

**PHILOSOPHY'S DANGEROUS PUPIL:
MURDOCH, DERRIDA, AND THE TENSION BETWEEN
LITERATURE AND PHILOSOPHY**

The anguish of the philosopher comes about because philosophy touches impossibility... It's impossible
for the human mind to dominate the things which haunt it.

Iris Murdoch qtd. in Haffenden

What is the relation between philosophy and literature in Murdoch's writing? The question has often been raised in discussions of her work, even though Murdoch herself always seemed quite clear about the answer. Time and again in interviews she patiently maintained that while her novels did contain philosophical discussions they were certainly not 'philosophical novels', nor did she set out deliberately to dramatize in fiction the philosophical questions which interested her. Speaking in 1976 Murdoch explained that in her fiction 'there's just a sort of atmosphere and, as it were, tension and direction which is sometimes given by a philosophical interest, but not anything very explicit' (Bradbury, 'Conversation'). In 1985 she claimed even more forcefully that she felt no 'tension' as a result of the demands placed on her by philosophy and art other than that brought by the fact that 'both pursuits take up time' (Haffenden 198). Most conclusive of all perhaps, her opinion seems to be justified by the work itself, which manages to preserve a remarkably stable outward distinction between her two writing identities. Philosophy, in other words, is often present within Murdoch's fiction but only in an atmospheric sense, contributing to the discussions and conflicts between characters, while her non-fiction (with the exception of interviews and conference papers) is largely devoid of references to her status as a practising novelist, even in essays concerned with the state of the contemporary novel like 'The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited' or 'Against Dryness'.

Nevertheless, that Murdoch should use the word tension in both of these remarks is interesting, for tension is precisely what we might expect to be produced in the practically unique case of a writer who continued to produce both philosophy and fiction side by side throughout her long career. Furthermore, she conceived of her two disciplines as not just different but quite opposite in crucial respects. While the fundamental aim of both was to convey ‘truth’, philosophy should try to clarify while literature must mystify. Literature was about play, magic, entertainment, arousing emotions, whereas philosophy had a duty to strive towards an ‘unambiguous plainness and hardness... an austere unselfish candid style. A philosopher must try to explain exactly what he means and avoid rhetoric and idle decoration’ (Magee 264-7). Each discipline is governed, in other words, by a opposite impulse or desire. In psychoanalytic terms, the co-existence of mutually exclusive desires is likely to lead to tension, perhaps even neurosis. How valid is Murdoch's insistence that her two main interests created only a small, productive amount of tension?

The answer might be found in two of the rare moments in her writing when the boundary between her double writing identity is temporarily broken down. In The Philosopher's Pupil we learn that the philosopher John Robert Rozanov had once published a ‘seminal work’ called Nostalgia for the Particular, which also happens to be the title of one of his author's own early essays. Self-reference is one of the ‘postmodern’ indulgences Murdoch sparingly allows herself in her fiction (consider the bottle of wine in An Unofficial Rose which is apparently made by the hero of A Severed Head, for example, or Julian's fictional boyfriend in The Black Prince who turns up in therapy in The Sacred and Profane Love Machine) perhaps because, as this example shows, the practice subtly serves to snag the fabric of Murdoch's realism by exposing the fictionality of her work as much as it strengthens its sense of verisimilitude by suggesting an extended fictional universe beyond the confines of the text. It prefigures the famous admission by the shadowy narrator at the end of the novel, ‘I also had the assistance of a certain lady’ (Philosopher's Pupil 558), which points implicitly to Murdoch as despotic creator of the fictional

world. Rozanov's book strengthens this implicit sense of confession and, most importantly, seems to suggest that the philosophy discussed within, and even the eponymous relationship between philosophical master and pupil is informed by Murdoch's own philosophical career.

Even more striking is a moment in Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals, Murdoch's sprawling last work of philosophy, when the boundary is crossed in the other direction. While glossing Derrida's idea (as she understands it) that there is 'only a network of meanings (the infinitely great net of language itself) under which there is nothing', Murdoch remarks parenthetically 'See a philosophical discussion these matters in my first novel, Under the Net' (Metaphysics 187). The comment is clearly intended to strengthen the point she is making about priority in philosophy, how Wittgenstein and Heidegger got there before Derrida. Yet, stylistically, this is actually a highly unusual move in Murdoch's philosophy. Because of her conviction that 'philosophical writing is not self-expression, it involves a disciplined removal of the personal voice' (Magee 165), she seldom writes in the first person in her non-fiction - far less directly acknowledges her 'other' career. But one of the immediate implications of this remark is to contradict Murdoch's assertion that her novels are not directly related to her philosophical concerns (although it is perhaps significant that it should refer to Under the Net, the only novel Murdoch has been happy to call a philosopher's novel 'in a very simple sense' because 'it plays with a philosophical idea' [Kermode 122]). It also seem especially appropriate that the traversing of the boundary should come in a reading of Derrida, of all philosophers.

