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Making Love to Apollo: The Agalmatophilia of Iris Murdoch's Athenian Lovers in *A Fairly Honourable Defeat*

This essay explores the theme of Apollonian love in Iris Murdoch's *A Fairly Honourable Defeat*. It traces the morally laden scopic and solar milieu of the novel that informs the portrayals of Morgan Browne's "rape"—instigated by the secular theophany of Apollo—and, most importantly, the trials of love, and the homosexual quasi-marital Apollonian union of Simon Foster and Axel Nilsson. Simon and Axel's sexual intercourse with the statue of a *kouros*,[1] on display at the National Archaeological Museum in Athens, bears testimony to the continuous presence of Apollo in Murdoch's fiction—made apparent in the admission in her *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* that she is a visualist still living "in a Greek light" (159). Having love as its thematic axis, this article focuses on the ways in which Murdoch's fiction is informed by her theoretical work and permeated by the tenets of her visualist philosophy. It reflects on Murdoch's philosophical and literary texts, highlighting the continuum and the uninterrupted flow of ideas between them.

Selfless love is at the center of Murdoch's idiosyncratic, quixotic conception of moral vision, as well as the philosophical idealism and spiritualism governing her ethically laden novels. Being two of Murdoch's most daring passages, Simon's and Axel's strikingly unexplored paraphilia and ménage à trois with the *kouros* and Morgan's erotic choreography of insolation allude to the impulses of low and high Eros. Murdoch consistently sublimates and elevates the unorthodox paraphilia of Apollo's wooers through their transformative sexual intercourse with the most celebrated simulacrum of the solar deity of Apollo that illuminates their divine love. Being Apollo's signifier, the reanimated *kouros* grants the ensuing illumination of his inamoratos in the novel's finale, which palpitates with the triumph of their love.

The novel is consistently discussed in light of philosophical works such as *The Fire and the Sun: Why Plato Banished the Artists* and *Metaphysics* that address Murdoch's Hellenic visualist morality. Following Murdoch's theorizing of virtuous love as an escape from the egocentric tenebrosity of

illusion granting a passage to light in her *Metaphysics*, I argue that "if we read" the abundant images that the case studies of Morgan, Simon, and Axel offer, these images will become "enlightening" in terms of Murdoch's visualist-laden conception of ethics and selfless love (*Metaphysics* 508). Through its largely neglected Apollonian erotica, the novel traces the processes through which the protagonists embark on a profound moral pilgrimage while frantically searching for love. The novel's *kouros* is one of Murdoch's most appealing icons of love and moral metaphors, which are discussed at length in her philosophical works, where she sings the praises of visual imagery: "There are many kinds of images in the world, sources of energy, checks and reminders, pure things, inspiring things, innocent things attracting love and veneration" (496). The scene of the transformative sexual "intercourse" of Apollo's lovers with one of the most tangible and celebrated simulacra of the solar deity Apollo—in other words, their precarious agalmatophilia and fervent sexual union with a statue of a little Apollo—has a largely neglected iconic status in Murdoch's fiction that deserves greater attention. Agalmatophilia—a paraphilia involving sexual attraction to statues, dolls, mannequins, and other figurative items—encompasses a desire for actual sexual contact and fantasies of having sexual encounters with inanimate objects. The theme of Pygmalionesque, sexual desire for statues is a common occurrence in the repertoire of psychopathology with examples ranging from classical antiquity to postmodernity (O'Bryhim 419–29).

The novel's pronounced ocular intensity, the recurrent litanies of light, and the quasi-literal presence of Apollo as wooer and wooed of three of its protagonists,[2] offer additional corroborating evidence to the attempted affiliation of Murdoch's visualist Hellenic metaphysics with the theme of love and Apollonian eroticism. I maintain that the novel portrays the consistent optical quality of Murdoch's philosophy and fiction. In this respect, Morgan's interchangeable optical experience of an epiphanic Apollonian "rape" of illumination, as well as Simon's and Axel's sexual intercourse with the *kouros* that grants the ensuing en*light*enment[3] of Apollo's lovers, bear testimony to Murdoch's ambivalent intertwining of questions of love and moral progress through ethical seeing. The largely unexamined quasi-literal presence of the sun god in the denouement of the novel and the striking sequence of illuminations that he prompts glorify and sublimate love as the magnetic center of her poetics, aesthetics, and metaphysics of vision.

Written in 1970, *A Fairly Honourable Defeat* is a novel preoccupied with ethical dilemmas, mysticism, and the magnetic force of sexual attraction,

as well as the transformation of low Eros into high Eros. Having a secular, sizzling, and bustling urban setting, the novel is mostly focused on the moral odysseys of solipsistic individuals of the London bourgeoisie. It consistently portrays erotic imagery and metaphors as fundamental aspects of the moral life. Besides, in her *Metaphysics*, the philosopher/novelist deems visualizations indispensable to any understanding of morals; these must "be understood in a moral-religious sense which pictures salvation or enlightenment as wisdom or true vision" (175). The visual exorbitance and allegorical ocular extravaganza of the subsequent analyses in a sense constitute Murdoch's creative response to the increasing philosophical and iconoclastic tendencies. These tendencies often defy the moral dimensions of pictorial, instructive metaphors and imagery, which Murdoch perceives as "clues and signals and wayside shrines and sacraments and places of meditation and refreshment" (496). In *The Sovereignty of Good*, Murdoch links the notion of attaining "knowledge of the individual" with "love" (27). In the process, she elaborates on how love is the labor of sustained attentiveness and moral vision: "it is perfectly obvious that goodness is connected with knowledge: … a patient and just discernment and exploration of what confronts one, which is the result not simply of opening one's eyes but of a certainly perfectly familiar kind of moral discipline" (37).

