

IRIS MURDOCH

The Sea, The Sea

With an Introduction by MARY KINZIE

PENGUIN BOOKS

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Table of Contents

[PENGUIN CLASSICS](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

[Introduction](#)

[Dedication](#)

[History - ONE](#)

[History - TWO](#)

[History - THREE](#)

[History - FOUR](#)

[History - FIVE](#)

[History - SIX](#)

[Postscript:](#)

THE SEA, THE SEA

IRIS MURDOCH was born in Dublin in 1919, grew up in London, and received her university education at Oxford and later at Cambridge. In 1948 she became a Fellow of St. Anne's College, Oxford, where for many years she taught philosophy. In 1987 she was appointed Dame Commander, Order of the British Empire. She died on February 8, 1999. Murdoch wrote twenty-six novels, including *Under the Net*, her writing debut of 1954, and the Booker Prize-winning *The Sea, The Sea* (1978). She received a number of other literary awards, among them the James Tait Black Memorial Prize for *The Black Prince* (1973) and the Whitbread Prize for *The Sacred and Profane Love Machine* (1974). Her works of philosophy include *Sartre, Romantic Rationalist* (1980), *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (1993), and *Existentialists and Mystics* (1998). She also wrote several plays and a volume of poetry.

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Philosophy

SARTRE, ROMANTIC RATIONALIST
THE FIRE AND THE SUN
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METAPHYSICS AS A GUIDE TO MORALS
EXISTENTIALISTS AND MYSTICS

Fiction

UNDER THE NET
THE FLIGHT FROM THE ENCHANTER
THE SANDCASTLE
THE BELL
SEVERED HEAD
AN UNOFFICIAL ROSE
THE UNICORN
THE ITALIAN GIRL
THE RED AND THE GREEN
THE TIME OF THE ANGELS
THE NICE AND THE GOOD
BRUNO'S DREAM
A FAIRLY HONOURABLE DEFEAT
AN ACCIDENTAL MAN
THE BLACK PRINCE
THE SACRED AND PROFANE LOVE MACHINE
A WORD CHILD
HENRY AND CATO
THE SEA, THE SEA
NUNS AND SOLDIERS
THE PHILOSOPHER'S PUPIL
THE GOOD APPRENTICE
THE BOOK AND THE BROTHERHOOD
THE MESSAGE TO THE PLANET
THE GREEN KNIGHT
JACKSON'S DILEMMA

Plays

A SEVERED HEAD (with J. B. Priestley)
THE ITALIAN GIRL (with James Saunders)
THE THREE ARROWS and
THE SERVANTS AND THE SNOW
THE BLACK PRINCE

Poetry

A YEAR OF BIRDS

(Illustrated by Reynolds Stone)

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Published by the Penguin Group
Penguin Putnam Inc., 375 Hudson Street,
New York, New York 10014, U.S.A.
Penguin Books Ltd, 27 Wrights Lane, London W8 5TZ, England
Penguin Books Australia Ltd, Ringwood, Victoria, Australia
Penguin Books Canada Ltd, 10 Alcorn Avenue,
Toronto, Ontario, Canada M4V 3B2
Penguin Books (N.Z.) Ltd, 182-190 Wairau Road,
Auckland 10, New Zealand

Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices:
Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England

First published in Great Britain by Chatto & Windus 1978
First published in the United States of America by The Viking Press 1978
Published in Penguin Books 1980
This edition with an introduction by
Mary Kinzie published in Penguin Books 2001

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LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Murdoch, Iris.

The sea, the sea / Iris Murdoch ; introduction by Mary Kinzie.

p. cm.

eISBN : 978-1-101-49565-0

1. Middle aged men—Fiction. 2. London (England)—
Fiction. 3. Actors—Fiction. I. Title.

PR6063.U7 S25 2001

823'.914—dc21 00-061132

<http://us.penguin.com>

INTRODUCTION: THE DANCE OF CREATION

In his portrait from the mid-1980s entitled “Dame Iris Murdoch” Tom Phillips painted the novelist looking out to her right toward the light that falls on her strong, pale face, high Mongol-looking cheekbones, and unsmiling mouth. Murdoch’s hair, as always roughly chopped, looks unattended to; her collar is awry. (One wrinkle in its cloth—a subtle touch—resembles a tendon in the neck.) Her expression is at once mournful and calm. A profound alertness and unflinching quality is created by the almost sweet set of the mouth and the indirect gaze, so unlike the many photographs in which she relentlessly glares out at us—the 1981 portrait by Snowden, for example, a photo that relishes also the crumpled bulk of the body in a poorly buttoned coat. But the size and disarray of self are not the focus of the image painted by Phillips. The light draws the sitter’s gaze, falling on the broad planes of her face—and on a corner of the painting on the wall behind her. This is the horrifying and majestic late painting by Titian of *The Flaying of Marsyas*. The light in this painting also comes from the upper left. A further mysterious link is that Murdoch’s head obscures the head of Marsyas.

