LABYRINTH Vol. 25, No. 2, Winter 2023

FROM INATTENTIVENESS TOWARDS MORAL FAILURES: ACKNOWLEDGING SIMONE WEIL IN IRIS MURDOCH'S LITERARY WRITINGS

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Abstract

Simone Weil's ideas proved fundamental for Iris Murdoch, opening up a difficult path of thought for one rooted in the British philosophical tradition in the 1950s (Sim 1985, Bok 2005, Lovibond 2011a, Panizza 2022a, Mac Cumhaill and Wiseman 2022). Grasping the Weilian-inspired moral theory of attention sketched by Iris Murdoch is a prerequisite for comprehending the development of her moral ideas (Panizza 2015, Broackes 2012) and the form they may take in her literary writings (Griffin 1993, Morgan 2006). This paper argues that we can read an expression of Simone Weil in Iris Murdoch's novels which articulate her notions of grace and gravity, but also convey the Weilian insights that shape Murdoch's moral perfectionism. It investigates three of Murdoch's well-known male protagonists, i.e., Bradley Pearson, Charles Arrowby and Hilary Burde, so as to comprehend how their moral failures relate to a defective implementation of the concepts of love and attention as theorised by Simone Weil as leading to goodness. Hence, it offers a new examination of the way in which the Murdochian literary staging of inattention as a cause of moral deficiency reveals its Weilian-based ethics of attention.

Keywords: Simone Weil, Iris Murdoch, moral philosophy, ethics of attention

1. Introductory remarks

Simone Weil's ideas proved fundamental for Iris Murdoch, opening up a difficult path of thought, both unique and significant, for one rooted in the non-religious, non-mysterious British philosophical tradition in the early 1950s Oxford (Mac Cumhaill and Wiseman 2022, Lovibond 2011, Broackes 2012). Iris Murdoch never made no secret of her admiration for the French philosopher: she admired Weil's "deeply self-disciplined" life, which combined a passionate search for truth with simplicity and austerity, giving to what she wrote an authority beyond compare (Lovibond 2011, 28). Murdoch's moral philosophical ideas would never have been as thoughtful and beautiful as they were without Simone Weil's

writings discovery in 1951, which revealed to Murdoch the significance of the concepts of love and attention. Weilian philosophy was marked by a Platonism with a strong mystical tone, in which the experience of suffering is an experience of reality, in that it focuses our attention on it, its otherness disarming our usual egoistic attempts to console ourselves with artifice and fantasy (Mac Cumhaill and Wiseman 2022, 271). Morality was regarded as a matter of meditation, not merely of action, where, when we turn our attention to the good, it *awakens* love in us, even though we recognize at the same time that we are unable to achieve it (Murdoch 1970). Following Weil's discovery, one idea was to become a guiding principle in Murdochian ethics, i.e., the human soul comes to know reality through love (Murdoch 1970, 45). It is precisely the lack of love – love being taken by Murdoch as a *virtue of attention* to others – that would be dramatised, in a tragicomic literary style, in her novels.

It is in her article "Against Dryness" (1961) that Murdoch evokes for the first time Simone Weil, in her idea that morality is "a matter of attention, not of will". Drawing on Weil, Murdoch builds a theory of freedom as "a continuous task of attention". Murdochian freedom is more a matter of knowledge, and that knowledge in question is the "reality revealed" to the eyes of a careful, loving observer. This new vision-oriented, more contemplative ideal of attention claims to reject the identification of morality with the realm of action, and emphasizes the existence of other moral values. Attention, by its inherent very nature, is a matter of something external to oneself, and attentive action does not instantaneously produce its results, but rather is part of the arduous, gradual, and piecemeal business of moral growth. Following Weilian-Platonician ideas, the utmost virtue of good, as theorised by Murdoch, is clear-headedness no longer turned towards oneself, but towards others, an awareness as an *attention virtue*. Thus, she gives a spiritual and moral meaning to her novelist work, and through the ordeals endured by the characters, her novels highlight the inner face-to-face work in each of them between self-obsession and meditation of the real, between will and attention. In other words, taken as a moral exercise one should practice, one reason for "the moral desirability" of attention is related to "its capacity for 'unselfing' or removing the pernicious influences of the ego, which according to Murdoch is the prime enemy of clear vision, standing at the opposite end of attention" (Panizza 2022b, 160).

Grasping the Weilian-inspired moral theory of attention sketched by Murdoch is a prerequisite for comprehending the subsequent development of her moral ideas, and the form they may take in her literary writings. I'd like to put forward my argument, and in so doing, step onto grounds partly opened up by Gabriele Griffin (1993) that we can read an expression of Weil in Murdoch's novels, especially her conception of gravity and grace, and what it is to reach goodness, to morally improve by shifting attention away from oneself towards an "other", as a change that is a moral improvement. In Murdoch's perfectionistic view of moral life, "goodness consists in a constantly perfectible apprehension of a perpetually receding reality" (Panizza 2015, 12). Murdoch's question – "how can we be morally better?" – is not just a question for her philosophy, but the underlying theme of her novels: why is it that her protagonists, when they could be bettering themselves and embracing the path to the good, especially when they are persuaded to fall in love, always fail to do so, and instead act pitifully and disgracefully? This leads this paper to ask two crucial questions in Murdoch's novels, based on Weil's readings: (i) what it is to *fail to love*, when love is taken as a virtue of attention, i.e., an ideal of decentering and receptiveness (to others) opening the access to truth and reality?; and (ii) to what extent can we sketch an ethical reflection from this recognition, conducted through a fictional portrayal of moral failures?

To go a step further, let's clarify that Murdoch's early interest in Weilian "selflessness" is driven primarily by the conviction that philosophy must be connected not only with the agent and/or decision-maker, but also with the subject as receiver, and thus with ethical life as it unfolds in intimacy or solitude[1]. According to Weil, what virtue ultimately demands of us is the willingness to reduce ourselves to zero, to dispense with any consolation other than the ineffable. Until we become "good" moral creatures, we are at the mercy of mechanical forces, of which gravity is a general image, and these forces are only obscurely heard by us. To resist this gravity is to suffer emptiness, i.e., to hold back from filling a certain void in our existence: a task that human beings can only perform with the help of grace. That said, I'd like to sketch the theoretical argument that this paper aims to advocate: quite a few of Murdoch's protagonists never achieve grace, especially

[1] Attention is both a "passive activity" (Weil) and a "moral effort" or "moral discipline" (Murdoch). It is something in which we are actively involved: yet it is also passive (Sim 1985, 61; Panizza 2022b, 165-167).

when they are convinced, they are, and it is precisely this dramatised failure that enables Murdoch's ethical reflection on attention to unfold. I'd like to show the various ways this phenomenon deploys itself convincingly in three novels, through male-protagonist figures: Charles Arrowby in *The Sea, The Sea*, Bradley Pearson in *The Black Prince*, and Hilary Burde, in *A Word Child*. These central male-protagonists actually fail to be truly attentive to the suffering of others, to be in a moral attitude of "loving care" with their peers, thus they fail to reach goodness and grace while they are seeking perfection and bettering themselves.

