CHARACTER ENLIGHTENMENT IN IRIS MURDOCH'S RETROSPECTIVE FICTION

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Abstract: My paper focuses on whether three representative first-person narrators from British author Iris Murdoch's fiction reach a degree of enlightenment. The narrating selves move between a past experience and a present experience in an attempt to build a clearer sense of identity. The more the narrating I distances itself from the experiencing I, claiming a different stand to his past behaviour, the more dissonant the relationship between the two is. The narrating self's disproval of past conduct produces a regenerative effect on the character healing his to a certain extent from moral ailments as egoism, pride and tyrany. The more alike the narrating I is to the experiencing self, the more their relationship is one of consonance. Iris Murdoch's reminiscing first-person characters illustrate a mix of consonant and disonant relationships reaching enlightenment only half-way. Having overcome moral struggles, they become more modest in their demands of themselfves and of others, but they still glimpse back at a semi-obscure past which they can't fully comprehend.

Keywords: experiencing I, narrating I, enlightenment, healing time, identity

The passaging of time and the self reflecting upon it as literary device has become a net of enchantment for readers and writers alike since Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*. Postmodernism's playfulness in conveying several truths according to context and perspective instead of the classical idea of objective truth also has implications on devices like time – which clings to a character's realm of experience and space – as map of self rather than mirror of the real world. Experienced time and narrating time are two coordinates within Murdoch's retrospective novels intermingling in a way that tries to embed a pattern in the narrative: that of the self moving between experiences in an attempt to build a clearer sense of identity.

Proust's lost time has a double meaning: at one level, it includes experienced time, time the narrator has already lived, imposing heavy alterations on the characters, and which comes back to life through remembering, and, at a secondary level, simply time wasted in unimportant pursuits. Life in Combray and its surrounding gardens seems to gently blossom and grow out of the narrator's teacup, reshaping itself with each of the self's revisiting of the past. But whereas in the final volume of *In Search of Lost Time* the result is that there are truths comprised within our lost time[1], we gather from Murdoch's work that truth is actually variable and no one person holds supremacy over it. Closely linked to lost time is time found, what we save from lost time offering us an image of eternity but also a real eternity confined within the realm of art.[2] On the one hand, time found is a strip of eternity hidden in a work of art, but what I find noteworthy for our thesis is the curative aspect of time, or rather the curative aspect of the process of going through fictive time which is directly linked to the degree of enlightenment a character achieves.

N. Bran brilliantly points out that "*The Sea, the Sea*, like *Under the Net* and *The Black Prince* are novels which portray the hero's gradual progression to a certain degree of enlightenment. Central to this process is the gradual acknowledgement of this internal dialogue".[3] When the narrating self intervenes into the experiencing self's discourse from a

[1] Deleuze, Gilles, *Proust et les Signes*, p. 30
[2] Deleuze, Gilles, *Proust et les Signes*, p. 26
[3] Bran, Nicol, *Iris Murdoch: The Retrospective Fiction*, p.72

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vantage point, i.e. time having passed between the moment of action and that of retelling, it endows him with the possibility to interpret the events, his position becomes similar to that of the third-person omniscient narrator towards the hero. *The Sea* and *The Brack Prince* closely follow this pattern where the experiencing self moves towards a sort of enlightenment deciphered by the narrating "I" which represents, in fact, the goal in all of Iris Murdoch's novels: the search for truth. In *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, her last book concerned with philosophical matters she writes: "We must indeed preserve and cherish a strong truth-bearing everyday language, not marred or corrupted by technical discourse or scientific codes; and thereby promote the clarified objective knowledge of man and society of which we are in need ad citizens, and as moral agents."[4] The search for what is real and meaningful in our lives assumed as moral duty flows through her the novels and finds an answer when the stories come to an end, although, it is never definite. It follows that as truth is something we aspire to, it is forever elusive, and one cannot reason towards a complete enlightenment of one's lived experiences and neither to a complete understanding of the people that surround us. Fickleness, the central discussion around which Jane Austen's *Persuasion* revolves is an important character trait of most Murdochian characters.

