uncertainty of his moral standing. Even though Arnold pushes him to "get back to reality" (Murdoch, 1973: 279) and reminds him that he is a "decent rational man and moral being" (Murdoch, 1973: 281), Bradley persists in his pursuit of Julian. His obsession with her goes so far that he ignores the suffering of his sister and shows no compassion for her at all: "I was at the door. She stared up at me now with huge slow tears coming out of her eyes, her gaping mouth all red and wet. I turned from her" (Murdoch, 1973: 302).

This pattern of control reaches its peak when Bradley takes Julian to the countryside, to a retreat called Patara, thereby isolating her from the everyday setting of London. After learning that his sister has died, he chooses not to tell her, defending his decision by maintaining that "[i]n acting as if it had not happened I was scarcely distorting the real course of events at all" (Murdoch, 1973: 325-326). His reasoning depends on the fact that Francis only found his location by chance (Murdoch, 1973: 324), and yet, instead of allowing the knowledge about Priscilla's suicide affect his actions, he remains fixated on his own sexual performance and on achieving the fulfilment of his desire. Indeed, according to Nussbaum,

> [i]n the grip of the idea that he must finally make love successfully to Julian, he allows himself to conceal from Julian, and to distance from his own thoughts, the news of his sister Priscilla's suicide, a death for which he is in part responsible because of the neglect induced by his passion (Nussbaum, 2003).

By prioritising his desire, he displays little regard for Julian's feelings, making no effort to consider how she might experience this concealment. When she later understands that she slept with a man who had learned that his sister had died, and who set that knowledge aside in order to satisfy his desire, she is likely to feel deep distress (Murdoch, 1973: 337). Meanwhile, the narrator prepares the reader for this moment of physical intimacy, shaping expectations of emotional fulfilment. It is one of the few occasions on which Julian's voice is directly heard, followed by her physical reaction: "Oh Bradley, please, don't be so rough, please, Bradley, you're hurting me"; and she begins to cry (Murdoch, 1973: 328). Surely, this moment demonstrates a stark contrast between Bradley's account of events and Julian's lived experience. Hence, this passage brings to light that Bradley's vanity and insecurity keep him from seeing reality and from being honest with Julian, including about his true age. Therefore, these circumstances destroy the prospect of an honest relationship.

Notably, this scene represents the culmination of Bradley's framing of love throughout the narrative, as he misuses Platonic imagery to justify his egoistic desires. Conradi writes,

> [o]n three occasions he compares the experience of falling in love with that of the Platonic pilgrim emerging from his enslavement to mere appearance in the Cave, into the Sun. He has early established his analogy between mind and Cave (1989: 205):
>
> These images which float in the mind's cave (and whatever the philosopher may say the mind is a dark cave full of drifting beings) are

> of course not neutral apparitions but already saturated with judgement, lurid with it (Murdoch, 1973: 192).

The protagonist depicts the experience of love as an illumination and ascent:

> [J]oy in my marvellous *achievement* (original emphasis) of absolute love. In this blaze of light of course a few more mundane thoughts flitted to and fro like little birds, scarcely described by one who was dazzled by emergence from the cave" (Murdoch, 1973: 208). "This morning I had felt like a cave-dweller emerging into the sun. She was the truth of my life (Murdoch, 1973: 285).

