



'Listening at the threshold' – A reading of religion in some excerpts from three of Iris Murdoch's novels: *Henry and Cato*, *Nuns and soldiers* and *The unicorn*

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This article examined the religious aspect of some excerpts from three of Iris Murdoch's novels according to a Christian theory of reading. However, the length and scope of this article did not encompass a discussion of Murdoch's overarching philosophy. Some justification was given for the adoption of a Christian theory of reading as opposed to a deconstructive, Marxist or psychoanalytical theory. The contention of the article was that, though Murdoch herself did not espouse orthodox Christian faith, there is in her work – when she is writing about religion in the three novels under consideration – an 'echo of the Divine', such as that described by Laurence Hemming, which is both authentic and strikingly compatible with orthodox Christian spirituality. The aim of the article was therefore to record some impressions, ask a pertinent question, and ponder some possible answers regarding the nature of this 'echo of the Divine' to be found in the extracts selected from these three novels.

'Listening at the threshold' – 'n Lesing van godsdiens in 'n paar uittreksels uit drie van Iris Murdoch se boek romans: *Henry and Cato*, *Nuns and soldiers* and *The unicorn*. Hierdie artikel het die godsdienstige aspekte van drie van Iris Murdoch se romans binne die raamwerk van 'n Christelike leesteorie ontleed. Die artikel het die gebruik van die Christelike leesteorie verdedig eerder as teorieë wat dekonstruksie, Marxistiese teorie of psigoanalise as vertrekpunte neem. Die argument in die artikel was dat, alhoewel Murdoch nie self 'n ortodokse Christelike geloof voorgestaan het nie, daar wel in haar werk 'n *echo of the Divine*, soos beskryf deur Laurence Hemming, bespeur kan word. Dit was veral duidelik wanneer sy oor godsdiens skryf in die drie romans wat in die artikel in ooreenstemming gekom het. Hierdie geestelike weerklanke is geloofwaardig en kom ook opvallend ooreen met ortodoks Christelike spiritualiteit. Die doel van die artikel was dus om 'n paar indrukke te noteer, 'n belangrike vraag aan die orde te stel en om 'n paar antwoorde te oorweeg oor die aard van die *echo of the Divine* wat aangetref word in die gekose uittreksels uit hierdie drie romans.

Introduction

This article is concerned with excerpts from three of Iris Murdoch's novels only; it does not presume to comment on her entire *oeuvre*. The extracts to be considered come from the following three novels: *Henry and Cato*, *Nuns and soldiers* and *The unicorn*. The novel *Henry and Cato* examines love, religion, sexuality and the complexity that underlies human motivation. Cato is a priest who is suffering from religious doubt and the despairing and growing conviction that his community work is a failure. He is also unnerved by an attractive but somehow threatening young man who haunts his community centre. The origins of his faith and his ordination to the priesthood are complex, but his relationship with Christ is genuine, though fragile. *Nuns and soldiers* too is a profound contemplation of love, faith and the nature of goodness. The love interests in the novel are many and intricate, but my interest, for the purpose of this article, lies in an ex-nun, Anne, and her fresh encounter with, and recommitment to, the Christ in whom her faith had been faltering when she left the convent. *The unicorn* can be called a Gothic novel but, as does all of Murdoch's work, it contemplates the complexities of love and faith in its characters. Effingham is a deeply self-centred man who comes to some understanding of the reality lying behind his cloying preoccupation with self when he undergoes a traumatic yet enlightening near-death experience. He plunges into the deep mud next to a path in the pitch dark but his terror is infused with a wonderful insight and an increasing perception of the light that lies behind the darkness.

This article is entitled *Listening at the threshold*, a phrase taken from Lucy Gardner's (2000) chapter within *Radical Orthodoxy? – A Catholic enquiry*. I have used this phrase because it describes so well a narrow but intent interest in one aspect of three of Iris Murdoch's novels. The contention of this article is that, in the uniquely compelling strains discernible in Murdoch's work when she



is writing about religion in these novels, there is an 'echo of the Divine' (Hemming 2000:27), which is both authentic and strikingly compatible with orthodox Christian spirituality. The aim of this article is to record some impressions and to propose some answers to a pertinent question regarding the nature of this 'echo of the Divine', which I suggest can be discerned in these novels.

The religious quality and nature of chosen passages from these three novels

This article maintains that the religious aspect of the areligious Murdoch's work in chosen passages from the three novels under consideration shows an interesting and striking affinity to overtly theological texts, in that her writing of religion here is not only theologically convincing but also inspiring and reassuring in the same way that overtly theological texts are traditionally considered to be. In noting a religious undertone in these three novels there is, of course, the ever-present danger of colonising Murdoch's work to suit basic presuppositions which are avowedly not hers. The intention of this article is not to do this but, rather, to speculate on a reading of three of Murdoch's novels from a specific point of view. The reading perspective taken by this article is strikingly outlined by John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock and Graham Ward (2000) in their book *Radical Orthodoxy: A new theology*:

