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Salvation Through Beauty: Iris Murdoch's New Religion in a Godless Universe

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Abstract

Novelist Iris Murdoch is also a modern philosopher, who is aware of the moral dilemma of the scientific age. For her, morality is the only means of salvation in this age, as she considers morals not related with religion but with metaphysics. Thus, any moral attempt to achieve good is a transcendental experience. This paper explores Murdoch's moral philosophy with reference to her artist character Tim Reede in *Nuns and Soldiers.*

***Key Words**: 20th century novel, Iris Murdoch, morals*

Özet

Roman yazarı Iris Murdoch, aynı zamanda bilim çağı insanının içsel çelişkilerinin farkında olan modern bir filozoftur da. Ona göre, bu çağın tek kurtuluş aracı, Murdoch'ın din'le degilde metafizikle bağdaştırdığı ahlaki değerlerdir. İyi'ye ulaşma yolundaki her girişim aşkın bir deneyimdir. Bu makalede *Nuns and Soldiers* romanındaki sanatçı Tim Reede karakterinden yola çıkılarak Murdoch'ın ahlaki felsefesi incelenmiştir.

***Anahtar Kelimeler**: Yirminci yüzyıl romanı, Iris Murdoch, ahlak*

Critical of the "modern situation" and the inadequacy of modern philosophies in solving man's ontological problems, Murdoch claims that traditional religion is far from providing the spiritual satisfaction that it had once. Murdoch relates this condition with the "Modern Situation", which she defines as follows:

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> We live in a scientific and anti-metaphysical age in which the dogmas, images, and precepts of religion have lost much of their power. We have not recovered from two wars and the experience of Hitler. We are also the heirs of Enlightenment, Romanticism and the liberal tradition (Murdoch, 1961: 23).

Starting with the Enlightenment in the 18th century, thus, man becomes subject to a scientific understanding which favors the physical world over the metaphysical one. The spiritual void caused by the abolition of metaphysics and adaption of the scientific approach, which is followed by technological developments, is, as Murdoch claims, the basis of modern man's " dilemma", his self-alienation (Murdoch, 1990: 23).

She is critical of almost all recent philosophers and their theories about the human condition. Murdoch argues that whatever approach they adapt to explain the human condition or to solve man's spiritual dilemma they all fail, including the great philosophers such as Hegel, Kant and Sartre. She is critical of Kant's philosophy, for example, for overemphasizing "human will" (Murdoch, 1970: 80). In other words, Kant, for her, reduces man to his physical being alone by disregarding metaphysical reality (Murdoch, 1970: 80). In Kant, ordained with such faculties as "freedom", "power" and "will" man is considered to be a self-sufficient entity who does not need spirituality (Murdoch, 1970: 81). Man is defined, thus, as capable of surviving in the material world, regardless of any metaphysical support.

Murdoch's objection, in her criticism of the modern world, is not to the demolition of god, but more she laments the abolition of metaphysics from human life totally. Murdoch believes that man's existence is not physical only, but extends beyond appearance. Moreover, de-limiting man to his physical existence only is traumatic, because it denies human essence. Man manages to survive spiritually only when he realizes his transcendental extension into the metaphysical world, which is the only source of energy that one needs for spiritual regeneration.

Morals, in this sense , occupy the central concern in Murdoch's philosophy. She believes that morality is a metaphysical concept rather than an extension of religion. Separated from religion, thus, morals become central to Murdoch's philosophy, which she formulates as a "new religion" in the godless universe of the scientific age. She adapts, in this process, the idea of "good" – as an alternative to "god" - as the primordial force that provides the energy for man's moral quest, which leads one up to the metaphysical world. In a discussion of Murdoch's "new religion" Alan Jacobs has argued that Murdoch's " . . . focus is directed [to] a single letter, the letter 'o': the

presence and absence of that letter can determine the grounds of our moral lives" (1995:1) . She replaces the absent "god" with the eternal "good". Murdoch is a Platonist, and she derives her concept of "good", from the Platonic idea that good is, " . . . the source of light which reveals to us all things as they really are" (Murdoch, 1970: 71). Good is the absolute truth as the highest in the hierarchy of transcendental forms. Beauty, on the other hand, which is defined in Plato as " one spiritual quality that we love by instinct", is a concept which opens the way for a search for good, which is the source of moral energy that one needs in transcending to the world of forms (Winston, 2006: 285).

