CHAPTER III
Iris Murdoch and the Oriental Interest

Iris Murdoch’s interest in human beings, the role of an individual in society, his interaction with other individuals, man’s responsibility towards God and to other men, does not confine itself to the land of Ireland where she was born, or England, the environment in which she has been brought up, or to the countries of Europe she is familiar with and has worked in, namely France, Belgium, Austria and others. We find that she has shown a deep and abiding interest in the countries of the East and its inhabitants too.

In a world where chaos, muddle and evil reign supreme, in a godless world where human beings according to Murdoch, make muddled and frustrated efforts to understand each other, many of her characters in various novels become Buddhist questers, trying to find peace and stability in the Buddhist religion. Murdoch attaches great value to an individual’s lonely meditations and she ventures into areas we try to avoid. Therefore, we also see the sad derailment of Buddhist questers due to some moral weakness or human failing, for instance of a homosexual attachment to a young Buddhist monk or a Tibetan sherpa boy.

Many of her novels have some characters or some events to show her interest in the Oriental Culture and Religion. Therefore we find an enormous cultural richness while reading her fictional works.

Elizabeth Dipple has said, “All Murdoch’s characters are world-immanent beings who, in spite of an inclination towards
ideals and knowledge, are forced to concentrate on ordinary action in a realistic world where muddle reigns. 1

Iris Murdoch's characters — "except for a few real demons — are given some hold on good, some access to truth." 2

Again we find, "Murdoch's characters are not allowed transcendence and their seeking of an ideal end is always brutally smashed, but they do know about virtue or holiness ..." 3

In The Nice and The Good, John Ducane who looks deceptively good does not on examination qualify as a character of the good — he is just nice. A minor, off-centre character Uncle Theo, functions as a vital signpost to rather than a successful illustration of the good. His impact on the design of the novel is minimal. He is absorbed in his Jewish refugee friend Willie Kost, his guilt over his past and his longing for redemption.

Theo's closest relationships are not with his placid, self-confident brother or the sophisticated crew of the main action, but with Willie Kost, Mingo the dog, the nature-loving twins Henrietta and Edward and Casie the servant whom he sends into rages occasionally, which cheer her considerably.

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1. WS. 8.
2. WS. 9.
3. WS. 8.
Theo is forever in the background and in his dirty room. Only Mary Clothier tries, but fails to penetrate to the secrets of his life, his problems, his past. He seems to her like a man who has indeed been through an inferno and been broken by it. Not until the last few pages do we learn that his derailment had been caused by his attempts at a solution — to take vows in a Buddhist monastery.

It had seemed to be a way of changing of pursuing the single truth, becoming good. After Theo's failure there, the rest of his life had been a discipline in the hard path, but always with hopes of redemptive healing touch of the old Buddhist master, as a possibility. Only towards the end, we learn how far Theo has travelled from his derailment and how much he can manage in a newer vein.

After the drowning incident of the Seagull Theo thought on good — "The point is that nothing matters except loving what is good. Not to look at evil but to look at good." He realizes that the breaking of the personality comes not from the curse of defeat, guilt or evil but from the clear light of the good.

As Theo was drawn further into the rigours of Buddhism, Theo had begun to glimpse the distance which separates the nice

\[4\] NG. 344.
from the good, and the vision of this gap had terrified his soul.

Although Theo has come a long way in the quest for the good and the need to change the greedy self, he must drop the illusion of the romantic dream of forgiveness in a green valley administered by a superior soul and go it alone, with out any illusion whatsoever. A choice to go back to the monastery to wait for death, must be made knowing the fullness of his limitations.

"Why should he stay here and rot? ... He could keep company with the enlightenment of others, and might regain at least the untempered innocence of a well-guarded ch.id. And although he might never draw a single step closer to that great blankness, he would know of its reality and feel more purely in the simplicity of his life the distant plucking of its magnetic power."

We see that, "Theo had never revealed to his family that while he was in India he had taken vows in a Buddhist monastery. He had thought to end his days there."

In Murdoch's The Nice and the Good the old man at the Buddhist monastery had told Theo. "'We like to take people young ... before they are soiled by the world' and he had looked doubtfully at Theo." But Theo, ardent then like someone in love,
had wanted "that discipline, that silence, and the thing which lay beyond it." He had then taken vows at the Buddhist monastery. But some years later he had left.

