Chapter Three
Fictive Narcissism at Thematic Level

The novelist is still a god, since he creates (and not even the most aleatory avant-garde novel has managed to extirpate its author completely); what has changed is that we are no longer the gods of the Victorian image, omniscient and decreeing; but in the new theological image, with freedom our first principle, not authority.

John Fowles, *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*

Having demonstrated the ironical tone of Murdoch’s formal style, the study, now, turns to investigate the admirable thematic richness of the select novels for signs of metafictional motifs; in the following analysis it is discussed that four certain metafictional topics, namely complexity of reality, inefficacy of language in reflecting reality, conventionality of artistic creation and dissolution of fact-fiction dichotomy are part of the thematic idiosyncrasy of her literary style. Such prominent themes along with the parodic rendering of the stylistic issues of plot, characterization, setting and narration displayed in the previous chapter echo Murdoch’s affinity with postmodern disbelief in any unifying systems, the phenomenon, famously formulated in Lyotard’s vindication of *petit récit* ‘little narratives’ over *grande récit* ‘metanarratives’. Developing postmodern themes in her literary works, Murdoch articulates more impressively the postmodern critique of man’s selfish propensity to reduce the particularity of everything and everybody into a coherent world of his or her fantasy.

3.1 Complexity of Reality

Attracting attention to the “unrepresentability of truth” is one of the most subtle metafictional tricks. In contrast to other conspicuous self-reflexive themes discussed in the following sections, the zoom on the intricacy of reality sheds doubt on the age-old taken-for-granted mimetic function of art and specifically fiction in the most indirect but effective way. As the result of this predominant theme, Murdoch’s novels acquire an
ironic tone; that is, their reflections on the multilateral nature of reality expose their status as restrictive constructed conventional forms. Portraying people’s selfish consciousness hence their limited perspectives to reality, it is Murdoch’s art to reveal both the multifaceted reality and the made-up nature of what is the product of human consciousness, namely. fiction here.

To shed light on the many-faceted nature of reality, Murdoch makes “love” the chief motif of her fiction. The idiosyncratic feature of Murdoch’s novels especially those under probe is their depreciation of “romantic love” as a selfish obsession with the other, stressing that, as Bellamy formulates, “the feeling that everything in the world has gone away to the other person is itself a function of one’s own will” (138). The zoom on such “central drama in the lives of so many people” (139) not only guarantees a timeless appeal for her fiction, but also paves the way to introduce the unselfish nature of the deepest kind of love which is, in Murdoch’s eyes as shown in chapter one, the only possible route to wisdom since it is spurred by imagination rather than fantasy. Most of her casts even the homodiegetic narrators are ignorant of this higher nature of love; being blinded by their fantastic love, they are involved in possessive relationship with others. Their love is so tarnished by a sense of pity, duty or even obedience to God that Whitehouse’s comment about Graham Greene’s characters is applicable to them: they “lose sight of the underlying factor common to all such feelings and perceptions: the lived awareness of another person’s own and separate humanity” (68).

Although hardly any person in her fiction is consciously respectful of others, the multi-perspective prism of her narratives, whether third-person or first-person, projects that reality is more multilateral than what her characters perceive and is captured in their deliberate accounts. Through an ironical art, her novels show that there are always areas of the beloved’s life that lie outside of the lover’s knowledge. In this sense, her novels are very similar to Greene’s works which, in Whitehouse’s words, “parallel to the sense of human weakness, obtuseness, and existential isolation” (68) evoke a suspicion that “there are dimensions to our lives and forces at work that even in our moments of greatest lucidity we can only dimly sense” (69). This thematic stress is, indeed metafictionally
revealing about the \textit{raison d’être} of Murdoch’s literary creation: fiction is truthful only if ironical.

Dealing with what is beyond the self makes religion the inescapable component of Murdoch’s imaginative landscape. Christian moral principles are contrasted to Buddhist morality in their explanation of human life, its needs and ends as well as man’s status in the universe. Whitehouse discusses that in Greene’s narratives there is only “a suggestion . . . of the comforting and consoling aspect of religious belief” (70). Murdoch incorporates a more critical analysis of the role of religion in human life. She believes that, because of its very consoling effect, Christianity cannot provide the truth that people need in order to realize their full and responsible humanity. Portraying, especially in \textit{The Bell} and \textit{The Unicorn}, the way that Christianity blinds people to the external reality through inculcating in them guilt and suffering, Murdoch shows that holiness is not a blind submission to the Christian principles nor it means being oneself in one’s true wholeness, as Whitehouse believes in Green’s idea of holiness; it is, on the contrary, the status of being open to the individuality of anybody and particularity of anything.

In her faith journey from a brought-up Protestant to the self-attributed status of “a Christian ‘fellow-traveller,’” Murdoch, influenced by Marxism and Platonism, develops “an agnostic standpoint, believing,” as Spear explains, “in nothing supernatural, rejecting God, not accepting the divinity of Christ and having no faith in the idea of a personal God” (10). Accepting Plato’s idea of man’s life as a pilgrimage towards reality, she conceptualizes religion as a commitment to spiritual change to perceive the light of reality. That is why Buddhism is favored in the novels such as \textit{The Sea, the Sea} and \textit{A Word Child}. She acknowledges it as “a very good kind of religion in that it’s not dogmatic and it has very much to do with change of consciousness” (Bellamy 134). In her literary career especially the later novels, she resorts to the image of Christ as an exemplum of good man and the ideal goal for modern man’s moral identity. Murdoch’s novels in which the problem of religion looms large are \textit{The Sea, the Sea}, \textit{Nuns and Soldiers}, \textit{Henry and Cato}, \textit{The Philosopher’s Pupil}, \textit{The Good Apprentice} and \textit{The Message to the Planet}. In these novels, which Spears subsumes as “mystic novels” (89), instead of endorsing the absence of God in modern time there is uneasiness about the
difficulty of staying on the pilgrimage. What is for certain in these novels is that any ardent belief in something outside the self is capable of improving man’s moral status. That is why, as Spear hints to, “reflection on Christian faith moves uneasily through the pages of The Philosopher’s Pupil” (89) and “the angst about personal faith” continues in all her mystic novels especially in The Message to the Planet with its search for “the ultimate philosophy, the secret . . . behind the very essence of spiritual life” (90).

Distraught by the fact that the metaphysical concern to replace the consolation that religion offered for the horrors of life has ended in substitution of either anxiety or materialism, Murdoch regrets “this loss of common background and the resulting moral breakdown” (Bove 7). Her concern over moral stagnation makes the effects of loss of faith on man’s consciousness and morality one of the characteristic themes of her novels. The Times of the Angels and The Philosopher’s Pupil are two conspicuous treatments of this theme. Father Bernard in The Philosopher’s Pupil calls the historical period in which people’s disbelief in God has not been suitably replaced as the “time of the angles,” an interregnum when there is nothing capable of supporting a sustained morality (187). Portraying the seedy practice of a renegade priest, Carel Fisher, and the stagnant, degenerate life the other characters lead, The Times of the Angels gives a clearer picture of this interregnum. The “literal wasteland in war-torn London” in which the novel is set, as Bove affirms, reflects the “spiritual lethargy” disbelievers are stuck in (8).

The failure of the philosophical attempts in these two novels to equip man with the consolation that religion once offered is metafictionally significant. Neither professor Rozanov nor Marcus Fisher completes his philosophical treatise. Before accomplishing their intellectual enterprises, Rozanov commits suicide and Marcus’s book named “a philosophical treatise upon morality in secular age” degenerates into a jumble of irrelevant aphorisms. Their failures along Rupert Foster’s death before finishing his book on virtue in A Fairly Honourable Defeat declines reason as a suitable substitution for religion because it “fails to control or explain [life’s occurrences] away or to preclude their occasion” (Bove 7). Divesting philosophy of any possible chance to help man in his/her moral journey in her novels, Murdoch introduces fiction in particular and great art in general as the feasible even more successful substitution.
Being optimistic about the role that fiction can play in opening man’s eyes to such previously unperceived order of reality, she tries to write a kind of fiction that while specific and entertaining is universal enough to serve the highest ideal of morality, the Good, ignored in Christianity due to its focus on God. Evident in her first-person narratives or her characters’ perceptions of some classical paintings, good art is morally significant. Whitehouse believes that in Greene’s novels “the recognition of the full humanity of other people and the beginnings of any real knowledge of them are closely linked to some awareness of God” (64). In Murdoch’s case, it is the practice and perception of art that stimulate the recognition of others and in turn the Good. Whether as painting or music to which some of her characters attend, or even the fiction that her first-person narrators create, art is able to lead both the artist and the audience away from the Cave to look at the Sun which, according to her, “represent the Form of the Good in whose light the truth is seen; it reveals the world, hitherto invisible, and is also a source of life” (FAS 4).

Over forty years of writing, Murdoch is, thus, more ambitious than Henry suggests; in addition to mining “the complicated psychological and social manifestations of such philosophical and theological concerns as the status of belief, truth, falsity, appearance, and the overwhelming and all-consuming forces of spiritualism” to which Henry refers (692), she tries to replace fiction for the defunct religion in man’s moral growth. In all her novels including the foci of this study, Murdoch is experimenting with the possibility of substituting modern unbelief in God with a belief in fiction. Delineating a group of atheistic people some of whom are involved in the philosophical or creative writing, her novels stress that fiction is the only means to expose the defects of religion and to satisfy the need of human’s psyche for explanation, meaning, and happiness in the face of absurdity of life. Clarifying what faith involves and offers through focusing on the life of disbelievers, they ironically lay bare the Janus-faced nature of fiction as a veil to or a mirror of reality. Through this mission, her novels present truthful fiction as an artifact that distrusts its own linguistic capacity to represent and doubts man’s ability to comprehend fully the formidable parts of reality, i.e. gaze of others, self-aggrandizing beliefs, the past and life’s contingencies.
In her emphasis on the role of the other’s gaze in what an individual does, Murdoch brings Sartre to mind. Pondrom interprets this stress as a Sartrean belief in the restrictive role of others on man’s freedom. In his analysis of *An Unofficial Rose*, he decides that Sartre’s concept of “Being for Others,” in which each individual endows everyone else with specific “unalterable” traits, is one of the major thematic axis of the novel (411). Identifying the controlling measures of “the other” (i.e., through look and gaze, an antagonist will, being absent and conventions of society) in the novel, he argues that *An Unofficial Rose* introduces Murdoch’s reconceptualization of the concept of freedom. Throughout the following elaborations on her select novels, it will be shown that her zoom on the gaze of others serves her realistic ambition. We will see that consolatory beliefs whether religious or fantastic can be motivations for action but not the only agents.

Besides, the other and the consolatory beliefs, contingency and the obsessive past are the other determining factors in the formula of reality. In all Murdoch’s works as in Sartre’s, chance and accidentalness of the flow of life stand out in relief. However, despite the Sartrean existentialist tradition that focuses on the extremity of human life, Murdoch sees the comic aspect that chaney and absurd events lend to man’s life. As its name assures, *An Accidental Man* is her most direct involvement with the role of contingency in human life. Abundant with accidental signs and occasions, as Bove states, the novel is populated by a cast who like Austin Gibson-Grey are both accidental people and victims (7). Despite Austin’s Sartrean view of life as “misery and muddle” (*AAM* 94), the novel is a comedy of errors illustrative of man’s disregard of chance. Although the overdoing of the coincidence and unexpected turn of events may turn Murdoch’s plots mechanical in the eyes of some of her critics, it, actually, puts them more in sync with sober reality of the world which, she believes, is glossed over and belittled in Sartre’s novels. By displaying the situations that transcend her characters’ control over life, she does not aim to embody nausea, the sensation that Sartre connects to the perception of one’s contingent existence; rather, she wants to demonstrate the importance of the recognition of contingency for moral growth and for higher mimesis in literature. In *An Unofficial Rose*, Douglas says to Ann, “Goodness accepts the contingent. Love accepts the contingent. Nothing is more fatal to love than to want everything to have
form” (*AUR* 111). The integration of contingencies in her novels both strips them of any forms that may emerge out of their contrived plots and distinguishes her literary atmosphere from Sartre’s since, as Pondrom hints, her “characters accept their occasional insights into the nature of the world with emotions ranging from fear to pleasure, but never with nausea” (409). The homage to the implacable contingencies of the real world makes her fiction even the early ones including *Under the Net*, *The Bell*, and *An Unofficial Rose*, whose Sartrean themes has already been identified, a critique of Sartrean existentialism or, as A. N. Wilson puts, an attack on “that philosophic system” (qtd. in Carr 46).

A dominant theme in all her novels, the past is like the contingent another factor that contributes to the complexity of reality. It affects the present of her characters whether in the form of old habits Murdoch captures in the concept of “rigid character”—the shaped personality, something forged in the past and resistant to change—or that of annoying obsessive memories. In his analysis of *An Unofficial Rose* as a portrait of Murdochian notion of freedom, Pondrom highlights the past as another element Murdoch relies on to attack the Sartrean concept of absolute freedom. However, in the context of present study, it is underlined as a formidable part of reality. Dramatizing the tenacity of the past on the life of a considerable number of characters, her novels display that reality is always both touched up by the present state of consciousness and the influence of what belongs to the past. People remain vague to each other in her fiction because they are ignorant of the excess past experiences are shaping their present consciousness. Here again Murdoch departs from the existential point of view which acknowledges that man’s will to power is capable of functioning unaffected by his/her past experiences.

