

FORM AND MYTH IN THREE NOVELS BY IRIS MURDOCH:
THE FLIGHT FROM THE ENCHANTER,
THE BELL, AND A SEVERED HEAD

By

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This study examines three novels by Iris Murdoch -- The Flight from the Enchanter, The Bell, and A Severed Head -- in terms of the connection between form and mythology. In Murdoch's moral and aesthetic theory, she maintains that myth is antagonistic to the literature of life she wishes to create. But an investigation of myth theory, primarily Joseph Campbell's Creative Mythology, reveals that myth, as an aesthetic expression of a particular experience of life, is consonant with Murdoch's vision of modern narrative form. While ancient myth sought to control and simplify life's terrors, modern myth can be an open, liberating form which fully embraces life. Her own novels in fact pervasively employ myth and thus reveal its possibilities

for the modern artist. Mythology and Iris Murdoch's conception of form are not incompatible, as her theories claim, but complementary, as her art proclaims.

Both Murdoch's moral and aesthetic theories are structured by the split between language philosophers and existentialists, for she feels neither group adequately accounts for the complexity of human life. One group diminishes man by denying the reality of inner experience, and the other ignores the solidity of the external world by over-emphasizing inner experience and inviting solipsism. Murdoch believes man's morality requires an imaginative apprehension of the world as mysteriously creative, individually valuable, and endlessly fluid. Thus the artist, because dedicated to imaginative vision, is always involved in morality and may suffer the same bifurcation: he may put too little emphasis on the mind's creative powers and produce "journalistic" novels which lack form, or he may deify the ego and produce "crystalline" novels with intellectual structures which tidy up life's messiness. The latter novel Murdoch believes is more prevalent now.

Since Murdoch sees life as ceaseless process, she fears too much form will still the movement. This fear is mitigated if form is regarded not as static, orderly arrangement but as that very process-rhythm of creation and destruction which is life's basis. Her injunction to avoid myth's powerfully seductive forms, by which crystalline

art simplifies life and controls threatening experience, can be similarly modified. The work of Ernst Cassirer, Mircea Eliade, and Joseph Campbell shows that mythology is not antagonistic to her realistic art of life. Cassirer and Eliade describe myth as a dynamic, intuitive realm in which the spirit is always incarnate. This, too, is Murdoch's vision of life. Further, Campbell's distinction between older mythologies, which controlled human experience, and creative mythology, which is an expression of individual experience, makes the mythopoeic zone life itself: the unique individual in contact with the world's ever-mysterious energy. Mythology is a fertile resource for fiction because with it man can rediscover what modern life has diluted: an immediate contact with incomprehensible, awesome spiritual energy. Moreover, mythology is an aesthetic mode and consequently its center is creation itself, the ultimate focal point for Murdoch's theories and art.

The three novels show the progress of Iris Murdoch's mythic form. The Flight from the Enchanter makes mythic power a reality, but since the power is seen as destructive, the form is rift by conflicts which eventually explode only to begin again unchanged. The Bell goes beyond this. Its form actually is a growth in which change occurs; however, its focus is a Christian myth acted out in a setting very much removed from ordinary life. Finally, A Severed Head achieves "the connection between myth and the

ordinary stuff of human life" as its form sends Martin Lynch-Gibbon
by means of a devastating encounter with concrete spiritual energy
to a joyful engagement with the creative process of life.

Chairman

INTRODUCTION

Iris Murdoch is a novelist trained as a philosopher, and as such she believes in the importance of both art and abstraction. Besides her prolific flow of novels, she continues to publish essays dealing with ethical, political, and aesthetic theory. Critics evaluating her novels have naturally used the extensive theoretical background which she provides. One aspect of her aesthetic, however, has had only slight attention. Murdoch associates, and sometimes equates, the concepts of novelistic form and myth. And while critics have explored both form and myth in Murdoch's fiction, only A. S. Byatt has attempted to deal with their connection.¹ Even she interchanges and confuses "symbolic" and "mythic." Some writers, like Peter Wolfe, have analyzed Murdoch's ideas of artistic form but have dealt with myth mostly in terms of specific allusions within the fiction.² Malcolm Bradbury and Alice Kenney do approach the form of A Severed Head as itself an expression of myth, but they do not consider Murdoch's comments about the nature of myth.³ Yet it is exactly her continual association of form and myth, and her distrust of both, which are interesting and richly suggestive.

Iris Murdoch shares her concern for form with many twentieth

century artists; however, contrary to her century's aesthetic trend, she distrusts form, believing that it can be inimical to the best art: "Form itself can be a temptation, making the work of art into a small myth which is a self-contained and indeed self-satisfied individual." She suggests that "since reality is incomplete, art must not be too much afraid of incompleteness."⁴ The form which Murdoch identifies, here and elsewhere, as mythic is associated with plot, excessive patterning, and a preoccupation with the personal. At times her attitude resembles a commonplace definition of man's myths as "universally recognized expressions of man's yearning for a dream world."⁵

Related to this, but more important critically, is Murdoch's dislike of form which attempts to constrain the rampant energies of life. The ritualization and thus control of experience has long been believed to be one purpose of myth for ancient men. In the face of life's terrifying unpredictableness, men's imaginations created ways to make sense of and to tame life's power. And for some artists in the twentieth century, this is still myth's function. T. S. Eliot's influential note on James Joyce's Ulysses praises his myth-making for just this ability to control and make intelligible the seeming chaos of man's life. Eliot says myth

is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history. . . . It is, I seriously believe, a step toward making the modern world possible for art, toward that order and

form which Mr. Aldington [another critic of Joyce] so earnestly desires.⁶

Eliot's response, while an accepted one, is not the only response to myth. In their avid reinspection of myth, twentieth century scholars have produced "schools" of myth theory which are various and often contradictory. Historians, philosophers, archeologists, social scientists and artists are exploring ancient man's mythic consciousness, as well as asking what place the ancient myths have in the lives of men today. Most important for artists is the question of the possibility of myth-creation now. If myth-making is open to modern man, what sort of myths will he create, what will be his sources, what will be myth's function, how will the new myths resemble or diverge from our mythic heritage?

These are the questions which Joseph Campbell addresses himself to in Creative Mythology, the final volume of The Masks of God. Generally he makes this distinction between traditional and creative mythologies: "Traditional mythologies, that is to say, whether of the primitive or of the higher cultures, antecede and control experience; whereas what I am here calling Creative Mythology is an effect and expression of experience."⁷ According to Campbell the mythologies which have been emerging in the West since the twelfth or thirteenth century are expressions of individual experience and are "not derived from dogma, learning, politics, or any current concepts of the general social good."⁸ He believes that myth now

is in some ways radically different from myth in the past. Rather than control of experience, the form of current myths is liberating. In terms of this perspective, Murdoch's objections to myth necessarily undergo a change. In fact, the aesthetic of form which Murdoch advances has essentially the same qualities as Campbell's "creative mythology." For him and many others, there is no conflict between myth and the open, liberating form which Iris Murdoch believes in and creates in her own novels. This open form is indeed the special characteristic of modern myth.

An understanding of this alternative theory of myth dispells the uneasy distance between Murdoch's belief in form and her distrust of it, between her constant use of myth and her disparagement of it. Once the limits of her aesthetic terminology are understood, it becomes clear that Iris Murdoch's theory and practice as a novelist offer important literary insights. Her creation of myth and her use of ancient myth are in fact a very important achievement in the twentieth century literature of life which her theories promulgate.

In order to demonstrate the mythic form which I believe Iris Murdoch to be moving toward, I will first examine thoroughly her aesthetic as it is expressed in essays and interviews. Then, with a brief review of myth theories and particular attention to the ideas of Joseph Campbell, it will be possible to more fully appreciate the conjunction of form and myth in three novels, The Flight from the Enchanter, The Bell, and A Severed Head, each of which reveals a different stage in Murdoch's own "mythic" development.

NOTES

1. Degrees of Freedom (London, 1965), pp. 184-185.
2. The Disciplined Heart: Iris Murdoch and Her Novels (Columbia, Missouri, 1966), pp. 22-27.
3. Bradbury, "Iris Murdoch's Under the Net," Critical Quarterly, IV (Spring 1962), 47-54; and Kenney, "The Mythic History of A Severed Head," Modern Fiction Studies, XV (Autumn 1969), 387-401.
4. "Against Dryness," Encounter, XVI (January 1961), 20.
5. Howard German, "Allusions in the Early Novels of Iris Murdoch," Modern Fiction Studies, XV (Autumn 1969), 368.
6. "Ulysses, Order, and Myth," The Dial, LXXV (November 1923), 483.
7. The Masks of God, IV (New York, 1968), 65.
8. Ibid., p. 64.

CHAPTER I

THE ETHICS

Iris Murdoch's theoretical writings can be divided into three successive, interrelated stages. In the first stage, beginning in 1952 with "Nostalgia for the Particular," her essays deal mainly with moral theory.¹ Gradually her focus shifts more solidly to art, and in a series of articles published from 1959 to 1961 she has translated her moral theory into a full aesthetic.² The ideas developed in these essays are continued, strengthened, and also begin to exhibit an increased affinity with Platonic thought. The fruit of this period is contained in her collection The Sovereignty of Good.³ As the title indicates, moral concerns have much weight, although by this time aesthetics and morality are thoroughly intertwined for Murdoch. These stages, while recognizable, are not disjunctive. Murdoch's theories, however judged or valued, are essentially all of a piece. As she has said, "My own temperament inclines to monism," and her writings reveal a particularly synthetic world vision.⁴ Her ethical theory and her ideas about the art of fiction coalesce; one of her main tenets is that morality and aesthetics are not separable, but "two aspects of a single struggle."⁵

Her aesthetics, then, with which I am mainly concerned, is more fully understood in the light of her philosophical writings. Since attention to Iris Murdoch's philosophical views has dominated the writings about her work, this will be a broad and brief review of her essays.⁶

Generally the course of Murdoch's thought runs somewhere between the extremities of the analytic and existential canons. Trained at Oxford, her teachers and famous contemporaries were the language philosophers. But she also spent time on the continent and her first book published dealt with Jean-Paul Sartre's philosophy. Taking from each school what she wishes, she uses these two philosophical attitudes as the poles against which she works out both her ethics and her aesthetics. Murdoch places her emphasis neither on the world nor the will, but on her pivotal concept of "love."

Murdoch's interest in morality and ethics is not a preoccupation with a narrow, dogmatic set of moral precepts. As she points out in an early article, "The Novelist as Metaphysician," the twentieth century has discarded its inherited moral bases, so that an interest in morality becomes simply an interest in how man lives his life.⁷ The "area of Morals" covers "the whole of our mode of living and the quality of our relations with the world."⁸ Murdoch's imagination is concerned with how men handle their lives, how they live out their relationships with others, how they resolve conflicts, how they conceive their choices, how they

respond to those choices. She is fascinated by the moving of will through the world -- the moments of passage and of impasse. The sterile systems provided by the language philosophers for describing man's moral behavior cannot encompass the richness and complexity which Murdoch sees in man's impact with his world. She advances rather

positive and radical moral conceptions which are unconnected with the view that morality is essentially universal rules. I have in mind moral attitudes which emphasize the in-exhaustible detail of the world, the endlessness of the task of understanding, the importance of not assuming that one has got individuals and situations "taped," the connection of knowledge with love and of spiritual insight with apprehension of the unique.⁹

This conception of morality is central to Murdoch's thought and in her later writings does double duty as the basis of her ideas about the novel's form.

From her first writings it is evident that Murdoch's focus is on people rather than theories or institutions, although she has an English intellectual's respect for both. She emphatically rejects the linguistic, analytic view that "a moral concept will be roughly an objective definition of a certain area of activity plus a recommendation or prohibition."¹⁰ Yet she is wary of the individual's prodigious gifts for turning in on himself. For Murdoch there is a serious contradiction between a concern for people and a concern with the personal. She strongly believes in the necessity of

"unselfing" both in life and in art, and for this reason her endorsement of existentialist thought is guarded. Since, for Murdoch, the most difficult and important part of a man's life is the relationship between himself and other people, she distrusts a solipsism which encourages a man to believe that he makes choices as an isolated will unaffected by social structures or people. This is one focal point for any critical evaluation of her theory: attention to the self works against attention to the outside. This, she feels, is the danger of extreme existentialism, which makes sincerity -- being true to oneself -- the highest virtue. Not denying that man must keep his integrity and keep out of bad faith, she argues that he must recognize the reality and opacity of those people and things outside himself. Too little attention to others is a failure of imagination and may result in fantasy, a degraded use of the imagination.

This repudiation of solipsism is Murdoch's response to one particular brand of twentieth century philosophy, the existential. Naturally she is well aware that to call any one attitude "existential" is a simplified summation of an extremely various body of thought. Her admittedly narrow definition of both philosophic positions, the analytic and the existential, is a specialized, but valid, use of them in order to define by contrast her own position. Murdoch feels that the theories of language philosophers such as Stuart Hampshire and John Austin tend to falsely fragment man's moral

being by concentrating attention on pressures applied from without the man -- by language or social convention -- rather than on inner experience. On the other hand, Murdoch feels some existentialist philosophy, for instance that of Sartre and Richard Hare, errs in its tendency to glorify the individual mental processes and to attribute to them the source of all value. The split, then, has another dimension; it leads to question of free will and determinism. Steering a path between the forces of determinism and the powers of free will is also a continuing pattern in Murdoch's thought.

However, the latter model of human life is Murdoch's main area of engagement in her philosophical essays because she feels it is the most wide-spread and tempting in our time. This is so in the collection of essays, The Sovereignty of Good, which provides the best overall introduction to Murdoch's thought since it expands upon and refines the earlier expressions of both her moral philosophy and her aesthetic. In these essays she makes rather quick work of the claims of logic to the supreme position in man's morality, but with all the power of her persuasive prose condemns modern man's tendency to shrink from the overwhelming barrage of irrational life. She rejects existentialism's emphasis on the lonely will and its tendency to dispense of the world's contingency as absurd, indifferent, and sometimes (as for Sartre) frightening.

She calls instead for an approach to life which embraces everything -- the repulsive and the beautiful, the creative and the

destructive. For Murdoch a man's relationship with other people and his environment is perpetually shifting, significant, and valuable. She frequently suggests that man must cultivate a "respect for contingency" -- not just recognition, but respect. Sartre's hero in Nausea is obsessed with contingency, but his response is horror. Beyond an objective awareness, Murdoch affirms life's contingency and incomprehensible variety and expresses this affirmation as love. She exhorts one not merely to "see" as much as possible, but to say "yes" to it. Murdoch's writings never have the detached tone of a philosopher attempting to create a "true model" of man's nature. She is quite vehemently "Against Dryness" and detachment. Her transition from philosopher to novelist is one sure indication that Iris Murdoch is a woman who must give flesh to her beliefs.

And appropriately it is from Simone Weil -- a woman who died as a consequence of her conviction -- that Murdoch borrows two terms, "attention" and "obedience," to describe her own vision. The example of Weils' life as well as her writing has persisted as a large influence in Murdoch's work, but it is in "The Idea of Perfection" that the debt is most explicit. Weil's notebooks show her to be a woman of extreme discipline who believed in the value of controlling and channeling the intelligence, will, and emotions. For her, attention was the disciplined will accomplishing a task unhampered by distraction or dreaming. Weil's strong religious

temperament deified this concept: "God is attention without distraction."¹¹ Since vision, not rule or willed-movement is the fulcrum of Murdoch's moral perception, a turning outward is essential; thus Weil's "attention" is suited to describe for Murdoch the effort a man must make to truly see the world around him.

For her attention is also a moral discipline resulting from her conception of life; it is an effort of consciousness and can be perfected. But what is more, it is a matter of imagination. Not adherence to rigid categories, man's morality is an effort to apprehend the world and others in a particular way. "I can only choose within the world I can see, in the moral sense of 'see' which implies that clear vision is a result of moral imagination and moral effort."¹² Thus attention is an inner quality -- a gathering of consciousness' forces to focus honesty on outside circumstances. It is an attempt to open the spirit to receive justly the impingements of other people and situations. This is will performing its most basic function: the bringing of spirit's powers to bear productively on the course of life. Attention strives to be "a refined and honest perception of what is really the case, a patient and just discernment and exploration of what confronts one." It is "the result not simply of opening one's eyes but of a certainly perfectly familiar kind of moral discipline" (38).

"What is really the case" and "what confronts one" are difficult

indeed to decide. Murdoch's most specific account of what one should attempt to see are the "inexhaustible detail" and "unique" already quoted. As a moral endeavor attention is not, of course, "objectivity," for the object of knowledge is not "quasi-scientific" fact but changeable, ambiguous people. To see or to understand must always involve the imagination for we move in a world in which complete "data" are never available. But the condition toward which such a faculty strives is one in which knowledge will indicate direction. While never in this world attainable, the ideal situation is one in which "If I attend properly I will have no choices" (40). For this sort of necessity Murdoch can only point to the experience of saints and artists. But she holds that with this loving regard, the will is pictured not so much as unrestricted movement but as obedience.

While Murdoch can feel such a strong bond with a woman whose piety bordered on fanaticism, and while she prefers the term obedience to choice, she underscores the value in morality of the ceaseless process itself. There is no attainable end: "moral tasks are characteristically endless" for "morality is essentially concerned with change" (28, 29). And she highlights the constant mysteriousness of life.

But on the view which I suggest, which connects morality with attention to individuals, human individuals or individual realities of other kinds, the struggle and the progress is something more obscure, more historically conditioned, and usually less clearly conscious. (38)

Finally at the article's end Murdoch tempers her defense of contemplation versus action: "I would not be understood, either, as suggesting that insight or pureness of heart are more important than action. . . . I have suggested that we have to accept a darker, less fully conscious, less steadily rational image of the dynamics of the human personality" (43-44).

This essay tries to take into account and to balance both the indeterminacy of the world and people and the possibility for approaching the real through concentrated attention to individuals. These recurring words constitute Murdoch's moral vocabulary: selfless, attention, imagination -- individual, real -- love, knowledge, freedom. Moral endeavor involves a willed selflessness, an imaginative attention, which aims at knowledge of individual realities as much as possible free of the distortions of our comforting fantasies. This ability to direct attention is love; its object is knowledge and is inseparable from freedom. Freedom is "itself a moral concept and not just a prerequisite of morality" (38).

The ensuing extension of this thought, however, shifts attention from the individual to a transcendent Good. This is a puzzling and complicated phase in Murdoch's thought; the shadow of Simone Weil's religiosity hovers near even as Murdoch eloquently describes the utter purposelessness of human life. The contradictions and dilemmas in this aspect of her moral theory need to be enunciated because they provide insight into the tensions in her imagination

which have dictated her pronouncements about myth. A conflict between a love for and a distrust of the individual is one aspect of Murdoch's feelings about myth which is clarified by Joseph Campbell's work. Partially it is the attitude toward the self which occasions Murdoch's excursion into a realm of transcendent value -- a journey easy for the theologian but laced with dangers for the modern philosopher.

Generally Murdoch in these essays is seeking a technique, based in something outside the self, to orient moral energy. She feels, too, that moral philosophy must account for natural psychology's ability to be altered by conceptions beyond its range. Murdoch sees an idea of Good as a powerful source of moral energy (like prayer), although not simply a utilitarian substitute for God. Generally the Good is all the moral qualities she has previously proposed, but under the aspect of necessity. "Good seems to us something necessary because the realism (ability to perceive reality) required for goodness is a kind of intellectual ability to perceive what is true, which is automatically at the same time a suppression of self" (66). This rather muddled, circular statement still has the familiar moral tenets: suppression of self enables one to see more of the truth. But Murdoch has uttered as a received wisdom that the "technique for exhibiting fact" must be self-denial and has then elevated that wisdom to a universal realm. While perfectly able to recognize man's brutish qualities, she nevertheless becomes

impatient at times with his flawed nature.

With a strident note she proclaims, "In the moral life the enemy is the fat relentless ego" (52). And with like extremity she argues that moral philosophy should include the idea of "a single perfect transcendent non-representable and necessarily real object of attention" (55).

I share Rubin Rabinovitz's criticism that Iris Murdoch's pre-occupation with the dangers of solipsism is a "weak point" in her moral theory which results in her rather narrow criteria for novelistic excellence.¹³ Since she frankly admits that her arguments for the attributes of Good can never be conclusive, this theory is a clue to those life-questions which most fundamentally obsess her.

Murdoch admits that philosophy never escapes the personal. She says,

It is frequently difficult in philosophy to tell whether one is saying something reasonably public and objective, or whether one is merely erecting a barrier, special to one's own temperament, against one's own personal fears. (It is always a significant question to ask about any philosopher: what is he afraid of?). (72)

This is not simple to answer in Iris Murdoch's case, but partially the answer is that she fears the frightening power of what Thoreau called the "glut and suck of living." Incongruously she couples a cold-eyed look at the human condition with such a fervid belief in man's valuable creative capacities that she is herself sometimes neglectful of contingency, preferring to leap

by selfishness lest it deter her upward course. Thus, for example, there is a fundamental contradiction between her premise that "human beings are naturally selfish" and her belief that the self is quite naturally attracted to the Good as to a magnet: "The image of the Good as a transcendent magnetic centre seems to me the least corruptible and most realistic picture for us to use in our reflections upon the moral life" (75. See also 38, 40, 42, 43). Given her picture of the self as a virtually blind mechanism fulfilling basic drives and proliferating comforting fantasies, she, with some urgency, tries to find another realm which is the source of moral action.

Thus the dark side of the individual seems at times capable of overwhelming those instincts for respecting others' lives which Murdoch believes are "good." Apprehensive, she creates a theoretical Good which satisfies her as a model but which is not conceptually defensible. And then, of course, she is thrown back on art. In her philosophical writings, it is impossible for Iris Murdoch to overcome the contradiction which she sets up. She never claims to succeed. However, in her fiction it is possible to imaginatively bridge the gap between this Good and the world's evil, between the self as a sensuous mechanism and as a lover of life. Consequently, Murdoch continually ends her theoretical arguments with the insistence that art is the only "proof" of her

theory. When, at the same time, she is not quite willing to discard her abstract structure, she opens herself to a crucial question: if art is the ultimate moral realm, why do men still need "a single perfect transcendent non-representable and necessarily real object of attention?" Murdoch's own reluctance to let go of metaphysical structures is her own tendency to "reduce all to a false unity" (66).

Even though there is no conceptual resolution in these essays, they are extremely valuable because Iris Murdoch, through her ultimate dedication to life, eloquently tells of a conflict recognizable to many modern men. Her dream of unity may sometimes lure her close to a dangerously prescriptive moral view, but she is, after all, braving a confusing realm. And it is to her credit that, believing as she does in the utter randomness of life, her search for some active means of connection is by and large carried out with relentless honesty. The supposition of the reality of virtue, self-sacrifice, and the good would be in another a kind of religious yearning, an adroit side-stepping of ignorance and cruelty in favor of anything which softens the rough blows of experience. It is precisely Murdoch's refusal to ignore the inexplicable in life which directs her philosophy. While Sartre and others see lucidly man's non-connection with the universe, they exhort him to draw all inward and with force of will to rise above contingency by repudiating it:

An authentic mode of existence is presented as attainable by intelligence and force of will. The atmosphere is invigorating and tends to produce self-satisfaction in the reader, who feels himself to be a member of the elite, addressed by another one. Contempt for the ordinary human condition, together with a conviction of personal salvation, saves the writer from real pessimism. His gloom is superficial and conceals elation. (50)

Murdoch is treading a much more difficult path; she wants to be able to bear that naked glance at the world for the sake of life itself and not in spite of its seeming threat to life.