Murdoch thinks of good and then she thinks of Buddhism. Theo said once, "Never regret a good action. It has more power than you know." Mary Clothier was puzzled by Uncle Theo and by the complete lack of curiosity about him enunced by the other members of the household. "When informed that Theo had left India under a cloud. Mary had asked what cloud. No one seemed to know."

"In this novel only Theo knows what good is, knows the appalling demands it makes."

Murdoch's production of a good character ... a person who goes as far as possible towards an unseeable goal ... is not an easy job. These characters with high moral constitutions are generally minor characters than gloriously heroic.

A character, for instance a saint, with the highest human state — is not really possible. Such a state is not really

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8. NG. 347.
9. NG. 156.
10. NG. 86.
11. NG. 14.
attainable, because, such a person would be invisible like God himself. In Work For The Spirit Elizabeth Dipple says, "Just beneath that absolute level of sainthood for which so many of Murdoch's characters yearn in horror and despair; we find the maximum human achievement, a good person whose self-discipline pushes him to act for nothing ... who does not wish for ego-satisfaction."  

Theo had gone for Buddhism. Lord Buddha had been a king, a human being, who had striven towards that unattainable good and come as close to it as only a few human beings have ever done. Though called a saint he had not been invisible. G. Galloway in The Philosophy of Religion says, "Buddha's own gospel was a gospel of deliverence from the illusions and snares of sense through the enlightenmen of which he was the prophet ... Gautam Buddha taught that the secret of man's sorrow and suffering, and of his redemptions likewise, lay within himself. Buddhism is strong because it lays stress upon and appeals to the inner spirit of man. The image of Buddha which rises before us is that of a soul gentle, tender and very pitiful, offering salvation to a world travelling in pain. The remedy he believed lay in the extirpation of man's insatiable desire, the suppression of the will to live, the casting away of the fetters of sense."  

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12. WS. 15.  
In some of Murdoch's novels we find certain minor characters as questers after Buddhism, seeking truth and all that is good. In the novel they are minor, yet to us they are very important as they give us an insight into Murdoch's thoughts, which are directed towards the East, towards Buddhism. Richard Todd in his book *Iris Murdoch*, says, 'Murdoch's very recent novels demand that the reader should remain relaxed in the face of their complexities.' \(^{14}\) We definitely see in Murdoch's recent novels an emerging sympathy for the non-aquisitiveness of eastern religious thought in contrast to its western counterpart. She is particularly interested in the way in which Buddhism appears to place so little of Christianity's emphasis on sin and suffering.

In *The Fire and the Sun* Murdoch writes of a strong agile realism and of the desirability of the work of art being free from the constraints of sentimentality and selfhood\(^{15}\). A work of art may of course portray or demonstrate these features while at the same time revealing their inadequacy.

In her most recent novels, Iris Murdoch continues her exploration of the combination of artist and saint in pairs of diametrically opposite characters. However, recently she seems

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\(^{14}\) RT. 87-88

\(^{15}\) Iris Murdoch, *The Fire and the Sun*, 84.
to be paying attention to the backgrounds against which these characters move.

In *The Sea, The Sea*, James Arrowby is Charles Arrowby's cousin. Though Charles is the major character in this novel, James in a minor role is the quester after Buddhism and what is good. "James Arrowby, the Buddhist quester in *The Sea, The Sea* only gradually emerges from the egotistic tangle of his cousin Charles's first-person narrative." ¹⁶

Among Charles's unwanted visitors is his cousin James, an ex-soldier, to whom Charles has always felt inferior. James, too, it later transpires, has been attempting a renunciation by coming to detach himself from Charles — so his attempts to detach himself become considerably more fraught than they appear on the surface. Also, he tries to detach himself from life.

James is forced back into involvement with the world he wishes to leave, when it emerges that at the end of the book he saves Charles from a lethally dangerous whirlpool into which Charles had been pushed — and James saves him by an exercise of paranormal powers. James' powers and Charles' theatrical techniques are referred to as "tricks."

James narrates to Charles the incident involving a sherpa boy, one who died on the mountains.

