

14. PHILOSOPHY AND LITERATURE

DIALOGUE WITH IRIS MURDOCH



INTRODUCTION

MAGEE Some great philosophers have been also great writers in the sense of great literary artists – I suppose the outstanding examples are Plato, St Augustine, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. Others, if not in quite their class, were certainly very good writers: Descartes, Pascal, Berkeley, Hume and Rousseau spring to mind. In our own time Bertrand Russell and Jean-Paul Sartre have both been awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. Yet there have been great philosophers who were bad writers, two of the very greatest – Kant and Aristotle – being two of the worst. Others were just pedestrian – one thinks of Aquinas and Locke, for example. As for Hegel, his work has become a byword for obscurity, almost a joke in that regard. I think he must be the most difficult to read of all world-famous writers.

What these examples show is that philosophy is not, as such, a branch of literature: its quality and importance rest on quite other considerations than literary and aesthetic values. If a philosopher writes well, that's a bonus – it makes him more enticing to study, obviously, but it does nothing to make him a better philosopher. I state this firmly at the outset because in this discussion I am going to consider some of the respects in which philosophy and literature do overlap, together with someone whose experience spans both worlds. Iris Murdoch is now a novelist of international reputation, but for many years before she became a successful novelist – and indeed for some years after, making a total of fifteen altogether – she was a tutor in philosophy at Oxford University.

DISCUSSION

MAGEE When you are writing a novel on the one hand and philosophy on the other, are you conscious that these are two radically different kinds of writing?

MURDOCH Yes, I am. Philosophy aims to clarify and to explain, it states and attempts to solve very difficult highly technical problems and the writing must be subservient to this aim. One might say that bad philosophy is not philosophy, whereas bad art is still art. There are all sorts of ways in which we tend to forgive literature, but we do not forgive philosophy. Literature is read by many and various people, philosophy by very few. Serious artists are their own critics and do not usually work for an audience of 'experts'. Besides, art is fun and for fun, it has innumerable intentions and charms. Literature interests us on different levels in different fashions. It is full of tricks and magic and deliberate mystification. Literature entertains, it does many things, and philosophy does one thing.

MAGEE Having read several of your books, including your philosophical books, it strikes me that the sentences themselves are different. In your novels the sentences are opaque, in the sense that they are rich in connotation, allusion, ambiguity; whereas in your philosophical

writing the sentences are transparent, because they are saying only one thing at a time.

MURDOCH Yes. Literary writing is art, an aspect of an art form. It may be self-effacing or it may be grand, but if it is literature it has an artful intention, the language is being used in a characteristically elaborate manner in relation to the 'work', long or short, of which it forms a part. So there is no one literary style or ideal literary style, though of course there is good and bad writing; and there are great individual thinkers who are great writers, whom I would not call philosophers, such as Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. Of course philosophers vary and some are more 'literary' than others, but I am tempted to say that there is an ideal philosophical style which has a special unambiguous plainness and hardness about it, an austere unselfish candid style. A philosopher must try to explain exactly what he means and avoid rhetoric and idle decoration. Of course this need not exclude wit and occasional interludes; but when the philosopher is as it were in the front line in relation to his problem I think he speaks with a certain cold clear recognizable voice.

MAGEE The number of people who have engaged in both activities at a professional level must be tiny. You are among the very few who can characterize from personal experience what the difference is. Can you say more about it?

MURDOCH Philosophical writing is not self-expression, it involves a disciplined removal of the personal voice. Some philosophers maintain a sort of personal presence in their work, Hume and Wittgenstein for instance do this in different ways. But the philosophy has a plain impersonal hardness nonetheless. Of course literature too involves a control of the personal voice and its transformation. One might even set up an analogy between philosophy and poetry, which is the hardest kind of literature. Both involve a special and difficult purification of one's statements, of thought emerging in language. But there is a kind of self-expression which remains in literature, together with all the playfulness and mystification of art. The literary writer deliberately leaves a space for his reader to play in. The philosopher must not leave any space.

MAGEE You said a moment ago that the aim of philosophy is to clarify whereas the aim of literature, very often, is to mystify: I suppose it is central to what the novelist or playwright is doing that he is trying to create an illusion, whereas it is central to what the philosopher is doing that he is trying to dispel illusion.

MURDOCH Philosophy is not aiming at any sort of formal perfection for its own sake. Literature struggles with complex problems of aesthetic form, it tries to produce a kind of completeness. There is a sensuous thingy element in every art form. Even fragmentary literary writing shows some sense of a complete whole. Literature is (mostly) 'works of art'. Works of philosophy are quite different things. Very occasionally a

work of philosophy may also be a work of art, such as the *Symposium*, but these are exceptional cases; and it is in the light of other parts of Plato's philosophy that we read the *Symposium* as a philosophical statement. Most philosophy, as compared with literature, seems rambling and formless, even when the philosopher is explaining something of great formal complexity. Philosophy is a matter of getting hold of a problem and holding on to it and being prepared to go on repeating oneself as one tries different formulations and solutions. This patient relentless ability to stay with a problem is a mark of the philosopher; whereas a certain desire for novelty usually marks the artist.

MAGEE With the making of the contrast in mind, how would you characterize literature as distinct from philosophy?

MURDOCH It might take a long time to 'define' literature, though we all know roughly what it is. It is the art form which uses words. Journalism can be literature if it is also art, scholarly writing can be literature. Literature is various and very large, whereas philosophy is very small. The problems stated at the beginning are mostly the same problems which occupy us today, and although the problems are vast, there are in a sense not all that many of them. Philosophy has had a tremendous influence, but the number of philosophers exerting the influence has been comparatively small. This is because philosophy is so difficult.

MAGEE Your point about the continuity of philosophical problems since the beginning was hit off strikingly by Whitehead when he said that all Western philosophy is merely footnotes to Plato.