In Titian’s painting, the satyr Marsyas is hung upside down, his goatish legs lashed to a tree’s branches as if in a long, tense stride. Bound at the wrists, his arms rest bent on the ground, framing his head. Near this suffering, shadowy head (the eyes open and luminous, but the mouth rucked down to the chin, as in the mask of tragedy), an ugly lapdog is licking up blood fallen from the long torso. The god Apollo, whom we also see, down to the left, in Phillips’s painting, is wielding the knife that has just begun to flay the skin from the living Marsyas’s body. Titian’s radiant blond Apollo is kneeling and intent—Robert Hughes calls him “prim,” but perhaps it is more accurate to say that Apollo is completely absorbed, for it is his task to extract the true soul, however painfully, out of the husk of even a very beautiful body. As he does so (in fact), he must aim to make the materially beautiful *seem* like a husk. Rather than being primarily an allegory of the mortal artist punished for hubris by a divine one (Marsyas was tricked into admitting he believed his reed flute might rival Apollo’s lyre), Marsyas represents for Murdoch, as he clearly did for Titian, the pain of yearning endured and terror faced in the ordeal of creation. The artist is being remade with a new kind of beauty as we watch the painting, and a new definition of heroism is born out of this unbearable unselfing.

Murdoch’s Bradley Pearson, the narrator and protagonist of *The Black Prince* (1973), explains how this unselfing works in the artwork *he* is most drawn by:

Hamlet is words, and so is Hamlet.... He is the tormented empty sinful consciousness of man seared by the bright light of art, the god’s flayed victim dancing the dance of creation.

The late Elizabeth Dipple, a Renaissance scholar attracted to Murdoch because of the novelist’s Shakespearean variety and seriousness, has properly identified the source of the dance: “That Shakespeare is Marsyas,” writes Dipple, “flayed, suffering, defeated, dead to the self (drawn out of himself as his skin flaps to the wind) is Murdoch’s image of the genuine artist.” The identification between Marsyas and the artist is made in Tom Phillips’s painting by the placement of Murdoch’s face over the suffering satyr’s. But what are we to make of the preternaturally gentle expression on Murdoch’s face? Surely this is not the artist as masochist? “Is Shakespeare a masochist? Of course,” Bradley Pearson insists.

He is the king of masochists, his writing thrills with that secret. But because his god is a real

god and not an *eidolon* of private fantasy, and because love has here invented language as if for the first time, he can change pain into pure poetry.... He enacts the purification of speech, and yet this is also something comic.... Shakespeare cries out in agony, he writhes, he dances, he laughs, he shrieks, and he makes us laugh and shriek ourselves out of hell.... What redeems us is that speech is ultimately divine.

Shakespeare endures the tortures of imperfection yet renders them in intelligent plots, careful placement of character, and sublime and various language. He is both the delver into the coils of self and the perspective taken by art above self. (To be Apollo is beyond even the great artist's ability; he is an unearthly music.) All one can do is hope to endure the pain that comes with creation. Furthermore, Marsyas as the type of the artist is being both defeated and redeemed. His rescue takes him out of the husk of a lower form and into a higher. By Titian's time he had come to represent a religious metamorphosis that might be granted to the painter or poet: "Enter my breast," Dante had written, "and infuse me with your spirit as you did when you tore Marsyas from the covering of his limbs" (*Paradiso* I.19-20). The god's act creates the conditions for a passage into a form of being one does not know about yet.

When we ask why Murdoch so identified herself with this painting as to return to it in her work and to elect it as the background for her portrait, we might conjecture that Marsyas represents the major artistic paradox of the physical being on the threshold of a spiritual change. The figure of Marsyas is blazing with life, although clearly linked to a satyr's lower, animal nature. (He is a flawed entity, not entirely human as yet.) Moreover, he is suffering, for this is also part of the artist's task. He is submitting in terror, yet without struggle, to having the real rind of his symbolically flawed nature sliced away. The process is only just beginning in the painting—it will take a long time before he dies to the flesh. The self released from this body is implicitly linked to the beauty of the kneeling Apollo and to the youth Olympus in the background, a former follower of Marsyas who now plays the viola da braccio, Titian's version of Apollo's lyre. To these figures Marsyas is linked by contrast (his pan pipes hang from the branch by his hoof), but also by the promise that in his change, through unspeakable striving, he might aspire to mingle with mind, spirit, and wordless nonnarrative formal perfection.

Murdoch believed that the threefold task of the novelist was to see ourselves not as romantically separate beings but in the context of the world about us ("Civilization is terrible," one character writes to the protagonist in *The Sea, the Sea*, "but don't imagine that *you* can ever escape it"), then to witness ourselves through the ordeal of an introspection that must be painful to our human natures, bent as we are on self-satisfaction, and finally to intuit patterns emerging from random necessity, chaos, confusion, rubble—the "wandering causes" with which the demiurge must work in making the world. Murdoch extends the idea of external chaos to the internal realm: To be an artist means working against—as well as working with—the miserable nonsense that fate and accident make of our lives, no less than the nonsense our own foreshortened insight makes of the patterns in which we are embroiled. "To see misery and evil justly," Murdoch writes in *The Fire and the Sun* (1976), "is one of the heights of aesthetic endeavor":

How this becomes beautiful is a mystery.... Shakespeare makes not only splendour but beauty out of the malevolence of Iago and the intolerable death of Cordelia, as Homer does out of the miseries of a pointless war and the stylish ruthlessness of Achilles.

But the typical Murdoch protagonist—male, middle-aged or older, with some artistic inclinations and a long history of skewed self-regard—seldom begins with such high aesthetic capacities, and

certainly never sets out to follow Marsyas into torment. On the contrary, her men of middling sensibilities are originally on the wrong path entirely. Bradley Pearson in *The Black Prince* does not realize the connection to Marsyas until he has already begun to be drawn out of his old self. He is a limited being, selfish, fastidious, opinionated (Murdoch links him to Humbert Humbert), also desperate for change, eager to retire from the civil service to the seaside so that at last he can add to his thin trickle of artificial poetry. The protagonist-narrator of *The Sea, the Sea* (1978), Charles Arrowby, is on a path yet more false, since he assumes he can now rest from *having been* a great theatrical artist and interpreter of Shakespeare. But despite these limitations, he backs into the making of real art, presenting us at last, as the earlier hero had done, with the book we read.