I'd like to argue that their imperfection lies precisely in their lack of attentiveness towards their peers, and in their moral failure to "love" while they claim they are experiencing "true" love. This love never undertakes the form it should take to move in the direction of goodness, if we draw on a Weilian perspective. As Lovibond puts it, Murdoch succeeds in calling the reader's judgement to appreciate or dislike her protagonists: a moral behavior is always at stake and the reader is taken to pay attention to otherwise selfish or reprehensible behaviors. From the outset of her literary career, Murdoch seems to appreciate the staging possibilities of a first-person (male) narrator whose moral foolishness is indirectly revealed to the reader (Lovibond 2011, 6). Both Charles, Bradley, Hilary, and other male protagonists are narrators the reader cannot help but dislike. Towards these selfish, arrogant though charismatic protagonists, the reader can yet feel a kind of pity, or compassion (if it is not revulsion) in watching them delude themselves. Inattentive to the reality of those they cause to suffer, they are cloistered in their own depths and egos: Murdochian characters are erratic, extremely solitary beings. Her novels explore how fantasy, the mechanical, egotistical, comforting part of the imagination, obscures reality, preventing us from properly perceiving each other, from truly *seeing* and *loving* each other, and thus distancing us from goodness (Sim 1985, 93).

This paper aims to sketch out how the Weilian notions of grace and disgrace shape a particular form in Murdoch's novels, i.e., how these two overriding concepts form the metaphysical narrative background of her novels, and how her protagonists interact with and perform within the space of her novels, rooted in these two concepts, in tension with each other and deeply entangled in their very selves – an interpretation of Weilian notions that conducts Murdoch to build her theoretical approach to ethics based on literature as a fully-fledged ethical experience. This leads this paper to analyse the Simone Weil's encounter, and how it

drives Murdoch to a renewal of moral thought in the 1950s. This brings to sketch out how we can acknowledge a Weilian presence in Iris Murdoch's novels, through the moral failures endorsed by three of her famous male-protagonists, i.e., Charles Arrowby, Bradley Pearson and Hilary Burde. Key point remains to grasp how Murdoch's literature reveals the ethics of attention she advocated on the basis of her reading of Simone Weil.

2. Simone Weil's encounter

To understand the groundbreaking significance of Simone Weil in Murdoch's work, it is crucial to grasp the background against which the first Weilian readings occurred. I do not wish to reiterate what has already been said about this background, and thus invite the reader to refer (among many works) to the recent work carried out by Clare Mac Cumhaill and Rachael Wiseman: *Metaphysical Animals: How Four Women Brought Philosophy Back to Life.* Still, I shall sketch out a few guidelines to put the following elements into perspective.

2.1. Oxford, the 1940s-1950s

When she enters Somerville College, Oxford, in 1938, the young Murdoch begins her education in philosophy in a rather disquieted context. In 1933, Alfred J. Ayer, young fellow at Christ Church, educated at Cambridge by Gilbert Ryle and steeped in the insights of the Vienna Circle, launched a "war on metaphysics and ethics". Realists, idealists and intuitionists, who dominated Oxfordian moral philosophy since 1900, were pitted against each other in their epistemological ambition, which was replaced by a radical logical empiricism. Anything that did not meet the criteria of scientific validation was declared pure nonsense. But when the war erupted, Ayer and his followers left Oxford. Metaphysics could discreetly regain its legitimacy, championed by philosophers such as Heinz Cassirer or Donald MacKinnon whom Murdoch had as teachers until 1942 (Mac Cumhaill and Wiseman 2022, 41-52). However, ethics as taught at Oxford did not appeal to Murdoch, who regarded it as incapable of addressing real contemporary moral issues. When she left Oxford for London, she discovered Martin Buber and Gabriel Marcel, and met Jean-Paul Sartre in 1945 in a Brussels avant-garde gallery, where he was presenting his existentialist manifesto. She sought to engage in a moral reflection that she wanted to be human, realistic, ordinary, caught up in the

drama of life. Existentialist ethics provided an all-new substantial morality, far removed from the flimsy ethics she deplored in Oxford a few years earlier.

But Iris Murdoch's relationship with existentialism soon proved ambiguous. She endorses the underlying liberal assumptions about the value of the individual and individual freedom that Sartre had suggested, but regrets that his philosophy cannot provide the conceptual resources to support these values. After the Second World War, existentialism was offering an "ethic of resistance" that wove the thread of her political and moral passion against political and social tyranny (Antonaccio 2012, 164). The Sartrean image of the heroic conscience, the inalienable individual ego, inescapably free, confronting the existing, historical, traditional society echoed in the minds of many Europeans who had experienced the war. Murdoch's concern for the integrity of the individual was shaped in this historical context, and she was to remain deeply concerned with it. But this existentialist hero of twentieth century literature was not wholly satisfactory. Defining him as a new version of the romantic character, a God-forsaken man of power fighting alone bravely, she contrasted him with the mystical hero. Undoubtedly concerned with the idea of religion, she used mystical terminology to refer to the attempt to keep the consciousness of the good in a post-war time when God could no longer be taken for granted. She was keen to think of "a man who had left traditional religion behind but is still haunted by a sense of reality and the unity of a kind of spiritual world" (Antonaccio 2012, 165). For Murdoch, religion was about what is deep and absolute in human life, standing not only at the "practical" forefront of human life, but also at the ontological background: religion was love and dedication to the good, the true foundation of morality.

Considerations, such as those rehearsed above, about moral change make sense of the notion of our being always "in the presence of God", being at every moment mobile between good and bad and attracted in both directions. This is a religious picture which belongs where morality and religion spontaneously blend. (Murdoch 1992, 336)

That is where Simone Weil enters the scene. The 1951 encounter with her is a turning point in Murdoch's thinking, unveiling to her the significance of the concepts of love and attention[2]. In *La Pesanteur et la Grâce*, Weil outlines the figure of a mankind stretched between two energies: gravity and grace. Briefly,

[2] "Simone Weil's influence on Iris Murdoch can hardly be exaggerated." (Düringer 2022, 306)

she writes, generally speaking, what we expect from others is determined by the effects of gravity in ourselves; what we receive from them is determined by the effects of gravity in them (Weil 1948, 11). All that is called *bassesse* is a phenomenon of gravity: *la pesanteur*. But grace is only achieved at the cost of a radical purification, of an absolute detachment from desires and goods: it is a pure willingness, an empty waiting (Weil 1948, 23). But this waiting is not so easy, as it requires emptiness that can only occur in a contemplation of unhappiness, a hopeless acceptance of suffering, a desolation that leads to the contemplation of the truth: grace is filling, but it can only enter where there is an emptiness to receive it, and it is grace that makes this emptiness (Weil 1948, 20). Therefore, every unhappy person, if she can attain grace, that is, touch the absolute good in unhappiness, must be able to contemplate it. The point is that every human being rejects emptiness, both in himself and in the world: if embracing emptiness is "supernatural", where does one find the energy for an uncompensated act? The energy has to come from somewhere else, but first there needs to be a tearing away, a void needs to be created (Weil 1948, 21). It is in absolute solitude that the truth of the world is revealed. To achieve detachment, one needs a misery without consolation: an ineffable, unrepresentable consolation.

