

Good Versus Evil in Austen's *Mansfield Park* and Iris Murdoch's *A Fairly Honourable Defeat*

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It is a commonplace observation that good characters are the most difficult for an artist to make interesting. This was the basis of one of Plato's arguments against art: '[The] fretful temper gives scope for a great diversity of dramatic representation; whereas the calm and wise character in its unvarying constancy is not easy to represent, nor when represented is it readily understood.'¹ Perhaps for this reason many novels are about not fundamentally evil characters, but imperfect people, often young, whose progress towards maturity claims the interest of the reader, and who at the end are presumed to have reached the less interesting state of 'calmness and wisdom.' A writer who does not wish to glamorise evil may choose to write this kind of *bildungsroman* instead of trying to present a character who is morally exemplary from the start. The more difficult path is to place in the foreground a 'good' character who must deal with vicissitudes which form the interest of the novel. This, for example, seems to have been the task Jane Austen set herself when she wrote *Mansfield Park*. She had tackled this problem to some extent in *Sense and Sensibility*, but Elinor's maturity and good sense is balanced by the painful lessons Marianne has to learn: there are two heroines. In *Mansfield Park*, on the other hand, despite the attractions of Mary Crawford, Fanny Price is undoubtedly the central figure. The problem Austen faced in presenting such an unglamorous, passive and, to many, unpalatably virtuous heroine is similar to that faced by Iris Murdoch when she dramatises a figure of good such as Tallis Browne in *A Fairly Honourable Defeat* (1970), although their methods are somewhat different.

Although we have little external evidence about Austen's moral philosophy, *Mansfield Park* seems to imply that she valued self-discipline and attention to the needs of others over wit and cleverness, as dramatised in the contrast and rivalry of Mary Crawford and Fanny Price – very much Murdoch's position. *Mansfield Park* is a great novel, and its greatness is absolutely inseparable from the qualities of Fanny. Lionel Trilling famously wrote that 'its greatness [is] commensurate with its power to offend.'² Austen's courage in putting a passive and morally upright heroine at the centre of her work causes both the offence and the triumph: she deliberately defies the expectations of her readers. As Brian Wilkie says, '*Mansfield Park* is Fanny's novel, and in it her morality is a given, not an acquisition.'³

Much has been written about Fanny. Nina Auerbach calls her a monster, exciting 'the same mixture of sympathy and aversion as does Frankenstein's loveless,

¹ Plato, *The Republic of Plato* trans. Francis MacDonald Cornford (London: Oxford University Press, 1974) 336.

² Lionel Trilling, '*Mansfield Park*,' *Jane Austen: A Collection of Critical Essays* ed. Ian Watt (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1963) 127.

³ Brian Wilkie, 'Structural Layering in Jane Austen's Problem Novels', *Nineteenth Century Literature* electronic edition 46: 4 (March 1992) 35.

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homeless creature,'⁴ while Clara Calvo sees her as an updated Cordelia.⁵ Joel C. Weinsheimer points out that 'it is difficult, often impossible, to distinguish satisfactorily the reactions occasioned by her physical frailty and timidity from those occasioned by her moral sensitivity,'⁶ and Michiel Heyns, in an extraordinarily illuminating article, demonstrates how Fanny's moral vocabulary betrays a 'double standard of judgement' and an 'untrained moral sensibility which can surely not serve as the standard of judgement in the novel.'⁷ So the critical consensus tends towards a complication of Fanny's status as simply a moral paragon. There is, for example, a strong subtext of sexual jealousy in her disapproval of Mary Crawford that undermines its moral force, and her dislike of the theatricals is composed partly of fear of Sir Thomas and partly of shrinking self-consciousness: she is quite content to help with the needlework and rehearsals, and 'she was occasionally useful to all; she was perhaps as much at peace as any.'⁸

However, it is her passivity as much as her self-righteousness which makes her unpopular with many readers. Her refusal to act to bring about the outcome she desires puts her at a disadvantage in relation to the other characters, who do more to attract the reader's attention. Austen provides us with just enough of the conflicted history of their doomed love to show that *Mansfield Park* could have been framed as the tragedy of Mary Crawford and Edmund Bertram. The pain of their parting is counteracted but not negated by Fanny's victorious tenacity: Austen counteracts it by presenting the novel almost exclusively through Fanny's consciousness, when the voice is not that of a sympathetic omniscient narrator. She will allow the other point of view to be seen, but Fanny's is the last word. Henry persists in his pursuit of her in face of her opposition: 'A little difficulty to be overcome was no evil to Henry Crawford. He rather derived spirits from it. ... To Fanny, however, who had known too much opposition all her life to find any charm in it, all this was unintelligible' (MP 249). We understand both positions, but we must sympathise with Fanny. Austen certainly occasionally undercuts Fanny's internal monologue with quiet irony, but Fanny's quivering sensibility is constantly present to the reader. Mary Crawford insists on seeing her alone to reprove her for her refusal of Henry's proposal, in 'words that Fanny felt all over her, in all her pulses, and all her nerves' (MP 273). Fanny's suffering and patience, if not virtue, is rewarded, and she is presented with her prize at the close of the novel.

