



A Mystical Philosophy

Transcendence
and Immanence
in the Works of
Virginia Woolf and
Iris Murdoch

Donna J. Lazenby

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A MYSTICAL PHILOSOPHY

A Mystical Philosophy contributes to the contemporary resurgence of interest in Spirituality, but from a new direction. Revealing, in an original and provocative study, the mystical contents of the works of the famous atheists Virginia Woolf and Iris Murdoch, the author shows how these women thinkers' refusal to construe worldviews on available reductive models brought them to offer radically alternative pictures of life which maintain its mysteriousness, and promote a mystical way of knowing. This study makes a daring claim: that a return to 'pure' experience is sufficient to demonstrate, for the contemporary imagination, the irreducibly mystical contents of everyday life, and, therefore, the enduring appropriateness of theological conversations. The author reveals how these atheist thinkers offer crucial spiritual-intellectual advice for our times: a warning against reductive scientific and philosophical models that impoverish our understanding of our selves and the world, and a powerful endorsement of ways of knowing that give art, and a restored concept of contemplation, their consummative place.

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Virginia Woolf and Iris Murdoch

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B L O O M S B U R Y
LONDON • NEW DELHI • NEW YORK • SYDNEY

Bloomsbury Academic

An imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

50 Bedford Square	1385 Broadway
London	New York
WC1B 3DP	NY 10018
UK	USA

www.bloomsbury.com

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First published 2014

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

eISBN: 978-1-4725-2310-5

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Lazenby, Donna J.

A Mystical Philosophy : Transcendence and Immanence in the Works of Virginia Woolf and Iris Murdoch / Donna J. Lazenby.

pages cm

Summary: "A provocative re-reading of famous atheists Iris Murdoch and Virginia Woolf as profoundly mystical thinkers" – Provided by publisher.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-4725-2280-1 (hardback) – ISBN 978-1-4725-2554-3 (epub) – ISBN 978-1-4725-2310-5 (epdf) 1. Woolf, Virginia, 1882–1941–Criticism and interpretation. 2. Murdoch, Iris–Criticism and interpretation. 3. Spirituality in literature. I. Title.

PR6045.O72Z77286 2014

823'.912–dc23

2013039116

Typeset by Newgen Knowledge Works (P) Ltd., Chennai, India

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After the Good all things yearn:
those that have mind and reason seeking it by knowledge,
those that have perception seeking it by perception,
those that have no perception seeking it
by the natural movement of their vital instinct,
and those that are without life and have but basic existence
seeking it by their aptitude for that bare participation
through which this basic existence is theirs.

Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite

On the Divine Names, iv

Now you are wondering and, wondering, say nothing;
but I will loosen for you the hard bonds
in which your subtle thoughts are tying you up.

Dante

Paradiso Canto XXXII, Stanza 49

Abbreviations

Where a text is frequently cited in this study, an abbreviated form of its title appears in the notes. For full reference details, please consult the Bibliography.

AROO	Virginia Woolf, <i>A Room of One's Own</i>
BTA	Virginia Woolf, <i>Between the Acts</i>
Diary I-V	Virginia Woolf, <i>Diary I-V</i>
EM	Iris Murdoch, <i>Existentialists and Mystics</i>
FAVW	Jane Goldman, <i>The Feminist Aesthetics of Virginia Woolf</i>
FFSR	Ricoeur, 'The Function of Fiction in Shaping Reality'
GandG	Iris Murdoch, 'On 'God' and 'Good''*
IP	Iris Murdoch, 'The Idea of Perfection'*
LettersVW	Virginia Woolf, <i>The Letters of Virginia Woolf</i>
LLG	Virginia Woolf, 'The Lady in the Looking Glass'
MB	Virginia Woolf, <i>Moments of Being</i>
MD	Virginia Woolf, <i>Mrs Dalloway</i>
ME	Grace Jantzen, 'Mysticism and Experience'
MGM	Iris Murdoch, <i>Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals</i>
ML	Bertrand Russell, <i>Mysticism and Logic</i>
MT	Pseudo-Dionysius, <i>Mystical Theology</i>
NN	Jane Marcus, 'The Niece of a Nun'
OP	Bertrand Russell, <i>An Outline of Philosophy</i>
SoGOOC	Iris Murdoch, 'The Sovereignty of Good Over Other Concepts'*
SRR	Iris Murdoch, <i>Sartre: Romantic Rationalist</i>
TPT	Ann Banfield, <i>The Phantom Table</i>

<i>T&N Vols I-III</i>	Paul Ricoeur, <i>Time and Narrative, Vols. I-III</i>
<i>TTL</i>	Virginia Woolf, <i>To The Lighthouse</i>
<i>TW</i>	Virginia Woolf, <i>The Waves</i>

*These three essays by Iris Murdoch appear together in Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (London and New York: Routledge Classics, 2001 [1970]). Reference numbers throughout this study refer to this collective edition of the essays.

Acknowledgements

I wish first, and most sincerely, to thank the Arts and Humanities Research Council for their funding of my MPhil and PhD research, conducted within the Divinity Faculty at the University of Cambridge, which has provided the foundation work for this book.

I must also thank those who supervised my doctoral research and writing: Professor Ben Quash of King's College, London; Dr Catherine Pickstock of Emmanuel College, Cambridge; Dr Pamela Sue Anderson of Regent's Park College, Oxford; and my examiners Professor Janet Martin Soskice, of Jesus College, Cambridge; and Professor John Milbank of Nottingham University.

I wish also to thank The John Templeton Foundation for their selection of my PhD thesis as one of the winners of *The John Templeton Award for Theological Promise 2011*.

Particular thanks to my editor, Liza Thompson, whose most recent support and encouragement for this work has been deeply appreciated, and whose guidance to an author when publishing her first book has been invaluable.

Copyright Acknowledgements

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1

Introduction

The text does not contain the truth of our experience; it heightens and illuminates it. It is in living that we encounter the terror and tenderness of God. Scripture and theology come later and are secondary. Literature, in its scrupulous attention to experience, may sometimes draw closer to sacred truth.

Heather Walton, *Imagining Theology*¹

According to Iris Murdoch, we are ‘living in the time of the angels’.² Western culture is allegedly undergoing a gradual demythologisation of traditional religious belief – our Judaeo-Christian imagery is ‘disappearing’ – and yet the cultural Imagination remains deeply engaged with distinctly ‘spiritual’ concerns. There remains a striving to locate the indispensable unconditioned ground of value: what Murdoch identifies as a due object of reverence, ‘the holy’.

This study considers how two women thinkers – Virginia Woolf and Iris Murdoch – women ‘of their time’ in distancing themselves from so-called ‘traditional’ models of religious belief – nevertheless produce distinctly mystical works in ways that indicate the perseverance of irreducibly mystical categories within human consciousness. Moreover, the refusal of these sophisticated atheists to accept the reductive quasi-scientific models of consciousness and reality offered by their analytical and continental contemporaries, reveals the unacceptable impoverishment that is a consequence of too hastily accepting forms of reductive naturalism, thereby constituting a poignant corrective to the intellectual reductionisms inherited by, and manifested within, today’s ‘secular’ western consciousness.

Metaphysicians in their own right: Virginia Woolf and Iris Murdoch

She did not wish to waste a keen mind in making rational statements that any educated fool could make.

Carl Woodring, 'Virginia Woolf'³

Sixty years after the publication of *A Room of One's Own* it is still necessary to tell the story of women and knowledge.

Marije Altorf, *Iris Murdoch and the Art of Imagining*⁴

Virginia Woolf and Iris Murdoch share certain things in common. They are both geniuses who have, in different ways, been 'shut out' from mainstream academic circles.⁵ Woolf famously wrote in *A Room of One's Own* of a woman's being denied access to an Oxbridge library on account of being a woman: an episode many believe to be autobiographical. Murdoch's unfashionable desire and willingness to fuse Platonic, continental and religious philosophy has secured her exclusion from British analytic thought, and from the official canon of great twentieth-century British philosophers to which she should belong. Instead, Woolf and Murdoch belong to 'a history of outsiders, who were also insiders,'⁶ being part of 'a tradition of women who wrote literature, but were still outside the academic discourse of philosophy, outside the library.'⁷

This study reveals, and esteems, Woolf and Murdoch as metaphysicians in their own right. The metaphysical dimension of their thought is of primary interest: consequently, Woolf's novels and diaries are engaged in order to locate her philosophical-aesthetic insights, as are Murdoch's undervalued philosophical works. I do not consult Murdoch's literature as such: academic treatments of her fiction abound, whereas her oft-neglected philosophy deserves contemporary attention. If it initially strikes the reader as an aesthetic imbalance to consider the novels of only one author, when both are famous contributors to this genre, I must emphasise the *philosophical* concern of this work: the single way of locating the philosophical dimensions of Woolf's work is through focused engagement with her literature and diaries. Murdoch, on the contrary, gives us the gift of specific philosophical texts.

Woolf and Murdoch share much as twentieth-century British atheist women metaphysicians excluded from the academic philosophical mainstream. However, they present markedly different pictures of the

self, and her world: the clearest difference in thinking might be captured in the image of a distinction between horizontality and verticality in the direction of vision. Woolf offers to theology a latitudinal appreciation of life in its brokenness, of life lived in 'landscape-view', as often appearing out of juncture with the possibility of resolution and unity offered by a transcendent point (or arc) of reference. Murdoch's distinctly Platonic moral philosophy, by contrast, fixes the Good, the Sun, as transcendent zenith, and life is conceived as a moral and spiritual pilgrimage on a model of 'ascent' towards this transcending reality. These variant ways of conceiving life – as landscape or ladder – capture, with timely urgency, the shape of a 'choice' confronting the contemporary individual.

The structure of this work

PART ONE: The Point of Departure

Chapters Two and Three explore the nature and shape, in turn, of Woolf's and Murdoch's departures from their surrounding philosophical and aesthetic milieu. In Woolf's case this includes a re-appraisal of critical treatments of the 'mystical' content of her work. The same is not required for Murdoch, since the 'mystical' and religious concerns of her work are accepted elements of her metaphysical aesthetic. Woolf's critics, however, have often been hostile to 'mystical' interpretations of her work: this requires an initial response.

Virginia Woolf

My discussion of Woolf indicates the need to rectify prevalent misapprehensions of mysticism especially as these are responsible for disguising two things: the contribution of a 'non-theological' writer such as Woolf to a mystical conversation where the latter is recognised for its theological significance; and the relevance of mystical literature for informing theological interpretations of certain dimensions of human experience which are currently under view.

I expose the inadequacy of certain recent critical studies of mysticism in Woolf's literature, illustrating how the definition of mysticism operating here is substantially the inheritance of a broadly empiricist epistemology, one which is both blind, and antipathetic, to the real mystical encounter properly understood. I extend this critique by exploring the various understandings of 'mysticism' which were current in Woolf's

contemporary philosophical and aesthetic environment, but argue that her departure from these influences highlights a quality of perspective which, in fact, brings her closer to traditional notions of the mystical, which these popular designations have eclipsed.

Iris Murdoch

Murdoch, who once described herself as a Christian atheist, admired Christian mysticism, and negative theology in particular. Drawn also to the iconoclasm of eastern mysticism, her interest in the 'negative' strand of western mysticism lies partly in its resonance with eastern concepts of self-annihilation, the dissolution of thought and language in proximity to reality, and the juxtaposition of the notion of enlightenment with images of darkness, plunging, and an imaginative 'abyss'. I restrict this study to an exploration of Murdoch's (much less considered) appraisal of western mysticism, firmly rooted as it is in her Platonic metaphysics, in order to locate points of contact with Woolf's philosophical-aesthetic insights, and to assist the development of a distinctly Christian theological imaginary.⁸

Murdoch's philosophical career performs a spiritual journey. The mystical metaphysics which will climax with a 'void' originates in an intellectual departure from post-war British and continental philosophy. I discuss the shape of this departure as it is detectable in Murdoch's first philosophical work *Sartre: Romantic Rationalist*, before bringing Murdoch's philosophy, in particular her three Platonic essays 'The Idea of Perfection', 'On "God" and "Good"' and 'The Sovereignty of Good Over Other Concepts', and her monumental treatise *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, to demonstrate the mystical shape of her philosophy. As for Woolf, the shape of her departure from her contemporary intellectual company is the beginning of the delineation of a philosophical perspective that engages a distinctly mystical viewpoint.

PART TWO: A Mystical Philosophy

The second part of this study embraces the invitation with which the first concludes, by identifying the distinctly mystical contents of Woolf's and Murdoch's thought. This is achieved in consultation with certain key sources of the Christian mystical tradition, and particularly in the identification and delineation of 'cataphatic' and 'apophatic' dimensions of their thought.

Virginia Woolf

Chapters Four and Six illustrate how engaging Woolf's literature with more traditional mystical perspectives, particularly those expounded by Plotinus and Pseudo-Dionysius, reveals the operation of a thoroughly mystical cataphatic-apophatic dialectic at the heart of her aesthetic. I bring the qualities in virtue of which Woolf's aesthetic perspective departs from those of her contemporaries to gesture her literary contribution to a redeemed understanding of the mystical. Her maintenance of certain non-reconciling tensions within experience, and as governing the aesthetic enterprise, is recognised, contra previous critical study, as gesturing a *positive* interpretation of formlessness and creative limitation as generative of artistic vision in response to a ceaselessly arriving reality. An aesthetic of openness to the excess imbuing daily experience locates, within Woolf, a thoroughly mystical temper.

Iris Murdoch

Chapters Five and Seven recognise how Murdoch's Platonic perspective and, in particular, her deliberate engagement with the negative theology of Christian mysticism, reveals the operation of a cataphatic-apophatic dialectic at the heart of her philosophical imaginary. I argue that her text *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, which, in virtue of its form and content, has left philosophers uncertain of its purpose and value, endeavours to take the reader on an 'iconoclastic pilgrimage' which reveals the mystical structure of the imagination, and declares, as consummative for human knowledge at transcendental boundaries, an encounter with an 'abyss' which is both destructive of preceding images and 'fertile of new images'.⁹ Murdoch's philosophy manifests a mystical methodology, and offers to theology and philosophy a picture of the mystical nature of human thought, as it juxtaposes endless image-making activity alongside the awareness that all imagery ultimately dissolves at the threshold of the most real.

PART THREE: *Contributions to a Contemporary Theological Aesthetic*

Virginia Woolf and Iris Murdoch

The final part of this study, contained in Chapter Eight, examines how the cataphatic-apophatic dialectic recognised as operating within the work of both writers can contribute to a Christian theological aesthetic,

to the theological imaginary in particular: highlighting the value of mystical aesthetic insights for contemporary attention to the theological interpretation of everyday experience. In *Imagining Theology: Women, Writing and God* (2007), Heather Walton explores the interdisciplinary relationship between theology and literature, arguing that the distinctly literary properties of theology are able to equip this discipline to respond to a cultural 'loss of innocence': a 'loss of innocence' appropriate to Woolf's and Murdoch's post-war viewpoints. Writing that 'Theology needs to embrace literature, and to be both an end and a beginning,' Walton cites David Jasper's exposition of the challenge: 'But that means bearing to think the unthinkable, embodying in textuality the unbearable so that embodiment and incarnation endures and embraces its own fragmentariness and dismemberment.'¹⁰ Here are tensions that Woolf and Murdoch elucidate for theology in their foregrounding of the landscapes of consciousness in *both* their unified and fractured aspects: hereby contributing to the contemporary theological imaginary.

A Common Ground

The contributions that Woolf and Murdoch offer to contemporary theology, philosophical theology, and mysticism, are in some senses individual and distinctive: consequently, for the purpose of this study, it will serve clarity to consider these writers individually.

However, it is worth identifying here, in a preliminary sense, some converging interests that will emerge. Both Woolf and Murdoch highlight the extraordinariness – for Murdoch, the 'sacredness' – of the everyday, and both women identify everyday life as the location of revelation. As artists, both women identify the preliminary nature of the image as iconographic of a self-transcending dimension which has, as Murdoch writes, 'metaphysical position but no metaphysical form.'¹¹ Their metaphysical perspectives are alive with the interpenetrative dialectics of immanence and transcendence. Both insist that false 'unities' (bad mysticism), falsely comforting views of reality must be avoided. For both thinkers, reductive accounts of self and reality are unacceptable because they are not accurate descriptions of reality as we experience it. For both, aesthetics, the work of the artist, how we *see* the world, is crucial: the work of the imagination, the production of the artwork and the artist's creative predicament, are not extraneous, epiphenomenal, inessential and decorative accretions or activities, supplementary to a purer, more accurate, 'scientific' way of knowing reality: what the imagination, what the artist reveals to us, is knowledge.

The implausibility of modern and postmodern ways of knowing which place the subject in isolated, abstract relation to concrete objects is cautioned against by both: we are, rather, porous subjects embedded within a reality that comes to us, as a pre-modern epistemology testifies. This truth – that we live in participative relationship with a ‘saturated’ reality – is evidenced in the preliminary nature of our philosophical and artistic images: life ceaselessly arrives to contest the settled frame. We are all artists. Here is offered a timely restoration of a mystical epistemology.

Cataphaticism and Apophaticism in Western Christian Mysticism

It is necessary to introduce the categories of Christian mysticism central to the structure of this work. One source of this branch of mysticism is recognised in Plato’s ‘Allegory of the Cave’. In *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* Iris Murdoch gives a description of Plato’s myth or allegory, which is worth quoting at length. I utilise Murdoch’s (accurate) portrayal, since this simultaneously elucidates the value of this myth for her moral philosophy:

Plato uses myths to explain his conception of human life. His most famous picture is that of the Cave (*Republic* 514) wherein people facing the wall at the back see first as shadows, then, turning round, the objects, themselves imitations of real things, which, in the light of a fire, have first cast the shadows. They (we) may perhaps go no further, taking the fire to be the only source of light. Some of us may venture on, glimpsing another light beyond, and emerge into the sunlight, where we are dazzled and can only look down at shadows and reflections, then, raising our heads, see the real things themselves and then (if finally enlightened) the sun. This parable portrays a spiritual pilgrimage from appearance to reality. We turn around, we climb up, we raise our heads. At each stage we see at first the *shadows* of what is more real and true. Plato’s ‘Theory of Forms’ deals with logical and moral questions. The (mythical, postulated) Forms (or Ideas) are models, archetypes: universals, general concepts as distinct from particular entities, and, in their ethical role, moral ideals active in our lives, radiant icons, images of virtue. The moral Forms are interrelated. (Justice relates to Truth.) The supreme power, which unifies the Forms, is the Form of the Good, pictured in the Cave myth as the sun. Other Platonic imagery (for instance concerning the soul) should also be understood (as Plato reminds us from time to time) as hermeneutic ‘as if’. These are instructive *pictures*.¹²

In *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism*,¹³ Denys Turner describes how a source for the use of images of light and darkness, ascent and descent, within Western Christian thought may be located in the convergence of Greek and Hebraic influences upon that thought. Indeed, the essential 'linguistic building blocks' of the Western Christian tradition may be derived from this 'convergence'. Furthermore, 'you could extract those building blocks from two stories, each foundational in the intellectual and religious cultures of its respective tradition: the 'Allegory of the Cave' in Book 7 of Plato's *Republic*, and the story in Exodus of Moses' encounter with Yahweh on Mount Sinai.'¹⁴ You could, Turner claims, 'derive much of the distinctiveness of the language of the Western Christian mystical tradition' from these texts. Turner recognises Greek theologian 'Denys the Areopagite' (referred to, in this study, by another of his well-established names, Pseudo-Dionysius), whose work embodies this convergence, as being 'pivotal from the point of view of the Western mystical tradition,'¹⁵ although 'the influence of Denys was principally felt within western Christianity in the four hundred years from the twelfth century to the sixteenth, and then chiefly within the formation of its systematic and mystical theologies.'¹⁶ It is, Turner claims, 'scarcely an exaggeration to say that Denys invented the genre' of 'mystical theology' 'for the Latin Church; and for sure, he forged the language . . . and he made a theology out of those central metaphors without which there could not have been the mystical tradition that there has been: 'light' and 'darkness', 'ascent' and 'descent', the love of God as *eros*.' 'This,' Turner significantly concludes, 'is the vocabulary of our mysticism: historically we owe it to Denys; and he owed it, as he saw, it, to Plato and Moses.'¹⁷

What Plato, in his image of the cave, intends 'as an allegory of the philosopher's ascent to knowledge,' Christians read 'as an allegory of the ascent to God.'¹⁸ Turner identifies a 'dialectical' narrative structure in both the Allegory and Exodus: 'there is an ascent toward the brilliant light, a light so excessive as to cause pain, distress and darkness: a darkness of knowledge deeper than any which is the darkness of ignorance. The price of the pure contemplation of the light is therefore darkness, even, as in Exodus, death, but not the darkness of the absence of light, rather of its excess – therefore a "luminous darkness": 'Light is darkness, knowing is unknowing, a cloud, and the pain of contemplating it, is the pain of contemplating more reality than can be borne: "man may not see me and live".'¹⁹

Now, Turner seeks to clarify the meaning of two terms, the senses they 'acquire within the Latin traditions of Neoplatonic mysticism': "Apophaticism" is the name of that theology which is done against the

background of human ignorance of the nature of God. It is the doing of theology in the light of the statement of Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century, that 'we do not know what kind of being God is'. It is the conception of theology not as a naive *pre-critical* ignorance of God, but as a kind of acquired ignorance, a *docta ignorantia* as Nicholas of Cues called it in the fifteenth century. It is the conception of theology as a strategy and practice of unknowing, as the fourteenth-century English mystic called it, who, we might say, invented the transitive verb-form 'to unknow' in order to describe theological knowledge, in this its deconstructive mode. Finally, 'apophaticism' is the same as what the Latin tradition of Christianity called the *via negativa*, 'the negative way'.²⁰

The 'cataphatic' is, 'we might say, the verbose element in theology, it is the Christian mind deploying all the resources of language in the effort to express something about God, and in that straining to speak, theology uses as many voices as it can. It is the cataphatic in theology which causes its metaphor-ridden character . . . It is its cataphatic tendencies which account for the sheer *heaviness* of theological language, its character of being linguistically *overburdened*; it is the cataphatic which accounts for that fine *nimietas* of image which we may observe in the best theologies, for example in Julian of Norwich or Bernard of Clairvaux.' In its cataphatic mode, theology is 'a kind of verbal riot, an anarchy of discourse,' and this is 'to say nothing about the extensive non-verbal vocabulary of theology, its liturgical and sacramental action, its music, its architecture, its dance and gesture, all of which are intrinsic to its character as an expressive discourse, a discourse of theological articulation.'²¹ We can add that the cataphatic mode of discourse includes a characteristic *confidence* originating in the participative relationship of language to that reality which transcends. Non-literal language – images, metaphors, allegories – is meaningful in relation to that transcending reality which its forms are most suited to express.

Pseudo-Dionysius begins his *Mystical Theology* with a prayer to the Trinity:

Trinity!! Higher than any being
 any divinity, any goodness! . . .
 Lead us up beyond unknowing and light,
 up to the farthest, highest peak
 of mystic scripture,
 where the mysteries of God's Word
 lie simple, absolute and unchangeable

in the brilliant darkness of a hidden silence.
 Amid the deepest shadow
 they pour overwhelming light
 on what is most manifest.
 Amid the wholly unsensed and unseen
 they completely fill our sightless minds
 with treasures beyond all beauty.²²

In the same mystical work, God, 'Cause of all', is referred to as both darkness and light; as a luminous darkness and a dark brilliance; as neither darkness nor light. Paradoxes abound. But these "self-subverting" utterance[s],²³ as Turner designates them, are 'not merely artful': they are rather 'the natural linguistic medium of [Pseudo-Dionysius'] negative, apophatic theology: or, more strictly speaking, they are the natural medium of a theological language which is subjected to the *twin* pressures of affirmation and negation, of the cataphatic and the apophatic. We must both affirm and deny all things of God; and then we must negate the contradiction between the affirmed and the denied.' God is light (affirmation); God is darkness (denial); then, negating the negation, 'God is a brilliant darkness.' And the negation of the negation 'is not a *third* utterance . . . not some intelligible *synthesis* of affirmation and negation; it is rather the collapse of our affirmation and denials into disorder, which we can only express, *a fortiori*, in bits of collapsed, disordered language . . . And that is what the 'self-subverting' utterance is, a bit of disordered language.'²⁴ Theological language is properly paradox.

These mystical categories of cataphaticism and apophaticism are formulated within a theological framework. However, this study demonstrates that where two atheists recognise dimensions of consciousness, and experience, as irreducible to reductive philosophical alternatives, they relocate specifically cataphatic and apophatic categories. This indicates the pervasiveness of mystical qualities of consciousness in ways that set aside over-wrought distinctions between 'theistic' and 'atheistic' worldviews, distinctions too often predetermining our exploration of the experience under view. This study reveals that a return to 'pure' experience is sufficient to demonstrate, for the contemporary imagination, the irreducibly mystical contents of everyday life: and, therefore, the enduring appropriateness of theological conversations.

PART ONE

The Point of Departure

2

The Point of Departure: Readdressing the Mystical in Virginia Woolf

The mystic's 'path is the pathless; his trace is the traceless'; and human intelligence ever tends to discredit all those experiences which its clumsy device of speech refuses to express, regardless of the fact that all life's finest moments are thereby excluded from participation in reality.

Evelyn Underhill, 'Bergson and the Mystics'¹

I

Readdressing the Mystical in Woolf: A Literary Context

This chapter re-opens a discussion of mysticism in the literature and thought of Virginia Woolf by assessing the grounds of recent critical opposition to, and support for, such interpretation. I examine the various conceptions of mysticism informing previous studies of Woolf's oeuvre, particularly where these claim to confirm the radical distance of Woolf's aesthetic insights from traditional (religious) mystical perspectives. An awareness of the variety, and attending limitations, of definitions of 'the mystical' operating both contemporaneously with Woolf's intellectual-artistic formation and within succeeding critiques of her work reveals the absence of any genuine consideration of the possibility of sympathetic resonance between religious mystical writing and Woolf's visionary aesthetics.

This chapter is partly a study in the varying manifestations of two terms or ideas – 'the mystical', or 'mysticism', and 'vision', or 'the visionary' – as these have shaped understandings of the relationship between the arts and theology: contemporaneously with Woolf's writing and in

current critical debate. I will illustrate the degree to which varying definitions of these terms have both restricted, and facilitated, the realisation of those connections between art, literature, 'traditional' mysticism, theology and philosophy of religion with which this study is concerned. One matter that becomes particularly apparent is the strength of connection between reductive, empiricist epistemologies – especially the static objectification of the phenomena of experience – and the construal of vision (as activity) and envisioning as finite processes occurring within the circumscribed location of the static and bounded agent. Within this framework, the more mysterious contents of human consciousness are either rejected as unimportant subjective comment or epiphenomena, or are seen to belong to 'a very alien and irrelevant world of personal superstition.'² Conversely, epistemological perspectives which accept, as Grace Jantzen suggests, the irreducible aspects of experience as challenging (rather than just falling beyond) the structures of received models of seeing and knowing, begin to accommodate contemporary theological awareness of the revelatory dimension of everyday experience. Such perspectives also re-acknowledge the richness and contemporary relevance of traditional notions of vision as contemplative practice.

This chapter will examine recent resistance to mystical interpretations of Woolf's literature as this resistance is present within Woolf-criticism. I will consider, in particular, the work of feminist scholars Jane Goldman and Jane Marcus in this respect and will illustrate that critical consideration of the mystical significance of Woolf's aesthetic has not been exhausted: on the contrary, the mystical perspective which has been discussed in relation to Woolf's writing is of a particular kind, and leaves quite untouched – both in its attempting conversation and subsequent failure – that rich tradition of religious mysticism with which her writing will be shown to hold a surprising affinity.

'Another female crank, irrational and eccentric': Introducing Feminist Critical Resistance to a Mystical Woolf

In *The Feminist Aesthetics of Virginia Woolf: Modernism, Post-Impressionism and the Politics of the Visual* (1998)³ Jane Goldman conducts an analysis of the aesthetic dimension of Woolf's literature, attempting to locate, in Woolf's use and colouring of light, the feminist politics emergent in her work. Examining several texts which she considers to convey the author's feminist aesthetic, Goldman develops theories of 'heliotropics'

and 'prismatics' in Woolf's literature: a 'language of light' through which Woolf communicates a rational, feminist politics.

In the first section of her study, Goldman explores the relationship between light and reason in Woolf's work. It is, Goldman says, a *rational light* with which Woolf is concerned, and through which she communicates her revisionist feminist aesthetic. However, Goldman conceives the need to refute alternative interpretations of Woolf's 'prismatics' which, she believes, threaten to associate the latter with *irrationality*. In a section insightfully entitled 'Woolf's photology: mystical or rational?', she criticises Jane Marcus' 1983 study 'The Niece of a Nun: Virginia Woolf, Caroline Stephen, and the Cloistered Imagination',⁴ in which, Goldman claims, 'Marcus makes the paradoxical case for a rational mysticism.'⁵

I will argue that Goldman does not, in her study, defeat the possibility of mystical interpretations of Woolf's literature, and that her specific attempt at refutation is inadequate on account of the limited definition of 'the mystical' with which she works. However, I suggest that Goldman's criticism of Marcus' article *does* reveal difficulties with the latter's original attempt to locate what may be called mystical sources in Woolf's literature: and that, moreover, these difficulties are indicative of a misunderstanding of the mystical and mysticism in general. Consequently, Goldman's belief that she has invalidated mystical interpretations of Woolf's literature (and light imagery) rests partly on her assumption that Marcus' understanding of mysticism, as presented in her chapter, is both definitive and exhaustive, something which an engagement with Grace Jantzen's 1989 article 'Mysticism and Experience' shows to be incorrect.

'apparitions and visions and dreams and voices': Goldman -vs- Marcus

Feminist theorists have strongly criticised the concept of the mystical female. Feminist opinion concerning the relationship of female mystics to the institutionalised Church is often divided between those who celebrate the phenomenon of mysticism as demarcating that place where women have exercised freedom and authority within a distinctly patriarchal ecclesiastical history, and those who consider the attribution of certain mystically associated characteristics to women as reinforcing misogynistic caricatures of the hysterical female.⁶

Towards the close of her argument for the prevalence of mystical influences on Woolf's life and writing, Jane Marcus herself insightfully comments that 'as a feminist critic I had avoided the subject of Woolf's

mysticism, and of *The Waves*, feeling that acknowledging her as a visionary was a trap that would allow her to be dismissed as another female crank, irrational and eccentric.⁷ Goldman recites Marcus' confessional statement, pointing out what she considers to be its contradicting effect on Marcus' preceding argument. Already, here, Marcus and Goldman associate the mystical with the *threat* of the dismissal of female experience and authority, with being deemed 'irrational and eccentric': but neither consider *contrasting* interpretations of mysticism, or the mystical, which positively oppose this threat. On the contrary, Goldman goes on to present a contradiction of Marcus' suggestion that Woolf critics ought to 'study mysticism and feminism together,' instead presenting an anti-mystical version of the structure of vision in feminist politics.⁸

Marcus' article, which attempts to locate and elucidate the mystical content of Woolf's work by charting the influence of Woolf's Quaker aunt, Caroline Stephen, on her niece's thought and writing, discusses the mystical in a way which inevitably alarms theorists keen to resist associations between female-ness, eccentricity and hysteria, or between women and irrationality. While Marcus designates Woolf as 'an agnostic, a rational mystic,'⁹ she also claims that Woolf 'trained herself to trust memory and inner voices,'¹⁰ and that Caroline Stephens' 'perception of visions and voices . . . must have appealed to Woolf.'¹¹ Goldman consequently states that 'The silent light Marcus attributes to Woolf is worryingly ineffectual as an expression of the author's socialist-feminist views.'¹² She writes that 'While I agree that Woolf does indeed colonize the figure of the sun for feminism, and may well have made use of her aunt Caroline's luminous imagery, I am not convinced that this amounts to quasi-Quakerism or mysticism in her writing.'¹³ She is particularly disturbed by Marcus' claim that Woolf adopted, as authoritative source, the 'apparitions and visions and dreams and voices' so cherished by her aunt.¹⁴

However, it is important to recognise that Goldman's rejection here of 'mysticism in [Woolf's] writing' depends heavily on her sense of the mutual exclusivity of the mystical and the rational (as her subtitle, 'Woolf's photology: mystical or rational?' makes evident). This becomes particularly clear when Goldman continues that 'Woolf . . . engages a positive and prismatic, rational light . . . one associated with the feminist movement, and indicative of a feminist project 'to enlighten the Enlightenment',¹⁵ and concludes that 'This mystical, feminist interpretation reflects orthodox, aesthetic analysis of light in Woolf's work; but does not account for Woolf's 'rich yellow flame of rational intercourse'.¹⁶ Again, Goldman's attempted refutation of mystical interpretations of Woolf's literature,

and of her 'luminous imagery' in particular, depends heavily on the assumption that to maintain the rationality of Woolf's aesthetic requires the abandonment of any claim to mystical influences or impulses where these cannot be exhaustively identified with her (solely political) use of quasi-sacred imagery.

It is also important to recognise that, *here*, Goldman does not consider the nature of the 'rational' or the 'mystical' *per se*: she rather resists the association which Marcus makes between Woolf's apparent lack of education and her adoption of a mystical language as compensation. Goldman recites Marcus' belief that 'Woolf learned to turn her lack of education to advantage; she trained herself to trust memory and inner voices,'¹⁷ learning from her aunt that 'the daughters of educated men . . . can be mystics.'¹⁸ Reacting to Marcus, here, Goldman rightly points out that 'From the fact of Woolf's exclusion from Cambridge, Marcus draws the dangerous conclusion that Woolf lacked an education altogether.'¹⁹ Goldman, by contrast, recalls Woolf's early classical instruction by Janet Case and her subsequent (if institutionally restricted) access to educational resources (including her Cambridge-affiliated friends). Most importantly, though, it is in reaction to Marcus' mistake here that Goldman resists the idea of a mystically influenced Woolf. It is Marcus' claim that 'from Caroline Stephen, Virginia Woolf learned to speak the language of the light,'²⁰ which most concerns Goldman, precisely because Marcus identifies with this 'language of the light' a 'rational mysticism' which is claimed to belong to Woolf on account of her lacking education. It is in order to emphasise Woolf's educational history that Goldman believes it necessary to discredit Marcus' theory of mystical resources: resources Marcus has vaguely identified with memory, visions and voices.

Goldman's conclusive statement that Marcus 'actually emphasises the mystical at the expense of the rational,'²¹ captures her concern. For this comment invites us to consider (aside from Goldman's conclusions concerning the possibility of mystical interpretations) Marcus' presentation of her pro-mystical argument: to which, again, Goldman is primarily responding. Marcus' description of mysticism as 'nonhierarchical and private, a harmless creed with no hatred,'²² already inspires reactions from a feminist perspective. Marcus says of Simone Weil, Walter Benjamin and Virginia Woolf that 'these three mystical "Marxists" came to reject action and choice for "waiting," "attention," meditation and mystical moments of illumination.'²³ She implies that they accept their personal prisons with resignation: even gladly, transforming them into palaces of insight. Not only does this description affront a feminist determination to dismantle 'ethically debilitating' caricatures of 'female

narcissist, lover and mystic':²⁴ this characterisation of mysticism also assumes contemplative action to be static. In these ways, Marcus' argument instantly conflicts with attempts, such as Goldman's, to relieve Woolf of associations with the passive, cloistered and apolitical, and to emphasise her politically active aesthetic. Goldman, on the contrary, reveals an *active* language of light in the imagery of Woolf's literature, one which consciously, if covertly, conveys a political message.

Overall, Marcus' portrayal of the mystical here, alongside her tendency to associate mysticism with 'visions', 'voices' and consolation for ignorance, alienates feminist approaches to Woolf's work which determine to distance the author from such associations. It also alienates theologians who recognise the traditional association between mistresses and masters of the contemplative life and brilliance in education and learning. But having identified the mystical characteristics of Marcus' account which most offend Woolf's other critic, it must be asked whether a different approach to the mystical would produce such a result. While Goldman may be correct to question the influence of nebulously conceived voices and visions on Woolf's aesthetic formation, it does not follow that her objections constitute a rejection of mystical interpretations of Woolf's literature altogether. For the artist remains a seer, recognising 'the ordinary truths to which most of us are blind.'²⁵ If true mystical vision approximates to *this* interpretation, a consideration of Woolf's mysticism remains to be had.

Woolf-criticism and 'mysticism'

Where critics *have* countenanced a mystical dimension to Woolf's writing, they often refer to her 1931 novel, *The Waves*. Woolf herself envisages, in an 'early glimpse' of the novel²⁶ the possible unfolding of 'some semi mystic very profound life of a woman.'²⁷ Disagreeing with Sue Roe's opinion that this visionary intention had 'gradually evaporated' during the novel's composition,²⁸ Goldman suggests rather that 'by the time of the novel's completion' we might find the anticipated 'mystical' theme 'still present, suggested at this 'under ground' level of imagery.'²⁹ But then she continues, 'Mystic', as well as referring to sacred, obscure religious feelings, may also suggest (see Chambers Twentieth Century Dictionary) 'a secret meaning hidden from the eyes of the ordinary person, only revealed to a spiritually enlightened mind: allegorical.'³⁰ Goldman continues that 'My reading of photological and colour tropes draws on both senses: Woolf's 'semi-mystic' text is explored for references

to quasi-sacred mythology, and as partly allegorical.' Moreover, she adds, 'Woolf's qualification is significant: the woman's life is to be *'semi mystic'*. A later projection suggests the novel to be about her *struggle* to 'come to terms with these mystical feelings'.³¹

Several points should be made here. Immediately recognisable are the limitations of Goldman's source for defining 'the mystical' (Chambers Twentieth Century Dictionary). Particularly for theological thinking, this popular definition is on no account exhaustive (let alone accurate) of understandings of the mystical. Consequently, the conclusions of Goldman's argument must be limited to the scope of her definition.

Secondly, Goldman does indeed, in her study of Woolf's 'feminist aesthetics', explore references to quasi-sacred mythology and allegory: for example, Woolf's use of suffrage iconography, the 'Genesis' imagery of *The Waves*, and the 'human-centred cosmogony' which emerges in 'the interludes', accompanied by the rising of a sun-goddess (an inversion of Apollonian imagery) over the sea. These insightful readings of allusion and quasi-sacred imagery are understood, by Goldman, to comprise, and exhaust, the mystical content of Woolf's work. In a statement which threatens to conceive, by any *other* sense of the mystical than that just described, a naïve and emotional (as opposed to rational) tendency to simplistic unification, Goldman wishes to move beyond those interpretations of *The Waves* which have dominated in describing the novel's 'symbolic universality' and 'sense of cosmic unity'.³² She comments: 'Emotional, mystical readings tend to emphasise Bernard as spokesperson for Woolf's own artistic vision, and to find harmony between characters. But I want to suggest the characters as contesting, and Bernard's role as ambivalent.'³³ Once again, mystical readings are aligned with the emotional as assumed in opposition to the sophisticated rational, thereby compromising the rationality of Woolf's aesthetics. Indeed, Goldman's depiction of mysticism more closely resembles Bertrand Russell's affiliation of the mystical and emotional, and opposition of the mystical and rational: an aesthetic and epistemological position from which Woolf departs, as we shall see.

Goldman's reductive interpretation of Woolf's desire to 'come to terms with these mystical feelings', fails to do justice to Woolf's own descriptions of her experience and aesthetic purpose. Considering Woolf's description of her desire to write 'some semi-mystic very profound life of a woman', Goldman comments that 'Woolf's qualification is significant: the woman's life is to be "*semi mystic*",'³⁴ (Goldman's emphasis). Goldman's reading intends to move 'beyond' interpretations of a passive,

unifying, harmonising 'aesthetic emotion' in *The Waves*, here identified with the mystical, and thereby to support, in contrast, a rational, feminist project, in which the mystical is exhausted by reference to quasi-sacred mythology and allegory. But Goldman's limited evidence for this reductive interpretation of Woolf's described intention consists in the fact that 'Woolf also expresses ambitions for a less abstract project: "I want to write a history, say of Newnham or the womans movement, in the same vein".'³⁵ Goldman, continuing to oppose the mystical and rational, attempts to argue that the presence of a 'less abstract' political instinct in Woolf's creative intention should diminish our sense of the mystical in *The Waves*. But the difficulty for Goldman here is twofold. Not only does Woolf explicitly record 'now, if I write *The Moths* I must come to terms with these mystical feelings',³⁶ but her political instinct gives birth to a distinctly different composition, *A Room of One's Own* (1929), a fact emphasising the distinctly 'mystical' quality of *The Waves* in spite of the critic's efforts to dilute this presence by insisting that "These feminist aspirations, although addressed in *A Room of One's Own*, may extend to the similarly multivocal text, *The Waves*."³⁷ This argument feels strained: Goldman cannot evacuate *The Waves* of an intended mystical content which, while Woolf is cautious of the 'affectation' of 'being too mystical, too abstract',³⁸ goes *beyond* the mythological and allegorical. What constitutes this 'going beyond' is the subject of this study.

Goldman's attempt to reduce the sense of 'mystical' content in Woolf's novels (especially in *To The Lighthouse* and *The Waves* where she is keen to unveil a rational light), also sits uneasily with Woolf's comments about mystical impulses which inspire her work. During her composition of *The Waves*, Woolf writes that 'I am ill so often . . . If I could stay in bed another fortnight . . . I believe I should see the whole of *The Waves*.' Then she adds, 'I believe these illnesses are in my case – how shall I express it? – partly mystical. Something happens in my mind. It refuses to go on registering impressions. It shuts itself up. It becomes chrysalis . . . Then suddenly something springs. Two nights ago Vita was here . . . I had a tremendous sense of life beginning; mixed up with that emotion which is the essence of my feeling, but escapes description.'³⁹ This comment, made in February 1930, echoes Woolf's earlier observation in September 1926, while writing *To The Lighthouse*: 'I wished to add some remarks to this, on the mystical side of this solicitude; how it is not oneself but something in the universe that one's left with,' concluding that, 'it may be the impulse behind another book.'⁴⁰ Neither of these diary comments are considered in Goldman's treatment of the mystical, yet they both (particularly given their extension over the years

1926–1930) suggest the consistent, if subtle, self-designation of a mystical genre to Woolf's thought and work.

Consequently, Goldman's claim, of Woolf, that 'her celebration of the powers of imaginative and communicative reason here marks her out as a rational rather than a mystical writer,'⁴¹ is premature. But Goldman partly believes the anti-mystical context of Woolf's writing to be affirmed through the latter's assessment of her own creative activity. Woolf declares that a 'shock-receiving capacity is what makes me a writer',⁴² and it is her 'desire to explain' these experiences, Goldman argues, that shows how, through her art, 'reason makes possible an overcoming of this earth-bound position, but is not entirely independent of it.'⁴³ It is 'This process [which] is 'particularly valuable' to Woolf's creative and imaginative powers.'⁴⁴ Goldman enforces the rational defeat of the mystical by stating that, when Woolf describes the creative movement from 'shock' to the 'desire to explain', her language of 'revelation' and 'rapture' must not be 'taken out of context to endorse a mystical or religious interpretation.'⁴⁵ This is because her *rational* creative powers impress 'a far more sophisticated response to her moments of shock than her childhood assumption that she had suffered "simply a blow from an enemy hidden behind the cotton wool of daily life".'⁴⁶ Goldman notes that Woolf describes 'a revelation of some order; it is a token of some real thing behind appearances; and I make it real by putting it into words:'

It is the rapture I get when in writing I seem to be discovering what belongs to what; making a scene come right; making a character come together. From this I reach what I might call a philosophy; at any rate it is a constant idea of mine; that behind the cotton wool is hidden a pattern; that we – I mean all human beings –are connected with this; that the whole world is a work of art; that we are parts of the work of art. *Hamlet* or a Beethoven quartet is the truth about this vast mass that we call the world. But there is no Shakespeare, there is no Beethoven; certainly and emphatically there is no God; we are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself. And I see this when I have a shock.⁴⁷

The point of objection here is that Goldman, rightly emphasising the rational aspect of Woolf's method, believes that the disappearance of the irrationally conceived 'enemy hidden behind the cotton wool,' and its replacement with the discovery of a hidden 'pattern' connecting 'all human beings,' a 'revelation of some order,' 'a token of some real thing behind appearances,'⁴⁸ signals the abandonment of any 'mystical or

religious interpretation': whereas, in fact, and while maintaining Woolf's atheism, it is fairer to say that Woolf's rejection of this enemy, and her statement, *made in light of this conception*, that 'there is no God,' actually amounts to a rejection of the idolatrous naivety of a certain corrupted concept of divinity.

Re-reading mysticism: Jantzen -vs- James

Despite Goldman's criticisms of Marcus' argument, aspects of the latter's attempts to identify the mystical in Woolf's work are sensitive and convincing, and overall offer a degree of attention more appropriate to the number of occasions on which Woolf calls her moods 'mystical'. In particular, her interpretation of the mystical content of *The Waves* as capturing the diminishment of the ego 'by the writer as minister of the interior,'⁴⁹ and as presenting, in the 'lady at a table writing,' the figure of Caroline Stephen,⁵⁰ does more justice to Woolf's *own* description of her novel as a 'mystical eye-less book' than does Goldman's dismissive reading of the 'semi mystic' novel. Marcus suggests that Woolf's 'moments of being . . . are remarkably like Caroline Stephen's experiences of "inner light",'⁵¹ and, indeed, we can recognise in Stephens' description that 'she had been able to "sink into the innermost depth of her being" and "become aware of things which are unseen and eternal",' an accurate mirroring of Mrs Ramsay's experience, as consciousness summoned to one point (and 'being limitless', free to move anywhere) in *To The Lighthouse*.⁵²

Goldman is willing to accept the possibility that Woolf adopted her aunt's 'luminous imagery': it is Marcus' claim for a mystical interpretation of Woolf's work which disturbs her. Given feminist resistance to 'hysterical', 'eccentric' and 'irrational' characterisations of the 'mad-woman', it is unfortunate that Marcus emphasises Woolf's indebtedness to her aunt's apprehension of 'visions and voices' as proof of mystical influence, and unsurprising that a Woolf-critic keen to promote the rationality of Woolf's prisms is averse to this mystical reading.

However, Marcus' acknowledgement that William James was one of Caroline Stephen's 'admiring readers'⁵³ is of more than passing interest. According to Marcus, Stephen cited James' discussion of 'whispers of the in speaking 'still small voice' – gleams of the innermost radiance.'⁵⁴ But Marcus' *own* presentation of Caroline Stephen's mysticism has a distinctly Jamesian flavour. Her emphasis on visions and voices – precisely those elements Goldman is determined to dissociate from Woolf – recall James' attention to such phenomena in his treatment and

classification of religious (and particularly mystical) experience. Being 'interested in the fringes of consciousness: psychic phenomena, hallucinations, the effects of nitrous oxide and intoxication, and intense or bizarre accounts of religious experience including trances, levitations, seizures, hallucinations, and the like,'⁵⁵ he adopts a highly nuanced, and distinctly post-Kantian, treatment of 'inner personal experiences.'⁵⁶ While attending to 'Any and all sorts of human experience' as deserving of, and accessible to, empirical (fact-based) study, it is the first, 'narrower' sense of experience that he identifies as characterising the 'mystical'.⁵⁷ James examines, as definitive of religious experience, just those kinds of phenomena which feminists have resisted in their efforts to free the female from her traditional associations with the irrational, hysterical and abnormal. Where critics emphasise the feminist activism of Woolf's literature, such a characterisation of religious experience instinctively opposes feminist prerogatives.

In her 1989 article 'Mysticism and Experience,'⁵⁸ Grace Jantzen critiques the view of mysticism presented by William James and propagated by his inheritors.⁵⁹ Indeed, the interpretation of mysticism which Jantzen opposes, and to which she suggests an alternative, strongly resembles that reading of the mystical which Goldman resists in response to Marcus. Jantzen writes that 'the definition of mysticism has shifted, in modern thinking, from a patristic emphasis on the objective content of experience to the modern emphasis on the subjective psychological states or feelings of the individual.'⁶⁰ Her concern is that 'a study of two paradigm Christian mystics,' conducted in her article, 'radically undermines the characterisation which contemporary philosophy inherited from romanticism via James . . . the sorts of experiences which James thinks of as the essence and goal of the mystical pathway do not at all coincide with what these two mystics consider to be the essence and goal, either for themselves, or for those whom they instruct.'⁶¹ Jantzen argues that 'subsequent philosophers have followed' James by characterising the mystical in terms of his 'narrower' sense of experience; by appeal to 'voices, visions, ecstasies, and the like, to such an extent that in many people's minds phenomena of this sort are part of their conception of mysticism.'⁶²

Considering passages from the mystical writings of Bernard of Clairvaux, Jantzen insists that 'Bernard would find alien and unacceptable James' focus on levitations, trances, quasi-sensory vision, and other such phenomena which James sees as 'the intenser manifestations' of religious experience, and from which he seeks to extract the essence of religion.'⁶³ According to Bernard, it is, on the contrary, 'charity' – that is, growth in the *love* of God – which forms the purpose and aim

of mystical encounter, while the voices and visions and other such of James' apparently definitive 'psychic phenomena' are considered neither as proof of God's closeness, nor as experiences to be sought by the mystic. Even on analysis of Julian of Norwich's 'showings', in which visions feature strongly (and suggest their object's 'sensory reality'),⁶⁴ Jantzen highlights Julian's confession that 'I never wanted any kind of bodily vision or any kind of revelation from God, but the compassion which I thought a loving soul could have for our Lord Jesus . . .'⁶⁵ 'The value of the visions did not, in Julian's mind,' Jantzen records, 'consist of ecstatic feelings or a sense of obliteration of personality, but rather in the way that they fostered in her and in her readers that which she supremely desired: contrition, compassion, and longing for God.'⁶⁶ She concludes that 'although the two mystics who serve as paradigms for our investigation disagree about the value of special experiences like visions and revelation, they are unanimous that these experiences are not the goal and centre of their religion. That goal is union with God.'⁶⁷ Jantzen is clear: the phenomena which James prioritises and emphasises as *defining* religious experience do not occupy a definitive position in the consciousness of the mystic. That position is occupied by the soul's living relationship, in love, with the divine.

The Mystical Everyday

Now clearly, while we can, with Jantzen, argue that the occurrence and pursuit of particular psychic phenomena should not be considered definitive of Christian mysticism, we cannot identify what Jantzen *does* reveal to be central to Bernard's and Julian's mystical experience to be present in Woolf's literature as such. In ironic reversal, Woolf does consider and express ecstatic moments of consciousness, but never describes, nor ever would, her personal artistic vision in terms of seeking, or achieving, the goal of union with God.

However, this study reverses a tendency to read experience exclusively through the lens of doctrine, allowing instead the experience of a secular writer (and its aesthetic manifestations) to engage with inherited conceptions of mysticism: thereby embracing that contemporary theological determination to recognise, in the openness of literature to the muted places of God's apparent *absence*, a constructive and theologically invigorating challenge to the closed-ness of conventional doctrinal spaces.

For now, and as point of departure, Jantzen's critical interpretation of the Jamesian heritage provides a tool with which to illustrate that Goldman's rejection of Marcus' argument constitutes a rebuttal of only

one interpretation of mysticism – moreover, an interpretation which is highly dubitable, and certainly not characteristic of Christian mysticism *per se*. Goldman's objection to the idea that Woolf might be influenced by 'visions' and 'voices', and the irrational associations of this claim, constitutes a refutation of identifiably religious mystical insights in Woolf's literature only insofar as Goldman assumes Marcus' emphasis on these 'psychic phenomena' (the constituents of religious experience conceived in James' 'narrow' sense) to be definitive of the mystical: and, according to Jantzen, this interpretation is radically flawed. We could almost say of Marcus and Goldman what Jantzen says of James: that 'even if we agree with James that the essence of religion must be judged from its intenser manifestations, James is wrong to think that this means it must be judged by acute experiences in the narrow sense of the word as he proceeds to do.'⁶⁸

Jantzen's perspective has epistemological consequences for Goldman's (and, as the second part of this chapter will show, the Russellian empiricist's) assumption that the mystical and rational are opposed. Establishing that 'experiences like visions and voices, though they undoubtedly occur, are not central to mysticism,'⁶⁹ Jantzen considers the philosophical consequences of freeing 'the study of mysticism' from those who, following James, are 'fundamentally misguided' in their approach to the subject.⁷⁰ If according to, and after analysis of, the writings of the mystics the goal of mysticism is not reducible to the production of certain ecstasies or visions, then the ascetical practices of Christian spirituality, and the three-fold path of purgation, illumination and contemplation, 'will need to be reconsidered.'⁷¹ But herein lie 'wide implications for the philosophy of religion,'⁷² for 'it could be argued that doing so provides us with an alternative anthropology to those views current in post-Kantian philosophy, a view of human personhood which correlates with an epistemology and ontology opposed to much post-Enlightenment thought and able to provide insight into contemporary problems, both philosophical and practical.'⁷³

The mystical epistemology suggested here invites revision of the characteristically post-Enlightenment tendency to subject ontology and metaphysics to epistemology, a method which, according to Jean-Luc Marion, 'is marked by the primacy of the knowing mind over what it knows,' so that 'we only know objects; our experience applies only to objects because it fixes the a priori conditions of their possibility as its own.'⁷⁴ Where, by contrast, we wish to 'bring to light the rationality of facts and doctrines that objectifying rationality will not let us touch,'⁷⁵ we question the authenticity of those implicitly accepted post-Enlightenment strictures of thought which place the mystical and

rational in *opposition*. It is these strictures ‘which a study of the paradigm mystics helps us first to question and finally to reject.’⁷⁶ Chambers’ popular definition of the mystical resonates with those general misconceptions which Jantzen identifies as the inheritance of a Romantic epistemology. This definition is symptomatic of a shift ‘in modern thinking, from a patristic emphasis on the objective content of experience to the modern emphasis on the subjective psychological states or feelings of the individual.’⁷⁷ But we can reverse the post-Enlightenment prioritisation of certainty over mystery, and re-engage a mystical epistemology.

The first part of this chapter has given a critical presentation of recent treatments of mysticism in the writing of Virginia Woolf. I have argued that such treatments fail to do justice both to Woolf’s own description of key moments of her creative vision as mystical, and the complex and various conceptions of mysticism with which her writing will, in due course, be seen both intentionally and unintentionally to engage. In particular, I suggested ways in which Woolf-critic Jane Goldman’s study of mysticism in Woolf’s literature does not conclusively reject the possibility of locating within Woolf’s work insights in accordance with the content of religious mysticism, and this study will explore this potential. I also showed how, in light of a critique of Goldman’s position, that of her conversation partner, Jane Marcus, is questionable as a resource for establishing mystical resonances in Woolf’s work.

The following section will explore the significance of Woolf’s aesthetic departure from her contemporary philosophical and aesthetic influences, particularly where this departure reveals, in its rejection of reductive analyses of human experience, a vision inviting her into conversation with traditional mystical insights: insights which are particularly relevant for current interdisciplinary discussions in theology, philosophy of religion and literature. The shape of Woolf’s departure from these influences – a departure partly defined by her engagement with, and reaction to, her contemporaries’ conceptions of mysticism – will strongly resemble the shape of our divergence *here* from Marcus’, Goldman’s and James’ accounts of the mystical.

II

Readdressing the Mystical in Woolf: A Philosophical and Aesthetic Context

The influence of philosopher Bertrand Russell, and the philosophical world his work represents, upon the theoretical development of the

post-Impressionist aestheticians is well documented.⁷⁸ Visual artists and philosophers of art including Roger Fry and Clive Bell adopted, and translated for the artistic field, the epistemological and metaphysical observances of such as Bertrand Russell, A. N. Whitehead, G. E. Moore and Ludwig Wittgenstein. While post-Impressionism developed its formalistic aesthetic in response to the Russellian apprehension of essential logical relations underlying appearances, a vocabulary including the terms 'mysticism' and 'the mystical' was also shared.

In every age the conception of certain general categories, such as 'spiritual', 'political' or 'scientific', is partly shaped and regulated by the wider atmosphere of the surrounding intellectual climate. To examine what may constitute the mystical content of Woolf's work, and what Woolf may have intended in using the term, it is necessary to explore its contemporary function within the intellectual life and vocabulary of her compatriots during the 1920s and early 1930s. Given Woolf's lack of engagement with theological ideas *per se*, I do not consider an examination of early twentieth century theological notions of mysticism to be directly relevant to this discussion. Such notions are highly unlikely to have influenced Woolf's thought, or that of her immediate philosophical and aesthetic influences. However, an examination of the mystical as this category functioned within the thinking and writing of her philosophical and aesthetic milieu, particularly where the effects of this engagement are detectable in her writing, illustrates both her conversation with, and departure from, the metaphysically reductive tendencies of her time. What emerges as Woolf's distinctive response to such tendencies is an aesthetic vision that accepts the twentieth century's challenge to certain traditional metaphysical perspectives, while, in its subtle insistence on the inexhaustibility of human experience as artistic object, also suggesting that we must look elsewhere than to Woolf's contemporaries for a fuller understanding of what may actually comprise the mystical dimension of her work.

Mysticism 'At Odds With Logic': Bertrand Russell on the Mystical

As it would for A. J. Ayer, Bertrand Russell's treatment of 'mysticism', definitively presented in his 1914 essay 'Mysticism and Logic',⁷⁹ occurred within a larger empiricist project, one which sought to renounce the traditional status of metaphysics as a legitimate branch of philosophy. Attempting to reconfigure philosophy as a subject exclusively concerned with the nature and achievement of subjective certainty, Ayer's logical positivism claimed that a proposition was only meaningful if subject to

analytical or empirical verification. This stipulation, famously invalidating the theory itself,⁸⁰ excluded from the corpus of meaningful statements discussion about any object where a literal relation between the language of reference and a corresponding object could not be shown. Consequently, according to Ayer, metaphysical statements and metaphysical discourse were not to be considered legitimate foci for philosophical attention. (Iris Murdoch, of course, conducts her metaphysical philosophy within this positivistic philosophical heritage.)

The logical positivism which defined early twentieth-century British philosophy was of a spirit in continuity with its heritage, particularly that heritage defined by the work of Cambridge philosopher Bertrand Russell. Ayer was to inherit Russell's discussion of mysticism, bringing it to define, within the context of even stricter attention to the logical and empirical structures of knowledge, the excesses of metaphysical speculation. Ayer was particularly irritated by what he recognised as a characteristically mystical insistence on the validity and appropriateness of non-literal language for the description of an ineffable reality.⁸¹

While Woolf declared having no desire to attend 'Bertie's lectures,' her literary engagement, nevertheless, with distinctly Russellian themes has been acknowledged.⁸² The resonances of this engagement are relevant here insofar as they illuminate Woolf's conversation with, and reaction to, Russell's distinction between the logical and mystical, especially where he identifies the latter with what he characterised as the irrational and epiphenomenal effusions of art (and literature). For Russell, art, like mysticism, 'is to be commended as an attitude towards life, not as a creed about the world.'⁸³

Russell's essay is recognised both as 'concentrat[ing] the ideas about mysticism circulating between Cambridge and Bloomsbury' at its time of composition, and as shaping definitions of the category for following years.⁸⁴ Woolf's own relationship with the term is informally ambiguous. We recall that although Bernard will insist in *The Waves* (1931) 'For I am no mystic; something always plucks at me . . . interest in hairdressers and the like brings me to the surface,'⁸⁵ Woolf appears to conceive the term more positively when outlining in her diary the possibility of writing 'some semi mystic very profound life of a woman.'⁸⁶ Earlier, we recall, during her writing of *To The Lighthouse* (September 1926) she had noted that 'I wished to add some remarks to this, on the mystical side of this solicitude; how it is not oneself but something in the universe one's left with,' concluding that this instinct 'may be the impulse behind another book.'⁸⁷ Here the 'mystical side' of vision is interpreted constructively, as providing energy and shape for fresh artistic creation.

But the ambivalence of Woolf's attitude towards the mystical begins to make sense when one considers contemporary definitions of the term, particularly its position within the broader context of disagreement between Woolf and Fry on the one hand, and Russell on the other, concerning the nature and status of art.

In his 1914 essay, Russell established as 'two very different human impulses' that which urges men 'towards mysticism' and that which urges men 'towards science.'⁸⁸ While initially claiming that 'the greatest men who have been philosophers have felt the need both of science and of mysticism,'⁸⁹ and attempting to illustrate, by comparing passages of Heraclitus with Plato, something of the blending of these 'two tendencies' in the Heraclitian system, Russell's essay quickly announces that 'Mysticism is, in essence, little more than a certain intensity and depth of feeling in regard to what is believed about the universe; and this kind of feeling leads Heraclitus, on the basis of his science, to strangely poignant sayings concerning life and the world.'⁹⁰ By 'strangely poignant sayings' Russell identifies the expressions of 'poetic imagination'⁹¹ which *in relation with* the factual statements of an empirical science yield 'the highest eminence' in 'the world of thought.'⁹²

It is in giving a distinct sense of these individual temperaments, the mystical and the scientific, that Russell's essay is most illuminating for our purposes. For where, in Plato, 'the same twofold impulse exists, though the mystic impulse is distinctly the stronger of the two,'⁹³ the consequence, according to Russell, is the endangering of the 'genuine scientific temper.' Where 'the mystic's apparent insight into a higher reality and a hidden good'⁹⁴ remains outside that 'marriage with the world'⁹⁵ which the empiricist doctrine ensures, the consequence is but ornamental illusion. Russell's consideration of the mystical is highly nuanced: 'the mystic's *apparent* insight' will '*now suddenly become* certain beyond the possibility of a doubt,' having prepared 'the way for the reception of *what seems like* a higher wisdom' (my emphasis).⁹⁶ The balance Russell initially advocates between the scientific and mystical temperaments in the pursuit of knowledge becomes rather the declaration that science without mysticism is acceptable (even preferable), while mysticism without science will merely 'bring forth, out of [the soul's] own depths, the mad dance of fantastic phantoms . . .'⁹⁷ For the mystic, unlike the scientist, 'the sense of certainty and revelation comes earlier than any definite belief.'⁹⁸ Indeed, as 'the definite beliefs at which mystics arrive are the result of reflection upon the inarticulate experience gained in the moment of insight,'⁹⁹ it often happens, adds Russell, that 'beliefs which have no real connexion with this moment

become subsequently attracted into the central nucleus,' 'by virtue of their subjective certainty.'¹⁰⁰ These 'inessential accretions,' Russell advises, 'we may ignore,' and intend, instead, a critique 'of the beliefs which all mystics share.'¹⁰¹ These, he asserts, are (i) 'belief in the possibility of a way of knowledge which may be called revelation or insight or intuition, as contrasted with sense, reason, and analysis, which are regarded as blind guides leading to the morass of illusion;'¹⁰² (ii) 'belief in unity, and [its] refusal to admit opposition or division anywhere;'¹⁰³ (iii) the 'denial of the reality of Time;' and (iv) the 'belief that all evil is mere appearance, an illusion produced by the divisions and opposition of the analytic intellect.' In 1914, the mystical route to knowledge is apprehended in direct contrast to the impersonal, empiricist attitude which will not allow insight, 'untested and unsupported' to be a sufficient guarantee of truth.¹⁰⁴ The kind of 'testing' implied here is the analytical and empirical verification which makes of mysticism a path to be 'commended as an attitude towards life, not as a creed about the world.'¹⁰⁵ Mysticism must be married with empirical science if its subjective 'swift certainty' is ever to encounter truth.

There is not room here to investigate the questionable validity of Russell's four criteria which he claims to be definitive of any mystical philosophy. But we must consider Woolf's reaction to Russell's discussion of mysticism, and its extended implications for assessments of the epistemic status of art.

On the occasions Woolf does use the term, she often appears to identify by the mystical, or mysticism, a temper or perspective strongly akin to Russell's definition of the term. For example, Bernard's comment recited above ('For I am no mystic; something always plucks at me . . .')¹⁰⁶ conveys a shared sense, with Russell, of mystical vision as bringing an unadulterated sense of unity to experience, to a realm removed from the everyday sphere of concrete objects and events. Earlier in *To The Lighthouse* (1927) it is 'the mystic', 'the visionary' who, walking the beach, had 'suddenly an answer . . . vouchsafed them' which they cannot communicate: 'they could not say' what it was.¹⁰⁷

But Woolf's ambiguous relationship with the mystical returns for consideration. For the individual is harassed: one moment, the questions "as to what, and why and wherefore" "which tempt the sleeper from his bed to seek an answer" and convert the insomniac into "[t]he mystic, the visionary" . . . are "[f]oolish questions, vain questions, questions one never asked if one were occupied. Is human life this? Is human life that? One never had time to think about it," Mr Bankes muses . . .¹⁰⁸ Yet the next moment, these mystical questions re-emerge.

Three years later, in 1930, we recall, Woolf writes that 'If I could stay in bed another fortnight . . . I believe I should see the whole of *The Waves* . . . I believe these illnesses are in my case – how shall I express it? – partly mystical.'¹⁰⁹ *Partly* mystical: to which she attributes, as with Russell's definition, the sudden wholeness of her intuitive vision. Woolf's treatment of the mystical in these instances conveys, consistently with the insights of previous studies of her work, a deep scepticism of naïve or comforting visions of unity, completeness, order, or the suggestion of an arch-narrative for life. The extent to which such reservations constitute a genuine critique of the kind of mysticism with which the next part of this study will be concerned, will become clear. But, for now, Woolf's reservations about mysticism can be interpreted not only as an extension of her rejection of the 'enemy hidden behind the cotton wool of daily life'¹¹⁰ (the characteristics of this interventionist divinity being as questionable as Russell's four criteria of mystical philosophy) but also as delineating her reaction to a more serious contemporary concern which united her with Fry, against Russell. That is, the latter's identification of art with the characteristics of mysticism.

**'The personal experience of a peculiar emotion':
Mysticism and Aesthetics**

Ann Banfield recognises, in her study of the relationship between Woolf's and Fry's formalist aesthetics and Russell's analytic philosophy, the latter's identification of art and literature with the subjective effusions of mysticism. Russell's romantic aesthetic, which identified 'expression of self' as the primary function of art,¹¹¹ is depicted in its mystical temper in *An Outline of Philosophy* (1927).¹¹² Remarking that 'the tendency of our perceptions is to emphasize increasingly the objective elements in an impression, unless we have some special reason, as artists have, for doing the opposite,'¹¹³ he presents a position against which Woolf (and Fry) violently objected. Russell was to insist that 'he cannot imagine an art like his physics, beginning with impressions but not stopping with them, not because they are "any less real" but "because they do not point to anything beyond themselves". Art is personal.'¹¹⁴ Russell's view of aesthetics is reinforced by Clive Bell's study, *Art*, printed in the same year as Russell's 'Mysticism and Logic'. Bell, declaring that "The starting-point for all systems of aesthetics must be the personal experience of a peculiar emotion,"¹¹⁵ claims the relevance of the perception of 'certain forms and relations of forms' only

insofar as they 'stir our aesthetic emotions.'¹¹⁶ 'It is fatal,' he writes, for art 'to sacrifice significance to representation,'¹¹⁷ and while objects *are* to be experienced 'as pure forms,' that is 'as ends in themselves,'¹¹⁸ this mode of perception is to begin with the *emotional* response of an individual to a set of relations, the significance of this formal arrangement being consummated by an 'inspired emotion' once again:¹¹⁹ 'Naturally, if an artist's emotion,' he writes, 'comes to him from, or through, the perception of forms and formal relations, he will be apt to express it in forms derived from those through which it came; but he will not be bound by his vision. He will be bound by his emotion.'¹²⁰

In response to Russell (and Bell), Woolf and Fry insisted that art, including, for Woolf, literary art, was *not* to be assigned the exclusively subjective characteristics which Russell had attributed to mysticism, nor the kind of status with which Ayer would relegate the artistic, within an emotivist theory, to the epiphenomenal. According to Woolf and Fry, art was not to be considered mystical in Russell's sense.

Over dinner on 3 December 1921, Woolf distinctly argued the possibility of an impersonal aesthetic with Russell, and recorded their conversation in her diary:¹²¹

'If you had my brain you would find the world a very thin, colourless place' he said.

But my colours are so foolish I replied.

You want them for your writing, he said. Do you never see things impersonally?

Yes. I see literature like that; Milton, that is.

The Choruses in Samson are pure art, he said.

But I have a feeling that human affairs are impure.

God does mathematics. That's my feeling. It is the most exalted form of art.

Art? I said.

Banfield reflects that 'The possibility of an impersonal aesthetic, the triumphantly recorded 'point' of Woolf's 1921 dinner-table encounter with Russell . . . now stands clearly as a challenge to his assumptions about art.'¹²² Fry's and Woolf's modern art not only demanded the self's reduction, the rejection of that self-assertion deemed characteristic of the mystical way of knowing, but, in its rejection of arch-narrative, of beauty as a criteria for the selection of artistic objects, of undivided, uninterrupted formal unity, also claimed the realism of its intention in reconnecting 'with life, the ordinary.'¹²³ Woolf writes, in her biography

of Fry, of the 'new mysticism which despised science,' and 'was highly antipathetic' to the artist.¹²⁴ She insists her aesthetic will convey that 'jar on the nerves'¹²⁵ which, as Banfield expresses, 'mars the perfected beauty of the whole';¹²⁶ her aesthetic will recognise, as she writes in *To The Lighthouse*, 'something out of harmony with this jocundity and this serenity.'¹²⁷ 'Art,' Banfield comments, 'must always allow the disruption of the real. To avoid the mystic phantasy that explains all, it is necessary to return periodically to the world of existence . . . the pattern is only one of several possible hypothetical approximations to reality . . .'¹²⁸

In positively distinguishing her literature from the mystical characteristics attributed by Russell to art, Woolf develops a formalist aesthetic capable of conveying the abstract, invisible relations constructing public space. She also resists the depiction of that naïve unity which both dissolves the concreteness of individual moments of daily experience and glosses the fracture and interruption which constantly frustrates the individual's effort to synthesise the mosaic of vision.

