

**“SINGULARITY IN ITS MINERAL ACTUALITY”¹: THE TEXTURE
OF MORAL LIFE IN IRIS MURDOCH’S *THE SEA, THE SEA*
(1978)**

MARIE LANIEL

Université de Picardie – Jules Verne

1. As Justin Broackes reminds us in the introduction to *Iris Murdoch, Philosopher* (2012), before becoming a novelist who happened to teach philosophy, Iris Murdoch was a philosopher who happened to write novels.² Early on in her career, as a Fellow and Tutor in Philosophy at St Anne’s College, Oxford (1948-1963), Murdoch rejected the conception of morality prevalent in the main philosophical movements of the time—Anglo-American analytical philosophy and continental existentialism³—and developed her own idiosyncratic conception of ethics as moral particularism. In an essay called “Vision and Choice in Morality” (1956), Murdoch redefined ethics, against behaviourism, as a matter not of choice, will and action, but as a matter of vision, an ability to assess the “moral features of people and situations” individually, to overcome the private fantasies of the “selfish ego”, in order to “see what is to be done”.⁴ In this essay, Murdoch vindicates the relevance of inner life in ethics, what she calls “the texture of a man’s being”, the singularity of his personal vision—as shown in his habits, manners, mode of speech—and its impact on his moral decisions:

When we apprehend and assess other people we do not consider only their solutions to specifiable practical problems, we consider something more elusive which may be called their total vision of life, as shown in their mode of speech or silence, their choice of words, their assessments of others, their conception of their own lives, what they think attractive or praiseworthy, what they think funny: in short the configurations of their thought which show continually in their reactions and conversation. These things, which may be overtly and comprehensibly displayed or inwardly elaborated and guessed at, constitute what, making different points in the two metaphors, one may call the texture of a man’s being or the nature of his personal vision. Now with regard to this area various attitudes may be adopted by the moral philosopher. It may be held that these elusive activities are irrelevant to morality which concerns definite moral choices and the reasons therefor. It may be held that these activities are of interest in so far as they make choices and their reasons more comprehensible. It may be held that these activities can be regarded as being themselves moral acts resulting from responsible choices and requiring reasons. All these three positions would be in different ways compatible with

1 J-L. Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, 18.

2 J. Broackes, *Iris Murdoch, Philosopher*, 1.

3 *Ibid.*, 1.

4 *Ibid.*, 10.

the current view. Or finally, it may be held that these activities are themselves direct expressions of a person's "moral nature" or "moral being" and demand a type of description which is not limited to the choice and argument model.⁵

2. This led her to argue that moral decisions cannot be attributed to universal principles or rules, because they depend on the singularity of personal visions expressed in particular situations, but that exception is the rule, so to speak. In later essays, such as "The Sublime and the Good" (1959) and "The Idea of Perfection" (1964), Murdoch increasingly drew on Simone Weil's concept of "loving attention" to define her views of ethics as "a just and loving gaze directed upon an individual reality".⁶ By redefining goodness as a matter of vision, perception and loving attention, by shifting the paradigms of morality from choice, will or action to the ethical imagination, Murdoch anticipated some aspects of the ethics of care, as developed by Carol Gilligan, the idea that there are no universal moral rules but only particular moral situations that need to be assessed individually and that require specific moral attention.⁷ As Martha Nussbaum and Cora Diamond have shown,⁸ art as an exercise in empathic vision is central to Murdoch's conception of ethics:

Art and morals are, with certain provisos which I shall mention in a moment, one. Their essence is the same. The essence of both of them is love. Love is the perception of individuals. Love is the extremely difficult realisation that something other than oneself is real. Love, and so art and morals, is the discovery of reality. What stuns us into a realisation of our supersensible destiny is not, as Kant imagined, the formlessness of nature, but rather its unutterable particularity; and most particular and individual of all natural things is the mind of man.⁹

Murdoch's views on ethics resonate with contemporary philosophical discourse, such as Giorgio Agamben's, for instance, who was also influenced by Simone Weil, and who, in *The Coming Community* (1990), tries to imagine a community based on sheer singularities eluding any attempt at categorisation ("*singularités quelconques*").

