

*Utopia, Dystopia and the Struggle for Redemption:
Iris Murdoch and Educative Attention*

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ABSTRACT: Where educationists have addressed the work of Iris Murdoch, they have focused almost exclusively on her non-fiction writings. This relatively limited canvassing of possibilities in Murdoch's corpus is somewhat surprising, for when we turn to her novels, educational contexts and themes, broadly conceived, figure prominently. Murdoch's novels provide nuanced studies of the varied processes of human formation, lending weight to the view that fiction has much to teach us about *bildung* and the idea of 'learning from life'. Murdoch's concern with the particulars of human growth and becoming – with what A.S. Byatt calls the 'thinginess' of the moral and physical world – also points us toward a distinctive orientation to utopia. While the common construct of utopia as a form of ideal social grouping is not altogether missing from Murdoch's fiction, it is more states of *inner* utopia and dystopia with which she is concerned. This article takes up this idea with reference to *The Philosopher's Pupil* and *The Bell*. In *The Bell* Murdoch shows that there is no safe haven from human frailties; our weaknesses not only accompany us wherever we go but in some respects *define* us as distinctive beings always in a process of becoming. Utopia does not sit waiting for us, guarded within the walls of a community in retreat from the world; instead, it must be constantly recreated, inwardly as well as outwardly. A key ingredient in distinguishing utopian situations from those of a dystopian nature is *love*, and in the pedagogical realm this can be expressed, among other ways, through attention to the Other and to the particulars of the world. *The Philosopher's Pupil* provides an example of how a dystopian inner space can be created within a pedagogical relationship when attention of this kind is lacking.

Keywords: Iris Murdoch, philosophy, education, utopia, dystopia, attention, love

RESUMÉ: Lorsque les spécialistes de l'éducation ont abordé le travail d'Iris Murdoch, ils se sont penchés presque exclusivement sur sa littérature non-romanesque. Limiter relativement l'examen des possibilités dans l'œuvre de Murdoch est quelque peu surprenant car, lorsque nous considérons ses romans, les sujets et thèmes éducatifs conçus dans une optique très large, y occupent une place prépondérante. Les romans de Murdoch apportent des études nuancées sur les différents processus de formation humaine, donnant du poids au fait que la fiction a beaucoup à nous enseigner sur *bildung* et sur l'idée « d'apprendre à partir du vécu. » Le souci de Murdoch, dans les détails de l'évolution et du devenir humains, et ce qu'A.S. Byatt nomme « la chose » du monde moral et physique, nous tourne aussi vers une perspective différente : celle de l'utopie. L'idée fréquente de l'utopie est une forme idéale de groupe social et cette idée n'est pas entièrement absente des romans de Murdoch mais l'idée se présente davantage sous formes d'états internes de l'utopie et de la dystopie pour lesquels elle se préoccupe. Dans cet article, l'idée est reprise en faisant référence aux romans *The Philosopher's Pupil* et *The Bell*. Dans *The Bell*, Murdoch montre qu'il n'y a pas moyen d'échapper, d'une façon sûre, aux défaillances humaines. Où que nous allions, nos faiblesses nous suivent. Cependant, d'un certain côté, elle nous définit comme étant des êtres distincts toujours sur le point de devenir. L'utopie ne reste pas les bras croisés à nous attendre protégée par les murs d'une société à l'écart du monde. En fait, elle doit se recréer constamment tant intérieurement qu'extérieurement. Pour distinguer les situations utopiques des situations dystopiques, un élément clé est l'amour. Dans le domaine pédagogique il peut s'exprimer, par exemple, par l'attention portée aux autres et aux événements du monde. *The Philosopher's Pupil* illustre la façon dont une sphère intérieure de dystopie peut se créer au sein d'une relation lorsqu'il y a un manque d'attention.

Mots-clés : Iris Murdoch, philosophie, éducation, utopie, dystopie, attention, amour

Introduction

A persistent theme in the life and work of Iris Murdoch is the idea of intellectual otherness. As a woman studying, and later teaching, philosophy at the University of Oxford in the late 1930s and 1940s, Murdoch was in a minority among her international peers. At that time, most of the key figures in the philosophical world were men. It was not just her gender that distinguished her from the majority of other scholars in her field; it was also her approach to philosophical problems. From early on Murdoch could see that analytic philosophy would not on its own provide adequate means for exploring questions of ethics and morality. Where, then, did Murdoch turn to set her philosophical compass? Her knowledge of the history of Western thought was extensive. In her philosophical writings she comments on everyone from the pre-Socratics to post-structuralists. Reference can be found to Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Hume, Hegel, Kant, Kierkegaard, Schopenhauer, Freud, Heidegger, Wittgenstein, Beauvoir, Sartre, Derrida, and many others. Murdoch was also well acquainted with the central tenets of Buddhism and other Eastern traditions. Her literary influences included Shakespeare, Stendhal, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Dickens, George Eliot, Proust, and Beckett, among others. Murdoch was an eclectic thinker and writer, at a moment in history when specialisation was beginning to become the norm. (See further, Bellamy, 1977; Conradi, 1998, 2001; Lesser, 1984; Sturrock, 1988.)

