

ETHICAL READINGS OF IRIS MURDOCH'S NOVELS

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Abstract The aim of this paper is to discuss ethical challenges occurring in the interpretation of Iris Murdoch's novels. Due to her role as an academic who taught moral philosophy at Oxford and to the writings that she produced from such a position, her novels have also been consistently treated as vehicles for philosophical ideas, despite her constant warnings that her literary work and her philosophy are not interrelated. According to Murdoch, any philosophical mixture in her novels is purely accidental and should not be given any attention whatsoever. However, critics have not ceased to look into Murdoch's novels for her philosophy. In this article, I question the limits of interpretation as far as three of Iris Murdoch's novels are concerned.

Keywords Moral vision, ethical reading, philosophy, realism, metafiction

Introduction

Iris Murdoch was both a novelist and an ethical philosopher. For this reason, since the publication of her novels until nowadays, critics have been tempted to find parallels between her own philosophy and the content of her literary works, or even to make use of her literary works in order to prove a philosophical point. This would be inappropriate, however, and actually constitutes an assimilation of literature to the status of an extension of philosophy, which thing Murdoch herself openly opposed. Rather, Murdoch the novelist and Murdoch the ethical philosopher must be allowed to exist separately on their own before any conclusions about overlap or parallelism can be drawn. Once this is done, however, two important principles of Murdoch's ethics — namely, ego-diminution and honesty — can be seen to be relevant and present in her literary works, as well. In what follows, our purpose is to approach the question of an ethical reading of Iris Murdoch's novels first by granting them their

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autonomy and independence as literary works, and only afterwards by drawing comparisons with Murdoch's ethical philosophy as expressed in such works as *The Sovereignty of Good*.

The discussion of the present essay will proceed in the following order. In the first section, we will discuss the reception of Murdoch's works as pieces of twentieth-century literature. It will be shown that Murdoch's *oeuvre* resists being easily collapsed into simple categories or labels. On the contrary, she is in various ways between categories, while at the same time her work as an author anticipated by many years some very important developments in literary theory and philosophy. After, we will proceed to a careful consideration of the practices of honesty and ego-diminution in Murdoch's novels, especially as regards her use of the literary technique of *the baring of the device*. In the context of the crisis of representation found at the core of the postwar period in literature, Murdoch's ethical response in her literary work is the rendering of honesty through this specific technique. Not at all coincidentally, her concern with honesty is manifested in the same direction as the concern of Iris Murdoch, the moral philosopher, towards ego diminution.

Rather than making use of Murdoch's novels to illustrate philosophical points, as some have done, it is more appropriate to see the outworking of Murdoch's ethical principles in the author-narrator dynamic at work in her novels.

Murdoch the novelist

There are problems in the reception of Iris Murdoch's novels. For example, her fictional works might seem very easily included within the modernist paradigm, taking into consideration that her first novel appeared in the 1950s. Further reflection, however, motivates the suggestion that she rather be considered an *anti-modernist*, specifically when taking into account her view on the importance of continuing what could be labeled as a sort of nineteenth-century realism, the best representatives of which were, in Murdoch's opinion, George Eliot and Leo Tolstoy. Yet from this proposal follow certain problematic consequences. For instance, anyone who studies Murdoch's works extensively would seem bound to draw the conclusion that her version of realism is by no means a mimetic reproduction of the model of realism offered by the two previously mentioned authors. If it is possible to speak of realism in Murdoch's works at all, it is rather a sort of realism infused with pastiche and a certain playfulness peculiar to the British author herself, which places her closer to the realism at work in the comedies of Shakespeare. Furthermore, this playfulness is undoubtedly a very important characteristic of postmodernist writing in general, so that it would be justifiable to apply this label to her writings, too.

