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SWIMMING AS MORAL COMPETENCE

Iris Murdoch's Crest of a Wave



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Introduction

The writer and philosopher Iris Murdoch (1919–1999) loved to swim in the sea. Throughout her life, she was drawn to water and swam not only in the sea but in lakes, rivers and ponds near Oxford, the city she lived in most of her life. Every so often she went alone to swim, sometimes with her husband, the critic and professor of literature John Bayley. When they moved to the countryside for a few years, Murdoch would occasionally enter – to the astonishment of those around her – into the small shallow pool behind the house. The modest pool in the big garden became a place of rest and creativity; in the countryside she never learned to like.¹

Water is one of Murdoch's most enduring images, and in several of her novels it becomes a symbol of cleansing and forgiving as well as a darker token of something frightening.² As novelist, Murdoch was continuously engaged in creating pictures of the moral world in all its complicated messiness and she expressed a theoretical interest in the novel's ability to show realistic pictures of human strivings.³

It could be argued that water and swimming become a prevalent analogy to a particular kind of moral insight that the writer and philosopher Iris Murdoch was deeply engaged in approaching, and shedding light on.⁴ Murdoch's biographer, Peter Conradi, said that "to be able to swim, for Murdoch, is in her fiction almost the same as to possess a moral competence."⁵ He also wrote that "swimming seems to act as the unofficial counter-image of a healing surrender to the mysterious supportive properties of the world, as well as its mysterious destructive powers."⁶ What does it mean to possess "a moral

competence” in the way Conradi suggests? And how can swimming be a “counter-image” for a character in a novel?

In the following I wish to dwell on the presence of the sea, swimming as a literary motif and the closeness it has to Murdoch’s ideas on morals, by uncovering images and themes of water in her novel *The Sea, the Sea* from 1978. The sea is the novel’s title, its undercurrent as well as its silent main character. Water and its unreliable nature and sometimes provocative silence despite the strong power it holds, act as aesthetic surface against which the novel’s unexpected changes make the reader aware that life is uncontrollable, just like the sea. Something about the fluidity and reciprocal nature of Murdoch’s intellectual temperament, how her mind shifted in ways that are difficult to trace in advance but needs to be *experienced* through her writing, is discernible in her high regard for swimming. Swimming – and from now on it is wild swimming that is our starting point – therefore forms an exciting bridge between the literary and the philosophical in her double practice.

Murdoch was awarded the Booker Prize for this novel, and it is one of her most read, and most loved. The importance of the sea and swimming in her novels as a repeated theme has been noted by Murdoch scholars but in its everyday indeterminacy and how swimming as practice designates an important act of immersion in nature and self-awareness, Murdoch’s use of water has perhaps not been accorded the significance it deserves.⁷ To swim, for Iris Murdoch, is indeed like Peter Conradi suggested to possess moral competence and I would like to show why.

Around the Horizon: The Article’s Contexts and Frameworks

Iris Murdoch began studying at Oxford in 1938. She initially read Greats (Oxford’s special model for studying ancient languages and philosophy) at Somerville College but came to move very purposefully towards moral philosophy. She became tutor at St Anne’s but was, above all, an acclaimed writer of twenty-six novels, several plays and collections of poetry.

During the 1960s, Murdoch begins a liberation process from the

university and philosophy as part of an institutional life. She swaps Oxford for London and enters a teaching arrangement at The Royal College of Art. Once in London, she discovers a new world. It is freer, both sexually and spiritually, and intellectual questions do not hold the same exalted place as in Oxford. Her heyday as a novel writer follows after her time in London, amongst art students. In letters she wrote from this period, Murdoch is exhausted – and often misses the sea.⁸

Throughout Murdoch's professional life, she alternated between philosophy and literature, an interaction that seems to have made her happy. In my literary dissertation on Murdoch, I contended that her philosophical intuitions and intentions were most skillfully formulated and realized in her novels.⁹ The argument was that the structure of the novels and their direction towards philosophical insight show why what is sometimes difficult to investigate in philosophy, appears as “congruent with life” in the form of the novel. In the novel, human disorders and moral contradictions are not problematic but rather realistic. Art, and novels, can be averse to the idea of completion, even if it requires form, while the practice of philosophy would find it difficult to abandon emphasizing and following the argument towards securing validity of thought, clarity and reason.¹⁰ For this article's purpose, since I am interested in discussing swimming as moral competence in Murdoch's novel *The Sea, the Sea*, something brief needs to be said about her idea of morality and our endeavors to reach “the good”.

