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‘If I could have given Willy my full attention this morning’: Ethics as Perceptive Attention in Iris Murdoch’s *The Nice and the Good*

Jean-Michel Ganteau

Univ Paul Valéry Montpellier 3, EMMA EA741, F34000, Montpellier, France

Reading ‘The Sovereignty of Good in relation’ to *The Nice and the Good* is a rewarding though disturbing experience. The essay, with its aphoristic drive and sharpness, does contrast with the novel’s complex, tentative orientation. Even if the latter was notoriously described by Peter Conradi as belonging to Murdoch’s ‘open’ novels—a label used by the novelist herself—(Conradi 1986), meaning narratives that privilege realism and spatial expansion, *The Nice and the Good*, despite its double location (London and the Grays’ estate on the Sussex coast), more often than not focuses on confined spaces: London houses and even basements, closed rooms and secluded cottages at Trescombe. Of course, the liminal space of the beach is very much present in the more pastoral of the two locations, and the view from Willy’s room commands a nice, enlarged perspective on the shore. Still, the latter is ultimately conducive to one of the novel’s most gripping and engaging chapters, as young, forlorn Pierce and the protagonist, John Ducane, swim into a cave that will be almost entirely submerged and from which they will emerge partially transformed (if not transfigured). *The Nice and the Good* boasts a large cast of characters, revolving around various centres: they all relate to the protagonist whose internal perceptions of them are thoroughly shared with the reader and they are physically gathered around Kate Gray, who acts as a magnetic force, getting them to zoom in on Trescombe House either permanently or regularly. Despite the early expository chapters, and most notably the second one that helps establish the identity of each one of the guests, and despite the use of idiosyncratic traits that help tag them (like Willy Kost’s tendency to lay his feet in the ash, while sitting close to the hearth, he who spent some years in Dachau during the Second World War), the reader may have difficulties in sorting out who is who, until the last stages in the novel. Similarly, *The Nice and the Good*, even if its form has been described as ‘quieter in style’ than some of Murdoch’s more closed novels (Gordon 115) does resort to an ‘elaborate plot’ (Gordon 117) that does not shy from coincidences and other possibly melodramatic devices. These grant the novel a generic and modal complexity straining its realistic ambitions or, rather, enriching them, as I shall try to show in due time. Such a complexity applies to the moral import of the narrative, which quite a few critics have pored over and striven to disentangle, despite the presence of some fairly didactic passages in both descriptive or dialogic form. The general impression is of a welter of perception and experience, more often than not mediated through internal focalisation, expressing the characters’ emotional and ethical groping.

The Nice and the Good calls on the reader’s powers of concentration and discrimination, as suggested by the title. The latter invites to take part in an effort at classifying or, at least, sorting out. It postulates that there are several categories of people, that they might be separated, but the conjunction also indicates that a certain degree of mixing up is to be expected and that achieving a clear impression of who is who and who does what will be no easy thing. And this is precisely what the narrative is about, i.e.: leading the reader on, refusing to endow her/him with the gift or privilege of transparency, getting her/him to share in the characters’ illusions and fantasy. It will have become apparent that, in alluding to such a notion as fantasy, I have adopted the ethical frame of reference favoured by Murdoch herself. This must be expected in an article that purports to address the novel’s invitation to *practice* an ethics of attention by sharing in the characters’ experiences. More precisely, some of the characters make it their

purpose to see Good and to act according to such a vision—which most of the time takes the shape of glimpses of mere inklings. From this point of view, *The Nice and the Good* provides a fictional exploration of one of Murdoch's central concerns, as the text not only suggests but also performs the idea that it is one of art's functions to allow the ethical subject to see Good, even if imperfectly and tentatively. Critics have suggested that the welter of this ethical work is thrown onto two male characters: the protagonist, John Ducane, and a peripheral, almost invisible character, Willy Kost, who both achieve some form of epiphany (Browning Bove 60-62). I will add that a great deal of the ethical inspiration is delegated to Mary Clothier, the picture of care and attention, whose openness to and dispossession in the face of the other characters make her an emblem of sensibility and vulnerability to the other. My leading hypothesis, throughout, will be that the novel's ethical thrust relies on the practice of attention. I shall attempt to do this in three stages by first dealing with complexity and fantasy. In the second part, I shall move on to vulnerability and unselfing, before finally addressing the categories of humility and consideration.