She recognizes that her espousal of good as a viable concept may be as much a defense as Sartre's overblown will. Near the end of "On 'God' and 'Good'" she attacks herself on the grounds that Good is merely a faked-up God and a poor one at that since it hasn't even a personal attraction. Good is not only imaginary but ineffective. She answers, "I am often more than half persuaded to think in these terms myself" (72). Of course she does not, and her response, quoted here extensively, is important not for its argument in defense of her concepts (she offers none), but for its lucid statement of the dilemma which she sees her art and her theory confronting:

Of course one is afraid that the attempt to be good may turn out to be meaningless, or at best something vague and not very important, or turn out to be as Nietzsche described it, or that the greatness of great art may be an ephemeral illusion. . . . That a glance at the scene prompts despair is certainly the case. The difficulty indeed is to look at all. If one does

not believe in a personal God there is no "problem" of evil, but there is the almost insuperable difficulty of looking properly at evil and human suffering. It is very difficult to concentrate attention upon suffering and sin, in others or in oneself, without falsifying the picture in some way by making it bearable. . . . Only the very greatest art can manage it, and that is the only public evidence that it can be done at all. Kant's notion of the sublime, though extremely interesting, possibly even more interesting than Kant realized, is a kind of romanticism. The spectacle of huge and appalling things can indeed exhilarate, but usually in a way that is less than excellent. . . . There is, however, something in the serious attempt to look compassionately at human things which automatically suggests that "there is more than this." The "there is more than this," if it is not to be corrupted by some sort of quasi-theological finality, must remain a very tiny spark of insight, something with, as it were, a metaphysical position but no metaphysical form. (72, 73)

But Murdoch does not abandon morality to this elusive abstraction; as always, she directs attention to the concreteness of art: "But it seems to me that the spark is real, and that great art is evidence of its reality. Art indeed, so far from being a playful diversion of the human race, is the place of its most fundamental insight, and the centre to which the more uncertain steps of metaphysics must return" (73). With her moral sense established, it is time to go to her center, although to suggest that her moral theory exists apart from her aesthetic is false; they are vitally connected.

NOTES

1. "Nostalgia for the Particular," Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, LII (1952), 243-260.
2. "The Sublime and the Good," Chicago Review, XIII (Autumn 1959), 42-55; "The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited," Yale Review, XLIX (December 1959), 247-71; and "Against Dryness."
3. The Sovereignty of Good (New York, 1971).
4. Ibid., p. 50.
5. Ibid., p. 41.
6. Peter Wolfe's book, The Disciplined Heart: Iris Murdoch and Her Novels, concentrates on her philosophy.
7. "The Novelist as Metaphysician," The Listener, 16 March 1950, pp. 473, 476.
8. The Sovereignty of Good, p. 97.
9. "Vision and Choice in Morality," Aristotelian Society: Dreams and Self-Knowledge, Supplement to vol. XXX (1956), 46.
10. Ibid., p. 35.
11. First and Last Notebooks, trans. Richard Rees (London, 1970), p. 141.
12. The Sovereignty of Good, p. 37. Subsequent references to The Sovereignty of Good in this chapter will be given in parentheses following the quotation.
13. Iris Murdoch, Columbia Essays on Modern Writers, No. 34 (New York, 1968), p. 45.

CHAPTER II

THE AESTHETICS

The movement from ethics to aesthetics is easily accomplished since imaginative vision, for Murdoch, is the basis of both. As a man dedicated to the life of the imagination, the artist becomes a "good" man, for he is engaged in creating ways to picture human situations. In order to exercise his imagination fully and to create an art of life, the artist must open himself fearlessly to life's complexity.

Murdoch's aesthetic, which occasions her feelings about myth, is again structured by the extremes of free will and determinism. The conflict has several different manifestations, but her basic terms for the two opposing trends in narrative form are the "crystalline" and the journalistic, " which in turn are identified respectively with models of humanity she designates "Neurotic Man" and "Conventional Man. " As before, the crystalline or neurotic is the more pernicious trend, and this type of fiction, which tends toward the mythic in Murdoch's definition, is a victim of too much form and is allied with personal preoccupation, fantasy, and control of experience. This aesthetic is immediately vulnerable, however

(quite aside from questions of its "truth"), because Iris Murdoch admits that by and large the best novels of the twentieth century have been of the crystalline variety and because she herself has a propensity for employing and creating myth in her own novels. This indicates, at the least, a misguided terminology and, at the most, a misunderstanding of aesthetic form. Generally, Iris Murdoch provides a brilliant, invigorating, and important conception of a novelistic form which embraces and itself creates the surprising mystery of life. However, her own aesthetic dictums can become constricting. An exploration of an expanded notion of form corrects some of the discrepancy between her theory and her practice. It will be seen that the narrowness of Murdoch's conception of form and her continuing over-reaction to the evils of solipsism lead her to intellectually discard some varieties of aesthetic expression which do match her own feelings about life and art. There are more avenues open to the novelist than those which she allows him and, in fact, myth can open the energies of life rather than crystallizing them. But first it is necessary to more completely understand Murdoch's aesthetic categories.

Kant's theory of the sublime, with which the discussion of her ethics ended, is one vehicle she uses to connect her moral and aesthetic conceptions in three articles, "The Sublime and the Good," "The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited," and "Against Dryness." Here she equates the imaginative vision which she has postulated

as the essence of the moral life with the vision of the artist. Murdoch sees Kant as the precursor of the dominant twentieth century attitude which conceives of art as self-contained. In Kant's thought, she explains, the beautiful is an experience of a conceptionless harmony between the imagination and the understanding.¹ He conceives of art as the production of a kind of quasi-thing which is whole, self-contained, and unrelated to emotion or desire. Reason is not involved in the creation of art. The sublime, on the other hand, is a conflict between reason and the imagination. And since reason is involved, the experience of the sublime is not an aesthetic experience: it is an exhilaration of the spirit as the mind contemplates that which surpasses it. But Murdoch believes this perception is in fact analogous to the experience of the artist, for he creates out of "the realization of a vast and varied reality outside [himself] which brings about a sense initially of terror and when properly understood of exhilaration and spiritual power." The impetus to Murdoch's imagination is the "sight of our surroundings as consisting of other individual men."² What Murdoch believes is essential for the best art, but also exceedingly difficult to obtain in spite of its obviousness, is the knowledge, deemed necessary in her moral theory, that other people exist.

But just as Murdoch qualifies her use of Kant's sublime in "On 'God' and 'Good'," she fully knows that a mere looking at other is not automatically uplifting. While she defines "love" as

the perception of individuals, she is under no illusion that other individuals always please. Love, for Murdoch, rarely carries the notion of personal gratification; it is more an attitude with a different sort of reward, e. g. "Balzac did not love these people because he knew them, he knew them because he loved them."³ To return to one of her purely moral statements (and one of her most pregnant because it really does deal with common sense reality and is not trifling with transcendence), "the more the separateness and differentness of other people is realized, and the fact seen that another man has needs and wishes as demanding as one's own, the harder it becomes to treat a person as a thing."⁴

The respect for contingency, then, is fundamental and the great artist must, like the good man, look at the world with a glance as panoramic and as honest as possible:

It is not simply that suppression of self is required before accurate vision can be obtained. The great artist sees his objects (and this is true whether they are sad, absurd, repulsive or even evil) in a light of justice and mercy. The direction of attention is, contrary to nature, outward, away from self which reduces all to a false unity, towards the great surprising variety of the world, and the ability so to direct attention is love.⁵

The artist must deal with his art in the same way that men deal with their lives, for art is about life. The artist creates and reacts to the problems and experiences of men in the world, so that "aesthetic situations are not so much analogies of morals as cases of morals."⁶

The importance of selflessly opening oneself is central to Murdoch's aesthetic, and she unhesitatingly prescribes criteria for good novels. The fictive form which her attitude dictates emphasizes character acting within a contingent world. Her models are those nineteenth century novels which house a number of characters and which, when most successful, have an effect of teeming life. The best show "a plurality of real persons . . . representing mutually independent centers of significance. . . . the individuals portrayed in the novels are free, independent of their author, and not merely puppets in the exteriorization of some closely locked psychological conflict of his own."⁷

This novel is positioned between the extremities of language philosophy and existentialism and their corresponding models of man, "Conventional Man" and "Neurotic Man." The former is an individual whose initiative is too much bound by convention, and the latter is a naked will too little influenced by the world's demands.⁸ Neither gives "a standpoint for considering the variety of individuals."⁹ Most twentieth century novels, then, are either journalistic or crystalline. The crystalline novel is a highly patterned, self-contained story, and the journalistic novel is too much like unstructured and unedited reportage. In a later elaboration of these "rather inexact . . . epigrammatic distinctions" she says,

There is a tendency, I think, on the one hand, and especially now, to produce a closely-coiled, care-

fully constructed object wherein the story rather than the people is the important thing, and wherein the story perhaps suggests a particular, fairly clear moral. On the other hand, there is and always has been in fiction a desire to describe the world around one in a fairly loose and cheerful way. And it seemed to me at present in the novel that there was a flying apart of these two different aims. Some ideal state of affairs would combine the merits of both.¹⁰

The crystalline novel, identified with the image of neurotic man, is also linked to an attitude which separates art and life, the French symbolist's l'art pour l'art. These artists, most conspicuously Mallarmé, desired to produce poems which were self-contained; they desired to built structures of words, not to use them referentially. Thus the "symbolic" novel is "Kant's theory of the beautiful served up in fresh form." It demonstrates a "yearning to pierce through the messy phenomenal world to some perfect and necessary form and order." And the alternatives which some supply to this turning-inward are also unsatisfactory to Murdoch. T.S. Eliot, opposed to the solipsistic creation of art, suggests that there must be some focus outside the self. But what he names are "things and institutions." Murdoch would suggest "other people." She feels that in the twentieth century these two strains of thought have failed to strike a balance between man's will and those things which determine him; the modern novel is either "a tight metaphysical object or loose journalistic epic. . . things or truths."¹¹

This impasse, seen another way, is between too little form (looseness) and too much (tightness). Unquestionably, form is the

issue for Murdoch. The novelist does not simply report, but he shapes and builds with words in time; the discursive nature of the novel should not obscure that its art is as much a matter of "how" as of "what":

But it will clearly not be enough for us to know that the novelist has a mature and interesting viewpoint on human affairs and to know from reading his novel what the viewpoint is; our judgment of him as a novelist will also depend on how he incarnates his viewpoint in his literary medium, although to put it thus is misleading if it suggests that the particular viewpoint exists apart from its incarnation.¹²

A novelist can really "say" nothing apart from the form of his work. The form is the art. And for Murdoch the form of a novel must be the form of life. She sees the world as multifarious and always surprising; it is unlimited, continually unfolding, constantly changing. For this reason she distrusts a novelist whose pre-occupation with structure leads him to pattern a novel too narrowly, to tie up loose ends, to make all events "fit" somehow in a neat vision. And she finds equally false the novel which neglects the creation of form and offers instead reportage. Her ideal is a novel which presents a "plurality of real persons" moving in an uncertain and chancy world.¹³

Form which blocks the creative imagination Murdoch associates with the personal, with fantasy, with myth, with plot. In her own experience she feels she has succumbed to structure in order to avoid grappling with the life of her novels: "But there can be a

tendency too readily to pull a form or a structure out of something one's thinking about and to rest upon that."¹⁴ The writer should not rest, neither should he turn aside from the painful or horrible. Literature must have a form which mirrors the complexity of the world. The form which she rejects is, she feels, an attempt to palliate the pain and incomprehensibility of the world -- part of its sublime aspect in Kant's sense. Today nothing is simple. "The modern writer, frightened of technology and . . . abandoned by philosophy and . . . presented with simplified dramatic theories, attempts to console us by myths or by stories." She fears that form can be used as a shield against chance, rather than as an exploration which liberates:

Form itself can be a temptation, making the work of art into a small myth which is a self-contained and indeed self-satisfied individual. We need to turn our attention away from the consoling dream necessity of Romanticism, away from the dry symbol, the bogus individual, the false whole, towards the real impenetrable human person. . . . this person is substantial, impenetrable, individual, indefinable, and valuable.

Form should not falsify life by making it neater, clearer, or more symmetrical than we experience it: "since reality is incomplete, art must not be too much afraid of incompleteness."¹⁵

Here is Murdoch's identification of "self-contained" and "self-satisfied" art with a "small myth." The "dream necessity" hints as well at the connection she makes between myth and fantasy, the effort to obscure and lessen painful experience. Also myth is con-

sistently a term which she uses to describe the crystalline novel.¹⁶ Not surprisingly, sometimes myth is not only too-restrictive form, but a giving in to the personal. Her definition of a Romantic writer, for example, is "one who gives the impression of externalizing a personal conflict in a tightly conceived self-contained myth."¹⁷ And again, she fears that a novel which is too mythic has "a kind of form which ultimately is the form of one's own mind." In her interview with Kermode, she associates myth with "structure" and with "plot." She feels that twentieth century writers too easily "give in" to myth, i. e. to the patterns they create, and "rest" on them: "The satisfaction of the form is such that it can stop one from going more deeply into the contradictions or paradoxes or more painful aspects of the subject matter." One may rest or stop on myth; it is, as she presents it, an inhibiting force. Since her desire is to create and examine "real people," she pits character against myth or plot: "I think [my novels] oscillate rather between attempts to portray a lot of people and giving in to a powerful plot or story."¹⁸ Myth is antagonistic both to the "incompleteness" which she feels art should have and to the self-extinction which is necessary for the creation of real characters:

Against the consolations of form, the clean crystalline work, the simplified fantasy-myth, we must pit the destructive power of the now so unfashionable naturalistic idea of character. Real people are destructive of myth, contingency is destructive of fantasy and opens the way for imagination.¹⁹

The assumption behind such an attitude is that myth has been an attempt to falsify or ignore the realities of life. The same belief underlies the current use of the word "myth" as a synonym for "untrue." Such an evasion of the more painful or sordid aspects of life is, of course, unacceptable to many modern writers, but mythology is much more than a collection of pleasing tales of amorous, ambrosia-eating deities. Not only is mythology a profound and enduring expression of human experience, it is an aesthetic expression and, hence, a celebration of the imagination's powers. Murdoch is herself guilty of simplifying, and at any rate she can only do so by ignoring the use of myth by artists whom she would not likely accuse of having inferior imaginations, e. g. James Joyce and Yeats. But before suggesting more concrete ways in which myth nourishes rather than defeats Iris Murdoch's aesthetic criteria, her general conception of form needs to be considered.

Her aesthetic of form is questionable on two counts. First, her conception of form is both too narrow and too ambiguous. She tends to equate form and order, with form consequently becoming an enclosure or framework. Second, she too readily connects the individual point of view (in narrative, the first-person) with the creation of selfish fantasy which tries to put on leash the unruly energies of life.

Murdoch's thoughts about form are contradictory, as she is aware. She both believes in form as the essence of art and distrusts

it. When asked how one decides which sort of form is valuable and which is dangerous she replies, with an obvious awareness of easy confusion, "This is a delicate question. It's almost absurd to say that form in art is in any sense a menace, because form is the absolute essence of art."²⁰ Yet she does make this distinction. There are other criteria too.

Besides representing a chancy universe filled with real, independent people, the novel's form must be generated from inside out. This is a common aesthetic tenet of our time: the art work has a form peculiar to itself and an artist must not at any point impose an alien form. He cannot rest on a structure he has extracted from the intellect. Murdoch believes the art work is a growth with its own life rather than an inert object -- the "things" of the crystalline novelist. But she stops short of identifying form in art and form in nature. In "The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited" she says, "Art has got to have form, whereas life need not," and this pronouncement is a revealing clue to her attraction/aversion attitude toward form.²¹ Here Murdoch is, I think, confusing *télos* and form. Her clear-eyed acceptance of a random, irrational universe leads her to assert the utter formlessness of life. But this is a false tautology. Indeed one of the scholarly phenomena of this century has been the burst of inter-disciplinary studies occasioned by the belief that form itself is the unifying principle of the universe. To many scientists, educators, philosophers, and

artists, Murdoch's implicit definition of form would be perplexing.

Lancelot Law Whyte is a physicist whose studies of form led him to investigate and relate such disparate branches of human endeavor as sculpture and biological theory. In Whyte's anthology of essays, Aspects of Form, Herbert Read's preface takes implicit issue with Murdoch's declaration that life need not have form:

But now the revelation that perception itself is essentially a pattern-selecting and pattern-making function (a Gestalt formation); that pattern is inherent in the physical structure or in the functioning of the nervous system; that matter itself analyses into coherent patterns or arrangements of molecules; and the gradual realization that all these patterns are effective and ontologically significant by virtue of an organization of their parts which can only be characterized as aesthetic -- all this development has brought works of art and natural phenomena on to an identical plane of enquiry.²²

The study of form is still an embryonic discipline, and Whyte's collection of essays exhibits one pervasive difficulty -- the inconsistency of the terminology. "Form," "structure," "pattern," "shape," "configuration," "system" connote different things and values to the different writers. Some of this vocabulary difficulty seems unavoidable. However, the confusion noted between Murdoch's "form" and what I will call "order" is not purely a word quibble; there is a conceptual misunderstanding involved.

Murdoch recognizes life as ceaseless process; too much form stills the movement. But this process-rhythm is itself what informs life; it is a constant. From this perspective, form does not appear

as a two-headed monster, indispensable to artistic achievement yet antagonistic to life. The static, stultifying, rational organization which Murdoch denigrates is more accurately referred to as "order," for this suggests the marshalling of experience into a contrived wholeness. However, a new definition does not fully resolve Murdoch's quandary about form as essence and form as menace. It is the apparent purposelessness of nature which Murdoch struggles to align somehow with man's inborn ability and desire to create purpose in his own life. Another contributor to Whyte's anthology, C. H. Waddington, puts his finger very accurately on the problem Murdoch faces, just as she might conceptualize it:

Man, it seems, when he begins to create, is usually more single-purposed than living Nature. The inner logic of his constructions is simpler; or he is concerned more with an externally imposed logic, of representation or symbolism. There is, in a human work of sculpture, no actual multitude of internal growth-forces which are balanced so as to issue in a near-equilibrium of a rhythmic character. We should therefore not expect that works of art will often arrive at the same type of form as we commonly find in the structures of living matter. Much more can we anticipate an influence of man's intellectualising, pattern-making habit of simplification, diluted perhaps by an intrusion of unresolved detail. Only the extremely simple, or the extremely sophisticated, are likely to stray into the realm of form which is the proper outcome of the blind but complex forces of life.²³

The "blindness" is the stone over which both Murdoch and Waddington stumble. Nothing is planned in nature as man would plan with his intelligence. Yet this faculty in man is certainly not

automatically a death-instinct unless it predominates over man's other faculties which do flow with the process-rhythm -- his emotions, his senses, his imagination.

Whyte's important book The Next Development in Man has as a main premise that man's inability to recognize the connection between himself and all organic life occasioned the twentieth century's well-known anxiety. Whyte maintains that "the primary duality from which all others spring is the separation of this system here [man's] and the rest of nature."²⁴ Man must recognize that he is an organic being and that as such he is ruled by the principle of nature that change is universal:

Man is one with nature as an expression of the universal formative process, and one with organic nature as an expression of a formative process continually developing its own process forms but never attaining static perfection.²⁵

In his attempt to create a precise vocabulary, Whyte's terms have distinctions so subtle that they merely confuse. But when he says that "the form common to all processes is that of a formative tendency," it seems clear enough that the unity of the world (or nature) lies in its ceaseless development through form. Moreover, it is the peculiar nature of organic life (as opposed to, e. g. crystal formation) to develop in a diastolic-systolic rhythm. "Form is developed, in the symmetry not of static form but of process in equilibrium. Organic development is not teleological, but is a process of continuing adjustment."²⁶ In addition to the pul-

sations of assimilation and disintegration within each organism, there is the always unpredictable encounter with the environment. Life is a wild confusion of events. Whyte cautions that "man . . . must accept his personal life for what it is, a transient development through changes which cannot be foreseen." While nature is "a unity in its form of process," it "is not a coherent unity."²⁷

Thus the life of an individual is a constant development through creation of form, but within the development there is an everlasting tension between conflicting forces. The ultimate conflict is between permanence and change. Permanence, in the sense of a static unchanging order, would be death to the organism. The relation is a complex balance: As Susanne Langer expresses it in Feeling and Form,

In the phenomenon we call "life," both continuous change and permanent form really exist; but the form is made and maintained by complicated disposition of mutual influences among the physical units. . . . Permanence of form, then, is the constant aim of living matter; not the final goal (for it is what finally fails), but the thing that is perpetually being achieved, and that is always, at every moment, an achievement, because it depends entirely on the activity of "living." But "living" itself is a process, a continuous change; if it stands still the form disintegrates -- for the permanence is a pattern of changes.²⁸

This permanence is precisely what Murdoch wishes to accomplish in her fiction; she wants to create a novel which is more than an individual pattern plus a few unresolved details. The struggle which she perceives between the integrating, liberating imagination

and the classifying, controlling intellect is real. But since she conceives of life's blindness as a formlessness, her aesthetic categories only make for more confusion. In order to escape rigidity of structure, she exhorts the novelist to return to a naturalistic representation of character. But this division into plot versus character is "rather inexact and epigrammatic" as she admits. There are other options: Joyce Cary was both a bold experimenter with form and a brilliant creator of character. And as A. S. Byatt has observed, Murdoch's distrust of the highly patterned novel shows her working against herself, for one of her remarkable talents is precisely the invention of plot or story.²⁹ Her theoretical distinctions lead her to conceive of form in quantitative, rather than qualitative terms: "Of course, too, artists are pattern-makers. The claims of form and the question of 'how much form' to elicit constitutes one of the chief problems of art."³⁰ While there are certainly differences in the ways in which art works are "formal," form is not a mass to be measured. It is more a way, a direction, a movement. There is probably nothing in life, from molecules to men, which does not have form.

But even with Whyte's "unitary" understanding that man is not separate from the rest of organic nature, there are differences between aesthetic form and natural form. In fact, Whyte's discussion of the organism-environment relationship is strained precisely because he at first tries to include all organisms, without

emphasizing man's special differences. These differences -- for example, the purposive, ordering thrust of his consciousness -- must be resolved with the likenesses. Murdoch herself expresses very well some of the differences between art and life in an interview with Stephanie Nettell, "But of course, art is art; one is drawing artificial lines around something, and one is offering it up in a heightened form."³¹ A work of art does have artificial lines about it in the sense that the artist marks the beginning and the end. His words begin and they cease. He limits the experience with which he will deal as we cannot in our lives often do. The artist is a shaper and a controller under the force of his invention. But her phrase "heightened form" is even better at indicating the special differences and the ultimate purpose of an art which is dedicated to life. Art is, finally, more stable, less chaotic, than actual organic life. The artist is able, by the selective powers of imagination, to heighten and to make clearer, more comprehensible, more available to the mind and spirit the complexities of life.

In the articles which most thoroughly connect morality and art Murdoch best grasps and expresses the significance of artistic form as opposed to the uncontrolled forms of life. There she says that "form in art is properly the simulation of the self-contained aimlessness of the universe," and yet art heightens even aimlessness. The artist chooses and isolates in order to make his vision more effective. He presents life "with a clarity which does not belong

to the self-centred rush of ordinary life." Finally, "it is when form is used to isolate, to explore, to display something which is true that we are most highly moved and enlightened."³² Artistic form is not something other than the form of life. It isolates and heightens, but it does not falsify.

Yet even here Murdoch is insisting that the self is the nemesis. Even with the modification of her theoretical approach to form, there remains the question of the individual's contribution. While she talks of heightening, she does seem to suggest that art should create something different -- not ordinary life but something better. "Self-centred" is clearly a pejorative judgment. She passionately upholds the person as "substantial, impenetrable, individual, indefinable, and valuable"; at the same time he is (always) a mean and selfish glut. Her "bogus individual" is still another self. The definitions are tangled.

Murdoch has evident difficulty reconciling the value of the individual with what could be loosely called a social consciousness. With the disappearance of absolute values and a transcendent order, each man is left as the center of the universe; how can these separate centers of energy be connected so that they do not simply destroy each other? Murdoch feels that the self is not only naturally inclined to reduce life to a smaller, safer unit but is encouraged to do so by popular modern philosophies. And in art the same is true; the writer turns personal conflicts into neat stories with

beginnings, middles, and ends. The intensity and consistency of Murdoch's moral outlook leads her to a rather dogmatic insistence on the value of one type of narrative form. She sees life as explosive and feels that the novel should be explosive as well. And yet the individual (who is also responsible for this volatile energy) is to efface himself in favor of other individual's outbursts. Her dangerously prescriptive moral and aesthetic theories hamper her own feelings, for she admits that by and large the best novels of the twentieth century have been of the crystalline variety. Here she violates her theory by making an aesthetic judgment untouched by her dislike of the "fat relentless ego."

Murdoch's description of the self is extremely restricted. She looks for an individual willing to face the mysterious and arduous reality of other people and things, but she does not conceive that this ability or power can originate within the individual. Within all is dark, greedy, and cowardly; only by extinguishing this monster and giving attention to his ideal opposite does man develop a moral sense and great art.