Murdoch’s aim in depicting characters obsessed with their past and origin is not to show “the triumphant survival of the personality, the devious tenacity and resilience of the self” as Conradi’s comment on Michael indicates (121), or Levenson takes as the message of the ending of *The Bell* (578). She wants to bring into the focus the part that the past can play in both the consciousness and external actions of an individual. Her fiction, then, loses interest in the historical time and embodies instead of “collective versions of the past,” according to Nicol’s discussion of her retrospective novels, “a
localized, personal past” to show “the effect of a particular past experience (often traumatic) on a particular character” (Herman 716). Her pictures of the Nazi horror in some of her novels like *Nuns and Soldiers* and *The Message to the Planet* are more than a reference to the culturally unassimilable trauma or an image of the radical displacement of horrible experiences by those who underwent those traumatic events. In this way, for example *A Fairly Honorable Defeat* is the story of the life that indifferently but naturally follows Julius King’s past experience of concentration camp.

Murdoch’s other novels deal with the question of the past differently. In *Bruno’s Dream*, the effects of the personal past are traced in the life of any of its cast. Bruno’s dream is his profound regret of his past that is haunting the present status of his mind now that he is bed-ridden. Bruno has become what his father wished him; he studied classics and went into the printing work. His marriage and his relationship with his son went on the rocks. His obsession with these memories accompanied by his conviction that “[i]t’s all a dream . . . one goes through life in a dream, it’s all too hard” (*BD* 7) indicates that Bruno has a conflict with the reality of his life, or, as Đjorić-Francuski discerns, “he has never fully accepted reality” (115). Stuck in the past, he lives “so much in his mind” (*BD* 30) that his reality becomes “his little prison box” (33). Cut from the present time of the story, he appears to be living in a perpetual dream that gives the novel its eponymous title. A large number of other dream-images in the novel stress that besides Bruno almost all other characters are in obsessive relation with their own past, having fantastic interpretation of it. This collective preoccupation with personal past has persuaded Đjorić-Francuski, who acknowledges Oates, that for Murdoch “the inner world is, in a sense parasitic upon the outer world” (114). However, the demonstration of the contingent, the selfish fantasies of the characters and the bizarre permutation of their relations manifest that her extensive dealing with the past is part of her moral, realistic project of picturing reality.

Murdoch’s fiction not only delineates the way personal past has a hand in the formation of people’s present, but also portrays how individuals resist the incessant interference of the past in the form of nationality and language. Her works imply that it is not until individuals acknowledge their past as part of their existence that they are
capable of manipulating their present. For example, the Count in *Nuns and Soldiers* loses the opportunity to propose to Gertrude, the widow of Guy Openshaw who dies of cancer at the beginning of the novel, because his discomfort about his national identity has estranged from British society and customs. It is not until he reorients himself to his Poland nationality and, as Bove suggests, embraces the national spirit by connecting “in his mind his ideal symbolic Poland with the sufferings of oppressed people everywhere” *(NS 40)* that he “gains a sense of purpose in his life” (11). Emmanuel Scarlett-Taylor in *The Philosopher’s Pupil* is another individual in conflict with his nationality. He is distressed by his eye-catching Irish accent. His refusal of his Irishness is obvious in his infrequent visits to his mother. The way that his unexpected visit to his mother makes him a vivacious, open person of the “Afterwards” chapter implies the significance of the reconciliation with the past for moral growth.

In *Iris Murdoch: The Retrospective Fiction*, Nicol concentrates on the rendering of the past in Murdoch’s first-person narratives. Referring to them as “retrospective novels,” he decides that they are based on two core ideas about the past in psychoanalytic theory: “the notion that the past will always find a way of making itself present (but never in precisely the way the subject wishes), and [the notion] that the subject is compelled to somehow make sense of it—in psychoanalytic terminology, to bring it into signification” *(Herman 716)*. He substantiates his claim with the help of Dorrit Cohn’s distinction between dissonant narrators (those who distance themselves from their experiencing-I) and consonant ones (those who follow their experiencing-I in point of view). According to Nicol, Murdoch’s six retrospective novels belong to two categories in term of their treatment of the past: those like *Under the Net, The Black Prince* and *The Sea, the Sea*, whose narrators “learn to understand the past by separating themselves from their past delusions, and those such as *A Severed Head, The Italian Girl* and *A Word Child* whose narrators “are doomed merely to repeat the past, finding themselves compelled to replay the same traumas” *(Herman 717)*.

The implication in these two categories of novels is that the past can never be ignored or repressed. Nicol believes that through the techniques of either dissonant narration or consonant narration these works display the two ways the past usually
emerges into the present: first, “by an epistemological quest, an attempt consciously to return to the past”; second, “by the uncontrolled and uncontrollable return of the past, which haunts with uncanny persistence those who repeat instead of remember” (Herman 717). Seen from another perspective, this association of the former category with dissonant narration and the latter with consonant narration is more a metafictional tribute to the moral function of fiction; only where the narrators are conscious of writing a novel (as in Under The Net and The Black Prince), they yield a dissonant narration that enables them to build a redemptive relationship with their past. The approval of the reconciliation with the past is, moreover, a metafictional conceit. It is a thematic contribution of the novels to the inevitable dependence of postmodern fiction on literary conventions. The novels, therefore, insist on the requirement of employing old novelistic conventions for the survival of the novel.

To sum up, Murdoch’s magnification of the constrictive effect of the past on the human will, along that of the others—contingency and fantastic beliefs and gaze of the other—completes her criticism of egoism. Emphasizing on the difference of her approach, Gordon even associates her with Lawrence: “[n]o novelist, writing since D. H. Lawrence, not even Aldous Huxley, has pursued the theme of attacking ‘the ego’ with more sustained intensity than Iris Murdoch” (115). Inhabited by a group of self-centered personae, her novels expose their delusion to control their life; the present is not controllable as obvious in the failure of Dora, George and Marian to change the course of their life when they want. The past cannot be compensated for as Charles Arrowby, Hugo Peronett and Hilary Burde cannot pick up the lost threats of their past and have it under control; their past have the upper hand to control their present. Their egoism is, moreover, criticized for blinding them to the reality of other people and the existence of other worlds independent of their own wishes. Since in Murdoch’s eyes virtue is the recognition of the other, her novels assure the cultivation of goodness in the rare but possible occasions of unpossessive relationships to the other, that is, when one is in true love not in romantic love.
**Under the Net**

Murdoch’s ambition of presenting a simulacrum of the whole reality involves her fiction with human consciousness. The goal to elucidate human reality differentiates her from her fellow philosopher-novelist, Sartre, whose influence on her has been overstated by her critics. In contrast to Sartre’s novels which revolve around human actions, her fiction depicts people in their social relationships and the effects of these social interactions on their actions. Pondrom’s conclusion that the central form of man’s social relations, i.e. “the effort to love and to obtain love” is at the heart of *An Unofficial Rose* is applicable to all Murdoch’s works (406). Although in *Under the Net* Jake is clearly obsessed with Hugo Belfounder and Anna Quentin, it is in reference to his other social relations that the status of his consciousness as a character and a narrator is revealed. His contact with others is mutually reflective: it not only shows his egoistic treatment of others in his reduction of the other characters to images suitable for his own universe, but also illuminates the restricting gaze of the others on him. It suffices him to be a translator of a French novelist because nobody expects him to be more as we see in Madge’s insistence that he should accept the sinecure job of being the scriptwriter of Jean Pierre Breteuil’s Anglo-French film company. It is not until he is left alone and free of the imposing gaze of others that his original work *Under the Net* is born.

In *Under the Net* Murdoch interlocks bildungsroman and künstlerroman to attract attention to the actual relationship of fiction and reality. While readers are presented with the way certain events affect Jake’s moral and psychological identity, they are offered with the story of his artistic vocation. *Under the Net* explicitly suggests that mimesis can never be achieved unless the invisible multi-agent net that ensnares man’s consciousness away from the details of reality is depicted. To her conviction that “suppression of self is required before accurate vision can be obtained” (*SOG* 66), Murdoch adds that an absolution of the obsession with others is essential to report that vision. In this way, *Under the Net* is the story of truthful fiction. Only after Hugo tells him about Anna’s love for himself that Jake starts to see her individuality: “it seemed as if, for the first time, Anna really existed as a separate being and not as a part of myself... Anna was something which had to be learned afresh” (*UTN* 268). However, it is only after he is
deprived of all his social relationship and faced with the financial insecurity that he sets writing *Under the Net* in order to secure his sense of identity which was shaken when Madge, Sadie, Anna, Hugo and Finn followed their own separate destinies.

As a writer, Jake finds the story of how he was pushed to his true vocation an appropriate interesting subject for his longed-for original work. The dramatic irony here is that such a theme aggrandizes the author’s vanity that everything is under control while exposing the forces that, actually, direct his life. The significant point is that Jake has not created *Under the Net* because he willed it. Some accidental events and the resilience of his past experiences led him toward his present status as a novelist. Affecting his social relationships, the incidents that push him toward the creation of *Under the Net* are: Madge’s sudden decision to marry, Jean Pierre’s last winning novel, Jake’s attempt to restore his translation manuscripts of Pierre’s *Le Rossignol de Bois* form Sadie and Sammy who are to sell it to an American film company, his escapade of kidnapping the film star dog Mr. Mars, his unrequited love for Anna and his shame for publishing Hugo’s ideas as his own in a book called *The Silencer*.

These events along his picaresque adventures through London and Paris dispel the illusion that Jake is in control of his life and that of the other people. His concluding statement to Mrs Tinckham that the birth of a pure Siamese is “just one of the wonders of the world” indicates, as Kiernan Ryan judges, his acceptance of the “innate elusiveness” and “impenetrable quiddity” of what is outside the self. However, it does not guarantee that his *Under the Net* is really what Ryan sees it, “a fable that will look at the world afresh instead of projecting his illusions upon it” (xiii).

His brooding on a bus after leaving Dave’s house for Mrs Tinckham’s shop is reflective of his insight into the absurdity of life and the impossibility of holding any meaning for life:

And as I looked down now on the crowds in Oxford Street and stroked Mars’s head I felt neither happy nor sad, only rather unreal, like a man shut in a glass. Events stream past us like these crowds and the face of each is seen only for a minute. What is urgent is not urgent forever but only ephemerally. All work and all love, the search for wealth and fame, the search for truth, life itself, are made up of moments which pass and
become nothing. Yet through this shaft of nothingness we drive onward with that miraculous vitality that creates our precarious habitations in the past and the future. So we live; a spirit that broods and hovers over the continual death of time, the lost meaning, the unrecaptured moment, the unremembered face, until the final chop chop that ends all our moments and plunges that spirit back into the void from which it came. (UTN 275)

Such broodings are the telltale sign that Jake’s writing practice has still an air of egoism to it. He writes to contradict the absurdity of life and affix it a meaning that cannot be fixed. In this regard, in the words of Nakanishi, his Under the Net is the outcome of the conflict between his “inner world of thoughts, dreams and desires and the external world which impinges upon the purely personal” (“The French”). Being simultaneously a report of Jake’s vision and the outcome of his egoism, Murdoch’s Under the Net rather than Jake’s narrative mirrors the relationship of reality and fiction. Portraying the shift of Jake’s hatred to endorsement in terms of contingency, the novel self-reflexively condemns literature’s tendency to evade or neglect what is particular or contingent in life. Germinated out of Jake’s desire to make sense of his past, the novel, moreover, reflects that the past is always part of what makes every life particular; so, instead of being decoded, it needs to be acknowledged for its existence; this is what Nicol implies when he argues that “in Under the Net and The Black Prince both narrator-protagonists are able to conquer their own epistemophilla, or delusion that everyday occurrences and coincidences are mysteries that must be unraveled” (Herman 717).

The Black Prince

Driven by his epistemophilla to understand the obsessive uncanny events that cost him life imprisonment, Bradley, the narrator-writer, pencils an artifact that ironically invalidates any probe into the underlying pattern. Portraying a permutation of relationships, “The Black Prince: A Celebration of Love” is Bradley’s attempt to express the transcendental quality of his love for Julian in an original truthful art he has awaited his entire life. In a self-reflexive account, Bradley reveals the two versions of love—low Eros and high Eros—connecting them to bad art and great art respectively. There, he stresses that only high Eros, the spiritual desire for truth, can disentangle us from, what Whitehouse calls, “the horror of death, anger, bitterness and paralyzing incomprehension” and grant us wisdom of reality (61). Nevertheless in the context of the
other characters’ postscripts on his text, Bradley’s account loses its truthful footing as they expose the delusive life he has lived during those events.

