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The Sea, the Sea: Murdoch, Language and Magic

Margarita Chourova

Iris Murdoch's novel, *The Sea, the Sea* (1978), seems a good starting point for the discussion of the limits of textuality as it suggests a number of approaches to the subject. The relationship of the text (stories, theories, etc.) to what is outside the text (and for Murdoch that meant the extra-linguistic situation) was a central concern of hers from the very beginning of her writing career. It is the focus of her first book, *Under the Net* (1953), based on Wittgenstein's metaphor from the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* of the net or mesh of language which attempts – with different degrees of accuracy – to cover “what is the case.” What Murdoch particularly emphasises in the novel is the necessity for the individual intellect to penetrate under any totalising net of concepts imposed on the world in order to see its particular aspects as they really are. The tension between the intellect which is impelled to conceptualise human reality and the world which “hits back” when acted upon following an inaccurate conceptualisation is a recurrent theme in Murdoch's novels. When Elizabeth Dipple says that “[t]he breaking in of the real world on the crafted form was a major idea in *The Black Prince*, and in certain ways *The Sea, the Sea* is related to that novel” (277), she rather understates the extent to which the above idea shapes the whole of Murdoch's work.

Murdoch herself does not operate with the concept of textuality since textuality as a notion developed after the general assumptions of her thinking had been set in the 1950s and 1960s under the influence of Sartre, Wittgenstein, Plato and the British empirical tradition. Many of these assumptions are not compatible with the concept of textuality as it developed in post-structuralist thinking in the wake of Barthes, Foucault and Derrida. I shall argue, however, that in spite of Murdoch's theoretical assumptions and her explicit disagreement with major tenets of post-structuralist theory, she employs in *The Sea, the Sea* textual strategies converging with deconstruction-

ist techniques. Exploring the basis of this convergence seems of particular interest as the limits of textuality are delineated in a radically different manner in Murdoch's thinking and in deconstructionist theory.

Actually, *The Sea, the Sea* not only exhibits the features of textuality in its endless deferral of meaning, in its dramatisation of the permeation of textual relations by power and its intertextual dimensions – virtually any text can be seen to do that – but does so to an extent suggesting a deliberate textual strategy. Barbara Heusel, although her discussion of *The Sea, the Sea* does not focus on this particular aspect, speaks in *Patterned Aimlessness* (1995) of Murdoch's "postmodern narrative strategies" (24). This rather clashes with the earlier picture of Murdoch who, for all her idiosyncrasies in terms of content, was seen to use predominantly traditional devices. Lorna Sage makes basically this point when, in her perceptive essay on *Henry and Cato*, "The Pursuit of Imperfection" (first published in 1977), she says that Murdoch "settles for the illusion of a three-dimensional moral world, achieved through her own particular adaptation of rather traditional fictional techniques" (119). It can be argued, of course, that the above distinction – reading a text with a view to the inconsistencies, gaps and contradictions it conveys on the one hand or as a consistent whole on the other – is largely methodological as it is a question of two different approaches to reading, a post-structuralist one which regards them as "texts" and a more traditional one which treats novels as "works." It is also historically conditioned as Barthes' seminal essay "From Work to Text" which elaborated on the distinction appeared in an English translation in 1977.

Since Roland Barthes introduced in his essay "From Work to Text" the distinction between (the literary) "work" and the "Text", defining the "Text" as "a methodological field" which "only exists in the movement of discourse" and "is experienced only in the activity of production" (156-57), writing has come to be seen in a dynamic, non-essentialist and non-positional manner. Barthes makes a distinction between the "work", which he described as yielding a definite significance, and the "Text," which produces no ultimate authoritative meaning but offers an infinite play of significations. The "Text," he says, "practices the infinite deferment of the signified, is dilatory; its field is that of the signifier"; it is a "system with neither closure, nor centre" (158-59). It is to be noted that Barthes does not identify the "Text" exclusively with either experimental writing or with the manner of reading.