As a philosopher, Murdoch's record of publication was wide-ranging, with a list of books that included *Sartre: Romantic Rationalist* (Murdoch, 1987a), *The Sovereignty of Good* (Murdoch, 2001), *The Fire and the Sun: Why Plato Banished the Artists* (Murdoch, 1977), *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (Murdoch, 1993), and *Existentialists and Mystics* (Murdoch, 1999). Despite this impressive body of work (see Antonaccio, 2001, 2004), Murdoch is best known as the author of twenty-six novels, beginning with *Under the Net* (Murdoch, 1956) in 1954 and continuing unabated for four decades thereafter. Her prodigious output as a novelist was complemented by several plays (Murdoch, 1989) and a collection of poems (Murdoch, 1984). Murdoch did not see herself as setting out to construct 'novels of ideas', or as a writer of didactic fiction where the literary qualities of a work

would become secondary to the ‘message’ to be conveyed. For these reasons among others, she was uncomfortable with being labelled a ‘philosophical novelist’. At the same time, the influence of her philosophical background on her fictional work is readily apparent to anyone who sampled her novels from across the decades. Collectively, Murdoch’s novels provide a rich, complex terrain for metaphysical, aesthetic and ethical reflection, and they have attracted extensive comment from philosophers, theologians, classicists, literary theorists, and many others.

Where educationists have addressed Murdoch’s work, they have referred almost exclusively to her non-fiction writings (see, for example, Alexander, 2003; Buchmann, 1988, 1989; Evans, 2009; Halpin, 2001; Hansen, 1989; Lavery, 2010; Liston, 2000, 2008; Mackenzie, 2008; McDonough, 2000; Rethorst, 1997). This relatively limited canvassing of possibilities in Murdoch’s corpus is somewhat surprising, for when we turn to her novels, educational contexts and themes, broadly conceived, figure prominently. In some cases, such as *The Sandcastle* (Murdoch, 1959), there is a direct focus on the life of a school teacher; in others, such as *The Book and the Brotherhood* (Murdoch, 1987b), Murdoch’s alma mater, Oxford, features as the historical link that ties a group of now middle-aged friends together. These direct references to school and university environments are, however, not in themselves the keys to finding something of educational value in Murdoch’s work. What matters more is that in Murdoch’s novels we find, time and time again, nuanced studies of the varied processes of human formation, lending weight to the view that fiction has much to teach us about *bildung* and the idea of ‘learning from life’. From Murdoch’s characters and their often tortured lives, the difficulties and frailties of human becoming are conveyed with great acuity. Murdoch allows us to examine the particulars of context and character that shape thoughts, feelings, actions, and relationships. She shows us, more from outside formal educational institutions than within them, how and why teaching and learning can flounder or flourish. Teachers and learners are everywhere in her novels, if we know how to look for them, and there is much that is educational in both the form and the content of her fiction.

Murdoch’s focus on the particulars of human growth and becoming – her concern with what A.S. Byatt (2004) calls the ‘thinginess’ of the moral and physical world – points us toward a

distinctive orientation to utopia. While the common construct of utopia as a form of ideal social grouping is not altogether missing from Murdoch's fiction, it is more states of *inner* utopia and dystopia with which she is concerned. Her interest in utopia was longstanding. Instead of having her students at St Anne's College in Oxford focus on Hobbes, Locke and social contract theory, Murdoch encouraged them to read the utopias of More, Swift, and Rousseau, together with Plato and Simone Weil (Conradi, 2001, p. 299). Her novels built on this foundation but also pushed her thinking on utopia in new directions. Like the Russian novelists she admired so much (Dostoevsky and Tolstoy foremost among them), Murdoch offers us portraits of tortured souls – human beings bedevilled by obsessiveness, jealousy, anger, self-doubt, social awkwardness, inconsistencies and contradictions, difficulties with commitment, and a catalogue of other faults – while keeping open, in some cases at least, and even if only slightly, doors to possible redemption. This is not to say, of course, that all of Murdoch's characters are so riddled with psychological flaws. To the contrary, there are many 'figures of good' in her work (Ramanathan, 1990). But Murdoch's exploration of goodness in her novels is by no means confined to such figures; to understand her conception of the good requires an examination, and often an uncomfortable one, of the human frailties that form an important part of the present discussion.

This article takes up these ideas with reference to two of Murdoch's novels: *The Bell* (Murdoch, 2004) and *The Philosopher's Pupil* (Murdoch, 2000). *The Bell* is perhaps the most overtly utopian of all Murdoch's novels, and a number of studies have examined the book in that light (e.g., Firchow, 2007; Wagner-Lawlor, 2011). The setting for *The Bell* is the Imber community, a 'holy group who had given up the world' (as one character sees it), still in an experimental stage, situated in the same grounds as a Benedictine Abbey, with a lake and a small market garden (Murdoch, 2004, p. 42). Outwardly, all does not end well for the inhabitants of Imber Court, but Murdoch's deeper concern is arguably with the inner development of her characters, and in that respect there is room for some optimism. *The Philosopher's Pupil* is, on the surface, a more pessimistic work. It focuses on a number of individuals in the spa town of Ennystone, among them the returning philosopher Rozanov and his former

student, George, a demonic character desperate for the approval of his teacher. *The Philosopher's Pupil* provides an example of how a *dystopian* inner space can be created within a pedagogical relationship. I argue that what is at stake in *The Bell* and *The Philosopher's Pupil* is the question of *attention*, as this is understood by Murdoch (who borrows the term from Simone Weil, an important influence on her work: Byatt, 1965; Griffith, 1993; McDonough, 2000; Phillips, 1991; Roberts, 2011): 'a just and loving gaze directed upon an individual reality'; this, Murdoch says, is the 'characteristic and proper mark of the active moral agent' (Murdoch, 2001, p. 33). Murdoch's distinctive perspective on utopia is evident in *The Philosopher's Pupil*, as it is in *The Bell*, but it is revealed as much by what 'goes wrong' in the process of human formation, in learning and teaching, as what goes well. The failure of the Imber community is also instructive in understanding what utopian groups of a religious kind, or of any other variety, are up against (cf. Dipple, 1982, p. 246). An examination of these two works, I hope to show, can yield much that has broader relevance for education, both within and beyond formal institutions.

