

# Religious Elements in Iris Murdoch's 'The Sea, the Sea'

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## Abstract

One of the major themes in Iris Murdoch's writings is the relation between art, morals and religion. Murdoch believes that the purification or transformation of consciousness requires finding an object of attention which lies outside us and which is capable of creating new source of energy. The religious element to this novel is very important and it emphasizes on Buddhism as a source of behavioral attitudes, spiritual enlightenment, and ultimate liberation in a world that has lost its religious consciousness. *The Sea, the Sea* is about a man obsessed with an adolescent romance. It is the self-told story of Charles Arrowby, a prominent London theatre director who retires from the limelight and decides, one day, to withdraw from the world and dwell in seclusion in a house by the sea. He has come to abjure magic both the magic of the theatre and personal power. That it is hard to give up power or significantly change is one of the book's messages. *The Tempest* is about the nature of dreams and reality, but it is also about the surrendering of magic. Through the prism of Buddhist teachings and Shakespeare's play, *The Tempest*, Murdoch makes a powerful statement about the surrender of magic, the practice of dying, and the making of art. At the end of the novel Charles learns to begin to embrace a healing surrender to the particulars of the world he inhabits and realise that he was a dreamer who was reading his own dream text and not looking at the reality.

**Keywords:** pilgrimage, religion, reality, dream, Buddhism, art, good, Karma, Sangsara, Bardo

## Introduction

*The Sea, the Sea*, which won the Booker Prize in

1978, is about a man obsessed with an adolescent romance. It is the self-told story of Charles Arrowby, a prominent London theatre director who at age 63 retires from the limelight and decides, one day, to withdraw from the world and dwell in seclusion in a house by the sea called Shruff End. He has what might be called Prospero's Syndrome: as an actor, he had been a compelling figure, not only to audiences, but also to his peers. Now, he thinks, the time has come to surrender his powers, to live in wise seclusion, in harmony with nature, swimming, walking and writing a diary/journal/novel, reflecting on his life and times.

Charles Arrowby in his lonely house by the sea – his cave, by an extraordinary coincidence encounters his first love, Mary Hartley Fitch, whom he has not seen since his love affair with her as an adolescent.

His life has been spent acquiring fame, women, and worldly success. Charles has carelessly smashed Rosina's marriage, his ex-lover with Percegrine, many years before, and then once he had enjoyed Rosina's subjection to him, purged her of friends and prevented her having children, he has just discarded her (Conradi, 1986, p.233). And when he hears that Lizzie, another ex-lover of his, has a happy, sexless but loving household management with Gilbert, refuses to release her from her love and need of him.

Murdoch in her book on Plato says that 'the subject of every good play and novel' is 'the pilgrimage from appearance to reality' (Murdoch, 1978, p.14). *The Sea, the Sea*, most critics agree, is about this pilgrimage. (Bran, p. 196)

In the novel, we can trace Murdoch's use of *The Tempest*, which she in 1969 had called 'perhaps my

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favourite of all plays. It is to do with reconciliation and virtue and triumph of virtue ('Good, Evil and Morality', discussion between Iris Murdoch and Father Martin Jarrett-Kerr, 1969, p.17-23). The *Tempest* is about the nature of dreams and reality, but it is also about the surrendering of magic. Charles has come to 'abjure magic' (Murdoch, 1978, p. 2) both the magic of the theatre and personal power. That it is hard to give up power or significantly change is one of the book's messages.

Charles in his house by the sea will be able to reject the theatrical world of power and magic and learn to be good, in other words, learn to distinguish between illusion and reality. Yet the inside of a cave, as Plato's famous metaphor illustrates, is where illusion resides, and Charles has another difficult experience to face before he can finally reach the end of his pilgrimage.

