

*UNSELVING AND VISION IN IRIS MURDOCH'S "NUNS AND SOLDIERS"*

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*Abstract* The paper expands upon the Murdochian moral doctrine based on goodness, loving attention, transcendence of the ego's selfishness, freedom and the metaphor of vision, as it is reflected in her novel "Nuns and Soldiers". Here, the emphasis on the need to unself and vision are placed in a Christian context. The metaphor of vision together with unselfing indicates the fact that although Murdoch has placed Good in the focus of our attention, because people's belief in God is declining nowadays, she has assimilated many Christian issues. The most important Christian issues are the symbolic presence of Jesus Christ, the concept of prayer, of love, of virtue, all meant to unify the moral world. For the meaning of the novel to be better surfaced and understood an interdisciplinary grid has been employed by us involving Levinas' and Cornea's ethical approach to human interrelationships.

*Keywords:* suffering, unselfing, moral growth, Levinas, Cornea and Murdoch

Iris Murdoch has generally been acknowledged as one of the most important post-war British novelists. We assume that Iris Murdoch, using her fiction didactically and her devised inspiringly, teaches us various ways of approaching the relationships established by her characters in her double role of writer and philosopher surprising us in a pleasantly unexpected way. "Nuns and Soldiers" is a palpitating and morally charged novel. The objective of the paper is to properly detect the Murdochian process of unselfing and vision in relation to the main character Anne Cavidge.

To meet this end a short presentation of the topic of the novel is of utmost importance. It concerns Anne Cavidge, about whom, at the beginning of the novel, we learn that she has left a religious order and wants to acquire a new faith based on the Platonic goodness. Immediately after leaving the convent she is thrown into the world of violent emotions. She is directly attracted to the Count whose real name is Piotr Wojcieck Szczepansky. His incapacity to reciprocitate her affection is further complicated by Anne's special relation with the family of the scholar Guy Openshaw. Half Jewish, the Christianized Openshaw has gathered around him the Count who seems to have impressed him with his heroic concern for an ideal symbolic

Poland, the painter Tim Reede to whom he gives financial assistance to attend the School of Art and Anne Cavidge. She is interested beyond herself in Guy's painful existence and in the suffering of Gertrude, his wife. After Guy's death, Anne has to help Gertrude to recover herself, only to find out and be overwhelmed by her friend's sudden emotional concern for Tim Reede.

The most destructive component of her personality is her sense of being a superior spiritual creature. Anne's "ensorious" (106) tendency stems from her incapacity to perceive the unity of the moral world. She cannot accept that Gertrude's pursuit of happiness and her own search for innocence first and goodness afterwards is one and the same thing. She sticks to the belief that the world works more or less against spiritual growth. The central event of her spiritual quest, her vision of Christ, shows that it is otherwise.

It has generally been acknowledged that Murdoch's account of Anne's vision of Christ derives directly from Julian of Norwich, the 14th century English mystic. Murdoch essentially modifies Julian's conception while still retaining the emphasis on love.

Both Julian and Murdoch state that proper loving leads to good actions while failure of love leads to unhappiness and bad actions. Julian and Anne's revelations assert the existence of a transcendental force. Julian's visions of Christ's bleeding reinforce the power of his presence. In "Nuns and Soldiers" Anne's specific decision to leave the convent is encapsulated in the conclusive statement "There was no great, positive 'showing' here, no revelation of a new task" (61).

Then, there comes Anne's withdrawal from the convent and the unexpected visitation of Christ. Anne's vision begins as a dream in which she encounters two beautiful angels stepping off their pedestals in an 18th century rose-garden, walking and then disappearing, leaving Anne alone, listening to footsteps she somehow knows to be those of Christ. All these belong to her dream from which she wakes up to find herself in her bedroom. In the moments of waking she knows that there is somebody standing in her kitchen "And she knew that the person was Jesus" (298).

Both Anne and Julian strive to establish the actuality of revelation. Ramanathan quotes Julian Norwich who wonders whether what Christ says to her is delirium or dream: "With it now well that it was no raving that thou sawest today" (104).