Taking a lead from Murdoch's careful installation of a barrier between her fiction and philosophy, and backed up by her own unequivocal statements about the priority of art over philosophy ('For both the collective and the individual salvation of the human race, art is doubtless more important than philosophy, and literature most important of all' [Sovereignty 76]) studies of Murdoch's work have tended to treat her philosophy and literary theory as supplementary to her fiction – that is, as a body of writings which can be used to clarify certain aspects of her fiction or to provide support for readings of particular novels if so desired, but

consideration of which is not essential to understanding her art. Yet the notion of supplementarity is one which Derrida has taught us to approach with caution – especially when it comes to the question of the relation between philosophy and literature. His famous reading of Rousseau in Of Grammatology interrogates Rousseau's persistent use of the word 'supplement', highlighting its strange doubleness: a term referring to something which might be added optionally to an already complete entity but which also implies a lack in this entity as a result. Derrida shows that this contradictory element at the heart of Rousseau's writing is in fact typical of the conceptual logic of philosophical (or 'logocentric' or 'metaphysical') thought in general, which operates by setting up a central opposition, in which one term is privileged over another subordinate term. But in fact - as the intricate process of deconstructive reading demonstrates - this secondary term points to a structure which determines the very shape of the prioritized concept, and, moreover, limits it by threatening to contaminate or collapse it. It is precisely this 'dangerous' quality of the supplement (Rousseau's description) which explains why it needed to be suppressed in the discourse in the first place. This suggests how Derrida goes about undoing the various key binaries which structure Rousseau's thought: culture/nature, melody/harmony, speech/writing. What is particularly significant in the case of Rousseau, is that his 'literary' writing, the Confessions, powerfully performs the contradictions between speech and writing which his philosophy attempts to suppress. This exemplifies the fact that the dangerous supplement is particularly associated with literary writing, a kind of writing which philosophy has to position as its other in order to police and keep at bay.¹

Derrida's notion of the supplement can help us see that the relation between philosophy and literature is more problematic than it may outwardly seem in Murdoch's work. My intention in what follows, though, is not to offer a deconstructive reading of Murdoch's writing in the established sense of the term, even though I will argue to some extent that in Murdoch the philosophical always already precedes the literary. More generally, I want to place the two thinkers alongside one another (something Murdoch does extensively herself in Metaphysics as a

Guide to Morals, as we shall see) in order to ascertain what kind of thinker - and what kind of novelist - she is. The short answer is that she is a profoundly contradictory writer, and the source of the contradictions is her determination to maintain the opposition between philosophy and literature.

Viewing Murdoch's work in a Derridean light suggests, most obviously, that the opposition she constructs between her philosophy and her fiction is but one example of what is in fact the single most characteristic feature of her thought: its oppositional logic. Murdoch continually works with oppositions: the sublime and the beautiful, the crystalline and the journalistic, existentialism and mysticism, low and high Eros, the necessary and the contingent. Her novels typically bring into conflict two different characters or worlds. Her literary theory emphasizes the responsibility of the writer not to give in to the temptations of fantasy, which distorts and consoles, but instead to use the imagination, which reveals and explains. Character must not lose out to the consolations of form. Ultimately, it is not too strong to say that these pairings all effectively come down to one fundamental opposition, which is inherent in the Platonic idea of the 'pilgrimage from appearance to reality' (Fire and Sun 14). Though the movement from one condition to the other (eikasia to enlightenment) operates more as a continuum than a stable opposition in practice, it still depends upon two distinct states, which we could alternatively describe using any number of Murdoch's favourite terms. On the one hand we have low Eros, fantasy, or 'the neurotic', on the other, high Eros, reality and 'the ascetic'. Not that the oppositional logic behind Murdoch's work is hidden. Rather, it is clearly advertised in her titles: The Fire and the Sun, The Nice and the Good, The Sacred and the Profane Love Machine, Henry and Cato, Nuns and Soldiers. But we might even go further and suggest that Murdoch is not just an oppositional thinker, but one who actually serves as an exemplification of Derrida's notion of the logocentric thinker. Here we might consider Murdoch's four great polemical essays, 'The Sublime and the Good', 'The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited', 'Against Dryness', and 'Existentialists and Mystics', all of which divide the fictional landscape into two opposite forms

of novel which are symptomatic of the weaknesses of liberal-romantic thought. The names she gives these genres are different, but the referents are more or less the same: the novel dictated by 'social convention' versus the novel which succumbs to 'neurosis' ('The Sublime and the Good' and 'The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited'), the 'journalistic' versus the 'crystalline' ('Against Dryness'), the 'existentialist' and the 'mystical' novel ('Existentialists and Mystics'). Together these oppositions combine to form the secondary pairing in a more fundamental opposition, in which priority rests with Murdoch's favoured ethical approach to the novel.

Symptomatic reading: Murdoch versus Derrida

What happens, then, when a definitively metaphysical thinker like Murdoch comes up against the great expositor of the problems of metaphysical thinking? Derrida is perhaps the key presence in Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals. There are more references to him in the book than to Freud and Sartre. In a sense his work might be seen as the catalyst for the entire book, for Murdoch is clearly troubled by what she regards as Derrida's mission to move philosophy into an entirely new way of thinking, one which takes for granted the death of metaphysics more provocatively than Nietzsche and Heidegger. As a result she sets about building up an extensive critique of his work. Her strategy is to attack his work on two main fronts: 1) its inherent flaws and contradictions, 2) its style. Her main tactic is one that she has used to good effect before (and which might be described, ironically, as a deconstructive move), that is, demonstrating that work which likes to think of itself as non- or anti- metaphysical is actually founded upon a central metaphysic. This was central to her reading of Sartre, which showed how reliant his work was on the metaphysical notion of freedom operating within it. Derrida is a metaphysician in that the idea of archi-écriture or différance, to which his work constantly appeals, is an overarching transcendent concept similar to the Saussurian notion of langue in that it exists 'behind' Derrida's readings rendering them meaningful. And for all the general accuracy of his

understanding of language, because it depends upon a metaphysical structure (the idea of language as a system) it

obliterates a necessary recognition of the contingent. What is left out of the picture, magically blotted out by a persuasive knitting-together of ideas and terminology, is that statements are made, propositions are uttered, by individual incarnate persons in particular extra-linguistic situations, and it is in the whole of this larger context that our familiar and essential concepts of truth and truthfulness live and work. “Truth” is inseparable from individual contextual human responsibilities. (194)