In an important sense Charles Arrowby's is the story of someone who violently and bullheadedly persists in all the wrong directions until time and experience—both under great pressure—and love from an unexpected quarter partially redeem him. His memoir, which covers one late May and June, and then a bit of an early-autumnal August, describes a series of derailments from his original intentions. He planned to leave the London theater scene, live *solus*, perhaps indulging in a poignant interlude with a sweet, boyish woman who used to be a (not very good) actress, Lizzie Scherer, whom he has kept on a string; he had twitched that string by sending her a lying, seductive letter just prior to the book's opening. And he also plans to tell the story of his central love affair with an older actress, Clement Makin, now dead. Clement "made" him both professionally and personally, and despite their infidelities and separations, Charles was with her when she died. But before so much as a page can follow this orderly focus, Charles is visited by a horrifying vision. So distressed is the narrator that he can neither tell us immediately what it was nor continue with his original narrative plan. This derailment is a harbinger of the deluge of occasions when Charles's experience vaults out of his control, and his narrative veers off its course into unmapped accidents as a veritable throng of Londoners appear at his doorstep (a convergence that peaks at a Whitsun revel both comic and eerie). These accidents are then interwoven with an almost equally strange sequence of daily routines, obsessively exact in their rendering, as if thereby to regain the thread that his fate has started to unravel. The story of Charles and Clement is never fully told. Charles does not succeed in a renewed affair with Lizzie. He does leave the theater scene but does not escape the moral aftermath of his time there. (Indeed, his past leads to his own near-death and to the actual death of a young man.) And finally, he moves tentatively into a state of solitude he has only begun to test. *None* of his plans work out—including the great last failed adventure at the novel's core. "The country of old age" one critic called Charles's environment, where everything he has done and left undone crowds in, like the dead in the underworld around the living hero. His attempt to steal happiness results in horrors. The gifts reserved for his age are destruction and remorse, what Yeats called "violence" and "bitterness."

There is a contradiction built into the literary use of what we might see as the mode of Marsyas, the mode of lifelikeness or a realism of the physical as it leads to the edge of the spiritual: The catch is that although an artwork needs a shape, the ordinary world and our experiences within it are unformed and inartistic, an ill-sorted jumble of events and crisscrossing motives and roughly joined disguises—false and foolish integuments. Beauty of form is far removed from most lives. The texture of consciousness is sluggish when not venal (nobody really thinks in the shaped linguistic patternings of Hermann Broch's Vergil or Beckett's Watt or García Márquez's patriarch or Coetzee's magistrate), while the many occasions in literary art for tempting closure in the shaping of event are all too often

triggered by fantasy or will. Paradoxically, it is this willed closure or neatness of finish that the true artist needs to resist, fending off the urge to smooth out the rough surfaces of pain, necessity, and accident. Instead, as in Shakespeare, exemplary in bearing witness to the terrible even in those plays most given over to a maniac tidying up of bodies in marriage and death, the goal is to render clearly and without flinching the truth of all the infinite varieties of untruth. Like Shakespeare, Murdoch canvasses the truth of untruth—human vanity, jealousy, idleness. “People lie so,” says James Arrowby to his cousin Charles, “even we old men do. Though in a way, if there is art enough it doesn’t matter, since there is another kind of truth in the art” (p. 173).

Does this model of the true art-of-the-untruth pertain in *The Sea, the Sea*? How far can Charles Arrowby, the scot-free predator upon other men’s women, theatrical Tartar and *tyrannus tonans*, enter into an understanding of the backwardness—the lies—of his own character? On the surface, he admits he has nothing extraordinary to show for his sixty-some-odd years, that he leaves nothing of lasting value behind (no offspring, for example), that he has not been generous or ever, really, courageous—and certainly not “good.” Yet he cannot seem to get up and *move elsewhere* with this recognition; he remains sanguine about his prospects, sunk in that self while lavish in his criticisms of traits in others that resemble his own bad ones. The hard, the necessary, and the fated truths of existence do not seem to affect or even brush against him—or when they do, they do so in beckonings of apparent reprieve or unanticipated blessing (as in his two visions of the starry night, the second ending with a visit from the selkies).

The first of Murdoch’s ways of telling the truth-of-an-untruth is to perfect and thicken and verify the world in which the play is played. Murdoch (and Arrowby with her) is a genius of texture and description. The world Charles enters—even the sea—is fresh, strange to his touch, on every page of his narrative exactly and eloquently delineated. We believe in this person in large measure because he can see the natural and material world in its intricacy and persistent changing. The “untruth” lies only in its transience as a handhold. Another technique is to present through Charles images of truth, which he misinterprets—or fails to see. (Because this is a first-person novel, it therefore seems as if Charles can notice as a record-keeper what he cannot absorb imaginatively.) A brief instance, already quoted, is his cousin’s comment on how much people lie to themselves, which occurs at a point where, as memoirist, Charles feels especially robust in his truth-telling. His response to James is therefore one of pique. More comically, he misinterprets James’s quotation from “some philosopher”: “ ‘It is not contrary to reason to prefer the destruction of the world to the scratching of one’s finger’ ” (p. 72). Charles recalls this unidentified *mot* (it comes from Hume) in light of the reckless mood he shared with one of his mistresses in which “we definitely preferred the former”; the woman even “hurled herself downstairs in a fit of rage.” But in fact, Hume was speaking of desires large or small as *logically* separate from reason, although he also believed natural benevolence and common sense would militate against preferring the world’s destruction to a minor irritant. (In Charles’s defense, James may well have thrown out the quotation *knowing* that his cousin would misconstrue.) Psychologically telling too are the occasions when Charles cannot take the point home, making “untrue” the echo in his own repetition of Lizzie’s loving and melancholy admission about herself, “You feel you can compel the beloved, but it’s an illusion,” at which Charles of course does *not* feel compelled by her or under any obligation to assuage her sorrow. Yet Charles will stormily try to compel *his* beloved later on. Nor can Charles take the point when he overhears the husband tell the woman he loves, “You’ve made me bad,” when he had already said of her, “she made me faithless.” Any cross-reference within Charles’s text is diminished into a sort of *renvoi bandé*, blind to its doubleness.