Morality is the guiding light in man's search for good, in transcending to metaphysical reality. The searching process is a mystical experience which has been traditionally associated with religion. Murdoch believes that it is possible to achieve similar mystical experience in search of good, too. Murdoch reformulates religion-morality relation as good-morality relation when she suggests the following,

> Morality has always been connected with religion and religion with mysticism. The disappearance of the middle term leaves morality in a situation which is certainly more difficult but essentially the same. The background to morals is some sort of mysticism, if this is meant a non-dogmatic essentially unformulated faith in the reality of good, occasionally connected with experience (Murdoch, 1970: 74).

Thus, any event or any object which is capable of leading one in his search of good can be regarded as an alternative to traditional religion. Any of this kind of perception is a mystical experience and is moral. Good exists as an ideal, a source of energy or a center of attraction to which the individual is prone through the love and attention directed to others. Iris Murdoch's novels serve as a fictional universe through which she practises her moral philosophy. Murdoch's morally confused characters are generally preoccupied with philosophical and intellectual matters. They mostly fail, in the process of the novel, to achieve moral wisdom as they become victims to their illusions, which Murdoch considers as selfishness. A critic quotes Murdoch's concept of virtue as follows: "anything which alters consciousness in the direction of unselfishness, objectivity and realism is to be connected with virtue", which she believes is quite difficult (Murdoch qtd. in Winston, 2006: 285). Only a few manage to improve spiritually. These characters' improvement is always generated from outside, as revealed, also, by one of her characters who says, " Let us then seek aid in pure things, turning our minds to good people, to our best work, to beautiful and noble art . . ." (Murdoch, 1984: 205). Sometimes a good person, sometimes the beauty of nature, and sometimes a work of art starts the regeneration process.

Though good is the basic concept in Murdoch's moral philosophy, and almost all of her characters are conscious of philosophical extensions of the concept of good as well as evil, she portrays only a few good characters in her novels. William Eastcote, in *The Philosopher's Pupil*, is one of them. He is introduced as " an elderly man . . . a most respected citizen and pillar . . ." of the society. He appears as a minor character only, as the resident of the town with its mysterious spa. (Murdoch 1984, 34). William Eastcote, "popularly known as 'Bill the Lizard'", retires early from his career at the bar to devote himself "to good work" (Murdoch, 1984: 59). Iris Murdoch never does give direct references to Eastcote's "good work". His goodness, however, is suggested through his influence on other characters in the novel, as well as through his connection with some extraordinary happenings in the town. While defining Ennistone, the spa town in which the events are set, the narrator refers to some mysterious and supernatural aspects of the spa. Among its mysteries is the sudden animation of one of the jets to send up spurts of hot water to a height of some twenty or thirty feet, and this "marvel of nature" is preceded by William Eastcote's seeing ". . . an unidentified flying object, a large luminous tilted saucer, hanging motionless over the Common . . ." (Murdoch, 1984: 34). The same mysterious apparition occurs once again on the night that William Eastcote dies.

Though there is only one instance in which he comes to the foreground, his "goodness" as a source of spiritual regeneration for other characters is implied throughout the novel, through some very brief hints such as, "[o]ne of the more universal aspects of human wickedness is the willingness of almost everyone to indulge in to spiteful gossip. . . . Someone who was never idly gossiped to because of his virtuous austerity was William Eastcote", or "[a] saint if ever there was one" (Murdoch, 1984: 414, 420). Eastcote's only personal revelation in the novel, occurs during a Sunday mass, the day he has learned that he is sick to death. He feels a sudden urge to rise up and deliver the following speech about love and human understanding. Eastcote refers to technological developments that have changed human life in the modern age. He admits also, however, the fact that there is still too much suffering on the planet;

> I want only to say something about simple good things which are as it were close to us, within our reach, part still of our world. Let us love the close things, the close clear good things, and hope that in their light other goods may be added. Let us prize innocence. . . . a return to a certain simplicity, something which is not hard to understand, not a remote good but very near. . . (Murdoch, 1984: 205)

What makes William Eastcote a good character is his awareness of the simplicity of a life depending on "love", which is lamented by Murdoch for being, " . . . so rarely mentioned now by philosophers" (Murdoch, 1980: 46). All the present audience, Adam's dog Zed included, are moved by Eastcote's simple philosophy of life.