In "Nuns and Soldiers" we are told "Jesus Christ came to Anne in a vision. The visitation began in a dream, but then gained a very undream-like reality" (288). There is one important allusion to Julian, mentioned by Suguna Ramanathan, that of her revelation when

Christ shows Julian something like a hazelnut, as “a sign of all that is made” (106), as the essence of the entire creation. Murdoch has telescoped Julian’s revelation and printed in half a page as follows:

“What am I holding in my hand?’ Christ asks Anne.

‘A hazelnut, Sir’.

Anne stared at the stone. Then she said slowly:

‘Is it so small?’

‘Yes, Anne’.

‘Everything that is, so little -’

‘Yes’.

‘But, Sir - how can it not perish, how can it be, if all this -’

‘Ah, my dear child, you want some wonderful answer, don’t you?’

‘Yes’, thought Anne, ‘I do’.

‘Have you not been shown enough?’

‘No, no, I want more’, said Anne, ‘more, more. Tell me - what are you - where are you?’

‘Where do I live? I live nowhere. Have you not heard it is said that birds have nests and foxes have holes but I have no home’

‘Oh, Sir, you have a home’, said Anne.

‘You mean -’

‘Love is my meaning’, said Anne.

He laughed.

‘You are witty, my child. You have given the wonderful answer. Is that not enough?’

‘No, not without you’, she said. ‘not without you’.

‘You are spoiling your gift, already’.

‘But what am I to believe’, said Anne, ‘you are so real, you are here, you are the most understandable of all things - you are the proof, there is no other’

‘I prove nothing, Anne. You have answered your own question. What more do you want? A miracle?’

‘Yes’, she said.

‘You must be the miracle-worker, little one. You must be the proof. The work is yours’ (293).

A few lines before she was once again told what she had to do, insisting that she is not allowed to surrender to feeling. She said: "Do not go away from me, how could I live without you now that you have come. If you are going to leave me, let me die now" (292).

"Come, come, Anne, you will die soon enough". He spoke briskly. 'As for salvation, anything you can think about it is as imaginary as my wounds. I am not a magician. I never was. You know what to do. Do right, refrain from wrong" (292).

Asking for further concessions in order to be made innocent, Christ teaches her to wash at the sink, ironically hinting at how sentimental her wishes are. Although Anne follows his instructions she replies: "It's no good, it won't work" (293). The great teaching which derives from her pure request is that goodness and total spiritual innocence cannot be obtained. It also conveys to her the idea that perfect human responsibility can only be achieved through continuously disciplining oneself so as to act unselfishly rather than expect some miraculous outside redemption. As regards suffering Christ refuses to emphasize the need of pain: "You do not need to see my wounds. If there were wounds, they have healed. If there was suffering it has gone and is nothing" (291). Moreover, a beautiful consolatory image is offered through the continuous series of questioning and negation all placed under the sign of "if". It occurs when Christ addressed Anne who was weeping "Don't cry. Are you really so sentimental? Art thou well-paid that I ever suffered passion for thee?" "If I could have suffered more, I would have suffered more" (293).

Anne's encounter with Jesus Christ can be approached via Levinas' philosophy based on the relation between "infinity" and "alterity". Bernadette Cailler's<sup>1</sup> approach to Levinas has closely been considered by us through his suggestion that he grounds "alterity" in the "idea of infinity" which "designated a relation with a being that maintains its total exteriority with respect to him who thinks it" (136). Equally relevant is Bruce Young's statement that Levinas has reached the conclusion regarding the "impossibility of capturing the other conceptually or otherwise", that "indicates the other's infinity (irreducibility to a finite bounded entity) over which I can have power" (1). Levinas also grants metaphysical connotations to the word "infinite". Young further claims that Levinas defines the encounter with the face as "the living presence of another person" (1), as something experienced ethically as "in the face, the other expresses his eminence, the transcendental dimension and divinity from which descends" (1).