But in bringing the experience of the conscious individual into relation with this formalist project, Woolf does not accept the reductive flavour of Russell's epistemology. Rather, she can be seen to reconfigure a metaphysical conversation which, embracing Russell's confrontation of the problem of knowledge in terms of the depiction of physical and logical reality, and accepting the inadequacy of that particular brand of mysticism with which her contemporary intellectual climate is engaged, also diverges from the reductionism of Russell's account in emphasising the experience of human individuals not only as constitutive of encounter with reality but as gesturing the shape of a public space also. For while Russell will accept the artist's depiction of a subject's received impressions as being no less real than those recognised by his physics, it is his belief that they cannot, unlike the impressions of physics, 'point to anything beyond themselves,'¹²⁹ which Fry and Woolf deny. Art gives more than depictions of objects of particular tastes: it attempts something more general, more true to the nature of the object experienced as such. Yet, equally, and especially for Woolf, it will attend to the value of the individual's transient encounters with the given landscapes of everyday experience as informing, through a complex relationship, what is both more general and equally essential to reality. Indeed, where Russell will argue 'that insight, untested and unsupported, is an insufficient guarantee of truth,'¹³⁰ Woolf's equation of logic's abstractness with mysticism will allow her novels to accommodate the inexhaustibility of experience, the un-resolving creative tensions operative between art and life, and the informative properties of expressive *failure*, as factors

contributing to her rational aesthetic depiction of reality. As Iris Murdoch succinctly puts it, “Not a report” need not entail, “not an activity.”¹³¹

Woolf’s rejection of Russell’s relegation of art to the mystical, by which the latter identifies the ‘merely’ emotional, subjective, naïve, unity-imposing reactions of the individual to her experience, inspires the constructive response of her formalist aesthetic. Her literary art will approximate to truth; will give, as she writes in *Night and Day* (1919), ‘access to another world independent of personal affairs, a world of law, of philosophy, or more strangely a world such as he had had a glimpse of . . . when together they seemed to be sharing something, creating something . . . a vision flung out far in advance of our actual circumstances.’¹³² This conviction inspires Woolf’s determination to create an ‘aesthetics of the unobserved’,¹³³ this phrase implying a deliberate contradiction of Russellian epistemology, since the invisibility of the logical structures underpinning perception could never, as such, be subject to aesthetic (non-literal) depiction on Russell’s account. But, crucially, Woolf will embrace what is ‘left out’ by purer, more hygienic depictions of reality, particularly the anxieties confronting the human subject as she tries to interpret the shape (or lack of shape) of that life experienced in consciousness. This determination to balance the impersonal and personal in her art is reflected in a comment of 1928:

The poets succeeding by simplifying: practically everything is left out. I want to put practically everything in; yet to saturate. That is what I want to do in *The Moths*. It must include nonsense, fact, sordidity: but made transparent.¹³⁴

While Banfield’s presentation of the development of Fry’s and Woolf’s impersonal formalism, in response to Russell’s challenge to art and literature, is convincing, her tendency to overemphasise the impersonal aspect of vision threatens to flatten moments of ecstasy and translucence in Woolf’s literature, where, as I will show, a more complex relationship with a transcending vision can be found. While undoubtedly Woolf’s desire, when surveying appearances, to be ‘content with this,’¹³⁵ to record “That is all,”¹³⁶ signals a determination to attend to the concreteness of everyday objects of experience, and so to give empirical truth in the novel, it is yet her ability to keep the ‘rainbow’ of personality alongside the ‘granite’ of fact which conveys her continuing dedication to an aesthetic vision which suspends the personal upon the abstract: ‘For I figure,’ she writes in January 1920, ‘that the approach will be entirely different this time: no scaffolding; scarcely a brick to be seen;

all crepuscular, but the heart, the passion, humour, everything as bright as fire in the mist.¹³⁷ This is articulated as Lily Briscoe's aesthetic vision: 'She saw the colour burning on a framework of steel; the light of a butterfly's wing lying upon the arches of a cathedral.'¹³⁸ Just so, Mrs Ramsay's *ecstatic* cry 'It is enough!'¹³⁹ which Banfield reads as declaring that 'the observer must accept the world's limits,'¹⁴⁰ can equally be read as an exclamation of exhaustion within an overwhelming moment of personal insight.

This latter interpretation is suggested by those moments when Woolf records positive encounters with the idea of the mystical. When she describes her artistic envisioning of an underlying pattern as the reception of something that 'is so instinctive that it seems given to me, not made by me,'¹⁴¹ when she describes as mystical that state of mind which allows her to 'see the whole of *The Waves*,'¹⁴² she appreciates the relevance, for her art, of that which Russell defines as a mysterious conviction of unity, of a pattern preceding vision: except that, unlike Russell, in her exploration of dimensions of her art as 'semi'¹⁴³ and 'partly'¹⁴⁴ mystical, we glimpse, with Woolf, a more genuine intention to balance the scientific temperament which addresses the impersonal, objective, logical and invisible structures of the real (and the logical language literally referring to this reality), with the complex, irreducible, descriptively inexhaustible yet *equally reality depicting* landscapes of human consciousness.

Woolf's recognition and maintenance of this tension can be illustrated through a brief study of her short story, 'The Lady in the Looking-Glass: A Reflection' (May 1929),¹⁴⁵ in which she presents a caution against the one-making tendencies of Roger Fry's art.¹⁴⁶ In his 1909 'An Essay in Aesthetics,'¹⁴⁷ a classic statement of modernist art, Fry presents the essentials of a position detectable in Clive Bell's work also. In this essay, Fry distinguishes what he conceives as the separate facets of the 'double life' of the individual human being, the 'actual life' and the 'imaginative life'. While the actual life consists in the activation of 'the processes of natural selection,' it is with the imaginative life, wherein 'no such action is necessary, and, therefore, the whole consciousness may be focused upon the perceptive and the emotional aspects of the experience,'¹⁴⁸ that 'the work of art is intimately connected.'¹⁴⁹

Fry illustrates the qualities of this imaginative life by analogy with 'the visions of the cinematograph,' which, he comments, do not arouse us to action, for 'whatever emotions are aroused by them,' we know that the pictured individual is not really hurt, and so our emotions 'are felt quite purely, since they cannot, as they would in life, pass at once into

actions of assistance.¹⁵⁰ A similar effect, he considers, 'can be obtained by watching a mirror in which a street scene is reflected':

If we look at the street itself we are almost sure to adjust ourselves in some way to its actual existence. We recognize an acquaintance, and wonder why he looks so dejected this morning, or become interested in a new fashion in hats – the moment we do that the spell is broken, we are reacting to life itself in however slight a degree, but, in the mirror, it is easier to abstract ourselves completely, and look upon the changing scene as a whole. It then, at once, takes on the visionary quality, and we become true spectators, not selecting what we see, but seeing everything equally, and thereby we come to notice a number of appearances and relations of appearances, which would have escaped our notice before . . . The frame of the mirror, then, does to some extent turn the reflected scene from one that belongs to our actual life into one that belongs rather to the imaginative life. The frame of the mirror makes its surface into a very rudimentary work of art, since it helps us to attain to the artistic vision.¹⁵¹

In her short story, which, written twenty years after the first publication of Fry's essay, nevertheless performs a significant critique of a contemporary aesthetic consensus, Woolf considers, in an almost identical mirroring of Fry's own illustration, the reflection of a woman, Isabella, in an ironically named 'looking-glass.' The narrator, beginning 'people should not leave looking-glasses hanging in their rooms'¹⁵² (a statement repeated exactly at the close of the piece) considers how 'one could not help looking, that summer afternoon, in the long glass that hung outside in the hall.'¹⁵³ From 'the depths of the sofa' one can see, in the manner of Fry's gazing on the street scene outside, 'a stretch of garden beyond': only in this case, 'one could see a long grass path leading between the banks of tall flowers until, slicing off an angle, the gold rim cut it off.'¹⁵⁴ Just as Fry's mirror had made us 'true spectators . . . seeing everything equally,¹⁵⁵ (and as Bell's forms had 'related on terms of equality,')¹⁵⁶ so Woolf's 'looking-glass reflected the hall table, the sunflowers, the garden path so accurately and so fixedly that they seemed held there in their reality inescapably. It was a strange contrast – all changing here, all stillness there.'¹⁵⁷ While the open 'doors' and 'windows' bring 'a perpetual sighing and ceasing sound, the voice of the transient and the perishing . . . coming and going like human breath,' 'in the looking-glass things had ceased to breathe and lay still in the trance of immortality.'¹⁵⁸

Furthermore, we are told that the mistress of the house 'Isabella Tyson . . . carrying a basket . . . had vanished, sliced off by the gilt rim

of the looking-glass.¹⁵⁹ A few paragraphs later, the image in the glass is for a moment 'entirely altered' when the postman's bringing of letters to the reflected table makes the mirrored space 'unrecognisable and irrational and entirely out of focus.' Now, 'one could not relate these tablets to any human purpose.' But 'then by degrees some logical process set to work on them and began ordering and arranging them and bringing them into the fold of common experience. One realised that they were merely letters.'¹⁶⁰

Out of chaos, the newly stilled letters are 'drawn in and arranged and composed and made part of the picture and granted that stillness and immortality which the looking-glass conferred.'¹⁶¹ Isabella, too, returns to be framed by the glass in 'that pitiless light. And there was nothing. Isabella was perfectly empty. She had no thoughts. She had no friends. She cared for nobody.'¹⁶² Here, Woolf suggests, in warning to Fry, is the deathly power of art, come 'like some acid to bite off the unessential and superficial and leave only the truth,'¹⁶³ but a truth that leaves all that Isabella *actually* is – her thoughts, tastes, desires – beyond what the gilt frame can tell. In a sense, we have her but empirically: all concrete relations, all impersonal details are perfectly translated in the immortal stillness of the mirror's flat reflection. But we remain unsatisfied that we have Isabella essentially. What is missing? 'There must be truth,' the narrator protests, 'there must be a wall. Yet it was strange that after knowing her all these years one could not say what the truth about Isabella was; one still made up phrases . . .'¹⁶⁴ Comparisons may be 'worse than idle and superficial – they are cruel even, for they come like the convolvulus itself,' (the flower the narrator had compared Isabella to), 'trembling between one's eyes and the truth.'¹⁶⁵

One year before the composition of her story, in 1928, Woolf had written, 'what I want now to do is to saturate every atom. I mean to eliminate all waste, deadness, superfluity: to give the moment whole; whatever it includes . . . Waste, deadness come from the inclusion of things that don't belong to the moment.' But what comprises this dead matter for Woolf is not the apparent irrelevancies of human consciousness, but 'this appalling narrative business of the realist: getting on from lunch to dinner: it is false, unreal, merely conventional.'¹⁶⁶ The art work must know its own capacity to kill its object, to describe accurately the abstract, without touching the 'transient' and 'perishing' truth.¹⁶⁷ With characteristically subtle insight, Woolf recognises the tension here: the action which immortalises the image in stillness is also that which brings relief to the chaos which the postman's shadow had brought. Iris Murdoch is as deeply concerned with the preservation of 'the minute

and absolutely random detail of the world', which 'good art' 'reveals . . . together with a sense of unity and form' which 'often seems to us mysterious because it resists the easy patterns of the fantasy . . . the recognisable and familiar rat-runs of selfish day-dream.'¹⁶⁸ The question is one of balancing form and life: the former must never exist at the expense of accurate depictions of the latter.

Woolf's story not only responds to the aesthetic temperament of Fry's theory, but also to aspects of Bell's depiction of significant form. For in spite of Bell's emphasis on the emotional contents of artistic attention and creation, he also praises 'the perfect lover, he who can feel the profound significance of form' in being 'raised above the accidents of time and space.'¹⁶⁹ Bell identifies as common to all great art an appeal that 'is universal and eternal,' namely an *emotional* appreciation of significant form which simultaneously transcends the specificity of individual taste, which is itself interpreted as the particular instantiation of a universal appreciation of form. The observer of art, the artist, responds to an instant and inexplicable emotional impulse (we recall Russell's definition of the mystical temperament) which reveals a more general appreciation of the significant form which inspired the subjective emotion. In this way, Bell's discussion of aesthetic theory highlights the complex relationship of the at once subjective and objective dimensions of the aesthetic emotion, for while 'All systems of aesthetics must be based on personal experience – that is to say, they must be subjective,'¹⁷⁰ it is 'certain forms and relations of forms,' which 'stir our aesthetic emotions.'¹⁷¹ Once again, 'Significant form' designates the 'arrangement and combinations [of form] that move us in a particular way,' that 'provoke our aesthetics emotions,'¹⁷² as the artist, moved by the appreciation of significant form, perceives objects 'as pure forms in certain relations to each other, and feels emotion for them as such. These are his moments of inspiration: follows the desire to express what has been felt. The emotion that the artist felt in his moment of inspiration he did not feel for objects seen as means, but for objects seen as pure forms – that is, as ends in themselves.'¹⁷³

Echoing Bell, in *To The Lighthouse* Lily Briscoe can reveal to William Banks the possibility that 'Mother and child then – objects of universal veneration . . . might be reduced . . . to a purple shadow without irreverence,'¹⁷⁴ but the degree to which Woolf maintains Bell's emphasis on the significance of emotion as descriptive of the essence of art, or his advocating of that 'state of extraordinary exaltation and complete detachment from the concerns of life,' is significantly limited.¹⁷⁵ The woman in the park who terrifies Woolf as a child reemerges to weave her

incoherent and unsettling song through the novels, while Mrs Ramsay's social detachment, in her moment of vision with the lighthouse, far from validates the darkness of domestic imprisonment and political paralysis. While Woolf shares Bell's, Fry's and Russell's commitment to the impersonal depiction of objects and their relations as ends in themselves, she will diverge from the former two in outlining the dangers of an art that escapes the grit of daily experience in order to select immovable pictures of reality, and from Russell when, embracing an impersonal aesthetic, she brings the dissonances of subjective experience, through the work of art, to shape the public space that is the reading community.

In this synthesis of granite and rainbow, of impersonal and personal, of cathedral arch and butterfly wing,¹⁷⁶ Woolf embraces Russell's challenge to make her literary art reality-depicting while renouncing the prevailing philosophical tendency to characterise the private and transitional landscapes of human consciousness – the individual's navigation of the shifting shapes of her emotional and intellectual relationships with the world – as merely epiphenomenal. Woolf's dedication to the depiction of the everyday experience of the human subject, which Banfield's analysis, in its final stages, threatens to overshadow,¹⁷⁷ is that which gives the richest sense, ironically, of Banfield's own observation that 'in characterizing *The Waves* as an 'abstract mystical eyeless book' . . . Woolf thereby equated logic's abstractness with mysticism, contra Russell.¹⁷⁸ For where Woolf describes her own work as 'mystical' we recognise *not* her appropriation of the characteristics that Russell had attributed to a mystical art, but her conception of 'the androgynous union of mysticism and logic' which Banfield recognises as characterising the more mature years of Woolf's literary career.¹⁷⁹ The new aesthetic 'does not reject mysticism; it adjusts mystical feeling to the world which science reveals as "extraordinary", "miraculous", "strange."¹⁸⁰ Just so, Woolf herself can recognise, as mystical, a quality of vision not necessarily in confrontation with that 'rich yellow flame of rational intercourse': the preservation of which, we recall, Jane Goldman believes must require the abandonment of any mystical interpretation of Woolf's literature whatsoever.¹⁸¹

My point here is double: on the one hand, Woolf does not univocally refer to mysticism as something to be rejected – her attitude towards the term is informally ambiguous: on the other hand, where she does avoid 'the mystical', she appears to reject – as we will increasingly observe – an attitude or perspective which an explicitly theological mysticism does *not* itself advocate: which, in fact, it consistently refutes. Both Woolf and her critics seem unaware of this possibility. In *The Singing of the*

Real World: The Philosophy of Virginia Woolf's Fiction, Mark Hussey correctly observes Woolf's 'vacillat[ion] between faith in a meaningful world and a sense of life's absurdity, of a world in which human beings are blown aimlessly about.'¹⁸² But while 'the struggle between faith and despair is the heart of Woolf's thought, the impulse behind her fiction,' Hussey cannot but conceive this struggle as conclusively refuting a mystical approach:

There is a sense in Woolf's work (the work of an avowed atheist) of an immanent beyond . . . Pressing on the world of the novels is a mystery, glimpsed only in fleeting moments, in solitude. Although she describes the endless modalities of human being, it seems to me that Woolf's effort is at the same time to express her perception of a 'reality' that transcends all modalities and gives them their being. This abstract 'reality' is not bound by the spatiotemporal horizons of actual human life, but is distinguished from mysticism by its rootedness in lived experience.¹⁸³

Hussey places this refutation of a mystical reading of Woolf within the context of the author's atheism: 'A God,' he writes, 'makes the world one and indivisible, but denies the curious antimonies of the actual experience of human being, falsely reconciling them, and providing a means of escape from the ultimate horizon of death through the consolation of eternal life.'¹⁸⁴ He goes on to illustrate that which Woolf's art, rejecting God, is capable of expressing: 'the radical astonishment at simply being;¹⁸⁵ the fact that 'despite our inability to know anything absolutely or to reach any resting place in our actual lives, we continue to hover at the entrance to the cavern of mystery;¹⁸⁶ the sense that 'reality' is synonymous with 'beauty', and rest achieved in experiencing the beauty of nature;¹⁸⁷ the conception of all human being reduced to nothingness when set against infinity.'¹⁸⁸ Hussey neither questions nor contests the validity of Woolf's religious antipathies here. Neither does he confine his assessment of Woolf's depiction of 'reality' to an exploration of the fictional outworking of these antipathies. He has his *own* sense of the fundamentally illusory characteristics of the religious perspective, which he takes this opportunity to air. Comparing *To The Lighthouse's* evocation of one character's 'sense of vastness and littleness,' with 'an important fragment' of Pascal's *Disproportion of Man* (*Pensées*),¹⁸⁹ Hussey critiques the latter's conviction that to understand the human situation, requires us to pass to knowledge of God.¹⁹⁰

While Pascal stays on the human plane, his thought and that of the novels exactly correspond; he is, as most are, lured away from the human by the

'essentially religious' character of human centrality. The mind that speaks the novels allows itself no resting-place from which to view human being, and thus the basic question is restated by the very form of the art.¹⁹¹

This statement – and its placement within the context of an attempted refutation of mystical impulses in Woolf's writing – further conveys the recurring critical association between the mystical, the religious or theological, and the naive conception of 'the easy resting-place of a deity,' the 'faith in a supernatural agency,'¹⁹² which artificially resolves the oppositions and tensions of experience, particularly that between faith and despair. This misunderstanding, which an exploration of religious mystical texts exposes as such, nevertheless speaks the shape of one challenge to contemporary theology: the need for the theological imaginary to attend to the aesthetic shapes and shades of daily human encounter. Indeed, it will be precisely (and ironically, given the shape of those misunderstandings currently under discussion), a *mystical* theology which most ably addresses these contemporary concerns.

Woolf's divergence from a Russellian epistemology and philosophy of language is further evident in the way in which for her, as a writer of fiction, non-literal language can be reality-depicting. Where objects of experience are observed through an empirical lens, the epistemological model, and attendant logical language, governing knowledge of these objects, are neatly describable and testable. But where, as for Woolf, a more subtle science interprets the un-reconciling dissonance between intuitions of unity and disunity, transcendence and immanence, cohesion and fracture, as irreducibly interdependent movements within the life of consciousness, we must look elsewhere than to Woolf's contemporaries for an appreciation of what may actually constitute the mystical content of her work.

Herein lies art's ability, contra Russell, to point, through impressions, to something more general. On one hand we encounter the efforts of the formalist aesthetic to present the shape of those invisible relations which construct public place. Consider the empty, unoccupied centre of 'Jacob's Room', or the absent character Percival (*The Waves*), where the depiction of a unifying but invisible centre gives an 'aesthetics of the unobserved'.¹⁹³ But on the other hand, we acknowledge, for Woolf, an additional confidence in the ability of non-literal language to approach what is *equally* real and 'depictable' for her: the individual's encounter with the mysterious tensions and abundances of daily experience, and the communal value of this subjective experience encountered, by others, through the work of art. Where Hussey identifies what we have explored above – the 'opposition in Woolf's thinking between the

symbolical, inclusive, intuitive, and nondiscursive mode of thought' and the 'style of rationality and logic, which tends to exclude,' – we must *not*, with Hussey, conclude that 'it is this counterbalancing that prevents her thought from being merely mystical, rooting it firmly in actual experience.'¹⁹⁴ An impoverished concept of mysticism is operating here. This study will demonstrate how the simultaneity of the successes and failures of thought and language becomes informative for readdressing the mystical dimension of Woolf's literature. Her metaphysical subtlety consists in her ability to interpret the powers and limitations of artistic expression, when confronting reality, as the truest invitation to the constant reinterpretation of life's inexhaustibility. Here is a truly mystical insight, non-naively conceived.

Platonism and Neo-Platonism

Throughout her life, Woolf studied Greek: she 'made translations and notes, reading and re-reading the poets, philosophers and dramatists,' through which she produced such essays as 'The Perfect Language', and 'On Not Knowing Greek', her studies consistently working 'in service of her thought and writing.'¹⁹⁵ Beginning Greek lessons under Janet Case in 1902 initiated an important academic relationship.¹⁹⁶ Declaring with satisfaction that 'I've finished the Symposium' in November 1920,¹⁹⁷ Woolf records reading Plato again in August 1922.¹⁹⁸ In October of the same year she writes 'I shall read the Trilogy & some Sophocles & Euripedes & a Plato dialogue,'¹⁹⁹ intends to read more Plato in January 1923,²⁰⁰ recording again that 'I must read a little translated Plato' on 3rd August 1924.²⁰¹ Given such evidence of consistent study and influence, Andrew McNeillie declares that 'Plato, it has to be said, was the philosopher Woolf read far more enthusiastically and extensively than ever she read Moore or any other philosopher . . . Moore, for all his Socratic presence, was an especially dry, analytic thinker, a philosopher's philosopher.' McNeillie locates *here* the 'need to recognise Woolf's resistance, her difference, and admit her own trajectory, beyond Bloomsbury.'²⁰²

Evidencing this intellectual inheritance, Woolf's literature brims with identifiable and well-documented allusions to Hellenic, including Platonic, literatures and imagery.²⁰³ Brenda Lyons recognises that Woolf's writings 'draw from the dialogues to inspire, complicate, and support her own aesthetic ends,'²⁰⁴ while 'her study notes on the *Euthyphro*, *Phaedrus*, *Symposium*, and *Republic*, though cursory outlines,

indicate special attention to questions of creativity, love, and truth.²⁰⁵ While indeed Woolf's 'own anti-religious sentiment,' her own *conscious* position, was 'closer to the Heretic Society than to doctrinal, especially Christian, Platonism,'²⁰⁶ nevertheless it is towards the more subtle integration of certain Platonic and Neoplatonic patterns of thought into the imaginative and conceptual architectures of her literary aesthetic that I wish to turn our attention, particularly where these reveal points of resonance with traditional mystical texts also informed by the conceptual and imaginative architectures of Platonism and Neoplatonism. Typically Platonic and Neoplatonic concerns are locatable where Woolf identifies within the scope of subjective experience an ecstatic moment of self-transcendence: when the individual intuits a pattern, a formal unity, behind appearances, while this construction simultaneously dissolves before a sense of the ever-coming 'new'.

The influence of G. E. Moore on Bloomsbury thought is detectable here. While Woolf does not share Moore's (or Murdoch's) distinctly ethical emphasis, his belief in an intuitive, *a priori* awareness of intrinsic value finds a correlate in Woolf's exploration of the significance of the individual's intuition of an irreducibly qualitative dimension of reality. Indeed, Moore's distinction between 'a world comprised of objects in space and time' (an epistemological model represented by Mr Ramsay's construal of objects of knowledge as 'P', 'Q', and 'R') and 'a realm of being that lacks both spatial and temporal properties'²⁰⁷ is echoed in Woolf's attention to the nature and relationship of these realms, although her ability to suggest their integration – through her aesthetic fusion of the impersonal and personal – locates, again, 'her own trajectory, beyond Bloomsbury.'²⁰⁸ Her exploration of the ineffable dimension of an indescribable reality, her sense of a 'non-natural' but structuring pattern behind appearances (the formal evocation of which unifies the work of art), the idea that the contemplating mind becomes in essential respects like that which it contemplates, and a particular consideration of the relationship of contemplation to love (all to be explored) each constitute, via Bloomsbury's engagement with Moorean philosophy, points of contact between the metaphysical dimensions of Woolf's literature and Platonic, and Neoplatonic, themes.

'I will read Plotinus'

On 29 October, 1934, Woolf wrote, 'I will read Plotinus.'²⁰⁹ Given her return, throughout her career, to sources of Greek philosophy, it is

surprising that the possibility of Woolf's acquaintance with Neoplatonic mystical themes has received little critical attention. While Woolf does not record which parts of Plotinus' work she read, and while this *recorded* reading occurs in the maturer years of her career, her long-standing acquaintance with Plato would have equipped her for Plotinian readings, not least in virtue of the continuity between Platonic and Plotinian philosophy.²¹⁰ An engagement of her writing with passages of Plotinus' *Enneads* reveals a striking conceptual affinity, testifying to the significance of Platonic and Neoplatonic thought for her aesthetic and intellectual formation.

On 11 March 1925, Woolf wrote to Gwen (Darwin) Raverat, 'I grow mystical as I grow older.'²¹¹ While believing this 'becoming mystical' to be consistent with her atheism,²¹² Alex Owen recognises in Woolf's observation, of 1923, that 'there is a great deal of mystic religion about,'²¹³ an indicator that "'mystic religion" was on her mind'²¹⁴ in key years of Woolf's aesthetic development. Owen observes that 'all acknowledged a kind of 'religious sense' in the post-war years,' which, although 'very differently experienced and articulated,' possessed 'a common theme: having a 'religious sense' involved a spiritualized apprehension of life, and in this vision life itself becomes sanctified.'²¹⁵ 'This was not,' Owen suggests, 'the Anglo- or Roman Catholicism that was still winning notable converts in the 1920s, but a different, less orthodox type of spirituality which implicitly questioned the designation 'religion' and explicitly challenged received wisdom on precisely that separation of spirit and matter (or, more conventionally, body and soul) that Woolf herself found so problematic.'²¹⁶

However, the following discussion will illustrate how Woolf's desire to fuse spirit and matter, to reject 'an externalized deity,'²¹⁷ to urge 'self-realization'²¹⁸ through an ecstatic self-transcendence, and to achieve a vision where 'life itself becomes sanctified,'²¹⁹ reveals an engagement with an 'immanentist spirituality'²²⁰ which simultaneously, if ironically, gestures transcendence. In emphasising immanence, Woolf escapes an 'ontic' construal of transcendence, therefore giving the latter more genuinely in the negativity of its presence. The subsequent aesthetic desire, born of this tension, to sanctify the immediate – particularly when this is conceived as requiring the rejection of an exclusively externalised divinity – draws Woolf *towards*, not away from, the metaphysical and aesthetic insights of traditional mystical literatures. Woolf engaged a characteristically post-war attitude: one which conveyed 'the palpable irony of a professed agnosticism (even atheism) that nevertheless shaded into a deeply felt personal spirituality.'²²¹

Conclusion

This chapter has examined Woolf's engagement with her contemporary world's notions of the 'mystical', demonstrating how the shape of both her coincidence and departure from her philosophical and aesthetic influences delineates the need for conversation with more traditionally sourced mystical literatures. This means bringing Woolf to engage not only with a different kind of mysticism than that which her contemporaries recognised – that is, with the literatures supporting a *religious* tradition – but with a perspective which critics, acknowledging her atheism, have not assumed worth attempting. The points of Woolf's divergence from Russell's, Bell's and Fry's epistemological and aesthetic perspectives are precisely those that draw her into conversation with a rich tradition of spiritual literature. Where Woolf refuses to accept the relegation of her literary art to a naively unifying mystical perspective on account of her dedication to the depiction of un-reconciling tensions in experience, she comes far closer to depicting what Evelyn Underhill describes as that 'spiritual life' which 'is not a consoling retreat from the difficulties of existence; but an invitation to enter fully into that difficult existence . . .'.²²² Equally, in her engagement with the reality-disclosing qualities of subjective experience, Woolf affirms the contents of daily consciousness, that 'burning heart', in its complex relation to an impersonal, transcending 'pattern'.

Moreover, where, as I will show, not only non-literal language is informative for Woolf's exploration of reality, but the *failure* of this non-literal language also, we approach the linguistic insights of those mystics for whom the mysterious logic of daily experience finds a correlate in their aesthetic response and address to the real. From the perspective of increasing present-day efforts to imagine a theology which owns the 'fragmentariness and dismemberment' of our daily encounters with the unknown,²²³ while renouncing naïve conceptions of transcendence, an exploration of points of contact between Woolf's aesthetic insights and those of traditional mysticism not only illuminates the remarkable and as yet unrecognised contribution of this literary artist to the realisation of a *theological* mystical aesthetic, but equally foregrounds the remarkable extent to which traditional mystical literatures address and interpret the vast and various atmospheres of everyday experience which contemporary theological thinking holds so rightly under view.

In response to the challenges and invitations posed by this chapter, Chapters Four and Six will bring Woolf to engage directly with two key

contributors to the Christian mystical tradition: Plotinus and Pseudo-Dionysius. While Woolf does not seem to have read Dionysius, the shape of her aesthetic nevertheless resonates markedly with his inherited Neoplatonic apophaticism. A study of the philosophical perspectives both directly and indirectly informing Woolf's literature reveals the spiritual insights of her aesthetic.

3

The Point of Departure: Readdressing the Mystical in Iris Murdoch

We know that the real lesson to be taught is that the human person is precious and unique; but we seem unable to set it forth except in terms of ideology and abstraction.

Iris Murdoch: *Sartre, Romantic Rationalist*¹

Mysticism in Murdoch: A Philosophical and Aesthetic Context

Chapter Two explored Virginia Woolf's departure from her artistic and philosophical contemporaries' assessments of the value of aesthetics for the picturing of reality, in particular her awareness of the need to fuse the impersonal, form-depicting characteristics of her literary art alongside the need to capture the intensity of subjective experience as disclosive of a dimension of reality. While Woolf shares Bell's, Fry's and Russell's commitment to the impersonal depiction of objects and their relations as ends in themselves, she diverges from the former two in outlining the dangers of an art that escapes the grit, and neglects the infinite detail, of daily experience – and forgets the limitations of the frame – in order to select immovable pictures of reality, and from Russell when, embracing an impersonal aesthetic, she will bring the dissonances of subjective experience, through the work of art, to shape the public space that is the reading community.

For Iris Murdoch, philosophy is *picturing*: philosophy involves the reception of, reflection on, and where necessary the re-imagining of, the

images human beings use to interpret their lives. Murdoch, like Woolf, is concerned (to use Murdoch-critic Maria Antonaccio's phrase) with 'picturing the human.'² Where Woolf rejects the reductionisms of Fry, Bell and Russell, Murdoch rejects the reductionisms of Anglo-American and Continental philosophical schools whose accounts of the self, and her experience, are too limited. This chapter will explore the shape of Murdoch's departure from her philosophical contemporaries in this respect. Where Woolf refused to relegate art to the epiphenomenal, Murdoch insists on philosophy's responsibility to picture the human being in the fullness of her experience, in particular that 'inner life' – for her, the *moral* life – evacuated by 'quasi-scientific' philosophical models. This is an aesthetic affirmation of the depictive powers and responsibilities of philosophy (as Woolf confronts Russell: the aesthetic can give the real), and an insistence on the need to maintain, against behaviouristic, linguistic and isolationist accounts of the human subject, an awareness of what is missing in such pictures. To consult Woolf's corresponding meditation, philosophical pictures are inadequate that confer merely 'stillness and immortality' on their subject:³ 'And there was nothing. Isabella was perfectly empty. She had no thoughts. She had no friends. She cared for nobody.'⁴ Murdoch, no more than Woolf, will accept a method of picturing the self, a philosophical methodology, that comes 'like some acid to bite off the unessential and superficial and leave only the truth,'⁵ a truth that leaves all that Isabella *actually* is – her thoughts, tastes, desires – beyond what the gilt frame can tell. Again, we may have 'Isabella' empirically: concrete relations, impersonal details, are perfectly translated in the immortal stillness of the mirror's flat reflection. But we can still 'not say what the truth about Isabella was . . .'⁶ Our pictures, our analogies, can violently obstruct: can come 'trembling between one's eyes and the truth.'⁷ For Woolf, subjective experience, consciousness, is disclosive of reality. So too, for Murdoch, the philosophical picturing of the human being in the fullness of her *inner* life is crucial. Her refusal to surrender the fullness of this reality, and its corresponding picture, is the locus of her departure from early to mid-twentieth-century analytic and continental philosophy. This departure, in its continental context, is observable through a study of her first published work, an examination of the early Jean Paul Sartre.

Sartre: Romantic Rationalist (1953) highlighted the innovative, and courageous, direction of Murdoch's attention: for this serious treatment of a key contributor to continental philosophy constituted an unfashionable move for a British academic whose philosophical world was largely defined by the inheritance of logical positivism. Murdoch's awareness of the need to search beyond the positivistic insights of reductive analytic

and scientific worldviews for the achievement of philosophy's true aim – to provide reliable pictures of what the human being, and human society, are, and *should* be – brings her into sympathy with Woolf's philosophical and artistic endeavours. Both women understand, interpret and apply the logical-philosophical insights of their male compatriots in their explorations of reality, but both come to envision the ideal philosophical mode as comprising a fusion of logical *and* affective dimensions. For both, this fusion is indicative of (and a response to) the prior intuition delivered within experience that logical and affective dimensions are equally constitutive of reality, and require equal representation in philosophical-aesthetic picturing. Moreover, where one of these dimensions is 'left out at first it cannot be put in later.'⁸

Murdoch recognised existentialist thought as a potential alternative to analytic philosophy, since the former's interest in literature meant that it 'also promised to be a philosophy interested in inner life.'⁹ However, while turning her attention from Anglo-American towards continental European philosophy, Murdoch hastily tempers the tendency she spies in the latter to make of the individual an abstract, bounded consciousness, alienated from relationships with other people, and the world of objects and events. While admiring Sartre's complex and timely (post-war) analysis of human identity, and the concept of freedom in the wake of 'the death of God', Murdoch's reservations about Sartre's portrayal of humanity's existential crises in his early writing revolve around his inability to conceive these in other than abstract terms. The characters of Sartre's early novels are, for Murdoch, chilly, distant (to themselves and one another), and hopelessly devoid of vision for moral or psychological progress. For Murdoch as moralist – as a writer wishing to witness characters 'warmed into life'¹⁰ – this clinical treatment of humanity (a sinister continental echo of the sterility of Anglo-American positivism) brings her to join the chorus of 'general criticism of the *Critique de la Raison Dialectique*' on the grounds that 'the factor of morality is, except in some extremely diminished and reduced form, absent. Morality,' Murdoch adds, 'is after all the great central arena of human life and the abode of freedom. Almost all our thoughts and actions are concerned with the infinitely heterogeneous business of evaluation, almost all our language is value language. The destruction or denial of this open texture is and has been (as we know) the aim of many theorists and many tyrannies.'¹¹ Later, in her collection of Platonic philosophical essays 'The Idea of Perfection' (1964), 'The Sovereignty of Good Over Other Concepts' (1967), and 'On "God" and "Good"' (1969), Murdoch specifically opposes the 'theorists' alluded to here.

Murdoch on *La Nausee*

Within *Sartre: Romantic Rationalist*, Murdoch analyses Sartre's first novel, *La Nausee*.¹² This 'most philosophical novel' concerns itself 'with freedom and bad faith, the character of the bourgeoisie, the phenomenology of perception, the nature of thought, of memory, of art.'¹³ At the metaphysical centre of the novel lies Antoine Roquentin's discovery: 'that the world is contingent, and that we are related to it discursively and not intuitively.'¹⁴ Roquentin is afflicted with a 'sickly horror' for the contingent, one which 'overcomes him'.¹⁵ 'A fear of objects invades him,' Murdoch comments, 'but he cannot decide whether it is he or they that have changed. Looking at a glass of beer, at the braces of the *cafe patron*, he is filled with a 'sweetish sort of disgust' . . . He subsequently makes the discovery: there are no adventures. Adventures are stories, and one does not *live* a story.' Roquentin's enlightenment consists in the realisation of the nature of the construction (or rather absence) of meaning: life's absurdity, its lurid contingency. Just as a story is only told later, after the event, and just as 'the meaning of an adventure comes from its conclusion,' so too 'when one is living, nothing happens.'¹⁶ 'The 'I' that goes on existing is merely the ever-lengthening *stuff* of gluey sensations and vague fragmentary thoughts.'¹⁷ Roquentin identifies as 'bad faith' the attempt to 'clothe the nakedness of existence' with 'trimmings of meaning,' such as the societal, institutional infrastructures supporting the otherwise meaningless lives of the bourgeoisie.¹⁸ These are existential constructions of typically modernist concerns.

Murdoch identifies the metaphysical climax of this existential malaise in the dissociation of objects from their names. 'Roquentin is staring at a seat in a tramcar. 'I murmur: it's a seat, as a sort of exorcism. But the word remains on my lips: it refuses to go and rest upon the thing . . . ' Things are delivered from their names. They are there, grotesque, stubborn, huge, and it seems crazy to call them seats or to say anything whatever about them.'¹⁹ The 'final revelation' for Roquentin is that 'there was no middle way between non-existence and this swooning abundance. What exists at all must exist to this point: to the point of mouldering, of bulging, of obscenity. In another world, circles and melodies retain their pure and rigid contours. But existence is a degeneration.'²⁰ Virginia Woolf's final novel *Between the Acts*, in a similar spirit, and with a coincidence of imagery, brings a gramophone to chant on the brink of war (degeneration), '*Unity . . . Dispersion . . . Unity . . . Dispersion*',²¹ foregrounding, as if from a timeless remove, this mortifying swing

'between non-existence and this swooning abundance.' Murdoch analyses Roquentin's experience:

The metaphysical doubt which seizes Roquentin is an old and familiar one. It is the doubt out of which the problem of particularity and the problem of induction arise. The doubter sees the world of everyday reality as a fallen and bedraggled place – fallen out of the realm of being into the realm of existence. The circle does not exist; but neither does what is named by 'black' or 'table' or 'cold'. The relation of these words to their context or application is shifting and arbitrary. What does exist is brute and nameless, it escapes from the scheme of relations in which we imagine it to be rigidly enclosed, it escapes from language and science, it is more than and other than our descriptions of it.²²

Roquentin yearns to exist necessarily, and 'for logical necessity in the order of the world'²³; but he simultaneously 'feels the vanity of these wishes,'²⁴ and Murdoch provocatively responds that 'what Roquentin has in common with Hume and with present-day empiricists is that he broods descriptively upon the doubt situation, instead of moving rapidly on to the task of providing a metaphysical solution.'²⁵ In positing the possibility of a *metaphysical* solution Murdoch strives beyond the contemporary scope of analytical philosophy which, following Russell and Ayer, refuses to legitimise metaphysics as a branch of philosophical enquiry. Murdoch's determination not to dwell with doubt, but to cast metaphysical bridges towards other planes restorative of substantial modes of self, and of meaningful relationships with reality, presupposes the existence of a land that her contemporary analytic companions (and, here, the early existentialist Sartre) would not countenance. At least here, in existentialist philosophy, the 'individual being' who 'is invaded by the senseless flux' is *interested* in 'his aspiration to *be* in a different way.'²⁶ However, his (and presumably the 'present-day empiricist's') rather weak-blooded reluctance to embark on this journey of moral progression concerns Murdoch. A situation in which the individual remains merely 'interested' in 'his aspiration to *be* in a different way,' anticipates Murdoch's condemnation of the prisoner of Plato's Cave who, recognising the fire for what it is ('the self, the old unregenerate psyche, that great source of energy and warmth,') determines to remain by the fire ('What is more likely than that they should settle down beside the fire, which though its form is flickering and unclear is quite easy to look at and cosy to sit by?'), indulging a narcissistic lamentation over unrealised potential, selecting to remain with this lower pleasure rather than

endeavouring to reach a vision of the Sun ('The fire may be mistaken for the sun, and self-scrutiny taken for goodness.')27

Language and Meaning

The dissolution of a meaningful sense of existence in *La Nausee* is complemented by associated revelations of the depravity and impotence of language, and the obscurity of thought. This exhaustive opposition of 'non-existence' and 'swooning abundance', and the associated collapse of meaning, contrasts directly with Murdoch's reflection in *The Fire and the Sun* (1977) on Plato's position in *The Sophist*, which precisely offers a constructive alternative, in this context, that is restorative of meaning: 'When we deny that something is X, we are not denying that it is, but asserting that it is other. This is possible because the world is *neither a dense unity nor an inapprehensible flux*, but an orderly network of samenesses and differences.'²⁸ (My emphasis.)

Sartre 'exaggerates in Roquentin' what 'all of us experience': 'that sense of emptiness and meaninglessness which we call *ennui*.' Murdoch recognises Sartre's exaggeration of our 'ordinary feelings of boredom and loss of meaning' precisely 'in order to bring home to us a point which 'carelessness and inattention' usually obscure.'²⁹ 'What is a thought?' Murdoch replies that, for Roquentin, 'it is bodily feelings, it is words that surge up and vanish, it is a story I tell myself later.' Indeed, Murdoch comments, in phrases that begin to set the contours of her future philosophical work, 'When we look at it closely, meaning vanishes – as when we repeat a word over and over, or stare at our faces in a mirror. If we consider our lives from moment to moment we observe, as Roquentin does, how much of the sense of what we are doing has to be put in afterwards. We observe the fabricated and shifting character of our memories. Meaning vanishes – yet we have to restore it.'³⁰ This sense for Roquentin – that 'when we look at it closely, meaning vanishes,' finds a correlate in an observation made by Woolf in her diary of 1926, when she writes that 'one can't write directly about the soul. Looked at, it vanishes.' However, in a significant diversion from Sartre's conclusion she adds, 'but look at the ceiling . . . & the soul slips in.' An interpretative key is offered here for considering the value of things about which 'one can't write directly.'³¹ The answer may partly lie – the restoration of meaning – in returning to life, in removing one's eyes from the fire. Murdoch writes in 'The Idea of Perfection' (1964), that 'the argument for looking outward at Christ and not inward at Reason is that self is such a dazzling object that if one looks there one

may see nothing else.³² Murdoch's philosophy is convinced that there exist truths which imbue experience, while escaping easy reference and verification: 'We know,' she writes, in poignant and prophetic conclusion to her first philosophical work, 'that the real lesson to be taught is that the human person is precious and unique; but we seem unable to set it forth except in terms of ideology and abstraction.'³³ Such things – that 'the human person is precious and unique' – 'the virtuous peasant knows,' as does the ordinary man, she writes in 'On "God" and "Good"', in 1969.³⁴ This is not special knowledge. Simply 'look at the ceiling . . . & the soul slips in.'³⁵ Murdoch's philosophy will reverse the direction of Roquentin's observation: 'Meaning vanishes – yet we have to restore it.'³⁶ Her consistent conviction will be that meaning, value, evacuated from the picture *cannot* be restored later. What our picture of self and world contains in its *beginning* is vital for its end.

Community, Time and Redemption

Murdoch objects to Sartre's sense that sincerity – the overturning of 'bad faith' – requires dissociation from society and community. This is an ethical objection. She notes that 'Roquentin, when he is enlightened, feels himself to have lost his role as a social human being . . . Roquentin has no *etre-pour-autrui*, no close connexion with other people and no concern about how they view him.'³⁷ She returns to this troubling anti-sentiment later, observing that Sartre, in his four-novel work *Les Chemins de la Liberté*, 'has not troubled to see the relation' between two important characters, Mathieu and his mistress Marcelle. In a climactic moment of glimpsed freedom, Mathieu simply 'drops' Marcelle, this abandonment of another being conveyed as worryingly consistent with personal enlightenment. 'What interests [Sartre], and Mathieu,' Murdoch consequently observes, 'is not Marcelle's plight at all, but an abstractly conceived problem of which her plight is the occasion.'³⁸ Later in the same text she objects to Sartre's sense that 'to value something is to seek through it to achieve a certain stabilising of one's own being.'³⁹ Murdoch identifies in Sartre's first novel a characteristic persisting elsewhere in his corpus: '*La Nausee* offers no clear answer to the ethical problems it raises.'⁴⁰ Roquentin learns that 'we must live forwards, not backwards'; just as 'language may solidify and kill our thoughts, so our values may be solidified if we do not subject them to a continual process of breaking down and rebuilding.' 'This much,' Murdoch condemningly concludes, 'is implicitly suggested by the analysis – but Sartre does not explain or examine it.'⁴¹

Murdoch is dissatisfied as much with the metaphysical picture of life Sartre portrays as with the lack of normative direction prescribed for living it. As a novel constituting 'a sort of palimpsest of metaphysical *aperçus*,' as 'an expression' of 'pure metaphysical doubt,' as an analysis of that doubt 'in terms of contemporary concepts,' as 'an epistemological essay on the phenomenology of thought' and as an 'ethical essay on the nature of "bad faith",' Sartre's text constitutes a work of philosophy and is therefore, in Murdoch's view, susceptible to the demanding criteria of that genre: indeed, it engages, to Murdoch's mind, the most serious of philosophical schools, moral philosophy and moral epistemology, and as such ought to provide not merely a vision of reality, but an invitation to consider how things *ought* to be. Sartre's impoverished conceptions of individuals, morality and relationships in *La Nausee* and *Les Chemins* constitute difficulties for Murdoch. Instead of offering any 'clear answer to the ethical problems which it raises,' *La Nausee* 'reads more like a corrective, a sort of hate poem – whose negative moral is: 'only the *salauds*⁴² think they win,' and its positive moral: 'if you want to understand something you must face it naked.'⁴³ These anaemic constructions of reality and personhood constitute a continental existentialist parallel to the arid landscapes of Anglo-American analytic philosophy.

Murdoch considers Roquentin's sense of the potential creation, or retrieval, of meaning through the creation of a work of art. When 'the book would be written' then 'a little of its radiance would fall upon my past.' 'Then perhaps I could remember my life without disgust . . . I should be able, in the past, only in the past, to accept myself.'⁴⁴ At this point, Murdoch recognises how 'others have hoped for salvation through art,' including 'Virginia Woolf, who attempts 'to make of the moment something permanent' by finely embalming it.'⁴⁵ But what Roquentin feels, Murdoch suggests, is something different from this. 'He does not imagine that while writing his novel he will experience any sense of justification or escape from absurdity . . . It is rather that through the book he will be able to attain to a conception of his own life as having the purity, the clarity and the necessity which the work of art created by him will possess.' Murdoch identifies this idea with Sartre's reference to 'the radiance falling on the past.' But, again, this is condemned as 'a very thin and unsatisfactory conclusion.'⁴⁶ For although 'a novel may be thought of as aspiring to the condition of a circle,' while 'It certainly may be thought of as conferring upon an image of life and character a certain tense self-contained form, a sort of internally related necessity,' yet *how*, she asks, 'is Roquentin, the creator, to transfer these yearned-for properties to, even, his own past? If no present thoughts of his own can confer necessary form

upon his past, then neither can a partial image of that past worked up into the wholeness of a work of art, confer the necessity.⁴⁷ This strange, abstract exercise posits an impossible retrospective achievement of life through a parasitic falling of the future on the past.

Murdoch's scepticism concerning the extent to which a work of art (as partial image) can confer necessity upon a living, breathing, life, and her scepticism concerning temporal dissonance – the ability of a work of art (necessarily created after the event or moment) to capture and solidify (in a pure, eternal form) what has already passed – engages Woolf's observations related in 'The Lady in the Looking-Glass: A Reflection'. For Woolf too, a distinction exists between the necessity conferred upon existence by significant form and the contingent reality which remains at best untouched – at worst misrepresented or unrepresented – by such efforts, while, equally 'it is too late' to capture Isabella: for 'she was gone' beyond the frame. For both women, the immortality conferred by the imposition of the frame achieves but 'a very thin and unsatisfactory conclusion.'⁴⁸ Remaining amidst existential absurdity, Woolf shares Murdoch's sense that no 'partial image' 'worked up into the wholeness of a work of art' will 'confer the necessity' on *life* that Roquentin desires. Too much will escape: and if Roquentin could be satisfied with some limited, partial image that rescues some single strand of light from his past, then, for Murdoch, too little is hoped for. While Sartre speaks through Roquentin the conviction that nothing lies between 'non-existence and this swooning abundance,' Woolf occupies this in-between space with startling courageousness, balancing nihilism and abundance. In language reminiscent of *The Waves*, Woolf too is aware, with *La Nausee*, of how, 'in another world, circles and melodies retain their pure and rigid contours': but the life excluded by the framed work of art, by the 'Looking Glass', is not one of 'mouldering, of bulging, of obscenity,' which is, for Roquentin, the only observable reality beyond non-existence when standing outside the purifying necessity conferred retrospectively by the work of art. The life cropped by the frame is not, for Woolf, pure 'degeneration.'⁴⁹ The life *left out* of art is breathing, thinking, life. Perhaps just as absurd: but strangely beautiful, even haloed.

Finally, it is 'in the intelligibility of melodies and mathematical figures,' that Sartre's 'hero' eventually finds enlightenment: these, although 'man-made fictions', are 'pure forms' escaping absurdity. But, Murdoch concludes, with characteristic reference to common-sense everyday experience, 'Roquentin's problem is not the usual human problem,' since 'we do not in fact resign ourselves to finding the everyday world a

senseless place.⁵⁰ While Sartre is 'patently uninterested in the aesthetic solution,' 'the pure radiant life with which the little melody is endowed never appears to him capable of assuming the form of a political end.' The 'anti-rationalist, anti-essentialist teachings of the book' do not satisfy Murdoch because they 'never take on a more positive ideological character:' they become neither optimistic nor practical.⁵¹ Where, as we shall see, Murdoch's analytical contemporaries, through positivistic, emotivist and behaviourist theories, reduce the individual to alienated will-power, and statements of value to subjective or epiphenomenal expressions of sentiment (see below, and Chapter Five), her existentialist near-contemporary Sartre threatens, in his early work, to remove any sense of meaningful community from our experience of the world. His later work, Murdoch reports, moves us beyond 'the mere abstract pattern of the human situation in general,' with which *La Nausee* is so occupied.⁵² But his early observations haunt Murdoch's determination to discover and convey human identities, human relationships, in their concreteness, complexity and meaning-fullness.

Murdoch on *Les Chemins*

In Sartre's *Les Chemins*, Murdoch identifies as 'the climax of Mathieu's story' a scene in volume III. Mathieu is a private in the defeated French army. The soldiers, deserted by their officers, 'stroll about, smiling to one another,' awaiting capture by the Germans. What strikes Murdoch about this 'queer interval, where guilt and innocence are found unexpectedly together' is the achievement of 'a sort of poetry which is not apparent elsewhere in *Les Chemins*. A strange profundity and gentleness attend the soldiers as they stroll about, smiling to one another.'⁵³ Mathieu muses 'this is the paradise of despair,' and asks, 'must men have lost everything, even hope, for one to be able to read in their eyes that man could conquer?' At this point, where Murdoch recognises the fusion of philosophical perspective with 'the image constituted by the story,' 'Mathieu's musings no longer seem like interludes. A real emotion binds the tale together, and the self-consciousness of its hero no longer has a chilling and detaching effect.'⁵⁴

Murdoch's voice emerges beyond Sartre's where she commends the progression from the philosophical assessment – and literary representation – of human being and relationships as abstract, 'chilling', and un-engaging to the reader, to something warmer which, through 'real emotion', invests character, and relationships, with significance, such that the reader is newly engaged. She identifies 'one final moment of

illumination' as falling upon Mathieu as he fires from the tower: 'He approached the parapet and began to shoot, standing up. It was an immense retribution; each bullet revenged him for a former scruple . . . he fired on man, on Virtue, on the World: Liberty is Terror.'⁵⁵ 'There is no doubt,' Murdoch asserts, 'that here the author is speaking . . . Sartre throws himself with an equal zest, as he hurls his hero to a senseless destruction.'⁵⁶ Yet what Murdoch is attentive to in this illuminating moment is Mathieu's asking of himself, 'have I the right to drop my friends? Have I the right to die for nothing?'⁵⁷ How different is this moment of consciousness from that of the earlier Mathieu who 'is paralysed by his excessive lucidity' such that 'there is no reason why he should go to Spain, or marry Marcelle, or join the C[ommunist].P[arty] . . . he is an empty thought, reflecting on itself.'⁵⁸

While this moment of enlightenment, of sudden fullness, fails to develop in the novel beyond a final senseless statement of nihilistic obliteration, Murdoch nevertheless recognises within Sartre's work interrogations of his own presentation. The character Ivich, she writes, 'is a living reproach to Mathieu, yet one which he (and, one feels, the author) fails to understand.'⁵⁹ Ivich represents 'the secret, the inward, the momentary, the irrational – in the presence of which Mathieu' (and Sartre, Murdoch claims)⁶⁰ 'can only feel embarrassment.'⁶¹ The point is that while, for Sartre, Ivich constitutes a genuine depiction of the other, he is, Murdoch notes, merely that conception of the other 'as a case or as a secret' which is the outworking of that mode of vision which sees the individual 'from without' as 'a menace,' and 'from within' as 'a void.'⁶² A predetermination is at play: this view of the other as either void or menace (the ethical correlate to the phenomenological experience of the world as either non-existence or bulging monstrosity) is, in Murdoch's assessment, challenged from within Sartre's own work in a moment of emotional intensity and, indeed, moral awakening ('have I the right to drop my friends? Have I the right to die for nothing?') which, again, to Murdoch's view, Sartre fails to develop.

With palpable disappointment Murdoch comments that this bleak view is delivered by the existentialist philosopher despite 'all the subtlety of the analyses of our consciousness of others which Sartre offered us in *L'Être et le Néant*'.⁶³ Murdoch is troubled by the fact that 'In the relations of the characters to each other there seems to be no middle point between the insight of the analyst and being completely at a loss,' while 'Too much of the story is pre-digested for us in the consciousness of the main characters . . . Their reflexions, instead of deepening our sense of their concreteness and complexity, strip them to the bare

structure of the particular problem which they embody.⁶⁴ Again we locate the Sartrean equivalent of the reductive, analytic, positivist tendency to examine relationships (logical or personal) by 'strip[ing] them to the bare structure of the particular problem which they embody.' Even 'the loss of sense in human relationships is asserted rather than displayed; there is no tormenting entanglement of misunderstanding between Sartre's characters.'⁶⁵ They merely 'bump into each other in an external fashion,'⁶⁶ as Sartre 'treat[s] personal relations at the level of the psychological casebook.'⁶⁷ That 'fear of the senseless' which accompanied 'the hero's awareness of the crowded superfluity of things' in *La Nausee* has become 'the horror of the flesh' – and of the other – in *Les Chemins*.

Murdoch's objections to Sartre constitute a poignant declaration of her own priorities for philosophy and literature: the reader should be brought to realise and engage with the real predicaments of human people in their 'concreteness and complexity.' Murdoch is consequently drawn towards fitful moments of illumination in Sartre's work, when a 'third way' is offered beyond the view of reality as either non-existence or gross contingency; beyond the view of human beings as void or stranger (where 'all human communion is impure and opaque'); beyond a perilous epistemological dilemma wherein 'fruitless and precarious cogitation is the alternative to a descent into the meaningless.'⁶⁸ Murdoch recognises amidst Sartre's artificially polarising depressed vision that is Mathieu's moment of illumination, and in the 'warmed' relationship between two characters Brunet and Schneider, 'the touch of an intensity which remains unanalysed.' Again, her point of departure is clear: she feels the moral imperative, the prescriptive demand, for philosophy and literature to ask what we do, and ought, to live for. Where is value? Where is a real interrogation of motivation? She declares with some satisfaction that while 'the *gaucherie* and embarrassment of Brunet are somehow shared by his author,'⁶⁹ so that the potential for an awakening remains unexplored, nevertheless 'the waters are troubled.' Murdoch is *not* embarrassed by that moment of intensity, which arises spontaneously within Sartre's vision, and is not reducible to it.

Murdoch significantly selects another moment for analysis. The character Brunet, who 'is never in doubt,' appears in the prison camp as 'almost a caricature of the hard party bureaucrat': that is, 'until he is warmed into life by Schneider.'⁷⁰ Murdoch identifies in 'This mysterious person, gentle, humane and sceptical,' 'the critic both of Brunet's practical attitude to his fellows and of his confident rendering of the Party line.'

She identifies here an emergent concern espied elsewhere in Sartre's writing, a concern neither consistent with, nor reducible to, his philosophical imaging of life. In *Les Chemins* 'we constantly feel the violent swing from a total blindness to a total freedom, from the silence of unreason to an empty and alarming babble of reflexion.' Yet there is hope for movement beyond the pendulum swing: for on the other side of despair – Murdoch takes up Sartre's gesture – 'Human life *begins*.' But, she laments, 'the complexity of the moral virtue, which must return,' this, again, 'we are not shown.'⁷¹

In Schneider's death Murdoch identifies something essential: in the declaration 'No human victory can efface this absolute of suffering,' she sees affirmed the view that 'the moment of human love had its absolute value, that its loss is absolute loss.' But this instinctive response to an absolute value transcends the philosophical model and the literary medium offered. Sartre's focus remains 'on the lonely awareness of the individual,⁷² who is the 'solipsistic centre' of the universe.'⁷³

'The sickness of the language': Fact and Value, 'Real' and 'Unreal'

The previous chapter explored Woolf's aesthetic departure from her contemporary philosophical and aesthetic influences, particularly where this departure revealed a rejection of reductive analyses of human experience: and, indeed, of art. Woolf and Fry come into conflict with Russell when the latter identifies art and literature with purely subjective, epiphenomenal effusions, incapable of capturing what is objectively real. Murdoch, inheriting through British philosophy the logical positivism of early twentieth century empiricism, equally comes into conflict with this tradition in its reductionist aspects. She was troubled by the positivistic claim that propositions are only meaningful if logically non-contradictory, and only verifiable as true if either analytically true, or if referring to a state of affairs in a world where 'metaphysical objects [have been] eliminated and physical objects disintegrated into the appearances, or *sensa*, which justify statements about them.'⁷⁴ This philosophical perspective occasioned the disappearance of any meaningful talk about morality and metaphysics as real dimensions of human experience, while disabling art's ability to convey truths about the world. While Woolf might not share the distinctly moral anxieties characterising Murdoch's reaction to this position, these women share a metaphysical and artistic objection to the disappearance of

emotional and extra-linguistic dimensions from reality, and their depiction. Their explorations of both transcending, and immanent, dimensions of reality, non-naively conceived, delineate imaginative metaphysical infrastructures.

In *Sartre*, Murdoch describes how 'It was science, not poetry' that 'revolutionised the philosopher's consciousness of language.' 'The nineteenth-century efflorescence of scientific methods,' she writes, 'and the mathematical symbolisms which accompanied them, made the philosopher see the relation of symbols, including words, to reality in a new light. Language was suddenly construed on the model of the scientific definition: the meaning of a sentence being exactly determined by an explanation of the particular sensible observations which would decide its truth.'⁷⁵ Here was a view of language with its 'criteria of meaning drawn from the sciences,' and consequently 'this framework' was 'an extremely restricted one.'⁷⁶ Crucially, 'the meaning of poetry, of religious and theological statements, and of statements in morals and political theory remained problematic.' Murdoch records how 'the search, in any case a vain one, for strange objects named by such propositions' was subsequently discontinued.⁷⁷ Language was now 'divided between descriptive (empirical) uses, and emotive ones; and the propositions in question were then said to have 'emotive meaning', to be expressions of feeling without external reference.'⁷⁸ While Murdoch's Platonic essays, written in the 1960s, and collected under the title 'The Sovereignty of the Good', represent a philosophical response and antidote to such reductive perspectives, her earlier comments in *Sartre* critique the philosophical milieu that defined Woolf's intellectual environment and laid the foundations for her own. Her comments reveal her shared sense, with Woolf, that what is integral to human life and captured in art – the affective dimension of experience – has truth-content, and cannot be resigned to the category of 'unreal' on account of failing to be the object of strict 'external reference.'

Woolf's position, in distinction from Russell and Fry, challenges philosophical and aesthetic distinctions between logic and feeling, logic and mysticism, philosophy and art. Murdoch, similarly, resists the philosophical division of fact and value. She records a move beyond logical positivism, as 'the philosopher came to see language not as a structural mirror, or even as a categorical frame, of experience of the sensible world, but as one human activity among others.'⁷⁹ And yet, she writes, 'the powerful fascination of the emotive-descriptive distinction still lingers':⁸⁰ as it does to this day. Murdoch partly attributes the perseverance of this distinction to its ability to capture 'a real sense of loss: the loss of a world

of ideas and values assumed to be common to all thinking beings.⁸¹ But the shape of the suggested resolution (as division) offers a false position. We feel the enduring power of Russell's comments to Woolf when Murdoch writes that 'the view that political and ethical remarks are simply expressions of emotion might well occur to any critical reader of the daily press.'⁸² This distinguishing of emotion and description is associated with 'the breakdown of meaning in certain spheres,'⁸³ which subsequently upset confidence in the referential accuracy of language beyond the positivistic domain. Within the art-world, 'the novel' – being traditionally 'a story' – had relied upon 'a discursive referential use of language to describe one event after another.' Now Murdoch recognises – with an author just such as Woolf in mind – how the novelist, in response, 'seemed to turn to literature as to a metaphysical task whereon the sense of the universe was at stake.'⁸⁴ Murdoch concludes that 'the human task has become a literary task,' whereby, 'what is attempted might be called reconciliation by appropriation.'⁸⁵ This privileged status given by Murdoch to literature, to art – as being definitive of the human task – could not contrast more with Russell's assessment of art's intellectual merits. 'Art then,' Murdoch famously writes in 'The Sovereignty of Good Over Other Concepts,' 'is not a diversion or a side-issue, it is the most educational of all human activities and a place in which the nature of morality can be seen.'⁸⁶

Arising throughout Murdoch's examination of successive philosophical and literary treatments of concepts of fact, value, description, emotion, and linguistic reference is a refusal to relegate, to surrender, senses of meaning and purpose beyond the confines of a philosophy that fails to accommodate metaphysical questions. She is not, as others are, content to 'accept the divided scene' and to 'take a more dualistic view' of reality. For the latter, 'Phenomena were divided into the real and the unreal; it was the task of thought to express or mirror the real; and in this passive mirroring or spontaneous expression truth consisted; not in the dynamic picking and choosing, discriminating and evaluating of practical life.'⁸⁷ As Murdoch's assessments of *La Nausee* and *Les Chemins* make clear, this detachment from the world, this attempt to grasp reality from a position of remote abstraction rather than practical indwelling, does not offer, for Murdoch, a reliable encounter with reality: we experience the other as alien, stranger, without realising that our philosophical positioning has pre-ordained this inaccurate conclusion. On the contrary, where thought and emotion move together, where fact and value are real and related, 'the great and small practical activities of life' will yield their purposes and values.⁸⁸

In terms reminiscent of Russell's exclamations to Woolf about the status of her art, Murdoch recalls how 'the linguistic philosophers . . . took as real the facts of science,' while they 'regarded as unreal the world of art, politics and religion, emotion . . .'⁸⁹ Russell declared that 'he cannot imagine an art like his physics, beginning with impressions but not stopping with them . . . "because they do not point to anything beyond themselves." Art is personal.'⁹⁰ Equally, 'value,' Murdoch writes, 'failing to be in the world, was a sort of exclamation. Truth was correspondence with fact, was the sensibly verifiable.'⁹¹ But this, she notes, maintains a 'crude version of the mind-body dualism: the Cartesian dualism' that separates 'thinking and extended substance.'⁹² Woolf and Murdoch share a fusion of logic and emotion in their epistemological and metaphysical endeavours: and art, while certainly 'personal' in the sense of being able to capture the reality of the inner life, is, in virtue of capturing this experience, able to convey matters of universal (objective) significance and value (for Murdoch the ubiquity of moral consciousness).

Rather as Woolf defends art against Russell's claim that it cannot point to anything 'beyond impressions,' Murdoch criticises Sartre for a faulty view of imagination which furthermore 'impoverishes' his theory of art.⁹³ The shape of her criticism delineates the relationship between art and emotion: and the sense, with Woolf, that art presents what is excluded by positivist accounts of reality, what is irreducible to the denuded scene. For Sartre, 'Any imaginative movement which is not the scattering of a given complex' – the obliteration of a seeming whole – 'is a piece of self-deception, a self-protective dodge of consciousness,' that mars the way to freedom. Murdoch envisages emotion, and emotional relations, to constitute such 'a given complex': this conception of imagination is associated with Sartre's failure to consider any concept of 'justified' real emotions, or 'purged' aesthetic emotions.⁹⁴

Sartre's position – wherein 'Any imaginative movement which is not the scattering of a given complex is a piece of self-deception' – is strikingly at odds with the premise of Murdoch's later philosophical work *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*. Here, her opening words declare that 'The idea of a self-contained unity or limited whole is a fundamental instinctive concept. We see parts of things, we intuit whole things.'⁹⁵ This is an aesthetic and imaginative notion: 'Art,' she writes, 'essentially (traditionally) involves the idea of a sustained experienced mental synthesis . . . This ability to sustain and experience imagined syntheses has importance in other areas where we make use of analogous or related conceptions of authoritative limited wholes.'⁹⁶ Murdoch departs from Sartre in maintaining the validity of, and the rationality of trusting in,

intuitions of authoritative wholes, and in preserving a concept of moral progress that responds to such metaphysical integrity. Sartre's position, whereby he 'isolates emotion from the world,' is 'an imperious infantile gesture.'⁹⁷ Emotion and imagination – art itself – threaten to become versions of bad faith. In light of Sartre's 'Essay on the Emotions', 'the artist must appear . . . as a futile escapist,' or 'as engaged upon some dubious metaphysical project.' With serious reservations she concludes that 'Emotion as a real creative power, or as part of a new experience, Sartre does not recognise.'⁹⁸ Once again, in its refusal to countenance the imagination, and emotion, as reflective of – and constituting – dimensions of reality (as opposed to comfort or illusion), continental existentialism performs its reductive equivalent to the hopeless ponderings of that 'present-day empiricist' who 'broods descriptively upon the doubt situation, instead of moving rapidly on to the task of providing a metaphysical solution.'⁹⁹

Woolf refuses to consider art as failing to capture what is most real, to relegate the contents of art to the realms of the epiphenomenal. She resists aesthetic theories that forget what is lost beyond the frame. Now, Murdoch criticises the linguistic philosophers for their 'readiness to resolve what seemed a harsh and hopeless [mind-body] dualism into a simple and static monism,' by 'taking one aspect of life as its total and allowing the other aspects to appear simply as peripheral clouds.'¹⁰⁰ The consequence for the linguistic philosophers was that 'mental activity lost its complexity and depth,' and emotional language is discarded as offering nothing other than exclamations of subjective preferences. While, for Murdoch, 'Sartre attaches no value to the intellectual's lonely meditations, nor does he seem to attach much value to the muddled and frustrated efforts of human beings to understand each other,'¹⁰¹ nevertheless he is, commendably, 'not prepared to go as far as certain British empiricists in the direction of identifying mind or intelligence with its observable concomitants.'¹⁰² Murdoch writes that this 'despairing monistic attitude appears in literature as a readiness simply to record the flux of reality,' but is not quite accurate to report that, for Virginia Woolf, 'the person is presented as a series of more or less discrete experiences, connected by tone and colour rather than by any thread of consistent struggle or purpose – and both person and author seem content.'¹⁰³ The same novel that sees Mrs Ramsay killed in a square bracket conveys Lily's profuse agony over how to achieve artistic, and personal, communion with the object of her vision – the same Mrs Ramsay. Murdoch criticises Sartre's literature because 'The tragic and magnetic unattainability of the loved other is not presented.'¹⁰⁴ Yet Woolf's depiction of

Lily's feelings for Mrs Ramsay engages this territory in its agony and ecstasy.

What at least 'differentiates' Sartre 'from the British linguistic philosophers' is his 'desire to put language to work in the context of the great questions of faith,' his 'wish[ing] to conceive of language neither as a vehicle for realistic reporting nor as an expression of the unsorted totality of the unconscious.' Literature, therefore, 'is to be an activity going forward in a world where certain reconciliations are impossible and certain conflicts inevitable.'¹⁰⁵ Here is Murdoch's vision of language and literature emerging in distinction from that of the 'British linguistic philosophers'. She records how, for Sartre, 'The problem is to find a middle way (a third force) between the ossification of language and its descent into the senseless, between the bad faith of the salauds and spiritual chaos . . .'¹⁰⁶ This expression is evocative of the theological need to balance the cataphatic and apophatic dimensions of theological language. Where a dimension of reality is both transcendent and immanent, the simultaneous success and failure of language to refer to this reality is indicative of the creative interplay of these transcendent and immanent dimensions. This logic at the heart of traditional mystical language – testifying that language both captures, and cannot capture, ultimate reality – prevents the erroneous monistic resolution either into pure cataphaticism ('bad faith', the positivistic conviction that language is meaningful when making literal reference to an identifiable object) and pure apophaticism (utter meaninglessness, a collapse towards nihilism). Woolf and Murdoch may not possess a concept of divine being as the object of their epistemological, metaphysical and artistic quest: but the realities, the metaphysical landscapes, they desire to capture are sufficiently immanent to everyday life (moral and emotional) to identify that life as the site of truth, yet sufficiently transcendent of language to resist reduction to crude philosophical (or theological) literalisms. Finally, the analyses of consciousness, freedom and value offered in *L'Être et le Néant* 'lead to a starting-point – but do not indicate a road.'¹⁰⁷ The novels present 'the same spectacle of a struggle towards sincerity and reflexion which can bear no practical fruits.'

A broken totality¹⁰⁸

Towards the end of her analysis of Sartre's oeuvre, Murdoch identifies a point of transcendence for his vision and work: a *moral* reality, glimpsed in signs invisible to the author, immanent to his vision, but never

realised. He 'does attempt to assert the absolute value of the person and the moment . . . But he has to make this assertion without the support of any background faith, religious or political.' Consequently, 'his defence of the moment appears naked and desperate and unavoidably ambivalent':¹⁰⁹ and yet he 'cannot rid himself of the absolute aspiration, the desire for certainty and completion which he presents as an eternal characteristic of man,' and which leads him to wish 'to create a total picture of the broken totality, to describe man's limit from a point beyond that limit.'¹¹⁰ This description is again evocative of Murdoch's philosophical aim presented in *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, to examine our intuitive concepts of 'limited wholes.' Sartre continues to assert 'the absolute nature of the individual even if he is without hope and the sacredness of reason even if it is fruitless.' Murdoch draws out the aspects of Sartre's vision that remain irreducible to the content of his argument. But here, she notes, is the essence of a 'dilemma in which we are all involved. For many reasons, the chief of which is that science has altered our societies and our key concepts with a dreadful speed, it seems now impossible for us either to live unreflectively or to express a view of what we are in any systematic terms . . .' We 'can no longer,' she says, 'formulate a general truth about ourselves which shall encompass us like a house.' But 'what we hold in common, whatever our solution, is a sense of a broken totality, a divided being.'¹¹¹

Murdoch's subsequent philosophical work, in particular her Platonic writing, will endeavour to reintegrate such 'divided being', to locate those totalities – such as the converging of all virtues in love – which exert their magnetism over human life, granting to consciousness its quality of '*projet*' (its aspiration 'towards a wholeness which forever haunts its partial state'),¹¹² convicting consciousness of its need to grow towards a fuller grasp of such authoritative wholes. For Murdoch, 'all modern philosophies are philosophies of the third way': she refuses to adopt the artificial monistic perspectives that sideline either reason (the Surrealists) or passion (the reductive empiricists), in order to declare one branch of human experience, and one way of knowing and describing, as absolute, exhaustive and exclusively meaningful.

'Literature and Philosophy'

Where Woolf confronts, and situates her aesthetic and metaphysical convictions in relation to, an antagonistic Russellian distinction between art and physics, mysticism and logic – in which the first of the pair is

deemed 'weakest' for the depiction of reality – Murdoch confronts an equivalent philosophical bias. In 1977, she appeared on British television in conversation with Bryan Magee, philosopher and broadcaster: the text of the conversation was reworked and published in Magee's *Men of Ideas*, in 1978. Although (as in the case of Russell's essay on 'mysticism' and 'logic') the conversation indicates an unbiased intention to consider the true nature of literature and philosophy, the text of the conversation rehearses preconceived ideas – and mainly Magee's – about the nature of literature and philosophy.

