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Iris Murdoch's Use of First-Person Narrative in *The Black Prince*

Gillian Dooley

Many critics place Iris Murdoch's first-person novels, narrated by a more or less egotistical and unperceptive male who is also the protagonist, near the summit of her achievement as a novelist – Deborah Johnson says that “they constitute, it will readily be agreed, some of her most distinctive and thoughtful work” (2) – and most agree that *The Black Prince* (1973) is one of the best, if not the best, of all her works: Bloom includes it in his top four (1); Bove, in her *Dictionary of Literary Biography* article suggests that “readers who are unfamiliar with Murdoch's work would do well to begin with *The Black Prince* ... the most critically acclaimed of Murdoch's novels” (“Iris Murdoch”); and A.N. Wilson, writing after her death in 1999, suggests that “it is possibly the last entirely successful novel she wrote” (80).

In a novel like this, which is full of veiled meanings, ironies and mixed messages, how does the reader decide where the truth lies? How can a narrator such as Bradley Pearson, who is patently misguided throughout much of the book's action, convince us that at the time of writing he has attained true wisdom from his ordeals? And what made Murdoch choose, for the fourth time, to impersonate her protagonist in this “complex and brilliant exploration of the relationship between the author and her male narrator” (Johnson 35)?

Romberg calls the narrator's situation when writing a narrative “the epic situation,” and “in a novel of the first-person ... the epic situation ... belongs to the fiction,” and “can, from the aspect of narrative technique, be an important key to the novel” (33). Further,

the narrative technique, whereby the main character himself surveys his eventful life, or describes particularly exciting parts of it, or else lays bare his soul to his friend, gives to the author the opportunity to take advantage of the primitive but remarkably persistent demand that the novel-reader in general makes of a narrative: namely, that it shall give an illusion of reality and truth.

The authoritative “I” binds the reader more tightly to the fiction; there is a sort of two-man partnership between reader and narrator, and here we glimpse the primeval

epic situation, where someone who has had some experience or other relates this experience to someone else. (58-59)

On the other hand, Wallace Martin claims

any first-person narrative ... may prove unreliable because it issues from a speaking or writing self addressing someone. This is the condition of discourse, in which, as we know, the possibility of speaking the truth creates the possibility of misunderstanding, misperceiving, and lying,

whereas “we cannot question the reliability of third-person narrators” (142). These two statements are not necessarily contradictory, but may refer to different levels of reader response. Romberg’s “illusion of reality and truth” may be the primary, naïve response of a reader – even an experienced reader – whereas the “possibility of misunderstanding, misperceiving and lying” may be inferred by readers on a second or more thoughtful reading, and is often implied with more or less subtlety by the author behind the narrator’s back. In fact, in recent fiction, it is difficult to think of any first-person narrative in which the narrator is the main character, where the narrator can be relied upon to the same extent as a third-person narrator, whether omniscient or not. One interesting reversal of this tendency is Margaret Drabble’s *The Waterfall*, where the apparently omniscient and reliable third-person narrator is interrupted at intervals by her own first-person voice, commenting on and criticizing the narrative, exposing its distortions of reality, and laying bare its bias. This technique was perhaps suggested by the third-person novel within the first-person narrative in Doris Lessing’s influential novel *The Golden Notebook*. However, this reversal only works when the two voices are counterpointed within the same novel, when the apparently objective voice is shown to be in fact subjective, and this has the corollary that the subjective voice becomes the objective, critical and reliable authority.

In a sense, this is the opposite of what Murdoch does in *The Black Prince*. She appears to take full advantage of her readers’ demands for the “illusion of reality and truth” in the novel, only to unsettle and undermine them, not only in the postscripts at the end, but also in the narrator’s addresses to his “dear friend,” P. Loxias which interrupt the narrative from time to time. All first-person narratives contain more than one point of view: the writing “I” is necessarily distinguished from the “I” written about. The temporal distance between the narrating voice and the narrated events is important here. In the diary novel or the epistolary