Iris Murdoch defines the good to which we all strive (she walks in the footsteps of Plato) as existing “beyond” humans. Yet the human capacity to approach the good is eternal and inexhaustible. Murdoch's idea, which she develops most fully in *The Sovereignty of Good*, is that morality should not be understood as outward actions or following rules.¹¹ The emphasis she puts on the execution of practices in everyday life (praying, falling in love, rituals such as braiding one's hair, looking at art and being in nature) to get closer to the idea of the good, where attempts, intentions, and attention are at the heart of our human efforts, concerns emphasizing various pathways for the inner life. Moral competence thus, is not something you achieve by “being good” or when you apply abstract moral rules to perfect be-

havior.¹² Instead, the good reveals itself as the guiding principle of the moral life, and as ultimate reality it is often something we discover in literature and art, in the everyday life: its recognition is part of living in the world.¹³ “The living” as a realistic human experience is also the moral fabric of Murdoch’s novels, where the complexities and psychological machinery inherent to life becomes visible.¹⁴

One of the key elements in how we are drawn towards the good has to do with attention and “unselfing”.¹⁵ Murdoch borrows the concept of “unselfing” or “decreation” from Simone Weil and means with it an emptying of the ego, an occasion most readily experienced in our communion with entities outside of ourselves, but with the purpose to stir our inner lives.¹⁶ “Unselfing” is a practice where we get closer to the good and it is a philosophical keystone in Murdoch’s thinking.¹⁷ As humans we need to make away with our own egotistical fantasies and displace our own self by giving attention to the reality around us, she argues. Finding these instances where moments of unselfing occur and explain why they are part of our moral world preoccupies Murdoch as philosopher, and her approach becomes visible in the penchant for examples and images. One of the most enduring and famous is found in *The Sovereignty of Good* where we encounter “the kestrel” as an important perspective shifter for moral transformation, that is, as “breaker” of the ego. The kestrel is observed by a man in an anxious and resentful state of mind, who experiences a moment where everything is altered when he sees a hovering kestrel. The brooding self disappears, he fully takes in the animal in the sky and follows its movement, and when the preying bird flies on the obsessive thinking which has clouded his mind ebbs away.¹⁸

The moral life, which involves processes of unselfing, concerns an internal, continuous reciprocal process directed toward reality and others. Murdoch also articulates how art is “an image of metaphysics”, affirming a close relation between art, literature and philosophy, so she was aware of the trade-offs, pitfalls and opportunities that constantly revolve around questions of form.¹⁹ We are story-telling animals, stories are ways of thinking Murdoch argues, and “fictional characters swim in a moral atmosphere”.²⁰ We can keep Murdoch’s insight in mind as we continue.

Dropping Anchor: The Article's Foundations

Swedish writer and philosopher Kate Larson suggests that swimming for Murdoch implied “immersion in otherness”.²¹ In her choice of “otherness”, Larson highlights the connection between Simone Weil and Iris Murdoch, and although I think the metaphor of otherness is philosophically useful, since it denotes something relational but different, I would suggest that swimming is immersion in what Martin Heidegger called “thinginess”.²² Swimming is an activity that is to do with the adventure, the lightness, the power of the wave, and swimming in the wild has its own *reality*, the sea is not unfamiliar, other, it is rather something of its own. The poet Diane Mehta speaks of swimming in the oceans as a place for reimagination and to me this lies close to what is on offer with the word “thinginess”, where swimming as experience is one of dynamic movement between revelation and concealment, that builds up to sensations where things are the same but different.²³ Following Plato, Murdoch regards the real ethical “moment” as taking place when the natural world is “seen in the light of the sun and not in the flickering fires of the cave in which we are captive” and I also understand Murdoch to mean that swimming is an intimate act with oneself that is simultaneously shared with nature.²⁴

For the scholar Hannah Marije Altorf, swimming, in Murdoch’s view, concerns the self and how it “at the same time disappears”.²⁵ Altorf’s description is beautifully on point, but I would, based on the idea that the good is an preemptory absolute, reverse the starting point and put the emphasis on nature, the outside world first, not the self. The milieu enables the self to adjust, and the disappearance of the self is an effect of being engaged with nature: the natural world trumps the ego.²⁶ There is support for this theory, this idea that I would like to bring forth, where nature forces a *switch* of attention, in Murdoch’s own writings. As seen above, her philosophical emphasis on unselfing, where swimming could be taken as an activity of movement in which the ego and the self momentarily lose out to nature’s demands for attention, parallels the kestrel that breaks established patterns of thought and serves as a reminder of reality outside the self in *The Sovereignty of Good*. Murdoch also talks about swim-

ming as “a spiritual activity” in letters to her friend Philippa Foot, which suggests that the amorphous quality the sea bears can lift the veil of our false perceptions and make us see more clearly.²⁷ The self is always present, so to speak, but can be nudged by its surroundings. Swimming in the sea *as an activity* where the swimmer is in nature, attentive and yet dissolved by water, thereby gives rise to a fitting opening, an occasion, for perfecting the path towards the good. The dangerous and tempting sea offers submission to a wondrous element but also profound wisdom on what it means to reflect on and pay attention: morality and morals for Murdoch means abiding by the metaphysical, it is not, as previously stated, something separate or closed off as in ethical rules “out there” but part of our existence.