Utopia Reconsidered: *The Bell* and *The Philosopher's Pupil*

The Bell focuses on the lives of a small group of people who have, for various reasons, found their way to Imber Court, a religious lay community devoted to the contemplative life. The two key characters are Dora Greenfield, a former art student who decides to rejoin her estranged art historian husband, and Michael Meade, who has in the past worked as a teacher but who had also wanted to become a priest. Paul, Dora's husband, is working on some medieval manuscripts at the community, and he greets Dora with cold fury when she arrives without an important notebook, having accidentally left her suitcase on the train. Michael is the leader of the community but he believes James Tayper Place, an upright man who works to a clear set of rules for living, would be better suited to this role. Other figures in the novel include: Toby Gashe, a young man who intends to spend the summer at Imber Court before going on to study at Oxford; Nick Fawley, who as a student had ended Michael's teaching career by reporting on his homosexual relationship with him and who is now a troubled

alcoholic; and Nick's twin sister Catherine, who is about to enter the Abbey as a postulant. Occasional but sometimes important appearances are made by others such as Noel Spens, a reporter who is also Dora's lover, and the Abbess, who offers wise words to Michael and others as they struggle to address their ethical dilemmas.

A ceremony is being organised for the installation of a new bell at the Abbey but the old bell, discovered by Toby and Dora at the bottom of the lake, continues to exert a shadowy influence over the activities of the community. A small gesture of intimacy from Michael toward Toby at the end of a successful day (buying a mechanical cultivator in Swindon) prompts the latter to reassert his heterosexuality through relations with Dora. Dora and Toby develop an elaborate plan to secretly replace the new bell with the old one, aiming to surprise everyone at the ceremony. They retrieve the old bell from the lake but the rest of their scheme goes terribly wrong, with a ceremony, complete with a visiting Bishop, that degenerates into farce. The new bell topples into the lake, a result, it later turns out, of sabotage by Nick. Noel, tired of being used by Dora, has turned up at the Imber community for the ceremony, and ensures through his newspaper report that the strange goings on are relayed to the outside world. Catherine, declaring her love for Michael, has a breakdown and attempts to drown herself, and Nick commits suicide. The community dissolves, with Toby having left for Oxford, Michael now committed to caring for Catherine, and Dora, having made a decision to leave Paul for good, seeking a new life for herself as an art teacher.

The Philosopher's Pupil begins with George McCaffrey attempting to kill his wife Stella by driving their car into a canal. George, a violent and obsessive man, is one of three brothers in a family whose ancestors were 'commercially minded Quakers' (Murdoch, 2000, p. 35), the other two of whom are Brian (who, in his selfishness, finds 'the Good Life' difficult: p. 60), and the much younger, more innocent half-brother, Tom. Tom, the outcome of a liaison between his father, now dead, and 'Feckless Fiona', has been raised by Alex, mother of the two older McCaffrey brothers. (In its depiction of the tangled lives of three brothers, comparisons have been drawn with Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*: Conradi, 1986, p. 268; Todd, 1984, p. 85; Walsh, 1991.) George

and Stella had a child who died while young, and Brian and his wife Gabriel have a son, Adam.

Central to the novel is the relationship between George, forty-four years old at the time the story is told, and his former philosophy teacher, John Robert Rozanov, who returns to Ennistone as its most famous son. George seeks to establish a stronger relationship with Rozanov, having been rejected by him as second-rate in the past, but his efforts prove futile. Rozanov, who has made his name as an intellectual elsewhere in the world, seeks when back in his home town to tidy up affairs with his granddaughter, Hattie, whom he attempts to pair up with Tom. Tom has himself been away for much of his life at boarding school and, more recently, university. Hattie is accompanied by Pearl, her 'maid', while Tom is joined by his friend 'Emma' (Emmanuel) Scarlett-Taylor. Among the other characters of note is William Eastcote, a pillar of strength and goodness in the local Quaker community who dies during the course of the story, and Father Bernard Jacoby, a priest who engages in long philosophical discussions with Rozanov and who is enlisted by the philosopher as a tutor for Hattie.

George is a case of '[f]rustrated ambition' (p. 81), having achieved a first-class degree but failed in his attempt to gain an academic post. He has written plays 'which no one would perform' and, reportedly, poems 'which no one would publish' (p. 81). He finds employment in museum and archive work. He has one publication, a history of the Ennistone Museum ('well written but necessarily of limited importance': p. 81) to his name. Not lacking in intelligence, he nonetheless has never been able to make much of his talents and instead has set about destroying himself and others. George's deluded and destructive narcissism is matched by the self-assured, controlling detachment of his former teacher, who builds an international reputation on the back of his published studies of Kant, Descartes and Leibniz, among others. Pursued by George in earlier years, Rozanov wants nothing to do with him now. George's bitterness at this disinterest eventually finds expression in the town baths, where he thinks he drowns Rozanov, the philosopher having actually committed suicide immediately prior to George's arrival. As the novel ends, George's derangement is replaced by a state approaching calmness. He is portrayed as having attained a certain type of self-

knowledge, and there is even a hint that his efforts as a playwright and poet will not be altogether wasted.