novel there is a close relationship between the epic situation and the narrative, and this may entail an unwittingly ironic betrayal of the narrator's beliefs. In a novel like *The Black Prince*, however, written some time after the action, the narrating Bradley Pearson is a transformed character, and is quite aware of the ironies with which his former self is surrounded. He lets the reader know in his preface that a transformation has taken place, but explains frankly that he will "inhabit my past self and, for the ordinary purposes of storytelling, speak only with the apprehension of that time, a time in many ways so different from the present" (xi). The "ordinary purposes of story-telling" prohibit any but the most general hints at the nature of the crisis which precipitated his transformation into "a wiser and more charitable man" (xi). Iris Murdoch does not tend to relinquish the writer's privilege of maintaining suspense to keep the reader interested. Narrative foreshadowing does appear, but serves rather to heighten the reader's curiosity, for example, after describing the day before Arnold's death and his arrest, Bradley continues: "The morning brought the crisis of my life. But it was not anything that I could have conceived of in my wildest imaginings" (317). Thus we have the situation whereby the narrating voice of what Dipple calls "the flayed BP" (113) (referring to the deep mythological basis of the novel in the legend of Apollo's flaying of Marsyas) is holding back his knowledge of events and his understanding of their meanings, and letting the "unflayed BP" speak, nonetheless hoping "that the light of wisdom falling upon a fool can reveal, together with folly, the austere outline of truth" (xi).

Within the world of this fiction, we have little alternative but to trust our narrator when he is describing the course of events, while suspecting his assessments of the significance of these events, and his knowledge of the thoughts and motives of the other characters. This is indeed what he asks of us in the Foreword, when he writes "I have endeavored in what follows to be wisely artful and artfully wise, and to tell the truth as I understand it" (xi). That we should trust this truth – which is the domain only of P. Loxias, the "editor," and the "flayed" Bradley, is an assumption upon which the novel is founded. Loxias' postscript, following the postscripts of four of the other characters commenting on the novel and denying its accuracy, draws attention to their self-serving motives; their egotism in each believing Bradley to be motivated by love of themselves, and their self-promotion. In the person of Bradley Pearson, we have both a protagonist acting in a fantasy-ridden and prejudiced manner, and a narrator relating these past

events in prison, some years after they happened. He still has perfect recall of letters he wrote and received during this period (including the one from Arnold which he destroys) and he can remember events and conversations accurately, even when he was under severe emotional stress and in some cases deluded when they occurred. The reader's acceptance of such improbabilities would usually go unnoticed, as they are so large a part of the conventions of first-person writing. Consider the consequences if we allow that Bradley the narrator mis-remembered, or even misrepresented, any of the conversations he reported. For example, if Rachel had not been the prime mover in his abortive romance with her – if the version of events in her postscript is correct – then the very foundations of the novel's action begin to shake. Part of the reason we are willing to accept Bradley's version of events is that it is backed up within the text by letters from the main characters, but the main reason is, I believe, Romberg's "authoritative 'I'" which "binds the reader more tightly to the fiction." Murdoch works to unsettle this illusion, but does not destroy it. Thus, we see that Bradley lies to other characters within the narrative – for instance, when he returns from Bristol, he lies to Priscilla about her husband's domestic situation; and we are quite willing to believe he is wrong in his opinions of other characters. Even the Bradley of the Foreword regards Francis Marloe as insignificant, "an excellent fifth wheel to any coach" (xiv), whereas to a more objective observer Francis seems the best-intentioned and possibly the wisest of all the characters. (It is he who suggests that Bradley distract himself from his inappropriate passion for Julian by concentrating on helping Priscilla, a course of action which would have averted most of the problems Bradley brings upon himself.) We are even invited to believe that Bradley does not understand his own feelings, particularly in regard to his ex-wife Christian. He has a very definite self-image: for example, he claims that he refrains from returning to spy on Arnold and Rachel after their argument early in the novel because "such an action was not in my character" (29), but then speculates in detail and feels strong curiosity about what was happening in their "strange and violent world ... of matrimony" (29). It would be more accurate for him to say, "such an action was not my *style*": he is crippled throughout the action of the novel by his anxiety to convince both himself and others of his artistic and fastidious nature. But although the character Bradley is sometimes a liar and often mistaken about the nature and feelings of both himself and other people, and even the narrator

Bradley may be wrong in his beliefs about others, we are not prepared to accept that Bradley the narrator is ever a liar.

If this is the case, why does Murdoch so patently ask us to question Bradley's reliability? In an interview with Jack Biles, she absent-mindedly answered, "Yes, yes" to his statement that in the novel "there is no way in the world to know what really did happen. Which is what you were aiming for" (125); but more trust must be placed in a statement in the Bigsby interview, which is in her own words:

The thing is *The Black Prince* has got its own inbuilt mode of explanation. It is made pretty clear in that book how you should interpret the wanderings and maunderings of a narrator and where you should believe him and where you should not believe him....