Indeed, he argues that he is, at last, perceiving the world as it really is: "I stared ahead of me through the warm silvery veil of my tears and saw Julian's face, eager and intent, like a bird-mask, hanging there in space, like a vision of the Saviour come to console some starving and crazed ascetic in a desert cave" (Murdoch, 1973: 226). Nonetheless, this is only a fantasy, as he overcomes his egoistic perspective only to a limited extent. Interpreted through the philosophical framework set out in the first chapter, Bradley's references to Plato do not mark a real move from fantasy to reality; he adopts this language to support his own position. Whereas Dora's aesthetic experience in the National Gallery leads her to apprehend reality more accurately, Bradley's engagement with love continues to be centred on himself. Thus, his references to "light", "truth" and "emergence from the cave" give the impression of what Murdoch calls the movement beyond the self, but upon closer examination, they are just to be read as intensifications of his own aesthetic self-experience. Compared with Charles Arrowby, Bradley appears less controlling and less trapped in his own fantasy. For a short time, love broadens Bradley's perspective and draws his attention away from viewing himself as the centre of the story. For this reason, his attempt to unself remains incomplete, since he never fully removes what Murdoch calls "selfish energy", and even as his attention develops, it still returns to his own ego. Bradley presents his view as true, yet it works mainly as a comforting illusion. In this respect, it supports Plato's position that people often choose reassuring narratives instead of

facing a more difficult reality. Furthermore, his failure is also aesthetic, as his work does not show where his viewpoint breaks down, especially concerning his inability to see Julian as an agent in her own right and not as a character in his self-constructed story.

At this point in the narrative, Arnold functions like a *deus ex machina*. He appears without warning, interrupts Bradley's ego-driven reading of events, and prompts Julian to perceive the true nature of the situation. Arnold asserts that Bradley conceals information about Priscilla's death and that this concealment has serious moral consequences. Bradley comes across as an unstable, irresponsible, and uncaring human being, since "[h]is sister dies and he won't leave his love-making" (Murdoch, 1973: 335). Crucially, Arnold challenges Bradley's view of himself by forcing Julian to face what his age and authority imply: "The sexual gratification of an elderly man […] *Think* Julian, *think* (original emphasis). He is thirty-eight years older than you are […] can't you *see* (original emphasis) he is? (Murdoch, 1973: 336). His intervention breaks the spell that has misled both Julian and the reader. It represents the juncture at which the novel can no longer uphold the reader's empathetic connection with Bradley and, accordingly, any justification of his behaviour falls apart. So far, the first-person narrator has manipulated the audience throughout *The Black Prince*, privileging the most attractive characteristics of its negative character, specifically his sense of beauty and apparent moral concern. The bad traits that are left in the background to be forgotten become completely visible, as Julian and the reader are explicitly confronted with Bradley's deceptive nature and the gravity of his actions. As a result, the reader begins to empathise with Julian.

At the level of plot, Arnold's intervention serves the same purpose as Conradi's account of the central paradox of *The Black Prince*:

> The destruction of identity in love and in morals is the theme of *The Black Prince* and, perhaps, the redemption of identity in art and morals. It is the grand paradox of the novel that Bradley has to undergo an erotic

> *katabasis*, descent or desublimation, before achieving his ambiguous apotheosis – ambiguous both because it is untested and unstable in the real world, a serenity cloistered and then cut short by death, and also because the moral thrust of the book is, of course, toward sublimation. The way down has to be the way up (1989: 208).

This contradiction indicates that Arnold's confrontation pushes Bradley to admit something he has tried not to face. Arnold's intervention makes Bradley question his own sense of right and wrong and reveals how often his judgments have been mistaken. Even if Bradley believes that he has become a better human being afterwards, the novel does not show him acting differently toward the other characters. Because his version of events cannot be fully trusted, the fictional work then gives space to the other characters in the postscripts, allowing them to present their own accounts. As Bran Nicol points out,

> the postscripts [are] part of the metafictional method so central to the novel. Like Bradley's commentary, which accompanies his story, the postscripts allow Murdoch to draw attention to the artificiality of the story. They force us to recognize how our emotions have been manipulated by the narrator's rhetoric. They underline the dialogical point that the deep 'truths' Bradley tells are constructed subjectively and are true from one viewpoint only. Furthermore, they question the veracity of the very events from which he derives these truths (1999: 92).