A quarter of a century separates these two novels (their original dates of publication were 1958 and 1983 respectively), and while they differ in matters of plot and structure, there are also some intriguing resonances between them. The action in both books takes place in settlements beyond main centres. Both works feature men who have sought lives in the church but find themselves unable to believe. Michael Meade in *The Bell* fails in his attempt to join the clergy, while Father Bernard in *The Philosopher's Pupil* succeeds but finds himself 'an odd sort of priest' (Murdoch, 2000, p. 186). Both books have water as a key element. Imber Court sits adjacent to a lake, while Ennystone is a town best known for its hot springs, the waters of which reputedly have healing powers. Both works have characters who are defined by a certain kind of violence (Paul Greenfield in *The Bell* and George McCaffrey in *The Philosopher's Pupil*). The complexity and messiness of human sexuality figures prominently in *The Bell* and is also addressed in *The Philosopher's Pupil*. In both novels, there is a juxtapositioning of the young with the old, and there is even a connection between the two works in the important (though different) roles allocated to dogs. In *The Bell* Murphy plays a part in Toby's maturation; in *The Philosopher's Pupil* George's demonic character is temporarily forgotten with his rescuing of Zed, who has been swept out to sea ('Oh George, you hero!', Tom exclaims: p. 352). A sense of mystery is also present in both books, with, for example, speculation about how the medieval bell ended up in the Imber lake and unidentified flying objects in *The Philosopher's Pupil*. The two works complement each other in their portraits of utopia and dystopia, allowing the reader to see how the pursuit of human ideals can also involve a harrowing examination of that which is ugly, humiliating and filled with despair.

Two Accounts of the Good Life

In *The Bell* Murdoch provides us with competing approaches to the question of the good life via the weekly community talks of Michael Meade and James Tayper Pace. These homilies serve as a useful theoretical backdrop to the lived events of community

activity at Imber Court. James, whose sense of direction and purpose is clearer than Michael's, claims that the 'chief requirement of the good life ... is to live without any image of oneself' (p. 133). He elaborates:

The study of personality, indeed the whole conception of personality, is, as I see it, dangerous to goodness. We were told at school, at least I was told at school, to have ideals. This, it seems to me, is rot. Ideals are dreams. They come between us and reality – when what we need most is just precisely to see reality. And that is something outside us. Where perfection is, reality is. And where do we look for perfection? Not in some imaginary concoction out of our idea of our own character – but in something so external and so remote that we can get only now and then a distant hint of it. (p. 133)

For James, guidance on how to live has been provided by God and it takes the form of 'very simple ways', rules that enable us to see what we ought and ought not to do (p. 133). James has little time for those who claim that their lives are 'too complicated and special for the ordinary rules to fit (p. 133). To such people, he wants to say: 'What are you up to, my friend, what are you hiding?' (p. 134). James goes on to give examples of how such thinking applies, noting that sodomy and adultery, for instance, should simply be seen as forbidden. Those who are good live by faith. 'The good man *does* what seems right, what the rule enjoins, without considering the consequences, without calculation or prevarication, *knowing* that God will make all for the best' (p. 134).

Michael, by contrast, in a speech that also begins 'The chief requirement of the good life ...' (p. 206), points to a different view of human conduct and becoming. We should, he contends, have some conception of our own capacities. Our task is to know ourselves sufficiently, and draw as effectively as we can on our strengths, to act in what we think will be the best way under the circumstances. Michael argues that we have different talents and propensities, many of which are capable of being put to both good use and evil use (p. 209). Given our differences, each of us will apprehend God in our own way. We will be subject to temptations, Michael suggests, but it is not so much a case of denying such forces as mustering the strengths we have within us

to address them. Reflecting after his talk, and mulling over the question of 'sodomy' in particular, Michael concludes that actions are not, as James claims, *just* 'forbidden'. God had created tendencies within us, Michael reasons, and in some cases these tendencies are so deep-seated, they constitute 'the very core of the personality' (p. 211).

Whether in some other, and possibly better, society it could ever be morally permissible to have homosexual relations was, Michael felt, no business of his. He felt pretty sure that in any world in which he would live, he would judge it, for various reasons, to be wrong. But this did not make him feel that he could sweep, as James did, the whole subject aside. It was complicated. For himself, God had made him so and he did not think that God had made him a monster. (p. 211)

Later, summoned to speak with the Abbess, Michael sits in fear, unsure of exactly what she knows about his relations with Nick and Toby, and reluctant to be fully open with her. To his silence, his sense of discomfort and humiliation, the Abbess responds with an assurance that he is very much in her prayers, and that she knows how much he grieves for those under his care – 'those you try to help and fail, those you cannot help' (p. 242). She urges Michael to have faith in God and to 'remember that He will in His own way and in His own time complete what we so poorly attempt'. She summarises her position thus:

Often we do not achieve for others the good that we intend; but we achieve something, something that goes on from our effort. Good is an overflow. Where we generously and sincerely intend it, we are engaged in a work of creation which may be mysterious even to ourselves – and because it is mysterious we may be afraid of it. But this should not make us draw back. God can always show us, if we will, a higher and a better way; and we can only learn to love by loving. Remember that all our failures are ultimately failures in love. Imperfect love must not be condemned and rejected, but made perfect. The way is always forward, never back. (pp. 242-243)

Deeply moved by the Abbess's words, Michael is aware of '[h]ow well she knew his heart' (p. 243). At the same time, he is not fully confident he can take practical value from what she has said: 'He was too tarnished an instrument to do the work that needed doing.