The parade of the solar, ocular, and Apollonian *insignia* of Greek visualism[4] in *A Fairly Honourable Defeat* is indicative of Murdoch's imagery of love: in other words, of the omnipresent "naturalness of using visual images to express spiritual truths" (*Metaphysics* 15). Murdoch maintains that "we all have our icons, untainted and vital" (496). The following pages trace the zenith of Murdoch's fictional Greek visualism and scrutinize the processes through which some of her most enduring icons sharpen her characters' moral vision, sublimating their love through ethical seeing. In its four hundred and thirty-eight pages, the novel showcases Murdoch's commitment to ethically charged narratives on the frailty of human attachments and the sublimity of love with a mythical, eschatological intensity. Nothing remains of the initial self-satisfied world of bourgeois complacency and reassurance of the novel's Londoners in the optimistic finale that signals the defeat of their impulses of low Eros.

While both Morgan and Simon finally escape from the constraints of Julius's moral darkness, Julius plunges into his Machiavellian intrigue and blasé, sophisticated amoralism and is eventually ostracized. The emphasized haptic sensation of his macabre "black silver-topped cane," his "rather sober" and "almost clerical" clothes, his "dark grey suit," along with his impulsively bought Rue de Rivoli "mauve shirts," are chromatic

projections of his quasi-palpable somberness and loveless tenebrosity (*Fairly Honourable Defeat* 438, 437). Upon entering a sunless Parisian restaurant, Julius symbolically turns his "back" to the warm sun (438). Even the "flaking brown paint" of the walls of this Lutetian Rive Gauche eatery brings to mind the shadowy hermetic life of individuals permanently entrapped in the chthonic grotto of "*eikasia*," Murdoch's "state of vague image-ridden illusion" (*Fairly Honourable Defeat* 438; *Fire* 5). Murdoch's reference to her eccentric misanthrope rejoicing at the thought of being no longer "closely involved with human beings," as well as to the presence of an "aspidistra" plant—a photophobic genus of cave plant—catching his attention, offers additional verification of Julius's photophobia and misanthropic failure to love (438).

While Julius's allegedly blissful Parisian flânerie brings him to the crepuscular mouth of the neo-Platonic cave of solipsistic delusion, Morgan, as well as the homosexual lovers Simon and Axel, all experience a profound ethical awakening, opting not to turn their backs on Apollo's radiance. The progressive illuminations of these characters disclose Murdoch's profound (Greek) visualism. The novel's visualism remains a fundamental key to the understanding of the display of the fairly honorable defeat of the solipsism and low Eros of Simon, Axel, and Morgan, among others, in accordance with Murdoch's philosophical insistence on the importance of this "defeat": "In the moral life the enemy is the fat relentless ego. Moral philosophy is properly, and in the past has sometimes been, the discussion of this ego and of the techniques (if any) for its defeat" (*Sovereignty* 51). The first of the three explored instances of the defeat and transformation of low Eros through en*light*enment/spiritual vision concerns Morgan. Having simultaneously been Peter's quasi-incestuous and frivolous aunt, Tallis's adulterous ex-wife, and Julius's sadomasochistic lover, Morgan is a complex character who deserves greater attention. As the narrative of the novel's tragicomedy progresses, Morgan's alleged academic or sophisticated amoralism and cynical flippancy are substituted by unprecedented emotional crises ultimately leading to her moral reform with the assistance of overt symbolism. The sequence of Morgan's blindings and en*light*enments concerns the radiant flux of Apollo himself, who quasi-literally seduces and violently penetrates her, in a scene that alludes to his recurrent mythological rendering as a savage rapist.

More specifically, the scene of Morgan's painful transformation of her impulses of low Eros primarily concerns her ride through a radiant version of an English Arcadia, strikingly reminiscent of Apollo's primordial Mediterranean counterpart marked by its "tall pale yellow grasses" and

"blue sky" (*Fairly Honourable Defeat* 175). The beaming solstitial iconography of the scene with her nephew Peter "perspiring in white shirt and rolled up sleeves" and Morgan "dreamily looking up into the blue sky" certainly enhances the effect and overall feeling of sexually charged anticipation (175). The warm radiance of Apollo's solar orb and the keen description of the setting of Morgan and Peter's incestuous flirtation foreshadow her imminent literal and metaphorical insolation. The place where the car of the aspiring illicit lovers stops is also a literal sun-drenched Apollonia: "the flowers of the grass were mostly dried up and baked to a brittle tawniness" (175). Elsewhere, the setting is described as "sun-baked" and the blossomed plants as "dry cardboardly rods" (177). Morgan seems to be stepping into an English version of Apollo's sacred land, which is further enhanced by the presence of three white swans—Apollo's sacred birds—flying over her along with what sound like the metallic echoes of Apollo's stringed lyre pouring over from his celestial residence: "a strange regular metallic sound was coming down out of the sky. She saw three swans flying, their whiteness kindled and almost invisible against the pale sun-brimming sky. The rustling whistling sound of their wings passed on over her head and faded" (176).

The symbolism of the swan—an indispensable part of Apollo's entourage of sacred, dedicated animals, along with the wolf—enriches the allusion to the mellifluous and euphonious presence of Apollo that is already established through the harmonious sound of music. In classical antiquity, swans were thought to be singing of Apollo and the beating of the three swans over Morgan's head is reminiscent of a myth that offers additional clues regarding Apollo's constant transposition in *A Fairly Honourable Defeat*. According to this myth, Apollo flew on the back of a swan to the northernmost lands. The reference to the swan also foreshadows Morgan's posterior, radically sensualized[5] solar predicament. In tandem with the popular myth describing Apollo's flight to the land of Hyperboreans on the back of his swan, the complex net of allusions in *A Fairly Honourable Defeat* attests to his quasi-literal presence in Britain. Besides, the recurrent ancient identification of Britain with the Apollonian Hyperborea offers additional evidence regarding the veracity of the critical affiliation attempted here.