In this respect, Murdoch's own reflections on the novel provide a helpful basis for reading *The Black Prince*. Conradi, building on Bigsby, notes that

> Murdoch calls it 'an authoritarian work', dismisses the postscripts as 'just play' and says that, for the attentive reader, it is made clear 'how you should interpret the wanderings and maunderings of a narrator and where you should believe him and where you should not believe him (Bigsby, 1982, cited in Conradi, 1989: 186).

Indeed, Conradi's comment demonstrates that Bradley's apparent wisdom should not be taken as an ethical guideline but serves to test the reader's attention and critical thinking.

More broadly, Nicol proposes that Murdoch's concern with interpretation is best exemplified in *The Black Prince*, "as it relates to the process of reading *fiction* (original emphasis) as much as to reading a situation or people" (1999: 82). As such, the novel examines, how the text shapes the reader's expectations, how it pulls him into the narrative and finally how it misleads him. Moreover, the protagonist repeatedly maintains to give a true account of his story because he believes his narrative and language to lay bare what really happens in the course of the literary work. However, Nicol states that, from the beginning, Bradley understands that "it is one thing to know the truth, quite another to express it" (1999: 86). This tension runs through the novel, as Conradi highlights, "realism or illusionism cohabit in this novel perfectly comfortably with much that questions their premisses" (1989: 186). The postscripts further complicate this matter by undermining the credibility that Bradley establishes through his narrative voice (Nicol, 1999: 91).

Essentially, the introduction of the postscripts disrupts the readers' identification with Bradley. The protection that had allowed the audience to follow his version of events without questioning it begins to break down, not because the novel offers a clear moral lesson, but because the protagonist's control over the narrative is challenged. As explained in the first chapter, catharsis relies on a protective distance that permits the reader to confront difficult perspectives without experiencing their consequences directly. When this distance disappears, maintaining identification becomes impossible. The alternative perspectives in the postscripts weaken Bradley's control over the story and reveal how the other characters perceive him, encouraging the reader to confront different interpretations and reconsider original impressions. In this way, the reader is "freed" not by discovering whether Bradley was to blame, but by being taken out

of his version of events and realising how much it had influenced their view of him.

Each voice echoes its own interpretation of events and "all convict Bradley of various forms of egoistic illusion" (Nussbaum, 2003). Among these voices, Christian's comment presents a counter-reading of Bradley's story that differs sharply from the reading presented in the main text. She asserts that Bradley's memoir cannot be treated as an accurate record of what happened and implies that Julian is probably ashamed because the episode "was obviously mostly in his mind" (Murdoch, 1973: 393-394). She further suggests that the entire narrative is meant to hide the fact that Bradley is in love with her. In a different vein, Francis Marloe interprets Bradley's story as evidence of an unresolved Oedipus complex (Murdoch, 1973: 397). In fact, Nussbaum (2003) writes, "Bradley is in the grip of childhood ambivalence toward his mother, passionately desiring her but also hating her for her infidelity to him, therefore he fears women and is homosexual". Francis, moreover, believes that Bradley's strongest physical response, when Julian is dressed as Hamlet, supports the view that his longing mirrors a childhood fantasy instead of expressing real love.

Extending this pattern of demystification, Rachel contends that Bradley had long been in love with her and later displaces that feeling by inventing a romance with her daughter, using it both as a substitute and as a form of revenge. She also argues that he killed Arnold out of jealousy. In her commentary, she systematically deconstructs all incidents of the main plot, being at the same time convinced that "Pearson produces [a] sort of mad adolescent dream and not the serious work of art of which he imagined himself capable" and further claims her account to be truthful (Murdoch, 1973: 402). She explicitly calls him a Peter Pan figure and suggests that his story is "an adolescent fantasy" (Murdoch, 1973: 402). Additionally, Rachel defends her husband as the greater writer by asserting that Bradley has second-order taste, since he prefers to read "adventure stories by authors such as Forester and Stevenson and Mulford", and that he deliberately inverted Arnold's and his own abilities throughout the story (Murdoch, 1973: 405).