'In your novels,' says Magee to Murdoch, 'the sentences are opaque, in the sense that they are rich in connotation, allusion, ambiguity; whereas in your philosophical writing the sentences are transparent, because they are saying one thing at a time.'¹¹³ 'You have said,' says Magee, 'that philosophy is not science, and I agree. But it has certain very basic things in common with science . . . both are attempts to understand the world, and to do so in a way that does not consist of expressing personal attitudes. In other words, in both activities one submits oneself to criteria outside oneself; one tries to say something that is *impersonally* true.'¹¹⁴ While, for Magee, 'an imaginative or creative writer' must be in 'possession of a personality', 'with philosophers that is simply not the case.'¹¹⁵ 'Literature, to be literature at all,' he insists, 'must move one emotionally,' (we are reminded of Clive Bell's definition of aesthetics), 'whereas the philosopher – like the scientist – is positively trying to eliminate emotional appeal from his work.'¹¹⁶

What concerns Murdoch's critics most about this interview¹¹⁷ is Murdoch's apparent endorsement of a philosophical methodology and style very different to her own. Murdoch's philosophy does not manifest what she identifies in this interview as 'an ideal philosophical style which has a special unambiguous plainness and hardness about it, an austere unselfish candid style.' 'A philosopher' moreover, she adds, 'must try to explain exactly what he means and avoid rhetoric and idle decoration . . . this need not exclude wit and occasional interludes; but when the philosopher is at is were in the front line in relation to his problem I think he speaks with a certain cold clear recognisable voice.'¹¹⁸ She adds, a moment later, 'Philosophical writing is not self-expression, it involves a disciplined removal of the personal voice . . . a plain personal hardness . . .'¹¹⁹ But Murdoch's philosophical works contain protestations of faith, warm evocations, and lucid imagery and metaphor that might indeed be considered 'idle decoration' if her own philosophy did not consistently reveal, in virtue of the imaginative properties of consciousness, the indispensability of imaginative language for

the statement of philosophical problems. Her philosophy contains 'self-expression', her own voice emerging at consummative points to confess that 'I am not sure how far my positive suggestions make sense.'¹²⁰

Murdoch's responses to Magee do not contain a description of her own philosophical method, but rather reveal the extent to which this prominent philosopher finds herself encouraged to endorse inherited definitions of, and distinctions between, 'literature' and 'philosophy'. As in Woolf's case, Murdoch's departure from her contemporaries includes a challenge to such pre-existing convictions concerning the truth-telling properties of the aesthetic imagination. Murdoch's philosophy foregrounds the creative imagination as a route not to fancy but to knowledge. 'It is,' after all, 'a matter of what we "see things as",' and 'part of human learning' involves 'an ability' to 'judge and understand the imagery which helps us to interpret the world.'¹²¹ This is the right and proper subject matter of philosophy.

PART TWO

A Mystical Philosophy

4

Exploring the Cataphatic Dimension of Virginia Woolf's Work: Virginia Woolf and Plotinus

I will read Plotinus:

Virginia Woolf, 29 October 1934¹

The inexpressible makes its appearance, breaking through the comfortable, familiar texture of the everyday.

Pierre Hadot, *Plotinus*²

Chapter Two situated Woolf in terms of her contemporary world's discussion of 'the mystical', and delineated the shape of an invitation to embrace those aspects of Woolf's aesthetic which extend, as yet unexplored, from previous critical analysis.

This chapter begins to consider whether the insights of traditional mysticism come closer to capturing the essence of Woolf's aesthetic vision. I present points of conceptual engagement between the mysticism of Plotinus and Woolf's visionary aesthetics, demonstrated through the exploration of several distinctly mystical categories. In reading Plotinus, I consult the interpretation offered by Pierre Hadot's *Plotinus: or The Simplicity of Vision*. This reading is relevant for this study insofar as its emphasis on the spiritual *life* conveyed by Plotinus engages well with the atmosphere of Woolf's thought, reflecting her scepticism of strictly theoretical approaches to the real, and her uniting of intellectual and physical modes of vision for shaping the artist's approach to reality. Hadot's text is also appropriate in its recognition of Plotinus' awareness of the 'almost untenable position' human beings find themselves

in: being confronted both by the mystery of the inexpressible, breaking through 'the comfortable, familiar texture of the everyday,' and a contending desire always to come back 'to the reassuring obviousness of the everyday.'³ Hadot is distinctive in not allowing his awareness of Neoplatonism's suspicion of the body, and bodily, to obscure a more subtle Plotinian sense that all levels of human reality contain 'a latent potentiality for the mystic life.'⁴ As such, Plotinus' mystical philosophy speaks directly to the contemporary theological desire to affirm, as imbued with spiritual significance, the contours of everyday experience. This ancient thinker, who 'gently accepted the multiple levels of our being,' sees, as we must today, that 'it [is] necessary that [human]kind learn to tolerate itself.'⁵

This chapter intends to convey the rich engagement between aspects of Woolf's aesthetic and a valued interpretation of Plotinian thought. I do not interpret the various levels of translation and re-translation accompanying an attempt to consult Plotinus' original text (and exact meaning) as disabling this conversation: indeed, in his translation, which I use, of Hadot's text, Michael Chase – conversing with the author and several authoritative translations of, and commentaries on, Plotinus' text – brings Hadot's citations of Plotinus as close to the original Greek text as he can.⁶ In continuity with my desire to engage Hadot's translation and critique of Plotinus' *Enneads*, I quote directly from Hadot's text and therefore cite Hadot's (and Chase's) translation of Plotinus. However, I will also, for the purpose of authenticating their translation, footnote an alternative translation of each passage under view.⁷

The points of engagement explored in this chapter must be recognised as anticipating their own relationship with the apophatic insights to be encountered in Chapter Six. The present chapter explores the *cataphatic* elements of Woolf's aesthetic: positive moments of encounter with a transcending vision, ones which simultaneously affirm the constructive power of language in its response to an engagement with the ground of reality. However, these observations will only appear most true – both to the temperament of Woolf's aesthetic (in its contending attendance to fracture, dissolution and darkness) and the structure of the mystical perspective (in its holding together of cataphatic and apophatic moments) when related to that apophaticism explored in Chapter Six. The discussion of this chapter should be received as the first of a two-stage exploration of the mystical dimension of Woolf's aesthetic.

Woolf shares with the mystical Plotinus a passionate desire to 'see' and capture the 'real'. Metaphors of vision and expressive possession define two interpenetrating moments of relationship with an essential

dimension beyond the world of appearance: a dimension implied by the metaphysical architectures of Woolf's aesthetic perspectives. For Woolf and Plotinus, the term 'vision' designates both the mode of visual perception, and a mode of non-physical, intuitional and intellectual vision which has the power to inform and transform the first. Woolf engages with the *mystical* Plotinus precisely where the process of envisioning the form of the real brings the individual perceiver into intimate relationship with that reality so perceived. There are moments of vivid correspondence, in terms both of content and order of emergence, between the intellectual and visionary events informing Woolf's aesthetic and Plotinus' mystical apprehension, and attempted expression, of reality. Where the mystic prepares a state of interior being conducive to the reception of the inward vision of the real, Woolf considers the literary means by which she may 'come to terms with these mystical feelings',⁸ the inspiration for which emerges from the instinctual apprehension of a uniting impulse 'residing in downs or sky.'⁹ As the third century philosopher-mystic clothes reality with metaphors whose logic and content beckon the unutterable, Woolf, as creative writer, wrestles with the potentialities, complexities and subtleties of form (both of envisioned object and expressive medium): shaping and toning the compositional elements of her instrument as she strives to capture, in a moment, and completely, the elusive real. For both mystic and writer, for both visionaries, the moment of vision and the inspiration to attempt expression stand side by side, their energies sourced in the same conviction of the presence of an underlying order: an order which, albeit fluctuating and elusive to their touch, simultaneously imbues and transcends the world around them.

Art and Life

She chose not to impose form intellectually. She wrote, revised, rewrote, and revised again, in the expectation that a shape would emerge acceptable to her feeling for form. Mind was to recognize form, but not to determine it.

Carl Woodring, 'Virginia Woolf'¹⁰

External and internal impulses flow together.

Carl Woodring, 'Virginia Woolf'¹¹

Throughout Woolf's autobiographical and fictional works there exists a tension comprised of the opposition of two equally strong

intuitions: first, that life is somehow unified (there is a 'pattern' rather than an 'enemy' 'behind the cotton wool of daily life');¹² second, that life, being composed of disparate elements, achieves unity through the vision and creativity of the artist (Woolf, as Fry, will synthesise, through her literary art, 'the whole mosaic of vision').¹³

But what does it mean to say that life is unified? What is meant by 'life' or 'unified'? Woolf opposed what she identified as a scholastic tendency to reduce the elements of human experience to pieces of information in artificial systems: to cold science. This is already detected in her divergence from her contemporaries' philosophical perspectives. As Carl Woodring provocatively comments, 'She did not wish to waste a keen mind in making rational statements that any educated fool could make.'¹⁴ One consequence of this resistance is that Woolf does not, in the manner of her philosophical contemporaries, define her terms and use them rigidly. However, her writing contributes to metaphysical discourses, not least because the internally discursive and shifting attitudes of her characters convey, more honestly than any tidier theory, the content of human experience as the individual seeks the real. We could say of Woolf's oeuvre what Woodring suggests of *Mrs Dalloway*: that 'Despite her care to avoid "the twilight world of theory," certain liberal doctrines show through,'¹⁵ as Chapter Two's discussion of Woolf's intellectual influences intimated.

Sourcing Unity

Love had a thousand shapes. There might be lovers whose gift it was to choose out the elements of things and place them together and so, giving them a wholeness not theirs in life, make of some scene, or meeting of people (all now gone and separate), one of those globed compacted things over which thought lingers, and love plays.

Virginia Woolf, *To The Lighthouse*¹⁶

Our attention to the images of art can provide a point where the distinction of subject and object vanishes in an intuitive understanding.

Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*¹⁷

One dialectic under discussion in this study is that which embraces the movement between the cataphatic and apophatic moments of mystical discourse (the sayable and the unsayable). Another is introduced here: that is, the tension between the sense that order, that unity, is first

encountered in the world of appearance (as being inherent to structures of appearance), and the (*apparently* contending) sense that order, that unity, is first encountered through an artistic vision and practice which is, *a la* Fry and Cezanne, 'transformative' of the mosaic of appearance. But common to *both* these dialectics is the necessary *simultaneity* of their apparently mutually exclusive strands: in both cases, two apparently opposing disjuncts are understood as being not only necessary each for the other, but as actually creating, *through* their simultaneous operation, a radically new mode of operation, a new way of apprehending reality. The first dialectic creates, for the theologian, a new way of (not-) speaking: the second creates, for the artist, a new way of (not-) seeing. In upholding the originality of unity as encountered in the world (as an underlying structural order, essential, if invisible), alongside, 'conversely', the originality of unity envisioned through a transformative vision and practice, a strong sense of the mutual interpenetration of the infrastructures of appearance and intellect, of the visible and the invisible, arises at the heart of Woolf's aesthetic.

To express this succinctly: throughout Woolf's writing, intuitions of unity arise in apparently contradicting contexts. These intuitions vary in content, and construct the following dilemma:

- (i) The world of appearances and events is a unified whole, first and foremost, a fact which arrives in intuition, and inspires the artist to attempt its expression in the form of the art-work. Art is not purely imitative of appearance, and actually reveals the world's hidden unity, but this unity is discovered first in the world, being only later captured in art.

Contrasting with:

- (ii) The world is not an ordered, unified whole, but can be made such through the transformative and uniting powers of artistic vision and composition.

If (i) is the case, the artist's work *reveals* a unity which is experienced, or intuited, first in the world, the art-work distilling the essential structure of this world (the art work rendering pre-existing form);

If (ii) is the case, art not only reveals the essential structure of reality, but transforms human experience by unifying it, by *giving* it form, by creating order and – through framing – unity. Through artistic activity a transcendental unifier is imposed on a chaotic world of appearances and events, mediating a formal structure from the abstract to the

immediate, thereby creating formal shape for this otherwise chaotic world: in a sense, redeeming it.

However, as these apparent contrasts will be revealed as standing for inter-defining moments of one contemplative activity, Woolf's metaphysical standpoint will resist the following, often 'popular', distinction:

(i) 'The world', an amalgam of physical objects (with or without invisible underlying structures), informs the content of sense-experience, but is untouched by, unshaped by, and fundamentally separated from, consciousness of it. In her aesthetic renouncement of this perspective, Woolf departs from the objectifying, empirical literalism of such as Russell and Ayer, and those contemporary literary critics who absorb this philosophical heritage (as illustrated in Chapter Two).

(ii) 'Art' identifies an activity occurring in an abstract realm of form creation: which makes superfluous shapes for the landscapes of memory and imagination, but does not touch, inform, shape or transform the world described above. Art may utilise the world's materiality for its expression, but does not contribute to, or transform, the inherent structures of reality.

In resisting, through her writing, this naïve distinction, Woolf's divergence from both Russell and Bell is recognisable: for she resists, we recall, an exhaustive interpretation of art as articulating a purely emotional response to the world, especially where (as for Russell), this emotional content is not interpreted as contributing to the shape of reality. Resisting the distinction above, Woolf explores a radically interpenetrative interpretation of the relationship between the world encountered through art, and art as encountered through engagement with the world.

For Woolf, 'it is this writing that gives me my proportions,'¹⁸ it is art that makes sense of life. By 'life' Woolf identifies that everyday place where artistic vision meets the world and the two engage a mutually informative, though intermittently destructive or constructive, conversation. Life invalidates the distinction made above: when Woolf speaks of intuiting a pattern behind 'life', she moves beyond the moment of dialectical opposition between art (subjective) as source of order and unity, and world (objective) as source of order and unity, towards a moment of dialectical reconciliation. Again, this reconciliation is not the obliteration of either strand, but the transcendence of a false distinction

between subjective and objective in this context, in the realisation that these are mutually interpenetrating, not mutually exclusive, modes of being. Murdoch suggests something similar when writing that in cases of 'good art', form is invisible, rendering the ultimate coincidence of pointlessness and value: good art reveals 'the minute and absolutely random detail of the world, and reveals it together with a sense of unity and form.'¹⁹

Where an aesthetics of the unobserved is possible, where Woolf will call 'mystical' the capacity of art to render the invisible structures underpinning appearances, then 'art' and 'the world' engage in intimate conversation. Where the realms of 'art' and 'world' are mutually informative, each suggesting itself as the residence of the ordered and unified (a reinstatement of the dialectic), both are, in fact, bound up in a hermeneutical relationship of mutual interpenetration and mutual in-formation which will render the source of unity intriguingly, though incommunicably, transparent.²⁰

I

On Unity

That was the nature of the revelation. In the midst of chaos, there was shape.

Virginia Woolf, *To The Lighthouse*²¹

It was a question, she remembered, how to connect this mass on the right hand with that on the left. She might do it by bringing the line of the branch across so; or break the vacancy in the foreground by an object . . . But the danger was that by doing that the unity of the whole might be broken.

Virginia Woolf, *To The Lighthouse*²²

Intuiting Unity as a Principle of Being: Envisioning a Formal Aesthetic

By the end of 1927, Woolf had published *The Voyage Out* (1915), *Night & Day* (1919), *Jacob's Room* (1922), *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) and *To The Lighthouse* (1927). These novels constitute successive attempts to capture, in literary form, the elements of a vision of life which haunted Woolf with increasing intensity. Is life somehow ordered,

and, being ordered, somehow unified? Or are moments of experience merely shadows, there, then gone? These opposing intuitions surface in consciousness, and, for literature to *capture* life, its formal structures and textures must be so arranged as to render transparently the shape and tone and tenor of these thoughts.

Much critical attention has explored the darker moment of this tension: perhaps because its content makes a more urgent impression on the reader's consciousness; perhaps because critics identify in the crisis of form and meaning a typically modernist concern. However, while Woolf's novels (particularly *Jacob's Room*, *Mrs Dalloway*, *The Waves* (1931) and *Between the Acts* (1941)) are much occupied with themes of dispersion, dissolution and isolation (personal, temporal and ontological), her diaries highlight a keen instinct for the constructive and uniting powers of consciousness, one which has received a disproportionately low level of attention. It is possible to construct a conversation between Woolf's diaries and her novels in a way identifying the rich instinct towards a vision of unity present within her fiction. This is particularly true of *To The Lighthouse*, through reading which this intuition to unity can be explored: its definition, realm of application (as an inherent property of the world and a *formative* characteristic of the reality-apprehending efforts of creative expression), and its relation to opposing forces of disintegration also present in Woolf's aesthetic vision. In her creative exploration of these questions, Woolf is decidedly a metaphysician.

Attempting to describe the object of her creative and expressive efforts, Woolf comments in her diary, on 10 September 1927:

This has been a very animated summer: a summer lived almost too much in public. Often down here I have entered into a sanctuary; a nunnery; had a religious retreat; of great agony once; & always some terror: so afraid one is of loneliness: of seeing to the bottom of the vessel. This is one of the experiences I have had here in some Augusts; & got then into a consciousness of what I call 'reality': a thing I see before me; *something abstract; but residing in the downs or sky*; beside which nothing matters; *in which I shall rest and continue to exist*. Reality I call it. And I fancy sometimes this is the most necessary thing to me: that which I seek. But who knows – once one takes a pen & writes? How difficult not to go on making 'reality' this & that, whereas it is one thing. Now perhaps this is my gift; this perhaps is what distinguishes me from other people; I think it may be rare to have so acute a sense of something like that – but again, who knows? I would like to express it too.²³

This passage resonates with mystical associations. In terms of both conception and terminology, that striving of which Woolf is aware communes with a mystical instinct for approaching the real. As an observance of the consciousness preceding artistic endeavour, the priority of vision is secured here, as is the language of vision ('I see') with which Woolf captures this dimension of the artistic process (the language of vision, of attention, is also central to Murdoch's work). In possession of 'a consciousness' of 'reality', something 'see[n] before me', something at once abstract, yet immanent to the landscape of experience (the indwelling of the intuited abstract within the spatiotemporal suggests the transcendence of vision beyond the finitude of the immediately appearing object) Woolf describes the *pre-expressive* moment of artistic vision. Vision brings with it the inspiration to attempt expression ('I would like to express it too'), but this impulse poses a problem in the form of a threat to the unitive integrity of the vision: for 'reality', Woolf considers, 'is one thing', and the essence of her vision here is not simply a sense of order, but of *unity*. For Woolf, as Carl Woodring comments, 'a novel in progress somehow hedges the "truth" in order to create a "whole vision"'; her standard is 'the one shape that her inmost being creates and approves.'²⁴ (Plato, Murdoch notes, in apophatic tone, has something to say of such efforts to 'hedge in' the truth: 'Plato uses an image of a philosophical problem as being like a hunted animal, carefully cornered in a thicket which on approach turns out to be empty.'²⁵ Woolf, of course, is not unaware of this problem: look at the soul, and it vanishes.²⁶)

It is in virtue of the relationship between ontology and language that 'one [who] takes a pen and writes' threatens to 'go on making "reality" this and that, whereas it is one thing.' The potential of language to fracture the unity intuited in consciousness, is reflected in the oppositional moment which constitutes the second strand of the unity-disunity dilemma of conscious experience. While consciousness envisions, and writing aspires towards, the reception and creation of unity respectively, Woolf also recognises a destructive and 'many-making' potential, integral to written form, which corresponds to an equally divisive moment in speculative thinking. Her exploration of the structures and atmospheres of consciousness is often intimately bound up with a consideration of artistic activity and modes of artistic attention. This is significant for this study, since the relationship Woolf reveals between the characteristics of artistic attention and the landscapes of ordinary consciousness illustrates the distinctly

aesthetic nature of our everyday encounters with the world. In Murdoch's philosophy, a correlate exists in her foregrounding of the artistic, image-making, properties of consciousness.

This relationship, between the characteristics of artistic attention and the landscapes of ordinary consciousness, is explored in depth in *To The Lighthouse* (1927), a novel with many levels of interpretative value, but which, as a *Kunstlerroman* ('a novel charting an artist's development')²⁷ performs a self-reflexive, and typically modernist, exercise, in taking as its object, and thereby examining, the nature of that artistic activity responsible for its composition. The novel resonates the tension between unity (intuited, and the object of attempted expression) and disunity (intuited, and the object of attempted expression) throughout, and on several distinct levels: though particularly through the silent struggles and contemplations of Mrs Ramsay and Lily Briscoe, and, of course, in the creative efforts of Woolf as author.

In Woolf's diary entry of 10 September 1927 is glimpsed the shape of a dialectical struggle which is especially relevant for our discussion of negative theology. Woolf's intuition of the 'oneness' of reality exists alongside, is thrown into relief by, might even be revealed *through*, a consciousness of the fracturing capacities of attempted expression. For where there is vision, there is the impulse to respond creatively, to incarnate vision in the material of appearance, to make what is unobserved, observed: yet the exercising of this creative impulse is informative for the first intuition, as when the fracturing potential of language declares the original unity of vision. An awareness of the simultaneously unifying and disintegrating capacities of expression informs an aspect of the dialectic with which we are currently engaged: in addressing the claims of both life and art to be the source and creative location of the unity of the real. When Woolf considers the potential for expressive form to break apart her unified vision ('to go on making "reality" this and that whereas it is one thing'), the implication is that the world has possessed first what her vision has only come to know, and what her art may even, in endeavouring to make the vision concrete, break apart: yet, simultaneously, it is artistic vision, of which the contemplating individual is source, that has recognised the possibility of the inherent unity of the landscapes of consciousness in the first place.

Supporting our recognition of this central tension, Woolf's diaries are full of allusions to the interplay of inspiration, vision (perceptual and intellectual), and the nature of the attempt both to locate and express, express and locate, this feeling for the real. And it is, significantly, a

feeling that is *seeing*: Woolf testifies to the affective dimension of this visionary encounter, one which 'sees' beyond the flux of immediate appearances, but can draw the cool sub-structures recognised by Russell's intellectual vision into warmer relationship with human feeling (her rational mysticism). Woolf consistently endeavours to refine the texture of her literary 'tools' to a degree of subtlety capable of capturing a view of the world, of life, intuited at a 'deeper' level of being:

. . . I could hardly read for the swarm of ideas that rose involuntarily. I had to write them out at once . . . I am suspended between life & death in an unfamiliar way.²⁸

Well, be still and ruminate . . . and I'm sure that there is a remarkable shape somewhere concealed there.²⁹

This 'shape', arising involuntarily, promises self-reflexive clarity in 'still' moments: a contemplative mood will bring clearer vision of the emerging form. This image often accompanies, in Woolf's diaries, the description of a significant moment in the creative genesis of a new literary form, but one which captures a new perspective on reality to which this conception of form responds. The emerging shape is as much, if not more, a mysterious invitation to a new way of seeing life – the emergence of a new template for the organisation of experience – as it is a suggestion for the *formal* literary response required to express this new vision.

However, once again, and in virtue of the relationship of language and ontology, these two aspects of the emerging vision are inseparably linked. This moment of emergence captures the sense in which the uniting power of the formal structure cannot simply be understood as a kind of *post*-vision activation of the unitive powers of expression. For while the formal and structural considerations (active and compositional) inherent to Woolf's literary activity are distinguishable from the kind of formal presence which belongs to the emerging vision recorded in her diary entry above (where the artist more passively receives her vision), nevertheless the uniting powers of formal structure are inherently present to the pre-expressive moment of vision, the vision and its formal qualities being integral to one another. Prior, then, to Woolf's artistic response to her vision, is the recognition of the formal integrity of the vision *itself* as a united structure: Woolf's creative activity may also be constructive of unity, but the nature of this vision *itself* indicates a primordial ontological-linguistic relationship, announcing the formal unity of the vision before its expression is attempted. Murdoch is

similarly convicted, in spite of life's seeming pointlessness, of the priority of experiences of unity, of limited wholes, before the achievement of that speculative knowledge which assumes disjunctions between parts and wholes, between subjects and objects (see the opening pages of *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* and Chapter Five of the present work).

This point enhances another angle of the dialectic under view in Woolf's work: the sense in which both the moment of vision and the moment of expression claim to source the structural unity of reality. Since 'an aesthetics of the unobserved' requires a scaffolding of *translation* whereby the pre-expressive vision of formal integrity may be mediated for formal expression, something in the nature of form (and vision) therefore spans the pre-expressive and expressive moments. Yet, form must be qualitatively different for each. The attempt to compose literary form is *creative* insofar as a partially pre-meditated conception of form (inherent to vision as *activity*) is re-constructed (with creative significance) through matter. But the pre-expressive vision involves encounter with form disembodied, an intellectual apprehension of *abstract* form, the emergent shape behind (yet shining through) appearances:

I wished to add some remarks to this, on the mystical side of this solicitude; how it is not oneself, but something in the universe that one's left with . . . One sees a fin passing far out. What image can I reach to convey what I mean? Really there is none, I think . . . Life is, soberly & accurately, the oddest affair; has in it the essence of reality. I used to feel this as a child – couldn't step across a puddle once I remember, for thinking, how strange – what am I? &c. But by writing I don't reach anything. All I mean to make is a note of a curious state of mind. I hazard the guess that it may be the impulse behind another book . . . I want to watch and see how the idea at first occurs. I want to trace my own progress.³⁰

Woolf may wish to 'trace my own progress,' but Evelyn Underhill warns that the mystic's 'path is the pathless; his trace is the traceless'.³¹ Murdoch reflects on Dante's *Paradiso*: 'Exceptional persons, such as mystics or 'Dante' in Dante's story, who 'see God' cannot express what they saw. Nor can Plato's pilgrim describe the Sun.'³² Indeed, 'the beholder has neither the knowledge nor the power to speak, since the intellect, nearing its desired object, deepens so that memory cannot retrace its steps.'³³ Nevertheless, Woolf is compelled, by each visionary encounter, to acknowledge the call of this 'impulse behind another book': the 'oddest' sense of an underlying order brings its own energy

for depiction, for translation, as a work of art. On 7 February 1931, she marks the completion of her high-modernist text, *The Waves*, (in which 'she drove her concrete images and phrase-making as near to abstraction as any novelist has risked driving them'),³⁴ in terms of having 'captured' that initial vision of September 1926:

but I mean that I have netted that fin in the waste of waters which appeared to me over the marshes out of my window at Rodmell when I was coming to an end of *To the Lighthouse*.³⁵

In the passages examined so far, we have, in Woolf's terms, isolated several important characteristics of artistic vision, specifically with regard to identifying the principle of unity as a formal attribute of the real: (i) the intuited shape or image (of the aspect of reality experienced) involves a particular act of intellectual apprehension on the part of the contemplative individual (to be enhanced by (v)); (ii) the metaphor of vision is key to Woolf's exploration of this apprehension; (iii) the artist's realisation of a 'new' shape for reality brings an impulse to creative expression; (iv) acquaintance with the real, a vision of the real, is suggested as necessary to the self's integration (unity); (v) the moment of epiphany involves a sense of the self's absence and the impersonal possession of 'something in the universe', an acquaintance with something more general and essential to being; (vi) modes of expression struggle to communicate this vision adequately in spite of (iii); (vii) the encounter with the real involves, and is characterised by, the communion of affective and visionary experience, in a way suggestive of a mystical aesthetic (to be explored further below); (viii) the characteristic impulse of the artistic attempt to 'grasp' the vision, is the desire to render it complete, whole, formally integrated: i.e., the shape of artistic power is what we could call 'unitive'; (ix) a circular logic governs the origination of the vision of *order* and formal *unity*: at one moment the vision of unity arises from 'within' the artist, at another, it is 'given' by the world of appearance for interpretation by the artist, but this very act of interpretation requires the appropriate visionary scaffolding in the intellectual apprehension of the observer (this circularity is essential to the dialectical nature of vision, as a relationship between *mode* of vision and what is *seen* emerges); (x) the intensity of relationship between ontology and language is acknowledged.

Each of these 'characteristics' will find a substantial correlate in the mystical metaphysics of Plotinus.

An emerging 'point of view'

Early in her career, Woolf considers the emergence of her own 'point of view' and its coexistence with a strengthening imperative to exercise latent creative powers:

As I write, there rises somewhere in my head that queer, & very pleasant sense, of something which I want to write; my own point of view.³⁶

The fruit of this emerging perspective is Woolf's first experimental novel, *Jacob's Room*: for the emergence of this 'point of view' (language of vision), the surfacing of a distinctly aesthetic vision, brings with it an impulse to create new form, a form adequate not only to communicate, but to embody, this new perspective. In 1926, following *Mrs Dalloway's* publication, and during the conception and composition of *To The Lighthouse*, Woolf comments, of a fellow authoress, with enthusiasm and urgency:

But then there were causes in her life: prayer; principle. None in mine. Great excitability & search after something . . . I enjoy almost everything. Yet I have some restless searcher in me. Why is there not a discovery in life? Something one can lay hands on & say 'This is it'? My depression is a harassed feeling I'm looking; but that's not it – that's not it. What is it? And shall I die before I find it?³⁷

Woolf compares the source and purpose of her creative being with that of contemporary writer 'Mrs Webb': the tone of Woolf's reference to 'prayer and principle', as the ordering influences of the creative life of the latter, suggests a traditional or inherited (and sedate) method of structuring for imagination, for self-conception and creative exercise: in contrast to which Woolf, with an attitude of celebrated but frightening freedom, is driven by an instinctual, restless search for a mysterious object. Woolf, without doctrine, attends to experience, unfiltered. These early passages illustrate the initial (henceforth continuing) relationship between Woolf's philosophical and aesthetic formation. But, particularly, they record the fervour of her 'search after something', for 'a discovery in life', for her own, *aesthetically deduced*, 'principle'. *Jacob's Room*, in its depiction of empty places, challenges the Russellian dissociation of art and logic, by making the invisible visible. But while struggling to glimpse the object of her search, the shape of Woolf's 'seeking' indicates that what is *also* sought is an explanation for the *impulse* towards order

and unity. Her questioning moves beyond Banfield's conclusion that the immediate objects of experience, and the arbitrariness of their appearance, is finally in itself 'enough'.³⁸ Woolf seeks a vision of, and method of capturing, that 'pattern' intuited behind life, while managing the simultaneous reflection and (re-)creation of its envisioned unitive integrity through artistic practice, through the presentation of the moment in its illuminated fullness.

Woolf considers her internal 'restless searcher', the impulse which seeks 'something one can lay hands on & say "This is it"': the image is appropriately concrete ('lay hands on'), for, as Woolf's literature testifies, this artist's commitment to the development of the most appropriate form involves the cultivation and refinement of an expressive instrument of such spectacular aptitude as to be capable of capturing the simultaneous solidity and evanescence of reality: to capture life as it *really* is, its shapes 'seen' both by intellect and perception. The worlds of form and emotion will construct, in their different, but necessarily engaged, ways, this reality. Woolf searches for 'something' that is to be the essence, the meaning, the uniting principle both of life and the possibility of expressing it. In another visionary metaphor, Woolf explains 'I am looking': without a vision of the 'real' thing itself, but possessing the inspiration to seek out this 'discovery in life', her aesthetic vision is guided by an intuited impulse towards a particular way of *seeing*:

... & I ask myself sometimes whether one is not hypnotised, as a child by a silver globe, by life; & whether this is living. Its very quick, bright, exciting. But superficial perhaps. I should like to take the globe in my hands & feel it quietly, round, smooth, heavy & so hold it, day after day.³⁹

Here is located the moment of the dialectic in which vision precedes expression, although we have glimpsed the complexities surrounding the claim for the priority of an exclusively pre-expressive vision of unity, since the formal qualities inherent to this vision constitute the model for *reconstruction* as artistic object: reconstruction mediated through the materiality of language. The artistic striving – of which Woolf's search for adequate literary form is evidence – to achieve successful and transformative translation from the apprehension of disembodied form to the embodiment of form, suggests the eventual transcendence of a pre-expressive (visionary)/expressive (post-visionary) distinction. But we do, nevertheless, possess a distinctly pre-expressive moment here

insofar as Woolf has not yet attempted to grasp her vision in literary form: rather, at this initial stage, she describes the reorientation of vision which is the emergence of an *aesthetic* vision, and – most importantly – the distinctive character of this vision as attempting to grasp life itself, whole, solid, in essence (her distinctive ‘point of view’). The ‘reality’ Woolf intuitively draws her (the artist’s) attention, as if by vanishing lines, towards its centre-point, hinting the existence of an as yet invisible and undiscovered secret, ‘the thing’, life, ‘itself’. The gravity of the impulse is overwhelming to the point of dictating Woolf’s attention completely, being not only an impulse to create (for creativity promises more thorough acquaintance with the object of vision, as a help to ‘make it out’), but also, in the first place, an impulse simply to *see*:

This insatiable desire to write something before I die, this ravaging sense of the shortness & feverishness of life, make me cling, like a man on a rock, to my one anchor.⁴⁰

By the close of 1928, Woolf had considerably developed her aesthetic and literary capabilities, having published *To The Lighthouse* (1927) and *Orlando* (1928), works of remarkable formal experimentation. Nevertheless, her ‘insatiable desire to write something before I die’ remained, to her judgement, unfulfilled, her previous literary attempts having enhanced, rather than satisfied, her search for reality, and the question of how to capture it:

Now is life very solid or very shifting? I am haunted by the two contradictions. This has gone on forever: will last forever; goes down to the bottom of the world – this moment I stand on. Also it is transitory, flying, diaphanous. I shall pass like a cloud on the waves. Perhaps it may be that though we change; one flying after another, so quick so quick, yet we are somehow successive, & continuous – we human beings; & *show the light through*. But what is the light? I am impressed by the transitoriness of human life to such an extent that I am often saying a farewell . . .⁴¹

Woolf’s ‘light’ image conveys the metaphysical orientation of her aesthetic, and frames the sense in which her use of ‘light’ identifies more than an engagement with theories of light, physically conceived. Her image is not unlike that employed by Charles Taylor in his 1975 study, *Hegel*, in which he describes how Hegel’s universal life of Spirit maintains its universality through the mediative participation of successive

individual lives: 'God is like a flame which passes from mortal candle to mortal candle, each destined to light and go out, but the flame to be eternal.'⁴² Woolf not only shares Taylor's imagery, but makes a similar observation about an essential movement within, and continuous to, life. Her question 'But what is the light?' gives the shape of her metaphysical search. She searches for that which is constant to 'life', its 'essential', irreducible property, which survives the coming-into-being and passing away of individual instances, of individual lives and their myriad moments of consciousness. We humans 'show the light through': we exhibit a quality of being both independent of, but *general* to, ourselves, and are made somehow luminous in this participation.

Here, then, is another intuition of unity: to what, in spite of succession, is 'continuous', the solution to the simultaneity of permanence and dispersal, shining through individual lives. This light 'backs' the fluctuation between 'this moment' which 'has gone on forever: will last forever; goes down to the bottom of the world', and that which is 'transitory, flying, diaphanous'. This uniting instinct is *both* abstract and immanent to each human life, where it is experienced and articulated by the artist. Woolf gives the metaphysical contours of her artistic vision with striking clarity.

Rendering Form

As the intuition of a more permanent reality is accompanied by an intensifying intellectual vision of an abstract, formal shape behind appearances – as the 'sight' of feeling and logic are brought together to seek the 'discovery in life' – there comes the desire to render this complex vision formally, both as an expression of artistic vision, and as activating a moment in the process of envisioning itself. The creative exercise of struggling with literary tools sharpens the mode of vision: as Lily Briscoe comments of her vision, she 'could not even see it, without a brush in her hand.'⁴³

Woolf's 1931 novel *The Waves* is an impressive 'incarnation' of immaterial vision in material form. This novel reflects the abstract, structural and formal characteristics of the novel's fictional content within its 'material' structure: the waves described within the text echo the wavelike shape (cycles of monologues and 'silent' interludes) of the composition.⁴⁴ This artwork is, in a formal sense, self-referential. The imposition of 'a single undifferentiated style on the consciousness of all six' voices has brought critics to suggest these voices as facets of one consciousness: a

characteristic Woodring interprets as conveying 'the central theme that we are all joined together in a life of uniform flux.'⁴⁵

This novel's fusion of content and formal structure constructs, and indicates, the unification of – and successful translation between – aesthetic vision and formal expression. Further still, Woolf renders the image of 'the waves' so as to capture the opposing, yet necessarily simultaneously present, forces of permanence and dispersal in one united image. In 'the waves', Woolf exercises 'the unifying power of artistic vision',⁴⁶ creating an image with the formal potential to integrate the essences of two opposites, bringing both forces to juxtapositional presence. While the sea is self-contained, permanent and in possession of every wave (recall Woolf's 'light' image and its universalist connotations), these waves themselves are individual, transitory movements on the surface of one permanent mass, in which they are ultimately contained, and from which they emerge only to return. Of her effort here, Woolf writes, 'I want to keep the individual & the sense of things coming over & over again & yet changing. That's what's so difficult: to combine the two.'⁴⁷

These opposing forces of permanence and dispersal are recognised as forces shaping life itself. This tension forms part of the abstract structure or scaffolding which Woolf intuits behind the world of appearances. But this is not, as for Russell or Whitehead, simply an abstract formalism of logical relations, of conjunctions, disjunctions and negations. While sometimes experimenting with the atomistic languages responsive to the invisible substructures of Russellian reality, Woolf remains concerned with the broader, sweeping abstract shapes somehow holding the whole of 'life' together: her 'light'. Her wave imagery far from constitutes an arbitrary picture of the moods which colour our conscious experience of the world: on the contrary, those basic conflicts in consciousness between movements toward unity or dispersal, towards order or chaos, towards meaning or arbitrariness, are captured vividly in the ceaseless cycling of the waves, in the relentless rhythm of crashing on the shore, in the swelling and the heaving of the frighteningly heavy mass, in the passing and return of dark and light, night and day.

However, the turbulence of the whole is reflected in the *interpretational* fluidity of each moment of the image: the movement of return can be both the signature of pattern, of meaning, of reliability, or can signal the ceaseless, meaningless surging of a chilling cycle. But the refusal of cycles to rest and settle, of opposites to reconcile, in Woolf's literature, is a defining characteristic of her mystical aesthetic: one which not only embraces the painful shades of everyday consciousness, but offers itself to contemporary theology as an example of how these different moods

can be held together in the full mystery of their daily presence. What makes the art-work alive is precisely its unsettled shimmering.

The literary creation facilitates, through material form, through language, the possibility for imaginative participation in the artistic vision that inspired attempted expression in the first place. Rendering the permanence of the sea alongside the successiveness of individual waves, Woolf formally captures her vision of continuity in spite of succession, that which lets the light shine through, by fusing these apparently opposing movements in the ceaseless rhythm of 'the waves'. She discovers a unified, self-reflexive form for the artistic embodiment of a tension at the heart of *life*, just as the novel seeks to bring everything 'all flowing together.'⁴⁸ In 1929, Woolf asks of her novel 'Could one not get the waves to be heard all through?';⁴⁹ communicating as much a desire for a perspective on life as an instruction for literary composition.

Woolf makes the following striking observation on 16 February, 1930, concerning the nature of artistic vision:

And these mists of the spirit have other causes, I expect; though they are deeply hidden. There is some ebb and flow in the tide of life which accounts for it; though what produces either ebb or flow I'm not sure . . . I am ill so often . . . If I could stay in bed another fortnight . . . I believe I should see the whole of *The Waves* . . . I believe these illnesses are in my case – how shall I put it? – partly mystical.⁵⁰

Placing this passage alongside those examined so far, several things are now notable: the continued conviction of the internal 'hiddenness' of reality; the presence of a source of creativity (of inspiration); and the intimation of a connection between Woolf's depression ('these mists of the spirit') and the presence and emergence of a shape hidden behind, and coming through, appearances. Significant, here, is the possibility (and necessary priority *in part*, at least) of *seeing* 'the whole' of the artist's intended composition, and Woolf's own use of the word 'mystical' to describe her illness, for which the visionary-aesthetic dimension of her genius state of mind seems largely responsible. She conveys bafflement concerning the source of life's rhythm, the movement of life's 'waves', each of which contribute to a growing sense, observed by her artistic and philosophical contemporaries, that 'what lacks form is what creates form.'⁵¹ But this bafflement has greater scope, for Woolf, than that which Banfield interprets as her [Woolf's] engagement with contemporary empiricist analyses of the invisible space between

perspectives. For Woolf, 'this omnipresent, eternal element surrounding all things is at once destructive and constructive,' in 'dividing one perspective from another and linking each to each [as] it invisibly imparts form, constructing the "scaffolding" to give rigidity and permanence to the fleeting event.'⁵² But she also seeks, more essentially, the source of the 'mists' which deliver this vision to the artist. While Banfield comments that 'this form-giving surrounding space not only maps the geography of Woolf's universe but also of an aesthetics where *art holds together an otherwise fluid experience*,'⁵³ it must be noted that this 'holding together' depends partly on the artist's initial vision, before the creative act, of a *possibility* for ordering and uniting the 'mosaic': this revelation can come first, and with this comes the question of *what* it is that formlessly transcends yet mediates translation between the invisible and visible, that makes the transition, the transformation possible? 'What,' Woolf asks, 'is the light?'

An analysis of descriptions of Woolf's creative experience is fundamental for understanding the shape and object of her aesthetic vision. Her object, metaphysically speaking, is a mysterious and invisible place which answers, we have seen, to the following (Woolf's *own*) description: 'reality'; 'something abstract, yet residing in the downs or sky'; 'one thing'; source of the impulse to express; felt through 'the mystical side of this solicitude'; 'something in the universe one's left with' (beyond the self); something found in, and essential to, 'life'; something necessary for the integral unity of the self; the source and sustenance of life's 'rhythm' (life's 'ebb and flow'); intuited in the emergence of seemingly uncaused shapes and images (for the artist); inspiring the reorientation of vision; the metaphysical goal of artistic vision and the source of 'great excitability'; 'the light' that shines through 'we human beings'; the light and 'life' common to, yet transcending, individual lives; that which makes possible/gives a vision of the complete art-work, or divests sufficient vision to inspire and direct the formulation of a mode of expression *appropriate* to the disclosure of the whole; the source *and* object of the visionary activity of the artist when suspended in a state of mind that Woolf calls 'mystical'.

'A Saturated Unchopped Completeness'

In a passage capturing the artist's pre-expressive vision of unity and the ordering force of the work of art, Woolf anticipates what is created through art, her 'achievement, if any,' to be:

... a saturated, unchopped, completeness; done without spilling a drop . . .
 & having got astride my saddle the whole world falls into shape; it is this
 writing that gives me my proportions.⁵⁴

This description of the unifying power of art records what Woolf considers to be her achievement on completing *The Waves*. The novel aims to capture that reality she wishes to convey with 'completeness': there is a sense of having captured 'the whole world', which has, in vision, assumed a shape appropriate for formal depiction as fiction: and yet, something of this wholeness is created *through* this attempt at formal depiction, through the dialectic of artistic activity:

I thought, driving through Richmond last night, something very profound about the synthesis of my being: how only writing composes it: how nothing makes a whole unless I am writing;⁵⁵

Particularly interesting in the diary entry of 30 December 1930, is the sense of 'saturation' Woolf describes. The compositional elements of the novel resonate with fullness, a sense that all is captured, the aesthetic vision being so organised, in the novel, as to inhabit and stretch to the limit (with both enlivening and perilous consequences) the artistic medium. Woolf describes a unifying artistic vision, an incarnation-in-text, that captures each moment whole, yet also grasps, as whole, as complete, 'reality', understood as the amalgamation of these moments, being simultaneously present, if temporally dispersed (an effect achieved in the framing of *the life* of Mrs Dalloway in one day). The novel, as art-form, allows the contradiction of the simultaneity of 'simultaneity and succession' to persist.

For Woolf, this completeness, this wholeness, grants to the work of art something lasting. Lastingness consists in an achievement of unity that holds together uniting and fracturing moments. When composing *The Waves* she is endeavouring to capture the 'one thing'-ness of reality. Considering the novel's reviews, she reflects that 'What I want is to be told that this is solid & means something,⁵⁶ for 'the triumph of learning is that it leaves something done solidly forever.'⁵⁷

Conversing with Plotinus on Unity

How else could we paint a portrait of Plotinus than by describing this infinite quest after the absolutely simple?

Pierre Hadot, *Plotinus*⁵⁸

Intuiting Unity

The concept of unity is essential to Plotinian metaphysics. Indeed, 'It is in virtue of unity that beings are beings.'⁵⁹

The Unity, then, is not Intellectual-Principle but something higher still: Intellectual-Principle is still a being but that First is no being but precedent to all Being: it cannot be a being, for a being has what we may call the shape of its reality but The Unity is without shape, even shape Intellectual.⁶⁰

Considering the relationship between the One and Intellect, in his introduction to Hadot's text, Arnold I. Davidson describes how 'Intellect undergoes a process of formation in which it emanates from the prior unity of the Good or One: the One is the "ground or ultimate source of spiritual life [because it] is pure, simple, undecomposable presence."⁶¹

Having explored Woolf's sense of that united vision of reality, that 'one thing' which must not become, through expression, 'this & that',⁶² there is much in Plotinus' metaphysics of the One which instantly resonates with Woolf's intuitions. While Woolf makes no ethical-metaphysical identification of goodness with the real, the Plotinian association of an ineffable, emanating Oneness with the essential finds affiliation with the metaphysical perspectives expressed through Woolf's writing. The inherently unified Plotinian One is encountered, in intellect, as having ontological priority, as grounding all in existence. The One is 'pure, simple, undecomposable presence.' This chapter considers whether this 'pure, simple, undecomposable presence' is so different from the 'omnipresent, eternal element surrounding all things' which, for Woolf and her contemporaries, 'invisibly imparts form, constructing the "scaffolding" to give rigidity and permanence to the fleeting event.'⁶³ It is worth asking whether this formless source of form, the 'light' which 'shines through' to give continuity to the passing, the 'fleeting', is any less like the Plotinian essential for being 'at once destructive and constructive,' in 'dividing one perspective from another and linking each to each,'⁶⁴ when the Plotinian perspective can embrace, on account of the limitations of language when attempting to express the inexpressible, the negative moments inherent to the human point of view.

Woolf does not, in the manner of an academic philosopher, examine the ontological status of the object of her artistic vision of order and unity. Nevertheless, the shape of that which she seeks as 'reality',

and the nature of that aesthetic effort attempting to sketch the formal dimensions of its invisible object, shares the Plotinian characterisation of 'reality' in an essential respect: in its approach to Oneness, Oneness envisioned as prior to the participative activity of a subsequent expressive impulse, Oneness which orders and sources the life of the world of appearances according to its invisible presence. This One must not be conceived naively, as transcendence too often is, as an object. Consistent with the invisibility of the central vision, the visionary struggles to adapt her 'gaze' to 'say something' accurate about what she sees:

In order for discursive thought to say something, it must consider its objects successively, for such is the unfolding of thought. Yet what kind of unfolding can there be, in the case of something which is absolutely simple?⁶⁵

Here Hadot, voicing Plotinus' concern, communicates a Woolfian reservation about the fracturing effect of reflection and expression. Something inherent to the nature and function of thought and language threatens to make many of what is, in 'reality', 'one thing'. And yet, the *awareness* of this capacity for fracture testifies to a preceding intuition of the inherent unity of what is essential, what is 'real' beyond appearances. This intuition is the philosophical object of Plotinus' loving attention and the artistic object of Woolf's aesthetic vision: yet it is also, for both, a *mystical* object insofar as it forms the heart of a reality with which the self seeks relationship, a relationship achieved through a particular mode of vision, a particular way of seeing.

Recalling Woolf's sense of the pre-expressive priority of vision, particularly with respect to her intuition, preceding creative acts, that some formless quality (or 'light') may source the continuity of seemingly separate events, the following passage is significant:

. . . spiritual vision already had a premonition of such a total presence, behind the world of Forms; they had appeared as the manifestation of a force whose expansive movement did not stop at any particular form . . . the Forms . . . are only the figures in which the fecund simplicity of a pure movement expresses itself: a movement which engenders these forms at the same time as it goes beyond them, all the while remaining within itself.⁶⁶

Plotinus' Forms are not ontologically independent and self-subsistent, but are the manifestation of another more perfect life from which they are derived: the life of the One. As Hadot writes, "The world of Forms

is animated by a single Life: a constant movement which engenders the different Forms.⁶⁷ Indeed, ‘. . . all things commune in one single spiritual life.’⁶⁸ ‘Every form, therefore,’ Hadot continues, citing Plotinus, ‘is derivative: “Form is only the trace of that which has no form; indeed, it is the latter which engenders form.”’⁶⁹ Several ideas already prevalent in our discussion of Woolf re-emerge here: (i) the priority of intuitive vision (the ‘premonition’); (ii) the intuition of prior unity as all-pervading presence, underlying the world of appearances (compare Woolf’s description of something ‘residing in downs or sky’); (iii) the identification of this original unifying force with a ‘pure movement’ that is common to (lies behind) particulars, conferring permanence on template participants (on universals or Forms), but never stopping ‘at any particular form’: one might identify here Woolf’s life which ‘shines through’ particular instances, formlessly delineating the formal structures behind appearances, ‘backing’ the attempt to create particular works of art. We should also consider Banfield’s description of the essence of post-Impressionistic aesthetics: that ‘what lacks form is what creates form.’⁷⁰

I am not suggesting that Woolf unconsciously entertains a Neoplatonic metaphysics of Form in the sense of attributing specific ontological status to these Forms and the Ideas comprehending them. However, it would be premature to claim, from a lack of conscious intent, that Woolf’s perspective does not possess striking affinities with Plotinian thought in ways that identify the mystical dimensions of her work. In (i) (above), the language of vision is used to convey an intuition of total presence which takes the form of an underlying structural unity, one which is navigated by the artist in her attempt to capture the shape of the whole. In (ii) Woolf’s sense of formless presence as underlying the ‘manifestation’, appearance, or creation of particular forms, and the ‘fecund simplicity’ inherent to this ‘force’, is reinforced: and, in (iii) Woolf’s sense of a *movement* to unity, and the inherence of this movement in manifest forms, coupled with its *simultaneous* movement beyond them (being uncapturable), suggests that, in her description of life as something permeating individual instances while remaining common to all (‘at the same time as it goes beyond them, all the while remaining within itself’),⁷¹ her literary metaphysics conveys the movement with which Plotinus himself is occupied. His mystical object is of the same shape, manifests the same ‘movement’, and inspires the same response to contemplative expression (‘Well, be still & ruminate . . . And I’m sure that there is a remarkable shape somewhere concealed there’)⁷² as Woolf’s own.

While Woolf’s literature attends as much to the experience of dissipation and flux as it does to the attempt to compose (and to express

the compositional struggle towards) unity, the intuition of, and movement towards, unity (conveyed particularly through Lily Briscoe's artistic struggles, and Woolf's diaries) is particularly worthy of attention just because, at times, we glean the possibility that unity and order might be more essential to life. *Composing* her novel, Woolf attempts to give 'proportion' to life, to construct formal unity on a meta-level beyond the fluctuating senses of unification and fracture with which human experience is fraught. Woolf glimpses a Jantzenian possibility to transcend the epistemological scepticism of her modernist contemporaries, for while her art, here, creates unity for disordered experience, she has already intuited this unity in the pre-expressive vision first inspiring artistic effort. In the manner of Plotinus' all-transcending One, if there is resolution beyond the tension of infinite and finite, it lies beyond voluntary intellectual intuition, beyond concretisation on page or canvas, in what only a silent or stammering apophaticism is capable of indicating. Here, the unknowable and immediate moments of 'everyday' experience find mysterious resolution. For:

If the self is thus able to coincide with the Good – which Plotinus calls the One, in order to express its absolute simplicity – the reason is that the ground or ultimate source of spiritual life is pure, simple, undecomposable presence. As we have seen, spiritual vision already had a premonition of such a total presence, behind the world of Forms; they had appeared as the manifestation of a force whose expansive movement did not stop at any particular form . . .⁷³

Formal Aesthetics: Envisioning Form

Knowing how to look at the world of the senses is to "prolong the vision of the eye by means of the vision of the spirit"; it is "to pierce the material envelope of things by a powerful effort of mental vision, and go on to read the formula, invisible to the naked eye, *that their materiality makes manifest*." . . . It allows us to go beyond the material appearance of objects, and see their form.

Henri Bergson, in Pierre Hadot, *Plotinus*⁷⁴

While the Plotinian 'Forms' name conceptually distinct yet mutually participating universals derived from the life of the One, Woolf's sense of the term 'form', despite her acquaintance with Platonic philosophy, more naturally engages with contemporary artistic formalist theories (consider Bell's 'significant form'). Yet the metaphysical perspective integral

to Woolf's aesthetics does participate in a Plotinian sense of 'form': for while, as Banfield comments of *The Waves*, 'sunlight . . . "[makes] the garden like a mosaic of single sparks not yet formed into one whole",⁷⁵ this dialectical 'sunlight' also fuses the elements: 'though each was separate they seemed inextricably involved.'⁷⁶ Woolf's Impressionistic 'sun, like a sense organ, records an indubitable knowledge: it "burnt uncompromising, undeniable".⁷⁷ In *The Waves*, Impressionism's literal light of perceptual analysis meets a Russellian post-Impressionistic abstract 'light' of intellectual vision. This 'light', this way of seeing which 'backs' her analysis of 'the real', is Woolf's post-Russellian fusion of intellectual, perceptual and emotional vision as conveyed in Lily Briscoe's art, again making the 'aesthetics of the unobserved' possible.

In Plotinian philosophy, the shape of an underlying, hyper-present, unifying structure is seen, through contemplative exercise, to give life to the forms through the latter's participative engagement. The One formlessly sources the formal constituents of life. One-ness is source and organisational principle of that made manifest in sense. It could be said that what makes the vision *aesthetic* in character is the attending impulse to creative response, to attempt visionary refinement and accurate communication of the vision, albeit a necessarily limited communication, in material form. Woolf and Plotinus recognise the interpenetration of consciousness and reality; the sense of the significance of a unifying principle and the unifying effect of its exercise, through vision, on the disparately conceived materials of life; and, eventually, the formal limitations imposed upon language by the transcending nature of the vision. Consequently, there follows agreement on the nature and purpose of art:

Art must not copy reality . . . The true function of art is "heuristic": through the work of art, we discover, or "invent," the eternal model, the Idea, of which sensible reality is a mere image. The work of art is an attempt to imitate this Idea . . . In this sense, *the true portrait will attain to the true self* . . .⁷⁸

The formalist, post-Impressionistic emphasis of Woolf's contemporary artistic climate finds significant points of acquaintance with a Plotinian 'aesthetics'. The passage above contains several distinctly Woolfian aesthetic sentiments. Art must move beyond Impressionistic representation of the content of sense-experience to uncover and present 'logical' structures lying invisibly beneath the 'mosaic' of appearances. This aesthetic doctrine permeates *To The Lighthouse*, where Lily's attempts, simultaneously (hermeneutically), to envision and paint

Mrs Ramsay are not initially comprehensible to William Bankes, unacquainted, as he is, with Lily's abstract method. But Lily, like Woolf, is in search of essences: 'she tries herself to encompass both the wonder that Mrs. Ramsay was and the jolt to the nerves that her quiet way often produced. What Mrs. Ramsay was or is, not what she looked like, must be embodied in line, form, and juxtaposed colour.'⁷⁹

Lily's post-Impressionistic 'triangular purple shape',⁸⁰ in respect of its qualitative (coloured and spatial) relations to the 'masses' of the painting, eschews *imitation* of the sense-object in order to communicate something essential about Mrs Ramsay and her relationship to reality, best grasped in pure relations. Lily does begin by contemplating the physical appearance of Mrs Ramsay: but interprets this as manifesting underlying and essential forces of relation between the objects presented to her field of vision. In her efforts to 'see' and 'capture' Mrs Ramsay, Lily wrestles with both the unifying capacities of her medium (which may capture that which Mrs Ramsay is socially (if invisibly), a unifier of herself and of others), and the simultaneous *transcendence* of the moment of vision, as what Mrs Ramsay is *invisibly* – and for herself – remains beyond the representational properties of her (Lily's) art. In this recognition of vision as essential, Lily echoes James' realisation that 'the vision from the mainland was just as much the lighthouse,' as the object out at sea.⁸¹ It is through Lily's mode of artistic envisioning that Mrs. Ramsay, who 'died in a parenthesis' earlier in the text, is nevertheless 'vividly present in the final section,' of the novel.⁸² Woolf's aesthetic combines a post-Impressionistic attention to the immediate structures of phenomena in their immanent reality with the exploration of a transcending plane of vision.

Woolf also shares, with Plotinian philosophy, a sense of the 'heuristic' function of art, as characterised by the attempt to resolve two tensions: that between the sense that an 'eternal model' (oneness) is located first in the world (behind appearances) or first in abstract intellectual reflection and vision; and that between the sense that art reflects or expresses a unity intuited first in a pre-expressive moment ('a consciousness of what I call 'reality': a thing I see before me; something abstract; but residing in the downs or sky,')⁸³ and the conflicting intuition that art *creates* unity, is transformative of an initially fractured reality: 'it is this writing that gives me my proportions.'⁸⁴ About 'the synthesis of my being,' Woolf writes, 'only writing composes it: . . . nothing makes a whole unless I am writing . . .'⁸⁵ Concerning her vision, Lily 'could not see it . . . without a brush in her hand.'⁸⁶ And yet the pattern first intuited in 'downs or sky', the hearing of 'the first words'⁸⁷ which allows the movement

towards creativity for Miss la Trobe in *Between the Acts*: this first moment of vision is essential also.

The 'contradiction' here is important: for this heuristic embrace of the insights of intellectual vision alongside the inspiration to artistic practice results from the fact that each partner of these tensions must be *held* in constant tension with the other (both strands being simultaneously 'true'). As Woolf's diaries and literature testify, the process of envisioning and the stages of artistic composition are intimately interwoven, in a way recognising the aesthetic dimension of the relationship of consciousness to reality. Woolf's 'aesthetic of the unobserved', again to use Banfield's helpful expression, lays the foundation for a 'mystical' aesthetic, in bringing the material of art to convey the abstract: to depict the invisible structures of reality present to intellectual vision. Recognising, and responding aesthetically, to the unresolved tension above, Woolf moves beyond the epistemological limitations delineated by her sceptical contemporaries.

The Plotinian idea that sensible reality is a participative image of an eternal model, this model being intuited primarily through intellectual vision, arises within Woolf's perspective where art attempts to capture the 'pattern' intuited behind, yet also *through*, 'the cotton wool' of appearances. Here, again, emerges a meta-level: the light which backs Woolf's eyeless vision, that level assumed by the metaphysics of her art when the eye traverses the formless abyss between perspectives, making possible an aesthetics of the unobserved, is that which mediates the transformation of the invisible and abstract into visible, material form. But here is a moment of *transcendence* in Woolf's aesthetic: for that which contains *both* things in themselves as exceeding us (life) and ourselves as exceeding things (art) has to be transcendent to both. Beyond the Plotinian Forms lies the transcending One: simple Being, formless presence, which ceaselessly emanates all else in existence. Woolf's artist embraces her relationship with the formless source of creativity. Transcendence in Woolf's aesthetic must not to be conceived objectively (naively), but as something intuited in the formless gaps invisibly supporting moments of vision and expression.

Woolf's sense of a transcending light which makes all things continuous and allows the eyeless vision to 'see' emerges through a horizontal (immanent) poetics, attendant to the finitude of successive lives. Contrasting readings which exclusively emphasise the verticality of traditional notions of transcendence, Woolf's metaphysic captures the simultaneous *immanence* of the invisible light sourced beyond appearances, in the light of which the abstract structures of reality are 'seen'. Insofar as these structures are see-able to the 'eyeless', Woolf

implies the interpenetration of intellectual activity and the formless light which 'saturates' reality, evoking traditional conceptions of contemplation. Hadot describes the 'point' where 'there is no longer any distinction between outer and inner perception. We have gone beyond the level of reflection and perception, and reached that of intuition and contemplation. We now sense that Life is immediate self-contemplation, and we see all things being born from this total vision, by means of which the Beautiful appears to itself *as vision*.'⁸⁸

Hadot's interpretation of Plotinus' belief that 'the true portrait will attain to the true self' resonates with Woolf's aesthetic observations. We possess, in *To The Lighthouse*, three examples of artistic practice carried out with the awareness that 'the true portrait will attain to the true self'. First, *To The Lighthouse*, as a *Kunstlerroman*, is a self-reflexive examination, by Woolf, of her own artistic practice (partly as an account of the relationship between the artist and her object: Lily's passionate concern with the question of becoming 'one with' Mrs Ramsay reflects Woolf's eagerness to capture her mother's character in Mrs Ramsay: 'Lily Briscoe, trying to paint Mrs Ramsay as she sees her framed in the window with her youngest child, mirrors the author's own quest.'⁸⁹ Second, *To The Lighthouse* conveys in detail Mrs Ramsay's acts of self-contemplation, particularly illuminating and detailing her acute moments of self-collection (her sense of self-integration or self-identity). Third, Lily's attempt to paint a 'picture' of Mrs Ramsay involves an attempt to depict the formal and invisible relations (social, psychological yet also self-reflexive) between this woman and those surrounding her. In so doing, Woolf (like Murdoch) shows these *personal* relations, and their emotional content, to be *as* essential to the depiction of 'life' as the abstract, logical relations considered by an empiricist philosophy as 'backing' the objects of sense-experience, and constructing our knowledge of them. Where the object of vision is both concrete and abstract, Woolf confronts the challenges of depiction. Commenting on the Plotinian integration of visible and invisible dimensions of reality, Hadot recognises how the abstract structure of reality becomes discernable through the participating matter which thereby manifests this preceding order. Moreover, there is 'continuity' between these 'levels', which facilitates the translation from 'the vision of the spirit' to 'the vision of the eye' (from vision to incarnation), facilitating an aesthetics of the unobserved. This vision reveals the unity of these levels, giving metaphysical completeness:

What, then, is the relationship between the visible world and the world of Forms? If the latter can be seen through the former, and *if the vision of*

the spirit can prolong the vision of the eye, it is because there is continuity between the two worlds: they are the same thing, at two different levels. Plotinus insists strongly on the continuity. "Our world," he writes, "is not separated from the spiritual world . . ."⁹⁰

Aesthetic Limitations: Threatening to Fragment the One

A strong correlation exists between Woolf's awareness of the disintegrating effect of language on attempts to express unity, completeness, and 'proportion', and an equivalent Plotinian consciousness. The final line of Woolf's *To The Lighthouse* captures this artistic (linguistic) limitation. Lily's statement 'I have had my vision', despite her painting of a single line (evoking both vertical lighthouse and horizon) on a canvas of abstract hues, gives the sense of transcending what is conveyed on canvas. The idea that what is essential to the real is inexpressible, unspeakable, uncapturable, is also conveyed by Plotinus, as Hadot records:

Every form, therefore, is derivative: "Form is only the trace of that which has no form; indeed, it is the latter which engenders form."⁹¹

For Plotinus, 'it is [that which has no form] which engenders form.' Banfield recognises the post-Impressionistic doctrine: 'what lacks form is what creates form.'⁹² Woolf's attention to the inexhaustible sources of artistic inspiration will be particularly important in this context (see Chapter Six). For now, Woolf's awareness of the danger of making reality 'this & that' when 'it is one thing',⁹³ is originally present in Plotinus. We recall his comment:

In order for discursive thought to say something, it must consider its object successively, for such is the unfolding of thought. Yet what kind of unfolding can there be, in the case of something which is absolutely simple?⁹⁴

The danger of making a pre-expressive unified reality 'this & that' through the process of articulation, is the danger of giving form to what was formless. A creative activity which enacts the interpenetration of thought and world to bring order, unity, and completeness, also, in virtue of the divided nature of speculative thought, and the associated limitations of depiction, divides what was once one. Woolf is aware of

the contemplative activity of 'thought thinking itself',⁹⁵ a motif present in Mrs Ramsay's self-contemplation, explored below, and in the self-reflexivity of the *Kunstlerroman*. Yet, even in the case of self-contemplation, writes Hadot, 'By the mere fact that it thinks itself, thought is subject to the division between subject and object; thus a duality already lurks within its unity.'⁹⁶ Nevertheless, Woolf possesses, with Plotinus, an unyielding aspiration to achieve a synthesised vision, though inherently inexpressible. The 'unifying powers of artistic vision',⁹⁷ observable in Woolf's art where the multitudinous lighthouses are fused in the *relationship* of Lily's imaginative vision to her artistic practice, speak to the Plotinian sense that posited *above thought* is 'an absolute Unity': the principle which is One.⁹⁸ Being 'above thought' this unity is impenetrable to the sceptic, but is intuited by the artist who seeks to marry intellectual vision with intuition. Eventually, for Plotinus, it is because 'The Good itself is, after all, *without form*'⁹⁹ – for 'No longer can we wonder that the principle evoking such longing should be utterly free from shape, even shape Intellectual,'¹⁰⁰ – that the One will escape picturing. The formless centre of Plotinus' vision meets Woolf's sense of the inexpressible elusiveness of life's invisible scaffolding. Her endeavour to construct a literary aesthetic capable of capturing what is invisible enacts on her artistic practice an oscillation of positive and negative moments of vision and expression which Chapter Six considers in relation to the apophaticism of traditional mystical theology. But even here, the conflicting of positive and negative moments of vision and expression conveys Woolf's recognition of the simultaneity of cataphatic and apophatic moments, as mutually necessary aspects of penetration into the same formless centre: that which holds the 'eyeless' vision and permits its 'seeing' what is invisible and 'unobserved'.

One literary presentation of Woolf's aesthetic of the unobserved, and the mutually present apophatic and cataphatic perspectives oscillating about the absent 'centre' of vision, is the 'hole' or negative space at the centre of *Jacob's Room* (like the abandoned house of 'Time Passes' in *To The Lighthouse*). A literary metaphysics operates here: the artist's eye leads the reader into negative space, being such because both full ('saturated') and empty. This unperceived space 'appears', is given form by the artist. Yet what is that which envisages and translates? Again, 'What lacks form is what creates form.'¹⁰¹ Here is the sustaining, backing light. Artistic vision, which mediates the Russellian abyss between perspectives, gives form to the unobserved regions of existence, to the 'empty rooms' of houses. The aesthetic result is, as Banfield points to Wittgenstein, not a describing, but a gesturing, a showing.¹⁰²

A second 'presentation' of the absent centre comes through the absence, in the novel's 'present', of the central character of *The Waves*. While uniting the other characters in their responses to, and relationships with him, Percival himself has died in the novel's past. The subtle achievement of the absent formal centre is also present in *To The Lighthouse*, where Lily's consummative vision, surpassing registration on canvas, enacts through the 'unifying power of artistic vision' the bringing together of each character's 'lighthouse' to create the formal centre of the novel. What unites cannot be described. Is this an absence, then, of being: or merely description? Lily's ongoing struggle to 'relate the masses' and ignore the central, awkward 'space' of her canvas is as exposing, as it is confrontational, of that stark, uncertain place.

Conclusion

Woolf's intuition of an underlying, unified structure to 'reality', to 'life', shares Plotinus' desire to achieve 'the unmediated visionary experience of the first principle'. The inexpressibility of this vision, fluctuating between the apprehension of structural unity and a contending sense of fracture, is a definitive mode of the mystical aesthetic.

For both Plotinus and Woolf, a particular mode of *self awareness* is definitive for the personal realisation of what is real. Both are aware of 'impediment[s] to vision.'¹⁰³ The required visual attunement, however, does not concern physical vision alone. The whole self must prepare in order to see: yet to see what imbues the everyday. Here, departure from a certain sense of self will not contradict the revelatory power of the everyday: rather, through attendance to a deeper sense of the self's potential, the transcendent dimension of embodied experience is revealed. This theme finds a direct correlate in Murdoch's philosophy: in her restoration of a concept of self (and the self's inner life) which is also attendant to the clarification of 'vision', to the idea of a refined 'attention', and to the removal of certain 'impediment[s] to vision',¹⁰⁴ which depend on a concept of 'unselfing'.

II

The Mystical Self

Here we have the whole paradox of the human self: we only *are* that of which we are aware, and yet we are aware of having been more fully

ourselves precisely in those moments when, raising ourselves to a higher level of inner simplicity, we lose our self-awareness.

Pierre Hadot, *Plotinus*¹⁰⁵

The integrity of Clarissa and Mrs Ramsay as artists is reinforced by their ability to lose their sense of self and become anonymous. This is the quality that Virginia Woolf considered the most difficult for the artist to achieve, yet essential to the creation of works of art.

C. Ruth Miller, *The Frames of Art and Life*¹⁰⁶

'as a wedge of darkness'

Bearing the above quotations in mind, this section should begin with an analysis of a passage from Woolf's *To The Lighthouse* (1927):

To be silent; to be alone. All the being and doing, expansive, glittering, vocal, evaporated; and one shrunk, with a sense of solemnity, to being oneself, a wedge-shaped core of darkness, something invisible to others . . . When life sank down for a moment, the range of experience seemed limitless. And to everybody there was always this sense of unlimited resources, she supposed . . . our apparitions, the things you know us by, are simply childish. Beneath it is all dark, it is all spreading, it is unfathomably deep; but now and again we rise to the surface and that is what you see us by. Her horizon seemed to her limitless . . . This core of darkness could go anywhere, for no one saw it. They could not stop it, she thought, exulting. There was freedom, there was peace, there was, most welcome of all, a summoning together, a resting on a platform of stability. Not as oneself did one find rest ever, in her experience . . . but as a wedge of darkness. Losing personality, one lost the fret, the hurry, the stir; and there rose to her lips always some exclamation of triumph over life when things came together in this peace, this rest, this eternity; and pausing there she looked out to meet the stroke of the lighthouse . . . which was her stroke . . .¹⁰⁷

A moment later Mrs Ramsay's reverie continues:

She looked up over her knitting and met the third stroke and it seemed to her like her own eyes meeting her own eyes, searching as she alone could search into her mind and her heart, purifying out of existence that lie, any lie. She praised herself in praising the light, without vanity, for she was stern, she was searching, she was beautiful like that light. It was odd . . . how if one was alone, one leant to things, inanimate things . . . felt they

expressed one; felt they became one; felt they knew one, in a sense were one; felt an irrational tenderness thus (she looked at that long steady light) as for oneself. There rose, and she looked and looked with her needles suspended, there curled up off the floor of the mind, rose from the lake of one's being, a mist, a bride to meet her lover.¹⁰⁸

The first passage precedes a key moment of self-exploration by the object of Lily Briscoe's attempted painting, Mrs Ramsay. We encounter a description of the sense of self attending a particular relationship of acquaintance with one's own self and the world. In the second passage, Mrs Ramsay's sense of being united with the object of her perception, the lighthouse beams, explores the dissolution of the subject and object distinction: this is her rendition of the philosophical relationship between subject and object conceived previously, and so differently, by Andrew and Mr Ramsay.¹⁰⁹ Woolf writes that Mrs Ramsay 'often found herself sitting and looking, sitting and looking . . . until she became the thing she looked at – that light for example.'¹¹⁰ But *preceding* this experience of union between a conscious subject and the 'light' which is her object, is a description of a peculiar type of attention, of vision, and, most important at this stage, of a transformation of *self*, conveyed as preparation for this modified attention.