Furthermore Derrida’s conviction about undecideability means that necessary ‘ordinary-life truth-seeking’ (195), which depends upon everyday, old-fashioned but workable distinctions between what is true and false, is obscured. Derrida’s totalizing metaphysics results also in a profound determinism where what is individual and contingent is made to disappear ‘by equating reality with integration in system’ (196). Derrida’s theory is thereby guilty of ‘siding with the system against the individual’ (197). Central to this critique is Murdoch’s fundamental conviction, which she finds support for in Plato and Kant (216), that all philosophy is really moral philosophy. Derrida is dangerous because his deterministic, anti-humanist metaphysic threatens to dissolve the human and the precious notion of (moral) truth. By implication, that is, he adopts a moral position. Just like Sartre, in other words, deconstruction amounts to a form of ‘metaphysics as a guide to morals’ (though Derrida does not acknowledge this), drawing its rhetorical power from ‘an impressive image or set of images’ which means that it ‘may, like other metaphysics, be treated as a kind of pragmatism or aesthetic guide’ (197). Like her readings of the other philosophers in the book Murdoch is effectively reading Derrida through Plato: ‘The fundamental value which is lost, obscured, made not to be, by structuralist [sic] theory, is truth, language as truthful, where “truthful” means faithful to, engaging intelligently and responsibly with, a reality which is beyond us’ [214].)

Murdoch's second major objection to Derrida's work emerges more implicitly in Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals, but it appears to worry her even more. In the chapter she devotes to Derrida she comments that his thinking is not like other philosophy in terms of style, as it lacks 'the kind of careful lucid explanatory talk and use of relevant examples which good philosophy, however systematic, includes and consists of' (197). She finishes the chapter with a passionate appeal for a rearguard action to be fought in order to put the Western tradition back on track and resurrect its 'method of imaginative truth-seeking and lucid clarification' (210-11). The note of passion is significant for this section does not mark the end of her consideration of Derrida in the book even though she goes on to address other issues and the work of other philosophers. She keeps coming back to him as if she cannot escape him, the discussion becoming more and more rhetorical until eventually she is moved to break with her philosophical voice and speak directly – once again breaking out of her dispassionate stylistic constraints. She says that she first read Writing and Difference in the original on publication in 1967 'and was impressed and disturbed by it', going on to read other books up until more the recent Derrida of Glas and Psyche: The Invention of the Other. She pays compliment to him as 'a remarkable thinker, a great scholar, a brilliant maverick polymath, a pharmakeus', who is capable of creating brilliant works like Glas, concluding that 'One should not ignore (as some of his critics do) these unique literary marvels'. But she has a rhetorical question, which she immediately answers herself (lest we misinterpret her rhetoric perhaps):

So what is wrong, what is there to worry about, should we not enjoy and profit from his versatile writings, his scholarship, his gorgeous prose, his large literary achievement? [...]What is disturbing and dangerous is the presentation of his thought as philosophy or as some sort of final metaphysic, and its elevation into a comprehensive literary creed and model of prose style and criticism, constituting an entirely (as it were compulsory) new way of writing and thinking. (291)

Derrida is brilliant but dangerous, in other words, because he brings an element of the literary into philosophy, where it has no place. This is a quite accurate assessment, of course, though it is more than a little surprising coming from a philosopher who also happens to be an accomplished writer of literature herself. For one might reasonably imagine that properly bringing the literary into philosophy is precisely what a thinker like Murdoch, who continually emphasizes the value of literature in taking account of the contingent in the world, might seek to do in her own work.

This contradictory element is not too surprising, however, for the two parts to Murdoch's critique – content and style – actually amount to a central contradiction in her response to his work. On the one hand her portrayal Derrida as a metaphysician carries with it the implication that we should not take seriously his pretensions to bringing about the end of philosophy. On the other hand, she simultaneously seems to regard his 'literary' style as posing a very real threat to philosophy as we know it. At this point we must acknowledge that where there is much that is valid in Murdoch's reading of Derrida – like the idea that archi-écriture is essentially a metaphysical concept² – it contains some serious misrepresentations of Derrida's thought. It is misleading to suggest that deconstructive reading practices are motivated by the 'quest for the hidden-deep ... meaning of the text' (Metaphysics 189), for this description is more applicable to a psychoanalytic methodology: the very idea of 'deep truth' is something Derrida is keen to question. It is also a mistake to view Derrida's notion of the endless deferral of meaning as a version of relativism, for certain values – like the respect for otherness and difference – are carefully preserved in his work. Above all, her view of Derrida's dependence on an overarching metaphysical system of language may be a valid critique of structuralism but is entirely misrepresentative of Derrida. It clearly overlooks the fact that Derrida begins his career – e.g. in Writing and Difference, the book Murdoch read in 1967, the first essay of which is 'Force and Signification' – with some far-reaching critiques of structuralism. Derrida takes great care to avoid imposing a system on his readings, avoiding where possible the use of the same 'blanket' terminology when analysing different texts in favour of terms chosen precisely because they are