MURDOCH Yes indeed. Plato is not only the father of our philosophy, he is our best philosopher. Of course the methods of philosophy change, but we have not left Plato behind, which is also to say that philosophy does not make progress in the way that science does. Of course literature does not make progress either. Nobody is better than Homer. But literature has no continuous task, it is not in that sense a kind of 'work'. It is indeed something in which we all indulge spontaneously, and so might seem to be nearer to play, and to the vast irresponsible variety of play. Literary modes are very natural to us, very close to ordinary life and to the way we live as reflective beings. Not all literature is fiction, but the greater part of it is or involves fiction, invention, masks, playing roles, pretending, imagining, story-telling. When we return home and 'tell our day', we are artfully shaping material into story form. (These stories are very often funny, incidentally.) So in a way as word-users we all exist in a literary atmosphere, we live and breathe literature, we are all literary artists, we are constantly employing language to make interesting forms out of experience which perhaps originally seemed dull or incoherent. How far reshaping involves offences against truth is a problem any artist must face. A deep motive for making literature or

art of any sort is the desire to defeat the formlessness of the world and cheer oneself up by constructing forms out of what might otherwise seem a mass of senseless rubble.

MAGEE Your remark about cheering oneself up brings to the fore the fact that one of the chief aims of literature has always been to entertain; and I don't think that is an aim which has anything to do with philosophy.

MURDOCH Philosophy is not exactly entertaining but it can be comforting, since it too is an eliciting of form from muddle. Philosophers often construct huge schemes involving a lot of complicated imagery. Many kinds of philosophical argument depend more or less explicitly upon imagery. A philosopher is likely to be suspicious of aesthetic motives in himself and critical of the instinctive side of his imagination. Whereas any artist must be at least half in love with his unconscious mind, which after all provides his motive force and does a great deal of his work. Of course philosophers have unconscious minds too, and philosophy can relieve our fears; it is often revealing to ask of a philosopher, 'What is he afraid of?' The philosopher must resist the comfort-seeking artist in himself. He must always be undoing his own work in the interests of truth so as to go on gripping his problem. This tends to be incompatible with literary art. Philosophy is repetitive, it comes back over the same ground and is continually breaking the forms which it has made.

MAGEE You've now said a number of things about literature which, by implication, contrast it with philosophy, but I'd like to draw out the contrasts more explicitly. For instance, you said story-telling is natural - we all do it in everyday life, and we all like to be told stories. I suppose, by contrast, philosophy is counter-natural. Philosophy involves us in the critical analysis of our beliefs, and of the pre-suppositions of our beliefs, and it's a very striking fact that most people neither like doing this nor like having it done to them. If the assumptions on which their beliefs rest are questioned it makes them feel insecure, and they put up a strong resistance to it.

MURDOCH Yes. I think philosophy is very counter-natural, it is a very odd unnatural activity. Any teacher of philosophy must feel this. Philosophy disturbs the mass of semi-aesthetic conceptual habits on which we normally rely. Hume said that even the philosopher, when he leaves his study, falls back upon these habitual assumptions. And philosophy is not a kind of scientific pursuit, and anyone who resorts to science is falling straight out of philosophy. It is an attempt to perceive and to tease out in thought our deepest and most general concepts. It is not easy to persuade people to *look* at the level where philosophy operates.

MAGEE Bertrand Russell once said that philosophy consists of the questions we don't know how to answer. Isaiah Berlin also takes this view.

MURDOCH Yes, that we do not know *how* to answer, or perhaps even quite how to ask. There are plenty of questions we cannot answer, but we know

how they might be answered. Philosophy involves seeing the absolute oddity of what is familiar and trying to formulate really probing questions about it.

MAGEE You said just now that philosophy is not science, and I agree. But it has certain very basic things in common with science. One of these is that both are attempts to understand the world, and to do so in a way that does not consist of expressing personal attitudes. In other words, in both activities one submits oneself to criteria outside oneself; one tries to say something that is *impersonally* true. This relates to another important difference between philosophy and literature. Just now you said something that seemed to imply that whereas your novel writing reveals a distinctive literary personality you wouldn't mind if your philosophical writing did not. It strikes me that almost the most important thing about an imaginative or creative writer is the possession of a personality in that sense. If he hasn't got one we're not interested in reading him. Whereas with philosophers that is simply not the case. You could read all the works of Kant with impassioned interest, and at the end of it have very little idea what Kant was like internally, as a human being.

MURDOCH You mean what interests us is the personality expressed in the work? The writer himself is something else again; he might be dull though his work was not, or vice-versa. I am not sure about 'literary personality'. We want a writer to write well and to have something interesting to say. Perhaps we should distinguish a recognizable style from a personal presence. Shakespeare has a recognizable style but no presence, whereas a writer like D. H. Lawrence has a less evident style but a strong presence. Though many poets and some novelists speak to us in a highly personal manner, much of the best literature has no strongly felt presence of the author in the work. A literary presence if it is too bossy, like Lawrence's, may be damaging; when for instance one favoured character is the author's spokesman. Bad writing is almost always full of the fumes of personality. It is difficult to make rules here. The desire to express oneself, to explain and establish oneself, is a strong motive to art, but one which must be treated critically. I do not mind owning a personal style, but I do not want to be obviously present in my work. Of course a writer has to reveal his morality and his talents. This sort of self-revelation happens in philosophy too, but there we ask, is the conclusion true, is the argument valid?

MAGEE When talking to friends who may be very intelligent and well educated without knowing much about philosophy, I find that they often betray the assumption that philosophy is a branch of literature – that a philosopher is somehow expressing a personal view of the world in the same sort of way as an essayist might, or a novelist; and it's not always easy to explain why this is not so. I suppose the reason is partly that philosophical problems have histories, and each philos-

opher comes on the scene at a certain stage in that developing history; and if he is to make a contribution at all he has to make it at that point, otherwise there simply isn't a contribution to be made. In that respect, again, he is like a scientist.

MURDOCH Yes, that is true. And perhaps that is something which distinguishes the 'true philosopher' from other reflective thinkers and moralists. The philosopher engages with the philosophical field in the form which it has when he appears on the scene. There is a definite body of doctrine to which he must react, and he enters into what is in some ways a rather narrow dialogue with the past. The artist by contrast seems an irresponsible individual. He may be deeply related to his time and to the history of his art, but he has no given problems to solve. He has to invent his own problems.