Love. He shook his head. Perhaps only those who had given up the world had the right to use that word' (p. 243).

The idea of 'work' is central to Murdoch's implied view of utopia in *The Bell*. The residents of Imber Court, in common with many utopian communities, work the land; they work with each other, and they sometimes seek to do the 'work of God', however that might be understood. Most importantly, and partly through these other forms of work, they work on themselves. Both Michael and Dora provide examples of this process in the novel, and Murdoch leaves the results of their labours open for multiple interpretations. Dora and Michael remain incomplete beings (cf. Byatt, 1965), with much work still to be done, but in that very unfinishedness lies the utopian spirit. From a Murdochian perspective, utopia is always 'work in progress' (Wagnor-Lawler, 2011, p. 16). Utopia, whether pursued by the individual or embodied in a community, *never sits still*: it is constantly refining itself, even as it continues to pivot around a connected set of ideas. Marx's (1976) understanding of work as purposeful activity is not out place here. In the Imber community, as in any other utopian group or society, there remains a need, often more acutely felt and appreciated, to appropriate the products of nature in order to improve their usefulness. In labouring as reflective and active beings in this way, we not only alter the material world but also *ourselves*. The reconstituted reality we create through work 'acts back' on us, transforming, over time, our thoughts, feelings and impulses. Our inner reality, then, is always intimately intertwined with the reality we construct externally, even if the connection is not immediately obvious.

Murdoch's novel also 'works' on us. It prompts us to reconsider our taken for granted assumptions about the construction of better worlds; it unsettles us and makes us think about the characters and their predicaments; and it allows us to reflect on the contingencies and difficulties we all come up against in making ethical decisions. Murdoch is not alone, of course, in opening up these possibilities through fiction but in both the substance and the form of her novels she encourages this work more than most. The contrasting attributes of Michael and James, and their accompanying sermons, give impetus to two broader tendencies at work in the Imber community. On the one hand, there is a movement toward greater simplicity, purer faith and

traditional ways (represented by James); on the other, there is an acknowledgement of change, of complexity and contingency (represented by Michael). James is more like a saint, Michael an artist (Conradi, 2006, p. 117). Murdoch, while perhaps inclining more toward the latter, does not allow her narrator to push us heavy handedly into such a view. In the Abbess's discussion with Michael, moreover, she offers a third possibility: a middle path, if you will. Wagner-Lawlor (2011) argues that for Murdoch the work of utopia has, in the final analysis, little to do with 'potty communities' (as they are called in *The Bell*). Rather, what is important is 'the continual reworking of individual spirit that such experiments can advance but rarely perfect' (p. 3). Murdoch's concern is to map the journey we take in pursuing spiritual ideals. The spiritual maturity Murdoch has in mind is not tied to any faith but is best expressed as a form of human sympathy called 'love' (p. 3). This is what the Abbess signals with her comments: a striving toward perfection, but in a forgiving and tolerant manner, with a greater emphasis on love as the glue that binds a utopian community together (cf. Spear, 1995, 31). The Abbess, with her '[r]ealistic, unsentimental outlook recognizes the need to create a gentler milieu in which the socially deracinated can study and learn their basic human obligations' (Wolfe, 1966, p. 115).

Murdoch also prods us into asking further questions. One of importance for educationists is this: If utopia constitutes a form of 'work', what might we say about *dystopia*? There is a form of dystopian work evident in some of Murdoch's novels, and *The Philosopher's Pupil* is arguably one of the best examples. Wagner-Lawlor observes that at the end of *The Bell* the 'most faithful soul' is Dora. 'It is', Wagner-Lawlor suggests, 'no accident that we leave her resuming her art career as an art teacher, something she realizes she should have done all along. Murdoch's moral economy is based now on an "engagement in a work of creation" ... – but the work of utopian perfection is more critically directed at the individual than at any single communal vision' (p. 15). Teaching can, however, also become an act of *destruction*, as I shall attempt to show in relation to *The Philosopher's Pupil* in the next section.

Pedagogical Dystopia

Who is the philosopher in *The Philosopher's Pupil*? John Robert Rozanov, we learn, makes his mark in the field of philosophy at a comparatively early age, establishing himself as a brilliant young scholar following the publication of his first book, *Logic and Consciousness* (Murdoch, 2000, p. 65). Further books follow, together with a succession of academic appointments in Britain and America. Initially a logical positivist, Rozanov later becomes more eclectic in his thinking and is now seen by some as a neo-Platonist (p. 83). The sense of mystery surrounding him is enhanced by rumours of his knowledge of a 'secret doctrine' and his work on a 'great book' (p. 83). He has been married but his wife dies. They have had a daughter, with whom he does not get along, but she too dies – not, however, before she has left him with a granddaughter, a 'little neglected waif' (Hattie) about whom Rozanov appears to care even less (p. 66).