Every discipline must be framed by a theological perspective; otherwise these disciplines will define a zone apart from God, grounded literally in nothing ... This is a theological perspective of participation which allows of no territory independent of God, but which, although it refuses any reserve of created territory, yet allows finite things their own integrity ... This perspective recognises that materialism and spiritualism are false alternatives, since if there is only finite matter there is not even that, and that for phenomena really to be there they must be more than there. (pp. 3–4)

According to this 'theological perspective of participation' then, from which perspective this article is written, Murdoch's work in these three novels cannot claim to inhabit a 'territory independent of God', although of course it maintains its 'own integrity'. James Hanvey (2000) writes in *Radical Orthodoxy? A Catholic enquiry* that:

if theological discourse is to speak truly, it must not make of God an object ... it must speak in order to disclose presence. Indeed, it is the very disclosure of presence that opens up and sustains the possibility of this peculiar speech [*that is, words about God*] at all. (p. 169)

According to this perspective, then, I maintain that Murdoch's writing about God (the kind of writing Hanvey describes as 'this peculiar speech') in the passages chosen from these three novels discloses 'presence', which simultaneously makes the disclosure – that is, the writing – possible, and is itself disclosed. 'In this way theology [and, this article maintains, Murdoch's work when she writes about God in the passages being considered] becomes not just a speech act, but worship' (Hanvey 2000:169).

A Christian theory of reading

My chosen theory of reading that underpins my analysis of the passages discussed in this article is a Christian theory of reading. It is perhaps wise as well as courteous to make explicit the position of the theory of my choice in relation to the dominant theories of the 20th century, as these major theories colour critical thinking so vividly. My theoretical stance is not deconstructionist, Marxist, or psychoanalytical. I acknowledge, however, that these dominant theories enjoin rigour and scrupulous vigilance on any theory of literature reading in their wake. I agree with Ferretter (2003) that these theories:

teach ... theology nothing radically new, but [*they*] insist ... with a new rigour on what [*theology*] already knew, that [*its*] positive statements must be qualified with an acknowledgement of the incapacity of [*any*] position as such finally and certainly to represent God. (p. 19)

The critical vigilance enjoined by deconstruction on Christian theory

As I am working in a postmodernist period, I must answer the critical challenge of deconstruction. Along with Ferretter (2003:184), I maintain that 'deconstruction does not prohibit or render meaningless the use of theological language in literary theory or criticism ... since it remains within the circle of precisely such language itself'. However, deconstruction reiterates a point which Christian theologians have always recognised in principle:

that theology must remain continually critical of its own language. Theological statements cannot be taken to be finally or certainly true, therefore, but rather as provisional articulations of the church's faith in that which lies beyond the world to which language can refer. (Ferretter 2003:184)

I fully acknowledge the need for this rigorous self-interrogation and I hope to exercise it conscientiously.

Grounds for a rebuttal of deconstruction

In my opinion, Steiner (1989) articulates with elegant clarity the nub of the matter which lies at the heart of my reading of these three novels:

The issue is, quite simply, that of the meaning of meaning as it is re-insured by the postulate of the existence of God. 'In the beginning was the Word'. Deconstruction maintains that there was no such beginning. (Steiner 1989:120)

My position in this article is that there *was* 'such a beginning' and, as neither hypothesis is demonstrably provable, I maintain that my position is as tenable as that of deconstruction. When deconstruction:

instructs us that a text is not a sequence of words, of syntactic forms enunciating, communicating any single decidable meaning (or even constellation of meanings), [*its*] repudiation of meaningfulness is put in unmistakable terms. No body of discourse has any 'single theoretical meaning'. None transmits the 'message' of 'an Author-god'. There can be neither gospel in any authentic sense nor, it follows, gospel-truth. (Steiner 1989:120)

Therefore it is unequivocally clear that the truth of deconstruction's claim is not any more self-evident than the truth of the claim of meaningfulness:



Deconstruction's insistence on the truth of its claim can only be vitiated by a self-fulfilling irony: if there cannot be truth then there cannot be truth in its claim. (Steiner 1989:120)

Deconstruction claims that:

we must now be honest and percipient enough to set the metaphoric *insignificance*, the arbitrariness of meaning, always open to deferral or to vacancy, against the fossilized authority of the *Logos*, of what deconstruction calls 'the logocentric order'. (Steiner 1989:121)

Deconstruction is entitled to its claim of vacancy but, by a like exchange of intellectual courtesies, it must acknowledge a contrary claim to presence. My reading challenges the claim that the authority of the *Logos* is 'fossilized' – after all, a claim made by the simple attachment of an adjective, whilst it may be rhetorically impressive or persuasive, does not constitute a necessary proof of the justness of the claim. My reading recognises the 'authority of the *Logos*' and reads these passages in the light of it.