Gesturing the relationship between being and seeing, Woolf describes Mrs Ramsay's experience of 'a summoning together', 'a resting on a platform of stability.' 'Losing personality', Mrs Ramsay, 'silent', 'alone', reduced to 'being oneself', becomes 'a wedge-shaped core of darkness', 'invisible', a self which has 'shed its attachments' to the business of life. She becomes, simultaneously, absolutely simple, a point, in possession of a limitless horizon. Attending this simultaneous simplification and explosion of being is a sensation of 'peace', 'rest', 'eternity.' Only in solitude, in a state of essential, 'stripped-down' being, is Mrs Ramsay able, by contemplating the lighthouse beams, to possess the rhythmically returning object of her private vision. She feels she has become 'that light' itself, has become one with that light through focused contemplation. This conceptualisation of the simplification of being, of the attending transformation of vision to achieve relationship with an 'object', of the experience of self as 'limitless-point', is key to the mystical vocabulary.

This vision of a unified self, and a self united with her object, while established within the character of Mrs Ramsay, resonates the shape of other creative levels in the novel. That Lily's artistic endeavours, like Woolf's own, attempt both the construction and dissolution of the space

between the visionary subject and her envisioned object, is conveyed through the accuracy with which Lily's awareness of the integrating forces of her vision coincide, so perfectly, with Mrs Ramsay's own. Lily considers, in the compositional stages of her painting, not how to imitate Mrs Ramsay's physical *appearance*, but how to capture who her object is essentially, to 'see' her formally, as a woman comprised of internal and external relations (Murdoch prefers such modes of depiction over Sartre's kind, whose characters' 'reflexions, instead of deepening our sense of their concreteness and complexity, strip them to the bare structure of the particular problem which they embody').¹¹¹ Hence Mrs Ramsay, seated with James, can be depicted as 'a purple shadow without irreverence.'¹¹² Lily's endeavour, in common with post-Impressionism, to find the 'relation between those masses' of her painting,¹¹³ indicates her search for the *real* Mrs Ramsay, her passionate desire to convey the efforts of self-integration attempted by this centrally positioned woman, one who orchestrates the relations between others from behind the dinner table. The centralising, compositional force exerted by her presence on the surrounding landscape is the focus of Lily's (and Woolf's) artistic and visionary attention. Lily and Mrs Ramsay, as women, and artists of the inner life, endeavour to maintain the self's 'structural' integrity against the disintegrating forces of an oppressive society. During dinner, the sudden realisation of a way to unify her picture (to 'put the tree in the centre') is, for Lily, simultaneously restorative of a fracturing sense of self: a fracturing partly inflicted by Mr Ramsay's constant implication that women 'can't paint', women 'can't write'.¹¹⁴ The significance of creative practice for the construction and nourishment of the self is evident. Lily's and Mrs Ramsay's complementing attempts to envision the world's 'pattern' as unified, as compositionally balanced, in spite of the imminent threat of self-dispersal, are vividly captured, on the aesthetic plane, in the oscillating tension between ecstasies of successful creation and the simultaneous threat of expressive limitation. Through Lily and Mrs Ramsay, Woolf foregrounds the waxing and waning landscapes of that 'inner life' which Murdoch is equally determined to rescue from her behaviourist contemporaries.

Lily seeks, throughout the novel, to 'see' Mrs Ramsay. Finally, returning to the house years after Mrs Ramsay's death, 'it was strange how clearly she saw her':¹¹⁵ vision – note, a vision not dependent on physical appearance – is key to the achievement of Lily's aesthetic endeavours. The presence of this vision brings calm to Lily: its absence is anguish. Her artistic occupation comprises a way of seeing that is necessary for her *self*-composition. Woolf comments in her diary that:

It is a mistake to think that literature can be produced from the raw. One must get out of life . . . one must be externalised; very, very concentrated, all at one point, not having to draw upon the scattered parts of one's character . . .¹¹⁶

The artist is simultaneously abstracted from, yet intimately involved with, her object, life, a juxtaposition made possible by the contraction and concentration of the artist's conscious energies to 'one point'. The artist's 'point of view' is inherently unified, is achieved when she exists independently of the 'scattered parts' of her character, rather as Mrs Ramsay shrinks to a 'core of darkness' when released from the 'scattered parts' of her social character. A state of *self*, as state of being, is conducive to a mode of *vision*. The artist's life embodies this relationship.¹¹⁷

The sight, the phrase, had its power to console. Wherever she happened to be, painting . . . the vision would come to her, and her eyes, half closing, sought something to base her vision on.¹¹⁸

The Mystical Self

Fry's and Woolf's 'modern' art demands the self's reduction. Clive Bell sees it in this characteristically Woolfian way: 'Be they artists or lovers of art, mystics or mathematicians, those who achieve ecstasy are those who have freed themselves from the arrogance of humanity. He who would feel the significance of art must make himself humble before it.'

Ann Banfield, citing Clive Bell's *Art*¹¹⁹

For both Plotinus and Woolf, the self is a window onto reality. The exploration of what is real involves an exploration of the structures of the inner life. This 'spiritual world,' Hadot remarks, 'was nothing other than the self at its deepest level. It could be reached immediately, by returning within oneself.'¹²⁰ Plotinus writes:

Many times it has happened: lifted out of the body into myself; becoming external to all other things and self-centered; beholding a marvellous beauty; then, more-than ever, assured of community with the loftiest order . . .¹²¹

As Woolf's diary entries indicate, her literary materials often include revelatory reflections on her experiences and memories. Plotinus invites

return within oneself as the first step towards true vision. Mrs Ramsay's contemplation of the lighthouse beams is a spontaneous exercise in self awareness and self-orientation (particularly in the capacity of this contemplative act to convey Mrs Ramsay *in essence*). Woolf's adoption of the 'Kunsterroman' model achieves the shape of this inward 'return' too, in her novel's taking as its object the forces and processes of its own composition (the study of artistic activity). To *The Lighthouse*, *The Waves* and *Between the Acts*, in their structural manifestations of their own content, perform, and declare the significance of, such self-reflexive activity.

Recall Mrs Ramsay's experience, discussed briefly above: the drawing of her whole self, in solitude, to a single point, whereby she feels she has become the object of her own conscious attention, 'that light' itself. Recall the vocabulary of simplification, the attending transformation of vision, the experience of self as 'limitless-point', escaped from the fracturing business of social life. Conscious of this, we consider Plotinus' recommendation of preparation for mystical vision, his attunement of self for meditation:

Similarly any one, unable to see himself, but possessed by that God, has but to bring that divine-within before his consciousness and at once he sees an image of himself, himself lifted to a better beauty: now let him ignore that image, lovely though it is, and sink into a perfect self-identity, no such separation remaining; at once he forms a multiple unity with the God silently present . . . This conversion brings gain: at the first stage, that of separation, a man is aware of self; but retreating inwards, he becomes possessor of all.¹²²

Hadot interprets this passage, commenting that 'Dispersed amongst the cares and preoccupations of daily life, we can, first of all, concentrate ourselves inwardly, direct our attention towards the things up above, and regain consciousness of ourselves. Then we shall discover that we can, at times, rise up to a more perfect inner unity, in which we attain to our living, real, veritable self within divine Thought. When we get to this level, perhaps we will touch a state of ineffable unity, in which we mysteriously coincide with the absolute simplicity out of which all life, thought, and consciousness proceed.'¹²³ '[W]hat matters,' he adds, 'is that we rid ourselves of all "having" in order purely "to be".'¹²⁴

A significant coincidence of vocabulary and imagery exists between Plotinian and Woolfian descriptions of that state of self attending a particular vision of reality: it is also a state of self that, for them both,

participates in the nature of the vision. As Mark Hussey observes of Woolf, 'Her sense of the numinous and her idea of the soul are seen to be intimately related.'¹²⁵ For both Woolf and Plotinus, the self preparing for vision, for encounter with the structure of the real, is dissolved of its concreteness as egocentric self, achieving, instead, a fluid limitlessness of being which reveals the interpenetration of consciousness and reality. For both, a dissolution of attention to purely sense-mediated experience accompanies a realisation of the saturation of consciousness by the object of attention: a different mode of subject-object relationship than that acquired by Mr Ramsay's possessive method, which solidifies and petrifies, rather than enlivens, consciousness' object. While Woolf acknowledges the estrangement common to lives and perspectives, her epistemology, mediated through her aesthetic of the unobserved, suggests, for artistic attention, the object's saturation in the consciousness of the observer. This saturation is encountered in the intuition of limitlessness attending the explosion of the 'limited', self-orientated perspective when the self's true relationship to reality is experienced.

A further resemblance is identifiable between Woolf's description of Mrs Ramsay's pre-visionary state and the Plotinian conception of self-transcendence:

The soul's ascent does not culminate in an experience, an emotion, that has the individual self for its object; rather, it experiences a transcendent presence with which it sees itself becoming identical. At the summit of this ascent, there is not so much an experience of self as an experience of an Other than self, an experience of oneself becoming Other, that is, of uniting with the One . . . [the human self's] own most profound interiority is as the same time its own self-transcendence, its accession to a universality liberated from every limitation.¹²⁶

The experience of 'oneself becoming Other', of 'a transcendent presence with which it sees itself becoming identical', is given in *To The Lighthouse*. It is also reminiscent of literary depictions of mystical ascent, during which the soul experiences its own overwhelming in the strengthening presence of the Beloved, the beatific vision, culminating even in the union, or marriage, of the soul with God. We recall that Mrs Ramsay ponders:

It was odd . . . how if one was alone, one leant to things, inanimate things . . . felt they expressed one; felt they became one; felt they knew one, in a sense were one; felt an irrational tenderness thus (she looked at that long

steady light) as for oneself. There rose, and she looked and looked with her needles suspended, there curled up off the floor of the mind, rose from the lake of one's being, a mist, a bride to meet her lover.¹²⁷

It is significant here that Mrs Ramsay experiences a 'becoming one' with 'the light itself', with the means of vision the source of which (the lighthouse) is actually the formless, absent heart of the novel. As James reflects, there were many lighthouses, many perspectives, a multiplicity of essences which, through the self's engagement with the Plotinian 'One', or the Woolfian experience of the self's reduction which reveals reality's inherent unity (what which makes possible the unifying activity of artistic vision), are brought to coincide with the self's 'summoning together' on 'a platform of stability'.¹²⁸ However, this feeling of having achieved a mode of union with objects of the world is not the only point of contact between Plotinus and Woolf. The preparatory conditioning of the self for this uniting vision involves the reduction of the self to a 'concentrated' 'point' through the dissolution of that manifestation of being which, belonging to the world of appearance, now recognises its relationship with the structure of the real: as an emanation from what is essential. This essential being, moreover, is grasped in the transcendence of the superficial self. Just so, Hadot writes:

We must concentrate ourselves within, gathering ourselves together to the point that we can always be ready to receive the divine presence, when it manifests itself again. We must detach ourselves from life down here to such an extent that contemplation can become a continuous state.¹²⁹

While the Plotinian desire to 'detach' from 'life down here' appears to contradict our emphasis on the mystical quality of the everyday, his sense of the need to still the busy self in order to realise the self's deeper relationship with the ground of reality suggests, on the contrary, a stage towards deeper awareness of life's inherent mystery. Woolf's sense of the artist's need to reduce the activity of the busy, egocentric self (a prevalent theme in her unfinished work *Reading at Random*) in order to see her object more clearly, mirrors Plotinus' (and indeed Murdoch's) characterisation of the properties of contemplative vision.

What constitutes personal (particularly intellectual) experience of the divine for Plotinus becomes an artistic experience for Woolf. Where Plotinus' disciple Hadot recommends that we 'concentrate ourselves within, gathering ourselves together', Woolf describes how, in order to write, 'One must get out of life . . . one must be externalised; very, very

concentrated, all at one point, not having to draw upon the scattered parts of one's character . . .¹³⁰ Mrs Ramsay possesses a limitless horizon of being (for this 'wedge-shaped core of darkness', 'This core of darkness could go anywhere') in reducing herself to this point, actualising an essential, infinite self. Plotinus captures the same sense when he expounds that:

Because you have approached the All, and have not just stayed within one part of it, you have not said, "I am of such-and-such dimensions," but you have dropped the "such-and-such" and have become the All . . . Thus, you increase yourself when you get rid of everything else, and once you have gotten rid of it, the All is present to you . . . if it is not present, it is you who have absented yourself.¹³¹

Plotinus considers how reduction to the essential self is simultaneously the enlargement of the self beyond the conception defined by the description 'I am of such-and-such dimensions'. Mrs Ramsay may have 'shrunk' 'to being oneself, a wedge-shaped core of darkness, something invisible to others,' but, just then, 'the range of experience seemed limitless. And to everybody there was always this sense of unlimited resources:' for 'Beneath it is all dark, it is all spreading, it is unfathomably deep.'¹³²

Woolf's depiction of Mrs Ramsay's experience demonstrates her aesthetic potential to convey the unobserved life of the individual, what is formal and essential (what the behaviourist excises), as well as what is biographically colourful, in the personal. What Mrs Ramsay feels, in this expansive moment of self-reduction, is her own 'invisible' infinity, and a participative *kinship* with objects in the world. Plotinus (with comment from Hadot) indicates the same conflation of infinite simplicity, of expansion through reduction, explaining how:

". . . If you set aside everything that is other than the All (that is to say, the naught of individuality), you become larger. If you set that aside, the All will be present to you." In arriving at the level of intellect, the human "self" arrives at a universal and total vision of reality, in which *every particular point of view must give way*. Can one speak of the "self" at this level? That will only be possible if one understands by the "self" not individuality entrenched in itself, but the interiority of consciousness that, as soon as it apprehends itself as interiority, accedes to the universality of the thought of the All . . .¹³³

Two further key points of engagement arise here between Plotinus and Woolf. The first concerns the importance of interiority (self-reflection);

the second concerns the natures of perception and perspective. These points are connected.

In his article, 'This Fictitious Life: Virginia Woolf on Biography, Reality and Character', Ray Monk recognises the significance, for Woolf, of perception for the self's construction. He comments that 'in order to preserve our selves we have to be perpetually vigilant in guarding it against the perceptions of others. What other people see when they look at me is not me, but a reflection of themselves. Therefore, it is (literally) fatal to see myself as others see me; to do that is to disappear.'¹³⁴ Monk makes this observation with reference to Woolf's experimental short story, *The Mark on the Wall* (1917). '[T]he central character,' he writes, 'muses on the importance of protecting her image of herself – the self she sees when she looks in the mirror – from the distortions of other people . . .'¹³⁵ She acknowledges the threat-to-self conveyed also in *Jacob's Room*: 'Nobody sees any one as he is . . . They see a whole – they see all sorts of things – they see themselves.'¹³⁶

This observation engages Mrs Ramsay's situation in *To The Lighthouse*. Her self-contemplation engenders a self-purification from the perceptions and associated expectations of others, a purification accompanying the self-integration which later allows her to transcend the dynamics of the dining room. As Monk remarks, the restrictive perceptions of others are associated, by Woolf, with an inherently 'masculine', *external* 'point of view.'¹³⁷ The deadening effect of such modes of vision is conveyed in Mrs Ramsay's struggle to free herself from the disparate elements constructing the social self, just as Lily attempts to resist the deadening intellectual and physical advances of the male characters, for the sake of the accuracy of artistic vision, for her *accurate perception* of Mrs Ramsay. What is at stake is her right to exist at all: 'women can't write, women can't paint,' the predatory male voices declare. It is Mrs Ramsay, escaped and alive in her *interiority*, that Lily wishes to grasp. Where the amalgam of others' perceptions are sufficient to eliminate a self, Woolf and Murdoch are right to balk at philosophical constructions of the self based on purely behaviourist principles.

In terms of a Plotinian purification of perception, the removal of superfluous elements of being, which strikingly resembles Mrs Ramsay's purification of the extraneous, socially projected elements of her character, will create a being where 'nothing [is] inwardly mixed with the true self': 'the self, now transfigured, will not be measured by dimensions.' Just as Mrs Ramsay 'looked and looked' as 'there curled up off the floor of the mind, rose from the lake of one's being, a mist, a bride to meet her lover,'¹³⁸ so the 'true self', 'abandoning all individual and particular

contingencies,' 'will rise back up "to that which, within itself, is more itself than itself."'139 The Plotinian conception of transcendence is not only comparable with Mrs Ramsay's experience when contemplating the lighthouse beams, but, again, is reflected in Lily's empathetic expansion beyond the dimensions of her physical self, as she feels herself falling off the edge of the lawn into oblivion (Murdoch would note the irreplaceable importance of metaphor here for the depiction of this *real* inner life). Woolf conveys here a Plotinian sense of a conversion of attention, a turning of our attention away from a preoccupation with sensible things and toward a spiritual world: a 'spiritual world' which is 'nothing other than the self at its deepest level.'¹⁴⁰

Mrs Ramsay achieves something in interiority, invisible, permanent (for, even after her death, Lily can 'see' her), and beyond the fragility of the self as smashable mirror: just as Lily, when 'looking at' Mrs Ramsay, achieves something more than simply 'looking within' herself. Mrs Ramsay's self-reflexive communion in solitude, her reduction of herself to that essential 'core of darkness', ushers the emergence and discovery of an invisible yet imperishable self, one that experiences its own transcendence. While personal and emotional, its invisibility, its infinitude and its abstract shape (the wedge-shaped core of darkness and purple shadow) possess the logical characteristics of aesthetic formalism, thereby achieving the *fusion* of scaffolding and colour, of granite and rainbow, which Banfield identifies as the 'mystical' signature of Woolf's aesthetic. Lily, the artist, understands, *sees*, Mrs Ramsay *as* the integrated unity which the latter intuits in solitude. And yet, as corrective to the arrogance of a reductive epistemology, one governed by the literal language of logic and an aesthetics of representation, Mrs Ramsay is simultaneously uncapturable, spilling out beyond the dimensions of the wedge-shaped core of darkness and purple shadow. Lily's question mirrors Woolf's own: how to capture 'the heart, the passion, humour, everything as bright as fire in the mist'?¹⁴¹

The transformative power of artistic vision, in its ability to intuit and convey the unity of the disparate elements of life, is akin to a mystical seeing in the traditional sense encountered in Plotinian philosophy. The drive towards interiority, the discovery of the essential self beyond the multi-faceted construction of others' perceptions, and the realisation of a power of vision which, being 'beyond the level of reflection and perception', is rather that 'of intuition and contemplation',¹⁴² are elements delineating the mystical contours of Woolf's literary aesthetics. This mystical seeing which seeks to penetrate to what is real, which searches for a gentle relationship with the other, is the means by which Mrs Ramsay and Lily, in spite of spatio-temporal distance, are brought

into relationship on a meta-level of the novel: hence, both seek 'the lighthouse', the lighthouse which, through her contemplation of it, Mrs Ramsay becomes. Just as, for Banfield, 'the unobserved table fills in the gap to create continuity between Lily's and [Mr Ramsay's] private perspectives,'¹⁴³ so the lighthouse unites Lily's and Mrs Ramsay's perspectives. The formal heart of the novel mediates separate perspectives. The lighthouse, quite literally, sheds 'light' on the dark spaces between perspectives. Now, contra Russell, the artist has constructed and represented public space: has 'pointed to' something beyond subjective 'impressions'. And here 'there is no longer any distinction between outer and inner perception. We have gone beyond the level of reflection and perception, and reached that of intuition and contemplation.'¹⁴⁴

The Plotinian self, situated within the metaphysical architectures of Neoplatonism, is more ontologically robust than Woolf's self. Her 'self' participates in that 'modernist human decentering' which characterised the intellectual atmosphere of her contemporary world.¹⁴⁵ But while exploring the estranging consequences of that new sense of vastness which forced humans to 'accept their decentered position within the abyss of intergalactic space,' 'at least,' Holly Henry writes, 'they could identify the "centre" of their own galaxy.'¹⁴⁶ What is striking is the degree to which this modernist self-exploration shares insights with pre-modern exercises in self-contemplation. Plotinus meets the turn of the gaze inwards: the approach to the true self requires the 'reorientation of our attention,' which in turn 'requires an inner transformation, a metamorphosis of our whole being;' perhaps because now, as always, 'there is not some other place to go to find ourselves, to rediscover the divine within us . . .'¹⁴⁷ It will belong to the apophatic dimension of mystical experience to situate the self's de-centering within the context of life's ceaseless arrival.

III

Vision and Light

Plotinus' vision, before which everything opens up, is a vision which comes from beyond and penetrates, behind appearances, as far as spiritual reality.

Pierre Hadot, *Plotinus*¹⁴⁸

We develop language in the context of looking: the metaphor of vision again.

Iris Murdoch, *The Idea of Perfection*¹⁴⁹

The idea of transformed vision is essential to Plotinian mysticism, and to the mystical tradition inspired by Neoplatonic philosophy. But the transformation of vision is a theme of Woolf's writing also, particularly where her literature explores artistic vision, and private acts of contemplative self-exploration. The ethereal substance and movement of 'light' is used by Woolf to define that quality of life she seeks to capture in aesthetic vision. Endeavouring to capture that 'light' which makes us 'somehow successive and continuous, we human beings', she identifies several things: the possibility of conveying the 'unobserved' (light being 'everywhere') which contemporary discoveries in light theory, to her mind, suggested;¹⁵⁰ some basic pattern, or presence, which makes of disparate parts 'something continuous'; and a meta-level, assumed by her aesthetic philosophy, upon which an 'eyeless' gaze moves invisibly, limitlessly, anonymously, observing the invisible sources and structures of reality (of world and self), creating her aesthetic of the unobserved.

Becoming Vision

And the faculty for seeing in imagination always leaves me so suffused with something partly visual, partly emotional, I can't, though its very pervasive, catch it when I come home-

Virginia Woolf, 30 May 1940¹⁵¹

The particular instance, studied above, of Mrs Ramsay's 'own eyes meeting her own eyes' and her 'becoming one' with 'that light' of the lighthouse beams, brings the concepts of vision and light into relationship. Mrs Ramsay's moment of self-encounter reflects the novel's self-reflexive structure, its exploration of themes of artistic vision and composition. Woolf's writing brings us to consider, and participate in, the process of creativity. In a sense, we *become* vision.

This self-reflexive dynamic is captured in the idea of becoming vision which permeates this novel. Mrs Ramsay looks at – and, she feels, thereby becomes 'the thing she looked at' – the light of the lighthouse; Lily looks at, and desires to become 'one with' Mrs Ramsay; and the movement of Lily's attention towards the lighthouse coincides with a deepening awareness of who Mrs Ramsay is essentially. In a formalist sense, lines of vision crisscross one another to create a net of light. This notion of *becoming the light by which one sees*, and the terms of its expression in Mrs Ramsay's experience, bears strong resemblance to Hadot's account of Plotinus' sense that 'In order to unite herself to divine Thought, in the midst of which the Forms contemplate themselves, the soul must cease

contemplating this world of Forms as if it were something exterior. She must experience this world *within herself, by raising herself* to the level of pure contemplation characteristic of divine Thought. She must coincide at the summit of herself, with this immediate vision of herself.¹⁵² How is the world of Forms, in its immanence, to be seen? How is transcendent Reality to be glimpsed? Hadot translates Plotinus: "If one were to compare [the world of Forms] to a living, variegated sphere . . . then one would see it, but as it were from the outside, as one being sees another; in fact, however, one must oneself become Spirit, and oneself become vision."¹⁵³

Towards the end of the novel, the disappearance of the lighthouse from Lily's physical vision alongside the appearance, in imaginative vision, of Mrs Ramsay, invokes the *formless* heart of the novel, and the corresponding quality of creative experience. For the post-Impressionistic aesthetic, 'what lacks form is what creates form.'¹⁵⁴ All attention is drawn towards the silent, invisible heart of the novel. Yet this central point of invisibility alludes not only to the manifestation of the logical, abstract structure 'underpinning' appearances, but points into the formlessness beyond formal structure itself. Woolf's aesthetic attempt to render the unobserved – the fusion of many lighthouses, the many perspectives constitutive of the object, in one moment of vision (that which has 'become a symbol reverberating beyond an individual mind')¹⁵⁵ – also gives the emptiness from out of which vision comes. Lily will not have captured, in her final linear brush stroke, all she meant to say, all that came as vision.

The self-reflexive characteristics of this novel suggest the fusion of each moment with every other. The work appears a 'unified whole', 'saturated', as Woolf would say, with lines of vision. The dynamic, *cyclical* images of 'eyes meeting her own eyes', becoming one with 'that light for example',¹⁵⁶ and the rotation of the beams themselves, however, give a less linear template for interpreting vision in *To The Lighthouse*. The idea of the self 'becoming vision', conveyed through Mrs Ramsay's contemplation of the lighthouse beams, is expressed in terms of infinitude and limitlessness, coinciding with the simultaneity of the reduction and expansion of self.

As both Banfield's and Monk's studies illustrate, Woolf is concerned with a typically modernist problem in considering human character as potentially comprising the sum of self-projected perspectives. While Monk conceives this problem in its social context, Banfield explores the contemporary philosophical origins of Woolf's engagement with the idea of the self as a sealed centre of light, impervious to the gaze

of others. But what Woolf attempts to achieve, artistically, in the depiction of unseen rooms, private perspectives, and the abstract, invisible networks constructing public spaces, relationships, and the invisible depths of the self, stretches her epistemological creed beyond the reductive models of her sceptical contemporaries.

That this epistemological stretching is facilitated by structures of imaginative and intellectual vision mediated through a pervading 'light' of proportion, order and continuity brings Woolf to converse with Plotinus again: not least because this intuition of proportion, order and continuity, inspiring the artistic effort, grounds the artist's vision in an encounter with a transcending plane. Also, for both, the depths of the self contain the impress of this reality. Hadot remarks that 'Consciousness is a point of view, a centre of perspective. For us, our "self" coincides with that point from which a perspective is opened up for us, be it into the world or onto our souls . . . But we will not *be* what we really *are*, until we become aware of these levels.'¹⁵⁷ Woolf is similarly driven to explore the 'awareness of these levels' which precipitates the emergence of the self at a 'deeper' level. For Plotinus, this matter of moving beyond the 'self' known through the consciousness of an isolated perspective is naturally connected to an epistemological question: 'Can we really say that we *are* something of which we are not conscious?'¹⁵⁸ Bringing her literary aesthetic not only to manifest the formal properties of reality, but also, in presenting artistic effort, to give the negative space of the surrounding formlessness (that which '*creates*' form), Woolf suggests the potential of her art to convey that of which we are not directly and fully conscious, that which is intuited. In *this* respect Woolf engages Plotinus' question: 'Can we really say that we are something of which we are not conscious?' Murdoch declares that philosophers must 'invent a terminology which shows how our natural psychology can be altered by conceptions which lie beyond its range.'¹⁵⁹

The emptiness Woolf often makes central can be interpreted not simply as the isolated positing of an opposite for that vision of unity, integration and continuity that we are exploring, but as an instinct emerging, as it does in Woolf's art, *in relation to* the positive moment of vision and expression. This reading recognises the negative dimension of experience not simply as the fracture and dispersal of what had suggested pattern and completeness, but as testifying to that which emerges from beyond conscious experience, interrupting this experience and disrupting naïve notions of transcendence: that which, transcending the capacities of the artist, continues, nevertheless, to haunt her as new vision. Responding to this mode of vision, Plotinus writes 'We must not

look, but must, as it were, close our eyes and exchange our faculty of vision for another. We must awaken this faculty which everyone possesses, but few people ever use':¹⁶⁰

Knowing how to look at the world of the senses is to "prolong the vision of the eye by means of the vision of the spirit"; it is "to pierce the material envelope of things by a powerful effort of mental vision, and go on to read the formula, invisible to the naked eye, that their materiality makes manifest" . . . [This procedure] allows us to go beyond the material appearance of objects, and see their form . . .¹⁶¹

This visionary penetration beyond instances to form evokes Woolf's post-Impressionistic aim. The search for 'the formula, invisible to the naked eye' recalls her search for the 'pattern' intuited by post-Impressionistic vision, while the invisibility of those intuited aspects of vision she cannot make manifest (that sea of formlessness surrounding creativity) locates the apophatic moment. Both Woolf and Plotinus seek the 'unifying power of artistic vision',¹⁶² a unity attributed by the former to the artist's vision, by the latter to the contemplative life of thought: so that 'having gathered all things together into one, we contemplated.'¹⁶³

'light'

The soul's vision becomes indistinguishable from this original brilliance. It is as if the soul were seeing the light at the very center of its own vision. . .

Pierre Hadot, *Plotinus*¹⁶⁴

She looked up over her knitting and met the third stroke and it seemed to her like her own eyes meeting her own eyes . . .

Virginia Woolf, *To The Lighthouse*¹⁶⁵

While recent criticism has focused on Woolf's use of colour in her literature, particularly its potential to codify her images with political intention,¹⁶⁶ the relationship, in her work, of images of darkness and light deserves attention. For Plotinus and Woolf, images of light capture the presence and activity of physical and imaginative-intellectual vision. For Plotinus, this imagery is characteristic of a Platonic heritage which influences mystical literature in this tradition. Light-imagery is key for Woolf's imaginary also, not least, it may be justifiably deduced, as evidence of her Platonic engagements.

Woolf subtly utilises images of light for the conveyance of her metaphysical search after the 'pattern' which backs the variegated structures of life. Mrs Ramsay feels she 'becomes one' with 'that light', feels the light to be 'her own eyes meeting her own eyes', in the manner in which Plotinus (and the mystics after him) is concerned with becoming vision itself. This sense of *becoming* mediation (becoming the relationship between subject and object) is central to Woolf's exploration of artistic vision. The dependence of Lily's emotional welfare upon her ability to envision Mrs Ramsay, Mrs Ramsay's ability to stabilise herself through metaphysical relation to the trees outside the dining room,¹⁶⁷ and Woolf's developing sense of the significance of anonymity for successful creation, each convey a conviction that the visionary must *become* vision.

For Plotinus:

The Intellect is beautiful . . . Situated in pure *light and pure radiance*, it includes within itself the nature of all beings. This beautiful world of ours is but a shadow and an image of its beauty . . . whoever were to see it . . . would be seized by awe.¹⁶⁸

Here, ecstasy (to 'be seized by awe') accompanies the vision of the beautiful 'real', and pure light, pure seeing, pure possession of the real *is* the essence of intellectual activity. The significance of intellectual vision, coupled with acknowledgement of the limitations of reasoning and language, is present for both Woolf and Plotinus: but particularly so is the unifying quality of that light in which the world is invisibly bathed. To become one with this vision is to *become* vision. It is to be 'eyeless' and yet to apprehend the 'abstract'. This vision sustains the visionary in that relationship between the stilled self and the (expansive) apprehension of reality, just as, for Plotinus, intellectual vision sustains the integration of the calmed self. Mrs Ramsay's *awareness* of her relation to the trees and stars holds her steady; Lily's relation to the masses of her canvas grants her satisfaction and serenity; just so "The illumination which comes from the Intellect . . . turns the soul back upon herself and *does not allow her to become dispersed*, but rather makes her satisfied with the splendour within her."¹⁶⁹

The cyclical shape of Mrs Ramsay's self-reflexive activity, of Woolf's *Kunstlerroman*, achieves a visionary unity echoing Plotinus' soul turned back upon itself, lit by Intellect, become integrally unified and delighted at the discovery of splendour within her: that backing light which makes of fractured moments something 'successive' and 'continuous'.¹⁷⁰

Contemplative vision alone achieves this. That light which is life, which is generative, is to shine through the work of art, that which attempts to order the world. The work of art makes the world transparent to this 'light': Woolf writes of her diary writings that 'I should like to come back, after a year or two, & find that the collection had sorted itself & refined itself & coalesced, as such deposits so mysteriously do, into a mould, transparent enough to reflect the light of our life, & yet steady, tranquil composed with the aloofness of a work of art.'¹⁷¹

Woolf's intuition of an essential backing light which makes her aesthetic of the unobserved capable of conveying the invisible dimensions of reality, suggests that meta-level constituting the architectures of imaginative vision. This backing light, upon which artistic vision depends, confers unity on the disparateness of individual events, moments and selves. This is a cosmic light: one that, as for Plotinus, relates the experience of the contemplating individual to the shape of reality as a whole. Writing of her desire for 'long poems', and evoking an impressionistic sense of light's atmospheric suffusion, Woolf records 'I want the concentration & the romance, & the words all glued together, fused, glowing; have no time to waste any more on prose.'¹⁷² The artistic medium must be *refined* to let this light shine through: must rid 'deadness and superfluity' giving instead 'saturated, unchopped completeness'¹⁷³ thereby revealing the formless source of the art work's energy. This artistic goal is described, by Plotinus, in terms of the 'the real goal for the soul: to touch and to behold this light itself, by means of itself. She does not wish to see it by means of some other light; what she wants to see is that light by means of which she is able to see. What she must behold is precisely that by which she was illuminated . . . How then, could this come about? Eliminate everything [sc. that is not light]!¹⁷⁴

What is described here as the soul's goal defines the meta-level assumed by Woolf's desire, in virtue of the interpenetration of art and life, to convey, in her self-reflexive works of art, the nature of artistic effort and vision itself:

For I figure that the approach will be entirely different this time: no scaffolding; scarcely a brick to be seen; all crepuscular, but the heart, the passion, humour, everything as bright as fire in the mist. What the unity shall be I have yet to discover: the theme is a blank to me.

She adds finally:

. . . this afternoon I had a gleam of light.¹⁷⁵

A luminous quality, the simultaneity of transparency and concreteness, is to be attempted in the novel. The material, whether words or paint, must barely betray 'scaffolding' or 'brick', allowing the heart to burn: in her mystical fusion of granite and rainbow, Woolf gives not simply the skeletal scaffolding of logical formalism, but sets this structure, transparently, as the background upon which the 'light' of *life* is to glow weightlessly.

As Hadot writes of Plotinian philosophy, the 'soul's vision' becomes 'indistinguishable from this original brilliance . . . as if the soul were seeing the light at the very centre of its own vision.'¹⁷⁶ The simultaneous conveyance of this vision, by Woolf, in terms of darkness (recall Mrs Ramsay's sense of 'being oneself, a wedge-shaped core of darkness')¹⁷⁷ complements the author's sense that when directly looked at, the soul vanishes.¹⁷⁸ Mrs Ramsay looks at the light, but becomes a limitless wedge, dark, invisible: just as the novel, possessing the self-reflexive dynamic of light seen by light (Woolf conveying through art *what it is* to convey through art), possesses an invisible centre. Woolf presents this movement in her own terms, but it strongly resembles, both in object (envisioning the shape of reality) and method (enlightening vision) the dynamics of Plotinian contemplative vision.

Plotinus describes the process that 'will render ideal Beauty perceptible', will give the soul her 'spiritual form' in the following way:

If you have become this, and seen it, and become pure and alone with yourself, with nothing now preventing you from *becoming one* in this way, and have nothing extraneous mixed within your self, but wholly yourself, *nothing but true light*, not measured by dimensions, or bounded by shape into littleness, or expanded to size by unboundedness, but everywhere unmeasured, because greater than all measure and *superior to all quantity*; if you see that this is what you have become, then you have become *vision* . . . Open your eyes and see. This alone is the eye that sees the immense Beauty.¹⁷⁹

Mrs Ramsay's contemplation of the lighthouse beams meets Plotinus' description here of 'becoming' and 'seeing', of a purification or refinement which makes the self 'bright', so that she is 'become pure and alone with [her]self', having 'nothing extraneous mixed within [her]self': where Mrs Ramsay becomes one with 'that light for example',¹⁸⁰ with her own 'stroke', 'the long steady stroke',¹⁸¹ Plotinus envisages a solitude and self-identity which is simultaneously self-transcendence in 'nothing but true light'. Mrs Ramsay becomes 'not measured by dimensions'

(observing the 'limitless horizon' of her being), but is, with Plotinus, 'everywhere unmeasured'. See all this in yourself, Plotinus instructs, and 'you have become vision': capture all this, Woolf reflects, and artistic vision – both of invisible form and the form-giving properties of formlessness – captures something of the essential shape of reality, accompanied by the darkness of life's final unutterability. She writes to make a window onto life. Just so, Hadot describes how, for Plotinus:

When . . . sculptor and statue are one – when they are both one and the same soul – soon the statue is nothing other than vision itself, and beauty is nothing more than a state of *complete simplicity* and *pure light*.¹⁸²

Woolf and her post-Impressionist contemporaries renounced artistic loyalty to traditional categories such as 'beauty', and departed from an Impressionistic privileging of depictions of light. But the way in which Woolf's light imagery constructs and conveys the architectures of intellectual, imaginative and emotional vision resonates with the shape and purpose of Plotinus' luminous vocabulary. In his discussion of Ulysses (wherein he explores Intellect's appearance to itself as the diffraction of the light of the primordial One), 'stages of conversion towards the light, correspond, for Plotinus, to a *total change in our mode of vision*: we must exchange one way of seeing for another which . . . "everyone has, but few use."¹⁸³(My emphasis.) Equally recognising the rarity of her visual 'gift', and reflecting her artistic contemporaries' determination to transcend the deadening habits of 'common sense',¹⁸⁴ Woolf, describing her sense that 'reality' is in fact 'one thing', comments that 'I think it may be rare to have so acute a sense of something like that . . .'¹⁸⁵ For Plotinus, this transformed mode of seeing is acquaintance with reality emerging from that prior light from which the soul itself comes: both this way of seeing, and the reality it sees, are structured to radiate the first light.

Woolf seeks in her writing, perhaps especially in *To The Lighthouse* where the artist studies the source of her creativity, looks into her own eyes, that which Hadot, quoting Plotinus, describes in the following way:

What we must see is that which allows us to see: light, to be sure, but just as much the original act of vision: in other words, that which sees in the depth of our vision. If life, in all its stages, is vision, it is because pure presence, which is its center and its source, is, in a sense, absolute vision, the immediate transparency of the Good to itself: "In a sense, for it, its being is its act of looking at itself."¹⁸⁶

Woolf's sense, shared with Plotinus, that to study life commits the artist to the realisation that *life's* 'being is its act of looking at itself', announces the importance of the cyclical dynamic of that artistic vision which is found within, yet sourced beyond, the self: thereby subtly locating the transcendent aspect of her immanentist observation that *we* are the work of art.¹⁸⁷ Becoming one with the light, Plotinus' contemplative visionary and Woolf's artist become the activity of seeing, of seeing reality not as the empiricist's eye grasps a sense-object, but as the artist pursues the formless source of creativity, of life, itself.

IV

Love and Ecstasy: The Ethics of Vision

If life has a base that it stands upon, if it is a bowl that one fills and fills and fills – then my bowl without a doubt stands upon this memory. It is of lying half asleep, half awake, in bed in the nursery at St Ives. It is of hearing the waves breaking, one, two, one, two, and sending a splash of water over the beach; and then breaking one, two, one, two behind a yellow blind. It is of hearing the blind draw its little acorn across the floor as the wind blew the blind out. It is of lying and hearing this splash and seeing this light, and feeling, it is almost impossible that I should be here; of feeling the purest ecstasy that I can conceive.

Virginia Woolf, *Moments of Being*¹⁸⁸

A loving just gaze cherishes and adds substance, a contemptuous gaze withers.

Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*¹⁸⁹

Love and 'the damned egotistical self'¹⁹⁰

To The Lighthouse takes, as a central concern, 'subject' and 'object' and different ways of conceiving their relationship. Lily Briscoe interprets her desire to capture Mrs Ramsay as an attempt to 'become one' with her. The dynamics of this aesthetic relation are conveyed through a vocabulary of vision, light: and ecstasy. Lily, observing the attentive gaze of another character, William Bankes, towards Mrs Ramsay, wonders:

Such a rapture . . . [what she was about to say] paled beside this 'rapture', this silent stare, for which she felt intense gratitude; for nothing so solaced

her, eased her of the perplexity of life, and miraculously raised its burdens, as this sublime power, this heavenly gift, and one would no more disturb it, while it lasted, than break up the shaft of sunlight lying level across the floor. That people should love like this, that Mr Bankes should feel this for Mrs Ramsay . . . was helpful, was exalting.¹⁹¹

Just before this passage, Lily begins her contemplation of William's attention to Mrs Ramsay: an act of contemplation which, welcoming another's gaze on her object, is generously non-possessive, while attending her own desire for relationship with her object. Lily's recognition of a similar generous passion in William's gaze initiates the fusion of their vision, as her 'different ray' meets his own 'beam':¹⁹²

For him to gaze as Lily saw him gazing at Mrs Ramsay was a rapture, equivalent, Lily felt, to the loves of dozens of young men . . . It was love, she thought, pretending to move her canvas, distilled and filtered; love that never attempted to clutch its object; but, like the love which mathematicians bear their symbols, or poets their phrases, was meant to be spread over the world and become part of the human gain.¹⁹³

The difficulty of differentiating whether William's or Lily's 'rapture' is referred to emphasises the coincidence of vision. The ambiguity is mirrored in the preceding passage, where it is difficult to determine whether the 'sublime power' of 'this silent stare' is seen by Lily as the quality of *William's* vision (in which she rejoices), or her own transformative interpretation of his admiring gaze. The resulting sense is a shared, suffused vision, observed and engaged by the passionate visionary enquiry of the artist, the artist who sees those invisible relations *as* making life itself. Vision, 'this silent stare', is conveyed in a language of light, 'the shaft of sunlight lying level across the floor', the allusion here to the lighthouse beams ('the steady light . . . she woke in the night and saw it bent across their bed, stroking the floor')¹⁹⁴ conveying the depths to which Lily sees Mrs Ramsay (for Mrs Ramsay becomes 'that light' 'she looked at').¹⁹⁵

This vision, moreover, is received, in its 'sublime power', in *ecstasy*. Lily is, to use a Plotinian expression, 'seized by awe'.¹⁹⁶ In *To The Lighthouse*, moments of profound attention, moments of loving attention which seek non-possessive unity with their object, are accompanied by a feeling of ecstasy. The phases of Lily's artistic struggle to capture Mrs Ramsay involve an oscillation between the sense of successful portrayal and an opposing sense of expressive failure: Mrs Ramsay's

disappearance from vision causes Lily anguish: her appearance (years after her death) brings the artist relief.¹⁹⁷

A corresponding relationship between the achievement of vision and an experience of ecstasy informs the Plotinian metaphysic (and Christian mysticism following this tradition). Just as, for Lily and Mrs Ramsay, the experience of ecstasy or despair is associated with degrees of proximity to, or distance from, their object – just as, for Woolf, the vision of proportion and order brings with it ‘the happiest feeling in the world’, – so also, for Plotinus, the “philosophical life . . . consists in a long waiting, a patient preparation, interrupted by brief, but vivid ecstasies, during which the soul reaches its end and its goal.”¹⁹⁸

Ecstasy accompanies transcendence of the fractured self. For Mrs Ramsay, it is ‘a resting on a platform of stability’, it is ‘peace’ which attends the moment of dissolution to simple, yet limitless, being. Woolf’s description of the reduction of the self to a limitless horizon gives the shape of Plotinian self-transcendence, the ecstatic flavour of this encounter being suggested in the artist’s feverish exclamations, her protestations of love and desire for visionary union:

‘Mrs Ramsay!’ Lily cried, ‘Mrs Ramsay!’ But nothing happened. The pain increased. That anguish could reduce one to such a pitch of imbecility, she thought! . . . no one had heard her cry that ignominious cry, stop pain, stop! She had not obviously taken leave of her senses. No one had seen her step off her strip of board into the waters of annihilation . . . And now slowly went the pain of the want, and the bitter anger . . . lessened; and of their anguish left, as antidote, a relief that was balm in itself, and also, but more mysteriously, *a sense of someone there*, of Mrs Ramsay, relieved for a moment the weight that the world had put on her, staying lightly by her side . . . It was strange how clearly she saw her . . .¹⁹⁹

Lily’s experience conveys that same synthesis of energy and stillness, in the ecstatic moment, as when Mrs Ramsay, waking at night and watching the lighthouse beams so that ‘the ecstasy burst in her eyes’, will ‘feel’ ‘It is enough! It is enough!’²⁰⁰ In this experiential coincidence, Lily’s accurate envisioning of Mrs Ramsay’s essence is reinforced. Through the heart of the novel, transcending the distance between characters, spans a radiant channel of connection.

Returning to Lily’s consideration of the quality of William Bankes’ vision when observing Mrs Ramsay,²⁰¹ the number of times ‘love’ is mentioned in this passage is notable. But it is a love with distinctive characteristics. It is passionate, but non-possessive; reverent but

distant; as 'spread'-ing as the reduced but limitless self which envisions. The characteristics of love are explored in relation to the characteristics of aesthetic vision, suggesting an exploration of 'love' as accompanying Woolf's search for the structure of the real. Lily expresses the demands of her distinctive epistemology:

Could loving, as people called it, make her and Mrs Ramsay one? for it was not knowledge but unity that she desired, not inscriptions on tablets, nothing that could be written in any language known to men, but intimacy itself, which is knowledge, she had thought, leaning her head on Mrs Ramsay's knee.²⁰²

The artist's vision is set in contrast to Mr Ramsay's and Charles Tansley's vision in *To The Lighthouse*. Woolf explores two different approaches to the problem of knowledge, the relation between subject and object. Mr Ramsay is troubled by a desire to achieve that philosophical 'genius' which will distinguish him as a great philosopher. In the atomised vocabulary of formal logic, he strives to search beyond 'P' and 'Q' to 'R':

R is then – what is R?

A shutter, like the leathern eyelid of a lizard, flickered over the intensity of his gaze and *obscured* the letter R. In that flash of darkness he heard people saying he was a failure – that R was beyond him. He would never reach R. On to R, once more. R . . .²⁰³

Here Woolf conveys what she conceived to be a characteristically masculine desire to reduce the world, as object, to conquerable units of information. Also conveyed is the (connected) degree to which Mr Ramsay's desire for knowledge concerns self-promotion, and the avoidance of the otherwise inevitable conclusion that 'he was a failure'. Even the description of the 'shutter' over the 'leathern eyelid' emphasises the coolness, the cold-bloodedness, of a mechanical gaze: there is nothing here of Lily Briscoe's ecstatic vision, suffused with warmth and light 'sublime'.²⁰⁴ Lily cherishes the distance of that 'love which mathematicians bear their symbols', can exercise the formalist's attention to logical structures of reality: but she can also *feel*, can engage passionately with, her object. Unconcerned with self-promotion, and asking only an undisturbed place from which to make her study of life (a 'room of one's own'), she is open to the danger of being overwhelmed, being transformed, by the saturated phenomenon before her. The impediment to vision is 'the damned egotistical self',²⁰⁵ Murdoch's 'fat relentless ego'.

But here, in Lily's case, while "There is still a subject in charge to make sense of phenomena, that is, to interpret them," yet "this subject cannot constitute the phenomena," since she comes "after, not before, them."²⁰⁶

Lily seeks 'unity'²⁰⁷ with her object, *as opposed* to (she asserts this opposition) any relation maintaining the distance implied by its being expressible in 'inscriptions on tablets' or 'any language known to men'.²⁰⁸ It is 'intimacy itself' she claims 'which is knowledge.'²⁰⁹ But the 'unity' desired here does not require the oppression of the object so possessed. Lily wants to see Mrs Ramsay as she is essentially, in the invisible relations of her self-reflexive encounter, and to capture this essence in paint. This vision coincides with what Mrs Ramsay herself feels when 'she looked at the steady light . . . which was so much her, yet so little her.'²¹⁰ The vision required for attempting expression is possessed by the artist, yet transcends her; it comes *to* Lily in the manner of a revelation which occupies her attention with the fullness of what is first perceived *in fullness*. Mr Ramsay's emotionally and materially distanced apprehension of those objects 'P' 'Q' and 'R' is, by contrast, the spilling of the ego onto the reductively conceived object: the world is stripped for easy conquest. His is the 'narrow rationality and dissection', which characterises 'mechanical time . . . subdividing and shredding the June day' of *Mrs Dalloway*.²¹¹ His intellectual 'plodding and persevering',²¹² his assertion of intellectual supremacy, depends on the repression and private consumption of his wife's elegant, fragrant and nurturing energies. His growth in knowledge – as the self's enlargement – requires diminution of the other.

Mr Ramsay laments his distance from those 'inspired' men 'who, miraculously, lump all the letters together in one flash – the way of genius.'²¹³ He is self-pitying in his declaration:

His own little light would shine, not very brightly, for a year or two, and would then be merged in some bigger light, and that in a bigger still . . .
Mr Ramsay squared his shoulders and stood very upright by the urn.²¹⁴

The presence of the urn consolidates the association between Mr Ramsay's way of knowing and death: the death of his object, but also (as conveyed in his recitation of Cowper's despairing line 'we perished each alone') the death that is a consequence of his dependence on others' praise for the preservation of his sense of self-worth. This *actual* emptiness contrasts markedly with Lily's ecstasy in *vision*, contrasts with the contemplation of the lighthouse beams which brings Mrs Ramsay to consider that 'she had known happiness, exquisite happiness, intense

happiness . . . the blue went out of the sea and it rolled in waves of pure lemon which curved and swelled and broke upon the beach and the ecstasy burst in her eyes and waves of pure delight raced over the floor of her mind and she felt, It is enough! It is enough!²¹⁵ The latter, consummating Mrs Ramsay's dissolution to a point of identification with that light, with vision, comes far closer to Hadot's depiction of 'mystical ecstasy', in which 'the soul leaves behind all forms, including her own, and becomes this formless reality, this pure presence which is the center of the soul, as it is of everything else.'²¹⁶ For 'In the pure Intellectual . . . the vision and the envisioned are a unity; the seen is as the seeing and seeing as seen.'²¹⁷

Aesthetic vision, vision which sees not static objects to be claimed and conquered, but the evanescence of invisible, fluctuating relationships which cannot be exhausted in reductive propositions constructed from 'P' 'Q' and 'R', apprehends the shape of reality most fully. In her mystical fusion of granite and rainbow, of logic and light, Woolf makes an epistemological observation, offering a creative response to the invisible, relational dimensions of life which are not exhausted by logical analysis but nevertheless constitute a dimension of reality. 'Could loving,' Lily asks, 'as people called it, make her and Mrs Ramsay one?'²¹⁸ Lily's post-Impressionistic, abstract art offers this synthesis, balancing the logical, emotional and imaginative modes of vision in one approach to reality. Lily's art fuses Mr Ramsay's logic (in its depiction of formal relations) with the riches of imaginative experience encountered in Mrs Ramsay's contemplations. Even 'the intuitive inconsistencies of Mrs. Dalloway and Mrs. Ramsay seem superior to Bradshaw's science and Ramsay's reason partly because the curling sentences persuade us that fluctuation of impulse is the essence of human consciousness. External and internal impulses flow together.'²¹⁹ Woolf's aesthetic manifests a rational mysticism.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored points of connection between the mystical metaphysics of Plotinus and the aesthetics of Virginia Woolf. I have given particular attention to conceptions of unity, the mystical self, vision, light, love and ecstasy, each of which arise as characteristic themes in mystical literature, find a definitive and influential shape within Plotinian philosophy, and converge, strikingly, with aspects of Woolf's aesthetic. This conversation has elucidated the constructive

and concrete dimensions of Woolf's vision and literary art, whereby the artist's intuition of a transcending reality is conveyed successfully through her chosen mode of expression. The delineation of this constructive vision indicates the rejection of reductive alternatives.

However, the unifying properties of art and life are always, within Woolf's aesthetic perspective, accompanied by a 'dash on the beach'²²⁰ which haunts the constructive, cataphatic, moment. This attending anxiety, caused so often by a sense of the object's absence, the interruption of the vision of unity and a corresponding awareness of the limitations of artistic expression, is frequently interpreted by Woolf's critics as a definitive bar to theological conversation. However, as I will demonstrate, this dimension of Woolf's aesthetic engages with the literature of a religious mystical tradition. Chapter Six will consider the apophatic complement to this chapter's cataphatic encounter with reality. We must consider what is revealed in darkness: what, being itself unvoiced, sources the artist's inspiration to respond, creatively, to vision.

Chapter Five will explore the corresponding cataphatic dimension of Iris Murdoch's philosophy, revealing how she evolves beyond the point of departure elucidated in Chapter Three. As with Woolf, her metaphysical arguments respond to reductive conceptions of self and other, of vision and contemplation, of philosophical considerations of consciousness, imagination and the work of art, offering restorative alternatives.

Exploring the Cataphatic Dimension of Iris Murdoch's Work

We still live in the old familiar mysterious world and explain and clarify and celebrate it in the old endlessly fertile and inventive modes of speech. We enjoy the freedom of a moral imagination. The idea of 'the world as full of images of God and hierarchies pointing to God' is, as I see it, fundamental in religion and (*mutatis mutandis*) in morality. I think this is what (if we put Good in for God) the world is full of! The affirmative way, which can find the divine everywhere in all the desire-driven burrowings of cognition, relates spirituality to the whole of our being.

Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*¹

How do sentences do it? Don't you know? For nothing is hidden.

Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*²

Chapter Four explored distinctly *cataphatic* elements of Virginia Woolf's aesthetic: positive moments of encounter with a transcending vision, moments affirming the constructive power of language in its response to engagement with the ground of reality. This chapter examines how Iris Murdoch's divergence from, and response to, reductive philosophical pictures, restores a richer conception of the human being, consciousness, and the power of contemplation to shape a reality which the reductive positivist ignores because this realm of 'inner' activity does not register in external signs (in behaviours or actions). This restoration of consciousness as the location of diverse inner happenings *as* constitutive of reality as any objective scientific entity, or fact, and the corresponding conviction that consciousness is changed by the world it contemplates, retrieves a concept of contemplation. This restoration of a substantial

'inner life' simultaneously restores cataphatic meaning-fullness to language. Literature can convey mental activity as constitutive of reality. Language is no longer required to be literal to be truth-bearing (metaphor is redeemed). Everyday life is recognised as the site of an irreducibly complex and continuous moral activity, within which the individual is immersed as within a fabric of being (recall Woolf's 'backing light'). Indeed, 'we are all artists': 'use of language is use of imagination', and 'perception is creative evaluation'.³

Murdoch's reappraisal of Platonism – presented in her three essays 'The Idea of Perfection' (1962), 'On "God" and "Good"' (1969) and 'The Sovereignty of Good Over Other Concepts' (1967) – indicates the direction of her departure from surrounding empirical and continental schools. Her retrieval of a Platonic concept of a transcending Good creates a metaphysical infrastructure to which a constructive moral vision and language *cataphatically* responds: our descriptions and pictures of our relationship with the Good are not reducible to positivistic correspondences between our thoughts, our words, our movements, and objects in the world. Herein lies Murdoch's departure from positivistic (behaviourist, linguistic, quasi-scientific) epistemologies. Reality contains a transcendent dimension, the argument for which is 'from the whole of life': human conscious experience makes constant evaluative reference to an intuited Good. Where reductive philosophical models strip the picture of the human person bare, Murdoch rebuilds the scene through the enacting of certain metaphysical deductions, and correspondingly reconstructs the meaning-fullness of moral language in reference to this complex reality, identifying the non-literal language of metaphor as an appropriate vehicle for philosophical discussion, thereby lifting the work of art – the work of literature, *the* aesthetic space for the exploration of moral vision – to the status of icon. As for Woolf, so for this metaphysician, the language of unity, vision, aesthetics, love and light are key: as is the idea of the porous self's location within a saturating, complex and dazzling reality of interpenetrating dynamics (the construction of form through art and life for Woolf, the activity of moral attention in reference to a transcending Good for Murdoch) that constantly remake the self as she readjusts her relationship (both internal and external) to reality and to the other.

One branch of Murdoch-criticism recognises Murdoch's philosophy to be 'premised on a version of Kant's Copernican Revolution: humans cannot directly know noumenal reality because our experience is necessarily phenomenal: that is, consciousness mediates and delimits human experience.'⁴ This study, however, explores Murdoch's sense

of the limitation of human experience and expression as these themes are sourced in the Platonic origins of her philosophy: in which context, indeed, she elucidates them. Equally, while previous studies have recognised 'Murdoch's critique of existentialism and linguistic behaviourism as reductionist accounts of the moral self' and have considered 'her constructive response to these philosophies,'⁵ this study is distinctive in recognising the mystical content of this 'constructive response' in a way not exhausted by eastern mystical affiliations, but in ways resonant with western mysticism, as consistent with Murdoch's Platonic heritage, and thereby delineating the value of her philosophy for the contemporary theological imagination.

The Cave and the Sun: The Origins of Mysticism in Murdoch's Thought

Murdoch is well aware of the appropriation of Platonic and Neoplatonic thought into Christian theology, and Christian mysticism in particular, observing that 'St Augustine mediated Platonism into Christianity.'⁶ It is therefore unsurprising that the western mysticism inspired by Platonic philosophy, encountered particularly in the tradition of negative theology with its emphasis on the dazzling of human faculties by a transcending reality, appeals to Murdoch as informing the mystical essence of any 'true religion.' While Eastern philosophy and spirituality is praised for being often 'more evidently mystical' than western Christian thought, on account of being less 'thingy', less 'concerned with complex completeness', (the doctrine of the Trinity 'is a celestial aesthetic celebration of internal relations,')⁷ nevertheless, Murdoch makes frequent reference to St John of the Cross's 'abyss of faith', and acknowledges the iconoclastic apophaticism of western mysticism at consummative points of her argument (see Chapter Seven).

The presence of a mystical dialectic in Murdoch's philosophy – of an oscillation between mutually informative cataphatic and apophatic dimensions – originates in the 'dialectics of the cave', contained within Plato's allegory (for Murdoch's description of this allegory, see the Introduction). What Plato intends 'as an allegory of the philosopher's ascent to knowledge,' Christians read 'as an allegory of the ascent to God.'⁸ Murdoch's religious beliefs changed throughout her lifetime: in 1972 she declares 'I am an ex-Christian',⁹ in 1983 describes herself as a 'Christian Buddhist': yet intriguingly adds, as Tammy Grimshaw notes, the qualifier that 'I can't get away from Christ, who travels with me.'¹⁰

Murdoch's writing reveals her awareness of her cultural and intellectual indebtedness to the Christian theological tradition. Denys Turner identifies a 'dialectical' narrative structure in the Allegory: 'there is an ascent toward the brilliant light, a light so excessive as to cause pain, distress and darkness: a darkness of knowledge deeper than any which is the darkness of ignorance. The price of the pure contemplation of the light is therefore darkness, even, as in Exodus, death, but not the darkness of the absence of light, rather of its excess – therefore a "luminous darkness".' 'Light is darkness, knowing is unknowing, a cloud, and the pain of contemplating it, is the pain of contemplating more reality than can be borne: "man may not see me and live".'¹¹ 'The Good itself is not visible,' Murdoch writes in 'On "God" and "Good"', 'perhaps to look at the sun is to be gloriously dazzled and to see nothing.'¹² 'Reality, then, in Murdoch's writing,' comments Murdoch-critic Marije Altorf, 'is both what one ought *most obviously* to know and what one can only know with great difficulty, if at all.'¹³

In virtue of her Platonism it is unsurprising that Murdoch's philosophy exudes affinities with Christian mysticism, especially considering that the Pseudo-Dionysian view of theological language 'is but the transposition of the Platonic dialectics of the Cave Allegory into the domain of discourse. If the light of the sun is a mind-stunning darkness, so is the reality of the divine a language-defeating silence.'¹⁴ Murdoch's retrieval of the Good, and associated Platonic symbolism, imports the cataphatic-apophatic dialectics into her philosophy, producing a distinctively Dionysian mysticism. This mystical dialectic – originating in her Platonism, and enhanced through her adamant appreciation for the negative stream of western mysticism – helps her develop philosophically beyond the reductionisms of her analytic and continental contemporaries. This chapter examines the operation of a constructive concept of metaphysical unity as it emerges in Murdoch's philosophy, the shape of her constructive reappraisal of notions of the self, and notions of vision, contemplation, language (and the associated power of art and literature to capture this rich life), and the ethical aspect of vision.

I

On Unity

I shall suggest that God was (or is) *a single perfect transcendent non-representable and necessarily real object of attention*; and I shall go on to suggest that moral philosophy should attempt to retain a central concept

which has all these characteristics . . . to a large extent they interpenetrate and overlap.

Iris Murdoch, 'On "God" and "Good"'¹⁵

There is a false unity and multiplicity and a true unity and multiplicity. There is the selfish ego surrounded by dark menacing chaos, and the more enlightened soul perceiving the diversity of creation in the light of truth.

Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*¹⁶

Iris Murdoch opens her philosophical text *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* with a chapter entitled: 'Conceptions of Unity. Art.' This 'art' does not so much designate fine art, as the nature of that activity in virtue of which 'we are all artists.' Something in the nature of human consciousness aspires to unity. 'The idea of a self-contained unity or limited whole is a fundamental instinctive concept. We see parts of things, we intuit whole things. We seem to know a great deal on the basis of very little. Oblivious of philosophical problems and paucity of evidence we grasp ourselves as unities, continuous bodies and continuous minds.'¹⁷ Acquaintance with Murdoch's philosophy soon teaches that obliviousness to 'philosophical problems' and 'paucity of evidence' are not circumstances necessarily telling against the value, or accuracy, of a thing. The ordinary man, attending only to his experiences and surroundings, lives in proximity to great wisdom. Philosophy is always 'catching up': 'The urge to prove that where we intuit unity there really is unity is a deep emotional motive to philosophy, to art, to thinking itself. Intellect is naturally one-making.'¹⁸ The value of 'art' in this context lies partly in the fact that 'Art . . . essentially (traditionally) involves the idea of a sustained *experienced* mental synthesis,' and that 'This ability to sustain and *experience* imagined syntheses has importance in other areas where we make use of analogous or related conceptions of authoritative limited wholes.'¹⁹

Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals contains an epic-proportioned charting of philosophical, artistic and common-sense approaches to such 'problems of deep structure.'²⁰ Murdoch meets Woolf in this metaphysical concern with the conflict, in consciousness, of intuitions to unity and disunity, and in considering how these conflicting intuitions meet at transcendental boundaries. Murdoch is similarly concerned with experienced juxtapositions of convictions of wholeness, of unity, of limited wholes ('we seem to know a great deal on the basis of very little'), alongside the pointlessness and seeming absurdity of life ('void').

For Murdoch, as for Woolf, it is premature to conclude that nihilistic instincts win out cleanly over convictions of unity, pattern, and purpose. In 'The Sovereignty of Good Over Other Concepts', Murdoch surveys the landscape of life: "The scene remains disparate and complex and 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."²¹ For Murdoch, it is morality, ultimately the transcendence of the concept 'Good' (which has metaphysical position though no metaphysical form)²² that makes a 'kind of shadowy unachieved' unity of life, just as the Platonic form of the Good unites the virtues. "The area of morals," she writes, confronting her contemporary moralists, 'and ergo of moral philosophy, can now be seen, not as a hole-and-corner matter of debts and promises, but as covering the whole of our mode of living and the quality of our relations with the world.'²³ This cataphatic confidence, this conviction of a participated unity ('the concept Good stretches through the whole of [the scene]'), is disclosed alongside an apophatic qualifier: 'However, the concept of Good still remains obscure and mysterious. We see the world in the light of the Good, but what is the Good itself? The source of vision is not in the ordinary sense seen.'²⁴ We cannot see, directly, the light in which we live and move and have our being. We see by a light that cannot itself be seen. Woolf muses, 'one can't write directly about the soul. Looked at, it vanishes: but look at the ceiling . . . & the soul slips in.'²⁵

These themes are articulated at the beginning of Murdoch's final philosophical work, evidencing long-term commitment to their investigation, but the constructive metaphysic underpinning her philosophical exploration of reality is laid out with brevity and clarity in three Platonic essays collected under the title 'The Sovereignty of Good.' Murdoch's search for 'the Good' as the beginning and end of the moral life coincides with her exploration of the intuition that moral reality is somehow unified, that somehow the virtues are on line to 'converge',²⁶ that a person's moral progression involves an increasing awareness, vision, of that Good which is 'sovereign' over all concepts.

However, the development of her argument in this direction creates an interesting tension in Murdoch's thought. She respects as a 'great merit' of the Oxbridge empiricist tradition its 'attack' on 'every form of spurious unity,' acknowledging that 'It is the traditional inspiration of the philosopher, but also his traditional vice, to believe that all is one.'²⁷ Most striking, and disarmingly honest within an academic philosophical essay, is Murdoch's confessional suggestion that 'Perhaps it is a matter of

temperament whether or not one is convinced that all is one,' adding, in parenthesis, 'My own temperament inclines to monism.'²⁸ A courageous merit of Murdoch's philosophical writing is her determination to expose the suppressed premises, the undisclosed starting-points, the prejudices and assumptions, of philosophical pictures. As late as *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* she is still observing that 'A philosopher may enlighten himself and others by reflection upon his temperament.'²⁹ Earlier, when responding to behaviourist, existentialist and utilitarian accounts of the 'self' by announcing that 'I find the image of man which I have sketched above both alien and implausible,'³⁰ she concedes a temperamental subjectivity to this judgement, adding that 'either one will be content with the emphasis on the reality of the outer, the absence of the inner, or one will feel (as I do) it cannot be so, something vital is missing.' Precisely because temperament, or 'instinct', may shape the philosopher's account of the world, every philosopher 'should be asked what he is afraid of.' 'To do philosophy is to explore one's own temperament, and yet at the same time to attempt to discover the truth.'³¹

Murdoch's awareness of the contribution of temperament towards the employment, or exclusion, of certain ideas, grounds an intriguing tension in her philosophy concerning the accuracy and healthiness of a concept of unity as underlying morality. If Plato is uncertain how to interpret the poet's divine inspiration – is this insight or delusion?³² – Murdoch is similarly conflicted about how to interpret the philosopher's, indeed the human being's, sense that somehow, ultimately, all things come together. In both cases, something essential is considered: the intellect's point of access to a reality beyond exhaustive comprehension and depiction. 'Plato was clearly fascinated by the unconscious nature of the artist's inspiration, which he constantly mocks, but which he also uses as a clue.'³³ Murdoch, similarly conflicted, considers her intuition (*her* 'clue') that unity grounds morality, yet notes that 'the madhouses of the world are filled with people who are convinced that all is one.'³⁴ We distinguish, here, a Murdochian distinction between false and true conceptions of unity.

Avoiding Bad Unity: Against Esoteric Mysticism

And (of course) philosophers (such as Schopenhauer, Wittgenstein and Heidegger) who celebrate or indicate mysticism, do not thereby qualify as mystics. (Mystics are *good*. A 'bad mystic' is a magician.)

Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*³⁵

Our most obvious unifying feature is methodical egoism, the barrier which divides the area of our interests and requirements from the rest of the world.

Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*³⁶

In her study of Murdoch's philosophical imaginary, Marije Altorf writes that 'Mysticism . . . Murdoch holds in high esteem,' pointing out that, 'Mysticism, both eastern and western, maintains for Murdoch that 'theological mythology, stories about gods, creation myths and so on,' are at 'a lower level than reality and ultimate religious truth . . . beyond the last image we fall into the abyss of God'.³⁷ While Altorf correctly identifies that point at which Murdoch is most in agreement with mysticism – namely, its insistence, within its 'negative' strand, on the preliminary nature of the image (picture or myth) when it comes to describing the 'highest' reality – it is important to note that Murdoch is not univocally admiring of what she identifies as a mystical temperament. For of *some* mystical tendencies Murdoch is intolerant: she shares an objection with Woolf in this respect.

Woolf, I have argued, rejects 'mystical' impulses in cases where what is meant by this term is something akin to Bertrand Russell's nebulous account. As Ann Banfield writes, Woolf's formalistic aesthetic, in its attendance to 'life, the ordinary,'³⁸ will, 'to avoid the mystic phantasy that explains all,' 'need to ceaselessly rearrange the data. The pattern is only one of several possible hypothetical approximations to reality . . .'³⁹ Mark Hussey identifies an 'abstract reality' appearing through Woolf's literature, which 'is not bound by the spatiotemporal horizons of actual human life, but is distinguished from [bad] mysticism by its rootedness in lived experience.'⁴⁰ [*My insertion*].

