

William Hall

“THE THIRD WAY”: THE NOVELS OF IRIS MURDOCH

“No, I DON’T THINK there is any direct connection between my philosophy and my writing. Perhaps they do come together in a general sort of way—in considering, for example, what morality is and what goes into making decisions” (quoted in Ved Mehta, *The Fly and the Flybottle* [New York, 1962], p. 54). The last sentence of this remark of Miss Murdoch’s suggests, despite the first, that an examination of her fiction in the light of what she has to say about philosophy might be rewarding. The approach is justified even if one includes the first sentence of the quotation, since in at least two works—her book *Sartre, Romantic Rationalist* (1953) and her essay “The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited” (*Yale Review*, XLIX [December, 1959], 247-271)—Miss Murdoch approaches philosophy as it impinges on and is expressed in art, and predominantly in the art of the novel. The problems of post-Hegelian philosophy she sees as reflected in the work of the post-Hegelian novelists. The solutions that have been offered by the philosophers she likewise finds reflected—in both form and theme—in the modern novel. She clearly considers the main lines of modern philosophy inadequate and points out the corresponding weaknesses in the modern novel.

It will be argued here that Miss Murdoch is attempting to write in modern terms a kind of novel that avoids the Scylla and Charybdis of Naturalism and Symbolism: “a novel . . . fit for free characters to live in; [that combines] form with a respect for reality with all its odd contingent ways” (“The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited”, p. 271). She is, at the same time, in the form of such a fiction, attempting to find and express what she describes in her book on Sartre as a philosophy of “the third way”.

There is no concern here with the validity of Miss Murdoch’s criticism, judgment, or understanding of the philosophies she discusses. My main concern is with *what* her judgments and understandings are, for it is these that are reflected in her fiction. And fiction is, in Miss Murdoch’s opinion, ideally suited to express the third philosophical way she postulates, for

the novelist proper . . . has had his eye fixed on what we do and not on what we ought or must be presumed to do. He has as a natural gift that blessed freedom from rationalism which the academic thinker achieves, if at all, by a precarious discipline. He has always been, what the very latest philosophers claim to be, a describer rather than an explainer; and in consequence he has often anticipated the philosophers' discoveries (*Sartre*, p. 8).

Miss Murdoch's strictures on the "very latest" philosophies—existentialism and linguistic empiricism—are as important for understanding her fiction as is the measure of her agreement with them. Neither one of them, in her opinion, comes close to presenting an adequate fruitful theory of personality that squares fully with the experience of the post-Hegelian world. Both "tend towards solipsism"; "neither pictures virtue as concerned with anything real outside ourselves. Neither provides us with a standpoint for considering real human beings in their variety, and neither presents us with any technique for exploring and controlling our own spiritual energy."

The personality that emerges from the philosophy of the linguistic empiricists she labels "Ordinary Language Man". This is a personality viewed, in moral terms, behaviouristically: "a man *is* what he observably does." This personality and the world which it inhabits is strictly limited then to experience verifiable by the senses, and capable of description in language—an experience which is, in the opinion of the philosophy she describes, the only truth. In the words of Wittgenstein, "The limits of my language are the limits of my world." In the world of experience such a personality represents for Miss Murdoch "the surrender to convention".

She does not question, however, the Wittgenstein dictum that "In the world everything is as it is and happens as it does happen. *In* it there is no value." And she therefore accepts its consequences: "that meaning and purpose do not reside as objective facts in the world of things" and that there can no longer be assumed "a world of ideas and values presumed to be common to all thinking beings." One might add, parenthetically, that, as one might expect from this, her rejection of any Christian interpretation is quite unequivocal.

The personality that emerges from the existentialist philosophy (as represented by Sartre) she describes as "Totalitarian Man." This personality she sees as "the surrender to neurosis", the second of the two poles—the other being convention—between which she considers the general modern consciousness (like its expression in philosophy) to be split or trapped.

Essentially she sees Sartre as in agreement with Wittgenstein: that no

form or pattern exists *in* this world. "What *does* exist is brute and nameless, it escapes from the scheme of relations." What shape, order, or form we note in experience is imposed upon it by the consciousness and, importantly, "has to be put in afterwards". The movement of the "Totalitarian" personality, in so far as it is a reflective consciousness, is one between a constant attempt "to rise freely towards completeness and stability" and as constant a frustration of the attempt as the consciousness falls back into the "brute and nameless". She quotes from *La Nausée* to make clear the consequences of this for what one might call the "virtuous" totalitarian man:

I [Roquéntin] understood there was no middle way between non-existence and this swooning abundance. What exists at all must exist to this point: to the point of mouldering, of bulging, of obscenity. In another world, circles and melodies retain their pure and rigid contours. But existence is a degeneration.