Murdoch's passive and saintly figure in *A Fairly Honourable Defeat* has none of these advantages. The narration is impersonal and apparently impartial, and Tallis's point of view is one among many in the novel. In the end he is not rewarded, and the last word is reserved for the satanic Julius King.

⁴ Nina Auerbach, 'Jane Austen's Dangerous Charm: Feeling as One Ought about Fanny Price,' *Women and Literature* 3 (1983) 219.

⁵ Clara Calvo, 'Rewriting Lear's Untender Daughter: Fanny Price as a Regency Cordelia in Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*,' *Shakespeare Survey* 58 (2005) 83-93.

⁶ Joel C. Weinsheimer, 'Mansfield Park: Three Problems', *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 29: 2 (September 1974) 193-4.

⁷ Michiel Heyns, 'Shock and Horror: The Moral Vocabulary of *Mansfield Park*,' *English Studies in Africa* 29 (1986) 12, 13.

⁸ Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park* edited by Pamela Norris; introduction by Peter Conrad (London: J.M. Dent, 1993) 127. Further references will be given in parentheses in the text.

Murdoch has explained the scheme behind the novel in subsequent interviews: 'Of course, that book is a theological myth. ... Julius King is, of course, Satan, and Tallis is a Christ figure, and Tallis's father (Leonard Browne) is God the Father, who finds that it's all gone wrong. ... And then Morgan ... is the human soul, for which the two protagonists are battling.'⁹ However, the novel makes sense without this explanation, and the mythology remains somewhat puzzling for reasons I will discuss.

Murdoch was committed to realism, in the sense that wish-fulfilling fantasies should be countered by exercise of the moral imagination. She told an interviewer:

Great art is connected with courage and truthfulness. There is a conception of truth, a lack of illusion, an ability to overcome selfish obsessions, which goes with good art, and the artist has got to have that particular sort of moral stamina.¹⁰

Two questions arise from Murdoch's thematic explanation for *A Fairly Honourable Defeat*: what internal evidence does an uninformed reader have to construct a moral universe from the narrative? And how is the realism, which is Murdoch's overriding aim, served in this witty and dramatic novel?

In her interview with Christopher Bigsby, discussing Kantian and Platonic views of morality, she says she is inclined to agree with Kant that

the recognition of duty ... is a rational thing, that it is something which everybody can do, and that the unconditional nature of duty is something which is self-evident to every rational being. ... This, of course, is a very unpopular view now; all kinds of ethical relativism are popular. ... I think in a non-philosophical way some of the people in my books want to say this, that it is perfectly obvious what you want to do and if you fudge around and say well it is all very complicated and so on you are evading something.¹¹

One is reminded of Mr Knightley's disapproval of Frank Churchill's neglect of his father in *Emma*, though of course in that case there was a strong admixture of jealousy in his attitude. Mr Knightley was one of Murdoch's favourite fictional characters.¹² One can see that the attraction for her was moral as well as emotional or aesthetic: there is much to be admired in Mr Knightley's no-nonsense practical benevolence. However, she goes on to say:

⁹ Michael O. Bellamy, 'An Interview with Iris Murdoch,' *From a Tiny Corner in the House of Fiction: Conversations with Iris Murdoch* ed. Gillian Dooley (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003) 51.

¹⁰ Jeffrey Meyers, 'Two Interviews with Iris Murdoch,' *From a Tiny Corner in the House of Fiction: Conversations with Iris Murdoch* ed. Gillian Dooley (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003), 225.

¹¹ Christopher Bigsby, 'Interview with Iris Murdoch,' *From a Tiny Corner in the House of Fiction: Conversations with Iris Murdoch* ed. Gillian Dooley (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003) 107.

¹² See Simon Price, 'Iris Murdoch: An Interview with Simon Price,' *From a Tiny Corner in the House of Fiction: Conversations with Iris Murdoch* ed. Gillian Dooley (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003) 150.