Iris Murdoch’s connection to waters more specifically appears most clearly while reading her novels, since the novel becomes this life-giving form where the practice of the good can be illuminated. To trace the sea and its function in *The Sea, the Sea*, something needs to be said about the novel’s plot and literary method.

***The Sea, the Sea*: Plot, Twist**

“Prehistory”, “History” and “Postscript: Life goes on” are the three parts that structure *The Sea, the Sea*.²⁸ The plot in this novel concerns the London actor Charles Arrowby, who like Prospero of Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, has retired to the seaside to “abjure the rough magic”.²⁹ Charles is giving up the theatre to write his memoirs. We are introduced to his writing attempts from the very beginning:

I spoke of a memoir. Is that what this chronicle will prove to be? Time will show. At this moment, a page old, it feels more like a diary than a memoir. Well, let it be a diary then. How I regret that I did not keep one earlier, what a record that would have been! But now the main events of my life are over and there is to be nothing but ‘recollection in tranquillity’. (1)

Early on Charles speaks of being shy of his emotions, that he will describe things more accurately when he has generated “a sufficient cloud of reflection” (17). His persevering attempts at writing a

“memoir”, “chronicle”, “diary” – he characterizes his book somewhat differently – and his continuous struggles with finding the perfect form for his subject, “I shall discover my ‘literary form’” (2), or “What a difficult form autobiography is proving to be!” (63), at first suggest that we are dealing with a protagonist who seeks closure but also desires to deepen his own self. We are motivated as readers by his promises of more revelations and await them with interest and a bit of skepticism. Murdoch’s literary method is readerly interplay, to engage by sprinkling information about a character’s traits and virtues, and Charles is extremely preoccupied by the contents of his picnic meals, his hyperboles and announcements. Events such as these in the novel are where the reader detects a theme of self-delusion. He is not attentive to the world around him.

While having retired to the little house called Shruff End, Charles encounters, unexpectedly, his first love Hartley. She lives nearby with her bullying husband Ben Fitch, and their adopted son Titus. When Charles moves into Shruff End, Titus is on the run from home. Shruff End appears to be haunted, and there are mysterious incidents happening that break with the realistic frame.³⁰ Objects are falling apart, things disappear, and all these events connect with the inexplicable things that happen in the mind of Charles. For example, a vase falls on the floor and breaks into several pieces (39) and this troubles Charles to such an extent that it signals to the reader to pay attention to his apparent self-preoccupation. The larger plot network points in the same direction; that Charles is deeply absorbed with himself. The former center of his life (the public theatre life, the shrewd world of the stage) has shifted into something much more mundane and isolated, and perhaps life’s new tediousness makes him beset with details (“Perhaps I shifted the vase very slightly when I dusted it yesterday?” [39]). His prior life slips away and the ordinariness of the new existence – such as heating up soup or eating biscuits – fills his days. Charles is fallible and the reader gets that he will experience some kind of “coming-to-know-that-he-is-fallible”. An incident in the local pub is somewhat worrying, where a conversation between guests about how many seconds it would take for you to drown in the sea passes Charles completely by. Instead, he answers nonchalant-

ly that he is a strong swimmer. “It’s them that drowns”, a local adds, as warning (67). Charles swims every day and feels “fit and salty” and “innocent and free”, “[p]erhaps it is all that swimming” (67). This scene feels like a bad omen.

Nature has a prominent role in this novel in several ways. The story begins with a description of the sea as part of a landscape full of different colors: “luxurious purple”, “emerald green”, “indigo”, “yellow,” “lighter green”, “silver” – all of these descriptive colors “perform” before Charles’ eyes within the very first paragraph. It is possible to use the word “perform” since his vision on the sea, the sky and the sun suggests that nature exists independently, and he is writing all this down at the same time as he witnesses what he sees. We are “in the north” he informs us, and everything “looks cold” (1). When nature is described in the novel it is intercepted as if it has a life that is partly hidden. Nature’s colors, the sea, the cliffs and pathways, are beyond our control and comprehension. This forms an archaic backdrop to the magic in the novel, and highlights life’s continuity and the eternal truths. Murdoch’s philosophical emphasis on nature for awaking our minds and seeing, as a path towards “ulselfing”, is present in *The Sea, the sea* too.