The consequence of the inescapableness of this "existence" is, for the virtuous or reflective consciousness, disgust, nausea, and despair. And his virtue, which is his reflectiveness, "lies in understanding his own contingency in order to assume it, not the contingency of the world in order to alter it." The alternative, which the virtuous man will reject, is *mauvais foi*, defined by Miss Murdoch as "the notion of the half-conscious unreflective self-deception". This, in Sartre's terms, is the condition of the conventional man and of man in society. The virtuous man must then be unconventional and separate from society. He must act with sincerity, courage, and will, and with complete freedom. His very virtue in fact consists in the "unillusioned exercise of complete freedom."

With a good many of these ideas Miss Murdoch is—in her non-fiction—in agreement. She does, however, qualify Sartre's conception of *mauvais foi*—an important qualification for her attitude to certain of the characters in her novels. In effect Sartre "regards all unreflective social outlooks as bad faith", but in doing so, she asserts, he overlooks or fails to give proper emphasis to "the power of our inherited collective view of the world." She has no great quarrel with Sartre's description of the "facts" of existence. She does disagree quite clearly, though, with Sartre's conclusion from these facts: "that human nature demands a modified form of socialism" and that the virtuous man will seek a resolution of his conflicts in political action. Moreover, she regards as an error Sartre's view that "the self is isolated" so that "it treats others, not as objects of knowledge certainly, but as objects to be feared, manipulated and imagined about."

She expresses these same criticisms in fictional form in her first novel, *Under The Net* (1954), which is a too simple allegorical rendering of her Sartre book. Jake, its hero, begins with the Sartrean solipsistic view of his world, in which Lefty Todd represents the Sartrean solution of political action, and Hugo Bellfounder a combination of the elements in both the Sartrean and the logical empiricist positions, which are in Miss Murdoch's opinion too "detached and theoretical." Lefty and Hugo represent for Jake the either/or of convention/neurosis—political action or silence. Jake eventually abandons the outlooks they represent. He ends as true artist ready to practise art as Miss Murdoch ideally views it; as Bledyard describes it in *The Sandcastle*, "We must paint it [an object] attempt to show what it is like in itself and not treat it as a symbol of our own mood and wishes."

Miss Murdoch's most vital area of disagreement with Sartre, however, is the same as that in which she disagrees with the linguistic empiricists. This is a disagreement with what one might call their stance.

Their stance consists in turning the face *away* from, or in trying to rise above, one of the "facts" of existence which both schools admit. Miss Murdoch assigns different names to this "fact" in different places in her non-fiction: "the chaos of empirical inwardness", "the unconscious", "the volcanic otherness within the personality", but it is clear in every instance what she means by it. She means that part of the self that answers to, reflects, is related to the shapeless and formless world that is actual experience. The stance she offers in place of that of the others is one of acceptance of the formless. From this follows her rejection of the despair of the existential position, which arises from a refusal to accept this world both within and without the individual personality.

Exactly what this acceptance means and entails is, I think, vital to an understanding of her fiction and the essential ideal posited in it. It does not consist in a merely fatalistic abandonment of personality or reflection. It does involve an *initial* abandonment of the self in order to understand and grasp the fact that other people exist as the individual self feels that it does, "that something real exists other than oneself." This acceptance involves, in her terms, a return to Kant's concept of the sublime: "an enjoyment and renewal of spiritual power arising from an apprehension of the vast formless strength of the natural world". The fear with which she argues that Sartre regards this "volcanic otherness" both within and without the self must be replaced

by love or, as she defines it in "The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited", "tolerance".

Sartre uses love as a particular case to illustrate "the unsatisfactory circularity of our relations with people." This particular idea of relationships Miss Murdoch describes—as has already been suggested—as an error resulting from Sartre's imaginative solipsism. Her concept is quite different. Sartre's definition is not, at least, the inescapable, necessary truth of the "fact".