It is important to stress that Rachel calls him a "sadomasochist" (Murdoch, 1973: 405), a term that Murdoch defines in *The Sovereignty of Good* as follows:

> It is the peculiar subtlety of [sado-masochism] that, while constantly leading attention and energy back into the self, it can produce, almost all the way as it were to the summit, plausible imitations of what is good. Refined sado-masochism can ruin art which is too good to be ruined by the cruder vulgarities of self-indulgence […] Fascinating too is the alleged relation of master to slave, of the good self to the bad self (1970: 66).

This definition aligns with Bradley's case because, on the one hand, his description reflects how his writing treats suffering, misunderstanding, introspection, and self-criticism in ways that build an internal conflict. In this conflict, a "critical self" is perceived as being virtuous, while a morally "bad self" is dominated and punished. On the other hand, his attention and focus remain rooted in narcissism, as has been established earlier in this chapter. Therefore, this structure of self-division functions as what Murdoch calls a "plausible imitation of goodness", that is, a process which appears to be introspective and enhances the appreciation of one's own aesthetic. Yet, it maintains Bradley's gaze on his own perception, pain, and his assurance of becoming virtuous. This perspective is reinforced by Bran Nicol's observation that "what makes *The Black Prince*'s concern with masochism especially complex is the fact that the idea of masquerade figures as part of its structure rather than just being treated thematically" (2001: 22). Moreover, Nicol's explanation places *The Black Prince* within the context of Murdoch's theory of masochism. Based on previous interpretations by A. S. Byatt and Richard Todd, Nicol concludes that

> Bradley Pearson derives pleasure from the humiliation and punishment he suffers in his story (Byatt, 1976; Todd, 1984, cited in Nicol, 2001: 21). Bradley Pearson serves as a perfect exemplification of the kind of ingenious artist who presents his story as a tale of purification when in

> fact it is driven by the *jouissance* he derives from the idea of suffering. This is intensified by the fact that the novel is narrated retrospectively in the first person, for as author of his own narrative it is *Bradley* (original emphasis) who has chosen to present himself in this way, wallowing in his own humiliation (2001: 21).

According to Murdoch, this might be seen as a more refined form of sadomasochism, as suffering is transformed into a moral tale, which feels redemptive; however, it continues to emphasise the ego.

Drawing on Nussbaum's interpretation, Julian's comment offers an alternative viewpoint to Bradley's narrative based on moral principles. Julian admits that their relationship contained an element of love (Nussbaum, 2003) and even acknowledges that "the child I was loved the man Pearson was" (Murdoch, 1973: 411). Despite this confession, she does not support Bradley's understanding of the events and instead argues that his greatest error lies in his assumption that Eros could reveal the truth (Nussbaum, 2003). For Julian, "[l]ove is concerned with possession and vindication of self […Art] is concerned with truth in its least pleasant and useful and therefore most truthful form" (Murdoch, 1973: 410). Thus, Eros can corrupt art because it is unable to uphold an objective and honest perception (Nussbaum, 2003). Julian accepts that Bradley's story is emotionally charged but favours her mother's account and rejects his endeavour to depict desire as a source of moral and creative wisdom. Her final commentary alters the reader's interpretation of Bradley's entire narrative by dismissing Bradley's effort to establish truth through Eros and aesthetic rupture.

Despite this, the editor's epilogue returns to the topic by replacing ethical certainty with irony, play, and open-ended interpretation. From Nicol's viewpoint, through the insistence on having the last word, Loxias portrays himself as the one who can state the definitive and undisputed truth (2001: 92): "I had intended to write a long analysis of my own, rather like a detective's final summing up, pointing out discrepancies making inferences, drawing conclusions" (Murdoch,

1973: 412). Yet, Nicol comments that "his divine nature seems to make him uniquely capable of providing such a conclusion, but he decides instead to omit the dénouement" (2001: 92), "partly because Bradley is dead […] partly because, rereading Bradley Pearson's story, I feel that it speaks for itself" (Murdoch, 1973: 412-413). This rejection has a fundamental impact, since the plot withholds enough information that the reader cannot know with certainty the truth about Arnold's murder (Nicol, 2001: 93). Accordingly, it places the reader into a position similar to Bradley's, namely an agent who is in pursuit of answers and asks for a clear account of incidents, though "unable to satisfy his sense of an ending" (Nicol, 2001: 93).

