

Meaning and What it Can Convey: The Case of Iris Murdoch Jane Mattisson Ekstam

*Iris Murdoch's novels explore human truths that are timeless. She defended her ideas of literature as representing something true of human nature in an era "marked by a crisis of representation" (Rowe: 2). The postmodern rejection of truth, and Murdoch's resistance to the theory-centred approach to textual analysis that emerged in the 1960s and reached its peak in the 1980s and 1990s, caused her to lose favour among scholars. It is time to revisit Iris Murdoch, a writer with a profound understanding of the importance of meaning in a literary text. What is this meaning? How is it represented in the novel? It is with these two questions that this article is concerned as it explores how Murdoch viewed her artistic mission and how it is embodied in the younger and older identities of the first-person narrator, Bradley Pearson, in *The Black Prince* (1973).*

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Traditionally, the humanities have been dedicated to interpretation, i.e. the reconstruction and attribution of meaning. The social construction of reality and its apparent relativity and plurality, as well as the questioning of the existence of objective truth brought about by the post-World War Two postmodernist movement have stimulated debate on the purpose of literature, particularly with regard to its role as a vehicle for ideas. At the same time, Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht's plea for a rethinking and reshaping of the intellectual practice within the humanities has encouraged greater focus on the aesthetic experience of literary texts.¹ Iris Murdoch is a particularly interesting example of a writer who, despite her postmodern context, saw it as her mission to explore truth both in her fiction and philosophical writings. Her popularity is evidence that her works answered a need.

Murdoch defended her ideas of literature as representing something true of human nature in an era "marked by a crisis of representation" (Rowe: 2). The crisis is far from over. Murdoch believed that writing springs from a concern with the truth, which is in turn intimately associated with moral thought. While she had little time for literary theories, claiming that they are an obstacle to the interpretive potential of the text, her writing – fictional as well as philosophical – reflects a very particular view of literature and its purpose. This article explores the theoretical basis of Murdoch's writing, with a special focus on *The Black Prince*. Murdoch asserted that novels have "become the most important form of moral discourse in a secular society. [. . .] a moral philosophy *must* be inhabited, and the novels are its practical illustration" (cited in Rowe 2007: 4). Philosophy and literature are not, however, compatible practices, she argued, as she was convinced that "art goes deeper than philosophy" ("Literature and Philosophy: A Conversation with Bryan Magee": 21) in that it has the potential to fundamentally change a moral agent's vision.

The postmodern rejection of truth, and Murdoch's resistance to the theory-centred approach to textual analysis that emerged in the 1960s and reached its peak in the 1980s and 1990s, caused her to lose favour among scholars. It is time to revisit Iris Murdoch, a writer with a profound understanding of the importance of meaning in a literary text.² What is this meaning? How is it represented in the novel? It is with these two questions that this article is concerned as it explores how Murdoch viewed her artistic mission and how it is embodied in the younger and older identities of the first-person narrator, Bradley Pearson, in *The Black Prince*.

Art and Ethics

In *The Sovereignty of Good*,³ Murdoch argues that art is an important source of inspiration for mankind, as it constitutes a powerful revelation of people's inner lives. Because Murdoch believed that the artist's task is to provide new perspectives and enable readers to experience aspects of human life with which they are unfamiliar, it inspires to attainment of the Good. Art and ethics are inseparable in Murdoch's writing. An artist must also, argues Murdoch, have a compassionate view of the surrounding world to create good art, which in its turn inspires love and understanding in the reader.⁴ Philosophical and literary discourse is inseparable in Murdoch's writing as it manifests the principle of going beyond the self (Heusel 1995: 99). Murdoch's characters are not understandable without knowledge of her philosophy.⁵ Art helps to explain inner and outer events, specifically through the narrator's power with words. Murdoch's first-person narrators use their gift of articulateness to intoxicate, concealing the truth from themselves as well as their readers.⁶ This is seen very clearly in Bradley Pearson's retrospective narrative in *The Black Prince*, where he tries to come to grips with his own obsessions as well as those of his fellow characters (Heusel 1995: 176).

Human nature and the nature of art are fundamental themes in Murdoch's novels.⁷ As the characters grapple with their retrospective languages, a surface and a deeper level are revealed. Narrators such as Bradley Pearson are to be found at the deeper level (Spear 1995: 9).