> . . . each person present promised himself some amendment of life. Brian thought, what a skunk I am, and how lucky I am . . . [I must] bloody stop hating everything and everyone. Gabriel thought, dear, dear, William, how much I love him . . . I must not think those mean spiteful thoughts about Stella. . . Adam thought, I must . . . be kinder to my father and talk to him and not tease him. Anthea Eastcote thought, I must be frank with Hector Gaines and I must give up Joey Tanner. Nick Roach thought, I must work harder and not go to bed with girls all the time (but he felt rather sad about this). . . . Tom thought, I'm innocent, I'm good, I love everybody. I shall go on being innocent and good and loving everybody, oh I feel so happy! What Zed [the dog] thought is not known, but as his nature was composed almost entirely of love, he may be imagined to have felt an increase of being (Murdoch, 1984: 206).

Attending to William Eastcote, who is one of the only few good characters in Murdoch's novels, by listening to his speech, creates a regenerating influence on innocent as well as evil characters.

Murdoch's idea of the spiritual regeneration by attending to good is revealed best through the fake-artist character Tim Reede, in *Nuns and Soldiers.* Tim and his girl friend Daisy Barret lead a carefree life with which they are almost pleased, despite their financial problems; "They counted themselves as wanderers, misfits, flotsam and jetsam, orphans of the storm, babes in the wood, mendicant artists, destitute hedonists on a perpetual picnic" (Murdoch, 1981: 77). Tim is a mediocre artist who is unable to produce paintings of any merit. Tim's paintings of a cat in a local pub are the only means of survival for him. Disrespecting any kind of social and personal principle, Tim never hesitates, "removing food from the houses to which he was invited (this surely was not stealing)", and "They had discussed [even] stealing but agreed that they were conditioned against it and would be terrified of the disgrace, it was nothing to do with morality" (Murdoch, 1981: 77). This irresponsible life style they have led since their college days, they seem to be enjoying still while in their thirties. They are critical of a settled life and social institutions such as marriage. "Daisy and Tim prided themselves on being free and having no possessions" (Murdoch, 1981: 78). Complaining about their financial problems, Daisy consoles herself believing that. " . . . at least we're free, we've stayed outside in freedom, in reality. We don't live artificial

faked up lives . . .” (Murdoch, 1981: 97) Tim, especially, adapts the word “*Lanthano*” as the motto of life, a Greek verb “which meant I escape notice doing something or other” (Murdoch 1981,89). As a person “ Tim was evasive by nature, even something of a casual habitual liar . . .” (Murdoch, 1981: 91).

Considered in terms of Murdochian understanding, Tim is doomed to fail as an artist because of his moral failure. The critic Amin Malak claims that “ Murdoch . . . equates art to morals; the creation and experience of one corresponds to the conception and exercise of the other” (Malak, 1987: 20). Iris Murdoch connects art with reality, with truth, thus with morality. “ The essence of both of them [art and morals] is love . . . . Love is the extremely difficult realization that something other than oneself is real. Love, and so art and morals is the discovery of reality” (Murdoch qtd. in Malak, 1987: 20). As in a cause and effect relation, one can attain universal reality, which is essential for the real artist, only by attending to moral facts. Tim, however, despite his ironical claim not to lead an artificial and fake life, is a fake himself for his escapism from moral reality, which is reflected in his painting also. He cannot improve beyond faking great artists.

> He . . . failed . . . to ‘develop’, . . . He had no identity, no ‘personal style’, but he did not mind . . . . He became a cubist, then a surrealist, then a *fauve*: a futurist, a constructivist, a suprematist. He adopted expressionism, post-expressionism, abstract expressionism. (But never minimal or conceptual or pop, these he despised.) He imitated everybody he admired, everybody fairly modern that is, he could not imitate Titian and Piero. (He would have done if he had known how to start. He painted pseudo-Klees, pseudo-Picassos, pseudo-Magrittes, pseudo-Soutines. He would have done pseudo-Cézannes only that was beyond him . . . . One of his teachers had said to him, ‘Tim I think it is your destiny to become a great faker.’ Alas Tim could not rise to this. Faking demands a patience and a knowledge of chemistry which Tim did not posses. It also demands a considerable talent as a painter. Tim did not posses this either (Murdoch, 1981: 85).

Tim is a total failure both as an individual and an artist, because of the unreal life he leads.