Where deconstruction challenges the 'presumption of insured content, of cognitive ballast', maintaining that 'signs do not transport presences' (Steiner 1989:121), my view dissents from the 'presumption' of meaninglessness. In the view of this article, signs 'do' transport presence. In my opinion, the grounds for rebuttal of the position of deconstruction are as unanswerable as I concede the claim made by deconstruction to be:

The deconstructive discourse is *itself* rhetorical, referential and altogether generated and governed by normal modes of causality, of logic and of sequence. The deconstructive denial of 'logocentrism' is expounded in wholly logocentric terms ... To some degree, symbolic logic [*as used in mathematics and philosophy*] has been able to develop formal presentations of so abstract and generalized a type that they can be used to test, to deconstruct other formal languages from, as it were, outside. No such extra-territoriality is available to post-structuralist and deconstructive practitioners. They have invented no new speech, no immaculate conceptualizations. The central dogma, according to which all readings are misreadings and the sign has no underwritten intelligibility, has precisely the same paradoxical, self-denying status as the celebrated *aporia* whereby a Cretan declares all Cretans to be liars. Immured within natural language, deconstructive propositions are self-falsifying. (Steiner 1989:129)

Deconstruction reads from its central dogmatic stance of the meaninglessness of signs which have no 'underwritten intelligibility'. I read from a central dogmatic stance which acquiesces in the meaningfulness transported by signs. Derrida recognises that:

where it is consequent, deconstruction rules that the very concept of *meaning-fulness*, of a congruence, even problematic, between the signifier and the signified, is theological or onto-theological ... the necessary unison between an epistemological and existential assumption of substantive meaning on the one hand, and a theological underwriting on the other. The archetypal paradigm of all affirmations of sense and of significant plenitude – the fullness of meaning in the world – is a *Logos*-model. (Steiner 1989:119)

This, for Derrida, is a delusion. For my reading, it is the truth. I agree that the claim to meaningfulness is a theological claim, which Derrida finds to be delusional but which I find to be

tenable. Both positions are ultimately unprovable and both can be legitimate theories of reading where they are practised with rigour and integrity.

In what might be defined as irony, Derrida, as mediated by Steiner, exquisitely articulates my theory of reading:

Derrida's formulation is beautifully incisive: 'the intelligible face of the sign remains turned to the word and the face of God'. A semantics, a poetics of correspondence, of decipherability and truth-values arrived at across time and consensus, are strictly inseparable from the postulate of theological-metaphysical transcendence. Thus the origin and the axiom of meaning and of the god-concept is a shared one. The semantic sign, where it is held to be meaningful, and divinity 'have the same place and time of birth'. (Steiner 1989:119)

It is from this position that I read chosen passages from three of Murdoch's novels in this article. Derrida's statement here could be said to simultaneously describe and analyse the religious quality of Murdoch's writing in these passages: she is entirely committed to the meaningfulness of the semantic signs she uses. She says of Cato when he sees God 'that he stumbles into reality' (Murdoch 1976:n.p.). Her word 'reality' makes a truth claim for what it writes. Thus the divinity disclosed in her writing about God issues from the 'theological-metaphysical transcendence' inherent in the meaningful semantic signs she uses.

In my opinion, therefore, deconstruction cannot claim to make the use of theological language in literary theory or criticism meaningless, because it, itself, uses language which transports meaning to transport a claim to meaninglessness, which it simultaneously claims to be a true or meaningful claim. To me, this position seems to be self-negating. Deconstruction does, however, reiterate the undeniable point 'that theology must remain continually critical of its own language' (Steiner 1989:119). It is right to remind us that:

theological statements cannot be taken to be finally or certainly true ... but rather [*must be taken*] as provisional articulations of the church's faith in that which lies beyond the world to which language can refer. (Steiner 1989:119)

However, whilst this is true of theological statements, it is equally true of deconstruction. 'The deconstructive discourse is *itself* rhetorical, referential and altogether generated and governed by normal modes of causality, of logic and of sequence' (Steiner 1989:129) and the statements it makes also cannot be 'taken to be finally or certainly true'.

The critical vigilance enjoined by Marxism on Christian theory

Marxism is another theory of awesome stature which requires courteous acknowledgement. I concede that Marxism remains 'an influential critique for politically committed forms of literary and cultural criticism' (Ferretter 2003:185). Certainly, Marxism 'reminds ... theology that it has historically functioned both to justify and to protest against social injustice and that it can still function in either way' (Ferretter 2003:185). Nevertheless, I stand with Ferretter (2003:184)



on the 'contention that Christian theology can be used in literary interpretation after the critique of religion posed by Marxism', because I agree with Ferretter that Marxism's claims to have debunked religion are logically flawed. Thus:

As an argument for atheism, the Marxist critique of religion is based upon a logical fallacy, inasmuch as the socio-economic determinants of religious beliefs do not constitute evidence for the truth or falsity of these beliefs. Whilst religious beliefs may be influenced by the social and economic conditions in which they are held, it does not follow from this, as Marxism claims, that they refer to no other reality than these conditions. The atheism of the Marxist world-view is ultimately an unproven hypothesis. (Ferretter 2003:185)

Indeed, Marxism is as unproven as it considers Christianity to be. Furthermore:

whilst Marxism is right to claim that Christian theology has been used as an ideology which serves to degrade human life, it is wrong to generalise from this historical fact to the essence of the Christian faith. Not only has Christian theology also been used to protest against social injustice, as Engels was aware, but the Christian faith is essentially a call to a fully human life, both individually and socially, as recent theology has emphasized. (Ferretter 2003:185)