In his article 'The Metaphysical Hostess: The Cult of Personal Relationships in the Modern English Novel', Peter Conradi singles out the eponymous motif as the organising principle of some of Murdoch's novels (Conradi 1981, 435). In *The Nice and the Good*, Kate Gray drags almost all members of the cast of characters to Trescombe, at the weekends and 'husband and wife act as King and Queen over a small Shakespearean court' (Conradi 1981, 429). Only a handful of London-based characters escape the pull of the hostess and are instrumental in thickening the plot and entrammelling the various individuals' actions and destinies. The novel starts with a bang, when an agent in Octavian Gray's department at Whitehall commits suicide, creating superficial dismay in the offices and sending ripples out to Trescombe House. From the beginning, the plot evinces the most stabilised characteristics of the detective novel: Ducane is entrusted with the responsibility of enquiring into the matter and launches into an internal inquest that will lead him to brush shoulders with shady characters—the blackmailer, McGrath, and his wife and accomplice Judy—and to descend into the nether regions of the Ministry, in the vaults formerly utilised as shelters during the war and in which the suicide, Radeechy, used to perform black masses. From the beginning, detection seems to play a central part in the novel's elaborate system of plot and subplots but proves in the end to be but a pretext for the complication of the emotional and ethical themes. As already suggested, Sussex is the place where the most significant entanglements take place. Trescombe House and its whereabouts (the wood, the cottage, the beach and the submarine cave) allow for a high concentration of characters and the cult of (inter)personal relationships that the novel as a form naturally accommodates and that Murdoch especially cultivates.

Over the court at Trescombe Kate Gray officially reigns, she who has entrapped most characters in her net of generosity and selfishness. This is suggested by the narrator, early in the narrative: 'Kate, herself undefined, was a definer of others, the noise, the heat, the light which flattered them into the clearer colours of themselves.' (18) Flattery, a superficial ('colour') version of personality, an identity thrust on the characters from outside, everything converges to introduce the Murdochian topic of falsity or, more particularly, fantasy. The theme is aired time and over again in the narrative but perhaps never as clearly as when linked to Kate, as is shown in an introspective passage, at the close of chapter 14, when the impersonal narrator delegates the focalisation to her and allows the reader to hear her voice in free direct discourse: 'I think being good is just a matter of temperament in the end. Yes, we shall all be so happy and good too. Oh, how utterly marvellous it is to be me!' (126) In such a redoubtably antiphrastic paragraph, the 'metaphysical hostess' becomes an emblem of selfishness and is made to reveal her inability to really open herself. Far from seeing good, she is the victim of illusion and comes to represent fantasy as the impossibility to achieve an ethical vision—even

if, admittedly, such a radical impression is extenuated in other passages. She thereby stands at the extreme end of a spectrum along which other characters are distributed.

Some secondary characters, Theo (Kate's brother in law) and Willy Kost, are situated toward the other end of the spectrum. Despite their relative invisibility, compared to Kate's or Ducane's, they may fail in achieving a clear picture of good, still they are under no illusion as to their inability to do so, as indicated in a pithy, fairly didactic dialogue:

All is vanity, Willy, and man walks in a vain shadow. You and I are the only people here who know this [...] You and I are the only people here who know, but we also know that we do not know. Our hearts are too corrupt to know such a thing as truth, we know it only as illusion. (129)

Illusion, one of the novel's main areas of investigation and a category so central to Murdoch's philosophy, is incarnated in the characters' experience and very acutely so in the protagonist's gropings and errings.