integral to the work he is considering (this is why he uses the word ‘supplement’ in his reading of Rousseau, for example). Murdoch’s misreading here brings us to the most unsatisfactory aspect of her discussion of Derrida – not to mention a potentially embarrassing aspect for anyone seeking to defend her as a thinker of contemporary relevance – the consistent characterization of Derrida as the originator and leading proponent of structuralism. The error is compounded by the fact that Murdoch’s definition of structuralism seems at times staggeringly wide of the mark: what we know as structuralism does not encompass post-structuralism, deconstruction, modernism, and post-modernism as she claims it does (5, 185). This seems to play into the hands of those who regard Murdoch as a theoretical dinosaur, still harping on about ‘truth’ and ‘greatness’ as if literary criticism and philosophy remained rooted in the Oxbridge Commons Rooms of the 1950s. Sure enough, Terry Eagleton duly leapt on the claim in a review of Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals, accusing Murdoch of ‘the kind of slipshod conflation of one’s bêtes noires which no academic would tolerate in a first-year undergraduate essay’ (Eagleton).

No doubt there is, to some degree, a polemical impulse behind Murdoch's gesture. It could plausibly be argued that although Derrida is not a structuralist it is possible to observe the ‘influence and effects’ of structuralism through his work and that of others who pursue the logic of structuralism as far as it will go (Metaphysics 185). And we can see poststructuralism, deconstruction, modernism, postmodernism, to varying degrees, as the product of a general ‘Saussurian’ worldview – namely the conviction that language constitutes the world rather than refers to it. I am less interested here, however, in revising Murdoch’s critique of Derrida or offering a point-by-point refutation of Murdoch’s charges against him (though both would be possible) than I am in how Murdoch’s uncharacteristic failure or unwillingness to read another philosopher on his own terms serves as an exemplification of a tendency in her thought as a whole.

While Murdoch’s rhetoric in her non-fiction unfailingly is about the necessity of preserving a sense of real, contingent experience away from the totalizing impulses of systems,

the fact is that her philosophy performs quite the opposite. She criticizes Derrida and structuralism for their adherence to a system which falsifies the true nature of contingency and particularity in the world but in order to make this point she disregards the particularity of the work of the different intellectual movements she mentions. Her apparent desire to reduce to a set of common characteristics a vast and diverse array of radically different writers and thinkers associated with the four terms she groups together is astonishing in one who so often insists on the difference between individual people and texts: does Murdoch really believe that (to make a random list) Lévi-Strauss, Derrida, Lacan, Deleuze, Joyce, Proust, Picasso, Pynchon, Baudrillard, Delillo, Morrison have more in common than sets them apart? This preference for the general is not just a feature of Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals, however, but is exhibited, often more visibly, everywhere else in her non-fiction. A familiar criticism levelled at Murdoch is that her fiction fails to live up to the rigorous standards set by her theory. Yet what is not often said is that her theory itself fails to live up to its own standards too. For all her insistence in her criticism on the value of ‘irreducible dissimilarity’, the way it goes about this involves reducing philosophy or literature to a set of similar groups or sub-groups. From her earliest essays to Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals Murdoch attempts to persuade us that a number of dominant twentieth-century intellectual approaches are guilty of offering a reductive picture of otherness and the individual. For all the undoubted accuracy of this claim, in practice this means divesting a range of distinct philosophical and literary movements and their members of their particularity and historical context, flattening the history of ideas into one great horizontal line of equivalence: Romanticism = existentialism = Hegelianism = formalism = Derrida = structuralism = poststructuralism, modernism, postmodernism, etc.

This strategy is most readily apparent, in fact, in her literary theory, a form of writing which, from a Derridean perspective, is firmly rooted in the ‘philosophical’ rather than the ‘literary’. Central to Murdoch’s view of literary criticism is that it should not be ‘theoretical’: ‘any so-called critical “system” has in the end to be evaluated by the final best instrument, the

calm open judging mind of the intelligent experienced critic, unmisted as far as possible by theory' (Fire and Sun 78). Literary critics must speak 'as individuals and not as scientists' and resist the temptation to apply 'non-evaluative structures and codes' to the work they discuss (Metaphysics 189). Yet with the exception of her book on Sartre, nowhere in Murdoch's writings on literature do we find extensive analyses of specific literary texts. On its own terms, there is a blatant failure in Murdoch's criticism to respect the irreducible dissimilarity of individual texts. We might add that, for all her rhetoric about the importance of respecting the contingent, Murdoch's work betrays a profound disinterest in one form of the contingent: contemporary (popular) culture and society. This is reflected in her frequent complaints about television and technology in Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals (which she rather bizarrely links to Derrida and the 'structuralist nightmare' [210]) and makes her occasional forays into cultural analysis, as in 'Existentialists and Mystics' where she considers the fast pace of technological change, or the threat of nuclear war, strangely non-specific and lifeless (the one remarkable exception being when she quotes Paul McCartney describing Sergeant Pepper as "last year's music" ['Existentialists' 227]).