The novel is a study of obsessive, jealous love which explores the theme of illusion and reality. Charles believes in reminiscence as the source of truth. He investigates through the experiences of what he calls his far past- memories of his friends and acquaintances in the theatre, his parents and his Aunt Estelle and cousin James- to find the one period where he thinks truth is located, the time he spent long ago with his childhood sweetheart Mary Hartley. Describing his mind, typically, as a cave, Charles explains it is illuminated by the memory of Hartley, '...the great light towards which I have been half consciously wending my way' (Murdoch, 1978, p. 77).

He alludes to the Platonic origin of the metaphor, wondering if this light is 'a great mouth opening to the daylight, or ... a hole through which fires emerge from the centre of the earth'(ibid)

The process of writing about this memory is central to discovering if this light is really, as he imagines, 'the light that reveals the truth'.(ibid, p. 79)

*The Sea, The Sea* represents something of a departure for Murdoch, because, as Lindsey Tucker says, it manifests a more complex and focused treatment of two of Murdoch's more compelling concerns. The first of these involves the usually neutral saintly figure who, in this work, is elevated to a role of more importance. This figure, Charles's cousin James, is involved in the action, not for reasons of ego, but because of his need to act in accordance with the teachings of his adopted religion, Buddhism. Indeed, this religious element is very important to the novel, and brings us

to the second of Murdoch's concerns, namely, an increased emphasis on Buddhism as a source of behavioral attitudes, spiritual enlightenment, and ultimate liberation in a world that has lost its religious consciousness(Tucker, 1986, p. 394).

The novel has six parts in its central section, which is named 'History'. It has also an introductory section named 'Prehistory,' and a reflective Postscript 'Life Goes On'. Its title comes from Valery's great poem 'The Graveyard by the Sea'. The poem concerns escape from and return to the world and is about the inevitable artifice of poetry(Conradi, 1986, p. 231).

### **'The Sea, the Sea'**

Mary Hartley is living in the village, married to an ex-soldier and retired fire-extinguisher salesman named Ben Fitch, who bullies her jealously, and to whom she submits. Although she is almost unrecognisable in old age, and totally outside his theatrical world, Charles becomes obsessed with her, idealizing his former relationship with her and attempting to persuade her to elope with him. His inability to recognise the egotism and selfishness of his own romantic ideals is at the heart of the novel.

Outsiders who see rules and not the love that turns through Mary Hartley and Ben are often too ready to label other people as prisoners. Charles clarifies what he thinks to be the truth of Hartley's marriage, through an awkward scene of eavesdropping, and sees only the sado-masochistic structure of Hartley's marriage not the deep habit and secret needs it has come to fulfil. Charles misreads the conventions of Hartley's world(Conradi, 1986, p. 236).After the comical and fruitless kidnapping of Mrs. Fitch by Arrowby, he is left to contemplate her rejection in an enjoyably self-obsessional and self-aggrandising manner over the space of several chapters.

'How much, I see as I look back, I read into it all, reading my own dream text and not looking at the reality... Yes of course I was in love with my own youth... Who is one's first love?'(Murdoch, 1978, p. 370)

Charles is impressed by the strange power of writing. He refers to the specific act of joining together past and present:

The past and the present are after all so close, so almost one, as if time were an artificial teasing out of a material which longs to join, to interpenetrate, and to become heavy and very small like some of

those heavenly bodies scientists tell us. (Ibid, p. 153)

Charles sets out to write his journal specifically to recapture the past. The reflective first section of his journal is something that has been intended to serve as a prelude to the events in past. The section 'prehistory' ends with Charles claiming to be haunted by the past (a fact suggested all along by his former lover Rosina occupying his house and pretending to be a ghost) and wondering, 'Can a woman's ghost, after so many years, open the doors of the heart?' (Murdoch, 1978, p. 89) Soon after this, as if conjured up by his possessed prose itself, the real Hartley appears in his life.