The real hub of the novel is John Ducane, who is the most efficient link between the various plot lines and the workings of whose consciousness the reader is most often allowed to share. Many episodes underline his lack of understanding and perception in his relationships with other characters: he fails to understand Jessica, who is madly in love with him, and he tends to patronise most other characters, women (Jessica, Judy, but also to a different extent Mary Clothier and Paula Biranne) and men alike. In many ways, he acts as a double of Kate in assuming a higher position over people, as match-maker and also as confessor or moral tutor. Still, he is most of the time if not always conscious of his tendency to patronise, as indicated in a hybrid of direct and free direct discourse giving access to his most spontaneous, genuine reactions: 'How instinctively I assume that what everyone needs is help from me, Ducane thought bitterly.' (187) Such an attitude leads him to dissemble and fall into the trap of illusion, as shown in the following snatch of free indirect discourse: 'If he was to have the impertinence to play at being God he must also have the discretion to conceal the fact.' (191) Like Willy and Theo, Ducane is conscious of his ethical blindness and limitations, which is made emphatically clear in one of his introspective outbursts of sincerity, steeped in Biblical allusions and tones:

I am the perfect whited sepulchre, Ducane thought. I've fiddled and compromised with two women and been a failure with one and a catastrophe to the other. I am the cause that evil is in a man like McGrath. I cannot pity the wretched or bring hope or comfort to the damned. I cannot feel compassionate for those over whom I imagine myself to be set as a judge. I cannot even take this girl in my arms. And that not because of duty or for her sake at all, but just because of my own conception of myself as spotless: my quaint idea of myself as good, which seems to go on being with me, however rottenly I may behave. (260–61)

Illusion and personal limitations, among which the failure to project oneself imaginatively into the other's situation—one that Ducane reproaches himself regularly with (48, 68)—, provide the gist of the narrative and fuel the plot dynamics at the same time as they slow it down. Fantasy, in the sense of illusion or at least difficulty in seeing truth, comes to occupy a central place in *The Nice and the Good*, appearing as 'the enemy of moral excellence' (Browning Bove 25). Gordon has summarised this situation pithily: 'we live rather absurdly, then, in a state of needing a truth we cannot quite reach' (Gordon 117) Such a paradoxical situation informs the whole novel and allows for the protracted resolution, tentative as it is, and for the ramifying plot entanglements, most of which develop into love stories: young Pierce is in the throes of his unrequited passion for Barbara, the Grays' daughter; Mary proposes to Willy; Jessica is pathologically in love with Ducane, a feeling and an object to a lesser degree shared by Judy, etc. Paradox thereby reigns supreme in providing the essence of complexity and ethical imperfection: 'For Murdoch, the only paths to the good are love and art, yet it is precisely love and art that impede and contaminate.' (Gordon 126) The romantic theme and its

multiple interpretations contribute to the complexity of the novel: perceptions become problematical and so does decision making, as most characters waver in the face of dilemmas. This sets the ethical ball rolling, multiplying glimpses of the right decision and the good life, without warranting any stable resolution, so much so that the following words, taken from 'The Sovereignty of Good', might be applied to the novel: 'The scene remains disparate and complex beyond the hopes of any system, yet at the same time the concept Good stretches through the whole of it and gives it the only kind of shadowy unachieved unity which it can possess.' (Murdoch 1986, 94–95)

In other terms, the vision of the good life keeps escaping the characters on account of the density of experience and the perceptual welter that both characters and reader are submitted to. Precisely, such a complexity requires the exercise of attention so as to attempt to embark on the right ethical course. This implies that having an ethical disposition is not enough and that the path towards the good life is entrained in a *practice* which is a practice of attention geared on to singularities. Drama critic Jon Foley Sherman may have something like this in mind when he comments on the incarnated dimension of attention: 'The grounding of ethics in attention needs to be said because it establishes *particularity* at the basis of ethics. Attention is an embodied action, which means it is irreducibly constrained and imperfect and incomplete. It inhabits a world of possibility and transformation that can be astonishing.' (147; emphasis in the original) The vision of attention as action is certainly to be taken into consideration as it is linked with that of perception, particularly so in as problematical a context as the one prevalent in *The Nice and the Good*. In fact, the various discursive devices that enable the use of internal focalisation, thereby placing the reader at the heart of the character's fumbling cogitations, raise the issue of perception as pre-determining attention, 'of *how* I attend to other people' (Sherman 6; emphasis added). The reader's necessary sharing in the character's errands and approximations suggests that 'perception doesn't *happen* to anyone. It is something people do.' (Sherman 6; emphasis in the original) This postulates not only the bodily dimension of attention, but also its voluntary nature, all the more conscious as it implies an action that is also an effort and a striving to be resumed time and other again in some of the characters and certainly in Ducane. Such a situation ushers in Aristotelian echoes, as Martha Nussbaum specifies: 'the good citizen is a good perceiver', she avers, in her/his capacity to 'attend to the heterogeneity of life' (Nussbaum 103). This also ties in with William James's definition of experience as that through which we pay attention (Citton 16): the density of experience that characterises *The Nice of the Good*, its insistence on imperfections, illusions and limitations, provides the perfect ground for ethical investigation and promotes attention as the locus of ethical striving.