Murdoch's reading of Derrida, then, illuminates a central contradiction within her thought: despite all the appearance to the contrary, she is in fact a rigorously systematic thinker. Her philosophy and literary theory set up a pervasive opposition between 'absurd irreducible uniqueness' on the one hand and totalizing intellectual systems or aesthetic patterns which eliminate the difference between things on the other. This hierarchy serves another fundamental pair of oppositions: literature is, by implication, prioritized over philosophy. To put this another way: although to all intents and purposes the 'literary' takes priority over the 'philosophical' in Murdoch in so far as it deals with the contingent, in practice, the nature of her philosophical writing destabilizes the opposition. As befits a metaphysician, Murdoch makes the typical philosophical move which Derrida has repeatedly exposed and challenged in metaphysics: she defines literature as the realm of contradiction and irreducibility, of chaos and muddle. But this

move, he demonstrates, is precisely the means by which philosophy creates its own other, placing the literary outside the boundaries of philosophy and thereby implying that philosophy is not all about contradiction and unchecked rhetorical play. Murdoch's insistence that philosophy is distinguished from literature chiefly as a result of style would seem to endorse this view. But in fact what functions as the supplement in her thought – philosophy – is not just equally important but also, as deconstruction stipulates, actually gives the prioritized term, literature, its very definition, for the whole idea of irreducibility and contingency is a fundamental property of her philosophical system. What is contingency if not a philosophical category? Indeed the implicit equation of 'the contingent' or 'the particular' with 'truth' that we find in Murdoch is problematic for this reason. The contingent can only be regarded as truth – can only be represented at all, perhaps – from within a particular theoretical frame.

The paradox is reminiscent of the one Maurice Blanchot highlights with regard to 'the everyday', that is, mundane, insignificant existence. The everyday exists ('il y a'), but only outside theory and conceptual categories like 'true' and 'false' or 'beginning' and 'end'. To try and represent it through art or theory is to make it significant in a way that dissolves its very particularity (Blanchot). The problem of representing the contingent is central to understanding Murdoch's 'sublime' project in her fiction, namely the attempt to represent in art what is unrepresentable. The key dilemma she grapples with is how to give a realistic portrayal of the role played by accident and the contingent in life when the very medium - the novel, as finished product, complete work of art - would seem to exclude accident and chance.³ In this sense, Murdoch's concern with the interface between philosophy and literature relates to another central opposition in her writing: chance and design.

Philosophical Anguish: The Philosopher's Pupil

Derrida haunts Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals, then, because he figures as Murdoch's symptom, her uncanny double, who brings out the inherent contradictions in her thought. Where she wants to preserve a boundary between philosophy and literature, he wants to break it down. He is a philosopher who brings the literary into philosophy, she a novelist who wishes to keep it out. Derrida is a thinker who is engaged on project - the attempt to deal with the contingent without recourse to system - which dovetails uncomfortably with Murdoch's own, for it is much less systematic. Reading Murdoch in terms of Derrida helps us see that the contingent in her work is essentially an idea about contingency. Although she refers continuously to the value of the particular, a representation of it is in fact very difficult to find in her writing. What we have instead is a simulacrum of the contingent, made possible by Murdoch's philosophical supplement. To put it in psychoanalytic terms, all her talk of the contingent gives it the status of the object of an unachievable desire; her yearning for the contingent is a fantasy of – perhaps even a nostalgia for – the particular.

This brings us back to The Philosopher's Pupil, which we can read in the light of what we have been saying up until now, for it is the novel which explores the relationship between philosophy and literature perhaps more deeply and more contradictorily than any of Murdoch's others. It is like so many of them, though, in that its central energy comes from the relationship between two men, the enchanter-philosopher John Robert Rozanov and his erstwhile pupil, the demonic George McCaffrey. Rozanov, after a life of academic and public success (Murdoch here gives us a fictional version of situation she witnessed herself with regard to Sartre and Derrida, of the 'philosopher being hailed as a prophet' [Murdoch, Sartre 10]) has reached crisis-point, severely disillusioned with philosophy and the rest of existence as a result. What chiefly depresses and frustrates him is his inability to think and write with absolute clarity: 'If only he could get down deep enough, grasp the difficulties deep deep down and learn to think in an

entirely new way. [...] He longed to live with ordinariness and see it simply with clear calm eyes. A simple lucidity seemed always close at hand, never achieved' (Philosopher's Pupil 135). Murdoch said shortly after publication of the novel that Rozanov's story reflects the 'anguish of the philosopher' which 'comes about because philosophy touches impossibility... It's impossible for the human mind to dominate the things which haunt it' (Haffenden 199). The urge to dominate what haunts him is beginning to make itself felt in Rozanov's everyday life, too, most troublingly when he decides, unsolicited, to arrange the marriage of his grand-daughter to Tom McCaffrey.

Like Rozanov, George McCaffrey is also deeply troubled, chiefly as a result of what he feels as a brutal rejection by Rozanov, who much earlier abruptly stopped his tuition and subsequently sought to avoid any contact with him. George has consequently chosen to embrace mystification, his every statement and action seemingly an attempt to move away from rationality, continually frustrating the attempts of others to understand his motives. The novel begins with him impulsively trying to kill his wife Stella by driving their car into a canal. After Rozanov's most recent snub George 'had been suddenly possessed by wild destructive hatred; only it was not really hatred, he could not hate John Robert, it was madness' (138). The contrasting desires of both men – the former to achieve order and clarity, the latter to create chaos – relate to a deeper opposition between two philosophical positions. On one side there is Murdoch's own philosophy, represented by Rozanov (who is described as a neo-Platonist [83], and is obsessed by the 'the uncategorized manifold, the ultimate jumble of the world, before which the metaphysician covers his eyes' [133]), and on the other we have an embodiment of a quasi-Nietzschean ideal of 'beyond good and evil', a man who has decided that if there is no moral structure against which to measure our actions, then everything is permissible, even murder (223).