Something about the boredom and slowness of Charles’ existence is ominous. The fact that Titus’ relationship with his adoptive father Ben has deteriorated enables Charles to use Titus to attract Hartley. In what must be interpreted as a re-enacting of the memories of youth, Charles compels his own history into present. Events take a dramatic turn, edged with violence and abuse, when he decides to kidnap Hartley and take her from a marriage, he concludes must be torturous and unhappy. The episodes between Hartley and Charles show the power struggle that is thwarting Charles’s seeing: the dialogues between them testify to his ignorance and meanness (299–308), he is “blind”. Charles’ obsession with his past is now underlying all his actions, and his sudden infatuation with Hartley redirects the narrative spotlight from Charles as Solitaire to Charles as Captor. When he abducts her, and locks her up in the attic, there is a clear change in the reader’s sympathy with Charles’ personal project that began as an attempt to capture life’s fleeting moments in

a manageable form. The suspense that to a high degree was created through Charles' comment that his new life implies "a moral change" (3) is turned into an anxiousness. The reader becomes on-edge. Although Charles declares that he is profound and earnest, the reader experiences a stage-like tone of voice that sounds rehearsed: "Little do they realise how ardently I look forward to those storms, when the wild waves will beat at my very door!" (11). The theatricality with which he depicts himself creates comic effects at first, but then the ironic mode with its rather mild humor, which Murdoch so often uses to present fallible characters, is in this novel unexpectedly turned into something more worrying and twisted when the plot suddenly changes direction and speed through the kidnapping.

A Not So Attentive Swimmer

Literary theorist Wayne Booth stresses that a character who lacks strong virtues, but where an author still wants him to be taken sympathetically uses "prolonged and deep inside views" in order to dominate our perceptions with a particular consciousness.³¹ Even if Booth speaks of impersonal narration, what he says works as a preliminary landmark for grasping the protagonist in *The Sea, the Sea*. Charles dominates our view by first-person narration but also in his autobiographical attempts at writing. We see so much of him, and his lack of strong virtues compensated by "deep inside views" is used by Murdoch to create an even more impactful dividing line between who he wants to be and who he really is. To live and search for life's truths is much more demanding than Charles initially believes. He is trying to find meaning by solving practical problems or solving existential problems through his own mind. His dismissal of warnings from the residents about the sea and how dangerous it is suggested that his swimming is ego-centered and part of a performance show, also before himself, which is in line with his inauthentic and self-absorbed existence. If we remind ourselves of how swimming can be seen as moral competence, as being in the world, Charles' inability to apprehend signs around him corresponds to Murdoch's conception of morality as a metaphysical reality. In the novel, Murdoch can show the particularity of a person and his perception's bias through the

protagonist Charles; his inside view comes with a plurality of possible interpretations. Charles will make several mistakes and find that there are regrets in life, and that his “memoir-writing” is a substitute for real relationships. The novel is a perfect form for the imperfection of life, where moral attempts and mistakes are weaved into the placing of the characters. Iris Murdoch knew this, of course, both in theory and in practice, as novelist.³²

Charles’ wise cousin James visits, he becomes a moral reminder of the world outside. James’ function in the novel is intricate and requires a longer exposition on narrative technique to do him justice, but that trail does not fit here. He brings up the sea, *en passant* in tone, but with moral intention. “Did you know that Plato was descended from Poseidon on his father’s side” James asks (176). As the conversation progresses Charles begins to experience nausea but fails to comprehend the obvious connection between Plato, Poseidon, Atlantis and the hubris that James points at as being part of Charles’ deluded self-view, with his comment. Charles’ body apprehends what his mind is incapable of realizing; this novelistic construction is, I would suggest, a literary image of Murdoch’s broader philosophical ideas on the transcendent reality.³³ That Charles’s body is registering the outside world without him being able to take in the experience is connected to Murdoch’s view of the human as immersed – figuratively, but at times also literally – in morality. This is an idea which aligns with the swimmer as being involved with perfecting a kind of competence, where the body is tested by submitting to forces such as nature and experiences beyond the knowing mind.

The novel is truffled with potential signs for Charles to see, to make him uncover a meaningful and more truthful reality of his disposition, where his conceit might fade. James reminds him repeatedly to look elsewhere and warns of false images: “The truth lies beyond”, he says (384).

When Charles is swimming naked and understands that he is being observed by the locals (66–69) his reaction reinforces a self-image, in which life still plays out on a theater stage rather than in the real world: the locals in the pub have stated that the sea is very dangerous and even when Charles realizes that his “curtain rope has somehow

come undone and vanished” (67) – a device he has used to get in and out of the water from the steep cliff – he is not taking this seriously. The sea is dangerous. Emptying of the ego requires a swimmer who is attentive to the elements and people around him, a kind of silencing of the self that is in opposition to hubris.

The novel’s beginning suggests that for Charles, writing a life is primarily a question of finding a form, but the moral of the story is that life destroys symmetry and interrupts our attempts to understand. His chatty monologues meet a deeper, complicated stratum since any attempts to understand a life involves efforts to explicate “temporality”; recollecting the past, anticipating the future, thoughts as well as people are constantly derailed. How can such muddle and messiness, life, be a container for form and subject matter? “Muddle” is a term often used by Murdoch. The background to why humans and characters often find themselves in muddles dates to the Platonic-derived idea of our inclination to live within fantasies, within states of neurosis, in “the cave”. We are often completely enclosed in a fantasy world of our own into which we try to draw things from outside, not grasping their specific reality and independence, making them into dream objects of our own. The sea itself, with its unpredictable force and tendency to change, thus becomes a symbol of man’s inability to tame existence and that our outer edges of consciousness are approachable but never completely reachable. Right towards the end Murdoch reveals one of the possible “answers” to what Charles has tried to understand when he began his project:

Time, like the sea, unties all knots. Judgments on people are never final, they emerge from summings-up which at once suggest the need for a reconsideration. Human arrangements are nothing but loose ends and hazy reckoning, whatever art may otherwise pretend in order to console us. (477)

When Charles finally sees (as in understands), it will be too late to restore the mistakes of the muddles, but life will go on.