It may have become clear at this point that the characters careering towards or at least attempting to have a glimpse of the good life are singled out by their openness, which underscores their relationality, hence their vulnerability to others. Along the same lines, I would argue that Murdoch adapts the form of the novel that is naturally suited to the evocation of interpersonal relationships to her own ethical purposes by staging individuals that are dominated that their openness to alterity. What I mean here is those who attend to the other's needs and singularities with as much selflessness as possible. One of the formal signs of this strenuous relationality lies in the fairly high proportion of dialogue in a novel that is otherwise characterised by its resort to description and deliberation. More precisely, I was struck by the number of chapters literally beginning in *medias res*, whose recurrence lends some automaticity to the device, so much so that the reader cannot but recognise it as such. The effect of such a modal choice is to literally foreground dialogism and relationality by making them appear foremost at the beginning of each chapter and by making the reader experience the urge to relate, the repetitive deprivation of a context, after a chapter break (and the long novel

comprises no less than forty of them) making the reader naturally reach out for information and putting her/him in a situation of linguistic vulnerability.

What I have in mind here is no vulnerability in the ontological meaning of the term, but more particularly one of the type analysed by Nussbaum in *The Fragility of Goodness* where she draws on classical sources to present a model of virtue based not on the image of the hunter (*mētis*) but on that of the plant (*aretē*), ‘a kind of human worth that is inseparable from vulnerability, an excellence that is in its nature other-related and social, a rationality whose nature is not to attempt to seize, hold, trap, and control, in whose values openness, receptivity and wonder play an important part’ (Nussbaum 2001, 20). Far away from isolated and sovereign individuals, Murdoch is intent on presenting characters who are ceaselessly and spontaneously fumbling towards the other in their search for the good life. This is given a concrete illustration in passages where male characters have to repress the need to touch other male characters. An obvious example is to be found in the opening scene, when Octavian Gray, discovering the suicide that triggers off the narrative, spontaneously strains towards what is presented as an image of human frailty: ‘Octavian noticed the neatness of the recently clipped grey hair upon the warm vulnerable neck. He had an impulse to touch it, to touch the material of Radeechy’s jacket, to pulp it timidly, curiously.’ (9) This vision of life that has absented itself from a fellow human being, and the paradoxical apprehension of death as evoked through the attributes of the living (the warm flesh, the recently cropped hair) insist on the character’s attentiveness to the other’s plight through singular details, and usher in the need for the *practice* of attention, hence of care.

The protagonist, Ducane, is also prone to such gestures towards the other, he who has to check his urge to touch other men, essentially his driver: ‘As the Bentley now turned into Whitehall Ducane [...] felt, not for the first time, a distinct impulse to lay his hand upon Fivey’s shoulder. He noticed that he had already stretched his arm along the seat behind the chauffeur’s back.’ (32) The fact that he makes himself *not* touch Fivey renders the impulse even more noticeable and thereby hints at the protagonist’s effort of attention, he who finds himself many times breaking out of his concentration on a matter at hand and discovering his own hands involved in actions relating to other characters. Towards the end of the novel, this is particularly the case with women’s dresses that he repeatedly finds himself fingering as he snaps out of his thoughts, as is the case in one of his central discussions with Mary where he recognises her ethical superiority at the close of chapter 31 (281). Similarly, and lingering on Ducane, it is telling that his body should be made to perform actions that signpost his vulnerability to the other’s situation. This is the case when, after resisting Judy’s advances as she was lying prone and naked on his bed, he spontaneously imitates her attitude after she has left the house: ‘Ducane went back into the bedroom and shut the door and locked it. He stood for a moment blankly. Then he lowered himself carefully on to the floor and lay there face downwards with his eyes closed.’ (262) In this passage, not only does he re-enact and incarnate the motions of the woman who is in love with him but he also finds himself in the position occupied by Pierce, the forlorn teenager pining for Barbara, his unrequited passion being intensified to the point of incandescence, as he is lying naked on the beach, in one of the early chapters (158–9), a figure of exposure and vulnerability.