In an important sense, the opposition is ultimately between philosophy and literature. Where Rozanov has clear interests in the kind of philosophical problems which have interested

his author and also shares her puritanical desire to write down 'nothing but the truth' in philosophy (134), George can be – and has been – regarded as the prime representative of the carnivalesque literary spirit which can be seen at work in the novel (Heusel 120-5). George is the 'dangerous supplement' in the novel, in other words, wandering through the text disrupting stable relationships and crossing boundaries. He plays a similar role, in other words, to that of Derrida in Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals. And true to the logic of deconstruction, the mystifying, disruptive supplement does come to contaminate the prioritized conception of clarity and purity. George doggedly draws Rozanov down from his lofty perch and forces him to engage in the chaotic jumbled world beneath, provoking him in a series of encounters until the philosopher feels that 'George had won. John Robert was now as obsessed with George as George was with John Robert' (416). A major factor in his descent is his encounter with the muddle of existence in a more traumatic personal sense, in the form of his growing awareness that he has incestuous feelings towards his grand-daughter, Hattie Meynell. After he painfully confesses his feelings to her, Hattie is disgusted at the transformation, barely able to look at him, 'at the cool dignified remote philosopher, the guardian of her childhood, suddenly transformed into this pathetic spitting moaning maniac' (456). This outcome validates the views of those critics who have argued that the literary wins out over the philosophical in the novel (Heusel, Bradbury, 'Introduction'). At the very least, it seems that the two forces come to co-exist, just as Rozanov and George become mutually dependable in a master-slave dialectic. Barbara Stevens Heusel has explored the dialogical nature of The Philosopher's Pupil, showing how philosophy in the shape of Rozanov is 'discrowned' thereby causing philosophical discourse to become stripped of its privileged status and made to take its place only as one of the many competing discourses in a supremely carnivalesque text (Heusel 119-25).

The problem with this reading, however, is that it does not take sufficient account of the other major embodiment of a philosophical position in the novel, the mysterious narrator 'N'. More so than George, it is he who represents 'literature' in this novel – literature, that is, in its

special guise as the 'realist novel', a genre inevitably informed by a philosophy. We return at this point to the metafictional dimension of Murdoch's work. For The Philosopher's Pupil is one of Murdoch's most self-deconstructive texts, perhaps more so even than The Black Prince which similarly brings the 'philosophical' up against the 'literary', as well as containing a number of dangerously supplementary texts (the prefaces and the postscripts). Indeed, because it combines the two principal kinds of novel Murdoch produced (first-person retrospective and 'loose baggy monster' full of different characters, narrated omnisciently) we could even describe The Philosopher's Pupil by echoing Victor Shklovsky's comment about Tristram Shandy, that it is at once the most typical and untypical novel in the Murdoch canon. In the context of Murdoch's fiction, that is, there is something particularly subversive about the way N combines the categories of first- and third-person narrator so that he both coincides with and departs from Murdoch's preferred narrative voice. Early on, N introduces himself as 'the narrator: a discreet and self-effacing narrator [...] I am an observer, a student of human nature, a moralist, a man; and will allow myself here the discreet luxury of moralizing' (23). He proceeds to give an obsessively detailed description of Ennistone and its inhabitants - even down to the exact look of the brass taps and crockery (29). This is a familiar postmodern exercise in 'baring the device', and it calls into question the convention of the narrator of realist fiction, reminding us that any story is the product of subjective strategies of selection, interpretation and representation. The implication is that nothing in the story - even the name of the town where it is set, which he calls 'N's Town' or 'Ennistone' (23) - has escaped the narrator's aesthetic shaping. Coming after the first part of the Prelude, in which we are plunged into an almost self-parodically Murdochian piece of drama (George driving the car into the canal), the implication is that this device does not just lay bare the conventions of traditional realism, but Murdoch's realism in particular. Indeed it would not be pushing things too far to regard N's portrait of Ennistone as a careful analogy of how Murdoch goes about constructing her fictional universe: N's town is really 'M's town', the narrator's detailed description of the elaborate machinery that allows the Baths to operate

signifying the symbolic and conceptual apparatus at work beneath the typical Murdoch novel. Though there is a sense in which N's shadowy role amounts to a dialogical intermingling of previously separate identities in the structure of fiction - author, narrator, character - (Heusel 122) he occupies a position above all other voices in the hierarchy, and is equal to no less than Murdoch's voice itself: the reference to 'a certain lady' at the end of the novel yokes author and N firmly together.