How many patterns flicker over the tale unremarked by Charles—including the rafts of ghosts who press in (characters often mentioned but never met, primarily Clement and Wilfred Dunning); there are even “double” ghosts, unmet characters borrowed from Murdoch’s earlier novels, such as Will and Adelaide Boase from *Bruno’s Dream*, and from *A Severed Head* the “character” Honor Klein is mentioned in terms of an established dramatic role someone else does not get to play. There are also offstage figures who travel closer to England and the present, although only Charles’s erstwhile chauffeur Freddie Arkwright ever reaches the scene; the producer Fritzie Eitel (his name means “idle”) merely takes encroaching steps toward the principal players, like Gradus the assassin in *Pale Fire*, but never arrives before us. (Real memoir does not open in this way to the incomplete present.) In all I count twenty-two absent presences who, even if still alive, add to the ghostliness of the novel human complement. I know of no other novel that, while operating in the present, summons forth so many nonextant characters.

A more extended example of Charles writing past himself or speaking more than he knows covers longer segments of the book—as in the unfolding of the first seventy pages and their settings. Charles somewhat restively goes through what has become the daily routine of swimming in the dangerous sea, buying groceries in the village, stopping at the Black Lion pub for unsatisfactory gossip with the mocking locals, making his obsessively detailed meals (garnished with fanatical views of right and wrong cookery: “Dried apricots eaten with cake should be soaked and simmered first, eaten with cheese they should be aboriginally dry”), reading the letters he is beginning to receive in retirement, and, sometimes steered by these, putting together rambling oddments of the journal-memoir we are reading. It is a limbo period, ominous, expectant. There are loose ends, half-done projects, things that break, things that are simply let lie when they fall, like the table that tumbled into the crevasse when Charles tried to haul it out across the rocks to his martello tower. He thinks he might restore the tower provide it with a winding stair and a high workroom (like Yeats’s at Thoor Ballylee?)—but he never does. This time has also been a stage of “portents” during which a large, ugly vase and the silvery oval mirror are smashed, and he has seen a luminous orb, like a face, high in the window of an inner room of Shruff End, the unspeakably sinister house he has rashly purchased to retire to. One of its more creepy furnishings is the sticky, yellow-and-black wooden bead curtain on an upper landing that ominously clicks in undetectable drafts. All these tell even the casual reader something the speaker may not yet realize about himself—that he cannot settle in. Arrowby is restless, half-finished, a sojourner arrested in the aging shell of himself. The place no less than the phrase “Shruff—” (with its etymology of metallic refuse or the kind of scrub wood used for kindling) piling up at an “—End” (where all the ladders start) becomes a speaking emblem of his ragged, foul, and haunted nature. (The dreams he has are part of the haunting.)

A further potent rendering of skewed truth occurs as Charles is gathering his resources (he thinks, write about Clement); there is another significant page break. (These breaks typically announce a passage of time of fairly short duration—overnight, or at most a few days.) Then he recounts the following half-awake vision about a premonition he ascribes to the wrong “presence”:

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 or 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 from the center of the earth. And am I still unsure what it is, and must I now approach in order to find out? This imag

has come to me so suddenly, I am not sure what to make of it.

~~When I decided to write about myself of course the question arose: am I then to write about Hartley~~
(p. 75)

One notes the canny device (is the narrative voice of Nicholas Mosley apropos here?) of choosing a strategic point in the utterance for turning a statement of uncertainty into a question: “And am I still unsure what it is, and must I now approach in order to find out?” It is by this device that Charles doubles the suspense of the paragraph, as if to say, *I think I am uncertain what it is, but the closer I come to the thought, the more a suspicion with a shape I can identify detaches itself from these shadows*. By increasing the suspense, Charles also performs the sleight of hand by which the previous withholding of information seems less culpable. He thinks (wrongly) that he knows what his great topic is.

There has been a subtext to which we were not privy until now—another person beyond Clement Makin whom the narrator believes to have been the “alpha and omega” of his life. This other person has been peripherally present in numerous veiled asides: “someone I had loved and lost”; “I never (except for once, when I was young) considered marriage”; Lizzie was “the only woman (with one exception) who never lied to me”; while cousin James in the war was in India, at Dehra Dun, “I had my own problems, notably first love and its after-effects”; Charles reserves the right to use the phrase “in love” “to describe the one single occasion when I loved a woman absolutely. (Not dear Clement of course.)” Even scattered across seventy pages of text and often occurring when more rambunctious revelations are afoot, these hints reveal the narrator’s reliance upon a still-operative daydream of the past. Gradually Murdoch, through Charles, brings this sweet shadow into the light, where she is given a name: Arrowby’s childhood sweetheart was Mary Hartley Smith, in comparison to whom he writes that “all the rest, even Clement, have been shadows.”