Contemporary notions of textuality, in the context of which we shall try to situate Murdoch's thinking and artistic practice, construct texts (oral and

written) as partaking of both the textual and the extra-linguistic, as permeated by power relationships and echoes of earlier texts, and also as lacking in stable significance. Insofar as texts are inseparable from practice, engaging as they do in a number of specific discourses, they are seen to be part of the world and, therefore, the dichotomy between the literary text and the world, implicit in the notion of mimesis which forms the basis of the traditional realistic novel, is regarded as false. Reality is a cultural construction as Barthes demonstrates in his "Mythologies" by examining a number of cultural codes and practices which can be read as non-verbal texts. Foucault, on the other hand, has pointed out that texts shape reality and create the world not only by organising experience but by expressing "the fundamental will of those who speak it" (290), in other words, they are inseparable from power. Texts do not have a stable significance: they are marked by fluidity, since signs refer to other signs and not to an exclusively extra-linguistic reality. It is in this sense that Barthes goes on to state: "no vital 'respect' is due to the Text: it can be *broken* . . . , it can be read without the guarantee of its father" (161). Thus it is the reader (collective or individual) who ultimately authors the meaning. Intrasubjective meanings, as they depend on the larger social and linguistic background, vary historically and are often at odds with subjective meanings which, in their turn, vary from person to person and sometimes, even if produced by the same person, may vary from one reading to the next. As Still and Worton put it when discussing the text, "its successive readers will redefine and reposition it, maintaining it in a state of fluidity, of textuality" (4). Their understanding of textuality sums up its important features:

Textuality implies the relative and mobile form of structuration, (i.e. a structure which is not fixed but constantly changing), from which significations can be produced by a subject – which is itself partly constructed by encounters which can themselves be understood as textual. In other words, our use of the term textuality insists on the following points:

- (i) the accessibility of material to significations;
- (ii) the inessential quality of significations (i.e. meanings are not fixed for all time even though some meanings persist over considerable time periods);
- (iii) the potential fluidity of textual structures (including social networks) over time and place;
- (iv) the permeation of (textual) relations by power;
- (v) the *intertextual* quality of textuality. (5-6)

These are all issues Murdoch engages in. The necessity human beings experience to articulate their situation and the particular – far from disinterested –

ways in which they construct their reality, the elusiveness of meaning and the impossibility of ultimate solutions and definitive accounts are among Murdoch's favourite themes whose treatment is intertextually enriched by echoes from a variety of philosophical and literary sources. Having said that, we should add that the particular ways in which she treats these issues are often at odds with poststructuralist thinking; on the other hand, however, her artistic practice is often at odds with her theoretical thinking.

Even so, Murdoch's thinking is a good starting point for the discussion of her novels since the whole of her *oeuvre* can be seen as a form of allegory in which the issues raised are transferred from one novel into the next. As Lorna Sage puts it in "The Pursuit of Imperfection," "her basic procedure is a loose form of allegory (or allegorising, to emphasise that it's a continuous process)" (117), and "[t]he imaginative curiosity that is always left over feeds into a new book" (119). Of course Murdoch handles allegory in her own specific fashion as a form of continuous quest consisting of exploring and discarding moral concepts. Or, to quote Sage again: "One way of taking an allegory is to see in it a universal image on which individual dilemmas converge; Miss Murdoch seems to see it rather differently, as a way of expressing the provisional nature of one's world picture" (Bloom 117-18).

Therefore, the typical Murdochian protagonist is an individual embarking on a quest, faced with the need to interpret his (very rarely her) world in order to be able to act without the help of enabling routine. This appears to be a fictional image of a theoretical life situation and is based on the assumption of the distinction between the world and the text. The interpreter is immersed in the world and the text he constructs is contaminated by inaccuracies, illusions and projections of his will. It is the mechanisms of the (mis)interpretation of the world that fascinate Murdoch as she creates ambiguous situations and has her characters construct and discard theories and stories conceptualising their situation and human relations. In her fictional world, reality is not only "material" accessible to provisional significations, it is "material" that *requires* provisional theorising and interpretation.