The appearance of the Ben Fitches' adopted son Titus, missing for two years, gives Charles his opportunity kidnapping of Hartley. Ben is as obsessively jealous a man as is Charles, and when, after some years of married life, Hartley told him of her childish love of Charles, Ben suffered retrospective jealousy, partly displaced onto Titus, who was adopted after a longish separation between them, when Hartley was away nursing her dying father (Conradi, 1986, p. 237). Then, he accused Hartley of still seeing Charles, and Titus being her son by him. Titus escaped two years before, out of the bad relationship with Ben, to study electricity at a Polytechnic, and to find his real father. He arrives at Charles' place to find out if the story of Charles having sired him is true. Charles, who likes him, uses him too as a decoy to attract Hartley to Shruff End where he put her in upstairs inner room as a prisoner.

Titus arrival complicates the jealousy that already exists between Charles and witnesses to the imprisonment. They are Lizzie, Rosina, Peregrine, Gilbert, and his cousin, the ex-General James.

Rosina confides to Charles that, when he left her, he also left the problem of an unwanted pregnancy that she had to deal with on her own; ingenious in hurting him she leaves to console Ben another of those attractive, violent men of power with whom she loves to fight. (Ibid) James gathers others to help Charles return Hartley to Ben. At the moment of Hartley's return, James recognises Ben as hero of a bloody revolt in an Ardennes prisoner-of-war camp in 1945.

The intensity with which he immediately hurls himself into pursuit of her is the result of more than simply the relight of dormant love. It is the inevitable reaction of a man obsessed by his past who now comes face to face with it. He is not attracted to Hartley physically or mentally, he wants her because she is an embodiment of lost world of inno-

cence. He describes their childhood love as innocent, kept secret from their friends, involving only caresses not sex, (Nicol, p. 201) 'a passion and ... a love of purity that can never come again and which I am sure rarely exists in the world at all' (Murdoch, 1978, p. 80)

In her presence he feels 'so helplessly, vulnerably close to my childhood' (ibid, p. 327) Given his fascination with the period of his youth, it is not totally surprising that he is evidently unable to recognise that the Hartley he has carried around in his imagination is quite unlike the dull, elderly, comfortably married woman she is now (Nicol, p. 201).

Hartley can no longer be sure why she rejected him because memory is fallible, she found Charles sort of bossy and she did not want him to become an actor but go to university instead.

Her guilt about having left Charles renders her powerless. Peregrine states all marriage is ruled over by the law that 'the spouse who feels guilty, even irrationally, is endlessly the victim of the whims of the other, and can take no moral stance.' (Murdoch, 1978, p. 162)

Charles's deep desire to revisit the past means that his attempt to capture Hartley is a way of doing literally what he first intended to accomplish metaphorically by writing his novel (Nicol, p. 201). She represents his past; by reclaiming her, he can possess it. Her significance in this sense is suggested when Charles, having failed to prise her away from her husband, imprisons her in a locked room in Shruff End. In addition, meeting her again causes him to ponder the close proximity of past and present with renewed vigour. Looking over old photographs of Hartley as a child, he tries 'to trace the similarities, to build connections between the young face and the old, the old face and the new'. (Murdoch, 1978, p. 156) She makes him 'whole as I have never been since she left me'. (ibid, p. 186)

Because of vanity about Titus' youth and a related unwillingness to admit that he is himself old, Charles omitted ever to warn Titus either how dangerous the sea was, or how difficult it was to get out of. The sea always undid the ropes he tried to attach to the rock. Titus died accidentally, needlessly (Conradi, 1986, p. 238).

Then the scene is set for Charles' recovery which is assisted by two disasters. First is that Peregrine pushed Charles, when drunk, into Minn's Cauldron, a lethally enclosed deep whirlpool twenty-foot steep and James mysteriously rescued him. Then Titus drowns.

Through Titus' death and his own near-murder, he begins to understand his own guilt, but not to overplay this, as he did his obsession. Charles manages to secure his past within the pages of his novel. It can be distinguished two aims behind his preoccupation with his past: a desire to comprehend the truth of the past, and a parallel wish to unite his past and present selves. His renewed involvement with Hartley has done nothing to suggest that his first aim is fulfilled, for he is just as unable to understand the terrible mystery of why she left him as he was at the start of the novel. As far as his second aim is concerned, Charles gradually comes to realize that the connective power of narrative form is illusory. Writing his novel teaches him the lesson that he is always already separated from even his most recent past. The very activity of narration implies a separation from experience.