As has been seen, too much dwelling on the personal supposedly produces form which is simplified, fantastic, and energy-inhibiting, the realm of myth in Murdoch's opinion. Yet not all agree that myth is a static form. The altered notion of form already discussed is one which others, notably Joseph Campbell, have also advanced for the character of myth in the modern world. Moreover, this

view of myth speaks to Murdoch's other large problem -- the individual perspective. Myth now, according to Campbell, while retaining its function of illuminating the individual's relation to the group, is necessarily an expression of individual experience. That is, myth does open up and accept life's enigma precisely because it is an individual creation for other individuals. The self is not necessarily a monster with a rage for order.

The next chapter will discuss the particular character of myth which does correspond to the open form which Murdoch's theories postulate, and it will relate the importance of the individual self to the creation of myth.

NOTES

1. "The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited," p. 248.
2. Ibid., p. 268.
3. Ibid., p. 271.
4. The Sovereignty of Good, p. 66.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid., p. 41.
7. "The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited," p. 257.
8. Ibid., p. 254.
9. Ibid.
10. Frank Kermode, "A House of Fiction: Interviews with Seven English Novelists," Partisan Review, XXX (Spring 1963), 63.
11. "The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited," pp. 259-260, 264.
12. Kermode, p. 70.
13. "The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited," p. 257.
14. Kermode, p. 70.
15. "Against Dryness," pp. 19, 20.
16. See "The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited," pp. 258, 271; Kermode, p. 63; "Against Dryness," p. 20.
17. "The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited," p. 258.
18. Kermode, pp. 63, 64.
19. "Against Dryness," p. 20.

20. Kermode, p. 63.
21. "The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited, p. 271.
22. Aspects of Form (Bloomington, Indiana, 1951), no page numbers.
23. Ibid., pp. 51-52.
24. The Next Development in Man (New York, 1948), p. 30.
25. Ibid., p. 38.
26. Ibid., p. 18.
27. Ibid., pp. 211, 29.
28. Feeling and Form (New York, 1953), p. 66.
29. Byatt, p. 190.
30. The Sovereignty of Good, p. 65.
31. "An Exclusive Interview," Books and Bookmen, XI (September 1966), 14.
32. The Sovereignty of Good, pp. 86, 65.

CHAPTER III
MYTH AS AESTHETIC FORM

It is necessary to make plain from the outset of this discussion that I intend no definitive statement about the nature of myth.

There continues heated debate among scholars about the proper understanding of myth and even about the questions to be asked. Some investigations pursue myth's functions, some its meanings, and some the structure of the mythical consciousness. A once powerful theory placed myth's origins in ritual; another viewed myth as mainly aetiological. The structural approach emphasizes the speculative purpose of myth, and some anthropologists view myth as the validation of social institutions. This discussion will attempt to illuminate those qualities of myth, viewed as an aesthetic expression of a particular experience of life, which are in accord with Iris Murdoch's significant vision of the form of modern narrative literature.

Murdoch is undeniably correct that myth has become exceptionally popular in this century, both with writers and with critics. However, its attractions are by no means limited to simplified fantasy, Romanticism, containment, and selfishness. Myth obviously offers

to some an avenue for reinstating just those qualities of life which Murdoch feels have been submerged in our culture beneath the powerful tide of man's reason. Myth is man's response to the mystery, power, and energy he feels immediately present in the world. It is a complex aesthetic expression which has indeed been used as a regulator of experience, but which springs from feeling and from a recognition of and identification with the metamorphic process of life. And it is a moral creation which illuminates the relation between one individual and a group. Certainly ancient man's response to life cannot be modern man's response. But what myth can mean now and the forms it may embody are important to Murdoch's vision of this chancy, explosive world.

There is at least one indication that Murdoch has ambivalent feelings about myth. She reviewed Elias Canetti's Crowds and Power (later dedicating The Flight from the Enchanter to him) and praised the book for showing "the interaction of 'the mythical' with the ordinary stuff of human life." She claimed that "The mythical is not something 'extra'; we live in myth and symbol all the time."¹ Murdoch does not continue this speculation, but those subsequent novels which extensively use myth are certainly attempts to imaginatively integrate myth and "ordinary" life.

Two deceptively simple attributes of myth are, I think, primarily important and must begin this investigation of myth's properties. First, a myth is verbal; it is a narrative or story. For the Greeks

muthos meant a tale, a statement, a story, or the plot of a play.

Plato is the first known user of the term muthologia, and he meant the telling of stories.² While some scholars find this etymology

unhelpful, it is quite significant, for it indicates that myth must be considered an aesthetic creation -- a too easily forgotten fact.

Ernst Cassirer even claims that myth "represents the earliest and most universal product of the aesthetic fantasy"; it is not a mere reflection of reality but "a characteristic creative elaboration"³

Second, myth is always about mystery. Scholars quibble whether myth must always involve gods, but though it does not always

include a pantheon, myth does explore the spiritual life. It

regards the unknowable energies, power, and mysteries -- whether or not called sacred -- which surround and permeate man. Myth

is the narrative expression of the entrance of the spiritual into the world; in myth the spirit is incarnate.

These general criteria, to yield their full value, must be aug-

mented with a discussion of specific attributes of the mythical

mind and then with a discussion of myth's functions. The philosopher

Ernst Cassirer has made a full and pregnant postulate of the workings

of the mythical consciousness, and his hypotheses and observations

have a singular correspondence with the feeling for life expressed

in Iris Murdoch's thought and art.

Cassirer's sweeping concern is the evolution of the symbolic

process, with the mythical consciousness as a beginning stage.

The qualities of mythical thought are posited within this framework and are categorized most generally by the opposition of the sacred (the mysterious, powerful, extraordinary) and the profane (the common and accessible). The modes of thought are further described as dynamic, intuitive, based on feeling, steeped in immediacy and the concrete. Also of importance is the mythical relation to time. Once a cosmic sense of time has been established, the mythical mind conceives of a sacred, immutable past to which the present is continually juxtaposed.

Cassirer's mythical age is essentially the "whole-natured" age which Lancelot Law Whyte sees antedating the split into the two incompatible systems of sense and intellect. In this ancient stage man was closely identified with the processes of nature, and Whyte's visionary hope is that modern man can regain this unitive experience in the form appropriate to his stage in history.⁴ The attributes -- fluidity, spontaneity, sensuality -- to be regained and integrated with man's more rational and time-conscious nature correspond to Cassirer's recreation of mythical life. Rather than the intellect, the intuition was primary. The processes of abstraction and analyzation were secondary to a state of awareness which the world impinged upon as power: "Long before the world appeared to consciousness as a totality of empirical things and a complex of empirical attributes it was manifested as an aggregate of mythical powers and effects."⁵ The world's constant flux was

the given, and its unending metamorphosis was both a source of fear and power. Elias Canetti also discusses men-animal totems as particularly significant because they are "representations of the process of transformation. From the unending flux of innumerable possible transformations, one is picked out and given permanent form."⁶

In Cassirer's theory of symbolic process, the important thing about mythical metamorphosis was the hypostatization of the flowing elements. Science approaches reality through relations; myth reduces all to material substances. Thus while myth is a first attempt to go beyond the given and to deal with spiritual powers, it does so by rendering them in concrete form. It is "a kind of materialization of spiritual contents."⁷ What differentiates this process from the symbolic process is that the creators of myth did not distinguish between object and image. This solidity of the spirit is important for this discussion of art and energy in the modern world. In myth the spiritual world is a concrete reality. The impulse in ancient man which led him to put his spiritual perceptions into story is still operative in the imagination's life today. A consciousness which believes in the identity of matter and spirit has been increasingly supplanted by a conception of the symbol as device. But aesthetic expression is the making solid of the imagination, and no matter how altered, art today shares that basic character with ancient myth. It is this century's special

position, and one Iris Murdoch recognizes, that a change has again occurred which calls for participation in those mythic modes which integrate the spiritual and the concrete.

The qualities thus far outlined -- the play of passion and feeling, the immersion in sensual and immediate life, the ability of man and nature to transform themselves, and the concrete reality of the spiritual world -- all have an affinity with Murdoch's forms of life. Ancient man's confrontation of this world, however, especially provokes her interest. Her attention is to form, and in myth she sees not a flowing with process but control. And so do many others. Cassirer's treatment of time is a natural approach to this facet of myth.

Again he differentiates between two stages. In the first, time is apprehended biologically; that is, the alternation of day and night or of the seasons underlies the primary intuition of time. Man feels the rhythmic periodicity of life. "The primary mythical 'sense of phases' can apprehend time only in the image of life."⁸ Then within this time a cosmic time appears in which true myth is born; time changes from the felt rhythm in all life to a vision of a temporal order allied with destiny and governing reality. In this time the ongoing life and action of both men and gods are possible. Here is Cassirer's description of this evolution:

True myth does not begin when the intuition of the universe and its parts and forces is merely formed into definite images, into the figures of demons and

gods; it begins only when a genesis, a becoming, a life in time, is attributed to these figures. Only where man ceases to content himself with a static contemplation of the divine, where the divine explicates its existence and nature in time, where the human consciousness takes the step forward from the figure of the gods to the history, the narrative, of the gods -- only then have we to do with "myths" in the restricted, specific meaning of the word.⁹

Cassirer further distinguishes this mythic time from our historical time in its treatment of the past. In myth there is a sacred, immutable, infinitely distant past "which neither requires nor is susceptible of any further explanation."¹⁰

This concept of a fixed past against which the present is judged and through which it is stabilized has been given its fullest expression by Mircea Eliade. His phrase in illo tempore designates that mysterious source of all life whose irruptions in the present are the subject of myth. This past is a separate, fully divine sphere of being. It functions as a definition and confinement of power whose sources can be tapped by living men. Thus in myth the absolute past is the constant arbiter of value in the present. "All the sanctity of mythical being goes back ultimately to the sanctity of the origin."¹¹ Eliade, more specifically concerned with ritual than with myth, contends that the repetition of an act supposedly originated by a god is an implicit abolition of "profane" time and transports the actor into the sacred, mythical epoch.¹² Whether through ritual or not, he believes that ancient man felt he could

participate in the remote, sacred, immutable "time" just as that time could break into the shifting, changing present. This belief was one response to the feared unpredictableness of life. Ancient man's very immersion in transformation as the pulse of life led to an escape through an uncorrupted order of being:

Archaic man's rejection of history, his refusal to situate himself in a concrete historical time, would, then, be the symptoms of a precocious weariness, a fear of movement and spontaneity; in short, placed between accepting the historical condition and its risks on the one hand, and his reidentification with the modes of nature on the other, he would choose such a reidentification.¹³

T.S. Eliot's previously quoted dictum about myth's function in literature arises, then, from a firm scholarly tradition. Besides Cassirer and Eliade, Elias Canetti, G.S. Kirk and Joseph Campbell support this hypothesis about ancient myth. Campbell, as we have seen, believes traditional myths "antecede and control experience." Kirk says concisely that part of myth's function is "binding the volatile present to the traditionally and divinely sanctioned regularity of the past."¹⁴ Canetti gives a more specific, imaginative picture:

It seems as though early man was made uneasy by the increasing fluidity of his nature, by his very gift for transformation in fact, and that this was what made him seek for some fixed and immovable barriers. There were so many sensations which he experienced as something alien operating within his body . . . that he felt as though he had been given over to it and forced to become it . . . He felt as though there was nothing but movement everywhere and that his own being was in a state of continual flux; and this inevitably aroused in him a desire for solidity and permanence."¹⁵

While without doubt men still often desire that solidity and permanence, it cannot be achieved, as it once was, through living participation in myth. There are always other alternatives -- the church, a social order, a belief in rationality or even in the past -- but there are also those who wish not to shun our volatile life but to embrace it. They do not wish to anchor themselves outside of time or history (history in the sense of a process in time, not as 'the past'), but "to accept the risks entailed by every creative act."¹⁶ As Eliade recognizes, modern man's creativity must arise from his life in time, from his own freedom, and cannot be merely a collaboration in some archetypal, distant gesture of the gods.

The gap between the mythic consciousness and the modern consciousness can seem vast and unbridgeable in this light, and indeed many scoff at the suggestion that our age can be in any sense mythopoetic. Yet myth's terrain -- its fluidity, its intuitive apprehension of the world, its belief in the constant unpredictable infusion of spiritual power in this life -- is also that of our unsettled age. While myth can no longer supply boundaries to experience, it can now turn its forms to the liberation of energy. This is the creative mythology which Joseph Campbell celebrates.

Campbell outlines four functions of myth which are, skeletally, the mystical, cosmological, sociological, and psychological. The first function involves the original, shocking impact between man and the mysterium tremendum et fascinans of this universe.

Mythology both elicits and supports this sense of awe. Then myth renders an image of the mystery, an invention of a cosmology which interprets the mystery to consciousness. The third function, the sociological, integrates the individual with the group and enforces a social and/or moral order. Campbell feels the importance of mythology in the progress of civilizations is of inestimable importance, for its basis in aspiration is more powerful than arbitrary authority. On the fourth function Campbell centers his energies. In Occidental Mythology he describes this function as "initiating the individual into the order of realities of his own psyche, guiding him toward his own spiritual enrichment and realization."¹⁷ In Creative Mythology the description is fuller and the intensity of the rhetoric bares Campbell's passion for the new mythology:

The fourth and most vital, most critical function of a mythology, then, is to foster, the centering and unfolding of the individual in integrity, in accord with d) himself (the microcosm), c) his culture (the mesocosm), b) the universe (the macrocosm), and a) that awesome ultimate mystery which is both beyond and within himself and all things.¹⁸

Defining the most vital and critical functions of a mythology in terms of the individual seems a shameless example of what Murdoch feels is existentialism's most pernicious tendency. But Campbell's expanding system of relationships removes any charge of solipsism. In truth, all does originate with the individual for Campbell, but this individual never works, creates, or exists in a blind vacuum.

The fourth volume of The Masks of God is the elucidation of the

fourth function and of the revolution which brought it into being. Through philosophy, science, art, and theology, Campbell traces the changes which have brought men to see the mysterium tremendum of the universe visibly expressed in the miracle of individual lives. The first three functions of myth are not obviated in the twentieth century, but the same forces which have increased the significance of individuation have altered the forms of the mystical, cosmological, and sociological apprehensions of being. The universe's multiplicity cannot be contained in absolute systems. Communities increasingly cannot be isolated or enclosed. A mythology cannot inhibit the range of possibilities but must actually provide for the unexpected.

Campbell believes the creative mythology witnessed in the western world today had its beginnings in the middle of the twelfth century. Before that time, the dicta of authority and tradition still presided over life; mythologies were immured in a respect for inherited forms. The individual was meant to share in the communal expression of a mythology and thus bind himself to the past and inherited meanings. Instead, in creative mythology the individual takes his own experience here and now, expressing it for others if they wish to receive it. Attention to immediate, worldly life supercedes the otherworldly structures which dictated value and prescribed action. The wane of religious mythology in modern life is undisputed; Campbell, using primarily Gottfried von Strassburg's Tristan und Isold and Wolfram von Eschenback's Parsival,

demonstrates the secularization of myth (after the Christianizing of myth in the West) occurring as early as the thirteenth century.

Here is Campbell's own ebullient paean to this revolutionary change:

Creative mythology . . . springs not, like theology, from the dicta of authority, but from the insights, sentiments, thoughts, and vision of an adequate individual, loyal to his own experience of value. Thus it corrects the authority holding to the shells of forms produced and left behind by lives once lived. Renewing the act of experience itself, it restores to existence the quality of adventure, at once shattering and reintegrating the fixed, already known, in the sacrificial creative fire of the becoming thing that is no thing at all but life, not as it will be or as it should be, as it was or as it never will be, but as it is, in depth, in process, here and now, inside and out. (6-7)

The last catalogue without question complements Murdoch's own admonition that art must deal with the given and not with fantastic distortion. The subject and the form of art is life. On this Joseph Campbell and Iris Murdoch indisputably agree. Yet myth to Murdoch is the antithesis of the acceptance of life's reality. If Campbell has not merely redefined a word, negating the never-never-land quality of myth, what in the mythic mode can apply to this perilous, sceptical, painful age?

One of the most obvious attraction of the mythic mode is that it is a possible means of preserving the largest dimensions of man's experience. This is clear in Campbell's four functions and in Cassirer's and Eliade's work, but it needs to be stated. Both Joseph Campbell and Iris Murdoch are temperamentally inclined toward monism in this sense: they are profoundly concerned with

the spiritual unity of the human race. But this concern works in concert with a secular belief (sometimes shaky for Murdoch) in the world of individuals as the arena of any spiritual activity. Myth is a way to probe the existence of mystery without wallowing in a mystical realm or subscribing to institutionalized religion's dogma of sin and salvation. And science, while stripping away the theological explanations of the world's being, leaves at last only other mysteries, other unanalyzable systems of energy bursting about us. So Joseph Campbell's creative mythology can be viewed as an alternative effort to embrace the spiritual life and the heroic dimension in the modern age. Myth is "the revelatory factor by which the incidents of the daylight world are linked to that ground which is the ground of all and gives to everything its life" (373). Like Iris Murdoch, he cannot abandon life to empirical scientists, to behavioral psychologists, to philosophers of ordinary language, or to cynical deniers of human worth. Neither can he accept the faiths of Scripture, Reason, Science or History whose members "have as yet no idea of how mysterious, really, is the mystery even of themselves" (609). He has, as Murdoch puts it, some dream of unity too; he at least desires that the human experience not disperse into fragments.

But there are great differences in Campbell's concept of the mythic and Murdoch's concept of the Good. Campbell does not need to postulate a transcendent perfection in order to deal with

man's morality or spiritual life. For Campbell, myth is the mode in our time which can approach our enigmatic existence and still not violate the unpredictable individuality which is the world's character: "However, myth cannot be thought of as fixed, once and for all, dogmatically defined. Rather it is to be rediscovered by the artist's eye, fresh and alive, as the form of this event and that: as a pattern that is no pattern, but in each thing uniquely present as never" (373).

Another aspect of the inclusive nature of myth is its universality or, at least, the durability of its life in time. Campbell's celebration of the unique present should not obscure his belief in the continuity of mythic experience. He rejects the past as dictator of experience but does not reject the body of the world's myths. Because myth has sought to still the moment in an approximation of an ideal, timeless state, and because myth has such power to captivate men's imaginations and beliefs, Campbell must adamantly warn against succumbing to the lure of the past: "And in this life-creative adventure the criterion of achievement will be, as in every one of the tales here reviewed, the courage to let go the past, with its truths, its goals, its dogmas of 'meaning,' and its gifts: to die to the world and to come to birth from within" (678). But this is not Campbell's complete perspective. In his enthusiasm for the revolution in attitudes toward the past and tradition, it is often easy to miss his insistence on the unity of the human race

and the need to use its mythic heritage. In much the same way, Campbell sometimes seems vague about the more specific criteria of myth: if individual experience is primary, could not all literature be mythic? At one point he explains that an artistic achievement will be mythic if the individual's realization has been "of a certain depth and import" (4). While these lapses do occur, as a result partially of the book's size and its excited rather than rational approach, Creative Mythology examines particular works of literature and demonstrates their place in the body of the world's myths. His method is comparative. He begins with the arrested spirit before the universe's mystery, proceeds to examine the vehicles of communication open to the Western artist, and then follows the productions of some of these "towering individuals" (40). The relation between myth-creation today and the world's mythic heritage must be considered.

In his preface to Creative Mythology, Campbell indicates that he does believe in the unity of the race of man -- biologically and spiritually -- in spite of the multitude of differences he himself has gathered. To this point, one of the techniques of his fourth volume is a heady amassing of allusions from the most disparate sources. Nietzsche, Jesus, and Bodhisattva are likely to appear in the same paragraph. Campbell believes in a theory of archetypes. He recognizes and catalogues motifs, images, and symbols which are constants in human experience, but which also appear

continually in changed relationships with distortions, amplifications, and developments appropriate to the men and the times. The mythic achievements in our time (his examples are James Joyce and Thomas Mann) necessarily make use of the mythic past. The imagination is unifying, and the artist a man capable of recognizing and creating in his work correspondences between his individual age and the mythological figures and events of the past. Campbell uses Schopenhauer's image of anamorphoses (pictures which appear broken to the naked eye but which show recognizable forms when reflected in a conic mirror) for the artist's ability to give form to disconnected experience. Myth is comprehensive; it is inclusive, not exclusive. What Campbell insists upon is that the past must not stifle the present; it must be evocative, not coercive. In fact, Campbell interprets our age's famous Wasteland as a result of the attempt to live by a mythology which no longer corresponds to experience (388). The fount of creation is the individual's singular experience here and now; then this may be added the time and space depth of other mythologies. Tradition is important, but

it has nothing to do with creative life and less than nothing with what I am here calling creative myth, which springs from the unpredictable, unprecedented experience-in-illumination of an object by a subject, and the labor, then, of achieving communication of the effect. It is in this second, altogether secondary, technical phase of creative art, communication, that the general treasury, the dictionary, so to say, of the world's infinitely rich heritage of symbols, images, myth motives, and hero deeds,

may be called upon -- either consciously, as by Joyce and Mann, or unconsciously, as in dream -- to render the message. (40)

This is a very extreme statement, not the least in the suggestion that communication is a secondary phase of art. I feel that Campbell did not seriously examine here the words which his zeal led him to use, for later he softens this view. Elsewhere he is perfectly aware that old forms excite the imagination to produce new forms. It is not as though the artist can shut out the memory of inherited forms. But Campbell is correct to insist that the past should not be the arbiter of experience:

The norms of myth, understood in the way rather of the "elementary idea" (Marga) than of the "ethnic" (desi), recognized, as in the Domitilla Ceiling through an intelligent "making use" not of one mythology only but of all of the dead and set-fast symbologies of the past, will enable the individual to anticipate and activate in himself the centers of his own creative imagination, out of which his own myth and life-building "yes because" may then unfold. (677)

These aspects of myth -- its wide scope and its ability to create characters and situations which are elementary -- joined with those culled from Cassirer and others are all part of myth's appeal for the modern man. But myth must undergo a radical redefinition in order to accommodate a changed consciousness. There are new qualities which Campbell deems mythic; the spiritual has a new environment, "the root and seed potentials, structuring laws and forces, interior to the earthly being that is man" (326).

In fact Campbell suggests that rather than reason, theology or literary criticism, the most promising approach to myth studies may be biological psychology. Out of his description of the new mythology I think two new qualities can be distilled: 1) the individual embodiment of mystery is a value in itself (not participation in an archetype) and 2) the process of myth is the process of creation and is in turn its meaning (and this again through individuals). Since the mystery of existence is first known by us through particulars, these must be eminently valuable. No longer reflecting definition from a transcendent concept or a cosmological scheme or a Golden Age, the individual radiates his own worth. As a corollary of the painful knowledge of individuation, man accepts himself as miracle. Worth "is not in transcendence, 'out there,' beyond thought, beyond personality, but here in this life, in its immanence, in the faces, personalities, loves and lives all around us, in our friends, our enemies, and ourselves" (578). Murdoch can sound the same note when she urges us to give attention to individuals. And yet, as a guide to moral action and an insurance that we truly recognize value, she abstracts from these particulars a transcendent Good. Of course Campbell does this also -- he talks of beauty and "the radiance of divinity" as outside guides, but he does not elevate these to an abstract realm from which they exercise authority. He leaves the judgments of good ultimately within the individual heart -- where they have much less chance

of being influenced by an external criterion which is falsified by its static nature.

Perhaps, then, Campbell is merely more optimistic about human nature than Murdoch. Nowhere does he baldly state that men are intrinsically low characters. In its fervor and its lush rhetoric, Campbell's book is a more joyful celebration of life than Murdoch's more restrained, cool appraisals. But this is not the telling distinction, for Joseph Campbell is hardly naive. His injunction to man to love all does not skirt Murdoch's hard "knowledge of reality": "[we] should view with equal eye and loving heart both the noble and the base, the wicked and the just . . . However, if we may be honest here for a moment . . . this transmutation [accomplished by loving all], to be realized, must include all those whom we fear and hate, as well as those whom we merely despise: the monsters, sadists, beasts, and degenerates of our kind" (331).