The particular perspective in which Murdoch views the relation between the text and the world is what she defines as "unity versus contingency." The extent to which this idea influences her writing is emphasised by Richard Todd when in *Iris Murdoch: The Shakespearean Interest* he describes her work as "a novelistic meditation on the question of 'form versus contingency'" (12). The best account of the issue is to be found in her much-quoted essay "Against Dryness" (1961), which is an attempt to diagnose the failings of the contemporary novel. In it Murdoch states:

Reality is not a given whole: an understanding of this, a respect for the contingent is essential to the imagination as opposed to fantasy. Our sense of form which is an aspect of our desire for consolation can be a danger to our sense of reality as a rich receding background. (20)

This passage, which relates art and morality to knowledge, is an excellent example of what a critic designated as Murdoch's shorthand. In terms of knowledge, it projects the understanding that the world is contingent and any attempt to grasp and represent it amounts to imparting logical unity and necessity to what is accidental and unconnected. Even though meaning is seen as a construction, the product of the human intellect, Murdoch's approach is dualistic and privileges the extra-linguistic (reality) over the text. In moral terms, her central "virtues" – freedom and goodness – are defined as correct perception of reality, an important aspect of which is the acceptance of its contingency without the consolation provided by the stability of self-flattering, unified accounts. As for art, her concerns derive from the same source, since she sees the task of the novelist as an attempt to find a satisfactory solution to the problem of giving a sufficiently flexible, yet unified, expression – form – to a contingent fictional world constructed as an image of the real one.

Thus we can observe two tendencies in Murdoch's attitude to theories. On the one hand, the emphasis on contingency, that is the emphasis on the accidental and the particular, makes her wary of generalisations and theories which, by definition, create connections which do not exist. On the other hand, she insists that an amount of generalising and theoretical speculation is necessary, and she favours a kind of provisional conceptual exploration that would render the world more intelligible without imposing too rigid an account on it. Murdoch's thinking is therefore based on a paradox: she insists on the necessity of theories insofar as they are indispensable in the attempts of human beings to grasp and master their situation, while at the same time pointing to the inevitable falseness of theories owing to the generalising properties of language and the contingent nature of the world. The tension this paradox creates can account for the idiosyncrasy of much of her artistic practice.

In its suspicion of theories Murdoch's thinking comes close to the idea of "the death of grand narratives" and the emphasis on fragmentation voiced by Jean-François Lyotard. In *The Postmodern Condition* Lyotard argues that in contemporary society and culture – a post-industrial society and a post-modern culture – "the grand narrative has lost its credibility, regardless of what mode of unification it uses, regardless of whether it is a speculative

narrative or a narrative of emancipation" (37). He argues in favour of little stories ("petits récits") – an umbrella notion covering all sorts of fragmentation, particularity, diversity, contingency, language games, etc. and rejects the legitimacy of grand narratives ("grands récits"), in other words totality, unity, the universal, the notion of metalanguage, etc. Fragmentation is stressed on every level and in every field: science, society, time, history, literature, the human subject. The discourses of truth and justice are seen to belong to the grand narratives of modernity which have lost all credibility.

Murdoch's distrust of theories, however, comes from a different source, as it owes much to Wittgenstein's particular treatment of the subject but ultimately derives from the tradition of British empiricism which sees "the world in terms of contingently conjoint simples" as "a totality of ultimately simple facts which have no necessary connection with each other" (*Metaphysics and Ethics* 113). Yet Murdoch, unlike Lyotard, emphasises the necessity of theorising, that is of the creation of provisional flexible accounts. Commenting in an early essay, entitled "A House of Theory" (1959), on the "elimination of metaphysics" in Western analytical theory and on the existing tendency among British intellectuals at the time to avoid theorising, Murdoch asks: "Is it the right choice? I think not. There is a serious and growing void in our thinking about moral and social problems." She adds: "it is the absence of theories which renders us blind and which enables bureaucracy in all its senses to keep us mystified" (26). This statement predates the flourishing of literary theory transgressing disciplinary boundaries and engaging in social, political, historiographic, cultural, ethnic, linguistic and other issues, which started in the mid-seventies and filled the perceptible void.