But people abhor emptiness and flee from it through fantasy, which constantly console them and enable them to avoid suffering: fantasy works continuously to fill all the cracks through which grace might enter, says Weil. But avoiding suffering is to engage in non-virtuous agentivity, while "compassionately attending to the affliction and suffering of others is a virtue according to both Murdoch and Weil" (Düringer 2022, 312). Where grace might enter the void, imagination comes to fill it, and to carry us through any suffering without purification. This is why we constantly fail to reach grace which yet is calling us, and why we remain grounded in gravity. So much of Weil's writings resonate with Murdoch's philosophy and literature, and it is her who, in large part, provides the substance of what moral improvement as theorised by Murdoch can be. From her first writings to her last major book *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, Murdoch never ceases to be indebted to Weil, even if she remains more optimistic about the possibility of ordinary virtues.

The background to all such change is our general (moral, spiritual) tendency to descend rather than to rise, which Simone Weil called gravity. Better conduct is

often harder and less natural than mediocre or bad conduct. It is not easy to sacrifice strong egoistic attachments or break bad habits. (Murdoch 1992, 331)

The "Void" chapter of *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* goes to embrace Weil's philosophy: "We have (gravity, necessity) a natural impulse to derealise our world and surround ourselves with fantasy. Simply stopping this, refraining from filling voids with lies and falsity, is progress. Equally in the more obscure labyrinths of personal relations it may be necessary to make the move which makes the void appear." (Murdoch 1992, 503). Murdoch's exposure to the writings of Simone Weil, overlapping with those of the analytic tradition, draws her towards a way of thinking "in tension", encompassing different components relating to the good: the immediate, practical, empirical component, always in tension with the distant, esoteric, metaphysical component. The dialogue between metaphysics and empiricism in Murdoch's writings assumes a particular form: metaphysics without empiricism is powerless to effect the good in the world; empiricism without metaphysics snaps morality's tie with the absolute. The metaphysical ethical approach that she sought to pursue embodied something close to a "non-dogmatic mysticism" advocating the investigation of ordinary lives engaged in a never-ending, overarching process of moral transformation. Since she seems to have called for a radical transformation of ethics calling our attention to ordinary lives by attending to details of language and expressivity, I share Sandra Laugier's view that her "unorthodox ethics", insofar she questioned the very idea of orthodoxy, "is a basis for redefining ethics as attention to ordinary life and care for moral expressivity." (Laugier 2022, 223).

2.2. Renewal of the moral thought

In a 1962 lecture that would spawn the forthcoming essay "The Idea of Perfection", Murdoch suggests a new Weilian-inspired theory of morality, centering it on the concept of attention.

If we ignore the prior work of attention and notice only the emptiness of the moment of choice we are likely to identify freedom with the outward movement since there is nothing else to identify it with. But if we consider what the work of attention is like, how continuously it goes on, and how imperceptibly it builds up structures of value round about us, we shall not be surprised that at crucial moments of choice most of the business of choosing is already over. This does not imply that we are not free, certainly not. But it implies that the exercise

of our freedom is a small piecemeal business which goes on all the time and not a grandiose leaping about unimpeded at important moments. The moral life, on this view, is something that goes on continually, not something that is switched off in between the occurrence of explicit moral choices. (Murdoch 1970, 36)

The headline of the essay sets the tone, with its reference to the assumption that our knowledge of an individual is infinitely perfectible, as is our understanding of a moral concept. This idea is merely part of a much larger project, i.e., attacking the whole "picture of man" that dominated the modern moral philosophy of the 1950s and proposing an alternative. Rather than conceiving the will as the sole creator of value in moral philosophy, Murdoch urges to reconsider the role of vision, the discovery of a moral reality exterior to ourselves; rather than confining morality to questions of outward behavior, we should recognize the importance of inner moral reflection, the aim of which, e.g., is to reach an accurate view of the moral character of others. Ultimately, the idea is that there can be a "vision" not just a "willingness" of the good. Good may be difficult to reach, and is not simply a tool used by rational individuals to act. Moral judgment can be contemplative, which implies seeing the moral character of things around us, rather than always action-oriented. In *La Pesanteur et la Grâce*, Weil defines the form of the good as a fundamentally tangible sensation, yet as a necessarily conflicting "idea" of absence and presence, within every person. In "What We Must Love is Absent" she explains that we must love what does not exist, and depicts human perception of the good as a truthful case of contradiction: some "*cas de contradictoires vrais*" (Weil 1948, 113).

More vision-oriented, the "counter-ideal" of attention seeks to reject the assimilation of morality to the realm of action and stresses the existence of other moral values. But the metaphor of vision is not intended to compete with agentivity, rather to deepen its conception (Moran 2012, 186-189). By its very nature, attention pertains to something external to oneself: attentional action does not produce its results instantaneously but rather is part of a gradual, "piecemeal" enterprise of moral growth. As Silvia Panizza puts it, the moral concept of attention involves "particular epistemic attitudes and faculties that are meant to enable the subject to apprehend moral reality and thus achieve correct moral understand and moral response" (Panizza 2015, 2). Freedom is reshaped as the "continuous work of attention" of human consciousness, constantly building new structures of value: it thus comes to be a matter of progress in a just and loving vision of an

individual, a thing infinitely perfectible. The distinguishing feature of the moral agent changes to that of directing a just and loving gaze on an individual reality, i.e., the reality of others. The exercise of attention is thus comprehended as (i) enabling moral perception, and (ii) an indispensable means in attaining moral understanding. As Panizza says, "being attentive is of central importance in morality, because it enables the individual to apprehend the moral relevance of what confronts her" (Panizza 2015, 8). Since it contributes to correct moral understanding, attention is something that one ought to exercise, in order to prevent or combat moral blindness, and other forms of visual impairment: it involves "recognizing that sometimes we are too lazy, fearful, distracted, careless, hurried, committed to certain positions, to see clearly" (Panizza 2015, 9). That is where moral failures begin: not in deliberation, not in choice, but in knowledge and perception.