In the novel's charged Apollonian erotica, Morgan endures an ironically sensualized trial of illumination in a secular English version of the mountainous, hilly, and evergreen Peloponnesian Arcadia, which is also perceived as a quintessentially Apollonian land due to the temple and Panhellenic cult of Apollo Epicurious/Helper. Specifically, one of the

prominent temples of Apollo's Panhellenic cult was erected in the Arcadian region of Vassai/Bassae (the word Vassai can be translated as valley or ravine). The plain that Murdoch's protagonists traverse ultimately comes to resemble the mythical plateau of Arcadia where Apollo reigns. Having disappeared into "some sort of gulley," Peter is soon followed by Morgan, who ironically excavates the past while getting to the "stony bed" of the valley, where she realizes that she has accessed the ruins of a manmade structure: the site of an abandoned railway cutting in the middle of the valley (*Fairly Honourable Defeat* 175, 176). The secular and profane setting soon acquires mythical proportions that subvert its mundane aura through Apollo's theophany that evokes the Arcadian topography of his temple at Vassai. Interestingly, this specific temple is marked by its architectural nonconformity as, unlike the vast majority of Greek temples, it is aligned with the north-south axis rather than the typical east-west axis pointing towards Apollo's Hyperborea. Descending the hillside of a similar Arcadian valley, Morgan becomes overwhelmed by the heat and the divine, pure pallidity of the "milky white flowering cow parsley" (*Fairly Honourable Defeat* 176). Amidst the intensely visualized heat and the spotless whiteness of the mysterious setting, she half-willingly surrenders to the erotic force of Apollo–Helios, experiencing the intensity of the transformative love prompted by his secular theophany:

> Morgan slid and scrambled down, pulling up the skirt of her dress, until she reached the level. It was hotter here and rather stifling with the drowsy honey smells of flowers and the smell of green.… She began to see more detail, more and different flowers hidden in the grassy jungle.… Small wild rose bushes scattered the slope with circles of papery luminous pink.… [W]oolly flowers of creamy blotting-papery rose. (176–77)

Amidst the sensual overabundance of the Arcadian flora and fauna, Morgan progressively feels the heat of the sun manifesting itself in and through her excessive sweating: "she could feel the perspiration quietly running down her back" (177). Morgan's hyperhidrosis and the physical symptoms that she experiences are consistently eroticized, underlining the palpable amorousness of the scene. Her literal and metaphorical heat and her heightened state of sexual receptiveness are emphasized through persistent references to her tight, sweaty clothes: "she pulled at her light blue cotton dress, detaching it here and there from her body," to her "hand round her damp hot neck" (177). Her literal, tangible, as well as

metaphorical insolation are interestingly depicted as products of a painful, nauseating sunstroke. In the passage, the waves of the sun produce heat radiation causing Morgan's hyperthermia and first temporary blindness. The flowers that "were beginning to quiver in front of her eyes" due to her failing eyesight, as well as many other symptoms like dizziness, nausea, abnormal heartbeat, rapid breathing, disorientation, red irritated skin, and sweating, suggest that Murdoch's dehydrated heroine experiences a sunstroke (177). However, the sensualized narration and almost violently tangible carnalized spirit of the passage suggest interesting alternatives alluding to the mythological Greco–Roman theme of rape as well as the centrality of divine rape to heroic narratives.

Murdoch's fictional remaking of the mythological theme is by no means normalized. It becomes de-energized through humor and hyperbole and mostly acts as a catalyst granting Morgan's subsequent moral reform. The rays of Apollo, who, perhaps, remains one the most notorious mythological rapists of all times, penetrate Morgan's eyes and skin, and she undergoes a painful, yet life-affirming, en*light*enment and transformation of her impulses of low Eros. While physically assaulted by the god of light, she indulges in a fit of divine estrus. Morgan eventually experiences idiosyncratic sexual intercourse with the fire and the sun of the Apollonian light and partakes of the surplus of illumination bestowed upon the entourage of Apollo's mortal lovers. The rather unprecedented ocular intensity of the long-winded passage of Morgan's simultaneous "rape," sightlessness, and (moral) insight is worth quoting at length:

> The next moment she was lying full length in the long grass and there was a great deal too much *light*. *Light* was *vibrating* inside her *eyes* and she could *see* nothing but *dazzling* and *pale shadows* as if the whole *scene* had been *bleached* and then half *blotted out* by a deluge *of light*.… *Rays* from very far away were being focused through her flesh. Her head fell down into deep grass and she fought for breath. The *blazing light* was rhythmically changing into *luminous flashes* of *black*, tugging the *visible* world away from her.… [T]he *sky* above her through the dome of grass was *lurid* and *brilliant* and *dark*.…
>
> She told herself, and hung desperately onto the thought, I have got *sunstroke* that is what it is, it must be. She got herself onto her knees, panting, gasping, keeping her head down. She did not know whether her *eyes* were closed or not. She seemed to *see* the expanse of green floor.… The great *ray* from afar was pinning her between

> the shoulder blades and trying to force her down again.… Saliva was dripping from her mouth.… She felt the *sun burning* into the back of her neck as if it was directed through a *prism*.… Gasping and sobbing for breath she got to her feet and as if still *blind* and yet *seeing* began to run as fast as she could along the level floor of the cutting.…
>
> Her body gave way again and she sat down abruptly with legs outstretched, leaning back against the longer grass. Her heart was pounding violently but her *vision* seemed to have returned and the awful *light* was gone. She wiped her mouth. (*Fairly Honourable Defeat* 177–78; emphasis added)