In general Campbell does have a firmer trust than Murdoch in man's ability to build more life than he destroys. Campbell understands that a belief in the individual as a source of value does not insulate man from man. The principle of individuation entails a respect for the intrinsic significance of each man's experience. Judgments concerning conflicts between one man's experience and another's will always be necessary, usually ambiguous, often painful. Murdoch's transcendent Good cannot arm man to avoid such confrontations. But an active belief in a man's worth as an

individual must be extended to all others. This is easy to write and hard to live. Such a maxim is not a facile key to any moral dilemma. But it is a start, and something of the sort must inform the lives of those good men who (even if few and far between) Murdoch admits do exist. Relying on inner sources and experiences is not equivalent to selfishness. Nowhere in Creative Mythology does Campbell suggest that man moves in a moral vacuum free from the claims of other individuals or of society. Of Parsival's attainment of the Grail ("the symbol of supreme spiritual value"), he says:

It is attained, however, not by renouncing the world or even current social custom, but, on the contrary, by participating with every ounce of one's force in the century's order of life in the way or ways dictated by one's own uncorrupted heart. (564)

With Murdoch's obviously deep-felt belief in the significance of the individual life, she does not escape a moral prescriptiveness which Campbell lacks. A moralizing tone, never sounded in Creative Mythology, reverberates in her essays. As forcefully as she defends the radical particularity of each life, as much as she tries to purge the Good of any theological imperatives, she constantly exercises her conviction that man ought to be better than he is. Her reluctance to let man fall back on himself even after the "death of the gods" is related to this. Murdoch has said that it is significant to ask of a philosopher, "What does he fear?"; her own moral philosophy demonstrates her hesitancy to let go of

abstract moral guides and to "fall" completely into the world of men equally capable of murder and of love. She still creates a spirituality existing, pure and motionless, outside the knowable world. Joseph Campbell identifies the spirit with the person. That is the possible mythic realm today. But far from assuming that man now is of mythic proportion, she sees him as usually capable only of producing the "small myths" which shield him from chance. Murdoch, to be fully consistent to her important, difficult vision of life -- a risky, explosive, undirected world full of real, impenetrable, unique, valuable people -- can take one more step and allow man, for better or worse, to celebrate his own mystery.

This celebration is accomplished through art; about this Joseph Campbell is clear enough. Myth is an aesthetic product, and the artists will be the giants of this age, the creators and purveyors of the myths which can connect men's centers of consciousness -- not through information or reason, but through a spiritual message passed to the brain by way of the heart. The artist is the anamorphoscope which unites the fragments of existence in concrete forms. Because he lives in imagination, the artist is the man today who can most readily approach participation in the mythical realm. The community, no longer enclosed nor a sanctuary of shared experience, cannot be a mythogenetic zone. Nor can the priesthood or science. Individual artists remain.

What Campbell does not emphasize sufficiently is the identity of

the creative process and the mythical way of life he proposes -- an understanding implicit on every page of Creative Mythology but never quite articulated completely. He does not say that the life of "adventure" held out to any who wish to set out is necessarily aesthetic. This has more than one dimension.

It is not only that life's power must be particularized. This important aspect of myth has already been mentioned. Ancient man lived in intimate contact with the spirit. Today again power or energy is the substance of life. The mysterious dynamo of the atom is the building block of the most solid skyscraper. And art is the making solid of the mysterious. But in this age when it has become increasingly clear that time cannot be stilled, that there is no other ideal sphere through which the world's movement can be controlled, that there is no authority whose dictates explain and ease the horrors of this life, the mythic realm can be nothing other than the realm of creation itself: the neverending renewal of life, the pulse of disintegration and rebirth, the mystery of mysteries, the imagination. One of the divisions used to classify ancient mythologies is the "creation myth." Today that is not a separable class, but the whole of mythology. Art, man's supreme creative achievement, reproduces the creative process of life. The imagination is myth's realm of transformation never stilled.

Such a mythology will not necessarily provide creeds to live by; it will not necessarily offer comfort. Its forms are "a pattern

that is no pattern, but in each thing uniquely present as never before." Its forms "come to birth from within" and are not, as Murdoch fears, imposed from the outside. The myths of the past, a living part of the artist's consciousness, are transformed in the creative heat of the immediate. For Joseph Campbell myth deals with what is -- an "is" never fixed, but in process. Mythic form, far from being an enclosure or inhibitor of experience, fosters more life. Murdoch's criteria for the novel's form, then, are not opposed by myth.¹⁹ The essence of both is change; myth is not a "crystalline" form but an organic one. A myth unfolds as from a seed and grows. Moreover, the aesthetic elements of myths cannot be reduced to the label "fantastic," for this suggests that myths distort life's realities. Such a notion ignores a number of myths whose enduring quality has been not the fantastic but the intricate, undecipherable qualities of human experience. Not Zeus' amorous adventures but Medea's awful blood-letting. Not Perseus' birth from a shower of gold, but the grisly stories in The Golden Bough. These examples are horrible, but the point is that myth does not ignore the more terrible aspects of life; neither is its rendering of them artistically inferior.

If anything is apparent in myth studies it is the high seriousness and artistic value of the myths of most peoples. G.S. Kirk, attempting to articulate the differences between myths and folktales, provides a revealing list of characteristics for myths: specificity

of characters and family relationships, complicated action, unpredictable reactions of individuals, free-ranging and paradoxical imagination (as opposed to the "neat logic" of folktales) which can produce drastic changes in the action, seriousness, often divine or semi-divine characters or culture heroes, a setting in the timeless past.²⁰ The emphasis on thoroughly realized characters and on unpredictable, complicated experience prevents myth from being too easily categorized as fantastic and consoling. Drastic changes in action are, in fact, one of Murdoch's special techniques and meanings. If myths can no longer be set in the timeless past in order to tame the dangerous present, the complete mythical mode is not invalidated. Further, Iris Murdoch's imagination is much committed to the means by which men experience the adumbrations between the waking world and that dark expanse of mystery which wells up in all times, all places, all peoples. Myth is not simply self-satisfied fantasy nor is it necessarily true that the individual, filled with his own importance, will be a fount of selfish energy producing just this sort of art.

The discussion of Joseph Campbell's Creative Mythology reveals an alternate view: recognizing individuation as the world's character unleashes the powers of the individual to an end which is the fostering of more individuated life. Modern myth is transformation without end; its forms are those of life; it reaches into the past but stands squarely in the present. This delineation of the means and meanings

of myth has prepared the way for an examination of Iris Murdoch's work where the specific form of a mythic imagination may be traced.

NOTES

1. "Mass, Might, and Myth," The Spectator, 7 September 1962, p. 338.
2. G. S. Kirk, Myth: Its Meanings and Functions in Ancient and Other Cultures (Berkeley, 1970), p. 8.
3. The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, II (New Haven, Connecticut, 1955), p. 23.
4. The Next Development in Man, p. 199.
5. Cassirer, II, p. 1.
6. Crowds and Power, trans. Carol Stewart (New York, 1962), p. 374.
7. Cassirer, II, p. 55.
8. Ibid., p. 110.
9. Ibid., p. 104.
10. Ibid., p. 106.
11. Ibid., p. 105.
12. Cosmos and History, trans. Willard R. Trask, rev. ed. (New York, 1959), p. 35.
13. Ibid., p. 155.
14. Kirk, p. 258.
15. Canetti, p. 382.
16. Eliade, p. 56.
17. Campbell, II, p. 519.

18. Campbell, IV, p. 6. Subsequent references to this volume in this chapter will be given in parentheses following the quotation.

19. It is also evident that Iris Murdoch has uppermost in her mind the classical Greek myths which have come to us in quite sophisticated versions and which, in comparison with more ancient myths of other peoples, do evidence a more civilized, rational, human-centered world.

20. Kirk, pp. 39-40.

CHAPTER IV

THE FLIGHT FROM THE ENCHANTER

The Flight from the Enchanter is a novel which immediately suggests to any reader mythic elements -- there is a magazine called The Artemis, an opening allusion to the Minotaur, a dark god figure, and two terrible demons -- but finally this novel's form is not that of mythic life. In its scope, its emphasis on individual character, its uncompromising presentation of the spirit's turbulent power, and its use of ancient myths, The Flight from the Enchanter is a fine introduction to Murdoch's involvement in the mythic mode. However, that involvement is "enchantment": the characters' destructive tendencies to submit to a binding spell rather than encounter the pain and pleasure of freedom. As Murdoch has herself said, the novel's form is, ultimately, "closed-up and obsessional."¹

Previous critical work on this novel has emphasized the illusory nature of the enchantment; James Gordin and Bernard Dick point out that the trance-spells are mostly self-imposed.² And while this is partially true, such an attitude obscures this important aspect of the novel: the power and mystery which draw the characters

are neither illusory nor escapable. Therefore, rather than fleeing from the mythic power, the individuals in the novel must learn to meet, to use, and to move with life's energy. Neither Iris Murdoch nor any of her characters is able to accomplish this.

The novel's form is a dichotomy which sets civilization-reason-light against nature-emotion-darkness. The life energies which could leap the gap between person and person, between the fixed and the creative, are either restrained by the intellect's rage for order or centered in malevolent personalities. The spirit's powers thus find an outlet only in violence; the release of energy prompts no growth of life and the novel ends as it began.

The alternating rather than spiraling form is also evident in the novel's mixture of social realism and fantasy, in the static nature of certain images, in the use of mythical allusions as anchors rather than seeds of meaning, in the reliance on deus-ex-machina escapes, in Murdoch's inability to make her power-figures also solid in-the-world people. Yet this novel is not a failure, and it is not simple. If, finally, its form is not the modern mythic creative present, it clearly recognizes life's complexity and the dangers which lie in attempts to reduce that complexity to a simple pattern. It does focus on the individual life. Its opening chapter with the young girl Annette has a tremendous feeling of full life, even if that promise is unfulfilled. And finally, The Flight from the Enchanter is a comic novel. For all its darkness, there is the

light and life of laughter.

The world of The Flight from the Enchanter is Murdoch's most comprehensive vision of man and society; in scale alone, it is a very ambitious book. Its action touches on politics (the financial relationship between England and America; Mischa Fox's power in Parliament); bureaucracy (SELIB and the Civil Service); social equality (the refugees, the Artemis, Rosa's factory, the rich versus the poor); academics (Peter Saward, the scholar-historian); economics (Mischa's journalism monopoly); personal relationships (lovers, parent-child, siblings, servant-master); time (the past haunting the present, e. g. the memory of Rosa's mother).

While the novel touches upon these broad realms, its most obvious organization, the chapter division, corresponds to the actions of individual characters. There are numerous characters, but six -- Rosa, Annette, Hunter, Rainborough, Peter, and Nina -- are primary; we see the workings of their minds. Of these six, Annette and Rosa receive most space in the novel, for they begin six and seven of the chapters respectively. The action is pretty well distributed over all the other characters, and only twice does the same individual initiate the action in two succeeding chapters. In addition, the novel's thirty chapters are of approximately equal length. All this is only to indicate that The Flight from the Enchanter makes a conscientious attempt to pay "attention" to its many characters.

This novel pointedly avoids the one-character focus and first person narration of Under the Net. The Flight from the Enchanter starts out very literally to prevent a single character from getting a grip on this story and making it "the form of his own mind."³ Whether this results in a more life-like form than does a personal narration remains to be seen.

The Flight from the Enchanter, then, presents its social panorama through the unique personalities which constitute it. Whatever failures of characterization exist, and there are some, Murdoch's people do not degenerate into types. Generally this work does create a "plurality of real people." And the one character, Mischa Fox, who is obviously a hub around which the others revolve, neatly unites in his person the social-economic and spiritual worlds. Mischa is the character in this novel who most boldly approximates the stature of a mythic hero. He has the natural grace and viciousness of an animal, he has a miraculous physiognomy (one blue eye and one brown), he lives and works in mysterious secrecy, he awes and subdues others as a primitive priest might do. He is also an incredibly wealthy, worldly businessman! In this novel mystery is not cloistered; it is active in the everyday world of London business. Further, Mischa activates in the other characters those energies of the spirit of which he seems the center. While he has an aura of moving in a separate world, the characters continually find that their beings are touched by the same formidable

forces within which Mischa so effortlessly dwells. The Flight from the Enchanter's mythic strain, easily located in the character of Mischa Fox, is inseparable from the workings of the modern world and from the individual lives which are the generators of that world.

In these ways, The Flight from the Enchanter possesses some elements of a creative mythology, but the deciding element is missing. A particular examination of form must determine whether or not the imagination has made of these elements a living whole. Is the form a process of continual creative-change whose outcome is growth? It is necessary to begin at the beginning.

The previous review of Murdoch's essays revealed her belief in growth as a property of aesthetic form, and it revealed that this is not a metaphoric description, but a real property. Like any organic being, the novel generates itself from a cell which multiplies and passes through creative and destructive cycles in order to build a changed form of much complexity which yet does not violate its beginnings. The living novel announces its elements and then allows them growth, and, as in nature, the flowerings of the artist's imagination are infinite in variety. A close reading of The Flight from the Enchanter's opening is important in this aspect of a "seed" chapter, for here is the initial impression of the book's life. From this beginning the novel's course reveals what sort of form is generated and, in fact, whether there is a generation at all.

The action and character of Annette begin the novel. She is a girl of some independence and intelligence who is bursting with life; she skips, jumps, and runs everywhere, rocks "tasteful" vases on their pedestals, swings on chandeliers, takes stairs three at a time, and is insatiably curious. She has decided, amid April's spring stirrings, to leave an institution and enter the School of Life. Sedately packing up her books and walking out, Annette exits from the classroom forever: "As Annette pondered, almost with awe, upon the ease with which she had done it, she felt that Ringenhall had taught her its most important lesson."⁴ The lesson, not named, is apparently the ease of freeing oneself from another's rule. Annette has already pondered, in the case of the Minotaur, a related problem of personal freedom versus "accidental" injustice. She has a rather petulant dislike for cruelties of fate which she feels are unjustly delivered on people, and it is obvious that she has some rather muddled idea that such cruelties can be avoided and may simply be a trick of the world's institutions played in order to keep people from doing as they please. And while Annette has a considerable amount of immediate success in her personal liberation, the limitations in her glorious discovery of Ringenhall's most important lesson are everywhere noticeable.

The reader sees, if Annette does not, that her solipsistic fix distorts her situation. To her, even the rooms of the school appear changed after her decision to leave. The library begins to look

as if it is in a "sacked city," and she feels that no one will ever again enter it (9). Also Annette soon discovers that there are a few obstacles to perfect freedom. Her irreverent desire to swing on the chandelier is accomplished (she even hears, as she expected, a noise like a "mixture of sound and light"), but she is unable to make a "flying leap" to the chandelier, as she has imagined. It turns out to be "not a very practical idea," and she instead climbs onto a chair. In addition, Annette prefers to picture her personal initiative in terms of an enchantment; she feels under "a delicious spell" (10). This notion of a spell or power which relieves one of personal responsibility is, of course, fundamental to the novel's meaning.

So far it is evident that the novel creates a conflict between the unrestrained energies of life and the controlling rules of an institution, and between the individual's powers of self-creation and the world's contingencies. Besides these divisions in the character of the world, the opening image of the novel puts a cleavage directly in man himself. The Minotaur is half man, half bull, a monster who exhibits how the dark greed of Minos stained the beauty and purity of his wife. The precarious balance of the civilized "light" world upon the edges of a darker world is thus illustrated. Annette doesn't like Dante's treatment of the Minotaur for she feels he is unjustly punished. But there is another passage which indicates that Annette is also a bit fearful of her own dark

resources. She has developed a technique of dropping into a "coma of stupidity" to irritate her teachers and avoid responding in class. However, she discovers that she can make herself fall asleep this way -- eyes still opened -- and "this frightened her very much indeed" (9). Annette perhaps expects that her lessons in the School of Life can exclude the tortures of a grotesque half-breed such as the Minotaur.

Thus Murdoch establishes in this chapter obvious dichotomies. She uses action and images to oppose Annette's zest to the dreary conformity of Ringenhall as well as to oppose the individual's energetic power to the world's frustrating demands. These oppositions are not resolved, but the weight of Murdoch's values are clearly on the side of her zestful character. She presents Annette's vitality with an art which is brisk, comic, and visual. Murdoch's intelligence does clearly shape -- through her realistic technique, her distance in point of view, and her controlled prose -- the solidity of the obstacles to Annette's casual rebellion. But Murdoch's humorous vision and her obvious delight in youth's brashness serve to make Annette's portrait a sympathetic one. Annette does, in this first chapter, have a triumph over the institution's restraining force.

It isn't a clear triumph, as we have seen (Miss Walpole catches Annette with a stolen book), and neither is the character of Annette a clear vessel of the life force. Though her swing on the chandelier

gives a tremendous promise of life, at the same time her very youthfulness vitiates the promise because of her distinct qualities of childish selfishness and ignorance. A child as a focus of a novel has a certain limitation: the dichotomies under this condition cannot be resolved. The weight of the art is on the side of the individual's energies, and yet there is no indication of the ways in which the real treacheries of life will be met and transcended. The form reveals not a unitary process, but a see-sawing of conflicts.

And while the novel is not solely about Annette, and while other more mature characters have a greater potentiality for growing amid life's threats, this seed chapter sets the novel's continuing form. The issue is not whether Annette will be stifled by the world's institutions, whether energy will be killed. Instead it is how Annette will negotiate her new adventure in education, how she will shape her power. Explosive energy is a given in this novel's life; that energy resists almost all attempts by individuals or institutions to deaden it. But that energy lacks the imaginative means to channel itself and become a creative rather than a destructive force. Annette's father puts the dilemma very well: will Annette grow through the School of Life or "one day . . . just explode into little pieces?" (14).

In order to ward off any explosion, most of the characters in the novel have fitted themselves into the order of enchantment; they allow themselves to be mesmerized in the face of the world's

difficulties. This pattern is not only, in Murdoch's terms, immoral (it attempts to falsify life's complex demands), but it doesn't work. And while these are the charges which she levels against myth, it will become clear that in this novel the value of myth and mythic heroes is not so simply rejected.

The particular enchantments are numerous and have been thoroughly compiled before: Rosa (the victim)/ Mischa (the enchanter); and in like manner, Rosa/the Poles, Rainborough/ Miss Casement, Annette/ Mischa, Nina/ Mischa, Hunter/ Calvin and Stefan, the refugees/ the line. There are probably others. Several critics feel that a prime thing to recognize about The Flight from the Enchanter is that the characters themselves create the enchantment. Nina is not "really" enchanted. Rosa is not "really" under a spell cast by Jan and Stefan. Certainly this is born out in several instances when it becomes apparent that a character abstractly views his situation as an enchantment in order to feel powerless in the face of a certain course of action. And, too, the mysterious power of Mischa Fox and the sinister machinations of Calvin Bick are shown to be easily foiled by a hilarious group of old women. However, to hold too exclusively to the insight that people are their own enchanters is to ignore part of the book's form as, I think, Howard German egregiously does when he says:

It is this preoccupation with individual illusion in the novel that provides the essential justification

for the wealth of material drawn from fairy tale and myth -- universally recognized expressions of man's yearning for a dream world.⁵

What this attitude misses is that the power and magic in the novel are only too real; Mischa Fox, Calvin Blick, the Lusiewicz's, the Olympians, and Annette's mermaid charm are not mere metaphors. Part of the problem comes from a confusion of the powerful enchanters with the characters' general rages for order. The failures of the orders they impose and the break-up of the enchantments are, of course, the same process; but it is not a necessary conclusion that, e.g., Mischa Fox's power is illusory. The first process is well described by James Gindin:

Each novel gives a symbolic identity to the characters' desire to manufacture form and direction out of their disparate existence. And, in each novel, this attempt, on the part of the characters, to manufacture form and direction is unsuccessful, the general structure suggested by the title cannot meaningfully operate in the fragmented, relative world.⁶

This is so, but it does not explain away The Flight from the Enchanter's use of mythic material. But it will be easier to begin with the rage for order of which enchantment is a part and then to show the reality of the powerful forces the characters futilely try to tame.

In The Flight from the Enchanter almost all the characters attempt to confine in false patterns their vital participation in the mysterious, creative, and mythic center of life. They attempt to order their experience so that all is accounted for and growth is

stilled. The forms of their lives cease to be organic and become static. In the same way, they are ruled by a scrupulous attempt not to touch or be touched, yet they are always impulsively doing the opposite. Rainborough perhaps tries harder than anyone for a settled, regulated life. His attachments are to an ancestral home and garden and to a traditional bureaucracy. Even SELIB displeases him because it has disorderly files and a "mysterious" system of promotion. He recalls with longing his position in the Civil Service not only because of its orderliness, but because there "ancient values and hallowed modes of procedure reduced to a minimum the naked conflict of personalities" (94). Rainborough wants neither contact nor action. He has convinced himself that fearless self-analysis is equivalent to virtue; he has not the ambition to change. And because Rainborough's actions are rarely self-initiated, he structures his life as if he were someone else looking in and judging. His curious relationship with Mischa Fox is a good example. Obviously Rainborough does not even like Mischa but is flattered that he is thought of as Mischa's close friend. Thus he is so worried that this reputation might falter that he will burden himself both with the friendship and the constant fear that it will end.

Rainborough finds that he cannot forestall "naked conflict"; he cannot, as he so desires, "combine the joys of contemplation and possession" (136). People are the problem. Even when Rainborough

comes to the sudden realization of the unfathomable diversity of the world -- "Then he felt, how little I know, and how little it is possible to know; and with this thought he experienced a moment of joy" -- he is looking at ants, snails, and flowers. Annette appears, and he loses his wisdom. As the vision fades with her interfering visit, the ants seem "very tiny and very remote" (132).

Rosa too has tried not to let "other human beings . . . come too near" (48). So she maintains her potentially explosive relationship with the Lusiewicz brothers by picturing herself in a fairy tale. This is Murdoch's most transparent instance of the simple tale which falsifies life. Rosa sees herself as a princess freeing a prince imprisoned in the form of a beast. And while this analogy holds, Rosa is happy. But the metamorphosis at the center of the fairy tale cannot be controlled. Rosa wishes that she could have back some moments in the metamorphosis, but the change must take its course (54). As the brothers change, they move themselves out of the fairy tale and into a flesh and blood world in which they seduce Rosa. Here Rosa feels no power. She is most content with stories. When the brothers cannot pinpoint their village on a map, she is content with the image called up in their tales. Here the places are "very remote yet crystal clear, like a vision procured in a fairy-tale," and Rosa "never wished to ask herself whether it was true" (69-70).

Rosa's involvement with the brothers is not the only instance of

her search for order. She works in a factory in an attempt to put herself outside other work which had become "something nauseating and contaminated, stained by surreptitious ambitions, frustrated wishes, and the competition and opinions of other people" (47).

While in the factory Rosa tries to make sense of her boring, meaningless task by personifying her machine as "Kitty" and attempting, fruitlessly, to find her face. Moreover, she tries to find an embracing sound-pattern for the whole factory:

An alternative way of distracting herself from Kitty's well-known diction was to try to listen instead to the din which the whole factory was making and try to understand its rhythm. But out of this deafening chaos of sounds Rosa was never able to draw any harmonious or repetitive pattern, although she felt sure that it was there, and that if only she could remember long enough and listen in the right way she would find out what it was. But it never emerged, and the only result of this entertainment was that she began to make mistakes with Kitty. (44)

Even though Rosa tells herself she is resigned to a life of "interludes," she has a nostalgia for grand designs (47).

Peter Saward has a foot in both worlds, the open and the closed. He, in fact, seems to be in process, for with his project of deciphering a script he is moving away from his historical studies. He has embarked on an enterprise which suggested itself to him by two "accidents," he proceeds on the basis of intuition, and he persists even with the evidence of others' folly: history doesn't help. However, his task is the attempt to make a whole out of fragments, and the quality of the life in which he pursues his puzzles is strangely

regulated and remote from the outside world. His day is artificially divided into four sections, and from this routine he does not deviate. He is deeply susceptible to Rosa, but he even reserves a dull task (cutting book pages) to fill the agitated time before her visits. Not a moment is wasted.