Spiritual transformation from appearance to the ultimate reality, Murdoch believes, is a painful one, not only for the artist but even for the ordinary man. The choice of a painter as a character in this novel, in this sense, is important in reflecting Murdoch’s preoccupation with difference between the real artist and the fake one. At the other end of the scale from the fake artist personified in Tim, Murdoch refers to the works of the great artists which bear, in her belief, a healing power even for Tim who visits the

National Gallery when he feels most miserable. A critic defines Murdoch's view of the real artist, with reference to the admired artist's, Titian's painting, "The Flaying of Marsyas": " . . . Marsyas represents for Murdoch, . . the pain of yearning endured and terror faced in the ordeal of creation. The artist is being remade with a new kind of beauty as we watch the painting, and a new definition of heroism is born out of this unbearable unselving" (Kinzie, 2001 Viii).

Tim's egoism in the face of the fake life in which he indulges, is an obstacle to the creation of the real work of art. Murdoch's illusioned characters, Malak asserts, " . . . symbolize . . . a crisis of an age that has lost the sense of the value of transcendent good and reality" (Malak,1987: 20). Tim, in fact, intuits something about truth, "He picked up ideas about 'form' from his teachers and fellow students, yet it seemed that he never learnt anything which he had not always known. . . . He knew about light without looking into learned books. . . . Yet, untaught, it was as if in another life he had glimpsed some of the working drawings of God, and in this life had almost but not quite forgotten them" (Murdoch, 1981: 130). To become a real person, thus a real artist, that will be able to grasp the almost forgotten forms, he needs to undergo a process of ordeal through which to clarify his vision.

Tim's ordeal and purification occurs through the beauty of nature, in "Les Grands Saules", Gertrude's country house in South France. In need of money, Tim goes there as a caretaker. His visit to "Les Grands Saules" is the beginning of artistically inefficient Tim's spiritual journey from his morally corrupt self towards his real self. This natural landscape which looks threatening at the beginning, heals Tim with its beauty and the "cosmic" love that is revived in him by Gertrude. The place has an identity of its own. The olive trees surrounding the house have a "grotesque attitude", with their " allocated faces and writhing bodies" ; the rocky landscape beyond the house has been " mysteriously keeping its identity" (Murdoch, 1981: 150, 155). Tim is both amazed and horrified to discover a rocky formation, beyond the house, rather like a face with a limpid pool below, which he calls "Great Face". "He was frightened of that empty rock-lorded land . . . He looked upon it with awe" (Murdoch, 1981: 158). A critic defines Tim's spiritual regeneration through nature as follows, " For Tim the vision of this natural phenomenon has the effect of diminishing his significance in the universe, of moving the center of meaning away from him toward a dimly intuited source of meaning" (Hauk, 1991: 152). The fear that the place arouses in him reflects, paradoxically, the beginning of his spiritual regeneration.

Having to face the natural world with all its thrilling beauty and purity, Tim is instinctively aware of his own corruption and artificiality. The gleaming pool below

the "Great Face" is " so smooth, that Tim could scarcely believe it to be a work of nature" (Murdoch, 1981: 157). This strange pool, Tim feels, symbolizes the purity of nature which contrasts with his own corruption. Tim touches his hand to the surface of pool, but " [he] could not sully that pure water with his sweat or . . . interrupt its sibylline vibration" (Murdoch, 1981: 160). During her later visit to the place, Gertrude, on the other hand, becomes a "goddess" for Tim after she swims in the "Crystal Pool". The identification of Gertrude with the purity of nature initiates Tim to real love, the kind of love as an "unsentimental, detached, unselfish, objective attention" to a beautiful object or a person out of one's own self (Murdoch, 1970: 66). Selfless love, in this sense, is the faculty which " . . . relate[s] us to what is real and thus bring[s] us to what is good" (Murdoch, 1970: 66).

Tim's love for Gertrude is the beginning of his "unselfing" process at the same time; " What is happening to me, thought Tim. . . a fast approaching comet. . . In a moment there would be some kind of crash or cataclysm, the end of the World. . . he had got to . . . reach out his hand across the table and take hold of Gertrude's hand. Some vast cosmic force was compelling him . . . he was about to lose consciousness" (Murdoch, 1981: 186). The process of falling in love with Gertrude is beyond Tim's perception and control. He cannot help submitting to this cosmic force; Tim " had done what he had to do what the cosmos had to do" (Murdoch, 1981: 186). Tim's spiritual transformation which is activated by the beauty of nature, is hastened by the genuine love he feels for Gertrude, which affects not only Tim and Gertrude but the whole universe. The meeting of their hands is like a shock wave which "passed out through all the galaxy" (Murdoch, 1981: 418).