If attention – as opposed to mere "looking" – is what reveals moral reality, that is because moral reality (and reality more generally) is not simply and immediately available to anyone, but requires the correct application of concepts, the use of the imagination to disclose possibilities, and virtues such as honesty, humility, truthfulness, patience, and love. Murdoch's epistemology and moral psychology are linked by this conception of perception and knowledge, whereby apprehension of reality (the main moral goal) is something to be achieved through moral effort. (Panizza 2015, 11)

While she embraces Weil's theory of affliction, i.e., painful reality as what connects us to what is good, and the natural mechanisms through which we ordinarily flee suffering, Murdoch is not Weil. The key distinction being: Murdoch is studying a post-World War II world without God. Thus, she is deeply convinced that the concept of God in such a historical context is impossible, although she is keen to preserve a spirituality that gives substance to moral philosophy and human life. How to think of Good without the God-image? In "On 'God' and 'Good'", the essay that makes up the second part of *The Sovereignty of Good*, Murdoch manages to find the parry: she parallels the good with the God of Christian theology. The argument can be summarised as follows: the good is the object of loving attention, through which we receive the energy for good action, and which saves us from our selfish nature, just as God is the object of prayer, which can be understood through grace, and which redeems us from the sin of human nature. For a Weilian reader, one immediately recalls: attention, at its highest level, is the same as prayer – it presupposes faith and love (Weil 1948, 119).

The analogy is very compelling: faith's path to God is identified with the moral agent's path to the good, conceived as a unique, transcendent, unrepresentable and necessarily real object of attention. It possesses the attributes of perfection and necessity, which Murdoch simultaneously inscribes in her novels that she begins to publish in the 1950s, where the characters are always subject to moral conversion. Love is staged as a privileged path towards the good, when it is not a desire for possession or self-projection, which, sadly, turns out to be the case in almost all her novels. The utmost virtue of the good is clear-sightedness, an awareness as a virtue of attention.

It is in the capacity to love, that is to *see*, that the liberation of the soul from fantasy consists. The freedom which is a proper human goal is the freedom from fantasy, that is the realism of compassion. What I have called fantasy, the proliferation of blinding self-centred aims and images, is itself a powerful system of energy, and most of what is often called "will" or "willing" belongs to this system. What counteracts the system is attention to reality inspired by, consisting of, love. (Murdoch 1970, 65)

The guiding thread of her moral philosophy – "how can we become morally better?" – forms a kind of backdrop to her novels, in which the protagonists endlessly fail to refine themselves, hardly ever achieving goodness and grace, precisely because they are incapable of being attentive to the reality of others and especially of those they constantly proclaim to "love". Murdoch's novels weave the canvas of (mental) realms with unreal, blurred, magical contours where through the absurd and the grotesque, grace never ceases to graze the characters and to drift away, where goodness never ceases to attract them while the latter repeatedly fail to achieve any form of perfection. Weilian morals acquire an unprecedented shape in Iris Murdoch's novels.

3. Acknowledging Simone Weil in Iris Murdoch's novels

I shall now sketch out how the Weilian notions of grace and disgrace acquire a distinctive form in Iris Murdoch's novels, i.e., how these two overriding concepts form the metaphysical narrative background of her novels and how her protagonists interact with and perform within the space of her novels rooted in these two concepts. As Griffin has putted it, it is a study concerned with "how certain conceptual parallels in Weil's and Murdoch's moral philosophy find their

expression in Murdoch's novels" (Griffin 1993, 1). This section will henceforth focus on three of Iris Murdoch's famous (male) protagonists: Bradley Pearson, Charles Arrowby and Hilary Burde.

3.1. Sketching the theoretical argument

I'd like to state at the very outset the theoretical argument that this paper aims to advocate: quite a few of Murdoch's protagonists never achieve grace, especially when they are convinced they are. That is particularly true for Bradley Pearson, failed writer in *The Black Prince*, performing the Weilian anti-hero, absolutely disgraceful, utterly egotistical man, inattentive to the suffering of his fellows; Charles Arrowby in *The Sea, The Sea*, an equally self-centered, though charismatic, manipulative retired actor; and Hilary Burde in *A Word Child*, moving in the Kafkaesque world of a London office, who rose through the ranks of society thanks to a brilliant education that has pulled him out of the shallows of his native environment, but who brings death to the women he claims to love. If this paper focuses on how quite a few of Murdoch's novels illustrate a Weilian approach of the graceful and the disgraceful, it is part, as I said, of a more broadly moral set-up which is driving her through her writings, i.e.: how can one be morally better? I am aware that detailed studies have been made of the figure of the saint and the artist in Murdoch's novels (e.g. Conradi 2021), but I will not dwell on them here.

For what I want to demonstrate is how the moral failure of these Murdochian male-characters, i.e., Bradley Pearson, Charles Arrowby and Hilary Burde, embody the Weilian moral vision as it animates Murdoch's writing. That is, how the failure to achieve goodness and moral excellence is an ordinary failure that takes the form of her protagonists being inattentive to the suffering of their fellow creatures, self-obsessed and much always misogynistic; a failure taking the form of *a failure to love*, when loving, regarded as a virtue of attention, is the mechanism by which grace can truly be achieved. In short, I'd like to pursue in a literary analysis what Panizza refers to as "the difficulty of attention", drawing on what Cora Diamond called "the difficulty of reality": the difficulty is "the mind's not being able to encompass something which it encounters[3]" (Panizza 2022a, 19).

[3] (Diamond 2008, 44). Diamond, Cora. 2008. *The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy*. In *Philosophy and Animal Life*, edited by Stanley Cavell et al., 43-91. New York: Columbia University Press.

Although these protagonists fail in attaining grace, it seems to be the friction between it and disgrace that motivates them to act. In her novels, Murdoch untangles the mechanisms by which we fail, as humans, to achieve grace, as long as we are not in full, unselfish attentiveness to the other, i.e., when what we call "loving" is in fact a hodgepodge of selfishness and carelessness. As Panizza puts it, drawing on Weil, "attention is difficult": "Attention to suffering is hard, opening up to the possibility that we are doing something wrong is hard, accepting that our world includes some fundamental harm is hard." (Panizza 2022a, 19). The hardest part seems the "unselfing[4]", though, as Panizza puts it, "attention is good insofar as it is an honest attempt to see reality, and for the concomitant suppression of self-concern" (Panizza 2022b, 160). What struck me when reading Murdoch's novels was the extent to which her male main protagonists fail to love, when they are so convinced that they are loving, and that this love unlocks for them the gates of grace: their delusional romance always leads to drama, loss and death.

Murdoch portraying this failure, it seems that the reader is brought to grips what it is like to fail to love, and in playing out an inverted mimesis, how seeing terrifying attentionlessness urges the reader to pursue the path of moral attentiveness. This is not to say that her novels are here to express moral ideas: but by means of clever, pity-inducing and highly humorous scenes, Murdoch succeeds in provoking a moral experience within the reader, in which the Weilian concepts of love and attention are interwoven. Griffin has interestingly putted it another way, referring to a process of "fictionalizing attention", taking three different forms: through plot and characters, through her style of writing, and through certain demands she makes on the reader (Griffin 1993, 200).

