



*The Role of the Light and the Sun  
in Some Novels of Iris Murdoch and John Fowles*

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# The Role of the Light and the Sun in Some Novels of Iris Murdoch and John Fowles

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In her essay *The Sovereignty of Good over Other Concepts* Iris Murdoch argues that "beauty is the only spiritual thing which we love by instinct"<sup>1</sup>. Following Plato's theory, she asserts that beauty in any form, be it in nature, in other-centred love or in great art, is the truest manifestation of the Good in the world of shadows. An unsentimental, almost detached appreciation of beauty is not only "the easiest available spiritual exercise"<sup>2</sup>, it can also induce man to set forth on his long and arduous quest for the Good and sustain him on his way — a thesis corroborated in many of her novels. Although John Fowles and Iris Murdoch appear to be very different writers, there are many underlying similarities in their work, obscured by the more obvious differences. One important element which their novels share is the recurrence in one form or another of the motif of the "revelation", a character's sudden piercing insight into the reality beyond self. This unique experience is by no means reserved for the most deserving characters. On the contrary, most of the "elect" (to use John Fowles' term in *The Magus*) are far too self-absorbed to apply the newly-acquired vision to their everyday lives and thus they gradually and complacently revert to self-delusion and self-aggrandising fantasies. The characters' revelations often spring from a temporarily intensified awareness of the natural world, which is, in most cases, a world drenched in light. In *The Unicorn*, Effingham Cooper's revelation takes place when he is sinking into the bog at night, surrounded by absolute blackness. Yet even here the deepening insight which Effingham acquires on the brink of death is accompanied by an increasing perception of light:

Why did it seem now that the dark ball at which he was staring was full of light? Perhaps he was dead already, the darkening image of the self forever removed ... Since he was mortal he was nothing and since he was nothing all that was not himself was filled to the brim with being and it was from this that the light streamed ... He ... 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<sup>3</sup>.

Both Fowles and Murdoch are keen naturalists with an eye for the simple but perfect beauties of nature, and both succeed in transmitting this beauty to the reader in their descriptive passages. Such passages are evocative of a totality beyond the particular and yet are at the same time very precise and detailed. Examples of this are the passages dealing with Nick's intended suicide in *The Magus*<sup>4</sup> and with Morgan's revelation in *A Fairly Honourable Defeat*<sup>5</sup>. Both are key-episodes in the novels, which mark a turning-point in the lives of the two characters, although especially in Morgan's case the enlightenment is short-lived and the insight fades with the radiant light which accompanied the revelation. It is significant that in both examples the luminous natural world does much more than provide an idyllic setting for a scene pregnant with meaning, as the characters' epiphanies directly result from a heightened perception of the natural world. In other words, nature is present in both these episodes, not as a suitable background to, but as a prerequisite for, the characters' "revelations". Without it their sudden insight into both their own situations and the "condition humaine" as such would have lacked profundity and intensity, or would perhaps not have occurred at all.

Almost all of Fowles' and Murdoch's characters have a consoling rather than a just conception of reality. They long for some form of "necessity" in their lives, for an absolute

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<sup>1</sup> Iris Murdoch, "The Sovereignty of Good over Other Concepts", *The Sovereignty Of Good*, London, 1970, p.85.

<sup>2</sup> Iris Murdoch, "On God and Good", *The Sovereignty of Good*, p.65.

<sup>3</sup> Iris Murdoch, *The Unicorn*, Harmondsworth, 1966, p. 167.

<sup>4</sup> John Fowles, *The Magus*, St.Albans, 1977, pp.61—62.

<sup>5</sup> Iris Murdoch, *A Fairly Honourable Defeat*, Harmondsworth, 1978, pp.185—187.