There are other instances of this sort of structuring, not the least in the enchanters themselves, but that is reserved for later. What each of these instances finally reveals is that the passion and chaos of life cannot be neatly tied up. Perhaps the single, most pregnant image for this is Rosa's beautiful, thick, extraordinarily long black hair: it continually frees itself from confining pins and flows down her body. Not one of the characters, no matter how isolated or regulated, can escape the very adventure which Annette sets forth upon with such an excess of enthusiasm. Life's surprises keep scattering the regulations. Rainborough's comfortable garden is usurped by the state. His bureaucratic security comes to an end. Rosa's dull work in the factory precipitates an episode of terror. And the personal walls are crumbled as surely as Rainborough's garden wall. Annette, who will stroke Rosa's hair because "it [is] not quite like touching," eventually attacks her "like a young tiger" (67, 212). And Rosa, who never wanted others to come too near, pins Annette to the floor with "a profound satisfaction of anger and hatred" (212). Rainborough, who thinks courtly love the best

possible sexual relationship, suddenly finds himself with his hand inside Annette's blouse. Hunter Keepe, Rosa's brother, "an animal whose protection was not teeth but flight and camouflage," physically attacks Calvin Blick "with a cry like an animal" (251, 175).

Indeed none of the characters, whatever their subterfuges, are able to eliminate life's unpredictable encounters. When this aspect of life is avoided, as it is by Rosa and by Rainborough, its appearance is correspondingly violent. The Flight from the Enchanter shows that contact with the world cannot be prevented, and if a person continually shrinks from that life, it will burst into his world with a power which is often destructive. Part of this novel's form is a continual restraint of energy which subsequently breaks out with extreme violence. The Flight from the Enchanter, then, is about not only the process of freeing oneself from false servility, but about the process of coming to terms with the mysterious life forces erupting unforeseeably in each individual. What the form reveals is that flight is not the answer at all. It is the dilemma. Seen in this way, the spell becomes a safe system from which the entrapped spirit can declare, "I have no power to change myself or others or the world." Rosa and the rest cannot flee; they must meet the energy head-on and rely on their own strengths.

The violent outbursts in this novel demonstrate that forces capable of enchanting -- or liberating -- are only too real. In

an interview with W. K. Rose, Murdoch makes quite clear that people not only play the roles of demons for others but are demons. Such force is not solely malevolent; it is a matter of energy: "I think. . . that there is a great deal of spare energy racing around which very often suddenly focuses a situation and makes a person play a commanding role."⁷ She further states that the people themselves possess this energy and generate the situations. In The Flight from the Enchanter this spare energy races around in almost everyone, not only in Mischa Fox and the more obvious enchanters. And while it is quite true that some of the characters are almost eager to submit to the power of others rather than make choices in their lives, it is not true that the magnetic powers of those enchanters are illusory. The Poles do have a special magnetism which draws others to them, and their actions show them to be devils, not simply "devil-images" for others. In the same way, Annette's parents, nicknamed "the Olympians," do in fact exercise authority from the heights. And Annette, from one-view-point a silly spoiled brat, does seem to lead a charmed life, "the female equivalent of Pan" who is eternally innocent and eternally unscarred (144).

The bewilderment experienced by many readers of this book seems to me to be caused by the double weight placed on the title's enchanters. A close examination of Mischa Fox and the Lusiewicz

brothers reveals both their life-giving and death-dealing aspects and reveals yet another instance of the novel's unresolved dichotomous form.

Mischa Fox has been described as "the hollow center of the novel," and there is good reason for this judgement.⁸ The contradictions in the aesthetic conception of this character and hence in his personality are confusing and do seem to cancel each other. Mischa's power is felt both as invigorating and dangerous, and since these two aspects remain in conflict, Mischa's characterization is incomplete. On the side of life, Mischa is a compelling personality. He elicits great love effortlessly. He has the extraordinary physical grace of an animal. He solves muddled predicaments swiftly and efficiently. And he "makes people mad" (222). This facet of Mischa is the strongest endorsement of his value: he creates disruptions which send others head-on into life. In the process of this novel, such power is certainly not to be considered malevolent.

On the other hand, all believe in his sinister nature. People fear him because he is capable of anything; particularly he is characterized by a desire to achieve indiscriminate control. Rosa speculates that Mischa wants the Artemis because "the sight of a little independent thing annoys [him]" (36). Yet even this mythological parallel can be seen as another instance of the way Mischa initiates

movement in the world. The Artemis is a periodical floundering because it has not changed; it is trying to be a perpetual virgin, like Artemis and her nymphs, in a world where such constant chasteness is impossible. As Peter Wolfe has pointed out, the ironic reversal of a man, "Hunter," as the editor of the Artemis is a further instance of lifelessness through the inversion of the male and the female.⁹

In the same way that Mischa's power has a split value, his mythical aura is both full and empty. His mythical associations all provide information about him, but they do not become alive in the book's immediate present. When he is linked with Janus, the Minotaur, or an Egyptian god (Howard German suggests Re) these mythical figures serve as signs; they point to the past but do not live in the present.¹⁰ These links do serve to establish Mischa's mysterious aloofness, but finally there is a blank in the apprehension of his character which is unlike the irreducible blankness at the center of a mystical experience.

He does appear remote and untouchable. His manner is grave and the operations of his life elaborate, sophisticated rituals. His aura is more consistently that of an Egyptian god, as Peter Saward suggests, than that of the brutish Minotaur -- although the dark intent of the latter association is obvious. Yet Mischa's mythic stature never becomes believably felt because both his thoughts and his actions are kept hidden. He is a wooden presence, rather than

a feeling and thinking human being. And this mythic vacuum cannot be interpreted as an ironic device used to disparage simple fantasy because the novel's events do ask us to believe that Mischa is, like Janus, an omniscient observer of all beginnings and ending and that he does, like the Minotaur, terribly combine the bestial and the human.

Since in the novel myth's mystery is basic to life, Mischa must exist as a solid person. Only as a real man, with feeling and fallibilities, can a creative mythic figure have life. Mischa does not. His passion for Rosa, for example, is never believable and neither is his distress in Chapter Sixteen's pretentious scene by the sea. There Mischa, apparently under extreme duress, is trying to take strength from the sea's rage. But this is a recognition of Murdoch's intent; it is not a felt response to Mischa's unrest. These are failures in Murdoch's artistry which arise, primarily, from her failure to envision power in its creative aspect. The hints of Mischa's life-giving abilities are overwhelmed by his sinister nature: such great power, in Murdoch's imagination, is obviously more intensely felt as dangerous.

And the danger is power as control. The one scene which provides a look at Mischa's inner life undercuts his participation in the spirit's turbulence by showing that he, too, like his prosaic London friends, hates messiness. Mischa comes to life, laughing, crying, exclaiming, only when he is reminiscing and trying to

reconstruct the past. The life in him is centered in what is already over, and "the pursuit of exactness and completeness was for him a terrible necessity" (224). The medium for this exact reconstruction is the photograph; with it Mischa tries to capture before him, stilled and forever changeless, the world of his childhood. That the attempt is impossible, even in "representational" photography, is apparent because the photographs do not include the particular events of his life (the fair) and because the village itself has changed with time.

While with Peter, Mischa recalls the baby chickens which he won at the village fair, and this remembrance illustrates his difficulty to accept the process of life. This results in a pathological pity which would rather kill animals (and people?) than watch them die from the world's accidents. His mixture of pity and cruelty is "strange" as Peter feels, but underlying it is, again, Mischa's attempt to control life, to take responsibility for wielding life and death. He has a mania for efficient systems, and this is the real horror for both Rosa and Nina: they feel their individuality is being cancelled as they become cogs in Mischa's machine. Rosa has "a sense of being, after all that had passed between them, a pawn in Mischa's game," and Nina is convinced "that she was playing, in the strange economy of Mischa Fox's existence, some quite precise part" (152, 263).

Finally, Mischa's power is indisputably real. He does propel his fearful acquaintances into surprising actions and emotions. He does destroy their insulations. But he does so out of an impulse to control, to exercise power over others, not to draw out their own powers.

If Mischa is a forbidding figure from the sophisticated mythologies of the Far East, the Lusiewicz brothers are his primitive counterparts. They too were born in Eastern Europe (I share Linda Kuehl's and others' disappointment in Murdoch's continual attribution of "dark mystery" to Eastern Europeans or Jews).¹¹ And they too provoke ambivalent feelings. They are attractive and repulsive. First, they are beautiful, intelligent, and charming. They are full of exuberance. They make Rosa laugh in a way which breaks down all the barriers of untouchability which she has erected between herself and others:

Sometimes they would make Rosa laugh so much that the tears would stream down her face; and then suddenly she would find that these tears were not to be checked, and they would flow and flow until she was sobbing to relieve a pain that lay too deep for any ordinary solace. The brothers had opened in her some profound seam of vulnerability and grief. In their presence she was always breathless, as one in a new and beautiful country, full of an inexplicable rapture and never very far from tears. (55)

Rosa's introduction into this emotional country reflects the autochthonous mythic being of the Poles. They are the "savage" sons living in intimate contact with the sensual life; they feel the

springs of their being in the raw cycle of decaying and regenerating organic life. They stand in awe of their earth origins (the old mother) and yet feel no compassion for her decline; that is nature's way and they feel positively infused with power as her cycle drops and causes theirs to rise:

Their mother seemed to fill them with a mixture of tenderness, irritation and savagery. . . . "She is our own earth. . . . One day we burn her up. . . . We kill you! We kill you!" . . . Then the pair of them would begin to dance about the room, shouting things out in Polish, and the old mother would arch herself up on the pillows as if at any moment she might get up and join in the dance. Then quite suddenly the excitement would be over, and the two brothers would sit down one on each side of the bed frame and mop their brows. (51-53)

The most ancient creation myths include the inevitable attack upon the father or mother by their offspring. The new continually destroys the old. After an initial unity, there is constant strife among the elements, but it is part of a process which produces life. The brothers are closest to this elementary conflict, to Rhea, Cronos and Zeus in Greek mythology, to Kumarbi and Anu in Hurrian mythology. Mischa is a later figure in the history of the gods. He has a place in institutionalized mythology, in systems of power. He works more efficiently in the modern world; he is more a part of civilization. But neither Mischa nor the Poles use their intimate contact with life's mysteries in order to serve as the only sorts of gods consonant with life's ongoing complexity -- those gods who use their powers not for conquest but for the

liberation of others' energy.

And Jan and Stefan's appetite for power is not structured by social conventions. Rosa reflects that they are not a product of civilization; they "had come from a place far outside the world of rules and reciprocal concerns and considerations in which Rosa mostly lived," and no matter how deeply she is responsible for her own enchantment, her feeling about the Poles is born out in their actions (257). They are obsessed with working themselves into positions of power and feel any means justify that end. They build an exercise machine so that "we are stronger than anyone else. If one of us is so, we are king. If both of us together, we are emperor" (69). Their individual wants are absolute, and so they are resolutely vindictive when they feel wronged. The story of the schoolmistress emphasizes this extreme cruelty and rigidity. The fairy tale aspects of this story do not make it a simple, consoling fantasy; in fact, this tale finally forces Rosa out of her dream world. The story of "the first woman" is a gruesome piece of realism within the dark trappings of the brothers Grimm. Here everything happens in threes and the maiden wears white -- only she isn't a maiden and in the end she, not a wicked stepmother, is drowned in the well. The story ends not with a self-satisfied neatness, but with a query about life's mysterious inexhaustibility:

"Funny thing too about that well," said Stefan. "Always there were fish in that well. We pull them out with long net, but always come more fish. Where they come from, those fish?" (78)

The story is complex, both in itself and as a revelation of the disjunctions in the brothers' characters. They are a beautiful "pair of young leopards" who marshal their personal attractiveness and abilities only to fulfill an omnivorous hunger for control (49).

This story is a revelation of the openly intuitive, sensual, passionate, and ruthless world of the brothers. Rosa is both fascinated and horrified. The qualities of a more emotionally open world lost to Rosa have life only in two cruel young men who attempt to keep her captive in their triangle.

The pattern bursts for all of them -- Rosa's secret is revealed, Stefan breaks an unspoken rule and visits Rosa at home, the old mother dies, and the brothers turn on each other. The inevitable dispersal of the energy pent up in an intricate, yet fragile structure is the form and meaning of The Flight from the Enchanter. The skillfully wielded power of Mischa and the passionately expressed feelings of the Lusiewicz's are but more intense versions of the life beating furtively in Rosa, Rainborough, Annette, Nina, and Hunter. In the same way that these characters' maintenance of artificial defenses resulted in proportionately violent actions, the novel's total form reflects restraint succeeded by chaos. Chapter Fifteen is the novel's violent center. This half-way mark in the thirty chapters, Mischa's party, is the moment when the bottled up passions of the up-tight characters spill over.

Thrown together in the Minotaur's labyrinthine house, surrounded by tapestries of nature red in tooth and claw, drunk on some "marvelous stuff," inhibitions dissolve (206). It is now that Rainborough succumbs to Miss Casement, Hunter precipitates the killing of the fish, Rosa and Annette grapple. Yet after these moments of sweet, rash action, there is no real change. Following Chapter Fifteen the enchantments become even stronger. Rainborough becomes engaged to Miss Casement whose sinister strength he identifies with Clytemnestra -- for him the struggle seems over. Hunter takes to his bed because he feels he cannot counter the demon, Stefan. Annette is confined in a cast and in a hopeless infatuation. And Rosa finally goes to Mischa.

Rosa's experience is exemplary of the process. When Rosa sees Mischa she cannot control the muscles of her face; she is letting go. Yet what seems like a release (her being "dazzled by the extra light" is an ambiguous support) is not, for Rosa and Mischa meet each other as facets of one personality or as fairy tale characters, not as two individuals (261). Rosa feels looking at Mischa is "like looking into a mirror"; she sees only herself (262). And in her appeal to him, Rosa does not tell the truth. And Mischa draws out her desperate appeal by pretending he can be the woodcutter in a fairy tale who will lead her out of the forest. Rosa is no closer to accepting her own spiritual needs and energies; she actually wants to "sell herself into captivity"(263). We can

see this, but Murdoch reinforces the point in her own voice:

At certain moments [Rosa] was prepared to let go and allow herself to be carried by a stronger force; and if she later demanded of herself an account of these surrenders there was usually a selection of labels ready made to bring the violence of the spirit under some clinical and domestic heading. (257)

The violence of the spirit has been repudiated by Rosa and others, only to erupt with doubled force. Still there is no breaking out of the enchanted circle.

Or out of the labyrinth -- Murdoch's image for the personal prison which Mischa Fox constructs with his selfish power. The original myth of Daedalus' marvelous labyrinth is also apt here in relation to Murdoch's art and this book's process. Daedalus' labyrinth was so complex that even he did not know all its twists and turns. His escape lay through the air -- a very pure image of the imagination's power to transcend the unsolvable complexities of life's maze. Yet the escape, unless it be susceptible to Murdoch's charge that myth is fantastic wish-fulfillment, had a painful price, the loss of Icarus, who did not use his power for flight carefully. Even if this myth lies too close to the romantic for Murdoch's comfort, it is a revelation of her failure. Not invention or imagination puts her characters through the maze, but the device of deus-ex-machina.

The rapidity of the novel's denouement is head-spinning. The characters are still traveling feverishly in closed circuits; their

sudden exits merely shock and confuse. Almost at one blow, Hunter recovers, Nina and Mrs. Wingfield die, Rainborough and Annette leave the country, Peter Saward ends his deciphering of the hieroglyph, and Rosa flees from Mischa a second time.

Rainborough is whisked away by the "celestial" Marcia who trails a fragrance of sandalwood. She is an off-stage goddess who delivers people from each other and who allows no one "to look into her eyes" (309). So when Rainborough gloats in his feeling of pure emptiness, the reader recognizes that emptiness as a vacuity of spirit (280).

Annette's escapes -- from the labyrinth, from her cast, from heartbreak, from suicide -- likewise are artistic manipulations. Annette's renewed vitality does not affirm life as emphatically as it obviously is intended to do because Annette undergoes no process of growth.

Peter Saward is a mature character who springs back from life's defeats, but his experience is hardly more affirmative than Annette's. While he does not despair that his attempt to make a whole out of fragments has failed -- it is "nothing to be sad about" -- he does not manage to make this "free world" believable (315). As Murdoch explains, he "is not a particularly real character."¹² His open world exists only in a cloistered space.

Rosa has no deus-ex-machina escape; in fact it is difficult to

say exactly what happens to her. Her second flight from Mischa has such an obscure pretext that it has puzzled almost every reader. However, nothing needs to be explained; the confusion is a natural consequence of the see-sawing conflicts and "emotional rationalist" character of the whole novel. Rosa can neither meet the enchanter nor really flee from him. Contrary to Peter Wolfe's assessment that at the end of the novel "[Rosa] has progressed morally," she has not changed.¹³ She is asking Peter to keep her from crying, which was, after all, his task all along. What he diverts her with is Mischa's photograph album, that search for exactness and completeness.

This circular path makes the novel "closed-up and obsessional." Linda Kuehl makes this judgment about "The Flight from the Enchanter's failure:"

Miss Murdoch's Gothic and fairy tale people are designed not to break out of the fantastic into the concrete world beyond but are ordained to remain within her dream-prisons. Were she really interested in dramatizing the flight from enchantment, she would have focused upon the struggle against illusion. Instead, however, it is enchantment itself that fascinates her, and consequently she prefers to entangle rather than to disentangle her characters.¹⁴

Miss Kuehl's reaction is understandable, but it is dubious to contend that Murdoch "prefers" to entangle her characters. Subsequent novels show Murdoch achieving a certain freedom for her characters which she was unable to accomplish here. The

signs of a life-form are strong, for it is not "enchantment" which fascinates Murdoch, but life's mystery. Mythic power is surely a reality, but Murdoch has not quite come to terms with it in The Flight from the Enchanter. Attempting to do so, and failing, Murdoch emphasizes the power's malevolent potential. The simultaneous vital signs in The Flight from the Enchanter are not missing, however. Annette is one -- her youthful recovery, her "fresh, untroubled face" in the penultimate chapter. Annette's final activity is looking not, as is Rosa, at a stilled photograph, but at the landscape seen from a moving train. She turns outside of herself in order to embrace "a house, a dog, a man on a bicycle" (310). She is now "enchanted" with the life around her; she smells, hears, and looks at "the world," eager to meet it rather than to shut it out (310). Life's freshness is appreciated here, even if centered in a silly girl and displayed against a backdrop of Rosa's gloom. Peter Saward is another sign, however weak. Murdoch's comic sense gives an extremely strong pulse of life, especially in old Mrs. Wingfield who rants and raves accurately that no one has any "blood." This novel appreciates the value of the individual, it recognizes the power of the spirit, it demonstrates the dangers of attempting to confine that power. But it does not quite create "the interaction of the mythical with the ordinary stuff of human life"; that is yet to come.

NOTES

1. W. K. Rose, "Iris Murdoch Informally," London Magazine, VIII (June 1968), 69.

2. Gindin, "Images of Illusion in the Work of Iris Murdoch," Texas Studies in Literature and Language, II (Summer 1960), 187; Dick, "The Novels of Iris Murdoch: A Formula for Enchantment," Bucknell Review, XIV (May 1966), 71.

3. Kermode, p. 64.

4. The Flight from the Enchanter (New York, 1956), p. 9. Subsequent page references to this book will be given in parenthesis following the quotation.

5. German, p. 368.

6. Gindin, p. 181.

7. Rose, p. 68.

8. Jacques Souvage, "Theme and Structure in Iris Murdoch's The Flight from the Enchanter," Spiegel Historiae van de Bond von Gentske Germanisten, III (June 1961), 74.

9. Wolfe, p. 86.

10. German, p. 366.

11. Linda Kuehl, "Iris Murdoch: The Novelist as Magician/The Magician as Artist," MFS, XV (Autumn 1969), 356.

12. Rose, p. 69.

13. Wolfe, p. 84.

14. Kuehl, p. 357.

CHAPTER V

THE BELL

The novel following The Flight from the Enchanter is The Sandcastle (1957), a thin domestic dilemma of the love affair between a middle-aged married man and a young, beautiful artist. Here if anywhere Iris Murdoch seems trying to create "the solidity of the normal," and has succeeded in boring almost all her readers with a prosaic "women's novelette."¹ The Bell returns to the fantastic and the mysterious, so that critics connect The Bell with The Flight from the Enchanter and categorize them both loosely as "mythological" novels. Certainly there is a link between them; The Sandcastle seems almost a respite after which Murdoch comes again to the conflicts, dilemmas, and possibilities left unfulfilled in The Flight from the Enchanter's form. But in this case the mythical focus is neither on the orient or ancient Greece but on the mysteries of Christianity. Thus while The Bell also exposes rigid, simplified order to the disruptive powers of complex life, the life-feeling of the novel's form is different. Part of The Flight from the Enchanter's form is the uncloistered nature of spiritual power or energy, but in The Bell that cloistering

is foremost. Most of the demonic, explosive, violent energy exhibited in The Flight from the Enchanter is here subdued, existing in the shadow of spirit institutionalized and purified. This control is reflected as well in the large narrative foci which give The Bell a unity conspicuously lacking in the previous novel. The secluded setting, the myth of the bell, the bell itself, and repetitive events show Murdoch's imagination schematizing to a greater extent.

Yet in spite of these indulgences in "the crystalline," The Bell is probably the most highly praised of her early novels precisely on the grounds that she has admirably succeeded in creating real, impenetrable characters and a feeling of solid life. And this is true. In this novel Iris Murdoch does partially accomplish what she failed to do in The Flight from the Enchanter. The characters are more real, and the form generates some change rather than producing only issueless violence. Instead of breaking in the middle, the novel plunges into darkness and disruption as a necessary prelude to a fuller life in the light. The myth here is not Christianity but Murdoch's own invention of the unchaste nun and the sympathetic bell, a story which describes the power and inevitability of man's sensual, emotional life. Murdoch makes the events of her narrative participate uncannily in the invented, quasi-historic myth, provoking the recognition that The Bell is itself a myth, not merely a novel with mythic elements.

What prevents this novel from making the bold step beyond the static conflicts of The Flight from the Enchanter is best summed up in one of the characters' words. The members of the Imber community are very conscious of their attempt to lead an "intermediary form of life," and this phrase aptly describes the novel's form.² While the physical and spiritual isolation of the characters is exploded as surely as it is in The Flight from the Enchanter, Murdoch has tamed the warring dichotomies in her imagination only by drawing back from her turbulent London and focusing attention on a restricted experience of life.

Imber is an experiment in living in between. It avoids the mess and violence of ordinary society; it shies away from a too austere dedication to the religious life. The outcome of the experiment is consonant with Murdoch's vision of life as constantly infused with an energy of extreme proportions; but by giving her attention to an endeavor to deal with the spirit and with mystery through religion, Murdoch does make a retreat of sorts.³ This is not to say that her distance here is not valuable; The Bell is a much more complex, more full creation of Murdoch's myth than The Flight from the Enchanter. Her imagination does free itself from some of the struggles evident in that novel. But the messy life in London remains and must be returned to, and it is, in A Severed Head.

Before exploring The Bell's opening chapter, it is important to note the enveloping form of the novel. The spatial focus is Imber, a lay community connected by a causeway to an Abbey, but the novel begins outside Imber, in London, with Dora deciding to meet Paul at the religious estate. The novel ends with the community dissolved, Imber Court empty, and its members dispersed to different cities. Even though narratively the estate is central and the city secondary, it is significant that Murdoch begins with an outsider reluctantly moving into the community and closes with that same character returning to the outside world. The situation of value here is evident. Dora's movement and Noel's activity as a member of the press are but two of the clearest indications of the impossibility of sealing oneself off from the rest of the world. Murdoch, as narrator, begins outside, moves inside, and prepares for another move at the novel's end.

To begin, then, with Dora and the initial chapter. Dora has an obvious resemblance to Annette, but she is older and, while thoroughly given to spontaneous action, has not Annette's frantic energy. She has felt the impact of the world's contingencies and consequently doesn't run down the streets kicking up her heels. Dora's movement already has another pattern, as the chapter's opening indicates: "Dora Greenfield left her husband because she was afraid of him. She decided six months later to return to

him for the same reason" (3). She exists in a paralysis of vacillating actions upon which "reason" has very little effect. She can turn one decision two ways. The seat episode on the train is another example. There Dora goes through a painstaking inner interrogation as to whether she should offer her seat to an elderly, standing woman. This is the result: "She decided not to give up her seat. She got up and said to the standing lady, 'Do sit down here, please'" (14). Dora is thoroughly nonreflective, undirected, and sensual; and she is a person trying to make a change, to find some way off the see-saw on which she finds herself.