Approaching the story through many perspectives that embody the complex human reality, Murdoch’s *The Black Prince* deserves the title of truthful fiction. A complicated textual project with the centrality of the bizarre erotic engrossment of Bradley Pearson with Julian Baffin, the twenty-year old daughter of his friend, the prolific novelist Arnold Baffin of whose murder Bradley is finally convicted, the novel demonstrates that true love, very different from its romantic kind in which Bradley was involved, is respectful of the other and thus an index of fuller humanity. Through Bradley and his narrative, Murdoch states that modern moral degeneration is due to man’s inability to connect virtue, truth and love: the three issues whose collaboration is essential for the individual’s perfection as Murdoch emphasizes in *The Sovereignty of Good*. As depicted in the case of Bradley, the pursuit of one without the others does not lead us to a better vision of reality.

The dramatis personae’s modification of Bradley’s account not only sheds doubts on the reliability of his narrative but helps Murdoch observe that, as Bove states, “life is horrible, life is a muddle, and one’s existence has no pattern” (6). Spotlighting the other aspects of events untouched or unknown by Bradley, their postscripts expose that Bradley’s confidence in his absolute freedom to impose a pattern on his aleatory life is a delusion. Murdoch’s dexterity in integrating the accidental occurrences, in contrast to Bove’s belief, is that she both completes her image of reality and takes advantage of them as complexities to resolve the plot. Aware of the difficulty to offer the jumble of his past as a work of art, Bradley decides to “play the witch” like Dora, but unknown to him, he acts as what Dora felt herself later to be, “a priestess, dedicate now to a rite” (*TB* 244). Deluded by his egoistic confidence in his freedom, he takes his narrative (its possible falsehood is brought to our attention by the postscripts) as what he has waited for mutely all his life “rather than profane the purity of a single page with anything less than what is perfectly appropriate and beautiful, that is to say, with anything less than what is true” (*BP* xii). The light that the dramatis personae shed on the gaps of Bradley’s narrative eventually reveals him to be, in effect, a victim of Murdoch’s plot.
Bradley is conscious of the indispensable part of chance in life: “life is horrible, without metaphysical sense, wrecked by chance, pain and the close prospect of death” (BP 55) and tries in his foreword to foreground the contingent as the only determinative force in life: “[a]lways a world of fear and horror lies but a millimeter away. Any man, even the greatest, can be broken in a moment and has no refuge” (xviii). However, he is ignorant of the roles that the will of others and the resistant presence of the past in the present play in any individual’s existence. The *raison d’être* of *The Black Prince* is to express this ignored aspects of reality. The sudden reappearance of Christian, his ex-wife, Francis, his ex-wife’s brother and Priscilla, his sister, after years in his life adduces the tenacity of the past on the state of the present. No matter what he does to keep them out of his life, they leave their footprint on the sharp turn his life takes towards its crisis after years of considerable passivity. The problem with Bradley is that he feels he can be the master of the moment, no matter what his past was and what chance has in reserve for him. Rachel tries to dissolve this delusion when she says, “[o]ne is responsible for one’s action, and one’s past does belong to one. You can’t blot it out by entering a dream world and decreeing that life began yesterday. You can’t make yourself into a new person overnight . . .” (BP 308).

Similarly, the same theme is explored in *The Sea, the Sea*. The actual outcome of the self-assigned project of Charles Arrowby to occupy his time of retirement in his seaside seclusion, *The Sea, the Sea* is a kind of fiction that paying a tribute to contingency oscillates between diary and memoir to suggest the intermingle of the past and present. Charles’s obsession with the art of narration and his engrossment in his past and present makes *The Sea, the Sea* thematically a more ambitious project in comparison to *The Black Prince* as they both engage in spotlighting the capacity of fiction to be a moral guide to even its composer. The integration of Charles’s self-conscious narration of the appearance of the elderly Hartley, his childhood sweetheart, that evokes a deep vague memory of her into a fresh obsession provoking him to kidnap and incarcerate her, with the undercurrent story of the improvement of his relationship with his cousin James Arrowby is Murdoch’s way to put fiction forward as a form capable of turning the incomprehensible sequence of events into a meaningful moral form.
*A Word Child*

Hilary Burde’s memoir of a strange double interlock of his destiny with Gunnar Jopling’s, *A Word Child* is another of her oeuvre that mirrors the profane and sacred function fiction can play in inflicting a form on the jumble of events and demonstrating the hidden multiplicity of reality to the consciousness respectively. Hilary is a character doomed to choice in an absurd world that eludes his control except in his schedules and when he formulates it as *A Word Child*. His “a bit unpleasant, warped, full of un-healthy attitudes towards life,” to use Pritchard’s description of him (157), hint at his moral turpitude as both character and narrator. His disregard to the separate existence of the others and his certitude of his controlling power over his own and the others’ life at the time of the story are his major moral faults that reappear when he recounts that past. Although he thinks that being attached to his consciousness at that time is enough to reveal his false perception of things, he is not aware that he cannot control the narrative that is thus forged.

His diary-like memoir is more than a recounting of his obsessive past. On the surface, it exemplifies, as Herman finds in Nicol’s contention, the “ways in which the destructive mechanisms of the unconscious can lead to a compulsion to repeat” (717). The unconscious of the text is, however, a metafictional illumination on the contradictory nature of art, particularly fiction. The chasm that Hilary tries to keep between his experiencing-I and his narrating-self via the parenthetical insertions leaves no doubt that *A Word Child* is a writing cure. It is a way of shirking responsibility for his miserable, unfortunate past, a proof of his desire for power and control. His narrative alleviates his guilty conscience in the very act of confession and provides Murdoch with a paradoxical means to reflect truth in its all dimensions; the memorable entanglement of Hilary in a mechanical repetition of the miserable experience of being the cause of Gunnar’s first and second wives’ death in a twenty-year span not only authorizes the past, the others and the chance as the constituent causes of events, but also illustrates the consciousness mechanism and by extension the double role of fiction in man’s life. *A Word Child* is a magic that both integrates the disparate elements of Hilary’s life into a whole and reveals the impossibility of doing so.
A third-person narrative with two focalizers, *The Bell* is really a bell that reminds the reader of the overlooked function of art for man’s moral identity. Build up on a legend of the fall of a medieval bell in the lake separating Imber Court from its adjacent convent, the novel tells the story of a community at Imber whose life is actually another version of that tale. This parallel similarity helps *The Bell* grow a self-reflexive dimension while being more reflective of truth. This time love is zeroed in on for its implications for man’s spiritual life. Although Byatt’s comment that *The Bell* is “about religion and sex, and the relation of those two” (xi) is very limiting in terms of the novel’s thematic scope, Spear is right in claiming that there love “transcends the physical and the human and moves into the realm of the religious and the spiritual” (31).

Here Murdoch widens her scope to explore the moral implication of the Christian concept of love. This makes *The Bell* in the eyes of critics like Byatt “her first directly religious novel” (xv). Demonstrating her unique powers as a novelist, Murdoch repudiates the common spiritual love, in its either Catholic or Protestant sense, as an untrue replacement to sexual romance. Her virtuosity, as Byatt acknowledges, lays in the fact that she takes advantage of communicating “sexual urgency in all its delectable, humiliating, baffling, driven complexity” (xii) to evoke an immediate and sensual experience in the reader while she thumbs it down along the two spiritual concepts of love promulgated in the orthodox Christianity that James follows and the personal Christianity that Michael practices. The loneliness, boredom and depression that the personae feel and eventually lead to the disintegration of the community are symptoms that, as long as there is no respect for the otherness of people, the true sense of love has not been realized.

Embodying Christianity’s failure to strengthen man’s moral identity in the strife that tears apart the community, Murdoch subtly introduces art and in a way fiction as the genuine bearers of the vision of the reality. Similar to the paintings in the National Gallery that jolt Dora out of herself, or even the drown bell that preoccupies her imagination, *The Bell* attracts the attention of its readers to the astonishing power of great art to include in its limited scope the vast and vague aspects of reality usually obscure to
man’s consciousness. Full of coincidences and unexpected encounters (e.g. Michael and Nick are brought together after years, Dora reunites with her husband after months living with her lover Noel Spens or Toby unexpected run into two nuns), *The Bell* is the story of the collective will of its personae and the way their past impinges on their present some inexorable influence. Dora’s final decision to start her future with her friend Sally telling her a story of Imber Court is another evidence of the bearing of the past on her future life. It is, moreover, a metafictional tribute to the novel as instructive in stimulating the openness required to acknowledge the vagueness of reality. Dora’s eventual return to painting and her learning to swim allude to her interest in what is outside her “self” and to her refusal to find a key to the mysteries of life. Reading *The Bell*, we are transported the same way that Dora is at the closure of the narrative: more conscious of the value of art in perceiving our “absolute” free choice to be good and respectful of the universe.

*The Philosopher’s Pupil*

Starting with a family quarrel between George and his wife Stella, *The Philosopher’s Pupil* like *The Bell* tries to explore the concept of love in many forms of human relationship. Besides showing the fragility and resilience of marriage in both George’s and Brian’s households, the novel displays that consolation and self-affirmation are the major impetus that keeps its personae in their relationships. Including instances of filial, affiliative, conjugal and communitarian relationships, the novel is a solid picture of the limited prospects for sainthood in everyday life. Displaying a group of people in their various relations with others, it is another testimony to Bove’s comment that “most of Murdoch’s characters are self-interested and egoistic” (6). Indeed, no one even Father Bernard in his Christian practice approaches others for their individuality; they need others to support the image they have of themselves. Consequently their love whether filial, connubial, romantic or even spiritual is morally degenerative and blinding as long as they are not selfless and respectful of the particularity of others.

Despite George and Stella’s strife and her temporal refusal to return home, as well as Brian’s constant bickering with Gabriel, there is no matrimonial break-up in the novel. This fact along with Tom and Hattie’s marriage in the final portion of the winding plot that sheds light on the social lives of a fairly large number of people, reminds one of the
“final reinforcement of family values” that Spears discovers in *The Sandcastle* (27). Although to distinguish true love from its false notions Murdoch zooms on the social life of so many people, it is as a constellation of relationships that *The Philosopher’s Pupil* sticks in mind. Spear believes, “the novel itself is less concerned with love than with obsessive relationships” (100). Some of these obsessions are: Alex’s anxiety over the status of her maid Ruby in her house now that they are both old, Pearl’s unrequited love for Rozanov, George’s devotion to Rozanov, his old teacher, and Rozanov’s incestuous passion for his granddaughter Hattie. The depiction of so many forms of relationships makes the novel one of the most dramatic presentations of man’s dealing with the other: a phenomenon that is typically Murdochian.

The absence of any “chameleon-like mythical character,” to use Spear’s description of Nigel whose selfless love brings about change in the life of those he encounters in *Bruno’s Dream*, denies a moral exemplum to the novel. The ideal, however, is suggested through the portrayal of many characters in moral dilemma. George, Stella, Alex, Tom and Rozanov come to have a glimpse of the jumble of life in their own experience that involves some symbolic descend. The glimpse is vivid enough to alter the course of their life; however, the characters are not conscious of what they have undergone as if all were blinded by the strong light of truth the same way that George literally gets blind by some strong beams that evening he leaves Rozanov’s rooms thinking he has murdered him. This image is a parody of Plato’s the Myth of the Cave where only philosophers are able to leave the cave of ignorance and fantasy and face the sun of truth. To criticize Plato’s elevation of philosophers, Murdoch suggests that the ultimate truth is not at all conceivable to human consciousness which is so disposed to ignore the reality of others as the cast of *The Philosophers Pupil* demonstrate in their contacts with each other.

The depiction of the actual limitation of man’s consciousness vis-à-vis truth would not be truthful unless the resultant image dispels the usual suspension of disbelief and discard any framing. That is why *The Philosophers Pupil* adopts some metafictional attributes. It deploys effectively a self-conscious narrator whose narration, far from being subjective, projects the impossibility to report objectively. Utilizing parentheses,
asterisks, single quotations, blank spaces and relying on multiple focalizers, the narrative of “N,” the unnamable narrator of *The Philosophers Pupil*, provides a fertile ground for Murdoch to incorporate “her favourite human types, and her most familiar themes, as well as her favourite images” to demonstrate, as Bradbury summarizes,

the accidental and the intended, the necessary and the contingent, the contrast between those who live in the groves of the sacred and those who revel in the world of the profane; the power of sexuality to create both the grace of love and the extremities of delusion; the power of childhood and innocence, the importance of wisdom and experience; the force of the animal kingdom and the near animate nature of the world of things. (xviii)

To these achievements, the exhibition of the inexorable influence of the past on any individual life should be added. In the narrator’s full access to the past of all the characters that sheds doubt on his reliability since he turns to be among the cast of the novel, Murdoch, furthermore, implies that the improvement of moral identity is impossible without the reconciliation with one’s past. As long as Emmanuel, ironically a history scholar, feels resentful of his nationality, he is stiff in his communications, thinking that he figures in the others’ eyes, “as he did for the moment in his own, as a lonely man, with no connections, no relations, no friends . . .” (*PP* 346). In this sense, he is very much a reminiscent of the Count in *Nuns and Soldiers* who “[f]or all his efforts to be English he had a slight foreign accent. And he increasingly felt, in every cell of his being, an alien” (*NS* 12). However, once Emma accepts his national identity, he visits his mother without scruples and mingles with the others more freely.