Rozanov's family ties and professional accomplishments have a bearing on the events that unfold in the novel but even more significant is the relationship between Rozanov and his former student, George McCaffrey. George has been deeply affected by Rozanov's teaching:

He "feels in love" with Rozanov, with philosophy, with Rozanov's philosophy. However, his soul was so shaken that (and this too was no doubt due to Rozanov's influence) he never told his love; and although he spoke admiringly of Rozanov when he went home he never revealed how absolutely this man had taken possession of his soul. (p. 82)

Despite this passion, Rozanov counsels George to give up philosophy and George accepts his advice. George comes to regret this decision, later attending Rozanov's classes despite being warned away from them, and attempts to stay in contact with his teacher. His efforts in this direction are sternly rebuffed by Rozanov. George fails in his one attempt to publish an article on Rozanov's thought in a scholarly journal. Beaten back but not broken, he feels he is owed something and fantasises that John Robert is returning to Ennistone for him, 'the lost sheep, the one just man, the justified sinner' (p. 84). Rozanov's motivations could not be further from George's delusional hopes, and the

pedagogical crisis that unfolds sets up the remaining action in the novel.

Believing he is the only person in Ennistone who can offer John Robert what he needs – philosophical discussion – George pays a visit to the philosopher, receiving a less than warm welcome. Tired with philosophy and with himself – his mind, his face, his personality – and preoccupied with other concerns, Rozanov is in no mood for George's company. At first stunned by the physical changes in his former teacher, who has become fatter, uglier and dirtier, George begins to question John Robert about his intentions, asking him whether he is going to stay in Ennistone and what he writing. George notes that he has continued reading philosophy. He inquires about a possible memoir, and asks Rozanov how he would sum up his philosophical contribution. The latter has no interest in commenting on this, and in response to George's invitation for philosophical conversation, Rozanov states clearly that he will not have time for this. George rouses faint curiosity in the philosopher when tells him of how he lost his job (by smashing all the Roman glass in a museum), but Rozanov cuts off George mid-sentence to ask about his wife, to which George replies: 'I tried to kill her' (p. 144). Rozanov raises his eyebrows and says 'You haven't changed much' (p. 145).

George becomes increasingly desperate. Assuring John Robert that he has not been put off philosophy, George attempts to make a philosophical point: 'I'm very interested in things you said about time. Sometimes I feel I lose the present moment, like losing the centre of one's field of vision, my sense of my individuality goes, I can't feel my present being – ' (p. 145). Rozanov replies, in seemingly deadpan fashion: 'I suggest you see a doctor' (p. 145). In answer to George's question, 'Why did you stop me from doing philosophy?', Rozanov responds simply: 'I thought you weren't good enough' (p. 145). His emotions no longer in check, George pleads for Rozanov's help and before the philosopher can answer fully, continues: 'You ruined my life, you know. Do you know? If you hadn't discouraged me just at that critical moment I might have made something of my life. I never recovered from your high standards. So you owe me something' (p. 145). John Robert is clear: 'I owe you nothing' (p. 145).

What 'goes wrong' here, and what does this exchange suggest about a failed pedagogical relationship in the past? The

answer, I wish to argue, lies in the notion of *attention*. George wants, more than anything else, to experience the ‘just and loving gaze’ of his teacher (Murdoch, 2001, p. 33). He attempts to impress this upon Rozanov, noting that ‘Kant cared about this pupils’ (Murdoch, 2000, p. 145) and, after bombarding the philosopher with further questions that receive only the briefest of answers, he finally exclaims: ‘I beg you, I beseech you. It’s a matter of salvation, it’s a matter of living or dying. Christ, can’t you even *look* at me, can’t you concentrate on me for a moment? Please let me see you, let me be with you, it doesn’t matter what we talk about’ (p. 146). Rozanov looks at him at last, only to say: ‘George, ... you are suffering from an *illusion*’ (p. 146). ‘I don’t want to discuss your imagined sins. I am not interested, I haven’t any wisdom or any help to give you’ (p. 147).

Rozanov’s blunt confession of utter disinterest here, implied throughout their conversation, goes to the heart of the pedagogical dystopia that is evident in the relationship between the two men. George simply does not *matter* for Rozanov; he is, as far as their educational connection is concerned, a ‘non-entity’. From Rozanov’s current perspective, George does not have the status of a fully thinking, feeling, willing human being; he is not regarded as a genuine, complex moral agent capable of making good decisions or of teaching the philosopher something he does not already know. Rozanov, in the exchange conveyed above and elsewhere in the novel, provides a model of utter indifference that sets up an impenetrable barrier to dialogue, to an ongoing, purposeful, educative conversation. In doing so, he not only seals George’s fate but also his own.

Elie Wiesel, a survivor of the Nazi concentration camps and a Nobel laureate, argues that the opposite of hope is not despair but indifference. Indifference, for Wiesel, is deeply problematic from an ethical, aesthetic and educational point of view:

To give in is so easy and I don’t like the easy path ... Indifference is never an option. It is not the beginning of a process; it is the end of a process. My mantra has been: The opposite of love is not hate but indifference; the opposite of education is not ignorance but indifference; the opposite of beauty is not ugliness but indifference; the opposite of life is not death but indifference to life and death. I don’t think I could ever become numb. (Aronson, 2007, p. 4)

If Wiesel's comments have any truth to them, Rozanov's indifference towards George can be seen as nothing short of an act of symbolic terror. Rozanov, by adopting a posture of absolute disinterest, conveys an underlying hatred of George, denying him hope and denuding the pedagogical relation of its very lifeblood: attention toward the Other. A 'refusal to admit the claims of others, or to *see* a wider world' is, for Murdoch, 'the root of all badness and pain' (Conradi, 1988, p. 41). This is not an *abstract* 'other' but the living, breathing 'Other', ultimately unknowable but who invites communication with us (cf. Levinas, 1969). Rozanov's indifference is dehumanizing, not only for George but for Rozanov himself. In diminishing his capacity to care, to engage in any meaningful way with George, he impedes his own growth as an emotional being. He demonstrates, through his words and actions, that he believes he has nothing to learn from George. He cannot truly hear what George has to say because the respect that is necessary for an attentive pedagogical relationship is missing. He treats George not as human subject but as an object, an irritation to be removed from sight and thought as quickly as possible.