Bradley Pearson, like other Murdoch narrators, must undergo moral education before being able to discern or depict something true about human nature. Love is an important ingredient in this process, as the sub-title of *The Black Prince*, "A Celebration of Love", indicates. As in many Murdoch novels, this love is erotic.⁸ Bradley Pearson strives towards perfection as he enhances his understanding of human nature and progresses towards a more just and loving relationship with others. This, according to Murdoch, is a moral progression ("The idea of Perfection": 23 and 25). At the same time, Murdoch explores how such internal progress is linked with external action; there is a complex relation between internal and external events. Only the novel can demonstrate the complexity of this relationship and reveal to the reader the deep-seated activities of the mind ("The Idea of Perfection": 22). Murdoch maintained that the creative language of the novel conveys the complex struggle between "good", i.e. seeing others in a fair light and "evil", comprising the self-imprisoned ego. Literature is all about making moral judgements:

Life is soaked in the moral, literature is soaked in the moral. [. . .] Value is only artificially and with difficulty expelled from language for scientific purposes. So the novelist is revealing his values by any sort of writing, which he may do. He is particularly bound to make moral judgements as far as his subject matter is the behaviour of human beings ("Literature and Philosophy: A Conversation with Bryan Magee": 33).

Language has a dual role: it can serve the purpose of truth-telling by confronting the reader with naked reality, or it can impede truth by deceiving the reader. Through narrators such as Bradley Pearson, the struggle between these two roles is made visible, as Pearson appropriates events and makes them his own.

Murdoch has been accused of creating improbable and unrealistic characters. Suguna Ramanathan, for example, suggests that Murdoch's focus on the hidden parts of the mind is exaggerated in order to convey to readers what they do not want to know about themselves and other people (*Iris Murdoch. Figures of Good*: 2). The absurdities of characters such as Bradley Pearson, however, are vanished "under the force of art" as truth can be purchased at the expense of improbability in great art (Conradi: *The Saint and the Artist*: 6), thereby forcing the reader to see what is beneath the surface.

Murdoch's realism offers no consolation to readers, as it shows characters in all their failings, demanding patience and sympathy from readers. Reality in her novels is not realism, a literary term, but "reality", i.e. "the profound truth the questing mind seeks" (Dipple: 30). While Bradley Pearson is concerned with "internal truth", he does not relate this to characters and plot but to the exterior, non-fictional world (Lamarque: 211). The reader is encouraged to view Pearson as justly as possible, making use of his/her experience of the non-fictional world. This is what Murdoch terms "art for life's sake" ("The Sublime and the Good": 218); readers refer to a reality beyond themselves and test the truth in it.

Good art makes it possible for human beings to appreciate and esteem someone outside themselves, thereby paving the way for the revelation of reality. Murdoch called this her "theory of morals" ("Literature and Philosophy": 16). Morals are related to the interior activity of an individual mind, resulting in a change of vision (*The Sovereignty of Good*: 22). The artist or writer thus takes a risk as the work of art brings out unexpected features of life of which the reader may not be conscious. If the art object is to be a complete representation of life, it must take that risk. For Murdoch, almost all uses of language convey value ("Literature and Philosophy": 27). The distinction between facts and values is often blurred as morals are omnipresent in life. Readers select different objects from the same world and also see different worlds ("The Idea of Perfection": 38).

For a novel to convey meaning, and moral meaning in particular, characters must, Murdoch claimed, be rich, realistic and memorable ("Literature and Philosophy": 27). The nature of the dark and incomprehensible nature of the human mind must be depicted. In order to make moral progress, it is necessary to harden oneself against any embellishment of reality ("On 'Good' and 'God'": 58-61, 64).

As the unconscious for Murdoch comprised that of which we are unaware, the more one becomes aware of one's surroundings, the greater the chance of making the "right" choices in life. This requires that one attains towards a more "truthful" vision of one's neighbour and leaves room for what is outside the ego:

Most of the time we fail to see the big wide real world at all because we are blinded by obsession, anxiety, envy, resentment, fear. We make a small personal world in which we remain enclosed. Great art is liberating, it enables us to see and take pleasure in what is not ourselves. Literature stirs and satisfies our curiosity, it interests us in other people and other scenes, and helps us to be tolerant and generous ("Literature and Philosophy": 14-15).