It seems to be essential to stress this, since in Miss Murdoch's novels most of her characters in fact behave in their love relationships in very much the way that Sartre describes. The exceptions to this behaviour are very few but highly significant, suggesting as they do that her own concept is possible and more desirable. At odd moments some characters (Matthew and Dora in Chapter 26 of *The Bell*, for example, or Rain and Mor at intervals through the first half of *The Sandcastle*) precariously and momentarily escape from what one might call the Sartrean pattern of love. But it is important for an understanding of what Miss Murdoch is about in her fiction to have it clear that to her the Sartrean pattern is mistaken. It is important to recognize this if only because to do so reveals more clearly (especially as love is of the essence of the correct "stance") the exact nature of Miss Murdoch's criticism (as novelist) of the modern consciousness, its view of itself and others, and of the society that moulds it. It reveals more clearly also the ideal of being and of conduct that is implied in her novels.

The Sartrean concept of love, as Miss Murdoch points out, follows Hegel in the notion that the consequence of love is inevitably "the enslavement of one consciousness by another." She does not point out, but it is relevant to her view of her characters, that this concept describes one of the obsessive themes of most nineteenth-century fiction. It is to be found at its clearest in Henry James' *The Sacred Fount*, which is a kind of paradigm of such love. It is the idea of love that informs *Anna Karenina*, Hawthorne's *The Marble Faun*, Dostoevsky's *The Possessed*, Melville's *Pierre*, Dickens' *Dombey and Son*. In all these novels as in Sartre's concept "reciprocal love is . . . precarious, if not impossible, and readily moves towards the satisfactions of sadism and masochism (varieties of domination and basking)."

Thus the criticism of the modern consciousness and modern society that underlies the comedy of *A Severed Head* is not that its decadence lies in its modernity—if one equates modernity with the cutting loose from former values and sanctions, with the substitution of the psychoanalyst for the priest,

with the general freedom from moral standards. The society (particularly as it is figured in Lynch-Gibbon) is not lost and decadent because it has cut itself loose from old sanctions but because it has done so with the head while still living and loving, still trapped, unaware (as is clear in Martin's relationships with Georgie and Honor till the final scene) in the patterns formed in the world of the old sanctions. The former spirit that had governed those relationships (essentially the orthodox Christian ethic) has gone. The new spirit (that is, love as tolerance, as Miss Murdoch understands the term) has not replaced it in the social fabric. It is this lack of spirit that has separated the consciousness from "the volcanic otherness". And the two have to be reconciled before the ideal of love can be realised. The novel ends with the possibility of this reconciliation hanging in the air between Martin and Honor, symbolized by his kneeling before her, as earlier Georgie had knelt before him.

A Severed Head is, I think, the novel in which Miss Murdoch's ideas find their most complete and best crystallization. And in view of what I have just suggested it acquires a fine and significant comic irony that lends meaning and significance to the characteristic *bizarrierie* of the events. The novel implies that the modern consciousness, for all that we see it at its most "advanced", is locked in outmoded patterns (psychologically speaking, infantile patterns) but unaware of being so. The triangular relationship between Antonia, Martin, and Georgie with which the novel opens is no more or less "old-fashioned" in this sense than is the later one between Martin, Palmer Anderson, and Honor. The irony is that everything in it that seems most modern is in fact out of date. The love of the characters is not (as the ideal should be) "connected with action and day to day living". It is still "a battle", as Miss Murdoch puts it, "between two hypnotists in a closed room", whereas the ideal love, implied throughout in Georgie's pathetic desire, is that "undramatic because unself-centred agnosticism which goes with tolerance".

Miss Murdoch's criticisms of the form of the modern novel, while in no way original, follow quite naturally from her criticism of modern philosophy.

Given the dilemma facing the modern consciousness, trapped, as she phrases it, between "convention" and "neurosis", the modern novel, like the modern consciousness, has become an expression of one or the other. The novel of neurosis is "the small metaphysical novel . . . which wishes it were a poem and which attempts to convey, often in mythical form, some central

truth about the human condition". The novel of convention is "the loose journalistic epic". The novel of neurosis tends at present to produce the better works of art: neurosis, as she puts it, "pays bigger dividends than convention". Her terms are her own, but she is clearly discussing the symbolist and naturalistic novel forms. It is equally clear that in defining the ideal of the novel as "an emotional experience resulting from the defeated yet invigorating attempt of reason to compass the boundlessness and formlessness of nature" Miss Murdoch is assuming a form different from the other two which yet includes elements of both.

It is difficult to describe exactly in the abstract the nature of this form, if only because Miss Murdoch, while giving a very definite impression of what it is not, does little more than suggest what such a form might accomplish rather than describing what it *is*. She comes closest to doing so when she says of her ideal novel that it would be "the art of the image rather than of analysis". And she does mention frequently two of its most essential features: the inclusion of contingency and the existence of the characters "as free and separate beings" rather than as "merely puppets in the exteriorization of some closely locked psychological conflict of his [the novelist's] own".

