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Ethics as Perceptive Attention in Iris Murdoch's *The Nice and the Good*

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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, the reader may have difficulties in sorting out who is who, until the last stages in the novel. Similarly, the novel that does not shy from coincidences and other possibly melodramatic devices. These grant the it a generic and modal complexity straining its realistic ambitions or, rather, enriching them. Such complexity applies to the moral import of the novel and 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. The latter invites to take part in an effort at classifying or, at least, sorting out. 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. And it is true that the novel 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, 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 selflessness before finally addressing the categories of humility and consideration.

In his article "The Metaphysical Hostess", Peter Conradi singles out this 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 characters' 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.

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: “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 “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 stand for the impossibility to achieve an ethical vision

Some secondary characters, Theo (Kate’s brother in law) and Willy Kost, are situated toward the other end of the spectrum ethical spectrum. 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.” (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. 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: “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.” (260-61)

Illusion and personal limitations, among which the failure to project oneself imaginatively into the other’s situation 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).

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. This is what Jon Foley Sherman reminds us of 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 a problematical context as the one prevalent in *The Nice and the Good*. 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. The density of experience that characterises *The Nice of the Good*, its insistence on imperfections, illusions

and limitations, provide the perfect ground for ethical investigation and promote 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 relationality, hence their vulnerability to others. 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.

The protagonist, Ducane, is 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 that 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 cave in one of his central discussions with Mary where he recognises her ethical superiority at the close of chapter 31 (281).

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*, 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: “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). 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 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.

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 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. [...] Everything that he was, even the best that he was, was connected with possessive self-filling human love.” 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 of 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 metes out her attention selflessly and benevolently, provides a natural picture of humility throughout the novel. As seen above, this cannot be said to be always the case with Ducane, the protagonist. 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 young Barbara Gray, young Pierce, Mary's son, in a desperate attempt to wear his unrequited passion on 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 one 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—gets him to 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 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 reigns supreme in a closure that tends towards the emphatically euphoric compared to what happens in the earlier chapters. 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 our ourselves as incarnated beings (Pelluchon 32) and it is predicated 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. In the concluding chapters, 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. 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).

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).

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 feel that 'romance' would be a relevant prism through which to envisage *The Nice and the Good* as it 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 Montrose, 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". 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.