Theory, however, took a turn which was considerably different from Murdoch's own mode of thinking. It came to privilege language, extending the notion of textuality to cover the world as well so that the concept of truth came to seem largely irrelevant. Murdoch's approach, however, is based on the dichotomy of the text and the world and to her "truth" is essential. While the early Murdoch admits that "truth" is a difficult concept and prefers to speak cautiously of "accuracy", she openly invokes as late as 1992 the by then unpopular notion in *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*. This is prompted by an unwillingness to accept the implications of losing the values of the truth-based morality and by a desire to recuperate the responsible individual that goes with it.

The above marks something of a reversal in her position. In "Against Dryness," the early Murdoch fought against the excessive existentialist em-

phasis on the individual. She found the image of the lonely individual affirming his freedom and responsibility through his choices unrealistic, claiming that human beings are immersed in situations which are too ambiguous to allow for free rational moral choices: "We are not isolated free choosers, monarchs of all we survey, but benighted creatures sunk in a reality whose nature we are constantly and overwhelmingly tempted to deform by fantasy" (Bloom 14). The Murdoch of *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, however, tries to rescue the individual, insisting that the total immersion of the human subject in language assumed in post-structuralist thought amounts to subjecting the individual to the system. This is how Murdoch, in her essay "Derrida and Structuralism," sees the implications of the poststructuralist privileging of language:

The removal from language of any reference except to other parts of language sweeps away not only the correspondence theory, but any theory, of truth. Meaning, then, is an internally self-related movement or *play* of language. *Le jeu des signifiants*. . . . What is transcendent is not the world but the great sea of language itself which cannot be dominated by the individuals who move or play in it, and who do not speak or use language, but are spoken or used by it. . . . On this view, almost all language use is an unconscious subjection to system. Only at some points (in the activity of some minds) can language be seen to emerge as *conscious play*. (193)

Her counter-arguments are based on several notions that are of key importance in her thinking: the unique quality of individuals and situations and, hence, the particularised nature of truth, which she links to a newly emphasised requirement for individuals to assume their responsibilities:

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)

Thus the threat to the individual comes from what she sees as the threat of an all-engulfing transcendent language marked by Derridean "traces" of similarities and differences which deprives the individual of control over meaning: "Something is lost, the existing incarnate individual with his real particular life of thoughts and perceptions and moral living" (202). She emphasises more than ever before the idea of truth because, as she puts it, "[w]ith the idea of truth the idea of value also vanishes" (202). She is not prepared to

accept what she sees as the totalitarian and manipulative character of the theory of the transcendence of language: "Metaphysical systems have consequences. Those who think that the individual has reality only through the system do not only sit in studies, they sit in places of political power" (197).