I am intent here on indicating the general patterns of both form and theme that are apparent in all Miss Murdoch's fiction down to *The Italian Girl*. This being so, it is necessary to stress, at this point, three aspects of the novels that will of necessity be given less than proper attention, but that must be mentioned if the perspective of her work is not to be completely distorted.

The first is that Miss Murdoch's vision is a comic vision, that in fact the best parts of her novels are scenes of a peculiar comedy. I do not mean simply the more obvious comedy of the stockholders' meeting in *Artemis* or the entire relationship of Ramborough and Miss Casement in *Flight from the Enchanter*. What is in mind is rather the more consistent, quite unusual blend of the serious and the comic that informs such a scene as that between Nan Mor and Tim Burke, and Nan and her husband in Chapter 12 of *The Sandcastle*, or the car wreck scene in Chapter 6 of the same novel. It is in such scenes that what appears to be the meaning of Miss Murdoch's "art of the image rather than of analysis" is most vividly exemplified. It is in such scenes also that the world as contingency is most fully realized, as the characters find themselves suddenly in a set of circumstances in which none of the usual expectations or rules of behaviour have meaning, in which even the usual sense of time is

distorted. It is the comedy of such scenes that informs the total vision in the novels with its energy. And it would appear to be significant that in *The Unicorn* (a singularly humourless novel) life and energy are singularly lacking, while the unevenness of performance in *The Italian Girl* is reflected in the violent oscillation between comedy and an altogether deadening seriousness.

The second point that needs to be made is that though certain general preoccupations reign throughout Miss Murdoch's work the separate novels display a remarkable variety of individual theme. *Under the Net* concerns the transformation of a man from journalist to artist. *Flight from the Enchanter* is concerned primarily with the "woman" question and the peculiar nature of the difficulties that stand in the way of a woman's self-realization. *The Sandcastle* shows the subtle ways in which new life and energy might be brought into a relationship, here a marriage, that is all but atrophied. In *The Bell* the theme of *Flight from the Enchanter* is raised again but subordinated to an examination of the paradox of love with its equal power for good and evil and the nature of religious faith. In *A Severed Head*, as already suggested, the theme is concerned with the ironic implications of a society's essential weakness, linked with a theme reminiscent of that of *Under the Net* in Lynch-Gibbon's movement from complete unawareness to a point of potential growth. *An Unofficial Rose* examines, in the persons of a highly conventionalized group of people, the way in which the roads of the fruitful world of the imagination are dealt with, blocked, frustrated, and distorted. In *The Unicorn*, despite the blurring of vision and a general weakness, a new emphasis is apparent: the omnipresence of guilt, sexual in nature, produced as a result of a distortion of the energy of love within a society. *The Italian Girl* is another attempt to grapple with essentially this same new interest. In this novel, it seems to me, the new direction of interest suggested in *The Unicorn* is given clearer statement, though a statement that is no more successful as fiction.

The major concerns of this essay also preclude an extensive examination of either Miss Murdoch's symbolic technique or of her style. The first I should describe as "the art of the image", a presentation of idea through symbolic action, as seen in such comic scenes as those that have already been mentioned. This is a method possibly derived from Lawrence; certainly Miss Murdoch's method resembles his, though hers at its most successful is comic while his is not. It is odd that, while Miss Murdoch's handling of this technique is highly successful, she is apt to be uncertain and uneven when presenting static symbols. The starlings and the glass window in *Under the Net* work, I think,

but the rose symbol and the Tintoretto in *An Unofficial Rose*, like the character of the woodlander (presumably intended as a projection of Mor's submerged self) in *The Sandcastle*, strike me as clumsy, over-conscious accretions intended to further enlighten but in fact adding nothing to understanding and not much to surface glitter.

There is one important aspect of Miss Murdoch's style that must be mentioned, however briefly. This is the manner in which she *uses* a style, not altogether her own, as she does markedly in *A Severed Head*, *An Unofficial Rose*, and *The Sandcastle*, to suggest a complex of ideas closely related to the theme. This particular technique is especially marked in *An Unofficial Rose*. Here, for example, is an extract from Hugh's thinking: "Because . . . Emma still, magnetically, existed; . . . how instinctively he classed her with the dark, free things, with that other shapely world of the imagination into which he had failed . . . to 'climb' at that crucial period of decision twenty-five years ago." The rhythms here, as consistently throughout the novel, especially when the action involves Hugh, are those of Henry James. The resemblance—as in this example—frequently goes beyond rhythm to include vocabulary and attitude. But the style is being used, I think, ironically, as the Lawrencian style is used ironically in Chapter 6 of *The Sandcastle*. In this example from *An Unofficial Rose* the style is being used to suggest not only the highly conventionalized, rigorously patterned thoughts and attitudes of the timid and self-conscious Hugh, but also the ironic inevitability of the failure of a mind that would habitually think in such rhythms to appreciate the fact of "the world of the imagination" as it is presented in the novel through Emma Sands, Lindsay Rimmer, Miranda, and Penn.