The Sea Monster

The sea is unsteady and when Charles contemplates it early in the novel he sees a sea monster, described in detail (19). He associates to a black snake, it has a “spiny back” and a “conspicuous head”, green eyes and teeth. Is it real? What can we make of this sea monster that Charles sees? The function of this monster has to do with two inter-connecting subject matters in the novel: self-delusion and rationality. Charles’ suggestion is that the experience is some sort of hallucination. He compares it to a “bad trip”, like the dose of LSD he took several years ago. But it becomes clear that when Charles is searching for reasons and evidence (20–21) he is deluding himself by assuming that there are rational explanations behind his experience. Murdoch gives clues to this in the novel when she lets Charles express that “happenings have explanations” (20). Charles begins to “classify and relate them” (20) but comes up with several possible ideas and chooses one on the grounds that “the strongest evidence for explanation is the total implausibility of all the others” (21). The *language* of rationality that Charles is using goes against his *reaction* to the sea monster. He confesses to be “*excessively* frightened” (20), experiencing a “feeling of horror” (21), and his “heart is beating violently” (22).

How far mental concepts can be represented in language is a philosophical preoccupation during the 1970s for Murdoch.³⁴ The sea monster becomes a suitable expression of the Freudian concept *uncanny*, the unsettling experience where the ordinary turns into strangeness. Literary theorist and Murdoch scholar Bran Nicol suggests that the uncanny receives a particular form in Murdoch’s novels, where “the strangeness of the world is the result of it being *perceived* that way through heightened, often deluded, senses of her characters”.³⁵ Charles is afraid to stay within his experience, brooding over the image of the sea monster and what it could mean is immediately abandoned. Again, the perception of things may delude us, but the strangeness could also be a result of our senses somehow heightening concerning aspects, rather than toning them down. Something is unfolding while Charles sees the monster. Is the sea monster a fiction, created by Charles’ imagination, a construction of fantasies? Or is it a literary motif, introduced by Murdoch to enforce Charles as an

unreliable character to the reader? A tenable answer is that both suggestions are possible, and that one advantage Murdoch has as author is that several interpretations work simultaneously. Charles is gazing at the monster, and tries to concentrate; perhaps he is experiencing a sudden gratuitous plunge into the metaphysics of the unknown? But even more, the sea monster is a symbol for the novel's strange psychic landscape, and the novel becomes increasingly deceptive: the reader makes mistaken assumptions – it takes a while, for example, to grasp that what Charles calls love is a complete fantasy. There is a sustained eerie questioning of spiritual life in *The Sea, the Sea* and the reader becomes uncertain of what is realized by Charles and what is not. Is he scared of the sea monster or of himself?

In *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, Murdoch argues that the experience of recognizing and perceiving the world comes in a pictorial form. We may not always fully comprehend reality, but there is a familiarity in moral knowledge we can intuit.³⁶ Murdoch's view, that we necessarily sense the moral aspects of a situation (which constitutes her interpretation of Plato's concept of *anamnesis*), is placed and expressed as part of Charles' intuitions. He is unsure of what it is that he is involved in during his vision of the sea monster, but he is somehow aware that this experience is meaningful and pictorial. This suggests that Charles is recognizing and involved in living the moral life that we as human beings always "only partly see and understand"³⁷ as Murdoch puts it. Through the uncanny sea monster Murdoch is using the spiritual superstructure as something on par with recognizing moral values. Spirituality is an aspect of life and not a set of fuzzy beliefs: "spiritual reality is the same as ordinary reality."³⁸

Swimming and the practice of morality

We are perfecting ourselves morally through many activities where perception (an active, concentrated engagement with our surroundings) is key – this is an idea Murdoch comes back to as philosopher and it is a premise in *The Sea, the Sea*.³⁹ Charles Arrowby is a fallible protagonist and it is important, I believe, for understanding the idea of swimming as a moral competence – the natural world embraces and confronts mankind, swimming demands submission and mas-

tering simultaneously. The activity of swimming as an illustration of morals is thus in line with Murdoch's reminder of how hard it is to see beyond oneself, how an emptying of the ego requires efforts that transcend the habitual performances of our everyday life. We can only perfect ourselves morally when we accept that literally anything might happen and that "we are simply here".⁴⁰

As the novel progresses, Charles will understand more by *seeing* the world around him in flashes where his ego will be challenged. He is unable to see Hartley with "loving attention", because seeing is *recognizing*.⁴¹ Seeing and thereby recognizing something has the potential to "stir" something in our intuitions. It is the nature of these intuitions that should be the object of morality and Charles will experience such understanding through a fatal accident.