In my opinion, therefore, it remains ethically possible to use a Christian theory of literature after the critique of religion posed by Marxism, though I agree with Ferreter (2003) that it:

is only on the basis of a self-reflection in the light of this reminder [of the historical fact that Christianity has been sometimes used as an ideology which serves to degrade human life] that Christian theology can justifiably be used in literary and cultural interpretation after Marxism. (p. 185)

The critical vigilance enjoined by psychoanalysis on Christian theory

The third theoretical giant to which civility is appropriate, though it is not the theory of my choice in the reading of these three novels, is psychoanalysis. I agree with Ferreter (2003) that Christian theology can be used in literary criticism after the critique of such theology posed by psychoanalysis for the following reasons:

Freud's theory that the Christian faith is a theological expression of guilt which derives from the collective memory of an ancient parricide is, as he himself recognises, a speculation that cannot be proved. (p. 185)

Furthermore:

his claim that religious beliefs are wish-fulfillments does not constitute evidence for their truth or falsity. Whilst religious beliefs may be expressions of infantile attitudes, it does not follow from this that there is no reality to which they correspond. (Ferretter 2003:185)

It remains legitimate, therefore, to use Christian theology in literary and cultural interpretation after psychoanalysis. Nevertheless, I agree with Ferretter that Freud's claim that such beliefs can be a means of flight from reality and moral responsibility is true and must be conscientiously borne in mind:

Psychoanalysis reminds Christian theology that the faith upon which it reflects can function as an imaginary escape from the

reality of human suffering, although it is in fact a call courageously to face and to improve this reality. It is only in the light of such a self-reflection that Christian theology can be used in literary theory and criticism after psychoanalysis. (Ferretter 2003:185)

The characteristics and insights of a specifically Christian theory of criticism

My article will have the qualities and points of view of an orthodox Christian criticism which is grounded in Hans Urs von Balthasar's (1984) account of a theological aesthetic, according to which Christ is the greatest beauty, in the incarnation, the crucifixion and the Eucharist, and

one ... who has been snatched up by the beauty of Christ ... [such, I contend, as Murdoch when she writes about Christ in these three novels] is inflamed by [this] most sublime of beauties. (Von Balthasar 1984:33)

An overtly Christian criticism will naturally be grounded in Christian theology:

That is, it [will] attempt not the inferring of Christian belief or theme in writers who may or may not be Christian [Murdoch was not an orthodox Christian], but rather the exploring of the creative laws, under which writers operate, as they might be understood both by a critic and a Christian theologian. (Jasper 1984:11)

It is my contention that the creative laws under which Murdoch operates when she writes about God, though she writes as a non-Christian, are framed by a 'theological perspective of participation which allows of no territory independent of God' (Milbank *et al.* 2003:3).

A Christian literary theory can be defined as a critical discourse 'whose interpretations and judgements derive from [Christian theology] or from principles consistent with it' (Ferreter 2003:183). It must be stated that:

to think of literature from the perspective of Christian faith and theology is to do so in terms of a structure of pre-understandings that derives from the acceptance of the claims of a given tradition. This is not an exceptional mode of literary interpretation, since all such interpretation is so determined. There is no act of interpretation which is not determined in advance by the pre-understandings which derive from an interpreter's situation in traditions. This is not a conservative claim, in the sense that it does not recognize that traditions can be sources of ideology ... An individual accepts the claims of a given tradition on the basis of a rational judgement, and it is through precisely this process of judgement that he can also reject those claims which he judges to be ideological, or in any other way false. It is in this process of reinterpreting the claims of the past in the light of the concerns of the present that all tradition as such consists. (Ferretter 2003:183)

Ferretter argues further, and I agree with him, that:

following Fish's theory of interpretative communities ... the determination of Christian literary interpretation by the beliefs and values of the community of which the interpreter is a member is a characteristic of all acts of interpretation. (Ferretter 2003:183)

Ferretter maintains that Christian theology can be used to understand and interpret literary and cultural works in the following ways. Literary texts are human works. The human person is a unity of body and spirit, and the literary works



they produce are determined by both these aspects of their being. As 'spiritual creatures, men and women are faced with the question of meaning in their existence, and their literary and cultural productions can constitute explorations of precisely that question' (Ferretter 2003:186). As such:

Western theology and the metaphysics, epistemology and aesthetics which have been its major footnotes, are 'logocentric'. This is to say that they axiomatize as fundamental and pre-eminent the concept of a 'presence'. [*This is my position, and the basic premise of my theory of literature*]. It can be that of God (ultimately, it must be); of Platonic 'Ideas'; of Aristotelian and Thomist essence. It can be that of Cartesian self-consciousness; of Kant's transcendent logic or of Heidegger's 'Being'. It is to these pivots that the spokes of meaning finally lead. They insure its plenitude. That presence, theological, ontological or metaphysical, makes credible the assertion that there 'is something in what we say. (Steiner 1989:121)

Of course I acknowledge that this stance, based on a presumption of meaningfulness, is ultimately no more provable than a stance based on meaninglessness, but it is therefore at least as legitimate. My theory of reading and writing is logocentric and it is my contention that Murdoch's writing in the passages under consideration from these three novels discloses presence.