MAGEE Perhaps partly for that reason the writing of art – the writing of plays, novels and poems – engages far more of the personality, both of the writer and of the reader, than philosophy does. Philosophy is a more narrowly intellectual activity. Literature, to be literature at all, must move one emotionally, whereas the philosopher – like the scientist – is positively trying to eliminate emotional appeal from his work.

MURDOCH Yes. I think it is more fun to be an artist than to be a philosopher. Literature could be called a disciplined technique for arousing certain emotions. (Of course there are other such techniques.) I would include the arousing of emotion in the definition of art, although not every occasion of experiencing art is an emotional occasion. The sensuous nature of art is involved here, the fact that it is concerned with visual and auditory sensations and bodily sensations. If nothing sensuous is present no art is present. This fact alone makes it quite different from 'theoretical' activities. Moreover much art, perhaps most art, perhaps all art is connected with sex, in some extremely general sense. (This may be a metaphysical statement.) Art is close dangerous play with unconscious forces. We enjoy art, even simple art, because it disturbs us in deep often incomprehensible ways; and this is one reason why it is good for us when it is good and bad for us when it is bad.

MAGEE So far we've been talking about the differences between philosophy and literature, and I think it's important that we should stress them; but there are also some significant things in common, aren't there? I know from previous conversations with you, for example, that you think notions of truth are near the centre of both.

MURDOCH Yes, indeed, I think that though they are so different, philosophy and literature are both truth-seeking and truth-revealing activities. They are cognitive activities, explanations. Literature, like other arts, involves exploration, classification, discrimination, organized vision. Of course good literature does not look like 'analysis' because what the imagination produces is sensuous, fused, reified, mysterious, ambiguous, particular. Art is cognition in another mode. Think how

much thought, how much truth, a Shakespeare play contains, or a great novel. It is illuminating in the case of any reflective discipline to see what kind of critical vocabulary is directed against it. Literature may be criticized in a purely formal way. But more often it is criticized for being in some sense untruthful. Words such as 'sentimental', 'pretentious', 'self-indulgent', 'trivial' and so on, impute some kind of falsehood, some failure of justice, some distortion or inadequacy of understanding or expression. The word 'fantasy' in a bad sense covers many of these typical literary faults. It may be useful to contrast 'fantasy' as bad with 'imagination' as good. Of course philosophy too is an imaginative activity, but the statements at which it aims are totally unlike the 'concrete statements' of art, and its methods and atmosphere, as those of science, inhibit the temptations of personal fantasy. Whereas creative imagination and obsessive fantasy may be very close almost indistinguishable forces in the mind of the writer. The serious writer must 'play with fire'. In bad art fantasy simply takes charge, as in the familiar case of the romance or thriller where the hero (alias the author) is brave, generous, indomitable, lovable (he has his faults of course) and ends the story loaded with the gifts of fortune. Fantasy is the strong cunning enemy of the discerning intelligent more truly inventive power of the imagination, and in condemning art for being 'fantastic' one is condemning it for being untrue.

MAGEE But that conception of truth is very different, is it not, from what the philosopher is trying to get at?

MURDOCH I want to say that literature is like philosophy in this respect because I want to emphasize that literature too is a truth-seeking activity. But of course philosophy is abstract and discursive and direct. Literary language can be deliberately obscure, and even what sounds like plain speaking is part of some ulterior formal imaginative structure. In fiction even the simplest story is artful and indirect, though we may not notice this because we are so used to the conventions involved, and we are all to some extent literary artists in our daily life. Here one might say that it is the directness of philosophy which strikes us as unnatural, the indirectness of the story as natural. It is not easy to describe what philosophical mistakes are like. Sometimes there is a logical or quasi-logical fault in a chain of argument, but more often philosophy fails because of what might be called imaginative or obsessive conceptual errors, false assumptions or starting points which send the whole investigation wrong. The notion of the 'sense datum', or the distinction between evaluative and descriptive language, are arguably examples of such errors. The test of truth in philosophy is difficult because the whole subject is so difficult and so abstract. It may not be clear what is supposed to verify what, since the phenomena which justify the theory have also to be described by the theory. The philosopher must fear tautology and constantly look

back at the less strictly conceptualised 'ordinary world'. There is an analogous problem in art, but it is different and often invisible because of the natural closeness of art to the world. The test of truth in philosophy is difficult because the subject is difficult, the test of truth in literature may be difficult because in a way the subject is easy. We all feel we understand art, or a lot of it anyway. And if it is very obscure it can numb the critical faculties; we are prepared to be enchanted. As I said, philosophy does one thing, literature does many things and involves many different motives in the creator and the client. It makes us happy, for instance. It shows us the world, and much pleasure in art is a pleasure of recognition of what we vaguely knew was there but never saw before. Art is mimesis and good art is, to use another Platonic term, anamnesis, 'memory' of what we did not know we knew. Art 'holds the mirror up to nature'. Of course this reflection or 'imitation' does not mean slavish or photographic copying. But it is important to hold on to the idea that art is about the world, it exists for us standing out against a background of our ordinary knowledge. Art may extend this knowledge but is also tested by it. We apply such tests instinctively, and sometimes of course wrongly, as when we dismiss a story as implausible when we have not really understood what sort of story it is.

MAGEE Let us move on now to consider philosophical ideas about literature. You have just been talking about fantasy in the bad sense – which I take to be a form of self-indulgence, usually incorporating false values such as the worship of power, status or wealth, and hence being closely involved with vulgarity in art. This is intimately linked with the reason why some philosophers have actually been hostile to art, isn't it? And indeed your last book, *The Fire and the Sun*, was about Plato's hostility to art. It would be interesting to hear you say something about why such a great philosopher as Plato – who himself used artistic forms, such as the dialogue: there's obviously a lot of fiction in Plato – should have been antagonistic to art.