The worrying comments in the pub early in the novel, where Charles is warned of strong currents – "a man could drown there in seconds" – are ignored and Charles will only apprehend this bad omen in retrospect, when Titus, the adoptive son in the Fitch family that Charles has come to love as his own son, accidentally drowns in strong waves while Charles is looking away. Afterwards, self-awareness suddenly hits Charles:

I had never warned him about the sea. Why had I not done so. *Out of vanity*. I recalled now very clearly that first day when Titus and I had dived in off the cliff. I had wanted to show him that I too was strong and fearless. It would have spoilt the charm of that moment if I had said. 'It's rather dangerous' or 'It's not easy to get out' or 'I don't think I'll swim here'.

Charles realizes that vanity and self-preoccupation has caused Titus' death. The "mysterious destructive properties" that the sea holds, which scholar Peter Conradi drew attention to earlier, suggests that being "able to swim" is dependent on an inner activity where an understanding of the sea as fundamentally mysterious needs to be part of the *practice* of morality. Suffering is, of course, part of the path to enlightenment. Titus' youthful pride and tragic death become Charles' moral touchstone in a way. So many bad things happen to

Charles, and he is getting nowhere in his attempts to understand his life, despite his friends' recurring reminders that he should "criticize this guiding idea" that he loves Hartley, and she loves him back (334–337). I interpret this incapacity as an effect of moral stagnation, a lack of seeing. After all that has happened, Charles wonders if he "would ever swim again" (426). Perhaps swimming is something that he is deprived of since he used it to show off, the deeper meaning in the novel being that Charles needs to be stripped or naked in front of himself not as performance but cathartically.

The idea of moving from appearance to reality, which is what Charles is involved in throughout the novel, is a recurring theme in Murdoch's fiction.⁴² According to Murdoch, we should see Plato's understanding of morality in "a moral-religious sense which pictures salvation or enlightenment as wisdom or true vision [...] including literal perception of the world".⁴³ She was also, as already mentioned, influenced by philosopher Simone Weil's use of "attention" and "unselfing", as methods to actively withdraw oneself from egotistical fantasies and self-centered thought patterns. One feature in Murdoch's own philosophy that draws from both Plato and Weil (as well as other schools such as Zen Buddhism) is the conviction that rituals *as practices*, or recurring habits, are formative for moral perceptions. *The Sea, the Sea* furthers Murdoch's understanding of Eastern practices as an antidote to the kind of delusion Charles is experiencing and unable to get rid of. The enactment of rituals is "played out" in her novel. One such practice that never becomes tainted in the novel is swimming. Charles' relationship with water, the sea and its dangers, becomes his rite of passage.

Swimming as a ritual perfecting moral competence is the grueling work in the present. It is an ascesis unbound by time. We will always be distracted by life, sea monsters, muddles, and many other things, but swimming is a counter-image for Charles since his hunger for vanity is restored from it. Looking at the sea, he understands that swimming provides "a flicker of life" (464) and he feels it in his body "as if scarcely yet in [his] mind" (464–465).

Concluding arguments

In literature, there is no function of affirmation or explanation. As Philip Sidney famously writes in *A Defence of Poetry*, “the poet... nothing affirms”.⁴⁴ When Charles is alone in the last pages of the novel he is still trying to understand and make sense of life’s randomness. The sea is silent. It is unchanged. It is as if the sea has been witnessing horrific events and recorded them in sphinxlike manner: everything is the same yet profoundly different from when the novel began.

Murdoch admits in her essay “Thinking and Language” that in a scientifically minded theory it is senseless to ask whether a retrospectively described experience was really like this and not like that. Yet it does make sense in the framework of an individual’s self-examination.⁴⁵ Literature’s affinity with life’s muddle and the retrospect in which Charles looks back at his life makes sense for him, it is like *this* and not like *that*, but whenever something is achieved as a moral transformation, a step taken by the protagonist on the moral awareness level-ladder, it does not lead anywhere. It is simply added to an already existing continuation of a life being lived. A newfound perspective or insight of a moral kind does not lead characters away from human muddles: they are still involved in a (represented) reality that is impenetrable.⁴⁶

Iris Murdoch was a philosopher in search of various expressions to accommodate her version of Platonic ascendance. For this, she needed a metaphysical good to create an overarching ideal image, the good which is manifested in the multiform phenomena of the world but always transcending them.⁴⁷ The striving towards the good lies “beyond” the varieties of human life and moral language, the good is a *force* rather than an object or artefact. Murdoch is – inspired by an interpretation of Plato’s Form of the Good – adamant that we are constituted as a *movement* towards goodness. It is vital to notice that the words used to describe Murdoch’s ambition are indeed verbs of movement: “in search”, “create”, “striving” and “transcendence”. Such forces capture the inside of experiences, and morality stems from this inwardness, rather than from an external viewpoint. Fundamental to her notion of morality is that human life is “chancy and incomplete”.⁴⁸