According to D. Cohn[5], there are two opposing attitudes the narrating self has towards his past actions, either condemning them in a way that creates a dichotomy between present I and past I which implies *dissonant self-narration* as is the case with Proust, or an overlapping of past and present I which implies *consonant self-narration*. If the Proustian narrating self is in dissonance with the experiencing self, the entailment is that the mature self no longer shares the same convictions as his younger self and by reinserting himself into the experiencing self's narration he detaches himself from previously professed views. The more dissonant the two voices are, the stronger one feels the healing aspect of time is through the narrating self's efforts to understand his position by analogy with past wishes and beliefs which the reader perceives as no longer valid. Murdoch's novels, however, illustrate a mixt condition of consonant and dissonant self-narrations because the narrative self cannot throw light on the past nor can it tolerate living in total darkness regarding it. The assumption that the process of revisiting time offers a cure implies that there is an ailment of some sort from which the characters suffer. Most characters suffer from one or several moral illnesses – egoism, selfishness, inability to act, envy, pride. The long emotional journeys the characters undertake in Murdoch's retrospective fiction finally end in an open manner by adopting a more humble attitude. Moral regeneration comes out of the characters' realization of their own faults. In this respect, time as lived experience heals Murdoch's characters because they learn to accept the limited human understanding of their peers and the tribulations of human relationships, although their metamorphosis is never complete.

The Italian Girl, one of the first of the British author's retrospective novels, makes a clear case for the dissonance of the narrating "I"s which bring about the healing nature of time. Considered one of her least accomplished novels[6], The Italian Girls revolves around Edmund Narraway and his return to his home where he had grown up for his mother's funeral. He is a middle-aged engraver who had never actually developed into a fully-fledged adult because of his mother's domineering personality. His return to his home town is a quest to find an agreement with his troubled past and also help the other members of his family who had suffered the same fate. His twin brother, Otto, is a stonemason leading a life of depravation, a victim of alcoholism and blind to the affairs both his wife Isabel and his daughter Flora were having with his apprentice Levkin. Smothered by Lydia's personality, all

[4] Murdoch, Iris, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, p. 164
[5] Cohn, Dorrit, *Transparent Minds*
[6] Bove, Cheryl K., *Understanding Iris Murdoch*, p. 175

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the members of the household await Edmund and beseech him to set things right. Otto pleads that he should speak to Isabel on his behalf and calm her: "You would do good, good. Someone like you can't help doing good" (IG 78). Teenager Flora asks that he helps her with money for an abortion: "I expect I'll do whatever you say. Only for God's sake look after me." (IG 54). Isabel's statement encompasses all their expectations of Edmund: "You are a good man. You are a sort of doctor. You are the assessor, the judge, the inspector, the liberator. You will clear us all up. You will set us in order. You will set us free." (IG 36). At first, Edmund declines, well aware that he is in no position to bring peace to others when his own life is as much a "muddle" as the others characters'. However, he starts meddling in their lives, but only manages to complicate things further until the climax is reached with the tragic death of Otto's Russian half-mad lover. Elsa's death seems to put all things in a sort of balance again: her brother Levkin, with whom Isabel and Flora were having affairs, leaves for Russia, Otto and Isabel divorce in a civil manner and Edmund enters a romantic relationship with his former nurse, Maria Magistretti, in a sort of Oedipian ending to the novel. The narrating self asks himself in a puzzled manner what the fruits of his long "meditation" were, his incursion into these past experiences and the answer follows: "I had had no power to heal the ills of others, I had merely discovered my own. I had thought to have passed beyond life, but now it seemed to me that I had simply evaded it. I had not passed beyond anything; I was a false religious, a frightened man." (IG 170). The narrating self looks back with surprise to his past self's pretenses and disqualifies them as false. The element of time found brings about a sense of closure and healing of old wounds. Edmund realizes that both his power to influence others and his ability to understand them is poor and limited by his own selfish designs. It is only when he understands this that he can perceive other people for their own selves and start loving them.