What then are the recurring patterns of theme and technique that animate the whole body of Miss Murdoch's fiction so far?

First there is the pattern of action. An individual, generally but not always (*Under the Net* and *The Italian Girl* are exceptions) a young girl, enters as a stranger an enclosed or isolated society which lacks a certain dynamic—usually love or some similar spiritual energy that her presence generally liberates. The individual who moves into the society moves from "convention" to "neurosis"—from some kind of form or order to contingency. At the same time she frequently represents or sets in motion, for the world she moves into, the forces of contingency, so that the movement of the members of the society with which she comes in contact is also from form to contingency. Frequently the "world" of the stranger, described in *Flight from the Enchanter* as "a re-

gion beyond the docility of the social world", coexists in the novel with the social world. This is most clear in *The Sandcastle*. Here the child Felicity lives completely in the world that Rain represents, that Rain brings to the adult society and into which, for a while, she drags Mor. In every case there is then an interaction between the individual and the society, between the different forces of form and contingency each represents for the other.

Brooding over the society this individual enters is the influence of a powerful figure. In the earlier novels this figure is invariably male: Hugo Bellfounder in *Under the Net*, Mischa Fox in *Flight from the Enchanter*. Beginning with *The Bell* (1958) there is a female figure of great power that either subtly controls the apparent male power or that competes with it. The prioress in *The Bell* and Honor in *A Severed Head* are clearly more powerful than either Michael or Palmer Anderson, who appear at first to be omnipotent. In *The Unicorn* there is an ambiguity, not, in my opinion, controlled, as to whether true power rests with Hannah Crem-Smith or not. But male or female, clear or ambiguous, this central figure is one with whom every other character is in some way connected. Such figures are, as it were, the Gods of the Universe of each novel—or more exactly they appear to be so to the other characters, especially when they are male figures. The evolving action of each novel makes clear that they do not in fact have anything approaching the omnipotence that is attributed to them by the others.

This is all made very clear in *The Italian Girl* in which, for the first time, the action is seen from the point of view of a male figure—Edmund—who, to begin with, is assumed by the others (and partly by himself) to have such powers:

You are the only person who can heal us [his sister-in-law Isabel tells him] . . . 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 up. You will set us in order. You will set us free.

Ironically he does set them free but only because he is *none* of the beings the others assume him to be with *none* of the powers or qualities or control they assume him to have; while he himself is freed when he recognizes in the novel's female figure of power "another person . . . a girl a stranger."

This attribution of omnipotence forms a central motif in all of the novels and is important in terms of both form and theme. This attribution of power makes the conception of love as either "domination . . . or basking" well-nigh inevitable and makes almost impossible the attainment of love as "toleration".

For this ideal requires an acceptance of the *others* as having the same objective reality as ourselves. Moreover, this attribution indicates the refusal of the members of society to accept "the contingencies of reality". Jake's original conception of Bellfounder's omnipotence, for example, in *Under the Net*, gives the bizarre events in which he is embroiled a pattern which he only later realizes to have been imposed subjectively on an objective contingency. His awareness of his initial error is indicated in several ways in the novel—in, for instance, the collapse of Bellfounder's studio city or in Jake's realization that the book he has written, *The Silencer*, which he believed to be a reproduction of his dialogues with Bellfounder, is in fact a fiction. He has, until he frees himself from illusion at the end of the novel, projected upon Bellfounder his *need* for pattern and order and in so doing has fallen into what Miss Murdoch regards as the Sartrean error of regarding him as an object "to be feared . . . and imagined about".