Another image which attracts me and which is rather different is a sort of platonic image, the notion that good is very, very far away and that ... one's task is to transform oneself, to discard selfishness and to undergo a very long process of conversion, ... though nobody in my books ever gets anywhere really, or gets very far with the process. It is extremely difficult, there aren't any saintly people ... there is only one real saint as it were, or symbolic good religious figure in the books and that is Tallis.¹³

We cannot take rewards and punishments as any indication of the success or failure of these efforts in *A Fairly Honourable Defeat*. Simon, whose instincts are often sound, has the courage finally to tell his lover, Axel, the truth and is rewarded by Axel's forgiveness. Rupert, whose guilty secret is found out before he tells, drowns. But both Morgan, Tallis's erring wife, and Julius, her seducer and the novel's chief mischief-maker, get away unscathed and possibly even happy, after causing so much misery; and Tallis keeps on unchanging, his life in as big a mess as at the start, with little hope of Morgan's return and the black prospect of his father's death ahead. This refusal of poetic justice increases the novel's realism.

While the conventions of romantic comedy give her license to marry Edmund to Fanny in *Mansfield Park*, Austen is also constrained by realism to some extent. Though she punishes Maria with banishment to the sole society of Aunt Norris – and if there is a monster in *Mansfield Park*, it is surely Mrs Norris, not Fanny – Austen cannot realistically mete out the deserved punishment to Henry Crawford:

That punishment, the public punishment of disgrace, should in a just measure attend *his* share of the offence, is, we know, not one of the barriers, which society gives to virtue. In this world, the penalty is less equal than could be wished; but without presuming to look forward to a juster appointment hereafter, we may fairly consider a man of sense like Henry Crawford, to be providing for himself no small portion of vexation and regret. (MP 360)

The 'hereafter' Austen refers to is ambiguous. It could be a secular hope for an improvement in social conditions for women, which might give heart to those who seek a feminist consciousness in Austen's works. But equally it could be a reference to the Christian afterlife, and if so seems to show the implied author as somewhat agnostic in her tendencies, since a devout Christian should surely 'presume to look forward' with confidence to the judgements of a just deity. There are already many intimations that the narrator of *Mansfield Park* is considerably more worldly than Fanny, especially in her attitude towards Henry's pursuit of her hand: 'I believe, there is scarcely a young lady in the united kingdoms, who would not rather put up with the misfortune of being sought by a clever, agreeable man, than have him driven away by the vulgarity of her nearest relations' (MP 310); and indeed, 'Would he have persevered, and uprightly, Fanny must have been his reward' (MP 359). The narrator here comes close to agreeing with Mary and Mrs Norris, though their emphasis is on Fanny's responsibility for Henry's behaviour through her delay in accepting him,

¹³ Bigsby 108.

while the narrator at least introduces the important condition of his 'upright perseverance,' in which he has signally failed.

Murdoch, however, is clearly on the side of the unworldly in her novel: that is clear from her external references to Tallis as a figure of good, a 'Christ figure'. It is ironic that Murdoch, who clearly repudiates a belief 'in a personal God, and ... the divinity of Christ,'¹⁴ shows herself in this novel to be more committed to a Christian ethic than the Austen, the clergyman's daughter. However, Murdoch is still attracted by 'a kind of moral philosophy, or even neo-theology,'¹⁵ and the more profound irony is that the philosophy Rupert professes throughout the novel is practically identical to that expounded by Murdoch herself in her non-fiction. Ramanathan points out that in the conversation between Julius and Rupert in Chapter 18 of Part One, 'the case against her own choice [of philosophy] is given the fullest possible hearing.'¹⁶ Murdoch's belief is that no philosophy is of any use unless it is so much a part of one that it is lived rather than consciously believed. Tallis is the character, of course, who does not express abstract beliefs – perhaps is not capable of expressing them – but who lives the genuinely good life. Like Rupert under attack from Julius, he is unable to find the words to argue with what he can see is wrong in Morgan's philosophy: 'It sounds like sense ... but somehow – oh how stupid you make me feel.'¹⁷ Morgan says, 'You're not on the wavelength, you don't understand what I'm saying half the time' (FHD 215). This is precisely Murdoch's point. Ramanathan says

Julius cannot be answered on his own terms. Another set of assumptions, extending to real possibilities outside the natural world, has to be called up before the argument can proceed further. ... Against such an onslaught ... belief in good can only stammer; it cannot provide the sort of proofs required, and finally has to fall back on faith.¹⁸

Both Morgan and Julius have chosen to view the world in a way which Tallis and Rupert, respectively, deeply feel is wrong, but their beliefs can 'only stammer' in reply.