In this regard, truth is not absolute but depends on how it is perceived. Nicol interprets this ambiguity as a matter of karma and suggests that Bradley's true trial is not the legal one but a textual one, played out through each postscript, which it re-evaluates, rectifies, and lays bare Bradley's rendition (2001: 93-94). From this perspective, Bradley's references to angels watching human beings appear to be an appeal to Loxias (Nicol, 2001: 93), and they likewise anticipate the editor's voice in the postscript that adopts the role of an impartial observer. Murdoch's technique maintains a metaphysical distance and, moreover, prevents the audience from adopting an omniscient perspective that might resolve the text's contradictions. Furthermore, Nicol stresses the irony of the editor's stance. His claim that "[a]rt tells the only truth that ultimately matters" (Murdoch, 1973: 415) leads one to believe that the precise details of Bradley's situation are of minor importance, as the novel matters for the lesson it offers, which the reader is meant to understand (Nicol, 2001: 94). Nicol contends that this stylistic choice "figures as the supreme piece of irony in a supremely ironic novel" (2001: 94).

In the light of everything discussed so far, Bradley's distress and his retrospective account may be interpreted as propelling him toward a kind of truth, yet that truth remains bound to loss, self-deception, and the sacrifices he makes to tell it (Nicol, 2001: 94). Nicol writes,

> [g]uided through his ordeal by the two gods, Apollo (disguised as Loxias) and the Black Prince, Eros, he learns that true love – a dark fusion of 'sex and true moral vision' (Conradi, 1989: 204, cited in Nicol, 2001: 94), 'low' and 'high' Eros – requires the loss of self. Bradley does achieve *ascesis*, but when competing with the divine the stakes are high and he must pay for his transition, as Marsyas did, with his life (2001: 94-95).

From a reader's perspective, as Byatt notes, this work presents "an endless series of receding, unattainable, focused images of truth, but nothing believable, nothing habitable" (1976: 36). Although *The Black Prince* tends to give the impression of going beyond illusion, it concludes by reflecting on itself. According to Nicol, "the one truth we can reliably draw from it is the truth it has expressed all along: all truth is fictional" (2001: 96).

Martha Nussbaum (2003) offers an alternative interpretation, arguing that the most self-deceived characters are the four writers of the postscripts: Their narratives are so thin that their motives are obvious, which weakens their capacity to convince the reader. In contrast, Bradley's storytelling is rich and complex, and many elements of his account reflect the Platonic pattern in the *Phaedrus*, as Eros refines his perception and makes his art capable of seeing what is true (Nussbaum, 2003). As a consequence, the editor's justification regarding Bradley adopts a different meaning. When Loxias comments that "[o]f course [art] is to do with truth, it makes truth. But to that anything can open its eyes. Erotic love can" (Murdoch, 1973: 413), he supports Bradley's view against Julian's rejection of Eros. Extending this argument, Nussbaum reads Murdoch as arguing that individuals often do not truly see other people since personal anxiety clouds judgment, leading to broad generalisations about reality rather than confronting the difficult individuality of every human being (Nussbaum, 2003). Therefore, she asserts that this numbed way of seeing is necessary for moral shortcomings and compares it to the shadows in Plato's cave. Despite the fact that love is often imperfect and prone to jealousy and anxiety, it may nonetheless clear the self-

focused confusion that influences how subjects see and treat others (Nussbaum, 2003). From this standpoint, Bradley's imperfect love allows true moral and artistic perception. Even though he remains vulnerable to fantasy and misjudgment, his desire leads him away from his self-focus toward moral action, especially when he accepts an unjust conviction in order to protect Julian (Nussbaum, 2003).