MURDOCH Plato was notoriously hostile to art. As a political theorist he was afraid of the irrational emotional power of the arts, their power to tell attractive lies or subversive truths. He favoured strict censorship and wanted to banish the dramatists from the ideal state. Also he was afraid of the artist in himself. He was a very religious man and he felt that art was hostile to religion as well as to philosophy: art was a sort of egoistic substitute for the discipline of religion. The paradox is that Plato's work is great art in a sense which he does not theoretically recognize. He says that there is an old quarrel between philosophy and poetry; and we must remember that in Plato's time philosophy as we know it was just emerging out of all sorts of poetic and theological speculation. Philosophy does make progress by defining itself as not being something else. In Plato's time it separated itself from literature, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries from

natural science, in the twentieth century from psychology. Plato thought art was mimesis, but he thought it was bad mimesis. And it is true that there is always more bad art around than good art, and more people like bad art than like good art. Plato believed that art was essentially personal fantasy, celebrations of unworthy things or distortions of good things. He saw it as trivial copying of particular objects with no general significance, and of course this is what a great deal of art is. Imagine what Plato would have thought of television. One ought to look at the real world and think about it and not be content with trivial images and unsavoury dreams. This is not totally unlike Freud's view of art as a substitute for power and 'real life' satisfactions. Freud sometimes suggests that art is the fantasy mind of the artist speaking directly to the fantasy mind of the client. Art is private consolation. I think this is a profound idea and a serious charge. One can see how the thriller or the sentimental picture may be simply a stimulus to the private fantasies of the reader or viewer. Pornography is the extreme instance of this private use of 'art'.

MAGEE But surely these criticisms apply only to bad art. Admittedly most art, as you say, is bad art. But good art – which is really the art that endures, one hopes – isn't subject to them.

MURDOCH I suppose a client can always try to use art for his own purposes, only good art may resist bad purposes more successfully. I mean, someone might go to the National Gallery just looking for pornographic images. What we call bad art is asking to be used badly and cannot be understood any other way. A general practice of art which produces the good will necessarily produce the bad too, and it need not be all that bad. Critics can be too austere and puritanical. I am very hostile to pornography, I think it is really damaging and degrading. But people are fairly harmlessly employed enjoying ordinary mediocre art. A sentimental novel can be a decent rest from one's troubles, though one might be even better off reading *War and Peace*.

MAGEE There's a widespread view today, isn't there, that good art is good for one in another sense: that it sharpens one's sensibilities, that it increases one's powers of understanding and therefore one's capacity for empathy with other people.

MURDOCH I think good art is good for people precisely because it is not fantasy but imagination. It breaks the grip of our own dull fantasy life and stirs us to the effort of true vision. Most of the time we fail to see the big wide real world at all because we are blinded by obsession, anxiety, envy, resentment, fear. We make a small personal world in which we remain enclosed. Great art is liberating, it enables us to see and take pleasure in what is not ourselves. Literature stirs and satisfies our curiosity, it interests us in other people and other scenes, and helps us to be tolerant and generous. Art is informative. And even mediocre art can tell us something, for instance about how other people live. But to say this is not to hold a utilitarian or didactic

view of art. Art is larger than such narrow ideas. Plato at least saw how tremendously important art is and he raised interesting questions about it. Philosophers on the whole have not written very well about art, partly because they have regarded it as a minor matter which must be fitted in with their general theory of metaphysics or morals.

MAGEE That is generally true, but there is one philosopher I would exempt from the charge: Schopenhauer. Unlike nearly all other philosophers he did regard art as being central to human life and had some genuinely profound things to say about it.

MURDOCH Yes, certainly. Schopenhauer disagreed with Plato, in fact he turned Plato's view upside down. Plato saw art as giving intellectual pleasure to the selfish stupid part of the soul. Whereas the nobler part of the soul sought for knowledge of reality through what Plato called Ideas, which were universal rational conceptions or sources of enlightenment, and to be contrasted with unintelligible particular things. So according to Plato art was meanly particular and knowledge was rationally general. Schopenhauer on the other hand says that art actually seeks and can convey the Ideas, which he pictures as intelligible forms which are partly realised in nature, and which the imagination of the artist tries to elicit. Schopenhauer says that art removes the veil or mist of subjectivity and arrests the flux of life and makes us see the real world and this shock is the experience of beauty. This is an attractive and lofty view of art since it pictures it as moral and intellectual striving, and as being like philosophy in that it attempts to explain the world. It also suggests the way in which good art is both very general and very particular. Eastern religions present views which are in some ways similar. However I cannot accept these 'Ideas', even as offering a metaphor of how the artist works. Of course our minds may be said to 'impose form' on the world, and philosophers have always been looking for built-in affinities between us and nature. I do not hold any general philosophical view on this matter, and I think that here an analogy between philosophy and art could go too far. The working artist confronts, and may glory in, a lot of unintelligible random stuff; and perhaps great artists only seem to 'explain the world', though they do explain parts of it. Kant's more muddled, less lofty, picture of art which Schopenhauer 'corrects' is in some ways more realistic. Art is not all that 'intelligible'. But I do find Schopenhauer's view sympathetic in that it portrays art as a high use of the intellectual and moral faculties, and as an attempt to overcome the self and see the world.

Schopenhauer is something of an exception among philosophers in that he clearly loves and values art. A lot of philosophical theorizing on the subject is less imaginative, concerned with opposing one rather limited view to another one, as in: is art for art's sake or for society's sake?