The difficulty of communication between the principled and the worldly parallels the situation in *Mansfield Park*. Fanny cannot make either of the Crawfords believe she is genuine in her rejection of Henry. And like Tallis when faced with Morgan's faulty philosophy, Edmund cannot make himself understood in his last conversation with Mary. He recounts it to Fanny:

'Oh Fanny, it was the detection, not the offence which she reprobated. It was the imprudence which had brought things to extremity, and obliged her brother to give up every dearer plan in order to fly with her.'

¹⁴ Jonathan Miller, 'My God: Iris Murdoch Interviewed,' *From a Tiny Corner in the House of Fiction: Conversations with Iris Murdoch* ed. Gillian Dooley (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003) 211.

¹⁵ Miller 211.

¹⁶ Suguna Ramanathan, *Iris Murdoch: Figures of Good* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990) 13.

¹⁷ Iris Murdoch, *A Fairly Honourable Defeat* (London: Penguin, 1972) 214. Further references will be given in parentheses in the text.

¹⁸ Ramanathan 13.

He stopt: – ‘And what,’ said Fanny, believing herself required to speak, ‘what could you say?’
‘Nothing, nothing to be understood. I was like a man stunned.’ (MP 350)

The irony with which Murdoch’s beliefs are tested is further complicated by the fact that the flighty Morgan’s beliefs are a watered-down and fanciful version of Rupert’s, that is, love is the key. It is this similarity of views that allows Julius to manipulate them into their disastrous ‘affair.’ Tallis is right about Morgan when, in reply to her statement, ‘I’m going to be free and love people,’ he exclaims, ‘Oh don’t talk such sickening rot, Morgan!’ (FHD 212). He knows that freedom is not a virtue, and that loving people is often burdensome and unrewarding, and that Morgan’s understanding of love is hopelessly self-centered and only operates when she is feeling happy, hence her cruel rejection of Peter. In this sense she is an even more faulty character than Mary and Henry in *Mansfield Park*. We are led to believe that their love, of Edmund and Fanny respectively, though it is not enough to prevent their foolish and vicious behaviour, persists and perhaps even remains a source of moral improvement after their hopes have disappeared.

Rupert’s beliefs are deeper and more soundly based. He tells his wife, Hilda:

I am sure love tells in the end ... There are times when one’s just got to go on loving somebody helplessly, with blank hope and blank faith. When love just *is* hope and faith in their most denuded form. Then love becomes almost impersonal and loses all its attractiveness and its ability to console. But it is just then that it may exert its greatest power. It is just then that it may really be able to redeem. (FHD 26)

But he cannot practice what he so sonorously preaches. It is Tallis who loves ‘helplessly with blank hope and blank faith.’ He is not tempted to act in any other way. Like Fanny with her love of Edmund and resistance to the addresses of Henry Crawford, in spite of everyone’s urging, and even apologetically, he follows his instincts.

Nevertheless, Tallis as a figure of good, someone for the reader to admire and even emulate, is not the obvious choice of a reader who is not versed in Murdoch’s particular brand of Platonism. Dipple notes that

disappointment [with Tallis] is built in very carefully by Murdoch and is felt as much by the reader as by Julius. The Christ figure as good cannot appear in the post-Christian world Murdoch insists on in the light of any sentimental or romantic radiance.

Further,

Murdoch, who denies expectations of many sorts in this novel, alters both the Christ figure and Satan, and it is questionable whether the reader can follow

her entirely in either case. Tallis's interest comes largely from his sheer peculiarity.¹⁹

Although he is sympathetically portrayed, Tallis's messy, dreary life is unlikely to excite admiration, and like Austen's Fanny once again, many readers would find him an unattractive role model. Murdoch told Jo Brans, 'it's symbolic of the situation that nowadays the holy man is sort of shaky, hopeless, muddled, he hasn't got a place.'²⁰ But, although he suffers, he is not vulnerable like other characters. He asks himself,

Would this muddle just go on and on or would it end in some sort of final catastrophe? Sometimes he wished for that catastrophe, wished that someone would come and just cart him away. Yet he knew his own toughness and knew that in all probability while he lived the muddle would simply go on and on and on. (FHD 113)

When he is regarded as a symbol of good, this amounts to a guarded optimism that good will survive almost any attack, although it lacks the power to overcome evil. However, as personal qualities that the reader might want to identify with, Tallis's passivity and toughness engage the reader less than the more wayward traits of other, more realistic, characters, who make mistakes, and may either sink or swim.