The Sea, the sea (1978) is Murdoch's last first-person novel and it seems to illustrate her preoccupation with the exploration of human nature as mentioned in an interview with M. Bellamey[7] from the previous year where she stated that people are odder that they would care to admit and how the novel can somehow mediate between what they think they are and how individual identity is created in relation to how we enact ourselves around others.

This is the story of an ageing playwright Charles Arrowby who, tired of the acting world and under the sway of a moral change, retires from the spotlight to lead a more quiet life in a remote house by the sea. His life which he documents under a series of literary genres – diary, memoir, philosophical journal – does not settle within the boundaries of the Romantic clichés he lays out in the beginning of the novel. Having undergone a moral change of which we are not given further details, he vouches to renounce his dealings with the theatre world akin to Shakespeare's Prospero and ''abjure all magic''. He moves to a rather rundown house called Shruff End where he is in permanent contact with the sea and the marine flora and fauna. This Romantic idea of communion with nature alongside his wish to cut all relation to society goes completely wayward when many of his past friends start showing up at Shruff End. Charles himself strives to keep in contact with all of them through letters and governs them from afar.

The story spans roughly around one month from Charles Arrowby's settling in at Shruff End to his return to London. The chapter sequencing indicates on the one hand the attempt to structure recollections in a logical way and, on the other, an implied desire to order and give sense to past experiences in the light of the present self. N. Bran points out that *The Sea, the Sea* is concerned with the "deliberate quest into the past"[8] as opposed to "involuntary

[7] Michael Bellamy interviews Iris Murdoch in *Contemporary Literature*, vol 18, no. 2, , University of Wisconsin Press, 1977, pp. 129-140

[8] Bran, Nicol, *Iris Murdoch: The Retrospective Fiction*, p.141

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memory" - both ways of "confronting time" in Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*. The most important moment around which all other events gravitate is Hartley's imprisonment. Time is also ordered around this event in a manner that transforms it into before (pre-history), during (history) and after (life goes on) the encounter with Hartley which gives the narrating self a sense of identity. The narrating I has become more humble, gradually distancing himself from the egotistical experiencing I, and allows that his knowledge is limited to his own perspective. When Hartley's imprisonment cause her gradual psychological down spiraling contrary to Charles' expectations for her to become free and independent, the experiencing I begins to question his disinterested motives for wanting to help Hartley. His eager willingness to re-enact and change the outcome of their failed relationship leads to the dissemination of confusion in their minds. Although unclear in her intentions, Hartley has a clearer sense of identity: "I live in long-times, not in sudden present moments – I'm married, I've got to go back to where I *am.*" *(SS 384)* and it is this sense of identity built in relation to the Other that Charles can't understand. The flow of time does not bring enlightenment to the ontological question "who am I?", but rather deepens the mystery. Not being able to answer this question could have caused dramatic consequences but such an ending is averted through the intimation that Charles has come to terms with the idea that no person alive is the vessel of truth.

These two novels are the most expressive in their dealing with the healing nature of time which sets the characters' inner world in balance, helping them renounce an egotistical view of human relationships. The two timelines of the retrospective novels – story time and narrative time[9] – create a pattern interwoven by the narrating voices that position themselves at different points of reference. The experienced self is often impatient to impart his later reflections with the reader, flashforwarding to enlighten puzzling events while it uses analepsis to shed some light on occurrences the experiencing I finds baffling and, in this way, reiterate the healing nature of time found. There is never complete healing in the sense of the narrating I completely denouncing the past self which might lead to an overtly assumed sense of self. Murdoch makes this idea clear in an interview "(…)the achievement of coherence is itself ambiguous. Coherence is not necessarily good and one must question its cost. Better sometimes to remain confused"[9]. Haziness in coherence implies that the agent can always revisit the past and reinterpret it, speculating over it in much the same way as one does in real life.