Murdoch's appropriation, or rejection, of a 'mystical' quality of vision is similarly determined by the extent to which this mysticism maintains the contingent details of the world, and our experience, avoiding what might be called 'bad unity.' Murdoch admires that mysticism which, located within the Christian tradition of negative theology (or within eastern religion), is capable of conveying the profound truth that ultimately all imagery dissolves before the most real. Murdoch is keen to avoid, however, a concept of unity that makes of morality something extraordinary and elusive, rather than grounding the study of morality in the study of daily life. 'Bad unity' falsely synthesises reality, compromising moral growth by providing consoling pictures of life, fantastical forms (Mrs Ramsey's 'lie').⁴¹ At the furthest remove from such illusion, great art achieves the opposite of this bad unity, presenting together

pointlessness and value (virtue). Cordelia's death, in *King Lear*, is offered as the perfect tragedy: true love (virtue) dies pointlessly. Here is a transparent juxtaposition of pointlessness and virtue (love). True love, without pretence, was invisible. For Murdoch the 'indefinability of Good is connected with the unsystematic and inexhaustible variety of the world and the pointlessness of virtue . . . there is a special link between the concept of Good and the ideas of Death and Chance.'⁴² She is aware of a degenerated concept of mysticism, one to be renounced. She writes that it is 'Needless to say' that 'the word 'mystical' is often, in a degraded sense, applied to Gnostic beliefs and power-seeking magic.'⁴³ In Woolf's case bad unity, the 'mystic phantasy that explains all', fails in the aesthetic and metaphysical sense of falsely reconciling the fragmentariness of experience. Murdoch's objection owns a distinctly *ethical* dimension: a mysticism indulging in bad unity presents erroneous pictures of the world, preventing moral growth. 'Mystics are *good*.' 'A 'bad mystic' is a magician.'⁴⁴

In terms of considering structural, systematic, or metaphysical unity, while Murdoch posits a certain 'philosophical backing' to her perspective, she determines to distance herself from quasi-theological or 'esoteric' ideas. This determination originates within a desire to recognise the life of 'the ordinary person' as the place where good is met and where deliberations concerning the nature of the moral life reliably take place. 'As for the elite of mystics, I would say no to the term 'elite'. Of course philosophy has its own terminology, but what it attempts to describe need not be, and I think is not in this case, removed from ordinary life.'⁴⁵ It is indeed 'the historical, individual, nature of the virtues as actually exemplified which makes it difficult to learn goodness from another person.'⁴⁶ Murdoch is as determined as Woolf to avoid the corruption performed by 'some sort of quasi-theological finality',⁴⁷ and while more directive in her treatment of the term 'mysticism' as such (and in its religious forms), is certainly as concerned as Woolf to avoid the fantastical consolation so often attributed to 'the mystical' mode. Murdoch warns that 'almost anything that consoles us is a fake,' and warns against concepts of transcendence that instantly begin 'degenerating into a vague Shelleyan mysticism.'⁴⁸ Yet, as we have seen, Woolf's relationship with the concept of 'unity', as with 'mysticism', is complex: while keen to dismantle false attributions of unity, her writings indicate a simultaneous (if cautious) appreciation of the uniting properties of art (the artist, as 'lover', may make of life 'one of those globed compacted things')⁴⁹ and an intuition that life is somehow already unified ('How difficult not to go on making 'reality' this & that, whereas it is one thing').⁵⁰ Just so,

Murdoch is suspicious of 'the traditional inspiration of the philosopher' which is 'also his traditional vice': that is, 'to believe that all is one,'⁵¹ and yet, philosophy has too easily surrendered the insight that 'Man is not a combination of an impersonal rational thinker and a personal will. He is a unified being, who sees, and who desires in accordance with what he sees. . .'⁵² For Murdoch, this composition reflects the metaphysical reality that where individual virtues are concerned 'the lines really do converge'⁵³ towards the invisible Sun, the Good. Even in terms of the metaphysical picturing (albeit preliminary) of reality, while that 'reality' to which the moral life is a witness could only, 'given the variety of human personality, and situation,' be 'thought of as 'one', as a single object for all men, in some very remote and ideal sense,' yet 'it is a deep paradox of moral philosophy that almost all philosophers have been led in one way or another to picture goodness as knowledge: and yet . . . to show 'reality' as 'one', seems to involve an improper prejudging of some moral issue.'⁵⁴

Murdoch is clear about an acceptable concept of 'mysticism': 'The background to morals is properly some sort of mysticism, if by this is meant a non-dogmatic essentially un-formulated faith in the reality of the Good, occasionally connected with experience.'⁵⁵ This mysticism implies a 'non-dogmatic essentially un-formulated faith' because the 'virtuous peasant knows, and I believe he will go on knowing, in spite of the removal or modification of the theological apparatus, although what he knows he might be at a loss to say.'⁵⁶ First comes the experience of the Good, our intuition of its presence. Only then come our doctrinal efforts to describe and systematise it. 'The text,' writes theologian Heather Walton, in terms Murdoch would applaud, 'does not contain the truth of our experience; it heightens and illuminates it. It is in living that we encounter the terror and tenderness of God. Scripture and theology come later and are secondary.'⁵⁷

On 'God' and 'Good': Retaining a Central Concept for Morality

Murdoch's essay 'On "God" and "Good"' (1969) opens with a statement of primary concerns: 'We need a moral philosophy in which the concept of love, so rarely mentioned now by philosophers, can once again be made central.'⁵⁸ The essay is in many ways a study in the nature of transcendence: in particular, in the nature of the transcendence of Good. The philosophical perspectives from which Murdoch distances herself, including that 'moral philosophy of an existentialist type' which 'is still

Cartesian and egocentric,' have brought us to lose 'the vision of a reality separate from ourselves.' This 'reality separate from ourselves', however, is not the (Sartrean) conception of others as alien. Neither does Murdoch 'endorse scientific objectivity, but rather one where disregard of self is to be acquired through a long process' in order to recognise the reality of the other.⁵⁹ The 'reality separate from ourselves' which she *commends* locates Murdoch's non-naïve realism, her 'non-dogmatic naturalism'. The Good is real and summons the will to obedience.⁶⁰ These are the difficulties for moral philosophy: 'our picture of ourselves has become too grand, we have isolated, and identified ourselves with, an unrealistic conception of will, we have lost the vision of a reality separate from ourselves, and,' – strangest perhaps to her analytical contemporaries' ears – 'we have no adequate conception of original sin.'⁶¹

Murdoch attributes the superseding of 'the idea of goodness (and of virtue)' in Western moral philosophy by 'the idea of rightness', supplemented by a concept of 'sincerity', to 'the disappearance of a permanent background to human activity,' that was once supplied 'by God, by Reason, by History, or by the self,'⁶² (Sartre too was 'without God, Nature or History').⁶³ Consequently, 'the agent's freedom, indeed his moral quality, resides in his choices, and yet we are not told what prepares him for the choices.'⁶⁴ Murdoch's moral philosophy seeks to rediscover a unifying, and unified, background to morality by restoring a concept of the Good which a common-sense examination of ordinary situations, relationships, and that quality of moral attention that 'prepares' us 'for the choices' we make, reveals to be operative. The 'mystery of choice' has not been sufficiently explored and accounted for by other philosophical schools: the fact that 'motives do not readily yield to 'introspection' has been taken by British philosophers as an excuse for forgetting them and talking about 'reasons' instead,⁶⁵ while the 'existentialist picture of choice' is no more helpful, being, whether 'surrealist or rational' nevertheless 'unrealistic, over-optimistic, romantic.'⁶⁶

Each failed account 'ignores what appears at least to be a sort of continuous background with a life of its own; and it is surely in the tissue of that life that the secrets of good and evil are to be found.'⁶⁷ Something exists which determines 'the condition of the system in between moments of choice,' something transcending the particular moment, yet revealing itself immanently within the continuous activity of human choices and moral events. There is a background to moral choices. Moreover, what we *are*, how we are constituted as moral agents, testifies to a transcending principle. Something fills the gaps between choices: this is as much a continuous individual activity (the restored

self) as an intuited background reality, or principle, to which the self makes reference (the latter inspires the self's ongoing drive towards perfection). Contra empirical and existentialist accounts, 'What we really are,' Murdoch writes, 'seems much more like an obscure system of energy out of which choices and visible acts of will emerge at intervals in ways which are often unclear and often dependent on the condition of the system in between the moments of choice.'⁶⁸ But that there is a 'system' 'in between the moments of choice' reveals the metaphysical infrastructure upon which the self rests and to which it relates (what Murdoch will eventually reveal to be 'the Good', the uniting principle of a spectrum of virtues, informing a background scale against which ethical judgements are constantly made).

Murdoch distinguishes two kinds of 'enlightenment' in her 1967 essay 'The Sovereignty of Good Over Other Concepts.' In *The Fire and the Sun* (1976) she summarises Plato's analogy of the Cave in this way:

The pilgrimage which restores our knowledge of this real world is explained in the Republic by the images of the Sun, quadripartite divided Line, and by the myth of the Cave. The prisoners in the Cave are first chained to face the back wall where all they can see are shadows, cast by a fire which is behind them, of themselves and of objects which are carried between them and the fire. Later they manage to turn round and see the fire and the objects which cast the shadows. Later still they escape from the Cave, see the outside world in the light of the sun, and finally the sun itself. The sun represents the Form of the Good in whose light the truth is seen; it reveals the world, hitherto invisible, and is also a source of life.⁶⁹

Some prisoners manage to free themselves, turn around, notice the fire: but then they may draw close to the fire, and becoming cosy, settle down next to it, and remain there, staring into its hypnotising flames: 'There are false suns, easier to gaze upon and far more comforting than the true one.'⁷⁰ This partial enlightenment is the enlightenment of one who has realised the power of his own self to determine how he sees reality, but is visually intoxicated by the playful flames of his turbulent self. 'The fire, I take it,' Murdoch writes in 'The Sovereignty of Good Over Other Concepts,' 'represents the self, the old unregenerate psyche, that great source of energy and warmth.'⁷¹ This activity consumes his newly freed attention, the cave-dweller remains imprisoned within the 'cave' of his own self or soul. 'It is,' Murdoch writes in 'On "God" and "Good"', 'an attachment to what lies outside the fantasy mechanism, and not a scrutiny of the mechanism itself, that liberates.'⁷² This description

is reminiscent of the existentialist, particularly the surrealist, who is preoccupied with the 'mad dance' of the shadowy phantasms of consciousness, even perversely thrilled by the senseless, grotesque extremities of a consciousness surrendered to a chaotic subconscious. By contrast, the more fully enlightened prisoner, once released from his chains, turns around, observes the fire which has cast the shadows he has mistaken for reality upon the walls, but now begins the ascent of leaving the cave altogether. This enlightenment brings the prisoner into the light of the Sun, the Form of the Good.

Self-knowledge is critical for moral progress. But the contrast Murdoch makes here shows that her desire to explore and expound that 'continuous background' to our moral activity which has 'a life of its own' is not merely an appeal to 'stare into the flames', to engage ourselves exclusively in a form of psychoanalysis (to which her linguistic behaviourist contemporaries resort), but is an appeal to search for the Sun: to search for an objective moral principle that backs and guides moral endeavours, that unifies the background of moral thought and activity (this is a search for something already intuited, not imposed). Murdoch looks to the 'techniques of religion', and to 'prayer' specifically, asking 'what becomes of such a technique in a world without God, and can it be transformed to supply at least part of the answer to our central question?' ('What is a good man like? How can we make ourselves morally better? *Can* we make ourselves morally better?')⁷³ With such questions, Murdoch strives far beyond the early Sartre.

Murdoch privileges prayer as a moral 'technique' because it is 'simply an attention to God which is a form of love.'⁷⁴ Clarified, concentrated and sustained vision – 'attention' – is key to moral progression. But then, why God? Because 'God was (or is) *a single perfect transcendent non-representable and necessarily real object of attention,*' (Murdoch's emphasis), and 'moral philosophy should attempt to retain a central concept which has all these characteristics.'⁷⁵ Murdoch's normative claim here that moral philosophy 'should' endeavour to retain this central concept reflects her observation in *The Fire and the Sun* that 'From the start the need for the Forms in Plato's mind is a moral need. The theory expresses a certainty that goodness is something indubitably real, unitary, and (somehow) simple, not fully expressed in the sensible world, therefore living elsewhere.'⁷⁶ The idea of goodness as 'living elsewhere' sits uneasily with Murdoch's philosophy. Reflecting her desire to avoid an 'esoteric', 'quasi-theological finality' for the Good, she cautions later in her essay that the instinct that 'there is more than this . . . must remain a very tiny spark of insight, something with, as it were, a

metaphysical position but no metaphysical form,' (although 'it seems to me that the spark is real, and that great art is evidence of its reality.')77 Her essays convey a care to avoid talking of metaphysical 'realities', or any other 'reality' (in a comprehensive sense) beyond the world of human life and activity. But otherwise, the Platonic idea of goodness as 'something indubitably real, unitary, and (somehow) simple, not fully expressed in the sensible world,' captures what Murdoch is searching for in 'On "God" and "Good"': in particular, her striving towards a unifying principle of morality. Something 'not fully expressed in the sensible world': we anticipate the apophatic dimension of Murdoch's perspective here.

'That God, attended to, is a powerful source of (often good) energy is a psychological fact,'⁷⁸ and yet, without belief in God, prayer nevertheless teaches another 'psychological fact, and one of importance in moral philosophy': that 'we can all receive moral help by focusing our attention upon things which are valuable: virtuous people, great art, perhaps . . . the idea of goodness itself.'⁷⁹ Murdoch begins to discuss this concept of 'value', reflecting that the idea 'that value should be in some sense unitary, or even that there should be a single supreme value concept, may seem if one surrenders the idea of God, far from obvious.'⁸⁰ 'Why,' she asks, 'should there not be many different kinds of independent moral values?' and given that 'the madhouses of the world are filled with people who are convinced that all is one,' then 'it might be said that 'all is one' is a dangerous falsehood at any level except the highest: and can that be discerned at all?'⁸¹

It is, once again, with the tone of common-sense observation that Murdoch notes that 'a belief in the unity, and also in the hierarchical order, of the moral world has a psychological importance.' This is something 'fairly evident.' But 'the difficulty is now to entertain this consoling notion in a way which is not false,' for 'As soon as any idea is a consolation the tendency to falsify it becomes strong.'⁸² We locate here the collapse from 'good' unity to 'bad' unity. Murdoch writes plainly that 'It is true that the intellect naturally seeks unity,' indeed, 'in the sciences . . . the assumption of unity consistently rewards the seeker.' But the challenge is to answer the question: 'how can this dangerous idea be used in morals?'⁸³ 'Ordinary language' will not help us to discern an answer, for now, significantly, 'we are dealing with concepts which are not on display in ordinary language or unambiguously tied up to ordinary words.'⁸⁴ And yet, she writes, we may 'set out from an ordinary language situation by reflecting upon the virtues': cataphatic confidence in moral language is possible because the transcendent Good simultaneously imbues the world.

An exploration of ordinary language reveals that 'if we reflect upon the nature of the virtues we are constantly led to consider their relation to each other.'⁸⁵ Indeed, 'the idea of an 'order' of virtues suggests itself, although,' Murdoch adds significantly, 'it might of course be difficult to state this in any systematic form.' Consider 'courage': if we are to determine whether courage is a virtue, what kind of courage may be highest, and what distinguishes courage from 'rashness, ferocity, self-assertion, and so on,' we will, in our explanation, 'use the names of other virtues.' 'The best kind of courage,' therefore, we might describe as 'steadfast, calm, temperate, intelligent, loving,' and although this 'may not be exactly the right description,' it is, crucially, 'the right sort of description.'⁸⁶ The virtues appear, in terms of ordinary-language definition, to be interdependent and mutually referential. This fact indicates a corresponding ontological and metaphysical interrelation of the virtues. There is, even here, both a cataphatic and apophatic power to language when it comes to discussing 'concepts which are not on display in ordinary language':⁸⁷ for while the virtues, particularly the idea of their unity, cannot be neatly, *comprehensively*, referred to as if we were speaking of isolatable objects or concepts, yet their presence within language as related to one another (their relationship is deducible through a process of dialectical comparison, as is their convergence on the unifying concept of Good) creates a kind of cataphatic superabundance which permits attempts to describe them to be at least 'the right sort of description' even if not 'exactly the right description.'⁸⁸ Theologians reflect similarly on mystical language: we may not be able to describe God, but at least, in juxtaposing inexhaustible cacophony with stumbling silence, we are beginning, in our paradoxical self-subversions, to speak appropriately of God: we begin to use 'the right *sort*' of language.

Murdoch now indicates her intention to discuss 'Whether there is a single supreme principle in the united world of the virtues, and whether the name of that principle is love.'⁸⁹ She begins with the observation that 'reflection rightly tends to unify the moral world, and that increasing moral sophistication reveals increasing unity.' However, this is not to impose that 'unexamined and empty idea of unity' which 'much contemporary moral philosophy' rushes to identify in 'sincerity' or 'authenticity' or 'freedom'. Such an imposition 'impoverish[es] our moral language,' since, by failing to consider the individual virtues, we lose 'a rich and diversified vocabulary for naming aspects of goodness.'⁹⁰ If there is a supreme moral principle, one which transcends the concepts 'on display' in ordinary language, then this 'single perfect transcendent non-representable and necessarily real object of attention,'⁹¹ though itself

inexpressible, may be recognised in its immanent manifestations, its 'magnetic' and invisible 'centre' deducible from the virtues' 'converging edges'.⁹² The individual virtues will not be dissolved within 'the good': each is a refracted light that points a return (directs human vision) to an invisible centre. While 'the Good itself is not visible',⁹³ while 'the Good cannot be experienced or represented or defined',⁹⁴ being in essence 'indefinable and non-representable'⁹⁵ (its apophatic aspect), it is simultaneously present in the cataphatic abundance of its multifarious self-expressions: those brilliant 'sparks of insight' which emerge amidst our dealings with the world and hint that 'there is more than this.'⁹⁶ The virtues, these prism refractions of the invisible good, are of the kind that 'make a man act unselfishly in a concentration camp.'⁹⁷

Transcendence: Consoling Dream Projected on an Empty Sky?

'We have spoken,' Murdoch writes, 'of an "object of attention" and of an unavoidable sense of "unity".' And so, 'Let us now go on to consider . . . the much more difficult idea of "transcendence".' The challenge is that 'All that has been said so far could be said without the benefit of metaphysics,' so now must come the question, 'are you speaking of a transcendent authority or of a psychological device?'⁹⁸ Again consulting what seems to be the case as ordinary life informs us, Murdoch comments that 'It seems to me that the idea of the transcendent, in some form or other, belongs to morality: but it is not easy to interpret.'⁹⁹ Determined to avoid an esoteric or bad unity again, she notes that 'As with so many of these large elusive ideas, it readily takes on forms which are false ones. There is a false transcendence, as there is a false unity, which is generated by modern empiricism: a transcendence which is . . . simply an exclusion, a relegation of the moral to a shadowy existence in terms of emotive language, imperatives, behaviour patterns, attitudes.' This relegation of something essential and reality-depicting to an epiphenomenal, or purely personal and subjective, status, is a relegation Woolf and Fry refuse for art, and which Murdoch now refuses for moral philosophy. 'Is there, however, any true transcendence?' she asks, 'or is this idea always a consoling dream projected by human need onto an empty sky?'¹⁰⁰ Another of the prisoner's many 'false suns?'¹⁰¹

The examination of the idea of a 'transcendent authority' in morality brings Murdoch to explore her conviction that 'goodness, is a form of realism.'¹⁰² The very functioning of morality, most particularly in the

case of the 'really good man', requires an awareness of 'the existence of other people and their claims,' while 'the chief enemy of excellence in morality (and also in art) is personal fantasy: the tissue of self-aggrandizing and consoling wishes and dreams which prevents one from seeing what is there outside one.'¹⁰³ Moral progress requires the purification of vision in order to see reality clearly: the Good is real. Murdoch's sense of the aesthetic quality of vision is confirmed in an artistic observation, one that affirms the 'realistic' dimension of her moral philosophy: 'Rilke said of Cezanne that he did not paint "I like it", he painted "There it is".'¹⁰⁴ Not only is such 'art an excellent analogy of morals,' it is even 'a case of morals,' insofar as great art calls us to attend to reality: and the achievement of this realistic artistic vision, as with the achievement of accurate moral vision, requires 'discipline.'¹⁰⁵

But what is the step from realism to transcendence? Murdoch establishes their relation through the idea of beauty, in particular 'the concept of indestructibility or incorruptibility.' 'What is truly beautiful is 'inaccessible' and cannot be possessed or destroyed. The statue is broken, the flower fades, the experience ceases, but something has not suffered from decay or mortality.'¹⁰⁶ At this point Murdoch moves into a struggle with theology, while the inaccessibility of her transcendent 'object' brings a foretaste of the apophatic dimension of her moral vision. The apprehension of beauty suggests 'inaccessibility', 'incorruptibility' and 'indestructibility', but now, again, 'Almost anything that consoles us is a fake,' 'it is not easy to prevent this idea from degenerating': 'In the case of the idea of a transcendent personal God the degeneration of the idea seems scarcely avoidable,' while 'theologians are busy at their desks at this very moment trying to undo the results of this degeneration.'¹⁰⁷ Murdoch echoes Plato's *Phaedrus*: 'It is as if we can see beauty itself in a way in which we cannot see goodness itself . . . I can experience the transcendence of the beautiful, but (I think) not the transcendence of the good . . . beauty is partly a matter of the senses.' However, the 'senses' cannot assist with the good: for 'if we speak of good as something transcendent we are speaking of something rather more complicated and which cannot be experienced, even when we see the unselfish man in the concentration camp. One might,' she adds, 'be tempted to use the word 'faith' here if it could be purged of its religious associations.'¹⁰⁸ Indeed, it is not clear how the transcendence of the Good, its indestructibility and incorruptibility, escapes that 'vague Shelleyan mysticism' which, to Murdoch's mind, so clearly assaults the conception of a 'transcendent personal God'. Her 'temptation' to make certain 'faith' statements – 'What is truly good is incorruptible and indestructible',

'Goodness is not in this world' – returns to haunt her self-interrogating dialogue 'Above the Gods: A Dialogue About Religion' (1986).¹⁰⁹

Certainty, Permanence and Perfection

The concept of transcendence connects with those of perfection and certainty: and contributes to Murdoch's mapping of a unified background to morality. 'Are we not certain,' she writes, 'that there is a 'true direction' towards better conduct, that goodness 'really matters'; and does not certainty about a standard suggest an idea of permanence which cannot be reduced to psychological or any other set of empirical terms?' Granted, 'there is a psychological power which derives from the mere idea of a transcendent object,' even from 'a transcendent object which is to some extent mysterious.'¹¹⁰ But any such dissolvable conception, argues Murdoch, is but a secondary conception: any 'reductive analysis' of this transcendent object in, 'for instance, Freudian terms, or Marxist terms, seems properly to apply here only to a degenerate form of a conception about which one remains certain that a higher and invulnerable form must exist.'¹¹¹ 'One remains certain' of this, Murdoch asserts, utilising the language of 'faith'.¹¹²

From this point in her essay 'On "God" and "Good"' Murdoch's argument is predominantly shaped by the rejection of linguistic, behaviouristic and similarly reductive empirical attempts at moral philosophy, alongside an appeal to human experience for the restoration of a constructive (as opposed to reductive) moral philosophy. We are 'certain' that 'there is a 'true direction' towards better conduct,' that 'goodness "really matters";' and this 'certainty' itself 'suggest[s] an idea of permanence' which cannot be 'reduced'.¹¹³ 'Goodness really matters,' and an idea of 'permanence' is suggested here. But now 'what is it for someone, who is not a religious believer and not some sort of mystic, to apprehend some separate 'form' of goodness behind the multifarious cases of good behaviour?'¹¹⁴ What is it to intuit unity, without esotericism? The challenge from reductive philosophical systems is acknowledged, the possibility that 'this idea' might 'be reduced to the much more intelligible notion of the interrelation of the virtues, plus a purely subjective sense of the certainty of judgements.'¹¹⁵ Here Murdoch searches for unity again, returning to 'the idea of perfection' as grounding the drive towards moral progress (towards the 'magnetic centre'), and sourcing the *objective* value of judgements. She asks, 'is it important to measure and compare things and know just how good they are?

In any field which interests or concerns us I think we would say yes.¹¹⁶ Indeed, any 'deep understanding of any field of human activity involves an increasing revelation of degrees of excellence and very often a revelation of there being in fact little that is very good and nothing that is perfect.' Just so with 'human conduct'. The operation of 'the idea of perfection' within such fields of study produces 'an increasing sense of direction', and the conviction that all multifarious instances of virtue converge at a unified centre. 'The idea of perfection is also a natural producer of order,' an order indicating an underlying systematic unity. This is because 'In its *light* we come to see that A, which superficially resembles B, is really better than B,' (Murdoch's emphasis). The spectrum is proof of a unified scale.

Murdoch's use of Platonic light imagery emerges here, and in juxtaposition with imagery of darkness, hiddenness. Plato's Sun, sourced beyond the cave, induces a 'mind-stunning darkness', the 'dazzling darkness' beloved of the Christian mystics. Murdoch speaks of a perfection *in the light of which* we come to see the relation of moral standards, and yet this light cannot itself be seen. We 'must' come to recognise the relative value of A and B yet 'without our having the sovereign idea in any sense 'taped'. It is *in its nature* that we cannot get it taped. This,' she continues, 'is the true sense of the 'indefinability' of the good . . . It lies always beyond, and it is from this beyond that it exercises its *authority*.'¹¹⁷ In 'The Sovereignty of Good Over Other Concepts', Murdoch writes how she wishes to re-conceive 'the indefinability of the good,' as concerning a Good about which 'we do really know a certain amount,' while yet 'the concept of Good remains obscure and mysterious. We see the world in the light of the Good, but what is the Good itself? The source of vision is not in the ordinary sense seen.' She cites the Platonic basis of this tension: 'Plato says of it 'It is that which every soul pursues and for the sake of which it does all that it does, with some intuition of its nature, and yet also baffled' (*Republic* 505). And he also says that Good is the source of knowledge and truth and yet is something which surpasses them in splendour (*Republic* 508–9).'¹¹⁸

This passage introduces, in the context of these philosophical essays, a certain dialectic, one adopted by Christian theologians, and a defining characteristic of mystical theology. The transcendent Good, which is most real, but not in the sense of any object, dazzles the viewer (Plato). This transcending reality, being 'always beyond' as Murdoch puts it, stuns the human mind that comes closest to it. The mind in contemplation of this resplendent brilliance experiences a dazzling darkness: dazzling insofar as the mind comprehends the Good (and language

works), darkness insofar as the mind is overwhelmed and thrown into (conceptual and linguistic) 'silence' by that which is 'incorruptible' and 'indestructible', to use Murdoch's terms again. Such a reality, ultimately 'inaccessible' (at least in any exhaustive sense) is also 'inexpressible', its transcendence depriving the subject of an ability to describe it. It is therefore interesting, in terms of identifying the mystical characteristics of Murdoch's philosophy, that as her essay 'On "God" and "Good"' progresses she finds herself speaking increasingly in terms of 'faith', in terms of an idea of an incorruptible good that is discovered *intuitively* within everyday experience, and is increasingly conscious of being unable to provide a comprehensive argument for the existence of something that, in virtue of its nature, 'we cannot get . . . taped.'¹¹⁹

For Christian mystics such as Pseudo-Dionysius, the inability to speak accurately of this transcending reality exists alongside a desire to speak of it (to possess a theo-logy). Inspired by the Platonic Sun, Dionysius appropriates the 'dazzling darkness' into language, thereby finding a way *to begin* to speak appropriately of the highest reality. We are inspired to gesture towards an expression of the nature of the highest in accordance with its reality, that is, in the mutual contradiction of affirmation (dazzling) and denial (darkness). This contradiction of positive and negative attributes more nearly gestures the 'dazzling darkness' occasioned by proximity to that which is both transcendent and immanent (that 'good' sourced beyond, and unifying, all multifarious instances of virtue, yet found as compassion in the concreteness of the concentration camp). As Murdoch recognises, within the light of the idea of perfection are all things truly seen, but the light itself cannot be seen: so, for Christian mystical theology, in the midst of the real are all things made that are made (through the logos), yet we cannot see the good, the light, itself (for now we see 'through a glass darkly').

Theology aside, Murdoch is, in terms of 'the Good', beginning to speak appropriately of her subject. But this poses challenges for a philosophical text. Murdoch has caricatured God and religious faith, has noted the relentless work of theologians who are 'even now busy at their desks' resisting the degeneration of theological concepts. Her comments attempt to dissociate the Good from God's predicament, but she finds herself confronting the theologian's difficulty: how to describe, and account for, the reality of a transcending non-form, in the absence of which accounts of the human self, and conduct, are at best intellectually unacceptable and at worst morally abhorrent? How can a philosophical text be the place of delineation for something which Murdoch refers to as form (concept, idea) occupying a 'metaphysical position', yet

lacking 'form'; as 'incorruptible', 'inexpressible', 'indestructible', 'indefinable',¹²⁰ ultimately 'beyond'?¹²¹; the non-form which resists depiction and makes itself known in intuitive 'certainty'? For all her misconstruals of the religious believer's position, and his God, Murdoch enters the faithful man's predicament, and begins to offer the mystical shape of his answer: a philosophical *via negativa*.

The Good is 'Real'

One must learn to become virtuous oneself, through contemplation of the good in unison with clarified attention to real situations: for 'beyond the details of craft and criticism' (criticism of art or philosophy, of technique or imitation) 'there is only the magnetic non-representable idea of the good which remains not 'empty' so much as mysterious. And thus too in the sphere of human conduct.'¹²² With this last observation, Murdoch locates the mystical characteristics of daily life. Human beings cannot learn virtue by imitating multifarious instances: rather, experience teaches us to make reference to an intuited background of goodness, a unifying standard. While 'our ability to act well 'when the time comes' depends partly, perhaps largely, upon the quality of our habitual objects of attention,' 'there is nothing odd or mystical about this'¹²³ in the sense of acquiring esoteric knowledge. Everyday life teaches this moral lesson.

The way forward now requires a return to 'the idea of "*realism*"', considered not in terms of an abstracted analysis of a philosophical concept, but as the concept arises within 'normative' contexts of everyday thought, language and conduct. But *this* context brings the philosopher to the realm of aesthetics, wherein the cleansing of perception in order to apprehend reality is enacted in the artist's purgation of 'consoling fantasy' in order to reveal what is *really* the case. It has been 'assumed' earlier in the essay, Murdoch writes, 'that it was better to know what was real than to be in a state of fantasy or illusion.' Now the embedded, normative context is delineated: 'human beings cannot bear much reality; and a consideration of what the effort to face reality is like, and what are its techniques, may serve to illuminate the necessity or certainty which seems to attach to "the Good".'¹²⁴ 'Here again,' then, 'art is the clue. Art presents the most comprehensible examples of the almost irresistible human tendency to seek consolation in fantasy and also of the effort to resist this and the vision of reality which comes with success.'¹²⁵ Fantasy concerns the construction of false consolation: the work of magic, of

esotericism, of bad unity. The good exists: yet 'one must avoid here, as in the case of God, any heavy material connotation of the misleading word "exist".' But also to be avoided, as the opposite correlate of the heavy objectivity entailed in naive conceptions of divinity, is 'a purely subjective conviction of certainty, which could receive a ready psychological explanation,' this being 'less than enough': a reductionist satisfaction which 'subdivides' the problem 'without residue by a careful linguistic analyst into parts which he would deem innocuous.'¹²⁶

The artist must render 'the vision of the real', but this requires moral discipline: 'To silence and expel self, to contemplate and delineate nature with a clear eye . . .'¹²⁷ In her contemplation of the lighthouse beams, Mrs Ramsay became one with 'that light for example',¹²⁸ with her own 'stroke', 'the long steady stroke':¹²⁹ 'She looked up over her knitting and met the third stroke and it seemed to her like her own eyes meeting her own eyes, searching as she alone could search into her mind and her heart, purifying out of existence that lie, any lie.'¹³⁰ The impediment to clarified aesthetic vision is 'the damned egotistical self.'¹³¹ Murdoch also acknowledges a need, when searching for the real, "To silence and expel self, to contemplate and delineate nature with a clear eye,' only she adds to this a full-bodied ethical imperative: 'A great artist is, in respect of his work, a good man, and, in the true sense, a free man.'¹³² The artist has a moral duty to see clearly, to reject falsified structure, but will, in doing so, (in the terms of another Platonic essay), espy that Good 'which stretches through the whole of [the scene] and gives it the only kind of shadowy unachieved unity which it can possess.'¹³³ Furthermore what is for Mrs Ramsay a relatively solitary achievement becomes for Murdoch an irreducibly communal achievement.¹³⁴ The escaped, enlightened prisoner of the Cave must eventually return to community, and teach others how to ascend. Unity and disunity, similarity and difference, are revealed together. As personal fantasy dissipates and 'the separateness and differentness of other people is realized, and the *fact* is seen that another man has needs and wishes as demanding as one's own,' (my emphasis), so 'the harder it becomes to treat a person as a thing.'¹³⁵ The reality of the other is disclosed in proportion to our visual proximity to the Good, because the better our moral attention, the more *real-ly* we see the world. To know the Good which unifies moral reality is to appreciate the value of contingent particulars, their irreducible dignity as purveyors of the real, as icons.

Murdoch draws a significant conclusion: 'the authority of the Good seems to us something necessary because the realism (ability to perceive reality) required for goodness is a kind of intellectual ability to perceive

what is true, which is automatically at the same time a suppression of self.' The following is key: '*The necessity of the good is then an aspect of the kind of necessity involved in any technique for exhibiting fact,*' (Murdoch's emphasis).¹³⁶ The good is necessary because its revelation requires realism: an unimpeded awareness of the real nature of things (lives and situations) and a contemplation of that good which, being 'beyond', unites all multifarious instances of goodness and is, in this sense, as a moral concept, 'sovereign'. If we remain unconvinced that the necessity of good belongs to 'the kind of necessity involved in any technique for exhibiting fact,' perhaps if confronting the seeming concreteness of logical and empirical statements of 'fact' (in distinction from 'value'), we should recall Murdoch's earlier observation that no competing contemporary philosophical system, whatever its presumption to alternative 'neutral' contexts, achieves a special neutrality in its exhibition of fact, but that all systems assume certain biases, depending, not least, on the philosopher's temperament: even what 'he is afraid of'. On the grounds of experience, and a metaphysical deduction from the inter-determination of the virtues, the unity, the reality, the certainty, the 'necessity', indeed the 'authority' of the Good is asserted with the confidence with which any other philosophical entity makes claim to the status of fact.

Murdoch's 'Good' endeavours to avoid both naive objective reality, and exclusively subjective reality, on account of what Altorf identifies (with indebtedness to Antonaccio) as Murdoch's 'reflexive realism': 'Reflexive realism has its starting point in consciousness, but avoids a purely subjective position by assuming the possibility of surpassing consciousness in its reflexive moments.'¹³⁷ This is consistent with Murdoch's earlier observation that 'our natural psychology can be altered by conceptions which lie beyond its range.'¹³⁸ This cannot become naive realism, in the manner of a reductive empiricism or a reductive naturalism, because "The Good "can only be apprehended through the reflexive activity of cognition".¹³⁹ However, it remains necessary to do justice to the intellectual struggle Murdoch encounters, and exhibits in 'On "God" and "Good"', as she endeavours to argue for conceptions which 'lie beyond [the] range' of psychology (Murdoch) and arise in moments which 'surpass consciousness' (Altorf). While a model of 'reflexive realism' may operate within her philosophy, navigating the territory between naive realism and mere subjectivism, this model does not release Murdoch from the intellectual predicament of having to construct a *justified* moral philosophy around a concept which remains 'beyond', in whose *light*' (Murdoch's emphasis)¹⁴⁰ we think, but which cannot itself be seen. *This* non-resolving tension, in its philosophical and artistic manifestations, locates the mystical

content of Murdoch's work. The Good is neither naively objective (naively transcendent), nor merely subjective (reductively immanent); it is both revealed in consciousness, yet surpasses consciousness. "The concept of Good still remains obscure and mysterious."¹⁴¹

Here the cataphatic-apophatic dialectic, inaugurated through the imagery of dazzling darkness, is at play. 'Good' is 'a central point of reflection, and here,' Murdoch writes, 'we may see the significance of its indefinable and non-representable character. *Good, not will is transcendent.*'¹⁴² 'Will is the natural energy of the psyche,' but 'Good is the focus of attention when an intent to be virtuous co-exists (as perhaps it almost always does) with some unclarity of vision.'¹⁴³ Now crucially, while 'beauty appears as the visible and accessible aspect of the Good,' 'The Good itself is not visible.' Here Murdoch conveys that she has 'never been sure' what to make of Plato's picturing of the good man 'as eventually able to look at the sun.' For 'While it seems proper to represent the Good as a centre or focus of attention, yet it cannot quite be thought of as a 'visible' one in that it cannot be experienced or represented or defined.'¹⁴⁴ While we can 'certainly know more or less where the sun is' it is 'not so easy to imagine what it would be like to look at it.' Employing that image appropriated by Christian mystics as most proper to their divine subject, Murdoch writes, 'perhaps to look at the sun is to be gloriously dazzled and to see nothing.'¹⁴⁵ If Murdoch cannot adopt Plato's sense that 'the good man' is 'eventually able to look at the sun,' what nevertheless 'does seem to make perfect sense in the Platonic myth is the idea of the Good as the source of life which reveals to us all things as they really are.' Such 'just vision' illuminates as much 'the strictest problems of the intellect' as 'when suffering or wickedness have to be perceived.'¹⁴⁶ Furthermore, 'An increasing awareness of 'goods' and the attempt . . . to attend to them purely, without self, brings with it an increasing awareness of the unity and interdependence of the moral world.' Finally, 'One-seeking intelligence is the image of "faith".'¹⁴⁷

A Philosophical 'Via Negativa'

Murdoch desires a terminology appropriate for conveying the influence of consciousness by conceptions 'beyond its range'. Now, 'the Platonic metaphor of the idea of the Good provides a suitable picture.'¹⁴⁸ This metaphor, joined with 'a realistic conception of natural psychology' and 'an acceptance of the utter lack of finality in human life,' brings us to recognise that 'The Good has nothing to do with purpose, indeed it

excludes the idea of purpose . . . The only genuine way to be good is to be good "for nothing". However, the requirement to be good 'for nothing' is not only generated by a conviction of life's 'utter lack of finality': this 'for nothing' is also 'the experienced correlate of the invisibility or non-representable blankness of the idea of Good itself.'¹⁴⁹ This 'for nothingness', the authority of the Good to command obedience in the seeming absence of any conceivable purpose, cannot be interpreted in accordance with nihilism. While Murdoch writes elsewhere that 'The pointlessness of art is . . . the pointlessness of human life itself,'¹⁵⁰ here, conversely, she makes it clear that this experiential 'for nothingness' is generated by the prior ontological 'nothingness' – by 'the invisibility or non-representable blankness' – of 'the idea of Good itself.'¹⁵¹ The dazzling Good, *in the light of which* all is clearly seen, is enshrouded in shadow when viewed directly by the human mind. 'What,' asks Virginia Woolf, 'is the light itself?', the 'backing light' behind appearances that gives form, pattern, both to life and the work of art? We are returned to that invisible light, in which we live and move and have our being.

Having promised to speak more about the 'status' of her argument, Murdoch now simply adds, in apophatic spirit, that 'there is perhaps little, or else too much, to say.' Her argument 'has already . . . occurred' and 'Philosophical argument is almost always inconclusive, and this one is not of the most rigorous kind.'¹⁵² In the end, "The image of the Good as a transcendent magnetic centre seems to me the least corruptible and most realistic picture for us to use in our reflections upon the moral life."¹⁵³ Murdoch reflects upon the status of her argument again: 'Here,' she says, 'the philosophical 'proof', if there is one, is the same as the moral 'proof'. I would rely especially upon arguments from experience concerned with the realism which we perceive to be connected with goodness, and with the love and detachment which is exhibited in great art.'¹⁵⁴ Now, her essay takes an important turn: 'I have throughout this paper assumed that 'there is no God' and that the influence of religion is waning rapidly. Both these assumptions may be challenged.' This admission, in its characteristic delineation of the philosophical work's own limitations, resets the parameters of her argument. Robert Hardy argues that, for all Murdoch's 'cool prose' concerning the waning influence of religion, 'religious belief in general, and its relation to the will in particular, is a subject that engaged Murdoch in a way belied' by her sometimes dismissive tone: her concern is made evident in her 'frequent mention of the ontological proof.'¹⁵⁵ It may not be going too far to claim that establishing the validity of claims of *faith* becomes critical to the efficacy of her philosophy.

In a move performative of a philosophical *via negativa*, Murdoch explains that it is 'the vanishing of the philosophical self, together with the confident filling in of the scientific self,' which she has 'been chiefly attacking,' while, she confesses, 'I am not sure how far my positive suggestions make sense.'¹⁵⁶ Her process has been one of negation, a negation which simultaneously involves gesturing towards a reality which is unrepresentable and indefinable but must not be lost to vision. 'The search for unity,' while being 'deeply natural,' 'like so many things which are deeply natural may be capable of producing nothing but a variety of illusions.' And yet, what Murdoch remains 'sure of' is 'the inadequacy, indeed the inaccuracy, of utilitarianism, linguistic behaviourism, and current existentialism . . .'¹⁵⁷ She has remained faithful to her philosophical point of departure. It is from 'art and ethics that we must hope to generate concepts worthy, and also able, to guide and check the increasing power of science.'¹⁵⁸

Conclusion

For all that the Good itself is unutterable, inaccessible, and invisible, Murdoch's Platonic essays comprise a cataphatic cacophony, to the sparse analytical mind indeed a 'riot',¹⁵⁹ of affirmative statements and attributions concerning the highest reality. The Good is 'a single perfect transcendent non-representable and necessarily real object of attention';¹⁶⁰ it is authoritative, permanent, encountered with certainty: it is unified and its essence unites the virtues. We are to believe 'in the unity, and also in the hierarchical order, of the moral world:' the 'intellect naturally seeks unity,' and we are to discern a place for 'this dangerous idea to be used in morals.'¹⁶¹ Experience teaches us that in any philosophical account 'value should be in some sense *unitary*,' even 'that there should be a single supreme value concept.'¹⁶² The cataphatic dimension of Murdoch's philosophy is partly found in the confidence with which we attribute such characteristics to a magnetic centre, a light, that is itself unseen. It is also located in the restoration of language – in the capacity of philosophy to speak around what is eventually impossible to describe (as Murdoch's comments about her methodology testify) – and in our ability to discuss the individual virtues when their inter-definability makes their exhaustive definition as separable qualities impossible, this inter-definability simultaneously allowing engagement with each virtue to extend an experiential vista onto another: making growth in virtue possible. Arguably, the key attributes of the Good are its guiding brilliance, as 'light', and its *unity*: that property in virtue

of which Murdoch writes that while "The scene remains disparate and complex and 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."¹⁶³

II

The Restored (Mystical) Self

Yet what is inaccessible? We can *seek* for truth, we can imagine the past and *test* our imaginings, and we can do the same about other minds, and about our own . . . Our 'innerness' may be elusive or hard to describe but it is not unimportant or (necessarily) shadowy.

Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*¹⁶⁴

Let us suppose that affective responses do not, or do not always, mislead, and that describing the world as it appears to members of our kind is not inferior to an imagined value-neutral observation of an ideal science, but our best handle on the true, the good, and the real. Let us suppose that our affections and even our animal response, properly attended to, are not distractions but guides to what we are and to the love of God.

Janet Martin Soskice, *The Kindness of God*¹⁶⁵

This study recognises the terms 'cataphatic' and 'apophatic' to identify epistemological, as well as linguistic, categories. In the context of Murdoch's philosophy this means recognising, as having cataphatic value, this metaphysician's restoration of a substantial concept of the self, particularly the 'inner life', in its relation to a transcending concept of the Good. This self is restored, redeemed, in opposition to reductive accounts of the person, and mental life, that evacuate these internal spaces of 'real', meaningful content. Murdoch re-empowers consciousness and language with the ability to make cataphatic utterance concerning the transcending reality it participates. This is to restore consciousness in its contemplative aspect, as reflecting the brilliant reality sourcing its light.

A 'Picture of the Soul'

Chapter Three explored how in her first published work, *Sartre: Romantic Rationalist*, Murdoch objected to a particular conception of the human person as an isolated, insubstantial will, clinically separated from others

conceived as objects. Here, she distanced herself from aspects of continental existentialist philosophy. To an arguably greater extent Murdoch also comes to disagree with her Anglo-Saxon analytical contemporaries where they offer a particular 'image' or 'picture of the soul', declaring her intention, in her Platonic essay 'The Idea of Perfection' (1964), precisely to offer an alternative 'picture of the soul'. This involves responding to prevailing assessments of morality, moral action and normative language by philosophers Hampshire, Hare and Ryle – and traditions influenced by Russell, Ayer and Sartre – and, thereby, presenting her own alternative 'sketch of a metaphysical theory.'¹⁶⁶

As Real as Shadows

In 'The Idea of Perfection', Murdoch addresses the work of contemporary philosopher Professor Hampshire, focusing on *Thought and Action*. Movements within philosophy of mind – in particular the construction of 'certain picture[s] of the soul' – impose restrictions on the study of human nature, so that modern ethics, which 'tends to constitute a sort of Newspeak,' brings this restricted image to predetermine the study of human nature. The result, Murdoch observes, is that 'certain values' are made 'non-expressible.'¹⁶⁷ particular problems in the philosophy of mind 'underlie the inarticulate moments of modern ethics,' such that certain moral concepts have become 'philosophically unstatable now.'¹⁶⁸ Among these are the moral concepts of G. E. Moore with whom Murdoch has sympathy: Moore, she writes, 'believed that good was a supersensible reality, that it was a mysterious quality, unrepresentable and indefinable. That it was an object of knowledge and (implicitly) that to be able to see it was in some sense to have it . . . he was, in spite of himself, a 'naturalist' in that he took goodness to be a real constituent of the world.'¹⁶⁹ Early in her essay Murdoch states her particular sympathy with Moore's 'quasi-aesthetic imagery of vision in conceiving the good': a vision which for Moore, as for Murdoch, placed him at odds with philosophical contemporaries who resisted the 'contemplative attitude' such a vision made possible, preferring to define the person as 'essentially and inescapably *an agent*.'¹⁷⁰ 'The image,' Moore's and Murdoch's opponents argue, 'whereby to understand morality . . . is not the image of vision but the image of movement.'¹⁷¹ 'Goodness is not an object of insight or knowledge,' the opponents continue, 'it is a function of the will.'¹⁷² 'Let me say,' Murdoch clarifies, 'that on almost every point I agree with Moore and not with his critics.'

While Hampshire 'suggests that we should abandon the image (dear to the British empiricists) of man as a detached observer,' Murdoch is no more satisfied with his alternative: the human person pictured 'as an object moving among other objects in a continual flow of intention into action.'¹⁷³ For Hampshire, "Touch and movement, not vision, should supply our metaphors.' Moreover, 'Actions are, roughly, instances of moving things about in the public world,' and, crucially, 'Nothing counts as an act unless it is a "bringing about of a recognizable change in the world."¹⁷⁴ What most disturbs Murdoch is the suggestion that 'the inner or mental world is inevitably parasitic upon the outer world': what Hampshire refers to as the inner world's 'parasitic and shadowy nature.'¹⁷⁵ For Hampshire, "The definiteness of any thought process depends upon 'the possibility of [its] being recognized, scrutinized and identified by observers from different points of view; this possibility,' she quotes Hampshire, "is essential to any definite reality'.¹⁷⁶ Crucially, 'The play of the mind, free of any expression in audible speech or visible action is a reality, as the play of shadows is a reality,' Hampshire writes. The 'reality' accorded to 'the play of the mind' in its interiority is strongly qualified – this is the reality of 'the play of shadows' – and this qualification, this dubious quasi-concession, is distinctly reminiscent of Bertrand Russell's statement that the 'impressions' of art are not 'any less real' than his physics, yet, simultaneously, they 'do not point to anything beyond themselves'. For Russell, art is personal:¹⁷⁷ we may safely qualify 'merely' personal, just as, for Hampshire, the world of thought that does not issue in publically observable action is 'merely' personal, is 'merely' shadow, is nothing substantially real. Utterly disappeared is any such thing as an 'idle contemplative attitude to the good.'¹⁷⁸

'Thought cannot be thought,' Hampshire writes, 'as opposed to day-dreaming or musing, unless it is directed towards a conclusion, whether in action or in judgement.' Yet even this 'judgement' is only 'a shadowy assent and a shadowy act' if it 'takes place in the mind' when 'no process of communication' is occurring because 'no question has been actually asked and answered.'¹⁷⁹ "Thought and belief' on this account, Murdoch notes, 'are separate from will and action . . . Thought is not action, but an introduction to action.'¹⁸⁰ This strict distinction of Thought and Will disturbs Murdoch. She cites Hampshire's statement that 'No process of thought could be punctuated by acts of will, voluntary switchings of attention, and retain its status as a continuous process of thought:' 'these,' she reflects, 'are very important assumptions,' not least because 'it will follow from this that a 'belief' is not something subject to the will.'¹⁸¹ an assumption which her philosophical example of the

relationship between a Mother and Daughter-in-law will show to be incorrect.

Murdoch turns to an examination of Hampshire's lecture, *Disposition and Memory*. Hampshire foregrounds 'intention' as 'the one concept that ought to be preserved free from any taint of the less than conscious,' and also gives a 'picture of 'the ideally rational man', who is, for Murdoch, impossible and undesirable: "This person would be 'aware of all his memories as memories . . . His wishes would be attached to definite possibilities in a definite future . . . He would . . . distinguish his present situation from unconscious memories of the past . . . and would find his motives for action in satisfying his instinctual needs within the objectively observed features of the situation.'" "This ideal man," Murdoch comments, 'does not exist because the palimpsest of 'dispositions' is too hard to penetrate: and this is just as well,' she adds, 'because ideal rationality would leave us 'without art, without dream or imagination, without likes or dislikes unconnected with instinctual needs'.¹⁸² This conception of the ideal human being – based on a 'logical' view of the mind 'still tied to an old-fashioned conception of science' – is, Murdoch observes (with timely relevance), 'the hero of almost every contemporary novel.'¹⁸³ This clinical individual, epitomised by 'clarity of intention', aims 'at total knowledge of [his] situation and a clear conceptualisation of [his] possibilities.' He is reminiscent of Woolf's Mr Ramsay, determined to achieve 'total knowledge' of a reality that can be categorised into discrete units. This recommendation itself (the singular 'ought' of Hampshire's psychology) may not sound austere, but it is premised on the theory that 'Thought and intention must be directed towards definite overt issues or else they are merely day-dream':

'Reality' is potentially open to different observers. What is 'inward', what lies in between overt actions, is either impersonal thought, or 'shadows' of acts, or else substanceless dream. Mental life is, and logically must be, a shadow of life in public.¹⁸⁴

Almost an analytic reflection of existentialist philosophy, 'Immense care is taken to picture the will as isolated. It is isolated from belief, from reason, from feeling, and is yet the essential centre of the self.'¹⁸⁵ On Hampshire's account 'Morality is a matter of thinking clearly and then proceeding to outward dealings with other men.'¹⁸⁶ This sanitised, mechanical construal of human interaction is alien to Murdoch. So too is the inevitable conclusion of Hampshire's view, that since 'Will does

not bear upon reason, so the 'inner life' is not to be thought of as a moral sphere: 'reason deals in neutral descriptions and aims at being the . . . ideal observer,' while 'will,' being 'pure choice, pure movement, and not thought or vision,' requires 'only action words such as 'good' or 'right'.' Murdoch concludes that 'the very powerful image with which we are here presented is behaviourist, existentialist, and utilitarian in a sense which unites all these three conceptions. It is behaviourist in its connection of the meaning and being of action with the publicly observable, it is existentialist in its elimination of the substantial self and its emphasis on the solitary omnipotent will, and it is utilitarian in its assumption that morality is and can only be concerned with public acts.'¹⁸⁷

Murdoch objects to all three tenets, declaring that 'I find the image of man which I have sketched above both alien and implausible.'¹⁸⁸ She will provide 'a rival picture', shall reevaluate this 'theory of the 'inner life': in another moment of honesty concerning the degree to which temperament and 'instinct' may determine the matter, she states that 'either one will be content with the emphasis on the reality of the outer, the absence of the inner, or one will feel (as I do) it cannot be so, something vital is missing.' Murdoch will not give up 'the inner life', which is too obviously the *substantial* heart of human being to be relegated to the status of parasitic shadow. Moreover, the thoughts of the inner life are so often the origin, not the secondary reflection, of certain acts, as to identify themselves as the luminous location of real activity. Murdoch will oppose 'the most radical argument, the keystone' of the highly detrimental 'existentialist-behaviourist type of moral psychology' that strips the self and makes its inner world of reflection and imagination only real insofar as thoughts register in outward physical signs (that positivist conception of correspondence): the argument 'that mental concepts must be analysed genetically' so that 'the inner must be thought of as parasitic upon the outer.' We hear the narrator of Woolf's short-story *The Lady in the Looking Glass* protesting here: "There must be truth . . . Yet it was strange that after knowing her all these years one could not say what the truth about Isabella was; one still made up phrases . . ."¹⁸⁹ The narrator is searching for Isabella's inner life. Even with the best efforts at depiction, the living reality will break the frame, the frame will 'shear off' the reality it meant to capture. How much worse to begin the 'picture' by claiming that only what registers publically is 'real' at all.

Acknowledging that thinkers including Hampshire, Hare, Ayer and Ryle have developed Wittgenstein's idea that 'no sense can be attached to the idea of an 'inner object',¹⁹⁰ Murdoch exhorts that 'this is the point at which people may begin to protest and cry out and say that something

has been taken from them. Surely there is something such as deciding and not acting? Surely there are private decisions? Surely there are lots and lots of objects . . . in orbit as it were in inner space?'¹⁹¹ 'There are,' she insists, 'introspectible objects.' 'We do have images,' and 'talk to ourselves.'¹⁹² Alongside Murdoch's determination to reconnect thought and action, reason and will, is her retrieval of (at this point refusal to surrender) an identification of the inner life as 'real'. Woolf refused to relegate art to the epiphenomenal, to the exclusive representation of subjective impressions. Murdoch will not relegate the inner life of thought to a disparaged, parasitic shadowland. 'Inner words 'mean', and she will not accept that 'I can only 'know' my imagery because I know the public things which it is 'of.' 'Public concepts' are not 'sovereign over private objects'.¹⁹³ The 'inner life', the life of introspection – indeed, as she names it, of contemplation – is real.

A Real Inner Life

Murdoch presents an argument for the preservation of the inner life, 'pure' thinking activity, as 'real'. 'A mother, whom I shall call M, feels hostility to her daughter-in-law, whom I shall call D.'¹⁹⁴ M finds D 'not exactly common yet certainly unpolished and lacking in dignity and refinement.' Although M feels that her son has 'married beneath him,' she behaves 'beautifully to the girl throughout.' However, M is about to change her mind: and 'to ensure that whatever is in question as *happening* happens entirely in M's mind,'¹⁹⁵ Murdoch claims that D is absent (emigrated or dead): that is, no alteration in physical, public or otherwise outward circumstances is the occasion for this change in thought, or the consequence of its occurrence. Without this external referent Hampshire claims that such thought is indistinguishable from *unreal* daydream. Nevertheless, M decides to 'look again',¹⁹⁶ to 'reflect deliberately' about D, 'until gradually her vision of D alters.' The result of M's contemplations, in D's physical absence, is a change which 'is not in D's behaviour but in M's mind.'¹⁹⁷ Again, Murdoch cites Hampshire's assertion that "Thought cannot be thought as opposed to day-dreaming or musing, unless it is directed towards a conclusion, whether in action or judgement . . . The idea of thought as an interior monologue . . . will become altogether empty if the thought does not even purport to be directed towards its issue in the external world."¹⁹⁸ But D is absent: what has taken place has occurred only in M's mind, and this new judgement will not issue in outward signs. So, asks Murdoch, how are M's mental events to be rescued 'from the fate of being mere

nothings?' M's contemplative work has not registered in a physical sense: yet clearly 'she has been *active*, she has been *doing* something.'¹⁹⁹ While there is 'no outward alteration of structure to correspond to an alleged inner change, no sequence of outer events of which the inner can claim to be shadows,' yet Murdoch resists the philosophical position that leaves one 'relentlessly prevented from saying something which one is irresistibly impelled to say.'²⁰⁰ Pictures of the soul attempting to define M (and her interior use of moral language) 'from the outside in' fail to provide any sense of her 'as continually active, as making progress, or of her inner acts as belonging to her or forming part of a continuous fabric of being.'²⁰¹ Murdoch notes that Hampshire's, and related, analyses, are critical of 'metaphors such as 'fabric of being',' and yet, Murdoch asks, 'can we do without such metaphors here?'²⁰² Furthermore, 'is not the metaphor of vision almost irresistibly suggested to anyone who, without philosophical prejudice, wishes to describe the situation?' 'M *looks* at D, she attends to D, she focuses her attention.'²⁰³

This is real activity: thought, quite alone, *matters*. The illustration presents Murdoch's conception of moral activity as an exercise of attention: it also, by reinvesting the inner world with its rightful epistemic status, highlights the extent to which the moral reality undergirding, and discoverable through, human relationships, is intuited by the moral agent in the patient and participative action of paying attention to the world around her. The intuited possibility of moral (and therefore visionary) perfection inspires the self who endeavours to 'grow by looking', but this 'idea of perfection', never itself fully conceivable, is the transcendent source of this continual inspiration. The progressive moral life is a striving for the transcendent: yet one that comes through the contemplative recognition of goodness in its immanent manifestations, amongst the pots and pans, the passions and furies, of daily life. Here we locate the cataphatic in its epistemological and linguistic respects: the contemplative life offers real encounter with a transcending reality that imbues daily life, and our moral language is meaningful – it 'means' – not only in circumstances where it finds a referent in public space and in the context of public use, but also because, when it comes to 'inner words', moral language participates in, takes place within, a contemplative activity – an inner reality – that has intuitional and reflexive access to this transcending Good. The 'inner life', contra Murdoch's opponents, *can* 'take up an idle contemplative attitude to the good,' and this is real activity.²⁰⁴ Now we can talk about forgiveness, repentance, sin, love, redemption, and begin to analyse words that feature constantly within the landscape of our everyday lives, appear within our moral thinking, but which a

positivistic or behaviourist philosophy would never be sufficiently complex to interpret. 'Moral language which relates to a reality infinitely more complex and various than that of science is often unavoidably idiosyncratic and inaccessible.'²⁰⁵

M's activity 'is hard to characterize not because it is hazy but *precisely because it is moral.*' M is not just trying to see D 'accurately' but 'to see her justly or lovingly.'²⁰⁶ Now a different image of freedom emerges, not as 'the sudden jumping of the isolated will in and out of an impersonal logical complex,' but as 'a function of the progressive attempt to see a particular object clearly.'²⁰⁷ But it is impossible to analyse such mental concepts in genetic terms. The philosopher is 'still trying to characterize . . . the idea of an impersonal world of facts: the hard objective world out of which the will leaps into a position of isolation.'²⁰⁸ But now the philosopher must be saved from 'the domination of science: or rather from the domination of inexact ideas of science which haunt philosophers.'²⁰⁹ The individual interprets moral language, organically, in the context of her circumstances and history. She is not an isolated will interacting with the world in moments of sudden contact, but is constantly, daily, immersed in the moral activity of interaction with others, working against a background of values which intuition and experience declare to be subtly unified. The adoption of crude, faulty 'scientific' principles have distorted the philosophy of mind – the 'picture of the soul' – rendering moral philosophy almost inarticulate. 'M's independence of science and of the 'world of facts' which empiricist philosophy has created in the scientific image rests not simply in her moving will but *in her seeing knowing mind.* Moral concepts do not move about *within* a hard world set up by science and logic. They set up, for different purposes, a different world.'²¹⁰

Murdoch's alternative account of moral reality recognises that 'Love is knowledge of the individual' and that 'M confronted with D has an endless task.'²¹¹ Here is Lily Briscoe's (the artist's) struggle to achieve 'unity' with Mrs Ramsay, the 'endless task' of working out how rightly to capture her object: and the novel's concluding sense that logic and art must fuse to present reality, for they capture equally 'real', yet irreducibly different, dimensions of existence.

Receding Limits: Re-building the Inner Life

A transcending horizon emerges. 'Moral tasks are characteristically endless,' because our efforts are imperfect, because our concepts are

changing as we move, and crucially because it is 'a synthetic *a priori* truth' that 'an ideal limit of love or knowledge' always 'recedes': human beings, in their moral activity, suffer 'an inevitable imperfection.'²¹² In his Introduction to *The Sea, The Sea*, John Burnside, quoting Murdoch's obituary in *The Times*, poignantly writes that "Those who reproached her for publishing too much were perhaps missing the point: her project was one of imperfection, or imperfectability even, as if the perfect – like the good, about which she meditated so deeply – was fundamentally beyond human achievement. If for her every novel was a fresh attempt to attain her ideal, she found each time that her ideal had moved on."²¹³ He precisely captures Murdoch's sense in 'The Idea of Perfection' that an 'ideal limit' of love of knowledge always 'recedes'.

The un-achievability of 'an ideal limit' within a mental concept 'destroys the genetic analysis of its meaning,' while the ever-deepening process of moral growth, the life-long 'altering and complicating process' that defines human progress never arrives at perfection. We approach a concept of the good which is indefinable 'because of the infinite difficulty of the task of apprehending a magnetic but inexhaustible reality.' Grasping the dynamic interaction of cataphatic and apophatic dimensions, Murdoch comments that 'Moore was in a way nearer the truth than he realized when he tried to say both that Good was *there* and that one could say nothing of what it essentially was. If apprehension of good is apprehension of the individual and the real, then good partakes of the infinite elusive character of reality.'²¹⁴ The good 'lies always beyond, and it is from this beyond that it exercises authority.'

In *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, Murdoch reflects that "The inner needs the outer and the outer needs the inner. In these pictures I have tried to 'exhibit' the inner; and resist tendencies which give value and effective function only to the outer (thought of as 'moral acts' or as linguistic activity), or regard the 'inner life' as fantasy and dream, lacking identity and definition, even as a fake illusory concept. Such views tend in effect toward a behaviourist moral philosophy, or toward an existentialist or structuralist reduction."²¹⁵ Throughout her career Murdoch consistently resists 'this nullification of the inner' characteristic of the pragmatic thinking of her culture. As Chapter Seven will elucidate, this redefinition of the inner (and outer) life has profound consequences for the kind of art that is appropriate to its 'exhibition': the 'religious myth', such as Plato's Cave, is valuable because capable of conveying 'that there are discernable levels and qualities of *awareness* or *experience* (we need this terminology), which cannot be reduced to acquaintance with neutral factual propositions or analysed in terms of dispositions

to act.²¹⁶ Murdoch's philosophy exhibits a clear connection between the restoration of a substantial sense of self – as the location of real interior activity, of an 'inner life' – and the rediscovery of an intuited idea of perfection that relates consciousness to an infinitely retreating horizon. This retreat, this deferment of absolute coincidence with the Good, and the experience of 'lack' accompanying it (this lack inspiring the drive to progress), constitutes the apophatic 'shadow' which is the natural complement of the positive, cataphatic mode (and a constituent of eros).

III

Vision and Light: the Process of Becoming

'You mean the city we have been talking of is an ideal city, not to be found on earth?' Socrates replies, 'Perhaps its pattern is laid up in heaven where he who wishes may see it, and in looking become its citizen.'

Plato's *Laws*, in Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*²¹⁷

. . . the eye has light to thank for its being. Out of the indifferent animal frame Light has called an organ to be in its own image. And so the eye is built by Light for Light, so that the inner light may encounter the other.

J.W. Goethe, *Zur Farbenlehre*²¹⁸

'Attention is our daily bread'

The metaphor of 'vision' is key to Murdoch's philosophical imaginary, emerging in deliberate distinction from metaphors of movement as the favoured descriptive language of her analytical contemporaries. While Murdoch differs from Woolf in giving *substantial* ethical content to the concept of envisioning (although, as Chapter Four illustrated, Woolf's writing exhibits an 'ethics of vision'), they share the conviction that aesthetic analogies, and descriptive languages of 'looking' and 'paying attention', accurately convey reality. This cements, for Murdoch, the descriptive power of metaphor.

Precisely because of the interpenetration of the cataphatic and apophatic dimensions of our experiential and linguistic engagements with a transcending quality, 'Where virtue is concerned we often apprehend more than we clearly understand and *grow by looking*.'²¹⁹ The concept of attentive 'looking' is attributed in Murdoch's writing to Simone Weil: in *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* Murdoch refers to 'Weil's wish that she

could 'perceive without reverie', 'attention' being "not to think about" but simply (and lovingly) to behold.²²⁰ We are to learn to see without impressing our own preconceptions upon another.

The study of literature 'is an education in how to picture and understand human situations.'²²¹ Art, particularly literature, is the location of humanity's 'most fundamental insight':²²² not least because literature teaches the reader, trains him, to *look*, guiding him to attend more really – to himself, to others, to the world, and to a transcendent referent which escapes, yet shapes, him. The image of 'looking' is central to Murdoch's philosophy. Language is dependent 'upon contexts of attention' (human beings are 'obscure to each other, unless they are mutual objects of attention or have common objects of attention')²²³ and she borrows Weil's concept of 'attention' to convey 'the idea of a just and loving gaze directed upon an individual reality,' which is 'the characteristic and proper mark of the active moral agent.'²²⁴ Murdoch's preference for metaphors of vision over movement when describing the will, and its negotiation of moral reality, reflects the self's participative relationship with this reality: we are *in* it, looking *through* it. Hampshire, Ayer, Hare and Sartre are equally existentialist for Murdoch because they identify 'the true person with the empty choosing will, and the corresponding emphasis upon the idea of movement rather than vision.' Crucially, for these philosophers 'there is no point in talking of 'moral seeing' since there is nothing *morally* to see.'²²⁵ By contrast, for Murdoch, as her study of 'M' and 'D' made clear, the result of 'moral imagination and moral effort' is precisely 'clear vision.'²²⁶

Chapter Four recognised a certain relationship between ontology and epistemology presented in *To The Lighthouse*. Mr Ramsay is presented as dispassionate, egocentric will, *looking* coldly at a distant world comprised of objects which must be possessed to achieve knowledge. Lily, by contrast, envisions her object, Mrs Ramsay, in the warmth of a passionate contemplation attending a specific desire not for any knowledge 'known to men', or inscribed on tablets, but for relational unity, for communion, 'that is knowledge.' This communion she desires, her way of knowing, contrasts with Mr Ramsay's model of knowledge by acquisition: a way of knowing that draws Mrs Ramsay's energy away from herself, to be consumed by Mr Ramsay. Murdoch also conceives of something 'of which saints speak and which any artist will readily understand. The idea of a patient, loving regard, directed upon a person, a thing, a situation,' which then presents the will 'not as unimpeded movement' (Mr Ramsay, and the analytic philosophical school he represents) but 'as something very much more like 'obedience'.²²⁷

Here again is a direct connection between ontology and epistemology: between how we believe reality to be structured, and how we subsequently go about attempting to understand it. We can blind ourselves, predetermining what we see by prematurely conceiving reality in certain ways. Certain restrictive 'pictures of the soul' in the philosophy of mind have rendered moral philosophy literally inarticulate when endeavouring to describing the complex moral reality in which we 'live and move and have our being': particular moral concepts have become 'philosophically unstatable.'²²⁸

Becoming Vision: A Contemplative Methodology

In 1956 Iris Murdoch reviewed, for *The Spectator*, the publication of Simone Weil's complete *Notebooks*. Towards the close of her review, Murdoch writes of Weil's support for the conviction that 'the science of religions has not yet begun.' Weil 'points out' that 'mysteries will yield truths only to a religious attention . . . Whatever one's ultimate beliefs, these 'truths' and the mode of their emergence are a reality which cannot be neglected, and of which we have yet to devise a method of study.' '*The Notebooks*,' Murdoch concludes, 'may also be recommended to those who imagine that current philosophical techniques can readily show theological statements to be empty. "To be able to study the supernatural, one must first be capable of discerning it."²²⁹

This latter conviction invites a consideration of contemplative vision. Murdoch objects to behaviourist accounts of the self which, relegating the 'inner life' to something 'hazy, largely absent, and any way 'not part of the mechanism', make it impossible to 'take up an idle contemplative attitude to the good.' In precisely such circumstances the human will is erroneously pictured according to metaphors of 'movement' rather than 'vision.'²³⁰ In Murdoch's philosophy the contemplative quality of vision does not consist in a one-way meditation of consciousness on some transcendent object. Rather, consciousness is also transformed by the object it contemplates. The better the chosen object of vision, the better the contemplative gaze becomes. This relationship is so tight that consciousness will come to have the object it deserves (although 'grace' presents a challenge here). As so often, the aesthetic *instance* prevails: 'art,' Murdoch writes with emphasis, '*creates* its client.' Art 'inspires intuitions of ideal formal and symbolic unity which enable us to cooperate with the artist and to be, as we enjoy the work, artists ourselves.'²³¹

In her set of essays collectively entitled *The Kindness of God: Metaphor, Gender, and Religious Language* (2007), Janet Martin Soskice explores what it means for human beings to be made in the image of God, and, in virtue of a properly construed ontological reciprocity, how we might discover what 'kind' of nature God has, and what 'kindness' we may share with this God. Realising where divine and human natures share such kinship allows us to discern where holiness may be found. In an essay entitled 'Love and Attention', in which, as the title suggests, Soskice makes reference to Murdoch's work, she recognises the relationship between vision and reality that emerges in Murdoch's writing. Reflecting on Goethe's observation that, 'the eye is built by Light for Light, so the inner light may encounter the other,' Soskice comments that, 'Not only does seeing 'give us' the world, the world – in some real sense – gives us seeing.'²³² 'To recapitulate,' she writes, 'all life . . . is such as to be affected by the world it inhabits. Attention is rewarded with reality. This is the principle of growth. But is this a stage to the moral and the spiritual?' This cannot be so if 'one thinks that moral and devotional life is in a stark sense the product of unencumbered reason or that our affections and desires are delusions and snares on our path to the real.'²³³ As Murdoch's philosophy conveys, a direct relationship exists between a restored conception of self as comprised of affective dimensions – including emotions and a 'real' inner life – and a return to the ancient conviction that 'attention is rewarded with reality', and this within a process of 'moral' and 'spiritual' progression. For Murdoch, the 'moral and devotional life,' to use Soskice's terms, is precisely not 'the product of unencumbered' (disembodied, non-related) reason: neither are 'affections and desires' 'delusions and snares on our path to the real,' although they must be purged. 'All of us,' writes Soskice, 'are directed by our loves and desires,' yet the relationship between vision and reality, between attention and world, is such that 'we must ask *what* we love, *what* we attend to, in order to know *who we are and should be*.'²³⁴

The conception of vision as contemplative – of vision as affected by the reality it contemplates, and in a way that restores vision to its source – is founded on a metaphysical conviction: that reality, that the world, comes to the observer as *gift*, as transcending the subject both as an object of knowledge, and as something to be controlled or possessed. By contrast, the Cartesian 'turn to the self, which entails a turn from the other,' the philosophical position which inevitably 'break[s] down into the indubitable "in here" and the unreliable "out there",' is the aggrandisement of the knowing self and the reduction of the world to a set of 'objects, distant and no part of me.' The world

is *not* gift, arriving, in some deliberate sense, independently of me, and inviting my participation in pursuit of practical wisdom: what is most real is my suspicious self, and once 'confined securely within' this self 'we can manipulate and control a world of objects.'²³⁵ There is no contemplative vision here, or if there is, it is terribly weakened. Contemplative vision requires my participative relationship with a reality that arrives, and teaches me who I am. What arrives is already of my essence, and in coming to know this reality, I come to know myself. If, in the case of 'the new [Cartesian] agent of science,' 'Radical subjectivity made the new radical objectivity possible,'²³⁶ now, in reverse, we could say that, in the contemplative vision, true objectivity (God, the Good, another person) restores true subjectivity in its right relationship to this given reality. 'To be fully human and moral is to respond to that which demands or compels our response – the other attended to with love.'²³⁷ We are 'called' into relationship with the world. Understanding is vocational. A universe of extended objects detached from disembodied mind cannot, without the required ontological continuity, generate that magnetism (eros) which inspires consciousness into relationship with a subject-transcending reality. Contemplative vision – vision which is both transformed by its object, and, to a significant extent, possesses the object it deserves – receives the world (its object) in the fullness of gift and begins its progression (the refinement of vision) on the basis of this relationship. There is a fundamental starting-point, then, for contemplative vision: it begins with reality in the fullness and diversity of its arrival, and, in the spirit of that practical wisdom contained in both Platonic and Aristotelian philosophy, realises that progression depends on '*seeing* an order already given in nature.'²³⁸ And, as Murdoch warns, what is taken out of the picture of reality at the beginning cannot be added in again later.

This conception of contemplative vision allows Murdoch to make controversial sense of a story which, in turn, complements our understanding of that 'way of knowing' presented in the Ontological Proof (a controversial sense, incidentally, of a proof which has been called 'a charming joke.'²³⁹ Recall the proximity of wisdom and nonsense.) Murdoch recites 'a Tibetan story':

a mother asks her son, a merchant setting off for the city, to bring her back a religious relic. He forgets her request until he is nearly home again. He picks up a dog's tooth by the roadside and tells the old lady it is a relic of a saint. She places it in her chapel where it is venerated. It begins miraculously to glow with light.