Austen's only extant explicit statement of intent with regard to *Mansfield Park* is the famous passage in her letter of 29 January 1813 to her sister Cassandra, which seems to say that the novel was about 'ordination', though as Deirdre Le Faye shows in her edition of Austen's letters, this is an 'over-hasty reading' of the letter, and is more likely to be a specific reference to the passage she is about to write, rather than the novel as a whole.²¹ It is somewhat of a relief to be rid of this red herring: ordination as an overall theme of *Mansfield Park* is indeed a puzzle, and critics have had difficulty making it fit. However, another religious theme has occurred to more than one critic. The Sermon on the Mount grants the earth to the meek. Peter Conrad draws the comparison with Fanny's final reward in his introduction to the Everyman edition (MP xvi). Josephine Singer infers a more detailed scheme from the novel, 'Austen set for herself an almost impossible task: Fanny Price must personify each and every one of the Beatitudes.'²² Her argument is attractive and lively in its presentation, but perhaps not entirely convincing: it is not difficult in a novel of the scale of *Mansfield Park* to find 'evidence' for a multitude of schemata. Still, Austen may well have had the third Beatitude, 'Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth' in mind when she wrote *Mansfield Park*. Michiel Heyns points out that if this is so,

¹⁹ Elizabeth Dipple, *Iris Murdoch: Work for the Spirit* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982) 184-5.

²⁰ Jo Brans, 'Virtuous Dogs and a Unicorn: An Interview with Iris Murdoch,' *From a Tiny Corner in the House of Fiction: Conversations with Iris Murdoch* ed. Gillian Dooley (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003) 165-6.

²¹ Jane Austen, *Jane Austen's Letters*, collected and edited by Deirdre Le Faye (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995) 411.

²² Josephine Singer, 'Fanny and the Beatitudes,' *Persuasions On-Line* 28: 1 (Winter 2007) 1.

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their inheritance will not be undisputed. Thus readers who quite contentedly, even gleefully, assent to the pollution of the shades of Pemberley by Elizabeth Bennet's presumptuous annexation, begrudge little Fanny Price even that modest part of the earth occupied by Mansfield Parsonage.²³

Like Tallis, Fanny has a particular brand of mental toughness and passive rectitude that has not attracted many admirers among *Mansfield Park*'s readers.

Fanny's antagonists in *Mansfield Park* have a superficial attractiveness: Henry is 'a clever, agreeable man' (MP 310), and Mary 'a talking pretty young woman' (MP 35). But they are not to be regarded as incorrigibly evil: Henry's condemnation by Fanny is not absolutely endorsed by the implied author, as we have seen, and it is suggested that Mary would have been improved by her marriage to Edmund. 'Impartiality would not have denied to Miss Crawford's nature, that participation of the general nature of women, which would lead her to adopt the opinions of the man she loved and respected, as her own' (MP 282), despite Fanny's desperate (and biased) belief to the contrary. Heyns points out,

The Crawfords are, of course, flawed and convincingly dramatized as such: any reading that tried to attack Fanny by exculpating the Crawfords would find itself at odds with the text. But this does not mean that Fanny is right about them. She believes that they are 'bad', and indeed they are 'bad', but it is only at this crude level that Fanny's judgement is vindicated by the novel; any subtler moral discrimination than that would have to distinguish, on many points if not on all, between Fanny's judgement and that of the novel.²⁴

Henry and Mary are faulty, but they are still human and not incorrigible. Thus the moral principles of Fanny, the novel's apparent centre of rectitude, are doubly undercut, firstly by their contamination by her overriding passion for Edmund and the resulting jealousy, and secondly by the ironic asides of the author. Wilkie claims that 'the charting of increments in Fanny's physical development and energy of mind ... constitutes the essential plot of *Mansfield Park*,' and '

the moralism in *Mansfield Park* is ... part of the novel's nexus of characterization, a half-conventional mode of enhancing characters' attractiveness analogous to the novelistic convention of giving them good looks.²⁵

Fanny's moral world is not that of the novel as a whole.

In *A Fairly Honourable Defeat*, on the other hand, Tallis's morality is inseparable from that of the novel as a whole, and his antagonist is explicitly demonic. Julius is a deconstructionist. He is an inveterate destroyer of other people's value systems and a demolisher of grand narratives. He believes that he is 'an instrument of justice' (FHD 431) and indeed many of his assessments of people are accurate. He

²³ Heyns 1.