See-sawing or repetition has been the pattern of Dora's life until now. Her energy is abundant, but she seems incapable of managing it, always eager to accept "roles" offered her by others. Consequently her personality has no definition, and when driven to escape an intolerable situation she very naturally recapitulates the past. "She passed the summer drinking and dancing and making love and spending Paul's allowance on multi-coloured skirts and sandals and jazz records" exactly as she had done before (10). Obviously she feels fraudulent: "She lived in an atmosphere of factitious and self-conscious frivolity, picturing herself as an irresponsible Bohemian" (9). The narrative sequence of this chapter evidences the same pendular movement from the present to the past. The Bell begins in the narrative present (the fact of Dora's decision to return

to Paul), gives a retrospective survey of events leading to this decision, and then returns on page ten to the present. The significance and influence of the past is a major part of The Bell and of myth in general, as has been shown. It works in more than one way in this novel, but here the form entails a retreat to the past which is merely an avoidance of change. There are issues and emotions in Dora's life which must be faced before she can move on. This chapter shows that returning to an unchanged past is no solution and is, in fact, impossible except through self-deception.

In addition to these repetitive cycles, the past is in illo tempore, an idea especially repugnant to Dora. She may blindly repeat her own past when unable to initiate change, but she chafes under the past as an authority which regulates her immediate present. Thus she does not share Paul's desire for a child because he is not interested in bringing something new into the world but "[preserves] an ancestral nostalgia for the dignity and ceremonial of kinship" (6). In this light a child would "[invest] her . . . with some more impersonal significance drawn from the past," but Dora is struggling to become a person, not to further efface herself (7). This relationship between present and past is continued throughout The Bell, where it is an obvious issue in a strict religious community trying to separate itself from the modern world.

Underlying these large forms is the concrete situation in which Dora finds herself and which does propel her into action, even if non-productive. At last it is Paul's compulsion to control which begins Dora's process of self-creation. She begins to have identity only in defense. Paul is an art historian whose own home is a museum, and Dora herself feels like a collector's item in Paul's "unique collection of medieval ivories" (4). The apartment is "florid and unchanging," and Dora is too intimidated even to dust (11). As a facet of Paul's impulse to control, he "places" others according to class and role, something Dora is entirely unable to do (6). After their marriage he sets about making Dora his wife -- he cuts her off from her old friends, makes her give up her taste in clothing, and leaves her empty as he returns to his work. Paul's rigidity has its opposite side. The "demonic intensity" of his passion attracted Dora, but she finds it can easily be turned against her. Paul's virtually split personality -- his reserved medieval scholar side and his "violent and predatory" side -- reflect the demonic characters in The Flight from the Enchanter, although in a minor key (7-8). Paul is an apparent victim of an inability to reconcile his passions and his intellect (which is drawn toward the unchanging past) and is thus subject to a paralysis different from Dora's: he "oscillated between brutality and sentimentality" (8).

Dora has too much vitality to submit to his extinguishing; the extremity of Paul's predatory side forces that vitality to act.

Besides her first reflexive movements to return to the past, she begins not to tell Paul everything. Here is another important movement in The Bell -- the attempt to conceal oneself from others. That attempt is continually doomed as Dora promptly finds (she has no talent for deception). She must begin to see herself as a very solid individual, not as a shadow; her progress is first revealed in the communions with her mirror where she indeed sees herself as real and attractive (12, 44). If, like Annette, Dora is indulging in solipsism, it seems necessary for a person so drained of personality. The passage from self-concern to awareness of others is not accomplished all at once for Dora (or for anyone), but her first shock of this sort is the realization that "Paul had actually existed during the months of their separation" (19).

The process of this novel will show life's energy rebelling against rigid authority, spending itself in a celebration of sensual movement, and then returning, strengthened and purposeful, to be in the world with its own authority. In the first chapter Dora begins, but does not complete, the process; her undirected energy still thrashes about within a paralysis she cannot quite destroy. That paralysis partakes of both time (repetitive cycles) and conflicting aspects of her personality (hedonist or dutiful wife).⁹ However, Dora's qualifications for effecting her transformation are clearly figured. She has an immense joie de vivre and, importantly, is

loose enough to allow the unexpected to break into her life. Dora's capture of the Red Admiral butterfly demonstrates her capacity for responding immediately and totally to a thing of beauty: "Every other thought left her head" (20). She finds herself scooping it up in her hands even though she feels "They would think her silly. It was out of the question" (20).

Set against this open spirit is her destination, Imber, where a group of people live conspicuously by principle and rule. Dora's solipsism, her indecisiveness, her thoughtless spontaneity, her abhorrence of rule are traveling into a community whose religious basis makes it a bulwark against just the messiness in which Dora delightedly indulges. Her encounter on the train with James and Toby is indicative of what will come. Just as Dora very naturally touches Toby, disturbs him, and manages to subvert the serious advice being delivered by James Tayper Pace, she affects the stultified spiritual ambience of Imber. The force abundant in Dora and inchoate in all the characters which must disrupt the unrealistic, unlikelike religious structure of Imber is given us succinctly at the chapter's end. She has forgotten about her captive butterfly:

She opened her hands now, holding the wrists together and opening the palms like a flower. The brilliantly coloured butterfly emerged. It circled round them for a moment and then fluttered across the sunlit platform and flew away into the distance. There was a moment's surprised silence.

"You are full of novelties," said Paul. (23)

Dora is full of novelty, and the new has its effect on Imber.

Michael and Dora are the two main characters in The Bell, but I shall deal mainly with Dora because the novel's process is more thoroughly dependent on her actions, and, as she says, she "has survived" at the book's close (342). Her inauspicious entry into the community is to be expected, for the situation is thoroughly inimical to everything she has felt and been in her life. Religion is foreign to her, and the community's austerity and piety merely irritate. She immediately breaks a rule by not covering her head during a service and is unable to extinguish her bodily discomfort (her clothes and her shoes are too tight) through concentration on a matter of spirit (33). She flees, she loses a shoe, she inspires a rivalry between two men. However, before following Dora's progress, there are other narrative elements to be observed: the physical setting, the images of the lake and the wall, the importance of secrecy, the repetition of history, and the myth of the bell itself.

The setting contributes several effects to the story. Because the characters are set down in an isolated, "other-worldly" place, a mythological tone is pervasive even though the novel has few connections with Greek or oriental myth. This is reinforced by the point of view, the remoteness of Murdoch's narration. Complementing this pristine situation is the neat spatial arrangement of the buildings.

There is beautiful symmetry in the placement of the Abbey, Imber, and the Lodge and in their distance from towns and cities. Imber has been established as a "useful parasite, a buffer"; its members are those unfortunate people "who can live neither in the world nor out of it" (84). Thus Imber is connected by a causeway with the Abbey, a closed order of Benedictine nuns. Across the lake in another direction is the Lodge, situated at the gateway to the main road and reached, from Imber, usually by boat. Here lives Nick, whose demonic qualities are sufficiently obvious, and of course it is he who actually destroys the bridge between the convent and Imber. He exists only on the fringes of the community, an incorrigible reminder of the sensual life and violence (his associations are whiskey, guns, and a dog). At the same time Nick and his Lodge are fundamental to the Abbess' idea of the community's function; it is she who feels he has a place at Imber. The suggestion that the Lodge is hell, coupled with Nick's entrapment in the sin-guilt-repentance cycle, indicates that the dissolution of the community is accomplished from within. Nick is very much a part of Christianity's structure. The Abbey's special position in the novel's form will be expanded later.

A distinguishing feature of this ordered landscape and the biggest single image for the quality of life at Imber is the wall. Dora's first glimpse of Imber is "an enormous stone wall" which is matched

by the high wall of the Abbey (25). To Dora, of course, the wall is a visual representation of the "imprisoned" nuns (65). As a part of the barrier structure, the commerce between the Abbey's nuns and the Imber brotherhood is conducted through gauze screens and a grille of iron in a room one half of which is on the Imber side and one half "within the enclosure" (66). While this novel explores spiritual energy just as did The Flight from the Enchanter, the controls in The Bell are initially more securely established. The community's members, and the nuns, have been apparently more successful at fixing rules and structures in their lives than were Rainborough or Rosa. Boundaries to experience and personal contact are carefully erected.

Another significant feature of the Imber landscape is the immense lake which sprawls over the grounds and which is spanned by the causeway. A. S. Byatt describes the water as "an image of the mystery, the depths outside the life which goes on in house and market-garden," and certainly this is true.⁴ The lake is important in relation to various members' abilities to swim and with respect to the myth of the bell. The nun who indulged her passionate, sexual nature drowns herself after the bell flies into the lake. The lake is an image for precisely the mysteries of the whole person, his emotions, his body, his sexual being, his capacities for power both good and evil. Thus significantly Catherine can swim but is

afraid of water.

While it is dangerous to assume images are transferable from one novel to another, Murdoch's use of swimming in Under the Net (1954) is similar and indicates one of the ways her imagination has pictured the art of swimming. Jake says, "Both arts [swimming and judo] depend upon one's willingness to surrender a rigid and nervous attachment to the up-right position."⁵ Surely this is Catherine, who cannot slip from the upright, from the domination of head over body (or heart), without destroying her world as she has invented it. On the other hand, Dora can't swim but has no fear of water: the depths are not her enemies but she needs discipline and a method for dealing with them -- exactly her process in the novel. Toby is a natural swimmer (James tells us, however, that Michael is the "lake expert") who passes into another element effortlessly and with delight; Toby, like Annette, accomplishes a great many surprising things as a result of brash innocence, not skillful experience (27). Through Toby Murdoch links the images of the water and the wall; both appear to him as "looking-glasses" through which he crosses over to another realm of experience (154, 188). Toby is young enough not to have erected his own walls and has a fluidity which allows him to participate in mysteries off-limits to others like Catherine and Michael.

In the matter of walls and water-barriers, of patterns and

tensions impossible of being sustained, The Bell is similar to The Flight from the Enchanter. Many of these false structures or dead-locked conflicts have been treated by other writers. The theoretical dispute, for example, between James and Michael has, I feel, been given ample attention.⁶ James, a Christian by the letter of the law, distrusts introspection; Michael feels self-knowledge is primary. Another obvious conflict, the struggle between religious and profane love, is one focus of Stephen Wall's article, "The Bell in The Bell."⁷ But while the conflict in The Flight from the Enchanter usually took the form of an attempt to ignore the power of life's energy, in The Bell conflicts often arise as a result of an attempt to allow energy only one particular outlet. The Bell explodes this narrowness and exhibits the value of full and diverse life.

A small but telling example is the brotherhood's controversy about the use of modern technology and a return to hand crafts. Science's gifts to mankind are not to be refused out of fear that science's method will undermine our humanity. Becoming merchandized is greatly to be feared, but using mechanics is not. As Michael says, the community "should do [its work] to God's glory, as well as the fruitful discoveries of the age [will] allow" (95). Thus, significantly after a discussion of the beauties of a natural bird call as opposed to an imitation, Michael and Toby stand breathless

at the "beauty" of four jets which fly overhead in formation and "[peel] off like a flower" (137). This is a community dedicated to the life of the spirit, but The Bell, as a modern myth, cannot narrowly confine the domain of the spirit. Hence Murdoch uses "electricity" as a metaphor for the spirit (118, 126, 131).

Also of particular emphasis within the wall structures are the dangers of concealment. Most of the truly disruptive actions are precipitated by the characters' frustrated attempts to keep secrets from each other and from themselves. While in The Flight from the Enchanter the characters tried mainly to keep order and regularity in their lives, Imber as a literal retreat from confusing modern life must be less exposed in order to reduce vulnerability. Imber hides within its walls and the characters hide from each other. There are several instances of a sort of eaves-dropping, the accidental watching of others from a concealed position. Toby outside the kitchen, Mrs. Mark outside her husband's office window, Dora outside the drawing room and Nick's window. There are Catherine's secret about Michael, Michael's secret about Nick and Toby, Toby's secrets of Michael and the bell, Dora's secret "rites," Nick's secret of the sabotaged bridge. And the only result of such fearful privacy is either death-like isolation or hysterical outburst. Once again an extreme swings only to another extreme. Certainly the novel's complexity does not encourage, as James

seems to, "telling everybody everything, whether it concerned them or not, and regardless of whether they wanted to know" (92). This is too much like the dangerous pass to which Nick is brought as a result of adopting a perpetual mask: "There are moments . . . when one wants to tell the truth, when one wants to shout it around, however much damage it does" (285-286). Damage is done in other ways. Concealment in Catherine's sensitive temperament results in insanity. Toby's concealment fosters a guilt which Nick easily twists to a destructive use as an extravagant confession. Nick finally kills himself without ever having bared himself to another. And the antithesis to these extreme revelations of self is Michael's state after choosing not to expose himself to the Abbess: he feels "small, and shriveled, and dry" (253). Only Dora, of her own accord, decides to expose herself. Her eventual willingness to do so, at a moment when it is most difficult, is a central event in her growth. But there is one more aspect of The Bell to examine before surveying Dora's achievement of a new voice.

Repetition is a striking part of The Bell's form. It occurs in the characters' re-enactment of their past lives, in the narrative's repetition of the bell myth, in Michael's prophetic dreams, and in Murdoch's precise verbal echos from chapter to chapter. The process of The Bell involves those recurring cycles in our lives which are sometimes truly mysterious, sometimes merely our

own avoidance of change. Michael's relationships with Nick and Toby are the most obvious personal repetitions, and Michael's entire history affords a clear example of the way in which one can fall into an oscillating cycle which seems like movement but is actually stasis. The structure Michael's life has taken is a wild veering between religious fervor and erotic gratification. He alternately feels that his homosexuality is a "vice" to be "cured" and a virtue (105). Here is the latter side:

He could not believe there was anything inherently evil in the great love which he bore to Nick: this love was something so strong, so radiant, it came from so deep it seemed of the very nature of goodness itself. (111)

Michael is fixed in a conception in which he cannot fully account for his sexual feelings nor fully repudiate them; he is forced to swing between abstinence and excess. While with Nick, Michael obscurely felt that "his religion and his passions sprang from the same source," but the order of his Anglican religion denies such an identification (111). At Imber Michael still segregates; he has not abandoned his idea that passions are emotions which need to be "purified" and is susceptible to a repetition of the damaging break-through of his emotions (111). Two glasses of cider break the thin wall Michael has erected about his physical impulses, and he is off again.

Michael not only repeats scenes with Toby which he experienced with Nick, he even begins to imagine their relationship in the same

terms -- under conditions he decided once before were unrealistic:

Vaguely Michael had visions of himself as [Nick's] spiritual guardian, his passion slowly transformed into a lofty and more selfless attachment. He would watch Nick grow to manhood. (111)

He felt within him an infinite power to protect Toby from harm. Quietly he conjured up the vision of Toby the undergraduate, Toby the young man. (166)

Because Michael is split and yet tries to put his energies into one channel, he is either emotionally starved or guilt-ridden.

Nick is an even more extreme case, for he accomplishes the finish of Michael's affair with Toby as a very deliberate reconstruction of the past. He consciously makes history repeat itself; he is so far defeated, so far incapable of initiating any forward movement (even if under a misguided belief such as Michael's that there is an ordained pattern for his life), that he, with resignation, accepts the two-way cycle. Obviously his religion's structure also still rules his life. He is not "demonic" in any sense outside of Christianity. He is a fallen angel, the dark side of the light, and so conducts a drunken "sermon" for Toby while he is "filled with the spirit" (277). No matter that his spirit is whiskey, Nick is caught in and ordered by a sin-guilt-repentance cycle he seems to scorn, for he very sincerely commands Toby to confess to James Tayper Pace. The Bell's cyclical retreats enact an urgent need for a means to acknowledge and direct and celebrate the whole passionate nature in accordance with spiritual nature. The structure

provided by the Christian community in The Bell is, for Michael, Catherine and Nick, confining; it forces them to repeat the same damaging acts. They try to smother their feelings and impulses and are no more successful than the guilty nun. Since this part of them can never be eradicated, they are locked into an extremely vicious circle.

Peter Wolfe has said, "One of the novel's mythical themes, in fact, impinges on the idea that those who fail to understand the past are condemned to relive it."⁸ Wolfe comes close to suggesting that such a sentence is mythic (when in fact the opposite is true), but he does recognize that the characters have fashioned their own jails. By trying to restrict experience, they foster only sameness. They do not "understand" the past by not seeing that its structures must be altered. All the characters need to find ways to make their energies productive, not agents of their own self-castigation.

Generally, then, Michael and Catherine relive the nun's story because they too are at war with themselves. These repetitions are life-defeating circular revolutions. However, all cycles are not so, and there are even particular repetitions which cannot be naturalistically explained, e. g. Michael's clearly prophetic dreams. In this sense the narrative repetitions are evidence and reminder of the extraordinary and inexplicable in our lives. Life can

mysteriously repeat and anticipate itself, but "the way is forward, never back" (253).

Because there is more character complexity in this novel and because it does cohere so well in terms of setting and image, The Bell has received fewer derogatory critical remarks about its fantasy. The more fantastic elements of the bell myth have been overshadowed by critical appraisals of the varied symbolic facets of the bell. Yet extraordinary coincidence is a main structure in this work, and Michael is a central figure in these mysteries for he is a man of powerful emotions and a remarkable sensibility. Without knowing the legend of the bell, Michael has a recurring dream in which a "booming noise" wakes him to see a group of nuns dragging a body from the lake (81). Michael attributes his horror and sense of evil to evil in himself, but whatever the naturalistic explanation Michael sees the situation and setting in which he exists as potentially evil and violent. He has a certain fear of what he does not understand -- the existence of those nuns and their relation to the depths of the lake. Even this is much elaboration on my part, and what is more significant in terms of the novel's form is that Michael's dream is a true prophecy which both repeats the legend and anticipates the events of the narrative. The drowned figure of course foretells Catherine's attempted suicide, and the emphasized dragging noise is very much like the description of the

dragging of the bell from the lake by Toby and Dora. Then, too, the booming noise in his dream (which he always feels is real) does become real as Toby and Dora grapple in the bell, so that Chapter Eighteen begins exactly as did Chapter Six (81, 239). This time Michael is not dreaming, but as he looks out his window he now sees the real figure of a man where in the dream he saw the figures of the nuns. The coincidences are expanded by Michael's having been dreaming of Nick when he actually hears the bell; Paul explains that the bell's ringing supposedly foretells a death and Nick, whether consciously or not, fulfills this pattern.

The reality of these mysterious coincidences is reinforced by the striking verbal repetitions of Chapters Nine and Sixteen, Six and Eighteen. It is not only that Murdoch as an outside narrator describes these coincidences, her words become the coincidence. These repetitions stand as instances of the continued presence of the inexplicable and surprising and stand against the attempt to bring life to a standstill in a predictable repetition of the past.

Life as a process which renews itself through cycles is very different from Michael's belief in "the emergence in his life of patterns and signs," for what he truly seems to long for is "a loss of personality such as could perhaps come about through the named office of a servant or the surrender of will in an unquestioning obedience" (85, 89). In other words he wants an "intermediary"

life which is directed from the outside. But his notion of life's grand design for him makes it difficult for him to meet the day to day contingencies which might have enriched him. This is what he must finally admit concerning Nick: he had his eye on a pattern and could not see an individual. Only the break-up of his dream community and the death of Nick bring Michael to the realization that "at the human level there was no pattern" (334).

This is a level which Dora, more successfully than any of the characters, is able to reach. James Hall, in his article "Blurring the Will: The Growth of Iris Murdoch," describes a "fable" in Murdoch's work which he feels applies to Dora:

People of above-average competence, with no resources outside themselves, begin as egoists doing what comes naturally, and in the process injure and get injured. This first impulse exhausts itself in unsatisfying activism, which finally seems pointless. In this injury-inflicting world, eros is overmatched against aggressiveness. At some stage the individual naturally -- not on existential principle -- begins to think of regrouping, gathering his scattered forces and centering on his best possibilities. The effort, because it is a counterattack, becomes a private attempt at rebirth, vulnerable because unsupported in the confusing social fabric.⁹

This is close. The movement Hall describes I would term a "myth" rather than a "fable," (with its simplistic connotation) when the individual accomplishes that rebirth by "regrouping, gathering . . . and centering on" the energies of the spirit which open him to the world rather than protecting him from it. Dora does move from a solipsistic state, through "activism" (not

pointless), to a centering on her best possibilities, and certainly her journey is made difficult by the conflicting messages of her social world. But there are other, more precise descriptions possible of Dora's movement.

One important element has already been observed in the first chapter. Dora's "activism" after leaving Paul is an indulgence in the sensual life. This sort of release occurs again and is seen as an inevitable reaction to an unnatural curbing of this side of her life. In The Flight from the Enchanter any such release was a violent outbreak; Dora eventually manages to progress beyond this violence by abandoning the schismatic structure which has caused her paralysis. She gets her two halves in balance by moving out of solipsism into an imaginative awareness of others' reality and by quitting her attempt to ward off life's unpleasantness. The key incidents in this process are Dora's flight to London, her scheme to raise the bell, her vigil with and ringing of the bell, and her rescue of Catherine.

The first is precipitated by Imber's narrowness and Paul's imperious disdain for Dora's individuality; her isolation is complete. However, temperamentally a person who goes out to the world and who wants to let it in, her solipsism becomes unbearable. Feeling "as if her consciousness had eaten up its surroundings" and that "everything was now subjective," she finds that she cannot "even

focus her eyes properly upon the stupefied image of her face" (194). Everything is turned inward and Dora cannot even look outward. Horrified at this feeling, she tries to break through this isolation by throwing something into the lake. When this fails she decides to leave and once again finds consolation in pure action.

Peter Wolfe notes that this chapter, Thirteen, and the following one "form the thematic and quantitative middle of the novel," for both Dora and Toby reject Imber's rules, one escaping to London and the other scaling the Abbey wall.¹⁰ These are Toby's and Dora's first bold rebellions and demonstrate their desire to seize experience rather than contain it. However, these episodes are but a beginning, and the process of yielding to impulse and then channeling the impulsive spirit will occur more than once, with each time the spirit more surely an agent of creation. Thus it is not solely and suddenly here that Toby and Dora "acquire . . . the knowledge that permits them to execute their 'miracle' later in the novel."¹¹ Dora's progress is more gradually, and painfully, accomplished.

Her sojourn with Noel Spens supplies Dora with, as she puts it, the joy of "sheer present physical being" (200). Dora drinks, bathes, dances, and prepares for a delicious repast. This gratification of the senses is a real value in this novel's form; the consequences of denying that gratification (without the conviction of the Abbey's

nuns) are clear. Yet at this point Dora's being is still split; she sees the play of her senses and imagination and her wifely role as incompatible. And as Noel's speeches to her show, Dora's state is further complicated by new thoughts of right and wrong, of sin and penitence. Thus Paul's telephone call and the accident of the blackbird's song work on her guilt. The blackbird is strikingly opposed to the jungle rhythms of Noel's jazz record, and Noel's ultra-modern apartment is contrasted with staid Imber. Dora feels victimized by both, but in fact she is victimized by their mutual exclusion in her world. Her appetite ruined by the blackbird, Dora laments, "After all, there were no meetings and no actions" (201). To find a "meeting" is her next step.

Dora's experience in the National Gallery is crucial and yet flawed. While it is certainly consonant with the person Dora has revealed herself to be, there is a noticeable laboring on Murdoch's part -- a laboring also detectable in the scene in Noel's apartment. In that instance, the effect is mainly a stiffness of language completely at odds with the abandon Murdoch wants urgently to convey: Dora, drawn to a wild jungle rhythm "issued eagerly" from the bathroom and Noel, caught up in his dance, "expelled" the chairs from the room (199). But in the National Gallery scene, Murdoch is working much too hard to make us verbally understand ideas, while the whole point is that Dora is seeing and feeling something real. Certainly

Dora can translate her sensual experience into conceptions, but Murdoch does it for the reader and does it in terms she has used repeatedly in essays. Finally she offers an apology: "These thoughts, not clearly articulated, flitted through Dora's mind" (204). There is a hint here that Murdoch is reluctant to let Dora's experience speak for itself; she wants to explain and make more intelligible her "revelation" (204). I don't believe Murdoch intrudes in this way throughout the novel, and I don't feel this episode is hopelessly marred. But a crucial moment is strained.