Murdoch wrote about the forms of art too and expressed apprehension about being dominated by her own mythology when determining the form of her novels.⁴⁹ My suggestion is that her emphasis on the good and its, as she writes (in italics) “*extremely various*” experiences, and morality as acts and undergoing’s of movement, opens to the possibility of regarding swimming as a way of being literally soaked in morals.⁵⁰ To swim is to mediate with high attention – you must adapt to new sensations, improvise and be attentive, and move away from the ego.

Some philosophers have pointed out “an apparent lack of content of this transcendent good” in Murdoch’s philosophical framework.⁵¹ My answer is, and this has been a main point in this article, that the content of the transcendent good is participation in the world, perfecting the practices where movement appears. One of these practices is swimming. Reflections on moral intuitions are inherent in art, in Murdoch’s view.⁵² *The Sea, the Sea* is thus a novel where she tries to make such reflections *visible* within art’s own “system”.

As for the brave swimmer, and monsters in the sea that make us question our visions, Iris Murdoch replied in an interview that “I used to think that the sea and I were great friends, but one must fear the sea.”⁵³ Perhaps only a writer with infinitely variable encounters with the sea knows the depth of such (self)understanding.

Noter

- 1 Peter Conradi, *Iris Murdoch: A Life* (London: Harper Collins, 1986).
- 2 *From a Tiny Corner in the House of Fiction: Conversations with Iris Murdoch*, ed. Gillian Dooley (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003), 239.
- 3 Marije Altorf, *Iris Murdoch and the Art of Imagining* (London/New York: Continuum, 2008); Iris Murdoch, “Against Dryness: A Polemical Sketch”, *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature*, ed. Peter Conradi (London: Chatto & Windus, 1997), 287–295.
- 4 I develop this argument from the conversation between Natasha Alden, Miles Leeson, Hannah Marije and Lucy Oulton in “Iris Murdoch and Swimming”, *The Iris Murdoch Podcast* (2021). Retrieved 2026-07 01 <https://on.soundcloud.com/KG9vm8DFRhcptgPK3n>
- 5 Peter Conradi, “Iris Murdoch and the Sea”, *Études britanniques contemporaines* no 4 (1994, 1–11).
- 6 Peter Conradi, *Iris Murdoch: The Saint and the Artist* (London: Macmillan, 1986), 137.
- 7 See for example podcast “Iris Murdoch and Swimming” and Conradi, “Iris Mur-

- doch and the Sea". Swimming is also mentioned in Kate Larson, "*Everything important is to do with passion*": Iris Murdoch's concept of love and its Platonic Origin (Uppsala: Uppsala University, 2009).
- 8 *Living on Paper: Letters from Iris Murdoch 1934-1995*, eds. Avril Horner and Anne Rowe (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2016), 351-463.
 - 9 Anna Victoria Hallberg, *Novel writing and moral philosophy as aspects of a single struggle: Iris Murdoch's Hybrid Novels* (Örebro: Örebro University Press, 2011).
 - 10 Iris Murdoch, "Literature and Philosophy: A Conversation with Bryan Magee", *Existentialists and Mystics*, 3-30.
 - 11 Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge, 1970).
 - 12 Murdoch says that the possession of a moral sense is uniquely human; morality is, something sui generis, "as if it came to us from elsewhere". Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as A Guide to Morals* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1992), 26.
 - 13 Murdoch, "Art is the Imitation of Nature", *Existentialists and Mystics*, 243-257.
 - 14 Hallberg, *Novel writing and moral philosophy as aspects of a single struggle*.
 - 15 Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 1-45.
 - 16 Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 33. There is a large body of texts concerned with how Murdoch engages with Weil's concept, see for example Justin Broackes, "Iris Murdoch's first encounters with Simone Weil", *The Iris Murdoch Review* (2017), 17-21. Mark Freeman, "Beholding and Being Beheld: Simone Weil, Iris Murdoch, and the Ethics of Attention", *The Humanistic Psychologist* no. 43 (2015: 2), 160-172. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08873267.2014.990458>, Eva-Maria Düringer, "Murdoch and Weil", *The Murdochian Mind*, eds. Silvia Caprioglio Panizza and Mark Hopwood (London: Routledge, 2022), 306-318. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003031222>
 - 17 Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 1-45. Interesting reading on the slipperiness of the good can be found in, Sabina Lovibond, "The Elusiveness of the Ethical: From Murdoch to Diamond", *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement* (2020), 181-200. doi:10.1017/S1358246119000195
 - 18 For a discussion in Swedish on how these examples can be useful starting points for our understanding of the interplay between life, literature and philosophy in Murdoch's oeuvre, see Anna Victoria Hallberg, *Du berör min själ: scener ur ett liv med Iris Murdoch* (Stockholm: Fri tanke, 2025).
 - 19 Murdoch, *Metaphysics as A Guide to Morals*, 322.
 - 20 Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics*, 254.
 - 21 Larson, "*Everything important is to do with passion*", 178.
 - 22 Martin Heidegger, *What Is a Thing?* (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1967). "I'm glad we live in a thingy world", said Iris Murdoch. Quoted in Conradi, *Iris Murdoch: A Life*, 588.
 - 23 Diane Mehta, *Happier Far* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2025), 140.
 - 24 I find support for this view in a book where the chapter on Murdoch and metaphysics is called "Swimming", see Nikhil Krishnan, *A Terribly Serious Adventure: Philosophy at Oxford 1900-60* (London: Profile Books, 2023), 199.
 - 25 Podcast episode, "Iris Murdoch and Swimming".
 - 26 There are several reflections on wild swimming, and whether the self or the surroundings should be emphasized, in a collection of essays by writers such as Esther Freud, Margaret Drabble, and Lou Stoppard, put together by Daunt Books,