The disclosure of presence

According to my Christian reading perspective, the quality of meaningfulness, which is a 'disclosure of presence', is discernible in the passage describing Cato's conversion in Murdoch's (1976) novel, *Henry and Cato*:

Then suddenly, with no warning and a sense of immense barriers dissolving in the mind, he had tripped and stumbled into reality. Suddenly, with faculties he had not been aware of, he experienced God. All that he had 'known' before now seemed a shadow land through which he had passed into the real world ... He entered quite quietly into a sort of white joy, as if he had not only emerged from the cave, but was looking at the Sun and finding that it was easy to look at, and that all was white and pure and not dazzling, not extreme, but gentle and complete, and that everything was there, kept safe and pulsating silently inside the circle of the Sun. (p. 26)

In this passage, Murdoch both implicitly and explicitly describes a religious experience as an experience of 'reality'. The writing in effect makes a claim to the meaningfulness of what it writes. I do not naively refer in any way here to any actual belief of Murdoch's as a person, but I do contend that the writing itself, by virtue of its subject, inheres in meaningfulness and makes an implicit and explicit claim to the truth of what it says. Murdoch does not write that Cato *felt* or *thought* that his experience of God was real. She writes that 'he had tripped and stumbled into reality'. She is referring, of course, in this passage to Plato's analogy of the cave, though it is impossible in this context of a description in English of a direct experience of God not to think also of the word 'Son' alongside the 'Sun' of Plato's analogy. There are implicit scriptural undertones in the words: 'it [*the sun*] was *easy* to look at ... gentle and complete ... safe'. They bring to mind, of course, Christ's words 'my yoke is *easy* and my burden is *light*' (Mt 11:30).

Murdoch (1976:27) writes that, in the course of this experience, Cato learns that 'all [is] mystical'. A comment such as this places her writing in this instance securely in the domain of the theological and acknowledges a relation to presence. It evokes immediate resonances with strains of orthodox religious thought over the centuries, for example from De Caussade's ([1741] 1981:103) *The sacrament of the present moment*, another orthodox religious classic: 'There are no moments which are not filled with [God's] infinite holiness so that there are none we should not honour'; and from Catherine Pickstock (1998:20), 'genuine intellectual clarity is obtainable only when that which is to be "known" is allowed to remain open and mysterious: an attitude synonymous with a kind of reverence'. According to my theory of reading, Murdoch's writing here evokes these resonances because it is inhabiting the same presence-filled space which all logocentric writing inhabits.

Anne's vision of Christ in *Nuns and soldiers*

In *Henry and Cato*, although Cato is given an experience of God which is 'joyful', 'pure', 'gentle' and 'complete', he is not given any spectacular 'vision' of Christ. Anne, however, the ex-nun from Murdoch's (1980) novel *Nuns and Soldiers*, is vouchsafed one:

Jesus was standing beside the table ... she saw his hand pressed upon the scrubbed grainy wood of the table. His hand was pale and bony, the skin rough as if chapped. Then he said her name, 'Anne', and she simultaneously fell on her knees on the floor. (p. 289)

Murdoch is not afraid of the seemingly conventional piety of Anne's falling on her knees. Theological profundity underlies the apparent cliché: to be on his or her knees in the presence of God is traditionally an appropriate posture for a human being in many orthodox traditions, and Anne, in that position, feels 'thrilling, passionate' joy. It is when she stands up that 'as soon as her knees lost contact with the floor she began to feel different, more vulnerable and terrified' (Murdoch 1980:290). Murdoch thus tacitly endorses here the orthodox religious tenet that only when a person is in a proper relation to God – that is, one of worship, as signified in this case by being on their knees – is a person safe, able to be without fear and capable of 'thrilling, passionate' joy. This passage describing Anne's vision is brilliantly underwritten so that its astonishing content is all the more striking: Jesus' hand is 'pale and bony, the skin ... chapped', he has 'wispy blond hair', he is 'thin and of medium height', he wears 'plimsolls ... with no socks' (p. 289). Murdoch evokes a touching vulnerability by the thinness, the chapped skin, the bare ankles, which makes the underlying fact that this is a description of the King of Kings (majesty being, from an orthodox Christian perspective, an intrinsic attribute of Christ), positively metaphysical in its intellectual profundity and daring. This is clearly the same weak and poor king who was born of a simple girl onto straw, only he is grown up now. Yet, he remains who he is (King of Kings), which is the astounding ontotheological claim made by the writing. Murdoch even risks the nearly comic in her description of Christ: Jesus has the pallor of 'a shadowed leaf' – so



far so good – but then of ‘a deep sea fish’ and finally, in a perilous approach to the ridiculous, of ‘a grub inside a fruit’ (p. 290) – a daring and masterly way to highlight the sublime, metaphysical in its shockingly unexpected metaphor and a description which leaves the reader with an unforgettable sense of the paradoxical homeliness of that which is nevertheless intrinsically and simultaneously sublime.