The ideas are clear enough. Dora is able, through the use of her imagination, to see the Gainsborough painting as an individual expression of two individual children. She sees this painting as something unique; she sees its quidditas. It has value for her because it is and because another man created it:

Here was something which her consciousness could not wretchedly devour, and by making it part of her fantasy make it worthless. . . . When the world had seemed to be subjective it had seemed to be without interest or value. But now there was something else in it after all. (203-204)

The painting is a value. What happens subsequently is Dora's attempt to create value in her own life. As she leaves the gallery she repeats to herself that there is a "connection" between the painting and her life (204). She understands this only intuitively and still must make her own connection; she must accomplish that which she feels Gainsborough has in his art.

The aftermath of this glimmering of a "meeting" mitigates the artistic straining in Chapter Fourteen, for Murdoch does not leave Dora radiantly in the grip of her epiphany:

By the time Dora arrived back at Imber she felt considerably more subdued. . . . She was afraid of Paul's anger. She tried to keep on believing that something good had happened to her; but now it seemed that this good thing had after all nothing whatever to do with her present troubles. It had been a treat and now it was over. At any rate, Dora was tired and couldn't think any more and felt discouraged, frightened, and resentful. (205)

Attaining that vision, not simply recognizing it, is hard work.

Returning to Imber, still split by conflicts, Dora harbors feelings of resentment and a desire to get back at the smugness and restraint of the community. Arriving at night, she views from the dark the brotherhood illuminated in the drawing room, appropriate for her idea of them as "the spiritual ruling class" (207). She "wished suddenly that she might grow as large and fierce as a gorilla and shake the flimsy doors off their hinges, drowning the repulsive music in a savage carnivorous yell" (207). At this point Dora wants to bring chaos into the "hard patterns of sound" of Bach (206). She wants to disrupt utterly by unleashing her animal energies.

Within the religious structure of Imber, Dora cannot be other than a demon, and now she unhesitatingly accepts this role. She will "play the witch" and work a "miracle" to mock the community's

limited conception of mystery and power (213).

Dora's original project is finally modified. She loses her desire to be an enchanter who controls the lives of others. Both Toby and Dora encounter obstacles which cause them to revise their headlong rushes into action; both become more thoughtful and cautious. Still it is their willingness to descend into confusing emotions and sensations which brings Dora and Imber more fully into the world.

Thus one of the most obvious and yet most significant aspects of Toby's and Dora's adventure with the bell is that it is a messy, physical ordeal. Both on the night of the bell's extrication from the mud and on the night of Dora's communion with the bell, she is thoroughly wet, muddy, and tired. Toby, of course, "naked as a fish," has dived into the lake and wallowed on the muddy bottom (237). Moreover on both occasions there is a sort of synesthesia:

A fearful dragging could be heard, or perhaps felt, in that pandemonium it was hard to say which, upon the floor of the lake. (235)

She felt rather than heard the clapper moving inside the cone, not yet touching the sides. (289)

This "pandemonium" is, in the novel's form, the necessary antidote to an intermediary form of life.

These two episodes bear a relation to each other exemplified by the differences in the bell's voice. At the end of Chapter Seventeen the bell emits a "muted boom" and at the close of Chapter Twenty-three "a roar which made her cry out. . . a tremendous boom". (238, 239).

Since the bell, an individual named Gabriel, is vox amoris, the voice of love, its ringing is a declaration of love. And if the later is a larger, more honest love, the former is seen as its necessary predecessor. Both Toby and Dora began their plan inspired by visions of personal power. Dora saw the enterprise as a "rite of power and liberation," and Toby, so amazed that "it had been possible to make so large and inert an object obey his will," felt "a hero. . . a king" (226, 236, 238). This exhilarating sense of skill and accomplishment becomes dimmed. Their personal desires dwindle in significance, and they discover how much effect an "inert object" and other people can exert on them. Undimmed, however, is the fact that their display of power is an outcome of their vital participation in life's mysterious energies. They possess as truly as did the nun in the myth (and without her morbid guilt) an apprehension of life which excludes nothing, so that their arduous task is naturally transformed into ardor as they embrace in the bell and make it speak for the first time in centuries.

To amplify this muted boom into an ear-splitting announcement of a resurrection, Dora abandons her witch role. She has begun to imaginatively see her actions as others might: "The enterprise now seemed as cheap to her as it would shortly seem to the readers of the sensational press: at best funny in a vulgar way, at worst thoroughly nasty" (287). Since she now sees the people of Imber as

individuals as worthy of attention as herself, she can no longer work a trick on them. She applies attention to the bell, the same "attention" which Murdoch feels is the center of the moral act. As with the Gainsborough, Dora attends to the imagination which created the bell's carvings and again recognizes a king of reality:

The squat figures faced her from the sloping surface of the bronze, solid, simple, beautiful, absurd, full to the brim with something which was to the artist not an object of speculation or imagination. (288)

Dora is able to see the bell as an object, as the creation of another man, and as a reborn vessel of the spirit. Witnessing this continuation of life through the creative power of an individual (and in this case the individual is a pious Christian bellmaker very much unlike herself) convinces Dora that she must no longer conceal herself. She makes the connection between the bell and herself and decides to expose herself fearlessly, to continue the process of her life in the open, among other people, even those who frighten her and threaten her.

To so reveal oneself is to move from the shadows into the light. Dora does this, but the point is that Dora was willing to navigate both the darkness and the light just as did the bell. It has been lifted out of mess, mud, and darkness to become a "truth-telling voice" (267). With Dora's whole body "hurled against it," the bell swings, "a huge moving piece of darkness"; and Toby is rightly amazed that "a thing so brightly coloured should have come

out of so dark a place" (289-290, 236-237). In this novel, Murdoch uses the bell to bridge the light-dark dichotomy which split The Flight from the Enchanter. The bell emerges brilliant from the depths and speaks out, announcing that "some great thing was newly returned to the world" (290). Dora is a person who sets things free; just as she spontaneously loosed a butterfly, she now gives back to the world a piece of life which has endured a dark interval. Resurrection is a process in all life, not simply in Christ's life. And as Peter Wolfe correctly recognizes, this ringing and rebirth becomes part of a myth, a miraculous story to be shared with many, evidenced by the widening structure of Murdoch's sentence: "The clamour arose, distinctive, piercing, amazing, audible at the Court, at the Abbey, in the village, and along the road, so the story was told later, for many many miles in either direction" (268).¹²

Dora's process is far from over, however. She has yet her near-drowning and then the positive changes she is able to make in her relationship with Paul. Catherine's attempted suicide, narratively surprising, is psychologically perfect. Catherine nearly loses her life by dedicating herself to a spiritual severity at odds with her feelings and appetites. Trying to be what she is not, assuming a role which excludes the sensual life, Catherine finally takes total leave of her own individual being and identifies herself

with the nun of the myth. She appropriates the myth of another woman because the narrow channel she has supplied for her energies forces her to gaze back instead of moving forward into life.

Regarding Dora, the episode is exactly what it appears: unable to swim she nevertheless "without hesitation" plunges into the water to save another woman (300). Dora and the "amphibious nun" alter the myth; they prevent Catherine from paying for a forbidden desire with her death (329). Nick, who is himself drowning, cannot stand that his sister choose to split herself by allegiance to the opposite mode of life. Thus he again, although inadvertently, makes history repeat itself. The outcome of both extremities -- life in the Abbey and life in the Lodge -- end in death and madness and the breaking of the bridge between Imber and the Abbey.

For Dora and for Michael disintegration is not the culmination of their process. Both accept life, although Michael's attitude has more resignation than joy. His feelings still weighted heavily toward death, Michael feels life's ongoing process as a tide which forces him along, not as a current through which he propels himself. For him life's inordinate strength is revealed in its refusal to let him easily die after Nick's death: "But death is not easy, and life can win by simulating it" (334).

Dora, partially because she has not suffered as much, has no instinct for death. The last chapter shows her refusing to allow

the past to prevent those changes which she must make in her life. This is graphically shown as Dora tears up her two letters to Paul (311). Paul has preserved these two contradictory faces of Dora; obviously such mementoes are his feeble means of containing Dora, while they are glaring witnesses to the fact of a change Paul would blindly deny. Dora rips them to shreds and removes at least part of herself from Paul's museum. Now Dora does what she could not at first; she "created her own role with energy" (324-325). She makes preparations for a job, tries cooking, listens to classical music, and fills Imber with the flowers which before had been forbidden. She learns to swim and is, after all, a "natural swimmer, buoyant and fearless," for "the depths below affrighted her no longer" (325, 342).

Dora closes this book by casting off her moorings (she unties the rowboat) and relishing the sights about her. Her regret is that these sights will be inaccessible to others, but this sadness is extinguished because Dora looks forward to her life in "another world" where she can tell "the whole story" to others (342).

Dora has not only won an entrance to a mythic life by fearlessly engaging in life's dynamic and mysterious energies, but she will (like the bell, like Iris Murdoch) use her voice to give the myth to others.

So Dora does come through her ordeals a less paralyzed individual than Rosa; there is a much surer creation of life in this novel. Yet

part of the necessary condition for this sureness is a narrative situation which has a tinge of an (aesthetic) laboratory experiment. Perhaps this is why Iris Murdoch now feels that The Bell is a "fairly open" novel.¹³ If The Flight from the Enchanter was a witness to everpresent spiritual energy which all try to evade, The Bell offers a brotherhood who take that energy as foremost but impose a single order upon it. In other words, The Bell rejects still another false pattern.

The vehicle for Dora's triumph is a novel which makes a story, an object, and a convent the vessels of life's mysteries. And while it does so successfully, just those elements are ones Murdoch fears as aesthetic traps. None of these elements is a purely "crystalline" flaw, but I feel it is important to recognize the subtle strains in the fabric. In this way: The bell -- solid, intractable, named object that it is -- does rather tidy up the novel's loose ends by becoming an idea. The bell itself, its technically difficult resurrection, and the activity which its discovery precipitates are thoroughly concrete and important. But it is still a tempting handle for a philosophical excursion, and thus becomes identified with the Abbess' sermonette about love:

Good is an overflow. Where we generously and sincerely intend it, we are engaged in a work of creation which may be mysterious even to ourselves -- and because it is mysterious we may be afraid of it. But this should not make us

draw back. God can always show us, if we will, a higher and a better way; and we can only learn to love by loving. Remember that all our failures are ultimately failures in love. Imperfect love must not be condemned and rejected, but made perfect. The way is always forward, never back. (253)

Making the identification between the Abbess' words and Gabriel,

A. S. Byatt says this:

It [the bell] is something planted there, which one is surprised to be reminded of, when occupied with more serious things. However, as planted symbols go, it is a good one, much more knit into the pattern of events and relationships than the excrescent gipsy, and much more complex.¹⁴

Certainly an object can have an extraordinary impact in one's life, but never again is an object so thoroughly the focus of Murdoch's novels.

The Abbess and the convent as an ideal source of value is another tension in the novel. While the Abbey's position as a perfect realm is carefully undercut -- Toby finds ordinary death behind the wall, Mother Clare has a crew cut but thoroughly womanly breasts which she is unembarrassed to expose, the Bishop wears smart dark trousers beneath his hassock and welcomes publicity -- it still seems to represent a peaceful ideal. Showing life in its endlessly variant forms, The Bell certainly cannot repudiate the reality of the nuns' religious experience; Dora herself learns that the convent is not "prison" to its members. Yet the Abbess

is so blatantly the vox amoris and wields, as Michael feels, great power without great corruption, that the Abbey has at times the shadowy aspect of a realm which the poor fools of Imber and London can never reach. I emphasize "at times." For even as the Abbey draws Imber (rather sinisterly) "within the enclosure," Dora is heading for life in the city (339).

With all its remoteness, patterning, and Christian myth, The Bell is still a fine achievement in the development of Murdoch's mythic form. This novel's attention to individuals and their change is an accomplishment which is repeated in A Severed Head, where the mythic moments -- the shocking encounter with the spirit's power -- do not occur in the shadow of a Benedictine convent.

NOTES

1. G. S. Fraser, "Iris Murdoch: The Solidity of the Normal," International Literary Annual, II (1959), 37; Byatt, p. 61.

2. The Bell (New York, 1958), p. 84. Subsequent page references to this book will be given in parentheses following the quotation.

3. In "Against Dryness" Murdoch states "We need to be enabled to think in terms, of degrees of freedom, and to picture, in a non-metaphysical, non-totalitarian, and non-religious sense, the transcendence of reality" (19).

4. Byatt, p. 84.

5. Under the Net (New York, 1954), p. 114.

6. Byatt, pp. 76-77, 92-98; Fraser, p. 40; Wolfe, pp. 118-120.

7. "The Bell in The Bell," Essays in Criticism, XIII (July 1963), pp. 267-271.

8. Wolfe, p. 114.

9. "Blurring the Will: The Growth of Iris Murdoch," ELH, XXXII (June 1965), p. 258.

10. Wolfe, p. 126.

11. Ibid.

12. Wolfe, p. 133.

13. Personal letter from Miss Murdoch dated January 7, 1974.

14. Byatt, p. 75.

CHAPTER VI

A SEVERED HEAD

To those critics who are myth-hunters, A Severed Head has offered an almost irresistible temptation. The title's signified primitive rite, Honor Klein's anthropological specialty, and Martin Lynch-Gibbon's narrative tendency to associate his characters with gods or goddesses have stimulated some ingenious mythic identifications. Such esoteric figures as Medb, Mu King, Hsi Wang Mu, Black Jade and Previous Virtue have been suggested as the mythological counterparts of Murdoch's characters.¹ However, such frameworks are obviously dubious and have very seldom resulted in any particular enlightenment about this story itself.² The mythic allusions -- and events -- which do indeed saturate this novel need to be approached in a different manner.

A Severed Head returns to the London world of The Flight from the Enchanter, but Iris Murdoch's imagination returns to the city changed by the spiritual sojourn at Imber Court. In terms of mythic sources and character types, A Severed Head has much more affinity with The Flight from the Enchanter. Rather than in a religious milieu,

this novel takes place in an aggressively atheistic world where psychoanalysis has replaced religion, and again the mythological allusions are drawn from Greek and Oriental myth, with an additional emphasis on "primitive" myths such as those enumerated in The Golden Bough. The main figures of mystery are once more "dark" characters with great power and, in the case of Honor Klein, products of non-English cultures. Yet Honor Klein is not shadowy in the sense that Mischa Fox was; she is not a victim of an irreconcilable attraction-repulsion characterization. Her god-like aura does not obscure her reality as a woman, and she lives as did the characters in The Bell. She is no more simple than are the power-characters in The Flight from the Enchanter, but she is more whole.

Without the elaborate settings and authorial distance of The Bell, A Severed Head has yet a unified narrative direction which leads to a violent central chapter remarkably similar to Chapter Fifteen in The Flight from the Enchanter. However, there is now no circularity or hesitancy or backward glances. What decisively differentiates A Severed Head from The Flight from the Enchanter and The Bell are its first-person narration and its successful creation of myth in the ordinary course of human life. Martin has his mind shaken by people -- the incest -- and not, as does Dora, by an object -- the bell. This ultimate concentration on individuals is mirrored in the point of view, for Martin has become a creator. He actually

does what Dora seems preparing to do at The Bell's end. A Severed Head is then one step closer than The Bell, for Iris Murdoch has effaced herself as omniscient narrator and let a single man both participate in and create his own myth, leading him to a life emphatically not "intermediary."

Considering these three novels as a group in which Murdoch has sought to imaginatively face man's experience of mystery, A Severed Head succeeds in part because the narration is individually immediate. Allowing Martin's experience and voice to stand by themselves, Murdoch gives life to that unique individual whose necessary obscurity and unpredictability have both enthralled and threatened her imagination. Martin says, "The story which follows will reveal, whether I will or no, what sort of person I am"; the creation is the man.³

However, the power of the "I," because great, is an aesthetic risk; the temptation to elevate personal experience to an heroic level from which universal judgments can be made is, Murdoch feels, particularly attractive to modern writers. Moreover, a single "I" may be single-minded, indulging his taste for a personal pattern and neglecting variety. There is a tinge of this in A Severed Head in Martin's heavy-handed attempt to give his city and his friends an air of brooding participation in the supernatural. Honor's identification with a dark, untouchable goddess is tediously repeated. Yet this rather obsessive repetition does not defeat the novel's life, nor smother Honor's individuality. There is still the "incompleteness"

Murdoch covets. Martin tells his own personal story, but it engages him in the world by making it impossible for him to ignore the otherness of those around him.

Martin at the novel's beginning lives the self-satisfied, comfortable, orderly existence of a rich and well-married man. He exudes a rather aristocratic finickiness. He is a passive man and describes his life prior to the events in A Severed Head not as the outcome of choices, but as an inevitable outcome of the flow of life outside him. He accepts the characterizations which others provide him; he has a "reputation" rather than a personality:

I used to be a good boxer, and passed when I was younger as a raffish quarrelsome violent fellow. This reputation was precious to me; equally precious is the reputation which I have more lately gained of having become morose, something of a recluse, something indeed of a philosopher and cynic, one who expects little and watches the world go by. (15)

In many ways the world has passed him by, or at any rate he believes so and accepts what is given him. He inherits the family's wine firm and is a pedantic connoisseur of wines, but has no interest in the business as such. He is interested in military history but manages to practice it at a double remove from reality. Drawn to violence, he can only approach it as history; he attempts to make intellectual sense out of the past. Even this study he undertakes as an "amateur" or "dilettante," although he received a history first at Cambridge (16). The historian's temperament is

reflected as well in Martin's penchant for collecting and arranging objects. His beautiful home he delights in as a protective "shell" or "carapace" (24). He feels secure in "the rich and highly integrated mosaic of our surroundings" (7). Martin is not merely stable, he is fixed. Indeed he professes a belief that there are "inflexible" patterns in his life (14).

A Severed Head is, however, Martin's nightmare education into the flexibility of all he felt was impregnable. Even at its most successful stages, Martin's serenity is accomplished only by a precarious juggling feat, and the opening chapter perfectly describes this special character of Martin's world as well as the inevitability of its failure. Nowhere in Murdoch's work is the fairy tale atmosphere more pronounced or more symptomatic of a retreat from life. Martin and his mistress Georgie maintain their "liaison dangereuse" only by pretending that Georgie's sitting room is the extent of the world; thus her room, equipped with candles and incense, becomes a lover's grotto, "a subterranean place, remote, enclosed, hidden" (12). Georgie is far less comfortable with the secrecy than is Martin, and although she has her own defenses and means of self-deception, she wishes to let the daylight into their relationship. Her capacity for love exceeds Martin's, for she can and does put herself full length at his feet. Martin at this point does not have it in him to so expose himself: "There was no one in the world at

whose feet I would myself have lain in such an attitude of abandonment" (9). Martin likes things much too neat to allow himself such an excess of emotion.

The neatness of Martin's personal affairs depends on his balancing the two disjunctive halves of his life. Martin is simply another split character who, in the process of trying to avoid a full involvement in life, achieves an imitation unity. He explains.

I loved her [Georgie] with a wild undignified joy, and also with a certain cheerful brutality, both of which were absent from my always more decorous, my essentially sweeter, relationship with Antonia. I adored Georgie too for her dryness, her toughness, her independence, her lack of intensity, her wit, and altogether for her being such a contrast, such a complement, to the softer and more moist attractions, the more dewy radiance of my lovely wife. I needed both of them and having both I possessed the world. (21)

Martin wants both a brutal and sweet love, but he perceives these qualities as mutually exclusive.

His belief that "possessing the world" is dependent on an illicit, hidden double life dictates the myth which Martin chooses to illustrate his affair with Georgie:

"But knowledge, other people's knowledge, does inevitably modify what it touches. Remember the legend of Psyche, whose child, if she told about her pregnancy, would be mortal, whereas if she kept silent it would be a god." (13)

Martin is attracted to the idea that secrecy or hiding will bring about divinity; he prefers his solipsistic vision of his love for Georgie and fears the modification or change natural when another's

vision is allowed. Martin's perfect world begins to crack, however; the "old innocent world" was forever altered after Georgie's pregnancy (24). It is more difficult than Martin knew to keep new life from kicking into the world. Georgie's abortion stopped the child, but there are always other creations which make a timeless love grotto impossible. Hints of this inevitable painful birth come to Martin through the only medium which his dictatorial intellect has not totally stilled. "Only sometimes in dreams" does Martin have a glimpse of what the abortion has truly done to Georgie (13). His imagination struggles to show him what his glossing consciousness will not permit, that he cannot have "a miraculous April without its pangs of transformation and birth" (21).

This first chapter shows both Martin's double world and the already existing strain along its fissures. Birth -- Martin's own, Psyche's child's, Christ's (it is Christmas), the New Year's -- will come, and it can neither be hidden nor be fabulously painless. Martin's use of myth as a shield against "other people's knowledge" will be revised as he discovers that any divinity in the modern world is not only incarnate but exposed. Psyche, in the better-known segment of the myth, desires to have no secrets. She breaks a vow in order to know her husband, Cupid, and even though she is punished for her faithless curiosity, she accomplishes her arduous tasks graced by nature and returns to her husband more

joyous, because more knowledgeable. Martin, however, is only beginning.

A Severed Head is, in effect, bracketed by two myths, Psyche and the story of Gyges and Candaules. Gyges' story is at least semi-historical; it is related by Herodotus whose work is a freely mixed narrative of gods and historical mortals. Martin uses these two myths as the beginning and end markers of his journey, but the main mythic image for what passes in between is, of course, the severed head. The head has at least two definite symbolic associations in the novel -- the Medusa myth (variously interpreted) and the head as an alchemical or primitive agent of prophecy. While most critics have assessed the Medusa myth sensibly, the one essay which seeks to shed light on the non-Greek severed head myth is very unsatisfactory. Alice P. Kenney uses Ann Ross' Pagan Celtic Britain and decides, because it was published at the same time as the novel and because it is so "consonant" with Murdoch's conception of severed heads, that some contact between the two women is "an almost unavoidable inference" (4). On the contrary, after her evidence is presented, it seems easily avoidable and highly unnecessary. The mass of material quoted from Miss Ross' book is really left flimsily explained and totally unconnected with the story of Martin, which is, after all, Miss Kenney's only reason for investigating severed heads in the first place.

All the allusions to severed heads in this novel are connected and are most relevantly and easily understood as visual emblems of what Martin must undergo in order to enter life in a new way.

The topic of severed heads is first introduced by Alexander as he and Martin examine some sculpted heads. Martin is uncomfortable in the presence of these disembodied busts; he says "I don't think I like a sculptured head alone" (50). As he points out, Antonia cannot be herself without her body, but Alexander, a somewhat pretentious artist who himself leads a deeply double life, nevertheless insists that "heads are us most of all, the apex of our incarnation" (50). Alexander, even though he uses the word "incarnation" and is now a realistic artist, segregates the "higher" faculties from the body which bears them. Martin intuitively dislikes this separation, but can only now express his feelings about severed heads as representing "an unfair advantage, an illicit and incomplete relationship." Alexander relates this feeling to Freud's interpretation of the Medusa myth in which sex is a warring antagonism; the head represents the female genitals, "feared but desired" (50).

The Medusa myth has been put to other uses in the twentieth century as Murdoch was aware from her work on Sartre. She writes in a note:

The striking symbol of the petrifying Medusa is interpreted by Freud as a castration fear

(Collected Papers, Vol. V). Sartre of course regards as its basic sense our general fear of being observed (L'Être et le Néant, p. 502). It is interesting to speculate on how one would set about deciding which interpretation was "correct." 5

The point here, as Murdoch knows, is that neither of the interpretations is conclusively "correct." Freud and Sartre have used the ancient myth to express a facet of experience; they have assigned a meaning to the story, and the different meanings testify to the diversity of human life. The Medusa myth does not fix life, although it can be used as a vehicle of control, as both Freud and Sartre obviously use it. Iris Murdoch may use the Medusa myth in her work as a striking and redolent and emotional image, but she uses it to suggest a realm of experience, she does not assign it a fixed meaning.

But more important for a study of this novel is the fact that, although the expressions are different, these two versions of the myth actually coalesce, for they both indicate a state brought about by super-consciousness or super "headness." It happened that Freud's circumstances of personality and history focused his attention on sexuality; Sartre, however, concentrated on more cerebral modes of communication (things and matter inspire "nausea" precisely because they challenge the supremacy of consciousness). At any rate the structural content of their interpretation is a divorce between a controlling consciousness,

the head, and those other forces in human life which challenge the head and seem to threaten disruption. For both Freud and Sartre such a state of conflict is most prevalent in life and wholeness difficult if not impossible. The blow of such knowledge may be, as Murdoch believes, softened by externalizing it in an image.