Murdoch depicts the transformation of Morgan's culpable blindness regarding the moral crimes that she—along with Julius—persistently commits and its mutation into a version of a tangible, literal, quasi-Oedipodean sightlessness of insight. Indeed, when the sheer violence of the interrogatory light of Apollo wanes and her sight is finally restored, Morgan's dormant and latent moral vision finally starts to materialize. As Murdoch emphatically asserts in her analysis of her moral visualism in *The Sovereignty of Good*, the slow transformation of one's attachments is painful: "it is *difficult* to look at the sun: it is not like looking at other things" (97). Morgan manages to see the solar orb as "the sun is seen at the end of a long quest which involves a reorientation," and the novel itself attests to the very palpability of her moral reorientation (*Sovereignty* 90). In spite of the fact that Murdoch's texts often narrate the pseudo-enlightenments of various protagonists like Morgan in disbelief, alluding to the unattainability and unapproachability of goodness, these progressive stages of en*light*enment are indispensable parts of her moral outlook. In spite of the apparent excess of farcical, visual extravaganza and ocular maximalism in the scene, Morgan's heliotropism is rendered meaningful.

Penetrated by Apollo's rays and having his light "vibrating inside her eyes," Morgan feels pinned by "the great ray" to the ground with "outstretched" legs while dripping "saliva." The erotic choreography of Morgan's solar rape possibly constitutes an additional allusion to the ardent Greek vignette of the attempted rape of Daphne—eventually spared from Apollo's lustful embrace through divine transformation into a laurel tree—in the Arcadian fields of classical mythology (Ovid 14–18). Murdoch's conceptual remaking of her image of Apollo as a mysterious "primitive" alludes to his association with the dark powers of Eros ("Iris" 153). In a 1984 interview with Simon Price, Murdoch refers to Apollo as

"a most terrible murderer and rapist," and his hinted presence in the novel affirms her remark ("Iris" 153). Morgan's post-illumination reflections and her keen contemplation of her sublime natural surroundings offer additional corroborating evidence regarding her Daphne-like, quasi-literal merging with the flora of the setting following her sublime sexual intercourse with the sun god himself:

> But now it was suddenly more beautiful to her, more intensely coloured and more absolutely here, under a sky which had resumed its blue. It was as if she had passed through a screen into some more primitive and lovely world, as if she were millennia away in the past or in the future in some paradise of undimmed experience and unblurred vision. "How beautiful it all is," she said. "How infinitely beautiful. I worship it." (*Fairly Honourable Defeat* 179)

Shortly after their rural sensualized encounter, Morgan quasi-literally gets to *de novo* encounter Apollo's simulacrum on the occasion of her visit to Simon and Axel's domestic arrangement in London. There, a photograph of the god of light in the form of "a Greek statue of a youth" ironically hangs "beside the fireplace," radiating the fire of divine illumination (190). The unorthodox assemblage of Apollonian wooers, the paradoxical secular lovers of Apollo, naturally meditate on Apollo's uncanny omnipresence through his light-exuding illustration. Morgan's enquiry regarding Apollo's true identity—"He? However? What is he, some Greek thing?"—is followed by Simon's description of the visual verification of the tutelary deity of his Greek love with Axel: "A *kouros*, a youth, an Apollo as they sometimes call them. Archaic, fifth century B.C. National Museum at Athens" (190).

Having witnessed Morgan's eroticized, photosensitive, and almost epileptic seizure, Peter attributes the uncanniness and mysteriousness of the event to Pan's presence. This is an interesting remark, since the Greco-Roman god of shepherds, flora, and fauna is also notorious for his musical duel with Apollo. In the following passage, however, Morgan disproves Peter's claims, suggesting that the gleaming light illuminating her mortal darkness through a solar version of Eros has a distinctly different mythological background:

> Peter was silent. Then he said gravely. "Yes, Pan might be here."
> "I don't know what his name is," said Morgan, "but he was certainly here just now."[6]

> "Or it might be a touch of the sun," said Peter.
> "Or it might be a touch of the sun!" She laughed weakly. (178)

Following Morgan's quasi-literal, neo-mythological rape in the English fields by Murdoch's notorious "rapist," Simon and Axel meet for the first time while indulging in a bold ménage à trois, making love to the statue of a *kouros* on display in the archaic sculpture galleries of the National Archaeological Museum of Athens (Murdoch, "Iris" 153). Murdoch's perhaps most daring and progressive passage attests to the palpability of the affiliation of her fiction with her philosophy through the tenets of Apollonianism and Greek visualism. Simon and Axel's strikingly unexplored paraphilia and museum sexual misconduct constitute the culmination of Murdoch's Apollonian erotica in *A Fairly Honourable Defeat*. In addition, these scenes invite a discussion on art as a collective memory bank and a reservoir of erotic desires and dreams in Murdoch's fiction. In fact, through their unorthodox intercourse, the novel traces the processes through which disengaged or distracted viewers of art finally become engaged art lovers—in the most grotesquely literal and tactile of all potential forms of engagement—and embark on a moral pilgrimage in tandem with Murdoch's lengthy exegesis of iconophilia in *The Fire and the Sun*.