The main difference between the realism of Murdoch's novels and that of the nineteenth century is principally of a formal nature, such as the *baring of the device*, the Formalist principle defined by Victor Shklovsky as the core practice of defamiliarization. Bran Nicol explains the way in which this operates in Murdoch's writings: she does not hide the fact that the text is in fact a metafiction, even if atypical in comparison with the usual self-reflexive writings with which the reader may be accustomed in the 1960s. In this regard, Nicol states that the way is long that leads from Murdoch's *baring the device* to the celebrated *frame-breaking* encountered in Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. Bran Nicol, in his essay

entitled “Postmodern Murdoch,” demonstrates that there is a certain feeling of belatedness entertained by Murdoch that does not permit her to create a nineteenth century kind of realism. Instead, she focuses on a fiction that is “less realistic and more artistic” than realism, “more concerned with ideas and ideals, less concerned with things”.¹

Since post-war writing is characterized by “an incredulity towards realism”,² the question regarding the way in which realism can continue being produced has no simple answer. Murdoch, whose work “advertises its aesthetic status but without indulging in the kind of explicit intervention which is typical of the Metafictionist tradition of the 1960s”,³ makes a step forward from the technique of the nineteenth century novel. However, it is not quite a sufficiently big leap to make her a metafictionist. At this point we consider it necessary to discuss the formal nature of Murdoch’s use of the baring of the device, which we previously mentioned as the main difference between the traditional realist novel and her writing. How does the baring of the device operate in Murdoch? For purposes of illustration, we can take into consideration the structure of *The Philosopher’s Pupil*. The narrator, known as N., uses a third-person narrative, which is not unusual for Murdoch’s writings and which reminds one of the omniscient narrators of the *magna opera* of the nineteenth century. Yet, from time to time, this narrator also includes himself in the tale he tells, as if he were himself a character, notwithstanding the fact that he always remains somewhere on the outer edges of the story, surveilling — or rather *inventing* — the plot as he tells it. We emphasize the fact that N.’s role is not at all comparable to the role of the narrator in Fowles’ *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*, namely that of questioning the reality of both the textual world and the author’s world. His role is more modest in the sense that what he is pursuing is to expose the true status of the novel as belonging to a post-nineteenth century realism. If the novel had not drawn attention to its narrator and to its form at all, then it would easily have been perceived as a typical realistic novel like those written by George Eliot or Tolstoy. However, it would have been dishonest for an author who has a firm “sense of belatedness” in terms of realistic writing to opt for such a narrator. Therefore, the end of *The Philosopher’s Pupil* explicitly mentions a connection between the narrator, whose role in life is to “listen to stories,” and Murdoch, whom he names as “a certain lady” from whose assistance he benefited. Here, as Nicol notes, we can observe how Murdoch’s “more typical, non-experimental, brand of realism ends up advertising its aesthetic status, despite the efforts of the author to ensure that the reader focuses on the fictional world and its inhabitants rather than on the form that contains them”.⁴ In what follows, we will make constant reference to her essays of moral philosophy, while trying not to dovetail in unnecessary or misleading ways the two domains in which she evolved as a thinker. Since Murdoch constantly referred to literature and philosophy as sharing the

¹ Bran Nicol, “Postmodern Murdoch” in *Iris Murdoch and Her Work: Critical Essays*, edited by Mustafa Kirca and Şule Okuroğlu (Stuttgart: Ibid.-Verlag, 2010), 24.

² Ibid., 9.

³ Ibid., 22.

⁴ Ibid., 24.

same end, at which they arrive nevertheless by different paths, we will try to present our reading of Murdoch's novels in a manner that regards these two modes of thinking in parallel with each other. It is essential that an investigation of such an intricate subject grant literature its freedom as a separate entity and not treat it as an extension of philosophy. In this sense, we sympathize with Niklas Forsberg's position that one should not interpret her fiction as a vehicle for communicating the ideas of her philosophical works. He has written exhaustively on this misuse of Murdoch's novels in the work of Martha Nussbaum in his study titled *Language Lost and Found*. Going beyond the arguments brought forth by Forsberg, Derek Attridge's theory concerning the "singularity of literature" is also of special importance for our present endeavor. It is what distinguishes literature from the other arts, though it has nothing to do with the notion of aesthetic autonomy, a modernist principle that contradicts any systematic discussion of an ethics of reading. This theory is very closely connected to the so-called *formalist principle of literariness*, another major guideline for our attempt to propose an ethical reading of Murdoch's novels.