Bradley Pearson touches on this in the foreword to *The Black Prince* as he explains how he will attempt to re-enter the world of thoughts belonging to his younger self and explore this interior world at the time of the events narrated. His purpose is to investigate if a close study of his inner activities might elucidate deeds that, when viewed from an external perspective only, could appear evil. He wishes to make visible the workings of his mind as he attempts to inhabit his former self (*The Black Prince*: 11), judging people in accordance with

his views at the time. The work of art reveals the complexity of the younger self as it unfolds by degrees during the recounting of events.

Pearson claims that his younger self was incapable of viewing characters objectively. He wishes to reveal his younger self's inner moral struggle as he attempted to achieve greater maturity of judgement, a pre-requisite for creation. While the narrator has a double view of events: the older and the younger, the protagonist Bradley Pearson is limited to the inner perspective of the younger self, thereby revealing the complex relationship between inner and outer events: the mind's eye produces "a falsifying veil which partially conceals the real world" (Murdoch, "The Sovereignty of Good Over Other Concepts": 84). The mature and chastened narrator promotes truth telling, according to Pearson, because "the light of wisdom falling upon a fool can reveal, together with folly, the austere outline of truth" (*The Black Prince*: 11). The narrator juxtaposes his own reformed and more mature vision with the younger hero's immature and more egotistical view of the world. Pearson is unsparing in his criticism of his artistic enterprise. This increases his trustworthiness as his shortcomings incite sympathy and acceptance.

Occasionally, the narrator's reflections point to a more general wisdom and knowledge of human nature that is beyond the story itself. This is particularly apparent in the eight reflections addressed to his mentor and friend, Mr Loxias. While the narrator castigates his younger self in these addresses, he tries to justify and explain his previous thoughts and deeds in general terms, blending facts and values as he produces a defence in the guise of philosophy. Pearson reveals his obsessions and attitudes while at the same time admitting that he hides behind words.

The younger Pearson is guided by a tendency towards self-preservation. The narrator tries to make the harsh judgements of other characters by his younger self understandable by referring to ego-protecting emotions:

Emotions cloud the view, and so far from isolating the particular, draw generality and even theory in their train. When I write of Arnold my pen shakes with resentment, love, remorse and fear. It is as if I were building a barrier against him composed of words, hiding myself behind a mound of words. We defend ourselves by descriptions and tame the world by generalizing. What does he fear? is usually the key to the artist's mind. Art is so often a barrier. (Is this true even of the greatest art, I wonder?). So art becomes not communication but mystification. When I think of my sister I feel pity, annoyance, guilt, disgust and it is in the "light" of these that I present her, crippled and diminished by my perception itself (*The Black Prince*: 81-2).

Fear, in Pearson's world, is identified as the prime cause of all immorality. Above all, he fears Arnold Baffin, his friend and fellow-writer. He is afraid that he is not good enough as an artist, causing him to be particularly severe in his criticism of Baffin's writing. He puts together a formidable battery of derogatory value judgements against Baffin (*The Black Prince*: 82).

The narrator also provides numerous instances of explicit self-praise as he compares himself with other characters. A case in point is when he compares his own apparent purposefulness with his sister's naïve approach to life (*The Black Prince*: 68). He also compares himself with his friend and colleague, Hartman, juxtaposing his own dedication to art to Hartbourne's "relaxed banality of life without goals" (*The Black Prince*: 62).

Creativity and Love

Pearson reflects that the chain of events that enabled him to become a real writer started with his falling in love. His love of Julian enables him to adopt a benevolent attitude towards the surrounding world: “I wanted to go around touching people, blessing them, communicating my great happiness, the good news, the *secret* of how the universe was a place of joy and freedom filled and running over with selfless rapture” (*The Black Prince*: 244). His first impression was of a mediocre schoolgirl. This changes when Pearson discusses art with Julian. She appears to be sincere, and her views harmonise with his strict aesthetics. In the subsequent Hamlet tutorial, Pearson recognises that Julian’s inner qualities are expressed externally, in her shining, healthy face (*The Black Prince*: 200). The narrator admits that until he fell in love with Julian, “he could not see her” (*The Black Prince*: 207), thereby confirming that the story is about his unconscious.