Charles’s decision to think about Hartley, even to place her name on the page, comes about as the subliminal result of his seeing now and then in the village south of him an old woman, who resembles his first love. Exploring the indefinite effect of these “glimpses” leads him to meditate on the imagery of the cave. Hartley is still, for him, a true light-source, whereas his first mistress Clement was only a fire-edged shadow. The terms recall Plato’s in his condemnation of false art (the shadow thrown by the fire of mediocre art), as contrasted with true art (the light of the sun). Murdoch’s long meditation on Plato and on art uses the two terms of this image. However, we would not need the philosophical text to validate the symbolism of Charles Arrowby’s meditation of wandering and discovery in the dark limbo of suspended and omen-filled time he seems to have entered with his removal to the northwest coast of England. He is moving about in his own dark. Then lo! the old woman in the village turns out to *be* Hartley, and Charles hurls himself into a maelstrom of hilarious conniving to “get her back.” Not once during the two hundred pages of his pursuit and not very edifying capture of Hartley does he reflect on the pertinence of his many earlier cautions about the difficulty of seeing into a family from the outside: “It may be that my uncle and aunt thought that my upbringing was too strict. Outsiders who see rules and not the love that runs through them are often too ready to label other people as ‘prisoners’ ” (pp. 59-60). But Charles reflexively interprets Hartley’s marriage as *her* prison. Not only this; in stealing her away to Shruff End he literally imprisons her. His defense is that “in the teeth of all the evidence, we belonged to each other.” In the teeth of all the evidence—Charles’s proud banner. As Borges wrote about the great Roman historian, “Tacitus did not perceive the Crucifixion—although his book recorded it.”

To be sure, Charles is a frail vessel, given to fantasy, greed, and unscrupulous manipulation. And

while these adjectives suggest a personality that has *hardened*, we can also see him as unformed, arrested midway. This arresting of development has brought with it all the supersimplified polarities that attend on exaggerated images of ourselves. (There was a “rival” figure, and a “true” mother of more joyous good cheer than his own, a sad, sweet, ineffectual father, and a radiant, innocent sweetheart.) Binding all these extremes together is a series of extreme responses, inextricably woven into each other, envy, shame, and rancor: envy, of his wealthy uncle Abel’s family, including the joyous Aunt Estelle and cousin James; shame at the disloyalty this entailed toward his poor and ordinary parents; and rancor toward the larger world that made his small family seem pinched and sad. His career allowed him to “shout back at the world” because he discovered that theater was essentially “an *attack on mankind* carried on by magic” (p. 33, my emphasis).

A further device for obtaining our consent to such a deluded being is what Seymour Chatman calls “interest point of view,” a term for the gradual imbedding in a work of fiction of the vantage established by one character’s desires; we might also call it the libidinal interest. It is not surprising that a work of fiction would cohere around the protagonist’s desires; what is unusual is an author’s exhaustive, deliberate, and artful manipulation of this perspective until we empathically attribute desire and response in cases where the narrative cannot or does not. Murdoch, with her fascination for first-person narrators and for exclusionary characters in other novels—demons of possessiveness like Hilary Burde and Austin Gibson Grey and George McCaffrey who, like Charles Arrowby, are driven by jealousy—takes interest point of view to profound extremes; it is part of her ingeniously thorough placement of the character within both past time and the novel’s lived time. It works like a buried clue. Even when the novelistic actor may not be focused on a moment or even when his consciousness is closed to us (as often occurs here in letters addressed to the protagonist and in passages of reported dialogue), the reader assumes his angle of vision. Invisible to the narrative locally, the interest point of view derives from a work’s overarching perspective as the main character’s history guides us to make associations and to take sides, defending the character’s “interests” while he is away. We understand that Charles relishes the discomfort he causes one of his former troupe’s character actors, the homosexual Gilbert Opian (who is also aging), when he lands on certain ill-chosen words of Opian’s, who is trying to explain the new non-sexual menage he has formed with Lizzie Scherer:

“It’s about Lizzie and me. Please, Charles, take it seriously and don’t look like that or I shall cry! Something has really happened between us, I don’t mean like that sort of thing, but like real love like God, in this awful world one doesn’t often have such divine luck, sex is the trouble of course, if people could only search for each other as souls—”

“Souls?”

“Like just *see* people and love them quietly and tenderly and seek for happiness together, well I suppose that’s sex too but it’s sort of cosmic sex and not just to do with organs—”

“Organs?”

“Lizzie and I are really connected, we’re close . . . we’ve stopped wandering, we’ve come home. . . . Now everything’s different, we’ve talked all our lives over together, we’ve talked it all out, we’ve so of repossessed the past together and redeemed it—”

“How perfectly loathsome.”

“I mean we did it reverently, especially about you—”

“You discussed *me*?”

“Yes, how could we not, Charles, you’re not invisible—oh, please don’t be cross, you know how I’ve always felt about you, you know how we both feel about you—”

“You want me to join the family.”