3. Murdoch's ethical views translate into her novels, in which moral success or failure depends upon the characters' scope of attention, their ability to see the situation for what it really is, to cast

5 I. Murdoch, "Vision and Choice in Morality" (1956), *Existentialists and Mystics*, 80-81.

6 "I have used the word 'attention', which I borrow from Simone Weil, to express the idea of a just and loving gaze directed upon an individual reality. I believe this to be the characteristic and proper mark of the active moral agent." (I. Murdoch, "The Idea of Perfection" (1964), *Existentialists and Mystics*, 327)

7 S. Laugier, "L'éthique comme politique de l'ordinaire", 84; "Care, environnement et éthique globale", 142.

8 See M. Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy*, Cambridge: CUP, 1986; M. Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature*, Oxford: OUP, 1990; C. Diamond, "Having a Rough Story about What Moral Philosophy Is", *The Realistic Spirit: Wittgenstein, Philosophy and the Mind*, Cambridge MA: the MIT Press, 1991, 374.

9 I. Murdoch, "The Sublime and the Good" (1959), *Existentialists and Mystics*, 215. On Murdoch's "ethics of vision", see also M. Antonaccio, "The Virtues of Metaphysics: A Review of Murdoch's Philosophical Writings", 161.

“a just and loving gaze upon an individual reality”.¹⁰ Her 1978 Booker Prize winning novel, *The Sea, The Sea*, is told from the perspective of an unreliable first-person narrator, Charles Arrowby, a former theatre director/actor, who decided to retire to a seaside town on the North Sea, to “repent of a life of egoism”, “become a hermit” and “learn to be good”.¹¹ There, he starts writing a day-to-day account of his life in his new surroundings, “a record of mingled thoughts and daily observations: ‘my philosophy’, my *pensées* against a background of simple descriptions of the weather and other natural phenomena” (SS 2), conflating memories of his past life, portraits of significant people and private fantasies. As in many of Murdoch’s novels, the setting is partly allegorical and contributes to the sense of apartness experienced by the main character. Charles has moved to an ugly house called Shruff End, situated on a promontory, overlooking the small town of Narrowdean, on one side—a toponym suggesting his restricted outlook on the world—, and facing the sea, on the other, a symbol of contingency in Murdoch’s work:

Art confers significance; the sea especially the Northern seas of her many [...] novels—mocks significance, or rather, seems to present the realm of *contingency*, a key term in Iris Murdoch’s moral universe, betokening our seemingly random subjection to chance and mortality; against which and out of which realm the significance of art is to be drawn.¹²

Charles is the embodiment of a recurring type in Murdoch’s fiction, the existentialist, neo-romantic hero, “powerful, self-assertive”,¹³ guided by willpower and solipsistic egoism, cut off from ordinary people and suffering from a deluded sense of exceptionality, “the new version of the romantic man, the man of power, abandoned by God, struggling on bravely, sincerely and alone”.¹⁴ A new Prospero, exiled of his own free will, who professes to abjure the magic of the theatre—“Now I shall abjure magic and become a hermit” (SS 2)—Charles is unable to surrender his delusions of power and deliberately locks himself up in a Platonic cave of his own making, in which he revels in the contemplation of his own private fantasies.

4. The opening pages of the novel re-enact the solipsistic birth of the egotistic subject to his new environment, as, in the early stages of his stay, Charles only mentions his interactions with the natural world—the sea, rocks, flowers, birds—, before introducing other people. Instead of opening up to the richness of the constantly changing seascape, and establishing an ethical mode of interaction with the world around him, Charles appropriates it—“this, here, is my cave” (SS 4), “my yellow

10 I. Murdoch, “The Idea of Perfection” (1964), *Existentialists and Mystics*, 327.

11 I. Murdoch, *The Sea, The Sea* (1978), London: Vintage, 1999, 2 [SS from now on].

12 P. J. Conradi, “Iris Murdoch and the Sea”, 2.

13 I. Murdoch, “Existentialists and Mystics” (1970), *Existentialists and Mystics*, 226.

14 *Ibid.*, 227.