- MAGEE One of the troubles with almost any philosophy of art is that it is exclusive. Once you think that all art has got to be of a certain kind to fit your particular theory, then it follows that everything that does not fit in with your theory is not art.
- MURDOCH Fortunately artists do not pay too much attention to philosophers. But sometimes philosophy can damage art, it can make people blind to some kinds of art, or only able to produce some kinds.
- MAGEE One outstanding example, in the modern world, of a philosophy which has been damaging to art is Marxism. According to Marxist theory art has a specific role, which is to be an instrument of social revolution. There is a very great deal of Marxist art of all kinds – novels, plays, paintings, sculpture and so on – and I have to say I regard most of it as rubbish. It is rubbish because the impulse that created it has not been a genuinely artistic impulse at all. It is a branch of propaganda.
- MURDOCH I certainly do not believe that it is the artist's task to serve society. Marxists, I suppose, do believe this, though there have been famous controversies about how it is to be done. Some Marxists would hold that art should be virtually pamphlets or posters for the present state of the revolution, that novelists and painters should attack 'social enemies' and glorify the kind of people society needs now. Modern Soviet pictures of noble farm workers or girl scientists are cases of this thoroughly sentimental form of art. There is a more intelligent and liberal Marxist view of literature as deep analysis of society. George Lukács took that sort of view before he was forced to admit he was 'mistaken'. He made a distinction between 'realism', which was an imaginative exploration of social structure, and 'naturalism' which was trivial or sensationalist copying; and he described the great nineteenth-century novelists as realists, in that they told us deep important truths about society. I think he is right to praise these novelists in this way. But analysis of society in a way interesting to a Marxist was not the main aim of these writers nor the only thing they were doing. As soon as a writer says to himself, 'I must try to change society in such and such ways by my writing', he is likely to damage his work.
- MAGEE But how can we fit Dickens in here? He seems to have had genuinely social aims – among other aims, no doubt – and he does appear to have had quite a considerable social influence.
- MURDOCH Yes, Dickens manages to do everything, to be a great imaginative writer and a persistent and explicit social critic. I think the scandals of his society were closely connected with the kind of ferment and social change which engaged his imagination most deeply. He is able to swallow all these things into his genius, and you rarely feel he is 'getting at you' with some alien social point. But one might note all the same that his most 'abstract' novel *Hard Times* is one of his less successful, and that his most effective criticisms of society are made

- through live and touching characters such as the sweeper boy Joe in *Bleak House*. Dickens is a great writer because of his ability to create character, and also because of deep frightful imaginative visions which have little to do with social reform. *Edwin Drood* is a better novel than *Hard Times*. A deliberate or anxiously surreptitious attempt to persuade usually removes a work to a more superficial level. One feels this sometimes in George Eliot who does not 'get away with it' as well as Dickens does.
- MAGEE In such cases the work of art is not only ceasing to be an end in itself, it is being made a means for a lesser end than itself.
- MURDOCH Yes. As I said, I do not think that the artist, qua artist, has a duty to society. A citizen has a duty to society, and a writer might sometimes feel he ought to write persuasive newspaper articles or pamphlets, but this would be a different activity. The artist's duty is to art, to truth-telling in his own medium, the writer's duty is to produce the best literary work of which he is capable, and he must find out how this can be done. This may seem a rather artificial distinction between artist and citizen, but I think it is worth reflecting in this way. A propaganda play which is indifferent to art is likely to be a misleading statement even if it is inspired by good principles. If serious art is a primary aim then some sort of justice is a primary aim. A social theme presented as art is likely to be more clarified even if it is less immediately persuasive. And any artist may serve his society incidentally by revealing things which people have not noticed or understood. Imagination reveals, it explains. This is part of what is meant by saying that art is mimesis. Any society contains propaganda, but it is important to distinguish this from art and to preserve the purity and independence of the practice of art. A good society contains many different artists doing many different things. A bad society coerces artists because it knows that they can reveal all kinds of truths.
- MAGEE We've discussed, first, the distinction between philosophy and literature; then philosophical ideas about literature; let us now move on to philosophy in literature. I mean several things by that. Let us take novels as our example. First, there have been some famous philosophers – or thinkers very like philosophers, such as Voltaire – who have been themselves novelists: Rousseau, for instance, or in our own time Jean-Paul Sartre. Then, among other novelists, there are some who have been influenced by philosophical ideas. Tolstoy appends an epilogue to *War and Peace* in which he explains that he's been trying in this novel to express a certain philosophy of history. Dostoevsky is quite often described by Existentialists as the greatest of all Existentialist writers. Proust, in *À la recherche du temps perdu*, is deeply concerned with problems about the nature of time, which is also one of the classic concerns of philosophers. Can you make any observations on the sort of role philosophy can play in novels?

MURDOCH I see no 'general role' of philosophy in literature. People talk about Tolstoy's 'philosophy' but that is really a *façon de parler*. And Bernard Shaw is a terrible instance of a writer quite mistakenly imagining that he has 'a philosophy'. Fortunately his 'ideas' do not harm his plays too much. When T. S. Eliot says that it is not the poet's task to think and that neither Dante nor Shakespeare could do so, I understand him although I would not put it that way. Of course writers are influenced by the ideas of their time and may be interested in philosophical change, but the amount of philosophy they succeed in expressing is likely to be small. I think as soon as philosophy gets into a work of literature it becomes a plaything of the writer, and rightly so. There is no strictness about ideas and argument, the rules are different and truth is differently conveyed. If a so-called 'novel of ideas' is bad art its ideas if any would have been better expressed elsewhere. If it is good art the ideas are either transformed or else appear as little chunks of reflection (as in Tolstoy) which are put up with cheerfully for the sake of the rest of the work. Great nineteenth-century novelists get away with a lot of 'idea play' in their work, but one could not regard it as philosophy. Of course artists writing as critics and theorizing about their own art may not be very 'philosophical' but they can be more interesting than the philosophers! Tolstoy's book *What is art?* is full of oddities, but it expresses one profound central idea, that good art is religious, that it embodies the highest religious perceptions of the age. One might say that the best art can somehow *explain* the concept of religion to each generation. I feel great sympathy with this idea though it is not philosophically presented.

MAGEE I'm not sure I go along with you entirely. In *War and Peace* Tolstoy tells us that the articulation of a particular philosophy of history is one of the things his novel came into existence to do. Or take a major English novel like Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*. Not only was that directly influenced by Locke's theories about the association of ideas: this is actually mentioned in the novel, and in terms which clearly refer to the novel itself. In other words Sterne was consciously doing something which he *himself* related to Locke's theory of the association of ideas. So there really are great novels in which the use of philosophical ideas is part of the structure.