In the second paragraph of *The Sea*, the narrating I intimates that he has had a horrible experience which he doesn't dwell on, only mentioning it and building suspense up to the point in the story where the narrating I reveals the mystery of the "extraordinary and horrible" event. The voice points back in time – through what Genette calls "completing analepsis"[10] – completing an earlier gap in time which, in the case of *The Sea, the Sea* - has been omitted to increase suspense. Charles recalls the image of the sea monster rising from the waves, a terrifying appearance coiling itself above the water level and creating a loophole through which Charles "could see the sky". The horrible experience displayed in the recalling of the complex picture of the frightening "green-eyed" sea monster is interpreted in the key of a hallucination at this point in the story but it is implied that Charles would perceive it in a different manner later on. The second completing analepsis related to the same event underlines the untrustworthiness of memory: "the memory of that hallucination, or whatever it was, was suddenly more disquieting than it had ever been". Seeing the painting of *Perseus and Andromeda* brings back the haunting image of the sea monster which Charles however finds difficult to attribute a meaning to, the only certain quality relating to it being that is

[9] Murdoch, Iris, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, p. 147
[10] Genette, G., *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, chapter. *Order*

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more troubling than before. The reiterative image of the monster is a symbol of jealousy, destructive in its unabashed surfacing, coiling itself around Charles' minds and clouding his judgment. The vision of the wide-gapped sea-monster playing among the waves unveils a Shakespearean perspective to the text: the monster is a projection of man's darkest feelings: "In men, as in a rough-grown grove, remain /Cave-keeping evils that obscurely sleep"[11]. However, towards the close of the story, the disquieting monster is replaced with the calming sea and Charles sights sea lions frolicking in the water and interprets them as "beneficent beings" *(SS 476)* having come to bless him. To a certain extent, he changes after having come face to face with real people and failing in his attempt to run his life and that of others as he had directed his plays in London. His less malignant attitude after his return to London is mirrored by the healing sea: "Time, like the sea, unties all knots." (SS.556)

Charles Arrowby states at the beginning of *The Sea, The Sea* "Now, I shall abjure magic and become a hermit: put myself in a situation where I can honestly say that I have nothing else to do but to learn to be good."*(SS 2)* Yet by the end of his récit he says: "Yes, I go to parties now. I go about in London, I eat and drink and gossip just as if I were an ordinary person. Well, am I not one?" *(SS 562)* The two passages reflect antithetic intentions, passing from complete monastic renouncement to the reclaiming of former glamorous life and they illustrate a radical distancing of the narrating voice from the enthusiastic and idealistic experiencing self. The two voices are in dissonance and Charles's illumination comes from his conclusion that the only truth to be discovered from his passing in Shruff End is that the nature of man is fickle. The situation does not become less "muddled" – a key adjective that describes opaque relations between people and that surfaces in several novels: in *A fairly Honourable Defeat*, *The Bell* as well as in her retrospective novels – but rather the narrator relapses into a state of agreement with the limit to which we can understand other people. Charles never found out the truth of the matter and the final pages are filled with puzzling question that set the reader into a meditative frame of mind: "Hartley said that she had lied about Ben's violence, but perhaps that was a lie uttered out of loyalty, out of irrational fear. Can one not recognize the smell of fear?" *(SS 582)*, "Perhaps in a way James and I had the same problem?" *(SS 583)*, "Am I after all alone now, as I intended to be and without attachments? Is history over" *(SS.583)* and the very last sentences of the novel: "Upon the demon-ridden pilgrimage of human life, what next, I wonder?". Suggestively, no clear answers are given, in this respect, the narrating self hasn't found convincing answers in a way that would close the novel in a traditional sense. Charles had imprisoned Hartley convinced that he was saving her from an abusive husband yet in their conversations are always failed dialogues as the message usually travels one way. The narrating voice implies in a rather Socratic way that what it knows with certainty is that it cannot understand people's deep desires and thoughts and, in extenso, a person can't reach some holistic truth.