In the editorial afterword, the two interpretations come into conflict: Nicol argues that the ending deepens the novel's irony and leaves open the question of whether Bradley is telling the truth. Nussbaum, by contrast, sees the same conclusion as a confirmation for the moral and cognitive power of erotic love and negative empathy. Nonetheless, Murdoch keeps the reader suspended between different versions of events, asking them to examine the limits of empathy and how easily a well-told story can persuade the audience simply because it seems logical. The story ends without clearly resolving what really happened or whether Bradley's account can be trusted, leaving the reader to reflect on how a convincing narrative can blur the line between fact and self-deception, and how difficult it is to arrive at a truthful understanding of events.

Conclusion

This thesis has examined Iris Murdoch's concept of morality alongside her fiction, arguing that her novels not only illustrate her moral theory but also play an essential role in her moral thinking. In Murdoch's philosophical work, morality is presented less as a matter of choice, rule-following, or intention. Instead, she understands it as an issue of attention: the difficult task of perceiving other people's reality and resisting the pull of self-centred fantasy. Her fiction has provided the narrative space in which this effort has been shown, examined, and challenged. By placing characters in circumstances shaped by imagination and self-deception, Murdoch uses the novel to demonstrate how moral life is lived and often mis-lived in practice.

The analyses have also made clear that narrative form in Murdoch's novels is not neutral. The distinction between omniscient narration and first-person confession determines how illusion becomes visible and how far the reader can see beyond a character's self-understanding. The enclosed settings of *The Bell* and *The Sea, The Sea* intensify patterns of justification and self-deception, while *The Black Prince* presents art as both a refinement of attention and a possible refuge from uncomfortable truths. In this respect, Murdoch's fiction does not simply translate her moral philosophy but works through its central conflicts in narrative form. This includes a reshaping of empathy: rather than spontaneous emotional identification, Murdoch presents it as a disciplined and often fragile achievement, dependent upon attention rather than projection.

Against this background, the first chapter has established the philosophical framework for this enquiry by drawing on Murdoch's major philosophical writings, with particular attention to *The Sovereignty of Good*. It has examined her critique of modern moral philosophy and developed her alternative view of *moral vision*, *attention*, and *unselfing*. Additionally, the chapter has also addressed Murdoch's understanding of imagination and empathy, including the risks associated with *Einfühlung*. It has illustrated how imaginative involvement can either encourage attention to reality or reinforce illusion and distorted perception. In doing so, it has established why, for Murdoch, morality depends on careful attention to the world as it is, rather than on personal intention, emotional projection, or fantasy.

Building on this philosophical basis, the second chapter has analysed *The Bell* and *The Sea, The Sea* as moral laboratories in which Murdoch's moral ideas are worked out through the everyday choices, emotions, and relationships of her characters. By focusing on these two enclosed social settings, the chapter has shown how the characters often confuse strong feelings, romantic desire, or bold gestures with genuine moral insight. In both novels, however, happiness has emerged not as the result of emotional intensity but as something that develops slowly through sustained moral effort. In *The Bell*, the story has unfolded within a religious community that follows strict rules guiding how members should behave. Rather than confronting her conflicts directly, Dora has often hidden behind those rules or projected her tensions onto symbols like the bell. By contrast, in *The Sea, The Sea*, the difficulty of acting morally has been conveyed through the narrator's detailed account of his own feelings and actions. His reflections reveal how he misinterprets situations to fit his desires.