The resurrection of Murdoch studies came with the so-called *ethical turn* in literature. The paramount text of this moment in the history of literary studies is represented by Wayne C. Booth's *The Company We Keep*. The role Murdoch herself played in this "ethical turn" has been emphasized by Anne Rowe and Avril Horner:

Murdoch's marrying of fiction and philosophy consolidates her claim that the novel has become the most important form of moral discourse in a secular society, and this claim lies at the heart of the renewed ethical awareness within contemporary literary theory. It is arguable too that the "ethical turn" could not have occurred without Murdoch's prior engagement with the connections between morality and the novel.⁵

Now, the *ethical turn* took place at the same time as what came to be known as the "literary turn" in philosophy. Among the various works exemplifying this *literary turn*, Martha Nussbaum's reading of Murdoch's fiction is particularly notable. Nussbaum intended to resuscitate a nearly exhausted philosophical language through her readings of Murdoch's novels. But the price which was to be paid for this resuscitation of philosophy was the use of Murdoch's writings with the *a priori* ulterior motive of demonstrating certain philosophical premises. While it is generally possible to borrow ideas from philosophy in order to make better sense of literature, we insist that it is not an ethical way of approaching Murdoch's novels. Having clarified the point of view which we hold in this matter, we will continue with a discussion of what the ethical presupposes within Murdoch's fictional works, on the one hand, as well as what would constitute an appropriately ethical reception of her novels, on the other. We will now return to the discussion about the honesty displayed by Murdoch when in *The Philosopher's Pupil* she chooses a narrator who exposes the novel as not being a traditional realistic novel, but a self-reflexive text conscious of its belatedness in the sense in which it came to be written much later than the paramount texts of the nineteenth century. As we

⁵ Anne Rowe and Avril Horner, *Iris Murdoch and Morality* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 7.

previously mentioned, we may regard this technique as representative of an *honest* approach of literature. Thus, we may safely assume there is an ethical impulse at work in this technique. Such an impulse may be easily understood by looking at the essence of Iris Murdoch's moral philosophy, that is, at the diminution of the ego in the interest of opening a space for what she calls a "just and loving gaze directed upon an individual reality".⁶ We might also refer to this attitude as a "loving gaze upon the other," or "openness to alterity." The exercise of baring *oneself* as author is an exercise in sincerity, which George Watson, in his "Iris Murdoch and the Net of Theory," regards to be "the feature that detaches her from the general mode of thinking where sincerity is no longer a commonplace property".⁷ The diminution of the ego which stands at the core of Murdoch's philosophy and which we also find at work in the sincerity of her novel writing is representative of her sense of "the dislocation of the sovereignty and authority of the figure of the author and of authorial self-consciousness which has taken place in 20th century fiction".⁸ Quite remarkably, Murdoch mentions in an interview that "all the stuff that Barthes and Co. think they invented. I knew all about that in the 1930s."⁹

Furthermore, in *Under the Net*, her first novel (which she published in 1950, before the major texts of poststructuralism were written), had anticipated, discussed and dismissed Deconstruction altogether.¹⁰

Possessing this sense of the fragility of the author figure in twentieth century fiction for Murdoch means placing herself on the border between fiction and reality because the dislocation brought about by self-reference in fiction means to be "both part of that fiction and outside it," since "the moment of self-referring simultaneously belongs and does not belong to the fiction".¹¹

However, Murdoch is not alone in occupying such a borderline position; she shares it with important narrators that she chooses for her novels. For example, her Booker Prize winning novel, *The Sea, The Sea*, recounts the story of Charles Arrowby, a retired theatre director who buys a house on the edge of the Northern Sea, named Shruff End. There he plans to run away from the noisiness of the capital and to make sense of his own past by writing a memoir. What is interesting to note is the fact that while in *The Philosopher's Pupil* the main character is a philosopher, in *The Sea, the Sea* Charles Arrowby is a would-be novelist, so we are presented with two different perspectives *inside* the text corresponding to Murdoch's own perspectives manifested *outside* her texts.