rocks” (2), “[m]y ‘cliff’ as I call it” (5), “my various pools” (7)—as a reflection of his own mental states. Thus, his day-to-day accounts of variations in the weather and in the seascape only serve as a background to the never-ending ebb and flow of his thoughts and obsessions, as encapsulated in the title of the novel.¹⁵ As becomes obvious very early on, Charles refuses to face the particular and contingent in nature, preferring instead to see natural phenomena, such as the star-lit sky or the sea, as the expression of a Kantian sublime, which however completely fails to elicit any moral law within him, or to subsume singularities into types through unconvincing attempts at taxonomy:

Walking back I looked into my various pools. What a remarkable amount of beautiful and curious life they contain. I must buy some books about these matters, if I am to become, even to my own modest satisfaction, the Gilbert White of this area. I also picked up a number of pretty stones and carried them to my other lawn. They are smooth, elliptical, lovely to handle. One, a mottled pink, elaborately crossed with white lines, lies before me as I write. (7-8)

Charles’s dabbling with natural history is a way for him to elude nature’s “unutterable particularity”¹⁶ by “positing universal significance”, through properties and categories, in place of singular individuals, by “transform[ing] singularities into members of a class”.¹⁷ His interest in rarities or unique objects—Charles singles out one stone, which he appropriates and transfigures into an art object, self-contained and autonomous—also partakes of his desire to essentialize singularity into exceptionality, to abstract himself from the chaotic reality of the world through a form of “ecstatic mysticism”:

Themes of “wonder” and the “marvel of Being” are suspect if they refer to an ecstatic mysticism that pretends to escape the world. The theme of scientific curiosity is no less suspect if it boils down to a collector’s preoccupation with rarities. In both cases, desire for the exception presupposes disdain for the ordinary.¹⁸

5. Charles’s failure to see singularity in nature reflects his failure to see singularity in people and to grant them the particular “loving attention” required to treat them ethically. As a former theatre director, Charles revels in casting individuals into types or roles—such as his ex-girlfriend Lizzie, a perfect Ariel in his production of *The Tempest*—and is also paradoxically bent on a mystical quest for the absolute. His whole existence is based on what Peter J. Conradi calls a “life-myth”,¹⁹ the Pla-

15 “[The] title comes from Paul Valéry’s great poem ‘The Graveyard by the Sea’ [*Le Cimetière marin*], which in turn alludes in its final lines to the Greeks’ excited cry in Xenophon’s *Anabasis*, ‘*Thalassa, thalassa!*’ on sighting salt water during the Persian wars.” (P. J. Conradi, *The Saint and the Artist*, 293)

16 I. Murdoch, “The Sublime and the Good” (1959), *Existentialists and Mystics*, 215.

17 G. Agamben, *The Coming Community*, 8.

18 J-L. Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, 10.

19 P. J. Conradi, “Iris Murdoch and the Sea”, 4.

tonic love he once felt for his teenage girlfriend, Mary Hartley Smith. Although he saw Hartley—as he chose to call her to set her apart from all the other Mary Smiths in the area—as his soul mate, she put an end to their relationship, because he was “so sort of bossy” (SS 233). He was left unable to truly love again, finding comfort in a string of unsatisfactory *liaisons* with neurotic or needy actresses, symbolically confining himself to the realm of illusions, the shadows in his Platonic cave:

I never (except for once when I was young) seriously considered marriage. I loved once (the same once) absolutely. (SS 41)

I have only really loved once [...]. (SS 44)

I would like to reserve that phrase to describe the one single occasion when I loved a woman absolutely. (SS 78)

My first love, and also my only love. (SS 83)

And that was passion and that was love of a purity which can never come again and which I am sure rarely exists in the world at all. (SS 86)