MURDOCH Perhaps it is partly that I feel in myself such an absolute horror of putting theories or 'philosophical ideas' as such into my novels. I might put in things about philosophy because I happen to know about philosophy. If I knew about sailing ships I would put in sailing ships; and in a way, as a novelist, I would rather know about sailing ships than about philosophy. Of course novelists and poets *think*, and great ones think supremely well (and T. S. Eliot is not literally right) but that is another matter. Tolstoy or someone may say that he is writing to 'express a philosophy' but why should we think he has

succeeded? The novels by Rousseau and Voltaire are certainly robust cases of 'novels of ideas' and have been very influential books in their time. Now they seem dated and rather dead, and that is the penalty of the form. I can think of one good philosophical novel which I admire very much, Sartre's *La Nausée*. That does manage to express some interesting ideas about contingency and consciousness, and to remain a work of art which does not have to be read in the light of theories which the author has expressed elsewhere. It is a rare object. Of course it is still philosophically 'fresh'.

MAGEE All right, let's take Jean-Paul Sartre's *La Nausée*. I agree with you, I think it's a magnificent novel. Surely it also articulates a philosophical theory? To articulate a philosophical theory so successfully in the form of a work of fiction may be a unique achievement, but the fact that it has been done shows that it can be done. I think there is an important difference of opinion between you and me which we may simply not be able to resolve in this discussion. You, it seems to me, are trying to say that philosophy as such has no place in imaginative writing, except in so far as it can be material as anything else can be material. Whereas I want to say that some major novels make use of philosophical ideas not just as material in that sense, but in ways which are structural to the whole undertaking.

MURDOCH The case of Sartre may be a special one. There is a literary 'feel' about his earlier philosophy, *L'Être et le Néant* is full of 'pictures and conversations'. Sartre emphasizes the more dramatic aspects of the philosophy of Hegel, which is full of historical instances and in which the movement of thought itself is seen in terms of formal oppositions and conflicts. 'Ideas' often seem more at home in the theatre, though (as in the case of Shaw) there may be an illusion involved here. I am not sure how far Sartre's plays are, or are not, damaged by having strong theoretical motives. Certainly one sees from Sartre's other novels, and the novels of Simone de Beauvoir, and I admire all these, how, as soon as the 'existentialist voice' is switched on, the work of art rigidifies. In general I am reluctant to say that the deep structure of any good literary work could be a philosophical one. I think this is not just a verbal point. The unconscious mind is not a philosopher. For better and worse art goes deeper than philosophy. Ideas in art must suffer a sea change. Think how much original thought there is in Shakespeare and how divinely inconspicuous it is. Of course some writers reflect much more overtly but as in the case of Dickens their reflections are *aesthetically* valuable in so far as they are connected, through character for instance, with substructures which are not abstract. When we ask what a novel is *about* we are asking for something deep. What is Proust about, and why not just read Bergson? There is always something moral which goes down further than the ideas, the structures of good literary works are to do with erotic mysteries and deep dark struggles between good and evil.

MAGEE If the fiction writer is dealing with 'something moral which goes down further than the ideas' this must mean that fiction unavoidably involves the writer in presuppositions of not only a moral-philosophical but even a moral-metaphysical sort. One of the things I have in mind is this. Any kind of story at all, and any kind of description at all, are bound to incorporate value judgments, not just in the words you use but in what you choose to narrate, or describe, at all. So there simply is no way in which value judgments can *not* be structural to the writing. Any investigation of what these value judgments are is a philosophical activity, at least in part, as is even merely any seriously critical discussion of them. If your story is a serious one about people and the relations between people there will be no way in which you can avoid revealing moral presuppositions of many, complex and deep kinds.

MURDOCH I agree, one cannot avoid value judgments. Values show, and show clearly, in literature. There are important moral presuppositions, for instance about religion and society, which belong to changing 'climates of ideas'. The disappearance of a general faith in religion and social hierarchy has affected literature profoundly. Our consciousness changes, and the change may appear in art before it receives its commentary in a theory, though the theory may also subsequently affect the art. We might mention here a contemporary school of critics who are especially interested in recent changes of consciousness. I mean the literary formalists who have tried to develop a literary criticism out of structuralist philosophy. 'Structuralism' is the name of a very general philosophical attitude which originated in linguistics and anthropology with thinkers such as Saussure and Lévi-Strauss.

MAGEE As you say, it originated in linguistics. We could illustrate it this way. You and I are communicating by uttering sentences each of which contains comparatively few words. But for somebody to understand us it isn't enough for him to know just the words we are using: he's got to be acquainted with a whole language system, in this case the English language. The point being made is a reaction against an idea that arose in the nineteenth century as a result of the development of science, the idea that to understand something you should isolate the phenomenon and, so to speak, look at it through a microscope. The basic thought of structuralism is a reaction against that, which says: 'No, the only way you can *really* understand phenomena is by relating them to larger structures. In fact the very notion of intelligibility itself involves relating things to structures.' The application of this view to literature has resulted in each piece of writing being viewed primarily as a word-structure.

MURDOCH Yes. This view expresses a sort of anxious self-consciousness about language which has been evident in literature at least since Mallarmé. It has also found expression in linguistic philosophy. One