Murdoch's emphasis on accuracy and her particularised conception of truth are an attempt to counter the natural propensity of human beings to project their will in stories and theories. Hence her insistence on "realism," in the sense of accurate apprehension of reality (which incidentally goes together with her admiration for the realistic novel of the nineteenth century), and her adoption of the concept of "attention." This is a concept which she borrows from Simone Weil and which underscores the moral necessity of recognising the "otherness" of things and people. This emphasis arose initially as a reaction to what Murdoch saw as Sartre's tendency to solipsism. For Sartre, who approaches the relationship of the consciousness to the world in a situation composed of both objective and subjective factors, the significance of the objective factors is entirely determined by the individual's consciousness which assesses them from the viewpoint of its aims. In *L'Être et le Néant* he says: "C'est par moi qu'une face du monde se révèle, c'est à moi qu'elle se révèle. En ce sens je suis créateur et possesseur" (666) ["It is through me that a facet of the world is revealed; it is to me that it reveals itself. In this sense I am creator and possessor" (577)]. Further on he notes: "Ainsi, dans la mesure où je m'apparais comme créant les objets par le seul rapport d'appropriation, ces objets sont moi" (680) ["Thus to the extent that I appear to myself as *creating* objects by the sole relation of appropriation, these objects are *myself*" (590-91)]. He defines knowledge as possession: "C'est encore s'approprier . . . que connaître" (666) ["*Knowing* also . . . is a form of appropriation" (577)]. Murdoch has Sartre's concept of "appropriation" in mind when in "Hegel in Modern Dress" she comments: "Other people on Sartre's picture appear as unassimilated parts of oneself" (675). In order to counter what she sees as the undesirable implications for morality of Sartre's approach (to which she likens the moral thought of Ordinary Language philosophy), she attaches value to the apprehension of the "otherness" of things and people as a separate reality. "Attention," Murdoch says in "The Idea of Perfection," expresses "the idea of a just and loving gaze directed upon an individual reality" (*Sovereignty* 34). The quests of her characters are never-ending exercises in accurate seeing. Thus Murdoch's angle precludes Barthes' assumption that "no 'vital respect' is due to the Text."

While her theoretical assumptions also preclude many other tenets of textuality, Murdoch's books testify to a much more flexible approach. It should be pointed out that Murdoch always denied any direct continuity between her non-fictional writing and her fiction, repeatedly stating that her novels "are *not connected* with philosophy" (Heusel 1) and that she is not a philosophical novelist. This does not mean, however, that her polemical work does not throw light on her fiction. On the contrary: it creates a framework enabling the reader to situate and account for many of the features of her writing which may otherwise seem very puzzling indeed.

The Sea, the Sea, in particular, lends itself to dual interpretation. On the one hand, it can be seen as a consistent extension of her theoretical work: an allegory (albeit a pessimistic one) of the moral progress of the individual enacting a *quasi* parody of the process of emancipation of the soul from Plato's Allegory of the Cave in *The Republic*. And because moral progress is equated with the acquisition of knowledge in Murdoch's thought, the novel is also an extended metaphor of the individual theorising the external world and of the necessity of working with and discarding provisional constructs contaminated (consciously or otherwise) by the will of the interpreter. However, *The Sea, the Sea* can also be read as going against the grain of Murdoch's theoretical explorations as a text which deliberately blurs the distinction between the subject and object of knowledge, between the intellectual construct and the extra-linguistic situation. With several major intertexts (philosophical and literary) entering into a complicated web of relationships – Buddhism as emerging from the Tibetan *Book of the Dead* (contrasted to the empirical tradition in philosophy), Plato's *Republic* and Shakespeare's *Tempest* – *The Sea, the Sea* offers a complex discordant picture presenting multiple viewpoints which preclude any synthesis and render fact and meaning problematic, undermine the distinction between the text and the world and can be read as an elaboration on the theme of textuality.

The post-modern effect is achieved through the carefully maintained ambiguity in the novel. Many key episodes are pictured in a deliberately uncertain manner. Charles, for instance, sees a sea monster in broad daylight: the creature is described with a surrealist clarity of detail but its status in the novel is far from obvious. Is it a real monster, is it a hallucination, a belated after-effect of a bad LSD trip, or is it a demon conjured up by James who, with his long experience in Tibet, is suspected of "meddling in the spiritual world" (445)? Owing to the skilful handling of the narrative the status of magic itself remains uncertain: is it the product of a confused mind hypostatizing its own hallucinations or is it something "real" – part of the extra-

textual in the fictional world of the novel? Barbara Heusel, for instance, would seem to attribute to it a status of fictional reality when she points out that Murdoch “absorbed several cues from Wittgenstein, particularly through his interest in Buddhism, that the paranormal and mysticism can be legitimate subjects” (31). Alternatively, is magic simply a literary device, a metaphor aiming to represent aspects of morality in terms of images rather than straightforward concepts? Or, to take another example, is Charles saved from Minn’s cauldron by a freak wave, as James suggests, or by James himself, or by the sea monster whom Charles seems to remember having seen while falling into the churning sea? Similarly, James’s death is attributed to heart failure in the official death certificate signed by the enigmatic Dr Tsang, even though he, in a letter to Charles, makes the contrary statement that James has willed himself to death. Not having seen James’s body, Charles is inclined at times to doubt that James is dead and suspects he might be on a secret mission to Tibet. Thus accounts which belong to different discourses are contrasted and while they cancel each other out, leaving the reader (and Charles) with a sense of uncertainty, they remain powerfully present allowing a choice between natural, supernatural and metaphoric interpretations.