The epilogue is just play. I mean it adds, pretty clearly, further comments on the characters of the people who were in the story but I think it is quite clear what you are supposed to think. (216)

This makes it clear that she does not intend to create factual indeterminacy. On a first reading of the novel it does seem that the nature of reality is being questioned, but on a second reading it is easier to see beyond the assertions of the other characters to a more stable idea of the truth and to understand that the distortions of the evidence are part of this novel's contemplation of the nature of reality and perception. Part of its subtlety is in the attention one must pay to all the details if one wants to make sense of the whole.

Bove writes, "Murdoch's vision admonishes her readers to attend to others, to really *see* them as distinct and separate individuals with rights of their own" (*Understanding* 17-18). In most of her novels she moves freely among the points of view of several characters, which is an obvious way of achieving this end. In this novel, on the contrary, an attachment to Bradley is encouraged, so that the idea that he is really the pathetic creature described by Christian and Rachel in their postscripts is repugnant. The implied reader is inoculated from believing that he murdered Arnold, of course, but is also invited to excuse his admitted crimes and negligence. What else is he to do when he is about to escape with Julian, and Priscilla arrives demanding to be looked after? Leaving her in Francis' care seems reasonable in the circumstances, given the urgency of the situation with Julian. In the case of the more shocking episode of what Johnson calls his "virtual rape presented as an act of passionate love" (38) of Julian, his justification of

the need to consummate his passion for Julian, which “had come to seem a symbol of the whole dilemma” (279), before telling her of Priscilla’s suicide and bringing on their inevitable return to London and the real world, is persuasive – and the immediate consequence is Julian’s feeling that “we are joined forever” (283). It is, as is so often the case in Murdoch’s novels, his decision to keep back the truth, rather than his violent and impetuous lovemaking, that has unfortunate consequences; it provides a foothold in Julian’s mind for Arnold’s argument against their romance, although it is not until she reads Rachel’s version of the Rachel-Bradley “affair” in her letter that she decides to leave Bradley. As the narrator points out, “There are moments when, if one rejects the simple and obvious promptings of duty, one finds oneself in a labyrinth of complexities of some quite new kind” (278). Bradley is often unwise in his decisions, and impetuous and irresponsible in his actions, but at worst he is guilty of what he himself calls “a semi-deliberate inattention,” a series of momentary rejections of “the simple and obvious promptings of duty,” rather than “a sort of conscious leeringly evil intent” (154). The awkward and sometimes intransigent nature of these promptings is, however, fully recognized and dramatized, as in all her novels. As Johnson points out, though, the compulsive readability has the effect of hurrying the reader past such “local dramatic strengths” as, in this case, “the ways in which the language reflects psychological shifts of awareness. These can only be seen fully if the reading process is slowed down or even halted for a moment” (99). Bradley’s justification, when re-read slowly, is seen to be loaded with irony and retrospective self-accusation.

It is Bradley’s inattention which provides much of the comedy in the novel. Hague comments that the narrator “revel[s] in his comically grotesque descriptions of characters, ... so that he can bring them under his imaginative control and limit their power to affect him” (107). Certainly there are comic descriptions of characters, often juxtaposed with darker, more somber situations, as with Priscilla – the “woo-woo-woo” sound she makes when crying, her concern over the “things,” the stripey vase and the mink stole, she has left behind with Roger. But Bradley the narrator turns his comedic vision on his former self more than on the other characters. He is describing these characters through his former self’s eyes, and his failure to sympathize with or to help Priscilla properly is treated, overall, with a grim irony. Dipple says “the comic genius of [the narrator’s] presentation consists in the risible contrast between the wisdom he believes he has and the tyranny of his compulsions” (119). Part of this presentation

consists of refraining from commenting during much of the narration of the action. He alerts us in his Foreword to the fact that these events have left him chastened, and therefore the reader looks for signs of his folly. Of course, we can see foolish and worse than foolish behavior in the other characters as well – Arnold and Rachel in particular. The point is that everyone is acting on their own private set of compulsions – Priscilla on the compulsion to leave Roger, Arnold to stop Rachel screaming, Rachel to enlist Bradley’s loyalty against Arnold, Francis to make himself a place in the world by being helpful – and out of clashes between these compulsive sets of behavior arise most of the novel’s comic set pieces. We see at the beginning the foreshadowing of the delays and frustrations that drive the plot. Bradley

was about to leave London ... I had my suitcases ready and was about to telephone for a taxi, had in fact already lifted the ’phone, when I experienced that nervous urge to delay departure, to sit down and reflect, which I am told the Russians have elevated into a ritual. (1)