²⁴ Heyns 3.

²⁵ Wilkie, 26-7.

admires Hilda and he is delighted by Simon's courage and spirit, even though, or perhaps because, they are directed against him. Peter Conradi writes,

the gap, which lies at the heart of this tragi-comedy, is that between the wisdom, which is professed, and the wisdom, which is lived from the heart. It is a gap which Julius as artist is uniquely equipped to unmask, and one which only Tallis – significantly a man who does not rate himself as an intellectual – is able to overcome.²⁶

It is not Julius' perceptions, which are at fault, it is his passion for justice untempered by love. As well as seeing himself as a judge, he longs to be judged. He says to Rupert, 'If there were a perfectly just judge I would kiss his feet and accept his punishments upon my knees. But ... there is no such being' (FHD 226). Later, however, he tells Tallis that his 'picture of Rupert and Morgan is entirely just' (FHD 402), and his answer when Tallis asks why he has told him the truth is, 'Oh, you know why' (FHD 408), implying that he now sees Tallis as a worthy judge. Even when he is flattering Hilda to gain her trust, the line he uses is that he cares about her opinion of him – that she is a judge he has instinctively selected (FHD 296). Murdoch's ideal is a person who refuses to judge others, and who realises it is never possible to know other persons well enough to judge them.

Austen does not seem, from the evidence of her letters, to share this belief. Certainly Fanny Price has no hesitation in judging those she disapproves of, though she politely refrains from expressing her opinion, even when it is asked for. Henry says,

'When you give me your opinion, I always know what is right. Your judgment is my rule of right.'

'Oh no! – do not say so. We have all a better guide in ourselves, if we would attend to it, than any other person can be.' (MP 317)

In Austen's world, judging correctly is not only allowable but a virtue, one which Mrs Norris, for example, conspicuously lacks, and which Sir Thomas for all his gravitas learns too late. Even then, perhaps, he goes too far in banishing Maria and Mrs Norris from Mansfield to a fate worse than death: 'remote and private, where, shut up together with little society, on one side no affection, on the other, no judgment, it may be reasonably supposed that their tempers became their mutual punishment' (MP 358). Wilkie points out that 'this is very nearly the same unchristian harshness urged by Mr Collins with regard to Lydia in *Pride and Prejudice*.'²⁷ Tallis, however, refuses judgment: at the end of the *A Fairly Honourable Defeat*, left suffering at least partly through the actions of others, he does not 'speculate about the guilt of any person, not even about his own' (FHD 443). Julius' understanding of human nature is not profound enough to admit of such mysteries. He several times describes human beings as puppets, and is amused by how easy they are to manipulate. But he admits himself that 'it all got rather out of hand' (FHD 408), which means that his earlier

²⁶ Peter Conradi, 'A Fairly Honourable Defeat,' *Critical Essays on Iris Murdoch* ed. Lindsey Tucker (New York: G.K. Hall & Co., 1992) 93-4.

²⁷ Wilkie 34.

claim that 'no one would really suffer, that's part of my point' (FHD 234), was fundamentally wrong. The defeat of the title begins to seem more of a problem in this light. Is Julius a meddling human being who gets out of his depth, or a satanic figure who intends the consequences of his actions? In the former case, it is all more accidental than the 'battle between good and evil' schema implies; in the latter case, the self-deprecating confession to Tallis is out of key.

That Murdoch intends Julius as a demonic figure is, I think, fairly plain to a careful reader. Many of his appearances are sudden and mysterious, without normal, socially acceptable door-knocking or bell-ringing to announce him. His friendships are cool, and his affair with Morgan is characterised by a lack of warmth and a refusal to love. In the last chapter, there is a slight, easily missed hint in the sentence, 'He was so much better now that he was not closely involved with human beings' (FHD 447). The absence of one word, 'other,' to qualify 'human beings' sets him neatly apart from the human race. There are also little, playful touches, which might have significance, such as when Tallis tells him to 'go to hell' (FHD 339). Like a supernatural being, his physical appearance is odd and changeable; his face is more than once referred to as a mask, and his eyes are constantly changing colour. But if he is Satan, there is hope for good against evil, because he so underestimates the bond between Simon and Axel. And even Rupert and Morgan are not led to extremities of vice by Julius' machinations. In fact, they both display delicacy, kindness and thoughtfulness until the strain of deceit becomes too great for them to bear. This is not what Julius expects. He foresees an affair, with the comfortable accommodation of half-truths into the marriage. No one will be hurt very much: 'They'll gain a little experience. It will all unravel quite painlessly' (FHD 268). This is reminiscent of Mary Crawford's notion of the best way to deal with Henry and Maria's affair: keep it quiet, let them marry, accept it without fuss, a plan which Edmund finds so appalling that it 'convinced me that I had never understood her before, and that, as far as related to mind, it had been a creature of my own imagination, not Miss Crawford, that I had been too apt to dwell on for many months past' (MP 352). In parting from her, he tells her that 'I earnestly hoped that she might soon learn to think more justly' (MP 353).