Like the philosophical aspects of her fiction, the metafictional or postmodern aspects have been played down by Murdoch as nothing more than a supplement, just 'play', 'a little game to amuse a small number of kindly readers' (Todd). But the self-reflexive elements in The Philosopher's Pupil suggest that they are supplementary in the destabilizing deconstructive sense, too. N's presence (he descends into the action at strategic points as the novel continues) is a constant reminder that the apparently 'natural' unfolding of the story, the realistic world of Ennistone and the independent-seeming characters are all the result of a detailed process of construction on the part of the novelist. Realism is in fact made possible by the theoretical process that postmodern fiction chooses to lay bare; the difference between realism and postmodernism is, in this respect, no more than a question of visibility. The plot has been loaded from the start, the interpenetration of ideas has been organized by N/M all along. In this sense The Philosopher's Pupil never escapes the author's grasp. So while there is undoubtedly a degree of carnivalesque polyphony, the author's voice retains the final authoritative word. Rozanov's philosophy might be deconstructed by the events of the novel, but the philosophy that gave rise to the creation of the novel and determines its very disposition - namely Murdoch's philosophy of fiction, expressed through her spokesperson, N - remains intact.

Murdoch's desire

In a sense the philosophy precedes the fiction in Iris Murdoch simply because of the co-existence of her two kinds of text, philosophical and literary. Reading Murdoch's non-fiction, in other words (which many people interested in her fiction will do, certainly those who write about it) comes to produce a particular reading of her work. This is clear from the way critical readings of her work frequently concentrate on the philosophical markers set down within the fiction which point to the philosophy outside: the passage from fantasy to reality, the interplay of the necessary and the contingent, the relevance of Plato's allegory of the cave. Her characters wrestle with dilemmas we recognise from the philosophy (George's feelings that 'he could not sin' [96]) and mechanically spout a language informed by its reference-points ('You flayed me, you took away my life-illusions, you killed my self-love' [222]). But The Philosopher's Pupil shows that the philosophy precedes the fiction in an even more deep-rooted sense, in that the organization of Murdoch's novels, the characterization and the plot are governed by her philosophy and literary theory. This is something which Joyce Carol Oates discerned, in one of the best essays written about Murdoch's fiction, 'Sacred and Profane Iris Murdoch'. Oates argues that in contrast to Murdoch's definition of the highest art, 'her own ambitious, disturbing and eerily eccentric novels are stichomythic structures in which ideas, not things, and certainly not human beings, flourish' (Oates 1). This, she suggests, is because of Murdoch's Platonism: because, for Plato, the relation between reality and fiction is reversed (that is, the everyday world is unreal and illusory, while the real world is the transcendent metaphysical world of the forms), it follows that the ideas in Murdoch's novels are more real than the everyday world she seeks to depict (3-4). Her novels resemble philosophical 'debates' or structures 'in which near-symmetrical, balanced forces war with one another' (2), with Murdoch operating at the level of 'the gods', visibly shaping and ordering the debate within. Rather than the machinations of her plots, which are absorbing but 'inconsequential' and threaten 'to dissipate all seriousness', it is the proliferation

of ‘off-hand, gnomic, always provocative remarks - essays in miniature, really’ offered by her characters that give Murdoch’s novels ‘their intelligence, their gravity’ (6). This means that Murdoch’s aim to create independent-seeming character is inevitably compromised, too, as Murdoch comes increasingly in her fiction to rely on ‘a certain category of personage... to make her primary ideas explicit’ (e.g. Brendan in Henry and Cato, Edgar in The Sacred and the Profane Love Machine, Arthur in A Word Child), characters who enter the novel as ‘self-conscious gods-from-the-machine who confront the protagonist with certain gnomic observations that might be applicable to any human dilemma’ (7).

Oates’s insights certainly apply to The Philosopher’s Pupil. At the heart of the novel is a series of scenes in which two men engage in philosophical debate – Rozanov and George, of course, but even more centrally, Rozanov and the doubting priest (a familiar Murdoch type) Father Bernard Jacoby. The structural importance of such homosocial couplings in this novel and others suggests that the libidinal energy of Murdoch’s fiction comes from the currency of ideas circulating within. But the chief merit of Oates’s reading is that she treats Murdoch as a contradictory writer from the outset. Not that this in itself amounts to an especially unusual response to Murdoch’s work, for the contradictions between her theory and practice have fuelled many criticisms of her work since the beginning. By contrast, it has proved difficult for those who admire Murdoch’s writing to resist the temptation to try to iron out the contradictions or to demonstrate that they are inconsequential. But Oates’s reading implies that to understand Murdoch we must appreciate that, more than just supplementary, the contradictions, paradoxes, aporias in Murdoch’s thought are what drive the work. Her fiction is the product of the clash of two powerful and perhaps irreconcilable impulses in her mind: the desire to totalize and the desire to reflect what is irreducible and particular.

In Sartre: Romantic Rationalist Murdoch’s ability to see through Sartre’s entire system is summed up in the question she borrows from Gabriel Marcel: ‘Why’, she asks, ‘does Sartre find the contingent over-abundance of the world nauseating rather than glorious?’ (Murdoch, Sartre