Pearson is amicable even to those whom he has previously treated rather coldly. The first time he meets Rachel after falling in love with Julian, for example, he is overwhelmingly benevolent, proclaiming his joy at meeting her and praising her “charming” appearance (*The Black Prince*: 218). He discusses the nature of love with Rachel while carefully disguising the identity of its object. He claims that love has the capacity to release the confined ego from its defensive emotions, enabling one to see the immediate environment: “one tends to live at a sort of level of anxiety and resentment where one’s protecting oneself all the time. Climb above it, climb above it, and feel free to love! That’s the message” (*The Black Prince*: 218). Pearson is capable of feeling sympathy for Rachel as he reminisces about her sitting alone in a pub. He can even welcome his brother-in-law, Roger, and accepts, indeed praises, his girlfriend. Having previously condemned Roger for his betrayal of Priscilla, he now accepts the situation, explaining that “I know how these things happen” (*The Black Prince*: 220).

Increasingly, Pearson experiences the world with vigour and is aware of detail in a way not previously experienced. He explains that “[t]here was an overwhelming sense of reality, of being at last real and seeing the real. The tables, the chairs, the sherry glasses, the curls on the rug, the dust: the real” (*The Black Prince*: 209). When accompanying Julian to the Royal Opera House his experience of sounds and images is so enhanced by his being in love that it causes him to be literally sick as the applause from the audience turns into a “patterning noise of clapping, rising to a rattling crescendo, the deadly sound of a dry sea, the light banging of many bones in the tempest” (*The Black Prince*: 259).

Love also enables Pearson to face both the unpredictability and cruelty of the world. He echoes Murdoch’s thoughts in “On ‘God’ and ‘Good’”: “We are all mortal and equally at the mercy of necessity and chance” (*The Black Prince*: 74). In his second address to Mr Loxias, for example, he reflects:

Obviously life is full of accidents. But to the intensity of this impression we contribute too by our anxiety and fear. Anxiety most of all characterizes the human animal. This is perhaps the most general name for all the vices at a certain mean level of their operation. It is a kind of cupidity, a kind of fear, a kind of envy, a kind of hate. Now, a favoured recluse, I can, as anxiety diminished, measure both my freedom and my previous servitude. Fortunate are they who are even sufficiently aware of this problem to make the smallest efforts to check this dimming preoccupation (*The Black Prince*: 183).

Anxiety is part of Pearson's personality and, along with erotic love, is an important source of his creativity. Indeed, he suggests that it is only "in the ink of this darkness" that writing can "properly be written" (*The Black Prince*: 108). He becomes particularly aware of this after his unsuccessful attempt to retrieve some of Priscilla's belongings from Roger. When he fails, and reflects on his sister's humiliation and rejection by her husband, he notes: "Even as I write these words, which should be lucid and filled with glowing colour, I feel the very darkness of my own personality invading my pen" (*The Black Prince*: 281).

To describe his new insight into the misery of his sister's existence he uses the metaphor⁹ of a funnel changing character and shape, matching his frame of mind: "This funnel was very clear, very there, filled to the brim with colour and being. The sky was crazily infinite and huge, curtain behind curtain of gauzy granules of pure blue" (*The Black Prince*: 107). The funnel suddenly turns into a cylinder or a kite, representing the fragility of the human condition: "the funnel was blue and white, the blue confounded with the sky, the white hung in space like a great cylinder of crinkly paper or like a kite in a picture" (*The Black Prince*: 107). Once Pearson realises that innocent birds are being shot, he visualises the funnel as a mass of glaring colours, "yellow and black against a sky of lucid green" (*The Black Prince*: 108). He is made painfully aware not only of his sister's misery but of the evil of mankind in general. This is the realisation of the older Pearson.

The older narrator also recognises that his acceptance of his brother-in-law's new girlfriend is evolving into envy and resentment:

Yet there was more offence even than that, something profoundly ugly and repulsive to me: that vision of Roger with his grey hair and his genial pseudo-distinguished air of an ageing worldly man, holding a girl who could be his daughter, a girl unused, unmarked and fresh. That particular juxtaposition of youth and age offends, and, I felt, offends rightly (*The Black Prince*: 109).