Perhaps the character who most evinces her vulnerability to others is Mary, the picture of attention and care, as appears in the scene when she pays a visit to Willy and attends to him in a lengthy passage that seems to be worth quoting:

Then she started to caress his face with her finger tips, first lightly outlining his profile, his big faintly scored brow, his thin Jewish nose, the tender runnel over his lips, the roughened prickly chin, then moving her fingers to his eyes, which flickered shut and flickered open again, his cheeks, moulding the bones, and drawing her finger tips back

along the length of his mouth: the soft feeling of the human face above the bone, touching, vulnerable and mortal.’ (99)

It is not fortuitous that one of the novel’s three occurrences of the adjective ‘vulnerable’ should be found in this central passage, with its Levinasian echoes and a presentation of a non-violent face-to-face that cannot be separated from incarnation (through touch), thereby emphasising bodily, hence ontological vulnerability. By laying the stress on materiality and corporeality, such an insistence on tactility makes it clear that the ethics of devoted attention evoked in this passage are nothing less, once again, than a *practice*,¹ an action to be performed as the expression and translation of the individual’s responsibility, even while it evokes the character’s desire.

It is fitting that the radical vulnerability in the face of the other should be not only practiced but also pithily encapsulated in a passage devoted to one of Mary’s introspective moments couched in free direct discourse: ‘We think with our body, with its yearnings and its shrinkings and its ghostly walkings.’ (342) Such a vision is evocative of Nussbaum’s definition of human nature as vulnerable in so far as it is based on irrepressible attachments that guarantee relationality and are instrumental in the search for the good life. She describes the ethical capacity as reliant on and determined by human dependency on needs and appetites emblematised by human love: ‘It is a relationship that expresses, in the structure of its desires, a love for the world of change and motion, for orexis itself, and therefore for the needy and non-self-sufficient elements of our condition.’ (Nussbaum 2001, 357).² The most active ethical agents in *The Nice and the Good* obviously partake of such an orectic orientation and their attention to others is conditioned by a relational appetite grounded in corporeality, which makes the novel a romance as much as a detective novel, as will be developed later. This may be put in relation with Murdoch’s observations, in ‘The Sovereignty of Good’. For her, despite the fact that we are ‘blinded by self’ (Murdoch 1971), and precisely on account of our limitations, we are embarked on a course towards eudemonia, or the good life, that is warranted by the very inaccessibility of good: ‘Good is mysterious because of human frailty, because of the immense distance that is involved.’ (Murdoch 1971, 96) In other terms, vulnerability is the condition of ethical orientation and of attention to what is outside the subject and makes her/him dependent on others. Such a development ties in with the paradoxical idea of the instrumental or possibly indispensable function of selfishness in setting the subject on the course towards the other, thereby ushering in a measure of selflessness, a category central to Murdoch’s conception of ethics. Once again, such a vision is expressed in ‘The Sovereignty of Good’, as she deliberates on the complexity of the ethical: ‘we can combine the aspiration to complete goodness with a realistic sense of achievement within our limitations. For all our frailty the command ‘be perfect’ has sense for us. The concept Good resists collapse into the selfish empirical consciousness.’ (Murdoch 2001, 90)

The main avenue towards eudemonia would then seem to reside away from the veil of the self which, according to John Kekes in an article devoted to ‘The Sovereignty of Good’ and mentioning the specific relevance of *The Nice and the Good*, where he insists that ‘[i]f unselfing means the process of getting the habit of not allowing selfishness to distort what we see, then it enters at the second stage of our progress towards objectivity, and we can agree with Irish Murdoch that it is morally necessary.’ (Kekes 460) This throws centre stage the notion of unselfing—or at least provisional, partial unselfing—as one of the cornerstones of Murdoch’s ethics expounded in her philosophical texts and fleshed out in *The Nice and the Good*. Such a tentative process ‘is to be achieved through the experience of beauty, nature, love, or of the

¹ On the four phases of care as a practice dependent on attention, see TRONTO (127).