which is totally unlike the bewildering and transient reality which surrounds them and which is ruled by chance. What most of Murdoch's and Fowles' characters find hard to accept is that even the highest goals to which man can aspire, such as beauty, love, freedom, goodness, can only — if at all — be attained on condition that he accepts that not only he himself, but all that exists, is subject to chance (Fowles usually employs the word "hazard", Murdoch's term is "contingency"). Whatever man strives to achieve and any good intentions which he may have are subject to the reverses of fate, and one aspect of Conchis' wisdom in *The Magus* and more morally advanced characters in Murdoch's fiction, such as Tallis in *A Fairly Honourable Defeat* and Peter Saward in *The Flight from the Enchanter*, is that they do not rage against the inequalities and injustices of life. Moral advancement is impossible without a constant strenuous effort to contain one's selfishness, yet even the most dedicated and ascetic seekers after high moral goals may be crushed by fate and fail. *Mutatis mutandis*, the morally mediocre may be given more than their fair share of opportunities to gain insight. As Conchis in *The Magus* tells Nicholas Urfe, by no means a morally very attractive man, "Hazard makes you elect. You cannot elect yourself"<sup>6</sup>. There is no necessary correlation between merit and being "elect". It is all a matter of "sheer wonderful utterly undeserved luck"<sup>7</sup>, as Morgan aptly formulates it in *A Fairly Honourable Defeat*. Effingham Cooper in Murdoch's *The Unicorn* is another case in point: he has no less than three moments of heightened moral awareness in the course of the novel, yet in all three cases he ultimately refuses the opportunity to translate insight into action, and instead settles for an easy, undemanding life.

It also needs to be stressed that to be "elect", or to be granted a glimpse of the reality beyond appearances and beyond the routine of everyday life, does not automatically entail success in the quest which the character may subsequently undertake. On the contrary, many of Murdoch's characters perish on the way or barely survive, and although there are fewer casualties in Fowles' novels, his main characters too know moments of utter despair in the face of the trials that confront them. Like protagonists in mediaeval romances, the main characters in Murdoch's and Fowles' novels often have to undergo one or more ordeals in the course of their quests. Some fail to recognise that these are tests to be passed before greater moral awareness may be achieved, some bluntly refuse to accept the challenge, some become true seekers who, like their mediaeval counterparts, gradually acquire deeper insight into their awe-inspiring moral responsibilities towards both themselves and others. Being able to see oneself as one is, and others as they are, and not as one would like them to be, requires a form of self-renunciation, a renunciation which is so contrary to man's nature that it is an almost insuperable obstacle in his progress towards moral improvement.

Another feature of the mediaeval romance which occurs in some of Fowles' and Murdoch's novels is the motif of the journey which the main character undertakes and in the course of which he undergoes various mysterious and perilous experiences. Although several of John Fowles' protagonists travel or move from one country (and one culture) to another, it is in *The Magus* and *The Ebony Tower* that the journeys not only acquire deeper metaphorical significance, but are also closely linked with the central themes. In other words, in these works it is the transition from one place to another which actually induces the subsequent change in the main character. In both these works the characters travel South : in *The Ebony Tower* David Williams, a rather smug art critic and abstract painter, travels to Brittany to meet the famous painter Henry Breasley, now living in self-imposed exile in his isolated manor house in the middle of a vast forest. Both David's professional and his private life are well-organised and conventionally successful: he is happily married to one of his former students who, "except for one brief bad period when [she] had rebelled against 'constant motherhood'

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<sup>6</sup> John Fowles, *The Magus*, p.87.

<sup>7</sup> Iris Murdoch, *A Fairly Honourable Defeat*, p.194.