This is, of course, deeply ironical in view of his relations with Julian.

At the same time as Pearson recognises the weaknesses of mankind, he is, thanks to his relationship with Julian, on the right path to "good" as he gradually gains a truer vision of his fellow characters. As he eats dinner with Julian at the restaurant at the top of the Post Office Tower, he appears to see clearly, conversing "not as angels might converse, not through a glass darkly but face to face" (*The Black Prince*: 238). His mind, however, is becoming increasingly obsessed by erotic craving, ultimately leading to self-indulgent behaviour as his unconscious mind gains precedence and empowers his thinking. This, as Murdoch observes in "Art is the Imitation of Nature", is a source of power but also potential conflict for the writer: "Art is a battle with obsessive unconscious forces and in this sense Plato was right to say that the enemy is the unconscious mind, although of course the unconscious mind is also a source of art and the paradox is that if there are no unconscious forces there is no art" (*Existentialists and Mystics*: 252). It is essential for the artist to take every precaution against these uncontrollable forces: it takes a brave person to create good art (*The Black Prince*: 144).¹⁰

While Pearson's erotic love appeals to his finer feelings it also encourages him to yield to his self-satisfying demands. He acknowledges that erotic love had been necessary for his creative ability when younger (*The Black Prince*: 144 and 244) but is aware that he must keep his sexual desire in check if he is to progress as a writer. Murdoch draws attention to the consequences of a division of the mind between personal wishes and ideal behaviour:

If [Angst] cannot be understood in [the existentialists'] sense as an experience of pure freedom, what is it, and does it really occur at all? Perhaps there are several different conditions involved here. But the central one, the heart of the concept, I think I would describe rather as a kind of fright which the conscious will feels when it apprehends the strength and direction of the personality which is not under its immediate control. [Angst] may occur where there is any felt discrepancy between personality and ideals ("On 'God' and 'Good'": 75).

Pearson's attempted seduction of Julian and his failure to return home on learning about the suicide of his sister reveals the discrepancy between personality and ideals. He tries to rationalise his action by telling himself that it is acceptable because it is "done".¹¹ He seems unable to fully take in what has happened until he has fulfilled his love making.¹²

Pearson reflects on the differences between his younger and older self when he relates his attempted seduction of Julian. The older narrator concludes that there is a fine dividing line between what is socially and morally acceptable to the individual. Morality has become more complex:

There are moments when, if one rejects the simple and the obvious promptings of duty, one finds oneself in a labyrinth of complexities of some quite new kind. Sometimes no doubt one acts rightly in resisting these simple promptings, one acts rightly in bringing into being the terrible refinements which lie beyond. I was not in fact then troubled about duty. Perhaps I assumed that I was acting wrongly, but the assumption attracted little of my attention (*The Black Prince*: 325).

This lack of attention has fatal consequences for Pearson, ultimately leading to his being imprisoned. He goes to the Baffins' house at the end of the novel because he thinks he will be given information about Julian. Instead, he is accused of murdering his best friend, Arnold Baffin. This outcome substantiates Pearson's assertion in the preface to the novel: fear and horror are never far away in life and can break one in a moment (*The Black Prince*: 19).

At the same time, it must be acknowledged that Pearson, as a consequence of his falling in love, does ultimately manage to create a work of art. In so doing, he has become virtuous and transcended the self,¹³ even if, in his final address to Mr Loxias, entitled "Postscript by Bradley Pearson", he questions the artist's artistic and spiritual ability to reach beyond the confined ego:

But if after reflection and with deliberation one attempts with words to create bridges and open vistas one soon finds out how puny is one's power to describe or to connect. Art is a kind of artificial memory and the pain which attends all serious art is a sense of that factitiousness. Most artists are the minor poets of their little world, who have only one voice and can sing only one song (*The Black Prince*: 381).

As he discusses the role of the artist in the postscript, he summarises some of the most important features of his novel, focusing on different kinds of relationship: between art and truth, identity and love as artistic forces, religion and the sequestered existence of the artist, and the importance of other characters in the achievement of happiness in life and through artistic production.