6. A few days after his arrival in Narrowdean, Charles finds out that Hartley is also living there. She has now become the quintessence of the ordinary: “a stout elderly woman in a shapeless brown tent-like dress” (SS 122). She has mousy hair and a moustache on her upper lip. She is married to a retired soldier, Ben Fitch, who bullies her, and they live together in a small, ugly bungalow called “Nibletts”. However, Charles still sees her as his lost soul mate, “a miracle of love preserved” (SS 130). He is convinced that he must rescue her from a loveless marriage and that a Platonic relation with her, a “mystical marriage” (SS 155), will redeem him of a life of egoism and give him access to the Good: “Was Hartley, seen not touched, loved not possessed, destined to make me a saint? How strange and significant that I had come precisely *here* to repent of my egoism! Was this perhaps the final sense of my mystical marriage with my only love?” (SS 148). Because he hopes to possess Hartley’s essence in a mystical union, Charles completely fails to see her singularity, shaped by years of marriage and habits, what Murdoch would call the “texture” of her moral being, and which Agamben describes as “*singularité quelconque*”, a manner of being or an ethos continually self-engendered, eluding “properties”—an “im-property”:

Only the idea of this modality of rising forth, this original mannerism of being, allows us to find a common passage between ontology and ethics. The being that does not remain below itself, that does not *presuppose* itself as a hidden essence that chance or destiny would then condemn to the torment of qualifications, but rather *exposes* itself in its qualifications, *is its thus* without remainder—such a

being is neither accidental nor necessary, but is, so to speak, *continually engendered from its own manner*. [...] Perhaps the only way to understand this free *use of the self*, a way that does not, however, treat existence as a property, is to think of it as a *habitus*, an *ethos*. Being engendered from one's own manner of being is, in effect, the very definition of habit (this is why the Greeks spoke of a second nature): *That manner is ethical that does not befall us and does not found us but engenders us*. And this being engendered from one's own manner is the only happiness really possible for humans. But a manner of rising forth is also the place of whatever singularity, its *principium individuationis*. For the being that is its own manner this is not, in effect, so much a property that determines and identifies it as an essence, but rather an impropriety; what makes it exemplary, however, is that this impropriety is assumed and appropriated as its unique being.²⁰

7. Instead of giving him access to the “essence” of Hartley’s being, Charles’s growing obsession, his fantasies of playing Paris to his Helen of Troy, Orpheus to his Eurydice, or Perseus to his Andromeda, cuts him off from reality and confines him further to the prison of the ego. Unable to understand that “the original role of the [Platonic] Forms [is] not to lead us to some attenuated elsewhere but to show us the real world”, Charles embarks on a fruitless quest, epitomized by his stone collection, a “pursuit to *infimae species*”, to the lowest possible terms:²¹

I swam every day, sometimes in the sun, sometimes in the rain, and began to feel soaked in the sea as if it were penetrating my skin. When the sun shone I spent time out on the rocks. Gilbert kept watch over the front door and went out to look for letters, only no one called and Hartley did not write. I returned to my obsessive task of collecting stones, picking them out of tide-washed crannies and rock pools and carrying them back to the lawn, where Gilbert helped me with my border round the edge of the grass. The stones, so close-textured, so variously decorated, so individual, so handy, pleased me as if they were a small harmless tribe which I had discovered. Some of them were beautiful with a simple wit beyond that of any artist: light grey with thin pink traceries, black with elaborate white crosses, brown with purple ellipses, spotted and blotched and striped, and their exquisitely smooth forms lightly dented and creased by the millennial work of the sea. More and more of them now found their way into the house, to lie upon the rosewood table or on my bedroom window ledge. (SS 260-261)

Although the natural world gives Charles the key to a good life, by presenting him with “close-tex-

20 G. Agamben, *The Coming Community*, 27-28.

21 “It remains Plato’s (surely correct) view that the bad (or mediocre) man is in a state of illusion, of which egoism is the most general name, though particular cases would of course suggest more detailed descriptions. Obsession, prejudice, envy, anxiety, ignorance, greed, neurosis, and so on and so on *veil* reality. The defeat of illusion requires moral effort. The instructed and morally purified mind sees reality clearly and indeed (in an important sense) provides us with the concept. The original role of the Forms was not to lead us to some attenuated elsewhere but to show us the real world. It is the dreamer in the cave who is astray and elsewhere. What here becomes of the problem of the relation of Forms to particulars, and is it still important? If dialectic is a kind of logic, together with a kind of classification involving a pursuit to *infimae species*, then the problem posed at the end of the *Theaetetus* about the unknowability of the particular may indeed remain, but may also be deemed trivial.” (I. Murdoch, “The Fire and the Sun: Why Plato Banished the Artists” (1977), *Existentialists and Mystics*, 426-427)

ured”, beautifully varied stones, the epitome of “the agentic contributions of nonhuman forces”, “to counter the narcissistic reflex of human language and thought”,²² Charles only sees other people as objects he can manipulate or “handle” like the stones, to lure Hartley into Shruff End and sequester her.