Of course, the characterization of the homosexual couple of Apollonian lovers in the novel also has a striking significance in terms of Murdoch's burning gender agendas, particularly in relation to the progressiveness and radicalism of the queer characterization of Simon and Axel, as well as the portrayal of their slow departure from the immorality of the recurrent homophobic attacks and tortures inflicted by Julius King. Most importantly, Murdoch's depiction of the galleries of the National Museum in the urban heart of Athens as "arks of lost moments in which the here-and-now of the work functions as a possible portal between an unfinished past and a reopened future" showcases the cultural history of homosexuality for individuals like Simon and Axel who seek to retrieve the genealogy of homosexual love (Foster 15). Looking out on a forlorn, archaic world, Simon and Axel challenge the framing of a historical period finally transgressing the melancholic fixation of casual Romantic reverie inherent in various cliché encounters with ruins of the past. Through Simon and Axel's unorthodox, Apollonian agalmatophilia, Murdoch exposes the museum as an "active," "unstable" site that remains "open to eruptive returns and entropic collapses" (Foster 17). Thus, the author turns an "excavation site" into a "construction site," where western canonical heteronormativity and masculinist conventions governing gender performance and stereo-

typing undergo conceptual remaking (22). Axel and Simon strive to connect their homosexual love with an accepting, but irrevocably lost, past. Derrida's insights in "Archive Fever" regarding the compulsion to associate with the fragments of the past are also pertinent here:

> It is to burn with a passion. It is never to rest, interminably, from searching for the archive right where it slips away.… It is to have a compulsive, repetitive, and nostalgic desire … an irrepressible desire to return to the origin, a homesickness, a nostalgia for the return to the most archaic place of absolute commencement. (Derrida and Prenowitz 57)

The portrayal of the museum as an archive of the permutations of homosexual love in *A Fairly Honourable Defeat* centers on the powerful signifier of the statue of the archaic *kouros*, which is the symbolic object at the heart of the story and is also present on the daring back cover of the novel's first edition in 1970.[7] John Sergeant's jacket design features a powerful image of a naked female that seems to visualize Morgan's Apollonian rape on its front cover, as well as the momentous meeting of the novel's queer lovers, Simon and Axel, while caressing the thighs of the Athenian archaic Kouros on the back cover. The caressed *kouros* points to the indissoluble connection between the overwhelming love story of the two protagonists and the sheer materiality, the physical consistency of the *kouros* as a work of art. Carved in the Archaic period, between the late seventh and early fifth centuries BC, it remains one of the earliest marble statues of a human figure created in the region of Attica in the periphery of Athens.

Simon and Axel's sexual awakening of the past entails a reconfiguration and perceptual modification of their present status. Thus, the Athenian museum in *A Fairly Honourable Defeat* becomes a re-constellation of past and present and is portrayed as a monument to western sexuality. It perpetuates the impact of classical Greek homoeroticism as it has been romanticized and idealized in the context of the high ideal of same-sex camaraderie. The novel's *kouros*—a powerful signifier of the origins of the western conception of homosexuality in and through the notion of Greek love—also prompts the remaking and reconfiguration of the sexual identity of the two (rather Forsterian) closeted homosexuals previously entrapped in the false pretence of a chaste, celibate, and guilt-ridden sexual abstinence. Murdoch reaches daring progressive heights fostering the materialization of their illicit desires within the museum's galleries in a series of provocatively explicit passages. They both experience sublimity

through visualism and the emancipatory aesthetic contemplation, flirtation, and sexual awakening of the inanimate sublime and beautiful icon as an object of love. Thus, through their reanimation of the statue of *kouro*s, Simon and Axel disempower the dialectics of reification and immobilization that often accompany reflections on displays of artworks and recurrent bourgeois commodity fetishism.

Expanding on the specifics of the couple's Apollonian iconophilia and their metaphorical reanimation of their archaic lover, one must also consider Murdoch's essays on the sublime where the Kantian notion of aesthetic contemplation is juxtaposed with Platonic visualist morality. Murdoch challenges the neo-Platonic prejudice against the allegedly deceiving arts perennially preoccupied with form, and, connecting art with morality, she maintains that "the beautiful is an analogon of the good" ("Sublime" 249). In *The Sovereignty of Good*, also, Murdoch characteristically mentions that "Plato held that beauty could be a starting point of the good life, but he came to mistrust art.… Plato allowed to the beauty of the lovely boy an awakening power which he denied to the beauty of nature or of art (86). Arguably, the beauty of Plato's lovely boy and Murdoch's notion of the sublime contemplation of the object of love converge in the idealized and heavily romanticized beauty of the Apollonian simulacrum of the archaic *kouros*. Therefore, through their adoration of and unorthodox sexual intercourse with the sublime *kouros*, Simon and Axel are finally closer to a keen apprehension of goodness.

Axel and Simon's "momentous meeting" in Athens strangely remains largely unexplored in Murdoch criticism (*Fairly Honourable Defeat* 21). The very first reference to the Athenian *kouros* concerns Simon's contemplation of his destabilized relationship with Axel due to Julius's plotting and machinations: "Behind Axel's head upon the wall hung the photo of the tall slim long-nosed Greek *kouros* from the National Museum at Athens, the tutelary deity of their love" (78). When Morgan asks Simon "what suddenly brought" him and Axel together, pointing to the photograph of the *kouros* "which hung beside the fireplace," Simon is quite straightforward: "*He* did" (190; emphasis in original). Simon's cryptic vagueness cannot, of course, satisfy Morgan, who—in spite of her Apollonian "rape" of insolation and sunstroke—appears still to be immersed in the shadows of solipsism and fails to recognize the simulacrum of the sun god. The subsequent four pages of the novel concern the detailed narration of Simon's falling in love in Athens in the context of his momentous encounter with the *kouros*. Upon noticing the statue on his first day ever in Athens, Simon realizes that "it is not impossible to fall in love with a statue. The *kouros* stood alone

in a deep alcove and once inside the alcove one could be out of sight of the attendants.… Simon had the *kouros* to himself. He could not resist touching it" (190).