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<sup>1</sup> Translation by David-Olivier Gougelet and Bernadette Cailler

The series of quotations offered by Young and belonging to Levinas also reveal the fact that the other person's presence can be experienced in two ways: through the transcendental idea of the "face" (1), a face associated with suffering and that looks separate, distant revealing the Divine or the "Infinite" (1) and through "the literal face" (1), that is through bodily presence, gesture, action, speech.

At the discourse level, the bodily presence is activated by the interrogative construction "What am I holding in my hand", Christ asks Anne". It functions as a specific modality of initiating communication and the exchange of meaning. The word "Christ" urges a two-fold interpretation, a religious and a philosophical one, Anne being further invited by Christ to see Him in the face of the other, her fellow man, "the original 'locus' of Revelation", according to Cailler's appreciations on Levinas (141).

If this interrogative construction associated with the word "Christ" hints at "Infinity", the word "hazelnut" from "A hazelnut, Sir" sends us to another basic concept of Levinas "Totality". It stands for "the finite and realized quantity of the infinite detail of the real", as Cailler clearly quotes Levinas' definition of the respective concept (136).

Murdoch has created a spiritual environment filled in with symbols and religious and cultural patterns. The series of questions related to the symbolic hazelnut (a sign of all that is made), namely "Is it so small?", "How can it not perish?" intermingles with questions related to the poetics of space: "Where are you?" "Where do I live?" The answer: "Have you not heard it is said that birds have nests and foxes have holes but I have no home", followed by: "Oh, Sir, you have a home" said Anne. "You mean", "Love is my meaning" said Anne (Murdoch, 293) is grounded in "the spirituality of the One", another concept quoted by Cailler in relation to Levinas' philosophy (135). This type of spirituality can be associated with Anne's developing awareness that love, selflessness, unconditioned goodness are required to generate miraculous inside redemption. "The thought of the One that has done so much to magnify", is another quotation belonging to Levinas that is mentioned in Cailler's study (135). It is translated, in Murdoch's text, as an encouragement addressed to each and every individual not to spoil one's "gift" of becoming the "miracle-worker" (Murdoch, 292) in the sense of "doing right" and "refrain from wrong" (292). According to Cailler, Levinas thinks that "the consent to this thought" (136) implies suffering as a necessary psychological and spiritual condition to be fulfilled, which is also the essence of Murdoch's philosophy. The message related to suffering

reverberates in: “If there were wounds, they have healed” and “If I could have suffered more, I would have suffered more” (293).

Moreover, in order to prove Levinas’ assumption that one’s consent to doing good “transfigures, while neither offending nor de-routing the Diverse”, as Cailler's quotation reveals (136), we suggest that transfiguration brings about “images of awakening” (Bachelard, 63). They refer to the awakening of our “active being from within ourselves” (63).

As concerns the speech level, Anne’s symbolic encounter with Christ contains “elements of a confession of human dynamics” (63). Identifying herself with Anne – as her alter ego, Murdoch proves to be the creator of a spiritual destiny. As such, Anne will turn into a social nun (a spiritual soldier) meant to pass through and also to bring about various degrees of awareness in the other characters’ lives. After the visitation, Anne is overwhelmed by “loving attention” (Murdoch, 20), acting as the embodiment of a “conscience – in- action” (Bachelard, 64).