Despite all this spiritual improvement which is new to Tim, he is not mature enough yet in the process of moral perfection. He is able to see and praise the beauty and purity of nature, and he is pure enough to respond to the cosmic call for love, but he is not yet "real" enough to confront and reveal the part of his existence which is related to Daisy. Thus he feels sick, deceitful and fake. Tim's spiritual transformation is completed only after his second visit to "Les Grands Saules", to see Gertrude who has rejected him on learning about his mistress, just after their marriage. He spends the night among the rocks, in the "Great Face", when he gets lost on his way to the house, in the darkness. He feels impure and threatened by nature once again. He is thirsty but does not dare to drink the pure, "the forbidden water" of the pool. He drinks from the nearby canal, where he falls and is carried away by the wild-running water. He struggles but cannot get out of the canal until he is carried away through a dark tunnel, where he thinks he will die. After a difficult recovery at the end of the tunnel, Tim feels changed. "The murderous waters of the canal and darkness of the tunnel had beaten and baptized him back to life" (Murdoch, 1981: 413).

Tim's symbolical rebirth from the tunnel is preceded by a process of suffering, which is a " part of the artist's task . . . at the threshold of a spiritual change" (Kinzie, 2001: ix). Rejected by Gertrude just after their marriage, Tim has to face a new phase of life completely different either from his earlier irresponsible life with Daisy or his protected and happy life with Gertrude. His being is haunted by concepts which have been alien to him, " Tim sensed himself as sick, sick forever with a kind of moral sickness which he had never known before" (Murdoch, 1981: 346). Not having mentioned Daisy, thus disappointing Gertrude , Tim believes has been " a moral failure".

He believes that it is his duty to get over his fake self totally, not for Gertrude but himself, by ending up with Daisy, even if it requires a deeply painful process. He suffers a lot: "Tim began to think about death. He felt tired of the stupid suffering which he was beginning to realize was like a virus, the very essence of his invaded being . . . He felt broken and words like 'integrity' and 'honor' occurred to him as names of what he had lost" (Murdoch, 1981: 379). In the later phases of this moral transformation Tim is convinced that he is going to lose his sanity. The more he suffers the more he gets closer to the solution of his moral dilemma. " Tim gives up Daisy not because he thinks he can get Gertrude back, but because he realizes he has not loved her enough, because he has merely used her and because their relationship is based on destructive selfishness" (Dipple, 1982: 336). He feels as though his personality is divided into particles. He is undergoing a process of unselving, during which he kills his strong ego and becomes purely transparent and unified spiritually:

> Everything seemed to vanish including his own personality. He was a tiny scrap of being, a particle, and yet also he was the surrounding area which seemed infinite. He was an atom, an electron, a proton, a point in empty space. He was transparent. . . . It was this transparency which made him invisible. He was empty, he was clean, he was nothing. Yet at the same time he was refined energy, pure activity, pure being (Murdoch, 1981: 393).

This paradise, this detached place with its supernatural atmosphere turns out to be a place where Tim is judged and purified personally, morally and artistically to achieve real love and intuition at the end. Elizabeth Dipple states the fact that, " . . . Tim finally feels that he has been made real by his confessional truth-telling and Gertrude's god-like role in hearing and forgiving him" (1981: 331). Tim thinks after his transformation and recovery, "Something in his life had begun there [Les Grands Saules], something which ties deeply and mysteriously together Gertrude and his art. . ." (Murdoch, 1981: 483). Tim is able, finally, to draw images "coming to him

out of a faintly discernible background of relentless form which he could apprehend as taking shape behind them. Sometimes he filled in mathematical patterns . . . He had painted on big wooden panels with bright acrylic paint some purely abstract 'network' pictures . . . But then how did these networks connect with the organic forms which also so spontaneously appeared?" (Murdoch, 1981: 482) He is mystified by the forms and their organic unity in his painting.

Tim Reede is the typical "modern man" who is alienated from himself by the spiritual void caused by "the death of god". Murdoch reasserts, through Tim once again, her belief that the loss of the power of traditional religion does not deny the existence of the metaphysical reality. Tim pretends to be content with his fake life as an artist faking the real ones, until he realizes his moral dilemma. In this process, he is first revived by the beauty and purity of nature, in the presence of which he realizes his own impurity and self-alienation. Then, through the irresistible cosmic love he feels for Gertrude completes the purifying process, which he follows as a moral obligation despite its pains. Just like William Eastcote, whose speech on the power and beauty of love revives his audience to a realization of their virtue or vices, the beauty of nature and love heal Tim Reede, by transforming him into a new being, a more capable artist.

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