Finally, the last chapter has examined *The Black Prince* to highlight how artistic ambition, romantic idealisation, and narrative control can blur moral judgment, as Bradley turns his life into a narrative that conceals as much as it reveals. Through its unreliable first-person narrator and its postscripts, the novel has made evident how shaping events into a narrative can influence and distort

moral judgment. Bradley Pearson's effort to present his life as a tragic love story has illustrated how art can become a way of defending oneself and avoiding difficult truths. The chapter has also demonstrated that Murdoch does not present art as simply good or bad: while art can sharpen attention and expand understanding, it can also encourage fantasy and self-deception when it is used to protect one's own image.

Overall, these chapters have brought into focus the demands of Murdoch's moral vision. Moral understanding is never final, unselfing is always partial, and those moments when reality overcomes illusion are fragile and easily undone by habit, desire, or imagination. Murdoch's fictional works do not tell how to act in morally difficult situations, nor do they offer exemplary models of behaviour. It has underscored how hard it is to live morally, and how much steady effort it takes to keep paying attention to others rather than slipping back into illusory desires.

Crucially, Murdoch has written her novels with a deliberate moral purpose. She has argued that literature can contribute to moral growth, not by preaching or giving lessons, but by training readers to look more carefully at human beings and situations. By portraying fictional figures who deceive themselves and whose motives are not fully transparent, her fiction requires sustained and attentive reading. Moral improvement, in this sense, has not been presented as a guaranteed result, but as something that may develop gradually through careful engagement with these complex fictional lives. This way of thinking about literature places Murdoch within a broader tradition that treats moral value as a matter of how life is seen and represented, rather than of what lessons are explicitly taught. Moreover, this view of the moral value of literature is echoed by Henry James, as discussed by Martha Nussbaum, who maintains that a novel's moral seriousness depends not on explicit moral teaching but on how fully and responsibly it renders human life:

> The question comes back thus, obviously, to the kind and the degree of the artist's prime sensibility, which is the soil out of which his subject springs. The quality and capacity of that soil, its ability to 'grow' with

> due freshness and straightness any vision of life, represents, strongly or weakly, the projected morality (1985: 527).

In fact, this formulation closely reflects Murdoch's view that art is morally serious when it helps both the writer and the reader to look carefully at others, rather than reshaping them to fit consoling illusions.

From this perspective, Murdoch's emphasis on attention helps explain why her work remains relevant. In many public debates today, human suffering is frequently communicated through statistics, headlines, or simplified narratives, and complex situations are reduced to quickly formulated positions. Murdoch's novels move in a different direction. By focusing on the lives of ordinary individuals and illustrating how readily people justify their own actions, her fiction makes it harder to overlook or excuse harm. Literature cannot stop war, oppression, or the abuse of power; however, the kind of attention encouraged by moral fiction, not acting out of habit, considering how one's response affects others, and trying to see other subjects in their individuality, stands in opposition to the mentalities that make such actions possible. In this sense, reading Murdoch's novels does not allow readers to withdraw from moral responsibility; rather, it trains them to take it more seriously. Her fiction encourages readers to slow down, question their first reactions, and see how easily good intentions can be guided by personal wishes or comforting illusions. It suggests that harm often begins not with obvious cruelty, but with small failures: not listening carefully, overlooking another subjects' point of view, or refusing to face difficult facts. By distinguishing between the omniscient structure of *The Bell*, the confessional narration of *The Sea, The Sea*, and the self-consciously literary construction of *The Black Prince*, this thesis has established how Murdoch uses narrative form to probe the limits of moral perception and self-knowledge.

In conclusion, this study has not attempted to cover every aspect of Murdoch's philosophical thought or her fiction. Further research could apply this approach to additional novels, analyse her work through a gender-studies perspective, or compare her understanding of moral reality with that of other moral

realist thinkers. Nevertheless, by reading Murdoch's philosophical and fictional writings together, this thesis has aimed to underscore how her work develops a consistent ethical project: one that highlights how easily moral attention falters, how imagination can mislead, and how difficult, but necessary, it is to keep looking attentively at the world and at fellow human beings.

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