Thus the main import of the head is precisely its severing. Martin fundamentally, not colloquially, "loses his head," and he must in order to escape the tyranny of his reason. The severed head's other symbolic association completes Martin's entrance into a changed life. Honor's association with a prophetic severed head, one used as an instrument of magical power, does not isolate her in some mythical country. Honor disclaims such a use of power. She is not the severed head but the "executioner," and if ancient myth-makers and alchemists used that head to gain power over others or to control nature, Honor severs heads only to reunite them with their bodies and produce transformation (118). Honor's association with this mythical severed head must be understood in connection with Martin's witnessing of the incest, but he has a long passage before he arrives at that climactic moment.

Antonia's announcement of her love affair first moves Martin out of his "slow old world" (24). While the reader waits with frustration for Martin's irate retaliation, Antonia is saying lovingly to him, "I'm extremely grateful to you for being so rational about it" (29). Martin sustains this "civilized" pose of "taking it well"

by staying drunk most of the time. Antonia merely parrots the ideas of Palmer Anderson who, as psychoanalyst, is the twentieth century's accepted magician. It is generally agreed that Palmer radiates power; however, as Georgie so rightly guesses, Palmer professes to liberate but more usually enslaves. While attention to mystery -- and what is more mysterious than the human psyche? -- is a value in this novel, Palmer's particular method of dealing with the darkness within is as rigidly intellectual as Martin's attempt to deal with his wife's adultery. When Martin politely visits Palmer's office, Palmer has ready a Freudian interpretation of Martin's personality which is compelling (because so neat) but which is proved ludicrous as the story unwinds. Palmer, for all his supposedly dark, liberating powers, really believes that "mechanical models are the best to understand [the psyche] with" (35). Further events reveal that Palmer can believe this only by a surely exhausting determination to be blind to his own actions and feelings. The thorn in the mechanical-civilized-rational model for both Palmer and Martin is Honor Klein.

Honor arrives in London on a particularly foggy dark night. A Severed Head is indeed a succession of foggy days in which Martin drunkenly gropes for a clarifying light, and on this particular night Martin feels "the darkness seemed to have got inside one's head" (61). With his rational universe wheeling, the night seems to have usurped

his mental faculties. Honor's milieu throughout the story is "sulphur and brimstone"; her appearance is "Oriental" and "animal-like" (64). Honor is an ugly woman, and Martin decides she is an "object"; significantly in the car "her body sagged and jolted. . . like a headless sack" (66). And as she enters Palmer's house, she pauses directly under the hanging samurai sword. True to her accompanying dark, heavily sensual images, Honor Klein voices what Martin has been trying to avoid, "You are a violent man, Mr. Lynch-Gibbon. You cannot get away with this intimacy with your wife's seducer" (76). Martin has himself recognized that "violence. . . moved within," but he cannot act because he "too much feared the darkness beyond" (62). Honor simply tells him that the dark gods cannot be cheated, nor can anything be earned without a price (76, 77). Honor's prophecy is unquestionably born out, beginning with the scene in the cellar, but Martin is not yet ready to quit his "double-dealing" (78).

The scenes intervening between Martin's first and second conversations with Honor show him trying to "break down some of the doubleness," but they also show his unreadiness (80). Martin, who characteristically responds more fiercely to things than to people (he fell in love with Georgie when he saw her bed), takes Georgie to Hereford Square and asks her to touch things in order to "symbolize" breaking down the doubleness (81). Martin's

drama is cut unceremoniously short when he fears Antonia has returned; he may let Georgie touch things but he still is not ready to let the two halves of his world really face each other. While Martin is beginning to have impulses to let himself be known more truthfully, he still wants to be in control; he panics at the unexpected. He reflects that his symbolic action with Georgie might have succeeded if "I had been able to make the revelation in my own time and in my own way, with dignity and a serene face" (98).

Martin's already impoverished dignity vanishes completely when he next meets Honor. Like Mischa Fox, Honor adeptly introduces chaos into everyone's lives. Generally Honor casts aside conversational politeness and speaks the blunt truth, so that Georgie claims Honor's coming was like "a message from the gods" in the face of which she could not lie (101). When Honor reveals Martin's adultery to Antonia and Palmer, those two show their true colors: "We thought we knew you, Martin. We have just had a surprise. . . . We have lost our grip" (92). The two liberated souls cannot stand losing their grip. Martin is to lose his truly for the first time in the cellar.

The preparatory episode with the samurai sword is especially well done because it both increases the apprehension of Honor's extraordinary power and begins to make her more human. Honor may seem "a remote and self-absorbed diety," but she is "in

extremis" (112, 114). It is New Year's Eve as Martin is instructed in some new ways of the spirit. Since he is appalled by the violence of the samurau warriors, Honor tells him: "Being a Christian you connect spirit with love. These people connect it with control, with power" (116). Martin, who has already created his own vision of Honor Klein (just as he has done for Antonia and Georgie), counters, "but you believe in the dark gods." Honor's reply is important, "I believe in people" (116).

While Honor has indeed reminded Martin of the dark gods, their only importance is as a facet of human life. Not only Martin, but most critics, have tended to be impressed by Honor's "primitive, godly" qualities and consequently have neglected Honor's emphasis on people. People contain within them both the dark gods and the light; Honor is in effect saying "it is all here within us." Honor is not a savage; she is a super-educated intellectual who, unlike Martin, does not separate her emotions and senses from her scholarly work. She is "barbarous yet highly conscious" (134). Her profession -- anthropology with a specialty in primitive tribes -- is simply a graphic welding of the intellectual and sensual worlds. As a corollary, her expertise with the samurai sword is the union of a spiritual and physical exercise. The spirit is concrete in the beauty and agility of Honor's display. Martin, constrained in spirit and often stumbling drunk, must appreciate Honor's grace:

"I wanted to see her moving again" (117).

Honor's refusal to praise Martin for moral largesse in the matter of his wife's adultery answers his own secret revengeful impulses. But since Martin still believes acting rationally is best, he must resent Honor. Thus after Martin's "apex" of good behavior in Antonia's and Palmer's bedroom, Honor receives Martin's frustrated, misplaced violence (129).

As in The Flight from the Enchanter, the central chapter of A Severed Head breaks the novel open. Martin, who has been "shuttling to and fro with an increasing speed between the various poles of [his] situation" finally succumbs to his own fragmentation (127). The supremacy of his consciousness falters and is superseded by a blind animal attack. For the first time Martin loses his head: when the struggle is ended "[his] head, suddenly asserting its existence, felt terrible" (135). In the "sulphurous" darkness of the cellar Martin finally unleashes his pent-up energies (with the help of wine) and significantly has one of those uncanny experiences of standing outside himself and seeing himself totally. Martin is released from his consciousness in more ways than one, and when he runs after Honor he finds he cannot name her (136). Martin now "knows" Honor in more than an intellectual manner.

So Martin's rebirth on New Year's Day is begun. Such a blind assertion of passion -- a complete severing of the head -- is no more a whole state than Martin's previous one. The process of

incorporating that energy with his other modes of experiencing -- his intellect and his imagination -- is crucial. After the wrestling match, Martin is not liberated; in fact his intellect has a wonderful time trying to patch up the mess. However, Martin, unlike the characters in The Flight from the Enchanter, does move forward and does not return to the same enchantment after his outburst.

The letters in Chapter Seventeen are simply an example of Martin's long-standing tendency to turn experience into history. He tries to tidy up the havoc he has wreaked, just as he wishes he could put Georgie in "cold storage" (145). Martin discovers at least three ways to "explain" his actions to Honor and feels "totally exhausted, having put more intellectual effort into the letters to Honor than [he] had expended since [he] wrote Sir Eyre Coote and the Campaign of Wandewash" (142).

This satisfaction is short-lived, for as Martin walks by the river he is overwhelmed by the fogginess which has surrounded him throughout this story. This time he is trying to see, which is exactly what he must do in order to escape the prison of his own self-concern. However, "peering is . . . painful," and Martin desperately cries "I cannot see, I cannot see" (148). To mark his new gropings, his beginning ability to see "shadows and hints of things," he tells us "a concealed sun was shining": he is beginning to see the light, but he cannot see its source (147, 148). Suddenly, like Dora, he sees the glory in an object which is like a proof of God's

existence "e contingentia mundi" (149). And he is in love.

Surely this experience is real. Martin has seen the spirit glowing in the world around him; he has fallen in love, an experience which always bespeaks the miraculous. Yet the reality of Martin's emotions does not lessen the fact that his love is private. The mysterious epithets which Martin now applies to Honor have some truth but are also products of Martin's fantasy. He has, like Rosa and others, some desire to be enchanted, to feel he is "chosen" and his actions "inevitable" (150). I think it is important to understand that Martin's condition at this moment is an interval in an on-going process. If it is not, Martin is as fantastically deluded as Rosa Keepe, and Honor's very real power degenerates to the shadowy omnipotence of Mischa Fox. The criticisms of Honor Klein as an unreal, too heavily symbolic figure arise from an uncritical acceptance of Martin's viewpoint at every stage. Martin is telling his story as it happened, and at this point he is very much in the grip of the illusion that Honor is a marvelous goddess. For Martin now it is true that "the human figure . . . is overshadowed," as Linda Kuehl complains.⁶ But not for long.

As Martin approaches Honor's incestuous bed he assumes, again failing to exercise true vision, that she is alone (he "pictured her" studying) and a virgin (154). Both those illusions are brutally dispelled. The incest is the central event in Martin's change. He now has felt

the power of his own passions, but he must marshal his new experience in order to meet life as it is. First, Honor's love for her brother revises Martin's apprehension of her "untouchable" nature (148). Whatever the nature of her searing energy, it does not exclude the flesh. Honor becomes a solid, suffering woman. Moreover, the incest is something Martin cannot possibly rationalize. As Palmer says, "We have to do with something which can shake the mind to its foundations" (160). This is precisely the point. The form of A Severed Head is the personal narration of events which shook Martin's mind and forced him to abandon his stilted vision of life. Far more immediate than the bell as a revelation of the solidity of the spirit, the incest makes undeniable the inexorable, ancient primacy of the mysteries of the flesh. In an artificial, cultivated, civilized society where a man can say the psyche is mechanical and mean it, that same man cannot prevent a passion which negates all his professed beliefs. The incest as Martin's encounter with a tremendous, baffling energy destroys any divorce between spirit and body. Palmer and Honor defy society's imposed rules and engage in the fundamental creative act. For this Martin's response must be creative too.

One of the important facts about the incest is the manner in which Martin discovers it. The importance of seeing has already been mentioned: Martin must use his imagination to look at others as

they are, rather than as he believes them to be, usually a selfish fantasy. Martin does not simply learn of the incest, he sees it; it is a reality existing outside of him which he cannot swallow up in thought: "I shuddered not so much at what I had seen as at the fact that I had seen it" (218). Martin is forced to approach this knowledge through his imagination, his dreams, and specifically mythology, a work of creation itself:

The psychological literature was scanty and unsatisfactory, and I soon turned my attention to mythology where, with a curious gratification which was almost consoling, I noted the frequency of brother and sister marriages, particularly among royalty and gods. (185)

Significantly, his incest is the one thing Palmer makes no attempt to explain. His modes of knowledge cannot handle it.

Besides shocking Martin into an imaginative apprehension of a reality which he now perceives to be an ever-surprising flow of energy, the incest, because of the mythological allusions to royal and divine incestuous unions, increases the threatening aspect of Palmer and Honor's power. In myth and primitive societies, the ordinary populace were usually prohibited from having incestuous relations, and even the privileged gods and rulers often had "monstrous progeny" (185). It is as though such a concentration of sexual energy were too fierce except for those who were already familiar with life's mysteries. The energies of life are total, and thus equally capable of destroying and creating. Incest can produce

gods or blight nature.⁷ Now for Martin Honor is "in a way which I now more clearly understood, taboo" (185). She is willing to take her chances with that total energy and consequently radiates a power which is exceedingly volatile.⁸ Martin is on his way to taking such a chance.

Any romantic notions of Honor's purity totally lost, Martin still feels spellbound in his love. Thus when he prostrates himself at Honor's feet, his action is both histrionic and real. Martin has said he could never lie at another's feet, but now he is "spontaneously" willing to be completely vulnerable (221-222). Honor is moved but must command him to rise because Martin has made of her a fantastic worship-object. During this exchange Honor makes her much-noticed severed head speech which is vital to recognizing the myth of this novel:

"Because of what I am and because of what you saw I am a terrible object of fascination for you. I am a severed head such as primitive tribes and old alchemists used to use, anointing it with oil and putting a morsel of gold upon its tongue to make it utter prophecies. And who knows but that long acquaintance with a severed head might not lead to strange knowledge. For such knowledge one would have paid enough. But that is remote from love and remote from ordinary life. As real people we do not exist for each other." (221)

Honor, who does indeed have the characteristics of a dark goddess, will have nothing to do with a mythic consciousness which separates the spirit from ordinary life and real people. Her spiritual strength, through which she has endured a passionate

relationship wholly outside society's rules, Martin perceives as something extraneous to the course of his London life. Honor both refuses to be so segregated and refuses to be a single part of a split being. Not denying the possibility of such a life, Honor does not want to pay the schizophrenic price of cultivating only the head's strange knowledge. So that rather than the severed head itself, Honor is the "executioner" (118). In the world of A Severed Head, in which heads dominate, the execution comes first (Chapter Sixteen) in order to liberate shackled passions and emotions; then the imagination can reintegrate the whole man to live his life in an endlessly transforming world. Martin revises his aversion to "decapitating people as a spiritual exercise" (116).

The last chapter of this novel, much criticized, puts myth squarely on its earthy feet. Having left the sheltered fairy tale atmosphere of Georgie's apartment, Martin is in his own thoroughly disordered flat. No longer an integrated mosaic, Martin's world is now a room with an unmade bed, scattered rugs, and over-flowing ash trays. Martin has ceased trying to control his world; the fastidious wine expert "pulled out a bottle at random" (243). Believing that he has seen the last of Honor, with "her demon splendour quenched," Martin is left with only his haphazard present (240). Alexander's secret betrayal has undercut even the security

of the past; there is no historical certainty. Martin reflects Alexander has scarred "an innocence of the past which I had believed to be impregnable" (237). He attempts to assuage his emptiness with thought, "to cover it with a haze of consciousness," but he cannot elude his physical pain: "a pain in my body told me what was real" (244).

When Honor does arrive, she finds Martin wary rather than ready to pay homage. With all games, illusions, and double existences aside, they meet as individuals. In response to Martin's question, "Why me," Honor reminds him of the story of Gyges and Candaules:

"Candaules was proud of the beauty of his wife and he wanted his friend Gyges to see her naked. He concealed Gyges in the bedroom -- but Candaules' wife realized that he was there. Then later, because he had seen her, she approached him and forced him to kill Candaules and become king himself." (247-248)

Martin is at first incensed that Honor is suggesting he is "privileged" only because he saw her with Palmer. Honor wisely doesn't reply, and their smiles indicate the myth is not meant to deny Martin his individuality. It is not simply that Martin chanced to learn their secret; it is that the vision and the knowledge changed him. Martin, who believed that the life of the spirit achieved divinity in Psyche's secret pregnancy, has himself witnessed real spiritual/sexual power in the actions of two human beings. Shocked and horrified at first, Martin has nevertheless not shut out this

experience but has endured the "shaking" of his mind to accept a fuller mode of life. Martin has not acquired "strange knowledge," but knowledge of a sort which must be embraced with one's whole being and which, consequently, is paid for in the fullest sense. Honor never avoids confrontation; she initiates some of the story's major confrontations. She ends the secrecy of Martin's affair; she introduces his mistress to his brother. As she says, "With me people pay as they earn!" (77). This is precisely what Martin has done. He has paid with despair and anxiety for each growth of his full emotional and imaginative life. Honor Klein is a woman who understands that the spirit is not solely love, as Christians would have it, but power as well. Action, the discharge of emotion, the violence of the samurai sword which Honor swings are full expressions of a human life which does not avoid impact with its world. Martin has come slowly to this more dangerous life.

This life is the realm of myth, and it is necessarily an incomplete one. What will evolve for Martin and Honor is thoroughly uncertain, and Martin at last embraces the unexpected:

She said, smiling splendidly, "You must take your chance!"

I gave her back the bright light of the smile, now softening at last out of irony. "So must you, my dear!" (248)

Ironically, this open-ended conclusion has been called a "neat bundle of myth."⁹ In Wolfe's opinion, any mythological allusion

must necessarily intend a universal, in illo tempore significance. He thus feels lost when Iris Murdoch does not use a myth to spell out some specific conclusion, and he decides that she herself is muddled: "at the end the two main characters are being led into a blurred relationship that bears withheld mythological significance."¹⁰ In this novel's form "mythological significance" is situated in "the insecurity and the blinding pace of modern life" (Wolfe's own words) and hence does not call for a resolution. Similarly, Jacques Souvage recognizes that Martin and Honor are involved in myth, but feels Iris Murdoch has committed a sort of sacrilege to have "myth reversed, myth domesticated."¹¹

Souvage's attitude toward myth as a literary form leads conveniently to A Severed Head's final mythical aspect. He complains that the novel should have had a third person narration because it thus "would have met more successfully the requirements of the impersonal modes of myth and of comedy."¹² Yet the center of the mythic mode is creative energy itself, and Martin's collision with that energy has led directly to his own creation of A Severed Head, a brave and comical exposure of his own education in life. He has moved out of the intellect which surveys and controls, released his fettered emotions, and entered the realm of imagination which sees the individual life in its perpetual, dangerous, yet exhilarating movement. Martin rejects "impersonal modes" because life

itself will not allow them; he sees myth in his own life and becomes a creator.

Certainly the achievement of an aesthetic form which is life-like is not necessarily a matter of writing in the first person. But in the life of Iris Murdoch's imagination, allowing Martin Lynch-Gibbon his own voice marked a point where the spiritual energy which rocked the characters in The Flight from the Enchanter finally had "a course to run" (221). What Dora is approaching after having left an intermediary life, Martin has entered. He chooses to tell "the whole story" against a mythological background because it is the story of his discovery of the fundamental mystery and creative thrust of life.

The investigation of these three novels shows concretely how Iris Murdoch's imagination met the binary conflicts set forth in the first half of this study, and it shows that mythology has been an aid to their resolution rather than itself an agent of fragmentation. In moral theory, Murdoch sees a fundamental split between the language philosophers and the existentialists, and feels that neither group adequately accounts for the complexity of human life. One group falsifies and diminishes man by denying the reality of his inner experience, as dark and mysterious as that may be, and the other runs the risk of ignoring the solidity of the external world,

both substance and circumstance, by over-emphasizing inner experience and inviting solipsism.

An imaginative apprehension of life as mysteriously creative, individually valuable, and endlessly fluid is the essence of morality for Iris Murdoch, and thus the artist, because he is dedicated to imaginative vision, is always involved in morality. The dualities of her aesthetic, then, correspond to those of her moral theory. She believes a modern writer suffers the same bifurcation: he may put too little emphasis on the mind's creative powers and produce rambling, journalistic novels with too little form, or he may deify the ego and produce crystalline novels in which the intellect imposes structures which tidy up life's messiness. The latter sort of novel is, in Murdoch's opinion, clearly the more prevalent in modern literature.

Since Murdoch sees life as ceaseless process, she fears that too much form will still the movement. But this fear is mitigated if form is regarded not as a static, orderly arrangement, but as that very process-rhythm which is the basis of all life. Her injunction to avoid the powerfully seductive forms of myth -- one means by which crystalline art simplifies life and controls threatening experience -- can be, in like manner, modified. The attention given here to the work of Ernst Cassirer, Mircea Eliade, and Joseph Campbell adjusts Murdoch's belief that mythology is

antagonistic to the realistic art of life she wishes to create. Both Cassirer and Eliade describe the mythic realm as dynamic, intuitive, and attentive to the immediate and concrete reality of the spiritual world. This, too, is Iris Murdoch's vision of life. And in Joseph Campbell's Creative Mythology, the mythopoeic possibilities of modern art are emphatically described. Campbell's distinction between older mythologies, which served to control human experience, and creative mythology, which is an expression of human experience, presents the mythopoeic zone as life itself: the unique individual in contact with the world's mysterious energy. The ancient myths cannot dictate values for modern man, but myth can be a fertile resource for fiction because with it man can rediscover what modern life has diluted: an immediate contact with incomprehensible, awesome spiritual energy. Moreover, mythology is an aesthetic mode and consequently has as its center the activity of creation itself which, as this study has shown, is the ultimate focal point for Iris Murdoch's theories and her art.

Mythology and Murdoch's conception of form are not incompatible, as her theories claim, but complementary, as her art proclaims. Iris Murdoch has her own binary conflicts in addition to those which she sees existing about her. She is both a philosopher and an artist. She believes form is essential to art and yet fears its power. She believes in the ultimate value of the individual and yet

despises his natural selfishness. She rejects the idea of God yet substitutes for this a transcendent Good. She claims myth is antagonistic to the best art yet uses it in her own novels. The difficulties in a critical treatment of Iris Murdoch show through even in the structure of this study: one half is devoted to abstraction and one half to art. Clearly Iris Murdoch is an artist more than she is a philosopher, but the strength of her academic education persists, so much so that she is led to establish dogmatic concepts even after affirming that life resists all such attempts at classification. At her most lucid, Murdoch expresses her belief that theories are important as guides or as models but are never knowably absolute; for this reason, art, with its radical particularity and impossibility of completion, has received most of her energies. While her desire for conceptual certainty lingers, resulting in an often noticeable discrepancy between the thought and the act, Murdoch knows that, finally, the imagination is wiser than the intellect.

Murdoch's undercurrent of philosophical rationalism does not dim the importance of her imaginative engagement with life. From the demonic spell binders in The Flight from the Enchanter through the myth of the drowned nun in The Bell to the "monstrous" incest of A Severed Head, Iris Murdoch's subjects reveal her fascination with life's energy. Her art testifies to an appetite for life in all its marvelous and terrifying aspects, and she uses the

spiritual heritage which is myth as she must -- not to control experience but to embrace it.

This study treats only three early novels, and many more have followed. But these three, because of their pervasive use of myth, provide a significant insight into the ways in which Iris Murdoch's imagination has engaged itself with life through myth. A Severed Head certainly is not an end; nor can its achievement be thought of as fixed. In fact, Murdoch's following novel, The Unicorn, can be seen partly as a swing back to the aesthetic approach and narrative setting of The Bell. The tensions in Murdoch's imagination persist even in her latest novel (at this writing), The Black Prince. But the valuable enterprise upon which she has set out, to create a literature of life, continues through her eloquent, comic, honest, and endlessly inventive novels. In the evolution of her art, the achievements of The Flight from the Enchanter, The Bell, and A Severed Head have enriched her imagination as she succeeded in connecting myth and "the ordinary stuff of human life."

NOTES

1. Kenney, p. 394; German, p. 375.
2. In this connection, after reading Robert McGinnis' "Iris Murdoch's The Bell" (The Explicator, XXVIII [September 1969], Item 1), I was so impressed with the thorough and striking correspondences between The Bell and Gerhart Hauptmann's Die Versunkene Glocke, that out of curiosity I asked Miss Murdoch whether she indeed had this play in mind. She replied in a letter of January 7, "No, I have not read Die Versunkene Glocke or anything by Hauptmann."
3. A Severed Head (New York, 1961), p. 15. Subsequent page references to this book will be given in parentheses following the quotation.
4. Kenney, p. 393.
5. Sartre: Romantic Rationalist (1953; rpr, New Haven, Conn., 1959), p. 62.
6. Kuehl, p. 354.
7. Sir James Frazer, The Golden Bough, 3rd ed. (New York, 1963), II, pp. 108-117.
8. Frazer explains that taboo persons are insulated to keep the "holiness, magical virtue, taboo" from exploding. Ibid., X, 6.
9. Wolfe, p. 158.
10. Ibid., p. 159.
11. "The Novels of Iris Murdoch," Studia Germanica Gandensia, IV (1962), p. 252.
12. Ibid., p. 249.

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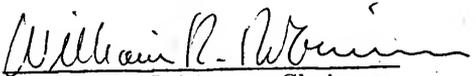
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Professor of Religion

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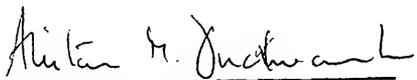
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