The idealized, "blinding" beauty of Apollo's embodiment and the ocular intensity of the passage that narrates Simon's initial scopic frenzy foreshadow future developments. What follows is Simon's ritualistic lovemaking to the statue, which defies the popular conception of the museum as a space where inanimate things or accoutrements are kept in a state of permanent stasis. Thus, the statue is rescued from oblivion through love. It is worshipped in an idolatrous sense as the archetype of male beauty through Simon's caresses, kisses, and unorthodox Eros. This is the sole example of characters indulging in agalmatophilia in the totality of Murdoch's twenty-six novels. However, Simon and Axel's agalmatophilia in Murdoch's perhaps most erotically charged passage is by no means pathologized, as it is merged with the theme of Apollonian (moral) en*light*enment:

> The *kouros*, which was about six feet high, stood on a pedestal with its navel just about level with Simon's eyes.…[8] He could not caress the face. But, coming back day after day, he caressed everything else. His fingers explored the bones of the long straight legs, the hollow of the thigh, the heavenly curve of the narrow buttocks, the flat stomach and the noble pattern of the rib cage, the pretty eye-shaped navel, the nipples of the breasts, the runnel of the back, the shoulder blades. He lightly stroked the feet, probing between the long separated toes, he reverently touched the penis. He looked up into the serene divine countenance, huge-eyed, long-nosed, so enigmatically smiling.[9] After a while fingers were not enough. He had to worship the statue with his lips, with his tongue. He kissed the buttocks, the thighs, the hands, the penis, first hastily and then with slow adoration. (*Fairly Honourable Defeat* 191)

Murdoch narrates the museum as an archive of western homosexuality, an archive whose conventions of scientific distancing and epistemological neutrality are radically undone through love. The functionality of Athens as the locus par excellence of this deviant love is characteristic, as—given the homoerotic tradition of the city's classical past—these two Englishmen could not, perhaps, fall in love in the same way anywhere else. Among the ruins of Athens, Simon's latent homosexuality becomes naturalized and unfolds, joining Axel's, while seeming perfectly in context:

> On the fifth morning.… He came back and to his joy found the *kouros* alone again. He walked round to the side of the statue and laid his hand lightly in the small of the back. Then he drew it downward very slowly, outlining the curve of the buttock, and led his fingers gently in onto the interior of the thigh. At that moment he realized that someone was watching him. It was Axel.… [R]egarding the little love scene with gravity.… After a moment Axel moved forward and with great deliberation and absolute solemnity laid his hand on top of Simon's. (191–92)

Having become Simon's and Axel's lover—in a libido-ridden, flamboyant passage that palpitates with his secular theophany—Apollo himself later on hangs as visual verification of their divine infatuation within the premises of their cockney, bourgeois salon. However, apart from being a living monument to their Greek love, the constant presence of the signifier of the *kouros* also has certain ethical implications for the moral odyssey of the couple. Having survived a set of ordeals—Simon's liquid ordeal due to his entrapment by supermasculine Julius in the novel's killer pool being the most characteristic—they eventually appear immersed in abundant light. Yet, before reaching that stage, they experience a tragicomedy of errors and self-aggrandizing fantasies that are (often) connected to the *kouros*. The threat of total disenchantment due to Julius's manipulative schemes, for example, is symbolically manifested in Axel's temporary loss of belief in the *kouros* as the symbol of their divine unconditional love: "You can take that photograph down, I don't want to see it any more, it's spoilt" (196).

The demise of their Eros is also figuratively portrayed in a cinematic nightmare of Simon's that teems with visual metaphors. However, in spite of its haunting and macabre imagery, the passage simultaneously contains the seeds of an Apollonian immersion in the life-affirming light of moral vision. As the narration of the nightmare progresses, Simon is literally immersed in darkness, finding himself in "a dark twilit garden" while "intermittently" catching sight of "a luminous but darkening sky" (*Fairly Honourable Defeat* 159). One sentence alone is indicative of the visual extravaganza of the passage that foreshadows Simon's forthcoming moral illumination after the horror of his brother's drowning and of his asphyxia in the liquid ordeal that Julius King prompts: "there was different light under the trees, strange light, dark and yet lurid" (159). Interestingly, Simon does not wander alone in this dream, as he is accompanied by wildlife roaming the mythological garden of fire. His patron, Maecenas, and lover, the sun god, followed by some of his kinsmen, are once again

accompanying him. Simon's mythological entourage does not consist of graceful *kouroi* this time. Rather, Simon has an unorthodox chaperon: a maternal *lupus*, a she-wolf having the appearance of his mother guiding him through the nightmarish Albion, the heart of darkness. The striking reference attests to the palpability of the affiliation of Simon and Axel with the cult of Apollo as well as the proposition that Simon, in particular, is often portrayed as Apollo transposed. The female wolf appears to be an amalgam of Apollo and Apollo's mother Leto, as well as Simon's mother. The divinity of the radiant matriarch and ancestress of Apollo/Simon is enhanced through persistent references to her emanations of psychedelic light: "His mother moved onward like a dog, turning every now and then to look back at him, and when she turned the luminosity under the trees was reflected in the steel rimmed spectacles which she was wearing, and her eyes gleamed cold like those of a nocturnal animal caught in a ray of light" (159). The bright-eyed canine leading Apollo/Simon through the shadows of the nightmare constitutes an overt allusion to Apollo's epithet Lyceus/Bright, wolf-eyed, and to the wolf as his sacred animal. The focus is straightaway placed on the "gleaming" eyes of the "nocturnal animal" that guides Simon to his prophetic discovery amidst an overabundance of "light" (159).[10] The god of light repeatedly appears, disappears, and reappears in *A Fairly Honourable Defeat*, either as Apollo himself, or as a *kouros*, a radiant canine, and, eventually, as Simon and Axel themselves as Apollos transposed. In the unorthodox "illuminated darkness," Simon perceives the "ashes of a bonfire" and, brushing the ash aside in an agonizing scene, he realizes that the dead face buried beneath is that of his brother Rupert (159). Thus, having glimpsed the morally improving "Apolline dream world" of images, Simon finally learns to see the world in the light of this insight (Nietzsche 43). In fact, Simon's Apollo-inspired (Delphic), prophetic glimmer and ocular phantasmagoria not only foreshadow his dear brother's eventual drowning but also allude to his own eventual unconditional surrender to Apollonian love.