In some respects, George and John Robert mirror each other. Both have titanic egos; both are self-centred and selfish; both are controlling and manipulative; both, at different times and in different ways, have valued philosophy. George is often cruel in his dealings with others, including his wife, and his actions in following Rozanov to America might nowadays be regarded as a form of stalking, for which criminal prosecution would be likely. Rozanov, for his part, appears to feel no regret in responding so coldly to George's call for help. There is an obvious difference between the two men in their accomplishments. Rozanov is Ennystone's most famous son, while George is recognised by most as a failure. George's philosophical abilities, unlike those of his teacher, are not of the first rank, and he also falls short in his other endeavours. Yet, Murdoch allows us to feel that despite their frailties, some kind of worthwhile pedagogical communication might have been possible. The possibility that in his earlier student days George had been a 'favourite pupil' of Rozanov is not altogether ruled out (Murdoch, 2000, p. 82), but even if the most positive reading of that time is granted, it is clear that relations have deteriorated substantially in subsequent years.

*The Struggle for Redemption: Education, Utopia and
Attention to Particulars*

Does Rozanov ‘owe’ George anything? He owes him the respect that should be accorded any human being. This is perhaps one of key educative points Murdoch conveys in the novel: in teaching, we face not the already perfected image of the learning ‘other’ but the flesh and blood, thoroughly imperfect, fellow human sufferer. It is the *particular* Other with whom we must deal if we are to build a pedagogical relationship, and this carries with it the burden of attempting to pay attention not only to that human being but to ourselves. We must, as Michael Meade suggests, seek to try to know ourselves, recognising that we will never completely succeed in this but going on regardless – making decisions, taking action, working with others. Education for *all* of us, if it is to be education at all, is a process of struggle. Education can bring great joy, but it may also contribute to a sense of despair (Roberts, 2016). Education involves effort, discomfort and pain. The hope generated by educational experiences arises not so much in spite of the difficulties associated with teaching and learning but because of them. For Murdoch, not all suffering is redemptive (Nicol, 1999, p. 47), but that does not mean suffering cannot contribute to an educative process. In the case of the two novels under examination here, many suffer, and not all redeem themselves, but most learn *something* worthwhile.

This is, in part, why both *The Bell* and *The Philosopher’s Pupil* work so well as educational texts. In both books, through the lives of several key characters, we bear witness to the unevenness, the messiness, the backwards and forwards movements, that constitute the human learning process. Murdoch’s concern is with the ‘unutterable particularity, of experience in general, and individual human beings in particular’ (Byatt, 1976, p. 11), a theme to which she returns again and again in her non-fiction writings as well as her novels. Deliberate attention to particulars allows us to unfold the ‘motley dimensions of reality’ (Masong, 2008, p. 15). In *The Philosopher’s Pupil* there is even a direct reference to this as a philosophical subject. Rozanov, while frequently dealing in abstractions, publishes a seminal work with the title *Nostalgia for the Particular* (Murdoch, 2000, p. 83).

In *The Bell* Michael recognises the wisdom in the Abbess's words but can also see that in his *particular* case it may not be as straightforward as she suggests. Michael, while arguing the need to know oneself perhaps does not know himself as best he might (Nicol, 2006, p. 155) but he is at least aware that he still has more work to do. James, too wedded to his rules, succumbs to 'the temptation to judge by absolute principles rather than by a careful examination of complex and often messy particulars' (Kaehele & German, 1967, p. 554). Michael redeems himself, among other ways, by committing to Catherine's ongoing care following her attempted suicide, but he is also aware that this does not unshackle him from the guilt he feels for Nick. Nick's suicide serves as an act of supreme revenge, leaving Michael no means of escape from a psychological prison. Indeed, this is perhaps the point: there *is* no 'escape' in seeking to construct better lives and build better worlds. As Murdoch says, '[t]hose who hope, by retiring from the world, to earn a holiday from human frailty, in themselves and others, are usually disappointed' (Murdoch, 2004, p. 84). Utopia is not an act of flight but a process of examining oneself and one's surroundings more closely. Utopia means 'learning to live with' the past that haunts us, but not in the sense of merely 'surviving' this. Acceptance of the past and its significance in shaping us is, Murdoch seems to suggest, crucial in understanding how we will work toward a better future. We don't 'move on' in a manner that puts the past 'behind us'; the past is always there, working away at us just as we work with it.

Dora Greenfield, it is made clear near the beginning of *The Bell*, is not distinguished by her depth of intellect; yet, by the end of the novel she has, not without some embarrassment and periods of difficulty, become a more independent, reflective human being (Bove, 1993; Johnson, 1987). Murdoch's stance on questions of gender, feminism, and the extent to which Dora provides a worthy example of fulfilment as a woman, have been matters of some debate (Beams, 1988; Lovibond, 2011), but in *Dora* there is undeniably a sense of subtle transformation and promise. Indeed, it might be argued that Dora's inadequacies make the inner movement that is depicted in *The Bell* even more telling. From the beginning, she is shown to have qualities of kindness, rescuing a butterfly on the train for example, and when she visits the National Gallery she finds herself transfixed, filled with love for the

splendour of the art works exhibited there. She grants the pictures her rapt *attention*: ‘She could look, as one can at last when one knows a great thing very well, confronting it with a dignity which it has itself conferred’ (Murdoch, 2004, p. 195). Dora, flighty and shallow at times, can also demonstrate, and increasingly does so as the novel progresses, complexity and subtlety in her thoughts, feelings and actions. She is, one might say, a richly textured character, to whom other imperfect but open human beings can relate.