In *Sealing Through the Past: Postmodern Histories and the Maritime Metaphor in Contemporary Anglophone Fiction*, Joana Rostek calls Arrowby's writing "a fictional

⁶ Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (New York: Routledge, 1970), 33.

⁷ George Watson, "Iris Murdoch and the Net of Theory" in *The Hudson Review*, (vol. 51, no. 3, 1998), 492.

⁸ Bran Nicol, *Ibid.*, 20.

⁹ Gillian Dooley, *From a Tiny Corner in the House of Fiction: Conversations with Iris Murdoch* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003), 117.

¹⁰ George Watson, *Ibid.*, 499.

¹¹ Nicol, *Ibid.*, 20.

(meta)autobiography”.¹² The critic also draws attention to three elements which are interconnected and illuminating for the narrator’s journey to self-understanding: (i) the sea, (ii) the narrator’s personal past as well as his manner of dealing with it, and (iii) the narrator’s quest for the appropriate form through which to meditate his past. The link between the three is their resistance to Charles’ control. According to Rostek, only by coming to the realization that he cannot impose his will upon these three elements does Charles start to give up his will. Analyzing every element in part will provide further help in the understanding of the manner in which Murdoch intends to create a moral atmosphere in her novels. As she highlights in an interview, “I think that it is very difficult to say of any complicated novel what the moral is. I mean, there isn’t any one moral, but there is a moral atmosphere and a moral construction.”¹³ Murdoch’s conviction that “novels exhibit the ubiquity of moral quality inherent in consciousness”¹⁴ is expressed in her collection of essays, *The Sovereignty of Good*. But before further elaborating on this, we must explain what the concept of the *moral* means for Murdoch. A further reason for an explanation is that Murdoch’s use of the word does not correspond to the general sense of the term, since the latter is borrowed from the existentialist take on the notion of the moral. The difference between Murdoch and Sartre on moral matters consists in the fact that whereas for Sartre morality is identified with the will, the vision of Murdoch is entirely different; for her, morality consists in a dissection of the inner life which encompasses both the individual and his social background, in this way excluding the possibility of solipsism which is otherwise inevitable in Sartre’s philosophy. Thus, we consider the fact that Charles’ memoir metamorphoses into an intricate daily analysis of his inner life to be a paradigmatic example of what Murdoch regards as the essentially moral. Anne Marie Musschoot, in an article entitled “From Perspective over Focalization to Vision: A Look at New Developments in the Theory of Narrative”, shows how narratology has moved from the traditional take on point of view (which Lintvelt or Genette called “focalization”), towards what is now called “‘vision’ (an old term, incidentally; cf. *The vision du monde*), but in the sense of attitude or position”.¹⁵ Murdoch can therefore also be regarded as a visionary given her anticipation of the necessity of operating such a change in narratological terms.

¹² Joana Rostek, *Seating Through the Past: Postmodern Histories and the Maritime Metaphor in Contemporary Anglophone Fiction* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2011), 68.

¹³ Sagare, S.B. and Iris Murdoch. “An Interview with Iris Murdoch” in *Modern Fiction Studies* (vol. 47, no. 3, 2001), 703.

¹⁴ Frances White, “‘Art is for life’s sake ... or else it is worthless’: The Innovative Influence of Iris Murdoch” in *Iris Murdoch and Her Work: Critical Essays*, edited by Mustafa Kirca and Şule Okuroğlu (Stuttgart: Ibidem-Verlag, 2010), 33.

¹⁵ Anne Marie Musschoot, “From Perspective over Focalization to Vision: A Look at New Developments in the Theory of Narrative” in *Under Construction: Links for the Site of Literary Theory*, (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2000), 15.