'This story,' Murdoch comments, 'which may be seen as a version of the Ontological Proof, is itself a religious image or icon: importance of stories in religion.'²⁴⁰ 'Our attention to the images of art can provide a point where the distinction of subject and object vanishes in an intuitive understanding,'²⁴¹ (recall Woolf's depiction of Lily's desire for unity with her object (Mrs Ramsay), as the achievement of an intuitive understanding, called 'love'). Our first instinct, when reading this story, is to ridicule, to pity, the gullibility of the mother, and the subsequent embarrassing naivety of her enshrinement of a worthless object. The story conjures remembered tales of simplistic, mistakenly placed belief, and superstitious delusion: the context in which so many opponents of religion choose to denude their object.²⁴² But this humble story has the power to reveal, as Murdoch points out, that *how* we see things can change the thing, or, rather, reveal the object's own power, when properly observed, to disclose dimensions of that reality in which it partakes. The mystical is not esoteric, or magical: it is the everyday, but in a way that reveals that everydayness as itself sacred. The apparently worthless object, the dog's tooth, the 'particular, as art shows us with an exemplary clarity, is not to be left behind, falling out of being, dusty and forgotten, lost in the dark; it must be allowed to glow with light. There is an ordinary mystical discipline which relies on such insights.'²⁴³ The 'intuitive understanding' in which 'the distinction of subject and object vanishes' may be 'lodged' in something particular. The particular, which is saved, held in attention, given being, found to be significant,' is not to be conceived in that Hegelian sense 'where the dialectic casts a light on something taken to be solitary and then destroys it in a higher synthesis. (It eats it.)' We witness, in the mutual integration of religious, artistic and moral modes of thought, 'the mystery of the synthesis of different levels of cognition, how complexly integrated these levels are, and how therein the 'brute particular' is transcended and retained (known).' This is, Murdoch poignantly concludes, 'A case of saving the phenomena.'²⁴⁴

The point is that 'everything about us asks for our attention': we are called into recognition, into understanding. The world arrives as gift. 'Contingent particulars, objects . . . can startle us with their reality and arrest obsessive mechanical thought-runs,' and 'A good consciousness does not ignore or blur these witnesses, or overwhelm their private radiance.'²⁴⁵ To contemplative vision even a dog's tooth can be seen to glow: for our relationship with its particularity, our reverence for its distinctive existence, transforms and purifies consciousness. We learn the spiritual practice of devotion.

Murdoch's philosophical work presents a concept of contemplative vision. Furthermore, it can be argued that the structure of *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, which has so 'baffled' Murdoch's reviewers, invites the reader to engage a form of contemplative envisioning. The reader constantly revisits philosophical themes and viewpoints, deepening her vision of the difficulty under view, and realising Murdoch's conviction that 'one kind of insight of vision, as well as being itself, can image another.'²⁴⁶ Murdoch's Platonic essays speak consistently of an attempt to elaborate convictions that are already known, but have not been securely argued for. This reflection, coupled with the 'circling' pattern characteristic of Murdoch's final philosophical work, shows her philosophy to embody, to incarnate, that 'partly circular juggling which the human mind indulges in when determined to *argue* for something which it already *knows*. Such argument is also characteristic of metaphysics.'²⁴⁷ 'There is,' she argues, 'a dialectic or oscillation or ferment within which fundamental ideas enlighten and support each other,' and the reader of her final philosophical work feels drawn into this mode of envisioning.²⁴⁸ Contemplative vision operates on an epistemological model of 'faith seeking understanding', a model premised on the ontological conviction that reality transcends the subject and *comes to meet her*, informing her comprehension of her nature. We might recover what was described as lost in *Sartre*, 'a general truth about ourselves which shall encompass us like a house.' We may progress beyond 'a broken totality, a divided being.'²⁴⁹ Love is 'a reflection of the warmth and light of the sun,' the Good, which surrounds us.²⁵⁰ Consequently, 'A general acquaintance with tested certainty and truth and clear-seeing, an ability to think seriously and honestly, works to support what is already innately known.'²⁵¹

At the centre of Murdoch's philosophical method is a restoration of the validity of that 'way of knowing' to which she believes the Ontological Proof points: to a restoration, in morality, in philosophy, in 'true' (mystical) religion, of that 'way of knowing' exemplified in everyday living, the constant sense in which we 'believe in order to understand': relationship precedes knowledge ('Faith (loving belief) and knowledge often have an intimate relation which is not easy to analyse in terms of what is prior to what.')252 Part of the value of the Ontological Proof, to Murdoch's view, is its use of that 'well-recognised metaphysical circularity' in virtue of which it may be said of such 'things' as God, or Good, that 'unless you have it in the picture from the start you cannot get it in later by extraneous means.' 'The Ontological Proof, unlike other alleged proofs of God's existence, shows, indeed uses, an awareness of this.'²⁵³ The concept of

grace – which poses something of an incontrovertible ‘problem’²⁵⁴ for Murdoch’s system (the sense that psychic help comes from ‘beyond’ remains mysterious) – recognises that ‘impure feelings can be purified by being directed upon a pure (untainted, unstained) object,’²⁵⁵ just as, in the other direction, ‘Changes in our desires go along with changes in instinctive imagery . . .’²⁵⁶ ‘Saving the phenomena,’ writes Murdoch towards the end of *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, ‘is happening all the time. We do not lose the particular, it teaches us love, we understand it, we see it, as Plato’s carpenter sees the table . . . [as] the girl in the bed-sitter sees her potted plant or her cat.’²⁵⁷ Murdoch considers the *Phaedrus*’ lesson that ‘on earth we are moved toward what is good’ by ‘a faint memory of those pure things,’ glimpsed in a previous existence, pure things ‘simple and calm and blessed, which we saw then in a pure clear light, being pure ourselves.’ ‘This,’ Murdoch writes, ‘seems to me an excellent image of our apprehension of morality and goodness.’²⁵⁸ *Being pure ourselves*: the quality of our vision, and the quality of our object, is commensurate; and yet, ‘grace’ is the improvement of our vision by the apprehension of an object beyond our deserving. ‘Space and light are essential images in the description of morality.’²⁵⁹

A circular light motif emerges within Murdoch’s philosophy, and traces a way of knowing. Vision is lit by the source of light it contemplates (the Sun), vision itself grows more brilliant in the act of purified seeing, and, in consequence, the Sun becomes more brilliant still to vision. ‘To attend is to care, to learn to desire to learn.’²⁶⁰ ‘A good desire includes the urge to see truly. Truthful vision prompts right action.’²⁶¹ Consequently, writes Murdoch, ‘I think that what we literally see is important. Perception is both evaluation and inspiration . . .’²⁶² St. Paul, then, is right to commend certain objects for attention.²⁶³ Moral character is comprised of interconnections between ‘our fundamental moral disposition,’ what ‘we really value, what we love and are magnetised by,’ and ‘what we are capable of noticing.’²⁶⁴ Our intention, our desire to learn, the deliberate clarification of attention through determined focus on morally appropriate objects, declares the importance of what is objectively real and good. ‘An understanding and practice of goodness clarifies the intuitions of it which arise in the soul.’²⁶⁵

Contemplative vision rests on the same epistemological and ontological grounds as the conviction that I can, indeed, often *must*, believe in order to understand. In light of all this, Murdoch’s quotation of Weil’s statement that ‘To be able to study the supernatural, one must first be capable of discerning it,’²⁶⁶ is no faint-hearted remark. The critic of religious experience must endeavour to have understood before daring

to pronounce against its validity: it will not be so easy, Murdoch comments, to 'imagine that current philosophical techniques can readily show theological statements to be empty.'²⁶⁷ On a restored account of rationality, and the reasonableness of belief that precedes comprehensive understanding – an account presented in the Ontological Proof as a 'defence of a way of knowing' – the Psalmist recommends something most rational and reasonable, and a way of knowing consonant with ways we employ and test daily, when he pronounces, 'O taste and see that the Lord is good.' This is precisely not extraordinary knowledge. It is a reinstatement of the distinctly mystical identity of everyday experience revealed in its sacred aspect. As Michael Kessler and Christian Shepard acknowledge, 'for many now, "mysticism" has come to signify mystical experiences only, extraordinary experiences, and, as such, has been separated both from its interpretation and from ordinary reality. Such a view cannot, for example, seriously consider the idea – an idea sustained by Dionysian mystical theology as well as the new phenomenology – that experience as such, including ordinary everyday experience, is so gracious (or gratuitous) as to be itself somehow mystical.'²⁶⁸

Murdoch invites the reader to return to faith in that 'natural light' of reason which exists in virtue of our participative relationship with a transcending reality.²⁶⁹ The light by which we see is sourced in that which we contemplate. Our knowledge of *it* informs our knowledge of ourselves. We are to become vision: our whole being defined as 'a just and loving gaze'. There 'is a place both inside and outside religion for a sort of contemplation of the Good.'²⁷⁰ The restored self is a contemplative self.

IV

The Ethics of Vision: Love and the Everyday

Her full nature, like that river of which Cyrus broke the strength, spent itself in channels which had no great name on the earth. But the effect of her being on those around her was incalculably diffusive: for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs.

George Eliot, closing lines of *Middlemarch*²⁷¹

Soskice's essay on 'Love and Attention' in *The Kindness of God* demonstrates the significant extent to which Murdoch's ethical insights inform

a contemporary Christian theology that desires to recognise the sacredness of everyday experience. Woolf's foregrounding of the landscapes of human consciousness witnesses to dimensions of experience too often excluded from a systematic theology. Heather Walton describes David Jasper's exposition of the challenge: what is required of theology, and achievable in its embrace of literature, is its 'bearing to think the unthinkable, embodying in textuality the unbearable so that embodiment and incarnation endures and embraces its own fragmentariness and dismemberment.'²⁷² Theology must embrace 'Everything the discourses call flesh. That which is bodily, fragile, fertile, desiring, disruptive, female.'²⁷³ Woolf's formal-aesthetic incarnation of experienced tensions between unity and disunity, her lamentation over what is lost beyond the synthesising frame, provides literary material for this theological endeavour.

Responding to a history of spirituality that has drawn the locus of spiritual experience out and away from daily chores and troubles, and into the 'pure still air' of silent mountain-tops, cloisters and deserts, Soskice desires a spirituality truer to the incarnational heart of Christianity. 'What we want is a monk who finds God while cooking a meal with one child clamouring for a drink, another who needs a bottom wiped, and a baby throwing up over his shoulder.'²⁷⁴ Soskice considers a tradition which, through nuanced and complex routes, has come to offer 'a spiritual idea in which the demands of others, even of one's own babies and children, are not merely indifferent to the task of gazing on God, but in competition with it.'²⁷⁵ Her conviction, on the contrary, is that the doctrine of *Imago Dei*, and Christ's own embodied existence, provide theological grounding and encouragement for identifying everyday tasks, events and duties – too often viewed as 'worthy in God's service' as opposed to being 'spiritual' activities in themselves²⁷⁶ – as sites of sacredness, even disclosive of the divine nature.

In this theological context, Murdoch is helpfully emphatic about the value of contingent particularity for the picturing of reality, and the value of paying attention to concrete relationships, to distinctive discrete experiences of sin, love, hate, and war, for moral growth. The value of Murdoch's insights, in this context, for orthodox religious thinking, may surprise critics: particularly those for whom the fact that 'her philosophy continually asserts the primacy of ordinary human experience as the starting point and continual touchstone of true philosophy' is interpreted as evidence for her being 'adamantly unreligious in the traditional sense.'²⁷⁷ Murdoch's examples *complement* Soskice's emphasis on local, domestic life: goodness is 'perhaps most convincingly

met with in simple people – inarticulate, unselfish mothers of large families . . .²⁷⁸ Soskice offers, as ‘spiritual’, as blessed, the experience of parents, mothers, caring attendants to seemingly trivial, repetitive tasks (making meals, washing clothes); Murdoch offers, as blessed, the experience of inarticulate peasants, mothers, and self-giving aunts.

These emphases again distinguish Murdoch’s thought from that of her philosophical contemporaries. ‘The merits of linguistic analytical man are freedom (in the sense of detachment, rationality), responsibility, self-awareness, sincerity, and a lot of utilitarian common sense. There is of course no mention of sin, and no mention of love,²⁷⁹ conveying a disdain for the fleshly, earthly and ‘ordinary’ (classically the ‘feminine’ province) which Soskice similarly counters. Murdoch endorses a practical wisdom, sourced and nurtured in virtuous daily living. ‘The activity of Eros is orientation of desire,’ and ‘we see ‘salvation’ or ‘good’ as connected with, or incarnate in, all sorts of particulars, and not just as ‘an abstract idea’. ‘Saving the phenomena’ is happening all the time. We do not lose the particular, it teaches us love, we understand it, we *see* it . . .’²⁸⁰ In *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, Murdoch reflects on her methodology: ‘I have used an extended sense of the aesthetic in which ‘we are all artists’: ‘use of language is use of imagination’, and ‘perception is creative evaluation’. These are formulations, designed to evade being tautological or senseless, intended in their context to draw attention to areas of reality which are ‘ordinarily’ missed or misunderstood.²⁸¹ Murdoch shares with Heather Walton and David Jasper a sense of the importance of holding in view aspects of experience so easily ‘missed or misunderstood,’ and where Walton locates literature as the place for retracing this experience, Murdoch too points to literature, and to great works of art, for the restoration of what philosophical models based on reductive scientific viewpoints have excised.

For Murdoch, as for Woolf, proper vision respects its object: does not reduce him for possession or control, but loves in a way that permits the object his objectivity. The other must not be consumed in the construction of the subject’s fantasylands. Moreover, where Soskice is dedicated to locating everyday events *as* ‘spiritual’, for Murdoch, similarly, ‘the virtuous peasant knows, and I believe he will go on knowing, in spite of the removal or modification of the theological apparatus.’²⁸² Soskice considers the example of parenting, or looking after children: in this experience ‘the rational and spiritual’ is ‘strangely mixed with the visceral and instinctive.’²⁸³ In a manner echoing Murdoch’s endeavours to re-integrate the rational and affective dimensions of the self, Soskice considers how the seemingly involuntary process of lactation reveals the

connection between beliefs (mental) and physical processes: the mother believes her baby is crying, milk flows. The selflessness required – indeed, demanded – of the person who cares for a child precisely develops ‘the spiritual discipline of attention (*prosoche*)’ and ‘self-mastery (*enkrateia*),’ that is ‘being at the disposal of another,’ whereby we ‘are characteristically drawn out of ourselves (*ecstatis*) and come to understand ourselves fully as selves.’²⁸⁴ These are thoroughly Murdochian commitments. Everyday events that follow naturally from the fact of our embodiment are spiritually significant: they are icons for attentive vision. Moreover, ‘an unexamined life can be virtuous.’²⁸⁵ While philosophical explorations of certain problems are ‘for thinkers to look at,’ ‘The ordinary fellow ‘just knows’ . . .’²⁸⁶

‘Women’s lives,’ Soskice notes, ‘are much given to attending to particulars; to small, repetitive tasks like the washing of clothes and the wiping of noses that leave no carved stone monuments behind them.’²⁸⁷ Murdoch recalls those who have died forgotten, anonymous, unnoticed deaths, brought out into the cold one morning, and shot in the back of the head. ‘The particular,’ Murdoch writes, speaking of physical as much as speculative entities, ‘is not to be left behind, falling out of being, dusty and forgotten, lost in the dark; it must be allowed to glow with light. There is an ordinary mystical discipline which relies upon such insights.’²⁸⁸ ‘It may be said that all saints may be used as icons, but are as individuals merely imaginary,’ writes Murdoch.²⁸⁹ In their stead, she offers the ‘innumerable unknown saints and martyrs . . . some quiet unpretentious worker, a schoolteacher or a mother, or better still an aunt.’²⁹⁰ There is no elite of mystics for Murdoch: she shares Soskice’s suspicion of the ‘spiritual hero’,²⁹¹ the ‘true “spiritual aesthete”,’²⁹² (the spiritualised equivalent of the philosophical picture of the rational, autonomous, emotionally detached man. ‘The good man is humble; he is very unlike the big neo-Kantian Lucifer.’)²⁹³ ‘The background to morals is properly some sort of mysticism, if by this is meant a non-dogmatic essentially un-formulated faith in the reality of the Good, occasionally connected with experience.’²⁹⁴

‘Contingent particulars, objects . . . can startle us with their reality’: here are everyday spiritual gifts, offered to vision, and capable of becoming iconographic focal points for the spiritual disciplining of attention. The particularity of watching a kestrel is famously posited by Murdoch as arresting vision and diverting the ego from self-indulgent brooding. ‘A good consciousness,’ writes Murdoch, ‘does not ignore or blur these witnesses, or overwhelm their private radiance.’²⁹⁵ This conviction sources her objection to Hegelian idealism, which “‘ruins’ conscious-

ness as it 'ruins' imagination by making it swallow and be everything. We must attach consciousness to the individual thinker, it is part of his definition and his particular mode of being.²⁹⁶ The most ordinary of daily events has the power to transform consciousness: to become the site of acute spiritual experience. Particularity, contingency, is protected: people, objects, or events, must be protected as ends, saved from relegation to the 'means' of my consuming consciousness. (In Woolf's short-story, the 'picture', the frame, has left out who Isabella really is, the particularity of her tastes, who or what she cares for. Analogies (the convolulus) fail too, 'trembling between one's eyes and the truth.'²⁹⁷ Neglecting the contingent truth, we go on 'making phrases.') The process of moral pilgrimage retains the particular. Again, with reservations for Hegel (and a little earlier in her text), Murdoch writes that, "The myth of the Cave envisages possible emergence into the sunlight. But this emergence is something to be achieved, if at all, by individuals. (*Noesis*, beyond images, holiness, the mystical). It is not, as in Hegel, a final totality in which all entities are ultimately (logically) fused."²⁹⁸ Murdoch cannot accept any solution, any picturing of the moral landscape, which 'obliterates the picture of individual people in an accidental world.'²⁹⁹ It is impossible even to describe mind philosophically without including 'the sense in which any situation is individualised by being pierced by moral considerations, by being given a particular moral colour or orientation.'³⁰⁰ In pursuit of the moral pilgrim 'We do not have to go as far as genius, but only as far as the category of the existing individual which Kierkegaard asserted against Hegel.'³⁰¹ Also to be resisted is Hegel's 'rolling' of transcendences, the repeated dissolution of horizons of particularity by some generalising principle.³⁰² (Recall Walton's challenge to theology again.)

Murdoch wishes to balance a conviction of the absolute nature of goodness with the value of particularity. If goodness is to be used in politics and the market place 'it must combine its increasing intuitions of unity with an increasing grasp of complexity and detail. False conceptions are often generalized, stereotyped and unconnected. True conceptions combine just modes of judgement and ability to connect with an increased perception of detail.' We are to receive 'a double revelation of both random detail and intuited unity,' one that we can 'receive in every sphere of life if we seek for what is best.'³⁰³

In this context Murdoch is appreciative of the inherited wisdoms of Christendom, especially where Christian insights acknowledge the significance of graceful acts in ordinary situations, the potential for apparently simple situations to reveal profound moral truths: 'the

'conventional' level,' she writes, 'is often not so simple as it seems, and the quaintly phrased hymn which I sang in my childhood, 'Who sweeps a room as for Thy laws makes that and the action fine', was not talking foolishly.'³⁰⁴ This epithet reflects the fact that 'the task of attention goes on all the time and at apparently empty and everyday moments we are 'looking', making those little peering efforts of imagination which have such important cumulative results.'³⁰⁵ Murdoch teaches the student of doctrine how to attend concretely to instances of sin, temptation, evil and love, to examine individual practical instances of what otherwise become abstract categories. This, again, is not 'esoteric' knowledge: 'In particular situations 'reality' as that which is revealed to the patient eye of love is an idea entirely comprehensible to the ordinary person.'³⁰⁶ This recognition of the revelation of love in ordinary lives and circumstances is fully at home with Christian mystics, in their appreciation of the humble dwellings of divine expressions, and their determination to cultivate an awareness of the sacredness of everyday situations in ways that respond to the pre-existing sacredness of each moment.

Murdoch wishes us to embrace 'important movements of return from philosophical theory to simple things which we are certain of . . .'³⁰⁷ We sense it is almost sufficient for Murdoch that 'at the level of *serious common sense* and of an *ordinary non-philosophical reflection* about the nature of morals *it is perfectly obvious* that goodness is connected with knowledge: not with quasi-scientific knowledge of the ordinary world . . . but with a refined and honest perception of *what is really the case*, a patient and just discernment and exploration of what confronts one, which is the result not simply of opening one's eyes but of a certainly perfectly familiar kind of moral discipline,' (my emphasis).³⁰⁸ Growth towards knowledge of what is 'really the case' (Murdoch's reflexive realism) requires a participative relationship with this reality of which we are gaining knowledge. For this reason, 'Where virtue is concerned we often apprehend more than we clearly understand and *grow by looking*.'³⁰⁹ The language of initiation is appropriate here. However, 'To silence and expel self, to contemplate and delineate nature with a clear eye, is not easy and demands a moral discipline.'³¹⁰ Yet, this discipline is thoroughly accessible. 'I think,' writes Murdoch, that 'there is something analogous to prayer . . . something which belongs to the moral life of the ordinary person.'³¹¹ Salvation is democratic: 'Redemption or salvation is the discovery of oneself as an artist.' 'We may also see,' she writes in a later chapter, 'how it is that spiritual reality is the same as ordinary reality, is the reality of our everyday appearance, is

all *here*, not elsewhere: which is also,' she does justice to Christian theology, 'a fundamental religious view.'³¹² 'Some saintly figures,' writes Murdoch, towards the close of *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, and capturing Soskice's emphasis on the potential sanctity of life's most ordinary tasks, 'are self-evidently 'religious', others may be invisible, buried deep in families or offices or silent religious houses. The vision if any may have been entirely dissolved into the work. 'Christ? Who is he? Oh yes – I forgot.' At the highest level this is practical mysticism, where the certainty and the absolute appear incarnate and immediate in the needs of others.'³¹³

Conclusion

This chapter has explored how Murdoch's response to certain reductive philosophical traditions restores a richer conception of the self, consciousness, and the contemplative quality of vision (attention). This restoration of a substantial concept of the 'inner life' also restores meaning-fullness to language, since now literature, and, indeed, metaphorical (non-literal) language, can convey that 'inner life' which is actually constitutive of reality. Furthermore, ordinary moral language (and knowledge, moral 'common-sense') 'works'. Murdoch reclaims the fullness of the inner life, of language, and contemplation, in participative reference to a transcending Good, which gives a cautious, 'shadowy' unity to the world. Everyday life is recognised as the site of an irreducibly complex and continuous moral activity, within which the individual is immersed as within a fabric of being. Woolf and Murdoch share several foci: a concern with picturing a (not uncontested) metaphysical unity (that intuited 'backing light', a non-naively construed 'pattern' behind appearances); a restored conception of the self as integrating rational and affective dimensions, and of the inner life as constituting something 'real'; consequently, an elevation of literature, and art, as pointing 'beyond' subjective 'impressions' in their foregrounding of landscapes of consciousness; a concept of 'vision' as contemplative, and an appreciation for the artistic consciousness as being particularly able to convey this (for Murdoch all individuals are artists); and the conveyance of an ethics of vision: the idea of a better attention, one that enlivens, rather than eliminates, its object. Each of these shared concerns represents, in the work of Woolf and Murdoch, the shaping of metaphysical perspectives in contrast with contemporary philosophical approaches to the self and her world.

'It is *difficult* to look at the Sun . . .'³¹⁴

In both *Existentialists and Mystics* and the Routledge edition of Murdoch's three Platonic essays, the essays are presented in the following order: 'The Idea of Perfection' (1962–4), 'On "God" and "Good"' (1969) and 'The Sovereignty of Good Over Other Concepts', (1967). This ordering is not chronological. However, the publication of 'The Sovereignty of Good Over Other Concepts' as third in sequence assists the reader endeavouring to grasp the development of Murdoch's metaphysical argument: her elaboration of an idea of perfection grounding morality, the relationship of the Good to its qualitative 'predecessor' 'God', are stages towards the presentation of the ultimate (final) sovereignty of the Good. But it is also interesting to note that this finally placed essay most clearly presents the Good in its *apophatic* aspect. For all Murdoch's preceding words about the Good, and its various manifestations, the reader now confronts its dazzling invisibility.

'Mystics of all kinds,' Murdoch writes in this essay, 'have attempted by extremities of language to portray the nakedness and aloneness of Good, its absolute for-nothingness. One might say that true morality is a sort of unesoteric mysticism, having its source in an austere and unconsolated love of the Good.'³¹⁵ This juxtaposition of virtue and pointlessness already anticipates the final chapter of *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*: 'Void'. For now, Murdoch emphasises that 'the concept of Good still remains obscure and mysterious. We see the world in the light of the Good, but what is the Good itself? The source of vision is not in the ordinary sense seen.' This is Murdoch's Platonic understanding of 'the indefinability of the good.'³¹⁶ We cannot 'sum up human excellence' because 'It is difficult to look at the Sun: it is not like looking at other things. We somehow retain the idea . . . that the lines really do converge. There is a magnetic centre. But it is easier to look at the converging edges than to look at the centre itself. We do not and probably cannot know, conceptualise, what it is like in the centre.'³¹⁷ However, this centre is not empty: the ethical correlate of an ontology that manifests as 'traceless light' is a 'pointless' virtue which has 'unique value' and conveys, by its magnetism, 'the endless extent of its demand.'³¹⁸

This Platonic essay, placed last, draws the reader towards the apophatic edges of Murdoch's philosophy. Chapter Seven will explore this apophatic dimension, especially as it emerges in her final philosophical work *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*. Chapter Six, however, returns to our conversation with Virginia Woolf, and pursues the invitation to explore the apophatic character of *her* work, with which our study of her cataphaticism ended.

6

Exploring the Apophatic Dimension of Virginia Woolf's Work: Virginia Woolf, Pseudo-Dionysius and the Aesthetics of Excess

. . . the disintegration of our world is not too rapid for creative discovery to continue.

Carl Woodring, 'Virginia Woolf'¹

The soul or mind reaching towards the formless finds itself incompetent to grasp where nothing bounds it or to take impression where the impinging reality is diffuse; in sheer dread of holding to nothingness, it slips away. The state is painful; often it seeks relief by retreating from all this vagueness to the region of sense, there to rest as on solid ground, just as the sight distressed by the minute rests with pleasure on the bold.

Plotinus, *Enneads* VI 9 3²

I

Exploring the Apophatic Dimension of Woolf's Literature

. . . what lacks form is what creates form.

Ann Banfield, *The Phantom Table*³

Chapter Four explored conceptual affiliations between Virginia Woolf's aesthetic vision and Plotinus' mystical metaphysics. I focused on the positive properties of Woolf's art as a constructive response to the artist's

vision of pattern, impulse to union and transcendence: key components of her relationship with reality. This chapter, recognising the negative dimension of Woolf's aesthetic vision – her awareness of the limitations of artistic expression in light of the fracture and interruption equally integral to vision – identifies an apophatic moment within an increasingly mystical aesthetic. The positive dimension of reality-encounter was explored in relation to a traditional source of mystical thought. I examine further, in the first section of this chapter, the mystical dialectics of Pseudo-Dionysius insofar as they reveal the value of Woolf's apophatic insights for contemporary conversations with Western mysticism. The second section explores how the generative aspect of the absent and open-ended in Woolf's work can be revealed, through encounter with Paul Ricoeur's phenomenology, in its iconographic power.

Certain traditional ecclesiastical structures contextualise Pseudo-Dionysius' mystical contemplations. Dionysius' attraction to Neoplatonism, as opposed to Plotinus', has been attributed to the former's refusal to believe 'in the autonomous intellect,' rather denying 'the soul's capacity to ascend unaided to union with the One,' and holding faith in the 'ineffable rites' handed down through antiquity as necessary aids to the 'weakness of the soul,'⁴ (we glimpse, here, Murdoch's reverence for rituals which, bestowing a certain grace, strengthen moral vision). Nevertheless, Dionysius' discourse of ascent towards speechless union with the Unutterable, a process of negation, *apophasis*, 'which appears to be largely devoid of any ostensibly Christian elements,'⁵ does, despite its late Neoplatonic Christian context, lend itself to conversation with a writer such as Woolf: not least because a woman who, proclaiming that 'there is no God' and asserting simultaneously 'all human beings – are connected with this . . . we are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself',⁶ suggests the tone of a non-theistic 'natural mysticism' with which Dionysius' writing has been associated by some critics.⁷

But more importantly, Dionysian thought is relevant as negative theology within the postmodern deconstruction of certain religious idols and the reaffirmation of divine unknowability from the perspective of everyday vision. The negative way still joins an affirmative way, but the requirement of contemporary theology to embrace the challenge of those things 'too often excluded by its systematic claims – laughter, expenditure, meaninglessness, loss,'⁸ brings the day-to-day reality of the experience of divine distance within the scope of a theological aesthetic. The 'Dionysian mystical theology' which affirms 'experience as such, including ordinary everyday experience,' as 'so gracious (or gratuitous) as to be itself somehow mystical,'⁹ embraces Woolf's fascination with

the ceaseless arrival of vision and inspiration which, however apparently accidental, remains essential to aesthetic depictions of existence.¹⁰

To explore the shape of Woolf's contribution to the delineation of this aesthetic, this chapter continues to focus on the artistic efforts of Lily Briscoe as presented in *To The Lighthouse*.

Pseudo-Dionysius and the Apophatic

We could . . . consider the impossibility of any knowledge of God, not as a failure of our inquiry but as a positive opportunity for questioning metaphysical concepts.

Jean-Luc Marion, *Mystics*¹¹

God cannot be known by our kind of knowing but, instead, only by a special kind of 'unknowing,' *agnosia*, which leaves us free for the experience of the divine presence. Here, then, is the second thrust of the negations: they open up a way to the *cognitio dei experimentalis*.

Alexander Golitzin, *Mystics*¹²

Through his *Mystical Theology*¹³ the fifth or sixth century theologian Pseudo-Dionysius¹⁴ has, arguably, 'exerted a vast influence on the theology and mysticism of later centuries.' Dionysius' mini-treatise offers an archetypal exposition of the logical dynamics constituting the foundation of Christian mystical linguistics. This tradition recognises two distinguishable but interdependent modes of discussion about God, classically identified as the cataphatic and the apophatic (see the Introduction). As considered in the previous part of this study, the cataphatic includes and concerns the concrete attribution of positive qualities to the ground of Reality, to God, the constructive linguistic this entails, and the corresponding experience of God in the faithful life which this successful reference both makes possible and reflects. Contrasting, but *involving*, this positive realm of discourse is the negative dimension of the apophatic. Dionysius' invocation of the Trinity gives the shape of the interaction of these dimensions:

Lead us up beyond unknowing and light,
up to the farthest, highest peak
of mystic scripture,
where the mysteries of God's Word

lie simple, absolute and unchangeable
 in the brilliant darkness of a hidden silence.
 Amid the deepest shadow
 they pour overwhelming light
 on what is most manifest.
 Amid the wholly unsensed and unseen
 they completely fill our sightless minds
 with treasures beyond all beauty.¹⁵

Dionysius captures the mystical impulse of the *via negativa*, the movement into relationship with God which inaugurates the radical overshadowing of our intellectual capacities, of our 'sightless minds', as the human soul, approaching the 'highest peak' of 'mystic scripture', is saturated with the 'overwhelming light' of divine presence. Juxtaposed with the moment of God's overwhelming presence is the experience of God's *absence*, the unknowability of the divine essence at the threshold of human finitude; God's radical 'beyondness' is 'His' dwelling in 'deepest shadow', in 'divine darkness'. Dionysius outlines a point of 'mystical' logic: that while negative statements about God (that God is 'not Good', 'not Kind' etc.), are technically more true of God than positive affirmations insofar as they come closer to communicating divine transcendence,¹⁶ it is *not* these negative attributions which constitute the apophatic, but rather the recognition of the necessary transcendence of language altogether, to which the interaction of the cataphatic and apophatic *collectively* witnesses.¹⁷

As Kevin Hart reflects, 'the cataphatic and apophatic do not cancel each other out so much as engage one another. It is not the positive and negative annihilating one another that makes mystical texts so intriguing, rather the patterns of textual disturbance that are set up by their engagements.'¹⁸ This observation cautions against interpretations of mysticism which associate the latter with flight from the material and immediate, and the maintenance of such traditional binaries as transcendence/immanence, verticality/horizontality, perfection/imperfection and masculinity/femininity. On the contrary, the mystical linguistic precisely *disrupts* oppositional logic. This study's engagement of the *unreconciling* tensions inherent to Woolf's literary aesthetic with the cataphatic-apophatic dialogue is possible in just this respect.

Aspects of Dionysius' mystical theology may be developed for our conversation with Woolf's visionary aesthetics: aspects which, maintaining the attributive potential of negativity (recall the aesthetic significance of the formless centre for Woolf, and James Ramsay's observation that the

uncapturable *vision* of the lighthouse is as much the lighthouse as the object out at sea), retain the descriptive power of the cataphatic, while the simultaneity of positive and negative ascriptions launches the visionary beyond both. Cataphaticism gives birth to apophaticism through the exhaustive outworking of its capacities for expression; but, consistent with this exhaustion, and the acknowledgement of the experiential and expressive limitations constitutive of this exhaustion, the visionary cannot express the vision which transcends. As Dionysius explains, 'we should not conclude that the negations are simply the opposites of the affirmations, but rather that the cause of all is considerably prior to this, beyond privations, beyond every denial, beyond every assertion.'¹⁹ Following the exhaustion of expressive effort, the ground of reality is intuited, in a return to original vision, formlessly: 'what lacks form is what creates form.'²⁰ The vision 'is beyond assertion and denial. We make assertions and denials of what is next to it, but never of it, for it is both beyond every assertion . . . [and] . . . beyond every denial.'²¹

However, we are not necessarily, at this point, plunged into an unfathomable darkness from which radical absence alone is discerned. Rather, the apophatic interprets the breaking-down of language as the *positive* signalling of an inaccessible vision. What is immanent may intuit the transcendent in the moments of silence between expression: but crucially, as in the relation of rests to beats in music, or lines to form in visual art, the immanent and transcendent inter-participate to form the fabric of vision. There must be both granite and rainbow. The apophatic embraces the cessation of language in response to a transcending vision. This dissolution is described in a rich history of mystical literature as an intellectual and spiritual plunge into darkness. But this plunge occurs on the threshold of an otherness: a crashing ocean swell beneath the force of which the cliff-edge of language cracks.

Within Woolf's aesthetic, the double-edged (simultaneous) success and defeat of language in its attempt to capture and present the ground of reality is the embodiment of the interactive dynamics of cataphaticism and apophaticism, dimensions integral to her delineation of artistic vision and expression.

This is manifest in Woolf's assessment of artistic activity. Where the artist is inspired to vision, but cannot 'see' this vision – grasped in a shocking yet relieving moment – 'without a brush in her hand',²² we witness a fluctuating vision dependent on the expressive endeavours of the artist. The cataphatic nature of creativity supports vision: but this mysteriously arising creative inspiration is self-subverting in its inability to render, in concrete form, the essence of the vision possessed, prior

to expression, as inspiration. (The cataphatic positivity of vision and expressive promise gestures, but cannot capture, the vision which, transcending the artist, escapes in an apophatic silence: Lily sees more than she can register on canvas, more than 'inscriptions on tablets'.) These complementing dimensions capture that tension between the sense that life gives form to art, and that, conversely (yet simultaneously), art embellishes life: between 'the physical world which she holds too much in awe to alter for a merely fictional pattern,' and 'the responsibility to make fiction heighten life while portraying it . . .'.²³ That this tension holds true for Woolf – that the cataphatic and apophatic dimensions of vision and expression mutually interpenetrate, and permeate her aesthetic – is reflected in her consciousness, *through* expression, of having fallen short *of* expression. This event haunts her literary career, and is conveyed vividly in the creative anxieties of abstract painter Lily Briscoe and playwright Miss La Trobe (*Between the Acts*),²⁴ through their efforts to give form for vision.

While critics tend to interpret, exclusively, the negativity of Woolf's aesthetic as signalling the emptiness, arbitrariness and meaninglessness of life, this study recognises this negativity in its relation to the positive construals of unity (of vision and form) and transcendence which, emerging through Woolf's aesthetic, were explored in Chapter Four. While the absence of theistic belief in Woolf's case precludes the identification of the cataphatic moment with an experience of the divine *as such*, yet in virtue of the interpenetration of positive and negative moments (of vision and expression) belonging to the literary aesthetics both of Woolf and Pseudo-Dionysius, the negative dimension of Woolf's vision can be embraced as making observations about our conscious experience of reality in continuity with the observations of mystical literature.

To elucidate these points, this chapter will now explore Woolf's sense of the ineffable and irreducible content of life, to which her aesthetic vision apophatically gestures; and her sharing, with Pseudo-Dionysius, the intuited shape of language's cracking on the threshold of the real.

The Mystical Aesthetics of Lily Briscoe

Throughout *To The Lighthouse* Woolf conducts an exploration of the nature and purpose of aesthetic vision and activity, most explicitly through the creative efforts of abstract painter Lily Briscoe. We first encounter Lily, her canvas propped on the lawn, agonising over how to capture the object of her vision, Mrs Ramsay. Exalting and suffering

within the grip of a powerful and demanding inspiration to envision correctly Mrs Ramsay, Lily gives the shape of her passion for possession. She asks:

Could loving, as people called it, make her and Mrs. Ramsay one? for it was not knowledge but unity that she desired, not inscriptions on tablets, nothing that could be written in any language known to men, but intimacy itself, which is knowledge . . .²⁵

Her frustration is articulated earlier in the novel:

-but what could one say to her? 'I'm in love with you'? No, that was not true. 'I'm in love with all this,' waving her hand at the hedge, at the house, at the children? It was absurd, it was impossible. One could not say what one meant.²⁶

Woolf conceives, here, the original artistic instinct both to create unity and reveal life's pattern, as the attempting of *relationship* (between Lily and Mrs Ramsay); and thereby conveys the artist's attempt to envision accurately and communicate reality in terms of relational encounter, of personal outreaching. The artist strives not to possess in Mr Ramsay's sense, yet to touch the real.

But there is, simultaneous with the shaping of Lily's endeavour, a recognition of the extra-linguistic, non-descriptive properties of this aesthetic 'reaching'. Lily, at a distance from her object, desires 'unity': 'not inscriptions on tablets', 'but intimacy itself, which is knowledge'. This sentiment, reminiscent of Woodring's observation that Woolf 'did not wish to waste a keen mind in making rational statements that any educated fool could make,²⁷ is of importance in conveying something integral to Woolf's aesthetic: its apophatic temper. Lily's aesthetic approach to the real, to 'the problem of knowledge', struggles to resolve the desire for uniting vision (which sometimes she could not even see 'without a brush in her hand')²⁸ with the acquisition of a knowledge which, being 'intimacy itself', is not of the nature of anything that can be written as 'inscriptions on tablets': and yet the desire, in envisioning, is also to express, for it is with frustration that Lily observes that 'one could not say what one meant'.

In the painter's striving to reach and render the real, Woolf gives the shape of the writer's relationship with words. She communicates, through Lily, a scepticism of naively representational theories of language and knowledge: the artist desires an intimacy with her object

which escapes expression in terms of propositions, a way of knowing distinct from Mr Ramsay's epistemological model. Lily yearns for union with the object of contemplation, to possess an intimate vision of the essence of the reality confronting her. Here is the aesthetic nature of the subject's relationship to her object: the shape of intimacy is union. Lily's desire captures Woolf's 'consciousness of what I call 'reality'. . . But who knows – once one takes a pen and writes? How difficult not to go on making 'reality' this & that, whereas it is one thing.'²⁹ Lily gestures, for painter, for writer, for the artist – and, thereby, for the human subject as maker of *relationships* – the ever deepening relationship between the questing visionary and her distant object: that is, reality experienced relationally, as life irreducible.

Lily's inability to traverse the distance between herself and her object, shapes, hollows out, that negative space which the divorcing logic of subject-object relations (characterising the logical, language-bearing consciousness) cannot bear. Lily's way of seeing and knowing is detested by the logician, Mr Ramsay, who mutters, crushingly, 'women can't write, women can't paint.' But the possibility for overcoming the estrangement between the subject and her object, in response to her desire for communion (as opposed to possession), is glimpsed in Lily's intuition that the consummative vision lies beyond language, beyond 'inscriptions on tablets.' Lily's aesthetic imagining of relationship with the world, and her opposition to Mr Ramsay in this, recalls Grace Jantzen's appeal to the mystical way of knowing as declaring the inadequacy of post-Enlightenment epistemological models.³⁰ Lily's vision of relationship with her object exists apart from that which can be written, or named, because language, where once it gave order and proportion, in its *negative* moment, splinters, distorts, fractures vision, alienating the subject from her object. There rises here, again, a paradox characteristic of Woolf's aesthetic: the impulse to creative expression, which promises order and structure for the observed, is a self-subverting movement, for this attempted expression is the very 'making many' of that reality which, being 'one thing', was first intuited as such.

The Formless Heart

Her heart leapt at her and seized her and tortured her. 'Mrs Ramsay! Mrs Ramsay!' she cried, feeling the old horror come back – to want and want and not to have. Could she inflict that still?³¹

An aesthetic response to this mystical landscape of everyday consciousness is evident in *To The Lighthouse*. Lily's painting of Mrs Ramsay embodies her recognition that far subtler techniques than the fashionable, representational methods of her contemporary painters (and philosophers) are required to capture the shape of the real. In a mood of abstraction, Lily's work begins a carefully deliberated, though highly constrained, organisation of tones and shapes attempting to 'relate the masses' of her canvas. Relation and relationship matter most: Lily recognises, as essential to her situation as subject, as point of consciousness, not the three dimensional appearance of perceived objects, but rather the enormous compositional forces constructive and destructive of life itself, within which she includes, and explores, intuitions to unity and disunity, to love and despair. She reveals the plane of everyday experience as an aesthetic landscape (Murdoch: every person is an artist). As the novel progresses, Lily resolves to 'avoid that awkward space',³² that central void which makes of art, of the cataphatic, a set of 'curves and arabesques flourishing round a centre of complete emptiness.'³³ She attempts to deal with this central emptiness aesthetically by placing an object in the middle of her canvas.

Lily finds this absent central space awkward because, while she cannot frame it, it nevertheless constitutes the most honest aspect of her abstract depiction of reality: particularly insofar as it painfully states the limitations of attempted expression, while initiating her progress towards that final transcendence of vision, beyond the 'line', which will capture Woolf's own abstract aesthetic in its depiction of the 'burning', 'crepuscular' 'heart' on a near invisible, weightless scaffolding. Correspondingly, as Lily's creative consciousness evolves throughout the novel, we perceive not the confident accumulation of representational images upon her canvas, but, on the contrary, a brush held tremulously above vacant space, terrified to make a mark for the commitment this entails, particularly given the threat of instantaneous dissolution, of both vision and representational power, at the moment of attempt. It is clear, throughout the novel, that for all Lily's attention to her canvas (the cataphatic power of her art) her vision exists elsewhere: in the formlessness which sources inspiration, conveying a priority and transcendence of vision to which her constant interior struggle over just how to communicate this vision testifies. A crucial dynamic operates here. The artist attempts (as Woolf's diaries note) to unify, through her art, the world, according to the cataphatic properties of her art. But the expressive potential of this art constantly dissolves before an irreducible intuition of relational unity, an integral pattern which shapes a world

lying 'less "behind" than "in front of" the text',³⁴ defining the essence of life: the light, again, which shows through, but is *itself* uncapturable.

The artist's encounter with reality occurs not only *on* and *through* canvas and paper, but also in the passionate intellectual and intuitional struggles which, not being exhaustively rendered, shape a contemplative mode of vision. Life, again, comes to the artist: the world lies 'in front of' the text.³⁵ Lily, in common with characteristically mystical instincts, is constantly attempting to purify, to refine, this mode of vision, and dares to suggest its name is love.

The empty space occupying the centre of Lily's canvas gestures wordlessly, formlessly, to a positive beyondness: to her vision, which is simultaneously darkness, in its wordlessness, formlessness. To this vision, the final line of Lily's abstract painting, suspended weightlessly on a wash of greens and blues, can gesture, but not grasp: can, with Wittgenstein, perhaps show, but never say.³⁶ The painting of the line, abstractly representative of the lighthouse, exercises a formal purpose in evoking the compositional unity of perspectives attempted by both Lily, and Woolf, in and through the novel. While Woolf's novel unifies the many lighthouses occupying, successively, the perceptual field of each character, Lily's desire to capture Mrs Ramsay in paint culminates appropriately in the marking of a line, the lighthouse's abstract shape, in a move which unites her with her object (recalling that Mrs Ramsay had, earlier in the novel, experienced a becoming one with the lighthouse beams: it was, she said, in that line reminiscent of traditional depictions of mystical contemplation, 'like her own eyes meeting her own eyes.') But the formlessness of the lighthouse, and the simplicity of Lily's corresponding stroke, identifies that quality of vision which James had sensed when he realised that 'the vision from the mainland was just as much the lighthouse,' as the object out at sea.³⁷

Lily's line is a cataphatic gesture integrating an apophatic dimension, the quality of vision which transcends the power to say. The apophatic dimension of her aesthetic gestures beyond, yet is launched from within, the effort of expressive affirmation:

She looked at her picture . . . nothing stays; all changes; but not words, not paint . . . One might say, *even of this scrawl, not of that actual picture, perhaps, but of what it attempted*, that it 'remained for ever', she was going to say, or – for the words spoken sounded even to herself too boastful – to hint, wordlessly; . . .³⁸

Recall Murdoch's quotation of Wittgenstein's reflections on Heidegger: 'Man feels the urge to run up against the limits of language . . . the

inclination, the running up against something, *indicates something*.³⁹ It is, to return to Lily's language, 'what is attempted' in the picturing that "remained for ever", she was going to say. '*She was going to say*': even the pronouncement of the gesture's remaining must be dissolved, cannot finally be asserted.

An important tension emerges here. While 'all changes', 'words' and 'paint' stay firm: yet it is not their material permanence, but what they 'attempt', which might endure (though we cannot assert (describe) it). Language, expression, *cannot* and yet *must* fail for the achievement of vision. It must both successfully attempt and yet fall short of deliverance. Such are the mystical dialectics surrounding an aesthetic vision which, as Dionysius writes, 'falls neither within the predicate of non-being nor of being . . . There is no speaking of it, nor name nor knowledge of it.'⁴⁰ The affirmative, cataphatic mode of finite linguistics, in delineating its own limitations, thereby indicates that in respect of which it is deficient. And yet, for Woolf, what lie beyond capture, as the constant goal of her aesthetic practice, are not the skeletal structures or logical formulae of a Leslie Stephen, a Mr Ramsay, a Bertrand Russell or a Charles Tansley: but the elusive, burning, irreducible essence of life which is formlessly present to the artist, at the threshold of her powers, as a brilliant darkness. As Mark Hussey writes:

The elements of Woolf's faith are these: that life is surrounded by a halo of beauty, a *nameless* quality inhering in the actual, but not actual and so free of the constraints and decadence of space and time; all beings are afloat on this 'sea' of beauty. For the most part all people are impervious to beauty, but sometimes it is glimpsed – as manifest in the novel by the sense of unity . . .⁴¹

The aesthetic conviction rising here is strongly reminiscent of the shape of Dionysius' observation that '[the] highest of the things perceived with the eye of the body or the mind are but the rationale which presupposes all that lies below the Transcendent One.' And yet, "Through them" its 'unimaginable presence' is shown.⁴²

With equal awareness of the necessary, though limited, cataphatic threshold of approach to the real, Woolf describes Lily's response when called to explain her abstract formalistic method to William Banks:

She could not show him what she wished to make of it, could not see it even herself, *without a brush in her hand* . . . becoming once more – under the power of that vision which she had seen clearly once and must now grope for . . . – her picture.⁴³

Such an aesthetic suggests an amassing of signs which captures nothing *completely* (pointing to the transcendence of vision) but is capable of *gesturing* much: for 'the voyage to the lighthouse necessarily lies . . . over the waves.'⁴⁴ Dionysius explains, 'the more we take flight upward, the more our words are confined to the ideas we are capable of forming; so that now as we plunge into that darkness which is beyond intellect, we shall find ourselves not simply running short of words but actually speechless and unknowing.'⁴⁵ But for Woolf, as for Dionysius, language, just because it is limited in its capacity to express experience, shows itself (as the cataphatic declares the apophatic) to be not exhaustive of *reality*: its limits are not the limits of the real. The emptiness of Jacob's Room gives way to Lily's line – a symbol which, itself empty, points beyond itself to presence, to a positive construal of the negative moment of expression. This negativity is most powerfully conveyed in Woolf's final novel, soon to be considered.

The final passages of *To The Lighthouse* reveal the location of real vision in this novel. Despite Lily's painting her line, and her accompanying proclamation 'I have had my vision',⁴⁶ we feel that this final brushstroke has not captured all that Lily has 'seen'. Years after Mrs Ramsay's death (and here we are closest to Woolf's own aesthetic and visionary predicament), Lily's desire to see her beloved object must occur independently of her object's physical appearance, composed with the assistance of the recollective powers of memory. Depressed beneath the absence of vision, standing perplexed before the empty steps where once Mrs Ramsay sat, Lily despairs:

'About life, about death; about Mrs. Ramsay' – no, she thought, one could say nothing to nobody. The urgency of the moment always missed its mark. Words fluttered sideways and struck the object inches too low . . . how could one express in words these emotions of the body? express that emptiness there? (She was looking at the drawing-room steps; they looked extraordinarily empty.)⁴⁷

The vision for which she struggles, Lily tells us, exists apart from the 'Little words that broke up the thought and dismembered it [and] said nothing'.⁴⁸ Moreover, for all her efforts, she is powerless to invoke the vision she urgently seeks. It will come spontaneously, emerging with that same suddenness, given-ness and inexplicability which Woolf accredits to creative inspiration: indeed, to life itself. The vision cannot, no more than life, be grasped possessively, or be demanded into presence for the scrutiny of the viewer. And yet, in spite of the failure of paint and words

to provoke and deliver vision, the vision itself remains, simultaneously present and absent, the source of the artist's untiring inspiration for creative endeavour. This is the tension. In a moment of reconciliation with emptiness, Lily suddenly, and hopefully, resolves:

It was all in keeping with this silence, this emptiness . . . Life was most vivid then.⁴⁹

One need not speak at all . . . Empty it was not, but full to the brim . . . these waters were unfathomably deep.⁵⁰

This sense of the all-encompassing liquidity of consciousness leaves something experienced which is not spoken, as 'so many lives' 'spill' into this mysterious space.⁵¹ We sense that 'light' which 'shines through' individual lives to make them 'somehow successive and continuous', the light which is the essence of reality upon which we are 'afloat'.⁵² As Lily takes up her brush,⁵³ we find the canvas trembling evanescently, a thin veil to an inexhaustible quality of life. Mrs Ramsay, the object of Lily's love, suddenly appears on the drawing room steps as an apparently accidental reorganisation of light and shadow evokes the shape of her essence. In *this* moment Lily has had her vision. With her final brush-stroke, she betokens that form of compositional unity, the relatedness of all to the centre, which expresses her broader aesthetic and metaphysical efforts to unify several perspectives on reality: such is the scope of Woolf's own aesthetic vision. But her claim 'I have had my vision' is more immediately responsive to the sudden appearance of Mrs Ramsay, her beloved object, than to the final brush-stroke which feels like a repercussive reflection of it. Lily's vision remains within the love she has felt for Mrs Ramsay, love which belongs to life, immediate and escaping.

Given the striking similarities revealed here between the apophatic dimension of mystical experience and expression, and the aesthetic insights conveyed in *To The Lighthouse*, it is ironic that Mark Hussey, renouncing the possibility of mystical or religious resonances in Woolf's literature, defines as characteristic of her work a distinctly 'nameless' quality. Orlando,

in a moment of faintness . . . shuts off the visible, and 'in that moment's darkness . . . was relieved of the pressure of the present. There was something strange in the shadow that the flicker of her eyes cast, something which (as anyone can test for himself by *looking now at the sky*) is always *absent from the present* – whence its terror, its nondescript character – something one trembles to pin through the body with a name and call

beauty, for it has no body, is as a shadow without substance or quality of its own, yet has the power to change whatever it adds itself to.⁵⁴

'Here,' Hussey comments, 'we have the familiar contours of that paradigmatic experience of Woolf's fiction: this abstract, insubstantial 'shadow' (or *beauty*, or 'reality') is nameless; it is a quality absent from the present like that apprehended in the sky . . . in which the soul finds *rest*; it is a transcendence of the passage of time':

Throughout the oeuvre a state of rhythmic rest gives rise to the psychic perception of pattern: Clarissa sewing, Mrs. Ramsay knitting, Lily painting, Lucy Swithin 'one-making' – these women perceive a pattern behind daily life, a harmony that contrasts with male methodolatry, theorizing, and system-making. Rhythm, rest, and loss of identity, silence, darkness, and namelessness are the common features of this primary experience in the fiction and are common to 'self-awareness' and apprehension of 'reality.'⁵⁵

Contrary to Hussey's assessment, the 'common features of this primary experience' point *towards*, not away from, the literatures of religious mysticism. But they do not do so in the way he *would* allow, that is, in characterising a response to 'the apprehension of the numinous' through the making of 'efforts to overcome life in time.'⁵⁶ For Hussey, 'the actual objects of the visible world' remind Woolf's characters of 'the present', so that 'a tension is introduced between the actual and the transcendent world of beauty': a tension 'necessary if mysticism is to be avoided.'⁵⁷ Not only does Hussey's opposition of 'the actual and the transcendent' threaten to subvert the nature of transcendence in its positing of the latter as a separate realm: but his assumption that the experience of this tension – particularly the attention paid to the objects of the visible world – thwarts the essence of a (particularly religious) mysticism is incorrect (as discussed, with Murdoch, in Chapter Five). Precisely the incarnational logic of a cataphatic-apophatic relationship defines the iconic potential of the created world: allowing art to gesture in the first place.

Woolf's aesthetic attends to a brilliant darkness, not to darkness alone. Far from intuiting an all-encompassing nihilistic arrest, Woolf's writing 'participates in what also eludes her': the threshold of reality is a fertile, if overwhelming, ground of creativity and revelation. Two years after publishing *To The Lighthouse*, she is still endeavouring to reach the vision which resides beyond and through emptiness: 'If I could catch the feeling, I would; the feeling of the singing of the real world, as one

is driven by loneliness & silence from the habitable world . . . But I have not really laid hands on the emptiness after all.⁵⁸

‘Between the Acts’

She must try to get hold of something that evaded her. It evaded her when she thought of Mrs Ramsay; it evaded her now when she thought of her picture. Phrases came. Visions came. Beautiful phrases. But what she wished to get hold of was that very jar on the nerves, the thing itself before it has been made anything. Get that and start afresh; get that and start afresh, she said desperately . . .

Virginia Woolf, *To The Lighthouse*⁵⁹

Reality, which is one thing in *The Waves*, is this and that, as well as one thing, in *Between the Acts*.

Carl Woodring, ‘Virginia Woolf’⁶⁰

In her final novel *Between the Acts* (published posthumously in 1941) Woolf portrays the artist’s experience of expressive failure, as the central character and playwright Miss La Trobe directs, then despairs of, an unsuccessful play. The play’s lack of success consists in its failure, as Miss La Trobe observes, to convey, to the audience, her purpose. They simply do not grasp her point.

Set within twenty four hours in June 1939, Woolf’s final novel creates something:

random & tentative; something I can blow of a morning . . . why not Poyntzet Hall; a centre: all lit[erature]. discussed in connection with real little incongruous living humour; & anything that comes into my head; but ‘I’ rejected: ‘We’ substituted: to whom at the end shall there be an invocation? ‘We’. . . composed of many different things . . . we all life, all art, all waifs & strays – a rambling capricious but somehow unified whole – the present state of my mind?⁶¹

As Julia Briggs comments in her 2005 biography, Eleanor Pargiter’s (*The Years*) ‘vision of peace and continuity on the threshold of disruption would provide the seed for Woolf’s final novel.’⁶² Moreover, ‘The pageant expresses the need to forge a relationship with the past and its narratives, yet the impossibility of doing so at a moment of national crisis, when the familiar is giving way to the unknown.’⁶³ But the *political*

tensions between the novel's 'separatists' and 'unifier[s]' (where, once again, as 'hostess or artist', 'a woman may harmonize society and heal its divisions',)⁶⁴ represent corresponding *aesthetic* tensions: between 'a sense of design apparent in human life . . . contrasted with the distance and alienation of the natural world';⁶⁵ between the 'seductive' and 'inhibiting' qualities of ancient England's 'ancestral voices';⁶⁶ between 'the perfection of the alabaster vase and the fecund mud of the lily pool'⁶⁷ which are both embraced in the nature of creativity.

The title 'Between the Acts' simultaneously suggests the time between the wars (the setting of the novel), the phases between creative acts (we are shown, directly, the moments between performance), while also provoking a more general question about what the 'act' consists in: whether the moments 'between the acts' identify the 'real' life assumed to be beyond the performance (the world of the audience), or whether, on the contrary, it is art which lies 'between the acts', the act itself being that of life lived, the 'real' performance taking place 'off-stage.'⁶⁸ La Trobe's final turning of mirrors on the audience, making them 'confront themselves by holding in front of them a wilderness of mirrors and reflective surfaces which throw back disconnected images of themselves,' certainly suggests this interpretation.⁶⁹

The latter ambiguity maintains the tension we observe throughout this study as occupying the heart of Woolf's aesthetic perspective on life: the simultaneity of the sense, first, that art perfects life, by ordering, with the sense, second, that life gives shape to art. The effect, or symptom, of this central, cyclical ambiguity, is the interaction of a cataphatic and apophatic dimension at the heart of her aesthetic. The mysterious origin of the artist's vision of a unifying and patterning light, lying behind yet infusing appearances, is shifted – constantly effaced – by a contending moment of negativity, yet one which is the breaking of language and expression before the strength of that vision again. Murdoch describes the formal pressure exhibited in Sartre's work: 'The referential nature of language almost gives way under the pressure of the flood of undiscriminated 'reality' demanding expression.'⁷⁰

Woolf's final novel conveys this mystical aesthetic landscape. The playwright's creative anxieties invite the reader beyond occupation with the concrete events of successful artistic expression, towards an exploration of the painful moments falling *between* them: the formless world glimpsed between expressive stages, ultimately the object of aesthetic vision and intention. La Trobe's play, the focus of a village pageant held on a summer afternoon, attempts to give 'a rapid, comic dash' through English literature, politics and social culture 'which replaces earlier

evocations of Englishness . . .⁷¹ Several villagers take parts in the play, while others comprise the audience. But the audience does not understand, as mirrors are turned on them, what the playwright, conveying the shape of Woolf's own literary experiment, is trying to say. La Trobe wishes to convey to them their continuity with, their own participative place within, history, and the juxtaposition of this sense of communal identity with the dispersal – literal, political, social – now ominously arrived. Indeed, the local priest's attempt to 'sum-up' the play's meaning as 'a plea for unity' is 'drowned out by the zoom and drone of twelve aeroplanes flying in formation overhead', signals of war, of humanity's conflict with humanity ('bad unity' is contested by life).⁷² The gramophone's intermittent chanting '*Unity – Dispersity*'⁷³ captures the essence of La Trobe's message.

Following the failure of her play, however, La Trobe's reflections take a decidedly positive turn. The artist, exhausted and disappointed, sits in the local tavern:

She raised her glass to her lips. And drank. And listened. Words of one syllable sank down into the mud. She drowsed; she nodded. The mud became fertile. Words rose above the intolerably laden dumb oxen plodding through the mud. Words without meaning – wonderful words . . . Suddenly the tree was pelted with starlings. She heard the first words.⁷⁴

This rich passage unites several key impulses of the novel. Julia Briggs recognises in an earlier draft the narrator's search for 'a name, an identity for whatever presence inhabits empty rooms, whatever presence

Perceives pictures, knife and fork, also men and women; and describes them; and not only perceives but partakes of them, and has access to the mind in its darkness. And further goes from mind to mind and surface to surface, and from body to body creating what is not mind or body, not surface or depths, but a common element in which the perishable is preserved, and the separate become one. Does it not by this means create immortality?⁷⁵

As Briggs remarks, 'this presence, 'this greatest of all preservers and creators', inhabits all life, conferring immortality upon it, yet it has 'no name but novelist, or poet, or sculptor, or musician.' Unseen, unnamed, memorializing and unifying, this presence,' Briggs continues, 'seems to anticipate Woolf's account of her philosophy in 'A Sketch of the Past' (composed a year or so later), where she wrote, 'there is no Shakespeare,

there is no Beethoven; certainly and emphatically there is no God; we are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself'.⁷⁶ Briggs comments that 'this moment of mystic affirmation,' however, is excised from the later typescript of 'Pointz Hall': in its place stands the room 'Empty, empty, empty; silent, silent, silent. A shell singing of what was before time was; a vase stood in the very heart of the house, alabaster, smooth, cold, holding the still, distilled essence of emptiness, silence.'⁷⁷ For Briggs, as for Banfield, the mystical continues to define the sense of everything's belonging together in an unbroken and comforting unity. By contrast, it is the tension, inherent to Woolf's thought, between the unifying and fracturing of vision, which is faithful to the dialectical interplay of the apophatic and cataphatic dimensions of mystical experience and language.

To return to Pointz Hall. The alabaster vase, as 'cenotaph' and 'funeral urn', both 'a symbol of artistic creation', 'yet memorializing a life that has ended',⁷⁸ is reminiscent of Mr Ramsay's standing 'very upright by the urn.' But this image of a lost past and empty epitaph strikingly contrasts the (aptly named) lily pond whose mud 'resembles the accumulating layers of memory, and like the primal sludge . . . new life will rise from it.'⁷⁹ This is the mud which, becoming 'fertile', brings to La Trobe's imagination 'the first words.' The consequence is an end, to the novel, which is an *opening*: for

The window was all sky without colour. The house had lost its shelter. It was night before roads were made, or houses. It was the night that dwellers in caves had watched from some high place among rocks.

Then the curtain rose. They spoke.⁸⁰

After the event of the novel, the whole is revealed as but a prelude: a prelude to life itself. For the return, through ancient memory, to a genesis of creativity in the present, gives, in Woolf's final work, the ceaselessness of life's surging, and the insatiability of inspiration, as the last word.⁸¹ Life itself rescues the playwright in her despair: where at one point the cows, together, make their ancient sound, at several others 'birds sang': when 'suddenly the starlings attacked the tree behind which she had hidden',⁸² they make what Briggs describes as 'Woolf's vision of a world singing to itself before the arrival of people, her idea of an ancient and primitive music,' which 'often included a singer, and an *incomprehensible but moving language*'.⁸³ While Briggs attributes this singing to Mrs Manresa, it can be attributed, more essentially, to those birds which 'pelted' the tree

like so many winged stones. The whole tree hummed with the whiz they made, as if each bird plucked a wire. A whiz, a buzz rose from the bird-buzzing, bird-vibrant, bird-blackened tree. The tree became a rhapsody, a quivering cacophony, a whiz and vibrant rapture, branches syllabing discordantly life, life, life, without measure, without stop devouring the tree. Then up! Then off!⁸⁴

This nerve-jerking sound, which fuses Bernard's 'little language' with Lily Briscoe's striving beyond 'inscriptions of tablets', is an apophatic moment in itself, as, before the vision of life's breaking through the despair of failed expression, all language collapses in order for the primitive cry of a 'vibrant rapture' to surge. The intrusion of life into the vista of the present, here given in the form of interruption by the natural world, requires 'the elimination of the "I"':⁸⁵ but 'the model of impersonality' does not take the naïve form of 'a mystical merging of self and world.'⁸⁶ Rather, it reveals, as characteristic of apophaticism, of a subtle mysticism, 'such protests', 'so many signs of the real', as interrupt any easy flow towards the creation of a cohesive unity.⁸⁷

In *Between the Acts*, the *suddenness* of cows mooing to interrupt the dreadful silence, the shock of songbirds hitting the tree, rescues the artist as the failing artwork crumbles. This affirmation of life's presence as ceaselessly returning from beyond a dissolving language, its arrival in the primitive sounds of yearning and song which rise from beneath the cracked surface of artistic scripture, declares, with Dionysius, 'the putting away of every image and concept, even the most exalted,' before the source of life.⁸⁸ We hear Lily's appeal, again, to that knowledge beyond 'inscriptions on tablets', and Bernard's 'little language', 'such as lovers use'. As Giles and Isa, at the close of the novel, becoming the two primeval figures, *speak*, Woolf foregrounds that which is constant for all the conflict of the afternoon: the fertility of the primitive mud from which human beings are cast, the ceaseless efforts at utterance that are made despite the inadequacy of language. Art tends towards the inexpressible which is essential, towards guttural yearning groans, and bird-trilling ecstasies. In these irrepressible breakthroughs of sound, Woolf gives, in suddenness, 'the timeless moment of intersection between eternity and time,' echoing a Dionysian motif inherited from the Platonic tradition.⁸⁹ Where 'the Forms and the phenomenal world meet,'⁹⁰ Woolf brings 'what I might call a philosophy . . . that behind the cotton wool is hidden a pattern,' 'that we are parts of the work of art,'⁹¹ into relationship with the conflicts and interruptions of daily living. The dynamic is not one of simple resolution, but continuous tension. As Iris Murdoch

reflects on the work of Sartre, 'Consciousness is rupture, it is able to spring out of unreflective thing-like conditions – but it is also *projet*, it aspires towards a wholeness which forever haunts its partial state.'⁹²

Within Woolf's aesthetic, the apophatic is characterised, as for Dionysian mysticism, by the collapse of the power and accuracy of comprehension and linguistic expression before a transcending vision: moreover, a transcending vision which fractures language and the creative effort in virtue of the immanence of its manifestation. Similarly, while Woolf partly envisages this unknown force as consisting, *immanently*, in the overwhelming presence of the ultimate dissolution, death (against which the compositional forces of art strain), her art also collapses before, but gives way to (as at the end of *Between the Acts*) the openness which is life ceaselessly arriving, the pattern never settling: it is little daily trivial occurrences, the interruption of 'life', of 'hairdressers and the like',⁹³ of door-bells and telephones ringing, of people coming unexpectedly for tea. This apophaticism is *enabling*. Woolf describes the new modernism as 'the bringing together from chaos and disorder of the parts that are necessary to the whole,' so that 'when at last the apple, the kitchen table, and the bread-knife have come together, it is felt to be a victory for the human spirit over matter.'⁹⁴ Woolf, never resting in naïve, comforting unity, is always being brought 'to the surface'.⁹⁵ Hers is a mysticism sourced in the ceaseless arrival of the everyday.

Revelation and the 'Saturated Phenomenon'

A remarkable affiliation emerges between this perspective and the theory of 'saturated phenomena' described by Jean-Luc Marion in his Introduction to *Mystics: Presence and Aporia* (2003).⁹⁶ Marion presents the saturated phenomenon in contrast to the object of post-Enlightenment epistemology, whereby, according to the latter, 'no phenomenon can be given to knowing, or be admitted into the limited fields of knowledge, if it does not accept being made into an object . . . if it does not assume as its own the conditions of phenomenality that the limits of our mind assign to it in advance.'⁹⁷ The saturated phenomenon, by contrast, is that phenomenon 'characterized by the uncontrollable excess of intuition' within it:⁹⁸ it 'bedazzles the gaze' because 'its intensity does not recognize any limit based on an absolute maximum that finite vision could not tolerate.'⁹⁹

Thwarting the habitual efforts of the individual to categorise and control her experience, the saturated phenomenon inspires and occupies

that tension, characteristic of Woolf's aesthetic, between life or art as ultimately structuring reality: for there is 'such an experience that we have to explain what we see. And the more we see, the more we have to explain.'¹⁰⁰ The saturated phenomenon is mediated through the embodiment of the individual, 'giving us an uninterrupted intuition, which is so rich and so overwhelming that we need new words – literature and poetry,' to attempt to make sense of it.¹⁰¹ It is also the work of art; the constant reinterpretation of historical events; the face of the other; the gratuitous interruption, of further presence, in everyday consciousness. It is, using Woolf's language, life at 'the surface', 'hairdressers and the like', bird-song, cows mooing, the world singing itself, the fertility of ceaseless inspiration. There is also discernable here the experiential infinitude described by Iris Murdoch when she writes, alluding to Plato's allegory, that 'We, inside the cave, are intuitively aware of many things whose presence and proximity we may 'feel', but which we cannot, or cannot yet, fully explain or inspect. Our sense of the presence of a vast extra-linguistic reality may be said (in the spirit of the myth) to be one such thing, as is our sense of history and of unrealised moral possibilities.'¹⁰² In opposition to the post-Enlightenment philosophical picture of the isolated rational agent who gazes on the world as on an alien object to be manipulated and controlled, a finite (if extensive) reality that is available for exhaustive comprehension, we are returned to a view of the person as situated in the midst of a reality which 'ceaselessly arrives': that comes to us as gift, and overwhelms. We become ecstatic selves.

For Marion, the Revelation, the *mysterion* par excellence, is itself a saturated phenomenon: is, indeed, a combination of the four saturated phenomena, and defines mystical experience.¹⁰³ But particularly interesting, in the context of this study, is the fact that these four saturated phenomena, while themselves 'non-religious types of phenomena,' compose a structure that, although itself 'not uniquely religious,'¹⁰⁴ nevertheless partakes in the nature of the authentically mystical insofar as the phenomena 'give themselves beyond our ability to receive,'¹⁰⁵ (Recall Murdoch's 'problems about grace': 'Art and high thought and difficult moral discernment appear as creation *ex nihilo*, as *grace*').¹⁰⁶ In their combination Marion identifies the mystical aesthetic shaping everyday experience: in the inexhaustible content of the painting, as saturated phenomenon, a quality Woolf identifies in the suddenly breaking-through bird-song; in an essential imaginative fertility, marking the presence of transcending vision in one's experience of the world; and in the inexhaustible potential to reinterpret the historical event, a possibility

with which Woolf became increasingly engaged towards the close of her career. On the horizon of daily experience, 'transcendence [*apophasis*] and immanence [*kataphasis*] [are] joined.'¹⁰⁷ In her genuinely mystical moment, the mystical is for Woolf, as for Dionysian tradition, anything other than the naïve unity conceived by an objectifying empiricism. Now, the inability to 'comprehend, see or think God can be taken seriously as a positive experience. We can be confronted to something completely outside of our reach and nevertheless present as such, as absent.'¹⁰⁸ To bathe in the revelation of saturated phenomena is to participate in the transcendent. Marion responds to Murdoch's call to philosophy, to 'invent a terminology which shows how our natural psychology can be altered by conceptions which lie beyond its range.' Such language, such terminology, is required to prevent 'a scientifically minded empiricism' from 'swallow[ing] up' the subject and her world.¹⁰⁹

The aesthetic of openness with which Woolf responds to the inspirational interruptions of life before the work of art, makes a positive metaphysical statement on behalf of the apophatic. Woolf's 'vision of a world singing to itself before the arrival of people, her idea of an ancient and primitive music,' which includes 'an incomprehensible but moving language,'¹¹⁰ recurs throughout her literature: as the empty room, 'a shell singing of what was before time was,'¹¹¹ as the 'singing of the real world.'¹¹² But *that* the world sings *in itself* insists upon the beauty and value, in and for itself, of that world, of the corporeal, of the immanent. The 'incomprehensible language', which Lily, Bernard and La Trobe all seek, rises from the fertile 'mud' of creative genesis, is uttered in 'the first words', just as the ecstasy of Woolf's childhood experience at St Ives recurs, throughout her creative life, to make a narrative of each ecstatic revelation and responding artistic effort.¹¹³ This 'incomprehensible language' of nursery rhymes, discordant syllables, silent singing, which sears through the artist's efforts at wholeness, speaks of *what* breaks through, of that life which transcends, but transcends on the level of the plane of vision, declaring itself in apophatic moments of fractured language and expression. Just as Isa's and Giles' reconciling embrace can bring new life, so 'the world where nothing is concluded'¹¹⁴ trembles as much on the possibility of hope as despair.