Edmund is tempted briefly to forgo his principles, but 'I know I was right,' he tells Fanny (MP 353): he wavers momentarily but remains firm. His antagonist is not demonic, however, like Julius: there is no diabolical plan to strip him of his virtue, just an erring woman, tempting but finally able to be vanquished by 'the knowledge of ourselves and our duty' (MP 353). Rupert is up against something more formidable, and his inability to live without what Julius calls his 'condition of high-minded illusion' (FHD 383) is actually a good quality. He dies rather than accept Julius' cynicism – is this really defeat? Dipple says that 'Julius's major characteristic is his ability to pervert the perception of anything or anyone he comes in contact with'²⁸ but Rupert's vision is troubled rather than perverted by Julius. If it were perverted he would have succumbed to falsehoods and the convenience of the second-rate, as Julius expects, and advises, him to. As Swinden points out, 'Rupert ... died because he was what he was.'²⁹ Rupert's status in the theological scheme is enigmatic. If Morgan is the soul over whom the battle is waged, it seems odd that it is

²⁸ Dipple 187-8.

²⁹ Patrick Swinden. *Unofficial Selves: Character in the Novel from Dickens to the Present Day* (London: Macmillan, 1973) 256.

Rupert who is the casualty, while Morgan ends up out of the orbit of influence of both Julius and Tallis.

Tallis is, as one would expect, not perverted by Julius either. Would readers guess that Tallis is a Christ-figure, without external information? There is a deeply suggestive passage in Chapter 17, Part One, which describes his feeling

a bond ... not with anything personal but with the world, possibly the universe, which became a sort of extension of his being. Occasionally the extension was gentle and warm, like the feeling of a river reaching the sea. More often it was uncomfortable or even horrible as if he had immense dusty itching limbs, which he could not scratch. (FHD 208)

There is an echo of this a few pages later when Julius speaks contemptuously of the human dream 'of the extension of goodness beyond the pitiful level at which they muck along' (FHD 224). Mucking along accurately describes Tallis's life: one certainly needs to reject any link between cleanliness and godliness to see Tallis in this role. Critics such as Ramanathan, Conradi and Dipple have explored the Christ identification in detail, and found much evidence for it. Murdoch herself, mentioning the theological myth, said, 'I think hardly anybody notices this, but it doesn't matter; it's just something in the background.'³⁰

It is difficult to be good in Murdoch's terms. Rupert thinks that he can keep his life orderly, bestow love where it is needed, and live the good life openly and honestly, but disorder – or reality – overcomes him. It is tempting to see in this an analogy with writing a philosophical novel (which Murdoch denies she attempts). The ideas in the novel try to impose order, but the chaos of characters and events and the openness of the novel form overcome the neatness of ideas. Murdoch is profoundly aware of this. Ramanathan suggests that

'transgressions' of this kind necessarily occur because Murdoch's mind constantly moves back on itself, questioning the assumptions of her moral base, of its genuineness, its possible falseness, its inevitable inefficacy in the world, and its exhaustion.³¹

In this way, Murdoch is expressing, rather than a moral code, a philosophical position of plurality, uncertainty, and ambiguity in her novels, and in this sense she can be called a philosophical novelist. She wrote that 'imaginative prose literature ... is *par excellence* the form of art most concerned with the existence of other persons.'³² Murdoch's characters are not intended as role models. Rather, they are 'other persons' whom readers may contemplate, and in doing so perhaps become more tolerant in their dealings with non-fictional persons, whose minds they cannot read. For this to happen, the reader needs to be convinced – provisionally and temporarily at least –

³⁰ Bellamy 135.

³¹ Ramanathan 6-7.