In this novel that attracts attention to its fictionality and its unparalleled thematic richness, Murdoch sets to disarm the age-old rivals of literature. Portraying the callousness of philosophers to respect particularity in the world in the figures of Rozanov and his former favorite student George, Murdoch divests philosophy of any chance to substitute the unfunctional Christianity. Highlighting the limitation of philosophy, *The Philosopher’s Pupil* subtly advertises fiction as the most truthful spokesman of truth and the most effective moral medium. As Bradbury reckons, the message of the novel is that “if love, sexual desire, confused and unbidden passion—the triumph of Aphrodite—are one form of disorder . . . the teachings of modern philosophy create their own disorders, and breed their pupils . . .” (xvii).
**The Unicorn**

Of the three third-person narratives, *The Unicorn* more evidently relies on its fictionality to incorporate the usually overlooked constituents of reality. Its fairy-tale plot foregrounds itself and fiction in general as the most able medium to do so. Governed by the conventions of the suspension of disbelief, it includes certain coincidences and accidents that though destined by the requirements of plot can stand for the actual contingent of real life. In such a self-reflexive plot that characters are partially conscious of playing a part in it, man’s failure to respond to the needs of others is indicated by the conscious attempt of the characters to enact their prescribed roles in the fairy-tale plot. In this regard, although some of the characters’ obsession with the past is justifiable in terms of the requirements of the plot, it reverberates meanwhile the actual inexorable reemergence of the past in the present and its effect on the formation of the future.

Demonstrating the limitations of the consciousness through highlighting its own fictional conventions, *The Unicorn* is a metafictional projection of the way that reality factors owe their expressions to a well-designed, considerately detailed plot that reflects external complexity in its own configuration.

In addition to the plot, the typical Murdochian themes like the ideal selfless love, the platonic interlacement of virtue, beauty and love, egoism and the tenacity of past in man’s destiny make *The Unicorn* observant of chance and accidents. Max’s talk with Effingham about Hannah’s passive acceptance of her incarceration brings the “notion of Ate” into the view as an embodiment of the selfless love. Max’s explication that Ate is when one suffers for the sake of others without inflicting any iota of misery on them attracts attention to how far from this ideal the people of the novel are. Although following Effingham we are likely to take Hannah as the image of Ate, it is Denis who, in his eventual sacrifice to bear the burden of the disaster in the castle alone, appears as the incarnation of this selfless love. This time Marian encourages us to replace Denis for Hannah. Disentangling ourselves from these two focalizations, we are struck by Murdoch’s dramatic irony: the narrative persuades us that neither Hannah nor Denis can be the perfect embodiment of Ate since their behavior is tarnished by some shred of selfishness.
Apart from the detailed picture of egoism in the passive or hostile behavior of characters towards each other, there is a memorable scene that literally connects selfless love with beauty; the near-death experience of Effingham, when he gets stuck in the bog the same night of his failure to kidnap Hannah with Marian’s help, grants him a momentary vision he tries to remember when saved by Denis he is attended by Hannah, Marian and Alice. “He tried to focus his gaze upon the women, but they drew together into a single fuzzy golden orb. His body felt limp yet glorious, as if he had been reborn, as if he had crawled forth into a new element and lay yet upon the shore, weary but transfigured. He wished he could remember what he was trying to remember” (TU 375). His vision onerously put into words is: “I think it is love which happens automatically when love is death” (376). As he elaborates,

dead is not the consummation of oneself but just the end of oneself. It’s very simple. Before the self vanishes nothing really is, and that’s how it is most of the time. But as soon as the self vanishes everything is, and becomes automatically the object of love. Love holds the world together, and if we could forget ourselves everything in the world would fly into a perfect harmony, and when we see beautiful things that is what they remind us of. (377)

The moral consequence of his near-death experience is that he sees the three ladies as three angels who “drew together into a single fuzzy golden orb” (375); he feels open enough to extend his love for all of them as the unraveling of the plot reveals. However, he remains still in the legion of selfish cast since as he leaves the region forever, he tries to protect himself behind another veil of fantasy: “[a]t Greytown junction he would telephone to Elizabeth. And perhaps, the thought did not displease him, when they had got on to the other train, he would summon little Marian Taylor to his carriage. He was still touched by her attachment to him. She would be delighted” (578). This makes Nakanishi’s comment on An Unofficial Rose reflective of The Unicorn as well: “[t]he list of delusions is nearly endless. No one in this novel appears to know himself or anyone else” (“The French”).

To sum up, Murdoch’s first-person narratives spotlight fiction as the resort the characters rely on in order to have a comprehensible unified vision of the heterogeneous and arbitrary turns of their lives. Their narrators’ frequent observations about the nature
and function of art make them metafiction. A skeptical look at the simplicity and clarity of concepts such as consciousness, truth, reality, love, freedom, good and happiness, they reflect their inherent complexity. Always exposing “the questionable attitudes of her heroes by a subtle process of distanciation,” through sliding on a scale stretching between “consonant” and “dissonant” narration as Nicol explicates, Murdoch never relies on her first-person narrators as her own spokesmen. Instead she prefers the third-person narratives for their fuller capacity and openness of form. Her novels rendered in this mode magnify in a slightly different manner the capability of fiction to encompass the medleys of disparate elements and forces in any individual life. Highlighting the impossibility of having an objective stable narration of reality through integrating many gaps, textual surplus, incongruities, and stunning coincidences, these works succeed to stir a consciousness into the mysterious being of life and individuals.

The mysteries that she elucidates in *The Message to the Planet*, states Albert B. Stewart, are “the nature and future of human consciousness, the roles of chance and of love in the search of happiness, Gaea and other New Age concepts” (398). In *The Green Knight* that, according to Knapp, is “replete with familiar characters, unpredictable erotic attachments, and philosophical musings” (569), she makes her readers question the common notion of madness and power and the certainty of the distinction between reality and fiction. In *The Times of The Angels*, as McKenzie emphasizes, even in *The Bell*, she presents a symbolic picture of her contemporary world. In a “tongue-in-cheek style,” she talks of the “religious revival, violence, dissipation, and the lack of sensitivity to spiritual values” in her time (211). In *An unofficial Rose*, according to Pondrom, she dissects “human personality and human freedom” to illuminate their unobserved features to the effect of rebutting their Sartrean versions (404, 405). However, at the same time these novels throw the confining scope of fiction into relief through availing more theatricality. Like the first-person narratives, they are concerned with people’s selfish interactions and their illusion of being the sole inscribers of their actions. Taking full advantage of the heteroglossic quality of the third-person perspective, these works display that people’s life is not restricted to their external and visible actions but is under the effects of the views and feelings of themselves and others as well as chance and absurdity. Because of
this capacity to encompass the polyphonic play of voices, this mode of narrative
outnumbers in Murdoch’s literary career as a formal counterpart to her ethics.

3.2 Inefficacy of Language in Reflecting Reality

Warning against “the desegregation of art” from actual lives of people, Muriel
Spark looks down on the twentieth-century fiction, believing that while offering an
emotional and vivid rendering of the “injuries of the world,” it remains passive to elicit
from its readers a bold, responsible response to the absurd reality (qtd. in Nakagami
12). The fault lies in its absolute faith in the communicative power of language. In this
sense, Spark is followed by Murdoch. Comparing their respective theories on life and
fiction, Nakagami concludes that The Comforters and Under the Net are suggestive of the
important themes that modern fiction must face: “the nature of narrative, and the
representation of reality . . . the increasingly uncertain relationship between life and
language, experience and narrative” (12).

Such overlooked issues constitute the typical Murdochian themes. In all her
novels, directly or indirectly, the realist and modernist reliance on language is questioned.
Stressing on the “far-reaching impact” of language on all her characters, Bove considers
communication as a recurrent theme in Murdoch’s works. In addition to the characters’
inability to communicate with each other, disbelief in the linguistic communication is
common among some of her characters who emphasize that whatever we say or write
results in lies. Although some critics including Bove regard the prevalent discussion
about the linguistic inadequacy in conveying the truth among her personae as the
irrefutable evidence to the influence of Oxford philosophy that nourished linguistic
analysis, it will be shown that Murdoch criticizes language on a moral basis without
losing faith in its inherent capacity to aid human beings in their moral growth.

Under the Net is Murdoch’s experiment to correct the faults she found in Sartre’s
fiction. In Sartre: Romantic Rationalist, Murdoch relates Sartre’s “tragic” inability to
write a great novel to his inattention to the preciousness and uniqueness of each
individual “except in terms of ideology and abstraction” (148). Under the Net then is a
project propelled by “the desire to find,” as Bradbury puts, “a new dawn beyond the
ideologies, to break out of the net of abstractions, ideas, language” (xi). Lack of
communication among the cast, accentuated in Anna’s mime theatre and the philosophical dialogues between Jake and Hugo that ended in the birth of The Silencer, sanctions the interpretation of the net in the title as the net of language. In 1978, Murdoch herself explained at the University of Caen that “[t]he net under which one cannot get, is the net of language.” Being entitled Under the Net, the novel dexterously connotes two signifieds: man’s entrapment within the limited structure of language and the jarring distance between language and reality which Murdoch phrases as “language moving towards silence, and the difficulty of relating concepts to anything which lies behind them, or under them” (Rencontres 76).

Most of explicit references to this dual linguistic problem are made via James Donaghue (Jake), the author-narrator of the novel, and Hugo Belfounder, his friend. Jake’s frequent allusions to the difficulty of describing the actual events and persons in addition to his obsession with Hugo’s views about the accessibility of the truth highlights the linguistic skepticism at the core of the novel. Hugo’s stress that “the whole language is a machine for making falsehoods” for it can never depict things as they are (UTN 68), and his conclusion that “truth can be attained . . . only in silence. It is in silence that the human spirit touches the divine” (92) put him in the tradition of the linguistic analysts like Wittgenstein and prove him the counterpoint of Sartre. In his treatments of others, Hugo is “immune to the lure of theoretical abstraction”. As Bradbury further elaborates, “[i]t’s the intractable specificity of things that enthralls him, not the specious propositions that we foist on them to make them fit our conceptual systems” (x). Hugo condemns generalization as a linguistic activity that cuts us short of capturing the nature of things; in the disguise of Annandine in The Silencer he says, “[a]ll theorizing is flight. We must be ruled by the situation itself and this is unutterably particular. Indeed it is something to which we can never get close enough, however hard we may try as it were to crawl under the net” (UTN 91).

The disbelief in the mimetic power of words is reiterated in all Murdoch’s novels. The irony is that at the heart of this depreciation her fiction brings forward the moral function of language totally overlooked in modern fiction. Characterized by what Nicol with a reference to Nathalie Sarraute defines as “a fundamental shift from confidence to
suspicion—on the part of both writer and reader,” modern literature evinces this linguistic crisis (Nicol 20). The unprecedented belief in the death of God in modernity deprived individuals of a “shared past” and brought about linguistic miscommunications. Bove contends that this tragic cause is what Murdoch delineates in her works where her characters suffer from the loss of what she calls in Sartre: Romantic Rationalist, “common purposes and common values” (70). Referring to the way the modernists like Joyce and Woolf adjusted their art to contain the inner life of modern man who cannot communicate, Bove implicitly pigeonholes Murdoch as a modernist. However, as we will see later, Murdoch integrates a concern over the role of language in her fiction for quite other reason than what gave rise to the modern novel.

Modernists considered the loss of values as indicative of “a new reality” that requires rejection of the traditional form of the novel and the invention of new techniques in fiction. The employment of stream of consciousness narration is the consequence of the new approach to character and psychology which comes to the foreground when man becomes isolated from the fellow individual. The open horizon of man’s psychology exempted modernists from maintaining the pretense that fictional world objectively exists. Instead of life-like, identifiable characters in their familiar social contexts, modernists realized it would suffice to create, as Nicol quoting Sarraute explains, “an anonymous first-person narrator/protagonist who is somehow ‘everything yet nothing’, and secondary characters who are consequently ‘deprived of their own existence’ by this narrator” (20). To cut it short, the linguistic communication crisis confines the novelists in the mind of their characters so much that their novels depict reality as nothing but what is in the narrator’s mind.