Completing analepses are instruments the narrating I uses to both expand and explain an occurrence which the experiencing I fails to comprehend at the moment of his narration. Although there is no complete state of enlightenment in Murdochian fiction, there is a sequel of incomplete states of enlightenment when the narrating I sheds light on an event the experiencing self had found obscure only to reinterpret it later and rob it of its previously ascribed meaning.

It would not be farfetched to affirm that Murdochian retrospective fiction, although less constant in its themes and narrative techniques than Proust's opus, is an apprenticeship to truth as G. Delleuze claims about the world of *In search of Lost Time*, an apprenticeship that in Murdoch's case is never completed, but continues even after the story has ended. Memory

[11] Shakespeare, William, *The Rape of Lucrece*

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plays the part of the ungracious instrument of the narrating self, always changing the first interpretation given to an occurrence endowed with a meaning and never revealing an all-encompassing truth. Passing time regenerates the characters only partially, building the interpretative openness of events. Perhaps the most suggestive in this respect is the evoked image of Hartley: "Oh, my darling, how clearly I see you now. (…) Perhaps it is the only true light in my life, the light that reveals the truth." (SS 91) which evolves into unquestionable certainty regarding her feelings: "I reviewed the evidence and I had little doubt about what it pointed to. Hartley loved me and had long regretted losing me." (SS 184) and ends in tormenting uncertainty "I had deluded myself throughout by the ides of reviving a secret love which did not exist at all. (….) But these speculations are too nightmarish. Better to feel 'I shall never know.'" (SS 580)

The irresolvable conflict at the core of *A Word Child* is Hilary Burde's inability to come to terms with his past. Orphaned as an infant and separated from his sister, Crystal, Hilary grew up with the feeling of being unwanted and unlovable. His talent for languages gets him out of the sordid world of the orphanage and into that of Oxford, becoming the protégé of Gunnar Jopling and his wife, Anne. Hilary and Anne have an affair which ends tragically with her death and that of her unborn child in a car accident. The story happens twenty years later when Gunnar reappears in his life an event which marks Hilary's breakdown. Having felt guilty and traumatized for Anne's death all those years, Hilary falls in love with Gunner's second wife, Lady Kitty. Hilary revives the past projecting the image of his former lover onto Lady Kitty, however history repeats itself because their affair ends with her death as well. Throughout the novel, Hilary shows some glimpses of a future reformed self, the narrating experiencing and narrating "I"s converging in both consonant and dissonant degrees. The tyrannical nature of Hilary expressed especially in his relationship to women becomes constrained, perhaps dulled by Kitty's death. After a lifetime of governing Crystal's life, keeping men away from her and preventing her from marrying, he finally gives in to Crystal's decision to marry unimportant Arthur. His relationship with Tommy, a failed actress and his lover, over whom he also exerts an inflexible authority, censuring any public effusions and hints at their intimate involvement, changes to a small extent towards the end of the story. The question of marriage, so appalling to him before, instigates less hate in him after Lady Kitty's death, the reader is even led to believe that he might actually be contemplating it in an ambiguous half-ironic, half-pensive manner as gathered from the final dialogue with Tommy: "I'm going to marry you, Hilary." "Are you, Thomas?" "Yes, I'm going to marry you." "Are you, Thomasina?" *(WC 391)* Hilary's repetitive question proves disbelief of her earnest declaration but, at the same time, naming her with her real name and not the domesticizing endearing "Thomas" is a momentous turn towards her real essence and an attempt to distinguish between the real and the phantasy he had constructed. Some discrepancies between the narrative voices could support the idea that the narrating I might wish to distance himself from his previous actions, although he paradoxically reinforces the idea that his behavior has not changed and admits to having been "a monster of egoism", attributes he does not relinquish in the narrating I's voice and warns the reader through a prolepsis to expect "there will be no improvement" *(WC 68).* Even when he speaks in terms of "now" and "then", the narrating I hints that he might have become wiser than he had been in his youth, seeing more clearly the accidental dimension of the two events over which he had no control. His old fear of having been the author of the two deaths is less present, collapsed under the weight of the "sheer accident which these things … contained" *(WC 382).*His transformation starts with shielding Crystal, his closest confidant who had borne much of the weight of his affair with Anne, from imparting the story of his dealings with Lady Kitty. He has not yet come to terms with the past but he is less inclined to take on the full responsibility of two deaths. In this sense, he is less the monster of egoism he made himself out to be because these events do not