In *this* way, the escaping moments of Woolf's vision are positive in spite of their informingly negative effect on art and language. Woolf's artist's vision is, finally, 'a vision composed of fragments, yet ultimately achieving a strange, contingent unity – contingent on the very having occurredness of these moments . . .'¹¹⁵ Interrupting her constructive aesthetic is an apophatic openness which embraces the life arriving

ceaselessly from beyond the energies of the pen. This life is the brilliance of the formless heart of darkness. In the immediacy of life simply lived, transcendence is present in immanence:

I had a tremendous sense of life beginning; mixed with that emotion, which is the essence of my feeling, but escapes description . . .¹¹⁶

The artist's effort of vision and mediation is partly constructive of vision (Lily cannot see 'without a brush in her hand'), but, simultaneously, it is what art attempts that eventually remains, placing the vision cataphatically within the one-making activity of art, but simultaneously beyond the capacity of the medium in an apophatic gesture to that more-ness which constantly interrupts the artist. This simultaneity, this inability to locate exhaustively artistic purpose and achievement within either the cataphatic or apophatic dimensions of the aesthetic, is the enactment of that visionary logic on account of which the mystics call this discovery a 'brilliant darkness'. For, resisting artificial resolution by suggesting the primacy of either state, both Woolf and Dionysius illustrate the interdependency of the cataphatic and apophatic realms of discourse as signalling two simultaneously present dimensions of one approach to reality. The un-resolving tension between conflicting intuitions of the primacy of art or life as the residence of the most real – that tension which, in its sense of the interpenetration and mutual shaping of receptive and creative moments, is most truly mystical in Woolf's work – responds to the epistemological challenge of saturated phenomena. The emerging mystical epistemology is an epistemology of vision, where the insights of perception, intellect and feeling commune to testify the iconographic status of everyday experience.

As the mystic on the apophatic threshold knows darkness as a gesture to light, knows the apophatic disintegration of language as perilous play on the boundaries of the infinite, so Woolf conveys an openness to the given-ness and inexhaustibility of life which in many ways, and rather poignantly, takes her back to those instincts with which her life's work began. For 'between the acts', between cataphatic gestures to the ineffable, it is *life itself*, life given, mysterious and endlessly inviting of communion, that holds Woolf 'suspended between life & death in an unfamiliar way.'¹¹⁷ The darkness will also show 'the light through',¹¹⁸ for

. . . I can't write, yet, Heaven help me, have a feeling that I've reached the no man's land that I'm after; & can pass from outer to inner, & inhabit eternity. A queer happy free feeling, such as I've not had at the finish of any other book . . . So what does it mean?¹¹⁹

II

The Mystical Shape of a Theological Aesthetic

If a strange shadow of the mystical God appears here, could that be because all creatures are indeed theophanies, or because the creative self-expression of God, which issues from and returns to Nothingness, is imaged perfectly in the creative self-expression of the human?

Thomas A. Carlson, *Mystics*¹²⁰

Goldie depresses me unspeakably. Always alone on a mountain top asking himself how to live, theorising about life; never living. Roger always down in the succulent valleys, living.

Virginia Woolf, 28 December 1935¹²¹

Navigating Nothingness: The Generative Power of Nothingness

That jarring interruption of 'something out of harmony with this jocundity and this serenity'. . . within the formal beauty of the whole guarantees against the phantasy that blinds itself complacently to interruptions of the real.

Ann Banfield, *The Phantom Table*¹²²

Theologians and philosophers of religion are well aware of the effect that deconstructive methods of postmodernism have enacted on notions of presence. I do not automatically say enacted on *traditional* notions of presence because, as students of mystical texts have acknowledged, within works of deconstructive thought it has been possible to 'glimpse a style of deconstruction that some of the mystics would recognize.'¹²³ In a chapter entitled 'The Experience of Nonexperience', Kevin Hart notes that when Maurice Blanchot reads Georges Bataille he does not discover 'a mode of nonexperience that hollows out experience and unsettles its claim to presence,' but rather 'finds an experience that cannot be assimilated to the human subject.'¹²⁴ Hart recognises in the ambivalences of deconstructive insights points of convergence with the epistemological and existential perspectives of traditional mystical texts.

Locating Blanchot's indebtedness to the 'French Hegel' of the thirties and forties, Hart identifies in Blanchot's 'Littérature et le droit a la mort' (1947–48), the latter's coming 'to think that literature's constitutive ambiguities have their ground and abyss in death.'¹²⁵ Not only does language, in naming, annihilate the particularity of the individual

while 'preserving its being in general as an idea,'¹²⁶ (thereby revealing 'a remarkable power of the negative . . . at work in language'), but also:

Art does not indicate a space of death, for there is no traction for the dialectic to gain a hold; nor is it a space of eternal life, for art is the realm of the imaginary where being is perpetuated as nothingness. Rather, it is a space of endless dying.¹²⁷

Woolf's conception of art's indeterminacy as both constructive and destructive of patterns of presence finds expression in Hart's description of Blanchot's position. The slippage of the work of art from behind the shape-displacing movements of life, the overwhelming of creative response by the surging waves coming ceaselessly to confront the settled image, allow neither the funereal solidity of the urn, nor Lily's vision of Mrs Ramsay, any finality. Literature so well conveys the *aesthetic* landscape of daily experience because, in the openness of its transcendental condition, it captures the impossibility (of dying) which 'does not haunt the extremes of our life but shadows each and every event in life, "as though its other dimension."¹²⁸ The individual, like her artwork, is 'suspended between life & death in an unfamiliar way.'¹²⁹

Murdoch is similarly cognisant of a special relationship between art, death and other transcendental horizons. The 'indefinability of Good is connected with the unsystematic and inexhaustible variety of the world and the pointlessness of virtue . . . there is a special link between the concept of Good and the ideas of Death and Chance.'¹³⁰ For Murdoch, as for Blanchot, something of 'literature's constitutive ambiguities have their ground and abyss in death,'¹³¹ but not so much because language annihilates the particularity of the individual (the nauseating word-object divorce Murdoch objects to in *Sartre*), but because great literature, great art, conveys the strange simultaneity of pointlessness and virtue.

Returning to Woolf, where a theology, cognisant of the experiential insights of literature, 'far from answering to a transcendent deity' rather 'broods on a quasi-transcendentality to which all writing exposes itself,' the mystical desire to know what one does not know is 'generated by the quest for what writing destroys.'¹³² (Murdoch quotes Wittgenstein: 'This "urge to run up against the limits of language," this "inclination, the running up against something, *indicates something*.'¹³³ Here, 'the experience of nonexperience' is identified as belonging to the mystical encounter, whereby experience of God does not isolate 'a particular kind of experience,' but 'experience is constituted as an aporia' which, as Derrida records, 'is a negative form: it upsets all positive programs and therefore offers no security of consolation of knowledge.'¹³⁴ Here, the ceaseless

interplay of apophatic and cataphatic aspects, which marks the mystical ambivalence of daily experience, is locatable in the ambiguous status of the text or work of art. But then, perhaps, 'in terms of textual effects it little matters whether one is responding to the transcendent or the transcendental'. Indeed, the failure of theologians, and particularly literary critics, to consider this point, might, as Hart suggests, explain why literary critics tend to find theological writing on the mystics distinctly naive.¹³⁵

Critical considerations of Woolf's vision as ultimately nihilistic paradoxically make emptiness ultimate, interpreting, as resting-place, the artist's inability to derive a steady shape for life (her inability to construe meaningful relationship between the individual and her world). The incommunicability of subjective experience, and the radical inaccessibility of the other, brings the subject to confront a desperate darkness. The metaphysical accompaniment to this existential and phenomenological trauma is the dispersal of any sense of ontological grounding on the precipice of a void. In *Between the Acts* the central female character, Isa, conveys this perspective:

'Where do I wander?' she mused. 'Down what draughty tunnels? Where the eyeless wind blows? And there grows nothing for the eye. No rose. To issue where? In some harvestless dim field where no evening lets fall her mantle; nor sun rises. All's equal there. Unblowing, ungrowing are the roses there. Change is not; nor the mutable and loveable; nor greetings nor partings; nor furtive findings and feelings, where hand seeks hand and eye seeks shelter from the eye.'¹³⁶

But this is only one mood, and, conflicting with a sense that nihilism is ultimate for, or exhaustive of, Woolf's aesthetic vision, is her exploration of her own simultaneously unifying and fracturing artistic activity as encountering the limitations of expression before a transcending vision of life's ceaseless arrival. The constitutive energies of life, surpass, and are not restricted by, the epistemological parameters of subjective certainty. Here is Woolf's aesthetic of openness, reflective of an essential quality of human experience: that which is conveyed, in her literature, through an apophatic disclosure. This aesthetic of openness, the shaping of darkness to render a curious, persistent light, is the expressive outworking of Woolf's theoretical struggle to interpret the interpenetrating, and inexhaustible, dialectics of art and life, the energy of this dialectic being sourced in the refusal of both life and art to reveal themselves as the origin of that intuition to unity, to the creation of form, which inspires the artist in the first place, and makes it the case that

'For Miss La Trobe, as for her author, 'another play always lay behind the play she had just written' – the next invention reaches out for whatever the last one has failed to say.'¹³⁷ (For Murdoch, if 'every novel was a fresh attempt to attain her ideal, she found each time that her ideal had moved on.'¹³⁸) This next invention bubbles up from a fertile and singing land, a formless nothingness the resources of which are inexhaustible, and is accompanied by an incomprehensible language, as La Trobe 'heard the first words.'¹³⁹ Here is Murdoch's 'image-making abyss', one 'both iconoclastic and fertile of new images.'¹⁴⁰

Idolatry is impossible. The icon lies open, and points. In apophatic fashion, the mode of expression disintegrates before the elusive object of vision, yet vitally informs us about the nature of that from which language has fallen short. We must recognise the nothingness that is *window* for Woolf, the shaping or framing of darkness about the lightening brilliance of life. Artistic inspiration partakes in this life, for 'everything becomes so green and vivified in me when I begin to think of *The Moths*.' As she writes on 23 June 1929, 'Well all this is of course the 'real' life; & nothingness only comes in the absence of this.'¹⁴¹

These two 'modes' of nothingness, particularly the relation of the latter to an aesthetics of openness, are relevant to Ricoeur's discussion of fictional creativity. A brief exploration of his essay 'The Function of Fiction in Shaping Reality',¹⁴² in particular its elucidation of three themes – the productive work of fiction; the dynamics of creativity operative within metaphor; and the conception of the 'icon' as the matrix of the creative 'semantic pertinence' of metaphor – assists an identification of an aesthetics of openness in its *iconographic* aspect: particularly in its fusion of cataphatic and apophatic dimensions of revelation and expression.

Negativity and Creativity: Woolf and Ricoeur

Hermeneutics – I refer here to Paul Ricoeur – is nothing else than the discovery that constitution cannot be achieved before the event of the phenomenon but has to be repeated and slowly, endlessly, repeated after the event of the phenomenon.

Jean-Luc Marion, *Mystics*¹⁴³

Discussion of the place of imagination and metaphor in our lives is not just about figurative writing, or clarified metaphorical speech or explicit virtually verbal thought, but (also) about what our private unclarified

but often very strong and present thinking and experiencing is like. At deep levels metaphor and perception merge. Perception is a mode of evaluation.

Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*¹⁴⁴

Metaphor, for Ricoeur, epitomizes the semantic openness of language. Metaphor occurs on the threshold of interpretable meaning, coming to be through the clashing of previously distinct semantic fields, bringing to birth a new relation.¹⁴⁵ The creative power of fiction, far from being exhausted in the instantiation of new organisational patterns for previously existing elements, actually constitutes the adding of *new* elements to reality: 'I shall,' Ricoeur writes, 'elaborate the crucial concept of *productive* reference as equivalent to *reality shaping*' (Ricoeur's emphasis).¹⁴⁶ The dynamics of productive reference identify the simultaneity of the reflective and creative moments which Woolf also recognises as belonging to fiction. Ricoeur's view of fiction as productive reference interprets Woolf's intuition that art and life are distinct, yet interpenetrating, forces; that they may, on account of interpenetration, make simultaneously valid claims to be source of pattern, order, and *disorder*; that some essence in life is always escaping art, while being found in the exercise of (and therefore yet within the scope of) artistic inspiration. Each of these intuitions is embraced within Ricoeur's understanding of art as productive reference, as working *with* semantic, imaginative and experiential openness to *create* further openness.

Ricoeur writes of the 'dimension of fiction' that 'If, on the one hand, the free image seems to weaken and disperse meaning into a floating reverie, then, on the other hand, the bound image introduces into the whole process an effect of neutralization, in a word, a negative moment, thanks to which the entire phenomenon of reading is placed in a dimension of unreality, the neutralized atmosphere of fiction.'¹⁴⁷ In the imaginative 'free play of possibilities', that suspension of reality which Ricoeur calls the 'epoché' of the real, 'fiction can . . . create a *redescription* of reality. But this positive function of fiction', he writes, 'of which the *epoché* is the negative condition, is understood only when the fecundity of imagination is clearly linked to that of language, as exemplified by the metaphorical process. In that case, we grasp this truth: we *see* some images only to the extent that we first *hear* them.'¹⁴⁸ To use Woolf's expression, when in search of a 'new', 'little', 'incomprehensible' language from the fertile lands of imagination, we 'hear the first words'.¹⁴⁹ The shared sense of both instances is that the power of language to disclose a new description of reality comes from beyond the formal model,

or potential, previously envisioned by the artist, appears from *beyond the page*, is given from the surplus: arrives with the saturated phenomenon. Where the image is placed in its linguistic framework, and the creative potential of language as reality-making is recognised, then language is empowered to create in virtue of its own activity, in the juxtaposition of previously discordant semantic fields which leads to new vision. Woolf's experiments with literary form, grammar, syntax, 'language', 'metaphor', 'humor', 'pattern', her 'private traps set . . . to catch life',¹⁵⁰ exercise precisely this disruption and resetting of fields of meaning and contextual expectation, with the effect of attempting to capture, ever more accurately, the 'thing before it has become anything',¹⁵¹ the 'shock',¹⁵² the 'jar on the nerves'¹⁵³ itself. Woodring comments on Woolf's awareness of the creative power of her art, which avoids imitation, to capture, instead, the vitality of the experienced object:

The novelist who conveys a meaning 'just on the far side of language' will produce what Mrs. Woolf defined for the common reader as the poetic power of Aeschylus: 'By the bold and running use of metaphor he will amplify and give us, not the thing itself, but the reverberation and reflection which, taken into his own mind, the thing has made; close enough to the original to illustrate it, remote enough to heighten, enlarge, and make splendid.'¹⁵⁴

As Marion acknowledges in his depiction of saturated phenomena and our creative encounters with them, the irreducible contents of experience, addressed by a Ricoeurian hermeneutic of ceaseless reinterpretation, can be seen to occupy the particular attention of the mystics.¹⁵⁵ Just so, Woolf's formalistic aesthetic, in its attendance to 'life, the ordinary',¹⁵⁶ will, 'to avoid the mystic phantasy that explains all,' 'need to ceaselessly rearrange the data. The pattern is only one of several possible hypothetical approximations to reality . . .'¹⁵⁷ Within the imaginative space of the novel, Woolf recognises the validity of the metaphors employed by her aesthetic as appropriate to the openness of vision. Constructing her abstract art, Lily brings William to realise that 'Mother and child then – objects of universal veneration . . . might be reduced . . . to a purple shadow without irreverence.'¹⁵⁸ Ricoeur's negative moment of imaginative opening, of unreality, achieved through the bound image of the text in virtue of its metaphorical status, and facilitating the interpretation of the transcending and inexhaustible content of experience, finds its distinctive place within the cataphatic and apophatic dialogue similarly engaged in Woolf's writing.

Woolf's literature conveys human experience of nothingness as void or *nihil* in its relationship to language's breaking up at the limits of expressible experience. The latter negative moment is only truly apophatic if standing in relation to a cataphatic moment. This is true for traditional mysticism, and true for Ricoeur insofar as his analysis of literature contexts an aesthetics of openness – that is, the responding *creativity* of fiction – within a narrative of hope and promise. Equally, for Woolf, integral to the dissolution of language is the encounter inaugurating dissolution: that quality of experience which transcends the expressed moment, that breaks through the organisation of linguistic patterning and convention – any formal arrangement, such as a novel, which attempts to rest – announcing, instead, the artist's failure, failure in the light of this generative mode of nothingness, the formless origin of form, the singing of the world before and beyond vision, 'the thing itself before it has been made anything.' The plane of vision is a place of dazzling darkness.

Icon

Words are the most subtle symbols which we possess and our human fabric depends on them. The living and radical nature of language is something which we forget at our peril.

Iris Murdoch, *The Idea of Perfection*¹⁵⁹

Exploring how fiction may refer 'in a productive way to reality, and even *increase* reality,' Ricoeur remarks that we will find that 'the 'productive' aspects of imagination will appear to be linked to some 'productive' aspects of language.'¹⁶⁰ Here, he sympathises with Woolf's sense of the potential life-*fullness* of language, of the creative properties of artistic activity which seek not just to organise, but to *emanate* the burning heart of life. Ricoeur identifies 'one example of this 'productive' state of imagination in the context of work,' as being 'that of "iconic augmentation".' 'It will appear that, in such a context, imagination is 'productive' not only of unreal objects,' he writes, 'but also of an expanded vision of reality. Imagination at work – in a work – produces itself as a world.'¹⁶¹ The icon both reflects and makes reality, grasping the logic of the interpenetration of art and life with which Woolf is confronted when attempting to identify the source of the artist's intuition of unity, of order, of a mode of aesthetic redemption. For Ricoeur, the *metaphor* perfectly resembles the logic of the icon. The icon 'is the matrix of the new semantic pertinence which is born of the collapse of the semantic kinds under the clash of contradiction . . . the icon is the

schematization of metaphorical attribution.¹⁶² Through the icon, we read the life of the image, where 'to form an image is not to have an image, in the sense of having a mental representation,' (reduced empirical sense of the thought, or object, again): 'instead, it is to read, through the icon of a relation, *the relation itself*.'¹⁶³

This reading, through the icon, of the *relation* between the components of metaphor, between the positive moment of productive representation and the negative moment of generative openness, in order to give what is newly created, recognises in the iconographic fusion of cataphatic and apophatic moments, the logic of the creative function of literature: the icon is created through an aesthetics of openness. This interpretation, which identifies the iconographic quality of Woolf's writing, resonates with central characteristics of her literary spirit: her explicit occupation with aesthetic questions; her recognition of the integration of reflective and productive dimensions as shaping the relationship between literature and reality; and, explicitly, through the form of the *Kunstlerroman*, her own examination of 'the relation itself' (to use Ricoeur's terms) between the artist and her vision, as, 'her own eyes meeting her own eyes',¹⁶⁴ the iconographic novel itself manifests 'the life of the image'. The self-effacing quality of her novels, particularly *To The Lighthouse* and *Between the Acts*, pertinently gestures the dissolution of the medium as precursor to vision. Woolf's works appear *increasingly* iconographic as we consider the apophatic dimension of her use of language and the emanation of an aesthetics of openness from her work: as we consider her desire to make of language a strongly bolted yet invisible scaffolding for a 'weightless' vision, 'as bright as fire in the mist'.¹⁶⁵ For the narrator of *The Lady in the Looking Glass*, the mirror, the work of art, is preliminary, cannot exhaustively capture: must reliably *gesture*, must direct vision. Murdoch alerts us to 'situations where what is wholly transcendent and invisible becomes partially, perhaps surprisingly, visible at points where the 'frame' does not quite 'meet'. . .'¹⁶⁶

Ricoeur identifies, as iconographic, 'the new semantic pertinence which is born of the collapse of the semantic kinds under the clash of contradiction':¹⁶⁷ Dionysius' *Mystical Theology* correspondingly offers, as language most appropriate to his object, contradicting, self-subverting images of dazzling darkness. Non-literal language is redeemed: for 'the icon is the schematization of metaphorical attribution.'¹⁶⁸ When that about which knowledge is sought cannot be caught in a static image, we must instead 'read, through the icon of a relation, *the relation itself*',¹⁶⁹ which gestures the life 'less behind than in front of' that image:¹⁷⁰ an art-form appropriate to life's ceaseless arrival.

Woolf's modernist novels constitute successive attempts to capture, in an apparently single image, in a whole, in the stillness of what she calls a 'moment of being', life. However this moment cannot be interpreted as a static picture, but as one quivering in the light shining through it by virtue of the arrangement of its own components, an arrangement making the literary canvas open to the beyond: the moment is ecstatic. The lighthouse captures this activity. From the formless centre of the apparently unified novel radiates the actuality of multiple perspectives, both revealed and concealed, trembling in the radial gravity of an apparently central solidity. The light of the self-effacing icon shines out from its multi-layered depths as the diffracted beams of a million conscious moments are, in one moment, glimpsed in *relation* as a single light: but this light glows *itself* invisibly, being the contemplated effect of finitely related moments, of layers of paint, of saturated words, of meanings bent in metaphor. *Between the Acts* is perhaps most explicitly identifiable in its iconographic role. In the impossibility of determining what lies *actually* 'between the acts' (life or art?) the frames of art are broken, and in pours life. The inter-changeability of life and art-work, of (crudely) fact and fiction, *dissolves* these naïve, false distinctions, while foregrounding the productive disclosure of life through artistic effort, which, augmenting both, creates the iconographic aesthetic. Now the work of art, possessed with the power of metaphor, may 'be referential without being tied to unrevisable description,' so that one may accommodate 'a realism which is neither dogmatic nor presumptuous.'¹⁷¹ Lily's picture can fail fruitfully before Mrs Ramsay's absence, managing what could never have been known in terms of P, Q and R.

In an essay of 1962, Ricoeur comments that 'In contrast to philosophies concerned with starting points, a meditation on symbols starts from the fullness of language and of meaning already there; it begins from within language which has already taken place and in which *everything in a certain sense has already been said*; it wants to be thought, not presuppositionless, but in and with all its presuppositions. Its first problem is not how to get started, but from the midst of speech to recollect itself.'¹⁷² We begin with the saturated phenomenon, not with our constitution of it: with what Heather Walton identifies as literature's 'scrupulous attention to experience.'¹⁷³ To begin from the place where 'everything in a certain sense has already been said,' evokes, resoundingly, the cataphatic starting-place of Dionysian mystical discourse.¹⁷⁴ From this place of birdsong, from this place of endlessly received gift, from this threshold of openness to the immanent disclosure of the 'surplus', the beyond, the transcendent, the work of art is acknowledged

as both an attempt to grasp, and a surrendering to, the inexhaustibility of life. It is a return to 'experience as such, including ordinary everyday experience,' which 'is so gracious (or gratuitous) as to be itself somehow mystical.'¹⁷⁵

We can say of Woolf and Ricoeur what Rowan Williams has remarked of Maritain: that they 'identified the labor of art as something rooted in the sense of an unfinishedness in 'ordinary perception', a recognition that the objects of perception were not exhausted by what could be said about them in descriptive, rational and pragmatic terms.'¹⁷⁶ We humans, Woolf writes, who 'show the light though', who seem surrounded by this 'transparent envelope', are of an essence which requires, for its capture in literature, the toughest scaffolding; and yet, true to the apophatic dimension of iconography, for all the shaping of the darkness, the light itself is never got. Rather, in the inexhaustible abundance of cataphatic presence, the artist refines her expressive tools to create an apophatic shape for the contemplative gaze. Through *this* engagement, this openness in experience, the light of ceaseless coming is glimpsed. The aesthetics of openness known to both Woolf and Ricoeur enacts an iconographic activity in its fusion of the cataphatic and apophatic dimensions of the relationship between language, creative expression and reality. Woolf's iconographic novels hold together both the pain of the closed, and the hope of the open, modes of nothingness. Her novels, her birds, are forever moving towards fresh expression: they are forever 'syllabbling discordantly life, life, life, without measure, without stop . . .'¹⁷⁷

Conclusion

This chapter has recognised the apophatic dimension of Woolf's thought and writing. In conjunction with Chapter Four, these chapters combine to illustrate how Woolf's aesthetic might be called a *mystical* aesthetic, in its combination – and dynamic relation – of cataphatic and apophatic insights. Chapter Eight will explore how the discoveries arising from this conversation shape a mystical contribution to a theological aesthetic. First, however, we turn to an exploration of the apophatic dimensions of Iris Murdoch's philosophy.

Exploring the Apophatic Dimension of Iris Murdoch's Work: An Iconoclastic Pilgrimage

There is, however, something in the serious attempt to look compassionately at human things which automatically suggests that 'there is more than this.' The 'there is more than this', if it is not to be corrupted by some sort of quasi-theological finality, must remain a very tiny spark of insight, something with, as it were, a metaphysical position but no metaphysical form. But it seems to me that the spark is real, and that great art is evidence of its reality.

Iris Murdoch, 'On "God" and "Good"'¹

The outward and visible things show us the inward and invisible things. There are all sorts of ways in which we use the visible for the invisible, life is riddled with metaphor and symbolism, this is not a 'special subject', it is everywhere.

Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*²

This chapter explores the apophatic dimension of Iris Murdoch's philosophical vision. Within Pseudo-Dionysian mystical theology, 'If the light of the sun is a mind-stunning darkness, so is the reality of the divine a language-defeating silence.'³ Engaging the same Platonic dialectics, Murdoch writes that, "The Good itself is not visible . . . perhaps to look at the sun is to be gloriously dazzled and to see nothing."⁴ The Good, in virtue of the 'unsystematic and inexhaustible variety of the world and the pointlessness of virtue'⁵ is 'indefinable and non-representable.'⁶ Nevertheless, while the 'scene remains disparate and complex and 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.⁷ Yet, this magnetic centre is invisible. 'Lines of convergence' are the evidence of its being. 'It is *difficult* to look at the sun,' for 'it is not like looking at other things . . . We do not and probably cannot know, conceptualise, what it is like in the centre.'⁸ We cannot really speak of it. Images, myths and analogies, will guide, but must ultimately dissolve into emptiness and silence.

As early as her text on *Sartre*, Murdoch describes the Christian mystical predicament with an accuracy she is perhaps unaware of: 'To lose the discursive 'thingy' nature of one's vision and yet to feel the necessity of utterance is to experience a breakdown of language.'⁹ This consideration haunts both her philosophy and her literature. In his Introduction to *The Sea, The Sea*, John Burnside quotes from Murdoch's obituary in *The Times*, writing that, 'Those who reproached her for publishing too much were perhaps missing the point: her project was one of imperfection, or imperfectability even, as if the perfect – like the good, about which she meditated so deeply – was fundamentally beyond human achievement. If for her every novel was a fresh attempt to attain her ideal, she found each time that her ideal had moved on.'¹⁰ Murdoch shared G. E. Moore's conviction 'both that Good was *there* and that one could say nothing of what it essentially was.' Moreover, 'if apprehension of good is apprehension of the individual and the real, then good partakes of the infinite elusive character of reality.'¹¹ She remarks, in apophatic spirit, that it is in the very 'nature' of Good 'that we cannot get it taped.'¹² She describes in 'On "God" and "Good"' the need for philosophers to 'try and invent a terminology which shows how our natural psychology can be altered by conceptions which lie beyond its range.'¹³ However, it is the language and thinking of mysticism – informing a distinctly mystical philosophy – that emerges within her work as being most able to confront such transcendental boundaries. In calling her philosophy 'mystical' I do not mean this purely in the sense of acknowledging her privileged referencing of mystical ideas as being most able to capture her sense that all imagery must finally dissolve, but also in that more expansive sense in which her philosophical work, in the fullness of its scope, balances cataphatic and apophatic dimensions, thereby granting her philosophy its truly 'mystical' character.

Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals

Good as absolute . . . is to be seen as unshadowed and separate, a pure source, the principle which creatively relates the virtues to each other in

our moral lives. In the iconoclastic pilgrimage, through the progressive destruction of false images, we experience the *distance* which separates us from perfection and are led to place our idea of it in a figurative sense outside the turmoil of existent being. The concept is thus 'forced upon us'. The transcendental proof of it is from all the world, all of our *extremely various* experience.

Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*¹⁴

Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals is a mysterious text, one that has frustrated, even disappointed, its reviewers. I have known one prominent philosopher of religion to ask, exasperated and genuinely at a loss, 'But just what is Murdoch trying to do?' Part of an answer might lie in Murdoch's appreciation for the writing of philosopher and mystic Simone Weil. In her 1956 article for *The Spectator*, 'Knowing the Void', (note that 'Void' is the title of the final chapter of *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*),¹⁵ Murdoch celebrates the publication of Weil's entire notebooks, delighting that the 'complete text' is 'immensely more interesting than the previously published selection.' While the 'selection tends to read as a series of epigrams,' the 'present book, with its obsessive circling round certain ideas, shows us the fundamental directions of the author's mind . . . She takes a vast range of European and Eastern thought as her text, yet she speaks only of what she has thoroughly understood and transformed by her own meditation. To read her is to be reminded of a standard.' Moreover, "There are a number of different 'tracks' leading through the *Notebooks* . . . Most obviously perhaps the writer can be seen as a Platonist. She believes that Good is a transcendent reality, and that Good and Evil are connected with modes of human knowledge. She is determined to regard everything as potentially related to everything else, in an intense synthesising vision which will delight some readers, and madden others . . ."¹⁶

The 'obsessive circling round certain ideas', which Murdoch attributes to Weil, the holding together of vast streams of 'European and Eastern thought' as an intellectual background to the emergence of a distinctly Platonic vista, the presentation of 'everything as potentially related to everything else' in an almost bewildering 'intense synthesising vision', easily describes Murdoch's own method, and effect, in her final philosophical work. Murdoch herself writes in *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* that "There is a point at which reflection, however beset, must stand firm and be prepared to go on circling around an essential point which remains obscure."¹⁷ There is a 'partly circular juggling which the human mind indulges in when determined to argue for something which

it already knows. Such argument is also characteristic of metaphysics.¹⁸ 'There is,' on occasion, 'a dialectic or oscillation or ferment within which fundamental ideas enlighten and support each other. This kind of metaphysical argument may displease many critics and never be capable of perfect clarity, but it is the way human beings often tend to think, at less exalted levels too, about serious matters.'¹⁹ At one point in *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, having isolated certain philosophical difficulties, she declares her intention: 'I hope in what follows to 'talk around' some of these questions.'²⁰

Such points of methodological coincidence suggest that Murdoch's indebtedness to Weil extends beyond her appropriation of Weil's concepts of loving 'attention' and 'void', and may include a methodological indebtedness in the production of a philosophical text which, in its own 'obsessive circling around certain ideas', has similarly both 'delighted' and 'maddened' its readers. (In her 1978 interview with Bryan Magee, Murdoch is reported to have said that 'Philosophy is repetitive, it comes back over the same ground and is continually breaking the forms which it has made.'²¹ Murdoch's text has been called 'a great hall of reflection',²² and it is significant that Murdoch's description of such a system in her text is followed immediately with an elucidating reference to Wittgenstein: 'There are, indeed, things which cannot be put into words. *They make themselves manifest*. They are what is mystical.'²³ It is worth asking, then, whether Murdoch's is a self-consciously *mystical* system. Her text brings the reader whirling through ideas which are constantly revisited to be refined and re-orientated in relation to other parts of 'the picture' which we are to understand as internally related, until narrowing towards a concentrated, clarified centre which finally disappears into darkness (void). Murdoch takes the reader on a pilgrimage, an iconoclastic pilgrimage, one related to the demythologisation of religion, but simultaneously bringing the reader into relationship with the image-making and image-breaking dialectics of theological mysticism.

Murdoch's text surveys key movements in the history of Western philosophy, partly in order to consider the contemporary claim that 'some entirely new *mode of thinking* is coming to be.'²⁴ She is concerned with the deepest groundings of philosophical perspectives, in particular with the alleged removal of a 'horizon' which thinkers such as Nietzsche, Heidegger and Derrida claim to have been 'sponged away.'²⁵ This is a transcendent horizon: the conviction that thought takes place against the background of some reality which extends beyond it, and which is the inspiration for the pre-deconstructive (pre-structuralist) idea, and, indeed, the 'everyday' common-sense belief, that the 'individual object',

the 'individual person', 'individual meaning' – those 'old and cherished 'limited wholes'' – do actually exist.²⁶ Here, Murdoch is characteristically unfashionable. While contemporary thinkers and artists assert the disappearance of concepts of a unified substantial self (real subject), of a language-independent, subject-transcending reality (real object), while they announce 'that the era, not only of Descartes, but also of Plato, has ended,'²⁷ Murdoch argues for the recapturing of a real individual subject, a real subject-transcending reality, and the real possibility of 'spiritual pilgrimage'²⁸ towards knowledge of this reality, in a way that re-situates Platonic philosophy in central view.

But this return to Platonic philosophy is counterpoised with one deconstructive attitude Murdoch *does* embrace. A central theme of the text, (of which 'structuralism (as deconstruction) is a radical form'),²⁹ is 'demythologisation', a process Murdoch relates throughout to another central theme, 'iconoclasm': and, together, these movements perform a sweeping apophatic correlate to that corresponding constructive cataphaticism which recognises the real existences of a self, of a self-transcending other, of the Good, of language as accurately and meaningfully referring to objects and persons, and, crucially, of the value and meaning of *images* as actually constitutive of states of consciousness and, indeed, of reality itself. The text of *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, which in its repetitive, circling, often 'chatty' style gives the reader a distinct sense of being personally led on a journey, escorts the reader in the direction of what Murdoch describes as 'the iconoclastic pilgrimage, through the progressive destruction of false images.'³⁰

Despite its complicated structure, Murdoch's aim in her text is simple: she seeks a way to rescue, cherish and intellectually stabilise 'our experience of the unconditioned and our continued sense of what is holy.'³¹ But these concepts of the unconditioned, of sanctity and holiness, must, to her mind, now be rescued amidst an irretrievable (though not misguided) loss of belief in 'God', of those 'traditional ideas' about his existence which art has so long propagated in its powerful images ('The Judaeo-Christian God . . . may even be seen as a work of art').³² She desires to locate (to restore, with Plato) a 'religion above the gods', (above imagery, above myth).

Despite substantial limitations to her understanding of Christianity, Murdoch is aware of contemporary theologians' efforts to rescue theology from the demythologising zeitgeist. At the beginning of *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* she asks, 'is there some clear analogy, or connection, between iconoclasm in art' (this 'new mood' which deliberately cultivates expressions of the 'deliberately incomplete')³³ 'and the more challenging

or reductionist trends in modern theology?³⁴ In the context of this sustained question, she is aware of the value of 'mysticism' for her demythologising iconoclastic pilgrimage, a pilgrimage which, recognising the disappearance of 'traditional images' of God, holds up the negative theologies of such as John of the Cross as evidence of a longstanding awareness within the history of theological thought that all images of God must ultimately give way before a 'void'. She emphasises eastern philosophy and religion as being 'more evidently mystical' than western Christian thought, on account of Eastern art's being less 'thingy', less 'concerned with complex completeness', than, for example, the doctrine of the Trinity which 'is a celestial aesthetic celebration of internal relations.'³⁵ And yet, Murdoch recognises that 'The violence of shock and paradox has of course always been at home in Christianity ever since Paul made his point of preaching not just Christ, but Christ crucified.'³⁶ This 'shock' and 'paradox' is central to the dialectics of Christian mystical language, in the juxtaposition of cataphatic and apophatic moments. In a move which informs the reader that Murdoch is curiously admiring of the theological traditions she also rejects, she adds that, despite the genius Paul's paradoxical preaching, 'the calming whole-making tendencies of human thought have also been at work, creating reassuring structures which occasional prophets feel moved to tear down in order to rejoin the original shock.'³⁷

Murdoch does not, in emphasising the 'negative' strand of Christian mysticism, entertain the validity of what she would call 'dogmatic' systems of belief in a personal God. She appropriates and applauds John of the Cross' concept of the 'abyss' in which all thought and language about God dissolves, and Eckhart's 'seething cauldron' in which all imagery is both formed and melted,³⁸ for the sake of morality, thereby importing a cataphatic-apophatic dialectic into her moral philosophy. This dialectic, of course, is more originally sourced in her Platonism, in the dialectics of the Cave, in the play of imagery of light and darkness, which is itself appropriated into Christian tradition through the mystical writings of Pseudo-Dionysius and others. What Murdoch loves in Christian mysticism she has met already in Plato ('Platonism is creative iconoclasm').³⁹ Equally, the concept of an iconoclastic *pilgrimage* is inherited from Platonism: Murdoch recognises the 'parable' of the Cave as portraying 'a spiritual pilgrimage from appearance to reality.'⁴⁰ And yet, for Murdoch, certain mystics' awareness of the effects on vision, imagination, image and language of contemplating a transcending non-object which sources the intellect's own light, casts an indispensable brilliance on the road of moral pilgrimage. If there are any shrines upon this road, these saints

and mystics might find themselves named, yet they are only acceptable because self-negating: their shadowy recess would stand empty.

Murdoch, as a Christian atheist, a Christian Buddhist, recognises within religious demythologisation an opportunity for the emergence of an apophatically clothed moral vision, a moral vision free of the fantastical consolation of belief in the gods, and thereby free to achieve her zenith: to see reality clearly, unconsolated; and, finally, to face the pointlessness of life itself, the void, in the presence of which, miraculously, we continue to believe in the Good, continue to feel that we live in a light, continue to find moral courage, continue to experience the Good's magnetism, continue to respond to its moral demands, and continue to strive to be better people; to be good 'in the only way there is', that is, 'to be good for nothing'. As Murdoch writes in 'On "God" and "Good"', capturing the essence of this apophatically clothed moral vision, 'The only way to be good is to be good 'for nothing'. . . That 'for nothing' is indeed the experienced correlate of the invisibility or non-representable blankness of the idea of Good itself.'⁴¹

It is, therefore, this tendency in Christian mysticism – this movement towards an 'abyss' in which all image-making is dissolved⁴² – that so appeals to Murdoch, and, with eastern religion, informs her own *via negativa*, an intellectual journey which draws the reader beyond a single cataphatic recognition of that light (the Good) in which all reality and knowledge is bathed, toward that simultaneous darkness which is the disappearance of our images of the highest reality, the transcendental void into which our consciousness expands as we intuit from parts to wholes (from virtues to Good), and the darkness which is the other side, and inevitable consequence, of the dazzling of a Sun too bright to look upon. And yet, this must not be interpreted as recommending the end of images altogether. In true mystical form, Murdoch's way is one as much of affirmation as denial. The negative poetry of Pseudo-Dionysius is itself a new image. Relishing John of the Cross' 'abyss of faith into which we fall when we have discarded all images of God,' Murdoch adds that "The idea of this image-making abyss is also the concept of a *via negativa*, which is both iconoclastic and fertile of new images."⁴³ The empty space, to pursue only one (not the only) picture of the matter, may be found to be full of forms, boiling and seething like Eckhart's God . . .⁴⁴ The creative life is a continuous creation *ex nihilo*. This is the dialectic we are called to engage with.

Marije Altorf, discussing how Murdoch's 'last and largest work of philosophy' has 'baffled' Murdoch's readers, and been accused 'of unclear argumentation or even lack of argument,'⁴⁵ cites Antonaccio's

suggestion that 'it may best be described with Murdoch's own words as 'a huge hall of reflection full of light and space and fresh air, in which ideas and intuitions can be unsystematically nurtured'.⁴⁶ However, I believe this conception of Murdoch's last work is too static: Murdoch's text certainly opens out vistas for the reader to contemplate, but essentially gives the reader the sense of being *led* in a particular *direction*, eventually to the edge of a 'void.' She offers not so much a hall within which to reflect, as a process of initiation with which to engage. In her final philosophical work Murdoch, in true Platonic spirit, guides the reader on an 'iconoclastic pilgrimage' towards the apophatic realisation that all images are preliminary before the invisible centre of the Good. This journey has tremendous consequences for philosophical methodology, when all philosophy has been picture-making: 'the pictorial nature of philosophy . . . one does not always notice because 'picturing' is so natural.'⁴⁷

Imagination and Image-making: Morality as a Transcendental Condition for Knowledge

Une difficile est une lumiere,
Une difficile insurmontable est un soleil.

Paul Valéry, quoted in Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*⁴⁸

It may be that the best model for all thought is the creative imagination.

Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*⁴⁹

The metaphysician's quest is the artist's quest. Every person is, as a conscious being, an artist. An appreciation of the importance of the image, and the imagination, is essential not only for understanding the mystical content and value of Murdoch's work (for mystical language concerns the making and breaking of images), but also for understanding her objection to 'traditional' religious ideas. Chapter Five recognised the importance of vision, of attention, for Murdoch's account of moral thought. In *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, we discover that the nature and quality of moral vision is defined by the nature and quality of imagination. Consciousness is imaginative. The effort to see reality clearly is an act of imagination. Pictures, images, metaphors proliferate, in philosophy, in our art, in our everyday interpretation of life. Everyone is an artist, everyone constantly uses their imagination: every individual, when asked what their day was like, from the moment they

begin to consider an answer, begins modelling, structuring, selecting, events, forming a kind of story with an aesthetic shape (even if this shape contains absences, incompletenesses, aporias).⁵⁰ 'We constantly weave our experience into limited wholes (art works).'⁵¹ The subject's creative imagination is forever active. But in a manner continuous with Murdoch's restoration of a substantial concept of the self, and her inner life, this imaginative activity is not extraneous, or additional, to 'pure' acts of consciousness, to a 'pure' reception of unassimilated empirical information: on the contrary, imaginative activity is constitutive of consciousness itself. Consciousness is an organising, unifying, structuring, assimilating, power. As such, images and pictures are key to how we both see, and interpret, the world. Consciousness is aesthetic. This is particularly made evident where our experience transcends our ability to capture, or explain, it. While 'the limits of my language, which are the limits of my world fade away on every side into areas of fighting for concepts, for understanding, for expression, for control,' (an apophatic breakdown at the edges of comprehension), 'the (essential) aspiration of language to truth is an aspect of consciousness as a work of evaluation.'⁵² 'Language, consciousness and world are bound together':⁵³ hence, the irrepressible desire of language (including concepts) to speak of what is real, is not only a manifestation, but an *enacting*, of the constructive, evaluative, quality of consciousness. When we realise that reality is both made of, and understood through, images and pictures, the faculty of Imagination becomes a route, not to fancy, but to knowledge.

To develop her argument for the image-making heart of consciousness Murdoch considers in her chapter on 'Consciousness and Thought – I' the particular privilege of the novelist as best resourced to portray the nature and contents of consciousness. Throughout her text Murdoch considers the fate of the object under view – here human consciousness – in relation to landmark philosophical systems, including those of Hume, Kant, Hegel, Wittgenstein and Derrida. At this early stage in her text, she draws from Wittgenstein (and subsequently distances from philosophical misunderstandings claiming to follow him) the fact that 'Language just does refer to the world.'⁵⁴ Wittgenstein's claim to leave the ordinary world of language untouched resonates with Murdoch's faith in the reality-disclosing properties of ordinary, everyday experience, in that 'unexamined life' which can nevertheless be 'virtuous.'⁵⁵ But she also highlights Wittgenstein's recognition, in the *Tractatus*, of a distinctly apophatic limit to knowledge and expression in the presence of which we nevertheless continue to operate confidently as human beings (we retain a cataphatic confidence that our language, simply, works):

Wittgenstein's world of fact owns nothing beyond, the subject who experiences it fits it exactly; the notion of his 'seeing beyond' can make no sense. This impossibility is established (by Wittgenstein) in the nature of logic and language; in the *Tractatus* facts, states of affairs, are projected in propositions intelligibly organised by logic. They just *are* so projected, we cannot in the nature of the case see *how*, for this would be to see beyond the transcendental barrier. (What is transcendent is beyond human experience, what is transcendental is not derived from human experience, but is a condition of it.) There is no other access to facts. Thus, in the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein dismisses any general *problem* of a transcendent 'factual' world, or of the ability of language to refer to the world. Language just does refer to the world.⁵⁶

'This,' she continues, 'disposes by fiat of many of the questions raised by structuralism, and also of course of Cartesian anxieties about how the mind reaches the world.'⁵⁷ The structuralists (including Derrida) inherit a Wittgensteinian sense of the coincidence of the self with the world of facts (the self as linguistically determined, as constituted by signs: 'The world is the totality of facts, not of things', – second sentence of the *Tractatus*)⁵⁸ but do not retain his sense that language 'just does refer to the world', a 'world' independent of signs, which does not exist for structuralism. 'Structuralism,' Murdoch writes, 'makes a further metaphysical move from which Wittgenstein wisely abstained. If we cannot see, or say, how language is able to refer to the world,' (to what is transcendent, the world in this case), 'then it seems a simple philosophical feat and apt use of Occam's razor to remove the world.'⁵⁹ We might say that structuralism, and deconstruction, attempt an exclusive 'way of negation' without a corresponding 'way of affirmation' which Wittgenstein partly, and Murdoch certainly, maintain. For Wittgenstein, silence indicates, is responsive to, an indescribable, yet immanently manifest, 'beyond': for Murdoch silence (as in Platonic myth) is responsive to a beyond (the Good), *and* we can make meaningful ethical propositions (a fully developed cataphaticism).

Murdoch continues her study of Wittgenstein: "The other sense in which (in the *Tractatus*) I am my world, or live or experience my world, is the moral sense. Here I become an artist, or a mystic, ethics and aesthetics being one, looking at and accepting the world *as a whole*, *all* the facts. Value lies *ineffably* outside this limited whole."⁶⁰ Where what we might call Wittgenstein's apophaticism stretches too far for Murdoch is in his segregation of fact and value to such a degree that he claims that 'it is impossible for there to be propositions of ethics.

Propositions can express nothing that is higher. It is clear that ethics cannot be put into words. Ethics is transcendental,' (Murdoch quotes the *Tractatus*).⁶¹ Murdoch contrasts this position with 'the way in which Kant's Categorical Imperative does mysteriously enter from the outside, illuminating particular situations and enabling us to act freely.' By contrast, 'Value', in the *Tractatus*, or the *moral* subject, of whom we cannot speak (6.423), resides rather in an *attitude* or *style* than in one's acceptance of all the facts.⁶²

Illuminatingly, Murdoch now makes certain selections from Wittgenstein's letters and conversations:

My work consists of two parts: the one presented here plus all that I have not written. And it is precisely the second part that is the important one. My book draws limits to the sphere of the ethical from the inside as it were, and I am convinced that this is the only rigorous way of drawing those limits. In short, I believe that where many others today are just gassing I have managed in my book to put everything firmly in place by being silent about it. And for that reason . . . the book will say a great deal that you yourself want to say. Only perhaps you won't see that it is said in the book.⁶³

Murdoch also quotes Wittgenstein's reflections on Heidegger:

Man feels the urge to run up against the limits of language. Think for example of the astonishment that anything at all exists. This astonishment cannot be expressed in the form of a question, and there is also no answer whatsoever. Anything we might say is *a priori* bound to be mere nonsense. Kierkegaard too saw that there is this running up against something and he referred to it in a fairly similar way (as running up against paradox). This running up against the limits of language is ethics . . . it will always be merely a misunderstanding to say that the essential thing, that what is really meant, corresponds to what is expressed (Moore). But the inclination, the running up against something, *indicates something*. St Augustine knew that already when he said: 'What, you swine you want not to talk nonsense! Go ahead and talk nonsense, it does not matter!'⁶⁴ (Wittgenstein's emphasis).

Murdoch does not agree with Wittgenstein that there cannot be ethical propositions: for her, ethical propositions comprise the ubiquitous fabric of that ordinary language which Wittgenstein rightly desires to leave untouched (that is, safely functioning). 'Wittgenstein,' she writes,

'has nothing to say in the *Tractatus* about a transcendent reality. Ethics cannot be expressed in words. 'Ethics is transcendental.' (6. 421). It is at the border of experience.'⁶⁵ However, Wittgenstein's appreciation of the coincidence of the ethical with a running up 'against the limits of language', (so that we have 'nothing to say'), with a confrontation of transcendental horizons that dazzle the seeking mind, with a running into paradox that brings the genius-saint to condone nonsense, are insights that shape the iconoclastic pilgrimage contained in Murdoch's text. The difficulty for Murdoch is that where Wittgenstein advises being silent about areas of life which, 'taking place' beyond transcendental barriers, can only be made manifest, he is 'not simply enjoining philosophical silence . . . He enjoins ordinary-language silence.'⁶⁶ Yet, Wittgenstein's claim to have, in his book, 'put everything firmly in place by being silent about it,' echoes Murdoch's recurrent observation that Plato's myths, his pictures, for all their crystalline dialectical precision, are structured according to a principle which gives silence its consummative place. At critical points, Murdoch observes, and most especially at the summit of a problem, Socrates chooses to be silent (Socrates speaks in the *Phaedo*: 'But, Simmias . . . It would not be fitting for a man of sense to maintain that all this is just as I have described it, but that something like it is true . . . and he ought to repeat such things to himself as incantations, which is why I have drawn out the story to such length').⁶⁷ And, as well as silence, the dialogues contain comedy: not the light mockery destructive of growth to knowledge which is clearly condemned by Socrates ('Jesus is witty; he does not tell jokes,') but an intelligent, wry nonsense whose appearance signals that we are close to the limits of what can be known and are beginning to run into paradox. Murdoch herself makes use of this self-subverting comedic form in her Platonic dialogue *Above the Gods: A Dialogue About Religion*, and is quick to remind us that the 'fool' of the *Proslogion* is a *learned* person of faith.⁶⁸

For Wittgenstein, she concludes, 'the 'fit', as one might put it, is perfect.'⁶⁹ 'I am my world.'⁷⁰ 'Wittgenstein's world of fact owns nothing beyond, the subject who experiences it fits it exactly; the notion of his 'seeing beyond' can make no sense.'⁷¹ 'There is no suggestive gleam from beyond, or crack through which one might peer, or any sense of talking about one.' The vision is fully immanent: 'We enact morality, it looks after itself.' She quotes Wittgenstein again: 'The solution of the problem of life is seen in the vanishing of the problem . . . There are, indeed, things which cannot be put into words. *They make themselves manifest*. They are what is mystical.'⁷² Again, Murdoch departs from Wittgenstein. Appreciative of his awareness of the intellectual and expressive stress

both consciousness and language suffer in proximity to transcendental boundaries, for *her* something (rather, some non-thing) *does* transcend. There is, contra Wittgenstein, a 'suggestive gleam', a 'crack through which one might peer': and indeed, though with limitations, there is 'sense in talking' of ethics. As described in 'On "God" and "Good"', there is glimpsed in a 'spark of insight', that spark inspired by 'the serious attempt to look compassionately at human things', the intuition that 'there is more than this': and it seems to her 'that the spark is real'.⁷³ Her vision cannot end where Wittgenstein draws the line. Her objection to his model calls for a cataphaticism that is more than confidence in ordinary language, but also an ability to intuit, to see, the light of the Sun (even if never the sun itself). 'Can we not,' she invites the reader to wonder, 'see a little beyond those transcendental barriers, do we not have intimations, gleams of light, glimpses of another scene?' The *Tractatus* 'is a sustained attempt to put a final end to such talk.' Morality and theology are ineffable, and 'can only be, in the whole living of life, *shown*'.⁷⁴ For Wittgenstein 'We must, at last,' in an apophatic gesture, 'talk as little as possible and then . . . 'throw away the ladder'.⁷⁵ For Murdoch, Wittgenstein draws the limitation-line of describable experience too close to the human subject: her world has cataphatic brilliance, the pilgrimage towards moral knowledge involves the enlightening of intellect in response to certain real, describable experiences. But she embraces the iconoclastic temperament of Wittgenstein's intellectual discipline, and cherishes the mystics where they too paint the climax as abyss.

The value of art (imagination) for Murdoch lies not only in its capacity to reveal moral truth, to become a resource for spiritual contemplation, but also in the fact that 'Art . . . essentially (traditionally) involves the idea of a sustained *experienced* mental synthesis,' and that 'This ability to sustain and *experience* imagined syntheses has importance in other areas where we make use of analogous or related conceptions of authoritative limited wholes.'⁷⁶ The work of art represents 'the limited whole': the internally synthesised entity (the self, our consciousness: 'What are these 'limited wholes'? Are 'persons' really real?⁷⁷) which is 'limited' insofar as it cannot see beyond the transcendental barriers constituting the conditions of its existence. This 'limited whole', of which understanding is one example, is mysterious, since in the midst of the synthesising, unifying activity through which we make sense of the world, we are simultaneously aware that while 'We see parts of things, we intuit whole things.' We 'grasp ourselves as unities, continuous bodies and continuous minds,'⁷⁸ despite a considerable 'paucity of evidence.'⁷⁹ This 'seeing of parts and intuiting of wholes' pertains not only to our understanding

of ourselves and others, but equally to the nature of ultimate moral reality: we can never, Murdoch diverges from Plato, 'see the Sun', ('The Good itself is not visible . . . perhaps to look at the sun is to be gloriously dazzled and to see nothing'),⁸⁰ yet we intuit from the experience of multifarious virtues a unifying Good in which all virtues participate. Yet here returns an inherent danger in consciousness: the synthesising work can be both 'limited whole' and 'illusory unity';⁸¹ the synthesising tendencies of (moral) consciousness are essential for moral agency, yet perilous ingredients for the easy construction of comforting false images of reality: images which console because they disguise the inevitability of 'void'. The difficulty is that 'In thinking about abstract matters one instinctively produces images.'⁸²

Murdoch now asks, her iconoclastic pilgrimage in mind, whether 'If the 'de-mythologisation' of theological and moral thinking means the removal of pictures, can this be more than a substitution of one picture for another, so that . . . instead of God we have the mobile jumping will, and instead of metaphors of light, metaphors of movement (and so on)? Philosophers are artists, and metaphysical ideas are aesthetic.'⁸³ Moreover, 'it is difficult for the philosopher, and *a fortiori* the theologian, to surrender the quest for satisfying sovereign imagery which is to indicate a very, or absolutely, important reality.'⁸⁴ At this point the mutually dependent tension between a cataphatic and apophatic temperament in philosophy, theology – and, above these, for Murdoch, in the moral life and understanding – is foregrounded. She emphasises the embeddedness of images, pictures, in our understanding of the world: 'Plato's *image* (metaphor) for the Form of the Good is another separate spherical object, the sun: an ideal unity, a transcendent source of light. Good is above being, non-personal, non-contingent, not a particular thing among other things.'⁸⁵ But she makes the demythologising, the apophatic, gesture: 'Plato illumines' this theory 'with stories which are deliberately cast as explanatory myths and must not be mistaken for anything else.'⁸⁶ Yet these explanatory myths, though not literal descriptions, are indicative of a living reality: 'Plato's 'sun' is separate and perfect, yet also immanent in the world as the life-giving magnetic genesis of all our struggles for truth and virtue.'⁸⁷ Murdoch observes that 'Plato never identified the Form of the Good with God,'⁸⁸ which she recognises as an 'essential separation.' This is because – here her position emerges clearly – 'Religion is above the level of the 'gods'. There are no gods and no God either.' Where 'Neo-Platonic thinkers made the identification (of God with Good) possible,' Murdoch recognises descent into consolation: 'the Judaeo-Christian tradition has made it easy and natural for us to gather

together the aesthetic and consoling impression of Good as a person,' a belief which is 'increasingly inaccessible to the thinkers of today.'⁸⁹

The *Tractatus*, Murdoch writes, 'may be seen as, in the Platonic sense, a myth. Its ethical purpose is to exclude talk about ethics,' since 'Such talk would be a running against the limits.' And yet, 'Such running against nevertheless indicates something.'⁹⁰ Contra Wittgenstein, Murdoch gives cataphatic power to 'talk about ethics', recognising art's capacity to incarnate a conception of transcendent value not as 'something separate, lodged in a part of the world,' but as 'a light in which the whole world is revealed.'⁹¹ This 'beyond' is indicated in her critique of Ayer's misunderstanding of Wittgenstein. Examining Ayer's decree that all metaphysical statements (including alleged ethical propositions) are 'literally senseless' (because no 'possible sense-experience' can be 'relevant to the determination of [the] truth or falsehood' of an ethical proposition⁹²) 'Ayer,' she reflects, 'seems to have taken to heart the message of the last part of the *Tractatus* which describes as nonsense and consigns to silence all our utterances except 'the propositions of natural science'.' 'However,' she objects, Ayer has 'misunderstood Wittgenstein in the same way in which numerous thinkers misunderstand Plato.' That is, 'The 'picturesque' structure indicates something beyond it; it is not to be taken literally.' This is 'in the nature (or magic) of metaphysics': and note that in speaking of both 'nature' (truth) and 'magic' (danger) Murdoch indicates the simultaneous validity and invalidity, necessity and absurdity, of image-making. Crucially, 'Wittgenstein's silence indicates the area of value.' This is an *apophatic* silence, silence that is not of, or for, itself, but is responsive to a reality which cannot itself be spoken of. The 'running up against the limits' *indicates* something. This contrasts Ayer's method (his 'use of the distinction between fact and value') which 'deliberately removes value.' His "explanation" of truth, his 'elimination' of the transcendent,⁹³ turns on his misunderstanding of the nature, and cause, of silence. Reductive philosophical pictures have misinterpreted what cannot be shown, or spoken.

'Philosophers,' Murdoch writes, 'attempt to make models of the deep aspects of human life.'⁹⁴ This 'metaphor of depth' is key: she speaks frequently throughout *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* of 'the problems of deep structure'⁹⁵ concerning human life and thought, consistently appealing against reductive philosophies which deprive us of 'deep' perspectives, or 'deep' accounts of our metaphysical convictions. Much later in her text she writes, 'We have to confront mysteries. We are not gods. Meanwhile of course philosophers hanker after deep foundations and describable (even if postulated) entities.'⁹⁶ "There is something about the

human spirit which seems to some thinkers to *demand* a search for 'deep foundations'. Herein, it is often felt, there is something *essential*; and this essential thing must be built into the explanation at the start, or else it tends to fly away and become problematic and remote and extremely difficult to integrate.⁹⁷ This latter caution returns for frequent re-articulation in *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*: unless morality in particular is, to use the common metaphor, 'built into the picture' of reality from the first brush stroke, it cannot be re-integrated later. Reductive philosophies evacuate the space in which value ought to dwell ("The denial of any philosophical role to 'experience' or 'mental contents' has left no place for a consideration of consciousness. 'Value' is placed outside philosophy or else is accommodated on the edge by some smaller technical structure").⁹⁸ Yet, 'if it is built in at the start, the thinker may be accused of an unwarrantable act of faith or intuition.'⁹⁹ Murdoch confesses in her conclusion to 'On "God" and "Good"', that 'I am not sure how far my positive suggestions make sense.'¹⁰⁰ She is often aware of the proximity of her assertions to protestations of faith ("That human life has no external point or *telos* is a view as difficult to argue as its opposite, and I shall simply assert it').¹⁰¹ Human beings engage in the aesthetic activity of understanding self and world in the form of 'limited wholes': 'We see parts of things, we intuit whole things. We seem to know a great deal on the basis of very little.'¹⁰² Murdoch's assessment of the ontological 'proof' is an associated endeavour to retrieve the legitimacy of a *kind* of argument, one recognising the epistemological claims of intuited certainty. Her work presents a defence for the rationality of faith.

'The philosopher's own primary certainty is present as an influence' in the building of pictures of reality. But now comes 'the problem' inherent to such image-making, and it lies in the coincidence of philosophical and religious instincts. 'Some great philosophical pictures are also great religious pictures, and illustrate how close philosophy and theology can come to each other, while still staying wisely apart.' Murdoch quotes Heraclitus: 'The One who alone is wise does not want and does want to be called by the name of Zeus.' (Fr 32).¹⁰³ Murdoch locates one tension at the heart of the cataphatic-apophatic dialectic: 'The problem' is that 'We yearn for the transcendent, for God, for something divine and good and pure, but in picturing the transcendent we transform it into idols which we then realise to be contingent particulars, just things among others here below. If we destroy these idols in order to reach something untainted and pure, what we really need, the thing itself, we render the Divine ineffable, and as such in peril of being judged non-existent. Then the sense of the Divine vanishes in the attempt to preserve it.'

It is, she adds, 'no wonder' that "that which alone is wise' is in two minds about how to proceed,' concluding significantly that, "The order of the wishes may be significant; fundamentally it does not want, but is forced by the frailties of human nature into wanting."¹⁰⁴ It is, she writes, 'a persistent human need' to 'protect the intuitively known essential by a circumstantial or picturesque theory . . .'¹⁰⁵ 'Goodness and holiness have traditionally been protected by establishing them, their source or exemplars, somewhere else, separate and sole, under the guard of dragon-like concepts.'¹⁰⁶ "The most familiar (western) concept' (for Murdoch, 'picture'), 'which gathers all value together into itself and then redistributes it is the concept of God,' and, again, 'unless you have it in the picture from the start you cannot get it in later by extraneous means.' This 'well-recognised metaphysical circularity' is, she notes, used by the Ontological Proof.¹⁰⁷ Although, as her own methodology shows, this circularity is not peculiar to theology.

We are 'Closer to Plato': Consciousness, Pilgrimage and Religious Myth¹⁰⁸

'Plato's moral education' is revealed in 'the myth of the Cave', which implies 'a progressively changing quality of consciousness' and teaches that moral education is a *pilgrimage* involving learning to see differently. 'Metaphysics is full of metaphors whose force is often half-concealed. The Platonic myths are an explicit resort to metaphor as a mode of explanation. Plato continually pictures education as moral progress . . .'¹⁰⁹ For Plato, mathematics 'may be seen as an image of . . . any strict intellectual discipline . . .' Yet Platonic metaphor points beyond itself. Platonic iconoclasm, an awareness of the limitations of philosophical picturing, precisely influences Plato's suspicion of writing, 'which seems to remove knowledge and truth from the present moment of the individual and lodge it elsewhere, in books, which are inert . . . The speaking person is fundamental. Insight into truth is the flash which in live conversation upon serious matters carries one beyond the words.'¹¹⁰

In *Meno* 86BC Murdoch identifies Plato's indication 'that part of what he says is to be taken as instructive metaphor.'¹¹¹ She then quotes Stanley Rosen's observation (contained in his 'excellent book')¹¹² that 'Plato recognises the difference between Being and beings . . . The openness of Being as prior to distinctions of beings, particular speeches, kinds of measuring, and the subject-object relationship is the unstated luminosity within which the dialogues are themselves visible.' Here is

what Woolf might call their 'backing light.' Murdoch continues to quote Rosen: "The dialogues become intelligible only when we perceive this unstated luminosity which is directly present as the *silence* of Plato. The spoken voice of the dialogues occurs always within the Cave (if not always in the language of the Cave). We may emerge from this Cave at any instant that we hear the silent accompanying voice of Plato.' Heidegger, indeed, 'goes wrong because he is not sufficiently attentive to the silence of Plato.'¹¹³ The errors here attributed to Heidegger, Murdoch points out, 'are shared by many other critics of Plato.'¹¹⁴

At this point, Murdoch elucidates her observation that 'in the strange cosmic astronomy of the wandering *Zeitgeist* we are closer to Plato now than in many previous centuries.'¹¹⁵ This is because Plato poses 'almost all the traditional problems of western philosophy and combines them with the insight of eastern philosophy,' an *iconoclastic* 'eastern philosophy [that] was and is intimately connected with religion.' In this respect . . . the Platonic view of the cosmos . . . speaks to our age.'¹¹⁶ Plato offers the idea that 'Help, 'mediation', can come from understanding a religion without a personal God.' 'Plato,' writes Murdoch, "'saves' metaphysics by showing how the noumenal and the phenomenal exist *inside* each human life. There is nowhere else, it is all here.'¹¹⁷ We might adopt Virginia Woolf's language: 'certainly and emphatically there is no God; we are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself.'¹¹⁸

'Religion' is acceptable to Murdoch in the sense that it is 'traditionally about, or is, the change of being attendant upon our deepest and highest concern with morality.'¹¹⁹ 'Religious icons' are available and valuable 'to all, whatever their beliefs,' and 'innumerable things can serve as icons.' 'The Cave is a religious myth,' suggesting 'that there are discernable levels and qualities of *awareness* or *experience* . . . which cannot be reduced to acquaintance with neutral factual propositions or analysed in terms of dispositions to act.'¹²⁰ 'Our understanding of a higher morality than that which comes easily to us tends to be intuitive and pictorial, we live all the time in semi-pictorial modes of awareness,' certainly not least of which is our 'picturesque awareness of modes of moral (including intellectual and aesthetic) procedures.'¹²¹ 'Theology,' Murdoch notes, '(east and west) often suggests to us that we can know God only by analogy, in myths, in pictures, through metaphors, in a glass darkly. To speak of Nirvana as nothingness, as the bringing-to-nothingness of our fallen nature, is to use an image.' But much 'less grand topics' make us 'aware that we think about value in a mixture of rational discourse and metaphor. The imagery moreover may be difficult to expose. The novelist may offer hard-edged clarified versions,' it is true: 'But the images which we use in

moral thinking and in other kinds of cognitive reflection may be elusive, allusive, and highly personal.¹²² Murdoch quotes Schopenhauer's letter to Goethe: ' . . . I stand before my own soul, like an inexorable judge before a prisoner lying on the rack, and make it answer until there is nothing else to ask . . .' We are to enquire until we run out of questions, until the only response, with Plato, is silence: crucial though images are (cataphatic), evidence of our proximity to the real will bring us running into paradox, our images should be breaking (apophatic).

Murdoch offers a Platonic picture. The Forms, 'in their moral role' present 'a comprehensible image, and, indeed, as a concept of 'the divine,' a familiar one. What is ideal is *active* in the imperfect life, and yet is also, and necessarily, separate from it. This separateness,' (transcendence) Murdoch significantly concludes, 'is connected with the possibility of freedom and spiritual movement and change' (*metanoia*) 'in the life of the individual. This continuous activity is experienced and lives and thrives, for good or ill, in the richly textured matrix of our moment-to-moment consciousness.'¹²³ Language, image-making, in its constructive and destructive moments corresponds to the simultaneous immanence and transcendence of the 'ideal': again, because 'Language, consciousness and world are bound together'; because 'the (essential) aspiration of language to truth is an aspect of consciousness as a work of evaluation.'¹²⁴

The Dissolving Image

However, the image will eventually dissolve under the pressure of endeavouring to exhibit that to which it points. Plato 'in the midst of hard detailed discussion and the use of innumerable examples, presents fundamental ideas metaphysically in the form of myth. You have to work hard to understand, and then throw away the ladder. (*Tractatus* 6.54.) The work must be understood in relation to a conclusion which is not to be thought of as 'containing' it.'¹²⁵ 'Plato's myths,' Murdoch continues, "'cover' and (often) clarify intuitive leaps which in other philosophers are also required but not (for better or worse) similarly adorned.' Realising that the term 'intuition' tends to suggest itself as standing in opposition to 'reason', she clarifies: 'What I mean to indicate here is that what is 'deep' in philosophy is not something literal or quasi-factual or quasi-scientific. A careful explicit use of metaphor, often instinctive, is in place. This may seem to leave the final utterance open to a degree of (carefully situated) ambiguity: which may in itself be a philosophical position.'¹²⁶

This is an important delineation of her own methodology: a consummative statement after years of philosophical analysis, during which she has already confessed 'I am not sure how far my positive suggestions make sense.'¹²⁷ 'Formal philosophy,' she continues, in true apophatic spirit, 'can come only so far, and after that can only point; Plato's *Seventh Letter* suggests something like this. This is not mysticism,' she adds, 'but a recognition of a difficulty.'¹²⁸ It is 'not mysticism', in this case, because still within the acceptable bounds of a philosophical system which 'is not like a literal account of the functioning of an engine, but a special *method of explanation*, not easy to understand, but having its own traditional standards of clarification and truthfulness.'¹²⁹ Mysticism – of the kind Murdoch appreciates – concerns the elimination of images before a 'void' within a life lived. What is truly mystical also possesses a religious quality.

With the tone of a mystic contemplating how to speak appropriately of God, Murdoch asks: 'Well, is there, discoverable by *philosophy*, deep structure, and . . . what mode of philosophical speech can deal with it?'¹³⁰ She proposes in her text 'to 'talk around', this question, to discover, at least, 'why a certain kind of explanation must fail.'¹³¹ Again, the account which fails to speak, at least of 'deep structure' (which requires metaphysical picturing), is the quasi-scientific reductionism of mechanistic or behaviouristic philosophical systems. We must not lose 'the detailed mobility of consciousness, its polymorphous complexity and the inherence in it of constant evaluation . . . Such theorising fails because it aims at a kind of scientific status, mixes philosophy with over-simplified psychology, or attempts to offer a 'neutral' analysis which ignores morality (value) . . . whereas the inherence of evaluation, of moral atmosphere, pressure, concepts, presuppositions, in consciousness, constitutes the main problem and its importance.'¹³² Murdoch supports Zen thinker Katsuki Sekida's opposition to the particular "'placing' of morals, by empiricists and structuralists,' since 'it is impossible to describe mind philosophically without including its moral mobility, the sense in which any situation is individualised by being pierced by moral considerations, by being given a particular moral colour or orientation.'¹³³ The comments of a 'spiritual thinker' like Sekida are valuable to philosophers where the 'religiously minded outsider' feels they 'must object to philosophical descriptions or reductions . . .'¹³⁴ It is not possible to 'descend by any unitary 'scientific' or systematic method below the levels at which, in various ways, we test truth and reflect upon moral understanding.' Rather, 'The parts of such process must be seen as everywhere, as something in which we are all engaged,'

(transcendental). 'But there is,' she adds, 'no science, or overall philosophical 'explanation', of 'the whole'.¹³⁵ Crucially, 'one resorts here, to obtain understanding, to metaphors.'¹³⁶

Where 'the question of consciousness' is concerned, 'Looking at a variety' of 'views and metaphors may help . . . towards a grasp of something essential.' What we attempt to capture is the conviction that 'there are also ways and states in which value inheres in consciousness.' Murdoch impresses the status of *value* as a transcendental condition for knowledge. Descartes argues that 'any pure certainty includes (is internally related to) an intuition of God. God is the light of truth. *Dominus illumination mea*. We might here translate 'God,' Murdoch continues, 'into absolute value, the unconditioned, the reality of Good': Murdoch's concern. The Good – value – is the light *in the light of which* we see the world and understand it. But this light is the act of thinking itself: consciousness in its purest form is contemplative, it attends purely, 'without reverie', to its object. This association of necessity (transcendental condition), goodness (the Good, the light) and knowledge (attentive consciousness) prefigures Murdoch's retrieval of the ontological argument (see Chapter Five). Descartes 'thinks (with the thought . . . which unites him to Anselm) that the idea of God and the sense of God's presence is close . . . to any man. A modern formulation might suggest that the idea of good, of value, of truth, is thus close.'¹³⁷ 'Consciousness *au fond* and *ab initio* must contain an element of truth-seeking through which it is also evaluated.' The moral light of the good is the mystics' light of God, in which consciousness is bathed, and through which it sees (evaluates): everything is seen through this light, but the source itself cannot be seen.