¹⁶ "WS. 274."
James and Milarepa, his sherpa servant, had been journeying through a high pass in winter. It really seemed an impossible journey James said, "'Now you know that in India and Tibet and such places there are tricks people can learn, almost anybody can learn them if they're well-taught and they try hard enough.'

Charles, 'Tricks?'

James, 'Yes ... like the Indian rope trick—anything. One of those tricks is raising one's body warmth by mental concentration ... It's useful in a primitive country, like being able to go on walking for forty-eight hours at five miles an hour without eating or drinking or stopping.'

Charles exclaimed, 'Wait a minute! You mean you can do this thing of generating bodily heat by mental concentration?'

James, 'I told you it is a trick.'

But Milarepa had died in James' arms. They got caught in a blizzard and there wasn't enough heat for two 'It was my vanity that killed him', James said.\(^{17}\)
In another place Charles said to James, "'I can't understand your attitude to Tibet ... you seem to regard it as a lost Buddhist paradise.' James replied, 'I don't regard it as a paradise. But Tibetan Buddhism was a wonderful human relic, a last living link with the ancient world, an extraordinary, untouched country with a unique texture of religion and folklore. All this has been destroyed deliberately ruthlessly and unselectively.'" 18

Then again James said, "'I suppose all religion is superstition really. Religion is power, it has to be, the power for instance to change oneself, even to destroy oneself ... The exercise of power is a dangerous delight. The short path is the only path but it is very steep.'

Again, 'Goodness is giving up power and acting upon the world negatively. The good are unimaginable.'

Charles, 'You've never introduced me to any of your friends from the east.'

James, 'They never visit me'

'Yes, they do. There was that bearded chap I saw in your flat once, sitting in a back room.'

James, 'Oh, him! he was just a tulpa.'" 19

18·Ss. 444.

19·Ss. 445-446.
In her play, *The Three Arrows*, the background is set in medieval Japan, in the context of a power struggle between the effete imperial court (manipulated not by the Emperor but by his far more dynamic predecessor and uncle Tokuzan) — and the warrior aristocracy under the leadership of Shogun, who really rules the country. Caught in a stalemate between the two is the political prisoner Prince Yorimitsu. Attempts are made to resolve matters by appeals to Yorimitsu to enter the religious life of a Buddhist monastery, but these are not successful. There are comical scenes where the Emperor's sister Keiko smuggles herself into Yorimitsu's presence (they instantly fall in love) and Tokuzan simultaneously decides to have the couple betrothed and thus resolves the deadlock. The initiating is done by the customary ordeal of the three arrows. Yorimitsu fails and he will have to commit the ritual suicide, but the Emperor intervenes then at that point. Keiko has already stabbed herself thinking of Yorimitsu's failure. Yorimitsu escapes in the ensuing confusion and resolves to enter the monastery after all.

In the book, *Exploring Buddhism* (1974) Christmas Humphreys says, "Buddhism is a Western term for the vast erection of thought and culture which has accumulated about the traditional teaching of Gautam Buddha and stems none the less from the
actual teaching of the All-Enlightened one."\(^{20}\)

H.G. Wells once described Buddha as "the greatest man that ever lived."\(^{21}\)

In an essay entitled "Buddhism in Britain" (included in the book, *Contribution of Buddhism to World Civilization* ed. P.N. Chopra, Delhi 1983) — Venerable Dr. M. Vajiranana has stated — "Though Buddhism came from the East and the British Society is a highly developed Western Society, the roots of which are in Greco — Roman and Judaeo Christian traditions its culture has been deeply affected by forces more compatible with the philosophical and ethical character of Buddhism .... Nor is all that is Western, so alien to the spirit and ethic of the Buddha. There is a long-standing respect for moderation and self-discipline in this culture. .... However, most British people meet the Dhamma not by attending a temple, but by reading books on the subject — enquirers into Buddhism in England tend to work at an intellectual level at first — in the study of the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path."\(^{22}\)

We see that Christmas Humphreys founded the Buddhist


\(^{21}\)CH. 23.