The artist, concludes Pearson, attempts to build bridges between the world with which s/he is accustomed and "other worlds in which one is a complete stranger" (*The Black Prince*: 381). At the trial, Pearson is given the opportunity of becoming another person, and is

portrayed as the monstrous and envious murderer of his best friend and fellow writer. He returns to the earlier theme of confusion and reflects that he is not able to conceptualise it (*The Black Prince*: 381). This causes him to adopt various attitudes, change his mind, tell the truth and then lie, and swing between playing the impassive observer at his own trial and the devious criminal. At times, Pearson even appears to believe that he had killed Arnold and reflects that Rachel might even “at moments [. . .] almost believe that she had not” (*The Black Prince*: 382).

Pearson notes that the story that Rachel has invented is almost perfect in that it enables her to take revenge upon the two men in her life. Significantly, he identifies Rachel’s love for him as the primary force behind her perfect story. He cannot find adequate words to express his feelings towards Rachel’s perfectly constructed and executed plan. Words are not important: it is the fact that Rachel must have loved him greatly to hate him so strongly, creating for him the role of a murderer, which allows Pearson to explore his new identity:

I had been confronted (at last) with a sizeable ordeal labelled with my name. This was not something to be wasted. I had never felt more alert and alive in my life, and from the vantage point of my new consciousness I looked back on what I had been: a timid incomplete resentful man (*The Black Prince*: 383).

The young narrator has become mature. He is no longer under the power of other writers, and can see himself for what he once was (this identity is reinforced by the final three adjectives – timid, incomplete and resentful), putting a clear distance between “then” and “now”.

At the trial, truth is compromised by lies. While Pearson refuses to accuse himself, he will not accuse others either. His story thus becomes implausible at the same time as “evidence” is taken out of context, e.g. his threatening letter to Arnold, and the tea-chest of fragments of Arnold’s torn-up books. As Pearson reflects that he is now completely defeated, his new identity as a murderer is substantiated. Francis, his sole supporter at the trial, is unable to convince the jury of Pearson’s innocence because the story of his guilt is perfectly constructed and convincing. Pearson’s fate is sealed.

Pearson continues to reflect on the emergence and nature of his new, guilty identity as he considers Rachel’s behaviour at the trial. Her “modest simplicity” (*The Black Prince*: 386) moves him to intense admiration and re-kindles a fire within him that was present in his younger, immature self but which now burns with a new and unanticipated ferocity. His love of Julian, on the other hand, plays no part at the trial, where “a machinery of magic [had been] designed to dematerialize her and make her as if she had never been” (*The Black Prince*: 387). This completes Pearson’s love story, as “she had now been made perfect by being removed into the sphere of the impossible” (*The Black Prince*: 387). While Pearson acknowledges the aesthetic possibility of confessing to a murder he has not committed, truth prevents this. By taking the blame for Arnold’s death, he exonerates himself from the guilt of having failed and abandoned Rachel and neglected Priscilla. The crimes of the younger Pearson are paid for by the older and wiser man who recognises the opportunities presented by the creation of his new but false identity, i.e. a callous murderer. Pearson concludes that “the emergence of my life out of quietness into public drama and horror was a necessary and in some deep sense natural outcome of the visitation with which I had been honoured” (*The Black Prince*: 389). His love for Julian is the ordeal he needs to help him write: “The book had to come into being because of Julian, and because of the book Julian had to be” (*The Black Prince*: 389). It takes on a form of possession, and Pearson, despite his sentence of

“guilty”, can look towards the future for which he believes he is predestined. He has become both the hero and victim of his own story. “Human love is the gateway to all knowledge”, he concludes, “[a]nd through the door that Julian opened my being passed into another world” (*The Black Prince*: 390).

As Pearson faces the solitude of prison and the knowledge that he will never again see the “outside world” (*The Black Prince*: 391), he is not concerned because he is assured that his book is “a truthful vision” that “finds the fullness of reality everywhere and the whole extended universe is in a little room” (*The Black Prince*: 391). He enjoys a “bliss of quietness” (391). Pearson is “at the end”, which is also “the beginning” (*The Black Prince*: 391). He has learned to live in the present “and to forswear the fruitless anxious pain which binds to past and to future our miserable local arc of the great wheel of desire” (*The Black Prince*: 391). His book has achieved the primary purpose of art as “it points beyond itself and moves ever wither it points” (*The Black Prince*: 392). Pearson enjoys a double consolation: he has produced good art, and his love of Julian remains undiminished “though changing” (*The Black Prince*: 392).