- see *At the Pond: Swimming at the Hampstead Ladies' Pond* (London: Daunt Books, 2019).
- 27 Podcast episode, "Iris Murdoch and Swimming". See also letters to Philippa Foot in *Living on Paper*, 380.
 - 28 Iris Murdoch, *The Sea, the Sea* [1978] (London: Vintage Classics Edition, 1999). Henceforth all quotes from the novel will be put in brackets in the running text.
 - 29 "But this rough magic I here abjure", see William Shakespeare, "The Tempest", *The Annotated Shakespeare* (London: Paperback Edition, 2006), 117. "Now I shall abjure magic and become a hermit", says Charles on page 2.
 - 30 "When, as they must, both violence and comedy ensue, with more than hints of genuine magical or daemonic intervention, the novel becomes a curious patchwork of those of Iris Murdoch's novels which could be described as magical fables and those which are a sustained attempt on the style and virtues of the nineteenth-century 'realist' novels." See A.S. Byatt, *Degrees of Freedom: The Novels of Iris Murdoch* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1965), 282. Byatt calls attention to how *The Sea, the Sea* often draws on several styles.
 - 31 Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 377.
 - 32 Murdoch, "Art is the Imitation of Nature", *Existentialists and Mystics*, 243-257.
 - 33 I developed this idea with support from, Charles Taliaferro and Jil Evans, *Iris Murdoch and the Transcendent*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2026). <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009631600>
 - 34 Iris Murdoch, "Salvation by Words" [1972], *Existentialists and Mystics*, 235-443.
 - 35 Bran Nicol, *Iris Murdoch: the Retrospective Fiction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1999), 55.
 - 36 "We can only learn what we already know, what we can, as it were, remember. If we have ideas of good or perfection in an imperfect world these must be derived from a higher source. We have to find our certainties for ourselves, in ourselves, and we must believe in our duty and ability to discover and make our own truths which we first intuit or make out as shadows." Murdoch, *Metaphysics as A Guide to Morals*, 434f.
 - 37 Murdoch, *Metaphysics as A Guide to Morals*, 222.
 - 38 Murdoch, *Metaphysics as A Guide to Morals*, 297.
 - 39 For a solid discussion on moral perception in Murdoch's writings, see Lawrence Blum, *Moral Perception and Particularity* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1994).
 - 40 Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 79.
 - 41 Murdoch, "Hegel in Modern Dress", *Existentialists and Mystics*, 149.
 - 42 Miles Leeson, *Iris Murdoch: Philosophical Novelist*, (London: Continuum, 2010).
 - 43 Murdoch, *Metaphysics as A Guide to Morals*, 175.
 - 44 Philip Sidney, *A Defence of Poetry*, ed. J. A. Van Dorsten (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966), 52.
 - 45 Murdoch says that the significance of the ontological question whether individual inner experiences exist, and the semantic question concerning their verifiable meaning, is not her concern. See Murdoch, "Thinking and Language", *Existentialists and Mystics*, 38-41.
 - 46 See Murdoch, "The Sublime and the Good", *Existentialists and Mystics*, 216.

- 47 For more on transcendence in Murdoch's thought, see Michael Weston, *Philosophy, Literature and the Human Good*, (London: Routledge, 2001), 69–83.
- 48 Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 87.
- 49 Murdoch, *Metaphysics as A Guide to Morals*, 86, 88.
- 50 Murdoch, *Metaphysics as A Guide to Morals*, 507.
- 51 Nora Hämmäläinen, *A Literary Turn: Rethinking the Roles of Generalization and Theory in Anglo-American Moral Philosophy* (Helsinki: Helsinki University, 2009), 303.
- 52 Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics*, 255.
- 53 *From a Tiny Corner in the House of Fiction*, 127.