Charles’s hermeneutic dilemma, for he is basically a reader immersed in the confused and complicated text of his situation, is set against the background of several “grand narratives” (in Lyotard’s sense) and a host of smaller personal fables. The two “grand narratives” of emancipation in the novel are that of human perfectability, as represented by Plato’s Allegory of the Cave and the Buddhist teaching of karma as automatic universal justice.

That Plato’s Allegory of the Cave is an important intertext of *The Sea*, *the Sea* is suggested by an image which Charles notes in his diary and which pictures his mind as a dark cavern in which an allegorical quest takes place. The image also refers intertextually to the Buddhist tradition by evoking the idea of the continuity of the mental and the physical:

Since I started writing this “book” or whatever it is I have felt as if I were walking about in a dark cavern where there are various “lights,” made perhaps by shafts and apertures which reach the outside world. (What a gloomy image of my mind, but I do not mean it in a gloomy sense.) There is among those lights one great light towards which I have been half-consciously wending my way. It may be a great “mouth” opening to the daylight or it may be a hole through which fires emerge through the centre of the world. And I am still unsure which it is, and must I now approach in order to find out? (77)

Plato's allegory visualises the progress of the soul to knowledge as a gradual process of emancipation from illusion. In Murdoch's understanding, it has an obvious moral dimension apart from its cognitive and emancipatory aspects: "This passage in *The Republic* has aroused a great deal of discussion but it seems to me that its general application to morality is fairly clear" (*The Sovereignty of Good* 94). In her interpretation the sun is the Good and the fire "represents the self, the old unregenerate psyche" (100). Thus Charles's paradoxical quest consists of wandering in the dark cave of the mind in search of true vision, guided by misleading light sources.

The metaphor is further extended to present the mind as a breeder of demons and a creator of gods, and as an object for manipulation by power wielders and "magicians." The "magician" or the "enchanter," a figure of power to whom the other characters are related in different degrees of submission or freedom is a key Murdochian figure. What is of particular interest to her in *The Sea, the Sea* is the responsibility of the individual for being manipulated: "Our lusts and attachments compose our god" (445), is a saying James is fond of repeating. And also: "If even a dog's tooth is truly worshipped it glows with light" (430).

Charles sees himself as a magician, but he has none of the superior knowledge that would enable him to wield power. Many factors combine in his case – and he is the eternal Everyman – to make knowledge virtually unattainable. The reasons go far beyond the failure of language to name the particular, though that, too, is commented upon almost at the very start of the novel. Charles has difficulty naming the book he has started writing: is the right description for it a "diary," "memoirs" or a "philosophical journal" (2)? It is each and all of these convenient abstractions, but none of them exclusively. (Incidentally, this is a comment on genres and generic mixing fully in line with postmodernist thinking.)

It is also human nature that, according to Murdoch, makes narratives unreliable:

I assume that human beings are naturally selfish and that human life has no external point or *telos*. . . . I can see no evidence to suggest that human life is not something self-contained. There are probably many patterns and purposes within life, but there is no general and as it were externally guaranteed pattern or purpose of the kind for which philosophers and theologians used to search. We are what we seem to be, transient mortal creatures subject to necessity and chance. (*Sovereignty* 78)

Furthermore, there is the failure of memory, the gaps in which are filled by unconscious or semiconscious projections of desire and will. Charles conceives of people as extended beings inevitably existing only in the present. It is memory that assures whatever unity the discontinuous human person may be said to have and memory is notoriously fallible. When, echoing James, he asks the legitimate question whether one can determine exactly what one felt or thought or did, he interrogates what is generally taken for granted, questioning the basic certainties human beings live by.