Apollo is also omnipresent in the denouement of the novel where both Simon and Axel experience their final life-affirming illumination and, very much like the archaic marble *kouros*, quasi-literally radiate light in a celebratory affirmation of their moral reorientation and strengthened moral vision. Their Apollo-sponsored divine love proves strong enough to survive the overabundance of trials and tribulations, and they set off for Mediterranean France.[11] Their voyage recalls their pilgrimage to Athens, the birthplace of their homosexual love. Gone are the days when the doors of Simon's separation from Axel, which Julius and Morgan seal behind

him, metaphorically lead Simon from "the sunny landing" of his public life to the claustrophobic "dimmer light of the little hall" of Julius's premises (*Fairly Honourable Defeat* 152–53). There Simon "blink[s]" and "blink[s] again," striving, in vain, to comprehend the degree of Julius's loveless misanthropy and moral darkness (153). Simon finally escapes from his half-willing confinement in the closet, as well as from the grotto-like, dismal salon of Julius's bourgeois cave of penumbrae which "glow[s] shadowily with reflected light from the declining sun" (153).

In the beginning of *A Fairly Honourable Defeat,* the morally unenlightened and unloved Simon finds the sun and the enervating summer heat intolerable, metaphorically seeking refuge from the "savage" rays of Apollo in the solipsistic caves of Julius:

> Simon was feeling very disturbed.… Perhaps it was the heat. Like most Englishmen, Simon pretended to like hot weather but really didn't. London in July with the sun for once continually shining had become a mad place, stifling, enclosed, dry, whose rows of unreal and shimmering houses seemed to conceal something quite else, some more than Saharan desolation. (149)

However, the final resolution and clarification of the novel find Simon and his partner radically transformed, literally moving in the direction of the sun like a pair of heliotropic lovers of the sun god himself. "Heading south," the "pale blue Hillman Minx" facilitates the passage of the remorseful Apollonian lovers to light (423). Their dialogues attest to the palpability of their Apollo-sponsored moral reform. Simon says, "Axel, I can't help feeling I'm more to blame than anyone. I simply let Julius enslave me" (424). Axel also admits that he was blinded by jealousy for what he wrongly perceived as Simon and Julius's summer flirtation: "all I could see was his connection with you" (424–25). "If I could only *see* it all clearly," Simon exclaims, finally realizing the ethical implications of sight (426). In the very next scene Simon's wish is almost fulfilled as, approaching their destination in southern France, he starts to realize that he can finally rejoice in the light of en*light*enment: "What a marvelous strange light. The sun's shining but I can just see a star. Look" (427). The French village and the car itself are, indeed, immersed in abundant celestial light: "[T]he strange light had turned the grass into furry green velvet.… The church tower reached upwards … to a slender spire of matching blue slate whose weather-cock had become a blurred spear of gold" (427).

Simon's definitive exodus from all dark interiors is also, interestingly, implicated in his refusal to enter the dark interior of the church: "No. It's already too dark inside. We'll see it tomorrow" (*Fairly Honourable Defeat* 427). The litany of light that Simon and Axel experience becomes more pronounced when they reach their hotel garden, "where the sun was shining" (427). The subsequent scene is suggestive of the literal, floral heliotropism of Simon's and Axel's metaphorical moral blossoming: "The *sun* was still *warm* and *bright*, though the *evening star* had strengthened. The vine was hung with grassy *green translucent* grapes and the leaves and tendrils *glowed* with a *pale green radiance*, outspread and welcoming and still in the quiet *sunlight*" (428; emphasis added). The novel exquisitely traces the quasi-literal turn to the sun of the couple. The celebratory affirmation of their erotic devotion to the deity of Apollo also becomes apparent in Simon's touching of the "warm pendant beads of the grape bunches" amidst profuse sunlight (428). Simon's haptic perception of one more of the novel's abundant metaphors of light and visualist imagery of love recalls the reverential way in which he caresses the statue of the Athenian *kouros* at the beginning of the novel.

Thus, in a recurring Murdochian fashion, the denouement of *A Fairly Honourable Defeat* signals the protagonists' literal/geographical and metaphorical/moral en*light*enment as well as the transformation of their selfish love and the shadowy egotism of life at their Barons Court flat. Characteristically, amidst a profound "diffusion of light," the "angelic hands" of the green leaves enclose Simon in a momentous, warm, and life-affirming luminous embrace as he

> raised his face to the *dazzle* of the *sun* among the leaves and felt his youth lift him and make him buoyant. He was young and healthy and he loved and was loved. It was impossible for him, as he sat there in the *green southern light* and waited for Axel, not to feel in his vein the warm anticipation of a new happiness. (428; emphasis added)

The novel traces Simon and Axel's literal and metaphorical exodus "*ex umbris*" and the setting itself symbolizes their quest for the (Greek) light in/through their absolute somatic surrender to the Athenian *kouros* as Apollo's signifier, and, by extension, to Apollo himself (*Metaphysics* 320). The novel also portrays the processes through which their divine love survives against all odds, very much like the reanimated *kouros* who acquires a life of its own through love. Composed in marble, as a material extension

of Apollo's divinity, the *kouros* becomes animated through the unrestricted agalmatophilia of Simon and Axel. Hence, things come full circle, and as Simon perceives the "dazzle of the sun" and notices "the sun made gold" in Axel's hair, they metaphorically become Apollo(s) transposed: youthful, charming, light-exuding Athenian lovers and *kouroi* themselves (*Fairly Honourable Defeat* 428).