It is interesting and illuminating to compare Anne’s fictional vision of Christ with the allegedly real experience of Simone Weil (1951), described in her book *Waiting on God: Letters and essays*, which has the status of a modern religious classic:

Christ himself came down and took possession of me. I had never foreseen the possibility of a real contact, person to person, here below, between a human being and God. I felt the presence of a love like that which one can read in the smile on a beloved face. (p. 25)

Weil’s simile is quiet and intimate: ‘a smile on a beloved face’. Murdoch, with instinctive religious and literary tact, also chooses simplicity as the proper vehicle for the sublime. I do not suggest that her personal belief is akin to Weil’s professed faith but that Murdoch’s writing in this passage is inhabiting the same meaningful space as Weil’s because they are disclosing presence as they write.

Cato’s experience of God in *Henry and Cato*

In Cato’s conversion experience, though there is no vision of Christ, there is a profound intimacy none the less:

He was with Christ, he was Christ. He was invaded, taken over, and it all happened so quietly and with such a perfect sense of reality. Cato said nothing. He waited to be told, and he was told. The will did nothing, there was no will. (Murdoch 1976:28)

Murdoch’s writing here has an affinity to Weil’s assertion that ‘Christ himself came down and took possession of me’: ‘[Cato] was invaded, taken over’. In both descriptions of mystical experience, there are paradoxical connotations of violence: Cato was ‘invaded, taken over’; and Weil was [taken] possession of ...’. There is a metaphysical quality in this theological paradox – ‘a love like that which one can read in the smile on a beloved face’ (Weil 1951:25) and which is ‘not dazzling, not extreme, but gentle’ (Murdoch 1976:28), is at the same time invasive and irresistible. This is logocentric writing, occupying a theological, ontological and metaphysical space.

‘The will did nothing, there was no will’ (Murdoch 1976: 28). This passage from Murdoch speaks with the same apparently authentically religious voice as the explicitly religious passage from De Caussade ([1741] 1981):

All will be well provided [you] leave him to do what he will ... he is everywhere. Everything proclaims him to you, everything reveals him to you, everything brings him to you. He is by your side, over you, around and in you. Here is his dwelling. (De Caussade [1741] 1981:34)

It is interesting to look at Murdoch’s (1976:30) comment that Cato ‘was without illusion about his ability to change ... [only] if he looked away from the world, if he looked only

at God, there might be a little change, an atom of it’, next to Weil’s (1951:53) intrinsically similar comments on attention: ‘Prayer consists of attention. It is the orientation of all the attention ... towards God’. Murdoch’s Cato must ‘[look] only at God’; for Weil ‘prayer ... is the orientation of all the attention ... towards God’. The claim to meaningfulness of both pieces of writing is explicitly theological. Again, Cato knows that purity can only come from ‘[looking] only at God’ and Weil (1951) that:

absolute purity, present here below to our earthly senses ... at the central point, is the Eucharist ... the Eucharist is indispensable for man, for man can only fix his full attention on something tangible, and he needs sometimes to fix his attention upon perfect purity. (p. 114)

So we have Murdoch’s (1980) Anne also, who:

had no intention of living without the mass ... How precious in a new way was that familiar longed-for food ... she would not henceforth live without the mass, any more than she would henceforth live without Christ. (p. 62)

According to the theory underpinning this article, which is grounded in Hans Urs von Balthasar’s (1984) account of a theological aesthetic, Christ is the greatest beauty, in the incarnation, the crucifixion and the Eucharist, and

one ... who has been snatched up by the beauty of Christ ... [such, I contend, as Murdoch when she writes about Christ in the passages considered here] is inflamed by [this] most sublime of beauties. (p. 33)

Again and again, the deceptive simplicity of Murdoch’s presentation of theological concepts in these passages masks profound religious insight, and careful reading of her work in these passages shows how she examines these concepts from many angles, turning them every way, as it were, so that all the facets of a religious truth are exposed. On the one hand, we have Cato, who needs to look away from the world and only at God; and on the other, we have Anne’s insight that the world is intrinsic to the love of God: ‘She could not rid herself of the experience of God’s love and the sense that only through God could she reach the world’ (Murdoch 1980:62). Murdoch in these two instances looks at the point of contact between God and a person from two different angles. Her theology remains strikingly contemporary: she wrote that of Anne in 1980. In August 2004, we have the same insight expressed in *The Tablet*, a Jesuit periodical: ‘at Mass we are astonished by the nearness of God who comes to us disguised as our lives’ (O’Leary 2004:12).

Further attributes of Murdoch’s treatment of religious experience

As is the case with the overtly theological texts mentioned in this article, so Murdoch’s treatment of the religious is not only thought-provoking but inspiring. This is because when she writes about God she is mediating a presence which ‘is the greatest beauty’ and ‘one ... who has been snatched up by the beauty of Christ ... [such, I contend, as Murdoch when she writes about Christ] is inflamed by [this] most sublime of beauties’ (Von Balthasar 1984:33). Of course, a short article can only skirt the extreme outer reaches of such a topic, but



it must mention at least Murdoch's inimitable analysis of the process of radical unselfing. This process Christ enjoined on his followers: 'for whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me ... will save it' (Mk 8:35) and Murdoch herself yearned and strove for this escape from the ego:

She indeed connected goodness, against the temper of the times, not with the quest for an authentic identity, so much as with the happiness that can come about when that quest can be relaxed' (Conradi 2002:597).