49). Oates asks an equivalent question of Murdoch: 'She has said that the greatest art, like that of Shakespeare, is impersonal; it contemplates and delineates nature with a "clear eye", untainted by fantasy. Why subjectivity and even the private self's fantasies should be so abhorred by Murdoch, and denied a place, a weight in the cosmos (for surely it is as "real" as the material world, or the collective fantasies we call culture), is never altogether clear in her philosophical writings or in her fiction' (2). So why does Murdoch find fantasy abhorrent rather than glorious? The obvious answer - which actually Murdoch does give over and over again in her work - is that fantasy prevents the subject from respecting the otherness of other subjects and the irreducibility of the world. As is made clear in her early writings, which repeatedly employ psychoanalytic terminology like fantasy and neurosis to diagnose the failings of the contemporary novel, her understanding of fantasy relates to the neurotic tendency to take things from outside the self and turn them 'into dream objects of our own', 'not grasping their reality and independence' ('Sublime and Good' 216).⁴ But Oates is right in that behind Murdoch's attitude to fantasy we can detect an unnaturally strong, puritanical hatred, perhaps even a fear, of the power of fantasy - an attitude which is especially surprising in a novelist who by her own definition trades in illusion and mystery. For psychoanalysis, an excessive reaction to an event or situation - one that cannot be accounted for by 'the facts' - gives a clue as to the underlying desire which motivates it. It is reasonable to assume that at one level Murdoch's desire here is to allow herself to indulge in precisely the kind of fantasy she continually condemns. And this desire is not completely unconscious, for of course Murdoch admitted early on in her career that she struggled against the temptation to give in to the 'myth' of her novels (Kermode 120-1; Bradbury, 'Conversation').

To underline the point we can usefully formulate Oates's question in a different way. Why did Murdoch, whose gifts as a writer were so obviously for creating intellectual patterns and interweaving symbolic textures into her novels, strive so hard to be the opposite kind of writer? After all we could easily imagine a parallel version of literary history in which Iris Murdoch devoted herself to a brilliant revitalization of the philosophical novel after Sartre. It is

clear from these questions that one of Murdoch's defining characteristics as a writer is her capacity – like the neurotic – to give way on her desire. In this respect, once again, Murdoch's philosophy is the governing force, for she blocks her own desire for the sake of her philosophical convictions – namely, the ethical imperative to respect alterity. Perhaps the ultimate irony, however, is that, as the contradictions of her totalizing thought suggest, her philosophy enabled her to indulge her fundamental fantasy all along.

Notes

1 Derrida's exploration of the relation between literature and philosophy is usefully collected together and introduced in Attridge.

2 As Derek Attridge points out, Derrida's notion of writing as a phenomenon which eludes conventional notions of identity, temporality, origin, activity/passivity depends 'on the opposition between the sensible and the intelligible [which] is a longstanding metaphysical one' (Attridge 9). Derrida himself is well aware of the impossibility of ever completely escaping the conceptual motivations of metaphysics.

3 For a discussion of Murdoch's aesthetic of the sublime, see Nicol 1-30.

4 Another contradiction in Murdoch's work is the fact that for all her condemnation of neurotic art, her own fiction presents us with some of the most fascinating and dynamic portrayals of neurosis to be found anywhere in contemporary literature. In this sense, as in so many others, The Philosopher's Pupil is exemplary. The reaction of the other characters to Rozanov demonstrates how one of the major functions of the enchanter figure in Murdoch's fiction is, like the big Other, to hystericize everyone else. His presence causes the other characters to try to

ascertain his desire and become its object, looking for some sense of self-definition in the 'truth' of their relation to him.

Works Cited

- Attridge, Derek. Jacques Derrida: Acts of Literature. London and New York: Routledge, 1992.
- Blanchot, Maurice. 'Everyday Speech'. 1969. The Infinite Conversation. Trans. Susan Hanson. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993: 238-245.
- Bradbury, Malcolm. 'Iris Murdoch in Conversation with Malcolm Bradbury'. British Council Literature Study Aids Recorded Interview RS2001. London 27 February 1976.
- _____. Introduction to The Philosopher's Pupil. London: Vintage, 2000.
- Conradi, Peter, ed. Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature. London: Chatto and Windus, 1997.
- Derrida, Jacques. Of Grammatology. 1967. Trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976.
- Derrida, Jacques. Writing and Difference. 1967. Trans. Alan Bass. London: Routledge, 1978.
- Eagleton, Terry. 'The Good, the True and the Beautiful' (review of Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals). The Guardian 20 October 1992: G2:8
- Haffenden, John. 'Iris Murdoch'. Novelists in Interview. London: Methuen, 1985: 191-209.
- Heusel, Barbara Stevens. Patterned Aimlessness: Iris Murdoch's Novels of the 1970s and 1980s. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995.
- Kermode, Frank. 'House of Fiction: Interviews with Seven English Novelists'. Malcolm Bradbury. The Novel Today. London: Fontana, 1990: 119-22.
- Magee, Bryan. 'Philosophy and Literature: A Dialogue with Iris Murdoch'. Men of Ideas: Some Creators of Contemporary Philosophy. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978: 244-66.

Murdoch, Iris. The Fire and the Sun: Why Plato Banished the Artists. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978.

_____. The Philosopher's Pupil. London: Penguin, 1983.

_____. The Sovereignty of Good. London: Routledge, 1985.

_____. Sartre: Romantic Rationalist. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1989.

_____. Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals. London: Chatto and Windus, 1992.

_____. 'The Sublime and the Good'. Conradi, Existentialists and Mystics 205-20.

_____. 'The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited'. Conradi, Existentialists and Mystics 261-86.

_____. 'Against Dryness'. Conradi, Existentialists and Mystics 287-95.

_____. 'Existentialists and Mystics'. Conradi, Existentialists and Mystics 221-34.

Oates, Joyce Carol. 'Sacred and Profane Iris Murdoch'. The Profane Art: Essays and Reviews.

New York: Dutton, 1983: <<http://www.usfca.edu/fac-staff/southern/murdoch.html>>

Todd, Richard, ed. Encounters with Iris Murdoch. Amsterdam: Free University Press, 1988.