“Exactly!” (p. 90)

Poor Gilbert is so nervous he blunders into a younger generation’s babble-style (all those *likes*), not to mention his clumsy provisos about sex. Charles’s derision of this honest nonsense is clear, and although we have no proof of his “thought,” pleasure is involved here, too, particularly when Gilbert furnishes the dangerous information that he and Lizzie had talked Charles over between themselves. Charles as the “king of shadows” who has figured so largely even for Gilbert (toward whom he feels precious little) likes nothing better than the chance to display his fury at being discussed. (Charles suffers an aversion—common to manipulators—to the sharing of confidences among the conquered ones. In a curious way, it’s as if he were jealous of the isolation he expects they will continue in.) He shows the most unsavory side of his jealousy by threatening poor Gilbert with the loss of Lizzie: “I’m beginning to feel it may even be my duty to bust up your rotten arrangement.” For a considerable time in the novel, Gilbert and Lizzie are then separated from each other, each attached miserably to Charles.

In novels of well-managed interest point of view such as this one, the protagonist’s patterns of desire, once established, remain in operation, like demonic presences. Like demons also, the memories and past actions of the middling individual proliferate with time. The technique thus mirrors on the stylistic level what burgeons uncontrollably in the realm Murdoch is most preoccupied with as thinker and artist, the moral realm. Like the magical pot of gruel overflowing in the fairy tale, automatic impulses, unmonitored by the soul, continue to fill up the world; one cannot eat them, but they choke one nevertheless. Not only that; Charles creates demons for others. (One person says Arrowby has been a “devil” in her mind for years; elsewhere, suspicions about Charles have been “like demons” poisoning a marriage.) The longer one lives, the clearer the path of causality streaming from one’s limitations and unchecked impulses as they run over, unleashing mischief. They generate form upon form—indeed, these acts and desires are all cold forms, all posturing grotesques that in time crowd the world with dragons the protagonist must continue to slay.

This is one meaning of the other Titian painting relevant to *The Sea, the Sea*, the eerie portrayal of Perseus about to rescue Andromeda from the water beast. When he can bring himself to, Charles Arrowby describes his terrible apparition rising up out of the sea, closely resembling the sea monster in the Titian painting, coiling itself high, opening wide its wet pink maw. It presents itself in profound detail—for example, Charles can see daylight at intervals under the arched body. Arrowby understands later on that the monster is a deep, unconscious projection of his voracious jealousy. At first, however, he worries that it is an aftereffect of the LSD he took in the 1960s. (Another sense in which demons proliferate in age is that the body may not recover from the habits of the past.) But of course, once he has his sights set on his suddenly appeared childhood sweetheart Mary Hartley Smith (now Mrs. Ben Fitch), Charles connects the sea monster he thinks he saw from the rocks near Shruff End to the one in Titian’s painting menacing Andromeda. It must have been a premonition of Hartley’s husband, Ben Fitch, from whom he must rescue her. (In his preoccupied state, Charles supposes the future must have cast this shadow.) Charles thinks of Perseus in the sky about to descend on the sea worm as *himself*, about to destroy the unworthy husband of the woman he loves, whose naked body (the largest thing in the painting) gleams white as it almost floats against the variegated rocks, taking up the entire left half of the painting. The truth is that he is both Perseus *and* the dragon that embodies his demon of jealousy.

Even to enact the role of Perseus, hero and dragon-slayer, entails a connection to a flaw. In the

myths, Perseus is the vanquisher of the Gorgon, but the act of killing feeds a continuing destruction of life—as is true of most violent acts. He is a model (of sorts) for the reckless and delusional Charles in the sense that he meets challenges such as the treachery of Andromeda's parents and their court by pulling from the enchanted wallet the head of Medusa and turning whole palaces into wastes of petrified folk. This is one symbolic origin for the quantities of misshapen yellow boulders that ring the uncanny north-coastal home Arrowby has chosen for his retirement. The boulders suggest a display of something formerly animate, again like the mythic land of the Hyperboreans in which Perseus finds the Gorgons asleep (as Robert Graves has put it) “among rain-worn shapes of men and wild beasts.”

During the novel many of those whom Charles Arrowby has turned to stone in his mind—loved, then discarded, or hated, then frozen out of his love—appear, to reassert their claims on life, either by courting his recognition as do Lizzie Scherer and his cousin James Arrowby, or by insisting, like his actors Rosina Vamburgh and her former husband Peregrine Arbelow, on vengeance. Charles believed he and his cousin could not breathe the same air (“we could not both be real”), so he has for some time energetically pretended that James was *not real*, crowding him out to an emotional periphery where he is barely visible any longer; James's inwardness cooperates in his exclusion. Even the woman Charles claims to love to distraction is crowded out by some muddy and distracted version of her. Charles does not attend to Hartley. He attends—but not to her, rather to his reactions, his elation at her rediscovery, his crazy hope for their chimerical future. Not only does he divert his attention from Hartley; he dismisses evidence he cannot help recording of her unease with his insistent absolutes. She is unmoved by his passionate reversion to their teenage friendship and is patently not attracted to him physically. Furthermore, Hartley is haunted by her own demons, her feckless attempts to enrich her married life by adopting a son, which wound up creating only jealous suspicions in her husband's mind about the child's paternity and cowering misery for the little harelipped child Titus. Charles at sixty-plus suggests an unlikely escape for her, one she cannot take seriously, believing as she does that she must remain in her marriage not because it is right but because it defines her. There is also a suggestion that she is given to emotional fits; Titus remembers them, Ben alludes to them, and we witness several extraordinary breakdowns. When Charles ingeniously “steals” Hartley and keeps her incarcerated in the cramped, *unheimlich* upstairs “inner room” of Shruff End, she and Charles grow shackled to each other in an unhealthy parody of her marital pain. During this long central stretch of days, Andromeda is chained up, to be sure, and menaced by another, but the signification of the painting subtly shifts to accommodate the monster Hartley and Charles create together, like a distorted child. The dragon idea twists somewhat, as the measure of their combined ill-fittedness to one another: it represents his desire and her remorse at leaving him, his jealous possessiveness and his stubborn and uncommunicative retreat. A more forthright woman would never have wound up in this fix, a less selfish romantic would never have persuaded himself that Hartley needed rescuing. This monstrous situation can only be put down by another. That role is taken by James (about whom more in a moment).