3.2. The Murdochian figures of disgrace

Bradley Pearson

In her introduction to *The Black Prince*'s latest edition, the British novelist Sophia Hannah writes: "Protagonists in Murdoch's fiction are constantly whining, 'Never mind you; what about me?' to an audience of equally uncaring, self-absorbed people" (Hannah 1973, 13). Indeed, Bradley is one of those

[4] "Very closely connected to attention is the concept of unselfing. Unselfing is Murdoch's term for that which Weil calls decreation." (Düringer 2022, 308)

"Murdoch's self-obsessed characters, who [interpret] everything in terms of their own needs" (Griffin 1993, 34). Penguin Random House's synopsis captures it well: "Ex-tax collector and author of two unpopular novels, Bradley Pearson wishes to devote his retirement to writing a masterpiece. But the doorbell and the phone keep ringing, and every ring brings with it an ex-wife, a friend in need, a sister in trouble or a young woman seeking a teacher, and so dusty, selfish Bradley is plunged into the muddles and mysteries which will end in his doom." As Griffin says, Murdoch's preoccupation with "the inner life" is intended to reveal what the self is "really" like at the same time as "offering instruction concerning the development of a particular moral attitude" (Griffin 1993, 35). And concerning Bradley, the least we can say is that his "moral response" to what he is facing his terrible.

In *The Black Prince*, there is not any extraordinary plot, heroic love or exemplary behavior, nothing but Bradley's muddled inner life going on. A selfish, macho, who pays no attention to anyone but himself, nor to his own sister, beaten and humiliated by her ex-husband, nor his ex-wife, nor to the young Julian Baffin who, while claiming a "love above all else", goes to have a final very near-rape sexual relationship with her. Driven by a fantasied "Black Eros", Bradley sketches the figure of the ordinary disgraceful man.

When Bradley Pearson is at his most frustrated, he suddenly finds himself falling deeply and unexpectedly in love with the Baffins' daughter, Julian. His response to this is not to do anything noble, grand or tragic, but rather to lie face down on the carpet for a very long time. This was the moment at which I fell head over heels in love with *The Black Prince* and knew that I would love it forever. I knew I was reading something more faithful to and representative of reality than anything I had ever read before. (Hannah 1973, 12)

This is what one might appreciate in Iris Murdoch: an ordinariness in the depiction of human behavior, always closer to disgrace than to grace[5] – but how to achieve it without being a saint? The thread of *The Black Prince* weaves around Bradley's desire to be moved by grace, touched by Eros, but the read-through of the novel never ceases to unfold a poverty in the roll-out of its moral virtues. All

[5] As Rosemary Sim argues: "It is probably true that for most of us at least it is easier to behave badly than to behave well – not of course that we do always take the line of least resistance, but doing so will lead us more often to the moral depths than the moral heights." (Sim 1985, 25)

the novel focus is on this relationship between attention and reality as Bradley firstly describes himself as a writer, thus a "seeker of truth" (Griffin 1993, 225). He believes absolutely in his calling, portraying himself as "an artist" of high principle: he waits, silently, for the moment or truth to arrive. While Griffin argues for "Pearson's foreword, in fact, contains the reason why he has not been successful as a writer. He has not lacked attention, that is obvious; his failure is not one of having blinked at the wrong moment but of having withdrawn from the source of inspiration, reality" (Griffin 1993, 229), I would still argue that the moral failure he is performing is played out at the level of his attention, which cannot be separated from reality: Bradley "fails to attend" (Panizza 2022b, 161).

I'd like to take here other directions than those taken by Martha Nussbaum and Niklas Forsberg in their studies of *The Black Prince*. I shall not go into all of Forsberg's criticisms of Nussbaum and her analyses of the novel. But I would like to join him in making a number of observations, which I shall set out here:

(i) "What is striking about Nussbaum's reading here is that she seems to be certain that Bradley really *loved* Julian. She also takes it to be evident that the form love takes in the novel, is the form that Murdoch supposedly 'advocates'. What is questioned in *The Black Prince* is 'The Platonism of Bradley's love.' *That* he loves her is not a question at all. [...] To my ears it is obvious that Bradley is not in attunement with himself and his feelings; that he really does not know what he talks about when he talks about love." (Forsberg 2013, 34)

Indeed, what surprised me when I read Nussbaum's article in Broackes' *Iris Murdoch, Philosopher* is that she begins by acknowledging that Bradley is an unreliable narrator, who is under a delusion of love for Julian. She quotes Julian, "You talk as is there was nobody but you... You do not seem to know me at all. Are you sure it is *me* you love?" thus, she describes Bradley's "love" as a "blinding joy" and suggests that his "erotic vision" is "a kind of self-centered illusion that does not really offer any insight into any real thing or person outside the ego self" (Nussbaum 2012, 136). So far, so good. But at the end of her article, while she recognizes that Bradley is imprisoned in a "fat cozy ego" that somehow prevents him from having a true and selfless vision of his peers, she also depicts "erotic love", from a Murdochian standpoint, as something that is capable of pulling us out of our own ego, an energy that transforms our vision towards something true outside ourselves, as if Bradley was approaching it, without ever questioning (thus

it creates, in my view, a theoretical gap) (i) how Bradley fails to truly love Julian and (ii) therefore how he *fails* morally and sinks into disgrace by (iii) raping Julian in the countryside, therefore never really pulling himself out of his own ego.

(ii) "Is it, for example, inconceivable that Murdoch wrote a book about a man who failed to love? And, if this is possible, why should we not then think that Murdoch was quite happy in displaying the hardness and difficulty of loving? In Nussbaum's view, it is 'evident that [Bradley] is freed from egoistic self-preoccupation'." (Forsberg 2013, 35)

I shall not follow Forsberg's criticism that Murdoch's literature is not merely a laboratory for her philosophical ideas. This has already been said. Nor where we should localize Murdoch's voice within her novels, otherwise I would be straying too far from an investigation that I intend here to be literary and conducted from a Weilian perspective. Anyhow, I say all my recognition towards the achievement made by Nussbaum these last years to make literature a guenine and serious object for ethical investigation – encompassing the idea of the novel as an ethical form in itself. I could venture to follow Forsberg's comments on reclaiming the meaning of "good" for the ordinary, claiming that I also do not think Murdoch's vision of love corresponds exactly to what Nussbaum proposes (i.e., torn between a Dantesque and a Platonic vision), but I shall go in a slightly different direction, sketching out the hypothesis that her vision of love as enacted in her novels is thoroughly Weilian. Referring to (i) and (ii), I think we can come up with some interesting ideas, i.e.: (a) how Bradley fails to love Julian despite repeatedly saying that he does; (b) what is it to fail to love; (c) to what extent can we sketch an ethical reflection from this recognition of a fictional moral failure?

In *The Black Prince*, one character embodies dreadful distress: Rachel Baffin. In her forties, she is Bradley's best friend wife – one Bradley seduces before swooping down on her daughter, Julian. Impeded in a deeply misogynistic society, she appears through Bradley's narrative as never ceasing to declaim her pain and her inability to be able to emancipate herself from her marriage. Bradley appears as never being able to help her. As Griffin puts it: "For Pearson part of the traditional role of the female is to be giving, submissive, unselfish. He is trapped in these gender attributions just as much as the female characters are represented as being." (Griffin 1993, 232). At the beginning of the novel, Bradley is phoned in the middle of the night to the house of his distraught friend, who has just had a violent fight with his wife. We understand that he had actually beaten

his wife. Managing to find Rachel locked in her bedroom, Bradley sees her covered in bruises and blood, but the only thing he manages to tell her is: go to bed, and stop acting "hysterical". As with so many of Murdoch's male protagonists, only selfishness, cynicism and sarcasm match the complex, often suffering, subjectivities of others.