Because he delays his departure (which we can see already is characteristic of his behavior) he is home when Francis arrives to tell him that his ex-wife, Francis’ sister Christian, has arrived in London; he is home to receive the phone call from Arnold which summons him to mediate in his domestic troubles with Rachel; and these events keep him in London so long that he is still home the next day when Priscilla appears. Thus these three threads of the plot are set in motion, to ravel and tangle together until the novel’s climax. The way all the plots jostle with each other, often in an accidental way, is part of the comedy, but the deeper comedy is in the irony of Bradley’s incapacity to cope, his inability to think the situation through clearly enough to act effectively and prevent the final disastrous train of events. Murdoch’s comedy might be called the comedy of accident and inattention, and it is intensified in *The Black Prince* because the narrator-protagonist is at the center of most of the accidents, and the dilemmas and decisions that the novel “lives through” are all his. The excitement and suspense the reader feels are all Bradley’s, which means that when we come to read the other postscripts we are reluctant to break the emotional bonds with him which have been strengthening throughout the novel, even while alerted intellectually to the possibility of disagreeing with many of his opinions and disapproving of his actions.

This feeling of identification would seem logically to be a function of the first-person narrative, but it does not happen equally in all Murdoch's first-person novels by any means. There are six novels with narrator-protagonists. In the first, *Under the Net*, Jake seems uncertain himself of his goals, and we do not feel any genuine desperation in his attempt to find Anna. *A Severed Head* is such a comedy of manners, with everybody falling in love with everybody else, that it is only a source of mild satisfaction when Martin is accepted by Honor Klein at the end. *The Italian Girl* is a slighter work, with comparatively little hold on the reader's attention. Hilary in *A Word Child* wants only what he obviously cannot and should not have, and it is other characters we would rather see happy in the end. And in *The Sea*, *The Sea* Charles is so patently behaving according to a ludicrous fantasy that we want him *not* to succeed with Hartley in the end.

On the other hand, characters for whom strong sympathy is aroused occur in several of the third-person novels; for instance in *The Sandcastle*, where Mor loses what seems like a possibility of real happiness, in *Nuns and Soldiers* where Tim gains and loses Gertrude so often that the ending, with the couple reunited, comes as a relief, and in *A Fairly Honorable Defeat* when Simon is reunited with Axel. There is something vulnerable about each of these characters which is particularly appealing, but perhaps Murdoch is also trading on an incorrigible belief in the legitimacy of mutual sexual love, deeply ingrained in the western tradition, that makes it seem so important that these lovers achieve happiness at almost any cost. Murdoch's characters often tell each other that love should not be wasted. Frequently the love they are talking of is dangerous and inappropriate, and there is always an ironic twist to these conversations: sometimes the irony is local, at other times it is dramatic irony which becomes clear in the light of later events. Innocent love is another myth Murdoch's characters often subscribe to – Morgan, for example, in *A Fairly Honorable Defeat*, wants love with no responsibilities or pain. But when her characters apprehend each other with what Murdoch would call real love, the accidents and outside forces which threaten these relationships seem particularly cruel – which is no doubt her point. She said in her interview with Bellamy,

Love is a kind of bombshell that breaks peoples' [sic] lives, really falling in love. It's obviously a dangerous condition, because it's so tremendously self-centered. To really love somebody in an unselfish way is not perhaps thoroughly natural to human beings;

certainly in romantic love, in “falling in love” love, one is tremendously selfish. One feels that everything in the world has gone away to the other person, but then this becomes a function of one’s own will, too. (138)

The self-centered life is antithetical to the good life she believes one should aspire to. But she also believes that art should express the accidental nature of reality, and not be merely the acting out of fantasies, and Bradley and Julian’s love is too fantastic to withstand the power of contingency.