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Notes

[1] I follow Murdoch's consistent italicization of the word *kouros* in *A Fairly Honourable Defeat* (190–91). In Ancient Greek, *kouros* means youth or a noble boy, and the term describes freestanding sculptures representing idealized nude male youths. Modelled after pharaonic, monumental sculptures, these archaic statues of youths acquired prominence in the seventh and sixth centuries BCE (Siebler and Wolf 38). Having been posited as the archetypes of the standing, unsupported "naked man in art," these statues were originally proposed as depictions of Apollo (38). The statues of *kouroi* were often found in sanctuaries of Apollo and were life-sized and typically made of marble. While questioning the legitimacy of the conflation of the solar deity of Apollo with the iconography of the *kouros* in Mediterranean archaeology, Stewart maintains that "it was axiomatic that archaic males of this type represented Apollo" (54). The term *kouros* was later adopted as a generic term for the standing male figure, paving the way for the *ekphrastic* revolution at the threshold of the golden age of classical art. The funerary statue of a youth from Anavyssos, the so-called Kroisos, stands out as its body is, particularly, "marked by a strong plasticity": "The arms are meaty, the legs are powerfully built, and the upright and stretched upper body is muscularly formed" (Siebler and Wolf 42). This sensual plasticity is immortalized in Murdoch's description of the magnetism of the Anavyssos *kouros* statue on display at the National Archaeological Museum in Athens. John Sergeant's jacket design for the novel's 1970 first edition back cover features the easily recognizable image of this particular statue.

[2] For a recent critical exploration of Apollonian imagery in Murdoch's fiction, refer to Osborn.

[3] I appropriate throughout the peculiar graphic rendering of en*light*enment following Martin Jay's influential treatise on visualism entitled *Downcast Eyes*. The book's second chapter highlights the term's intrinsic ocular dimension and visual problematics: "Dialectic of EnLIGHTenment" (83). References to moral en*light*enment in Murdoch's philosophy and fiction should by no means be conflated with or set over against the heritage of the 1688–1789 Age of Enlightenment. While the enlightened absolutism of European courts and the emphasis on order, reason, and science during the *siècle des lumières* is, indeed, a continuation of the western sensationalist and ocular tradition, it is, I contend, far removed from Murdoch's quixotic, spiritual, and morally charged conception of Apollonian illumination through sustained attention and selfless love.

[4] In "Myth and Phenomenology," Scarborough traces the inception of Hellenic Visualism as "one important Greek way of being-in-the-world" (58). For the most recent comprehensive genealogy of the fundamentals of classical Visualism and critical exploration of the surge of interest in Greek visual culture, consult Kampakoglou and Novokhatko.

[5] The mythological rape of Leda by Zeus transformed into a swan is also pertinent here. In his *Metamorphoses*, Ovid refers to Leda's sexual assault by Zeus and to her posture "as she lay" exactly like Morgan in *A Fairly Honourable Defeat* "under the white swan's wings" (124 VI. 93–123).

[6] A quasi-identical line is strikingly repeated in Murdoch's April 1964 letter to Brigid Brophy, where she most probably refers to an uncanny Apollonian experience she had in Delphi: "I'm interested Sally thought Apollo alive & well. Somebody was there no doubt, but I felt I didn't know Apollo well enough to be sure. It's a terrifying spot" (Letter). In her 1984 interview with Price, Murdoch narrates an uncanny "miracle" that she has experienced in Delphi, the "eerie home of Apollo" (Dooley 148).

[7] A seemingly unconnected "Note" in *A Fairly Honourable Defeat*'s 1970 Chatto and Windus first edition also (ironically) underscores the novel's visualist poetics: "The lines from the song 'The Sun has got his hat on' are quoted by permission of Messrs West's Ltd, Music Publishers" (n.p.). The conflation of the sun with the masculinist, Apollonian tradition, emphasized through the choice of the male pronoun, also points to the visualist overarching formula of the novel. The note was removed from later editions of *A Fairly Honourable Defeat*. The excerpt from the song playing on the Sikh's transistor in the body of the novel reads as such:

> The Sun has got his hat on,
> Hip hip hip hooray,
> The sun has got his hat on
> And he's coming out today! (269)

[8] The sensual description of the statue, arguably, recalls the renowned funerary statue of the so-called Kroisos on display at the National Archaeological Museum in Athens (Siebler and Wolf 42–43).

[9] In the description of the *kouros* figure, Murdoch is extremely attentive to the typical iconography of the male youths of pre-classical art (Siebler and Wolf 42–43).

[10] Murdoch's reference to the starry-eyed *simulacrum* of the "she-wolf" Leto is at the same time a clear allusion to the genealogy of Apollo and his mother complicating the heavy intertextuality and the surplus of mythological allusions in the novel. One of Apollo's most characteristic proto-Hellenic epithets is Lyceus/Wolf-eyed and/or Lycegenes/Born of Lycia, or born of a wolf.

[11] The south of France is most certainly another Apollonian destination for the renewed lovers of the sun god. The extant Corinthian columns of the Greco–Roman temple of Apollo in the town of Riez, as well as the now lost temple of Apollo that the Greek founders of Marseilles built, attest to the presence of sanctuaries of Apollo in pre-Roman Gaul. MacKillop traces the variety of epithets devoted to the amalgam of the "Gaulish Apollo" (35).

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