8. As a token of his love, Charles selects and gives Hartley, “the most beautiful stone on the shore”, “[his] very first [stone], the prize of [his] collection, hand-sized, a mottled pink, irregularly criss-crossed with white bars in a design before which Klee and Mondrian would have bowed to the ground” (SS 306), but this “hand-sized” stone is also the sign of his desire for “a unique, exclusive, and egoistic appropriation”:

If we do not have access to the other in the mode just described, but seek to appropriate the origin—which is something we always do—then this same curiosity transforms itself into appropriative or destructive rage. We no longer look for a singularity of the origin in the other; we look for the unique and exclusive origin, in order to either adopt it or reject it. The other becomes the Other according to the mode of desire or hatred.²³

When, in the face of Hartley’s utter confusion and misery, Charles eventually comes to his senses and releases her, she returns to her husband and together they move to Australia. At the very end of the novel, Charles returns to Niblets hoping to find a sign of Hartley’s love for him, he then notices “an unusual stone lying half covered by the earth” (SS 489), in the front yard of the house, the stone he had given her at Shruff End. A symbol of his rejected love, the stone also represents “the exteriority of singularity in what would have to be called its mineral [...] actuality”,²⁴ the concrete remainder of what he failed to see in Hartley, the “texture” of her moral being: “It was the mottled pink stone with the white chequering which I had given to Hartley [...]. I put it in my pocket” (SS 489).

9. Redemption, or partial redemption, for Charles, will not come from a mystical union with Hartley, but from his connection with another character, his cousin James, an ex-soldier and believer in Tibetan Buddhism, who will counteract Charles’s “ecstatic mysticism” with a form of “practical mysticism”,²⁵ “rooted in common humanity, in ‘ordinary’ being”, a belief at the heart of Murdoch’s conception of ethics:

22 J. Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, xvi.

23 J-L. Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, 20.

24 *Ibid.*, 18.

25 P. J. Conradi, *The Saint and the Artist*, 108.

Properly grasped, the “mystical” pursuit of the Good, of perfect unison with moral truths, arises out of a rootedness in common humanity, in “ordinary” being, far more concrete than either the “language-games” of analytic-academic philosophers or the ideologies of the existentialist. For Iris Murdoch, there is in “mysticism”, when it is attached to life, a deep-lying utilitarianism. In all this, the absolutely key *persona* is that of Simone Weil. It is Weil’s concept of *enracinement*, it is her invocation of solid weight (*pesanteur*) when applied to grace, it is the sacrificial tenor of her wretched existence, which, for Iris Murdoch exemplify and re-insure the otherwise contradictory ideal of immanent transcendence, of down-to-earth “rapture” or illumination.²⁶

Although, at the beginning of the novel, James merely hovers in the background of Charles’s self-centred narrative, it soon becomes obvious that he is endowed with a clarity of vision and an instinctive grasp of the complexity of moral situations which completely eludes Charles.²⁷ James knows that meaningful relations with people can only be achieved by taking into account the whole network of moral interactions with a plurality of “ordinary” people, not just the significant, capitalized “Other”: “Being cannot be anything but being-with-one-another”, in a “singularly plural coexistence”, “a constitution that undoes or dislocates every single, substantial essence of Being itself”.²⁸ Thus, on his arrival at Shruff End, James starts arranging Charles’s collection of stones into a pattern of relationality, “taking the stones out of the trough and arranging them on the grass in a complicated circular design” (SS 382):