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have him as a gravitational center. Hilary Burde is the most constant first-person character in Murdoch's retrospective novels in his unaltered attachment to a traumatic past that he finds no way to interpret. N. Bran's psychoanalytical approach to the novel suggests that it illustrates the uncanny capacity of the past trauma to return. The process of transfer between analysand and analyst aims to bring to surface recollections and, by interpreting them and giving them meaning, release the sufferer from the trauma.[12] Hilary fails to tell the full story of Anne's death to anyone – he tells Crystal, but leaves out the fact that she was pregnant when she died, possibly with his child; he also tells Arthur but omits some aspects which might have made him look less sympathetic in the listener's eyes. Lady Kitty's death imposes on him the desire to talk about it and externalize his anguishing thoughts, but there is no listener left. The ordered compartments of the novel tagged into the days of the week turn into Christmas Eve and Christmas Day and close the novel showing the shattering of his previously well-compartmentalized life and only at this moment do we notice that Hilary has told his own story to the reader but without appeasing his guilt-ridden conscience: he "could at least see that much now" *(WC 380)*.

The most frontal comparison the narrating I makes with the past self is set after Lady Kitty's death towards the close of the novel, postulating the character's possible reformation. The temporal adverbs "then" and "now" appear repetitively throughout this confrontational page. The narrating I wonders whether the present moment offers enough clarity to dispel the rage and darkness of the past and, ultimately, whether he has adopted a more modest stand towards events which were beyond his control. Hilary wavers between the oppressive moment of "then" and the promising moment of "now", yet wishing to move forward and to relinquish the old chains of his past burdened self.

In the case of Charles Arrowby, time has proved an ally, making it even clearer than in the case of Hilary Burde, that man driven and blinded by his passions becomes an easy prey to his own egoism, disguised in the person's desire to manipulate and govern the people around him. The experiencing self is wrapped in his own egotistical desires and never reflects on the truth value of his recollections until he faces the adversity of other characters. Charles devises ways to visit Hartley and her husband, but he takes action after having become convinced that he is saving her from a tyrannical husband and eventually kidnaps her, becoming himself the tyrant he loathed. The narrating self's current need is an attempt to bring the character face to face with his own follies ("I had deluded myself throughout by the idea of reviving a secret love which did not exist at all." *(SS 580)*. However, he sees that this statement could lead to the same illusion that one a person's recollections can be the source of truth, so he carefully steers away by adding "But these speculations are too nightmarish. Better to feel 'I shall never know'". If it is one thing that the narrating self has learned it is that no one knows the absolute truth of what he has experienced nor can he presume to know with certainty another person's thoughts and feelings. Individual and cultural memory offer an insight into the past but its truth value is subjective. Hilary, wrapped in his own phantasies of recreating the past, experiences the same events as the ones that traumatized him. Although not openly affirming to have found a way out of his emotional labyrinth, it is precisely the ambiguity of the endings that claim on their part a degree of enlightenment because, in Murdoch's unmistakable style, life is, unlike art, forever open to reinterpretations of the past.

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