If, as Lovibond says, Murdoch can hardly be considered a feminist who took the fight to the streets or a political activist in the public sphere[6], although she publicly advocated access for women to education, I nonetheless find in *The Black Prince* a form of feminist voice, at least, a voice given to the suffering of women trapped in a society that prevents them from achieving independence and happiness. As Griffin argues: "Without jobs, heterosexuality oriented in a heterosexual world, they [women] validate their lives solely in terms of male approval, have been socialized into an existence where men function as providers and resource pools from which the women receive. In that sense, many of the middle-class, middle-aged women Murdoch portrays still inhabit a world of Victorian values." (Griffin 1993, 233). I reject the argument that identifies Murdoch's voice with that of her male narrator-protagonists. I shall argue taking their voice hinges on the idea that: (i) men have the largest voice in society and the most rights, so putting oneself in their shoes allows exploration of more ordinary experiences (not permitted by society to women); (ii) putting the reader in their mind enables one to grasp Murdoch's ethics of attention, i.e., an ethical pursuit of attentiveness (as they are, precisely, uncaring). In other words, stepping into their minds is actually quite an effective way of drawing up what should be an ethics of attention, by means of a literary process of mirroring that, on the one hand, accounts for gender, and, on the other, portrays their inattention as the very phenomenon that

[6] Feminism in Iris Murdoch's work is still a controversial issue. Griffin (1993) argues for caution in making a *feminist reading* of Weil and Murdoch's texts, but also defends the idea that their writings were *situated*: in this sense, she speaks of a common "intrusion into male spaces" without the two women claiming to be feminists as such. Nora Hämäläinen (2015, 743–759) argues for Iris Murdoch as "a helpful companion in the quest for a well-rounded feminist ethics for anyone roughly sympathetic to the kind of poststructuralist feminism that Lovibond leans on" (756). Lucy Oulton's chapter "Murdoch and Feminism" in *The Murdochian Mind* (2022, 438-449) talks about "difficulties in considering Murdoch's philosophy to be feminist" (ibid., 441) but concludes that "Murdoch's individual exemplars exist in a network of connections and relationships that resonate profoundly with contemporary intersectional feminism and ethics of care" (ibid., 449).

leads to moral failures and disgrace. We can get a glimpse of this through a dialogue between Bradley and Rachel:

'Stop, please. You must rest. Do take some aspirins. Try to sleep little. I'll get you some tea, would you like that?'

'Sleep! With my mind in this state! He has sent me to hell. He has taken my whole life from me. He has spoilt the world. I am as clever as he is. He has just blocked me off from everything. I can't work, I can't think, I can't be, because of him. His stuff crawls over everything, he takes away all my things and turns them into his things. I've never been myself or lived my own life at all. I've always been afraid of him, that's what it comes to. All men despise all women really. All women fear all men really. Men are physically stronger, that's what it comes to, that's what's behind it all. Of course, they're bullies, they can end any argument. Ask any poor woman in the slums, she knows. He has given me a black eye, like any common brawler, any drunken husband like you hear of in the courts. He has hit me before; oh this isn't the first time by any means. [...]

'*Ach* –' Again, the horrible sound of aggressive violent disgust. 'Go away now, leave me please. Leave me alone with my thoughts and my torture and my punishment. I shall cry all night, all night. Sorry, Bradley. Tell Arnold I'm going to rest now. Tell him not to come near me again today. Tomorrow I will try to be as usual. There will be no recriminations, no reproaches, nothing. How can be I reproach him? He will become angry again, he will frighten me again. Better to be a slave.' (Murdoch 1973, 38-39)

Rachel's "*Ach* –" echoes (the upcoming) Hartley's "*aaah*" and "*oh – oh – oh*" that will disgust Charles Arrowby so much in *The Sea, The Sea*. Suffering does indeed have an atrocious ugliness, often unbearable to the human gaze. Hartley's face, as Charles will express it, takes the form of an agonized, pitiful "mask" – just as Rachel's, covered in bruises and tears, seems terrorized but then resigned. What is striking is that this suffering which "disgusts" Murdoch's male protagonists, is actually caused by them. Bradley is constantly making misogynistic remarks about Rachel, notably about her "hysteria" presumed caused by aging: it is the strength of Murdoch's novels to put the reader in the shoes of a male-protagonist we can never fully sympathize with.

A similar manifestation of Bradley's inattentiveness as a moral failing arises in his carelessness towards his sister Priscilla. At the beginning of the novel, Priscilla arrives at Bradley's house in tears, hopeless and disoriented. She has left

her husband, who neglected and mistreated her. We later learn that he has an affair with a younger woman, from whom he is expecting a child. Following an abortion she had to have when she was younger (at Roger's behest), Priscilla had never been able to become pregnant again. With no job, no diploma and no financial resources, Priscilla asks Bradley for hospitality, but he either sends her away or, when he welcomes her, *does not take care* of her: he always manages to leave the house, so that it is his ex-wife who takes care of Priscilla. As Bradley's passion for Julian deepens, he increasingly neglects his sister, who ends up committing suicide. When he receives news of her suicide, Bradley's immediate reaction is to make love (something more akin to sexual assault) to Julian – whom he has more or less abducted in the countryside. His sister's suicide is only matched by his mental wanderings about whether or not he is capable of doing sex.

Bradley's cynical cruelty is rivaled only by the funniness of Iris Murdoch's writing, which draws laughter from the reader through clever tragi-comic situations. But the strength of her writing lies in her ability to dig into the limits of comedy, to show in sharp lines the seriousness of Bradley's moral failure to do any good, as embodied in Priscilla's suicide. Her death ends the comedy. Through it, Bradley's assessment is carried forward: "You're simply not rational, Priscilla. I daresay Roger has been tiresome, he's a very selfish man, but you'll just have to forgive him. Women just have to put up with selfish men, it's their lot. You can't leave him, there isn't anywhere else for you to go." (Murdoch 1973, 91). And is there any other place for Priscilla, indeed?

Bradley firstly depicts his passion for Julian as a moment of blinding light and sudden vision, vision of a form of beauty from which mortal eyes are usually cut off (Nussbaum 2012, 135). He thus suggests that love offers a kind of insight into the truth of the world that we can hardly attain otherwise. So far, it could be said that he is following the right Weilian moral path. He recognizes that love is the path that leads to goodness. But obviously, the path he takes is anything but the path leading to the good. Why is that? I would like to sketch out some hypothesis:

(i) His advocated erotic vision is more of a kind of self-centered illusion which leads to no other reality than that of the ego itself.