For further expanding upon spirituality and the potential of the Murdochian text to reveal its meaning via philosophical interdisciplinary grids, we propose that Anne's vision of Christ could be also decoded resorting to Plato’s metaphysics built on his Theory of Forms or Ideas. Cornea’s article entitled “What Are We to Do with The Third Man” relies on the assumption that “all sensitive people” together with the “Ideal Man” participate in bringing about a new Ideal of man – the third man (15). In Murdoch’s novel, the Ideal Man stands for Jesus Christ, called by Jung “master of the collective unconscious”. As concerns the “sensitive man”, we relate this syntagm to Anne Cavidge before her experiencing the vision of Christ. The relation between the “sensitive Anne” and Jesus Christ generates within herself what Jung calls the phenomenon of individuation. It signifies the turning to good account of one’s will to change by accepting to take an inward journey and bring the dark socially unacceptable unconscious drives to conscious view (her feelings for the Count, her contradictory feeling regarding Gertrude, Tim Reede or the latter’s previous lover, Daisy). Whereas a conviction of the unity of all virtues characterizes Plato’s concern with the moral person (which is the basic idea of Cornea’s article), in Murdoch’s view, as it is clearly mentioned in Anne’s dialogue with Christ, the source of virtue is love. So for Murdoch, it is in loving others and in accepting them as they are that one is just to them. Anne’s inner struggle to see others in an unselfish way takes place at the level of consciousness. Her acquired virtue as knowledge of the Good by love of others, after Christ’s visitation, has contributed to creating a new ideal of man, the third man.

It has happened through Anne's continuous process of "unselving" that means, on the one hand, the recognition of the importance of suffering which leads to virtue and, on the other hand, the importance of perceiving the others selflessly.

But Anne, the Murdochian type of a saint-in-action, is not the only character in "Nuns and Soldiers" who is concerned with unselving and vision. Tin Reede, the artist, another customary type of Murdoch's characters closely connected with Anne's friend Gertrude, succeeds in extending the Platonic theory of the reflection of reality through art without fantasizing. As soon as he gains insight into the sea scape and into himself, he experiences a sort of spiritual renewal.

This happens when he slides into the moving stream of a canal. He is "seized by a water demon" and "abruptly dragged round" and "jerked down" the canal until he grabs hold of an acacia. He finally manages to crawl out of the canal just before it enters a subterranean 'demonic' tunnel. Tim follows the rule of Murdoch's artists who are incapable to reach self-knowledge and comprehend the world "Till he communicates his past to others", claims Bove (98). Unfortunately, Gertrude who has come to France, proves her egotism and interrupts him thrice while he is trying to speak about what Bove called his "shocking baptism" (96). Her gesture only proves how removed she is from the awareness of the other people's needs and preoccupations.

During the midsummer enchantment with the marvelous French landscape Gertrude profoundly impresses Tim who falls desperately in love with her. Transfigured with love their views of each other are altered. When Gertrude swims in the stone basin she looks like some sort of "goddess" and later Tim perceives her as "an Arthurian girl, a heroic girl out of a romantic picture" (Murdoch, 180). Tim himself looks "a different man from the pallid weedy rather hangdog young fellow who had come to Gertrude with apologetic hints about needing money. He seemed bigger, stronger" (177).

The next day Tim worries that they have been enchanted by the landscape: "This couldn't have happened at Ebury Street. It's just something to do with here, with this place, this landscape. We're under a spell. But when we go away it will fade; you'll see I'm just a dull fellow with ass's ears" (188). The allusion to Shakespeare's "A Midsummer's Night Dream" is obvious here. Their midsummer enchantment is short-lived. They return to London, get married, but their relationship is altered by anonymous letters accusing Tim of being a fortune-hunter. Tim temporarily leaves their lodging and returns to his former lover, Daisy. Meanwhile,

Tim already in deep need to be ‘saved’ and removed from the muddled existence, experiences a remarkable epiphany in Hyde Park: “The white light seemed to be with him but it was different now. He found that he could see through it. He could see the trees, the huge quiet planes, with their immensely friendly peeling trunks and the vast dangling swing of their downward reaching branches covered with feathery leaves” (388).

The two representations of what had happened in France and in Hyde Park are suggested through the same verb ‘to see’. In the first context it is a verb of sensation and it is related to the idea of illusion, or deceitful love. In the second it equates with the verb ‘to understand’ and it stresses comprehension which relies on the intellect in its search for truth. As the joyful experience from Hyde Park begins to ebb, the next day it appears that Tim is denied any true insight. He continues to rebuild his life. He is caught again ill selling some of his paintings.