\(^{22}\)Dr. M. Vajiranana. "Buddhism in Britain", included in *Contribution of Buddhism to World Civilization* 271. Subsequently cited as CB.
Lodge of the Theosophical Society of Britain in 1924 — Its simple and inspiring aim was, to make known the principles of Buddhism, and to encourage the study and practice of those principles. There is a Buddhist centre in Oxfordshire which provides for meditations, training in the Theravada tradition. There are a number of Zen centres and training groups. There are at least seven active University Buddhist groups in Britain.

There are books on the similarities between Buddhism and Christianity, which are valuable contributions toward better reciprocal understanding of East and West. These books make an effort toward building some bridges of understanding between the two religions. An English Scholar Dr. Winston L. King has written on Buddhism and Christianity to try to achieve a greater understanding of Buddhism on the part of Christians with perhaps a deeper and more intelligent interest in their own faith.

In the Essay, "Buddhism's impact on the World Civilization" R.R. Bhole says,

"It will not be difficult for one to equate the commandments of Jesus Christ to the Philosophy of Dhamma preached by Lord Buddha. Infact there is a theory that Jesus Christ during the period when his whereabouts were unknown, for a time in his life was somewhere in North India studying and practicing the tenets of Lord Buddha's Dhamma." 

23 CB. 38.
Rabindranath Tagore in his essay on "Buddhadeva" (published by the Visva-Bharati Granthalaya, Calcutta) related the story of Dr. Richard, a Christian Missionary who lived in China for many years. Once Dr. Richard went to Nanking on some work. There is a Buddhist organization there for the propagation of the Buddhist Scriptures. The aim of this association is to restore in writing, all the manuscripts which came to harm during the Taiping Revolution. The principal figure of this organization was Yang Ben Hui. He was a renowned scholar of Confucianism. When Dr. Richard asked him, how he became a Buddhist after being such a renowned scholar of Confucianism, Ben Hui replied, that he was equally amazed that Dr. Richard had asked such a question, being himself a missionary, that Confucianism was concerned only with what is earthly — it does not concern itself with anything beyond the secular.

Dr. Richard asked, if man could find the true answers to spiritual problems in the Buddhist religion.

Ben Hui replied that he could.

Dr. Richard then asked, Where he could seek that?

Ben Hui replied that there was a book entitled Bhakti-Udhbodhan. He was initiated into the Buddhist religion after reading that book, that was how he left Confucianism. Dr. Richard found that book and began his perusal of it. He read it all through the night. Another missionary was working through the night beside him. Dr. Richard exclaimed that he was reading an amazing book
on Christianity. The book referred to by Dr. Richard was originally in Sanskrit by Asvaghosa. The original manuscript has been lost, only the Chinese translation was there at that time. As the late Sri Sujit Kumar Mukhapadhyaya of the Visva-Bharati Chinese Department noted — there is an English Translation now of the above mentioned book: Asvaghosa’s Discourse on the Awakening of Faith in the Mahayana, translated for the first time from the Chinese version by Teitaro Suzuki, Chicago, 1900.

Tagore further says that the Christian finds a certain something in the Buddhist Religion for which he cannot feel any difference between Buddhism and Christianity, and even a scholar of Confucianism is drawn towards the Buddhist scriptures and is initiated into the Buddhist religion. Some people say that Buddhism and Christianity both are similar as both preach how a man can improve his character. Yet advice on how to improve the character is never attractive to any person. So that cannot be the only reason why people are attracted to Buddhism.

Dr. Richard certainly discovered some profound thought in Asvaghosa’s book — “which was something far deeper than advice on character-building.”

Scholars have noted that there are certain factors common about Christianity and Buddhism.

In both Truth and Bhakti have taken a human form. To get a better understanding of Truth through Love and Devotion, a human personality has been necessary.