What people are normally governed by, according to Murdoch, are Freudian unconscious and semi-conscious defence mechanisms, or, as Charles puts it in *The Sea, the Sea*, the “half-conscious cunning so characteristic of the self-protective human ego” (499). Accordingly, the developments in the novel show that the most powerful source of light for Charles is fire which distorts almost completely what it throws light on. His self-aggrandising vision of himself as a magician is only a fable, and in a moment of clarity, he realises that his quest has not taken him very far as he pessimistically estimates the possibility of moral progress as “the millionth part of a millimetre” (501). Many episodes in the novel work against the emancipatory narrative of the perfectibility of human beings.

The mechanisms of manipulation are an object of fascination for Murdoch. Rosina Vamburgh, the “witch” with the slight cast in her eye, long nails and little car which shoots off “like a red rocket” (316), finds people easy to manipulate because they are easy to scare: “It’s so easy to frighten people, to bewilder them and terrify them out of their wits and make their lives a misery. No wonder dictators flourish” (193). Contrary to Charles and James whose progress is away from power (equated with the path to goodness), Rosina delights in her power to manipulate people and at one (provisional) point of the novel is rumoured to have become obsessed with politics and power.

The other “grand narrative” deployed in the novel through Charles’s amateur interpretation of James’s comments is that of karma – automatic universal justice – according to which everyone is the author of their own fate as every act inevitably brings its commensurate consequences for the agent. Hells are created by actions (or thoughts) that deserve to be punished in hell and the tormenting demons are the memories of past wrong-doings. Everyone carries their private hells with them and only pure acts, free from desire and ignorance, bring no retribution.

If we follow the little “demonic” stories, however, we shall see the ways in which they put in question the necessity inherent in the notion of karma.

As in the case of the "light sources" and "deities," whether people become "demons" haunting another's mind or not is a rather arbitrary matter. "I might stride," Charles comments *a propos* his ex-chauffeur, "as a demon in the dreams of some but in the mind of Freddy Arkwright I evidently figured, quite undeservedly, as a beneficent deity" (457). The relations between the act and the fruit are shown to be much more indirect and unpredictable. Thus the world of karma in Murdoch's novel is contrasted with the picture of a contingent world. Each ambiguous episode is open to accounts from two diametrically opposed perspectives: a totalising perspective which sees everything as connected to everything else and a particularising perspective which pictures a realm of unrelated facts. The two world pictures are contrasted and vie with each other, allowing of no ultimate unified viewpoint.

James is conceived as a figure different from the self-styled magician Charles. Surrounded by the mystery of his Tibetan experience and his Buddhist practices, he remains an enigmatic figure credited with possessing superior knowledge and power. In a moment of sincerity he talks to Charles about power, explaining that "[w]hite magic is black magic" (445) and that "[g]oodness is giving up power and acting upon the world negatively" (445). This "definitive" pronouncement on the nature of power and goodness, the constructive "solution," so to speak, is undercut by the context: Charles reports James's words as he remembers hearing them in a half-drunk state.

The positive solution is thus shown in an unreal and uncertain context. This caution is probably prompted by an awareness of the corrupting and dangerous aspect of the exercise of power, combined with an awareness of the impossibility of advocating non-action or a complete rejection of power. Giving the solution as part of an uncertain context is a way of both offering it and expressing reservations about it. It is a way of both saying and not saying "the things one feels impelled to say" to use a phrase of Murdoch's from "On 'God' and 'Good.'" There she sets forth her ideas on morality in a more systematic form, adding cautiously that she is not certain about the validity of her theory. What she is certain of is the inadequacy of the other current views on morality: "I'm not sure how far my positive suggestions make sense. . . . What I feel sure of is the inadequacy, indeed the inaccuracy, of utilitarianism, linguistic behaviourism, and current existentialism in any of the forms with which I am familiar" (76).