² I use the term ‘orexis’ and its derivative ‘orectic’ in NUSSBAUM’S acceptance, as she refers to human nature as basically vulnerable, being predicated on dependence on the environment and on the other. The Greek word *orexis* refers to the individual but also the species’ appetite for/need of the other and the outside world.

mysterious Platonic notion of the Good' (Kekes 459). In Murdoch's terms, unselfing is predicated on striving to strain one's eyes on alterity, which is tantamount to paying attention to the other, thereby extricating oneself from the morass of the self. This is the gist of Theo's negative epiphany, in the last pages of the novel, when he realises that he is still miles away from the teachings of his Buddhist master and his practice of selflessness:

Theo had begun to glimpse the distance which separates the nice from the good, and the vision of this gap had terrified his soul. He had seen, far off, what is perhaps the most dreadful thing in the world, the other face of love, its blank face. Everything that he as, even the best that he was, was connected with possessive self-filling human love. That blank demand implied the death of his own being. (359–60).

Nowhere is this perhaps more explicitly penned than in the following lines from 'The Sovereignty of Good': '[T]here is a place both inside and outside religion for a sort of contemplation of the Good, not just by dedicated experts but by ordinary people: an attention which is not just the planning of particular good actions but an attempt to look right away from self towards a distant transcendent perfection, a source of uncontaminated energy, a source of *new* and quite undreamt-of virtue.' (Murdoch 1971, 99; emphasis in the original) I would argue that this painstaking, tentative process of unselfing is what is attempted and at times performed by both the protagonist and, more efficiently, by secondary characters like Mary, through her spontaneously attending to the other in a concrete, ordinary way.

In one of the novel's most straightforward didactic passages, Willy waxes aphoristic and delivers his opinion as to the nature of happiness in relation to selflessness: 'Happiness [...] is a matter of one's most ordinary everyday mode of consciousness being busy and lively and unconcerned with self. To be damned is for one's ordinary everyday mode of consciousness to be unremitting agonizing preoccupation with self.' (187) Common to both sentences is the notion or ordinariness that, applied to the search of happiness and good, implies an everyday attention to concerns external to the self. Ordinary attention to the other is singled out as one of the conditions of the good life, which brings in the idea of humility. Accepting one's vulnerability and limitations, renouncing a god-like posture and the trappings of sovereignty are necessary ingredients in the search for the good life, and the experience of humility is an indispensable stage. Mary, who naturally and selflessly attends to other characters and benevolently metes out her attention, provides a natural picture of humility throughout the novel. As seen above, this cannot be said to be the case with Ducane, the protagonist, whose tendency to patronise other people places him above the other members of the cast, despite his permanent impulse to relate positively to others and despite his own scruples and consciousness of his own limitations. Only after the cave experience are things allowed to take a different turn.

Chapter 35 is certainly the most dramatic one. Having been spurned by Barbara Gray, young Pierce, Mary's son, in a desperate attempt to wear his unrequited passion upon his sleeve and most probably to provoke Barbara's regrets, swims into a cave that nobody has ever explored thoroughly as it is submerged at high tide. Ducane, heeding his natural impulse to help others, swims into the cave in his turn. Soon, the two men are steeped in darkness as the mouth of the cave closes in on them, and they become lost in a labyrinth of corridors and rooms each filling with rushing water. Pierce, who is isolated at the beginning and goes through a painful night of the soul, is soon joined by Mingo, the family dog that swam in his wake, and later on by Ducane. The three of them go through extremities of discomfort and pain and even forsake any hope of surviving. As focalisation is delegated to each of the men in turn, the reader shares their turmoil of sensations and emotions and is allowed to follow each stage of the protagonist's progress, as he goes through this archetypal ordeal. At one point, he seems to surrender to his fate, to forsake any attempt at helping the other, and to renounce his superiority: 'Ducane gripped himself, almost physically, as one might grip and shake an *alter ego*, and then realized