(ii) His selfishness, the core source of his inability to care, prevents him from compassionating the suffering of his peers, thus from *seeing* the reality of others, therefore from truly loving Julian, since he does not really *see* her. He only

sees the projection of his own desires, while loving in the Weilian sense implies a "decreation of self" (Griffin 1993, 95).

(iii) His unresponsive attitude towards women suffering is the missed path of attention and compassion for others, which would have brought him to the good.

As Griffin puts it: "Love, according to Weil, is an image of the love shown by God for His creation through absenting Himself. For human beings the ability to withdraw the self has to do with understanding that we are not the centre of the world but co-exist with others." (Griffin 1993, 95). While admitting that Murdoch was convinced by Weil's moral vision of goodness, she focused on exploring the more pessimistic and ordinary mechanisms that cause individuals to fail to become better, while Weil argued for a more austere and uncompromising definition of love as selflessness: "consenting to distance", and "[the recognition of] the autonomy of the other" (Griffin 1993, 99). While advocating for selflessness, Murdoch evidences in her novels the many stratagems by which the ego wraps itself in a self-indulgent, egotistical fog that prevents it from accessing the reality of the other and so goodness. But strangely enough, the humorous atmosphere that surrounds each love drama transforms a potentially depressing pessimistic assessment into something that awakens the reader's sensibility and unleashes a whole ethical experience, in which Weilian attention acquires its full significance. "Falling in love is for many people their most intense experience" she writes in *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, thus "[it] can occasion extreme selfishness and possessive violence, the attempt to dominate that other place so that it be no longer separate; [or] it can prompt a process of unselfing wherein the lover learns to see, and cherish and respect, what is not himself' (Murdoch 1992, 16-17). Her novels render palpable this tension.

Charles Arrowby

Regarding Charles Arrowby's grotesque failure to achieve grace and goodness, let's start with a pretty fair summary from Penguin Random House of *The Sea, The Sea*.

Charles Arrowby has determined to spend the rest of his days in hermit-like contemplation. He buys a mysteriously damp house on the coast, far from the heady world of the theatre where he made his name, and there he swims in the sea, eats revolting meals and writes his memoirs. But then he meets his childhood sweetheart Hartley, and memories of her lovely, younger self crowd in – along

with more recent lovers and friends – to disrupt his self-imposed exile. So instead of "learning to be good", Charles proceeds to demonstrate how very bad he can be.

From the outset, the other protagonists, notably Charles's former flame Lizzie, try to explain to him the sum of fantasies and delusions he is projecting onto Hartley, his childhood sweetheart. "I remember your talking about a first love" says Lizzie, "but these things are imaginary, they are fables. You're just suffering from the shock of seeing her, give it a fortnight. And she's got a bourgeois marriage and a son, and, Charles, she's *ordinary*, you can't do it to an ordinary woman just because you fancied her at school, it's nonsense and she wouldn't understand!"; and she goes on warning him about how foolish and demeaned he would be running after her. But Charles's ego is too strong: Hartley "will understand" his feelings – does her feelings matter? Not really. At no point does Charles take the noble road of scepticism and humility, which would encourage him to care for Hartley without needing to possess her. He depicts her reluctance as a simple consequence of fear towards her own presumed love feelings – "she's afraid, she loves me too much, and she doesn't yet know enough to trust my feelings. She will *trust* them. And then her love will simply sweep her to me." (Murdoch 1978, 213).

As the story's narrator is Charles, the reader is unable to escape his psyche and is drawn into his torments and misapprehensions – finally in his moral collapse, i.e., when he kidnaps Hartley and locks her in the guest room for several days, persuaded that she is going to admit that she loves him, and that he is chivalrously rescuing her from an ill-fated marriage. From the very beginning of the novel, we sense that an inward moral battle is about to be enacted, between good and evil, and how Charles is going to be pulled along this tightrope. The odd feature of Charles's behavior is that he is fully aware of his tendency to seek to possess the women with whom he has had affairs, to mistreat them, but is convinced, in relation to Hartley, that he is not in the same predicament. What is fascinating about Murdoch's writing is that she manages to sketch a moral inward picture of the human moral condition that is absolutely accurate precisely by virtue of its despairing nature: we often plunge into the same mistakes, convinced that we are not doing so. The key question is: what are the deepest patterns that cause moral subjects to dive into the same moral failures? Why does Charles, well aware of his past cruelty to women, plunge into an astonishing blindness towards Hartley, the love he claims to have for her leading him into madness and, possibly,

to her death? (For Hartley may be considering suicide.) Several passages prompt the reader to question Hartley's love for Charles. Is it a genuine love, or a mere reflection of Charles's fantasies? It is not so much the veracity of this love that I question as the effects it has on Charles's moral development. Truth is: they are the worst.

"The presence of Hartley in the house was itself like a dream, her sheer revival overnight now something urgently in question. I felt like a child who rushes to the cage of its new pet fearing to find only a lifeless body. With a sick stomach and a pounding heart I ran out into the corridor, beat my way through the bead curtain, softly unlocked her door and tapped. No response. Has she died in the night like a captured animal, had she somehow escaped and drowned herself? I opened the door and peered in. [...]

'Hartley, darling, are you all right, did you sleep? Were you warm enough?'

She lowered the blanket a little and her mouth moved.

'Hartley, you're going to stay with me forever.'" (Murdoch 1978, 330)

Charles cannot stop seeing Hartley as a saint "refined by suffering", e.g., a "long-suffering saint" who endured an "horrible pain of having married a foul insanely jealous bullying maniac" (Murdoch 1978, 355). This may have been the truth, as Hartley's husband appears both in Titus's mouth, their foster son, and hers, as a violent and cruel man. But Hartley's suffering never really reaches Charles' heart, and the vision of it repulses him. This is a common feature of our three male-protagonists that women's suffering disgusts them, and it is not without significance.

"Sitting bolt upright against the wall she was now crying as I have never seen any woman cry (and I have seen many). [...] She was shuddering rigidly with a dreadful damaging electricity. Her face was red, wild with tears, her mouth dribbling. Her voice, raucous, piercing, shrieked out, like a terrified angry person shrieking an obscenity, a frenzied panic noise, a prolonged *'aaah'*, which turned into a sobbing wail of quick 'oh – oh – oh', with a long descending 'ooooh' sound ending almost softly, and then the scream again: this continuing mechanically, automatically, on and on as if the human creature were possessed by an alien demonic machine. I felt horror, fear, a sort of disgusted shame [...] I shall never forget the awful image of that face, that mask, and the relentless cruel rhythmical quality of that sound..." (Murdoch 1978, 358)

Charles's lack of empathy echoes Bradley's unresponsive attitude to the suffering of his sister. As he refuses to see the visible painfulness of Hartley's suffering, Charles is distanced from the path to goodness, deluding himself with illusory artifice: he faces the "impossibility of re-achieving" this relationship (Griffin 1993, 102). Charles's entire past does not encourage us to trust him when he says he loves Hartley tenderly, in a form that leads to goodness. This is particularly manifest in the words of Peregrine, Charles's old pal, who harbours a bitter hatred for him: "You deliberately smashed my marriage, you took away my wife whom I adored, you did it carefully, cold-bloodedly, you *worked* at it. Then when you had got her away from me you dropped her. You didn't even want her for yourself, you just wanted to steal her from me to satisfy the beastly impulses of your possessiveness and your jealousy! Then when they were satisfied, when my marriage was broken forever, you went jaunting off somewhere else." (Murdoch 1978, 465).