could say that Wittgenstein was a 'structuralist'. 'What signs fail to express, their application shows.'^o Many aspects of the theory are not new; it has heterogeneous literary and philosophical ancestors such as the phenomenologists, the surrealists, and Sartre. It is not a closely unified doctrine. The 'change of consciousness' which interests the formalists is consequent upon our becoming aware of ourselves as sign-using animals who 'constitute' the world and ourselves, by our significance-bestowing activity. This is a case of a philosophical, or quasi-philosophical, assumption which can affect literature, just as Marxist assumptions can affect literature. It is a kind of literary idealism or literary monism. The formalists want to cure us of what might be called 'the realistic fallacy' whereby we imagine we can look through language into a separate world beyond. If language makes the world it cannot refer to the world. The writer must realize that he lives and moves within a 'significance-world', and not think that he can pass through it or crawl under the net of signs. This theory involves many formalists in an attack on the realistic novel, and on the familiar conventions of 'easy' literature which affects to use language as a simple transparent medium. The classical story, the classical object, the classical self with its mass of solid motives, are all 'pseudo-wholes' constituted by a misunderstanding of language. The idea that the self is not a unity goes back to Hume, and the suspicion that language itself is a sort of primal fault goes back to Plato. A number of literary writers since the Romantic Movement have gradually interested themselves in these ideas and played with them. Formalism is the latest systematic attempt to describe and explain what is by now quite a long and heterogeneous process. Such an attempt is bound to be valuable and interesting, but I myself find its atmosphere and its terminology too constricting. I think literary change is more mysterious and less unitary, and literary forms more profoundly versatile than such critics seem to suggest. In its more extreme manifestations formalism can become a metaphysical theory which denies, as such theories often do, a useful and necessary distinction, in this case the distinction between self and world and between more and less referential (or 'transparent') uses of language. Any artist knows what it is to look at the world, and the distance and otherness thereof is his primary problem. When Dr Johnson 'refuted' Berkeley by kicking a stone he was rightly protesting against a metaphysical attempt to remove a necessary distinction. The writer will make his own choice, and use language as he pleases and as he can, and must not be bullied by a theory into imagining that he cannot now tell a plain tale, but must produce self-consciously verbal texts which fight against ordinary modes of intelligibility. As part of their prescriptive doctrine some formalists have tried to

^o*Tractatus*, 3.262

develop a 'poetics', a neutral quasi-scientific theory related to literature as linguistics is related to a natural language. But such a 'meta-language' would depend upon some neutral method of identifying fundamental elements in the material to be analysed, and it is not clear what the 'elements' in literature could be agreed to be. It seems to me that all the interesting and important differences of opinion would be likely to break out at the earliest stage and thus 'infect' the meta-language with value judgments; so that unless such a theory was extremely abstract and simple (and thus inadequate) it would prove to be merely literary criticism by other means. We have so many *kinds* of relation to a work of art. A literary work is an extremely heterogeneous object which demands an open-minded heterogeneous response. Moreover aesthetic criticism combines a certain generality with an 'ostensive' relation to a particular object at which the hearer looks while the critic talks. Of course students often want to be reassured by a 'theory of criticism', and simplifications ease the hard work of original thought. But critics are better off without any close-knit systematic background theory, scientific or philosophical. A good critic is a relaxed polymath. Nor would I accept the dangerous argument that having no particular theory means having a 'bourgeois' theory. Of course we live as we must within historical limitations. But as critics and thinkers and moral agents we can attempt to understand our instincts and our attitudes and to distinguish true values from local prejudices and blinkered conventions. The 'bourgeois era' has brought us certain moral conceptions, such as the idea of rights and the freedom of the individual, which we are able to judge as permanently valuable. It also produced a great literature which displays dated assumptions but also celebrates values which are still our own. We may appeal here to a conception of human nature which goes back to the Greeks. It is an important fact that we can understand Homer and Aeschylus. Literature is indeed the main carrier and creator of this wide-ranging understanding. Any theory which cuts people off from the great literature of the past deprives them of a historical and moral education and also of a great deal of pleasure.

MAGEE

In practice, literature written under the influence of formalist theories tends to be literature for a circle of cognoscenti, not literature which can appeal very widely. The common-sense assumption that language relates to a world of things and of people seems to me a necessary basis for any literature that is going to have a wide readership – and it is certainly a fact that most of the very greatest writers, from Shakespeare downwards, have been widely understood and appreciated. I have to confess that I am very much on one side of this controversy. Neither in literature nor in philosophy do I greatly care to see words made themselves the object of interest. I think they should be seen, in both activities, as a medium through

MURDOCH

which one relates to the world, whether it be a world of people, or of things, or of nature, or of problems, or of ideas, or of works of art.

Yes, but I think it is up to the artist to decide how he is to use words. Writers who have never heard of formalism may write in ways which attract formalists. *Tristram Shandy* and *Finnegans Wake* are justified as art without any theory. We rightly judge theories by their ability to explain states of affairs with which we are already familiar, and if the theory attacks our phenomena we must take sides. I know who are great writers in the past and I will not surrender them to a theory but rather consider the theory in their light. Of course, if one may pick up the word 'form' here, literature is art and is thus the creation of formal and in a sense self-contained objects. A poem, play or novel usually appears as a closed pattern. But it is also open in so far as it refers to a reality beyond itself, and such a reference raises the questions about truth which I have already mentioned. Art is truth as well as form, it is representational as well as autonomous. Of course the communication may be indirect, but the ambiguity of the great writer creates spaces which we can explore and enjoy because they are openings on to the real world and not formal language games or narrow crevices of personal fantasy; and we do not get tired of great writers, because what is true is interesting. Tolstoy's idea that art is religious is at home somewhere here. As I said, any serious artist has a sense of distance between himself and something quite other in relation to which he feels humility since he knows that it is far more detailed and wonderful and awful and amazing than anything which he can ever express. This 'other' is most readily called 'reality' or 'nature' or 'the world' and this is a way of talking that one must not give up. Beauty in art is the formal imaginative exhibition of something true, and criticism must remain free to work at a level where it can judge truth in art. Both artist and critic look at two things: representation and 'other'. This looking is of course not simple. Training in an art is largely training in how to discover a touchstone of truth; and there is an analogous training in criticism.

MAGEE

My last point was about certain kinds of self-consciousness in the use of language: I'd like now to raise a question about another one. An outstanding feature of philosophy in the twentieth century, especially in the Anglo-Saxon world, has been a completely new kind of concern with language, and in consequence a new self-consciousness about the use of language which can result in the most refined and scrupulous use of words. Has this in any way infected the novel? You personally, as someone who trained first of all as a philosopher and only then became a novelist – has it influenced the way you write your novels?

MURDOCH

It is true that there has been a kind of crisis in our relation to language, we are much more self-conscious about it, and that does affect writers.