that he had hold of Pierce who had blundered up against him.’ (308; emphasis in the original) The experience of extreme vulnerability, making him cling to someone else—hence surrender his sense of autonomy so as to accept the concrete, incarnated proof of his dependence—makes him accept to take part in the loop and chain of interdependence that illustrate the relationships between most of the characters. In doing this, he is led to embrace humility and choose the path of unselfing. Typically, the emergence from the cave will be described in terms of rebirth as Ducane will be hoisted, naked as on the day in which he came into the world, onto a safety boat before being taken home (319).

As expected, the rebirth makes Ducane a new man or, at least, strengthens his ethical dispositions so much so that the last chapters of the novel teem with references to forgiving: he absolves McGrath who had attempted to blackmail him and hires him as his new chauffeur, and he makes his peace with his former rival, Biranne. Humility and the refusal to keep positioning oneself over the others hovers over a closure that tends towards the emphatically euphoric compared to what happens in the earlier chapters, making the narrative edge in the direction of the *commedia*. Renouncing superiority and putting oneself on the same level as the others clearly indicates a humble position that is part and parcel of what Corine Pelluchon defines as consideration. For her, humility refers to the experience we have of ourselves as incarnated beings (Pelluchon 32) and it is predicated on a form of attention to the other that considers her/him as an equal, sharing the same condition of embodied subjects: ‘The subject of consideration’s attentive and benevolent gaze on the world and the beings inhabiting it is alien to any view from above.’ (Pelluchon 32; translation mine) The humility of attention is a matter of angle of vision and it affects, consequently, the object of attention as, in Ducane’s reformed perspective, it applies to all characters in *The Nice and the Good*, including those who were originally cast out of the good life. This is what the protagonist forcibly informs Biranne about, whom he used to suspect had camouflaged a murder into a suicide, and whom he ultimately comes to forgive: ‘Radeechy matters,’ said Ducane. ‘Claudia matters. Aren’t you interested?’ (321) In the concluding chapters in general and in the exchange between Ducane and Biranne in particular, what obtains is an ‘ethics of perception based on an effort to notice what is so ordinary that it is no longer visible’ (Laugier 2014; translation mine). Striving to redefine the norms or at least conditions of perception, and thereby making perception a social activity (Le Blanc 13) orients the ethical search as recommended by reformed Ducane towards what Cora Diamond has called the ‘realistic spirit,’ which Sandra Laugier interprets in the following terms: ‘The veritable realism [...] is the return to the attention (*care*) paid to ordinary human life, to what matters to us. And the best access to it (its most relevant descriptions and experiences) that we have to this life well and truly relies in literature and film.’ (Laugier 2006, 10; emphasis in the original, translation mine) This may be considered in relation to one of Murdoch’s own pronouncements, when, in ‘The Sovereignty of Good,’ she indicates that ‘The humble man, because he sees himself as nothing, can see other things as they are.’ (Murdoch 1971, 101) In other terms, humility allows for the setting up of specific conditions of perception that lead in turn to an enlarged practice of attention as all objects become equally worthy of interest. Humility, in turn, is the mainspring of consideration in that it takes into account the singularity of the observed object in its singularity, miles away from abstract contemplation. Such a situation implies that the subject of attention puts her-/himself on the same level as the others, as both are characterised by a common, universal vulnerability (Pelluchon 32). From this point of view, *The Nice and the Good* gives a literary presentation of the necessity to pay humble, egalitarian attention to the other, so much so that, in Murdoch’s terms, ‘attention is our daily bread’ (Murdoch 1971, 42).³

³ Needless to say, the egalitarian, democratic aspect of attention is a moot point, as underlined as scholars working in the field of the economy of attention (from this point of view, the volume edited by Yves CITTON as a whole would refute this hypothesis) and by Jon Foley Sherman (SHERMAN 145–147).