James is in fact, if not an exemplary Murdochian saint, one who is closest to “good” of anyone in the novel, and his powers are centred on his control of the inanimate: “he had, Charles tells us, “a sort of uncanny instinct about things” [...]. Such an affinity with objects transgresses the strict object/subject hierarchy of the collector [...] and replaces it with the subordination of oneself to the material stuff of the world [...].²⁹

Unlike Charles, James also succeeds in connecting with most of the other characters: he finds Titus, Hartley’s son, who had run away from home, and brings him to Shruff End; he succeeds in winning Ben’s esteem; he intuits the nature of Hartley’s complex relations with her husband; he tells Charles, to no avail, that she is just “a phantom Helen [of Troy]” (SS 378), that love is not a matter of willpower but a matter of attention: “To establish relationships, you can’t just elect people, it can’t be done just by thinking and willing” (SS 411).

10. Even though this is never made explicit, we are led to understand that James has strong feel-

26 G. Steiner, foreword to *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings in Philosophy and Literature by Iris Murdoch* (1997), P. J. Conradi (ed.), xiii-xiv.

27 P. J. Conradi, *The Saint and the Artist*, 307.

28 J-L. Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, 28-29.

29 J. Jordan, “‘A Thingy World’: Iris Murdoch’s Stuff”, 371.

ings of affection towards Charles and that he will try to act as a guide towards “practical mysticism”.³⁰ Soon after James’s arrival at Shruff End, Charles is violently pushed into Minn’s Cauldron, a whirlpool enclosed in the rocks, by Peregrine Arbelow, a friend whose marriage he deliberately broke up years before. His fall into the pool brings Charles into brutal contact with the reality of matter, and the contingent in life, as he is knocked unconscious against the rocks. Against all odds, James saves Charles, literally by climbing down the rocks, lifting him out of the sea and carrying him to safety, thus figuratively pulling him out of the whirlpool of his own obsessions.

To be able to swim, for Murdoch, is within her fiction almost to possess moral competence. [...] There are few Murdoch novels during which no one swims—sometimes in the Thames—and drowning is the commonest death—in a swimming-pool (*A Fairly Honourable Defeat*), a bath (*An Accidental Man*), the sea (*The Sea, The Sea*), a flashflood (*The Unicorn*), the Thames (*A Word Child*), a Public Baths (*The Philosopher’s Pupil*). Ordeals by water also abound. I have noted Cooper in the bog in *The Unicorn*; there are ordeals in a canal in the Midi in *Nuns and Soldiers*, and in the sea in *The Nice and the Good*, and in *The Philosopher’s Pupil*, and in the forthcoming *The Green Knight*. This is not an exhaustive list. The descriptions of such events are always superbly imagined and evoked. They also embody the wisdom, in which her books abound, that a brave immersion in the detail of the world, and of other lives, is both necessary but can carry with it no indemnity against mischance. The sea, in which Murdoch has recounted she herself once nearly drowned, is also “a vast image of power and danger”, an image of uncreated form itself, or of “infinite” multiplicity and contingency.³¹

Brutally “immersed in the detail of the world”, Charles barely but miraculously survives. Titus, however, whom Charles fails to warn about the dangers of the sea, drowns later on. This episode brings about a form of realization for Charles, a better understanding of James’s outlook, when he finds out, much later, that James saved him, and that he involuntarily caused the death of Titus.

Both sea-scape and star-scape are conventional triggers of the sublime, and the sublime here might be defined by its opposition to the box of obsession. Dwarfing both Charles’s one-pointed maundering pain about Hartley, and his pain about his life, are the multiplicity and disorder of the natural world. Charles has given Hartley the status of absolute in his life. Sea and stars decree that such incarnate absolutes must be delusive. Charles has made Hartley the source of all significance in his private religion. The sea, in changing from second-to-second while he watches it, mocks such transcendence, declares it premature.³²

11. Before leaving Shruff End, and soon before he himself dies of spiritual exhaustion, James takes a stone from Charles’s collection, as a token of their newly-formed bond: the stone James ran-

30 P. J. Conradi, *The Saint and the Artist*, 108.

31 P. J. Conradi, “Iris Murdoch and the sea”, 7.

32 *Ibid.*, 10.