Nevertheless, if only because of this misapprehension, the "omnipotent" individual does exert considerable power—as Mischa Fox does in *Flight from the Enchanter*. The nature of this power is significant, especially in view of one of Miss Murdoch's criticisms of Sartrean existentialism: that it overlooks or fails to give proper emphasis to "the power of our inherited collective view of the world". The power that the "omnipotent" one exerts (*The Italian Girl* is an exception here) is that which informs the conventions, and the conventional view, of the society in which the stranger finds himself involved. Thus when, as is usual, the power is invested in or attributed to an individual with whom the "stranger" has a close personal relationship—as Jake does with Bellfounder—the realization of the *limits* of the power of the person once thought omnipotent is in effect an increased understanding of the exact nature of the conventions of the society he finds himself in. The realization is also a measure of the degree to which he has been enslaved and hence an awareness of his own freedom. This increased understanding and its possible results in a totally new approach to life are frequently rejected by the characters in the novels. The characters then return to the sense of life as pattern, rejecting the new awareness of contingency, and in so doing clearly fall away from the ideal view implied in the novels.

The most central element in the patterns of Miss Murdoch's fiction is undoubtedly, to my mind, the necessity for the character within the novel, as for the novelist, of "the awareness of others . . . that other people exist . . . the knowing and understanding and respecting things quite other than our-

selves". This, as Miss Murdoch points out in "The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited", is virtue and is freedom. This is the practice of "toleration". This is the only way in which the awareness of contingency can come to the individual in her novels. It is to this condition as towards the ideal that her "heroes" and "heroines" move, and it is against this as an ideal that behaviour in the novels is morally assessed.

Enlightenment for the protagonist comes invariably at the instant at which he or she recognizes another person as both the extension of self they have been considered till this moment and the independently existing being they actually are, and with this enlightenment comes also the birth of a new self and hence of a new total awareness within the protagonist. This is clearly the case at the end of *A Severed Head*. It is even more clearly so at the end of *The Italian Girl* in Edmund's recognition of Maggie Magistretti. The scene is not, I think, adequately prepared for nor is it very subtly rendered, but its very clumsiness makes the idea it is intended to present "as image" all the more obvious. Throughout the novel Edmund has regarded Maggie as "the Italian girl"—one of a blurred series of such girls who have run the household since he and his brother were children. The Italian girls have become for him little more than projections of his need for the material qualities and service refused him in his relationship with his actual mother Lydia. Then in the final scene between himself and Maggie, after the shattering of the enclosed society Edmund has entered at the beginning of the novel, comes Edmund's moment of enlightenment:

I rubbed my eyes. I did not want to have, yet, so many thoughts. I wanted to be, for a while, perhaps for the first time, diminished and simple, and to deal simply for better or worse with another person. I saw her now, a girl, a stranger, and yet the most familiar person in the world: my Italian girl, and yet also the first woman, as strange as Eve to the dazed awakening Adam. She was there, separately and authoritatively there, like the cat which Isabel had shown me from the window. The fleeing woman fled no longer, she had turned about. . . .

I gave a sort of groan. "But now, what am I now?" I scarcely knew what I looked like any more. I had no images of myself. That too I would have to learn.

"Sì vedrà. Non aver paura."

The ideal that Miss Murdoch sets up for the characters in her novels, for the individual in her non-fiction, and for the novelist in her discussion of the novel, is always the same. There has been no apparent change in this in the ten years since *Under the Net*. There have been, however, in her last two

novels, which are on the whole, I think, less successful than the earlier ones, indications of a more consistently sombre view of existence and, if one may argue from an inability now to render what in earlier novels *was* rendered, there is also a possible lack of real imaginative faith in any realization of the ideal. Comedy does reassert itself in *The Italian Girl*—after the hiatus of *The Unicorn*—but it is a *comédie noire* in which the habitual violence of Miss Murdoch's world of contingency acquires a Dostoevskian quality reinforced by the new thematic preoccupation with guilt. Whether Miss Murdoch is indeed groping towards new directions will not be clear until her next novel. Whether she is or not, or whether she succeeds or not, the body of her fiction to date represents a remarkable and on the whole successful attempt to demonstrate that "a novel must be a house fit for free characters to live in; and . . . combine form with a respect for reality in all its odd contingent ways."

READING YEATS ON THE BEACH

John Wheatcroft

Stark sun renders his page too white,
 Yeats' alphabet too dazzling black
 for eye to cypher naked against
 the sand glinting like some cyclopsian
 mirror scanning our closest star.

Smoked glasses help—as if the A's
 and Z's were iron bars patterned
 on the floor of a sun-filtering pool.

Then when beside me you, roused from
 cat sleep by child's laugh, sit hostage
 to silence, arms cincturing tucked knees
 and shoulder, sole shadow against the sky,
 obscuring the poem. I fathom Yeats.