All attachments are vulnerable and finally impermanent, and the best love would be unpossessive. When Charles sees Hartley, feels 'a shock that annihilates space and time.' (Murdoch, 1978, p. 111). But, this must be illusory. James, Charles' cousin gives the authoritative idea, when he tries to break him away from obsession, he predict his recovery:

You've built a cage of needs and installed her in an empty space in the middle. The strong feelings are all round her – vanity, revenge, your love for your youth – they aren't focused on her, they don't harm them at all. You are using her image, a doll, a simulacrum, it's an exorcism. Soon you will start to see her as a wicked enchantress. Then you will have nothing to do except forgive her and that will be within your capacity. (ibid, p. 442)

Here we can see that the language insists on the absolute importance of the inner world, as well as the fantastic nature of much human action (Conradi, 1986, p. 247). James says: 'If even a dog's tooth is truly worshipped it glows with light' 34 (Murdoch, 1978, p. 175) and 'the worshipper endows the worshipped object with power, real power not imaginary power, that is the sense of the ontological proof, one of the most ambiguous ideas clever men ever thought of. But this power is dreadful stuff. Our lusts and our attachments compose our god' (ibid, 445).

### Religious Elements in the Novel

Murdoch has integrated Buddhist philosophy into her previous works, especially *The Nice and the Good*, *An Accidental Man*, and *Bruno's Dream*,

but in this novel the ultimate meaning seems to rely heavily on our understanding of Buddhism, especially Buddhism as practiced in Tibet (Dipple, 1982, p. 277).

Buddhism concerns itself with the nature of dreams and reality, but it deals greatly with the surrender of magic and with preparation for death. Consequently, *The Sea*, the Sea plans to be the diary/ memoirs/ autobiography of Charles (a Prospero figure), but as it becomes a novel about his experiences on a primitive English seacoast, another Prospero figure, his cousin James, emerges. What Murdoch gives us then in *The Sea*, *The Sea* is no simple reworking of *The Tempest*, but, through the prism of Buddhist teachings and Shakespeare's play, gives a powerful statement about the surrender of magic, the practice of dying, and the making of art.

One of the Buddhist beliefs is about the *sang-sara*, in which individual consciousness exists in a state of ignorance about realities, where *maya*, defined in *The Tempest Book of the Dead* as a 'magical show', deludes the unenlightened (Woodroffe, 1960, p. Ixxii). In *The Sea*, the Sea everyone is trapped in a world of dreams, but absolutely no one more than Charles. As the 'rapacious magician' (Murdoch, 1978, p. 45) of the London stage, he long confused illusion with reality. His so-called retirement has turned his fantasy-governed inner world outward, and Hartley, a figure of his dream world becomes his reality. The illusions he once thought he controlled on stage now control him.

Charles has devoted his life to Shakespeare. But unlike Shakespeare, he is not truly creative. As a playwright he is ordinary, his plays nothing more than 'magical delusions,' 'fireworks' (ibid, 7). His abilities lie in one particular type of directing. He says, for example, that for him the theatre is 'an attack on mankind carried on by magic: to victimize an audience every night' (ibid, 33). This seems a strange attitude, but it soon becomes clear that Charles loves directing because he loves power. The theatre, he goes on to say, is a 'place of obsession,' and while the genius of Shakespeare was able to change obsession 'into something spiritual' (ibid, 34). Charles enjoys having an audience of victims. He also prides himself on his ability to manipulate his actors, whom he works like demons, and adds, 'I fostered my reputation for ruthlessness, it was extremely useful' (ibid, 37). As the actual 'novel' begins, however, this tyrannical director has retired to a seaside house and is resolved upon learning to be good.