Hilary Burde

I would now like to sketch a more succinct portrait of Hilary Burde in *A Word Child*. Although his psychological in-depthness is as complex as that of the characters previously discussed, I believe that the more exhaustive portraits of Charles Arrowby and Bradley Pearson are sufficient to reveal the expression of disgrace as Murdoch sees it, based on her reading of Weil and in the perspective of arguing for a new ethics of attention, namely that their inability to be attentive to the suffering of their fellows is precisely what plunges the characters in Murdoch's novels into the depths of moral failure, and renders any form of moral progress impossible.

Coming from a poor family from the English countryside, Hilary managed to extricate himself from his social background thanks to an education that brought him to Oxford. But in Oxford, a terrible secret drives him to abandon his scholarly career, and from then on he lives an ordinary life in a London office, between meals at his sister's house, a lover he never ceases to reject, and stifling mates. When his terrible secret reappears in London in the shape of a certain Gunnar, Hilary finds himself caught up in a cycle of seeking redemption and forgiveness, seemingly repeating the same fault that led him to curse himself for years. Fact is: Hilary had been the lover of Gunnar's first wife, who was his

teacher and friend at Oxford, and caused her death. And that he reproduces the process by causing the death of Gunnar's second wife, Kitty.

Here again, Murdoch depicts an obsessional relationship in which one person's love for another is simply expressive of a specific need rather than a sense of the reality of the other. Apart from his "love" in its obsessional form that Hilary feels for Kitty, his "love" for his sister Crystal is possessiveness, and he fails to understand her separateness: "She [Crystal] was my first conception of a human individual. (Crystal was part of me)" (Griffin 1993, 100). It is not so much the romantic tribulations as the repetitive human pattern of making same mistakes that seems to emerge as a prominent feature in each novel of Iris Murdoch. And in each tragic narrative, there is a common thread: a male character who is selfish, inattentive to the suffering of others, generally unkind, but convinced that his love for "this person" in particular will lead him to the good, to redemption, to happiness. Unfortunately, at the end of the novels previously studied, the main male-character finds himself alone, and the beloved one, always dead or gone.

4. Concluding comments

Simone Weil wrote that one must not love his suffering because it is useful, but because *it is*. Accepting what is *bitter* (Weil 1948, 85). Charles in *The Sea, The Sea* seems to accept his pain when Hartley goes to Australia. Strangely enough, we could say he grazes grace at the end of the novel, but the fact that we are not convinced – considering that his past has shown that he repeats the same moral faults over and over again, in the shape of inattention to other's suffering – that he is not going to go back to uncaring behaviour, and that he is not going to escape his ego, we cannot say that he is reaching grace. Grace grazes him, but refuses to him.

From a Weilian standpoint, Iris Murdoch sees emptiness as a spiritual experience that leads the moral subject to meditation, humility, recognition of his contingency, finally, to moral inspiration, liberation, joy (Murdoch 1992, 501). She takes the same step as Weil in saying that only in emptiness can true joy be achieved, a joy connected to reality and truth. In the cases of Charles Arrowby and Hilary Burde, we could say there is a kind of experience of emptiness, linked to the loss of the "loved" one. However, I am not so sure that any of Murdoch's novels really manage to portray the Weilian desolation with the same intensity

that Weil gave to emptiness and suffering. But this does not occur randomly. Murdoch's protagonists are ordinary men who could improve morally, but fail to do so precisely because they are men, and not saints. Only saints can attain grace. There is a similar sense of grace in Simone Weil as that which only saints can achieve: grace presupposes the overcoming, the annihilation of self, the pure dedication to a reality outside oneself, a suffering of the world, of nature or of others. Because they are not saints, Bradley, Charles and Hilary fail to attain grace. And yet, Murdoch brings grace down to the ordinary life, while at the same time setting out the path to moral perfectionism.

Only "concentrated attention" (i.e., "loving care"), feeling joy in complete void and decentering, can result in moral improvement (Murdoch 1992, 504). Everything in *The Sea, The Sea* suggests that there is space for emptiness in Charles's life, and thus, grace: his seaside exile from London, his solitude, the calm of a country life, the loss of Hartley. But his moral path is so far from a virtuous one (i.e., marked by attention, compassion) that he fails to create anything morally significant out of this emptiness. This emptiness is constantly filled by actions or interpersonal relationships whose moral component fails to take shape. However, there is something more graceful, so to speak, in Charles than in Bradley: there is a form of pure expectation, an assumption of the void left by the absent woman, but his behavior throughout the novel has been so ungracious, that we can simply say that "perhaps", now, a real void in Charles's life will allow grace to enter – but will he really be able to respond to it? We do not know: we can only hope.

I'd like to add that in counterpoint of her self-obsessed male characters, Iris Murdoch portrayed (secondary) female characters in moral attitudes of care and attention. If one can remain cautious with Griffin's argument that she would have been simply "pursuing a philosophy which perpetuates an already existent female attitude towards morality, or at least one more obviously associated with woman than men[7]" (Griffin 1993, 271), I believe that a gender-based grid is helpful to grasp the ethics of attention emerging from the Murdochian interpretation

[7] "If one compare Gilligan's findings with Murdoch's and Weil's moral philosophy one cannot but conclude that these two writers propagate the female moral imperative, as detailed in Gilligan's studies. The key terms of their philosophy, such as 'attention' and 'self-effacement', mirror Gilligan's description of the female moral attitude." (Griffin 1993, 271). Murdoch and Weil are thus powerful and fruitful theoretical sources for the ethics of care.

of Simone Weil's ideas, as gender is to comprehend Murdoch's work. Her fiction reveals how far she was troubled with the impact social forces have upon individuals who might be socially marginalized because of their genders or sexualities, namely those who display "nonnormative" gender or sexual behaviors. She challenged social prejudices about gender and sexuality by asserting that the community's views on the "nonnormative" were unloving and morally unjust (Grimshaw 1995). In a way, Griffin is right when she writes: "For women this moral philosophy implies remaining in and perfecting the state of complete other-orientedness they are socialized into anyway. For men, on the other hand, it implies the education towards the female moral position and is therefore much more radical in its demands than the conventional education toward morality." (Griffin 1993, 272). Although Iris Murdoch was reluctant to call herself a feminist – and this cannot be denied – it is no coincidence that the characters she singled out for moral failure are men, usually mysogynists. This is crucial if we are to fully comprehend the Murdochian ethics of attention.

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