domly picks up represents his ability to see singularity in nature, his belief in the “ideal of immanent transcendence, down-to-earth ‘rapture’ or illumination”³³, the “gravity” that connects him to ordinary life. James’s acceptance of the state of the world as it is (“its being-thus—irreparable”³⁴) is precisely what enables him to save a human life and to prove that a specific act of loving attention can take on a universal significance:

The Irreparable is neither an essence nor an existence, neither a substance nor a quality, neither a possibility nor a necessity. It is not properly a modality of being, but it is the being that is always already given in modality, that *is* its modalities. It is not *thus*, but rather it is *its* thus. *Thus*. The meaning of this little word is the most difficult to grasp.³⁵

James guides Charles towards a partial understanding of the paradox at the heart of Murdoch’s conception of ethics, the fact that we can only have access to transcendence through the ultimate state of the singular, that love is not an ecstatic, out-of-the-world, experience, based on exceptionality, but a perception of people in their singularity, their “being-thus”, “the most difficult task”, according to Agamben: “Seeing something simply in its being-thus—irreparable, but not for that reason necessary; thus, but not for that reason contingent—is love. At the point you perceive the irreparability of the world, at that point it is transcendent”.³⁶

12. The novel concludes on Charles’s partial redemption, as he realizes his own lack of exceptionality—“But am I so exceptional?” (SS 517-518)—and pays tribute to James:

As I write I am touching with my other hand the brown stone with the blue lines on it which James selected from my collection at Shruff End. It was on the desk when I came here and perhaps he handled it a lot, so touching it is a bit like touching his hand (what sentimental nonsense). I hold the stone and play with a kind of emotion which I keep at bay. Loving people, isn’t that an attachment? I do not want to suffer fruitlessly. I feel regret, remorse, that I never got to know him better. We were never really friends and I spent a lot of my life stupidly envying him, nervously watching him, and exerting myself in a competition which he probably never knew existed. In so far as he did not succeed I was glad, and I valued my own success because it seemed that I outshone him. My awareness of him was fear, anxiety, envy, desire to impress. Could such an awareness contain or compose love? We missed each other because of lack of confidence, courage, generosity, because of misplaced dignity and English taciturnity. I feel now as if something of me went with James’s death, like part of a bridge carried away in a flood. (SS 532-533)

33 G. Steiner, foreword to *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings in Philosophy and Literature* by Iris Murdoch (1997), Peter J. Conradi (ed.), xiv.

34 G. Agamben, *The Coming Community*, 105.

35 *Ibid.*, 91-92.

36 *Ibid.*, 105.

While the stone Charles gave to Hartley, a symbol of ecstatic union and “egoistic appropriation”,³⁷ ends up lying on the lawn, a remainder/reminder of an unfulfilled human connection, James’s stone, the embodiment of his rootedness in ordinary life and common humanity, elicits a sense of touch and relationality between the two men. Charles’s final gesture connecting the act of writing with the ethical bond—“As I write I am touching with my other hand the brown stone with the blue lines on it” (SS 532)—, a gesture which partly redeems him as an artist, reminds us of Murdoch’s belief in art as a fundamentally ethical practice and of her conception of the novel as a unique literary form combining a detailed representation of particulars with patterns or symbols conveying universal significance:

Great art, then, by introducing a chaste self-critical precision into its mimesis, its representation of the world by would-be complete, yet incomplete, forms, inspires truthfulness and humility. (So Plato, though partly right, was partly wrong.) Great art is able to display and discuss the central area of our reality, our actual consciousness, in a more exact way than science or even philosophy can. I want to speak finally about one of the main tools of this exploration: words. If we wish to exhibit to ourselves the unpretentious, un-bogus, piercing lucidity of which art is capable we may think of certain pictures, certain music. (Bach, Piero.) Or we may think of a use of words by Homer or Shakespeare. But there is no doubt which art is the most practically important for our survival and our salvation, and that is literature. Words constitute the ultimate texture and stuff of our moral being, since they are the most refined and delicate and detailed, as well as the most universally used and understood, of the symbolisms whereby we express ourselves into existence.³⁸

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37 J-L. Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, 53.

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