Murdoch seems fascinated by the East. In The Nice and the Good, Octavian's brother Theo had to leave the Indian Civil Service because of a scandal with a boy and he is exiled from the Buddhist community that gave him a standard to love by. Later, Willy's confession of his guilt precedes the letter about the Buddhist master's death. It is not the letter but Willy's confession which produces Theo's greatest insight. He thinks: "What can I say to him. That one must soon forget one's sins in the claim of others. But how to forget. The point is that nothing matters except loving what is good. Not to look at evil but to look at good. Only this contemplation breaks the tyranny of the past ...."25

Elizabeth Dipple has said, "the major influences on Murdoch's thought, as opposed to her style, were Plato, Simone Weil, Shakespeare and Christianity, with Buddhism, Wittgenstein, Kant and Freud maintaining a strong secondary position."26

25 NG. 344.
26 WS. 156-157.
"One of Murdoch’s most precise points is that the average or mediocre mind shears away from a real definition of the good. ... She is also carefully illustrating that even a fair degree of discrimination is inadequate to the terrible, blank absoluteness of the term. Hence Theo in his years in the Buddhist Monastery was frightened by it and fell by the wayside ...." 27

"Theo tends to rail at Willy about the other characters, whom he regards as sex maniacs, even though he himself is hopelessly and silently trapped by his love for young Pierce. 28 The failed Buddhist tries to be good and keep the sexual misery within himself.

In  _A Fairly Honourable Defeat_, Tallis Browne is a character who is good. Yet he is simple, without charisma, undynamic.

"His real power and fascination come in his dealings with evil, where in a few dramatic scenes knowledge and activity coalesce with stunning success. The first occurs in a Chinese restaurant where a defenceless black man is being worked over by a gang of brutal white thugs ... Tallis steps forward to slap the leader with tremendous force ...." 29

\[27\text{WS. 160.}\
\[28\text{WS. 161.}\
\[29\text{WS. 21.}\]
Like the Tarot cards mentioned in The Sandcastle. "Murdoch plays as she spreads out her plots for speculation and development. Hence we have permutations and combinations of these cards: deceiving husbands, complacent middle-aged wife, troubled late-adolescent, middle-European Jew, refugee, artsy mistress, honourable soldier, glossy civil servant, witch, demonic girl-child, outsider, secret homosexual, failed writer, dabbler in eastern religions." 30

A new and unusual eastern character is the Indian girl Biscutt in A Word Child. She is introduced in the first sentence. Christopher Cather tells Hilary Burde:

"I say, an absolutely stunning coloured girl was here looking for you." 31

Again on Friday, Hilary was leaving for office when he saw the girl. "I saw at once that she was, wholly or partly, Indian. She had a thin light-brown transparent spiritual face, a long thin fastidious mouth, an aquiline nose: surely the most beautiful race in the world, blending delicate frailty and power into human animal grace. She was not wearing a sari, but an indefinably oriental get-up ... " 32

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30 WS. 86.
31 WC. 1.
32 WC. 25.
Hilary in *A Word Child* ran around the park for exercise and because he felt he had cleaned a piece of the filth of the world of his consciousness. He stopped running not because of his age, forty-one, but because of "the same laziness and failure of hope which still prevented me from starting to learn Chinese."\(^{33}\)

"Christopher, with his phony, paperback Buddhism, forms a constant frivolous periphery to most of the tale ..."\(^{34}\)

Hilary says to Christopher, "You promised last time. Or was that a Buddhist promise remote from the world of mere appearance where one pays telephone bills ..."\(^{35}\)

In *The Sea, The Sea*, James Arrowby "is one of Murdoch's most subtly developed characters, and his spiritual discipline and practice of Tibetan Buddhist rigour only slowly emerge through the interference of Charles's narration ..."\(^{36}\)

In *The Black Prince*, Julian says that Baffin "lives in a sort of rosy haze with Jesus and Mary and Buddha and Shiva and the Fisher King all chasing round and round dressed up as people in Chelsea."\(^{37}\)

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\(^{33}\) *WC*. 26.

\(^{34}\) *WS*. 225.

\(^{35}\) *WC*. 4.

\(^{36}\) *WS*. 289.

\(^{37}\) *BP*. 137.
"There is no guarantee that Theo’s grief, which is
consoling too in its own way, represents a ‘higher’ state of
illusion than Casie’s. And it is the worldly Octavian who is
seen at one point as a fat golden Buddha ..."\textsuperscript{38}

In \textit{The Book and the Brotherhood}, Crimond who is to
write the Book to express Left-wing idealism, is the pale, red-
haired son of a Scottish postman. At the start of the novel, he
is seen dancing in a kilt at a Commem Ball and he is perceived by
the others as Shiva the destroyer.