It is about this death to the self that Murdoch is writing when she describes Effingham's near-death experience in the bog in *The unicorn*. When Effingham nearly dies after stumbling off the path into the sucking bog he, in a wonderful irony, finds his spiritual life even as he very nearly loses his physical life:

Why had Effingham never realised that [death] was the only fact that mattered ... if one had realised this one could have lived all one's life in the light ... Perhaps he was dead already, the darkening image of the self forever removed. What was left was everything else, all that was not himself, that object which he had never before seen and upon which he now gazed with the passion of a lover ... This then was love, to look and look until one exists no more, *this* was the love which was the same as death. He looked, and knew with a clarity which was one with the increasing light, that with the death of the self the world becomes quite automatically the object of a perfect love. (Murdoch 1963:198)

Murdoch is clearly writing out of a theological, ontological and metaphysical space here. This is logocentric writing. The theology is explicit: death to the self is the doorway to authentic life in the light. The ontology is profound: selfless love is life-giving love, which is simultaneously a kind of death and an opening to eternal life. And the philosophical and intellectual rigour of the seemingly counterintuitive assertions that only the fact of death matters, that to lose one's life is to find it, that the darkening self forever removed means life forever in the light, are metaphysical in their paradoxical complexity and daring.

Another aspect of religious writing which Murdoch's writing displays in these novels is the quality of the offering of comfort and hope of the calibre to be found in convinced religious writing. Murdoch's (1976) Brendan says about the mystery of faith:

The point is one will never get to the end of it, never get to the bottom of it, never, never, never. And that never, never, never is what you must take for your hope and your shield and your most glorious promise. (p. 339)

This insight, which Murdoch gives to her infinitely attractive Brendan, from her novel, *Henry and Cato*, sits absolutely compatibly with Karl Rahner's (1984) theology, which informed the Second Vatican Council:

I accept this existence, accept it in ... the one hope which includes and supports everything ... whose inner light [which light Murdoch calls a 'strange and almost invisible tenderness'] is its only justification, [this hope] is the hope that the incomprehensibility of existence will one day be revealed in its ultimate meaning and will be this finally and blissfully. (p. 5)

This space of 'ultimate meaning' is, I contend, the logocentric space out of which Murdoch is writing in these three novels. I do not contend that the writing speaks for Murdoch but that the writing discloses presence because writing about God, by its very nature, inhabits a logocentric space. Rahner talks of meaning ultimately having the attributes of finality and bliss; Murdoch talks of it having the attributes of hopefulness, protection (shield) and 'glorious promise'.

Anne, too, is comforted in *Nuns and soldiers*:

Anne looked upward. The snow, illuminated by the street lamps, was falling abundantly ... 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 ... Then [Anne] began to walk through the snowy streets at random, feeling [like, I suspect, many of Murdoch's readers] lightened of her burdens. (Murdoch 1980:503)

I maintain that when this passage is read from the perspective of a Christian theory of reading, it can be seen that Murdoch is both describing and embodying a religious experience. She is mediating presence. Her words are theologically explicit about the nature of God: he is abundant, glorious, countless, limitless, eternally beautiful, majestic, good. But the description is not only theological; it is simultaneously and ecstatically doxological: 'the universe in majesty [is] proclaiming the presence and the goodness of its Creator' (Murdoch 1980:503). My contention makes no claim about Murdoch's personal beliefs. However, I do contend with Catherine Pickstock (1998:3) that language is intrinsically doxological and logocentric and that Murdoch is here both 'signifying and provoking a beneficent mystery'.

Rahner (1984) is explicit about an issue that I think throws light on the nature of Murdoch's writing about God:

This free fundamental act of existence [the allegiance to this all-embracing and unconditional hope] which can only be described haltingly – [but, in my view, by Murdoch in these novels, sublimely] ... moves towards what we call God. I know that this word is obscure, by definition the most obscure word there can be, the word that it is genuinely impossible to include among the other words of human language as one more word. (Rahner 1984:6)

Rahner's term 'word' raises a question about language that is recurrent in theology: Newman (1964:279) wrote that Christ brought us 'a new language which ... which sheds a new light on all that happens. Try to learn this language'. In this same vein, Weil (1951:47) demands that our language '... be permeated in a new way by the completely universal love' – described so irresistibly by Murdoch in Effingham's bog experience – 'expected of us by Christ'. Furthermore, Pickstock (1998) construes:

language as that which both signifies and provokes a beneficent mystery which is not wholly other from the sign, although it cannot be exhausted by the sign. Instead, the theological sign, [for the purpose of this article, Murdoch's writing about Christ in these three novels] includes and repeats the mystery it receives ... and as such, it reveals the nature of that divine mystery. (p. 267)



A question and some answers

So, I come to my question: how it is that the unbelieving Murdoch's writing in the passages from these three novels mediates presence so powerfully?