The manifestations of the distrust in language in Murdoch’s novels are basically for ontological rather than epistemological reasons. This puts her more in line with the ethos of postmodernism. By postmodernism I do not mean the negative idea of the Marxist critic Fredric Jameson who considering it as the extreme extension of modernism and a pathological condition resorts to the language of mental disorder to describe that
due to its stress on the loss of reality its effects are harmful.\(^9\) On the contrary, I mean the view of others who define postmodernism positively as celebration of multiple realities rather than as the harbinger of the death of reality. Cohen and Laure Taylor in their book *Escape Attempts* (1976), as Nicol explains, develop this view of the postmodern world, emphasizing on how “miniature escape fantasies” offered in such a world of advertising, pop culture and the media end in “split personalities” (8-9). Murdoch’s thematic stress on linguistic crisis helps her capture such realities without surrendering to Becket’s solution of silence. The relativism that her fiction embodies does not necessarily acknowledge the loss of reality. Portraying a group of people in their moral struggles, as in the novels under discussion, enables her not only to show that the everyday reality, to use Nicol’s terms, “is manufactured as a result of the interaction between given elements of the world and social convention, language, and individual vision” (8), but also to highlight the existence of an objective, ultimate truth which Burns affirms is at the heart of her novels (848).

The narratives of all the novels under discussion are full of gaps. Such lapses allow for the expression of multiple realities each as reliable and true as the others and indicate the impossibility of capturing the ultimate truth in the net-like linguistic accounts that due to their disposition to generalization cannot give full justice to the details of any circumstance. Jake in *Under the Net* remembers the outcome of his philosophic discussion with Dave, “[b]ut somehow we never seemed to get anywhere, and most of our conversations consisted of my saying something and Dave saying he didn’t understand what I meant and I saying it again and Dave getting very impatient” (*UTN* 25). Such instances of communication failure mainly in *Under the Net* and *The Philosopher’s Pupil*, *The Unicorn* and *The Bell*, while expressing a breakdown in the function of language are interlocked by reference to the ineffability of truth stressed especially in the three first-person narratives. Jake notes, “Hegel says that Truth is a great word and the thing is greater still” (*UTN* 25). The reason for Bradley’s idea in his

---

postscript that any speech whose meaning is not glowed out an ineffable understanding is “a deformation of the truth” is implicitly accounted for early in his narration when he says “how can one describe a human being ‘justly’? . . . How can those statements not be false? Even ‘I am tall’ has a context . . . . We defend ourselves by descriptions and tame the world by generalizing” (BP 55- 56). In his attempt to describe Crystal, Hilary puts forward egoism as the other cause of the inaccessibility of truth: “[n]one of this really describes Crystal however. How is it possible to describe someone to whom you are oned in love?” (WC 14)

The recurrent theme of language as an imperfect instrument to convey truth in Murdoch’s novels in which any philosophical attempt is doomed to failure is metafictionally and morally significant. Jake’s publication of a philosophic dialogue under the name of The Silencer fails critical recognition. Rozanov never completes his long-awaited great philosophical book and is driven to suicide instead. Max who is writing a book on Plato fails to make sense of Hannah’s suffering and stop the events that are heading to the final catastrophes. Rupert who is writing a treatise on love is caught in his vanity and dies as the consequence of Julius King’s joke. The near-saint Brendan Craddock in Henry and Cato intends to give up the teaching of philosophy and go to India. His statement in Wittgenstein’s fashion explains the fault of all aforementioned fellow speculators: “I never get to the end of it, never get to the bottom of it, never, never, never . . . everything that we concoct about God is an illusion” (HC 398). Such linguistic criticism of philosophic attempts in an art form that develops out of words paradoxically prioritizes literature especially the novel over philosophy.

Depicting the passivity and insensitivity of philosophers to the muddle of life, her novels are pulsating with her belief in the moral power of fiction. Like Muriel Spark, Murdoch writes to counteract modernists’ exultation over silence and expand their focus on the aesthetic value of literature. Their literary careers is an honest strive to restore the novel, discusses Nakagami, “the power to influence, or, if possible, to better the real lives of the real people through fictional narratives—through a ‘pack of lies’, to use Spark’s own phrase.” This ambition differentiates them from both aestheticists and pessimists since, as Nakagami continues, they believe in the “unique performative power” of fiction
and their own novels are the proof of its practicality (11). Murdoch’s six select novels are metafictional celebrations of the power of fiction to transform the falsehood of language into something morally good. In contrast to the general disbelief of linguistic analysts in literary language, they credit it powerful enough to unlock the truth of experience. Overcoming the disparate nature of reality without sacrificing its complexity, these novels are all what Kiernan Ryan comments about Under the Net: “a paradoxical vindication of its own impossible art” (xii).

Now the question is what grants fiction such priority. The answer is explainable in the light of Innis’s insightful article “Perception, Interpretation, and the Signs of Art.” In his discussion of “American” and “Continental” philosophical positions to “illuminate the essential dimensions of aesthetic experience and aesthetic reflection,” Innis stresses on their unanimous identification of three strata of “expressive,” “representation” and “signification” in any symbol. Building his study on Harriet Gavender’s encounter with a remarkable painting of St. Anthony and St. George in the National Gallery in Murdoch’s The Sacred and Profane Love Machine, Innis argues that while Murdoch’s focus is on the “receptive” side of the encounter, the scene reveals implicitly “the ‘dimensions’ within which Harriet’s meeting with the artwork takes place” (21). As a result it can be taken generally as an illumination of “the essential ‘moments’ in our encounter with works of art” (21). He believes that her ineffable experience at the gallery can be best explained through Dewey’s criticism of Gadamer’s language-based hermeneutical theory. In Dewey’s view, he quotes,

We unconsciously carry over [a] belief in the bounded character of all objects of experience (a belief founded ultimately in the practical exigencies of our dealings with things) into our conception of experience itself. We suppose that experience has the same definite limits as the things with which it is concerned. But any experience, the most ordinary, has an indefinite total setting. Things, objects, are only focal points of a here and now in a whole which stretches out indefinitely. This is the qualitative “background” which is defined and made definitely conscious in particular objects and specified properties and qualities. (qtd. in Innis 26)

Engrossed by the central tree in the painting, Harriet is actually caught in what Innis calls “the painting’s ‘aura’” (23) since Dewey believes that “about every explicit
and focal object there is a recession into the implicit which is not intellectually grasped” but acts as a frame for that object (qtd. in Innis 23).

What makes art different from other discourses, according to Innis, is, then, its concern over this qualitative background. Murdoch’s fiction self-consciously takes advantage of this capacity of art to improve its own moral quality. Her novels do not aim to be intelligible in the sense of being plausible stories; on the contrary, they consciously try to evoke an aesthetic experience in their readers to make them more morally qualified by enlarging their vision. Under the Net attracts attention to moral obstacles. The Black Prince foregrounds the vanity of man. A Word Child indicates the indispensable role of the contingent in man’s life. The Bell portrays the vision of true religion. The Unicorn projects man’s life as a simulation of art. And The Philosopher’s Pupil reveals man’s disposition to prejudgment.

Interweaving the question of language in such meta-art fiction, Murdoch bases her novels on a concept of mimesis that, as Innis explains, is formulated by Hans-Georg Gadamer in his analysis of modern painting. Gadamer restores mimesis to its Aristotelian sense believing that it can be a “universal aesthetic category” accounting the roles of “expression, imitation and sign” that an artistic work can play. He emphasizes that, notes Innis, for Aristotle mimesis is connected with “the joy of recognition,” (that is, the recognition of the represented in the representation) without forgetting the real distinction between representation and the represented (30). In this sense, Gadamerian mimesis is more than imitation in the realistic sense as a naturalistic resemblance or a copy. It is as he himself puts it “the presentation of order:” “that spiritual ordering energy that makes our life what it is.” As the result, any art-objects embody “the universal characteristic of human existence—the never-ending process of building a world” (qtd. in Innis 31)

It is this world, no matter how similar to our everyday life, that Murdoch builds in her fiction. By showing awareness of the unbridgeable gap between language and the real world in their very linguistic medium, her novels display to the reader the actual process of reading: we do not interpret fiction by focusing on its verbal meaning, but search for its “symbolic pregnance,” what Cassier define as “the basic symbolic value which probably precedes and prepares verbal meaning” and “whose fundamental stratum is the
“expressive,” upon which supervenes the stratum of “representation” and the stratum of “signification” (qtd. in Innis 24-25). In the fragmentation of her narratives into chapters, Murdoch achieves an element of surprise that by introducing some turn of events procrastinates the understanding of her novels. The integration of a mise en abyme whether in the form of hypodiegetic stories, as we see in the legend of the drowned bell in *The Bell*, or the famous works of painting, such as Bronzino’s picture of Venus, Cupid, Folly and Time in *The Nice and the Good*, or even statues, like the little bronze of the buffalo lady in *The Black Prince*, is her metafictional technique to say that artworks are symbols whose perception is held in the unity of vision. In her theory of art, Langer contends that even the linguistic work of art cannot be built up like the meaning of a discourse, but must be seen in toto first; that is, the “understanding” of a work of art begins with the intuition of the whole presented feeling. Contemplation then gradually reveals the complexities of the piece, and of its import. In discourse, meaning is synthetically construed by a succession of intuitions; but in art the complex whole is seen or anticipated first. (379)

In the parallelism between themselves and other forms of art, her novels self-reflexively deny the possibility of extracting any definite meaning out of their symbols to be expressed by other equivalent symbols; that is, the possibility of a faithful translation or paraphrase. In this sense, her novels conspicuously exemplify Langer’s view expressed by Innis: art’s wholeness “is the semiotic . . . key to art’s inexhaustibility and inability to be formulated in or translated into ‘concepts’” (25).

What exempts her novels from the effects of the linguistic crisis that has shaken the validity of philosophy, as they self-reflexively project, is that artistic import is always exhibited rather than expressed. Their paradoxical reliance on language does not inhibit them from conjuring an aesthetic experience for readers to enlighten them on the complexity of human condition. Since any art-form works symbolically, none of her novels are reducible to a stable meaning. Full of symbolic scenes of enclosing and imprisonment, *Under the Net* stacks together various layers of meanings. The net can be the web of language, the generalizing tendency of philosophy, the fantasy mechanism of consciousness or the cultural determinism. It can be for the characters, the author, or even the reader who gets entrapped in what Murdoch calls “the battle between real people and
images” (“Against Dryness” 16) since the characters are familiar people with allegorical aspects. The black prince, can be the epithet for Bradley Pearson whose initiatives are B. P.; associated with Hamlet, it may be for Julian who enacts as Hamlet especially when she takes a sheep skull she has found at the seaside to Patara and puts on Hamlet outfits later; it might be for Rachel who seems to be jealous of Arnold’s love for Bradley. A word child can be Hilary, Christ or a reference to the unrealized desire of the women of the novel for a child; it can even be a name for the novel itself that takes its existence from the constellation of words. The bell, an eponymous title referring to two bells in the novel, can indicate both the bell-like function of the novel and the hollow immoral self people develop through their vanity. In addition to Jesus, Hannah, and even Denis, the unicorn is associated with both the moral and aesthetic ideals. Finally the philosopher’s pupil may be anybody from George, Stella and Tom McCaffrey to Hattie Meynell.

The impossibility of determining the meaning of her novels reflected in these multifarious referents for their titles is a credit to Saussure’s theory that language does not need the world to function. It is a “system of differences with no positive term” (Saussure 120). The yield to multiple interpretations along with being stuffed by numerous allusions to other literary and non-literary arts puts her fiction in sync with postmodern fiction which incarnates the idea of language independency by displaying that, as Nicol puts, “specific words in a literary text mean what they mean because of how they relate to other words in the text and to other literary texts rather than how they relate to the real world” (7). However, in their preoccupation with language, they do not go to the extreme postmodern fiction are usually inclined to; that is, they never reduce human subjectivity to a linguistic unit with no spiritual goal but aim to highlight man’s moral dimension and the existence of an ultimate reality.

Her creative way to connect the nature of truth and nature of language, although has definite affinity with Wittgenstein’s theory in his Philosophical Investigations (1953) that language is meaningful only in its particular context or encapsulated in Jake’s words “actions don’t lie, words always do” (UTN 257), is a tribute to the truthfulness of literary language out of context. Having the question of language alive in the consciousness of some of her characters and suggesting its curtailed function in the need her narrators feel
for further explanations in the parentheses and in her personal symbols, Murdoch reminds
the reader of the conventionality of language, the Saussurean idea that the signifier and
the signified are yoked together arbitrarily. However, making all these revelations in the
linguistic art of fiction, Murdoch wants the reader to see language as an artifice, a
communicative device that, as Spear expounds, can be used to “displays or conceal”, “a
theatre” able to put on “a show which may or may not represent the speaker’s true
thoughts”, and open to various interpretations according to the addressee’s needs (23).
The farcical scenes that embellish almost all her plots are her way of marking language
inefficiency and her compliment to the mysteries of human condition.

3.3 Art and Artist

The trend for the self-conscious literary narrative after 1930s besides being taken
as a mode for reflecting the virtual reality of the postmodern age has been associated with
“high modernism.” Defining high modernism as the dominant literary movement of
around 1890s to 1930s, Nicol contends for its formative influence on metafiction
asserting, “[i]t ‘destabilized’ the widely held conception of the novel as the form geared
up to presenting accurately the nature of the relationship between the individual and
society, and prompted an increased self-consciousness amongst novelists about the
practice of writing fiction, which often took the form of skepticism about the very
function or possibility of realism” (19). Although writing from 1954 to 1995,
Murdoch definitely interweaves the same preoccupations in her novels, it is doubtful, as will be
shown in this section, that she follows the same aesthetics to renounce the possibility of
realism.

