

## ‘Figures of Good’ in Jane Austen and Iris Murdoch<sup>1</sup>

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It is a commonplace observation that good characters are the most difficult for an artist to make interesting. This seems to have been the challenge Jane Austen set herself when she wrote *Mansfield Park*. The problem she faced in presenting an unglamorous, passive and, to many, unpalatably virtuous heroine like Fanny is similar to that faced by Iris Murdoch when she presents a figure of good like Tallis Browne in *A Fairly Honourable Defeat* (1970).

Although we have little external evidence about Austen’s moral philosophy, *Mansfield Park* implies that she valued self-discipline and attention to 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 inseparable from the qualities of Fanny. The recent 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. But 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 to other characters who do more to attract the reader’s attention. Austen will allow the other point of view to be seen – she provides us with just enough of the history of their doomed love to show that *Mansfield Park* could have been framed as the tragedy of Mary Crawford and Edmund Bertram, and 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, but Fanny’s is the last word. Austen undercuts Fanny’s internal monologue with occasional quiet irony, but Fanny’s quivering sensibility is constantly present to the reader. Mary Crawford reproves 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.

Murdoch was committed to realism, in the sense that wish-fulfilling fantasies should be countered by exercise of the moral imagination. We cannot take rewards and punishments as any indication of the success or failure of efforts to be virtuous in *A Fairly Honourable Defeat*. This refusal of poetic justice increases the novel’s realism. While the conventions of romantic comedy give her licence to marry Edmund to Fanny in *Mansfield Park*, Austen is also constrained by realism to some extent. Though she punishes Maria with

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banishment to the sole society of Aunt Norris, 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 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: '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.

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,'<sup>2</sup> 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,'<sup>3</sup> and the more profound irony is that the philosophy the pompous Rupert professes throughout the novel is practically identical to that expounded by Murdoch herself in her non-fiction. 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 does not express abstract beliefs – perhaps is not capable of expressing them – but lives the genuinely good life. He is unable to find the words to argue with what he can see is wrong in his wife Morgan's philosophy. 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 tells Fanny he could say 'Nothing, nothing to be understood. I was like a man stunned' (MP 350).

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<sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>3</sup> Miller 211.

Nevertheless, although he is sympathetically portrayed, Tallis's messy, dreary life is unlikely to excite admiration, and many readers would find him, like Fanny, an unattractive role model. Although he suffers, he is not vulnerable like other characters, and 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 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 a letter 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.<sup>4</sup> 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. 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,

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.<sup>5</sup>

Like Tallis, Fanny has a particular brand of mental toughness and passive rectitude that has not attracted many admirers among *Mansfield Park*'s readers. Her moral principles, as 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. Fanny's antagonists in *Mansfield Park* have a superficial attractiveness, and although Henry and Mary are faulty, they are human and not incorrigible. 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, and his antagonist is explicitly demonic. It is not in his perceptions that Julius is at fault, but in his passion for justice untempered by love. 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 opinion. Certainly Fanny Price has no hesitation in judging those she disapproves of. 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. 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

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<sup>4</sup> Jane Austen, *Jane Austen's Letters*, collected and edited by Deirdre Le Faye (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995) 411.

<sup>5</sup> Michiel Heyns, 'Shock and Horror: The Moral Vocabulary of *Mansfield Park*,' *English Studies in Africa* 29 (1986) 1.

even about his own' (FHD 443). Julius' understanding of human nature is not profound enough to admit of such mysteries. The disaster caused by his manipulation of Rupert and Morgan's feelings is not what Julius expects. He foresees an affair, with the comfortable accommodation of half-truths into Rupert's marriage. 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. In parting from her, he tells her that 'I earnestly hoped that she might soon learn to think more justly' (MP 353).

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. But difficulties arise as to the ethical status of the author, who possesses all the facts, can read minds, and implies judgments herself. Can we allow that an author is 'in his work as God is in creation, invisible yet all-powerful,' as Flaubert declared,<sup>6</sup> or is there an assertion of superiority over the readers involved here which undermines Murdoch's own moral scheme, giving the morality of the novel a transcendence which is a little fraudulent?

In Austen criticism, one area in which many have ignored 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'. Murdoch was an admirer of Jane Austen:

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 characters. Jane Austen had it even though her world was so restricted. I haven't got it; too obsessive about plot.<sup>7</sup>

It may be that Murdoch would have done better as a novelist without such veneration for her nineteenth-century predecessors, as I have argued elsewhere.<sup>8</sup> 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'.

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<sup>6</sup> Quoted in Miriam Allott, ed., *Novelists on the Novel* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1959) 271.

<sup>7</sup> 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.

<sup>8</sup> See Gillian Dooley. 'The Post-War Novel in Crisis: Three Perspectives,' *AUMLA* 104 (November 2005) 103-119.