What Meaning Can and Does Convey in *The Black Prince*

While Murdoch wished to see philosophy and literature as two separate disciplines, she also saw the novelist as a philosopher depicting interesting ideas about human nature. Both philosophy and literature are concerned with the truth. First-person narrative enables the author to investigate an individual mind in the process of creation. As Bradley Pearson narrates his own experiences, the complex relationship between art and ethics is revealed, shaping previous events into an artful design. On occasions, Pearson is intoxicated with words at the same time as he indulges in self-analysis.

Bradley Pearson does what Murdoch claims all artists and storytellers try to do: justify and understand previous events and actions at the same time as one falsifies and withholds information both from oneself and others. He demonstrates that all art lies, but good art has the capacity to lie its way to the truth (Anne Rowe: 159). A similar notion is expressed in *The Sea, The Sea*, where a cousin of the narrator remarks: “If there is art enough, a lie can enlighten us as well as the truth” (*The Sea, The Sea*: 175). As Lindsey Tucker observes, “What Murdoch gives the reader is a lie that enlightens, and when the show is over, both the characters and the ‘audience’ have achieved some kind of liberation” (“Released from the Bands”: 174). Peter Lamarque argues that in *The Black Prince* Murdoch provides “illustrative support” in the form of dramatic events that corroborate Bradley’s Pearson’s comments on his story. Pearson repeatedly points out, for example, the difficulties an artist encounters, which are simultaneously illustrated by the protagonist’s endeavours as an artist (“Truth and Art in Iris Murdoch’s *The Black Prince*: 214).

Pearson’s artful dramatisations of previous events combined with his thoughts and speech constitute a philosophy of life which in turn questions all philosophy, including Murdoch’s own.¹⁴ As the narrator’s reflections and actions are juxtaposed, philosophy is questioned from within, just as literature, according to Murdoch, should be able to question itself. The eloquence with which Pearson describes his thoughts contrasts with the prejudices and self-defensive thoughts of his younger self. As the narrator’s inner world of thoughts is revealed to the reader, the elusive nature of his reflections is made clear. As in real life, no

definitive reading is possible because Bradley's mind is inscrutable. His imperfections and indeterminate character are, as one critic notes, what gives the novel life.¹⁵

Pearson's narrative invites the reader to try and make sense of the world through a continuous enterprise of interpretation and reinterpretation. *The Black Prince* requires very careful reading. As with other Murdoch novels, the reader cannot, as Margaret Scanlan notes, "remain an innocent spectator; the novel becomes an interpretive trap in which we are continually caught in our own too hasty judgments" ("The Problem of the Past in Iris Murdoch's *Nuns and Soldiers*: 182). Art is for life's sake, never for its own. For Murdoch, the novel was "the most important form of moral discourse in a secular society" [. . .] a moral philosophy must be inhabited, and [. . .] novels are its practical illustration" (Anne Rowe: 3-4). As asserted at the beginning, art goes deeper than philosophy because it has the potential to fundamentally change a moral agent's vision. Bradley Pearson must and has become another person as he allows the love which is his fundamental source of creative power to fuse together the past and present through the creation of a new identity that allows him to exorcise his guilt and ultimately pay the debt of his past actions.

Notes:

¹ Gumbrecht assesses the past and future of literary studies and the humanities. He focuses on the dimension of "presence", where cultural phenomena and cultural events become tangible and impact on our senses and bodies. He argues that aesthetic experience oscillates between "presence effects" and "meaning effects" (2).

² In a recent doctoral thesis on moral philosophy, Nora Hämäläinen argues that narrative literature, "like moral philosophy is both generalizing and particular, as well as both normative and descriptive" as it finds "ways of combining the insights provided by literature – both particular and general – with a theoretical and generalizing framework of ethical thought" (*A Literary Turn: Rethinking the Roles of Generalization and Theory in Anglo-American Moral Philosophy*. Eds. Marjaana Kopperi, Pannu Raatikainen, Petri Ylikoski, and Bernt Österman. Helsinki: University of Helsinki, 2009: 191 and 195).