- MAGEE One inevitable consequence of this is that you can no longer write like the novelists of the nineteenth century.
- MURDOCH Of course we are not anything like as good as the nineteenth-century novelists, but also we write differently.
- MAGEE This is an exceedingly interesting question. Can you say more about *why* you can't write like them?
- MURDOCH It is very difficult to answer that question. There are obvious differences to do with the standpoint of the author and his relationship to his characters. An author's relation to his characters reveals a great deal about his moral attitude, and this technical difference between us and the nineteenth-century writers is a moral change but one which it is hard to analyse. In general, our writing is more ironical and less confident. We are more timid, afraid of seeming unsophisticated or naïve. The story is more narrowly connected with the consciousness of the author who narrates through the consciousness of a character or characters. There is usually no direct judging or description by the author speaking as an external authoritative intelligence. To write like a nineteenth-century novelist in this respect now seems like a literary device and is sometimes used as one. As I said earlier, I think literature is about the struggle between good and evil, but this does not appear clearly in modern writing, where there is an atmosphere of moral diffidence and where the characters presented are usually mediocre. Many things cause literary change, and self-consciousness about language may be more of a symptom than a cause. The disappearance or weakening of organized religion is perhaps the most important thing that has happened to us in the last hundred years. The great nineteenth-century novelists took religion for granted. Loss of social hierarchy and religious belief makes judgment more tentative, interest in psychoanalysis makes it in some ways more complex. All these changes are so remarkable and so challenging that it sounds as if we ought to be better than our predecessors, but we are not!
- MAGEE We're approaching the end of this discussion, but before we get there I'd like to go a little more fully than we've managed to do so far into the question of what an author's relation to his characters reveals about his moral standpoint.
- MURDOCH It is important to remember that language itself is a moral medium, almost all uses of language convey value. This is one reason why we are almost always morally active. Life is soaked in the moral, literature is soaked in the moral. If we attempted to describe this room our descriptions would naturally carry all sorts of values. Value is only artificially and with difficulty expelled from language for scientific purposes. So the novelist is revealing his values by any sort of writing which he may do. He is particularly bound to make moral judgments in so far as his subject-matter is the behaviour of human beings. I suggested earlier that a work of art is both mimetic and formal, and of

course these two requirements sometimes conflict. In the novel this conflict may appear as a struggle between characters and plot. Does a writer limit and constrain his characters to suit the plot or to suit his own judgments and his theme? Or does he stand back and let the characters develop independently of him and of each other without regard to plot or any general overriding 'tone'? In particular, how does the writer indicate moral approval or disapproval of his characters? He has to do this, consciously or unconsciously. How does he justify the good man, how does he present him or even hint at his existence? The author's moral judgment is the air which the reader breathes. One can see here very clearly the contrast between blind fantasy and visionary imagination. The bad writer gives way to personal obsession and exalts some characters and demeans others without any concern for truth or justice, that is without any suitable aesthetic 'explanation'. It is clear here how the idea of reality enters into literary judgment. The good writer is the just intelligent judge. He justifies his placing of his characters by some sort of *work* which he does in the book. A literary fault such as sentimentality results from idealization without work. This work of course may be of different kinds, and all sorts of methods of placing characters, or relation of characters to plot or theme, may produce good art. Criticism is much concerned with the techniques by which this is done. A great writer can combine form and character in a felicitous way (think how Shakespeare does it) so as to produce a large space in which the characters can exist freely and yet at the same time serve the purposes of the tale. A great work of art gives one a sense of space, as if one had been invited into some large hall of reflection.

- MAGEE Does what you are saying mean, in the last analysis, that imaginative writing must, although it is imaginative, be rooted in some kind of acceptance of things as they are, and even respect for things as they are?
- MURDOCH Well, artists are often revolutionary in some sense or other. But the good artist has, I think, a sense of reality and might be said to understand 'how things are' and why they are. Of course the term 'reality' is notoriously ambiguous in philosophy and I have used it to suggest both that the serious artist looks at the world and that he sees more of the world. The great artist sees the marvels which selfish anxiety conceals from the rest of us. But what the artist sees is not something separate and special, some metaphysically cut-off never-never land. The artist engages a very large area of his personality in his work, and he works in and normally accepts the world of common sense. Art is naturally communication (only a perverse ingenuity can attempt to deny this obvious truth) and this involves the joining of the farthest-out reality to what is nearer, as must be done by any truthful explorer. This is something which the critic must be watching too. When is abstract painting bad art, when is it not art at all? Abstract

painting is not just wilful fantasy or provocation, it is connected with the nature of space and colour. The abstract painter lives, and his pictures are seen, in a world where colours are taken to be surfaces of objects, and his consciousness of this is a part of his problem. Such tensions between aesthetic vision and 'ordinary' reality may give rise to very refined and difficult judgments. Literature is connected with the way we live. Some philosophers tell us that the self is discontinuous and some writers explore this idea, but the writing (and the philosophy) takes place in a world where we have good reasons for assuming the self to be continuous. Of course this is not a plea for 'realistic' writing. It is to say that the artist cannot avoid the demands of truth, and that his decision about how to tell truth in his art is his most important decision.

MAGEE Do you think this acceptance of reality implies anything conservative with a small 'c'? What I have in mind is the sort of acceptance of things and people as they are which can arise out of intense interest and is also related to love. As regards people, at least, perhaps a better word than 'conservative' would be 'tolerant'.

MURDOCH I would like to say that all great artists are tolerant in their art, but perhaps this cannot be argued. Was Dante tolerant? I think most great writers have a sort of calm merciful vision because they can see how different people are and why they are different. Tolerance is connected with being able to imagine centres of reality which are remote from oneself. There is a breath of tolerance and generosity and intelligent kindness which blows out of Homer and Shakespeare and the great novelists. The great artist sees the vast interesting collection of what is other than himself and does not picture the world in his own image. I think this particular kind of merciful objectivity is virtue, and it is this which the totalitarian state is trying to destroy when it persecutes art.