and flown the banner of Women's Liberation"<sup>8</sup>, has been a devoted and supporting wife and mother; his two children do not cause him any problems; he is appreciated both as an art teacher and critic and as a painter of pictures that "went well on walls that had to be lived with"<sup>9</sup>. Yet it becomes clear in the course of the story that it is precisely David's conforming to generally accepted social norms, his being a conventionally "decent chap", which prevents him from becoming a great — rather than a successful — painter. Only the true artist is capable of the "translations of feeling" (a term Fowles uses in *The Aristos*<sup>10</sup>) which are, for Fowles as for Henry Breasley, the *conditio sine qua non* of great art. True passion, emotion, instinct — these David no longer experiences, if indeed he ever did. Although the whole setting and atmosphere of the story recall those of mediaeval romances, in *The Ebony Tower* the gallant knight, aware that he is rejecting a unique opportunity to throw off the deadening routine of everyday life and, by implication, of second-rate art, is unable to take up the challenge of a life without the reassuring constraints of convention, and never even embarks upon his quest. Turning his back on "castle perilous" and its temptations, he consciously exchanges the unsettling mysteries of the forest for the reassuring familiarity of the everyday world. In *The Ebony Tower*, just as in many of Iris Murdoch's novels, for example in *The Bell*, the wood is an almost sacred place associated with insight and imaginative vision rather than with factual knowledge. It is the domain of the enlightened to which the "elect" are fortunate enough to gain entry. Although, in actual fact, woods are usually dark and cool, both Murdoch and Fowles associate them with light and warmth. They are also very often places where the characters begin to "see the light" in a more metaphorical sense. In *The Ebony Tower*, for example, David Williams has to admit to himself after his visit to Henry Breasley's residence in the forest and his consequent exposure to a totally unconventional way of life, that "Coët had remorselessly demonstrated what he was born, still was and always would be : a decent man and eternal also-ran"<sup>11</sup>. In Iris Murdoch's *The Bell* Dora Greenfield has two revelations, one in the National Gallery, which is, to her, like "a well-loved grove"<sup>12</sup> and one when she rings the old bell in the barn in the wood.

In John Fowles' *The Magus* the light also plays an important role, but in a much more obvious way. This is, of course, partly because *The Magus* is situated in Greece, whereas *The Ebony Tower* is situated in the North of France, but also because symbols and images are more overtly present in the former than in the latter work. A clear example of this is the episode in which Nick and Alison climb Mount Parnassos. A euphoric Nick, who is at this stage totally mesmerised by the elusive Julie, has cleverly succeeded in staving off any sexual advances Alison might make by telling her he is being treated for syphilis and must temporarily abstain from any sexual activity. At the same time however, he is quite happy to sun himself in Alison's obvious devotion to him. When they get to the top of Parnassos, they are seized by the perfect beauty that surrounds them. The sky is cloudless, a "pale, absolutely dustless, absolutely pure azure"<sup>13</sup>, there are no other mountains to block the view, and the sun softens the colours of all they can see : thousands of flowers in different shades growing on slopes and in valleys and, in the distance, the sea and the islands. Then Nick notices that "with a splendid classical simplicity someone had formed in small stones, just beyond the cairn, the letters ΦΩΣ — 'light'" and he reflects that "It was exact. The peak reached up into a world both literally and metaphorically of light"<sup>14</sup>. The Parnassos episode is one of the most

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<sup>8</sup> John Fowles, *The Ebony Tower*, St. Albans, 1975, p.21.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> John Fowles, *The Aristos*, St. Albans, 1980, p.181.

<sup>11</sup> John Fowles, *The Ebony Tower*, p.113.

<sup>12</sup> Iris Murdoch, *The Bell*, St. Albans, 1976, p.189.

<sup>13</sup> John Fowles, *The Magus*, p.258.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

powerful in the novel, not only because of its simple yet highly evocative language, but also because Fowles, while merely reporting Nick's reflections on what he perceives, succeeds in highlighting Nick's emotional and moral shallowness. Although he is intellectually and aesthetically aware of the beauty of the natural world around him, it is clear that Nick fails to appreciate the deeper meaning of his own words. When he states that "the peak reached up into a world both literally and metaphorically of light", he fails to see the relevance of his words for his own existential situation. The world beyond, which he conceives as "being both literally and metaphorically of light" is not merely another world, quite distinct from his own private world, it is also, ultimately, a world which is so universal, so fundamental to the being of Man that it is at the same time impersonal and an intrinsic part of the individual's uniquely personal world. In other words, the world of light, which Nick erroneously equals with an "ideal" world in the Platonic sense, is also an enlightened world of Man. Being too much of a rationalist to be able to achieve a "translation of feelings", Nick fails to link what he has experienced to his own situation and thus, to learn that if one persists in one's efforts to progress on the road to the Good (as Nick persisted in the difficult climb up Mount Parnassos), one might be able to "see the light" in a moral sense. That Nick has failed to achieve this becomes painfully clear from his treatment of Alison on their way back — a treatment which will lead to Alison's apparent suicide and ultimately to Nick's trial.