³ *The Sovereignty of Good* comprises three previously published essays: "The Idea of Perfection", first published in 1964, "The Sovereignty of Good Over Other Concepts", first published in 1967, and "On 'God' and 'Good'", first published in 1969. The republication of the essays in book form indicates their importance to Murdoch.

⁴ See Iris Murdoch, "The Idea of Perfection" in *The Sovereignty of Good*: 87 and 90.

⁵ A.S. Byatt argues that "some idea, which could well be called philosophical, provides much of the unifying framework for each of Miss Murdoch's novels" (*Degrees of Freedom*, 184). Cheryl Bove claims that Murdoch's novels are incomprehensible without a philosophical context; her art and ethics are "inextricable" (*Understanding Murdoch*: 190). Elizabeth Dipple describes *The Black Prince* as "a dramatization of a theory of art", demonstrating art's ability to depict the narrator's (artist's) gradual ethical transformation (*Iris Murdoch: Work for the Spirit*:130 and 111).

⁶ Jake Donaghue in *Under the Net* (New York: Penguin, 1977) and Charles Arrowby in *The Sea, The Sea* (New York: Penguin, 1978) are two first-person narrators who are unsuccessful artists, and like Bradley Pearson, they try to cast themselves in a more favourable light, causing a clash between how they want the reader to perceive them and how they are actually perceived by the reader (Barbara Stevens Heusel. *Patterned Aimlessness: Iris Murdoch's Novels of the 1970s and 1980s*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995: 157).

⁷ This has been pointed out by among others, Richard Todd in *Iris Murdoch*. 1984. London: Methuen:74-75.

⁸ See, for example, Martha C. Nussbaum. "Faint with Secret Knowledge": Love and Vision in Murdoch's *The Black Prince*. In *Poetics Today*, Winter 2004, vol. 25.4, pp. 689-710. Nussbaum distinguishes between "the moral potential of erotic love" and "the moral potential of art inspired by erotic love".

⁹ Metaphors were extremely important to Murdoch. She claimed that the "[d]evelopment of consciousness in human beings is inseparably connected with the use of metaphors. Metaphors are not merely peripheral decorations or even useful models, they are fundamental forms of our awareness of our conditions: metaphors of space, metaphors of movement, metaphors of vision" ("The Sovereignty of Good over Other Concepts": 96).

¹⁰ Indeed, in his relationship with Rachel, Pearson comes to the conclusion that "*I was a bad artist because I was a coward*" (144. Murdoch's italics). He regrets that while he is a "grandiose thinker", he is also "a timid conscientious person full of sensitive moral scruples and conventional fears" (144). He fears the future because he is a slave to "the darkness" of his "present desires" (145), which he may not be able to control.

¹¹ For a discussion of this form of behaviour see Cora Diamond, "'We are Perpetual Moralists': Iris Murdoch, Fact and Value": 81. In Maria Antonaccio and William Schweiker (Eds.). 1996. *Iris Murdoch and the Search for Human Goodness*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996: 79-110.

¹² Richard Todd argues that Pearson's difficulty in understanding or controlling his sexual love "has to do with the fetishistic aspect of his sexuality", e.g. his fetishistic interest in Julian's dresses, making it difficult for the reader to decide whether or not Pearson's story is simply about sexual obsession "expressed in terms of fetish". See "The Plausibility of *The Black Prince*. *Dutch Quarterly Review of Anglo-American Letters* vol. 8, 1978: 82-93.

¹³ See, for example, Elizabeth Dipple, *Iris Murdoch: Work for the Spirit*: 107. Dipple regards *The Black Prince* as "Murdoch's metaphor for the stages of art", claiming that the novel shows more artistic and ethical progression in one character than any of her other novels (*Iris Murdoch: Work for the Spirit*: 115).

¹⁴ See Deborah Johnson, *Iris Murdoch*. 1993. Brighton: Harvester, 1993: 55.

¹⁵ Lorna Sage, "The Pursuit of Imperfection: Henry and Cato". In Harold Bloom (Ed.). 1986. *Modern Critical Views: Iris Murdoch*. New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1986: 111-119. Lorna Sage argues that the imperfect and indeterminate nature of Murdoch's characters "mocks the critical demand for totalities and makes fiction seem a living process" (119).

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