The rumpled yellow stones about Shruff End also represent the rubble out of which Charles as artist and stage magician is still trying to create form: He assembles tiny emblems of this impulse when he puts attractive sea pebbles into patterns outside the back door of the always-chilly house. But eventually the house becomes too crowded with demons assembled from the past for him to sort out, and these seem to condense into the sequence of terrible accidents that smash his design. However, a competing figure is also at work as mage and demiurge. Charles Arrowby likens himself to Shakespeare's Prospero, who announces at the close of *The Tempest* his intention to deny his powers,

to break up his magic, and withdraw from influencing the destinies of others. But the true Prospero, were he to be able to drown his book of necromancy, would hardly settle in at Milan to write a memoir. No, the retirement Charles imitates (minus religious allegiance) is closer to that of Andrew Marvell with his patron or Alexander Pope with his grot—gentle poets who lived intently self-memorializing lives of “remove,” fully relished and artfully described. Like them, Charles Arrowby is posing, trying on a role, toying with a notion about himself. He is hardly preparing to examine his conscience or give anything up. Furthermore, to the extent the islanders in *The Tempest* emanate from one self, Charles lies closer to the Caliban side of Prospero than to the Ariel side; he is a ruiner, not a releaser.

Charles may fancy himself as Prospero now aiming to turn (theatrical) magic back into spirit, but he has been the recipient rather than the generator of a deeper current of magic, which, intersecting with his own fate, goes haywire in the plot. The authentic Prospero figure, surprisingly, is cousin James. It is he who inserts himself into the unfolding of time and who takes charge of it. Standing as a fictive type midway between the occluded consciousness of fascinating mage-figures in other novels (John Robert Rozanov and David Crimond, for example, whose thoughts are yet more hidden than his) and the good characters at the apparent periphery of the main action in *Henry and Cato* and *A Fairly Honourable Defeat* (Brendan Craddock and Tallis Browne), James Arrowby both works inscrutably at a distance and attempts to help his cousin Charles in real and immediate ways to cope and also to improve. Like Tallis Browne, James is able to see each person as a reality; like Craddock, he has had a classical education and can reason brilliantly. James arrives with several others at thunders, oppressive Whitsun, when the Hartley episode is at an extreme impasse and the company begin to sizzle in many tongues. He obtains the approval of the others who are there to persuade Charles to “return” to Hartley. He arranges the mission, deflects the animosity of the husband, and seeks to instruct Charles in the chimerical quality of his “love” for this dowdy lower-middle-class woman. (She is nothing but “phantom Helen” invented by Charles’s needs.) Thus far, his rational, insightful, soldierly self, more liberating Perseus than a devious Prospero. But there are arrangements of James’s that we do not see—although we see their effects: He finds people. (This explains the otherwise unaccountable appearance of the lost son Titus.) Before this, he also “locates” Charles in the Wallace Collection in London (where Charles has been looking at *Perseus and Andromeda*) and comes to him there. James seems to materialize out of the profound auditory, visual, and kinesthetic premonitions not entirely owing to Charles’s hangover:

I still had a headache. A sort of brown fuzz and some very volatile darting black spots intermittently marred my field of vision. I felt unsteady and somewhat oddly related to the ground, as if I had suddenly become extremely tall.

Then it began to seem that so many of my women were there . . . [painted by various masters, but] Hartley . . . was not there. And then the clocks all began to strike four.

Some workmen were doing something or other downstairs, hammering a lot, flashing lights swarmed and receded . . .

[T]he light seemed a little hazy and chunky and sort of granulated and brownish.... The gallery was empty....

I began to walk down the long room and as I did so the hammering of the workmen down below seemed to be becoming more rhythmic, clearer, faster, more insistent, like the sound of those wooden clappers, which the Japanese call *hyoshigi*, and which are used to create suspense or announce doom in the Japanese theatre, and which I often used to use myself in my own plays. I began to walk away

down the gallery and as I went my hangover seemed to be turning into a sort of fainting fit. When I reached the door at the end I stopped and turned round. A man had come into the room by the other door at the far end and was standing looking at me through the curiously brownish murky air. I reached out and put one hand on the wall. Of course I recognized him at once. He was my cousin James. (pp. 167-68)

This description, covering three pages altogether, is gripping, intensely detailed, and credibly real. Yet there is also something portentous and deliberate about it (including as it does a subtle echo of the peasant working with metal in Anna Karenina's nightmare), and the effect on Charles is as if the molecules of his immediate sensory world were being . . . rearranged. This suspicion allows us to interpret the second occurrence of the main symptoms. Before the appearance of the Fitches' adoptive son Titus, Charles experiences a similar cluster of symptoms as he looks through the binoculars at the sea, awaiting what he is convinced will be the reemergence of his sea monster. The disturbances of sound and visual distortion experienced by Charles are plausibly in the world and not inside him. The *hyoshigi* sound returns. Then he sees through his glass the foot of the young man who has been brought to the sea by James and who is to play such a sad role in the climax of the book. Again, a third time, the accelerating thumping of the *hyoshigi* precedes a phenomenon we can link to James, his reappearance at Shruff End toward the very end of the book to check up on and say farewell to the cousin it is clear he loves. Since Charles is so fond of noise ("Noise has always been my friend," he brags when he confronts *le mari* Ben on the natural stone bridge over Minn's cauldron, p. 286), it may be that James chose this avenue of preparation for the three experiences of fear and premonition. What is clear is that James is somehow *behind* as well as mingling in these conjurings of presence.