The collaboration of perception, humility and consideration allows for a vision of the good life that *The Nice and the Good* offers a practice and an experience of. Miles away from the sirens of selfishness, it favours a ceaseless, tentative move towards alterity that goes along with a progressive unselfing. Such a dispossession of the self—in Athanasiou and Butler's first acceptance of the term (Butler and Athanasiou 2)—implies a widening of the ethical subject's perception, as indicated by Laugier who speaks of ethical action as 'a work of the imagination (our capacity to put ourselves in the other's place) and a widening of perception [...] that we are invited to perform by reading novels and watching films' (Laugier 2006, 11; translation mine). Such an experience of widening or opening out is also envisaged by scholars working on the category of consideration. This is the case with Marielle Macé, for whom considering the others in their singularities is tantamount to opening out or 'unclosing' (*déclure*): 'To consider would mean [...] going and having a look, take the living and their effective lives into account [...], taking their practices and their days into account, and thereby un-closing what sideration closes in' (Macé 24; translation mine). Admittedly, the enlarging vision of an ethics of consideration based on humble, vulnerable perception and attention is at the heart of Pelluchon's work as the ethical capacity that makes the subject feel and realise her/his belonging to a common world or, better said, a world that she/he has in common with the others (Pelluchon 254). Beyond and despite the complexity of life and its illusory dimension, thanks to the persistent attention paid to ordinary situations and subjects and along with the vulnerability inherent in the ethical subject's vulnerability, *The Nice and the Good* presents the reader with a progress from opacity to partial vision of the good life and partly lifts the veil on the possibility of ethical engagement.

By way of conclusion, I would like to refer back to my initial remarks on *The Nice and the Good*'s complex generic status. More precisely, I would like suggest that besides its borrowing from such genres as the detective novel and the novel of ideas, and on top of soliciting the tonal and narrative resources of melodrama compounded with realism, perhaps its main debt is to the mode of romance. To substantiate this point, suffice it to consider the emphatically euphoric closure of the novel, with its stress on reconciliation and forgiveness, as noted above. I have already used the term 'commedia' to refer to this type of conclusion, insisting on the religious acceptance of the term. Still, I feel that 'romance' would be more relevant, as *The Nice and the Good* essentially deals with the workings of human love and the complications that such a theme brings in. As indicated above, the novel ends on a series of reconciliations and unions, as Pierce and Barbara agree that they are in love, Richard Biranne and Paula, after being estranged, decide to have a go at the joys of the marriage state again, while Mary, the widow, and Ducane, the bachelor and protagonist, finally become a happy couple. As in a Shakespearean play, even the members of the natural, animal world seem to take part in the human concord as Mingo, the dog, and Monrose, the cat, are united, sharing a common basket while the household tabby had spent most of the narrative eyeing the spaniel 'with slit-eyed malevolence' (286). Fittingly, love is one of the main means through which (a vision of) the good life may be grasped, as indicated above and as forcibly expressed in 'The Sovereignty of Good': 'Good is the magnetic centre towards which love naturally moves. [...] Love is the tension between the imperfect soul and the magnetic perfection which is conceived of as lying beyond it.' (Murdoch 1971, 100) As might be expected, such a vision finds a clear echo in *The Nice and the Good* where Ducane, in one of his final introspective passages, reformulates one of Murdoch's aphorisms: 'But it is in the nature of love to discern good, and the best love is in some part of at any rate a love of what is good.' (344) This in turn may evoke one of the central tenets of one of the most influential of contemporary ethicists, i.e. Nussbaum, who defines human worth through vulnerability as incarnated dependence on the beloved other: '[Love] is a relation that expresses, in the structure of its desires, a love for the world of change

and motion, for *orexis* itself, and therefore for the needy and non-self-sufficient elements of our condition.’ (Nussbaum 2001, 387; emphasis in the original) Love qualifies as the hyperbolic presentation of dependence on the other. In this respect, it paroxystically translates human dependence and vulnerability, those primal ingredients of romance that, ultimately, Murdoch chooses to use as the most appropriate literary medium in her search for and recommendation of the good life. By soliciting the powers of romance, *The Nice and the Good* harnesses attention to human dependence and vulnerability as the privileged way to achieve, tentatively, provisionally, but resolutely, eudemonia.

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