In this case, then, the rebellion the reader has been induced to feel against the outcome of the story is certainly a part of what Murdoch would call the “moral orientation” (Heusel 5) of this novel. Wayne Booth, in *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, writes of narratives where

the narrator’s bewilderment is used not simply to mystify about minor facts of the story but to break down the reader’s convictions about truth itself, so that he may be ready to receive *the* truth when it is offered to him. If the reader is to desire the truth he must first be convinced that he does not already possess it. Like a well-written philosophical treatise, any work depending on this desire must raise an important question in a lively form if the reader is to care about reading on to find the answer, or to feel the importance of the answer when it comes. (285-6)

Given what Murdoch says about *The Black Prince*’s “inbuilt mode of explanation,” and that “jokes like [the postscripts] are one thing but deliberate and total mystification, a willingness to hand over the interpretation to the reader, is another thing and I don’t want to do the latter” (Biggsby 217), we can as I have said, assume that factual indeterminacy, in the sense of there being no stable reference to reality, is not part of her aim. However, uncertainty about other people’s feelings and beliefs remains important, and it is certainly part of her moral scheme. Her belief in the opacity and independence of other minds is fundamental, and in a way she is, in this novel and all her others, setting up a situation (that is, Bradley’s world view before the trial) where the reader’s and the main characters’ convictions about truth itself are broken down so that they “may be ready to receive *the* truth when it is offered.” This novel might be seen as an example to the reader of how this process works, since we see in Bradley the consequences of his blindness to the truth and his failure to really see other people, and we see also his post-trial calm and contentment.

How deeply behind Bradley, or Loxias, is the “real” voice of Iris Murdoch is still uncertain, however. The idea that Murdoch chooses to write in the first person as a male in order to distance herself from her narrator and thus create a character who is not herself (see Kermode 63-4) has occurred to some critics. Steven Cohan writes:

Murdoch’s preference “to be male” is in many ways central to her art. Her choice of male narrators allows for a playful act of male impersonation as an ironic commentary on the paradox of fiction writing. She uses the male voice to articulate a sense of lived experience unique to another self, while making sure that her narrators themselves remain bound to the limits of their own identities. (223)

She seemed to confirm this in a 1967 interview, saying, “The oppositeness in the person of a man is good for the imagination” (McGill). Bellamy brought up the question again in a later interview:

Is your choice of men as first-person narrators a way of avoiding the introspective, solipsistic novel you have so frequently criticized? I should think that imagining you were somebody of another sex would ensure the creation of a character different from yourself. The process would involve quite an impressive leap for the imagination. (132-3)

In response she said, “I identify with men more than women, I think,” which seems to contradict or at least undercut Bellamy’s proposal. Unfortunately she left unremarked an earlier comment Bellamy made to the effect that Bradley Pearson “seems closer to the author than the narrators of your other novels” (132). Johnson observes that

she is able to project her more personal sense of the connection between artistic, erotic and religious experience through the meditative narration of her *persona*, Bradley Pearson.

... The mask of the male narrator ... allows the author both the pleasure of projecting herself in a dramatic role and protection in exploring difficult and dangerous regions. (45-6)

In any event, most of the beliefs of Loxias and the “flayed” Bradley correspond closely with Murdoch’s own. For example, Bradley says in the postscript that suffering is a kind of false idea – “no doubt we need these ideas, we may have to live by them, and the last ones we will

abandon are those of dignity, tragedy and redemptive suffering” (337): as Murdoch wrote in her essays, “The idea of suffering confuses the mind and in certain contexts ... can masquerade as a purification. It is rarely this, for unless it is very intense indeed it is far too interesting” (“On ‘God’” 355); and “Masochism is the artist’s greatest and most subtle enemy” (“Sovereignty” 371). Furthermore,

art is an excellent analogy of morals, or indeed ... it is in this respect a case of morals.