One way or the other, all her fiction deals with the features and functions of art,
especially the art of storytelling. Directly or indirectly, they spark a sense of curiosity
about “what is art?” by incorporating deliberate interest in the problems of narration and
narrative devices. The direct approach is identifiable in her novels in which the narrator is
conscious of his act of writing a novel, namely, her first-person narratives as well as in
*The Philosopher’s Pupil* in which the narrator tries to be traditionally self-effacing. In
these novels the narrators are preoccupied by the relationship between art of fiction and
truth and how much narrative conventions are effective in yielding the actual reality.
Each of the three retrospective novels under analysis focuses on the problem of fiction in a unique way. *Under the Net* accounts the apprehensions of a would-be novelist over the representational function of language and his final resort to the soothing magical power of fiction to forget the unbridgeable gap between the language and the world. In this novel, as Spear affirms, “[t]he very telling of the story . . . is itself an artifice” (23). Jake’s description of the way he compiled his *The Silencer* is a self-reflexive reflection on how fiction is a more a self-contained pattern than a mirror of reality:

I now expanded it to cover a large number of our conversations, which I presented not necessarily as I remembered them to have occurred, but in a way which fitted in with the plan of the whole. A quite considerable book began to take shape. I kept it in the form of a dialogue between two characters called Tamarus and Annandine. The curious thing was that I could see quite clearly that this work was from start to finish an objective justification of Hugo’s attitude. That is, it was a travesty and falsification of our conversations. (*UTN* 70)

His frequent reference to himself as the author of what we are reading as in his comments on the way of his characterization, his remark that “my acquaintance with Hugo is the central theme of this book,” and his direct numerous addressing of his readers as “you” makes his narrative a “self-begetting novel,” what Kellman defines to be “at the same time an account of its own birth and of the rebirth of its principal protagonist and novelist” (95). A hack translator of cheap French fiction, a psychologically unstable and introspective figure in hatred of contingency, Jake takes writing fiction as his vocation after a series of events expose his limited selfish way of dealing with the world. To express his shock that life is more than his universe, a constellation of separate but mutually influencing universes, he trusts that fiction can be feasible only if he exposes its weakness and mechanism. This satisfactory strategy is the only possible way to contribute to civilization as foreshadowed in the philosophical dialogue in *The Silencer* that brings to mind Plato’s dialogues:

TAMARUS: . . . Any concept can be misused. Any sentence can state a falsehood. But words themselves don’t tell lies. A concept may have limitations but these won’t mislead if I expose them in my use of it.

ANNANDINE: Yes, that’s the grand style of lying. Put down your best half truth and call it a lie, but let it stand all the same. It will survive when your qualifications have been forgotten, even by yourself.
TAMARUS: But life has to be lived, and to be lived it has to be understood. This process is called civilization. What you say goes against our very nature. We are rational animals in the sense of theory-making animals. (UTN 90-91)

The Black Prince deals with the question of the fiction and art in a more obsessive way. Bradley is so scrupulously concerned to distinguish two possible forms of art in terms of their relation to truth and to introduce himself as the disciple of the higher version that one is alerted to doubt him as such artist. Being an account of Bradley’s eventual success in creating his long-awaited novel, his narrative is a celebration of his talent than a celebration of his love for Julian. This makes the novel a more complicated project than Under the Net since, as Spear points to, “the actual telling itself undermines—or, alternatively, becomes part of—the plot” (74). The appendage of the postscripts by the dramatis personae and the editor complicates the status of his story and the question of truthful narration. Nevertheless, these postscripts prove essential to provide a practical embodiment of Bradley’s theory of the great art that he himself fails to achieve.

The nature of art is the topic that Bradley picks in his “Foreword” and continues to return to in several pauses he makes to speak to his “dear friend” directly or indirectly. These ideas that have Jake’s preoccupations at their core—“real thoughts come out of silence” and “art comes out of endless restraint and silence” (BP 25-26)—are broader in scope and talk, in more details, of the temptations and difficulties that prevent the creation of the truthful good art. Bradley even openly underscores metafictional techniques as the indispensable part of any great art: “[a]rt . . . is the telling of truth, and is the only available method for the telling of certain truths. Yet how almost impossibly difficult it is not let the marvels of the instrument itself interfere with the task to which it is dedicated” (55). He furthermore licenses irony as the only capable tool to provide truth with an apt form:

Of course, as you have so often pointed out, we may attempt to attain truth through irony. . . . Almost any tale of our doings is comic. We are bottomlessly comic to each other. . . . The novel is a comic form. Language is a comic form, and makes jokes in its sleep. . . . Yet it is also the case that life is horrible without metaphysical sense, wrecked by chance, pain and the close prospect of death. Out of this is born irony, our dangerous and necessary tool.
Irony is a form of ‘tact’ (witty word). It is our tactful sense of proportion in the selection of forms for the embodying beauty. Beauty is present when truth has found an apt form” (55).

Although the other layers of experience that the other characters bring to light in the limited scope of their postscripts reveal Bradley’s failure to write the great work he has awaited for years, his work is not without merit. Being crammed with self-reflexive reflection on the apprehension of life through art, Bradley’s achievement shows the role of narrative in orienting his apprehension of life. As Spear remarks, “only through his narrated autobiography does Bradley’s life take on meaning and reality both for himself and his readers; only by examining each event is he able finally to distinguish [partly] reality from appearance . . . only by the actual act of writing his memoir is he able to realise himself as novelist and artist” (addition mine 79). Bradley’s attempt to verbalize his interpretation of art not only helps him respect contingencies and complexity of his experience but also persuades us of the necessity of the artistic form to make sense of them. P. Loxias, the editor of his work who claims to be the “dear friend” referred to in the text, regards Bradley’s narrative as a drama. Bradley’s unconscious adaptation of the theatrical technique of stage direction and his reflection over the nature of art in the style of “aside” are the strategies that put his narration into a familiar form as well as grant his story an eternal dimension by incorporating present-tense descriptions that make it true to all time. It is the indicator of Bradley’s desire to control his life. Being a playwright gives him the power to domineer anything from scene to what the characters do as the characters’ postscripts acknowledge.

The fragmented, multi-agent narration of The Black Prince, though undermines the romantic drama Bradley chooses to organize his obsession with certain past events, is a credit to the indispensable realization of form in any aesthetic perception which Dewey summarizes to include “original seizure and subsequent critical discrimination” as Innis quotes. For Dewey, before any logical interpretation, Innis adds, a reader has a “preanalytic apprehension of meaning or significance” of works of art (23). Underscoring Bradley’s account a novel, an autobiography, a fantastic writing and a literary failure, each subsequent postscript is an embodiment of the way readers first perceive wholeness in Bradley’s account and then try to understand what he is trying to
say. We cannot decide for the significance of the novel until we have a bird’s-eye view by the end of the novel. This makes the question of form one of the concerns of the novel, a theme that Murdoch deals with more conspicuously in the novels which have the perception of some famous paintings at their center. With so many versions of the story, Murdoch’s The Black Prince is the evidence of Bradley’s observation, “work consists very often of simply refusing all formulations which have not achieved the density, the special state of fusion, which is the unmistakable mark of art” (116). We cannot see it as such unless we grasp the “harmonious ensemble” which in Dewey’s words is “the musical quality” of any art (qtd. in Innis 24).

Hilary in A Word Child and N in The Philosopher’s Pupil are concerned over their narration in their own idiosyncratic ways without cramming their narratives with excessive reflections on language and art as in Under the Net and The Black Prince. Another first-person narrator, Hilary frequently pauses to characterize the people of his plot and the setting; although his comments question the representationality of these traditional conventions, he is not as self-conscious as Jake and Bradley. Murdoch herself accepts that, as Spear remarks, “she did not actually make ‘Hilary telling of the story itself into part of the story’” (23). As will be shown later, this novel in a more indirect way kindles the reader’s interest in the relationship of art and truth. The first-person narrator in The Philosopher’s Pupil parodies the traditional form of the novel by his self-conscious imitation of the role of an objective omniscient narrator. It is in the pursuit of this goal that he creates a conspicuously interrupted narrative which is overflowing with his presence; N legitimizes his presence by many parenthetical insertions, his freedom to pin down the characters—he refers to Emma as “Horatio to our Hamlet, or (for they often exchanged roles) Hamlet to our Horatio” (PP 125)—and his metafictional comments on the difficulty of paying tribute to life’s contingency and man’s consciousness: “[w]e are in fact far more randomly made, more full of rough contingent rubble, than art or vulgar psycho-analysis lead us to imagine” (81). Calling himself N while he is still a character in his story, he at most just achieves the concealment of his identity not the objective account he has set forth in the “Our Town” part of the prelude of the novel. The aesthetic impression we receive at the end of such bulky narrative is that objective narrative is just a convention and any account is partial and selective.
Besides these self-conscious engagements, Murdoch employs certain other indirect ways to shed light on the question of art generally and fiction particularly. Like the direct approach, these allusions point to two possible kinds of art: when it has consolatory effect on both its creator and the observer and when it flays their “self” and offers them a vision of reality. The former version is suggested in the self-protecting role literary plots and patterns play in the life of a group of her characters. The qualities of latter version which Murdoch considers as “great art” are indicated through the description of the effect of music on some of her characters and the aesthetical perception of some great paintings by certain others.

*The Black Prince*, *A Word Child* and *The Bell* are quite similar in the unique way that they flash out the consolatory effect of plots for distressed people. Bradley writes what he believes is his long-awaited masterpiece while serving his life sentence for the murder of Arnold, a fellow popular novelist friend. There he embodies the events that led to his incarceration in a controversial romance. The satisfaction he derives out of completing this romance (obvious in his postscript) in the face of the consequent upbraiding postscripts leaves no doubt that his writing was “a therapeutic plot.” Mattingly defines to occur “in a kind of gap, a space of desire created by the distance between where the protagonist is and where [he] wants to be” (qtd. in Nakagami 16). Excessively obsessed by the unexpected events, Bradley tries to make it tolerable by making it into a story. In this regard, he is much like Charles Arrowby in *The Sea, the Sea* who, as his cousin James tries to remind him, has made his childhood romance into a story and has invented himself the role of a broken-hearted lover to account for his life, forgetting that “stories are false” (*SS* 335).

*A Word Child* too is a therapeutic plot whose narrator Hilary invents to soothe his guilty conscience. After his affair with Gunnar’s first wife, Anne, which ended up in her eventual death in a car accident when he was trying to take her away, Hilary’s life loses all its significance and purpose. Mattingly asserts, “[t]he essence of meaningless is when lived experience seems to be driven by no form other than brute sequence” (qtd. in Nakagami 15). It is obvious in his account of his misery and the scheduled repetitious life he has developed after hiding himself in London. Only by a strange turn of events does
he feel stimulated to give some meaning to his life. After twenty years of routine and despair that, according to Nakagami, pushes people “out of the rich current of emotion-laden time” (15), Hilary falls in love with Gunnar’s second wife, Lady Kitty. This love kindles a dramatic transformation in his life. Not only does it disrupt his usual routine as he cancels all his scheduled visits and resigns from his job but also it germinates his narrative that we are reading. Hilary who in his childhood was fascinated by literature and has constructed his self-esteem through adoration for words and learning many languages has never imagined to write—“I never thought of myself as a ‘writer’ or tried to become one”—because of his despair. Mattingly says, “there is no story where there is no desire” (qtd. in Nakagami 15). However, after Kitty dies in another unpredicted accident, he sets to write of the events that led to it to prevent the life desire that evolved out of his love for Kitty from extinguishing. He does not want to suffer as he did after Anne’s death. So he writes *A Word Child*, a therapeutic plot to save himself from being “crushed” or “unmanned.”

The diary-like narration Murdoch adopts here, in which we never get into the real inner life of other characters, illuminates how much narration is actually selective by focusing on the one person’s interpretation of events. It moreover, reveals Hilary’s selfishness. Deprived of the consolatory effects of his daily schedule after getting acquainted with Lady Kitty, he tries to control the chaos that ends in her death by writing *A Word Child* in a format that assures him of familiarity and routine. Attracting attention to multiple agents that have brought about what happened to him, his narrative puts on an exonerative air at least to appease his conscience.

Similarly, *The Bell* indicates that the sort of art people resort to satisfy their selfish desires is degenerative and doomed to failure. Despaired of the improvement of her relationship with her husband Paul at the community, Dora suddenly leaves the place and after visiting her lover and having a strange aesthetic encounter with Gainsborough’s picture of his two daughters at the National Gallery, she returns to Amber Court inspired by the painting that everything can go all right. Here Toby divulges to her the place of a drowned bell in the lake. Being sure that the bell is the same one referred to in the legend Paul has studied in the abbey’s historical documents, she becomes excited at the power
that its restoration can bestow on her. She approves of Toby’s plot to take the bell out because she thinks the project can compensate for the empty, pathetic existence Paul reduced her to. Despite their difficult but scrupulous execution of the restoration plan, they fail to keep it secret and substitute the old bell for the new bell. This failure like the betrayal of Bradley’s story and Hilary’s blatant attempt to cohere his past experiences in a pattern evinces that the therapeutic plots are the result of rooted selfish desires and working of fantasy.