The first element of the three that Arrowby can not control is represented by the sea. Upon coming to Shruff End, the narrator envisages himself as a sort of Prospero — his appreciation for Shakespeare, echoing Murdoch's own, is displayed throughout the novel, so much so that one could easily argue that the novel itself is a rewriting of *The Tempest* — and Shruff End is his own cave, but then he gradually understands that he cannot control the sea, quite to the contrary. What we may call Arrowby's moral rebirth consists in his being pushed by Peregrine (a former actor whom he directed in multiple plays) into Minn's Cauldron (as a punishment for Charles ruining Peregrine's marriage with Rosina), whence he is miraculously rescued by his cousin James. Charles' realization that falling into the cauldron serves as a catalyst for significant change can be seen in the following confession:

That swim had certainly done something to me... Then I began to think about myself as a drowned man and I remembered how I had slept, on the night of my resurrection from Minn's cauldron, upon the floor in this room, in front of the glowing fire, wondering gratefully why I was still alive. And I seemed to see myself lying there, moving my limbs gently in the warmth to make certain that I was whole.¹⁶

Afterwards, Charles remembers that he was not alone in the cauldron: "Then I remembered that, just before my head cracked against the rock and the blackness came upon me, I had seen something else. I had seen a strange small head near to mine, terrible teeth, a black arched neck. The monstrous sea serpent had actually been in the cauldron with me."¹⁷ Critics have generally agreed that the sea monster which appears right from the beginning in Charles' memoir, haunting his nights spent at Shruff End, is in fact the representation of the other element that he cannot control, namely his past. Only after the "resurrection" that he experiences after the fall into the sea does he become more open to alterity and he thus gradually understands that Hartley, his former love interest from adolescence whom he found in the village where he lives, and whom he pursues desperately to win her back, will never come back to him. He gives Lizzie and Gilbert the blessing to pursue their relationship which he had struggled, out of pure egotism, to destroy throughout his stay on the coast of the sea. He even gladdens at the news that Peregrine and Rosina are resuming their marriage. Like in a Shakespearean play, "all's well that ends well."

Openness to alterity does not remain unnoticeable at a formal level, either. In a logic that reflects Murdoch's own understanding of the dislocation suffered by the author figure, Charles Arrowby himself finds that he does not possess the account of his own life story and "he even seems dimly aware of his failure: as his hybrid term "novelistic memoir" (and, earlier, "novel-diary") correctly indicates, the story of his life, composed in the unstable border area between sea and land is doomed to hover somewhere between the real and the fictional, between the confessed and the concealed."¹⁸ Moreover, Rostek remarks, even the self-reflexivity characterizing his work "no longer strikes as merely coquettish, but appears to stem

¹⁶ Iris Murdoch, *The Sea, The Sea* (London: Penguin Books, 2001), 461.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 461-462.

¹⁸ Joana Rostek, 74.

from the acceptance of insurmountable limitations".¹⁹ We would say that this too echoes Murdoch's own self-reflexivity, stemming from a similar acceptance of the limitations imposed by the age of incredulity towards realism in which she happens to live.

Can one change oneself? I doubt it. Or if there is any change it must be measured as the millionth part of a millimetre. When the poor ghosts have gone, what remains are ordinary obligations and ordinary interests. One can live quietly and try to do tiny good things and harm no one. I cannot think of any tiny good thing to do at the moment, but perhaps I shall think of one tomorrow.²⁰

This is Charles Arrowby's soliloquy from the end of *The Sea, The Sea*. Taking a closer look, one can fairly observe that it manages to capture all the major Murdochian moral themes: giving up one's own will in order to create space for the other is, in fact, the author's understanding of *love*. Charles also mentions doing *good*, which is the ultimate Murdochian desideratum, owing to the fact that in her mode of thought, marked by an undoubtedly Platonic lineage, the *good* is the sovereign concept. As Bran Nicol formulates it, *The Sea, The Sea* is "a retrospective novel and a novel about retrospection"²¹ which at the same time manages to remake autobiography at a time — the end of the 1970s — when the study of autobiography was, like many other academic disciplines, being remade.²²