We cease to be in order to attend to the existence of something else, a natural object, a person in need. We can see in mediocre art, where perhaps it is even more clearly seen than in mediocre conduct, the intrusion of fantasy, the assertion of self, the dimming of any reflection of the real world. (“On ‘God’” 348)

Thus, in the final paragraph of his Postscript, Bradley writes of Priscilla, “may I never in my thought knit up the precise and random detail of her wretchedness so as to forget that her death was not a necessity,” and of Julian, “I do not, my darling girl, however passionately and intensely my thought has worked upon your being, really imagine that I invented you. Eternally you escape my embrace. Art cannot assimilate you nor thought digest you” (339). These words show how far he has come even from his feeling during the trial that “I had been confronted (at last) with a sizeable *ordeal* labelled with my name” (331), and that the book he would write “is my gift to [Julian] and my final possession of her. From this embrace she can never now escape” (336). Dipple writes, “in no other book has she taken a character so far, from irritating inadequacy to the absolute of art and thence to death” (131), and this feeling of a journey well completed is clear in the postscript. However, the Foreword, which also purports to be written after the main text, is more confusing. He says he will write in the persona of his former self, but sometimes it is hard to sift the strands, especially because the tenses tend to change:

My life, until the drama which brought it so significantly to a climax, had been an uneventful one. Some people might call it dull. ... I was married, then ceased to be married, as I shall tell. I am childless. I suffer from intermittent stomach troubles and insomnia. I have usually lived alone. ... I have had few intimate friends. (I could not I think be “friends” with a woman.) (xv)

Read very carefully, the changes of tense have a certain logic if the present tense is regarded as referring to the time immediately before the action, but some of the statements could be

attributed to the narrator rather than the character, and would certainly be far from Murdoch's opinions or thoughts: she surely could not believe it is impossible for a man to be friends with a woman. As a writer, he is clearly very different from Murdoch, with his pretensions, his fear of "profan[ing] the purity of a single page with anything less than what is perfectly appropriate and beautiful" (xii), his "pride, ... as well as sorrow" (xvi) in having destroyed most of what he has written, his fastidious distaste for "an intemperate flux of words" (xvii). Talking to Simon Price in 1984, she said, "The poor old hero is full of illusions. He's not to be thought of as a great writer manqué. He's just a man who's obsessed with the idea of art, but can't actually do it." (4) She does not explain how Bradley then manages to write what is self-evidently a work of art. This is another part of the first-person narrative convention that the reader accepts, along with the exact memory of the narrator – the fact that this "poor old hero" can write such a novel. His rival author, Arnold Baffin appears to be partly a caricature of herself, with his new book each year, his urge to write and publish and get on with the next book, even when he knows what he has written may not be perfect. The narrator's prose style differs a little from Murdoch's, especially at first. Bradley has a more pedantic voice, a little more precious, with fewer Murdochian strings of three or four adjectives.

These are interesting points, but they operate in the realm of characterization or impersonation rather than moral judgment. I think one must agree with Dipple that the latter Bradley is as truly enlightened as it is possible to be, given that Murdoch says she can think of no people in her novels who achieve goodness; "How many people do we know who achieve goodness? I think it's extremely rare. Even so-called saints are imperfect" (Heusel 5-6). However, although the fundamental beliefs of the narrator in his last days may be close to those we know of from Murdoch's other writings, the character she has created is in this case a distinct person with a vividly imagined life of his own, not just a projection of the author.

Whether Murdoch writes in the first person as a male because she identifies more with men, as she claims, or because it is easier to create a distinct character with a life of his own when crossing the sexual divide, there is a fundamental importance in the choice. Talking about first-person narratives at a French symposium on her work, she said:

I think it is a very important decision that the novelist makes. When I make that decision I'm always anxious about it, for I know that things will come out quite

differently if it's written in the first person. The advantages of writing in the first person are obvious. In a way, they are enormous because you can then ramble around endlessly, you can address your reader, and you can produce a tremendous amount of verbiage which has got a sense in relation to the speaker. Also, I think, there's often a bigger emotional charge. ... On the other hand, the danger of this is that it's harder then to create other characters who can stand up to the narrator, because they're being seen through his eyes. (Chevalier 81)

She does not name the freedom that Johnson proposes – that it allows her to shelter behind the “protection” of her narrator “in exploring difficult and dangerous regions” (46), but this might perhaps be inferred from freedom she does name, to “ramble around endlessly.” Nevertheless, in her later novels especially, she does not let the third-person perspective hinder her ramblings. The success of this novel partly lies in the way the “tremendous amount of verbiage” contributes to a vivid, rounded portrayal of Bradley, whereas in other books it becomes separate from the characterization and in effect impedes it.