In a more complicated way, the question of literary pattern is at the heart of *The Unicorn* and *The Philosopher’s Pupil*. In these novels unlike the aforesaid novels, the restrictive and morally degenerative function of literary patterns is at issue. They do not denounce the conventional plots totally but point to their indispensability and their possible moral merits. The morally degenerative effect of plots is highlighted via Marian’s and Effingham’s character in *The Unicorn*. Discerning a fairy-tale plot dominating the life at Gaze as soon as she learns from Denis the cause of the anxious atmosphere at Gaze, Marian realizes her place in the plot as a chaperone. But deluded by her vanity, she decides to resist the role and dispel the lethargic magic that has tamed people into their assumed roles. She sets to awaken Hannah to her possible freedom not for her sake but to assert her own free will. Driven selfishly by a desire to make significant actions by and for herself, she like Dora fails and eventually brings about four tragic deaths. In this conflict over the authorial intention, Marian’s struggle to take over the plot is reflective of the possible fantastic origins of plots. Effingham similarly attracts attention to the moral torpidity that plots raise in people because of their restrictive scope. In line with the medieval romances, he assigns himself the role of a courtly lover and frequently visits Hannah during his vacations in Riders, satisfied with such relationship and indifferent to her actual feelings. Even his final succumbing to Marian’s plan of kidnapping Hannah to expose her to the reality outside Gaze Castle is to satisfy his own desire for an authorial power. That interference in Hannah’s life would trigger a counterpoint narrative in which Marian and he can see themselves as authors and readers as well as characters.
The irony is the ego-propping property of plots is expressed through the conventional pattern of the gothic plot that closes with an anticipation of the resurgence of similar flow of events as Denis leaves the place trying to quench Ate—“the almost automatic transfer of suffering from one being to another” (TU 38). Here Murdoch demonstrates that plot (a metonymy for fiction) can be morally functional only if it points to its weakness. *The Philosopher’s Pupil*, similarly, reveals the defects of realistic plots through parodying its conventions. Employing a self-conscious narrator in a narrative that copies the format of realistic plots with a large cast and a vision of future helps Murdoch reflect the possible selfish impulse behind such plots while crediting their all-encompassing capacity. N interrupts his narration to brag of his objectivity “I am the narrator—the discreet and self-effacing narrator” (PP 23). However, jolted into his presence and his perspective in many occasions, we readily condemn his vanity to achieve an authorial stance. The structural irony in *The Philosopher’s Pupil* is that Murdoch never loses her own objective stance in the novel that repudiates its very possibility.

Being criticized for her mechanical plots clearly evidences Murdoch’s experiment with plot. Spear considers Henry James’s interest in patterns as the major influence in her novels (14-15). As shown in all the select novels, Murdoch takes advantage of the expressive aspect of plot while exposing its morally blunting effect in one way or the other. The fault that Murdoch finds with plot is its exclusiveness and partiality; she takes in the self-reflexive techniques of metafiction to display that, as Nicol states, “narrative is always the result of selection and interpretation” (12). This is best expressed in Jake’s introspection near the end of *Under the Net*: “[e]vents stream past us like these crowds and the face of each is seen only for a minute. What is urgent is not urgent forever but only ephemerally” (UTN 275).

Although a couple of her novels incorporate the issue of music and painting, *The Bell* is the only one among the select group that explores the issue of aesthetic perception via them. Here in contrast to *The Sacred and Profane Love Machine*, the focus is more on what art (the paintings and the medieval bell) does on and for its addressee than the way the sign-reading interpreter is being moved. Music that, according to Bove, “is a viable
Returning back from London, she arrives late at night when the community is listening to Bach recital; “[s]he listened now with distaste to the hard patterns of sound which plucked at her emotions without satisfying them and which demanded in an arrogant way to be contemplated. Dora refused to contemplate them” (TB 199). Although she is not open to music as she was to the paintings at the National Gallery, music like the paintings demands her full attention: “Dora was always moved by the pictures. Today she was moved, but in a new way. She marvelled, with a kind of gratitude, that they were all still here, and her heart was filled with love for the pictures, their authority, their marvellous generosity, their splendour. It occurred to her that here at last was something real and something perfect” (196). Such naked impression of music is reiterated in The Unicorn when Denis plays piano and sings at the family party at the Gaze. While he sings, Marian feels “a great golden object rising slowly through space” as “sound sovereign [s] over vision” (TU 303, 304). The hovering golden object is Murdoch’s personal symbol for the way all great art works on man.

The paintings in the National Gallery affect Dora similarly by offering her perfect independent objects, sympathetic to her yet unconquerable:

Vaguely, consoled by the presence of something welcoming and responding in the place, her footsteps took her to various shrines at which she had worshipped so often before: the great light spaces of Italian pictures, more vast and southern than any real South, the angels of Botticelli, radiant as birds, delighted as gods, and curling like the tendrils of a vine, the glorious carnel presence of Susanna Fourment, the tragic presence of Margarethe Trip, the solemn world of Piero della Francesca with its early-morning colours, the enclosed and gilded world of Crivelli. Dora stopped at last in front of Gainsborough’s picture of his two daughters. These children step through a wood hand in hand, their garments shimmering, their eyes serious and dark, their two pale heads, round full buds, like yet unlike. (TB 195-196)

Her encounter with the paintings to which she refers as her “mystical experience” has a revolutionary effect on her life and helps her choose her future more deliberately. Their affective tone makes them, as Innis comments about Harriet Gavender’s perception of a famous picture of St. Anthony and St. George in The Sacred and Profane Love Machine, “a source both of self-recognition and of a kind of shattered, even undefined
and indefinable, self-completion” (21). The final independence that she seems to experience and decide for her future at the closing of the novel is the consequence of her aesthetic experience whether through the paintings or the bell. In this sense, *The Bell* exemplifies Wagner-Lawlor’s observation that the “‘transmission’ of a ‘real’ experience through the perception and reception of art is a core Murdoch motive” (14). Dora’s final bold attempt to save Catherine, while she herself does not know swimming, is indicative of the definite moral growth that art stimulated in her. In complementing the gallery paintings and the bell carvings, she learns the virtue of attending through realizing that art is the artist’s commitment to “truth” undistorted by any desire or will. As Levenson asserts, it is in a tribute to Weil’s attention that the novel ends. In front of the works of art, Dora’s attention is “other-centered”; it is drawn out of herself to the good that lies beyond. As Murdoch argues in *The Sovereignty of Good*, proper attention “is, contrary to nature, outward, away from the self which reduces all to a false unity, towards the great surprising variety of the world, and the ability so to direct attention is love” (65). What Dora learns gradually is more than being open to novelty. Her decision to abandon Paul and complete her studies in Bath, working there as a primary-school teacher indicates that she has learned to see reality as it is including both the other and herself.

The depiction of the moral function of art is not the sole end of *The Bell*. The last sentence opens another window into its goal. “From the tower above her the bell began to ring for Nones. She scarcely heard it. Already for her it rang from another world. Tonight she would be telling the whole story to Sally” (*TB* 329). Here Murdoch encapsulates a metafictional commentary on the status of *The Bell* itself. On the one hand, it shows that a truthful story requires moral openness in its author. On the other hand, it equals *The Bell* itself to that truthful story. Putting *The Bell* on par with the paintings and music in its capacity to contain truth, Murdoch accomplishes another attack on Plato’s denunciation of art. In Martin’s words, she gives another example of a more general motif in her fiction proving that the Platonic “shadow of shadow” is not “illusion” but “real” (128). Shedding light on the value of art and fiction, she is hopeful of the future of man’s moral life. In a utopian style, explains Wagner-Lawlor, she suggests that “any good life—or better life—is pursued neither from the outside in nor from the inside out but precisely in the in-between realm of human intersubjectivity that is the resonance of ‘art work’, where
imaginative sympathy is possible in “the capacity to love, that is to see”” (16). The already otherworldly resonance of the bell for Dora, in this light, is metafictionally significant; it points to the resonance of The Bell endorsing the art of storytelling and the moral force integrated in its structure.

Considering the forgoing, the message Murdoch conveys through her six paradoxical plots is what the bell does to Dora: real work of art is an act of love, a pursuit of sympathy for what is not “self”; goodness lies not in selflessness but the call of a self, as unbiased as the clang of the bell, for other human beings. Characterizing adults as various as Dora (in The Bell), Colette Forbes (in Henry and Cato), Emily McHugh (in The Sacred and Profane Love Machine), Daisy and Tim Reede (in Nuns and Soldiers), her fiction stresses that those with artistic gifts are capable to cope with the harsh reality and have a glimpse of goodness only if they learn to inhibit their creative imagination from degenerating into fantasy by being open to the physical world. They should be artists not magicians as we see clearly in the case of Dora; only true artists can contain the necessity and chance in their work without projecting it as their own choice and will as magicians do.

Representatives of her career, the six novels show that, like religion and philosophy, fiction fails in elevating man’s soul, if it does not comply with the requirements of the truth. Only new self-reflecting configurations (like those she creates) are able to offer us self-understanding by orienting us to and within an artistic world. Her complex, metafictional novels embody Bradley’s idea of art as “the struggle to be, in a particular sort of way, virtuous” (BP 154). In her unique, detailed, insightful depictions of human relationships, she offers an unparalleled portrayal of human consciousness in all its complexity and clarifies the moral problem of both artists and their addressees, what in Bradley’s eyes never has been achieved:

In fact the problem remains unclarified because no philosopher and hardly any novelist has ever managed to explain what that weird stuff, human consciousness, is really made of. Body, external objects, darty memories, warm fantasies, other minds, guilt, fear, hesitation, lies, glees, doles, breath-taking pains, a thousand things which words can only fumble at, coexist, many fused together in a single unit of consciousness. (155)
To sum up, Murdoch experiments with the form of the novel because of her faith in its valuable potential. In a pamphlet “Contemporary Writers: Iris Murdoch” published about her in 1988, she states, “[n]ovels are individuals, about individuals, essentially comic, essentially sad, telling of the secret travail which ordinary life conceals, and formulating deep truths about human society and the human soul. They are also works of art” (qtd. in Spear 19). Centering on art and love, her novels equate great art and intense love and self-reflexively foreground themselves in their heteroglossic feature and extensive scope as the best possible form for intimations of the truth. As proofs of the collapse of the distinction between art and ethics for Murdoch who believes that “the aesthetic situations are not so much analogies of morals as cases of morals” (SOG 38), they justify her more clear defiance of the murmur of the death of the novel when she declares “[t]his supreme literary form is . . . only now beginning its reign; long may it travel with us” (qtd. in Spear 14).

3.4 Dissolution of Reality-Fiction Dichotomy

Like many of her contemporaries, those who later come to be labeled postmodern, Murdoch’s major concern in both her philosophy and fiction is to theorize and represent the “universal” condition of human beings while paying tribute to the particularity of each individual and situation. The solution she comes up with differentiates her from her contemporary fellow writers who risk their reading population and even the narrativity of their text for the same cause. Susan Sontag in her article “One Culture and the New Sensibility” (1965) connects the commonest complaint about the narratives of Beckett or Burroughs to the frustration they cause in the reader. Their respective resort to “silence” and patched-up, perforated narratives makes their writings resistant to go down easily. Avoiding these extremes, Murdoch never has her fiction losing its readability because she still believes in the sublime function of art to elevate man’s soul.

What enables her to incorporate both universality and particularity in her fiction is a metafictional device that equips her fiction with the essential feature to take over what philosophy and religion failed to fulfill. She does not make a fully separate imaginary world nor does she create a familiar convincible picture of reality naturalized in realistic and modernist tradition. Her fiction, on the contrary, dissolves the taken-for-granted
dichotomy of reality/fiction not to deny the existence of an external reality independent from human consciousness but to expose the similarity of fiction and the perceived reality in their dependence on “frames.” To fulfill this goal, Murdoch works on two levels; first she dissolves the binary on the diegetic level, and then paradoxically blurs the distinction on the meta-diegetic level by making the fictional world an extension of the historical world.

On the diegetic level, she relies on two methods for this end: whether overtly when her novels attract attention to their structural imitation of another frame usually fictional as in *The Bell, The Unicorn* and *The Black Prince*; or covertly when a confusion between ontological levels and the characters’ visions, dreams and hallucinatory states controls and decides their apparent “reality” as in *Under the Net, A Word Child* and *The Philosopher’s Pupil*. The first group is the epitome of the way she takes advantage of the old mythologies to explore the aftermath of Nietzsche’s declaration of the “death of God”. Spear takes the copious “classical and mythological references” in *The Black Prince* as “a framework for the action” and the “enabling agents for the discussion of art and life” (81). There Bradley, whose fantasy-driven life like that of almost anybody else in Murdoch’s novels takes control of his interaction with others, develops a relation to Arnold’s family as complicated as that of Hamlet to his household.