Murdoch's particular textual strategy in *The Sea, the Sea* is, therefore, that of saying and "unsaying" the things she "feels impelled to say" but to which she does not want to give a ring of finality. This leaves her text open to significations which have an in-built provisional quality so that the

meaning is deferred and no stable significance emerges. This form of "mobile structuration" aims at asserting the lack of finality not only of moral judgements but also of life in general. She contrasts form in art to the shapelessness of life and the inconclusiveness of moral solutions when she has Charles say: "life, unlike art, has an irritating way of bumping and limping on, undoing conversations, casting doubt on solutions, and generally illustrating the impossibility of living happily or virtuously ever after" (477). The joke with which the book ends makes a move in the opposite direction. The casket Charles inherits from James which is of the kind Tibetan sorcerers are said to keep their demons in falls down on the floor and the lid comes off. "Upon the demon-ridden pilgrimage of human life what next I wonder" (502), exclaims Charles, asserting the inconclusiveness of artistic form itself. The ever-present protean Sea, another master image, epitomises the properties of the text of the novel and is itself an excellent symbol of textual inconclusiveness.

Realising that "reality" is elusive and that no final judgements are possible, Charles comments with resignation: "One can be too ingenious in trying to search out the truth. Sometimes one must respect its veiled face" (500). This position, although seeming to contradict Murdoch's emphasis on truth, is actually an example of the particular provisional truth of the individual in a particular situation. Charles also voices a stance in the Murdochian dialogue between statements of fact and the desire to glimpse at things as they ought to be: "is" is contrasted with "ought to" and both are left standing as frames of reference. Similarly to the grand narrative of knowledge, the narrative of universal justice is eroded and its authority questioned but both remain present as part of the "ought to," even though it is a presence "*sous rature*."

Barbara Heusel comments on Murdoch's method of theorising, saying that as a thinker she "has the special knack of seeing within an idea a whole spectrum of positions and of holding all the positions in her mind as she weighs their strengths and weaknesses" (1). This approach is characteristic of her artistic practice as well, since she pits ideologies and positions against each other, exploring their fictional manifestation but deliberately offering no synthesis. Interestingly enough, Murdoch herself seems to be subject to the tension arising from the conflict between a longing for unity and the distrust of it. "Perhaps it is a matter of temperament whether or not one is convinced that all is one. (My own temperament inclines to monism)" (*Sovereignty* 50), she says in "On 'God' and 'Good.'" Judging by both her theoretical thought and her fiction, she has made a decision not to yield to her

natural inclination. Hence the deliberate inconclusiveness of her novels and *The Sea, the Sea* in particular; hence the deliberate practising of textual strategies converging with deconstructionist techniques.

In *The Sea, the Sea* Murdoch tackles issues that are of considerable relevance to contemporary theory. Mirroring its subject – the ambiguous relation of the text to its “hors-texte” (or context), of the narrative to the circumstances that provoked it and to which it imparts whatever shape they may be said to have – *The Sea, the Sea* conforms to contemporary conceptions of textuality. Its deliberately “relative and mobile form of structuration” (Still and Worton 5) invites a multiplicity of interpretations which succeed, clash and compete with each other, whereas its dependence on other texts subtly changes and enriches it. It is paradoxical, ambiguous and elusive, commenting on its techniques, questioning familiar certainties and dramatising at once the necessity and the impossibility of searching out an all-embracing truth. It is a text which comments on the shifting sands of knowledge as power and on the magic of symbols both organising and acting on the extra-textual; it cautiously and consciously undermines itself, cancels out its proposed solutions, while exposing them for consideration. And while the strategy is deliberate, the fact that it converges with deconstructionist techniques seems more a matter of coincidence. It is due to the partial overlapping of some of Murdoch’s assumptions with those of poststructuralism, the distrust of unity and the endless deferral of meaning being the principal ones. More often than not, however, her practice is based on different sources of inspiration and is animated by different ideologies.

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