Could this novel have been written in the third person? The first-person form, as I have shown, is not necessary to engage the reader's sympathy. It might be that being only briefly privy to the points of view of any other characters – and even then only through their own letters or carefully-worded postscripts, rather than omniscient narration – we are more closely aligned with Bradley's point of view than that of any other character. On the other hand, we can also see and understand his failings from our privileged view into his consciousness. The obvious gap between what the narrator says and the reader perceives is more marked in the other first-person novels, particularly *The Sea*, *The Sea* and *A Word Child*, where the narrators are closer to themselves as characters, and are not so conscious of their faults. We do not feel that either Charles Arrowby or Hilary Burde have learnt a great deal from their experiences. The choice between “open” and “closed” novels which Murdoch has described does not seem to pertain, either, unless we follow John Burke's suggestion of re-defining the closed novel as that in which we are “by definition locked into or closed inside the consciousness of a single character” (488). At any rate, *The Black Prince* is, by her definition, a closed novel, and choosing to write it in the first person does not diminish this quality, but it is also one in which she has come close to achieving a synthesis between powerful plot and fully rounded characters. Barbara Grizzuti

Harrison, claiming that “few ... perhaps none” of Murdoch’s characters “resonate in the mind, memorable as unique, created beings, returning to trouble or nourish us ... no one remembers the names” (2), overstates the case.

One of the most important factors in Murdoch’s choice of the first person for this novel is the epic situation which is thereby created. It is in the form of a confession, and it would be a very different novel indeed without that aspect. The story could have been related in the third person, it is true, but the reflections on the nature of reality and art would sit oddly in a novel told by an omniscient third person. These events are so closely allied to the perceptions and experiences of the main character that they lend themselves more readily to the subjective narration – in fact, they are really inseparable from it.

Although Bradley rejects redemptive suffering as a false idea, paradoxically it is his ordeal which has enabled him to reach the state of mind wherein he is able to make this judgment. Although he is literally not guilty of the crime for which he is convicted, he feels during the trial that he is

guilty of *something* wicked. This picturesque explanation certainly had some force, perhaps simply because of the appeal of the picturesqueness to my literary mind. I had not willed Arnold’s death but I had envied him and (sometimes at least) detested him. I had failed Rachel and abandoned her. I had neglected Priscilla. Dreadful things had happened for which I was in part responsible. (335)

He realizes later in prison that “I surrendered myself to the trial as to a final exorcism of guilt from my life” (335). The fact that Bradley judges himself harshly enough to feel that his ordeal was deserved, even predestined by some “divine power which held me in its talons” (337), allows the reader to judge him more leniently. Murdoch is always more interested in explaining than either excusing or judging her characters’ behavior. The reader might be inclined to accuse Rachel of being the villain in this novel, but this is not Bradley’s opinion, or Murdoch’s evident intention. We know too much of Rachel, even though we see her mainly through Bradley’s eyes, to condemn her outright, and on the other hand we know too little of her, as a separate and distinct person with mysterious thoughts and motivations, to be able to judge her. One point on which Murdoch and her narrator agree is their dislike for “semi-educated theorizers who prefer any general blunted ‘symbolic’ explanation to the horror of confronting a unique human history”

(xiv), even though the particular theorist Bradley has in mind here is Francis Marloe, the only character whose actions approach, however distantly, the good life.

Finally, the first-person form of this novel gives it a frame. Its intention is clearly stated in the Foreword: “The elementary need to render a truthful account of what has been so universally falsified and misrepresented is the ordinary motive for this enterprise” (xiii). No other Murdoch novel has such a definite close. Bradley’s life is over before the novel is published, and this fact, coming to us in Loxias’ postscript at the very end of the book, gives what precedes it more status as a work of art, a self-contained object which nevertheless transcends its boundaries. The fact that we have lived with Bradley through these events, and that he is now dead, gives the events of the narrative, in retrospect, a profounder significance. As Loxias says in his postscript, “death always seems to commit truth to some wider and larger court” (362). In spite of the fact that Murdoch seems to resist closure in most of her novels, readers look to the close of a novel for some indication at least of how the lives of the characters are likely to continue, if not for the moral. For once, in *The Black Prince*, she has indulged her readers with the death of her protagonist, and a closing moral from Loxias, the editor:

Bradley Pearson’s story, which I made him tell, remains ... durable.... Art is not cosy and it is not mocked. Art tells the only truth that ultimately matters. It is the light by which human things can be mended. And after art there is, let me assure you, nothing.
(364)

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N.B. Dates in brackets indicate original date of publication if applicable.

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