The last novel to be discussed in this paper is a less accomplished one, but nonetheless significant for our analysis of Murdoch's narrators and the ethical dimension that develops along with their telling of the story: *The Sacred and Profane Love Machine*. Montague Small is the neighbour of the main characters from the story, a successful writer of detective novels who is nevertheless unsatisfied with his career and keeps thinking about assuming a teaching position. He is very involved in the conjugal drama of his neighbors, Blaise and Harriet Gavender, and even invents a character named Magnus Bowles, who is to be Blaise's sociopathic patient that sleeps during the day and is awake at night. With the aid of this invented character, Blaise, a psychoanalyst, visits his mistress and their son whom he has kept hidden for nine years. What at first sight seems to be a regular secondary character turns in time into the master puppeteer influencing the lives of all the other characters. With the same easiness that he manifested in the creation of Magnus Bowles, he kills him in a matter of seconds when Harriet wants to meet him. Thus, if Blaise blaming Monty when things went wrong can initially be easily dismissed by the reader as mere trifle, towards the end of the novel, Blaise holds a meaningful soliloquy which merits quotation in its entirety:

Of course it's not true that I don't like him now, thought Blaise. But what sort of evil genius he has been to me. I don't want to see him, not yet anyway, because he makes me feel inferior. He always did, but I suppose I enjoyed it once. Now I don't and that's part of the

¹⁹ Ibid., 85.

²⁰ Iris Murdoch, *The Sea, The Sea*, (London: Penguin Books, 2001), 495

²¹ Bran Nicol, "Anticipating Retrospection: The First-Person Retrospective Novel and Iris Murdoch's 'The Sea, the Sea' in *The Journal of Narrative Technique* (vol. 26, no. 2, 1996), 197.

²² Joana Rostek, Ibid., 70.

“failure” too, that Monty doesn’t “work” for me any more. Really in a way the whole thing was his doing, something he just did to amuse himself. He made my thing with Emily possible by inventing Magnus Bowles, and he made Harriet run away by killing him. Poor Magnus committing suicide was the last straw for Harriet. Monty really is the king of cynics. Or more like a dreaming god, making awful things happen in a sort of trance. ... It was not my fault Harriet ran off to Hanover, it was Monty’s fault. If he’d looked after her properly she wouldn’t have gone. I didn’t kill her, Monty did. He was the immediate cause. Let him have the guilt then and keep it for himself. He has eaten it up as he eats up everything. Let him burst with it like Magnus Bowles. Of course one can’t be friends with a power maniac like that. The sin of pride isolates people more than any other sin. Monty likes to think he’s Lucifer, but really in the end he isn’t even Magnus. He’s thin and small, as thin and mean and shrivelled up as Milo Fane. Yes, that’s who Monty is after all, just Milo in the end with intellect instead of nerve.²³

It is worth mentioning that the detective novels written by Montague represent, according to Nicol, Murdoch’s category of “bad art.” “In her 1978 interview with Magee”, she says, “[o]ne can see how the thriller or the sentimental picture may be simply a stimulus to the private fantasies of the reader or viewer”.²⁴ In “The Sublime and the Good,” she writes: “Fantasy, the enemy of art, is the enemy of true imagination: Love, an exercise of the imagination.”²⁵ Leo Schneiderman explains that “the opposite of ‘imagination,’ in Murdoch’s view, is ‘fantasy,’ or the exploitation by the novelist of his or her emotional problems, traumatic experiences, and other ‘solipsistic’ influences.”²⁶ Therefore, we may conclude that, in Murdoch’s thinking, fantasy is the enemy of honesty, in the sense in which it encourages egotism manifested as an unrealistic view of alterity. A single look at the relationship between Montague Small and Blaise Gavender is instructive in this sense: by perpetuating Blaise’s lies with the invention of a character as Magnus Bowles, Montague’s fantasy contributes to Blaise’s ferocious egotism. The moral salvation of the novel occurs only when another secondary character, Edgar, exposes the situation of the Gavender family in its naked realism. It is not long from this moment when Montague disappears. Fantasy no longer has a place around the Gavender family and in the novel altogether once egotism has been exposed and a choice has been made. Murdoch does not under any circumstances deny the importance of a moral choice and *The Sacred and Profane Love Machine* is a significant proof in this sense. The main idea, however, is that morality should never be reduced, as it happens in an existentialist-behaviorist paradigm, to a mere choice of the will. One should always pay *attention* (a term she borrows from Simone Weil) to the other and to one’s inner world before making any choice whatsoever.