*Hamlet* plays a deeper structural role in the formation of *The Black Prince*. This great classical drama lends much to the tile, theme, plot, symbolism and imagery of the novel. The interesting point is that *Hamlet* underlies the world of all the other characters not only Bradley. Anyone of the four stage characters (Bradley, Arnold, Rachel and Julian) enacts Hamlet so the events and relationships can be accordingly reconfigured. These duplications help Murdoch depict that since characters see through the prism of their self-interest, they take in what is outside them necessarily distorted and in false shades. Once the parallelism between the play and the story strike us, Bradley’s unconventional interpretation of *Hamlet* in his tutorial discussion of the drama with Julian becomes metafictionally insightful since it turns the novel into a narrative that is aware of the criticism that it may arouse and anticipates the interpretations that it may yield to. This parallel framework of *Hamlet* to the narrative in which the narrator is too
obsessed with the relationship of art and love ends in a more effective interlacing of art and ethics that Murdoch advocates through her philosophy.

The disruption of reality-fiction dichotomy qualifies Murdoch’s novels to reflect the mysterious reality of human life since it encourages the reader to draw the same parallelism between his world and the world of the novel as that world drew between itself and another fictional world. Having a medieval legend as the frame of action, *The Bell* reminds the reader that “a massive lack of connection with the world,” as one of her characters states, is the reason of modern man’s moral failure. To overcome it, it is essential for contemporary people to improve their relationships diligently as Dora realizes when she takes control of her life more consciously. Making sense of her life in the light of the legend, Dora improves morally so much that, in a way, she does not allow the legend to repeat the drowning of a nun as her bold strive to stop Catherine from her suicidal attempt successfully alerts others to the spot, saving both of them. Reierson believes that the stage characters in *The Bell* are wrestling with moral questions such as “how do we get beyond our own self-interest to value other people fully for themselves? How can we use power appropriately and not be destroyed by its capacity for evil expression? . . . Should we attempt the best acts we know or the second-best ones we can be sure we will succeed at? Can our religious life rise above the imposition of our own view and wishes to become something greater?” Obsessed by the same set of questions while reading the novel, the reader realizes, as the parallelism between the legend and the story suggests, that goodness is not a matter of choice and conventions but an autonomous response to the perception of what is other than the self as the spontaneous wading of Dora into the river to save Catherine in spite of all its risks reveals.

Unlike *The Bell* that draws on a particular legend that is for us as fictitious as the novel itself, *The Unicorn* is formulated on the generic conventions of fairy tales so that its full apprehension requires a literary competence in the traditional fairytales. Its reading strikes the mind of competent readers with images from *The Sleeping Beauty* and “Beauty and the Beast” even *Peter and Wendy* while the novel remains surprisingly distinct. It is the account of the conscious attempt of the personae to conform to and then resist the established roles in fairy tales. On their way to Blackport, Jamesie tells Marian,
“[a]ll the people round here are related to the fairies” (TU 120). Hannah is playing the role of the heroine, the innocent virgin girl expecting a virtuous hero as the award for her virtue. Gerald enacts the cruel guard, the villain who feeds on her innocence. Violet acts as the envious old maid who, like Cinderella’s step-sisters, enjoys Hannah’s suffering under undeserved neglect. Denis is a sacrificing faithful servant and Marian is summoned to be the chaperone and keep Hannah more under surveillance, the role that she consciously resists hence triggers the macabre plot of The Unicorn.

The fusion of mythical and realistic elements has been so reiterated in her novels that it has been taken as the staple of Murdoch’s literary style. Critics like Spear depreciate The Italian Girl as the least successful of her novels for the insufficient fusion of the two. They believe that the failure reduces the convincibility of the characters and the plausibility of the plot. Spear asserts that “even Edmund Narraway, the first-person narrator, is unconvincing. . . . the characters remain mythological and the ending is like that of a fairy tale” (50). What makes The Unicorn special among Murdoch’s novels is its successful intertwinement of its modern story with the fairy-tale tradition, that is, its triumph to create modern individuals with “fairy blood.”

It does not mean, however, that her fiction attracts us to a familiar world that soothes our senses. Readers are still struck by the unfamiliar world that rises against their consciousness. In his article “Iris Murdoch: Everybody Through the Looking Glass,” Kriegel uses the allusion to Lewis Carroll’s unreal world of looking glass to extend his argument from the incredibility of Murdoch’s characters to the unreality of her world (73). As seen in the case of The Unicorn, such proclamation is not the whole truth about her fiction. To adopt Spears’s comment, there are “the deliberate staging of the action of the novels, the dual plot, the mythological story [the archetypal patterns] which run parallel with the story of the real world and which is necessary to the understanding of the real world” (addition mine 45).

Murdoch easily dispenses with a realistic plot of the nineteenth century because she believes, as she states in the Gifford lectures (1982), that “[i]n good art we do not ask for realism, we ask for truth” (qtd. in Spear 25). The continuous exposure of the fairy-tale frame as the backbone of the world of the novel stimulates readers to comprehend the
complexity beyond their simplistic interpretations of the events and people. It reminds them that their perception of the world is always like fairy tales black and white while the actual reality is as complex and as indefinable as the life in the Scarren. The social, political and philosophical implications *The Unicorn* integrates in its unfamiliarized world bring immediately to mind *The Flight from Enchanter* which often astonishes us with its remoteness form the real life. The moral mission it fulfills via its fairy-tale frame, moreover, puts it on par with *The Green Knight* where the close interlace of myth and reality, as Spear puts, sucks the reader “into a world in which mystic events seem to be inseparable from those of the natural world”(15).

This strange world incarnates in another form in the second group of Murdoch’s select novels. There a group of individuals are depicted who have lost contact with the people around them due to their imprisonment in their fantastic life. Unable to distinguish between the made-up story they impose on their experiences and the actual ones, these figures shake the common certainty about the stable and objective relationship of the reader to the fictional world, and make us suspicious of our own objective perception of our everyday experiences. Restricted to the focalization of their first-person narrators, *Under the Net* and *A Word Child* are clear portrayals of the confusion of the two parallel worlds the narrators were living at the time of the story. By the end of *Under the Net*, we realize that Jake has lived his unfruitful, stagnant life because of the apathetic state of mind whose existentialist belief in the total individual freedom (a gift from his frequent visit to France to translate the fiction of Jean Pierre Breteuil) has reduced him to. His loss of contact with almost all his friends is “a natural consequence of his inaction and inattention,” Nakagami points to (13). To state clearly, it is the outcome of the excessive confidence in his power to bring about what he wants whenever he wills. This kind of self-satisfaction has numbed Jake’s sensitivity to reality by spreading a file of fantasy over his eyes. Highlighting his solipsism, Spear points to the world he creates by inventing “the roles of others around him, basing on his own beliefs” (33). Jake’s tendency to pin down anybody and anything in the past along with the traditional frame of quest he chooses for the narration of that past underlies the ontological similarity of reality and fiction. Besides, illuminating Jake’s quixotic quest as a moral endeavor to re-establish ties with people not a traditional, sacred crusade for the Holy Grail, the
shattering of his invented world by Hugo’s confession in his hospital room metafictionally demonstrates the artificiality of the novel: its reliance on frames that always tend to cut reality short.

Similarly in *A Word Child*, Hilary is deluded by his mental inventions that intervene between him and the reality of his life. Obsessed with his indistinct birth to a tart and his deprived and emotionally repressed childhood, and unhappy with his social status as a proletarian, he treats those around him biasedly. Unlike Jake, he willingly and readily chooses to ignore the realities of his life. Thus, he is very similar to Barney Drumm in *The Red and the Green* whom, Spear believes, prefers “his own interpretation of his life because it is less harrowing” (53). Hilary cannot have sincere relationship with people around him because he insists to see them through his own self-protecting prism. He fails to communicate properly with his sister, to get along with the young Christopher, to appreciate the respect the authorities show him at the Thursday-evening dinners by the Impiatts, to apprehend Tommy’s love for him, to see Arthur’s maturity and his needs and even to take people for themselves in the new acquaintances he makes (i.e. Lady kitty and her maid Biscuit).

The diary that he attempts to write of his past not only reveals his confused mind but also indicates how much the consciousness is frame-based. As in *Under the Net*, his narrative dissolves the binary between reality and fiction by exposing their similarly ontological dependence on frames. Reality for Hilary is what he constructs for himself whether at the time of events or later when he rearranges them into his narration. In this way, *A Word Child* jolts us into the way our own perception of reality is actually determined by our fantasies and the frames dictated by social conventions.

With a first-person narrator who self-consciously tries to imitate the realist literary tradition and with a host of characters who cannot distinct between their real experiences and what they have made of those experiences, *The Philosopher’s Pupil* is the ungainly beast that has trouble fitting in either of the two groups the select novels have been subsumed. However, since its parody of the realist novel does not depend on the mise en abyme technique as the first group, its blurring of the reality-fiction dichotomy should be discussed in line with the second group. “Set in Ireland in the
troubles of Easter 1916,” *The Red and the Green*, according to Spear, is “a carefully researched historical romance” (51). As much as it is rooted in the historical facts of Murdoch’s birthplace, *The Philosopher’s Pupil* is a detailed imaginary world nearby London. It is a self-contained world in contact with both familiar geographical places and historical past (as the megaliths of Ennistone ring, resonate with the presence of the prehistoric Stonehenge in England, indicate) as well as the alien worlds still unreal to us (as the rather frequent UFOs visitation of Ennistone suggests). Inhabited by a population each of whom busy with making up a story centralizing himself or herself as the hero, the novel is a symbolic reflection of their moral turpitude as well as a metafictional endorsement of the paradoxical literary frames.

A focus on George McCaffrey reveals how much his dreams (his invented stories) are interfering with his normal everyday interactions. His obvious puzzlement throughout the novel whether the fall of his car into the canal was an intentional attempt to murder his wife or just an accident exhibits that the line between reality and fiction is an arbitrary issue decided by personal or collective will. Reality is as much constructed as his attempt to mime that reality. Being booed away from the Slipper House by the revelers at Belmont’s garden, he rushes to the canal to recall what has actually happened on the rainy night that starts the novel:

*Did* I pushed the car, he wondered as the giddiness receded. If I could only start up some sort of memory. He began weaving about on the cobbles, moving his hands, moving hid feet, miming turning the car, stopping the car (did he stop it?), getting out of the car, coming round behind the car and pushing it with his hands spread out like stars. If he now imagined them ‘like stars’, did that mean that he had actually seen them like that as they slipped and strained upon the window? Or had he in a fantasy seen them ‘like stars’? Could he not hang on to something here as a clue? But the clue slipped away and returned him to a futile empty helpless feeling of blankness. (*BP* 398)

George is, similarly, confused about his interaction with his teacher, Professor Rozanov. And the novel does not provide any clue to its real nature as it does not do about the accident scene. Being in the grip of the medley of strong emotions vis-à-vis Rozanov, George has imagined killing him so many times that he immediately believes himself the murderer when he finally dumps the asleep Rozanov in the bath. This scene
again is silent about what actually happened and who is responsible for Rozanov’s death. Even Father Bernard’s discovery of Rozanov’s suicide note, as he ponders, does not exculpate George since it is not clear whether the lethal dose of the poisonous compound Rozanov took was fatal enough or he died as the result of being immersed in the bath.

Such a fictional world that simultaneously keeps reality behind the veil and magnifies its own contrived mechanism qualifies *The Philosophe’s Pupil* as another of Murdoch’s achievements in proving the moral and mimetic quality of the self-reflexive novels. In all the novels discussed here, Murdoch is optimistic regarding the future of man and art. The unique novelistic world she creates in them puts her beyond “Angry Young Men” who were limited to the social realism of the 1950s and 1960s. In this novelistic world, Spear asserts, Murdoch aims at “the malaise that lies at the heart of human life” and practices the “real realism.” That is, she grapples with the consequences the Second World War, the holocaust, the atom bomb and the class system, which defines people based on their parents’ income and social status, have had on the consciousness.

Murdoch underlines egoism as the root of all the unjust and catastrophic situations in man’s life. The frequent small-scale disasters in her created world are the outcome of human love which is “normally too profoundly possessive and also too ‘mechanical’ to be a place of vision” (*SOG* 75). In this regard, Bradbury’s comment on *Under the Net* can be a comprehensive description of all her novels: “it has a leaven of strong ideas, above all, it is urban and surreal in its use of philosophical speculations and in its play with image and metaphor. It is an elaborate and inventive comedy about necessity and contingency, words and silence, political claims and moral dilemmas, the need and illusions of love” (xi). In her combination of social realism with moral dilemmas and philosophical concepts, Murdoch implicates the reader in precisely the same dilemma the characters are caught in; she succeeds to make the reader of her fiction, as Nicol affirms, feel her philosophy (“The Curse” 102). Caught so in the network of her fiction that encourages one to reread her works over and over, anyone turns into a more active, objective interpreter of life.
Works Cited