³² Iris Murdoch, 'The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited,' [1959] *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature* ed. Peter Conradi (London: Chatto & Windus, 1997) 278.

that the characters resemble real people, and in this aim, as is shown by the opinions of various reviewers of *A Fairly Honourable Defeat*, she succeeds only partially.³³

The clear ethical argument of *A Fairly Honourable Defeat* opposes a desire for justice, because one human cannot know others well enough to have all the facts needed to judge them, as both Hilda and Tallis realise. But difficulties arise as to the ethical status of the author, who possesses all the facts, can read minds, and implies judgments herself, if not of all the characters, at least of the judgmental Julius. Can we allow that an author is 'in his work as God is in creation, invisible yet all-powerful,' as Flaubert declared,³⁴ or is there an assertion of superiority over the readers involved here which undermines Murdoch's own moral scheme? She wishes to disappear in her work – she values highly the 'exercise of overcoming one's self' in art³⁵ – but in this case, the invisibility of the implied author behind the invisible narrator gives the morality of the novel transcendence, which is a little fraudulent.

Thomas Jackson Rice claims that 'throughout her career Iris Murdoch has proved to be subtler than her critics.'³⁶ Whether or not this is true of Murdoch – and though some of her reviewers may lack subtlety, there is now a considerable body of extremely sophisticated criticism on Murdoch's work – it has certainly been true of Austen, at least among those readers who have regarded her works as moral tracts expressing a simple ethical code. Simple tracts with no moral ambiguity do not continue to nourish generations of readers. The one matter in which many critics have fallen short in criticism of Austen is the analysis of point of view and voice. *Mansfield Park* is a dramatisation of Fanny's point of view rather than a moral tract, and Fanny is not a 'picture of perfection'.³⁷ Austen's own morality is difficult to extrapolate from her novels, and there are no explicit and reliable external sources to rely upon, so there is little temptation to make the kind of comparisons between her beliefs and her fictional world which so preoccupies much Murdoch criticism.

Murdoch was an admirer of Jane Austen. 'I would like to think that something of the spirit of Jane Austen, whose work I love dearly, had entered into my work,'³⁸ she said in an early interview. Expanding on this in another interview, she said,

The greatest writers have an evasive tone, they are open to the world. There is a largeness of vision, which is lacking in most contemporary fiction, a freedom which allows characters to grow and develop independently of point of view and structure. Without this freedom there can be no great fictional

³³ See for example David Lodge's review in *The Month* (May 1970) 316: 'The characters and their actions are neither sufficiently realized to interest us on the level of realistic imitation, nor sufficiently transfigured by style to interest us on any other.'

³⁴ Quoted in Miriam Allott, ed., *Novelists on the Novel* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1959) 271.

³⁵ Iris Murdoch, 'The Sublime and the Good,' *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature* ed. Peter Conradi (London: Chatto & Windus, 1997) 216.

³⁶ Thomas Jackson Rice. 'The Reader's *Flight from the Enchanter*,' *Critical Essays on Iris Murdoch* ed. Lindsey Tucker (New York: G.K. Hall & Co., 1992) 75.

³⁷ In her letter to Fanny Knight of 23 March 1817, Austen said, 'Pictures of perfection as you know make me sick & wicked' (Austen, *Letters* 335).

³⁸ 'Speaking of Writing XII,' *From a Tiny Corner in the House of Fiction: Conversations with Iris Murdoch* ed. Gillian Dooley (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003) 15.

characters. Jane Austen had it even though her world was so restricted. I haven't got it; too obsessive about plot.³⁹

It may be that Murdoch would have done better as a novelist without this veneration for her nineteenth-century predecessors, as I have argued elsewhere.⁴⁰ She may also have attracted a different kind of criticism had she not been a philosopher and the kind of public figure who was often asked for her opinions. However, like Austen, she is more interesting as a novelist than a moralist, and if *A Fairly Honourable Defeat* endures as long as *Mansfield Park* has, it will be because its characters have indeed proved to have 'grown and developed' in the way Austen's characters have, rather than because it either conforms to or fails to endorse some external ethical scheme. Tallis will only continue to intrigue readers, as Fanny has, if he is more than merely a 'figure of good'.

³⁹ Sheila Hale, 'Interview from "Women Writers Now: Their Approach and Their Apprenticeship",' *From a Tiny Corner in the House of Fiction: Conversations with Iris Murdoch* ed. Gillian Dooley (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003) 31.

⁴⁰ See Gillian Dooley. 'The Post-War Novel in Crisis: Three Perspectives,' *AUMLA* 104 (November 2005) 103-119.