Rosina, whose marriage has been destroyed by Charles (Charles seems compelled to break up marriages but has never married any of the wives), functions as a witch/demon figure during Charles's retirement, having also come to understand a good deal about the sources of Charles's power as a director. 'You have been a sorcerer,' she tells him. 'Women loved you for your power, your magic'(ibid, 108). But she also recognizes his sorcery as 'facile' (ibid) Determined that Lizzie shall never have Charles, she appears on the scene, declares herself a 'demon,' and sets out to 'haunt' him. Her bondage to Charles depends not on love but on hate, which 'has its own magic'(ibid, 107).

In the book, Charles speaks of his relation with his cousin James:

When I was young I could never decide whether James was real and I was unreal, or vice versa. Somehow it was clear we could not both be real; one of us must inhabit the world of shadows(ibid, 57)

The relation between Charles and James is, like that of Tallis and Julius, in Murdoch's novel *A Fairly Honourable Defeat*, Hugo and Jake, in *Under The Net* another reworking of the theme of the saint and the artist. It is not explained by Charles like this until the end. Since childhood he has been full of both jealousy and envy of James's money, education, and assurance. Charles has pursued success out of rivalry with James and desire to be one up on him (Conradi, 1986, p. 239).

James went to Winchester, pursued an army career, became a Buddhist and spiritual seeker after a stay in Tibet, and has now left the army under some unspecified cloud. Charles finally realises, James importance, has existed in Charles' own mind. Charles, goes to James' Pimlico flat which is resemble an oriental commercial centre, full of fetiches and statues. He treasures the poem of the Milarepa, great sinner turn great saint (ibid, 240).

The rivalry between Charles and James is entirely inside Charles' head. In this it is the direct descendant of Jake and Hugo's relationship. Jake also imagined various bitter feelings onto Hugo, and they turned out at the end to be a projection of his own guilt. James too feels nothing for Charles but a baffled love. James' existence in Charles' life as much as what he has to tell him is at least in part a rebuke and a lesson to Charles.

James feels connected to Charles to the way that Charles feels connected to Hartley. He makes Charles his sole inheritor. James returns again and

again to see Charles, who is never at ease with him.

James' return to Charles parallels Charles' return to Hartley, but in opposite case. Charles has been unable to let go of his memories of Hartley, but James returns to Charles both to release himself from his own attachment to Charles, and also to assist Charles in releasing him and weaning him off his obsession with Hartley. Charles returns to the past to grab and freeze it. James returns to it gently to cut it loose. This is partly related to James' Buddhism, partly to common sense: obsessive attachment is a dangerous force whatever your religious belief or lack of it. Charles detachment differs from James's. Charles maddens and compels those who love him. James has achieved the state of ascetic which calms and cheers those he comes in contact with(ibid, p. 241).

As Ben mirrors Charles' violence and jealous spite, so James mirrors Charles' power and magic. Obsession narrows Charles' focus; virtue widens James's.

In the last pages Charles realises that he and James had the same problem. And this reflects James' earlier idea to the same effect. 'When I went to the sea I imagined that I was given up the world. But one surrenders power in one form and grasps it in another'(Murdoch, 1978, p. 500).

Charles sought to give up the magic of theatre, an image for the personal power. James sought to give up that spiritual magic which, as he and various books on his Tibetan Buddhism witness, is a degenerate by-product of the quest for virtue and wisdom.

About the tricks, James says 'All sorts of people can do them, they can be jolly tiring but – you know they have nothing to do with – with - ... nothing to do with anything important, like goodness' (ibid, p.446-447). What James does reveal is the fateful effect of such tricks as well as the bondage to sangsara. Payment for faults, the web of causality that Murdoch often, elaborates upon in all her fiction, is addressed by the teaching of Buddhism, for the belief in Karma – the consequences of actions incurred both in this life and in past lives – emphasizes individual's responsibility to be aware of his actions(Watts, 1957, p. 49).Charles ignorance of his real connection to people binds him more closely to the wheel, to life wandering on the sangsara, andhis karma is problematical. The other belief of Buddhism concerns the existence of what are known as the six lokas or poisons of the sangsara. These are pride, jealousy, sloth, anger, greed, and lust, all of which Charles suffers from.