Of the many other respects in which James and Charles echo one another, the jumble of their living arrangements is not the least important. (The clicking bead curtain from Shruff End is echoed by the tinkling chimes in James's place.) James, too, seems to have had trouble settling in. His flat, kept preternaturally dark, is filled with a forbidding and apparently nonsensical mix of fetishes and treasures. Charles says he finds this mess of feathers and sticks "childish" (another example of his failure to gauge the spiritual depth of his cousin). The apartment is quite dusty, perhaps unused, as if it were a place James has been trying to leave or has seldom lived in. The aura of departure surrounds him. Charles calls it a "dumping ground."

There are also a number of very exquisite have-worthy jade animals which I used to feel tempted to pocket, and plates and bowls of that heavenly Chinese grey sea-green colour wherein, beneath the deep glaze, when you have mopped the dust off with your handkerchief, you can descry lurking lotuses and chrysanthemums. (p. 170)

Things of beauty are being sifted over with the inattentions of time as James has moved deeper into white magic, which he admits is also demonic: "White magic is black magic." Because he summons Titus to the sea, Titus drowns. On the other hand, because James has magical skill, he might have saved Titus had he been able to "hold on." But here the demons of Charles's rotten past crowd in and darken the results of James's well-meaning magic. As the causality of his sins dawns on him, Charles has to take responsibility for Titus's death, too: Because he stole Rosina from Peregrine and because Peregrine pushed Charles into Minn's cauldron and James could not resist expending superhuman effort to rescue him, then had to rest for days, he was unable to prevent Titus from drowning or to summon the strength to administer the kiss of life at the right moment when Titus is found. This failure is so bitter that James almost disappears from under Charles's gaze; he paces about near the tower among the rocks as if measuring something out. This is part of James's agon, to suffer to the

dregs the resemblance between the loss of Titus and the loss of his Sherpa during a Himalayan blizzard. The ego of the adept also leads to sin.

There is a teaching in Buddhism that suggests a more than personal goal for the Bodhisattva, or Buddha-in-training. It is that by delaying his departure from life he may acquire merit and transfer it to another otherwise less worthy person. (The Teshoo Lama does this for Kim at the end of the Kipling novel.) James has unnaturally protracted his own limbo period out of love for Charles, who interprets James's beliefs somewhat too narrowly but with chastened rue as his cousin's desire to tidy up an attachment that would hamper him. Partial like so many of Charles's insights, it nevertheless recognizes in a scrambled way that he figured largely in James's life and that James was a profoundly troubled as well as gifted soul. Dr. Tsang, who informs Charles of James's death, is also from Dehra Dun, in the foothills of the Himalayan range separating northern India from Tibet, presumably also a Buddhist, and someone who recognizes in the willed manner of James's peaceful death the act of an "enlightened one" who died "achieving all." Undeniably part of Charles's change is that he knows how much he has lost. With hindsight, we can see that the "one great light" toward whom Charles has been wending in the dark cavern has been his cousin. "I remembered that James was dead. Who is one's first love? Who indeed."

During the last third of the novel both James and Charles Arrowby enter the realm of their separate ordeals. We see James's indirectly because Charles cannot see directly into it at the time. Illusions are methodically, if violently, stripped away. Each goes beyond himself. Each abjures magic, which Murdoch defines in her work on Plato as "the fantastic doctoring of the real for consumption by the private ego" (this could almost be a definition of novel-writing). *Magic, ego, illusion*—all of these terms, like the dust that falls on their possessions, come to rest with a difference on James, a more advanced being, than on Charles. But the torment of facing all the loss, for the one who remains, is no less Marsyas-like for that. And if Murdoch's fictional sophist were to cry, "That's poetic, just a metaphor!" perhaps her Socrates could again be summoned to remind the reader that "There are deep metaphors, perhaps there are bottomless metaphors."

—Mary Kinzie

NOTES

Tom Phillips's painting is in the National Portrait Gallery, London—easier to get to than Titian's *The Flaying of Marsyas*, which is in a former archepiscopal palace in Kromeriz, Czechoslovakia. (However, the Titian can now be accessed on the Web at artchive.com, and the Phillips portrait appears as a stamp-sized icon on the back of many of the Penguin paper editions of Murdoch's novels.) For help in thinking about the Titian painting I am indebted to Renaissance art historian Laura Giles of the Art Institute of Chicago, who provided me with the essential essay on this work by Sydney J. Freedberg from *FMR*, vol. 4 (1984). Robert Hughes's quip appears in his essay "The Legacy of *La Serenissima*" on the Royal Academy of Arts, London, show "The Genius of Venice 1500-1600" (*Time*, 6 February 1984); this show brought to London *The Flaying of Marsyas*, although Murdoch had earlier written of the painting in both *The Black Prince* (1973) and *A Fairly Honourable Defeat* (1970). Robert Graves's two-volume work on Greek myths (Penguin, 1955) provided material about

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