Although most of Iris Murdoch's novels are situated in England, and relatively few of her characters travel to other countries, the South is, in her work as well as in Fowles', a place of great natural beauty and thus, of enlightenment. Indeed, when a character is suddenly seized by the sheer perfection and separateness of the natural world, he is, as it were, stopped in his tracks and momentarily ceases his blind and frantic search for self-affirmation. These moments are moments of great inner calm and can generate a sudden lucid apprehension of what really constitutes the essence of man's life. The South is also in Murdoch's novels a place where the characters can free themselves from the trammels of a restrictive social framework. In *Nuns and Soldiers*, for example, the socially unlikely match between Gertrude and Tim, which would probably never have occurred within the rigid conformity of middle-class England, is brought about in the much more spontaneous and carefree atmosphere of Provence. Likewise, in *The Italian Girl*, Edmund Narraway, at last escaping from the oppressive atmosphere of the parental home, is beginning to feel free to live his own life or, in his own words, "whatever joy or sorrow might come to me ... would be real and my own, I would be living at my own level and suffering in my own place"<sup>15</sup>. His own level and his own place are, for Edmund, linked with the Italian Girl, one of the many Italian nannies who have shared his childhood and whom he associates with "the sweet presence of the sun"<sup>16</sup>. Being free at last is, to Edmund, synonymous with being able to "live in the sun, love in the open"<sup>17</sup>. This is also what Simon and Alex in *A Fairly Honourable Defeat* will henceforth strive for. Their love has proved strong enough to survive the machinations of the evil Julius King and now that they have successfully passed their ordeal they set off for the South of France. Their trip is like a pilgrimage to the birthplace of their love, namely Greece, and Simon's touching the "warm pendant beads of the grape bunches"<sup>18</sup> recalls the reverential way in which he once touched the statue of the Kouros in the National Museum in Athens. In this episode, too, the sun symbolises warmth, intimacy and fulfilment, and Simon's observation that the warm sun "made gold in [Axel's] hair"<sup>19</sup> recalls the descriptions of Dora Greenfield in *The Bell*, another successful seeker who leaves the scene in radiant sunshine, and of the Christlike Denis Nolan

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<sup>15</sup> Iris Murdoch, *The Italian Girl*, Harmondsworth, 1968, p.170.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Iris Murdoch, *A Fairly Honourable Defeat*, p.437.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

in *The Unicorn*, who is last seen climbing up "the golden yellow hillside"<sup>20</sup> until he is "lost to view in the saffron yellow haze near the skyline"<sup>21</sup>.

"Anything which alters consciousness in the direction of unselfishness, objectivity, and realism", Murdoch contends in *The Sovereignty of Good over Other Concepts*<sup>22</sup> aids man in his quest for the Good. The perception of beauty, both in nature and in art, constitutes one such path towards moral advancement. The beauty of nature is not only more immediately present and more readily available to all than beauty in art, it is also a purer kind of beauty since a work of art is a creation of a human, and thus morally imperfect, artist, who may be lost in self-deluding fantasies and, consequently, fail to perceive, let alone transmit, reality and truth. Moreover, as John Fowles asserts in *The Aristos*, form and style have become "the principal gauge of artistic worth ... We may see the history of the arts since the Renaissance ... as the slow but now almost total triumph of the means of expression over the thing expressed"<sup>23</sup>.

Although both Iris Murdoch and John Fowles have their limitations as artists, they succeed in their descriptive passages in transmitting to the reader the sheer physical beauty of the natural world. Furthermore, writing and reading are, for both authors, serious occupations, a kind of "spiritual pilgrimage"<sup>24</sup> which may leave the writer as well as the reader more morally aware. The ultimate aim of both authors is therefore not only to evoke the perfect beauty of nature for its own sake in aesthetically pleasing descriptive passages, but, through the evocation of the ever-inscrutable splendour of the natural world, to attempt to hint at the mystery of the reality beyond, a reality (to borrow Nick's words in *The Magus*) "both literally and metaphorically of light".

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<sup>20</sup> Iris Murdoch, *The Unicorn*, p.263.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p.264.

<sup>22</sup> Iris Murdoch, "The Sovereignty Of Good over Other Concepts", p.84.

<sup>23</sup> John Fowles, *The Aristos*, p.182.

<sup>24</sup> Iris Murdoch, *The Unicorn*, p.100.