²³Iris Murdoch, *The Sacred and Profane Love Machine* (London: Penguin Books, 1984), 343-344.

²⁴Bran Nicol, *Iris Murdoch: The Retrospective Fiction* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 176.

²⁵Iris Murdoch, “The Sublime and the Good” in *Chicago Review* (vol. 13, no. 3, 1959), 52.

²⁶Leo Schneiderman, “Iris Murdoch. Fantasy vs. Imagination” in *Imagination, Cognition and Personality* (vol. 16, no. 4, 1997), 379.

So much for the ethical as illustrated in the novels as such. Moving onto the ethical in terms of reading her novels, it should furthermore be noted that unethical readings do not necessarily have to do with the discrepancy between Murdoch the philosopher and Murdoch the novelist. They may also arise in a simple literary interpretation of *The Sea, the Sea* or *The Philosopher's Pupil*. The references to the masterpieces of the past in Murdoch's works should be understood simply as aspects of texts in possession of a manifestly ludic element, a characteristic of texts at the borderlines of postmodernity. In other words, despite the evident intertextuality between *The Sea, the Sea* and Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, or *The Philosopher's Pupil* and Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, the reader should not try to draw connections between the characters of the two texts in question. Such an interpretation is abhorrent to Murdoch, as Bran Nicol has noted in *Iris Murdoch: The Retrospective Fiction*.²⁷

We have proposed the principles of honesty and ego-diminution implicit in the utilization of the baring of the device as an example of a connection between Murdoch's ethical philosophy and her writing as a novelist. At the same time, while we certainly cannot completely dissociate Murdoch the philosopher from Murdoch the novelist, nevertheless we should be wary of attempting to find excessively particular and minute clear connections between certain philosophical concepts and elements pertaining to the imaginary of the novels. Indeed, in different instances, Murdoch insisted that many philosophical discussions in her novels are merely play. In the interview with Bryan Magee, for example, she stated: "If I knew about sailing ships I would put in sailing ships. And in a way, as a novelist, I would rather know about sailing ships than about philosophy."²⁸

Conclusion

Let us therefore conclude by summarizing the argument of this paper. The reception of Murdoch's novels is highly problematic insofar as they are susceptible to multiple categorizations. Broadly speaking, hers is a unique brand of quasi-postmodernist realism. This problem of reception is especially pronounced from the point of view of the relationship between her novels and her philosophy. On the one hand, her use of the baring of the device can rightly be interpreted as an exercise in honesty, in an opening or baring of oneself in pursuit of a just and loving gaze towards the individual reality, a critically important principle in Murdoch's ethical philosophy. Going further, the self-reflexivity of some of Murdoch's narrators, such as Charles Arrowby's own exercise in ego-diminution and (to some extent) honesty, provides a more convincing and appropriate avenue for connecting Murdoch's philosophy with her novels. But of course, a reading of her texts which attempts to use them in order to prove certain philosophical principles chosen *a priori*, such as Martha Nussbaum does, is unethical, as is also a literary interpretation which reads too much into Murdoch's merely playful use of intertextuality.

²⁷ Bran Nicol, *Iris Murdoch: The Retrospective Fiction* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 8.

²⁸ Bryan Magee, *Talking Philosophy: Dialogues with Fifteen Leading Philosophers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 242.