"In Murdoch’s own mediation between moral extremes hers
might be said to be like Buddhism, a dynamic and cheerful
philosophy of the middle way. It is dynamic in that it insists
on moral effort ..."\textsuperscript{39}

We can say that Iris Murdoch’s interest in the East,
its culture and traditions, in the Buddhist religion, is por-
trayed in many of her novels. Perhaps it is a by-product of the
Western tendency to learn more about the Buddhist perspective, to
see if Buddhism is the perfect solution to all its problems.

The Samurai Sword, a Japanese sword is shown in
Murdoch's novel \textit{A Severed Head} to show the power Honor Klein

\textsuperscript{38} SA. 152.

\textsuperscript{39} SA. 68.
weilled over the male characters inspite of her ugliness. It is a sort of symbol, a myth. Martin saw the sword as he came into Palmer's dining room looking for some whisky.

Honor says, "'Yes, It's a Japanese Samurai Sword. a very fine one. I used to have a great interest in Japan. I worked there for a time.'

'You were with Palmer in Japan?' Martin says 'Yes'. She spoke as out of a deep dream."40

Again Honor tells Martin: "In Japan these swords are practically religious objects. They are forged not only with great care but with great reverence. And the use of them is not merely an art but a spiritual exercise.

Martin says: 'I am not attracted by the idea of decapitating people as a spiritual exercise.'

Honor let the sword droop towards the floor. She said, 'Being a Christian, you connect spirit with love. These people connect it with control, power."41

We find that Murdoch uses the word reverence when she talks about the eastern culture. Sometimes her characters go off to the East, to find peace there.

40 'SH, 96.

41 'SH, 96.
In *Henry and Cato*, Cato asks Brendan Craddock, the Catholic priest, ... "But Brendan, is that why you're going to India, to stop thinking?" and later Cato says, "Shall I come and see you in Calcutta, if I can raise the money from somewhere?"

"Brendan's insistence on the fictionality of the self, and the novel's interest in the idea of experience as illusion, owes much to Buddhism, to which the Maverick priest Reggie Poole is converted in Japan. In this book Murdoch's stance as a Christian—Buddhist without belief in a personal God, but with Christ as the Western Saint of this Buddhism, is consequential ..."

We see that in the discussion between Cato and Brendan, pressed by Cato to say whether he still believes in a personal God, Brendan refuses to answer except by insisting that the notion of God as a person must be a falsification in so far as it is a human picture.

"Murdoch's very recent novels demand that the reader should remain relaxed in the face of their complexities. This seems related to her emerging sympathies—evident also from The
Fire and the Sun (1977) — for the non-acquisitiveness of eastern religious thought in contrast to its western counterpart. She is particularly interested in the way in which Buddhism appears to place so little of Christianity’s emphasis on suffering ... 45

Murdoch’s characters have often included Indian women like Biscuit in A Word Child, or Parvati in Bruno’s Dream, who has been mentioned as having been the cause of Miles’s alienation from his father Bruno, who opposed the marriage. We read that Parvati later died in an air-crash. There are men interested in Buddhism, like Theo in The Nice and the Good and James in The Sea, The Sea. Then there is Honor Klein, an archaeologist, who studied the art of using a Japanese-Samurai sword in Japan, in A Severed Head. There are people going off to India to relax or to find peace of mind there. In An Unofficial Rose, Hugh Peronett, rejected by Emma Sands, goes off with Mildred Finch and her brother Felix, for a promised journey to India. In Henry and Cato, Brendan Graddock, the Roman Catholic priest, decides to journey to India and Calcutta at the end of the novel. In The Sea, The Sea, Hartley went away to Australia with her husband Ben.

Whether it is to describe simple trips to the East, or to stress that eastern culture and religion are different, with a
certain mystery and depth, Murdoch certainly has respect and interest in the East. Murdoch's characters strive to get to the good, through difficult austerity and there is an inclination towards saintliness in many.

There are characters in Murdoch's novels whose quest for the unattainable good becomes a dangerous quest, and like James Arrowby in The Sea, The Sea they are unable to sustain the dangerous demands. James's failure as a Buddhist quester. "his failure on the dangerous road to the good is one of the hardest, saddest exempla in all of Murdoch's Works." 46

46 ·WS. 292.