Nature, natural, unnatural, all echo through the novel in direct connection with Tim’s renewal. He thinks that under the healing powers of the French landscape he and Gertrude can be reunited. As he finds her with the Count he takes flight again, tries to save an English collie in a canal, slips into the stream and the two are carried on to the stone tunnel mouth. Instead of drowning they are both deposited safely onto the valley below. Murdoch stresses the clarity of vision often associated with dramatic experiences: “Tim blessed the dog, he blessed the open sky and the sun, he even blessed the canal” (424). All the nouns enclosed between the two coordinates, earthly and unearthly respectively, supported by the verbal form ‘blessed’ mark Tim’s unselfing and his recognition that “something in his life had begun there, something which tied deeply and mysteriously together with Gertrude and his art” (476).

Many critics have wondered, due to Anne’s vision and Tim’s revelations, whether Murdoch is concerned with a transcendent authority or with Plato’s concept of good. Suguna Ramanathan thinks that the answer can be found in Murdoch’s dialogue on religion entitled “Acastos”: “I think it means that we’ve drawn to the idea of a sort of central-good, something very real after all morality feels more like discovering something than just inventing it and we want, to sort of, assert this central thing” (120). This thing is what Christ has told Anne, namely, that salvation is achieved through love and through accepting the insignificant condition of human beings.

There are hints throughout the novel that, despite Anne’s superior spirituality, she might be able to come to accept contingency and ordinary human feelings. Her enthusiasm for the



novels she reads with Gertrude is a good example in this respect. She finds “Little Dorrit”: “amazing, crammed and chaotic, and yet so touching and magical, a kind of miracle, a strangely naked display of feelings, and full of profound ideas, yet one felt it was all true” (53).

Her astonishment, expressed through the series of adjectives coupled with the noun ‘miracle’, is some sort of extended acoustic metaphor indicative of how removed from life she has been, in spite of her various relationships with different artist figures: Gertrude, the Count, Guy, Tim and last but not least important with his mistress, Daisy.

After Tim and Gertrude’s reconciliation, before leaving for America, Anne starts searching for Daisy, fearing that she might commit suicide. This form of charity hints at her awareness of the other people’s needs and at her capacity of directing her loving attention towards them. She halts at Tim and Daisy’s favourite pub “the Prince of Denmark”, another allusion to Shakespeare’s “Hamlet”. There she finds out that he has already left for America, also seeking her innocence. Anne is also willing and determined to forgive the gossipers of that pub who without knowing who she was, advanced unpleasant remarks regarding her experience as a nun.

Her openness to the existence of other people and to reality itself has paved the way for experiencing a vision of the night full of snowflakes suggesting metaphorically a turning of the interior universe inside out: “the big flakes came into view, moving, weaving, crowding, descending slowly in a great hypnotic silence which seemed to separate itself from the sounds of the street below. Anne stopped and watched it. It reminded her of something, which perhaps she had seen in a picture or a dream. It looked like the heavens spread out in glory, totally unrolled before the face of God, countless, limitless, eternally beautiful; the universe in majesty proclaiming the presence and the goodness of its Creator” (503).

In terms of conclusions, we can say that aesthetic perception as a visionary construal of goodness (mainly though the vision of Jesus Christ) is the result of Murdoch’s philosophy of “mobility”. It implies the individual’s psychological mobility to surpass selfishness and evolve towards selflessness, thus becoming other-centred.

For this psychological background to become functional and credible we have employed a three-fold interpretative grid. On the one hand, we have turned to good account Murdoch’s ethical theory according to which the nature of virtue is not related to human interests, but it is intrinsically other-directed. On the other hand, we have taken into account Levinas’ philosophy based on recognizing the other as being infinite (e.g. hardly reduceable to

a finite entity over which we can have power). We have also taken into consideration Cornea's assumption that our sensitive nature associated with the Ideal Man (Adam before the Fall) can bring about a new Idea of man, the third man, ethically equipped to face reality and to successfully cope with temptation and suffering. In our case, Anne Carridge is a synecdoche (the one standing for the many) in her attempt to morally recover herself.

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