Perhaps the most important way in which *The Sea, The Sea* relies on the teachings of Buddhism involves the problem of dying. According to Buddhist teaching, man is born and born again into a world of wandering (samsara) through continuous existences, until he is enlightened enough to attain his liberation. But only the yogi (the saint) is able to break free from the creations of the maya-governed mind and see the light that characterizes the Supreme State of the Void, or nirvana, and unite with it (Tucker, 1986, 387). As one Buddhist text expresses it, 'When thou hast understood the dissolution of all the 'fabrications' thou shalt understand that which is not fabricated' (David-Neel, 1979, 232).

Especially significant, then, given the Buddhist concept of life-after-death, is that after-death state known as bardo. This period lasts for forty-nine days and involves three separate stages.

Bardo is the realm where the soul wanders after death, meeting demons of its own manufacture, and awaiting rebirth. In *The Sea*, the Sea Bardo is the realm of the whole book (Conradi, 1986, p. 243). It is of course Charles' realm. Coleridge once complained that:

'A hunger-bitten and idea-less philosophy naturally produces a starveling and comfortless religion. It is among the miseries of the present age that it recognises no medium between Literal and Metaphorical.' (Coburn "ed". 1967, p. 30)

It can be said Bardo figures in the book as an in-between world, not a realm only separates death and rebirth, but because 'it is the realm in which one's own projection are seen to be real.' (Conradi, 1986, p. 243) Charles about his failure as a playwright, argues that 'Unless one is very talented indeed there is no resting-place between the naive and the ironic' (Murdoch, 1978, p. 35).

In the novel, we read about sea-serpent by which Charles is twice terrified. Once, when Rosina is jealously tormenting Charles, he for a moment sees on her 'the snake-like head and teeth and pink opening mouth of my sea monster...not really a vision but just a thought'. (Ibid, 105) The second time he sees the monster, in Minn's Cauldron after Peregrine has thrown him in, the water is bottle-green. So are the sea-serpent's eyes.

The reality of the sea-serpent (and the reality of sexual jealousy) as Conradi has pointed out is a kind of satire on those behaviourist philosophers and literary critics who relegate all inner experience to the realm of a ghostly and unimportant shadow of the public and measurable act. Jealousy, like guilt, is a

major theme of the book, and that the monster appears on the first page is some sort of warning that Charles' desire to get out of his former way of life is dangerous when the inner world, the world of fantasies and projections, remains unweeded and undisciplined. Charles produces the green-eyed monster of jealousy just as he produces a phantasmagoric picture of Hartley. Both take their revenge on him (Conradi, 1986, p. 245).

Murdoch has referred to her interest in water by saying 'all human beings are symbolic animals – one's always got certain obsessive symbols which seem to represent deep metaphorical ideas or moral ideas'. It is very freedom which, in *The Sea, The Sea* hold the gaze. The sea contains and represents everything, is symbol for the uncoerced unconscious, source of all symbol, from which identity comes and to which it returns (ibid, p. 249, 250).

Charles contemplates, with an effect beautifully poised between pathos and ripe humour:

Can one change oneself? I doubt it. Or if there is any change it must be measured as the millionth part of a millimetre. When the poor ghosts have gone, what remains are ordinary obligations and ordinary interests. One can live quietly and try to do tiny good things and harm no one. I cannot think of any tiny good thing to do at the moment, but perhaps I shall think of one tomorrow. (Murdoch, 1978, p. 501)

Finally James' casket, which may contain a demon, drops off the wall. Charles thinks 'Upon the demon – ridden pilgrimage of human life, what next I wonder?' Conradi says 'It is a perfectly judged ending, pointing to the inability of art to compel life, of consciousness to contain experience, mocking the idea of endings themselves' (Conradi, 1986, p. 254).