George does little to redeem himself through most of the scenes in which he features in *The Philosopher’s Pupil* – saving the dog is an exception – but because he seems to be such a hopeless case, the small flicker of hope opened up near the end of the novel has that much more significance. Even after abysmal failure, years of frustration, and two episodes of attempted *murder*, all is not completely lost. Rozanov might appear to have led a charmed intellectual life but he finds himself, having written all his books and achieved acclaim from his peers, at a loss to find sufficient meaning in his philosophical pursuits to go on. Both George and Rozanov are unbalanced. George is subject to wild emotional swings, and this hinders his ability to make the most of his intellectual talents. Rozanov, on the other hand, lacks the capacity to truly feel for others; he is too heavily steeped in the life of the mind (Ramanathan, 1990, p. 133). Where he does have some tenderness for others, notably in relation to his granddaughter Hattie, he cannot prevent his intellect from providing the dominant and controlling influence over his decisions. For Rozanov, Hattie is, at least at first, merely another philosophical problem to be addressed. He later expresses a kind of love for her but by then it is too late for his feelings to be reconciled harmoniously with the dictates of his philosophical mind (cf. Moss, 1986, pp. 233-234). Rozanov retains a kind of distance in his relations with others that prevents him from loving what is closest at hand. In his relations with George, Rozanov seems determined not to feel anything. To do so would require openness to that which, on the surface, is largely repugnant, and openness entails a risking of the safely contained, confident self. Rozanov keeps pondering philosophical questions but in some respects he remains a closed human being. He is representative of an approach to philosophy that relies too heavily on moral absolutes, leading to ‘uncompromising and even

absurd behaviour in relation to other human beings' (Todd, 1984, p. 24). George, self-centred and cruel as he is, adopts a posture a little closer to the one advanced by Paulo Freire (1997, 1998): as he learns, he becomes less certain of his certainties, more willing to rethink his understanding of the world and his place in it. The difficult work of 'unselfing' (Gordon, 1990) is, as much of Murdoch's fiction shows, never easy and never complete. It is possible to take a compassionate stance in seeking to understand George, as we might with other complex characters, precisely because his utter humiliation lays bare qualities we can recognise in ourselves but seldom dare to confront (cf. Roberts, 2012, 2013).

The Philosopher's Pupil raises another question of interest for educationists: Who is the pupil to whom the title refers? (This is a question also addressed by Todd, 1984.) At one level the answer is obvious: it is George McCaffrey, and Rozanov is the philosopher. But as the action of the novel unfolds, Murdoch grants us space to ponder this afresh. Rozanov has long conversations with Father Bernard, who might legitimately be regarded as a pupil in those dialogues. Tom, innocent and free when he first appears in front of Rozanov and Bernard, is by the end of the novel far less naïve, having learned through bitter experience just how complicated human beings can be. Rozanov himself can be seen not merely as the philosopher but as the pupil. He certainly seems to learn from his discussions with Father Bernard, and indeed seeks out this company, in part as a means to test his ideas but also for the genuine enjoyment it brings. Rozanov finds, near the end of his life, that all the intellect in the world cannot replace the need for love and attention. He realises, even if only partially, that his neglect of Hattie has done great harm to her and also diminished himself as a human being. Perhaps most importantly of all, the *reader* becomes the pupil, being taught not by one but by a cast of many, asking questions of the characters in the thick of the 'thinginess' that makes this a typical Murdoch novel while also being placed under examination. Murdoch shows that pupils are necessarily intertwined with the lives of their teachers. The teacher cannot ever fully 'let go' of the student, notwithstanding John Robert's attempt to do just that with George in *The Philosopher's Pupil*. Equally, students, once they have entered a pedagogical relationship with a teacher, cannot ever be the same again: they will always carry the 'imprint', no matter

how faded this may become, of a person who enters their life with an educative purpose in mind.

Conclusion

In seeking to capture Iris Murdoch's outlook on human beings and the world, there is perhaps no better term than that employed, albeit in a slightly different way, by David McLellan (1990) in relation to Simone Weil: 'utopian pessimist'. Murdoch's fiction leaves the reader with plenty of reasons to be pessimistic about the ability of human beings to attain their desired ethical goals; yet, it also does not allow us to give up on the idea of utopia altogether. In *The Bell* Murdoch shows that there is no safe haven from human frailties; our weaknesses not only accompany us wherever we go but in some respects *define* us as distinctive beings always in a process of becoming. Utopia does not sit waiting for us, guarded within the walls of a community in retreat from the world; instead, it must be constantly recreated. This is both an individual process and a collective endeavour. We build better worlds through *work* – work involving the messy particulars of everyday life, with other imperfect beings, both outwardly and within. Work, as *The Philosopher's Pupil* shows, can also be destructive; we can create *dystopias*, in teaching and in many other activities. A key ingredient in distinguishing utopian situations from those of a dystopian nature is *love*, and in the pedagogical realm this can be expressed, among other ways, through attention to the Other and to the particulars of the world. Educationists have an ongoing role to play in granting students opportunities to explore both utopian and dystopian possibilities, and Iris Murdoch helps us on that journey.

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