It is because, in my opinion, as Pickstock contends about theological writing, when Murdoch writes about God, she is receiving the 'divine mystery' and the writing is authentic from a religious point of view because she is revealing in the writing 'the nature of that divine mystery' (Pickstock 1998:xiii).

It is because, as claimed by *Radical Orthodoxy*, there is no territory independent of God (despite an individual's, in this case Murdoch's, opinion to the contrary) and, as Plato thought and Pickstock maintains, the character of language is essentially doxological in that 'language exists primarily for, and in the end only has meaning as, the praise of the divine.' Words inhabiting 'a zone apart from God, [are] grounded literally in nothing' (Pickstock 1998:xiii).

It is because, as Weil (1951) contends:

one can never wrestle enough with God if one does so out of pure regard for the truth. Christ likes us to prefer truth to him because, before being Christ, he is truth. If one turns aside from him to go towards the truth, one will not go far before falling into his arms. (p. 26)

(One remembers here that Cato 'stumbled and fell' into reality). I find Weil's words, 'If one turns aside from him to go towards the truth, one will not go far before falling into his arms' a charming description of Murdoch's work! She could indeed be said to have turned aside from him, certainly from conventional piety, but it was always in the course of her passionate search for truth.

And it is because, as expressed in the prose of Newman (1964:279), unsurpassable, in my opinion, even by Murdoch, that 'the poetry of the inner soul ... the mental attitude and bearing, the force and keenness of the logic' – and in his inimitable phrase, 'the beauty of the moral countenance are imaged in the ... language'. In my opinion, Murdoch's 'moral countenance' was indisputably beautiful: she recognised the demand of the good as absolute. As Weil (1951:54) wrote in regard to a longing for truth, 'the conviction came to me ... that when one hungers for bread one does not receive stones', so Murdoch hungered for the bread of truth: Conradi (2002:490) says in *The life*, that the 'search for ... self-transcendence which is in her fiction, philosophy, and journals, [was] a recurrent theme'. Certainly moral progress was Murdoch's abiding concern. She wrote in the *Metaphysics* (in Antonuccio 2000:190), 'that moral progress (freedom, justice, love, truth) leads us to a new state of being [which] involves ... the transformation of the ordinary person and the world.' And, as Maria Antonuccio (2000) puts it in her book, *Picturing the human: The moral thought of Iris Murdoch*:

for Murdoch reflexive realism presents us with an ethical demand, the demand critically to assess the pictures and narratives we construct of ourselves, others and the world. This demand, which is the demand of the good, is unconditional and allows, in Murdoch's words, 'no time off'. (p. 190)

This, for Murdoch, is the 'challenge of evaluative freedom, and the imperative of perfection' – (an echo, of course, of Christ's 'Be perfect, as your heavenly father is perfect' (Mt 5:48).

Newman's (1964) theory was that:

[if] the mind is occupied by some vast and awful subject of contemplation, [for Murdoch when she wrote about religion it was 'the imperative of perfection'] it is possessed by reverence and when, dazzled at length with the great sight, it turns away for relief, it still catches in every new object glimpses of its former vision and colours its whole range of thought with this one abiding association. (p. 82)

For Murdoch, love was the abiding association:

Love as possessing, or grasping, or filling of self must be passed beyond. [Selfless] love [as glimpsed by Effingham during his near-death experience in the bog] is the way and the only way. (Conradi 2002:490)

It is because of this abiding association with love, with the good, with self-transcendence that Murdoch's writing in these three novels is, in my opinion, logocentric.

And so, because I find Murdoch's portrayal of theistic religious experience authentic, despite her comment in the *Metaphysics* that we need 'a theology that can continue without God' (Murdoch 1983:511), I agree with Franklin Gamwell (1996:189) 'that her friendship with theistic religion need not be reserved and in truth may become an embrace'.

Conclusion

To conclude, then, in my opinion, and in the words of Hans Urs von Balthasar (1984), when one writes about the spiritual:

the ... words gravitate first of all towards the mystery of form ... Formosus (beautiful) comes from forma (shape) and speciosus (comely) from species (likeness)... This is to raise the question of 'the great radiance from within' which transforms species into speciosus, form into comeliness: the question of splendour. We are confronted simultaneously with both the [form or shape, of, in this case Murdoch's writing about Christ in these novels] and that which shines forth from the [form], the comeliness, making it into a worthy, a love-worthy thing. (p. 33)

This, then, is my answer to the question posed by this article about the quality of Murdoch's writing about God in selected passages from three novels discussed from the perspective of a Christian theory of reading: in my opinion, when Murdoch writes in these three novels about her abiding association, which is selfless love, then 'the great radiance from within', which transforms 'species into speciosus, form into comeliness', mediates presence. We are confronted simultaneously with both the form or shape of, in this case, Murdoch's writing about Christ in these novels and that which shines forth from the form, the comeliness, making it into a worthy, a love-worthy thing. Her logocentric writing in these three novels, in which, in Derrida's (in Steiner 1989:119) inimitable words, "'the intelligible face of the sign remains turned to the word and the face of God'", in my opinion, 'stirs up the hearing heart within itself [and] bewitches it' (Jasper 1984:395).



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