Murdoch recognizes two kinds of art. The first is 'a form of fantasy-consolation, a reflection of the writer's personal obsessions'. (Murdoch, 1970, p. 64). Surely, Charles's 'novel' is of that kind. Murdoch is also interested in another kind of art, however, the kind where personal obsession is transcended by the artist's 'just and compassionate vision':

The great artist sees his objects (and this is true whether they be sad, absurd, repulsive or even evil) in a light of justice and mercy. The direction of attention is, contrary to nature, outward, away from the self (ibid, 65, 66).

This is the kind of art, according to Murdoch, practiced by Titian, Velasquez, Tolstoy, and, of course, Shakespeare. Murdoch also uses Buddhism, particularly Zen, as another means to get at

the higher art. In *The Fire and the Sun* she argues that, while Western art, 'separated and grand,' has become an authority in itself, Eastern art is more loosely connected with religion and therefore is less likely to impose authority. Eastern art maintains mystery, a 'deeper relation to the spiritual.' 'Zen,' she says, 'is prepared to use art so long as art does not take itself too seriously.' She also notes that Zen is 'well aware of the way in which art imagery may provide false resting places' (Murdoch, 1978, p. 14).

Murdoch, Charles, and his 'novel' form a slightly different triad because Murdoch has created James, and both characters represent two different types of art. Charles, it should be recalled at this point, has observed the theatre to be a place of obsession, and his audiences as victims of trickery, while at the same time he has recognized Shakespeare's ability to turn theatre into something spiritual. It is not surprising, then, to find Charles creating his most provocative art while most under the bondage of his own obsessions. Nevertheless, the reflexive features of the entire work call attention to these obsessional aspects of art as well as to the kind of art where the personal and obsessive are transcended. Murdoch's text, like the epilogue of *The Tempest*, breaks down the barriers between itself and the reader and demands moral involvement. Does that imply that Charles's art is a failure? Perhaps the answer can be found in James's comment on art. 'If there is art enough,' he tells Charles, 'a lie can enlighten us as well as the truth' (Murdoch, 1978, p. 175).

## Conclusions

Like Shakespeare, Murdoch is able to present her audience with a fantasy while she calls attention to the fact, always keeping before the reader the obsession and the fantasized consolation it produces. What she 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.

Like so many other Murdoch heroes Charles fights off but eventually learns to begin to embrace a healing surrender to the particulars of the world he inhabits, and finally he reaches the point where he can say:

I had deluded myself throughout by the idea of renewing a secret love which did not exist at all.... I accused Hartley of being a 'fantasist' . . . but what a 'fantasist' I have been myself. I was the dreamer, I the magician. How much,

I see as I look back, I read into it all, reading my own dream text and not looking at the reality. (ibid, 499)

This recognition is the conclusion of his pilgrimage from appearance to reality. According to Murdoch the activity of consciousness is conceived as a pilgrimage from appearance toward perfected knowledge of reality. Central to his enlightenment is the realization that he cannot fully inhabit his past self, despite the power of narrative form. James has already hinted at this, asking his cousin:

What is the truth anyway, that truth? As we know ourselves we are fake objects, fakes, bundles of illusions. Can you determine exactly what you felt or thought or did? We have to pretend in law courts that such things can be done, but that is just a matter of convenience. (ibid, 175)

Only much later, after James's death, Charles begins to realize the significance of what James says that retrospective writing can bring only a limited degree of self-knowledge:

Time, like the sea, unties all knots. Judgments on people are never final; they emerge from summingsup which at once suggest the need of reconsideration. Human arrangements are nothing but loose ends and hazy reckoning, whatever art may otherwise pretend in order to console us. (ibid, 477)

Charles tries to tide the ropes to the rocks to ease his bathing. But the sea undoes the knots, and this can be regarded as a figure for impermanence. Charles ends the novel aware of the journey he has undertaken, looking into the future not the past: 'Upon the demon-ridden pilgrimage of human life, what next I wonder?' (ibid, 502). Life must go on, despite and because of what has happened in the past.

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