'Are there 'deep structures' in the mind, or in the soul?' Murdoch asks again, and 'Should philosophical approaches to the problem recognise the omnipresence of a moral sense in thinking and knowing?' In a statement expressive both of mystical pilgrimage and her philosophical methodology, she comments, 'There is a point at which reflection, however beset, must stand firm and be prepared to go on circling around an essential point which remains obscure.'¹³⁸ Murdoch's valuation of Sekida's thought conveys her commitment to the iconoclastic pilgrimage, to the demythologising spirit. Sekida engages, in Zen, with 'a form of spiritual discipline' in which 'one cannot separate cognition from an idea of truth as something reached by a spiritual or moral path.' This is, she adds, 'a Platonic view.' 'Many different disciplines can serve spiritual ends,' and 'Buddhism and Plato would agree about this, and also the difficulty, at a certain point, of talking about falsification.' To accommodate

this difficulty, 'Plato uses myths' (self-evidently non-literal depictions), while Sekida 'uses a terminology of overcoming the dualism between subject and object,' which is a spiritual exercise, Murdoch adds, using Wittgensteinian language, 'to be thought of as a disposable ladder, since Zen denies it is a philosophy.'¹³⁹

Murdoch determines to 'stay with Buddhism' to elaborate a spiritual-intellectual discipline that brings out the apophatic dimension of cognition. She has 'suggested that the concept of consciousness should contain the (moral) idea of truth-seeking': she warns us yet again, 'If this is left out at first it cannot be put in later.'¹⁴⁰ Now, 'one cannot separate cognition from some idea of truthfulness,' and 'The purification of cognition' takes place 'upon many different 'paths',' (the image of pilgrimage again), life being 'full of 'learnings' and 'attending'.' Zen cannot be formulated as a philosophy, but 'Enlightenment is achieved through a way of life which must include prolonged meditation.'¹⁴¹ The resonances between Murdoch's emphasis on purified 'attention' and the Zen Buddhist concern for 'attending' is strong. Crucially, the 'process' of moving through this way of life which includes meditation 'may involve the use of that characteristically Zen instrument, the koan, a paradox or contradiction which defeats imagination and conceptual thought, but which must be held in sustained attention.'¹⁴² 'The most famous koan: What is the sound of one hand clapping?'¹⁴³ Such paradoxes evoke Pseudo-Dionysius' 'brilliant darkness of a hidden silence.'¹⁴⁴ Murdoch identifies the purpose of this exercise as being 'to break the networks not only of casual thinking and feeling, but also of accustomed intellectual thinking, to break the 'natural standpoint', and the natural ego, producing thereby a selfless (pure, good) consciousness.' This aim, she notes, 'is not unlike that of the monastic disciplines of any austere religious order, but its methods seem more extreme, and its end-points less visible. Of course,' she adds, "'higher' spiritual states tend to be invisible, to appear empty or pointless from lower positions.'¹⁴⁵ The Zen sage is harder to understand than the Judaeo-Christian 'enlightened man', who we believe we recognise in his 'unusually unselfish and courageous conduct': the Zen sage is more thoroughly demythologised, 'Zen dispenses with the mass of supportive, partly aesthetic, imagery with which the idea of a selfless being is surrounded in the west.'¹⁴⁶ Murdoch is also appreciative of Zen's emphasis, 'partly in its instruction through art, upon the small contingent details of ordinary life and the natural world,' a quality recognised as informing Murdoch's philosophy in Chapter Five.

Murdoch considers the Japanese *haiku*, 'a very short poem with a strict formal structure, which points, sometimes in a paradoxical way,

at some aspect of the visible world.¹⁴⁷ She also cites Zen painting which 'combines a skill, born of long and strict teaching, with a throw-away simplicity. In a few strokes, the pointless presence,' (here we approach Murdoch's 'void'), 'the thereness, of the plant, the animal, the man. Zen uses art in teaching, but rejects the discursive intellectual and literary pomp and content of western art, so full of tropes and references, illusions and attachments.' Here, Murdoch prefers the sparse, apophatic temperament of eastern art and spirituality over the confident cataphaticism of western counterparts. 'The 'hardness' of Zen art is to leave no holes or surfaces where such things' (tropes and references) 'could lodge and grow.'¹⁴⁸ We are offered 'a path *through* the aesthetic.'¹⁴⁹ Here, also, is a consummative vision of consciousness: 'The notion of achieving a pure cognitive state where the object is not disturbed by the subjective ego, but where subject and object simply exist as one is here made comprehensible through a certain experience of art and nature.' 'A discipline of meditation wherein the mind is alert but emptied of self enables this form of awareness, and the disciplined practice of various skills may promote a similar unselfing, of *'decreation'* to use Simone Weil's vocabulary.' Attend 'without thinking about.'¹⁵⁰ 'This,' Murdoch elaborates, 'is 'good for us' because it involves respect, because it is an exercise in cleansing the mind of self-ish preoccupation, because it is an experience of what truth is *like*.'¹⁵¹ Here is evoked the corresponding western Plotinian pursuit of pure consciousness. The mind is to be alert (Mrs Ramsay's vision is 'like her own eyes meeting her own eyes, searching as she alone could search into her mind and her heart, purifying out of existence that lie, any lie,')¹⁵² yet emptied of self (the impediment to vision is 'the damned egotistical self').¹⁵³

'A contemplative observation of contingent 'trivial' details (insects, leaves, shapes of screwed-up paper, looks and shadows of anything, expressions of faces) is a prevalent . . . 'unselfing' activity of consciousness' which 'might also be called an argument from perception,' and 'proves', as against generalising and reductionist philosophical or psychological theories, that individual consciousness or awareness can be spoken of in theoretical discussions of morality.' What Murdoch describes here is a mystical pathway: a movement through a confident affirmation of perception, of what is manifest (as word, as object-seen, as present and comprehensible to the mind), toward an achievement of the mind which is 'alert but emptied of self' and is able to contemplate the 'void', pointlessness, the obliteration of gesturing, but inevitably falsifying, language and image (Platonic myth) in the 'abyss'.

Within this 'seething cauldron' language is both born and dissolved. It is the invisible source of the light in which the cataphatic is also made visible (giving 'good' images their capacity to be spiritual aids to vision). Later in her text, Murdoch praises the description offered by Jewish 'prophet' Martin Buber: 'The ground of human existence in which it' (that is, encountered reality, for Buber God) 'gathers and becomes whole is also the deep abyss out of which images arise. Symbols of God come into being, some of which allow themselves to be fixed in lasting visibility . . . and some which tolerate no other sanctuary than that of the soul.'" "This abyss," she comments, 'is, as I see it, more like the dark realm of Plato's *anamnesis*, or St John of the Cross's abyss of faith into which we fall when we have discarded all images of God; or the seething bubbling cauldron in terms of which Eckhart once described God.'¹⁵⁴ She then quotes from Eckhart's *Commentary on the Book of Exodus*:

The repetition of "am" in the words "I am who I am" indicates the purity of the affirmation, which excludes every kind of negation from God. It indicates too a certain turning-back and reversion of His being into and upon itself and its indwelling or inherence in itself: not only this but a boiling-up, as it were, or a process of giving birth to itself – inwardly seething, melting and boiling in itself and into itself, light in light and into light wholly interpenetrating itself, wholly and from every side turned and reflected upon itself.

Murdoch comments, "The God celebrated in this mix of sexual and cosmic symbols, and images of light and movement, may seem far from the dark quiet Godhead affirmed by Buber; but there is the same conception of God as a creative fullness of all being, continually engendering Himself. Here we are outside philosophy in poetic theology or mystical poetry."¹⁵⁵ This final claim requires comment. While the explicitly divine content of Eckhart's espousal, and Buber's commentary, define their theological character, Murdoch's *philosophical* methodology requires an iconoclastic elimination of false images of the Good, and a recognition of the artist-individual as making and breaking images of reality in reference to this transcending, invisible Good, in ways that do not place us 'outside philosophy' on her own account. Murdoch's philosophy is distinctly mystical in character, recognising the interpenetration of affirmative and negative moments within the mystical vision: "The idea of this image-making abyss is also the concept of a *via negativa*, which is both iconoclastic and fertile of new images."¹⁵⁶

'Love becomes invisible'¹⁵⁷

In 'Consciousness and Thought II' Murdoch gives a specific example of the quality of aesthetic envisioning recommended for (moral) consciousness. She quotes Rilke's description (to Clara Rilke) of what he has learnt from Cezanne. The artist must not exhibit love (or any feeling) for his objects within his work: 'if you show it, you make them less well; you judge instead of saying them. You cease being impartial; and love, the best thing of all, remains outside your work, does not enter into it, is left over unresolved beside it (which is no better than the realist school). They painted "I love this" instead of painting "Here it is."¹⁵⁸ "These remarks," Murdoch continues, 'exhibit, in a way which we may understand if we are acquainted with any art or craft, what kind of achievement 'pure cognition' or 'perception without reverie' might be . . . the 'consuming of love in anonymous work'. Love becomes invisible (Cordelia), its activity and its being are inward.' Now Murdoch quotes Simone Weil on Zen Buddhism: 'The idea behind Zen Buddhism: to perceive purely, without any admixture of reverie (my idea when I was seventeen).' Murdoch continues, 'The imageless austerity of Zen is impressive and attractive. It represents to us 'the real thing', what it is like to be stripped of the ego, and how difficult this is. (Plato's *distance* from the sun).'¹⁵⁹ She recognises Weil's appreciation for Hindu and Buddhist philosophy, while 'at the same time [she] loved Plato and the mystical Christ.'¹⁶⁰

Murdoch is intrigued and engaged by the notion of the annihilation of images, of self, of reverie in perception, for the achievement of accurate vision. 'Relentless asceticism may be suspect simply because we 'do not know what is going on,' rather as Plato is suspicious of the artist because the latter does not know from whence his inspiration comes. Plato's ambivalence about whether to dread, or desire, this creative mystery, (since it simultaneously 'reminds' him of something familiar, presumably *anamnesis*), finds a correlate in Murdoch's uncertainty with regard to 'relentless asceticism'. The accusation is that we 'do not know what is going on,' and yet 'This indeed may never be known, even by the ascetic himself. (God only knows.) In religious houses, doubts constantly return: is it a spiritual dark night or is it just egoistic despair? . . . In fact what we sinners usually want is *love*, to be in touch with pure just loving judgment. (Like God.) The secluded disciplined religious may provide this, or may provide some substitute, or may be wrapped in private egoism, or else simply mad. And even if mad, who can tell, spirit itself may seem, or *be*, mad. (Father Ferapont in

The Brothers Karamazov.)¹⁶¹ Murdoch explores (following Plato) the integration of manifestations of comedy and madness into myth where limits of understanding are approached. Zen itself, which 'has become known and practiced in the west for many reasons, for its spiritual aids of course, for its severity, for its bizarre methods, for its religious godlessness and imagelessness and apparent lack of ecstasy and for not being philosophy,' includes stories which involve 'senseless jokes, which may be given as koans . . .' Murdoch quotes Weil again: 'The search for the meaning of the koan results in a "dark night" which is followed by illumination.' Echoing the Christian mystical notion that the mystical ascent is both the overwhelming and consummation of reason, Murdoch comments that "The Zen 'attack on reason' occurs within a religious discipline . . . there is an air almost of cool rationality in the mounting of the Zen method."¹⁶²

Murdoch's appropriation of the apophatic dimension of mystical thought is partly motivated by her desire to maintain a concept of religion, a 'concept of the holy' which 'must not be lost',¹⁶³ and its relationship with consciousness and creativity (imagination and language), *without* maintaining allegiance to specific images of divine essence. 'What is important is that now we take in conceptions of religion without God, and of meditation as religious exercise.'¹⁶⁴ 'We can,' she writes, 'make our own rites and images, we can preserve the concept of holiness.'¹⁶⁵ Her philosophical work is haunted throughout, however, by a Nietzschean challenge: how to maintain a concept of an absolute, an 'unconditioned', of holiness or goodness, without God. 'We need the Platonic picture here,' she writes, 'We are moving through a continuum within which we are aware of truth and falsehood, illusion and reality, good and evil. We are continuously striving and learning, discovering and discarding images.' Images are fundamental to the structure, and our apprehension, of reality. Images, metaphors, bring a religious quality to thought: 'To be conscious is to be a value-bearer or value-donor. This sounds like a metaphysical or perhaps religious remark. I have used metaphors of being 'soaked in', or 'coloured by', value.' With Ricoeur, Murdoch recognises that the iconographic properties of metaphor are appropriate for gesturing the 'deepest', 'saturated', structures of reality.

A Problem of Articulation: The Ubiquity of Moral Consciousness

Murdoch returns to the problem of consciousness. In the language of confronting a void, she notes that 'Plato uses an image of a

philosophical problem as being like a hunted animal, carefully cornered in a thicket which on approach turns out to be empty.' How, too, is the 'idea of quality of consciousness', to be handled? 'The ubiquity of value demands a link between consciousness and cognition. A good quality of consciousness involves a continual discrimination between truth and falsehood.'¹⁶⁶ Goodness is a transcendental condition for knowledge ('Is there not something we ought to aim at here? Is every moment morally significant?')¹⁶⁷ 'I want to say that the emergence of awareness, perception, judgement, knowledge, in consciousness is a process in which value (moral colour) is inherent.'¹⁶⁸ 'Is there not something we ought to aim at here?' And, 'if we say yes, are we making some kind of moral or religious or metaphysical move? Does the whole consist simply of its parts?'¹⁶⁹ Murdoch's philosophical convictions include protestations of faith. An 'idea of 'parts' of consciousness gives a wrong *image*,' leading us back to 'a dispositional account of mind or states of mind,' which 'may still leave us with the familiar feeling of having lost something.'¹⁷⁰

Murdoch approaches the transcendental barrier, and the corresponding challenge of philosophical articulation. 'In the *Theaetetus* Socrates discussing the nature and possibility of true judgement (knowledge) suggests . . . that we should think of reality as composed of primal elements, not accessible to reason and knowledge, which can only be named. As these elements are woven together, so their names are woven together. This complex becomes a *logos*, an account or rational explanation; a *logos* is essentially a complex of names. However: how can the primal elements be unknowable and the complexes knowable? The dialogue continues and reaches no satisfactory conclusion.' Murdoch traces Wittgenstein's acknowledgement of his debt to Plato (in *Investigations* and *Philosophical Grammar*) and his offering of a similar picture in the *Tractatus*. Murdoch offers Wittgenstein's questioning of the relationship between objects and signs 'as examples of how philosophy can try, with an appearance of clear system, to reach the basis of things and show us what, though we may not be able to see it, *must* be there.' Moreover, 'these systems are, like Kant's, *deduced*, transcendental, offering huge general *pictures* of what 'must be the case' for human being to be as it is.'¹⁷¹

Confronting the challenge of articulating a transcendental condition of consciousness, Murdoch explains that 'I want to assert and indicate the importance and omnipresence of a reflective experiential background to moral decision and action, and with this the omnipresence of value (an opposition between good and bad) in human activity.'

The difficulty is that since we ‘cannot keep track’ of every distinct moment of moral reasoning, ‘to say that every moment counts may seem absurd; or else like a profession of faith. God sees it all.’ And yet, ‘We have a continuous *sense of orientation*.’ ‘This background of our thinking and feeling is always vulnerable.’¹⁷² Our knowledge of it is largely intuitive. Murdoch confronts central problems for her philosophy: how to conceptualise and articulate a quality of consciousness (value) as ubiquitous, when no number of individual instances can ‘prove’ consciousness to be moral in every moment. Indeed, ‘one may at times find oneself poised between uttering nonsense and laboriously saying the obvious. Philosophically, the path lies perilously between naive realism and some form of idealism.’ The problem is that ‘the mode of description proper to ‘consciousness’ presents evident difficulties . . . Must one not, to *describe* here, be a master of metaphor?’¹⁷³ We must ‘remind ourselves at intervals that we are, in a sense which perhaps has to be learnt, dealing with *pictures*.’¹⁷⁴ While ‘in general, we are not in any immediate way disturbed by metaphysical imagery,’ we cannot avoid or ignore its operation as part of the philosophical imaginary, and, certainly, as part of everyday language.

Now, Murdoch’s democratic temperament pervades. The power of images and imagining is revealed – *perversely* – in structuralism, ‘where the codified many may be thought of as sunk in a deep ocean while the (aesthetically, intellectually) enlightened few disport themselves upon the surface, rising up into the sunshine while still belonging to the sea.’ This is ‘the touching of the [transcendental] barrier’ by the enlightened and privileged ‘few’: an elitist conviction at odds with Murdoch’s viewpoint. She is suspicious of the status given to ‘genius’ poets (such as Holderlin by Heidegger), and specifically of Heidegger’s ‘demand’ for a *poeticised philosophy* ‘as the sole form of profound thinking suited to this age.’ This treacherous, ‘Luciferic’ celebration of dazzling obfuscation, his ‘prophetic proclamations’, together with Derrida’s ‘arcane prose, actually damage philosophy by renouncing the requirement of a careful sober lucidity and a quiet truthful clarified reflection which has characterised great philosophical writing since Plato.’¹⁷⁵ We have not improved on Sartre’s presentation of a ‘violent swing from a total blindness to a total freedom, from the silence of unreason to an empty and alarming babble of reflexion.’¹⁷⁶ Here is Murdoch’s objection to the structuralist equivalent of the analytic philosopher’s (Mr Ramsay’s) removal of knowledge beyond the planes of daily life, ‘out’ into the ephemeral logical space accessed by a privileged few. There is also, here, a caution to mystical language: the arising of paradox, the unsettling of established imagery,

the silence consummating myth, must emerge from the effort to articulate a deduced reality or principle: one transcending the pictorial system, but a pictorial, imaging, system formed so as to guide the pilgrim. Feckless play is unacceptable, is 'Luciferic': what might otherwise be justified by life's unfinished pointlessness (surrealism), is tempered by unconditioned value. The seas of chaos are blessed and stilled by the temperate light of the Sun.

So, there are to be 'Pictures, yes, (such as Plato used, declaring them to *be* pictures): but explained, used, related to human life, surrounded by clear plain language.'¹⁷⁷ Structuralist (monist, idealist) thought fails by 'inflating coherence at the expense of correspondence,' thereby 'losing' that 'ordinary everyday conception of truth,' which Murdoch credits Wittgenstein for maintaining (overall).¹⁷⁸ Here is a true balancing of cataphatic and apophatic dimensions. Correspondence crucially testifies to 'the awareness that we are *continually* confronting something other than ourselves.' Reality, the world, other people, transcend us, and we refer to these 'objects' as genuine others. She lustrously adds, 'Some exceptional people may gaze upon uncategorised manifolds and create new meanings, discover fresh categories, reinvent language . . . But we all, not only can but *have* to, experience and deal with a transcendent reality, the resistant otherness of other persons, other things, history, the natural world, the cosmos, and this involves perpetual effort.' Here is a moral appeal to exercise creativity well: the activities of imagination, whether engaged in poetry, prose writing, contemplation, visual art, or any other creative activity must never be in the service of fantasy (image as illusion) but always of clarity. Indeed, 'most of this effort is moral effort. This is the sense in which morality (value) is transcendental, concerned with the conditions of experience.'¹⁷⁹ The cataphatic power of philosophy is recognised in its duty 'to give much-needed help to the human race . . . [to] stay with its austere traditional modes of truth-telling.' Yet this involves an apophatic dissolution of false images, an indispensable facility, a check of honesty, in the vast exercise of reality-picturing. The apophatic and cataphatic, as ever, belong together: without a (careful) apophatic process of iconoclastic image-breaking, we cannot begin to *tell* the truth.

'Imagination'

Christian mysticism inherits from Platonic philosophy precisely those ideas which Murdoch also emphasises: the dialectics of the Cave,

whereby a mind-stunning sun (the good), which sources all wisdom, throws the mind, at its limits, into dazzling darkness; and the recognition that all myth resolves in silence, that the sun cannot itself be seen, that all picturing of the human condition must also contain silence as a mark of authenticity: Murdoch observes, as she says so many fail to, that most especially at the summit of a problem Socrates chooses to be silent. Her thought has a distinctly mystical quality, then, where the power of images, of pictures, of language, to describe a reality which transcends the human subject, is at the same time both affirmed and denied. Ordinary everyday language and picturing is 'good enough' and refers to the world: yet her final philosophical text takes seriously the limitations of picturing, and the corresponding epistemological value of iconoclastic mystical perspectives.

The apophatic strand of Murdoch's thought in this regard is expressed in her chapter on 'Imagination', and the pages just preceding it. In these preceding pages, Murdoch speaks of a necessary 'purification' of consciousness 'as the central and fundamental 'arena' of morality.'¹⁸⁰ She also begins to confront, more directly, the limitations of philosophical (and literary) picturing. When it comes to capturing a human life, 'To see the whole picture one may have to stop being neat, not everything therein can necessarily support or imply everything else.'¹⁸¹ There are 'situations where what is wholly transcendent and invisible becomes partially, perhaps surprisingly, visible at points where the 'frame' does not quite 'meet'. . . the curtain blows in the wind (of spirit maybe), and we see more than we are supposed to. Plato's myths indicate such visions.'¹⁸² Acknowledging the related limitations of human understanding and the philosophical methods endeavouring to explore these conscious landscapes, Murdoch writes:

Truth is central, energising a perpetual unsystematic (that is un-Hegelian) dialectic of subject and object. (Love is truth, truth is love). My moral energy is a function of how I understand, see, the world. There is continual strife in the deep patterns of desire. There are many ways in which people become better, all kinds of inspirations and illuminations, points of clarity and rays of grace. What is objective here, what is subjective? Concepts, truth, reason, love, may seem to us sometimes as 'our own', sometimes as external judges. I do not think philosophy can establish any closely knit system here. As Kant and Schopenhauer point out, a complete 'solution' is precluded by our finite nature. The word 'dialectic', which may suggest such system, should thus be used with care or avoided . . . One can only attempt to place ideas in various magnetic relationships to each other.¹⁸³

In a particularly evocative section, Murdoch remarks that 'There are good modes of attention and good objects of attention.' She quotes St Paul: 'Whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report . . . think on these things.' (St Paul, Philippians 4.8). 'Any look at the contingency of our strange and interesting world, its oddity, its surprisingness, its jumble or its neatness can provide such objects and occasions,' so that when 'Faced with difficult problems or terrible decisions we may feel the need . . . of a calm vision, a relaxed understanding, something that comes from a deep level. This darkness must be stirred and fed, as the deep mind of the artist is fed intuitively by his experience. There is a 'moral unconscious'. This is how morality leads naturally into mysticism and has a natural bond with religion. (By religion I mean a religious attitude and form of life, not a literalistic adherence to a particular dogma).'¹⁸⁴

There is certainly 'a mysticism of the extreme ascetic.' But there is also 'a natural way of mysticism, as indicated by St Paul, which involves a deepened and purified apprehension of our surroundings.' Now, 'The truth-seeking mind is magnetised by an independent transcendent multifiform reality.' As we attend to concrete instances, these 'visual cases have a metaphorical force. We instinctively dodge in and out of metaphor all the time, and in this sense too are fed or damaged spiritually by what we attend to.'¹⁸⁵ A distinctive apophaticism emerges now. For just as the power of metaphor, of image, is asserted, Murdoch notes that 'Simone Weil uses the image of becoming empty so as to be filled with the truth. She speaks of the mountain walker who sees many things besides the mountain top. Eckhart speaks of emptying the soul so that it may fill with God.'¹⁸⁶ Delineating a mystical logic, she adds that 'A moral position much higher than our own may only be imagined as deprivation. The idea of negation (void) or surrender of selfish will is to be understood together with the idea of purified desire as purified cognition.'¹⁸⁷

Murdoch appropriates mystical languages, and conceptions, for distinctly moralistic purposes, and for religious ends only insofar as the latter defines 'a religious attitude and form of life, not a literalistic adherence to a particular dogma.'¹⁸⁸ In *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* her intensifying emphasis on the value of 'negativity' in mysticism assists her iconoclastic pilgrimage, responds to particular philosophical challenges of silence and limitation, and, in its resonance with eastern philosophy and religion, suggests a route for the protection of concepts of 'holiness', of 'the unconditioned', in the midst of the alleged 'disappearance'

of western religion from public (and private) life. She speaks, and unspeaks, not of God, but of Good. And yet significant links between her atheistic iconoclasm and a mystically minded theology are detectable: "The conception of an absolute requirement, whether or not adorned with metaphysical justifications, is shared with religion where it is connected with an absolute ground, that is some idea of a persisting and necessarily existing reality."¹⁸⁹

Metaphor and Picturing

'Metaphors,' writes Murdoch, 'are not rhetorical speech-aids occasionally resorted to. They are fundamental modes of understanding.' But then consciousness and language contain an integral apophatic dimension: for with 'metaphor' and 'image' 'one form indicates another' and 'it may be very easy or very difficult to translate into a non-figurative mode.'¹⁹⁰

In this simultaneously creative and problematic interaction with language, the challenge of the conflict between affirmative and negative properties of language is live. 'Often we do not notice metaphors . . . Often we cannot get beyond the image or intimation.' (In Woolf's short story, the 'convolvulus', the analogy, comes 'trembling between one's eyes and the truth.'¹⁹¹) This is the difficulty. 'How do we, how can we, 'picture' the good man?' Images can both enliven, and *obscure*, accurate vision. Murdoch cites the Second Commandment's instruction, that inspirer of iconoclasm, 'not to make 'any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above or that is in the earth beneath or that is in the water under the earth'. (Exodus 20.4).' This commandment she recognises as 'a caution against idolatry and against anthropomorphism. What is true is 'beyond'.¹⁹² 'The prisoners in Plato's Cave wrongly took the images and shadows of things to be the things themselves.' (There are so many 'false suns').¹⁹³ It is difficult *not* to create images. Indeed, 'We may have to be content with images.' And yet, 'Exceptional persons, such as mystics or 'Dante' in Dante's story, who 'see God' cannot express what they saw. Nor can Plato's pilgrim describe the Sun.'¹⁹⁴ This defines an aspiration for Murdoch: it is the direction towards which her philosophical vision tends, as she makes her philosophical procession towards the final chapter, and 'Void'.

'We may,' Murdoch writes, 'think of a person as an image of God or of the soul, or attempt to find in 'nothingness', a negation of speech and picture, an 'image' of the spiritual life.'¹⁹⁵ Here she expresses the paradox

inherent to mystical language: 'a negation of speech and picture' may give 'an image'. It is not that negative attributions exhaustively speak more accurately of the divine (of God or Good) than positive attributions, but that the bringing of mutually contradicting concepts together – of 'nothingness', 'a negation of speech and picture', and the desire for an 'image' of the spiritual life – gives us a moment of 'dazzling darkness': our image is a non-image; nothingness is a picture of the spiritual life. We must both picture and not-picture (Zeus both does and does not wish to be named). Language both refers and does not refer, images both capture and do not capture, a reality 'beyond'. Pictures must break their frames, myths must contain silence. The Sun, itself the source of light, cannot be seen. 'Plato connects imagery with the work of Eros, the magnetism which draws us out of the Cave. The shadows puzzle the mind, suggest something beyond, give us the motive to move and change. The Forms fill our minds with images, they are beyond imagery and yet they 'inform' the soul with their magnetic figures.' Now, Murdoch notes, we may become uncomfortable or embarrassed to talk about such moral and religious aspects of experience, which have become 'unfashionable'. But in defence of such cataphatic confidence, she states that 'Absence of ritual from ordinary life also starves the imagination.'¹⁹⁶ The transcendental barrier to knowledge is not, *a la* Kant, a sharply delineated 'line' that 'cannot be said'. This is 'likely to be felt as intolerable. We have to 'talk' and our talk will be largely 'imaginative' (we are all artists).'¹⁹⁷ Rather, the 'transcendental barrier' is 'a huge a various band', and is 'largely penetrable by the creative activity of individuals . . . and this creativity is the place where the concept of imagination must be placed and defined.'¹⁹⁸ This liminal horizon, misting at either side, is the location of mystical creativity.

'Pointers Toward Higher Truth': Imagelessness¹⁹⁹

In one of the most distinctly apophatic sections of her *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* text, Murdoch now returns to Plato to elucidate how 'Moral improvement, as we learn from the *Republic*, involves a progressive destruction of false images.'²⁰⁰ The requirement for this progressive destruction originates in the indefinability of the 'highest' reality, the Good. In 'The Sovereignty of Good Over Other Concepts', Murdoch had described how 'It is *difficult* to look at the sun: it is not like looking at other things. We somehow retain the idea, and art both expresses and symbolises it, that the lines really do converge. There is a magnetic centre. But it is easier to look at the converging edges than to look at the centre

itself. We do not and probably cannot know, conceptualise, what it is like in the centre.²⁰¹ Such ontological characteristics have consequences for the imaginative properties of consciousness. 'Image-making or image-apprehending,' a fundamental characteristic of consciousness, 'is always an imperfect activity, some images are higher than others, that is nearer to reality. Images,' Murdoch continues, 'should not be resting places, but pointers toward higher truth. The implication is that the highest activities of the mind, as in mathematics and mysticism, are imageless.'²⁰² This distinguishes mysticism (and mathematics) from 'theological mythology', from 'stories about gods, creations myths and so on.'²⁰³ The geometer knows he 'is not talking about circles drawn in the sand nor about mental images.' Theological mythologies, by contrast, 'belong to the realm of image-making and are at a lower level than reality and ultimate religious truth.' This view is 'continuously held in the east, and also in western mysticism: beyond the last image we fall into the abyss of God.' Plato's own use of myth draws specific attention to the purely ancillary role of such pictures. Plato's moral philosophy is *about* demythologisation.' Alluding again to Wittgenstein's image-denying image, Murdoch writes that 'Plato in his mature years, and the author of the *Seventh Letter*, might agree that the mythical and metaphorical imagery of the central dialogues could be regarded, by those able to understand them, as ladders to be thrown away after use.'²⁰⁴ Murdoch reflects, 'We cannot know what Plato, who freely uses his own version of the Orphic myths, 'really thought' about spiritually highest states of consciousness. It is very difficult to understand 'what goes on' in the souls of dedicated religious people, even when we know them face to face and they are trying to tell us.' She continues an apophatic line: 'It is also difficult to *imagine* ways of life which are much above our own moral level as being morally demanded. They exert no magnetism and cannot be seen except in terms of senseless deprivation.' Such 'deprivation' delineates a mystical *via negativa*.

'There is much that cannot be expressed but can only be experienced or known after much training, as the *Seventh Letter* says of philosophy,' and as Murdoch herself repeatedly reminds us in 'On "God" and "Good"' ('I am not sure how far my positive suggestions make sense').²⁰⁵ We encounter here the direction of 'ascent' contained in Pseudo-Dionysius' mystical prayer, intellectual elevation towards encounter with that reality which can only be described by paradox, that appears within the mind (and dependent linguistic constructions) as brilliant darkness. 'In the spiritual hierarchy of the republic, *dianoia*, discursive understanding as selfless wisdom, is the highest image-using condition. *Noesis* is an indescribable mystical state.' The latter is 'thinkable perhaps,' in terms

of Platonic philosophy, 'as contemplation of the Form of the Good'; and in terms of Murdoch's appropriation of Weil's concept, as 'a passionate stilled attention, wherein the self is no more.'²⁰⁶

Murdoch recognises that in 'many of the dialogues,' especially *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*, 'Plato speaks with intense emotion about a vision of perfection which might be granted to the soul.' Now she refers specifically to 'Christian theology,' which 'would speak of the beatific vision.' She looks to Dante's *Paradiso*: 'About this Dante tells us that the beholder has neither the knowledge nor the power to speak, since the intellect, nearing its desired object, deepens so that memory cannot retrace its steps.'²⁰⁷ Memory is overshadowed with brilliance, and is left quite unable to articulate its experience, even for the conscious mind. Dante, in his Letter to Can Grande, 'mentions St Paul, 2 Corinthians 12: 2–4, concerning someone (Paul himself?) who was 'caught up into Paradise, and heard unspeakable words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter.' Dante, Murdoch records, 'emphasises that 'Dante' *nescit et nequit*, does not know what he saw and cannot tell it because, even if he could remember it, language fails.' 'Here,' she continues, 'the religious image also conjures up the highest inspiration of the artist who on the border-line of what can be expressed, with trembling excitement and quickening pace, reaches his goal by a path which he cannot later remember or explain.'²⁰⁸ Recall Plato's suspicion for the unknowable source of artistic inspiration: an unknowability which nevertheless evokes the Platonic doctrine of *anamnesis*. Recall also Lily Briscoe's passionate, flustered, approach to the object of her artistic vision, and the final drawing of that 'line in the centre' of the canvas, which descends with the serenity of its own elusive authority. The artist does not fully understand what she has done. Both source of inspiration, and content of vision, are inexhaustible, in some part inarticulable, indeed unre-membered (as untraceable as Murdoch's Good, which we cannot get 'taped').²⁰⁹ Evelyn Underhill makes the same point as Murdoch with regard to Dante's *Paradiso*: 'the mystic's "path is the pathless; his trace is the traceless".'²¹⁰ We are certainly reminded of Miss La Trobe's predicament in Woolf's *Between the Acts* when Murdoch writes that 'Any artist, or thinker, knows of what may be called 'help from the unconscious mind', sometimes called inspiration. One lives for a time with dull intractable material which is suddenly irradiated and transformed by a new vision.'²¹¹ New life meets the artist from beyond herself, startling her into fresh creation.

'Dante,' Murdoch recognises, 'speaks of Plato's use of metaphor to express what could not be said otherwise.' She quotes Dante: 'For we see

many things by the intellect for which there are no vocal signs, of which Plato gives sufficient hint in his books by having recourse to metaphors; for he saw many things by intellectual light which he could not express in direct speech.²¹² Murdoch notes that “The last lines of the *Paradiso* express both the joy and the helplessness of this condition in which ultimately the soul surrenders its desire and its will to the harmonious movement of love. This,’ she writes, ‘is the apotheosis of the imagination where words and images fail and the concept, which implies some kind of striving or separation, comes to an end.’²¹³ Here is intellectual unity, or (in its personal dimension) mystic union, achieved. Murdoch – with her profound respect for metaphors as ‘not merely peripheral decorations or even useful models’ but ‘fundamental forms of our awareness of our condition’²¹⁴ – identifies the mode of language adopted by Plato himself to indicate that ‘many things’ are seen by an ‘intellectual light which he could not express in direct speech.’²¹⁵

‘Perhaps most graphically,’ writes Murdoch, ‘Plato celebrates imagination as *anamnesis* in the *Meno*, a power working at a barrier of darkness, recovering verities which we somehow know of, but have in our egoistic fantasy life ‘forgotten.’ Plato, ‘teaching by images and myths . . . acknowledges high imagination as creative stirring spirit, attempting to express and embody what is perfectly good, but extremely remote, a picture which implicitly allows a redemption of art. The spiritual life is a long disciplined destruction of false images and false goods until (in some sense which we cannot understand) the imagining mind achieves an end of images and shadows (*ex umbris et imaginibus in veritatem*), the final *demythologisation* of the religious passion as expressed by mystics such as Eckhart and St John of the Cross.’²¹⁶ Murdoch now distinguishes ‘between egoistic *fantasy* and liberated truth-seeking creative *imagination*.’²¹⁷ We must ‘distinguish the genius from the saint.’ Now ‘imagination too is to be thought of as sanctified.’²¹⁸ In the latter case, the genius and saint may become one.

‘Good art ‘explains’ truth itself, by *manifesting* deep conceptual connections. Truth is clarification, justice, compassion. This manifestation of internal relations is an image of metaphysics.’²¹⁹ Metaphysics, and art, are to make manifest what cannot be otherwise articulated. Such manifestation of internal relations meets Ricoeur’s definition of the iconographic power of metaphor (see Chapter Six): Murdoch’s philosophical picture-making is iconographic. She holds the apophatic insight that ultimately languages (written and pictorial) fail to depict literally the deepest ‘Truth’, alongside the cataphatic insight that this failure is itself indicative of our proximity to a reality whose manifestation draws

language and intellect beyond its limits, into paradox, ultimately into abyssal silence, emptiness. The ladder must be thrown away for truth to be beheld. The 'striving or separation' inherent to the concept 'comes to an end';²²⁰ there is no concept, no language; there is annihilation of the ego and ultimate rest. Passionate, wandering Eros is stilled. Murdoch's philosophy gestures beyond itself to a reality in the light of which her reflections are bathed. Value (the ground of morals) 'is neither context-less choice' (a collapsed apophaticism), 'nor is it at the other extreme identical with some sort of filled out coming-into-existence' (a collapsed cataphaticism). 'It is neither void nor plenum.' Rather, 'The sun is separate from the world, but enlivens all of it.'²²¹ Truth is achieved both by correspondence and coherence, though by neither exhaustively nor naively. Zeus both does, and does not, wish to be named.²²² But the naming is the birth of all poetry, literature and art.

Where 'non-verbal consciousness is the ground of metaphor,' where 'our deepest not yet explicit thinking is alive with movement already grasped in a pictorial manner,' the poet 'seeking an image, anyone anxiously composing an adequate description, 'gropes in the dark.' But where we are required to consult what lies in 'the deep not yet formed thought-sense activity of the mind,' we must not 'simply surrender' to the explanatory pictures of 'empirical science.'²²³ Now religion may be helpful: 'If we have been touched by religion our minds are likely to be full of readily available religious imagery,' and there is a 'continuous breeding of imagery in the consciousness,' (cataphasis). Yet, 'the danger of idolatry, of taking the shadows for real (and mythology as literal) is always present,' (apophasis).²²⁴ 'We live by moving beyond our images and can recognise the effort of deliberately moving out into a 'blank' or 'void.' The apophatic dimension of Murdoch's perspective arrives where certain metaphors and pictures are not 'translatable into less figurative modes', but instead 'seem 'deep' and resist analysis'.²²⁵ 'Religious mystics,' writes Murdoch, 'have 'taken leave' of their gods to point to something central and mysterious and most real, and difficult to talk about.'²²⁶ Our imagery of the highest reality is inadequate, and must finally dissolve. Mystics 'have usually known this.'²²⁷

Is Murdoch's a mystical methodology? Her philosophy maintains an emphasis on the importance of an intuited truth to which philosophy can gesture, but may never capture. She writes of the necessary 'appeal to evidence, to reports of experience, and to the direct experience of the reader,' which 'is precarious, but is in some regions of philosophy not only the last resort but the proper and best move.'²²⁸ She retrieves the Ontological Proof for its recognition that 'I have faith (important place

for this concept) in a person or idea in order to understand him or it, I intuitively know and grasp more than I can yet explain.²²⁹ Furthermore, 'I am not sure how far my positive suggestions make sense':²³⁰ 'Formal philosophy can come only so far, and after that can only point.'²³¹ Murdoch appreciates an awareness of such limitations in other authors, praising Schopenhauer as a 'religious' thinker 'who dashes at problems again and again trying doggedly to illuminate them in ordinary terminology. One of his merits is that he is prepared to exhibit his puzzlement and to ramble.'²³² It is acceptable, Murdoch claims, 'to leave the final utterance open to a degree of (carefully situated) ambiguity: which may in itself be a philosophical position.'²³³ Murdoch's predicament is Plato's own: 'What is really important in philosophy cannot be put into written words and scarcely indeed into words. (Language itself may be a barrier).'²³⁴ Certainly, this recognition of an insuperable 'philosophical difficulty',²³⁵ indeed the identification of a 'negative' philosophical methodology, can be identified within Murdoch's work as a mystical philosophical correlate to the mystical theological concept of the 'kind of acquired ignorance', the *docta ignorantia*, the theology in 'deconstructive mode', that is definitive of apophaticism.²³⁶

Void

Murdoch introduces the final section of her work, 'Void', as one which could also be called 'despair' or 'affliction' or 'dark night'. Methodologically speaking, the 'void' is a Murdochian complement to Platonic silence. She presents, here, a 'tract of experience' even 'as an opposing piece to happiness', endeavouring to respond to the accusation that her vision of human life is, thus far, too optimistic, 'even sentimental'.²³⁷ Murdoch considers the concept of death: 'But, it may be said, surely . . . something good can be retained or learnt from the experience of emptiness and non-being? Should it not be taken as a spiritual icon or subject for meditation? There is nothing that cannot be broken or taken from us. Ultimately we are nothing.' Sue Yore comments that 'As part of her demythologising of Christianity, Murdoch de-centralises suffering as a means of atonement,' (although this concept of 'suffering as a means of atonement' is theologically contestable).²³⁸ 'People,' Murdoch writes, 'locked up in religious houses think longingly of the fruitful happy lives' they have given up *for nothing*.' This (longing) is, 'potentially, the dark night spoken of by St John of the Cross, wherein, beyond all images of God, lies the abyss of faith into which one falls. (Perhaps as into Eckhart's seething cauldron.)'²³⁹ In this final

chapter, mysticism and morality are married. The mystic's iconoclastic pilgrimage is the rejection of false consolation: 'Mystics of all kinds have usually known this and have attempted by extremities of language to portray the nakedness and aloneness of Good, its absolute for-nothingness. One might say that true morality is a sort of unesoteric mysticism, having its source in an austere and unconsolated love of the Good.'²⁴⁰

Such consummative reflections, combined with Murdoch's emphasis on 'the timeless and universal, but also empty character of the Good', have brought critics to remark that, in the end, 'Murdoch's world may seem rather depleted.'²⁴¹ Indeed, 'Can such a negating Good feed the imagination?'²⁴² Some resolution of these concerns is found in recalling the respect in which Murdoch is most genuinely mystical: in balancing, overall, her cataphatic and apophatic moods, in holding to a way of affirmation as much as to a way of negation. 'Can such a negating Good feed the imagination?' One must recall Murdoch's faith in 'the deep breeding places of imagery'²⁴³ into which love can reach, and create, *ex nihilo*.²⁴⁴ John of the Cross' 'image-making abyss', his '*via negativa*', is 'both iconoclastic and fertile of new images'.²⁴⁵

Nevertheless, a certain distance must re-emerge between Murdoch and her religious mystical counterparts, a distance she seems on the whole to ignore, and which is perhaps definitive of a critical difference in the closing mood attending the moment of consummation. In Pseudo-Dionysius' text we are similarly plunged, at the final moment, into apophatic darkness. But this is also into the heart of the beloved. Murdoch's, too, is a dazzling darkness, and she repeatedly evokes St John of the Cross' fall into the abyss: but his 'falling' is into love, his step into the unknown is a step into celestial company. Those Christian souls 'locked up in religious houses' would precisely contest that 'they have given up' otherwise 'happy lives' '*for nothing*'.²⁴⁶ Murdoch is not unaware of the difference, commenting (however inadequately) that 'Of course the Christian deity gives to individual pilgrims direct supernatural help, not offered by the Form of the Good.'²⁴⁷ But for all its emphasis on the richness, fullness and urgent reality of other people and relationships, there is a haunting loneliness, a difficult groundlessness, in Murdoch's world where the individual contemplates 'the good without God'. Does she not still, after all, with Sartre, embody 'very exactly the situation of a being who, deprived of general truths, is tormented by an absolute aspiration'?²⁴⁸ Perhaps, in the end, this loneliness and groundlessness are simply to be held within the unconsolated vision. But Murdoch's closing appeal for the preservation of holiness echoes plaintively, uncertainly, around an empty hall, for the statues are covered over.

PART THREE

Contributions to a Contemporary
Theological Aesthetic

Conclusion

Mystical Contributions to a Theological Aesthetic: Virginia Woolf and Iris Murdoch

Literature, in its scrupulous attention to experience, may sometimes draw closer to sacred truth.

Heather Walton, *Imagining Theology*¹

The spiritual life is a stern choice. It is not a consoling retreat from the difficulties of existence; but an invitation to enter fully into that difficult existence, and therefore apply to the Charity of God and bear the cost. Till we accept this truth, religion is full of puzzles for us, and its practices often unmeaning.

Evelyn Underhill, *The School of Charity*²

Within Virginia Woolf's literature, the inability to locate, exhaustively, artistic purpose and achievement within either the cataphatic or apophatic dimensions of the aesthetic, is the enactment of that visionary logic on account of which the mystics call this discovery a 'brilliant darkness'. Resisting artificial resolution by suggesting the primacy of either state, both Woolf and Dionysius can illustrate the interdependency of the cataphatic and apophatic realms of discourse as signalling two simultaneously present dimensions of one approach to reality. Iris Murdoch's philosophy exhibits the same tension. There is sun, yet void; value, yet pointlessness; light, yet darkness; intuition of wholes, yet 'proof' only of parts. This balancing of cataphatic and apophatic dimensions – their testifying to the presence of certain insuperable tensions in experience,

thought, and language – constitutes the mystical character of Woolf's and Murdoch's metaphysical perspectives. This final chapter outlines the contribution these perspectives can make to certain contemporary efforts to re-imagine Christian theology.

Albeit a surprising discovery in light of theological and literary convention, the contours of Woolf's experiential aesthetic recall the insights of the Christian mystics, those remarkable artists and psychologists, students of the revelation of the divine life in the complexities and ambivalences of daily human experience, where narratives are constantly broken, opened and interrupted. While, conversing with Woolf, this study approaches theology from beyond a Barthian framework which prioritises the revealed Word, identified as such, in the context of scripture, it nevertheless makes its contribution to the discourses of Christian spirituality. I could say with Heather Walton, who speaks from an equally 'muted zone',³ the silent space of the traditionally unauthorised female voice and experience, that 'I might recall that twentieth-century theology from Barth to Bultmann has been fascinated by the transformative space between the text and the Word –and so am I!⁴ The muted zone explored in this book is the contribution of two female writers to a mystical metaphysics, the contribution of the imaginative activities of two self-avowed atheists to the landscaping of a theological aesthetic. I have, thereby, contested the idea that clear distinctions between theistic and atheistic experience may be made with ease.

'Reality I call it . . . that which I seek'⁵

Insofar as Woolf's aesthetic concerns an artist's, an individual's, approach to, and shaping of, ultimate *reality*, she consistently brings her art to pose a thoroughly theological question. Moreover, in her ability to inhabit the mutually constructive relationship between the structure-giving patterns of life and the properties of art responding to, and thereby re-creating, this life, she maps the anxieties and exultations of the human individual as she attempts to structure, as giving meaning to, the content of daily experience. In this sense, Woolf's scope is cosmic. Yet her ability to hold the struggle to locate the 'relation between those masses'⁶ alongside the capturing of a glint of light on the blade of a knife, builds a relationship between macrocosmic and microcosmic vision which saturates her art work with some sustaining and interconnecting force: the fluidity of which is not only reminiscent of Einstein's space-time, but suggests the living, sustaining presence of transcendence in immanence. Woolf calls this permeating liquid 'light', the light through which the artist penetrates to empty rooms, can make her aesthetic of the unobserved: it is,

as with the contemplative vision of the mystics, a light that permeates all, but is itself unseen.

In her study of interdisciplinary relations between literature and theology, Heather Walton explores literature's ability to confront theology with the challenge of those things which are, David Jasper writes, 'too often excluded by its systematic claims – laughter, expenditure, meaninglessness, loss . . .'.⁷ If theology is to re-order the world, it must embrace the 'muted' zones of pain, fear and social injustice, to develop a theological imaginary which resists the temptation to closure, to making 'a quick judgement . . . a strong, clean cut', coming rather to 'tend a weeping wound'.⁸ Where, as Paul Fiddes suggests, 'literature tends to openness and doctrine to closure',⁹ this theological imagination learns from a literature which, 'far from restoring coherence, lends its energies to the unweaving of the world'.¹⁰ We hear here Woolf's own warning against that seductive approach to life which, neatly framing its elements, slices-off perspectives, loses the transient, and petrifies movement. We hear Murdoch's protestations against the false consolations of image and mythology, her insistence that art picture accurately, and the rejection of false systematisation, bad unity, that esoteric 'bad mysticism' which is but magic.¹¹

Woolf's awareness of the inevitable failure of artistic forms before the ceaseless arrival of life, and the unending fertility of imagination and inspiration, supports Walton's observation that it is in the nature of literature to challenge theology to engage with the ambiguities and pains haunting the aesthetics of everyday experience: the fracturing of patterns and narratives before the ceaseless gratuity of life's interrupting arrival. This dimension of everyday experience – so well captured, in its traumatic aspect, by Woolf's aesthetic – invites theology 'to be both an end and a beginning. But that means bearing to think the unthinkable, embodying in textuality the unbearable so that embodiment and incarnation endures and embraces its own fragmentariness and dismemberment'.¹² The latter statement participates Woolf's understanding of the nature of creativity as possessing the qualities of its own undermining: what creates form, breaks form; what initially perceives unity (the artistic eye) will enact fracture (in the effort to artistically express). The spiritual maturity embracing the ruggedness and brokenness of our visionary aesthetic, the spiritual maturity approached in Murdoch's chapter 'Void', reintroduces 'the scandal and the stumbling block', not only bringing theology to confront the immanent life of the incarnated individual in its uncertainty and pain, but, in moving 'to overturn the rhetorical machinery of religious power',¹³ refuses to

overlook, cancel or silence the uncertainty and yearning of ordinary experience in a 'flight to the beyond'. Walton's 'shock and revulsion' at Alvin Plantinga's 'words of comfort to the perplexed', patiently affirming God's moral perfection without addressing a crisis of suffering, mirrors Mrs Ramsay's irritation to find herself saying complacently and automatically 'we are in the hands of the Lord' despite her son's sadness, and a haunted war-time context.¹⁴ Murdoch awaits the clarification of central issues of morality 'now that religion is detaching itself from supernatural dogma'.¹⁵ However, the anxieties of daily existence do not defeat a religious perspective, as if the latter only took one form. Rather, they interrogate our systems of religious thought and feeling, demanding to be acknowledged as aspects of that human experience embraced, in its trembling fullness, by a loving God.

The limitedness of our expressive landscapes which gesture beyond themselves does not speak only of the pain of this situation, but also of the hope to which the ceaselessly arriving inspiration to reorder and re-imagine our world constantly testifies. Woolf's artist's failure to render exhaustively her vision in her work of art, while intermittently achieving the saturation of its elements within the 'burning' light of life, is captured by Walton's observation that "The text does not contain the truth of our experience; it heightens and illuminates it." The text's failure yet signals its success: in becoming iconographic, it, like Woolf's human beings, can 'show the light through'. This simultaneous failure and success testifies to the fact that 'we must always discern a "profounder intuition than language does justice to", and distinguish "between the traces that religion leaves on the text, and the thing itself"'.¹⁶ Woolf contributes to this theological aesthetic when, in the midst of the everyday, she negatively shapes the openness of her porous models, fashioned according to an attending aesthetic doctrine, and declares her fidelity to the ever-moving 'thing itself'. Murdoch's philosophy is similarly forcefully aware of a 'profounder intuition than language', or imagery, 'does justice to', and acknowledges 'the thing itself', the Good, the Sun, as that which, by its nature, cannot be 'taped'.

In her desire both to create coherence, to 'give proportion' through writing, yet also to reveal the failure of these efforts before a transcending vision, Woolf's experience, as literary artist, captures the complex, interpenetrative dynamics of a relation which Walton conceives as having once been oppositional: that between narrative conceived as the purveyor of coherence, meaning and healing of the fragmentation and incoherence of human experience, and narrative conceived as allowing 'humanity to encounter what is strange, unmanageable', – and, adds

Walton – ‘*sacred*’.¹⁷ Bringing these two perspectives together creates an aesthetic such as Michael Roemer presents in his *Telling Stories*, where ‘Plot-making does not signify a fragile mastery of circumstances, but enables an encounter with the strange; “necessity, the sacred, fate, nature, process, time, the past, the generic, and the unconscious”’.¹⁸ This is Murdoch’s condemnation of fantasy in art: it is also her awareness of the strange poignant coincidence of death, chance, and necessity. Conveying the by turns ecstatic, by turns despairing experience of attempted relation with her world, Woolf depicts for theology what Walton identifies as emerging through Celan and Blanchot: a recognition of literature ‘as testimony to what is lost, silent or strange’.¹⁹ Literature’s ability to embrace the challenge of the disordered, anti-schematic, seemingly arbitrary pains, absences and crises of life, confronts theology ‘and obliges us to respond to its claims’.²⁰ Murdoch points to the art of tragedy, capturing life’s mysterious, persistent juxtaposition of pointlessness and value. She advises courageous confrontation with ‘the void’: the perilous territories of experience not to be dissolved in a consoling vision. Murdoch’s reverence for the contingent particular, in this respect, is unyielding. For Ricoeur, ‘the world of the text is referring to a world less ‘behind’ than ‘in front of’ the text’;²¹ Walton commends literature inviting its readers to distinguish ‘between the traces that religion leaves on the text, and the thing itself’.²² Murdoch explains that ‘A poem, play or novel usually appears as a closed pattern. But it is also open in so far as it refers to a reality beyond itself, and such a reference raises the questions about truth . . .’²³

Woolf and Murdoch offer to this theological conversation an acute awareness of the individual’s relationship with her world as a distinctly *aesthetic* activity (‘we are all artists’), a process of re-shaping, reflecting, dismantling, and reinterpreting associations, narratives and relationships, accompanied by the interaction of cataphatic and apophatic dimensions of thought and language, which is itself indicative of transcendent and immanent aspects of vision. Where the landscapes of daily living are reconceived as the site of mystical experience, where the apophatic dimension of experience and discourse affirms, rather than renounces, the embodied human individual as participator in transcendence, we are *in* the waves. We are back to bread that is broken.

A Progressive Cycling

This tension between clay and mind is the source of all creativity. It is the tension in us between the ancient and the new . . . Only the imagination

is native to this rhythm. It alone can navigate in the sublime interim where the lineaments of these differing inner forces touch.

John O'Donohue, *Anam Cara*²⁴

In virtue of the imaginative properties of consciousness, every person is an artist: consequently, the cataphatic-apophatic dialectic central to artistic activity emerges also on the scale of a creative *life's* journey, shaping the strivings and failures of the individual who attempts to make a shape for, to build relations between, the elements of her experience. The artist attempts, again and again, to make her picture of life, her shape, her narrative, and for a while she succeeds (cataphatic): but each time, life itself, reality, comes crashing upon her vision, from a place *beyond* vision, and breaks the frame (apophatic). This ceaseless overwhelming, of the artist, by life, is apophatic in its being not simply the destruction of her mode of expression, of the shape she had created, but in breaking before the emergence of that life 'less behind than in front of the text':²⁵ the artist is mystified by the ceaseless resurgence of inspiration after each successive creative effort. The maintenance of this tension, between reconciliation and openness, is definitive of mystical experience, and informs the theological imagination: for amidst the tension, the baffled artist can at least affirm that 'the disintegration of our world is not too rapid for creative discovery to continue.'²⁶

Where everyday experience is recognised as confrontation with the unknown in its excess, our aesthetic efforts to make a narrative, or picture, of the world cannot conclude with nihilism where the transcendent aspect of vision is revealed partly to consist in the breaking down of expression before an irreducible and inexhaustible vision which drives the artist on to further vision. This is a project 'of imperfection, or imperfectability even': 'If for [Murdoch] every novel was a fresh attempt to attain her ideal, she found each time that her ideal had moved on'.²⁷ As Murdoch herself expresses it, this 'image-making abyss is also the concept of a *via negativa*, which is both iconoclastic and fertile of new images'.²⁸ After each failure, we are re-inspired to make our pictures of life.

Woolf's aesthetic attention to unity and fracture, light and darkness, form and formlessness, and notions of self/transcendence contribute, in this context, to a theological imaginary which embraces the ambivalence of these irreducible tensions within human experience. So too does Murdoch's philosophical exploration of co-existing convictions of unity/disunity, of 'light' and 'dark' imagery, of value and pointlessness, of Sun and void, of image/word and silence. These dialectics imbue

our daily experience, and emerge from the landscapes of consciousness. That we shall be overwhelmed is inevitable: but this predicament is daily shared, and through this sharing develops community. Within the 'ever unsettled reality of text production', in the space between the Word and the word, '[t]here are always spaces, discursive and nondiscursive spaces, that although they are not sanctioned or proper to a dominant discourse can be inhabited by theological interrogations'.²⁹

'grow by looking'³⁰

What Murdoch perhaps most importantly offers for the contemporary western consciousness, and in response to current philosophies that attempt to re-enchant the world by encouraging our receptivity to accidental, fitful disclosures of the sacred as compensation for disenchantment,³¹ is a redeemed, or rather *recovered*, way of seeing, of knowing. 'To be able to study the supernatural, one must first be capable of discerning it.'³² Life continues to offer us 'innumerable points at which we have to detach ourselves, to change our orientation, to redirect our desire and refresh and purify our energy, to keep on looking in the right direction,' so that we may, 'attend upon the grace that comes through faith.'³³ Murdoch offers to the contemporary mind, so anxious about the rationality of its convictions, the realisation that, in so many justified instances, we must first believe in order to understand.

This study has located the irreducibly mystical content of human consciousness. The genuinely theological imagination contains space for the paradox which is evidence of the proximity of the divine. 'O taste and see that the Lord is good', is not an absurdity: it is a way of looking, and a way of knowing. It is, indeed, the beginning of wisdom. We cannot be argued into faith: there are proofs which 'one has to do for oneself'.³⁴

The closing line of Murdoch's Platonic dialogue *Above the Gods: A Dialogue About Religion* contains a final dramatic instruction: 'The servant is left alone. He smiles, raising his arms as if in prayer.'³⁵ The description feels ironical, embarrassing, satirical. We sense we are expected to laugh. But we have been taught to contemplate the fool carefully. The ontological proof reveals a way of looking. Such is prayer, and all prayer is a preparation for death. So, therefore: we die upon a climax.

Concluding Summary

This book has considered how two women thinkers – Virginia Woolf and Iris Murdoch – women ‘of their time’ in distancing themselves from so-called ‘traditional’ models of religious belief, nevertheless produce distinctly mystical works in ways that indicate the perseverance of irreducibly mystical categories within consciousness. Key to the realisation of the mystical contents of their work has been the exploration of ways in which they depart from the reductive, quasi-scientific models of thought and reality offered by philosophical and artistic contemporaries: including Bertrand Russell, A. J. Ayer, Professor Hampshire, Richard Hare, Gilbert Ryle, Roger Fry, and the worldviews offered by analytic and continental schools. In Woolf’s case, an elucidation of the mystical quality of her writing required, additionally, a response to literary-critical treatments of her work which have strongly resisted mystical interpretations of her writing.

I have expounded certain ways in which Woolf and Murdoch directly associate with concepts of ‘mysticism’ and ‘the mystical’, but have argued that their works are most truly mystical in their containing cataphatic and apophatic dimensions, revealed together, and held in dialectical tension: dimensions located in conversation with Plotinian philosophy, and with Pseudo-Dionysian mystical theology. The presence of Platonic and Neo-platonic themes, as philosophical influences for their thought and writing, has been recognised by Woolf’s critics, and is self-evident in Murdoch’s Platonism. Having recognised the ways in which Woolf’s and Murdoch’s works can be identified as possessing mystical characteristics, I outlined the value of this conversation for certain contemporary concerns in Christian theology, for the Christian imaginary in particular.

Virginia Woolf and Iris Murdoch, as metaphysicians, offer enriched concepts of the self, and the world, that refuse reductive alternatives. Their refusal, even as atheists, to accept the reductive quasi-scientific models of their contemporaries, constitutes a poignant corrective to the various intellectual reductionisms inherited by, and manifested within, today's 'secular' western consciousness. These sophisticated atheists reveal the unacceptable impoverishment that is a consequence of too hastily accepting forms of reductive naturalism. They place the human subject back at the centre of a reality which ceaselessly arrives, exploring the effects of this participative relationship on thought and language, and demonstrating, for the contemporary mind, how contemplative vision, occurring within this ontological orientation, restores the sense in which we believe in order to understand.

Notes

1 Introduction

1. Heather Walton, *Imagining Theology: Women, Writing and God* (London: T&T Clark, 2007), p.132.
2. See Marije Altorf, *Iris Murdoch and the Art of Imagining* (London: Continuum, 2008), p.89.
3. Carl Woodring, 'Virginia Woolf', in *Six Modern British Novelists*, ed. by George Stade (London: Columbia University Press, 1974), pp.175–217, (p.175).
4. See Altorf's 'Coda: Women and Philosophy', in Altorf, *Iris Murdoch and the Art of Imagining*, p.113.
5. Altorf, *Iris Murdoch and the Art of Imagining*, p.118.
6. Altorf, *Iris Murdoch and the Art of Imagining*, p.118.
7. Altorf, *Iris Murdoch and the Art of Imagining*, p.117.
8. Explorations of Eastern influences on Murdoch's work abound, but see, for example, Kirca, Mustafa, and Sule Okuroglu, eds., *Iris Murdoch and Her Work: Critical Essays* (Stuttgart: ibidem-Verlag, 2010); also David Izzo, 'The Great Yearning: Spiritual Mysticism and Aesthetic Morality – Vedanta, the Perennial Philosophy, Schopenhauer, and Iris Murdoch,' in Ricci, ed., *Morality and the Literary Imagination*, (London: Transaction Publishers, 2009), pp.17–26.
9. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.465.
10. David Jasper, *Rhetoric, Power and Community: An Exercise in Reserve* (London: Macmillan, 1993), p.161, cited in Walton, *Imagining Theology*, p.48.
11. Murdoch, *GandG*, p.71.
12. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.10. (Murdoch's emphasis.)

13. Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).
14. Turner, *The Darkness of God*, p.11.
15. Turner, *The Darkness of God*, p.12.
16. Turner, *The Darkness of God*, p.13.
17. Turner, *The Darkness of God*, p.13.
18. Turner, *The Darkness of God*, p.15.
19. Turner, *The Darkness of God*, pp.17–18.
20. Turner, *The Darkness of God*, p.19.
21. Turner, *The Darkness of God*, p.20.
22. Pseudo-Dionysius, MT, 997A – 997B, p.135.
23. Turner, *The Darkness of God*, p.21.
24. Turner, *The Darkness of God*, p.22.

2 The Point of Departure: Readdressing the Mystical in Virginia Woolf

1. Evelyn Underhill, 'Bergson and the Mystics', in *The English Review*, 10 no.2 (1912), 511–22 (p.511).
2. Michael Austin, *Explorations in Art, Theology and Imagination* (London: Equinox Publishing Ltd., 2005), p.166.
3. Jane Goldman, *The Feminist Aesthetics of Virginia Woolf: Modernism, Post-Impressionism and the Politics of the Visual* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).
4. Jane Marcus, 'The Niece of a Nun: Virginia Woolf, Caroline Stephen, and the Cloistered Imagination', in *Virginia Woolf: A Feminist Slant*, ed. by Jane Marcus (London: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), pp.7–36.
5. Goldman, *FAWW*, p.23.
6. For differing approaches to this issue, see Amy Hollywood's *Sensible Ecstasy: Mysticism, Sexual Difference and the Demands of History* (London: The University of Chicago Press, 2002), and Grace Jantzen's *Power, Gender and Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000 [1995]).
7. Marcus, *NN*, p.27.
8. Marcus, *NN*, pp.27–8, in Goldman, *FAWW*, p.24.
9. Marcus, *NN*, pp.28–9.
10. Marcus, *NN*, p.28.
11. Marcus, *NN*, p.26.
12. Goldman, *FAWW*, p.23.
13. Goldman, *FAWW*, p.24.

14. Marcus, *NN*, pp.26–7. Goldman, *FAVW*, p.23.
15. Goldman, *FAVW*, p.24.
16. Woolf, *AROO*, p.17, in Goldman, *FAVW*, p.24.
17. Marcus, *NN*, p.28.
18. Goldman, *FAVW*, p.23, quoting Marcus, *NN*, p.26. Marcus writes that ‘Woolf found that cloistering her imagination promised a secret and profound creative life.’ (p.28).
19. Goldman, *FAVW*, p.23.
20. Marcus, *NN*, p.23.
21. Goldman, *FAVW*, p.23.
22. Marcus, *NN*, p.11.
23. Marcus, *NN*, p.13.
24. See Pamela Sue Anderson, ‘Transcendence and Feminist Philosophy: On Avoiding Apotheosis’, in *Women and the Divine: Transcendence in Contemporary Feminism* (London: Macmillan, 2008).
25. Austin, *Explorations in Art, Theology and Imagination*, p.166.
26. Goldman, *FAVW*, p.187.
27. 23 November 1926, *Diary III*, p.118, in Goldman, *FAVW*, p.187.
28. Sue Roe, *Writing and Gender: Virginia Woolf’s Writing Practice* (Hertfordshire: Harvester Wheatsheaf, St Martin’s Press, 1990), p. 106, in Goldman, *FAVW*, p.187.
29. Goldman, *FAVW*, p.187.
30. Goldman, *FAVW*, pp.187–188.
31. 7 November 1928, *Diary III*, p.203, in Goldman, *FAVW*, p.188. (Goldman’s emphasis.)
32. Goldman, *FAVW*, p.188.
33. Goldman, *FAVW*, p.188.
34. Goldman, *FAVW*, p.188.
35. 7 November 1928, *Diary III*, p.203, in Goldman, *FAVW*, p.188.
36. ‘The Moths’ was an early working title for *The Waves*. (My emphasis.)
37. Goldman, *FAVW*, p.188.
38. 7 November 1928, *Diary III*, p.203.
39. 16 February 1930, *Diary III*, pp.286–7.
40. 30 September 1926, *Diary III*, p.113.
41. Goldman, *FAVW*, p.46. She is considering the text of Virginia Woolf, *Moments of Being: Autobiographical Writings*, ed. by J. Schulkind (London: Pimlico, 2002), p.85.
42. Woolf, *MB*, p.85.
43. Goldman, *FAVW*, p.46.
44. Goldman, *FAVW*, p.46.
45. Goldman, *FAVW*, p.46.

46. MB, p.85, in Goldman, *FAVW*, p.46.
47. MB, p.85, in Goldman, *FAVW*, p.46.
48. MB, p.85.
49. Marcus, NN, p.14.
50. Marcus, NN, p.14.
51. Marcus, NN, p.15.
52. Woolf, *TTL*, p.76.
53. Marcus, NN, p.26.
54. Marcus, NN, p.26.
55. Grace Jantzen, 'Mysticism and Experience', in *Religious Studies*, 25 (1989), 295–315 (p.296).
56. William James, *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1914 [1907]), p.109. Quoted in Jantzen, *ME*, p.296.
57. Jantzen, *ME*, p.296.
58. Jantzen, *ME*, pp.295–315.
59. Jantzen responds to William James' *The Varieties of Religious Experience* and *Pragmatism* and *Principles of Psychology*.
60. Jantzen, *ME*, p.295.
61. Jantzen, *ME*, p.300.
62. Jantzen, *ME*, p.302.
63. Jantzen, *ME*, p.308.
64. Jantzen, *ME*, p.309.
65. Jantzen quotes from Julian of Norwich's *Shewings*, in Jantzen, *ME*, p.311.
66. Jantzen, *ME*, p.311.
67. Jantzen, *ME*, p.313.
68. Jantzen, *ME*, p.313.
69. Jantzen, *ME*, p.313.
70. Jantzen, *ME*, p.313.
71. Jantzen, *ME*, p.315.
72. Jantzen, *ME*, p.315.
73. Jantzen, *ME*, p.315.
74. Jean-Luc Marion, 'Introduction: What Do We Mean By "Mystic"?', in *Mystics: Presence and Aporia*, ed. by Michael Kessler and Christian Sheppard (London: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), pp.1–7 (p.2).
75. Marion, in *Mystics: Presence and Aporia*, p.6.
76. Jantzen, *ME*, p.314.
77. Jantzen, *ME*, p.295.
78. See in particular Ann Banfield, *The Phantom Table: Woolf, Fry, Russell and the Epistemology of Modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

79. Russell's essay on 'Mysticism and Logic' first appeared in the *Hibbert Journal* for July 1914, and as a member of the collection *Mysticism and Logic: and Other Essays* (the text I consult) in 1918.
80. See Janet Martin Soskice, 'Religious Language', in *A Companion to the Philosophy of Religion*, ed. by Philip Quinn and Charles Talliaferro (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1997), pp.197–203 (p.200).
81. See Janet Martin Soskice's discussion of this in *Metaphor and Religious Language* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), p.144.
82. See in particular Banfield's *The Phantom Table*.
83. Bertrand Russell, *Mysticism and Logic: and Other Essays* (London: Penguin Books, 1953 [1918]) p.18.
84. Banfield, *TPT*, p.360.
85. Woolf, *TW*, p.280, in Banfield, *TPT*, p.379.
86. 23 November 1926, *Diary III*, p.118, in Goldman, *FAVW*, p.187.
87. 30 September 1926, *Diary III*, p.113.
88. Russell, *ML*, p.9.
89. Russell, *ML*, p.9.
90. Russell, *ML*, p.10.
91. Russell, *ML*, p.10.
92. Russell, *ML*, p.11.
93. Russell, *ML*, p.11.
94. Russell, *ML*, p.14.
95. Russell, *ML*, p.14.
96. Russell, *ML*, p.15.
97. Russell, *ML*, p.15.
98. Russell, *ML*, p.15.
99. Russell, *ML*, pp.15–16.
100. Russell, *ML*, p.16.
101. Russell, *ML*, p.16.
102. Russell, *ML*, p.16.
103. Russell, *ML*, p.16.
104. Russell, *ML*, p.18.
105. Russell, *ML*, p.18.
106. Woolf, *TW*, p.280, in Banfield, *TPT*, p.379.
107. Woolf, *TTL*, p.153.
108. Woolf, *TTL*, in Banfield, *TPT*, pp.367–8.
109. 16 February 1930, *Diary III*, pp.286–7.
110. Woolf, *MB*, p.85, in Goldman, *FAVW*, p.46.
111. Banfield, *TPT*, p.382.
112. Bertrand Russell, *An Outline of Philosophy* (London: Unwin Books, 1970 [1927]).

113. Russell, *OP*, p.161, in Banfield, *TPT*, p.383.
114. Russell, *OP*, p.161, in Banfield, *TPT*, p.383.
115. Clive Bell, *Art* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1928 [1914]), p.6.
116. Bell, *Art*, p.8.
117. Bell, *Art*, p.23 (footnote 1).
118. Bell, *Art*, p.52.
119. Bell, *Art*, p.52.
120. Bell, *Art*, pp.57–8.
121. See 3 December 1921 (*Diary II*, pp.147–8). Woolf also records Russell's comment that: 'Now I have come to terms with myself: I am no longer surprised at what happens. I don't expect any more emotional experiences. I don't think any longer that something is going to happen when I meet a new person.' She adds, 'I said that I disagreed with much of this', (p.148).
122. Banfield, *TPT*, p.383.
123. Banfield, *TPT*, p.376.
124. Virginia Woolf, *Roger Fry: A Biography* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jonanovich, 1968 [1940]), p.237.
125. Woolf, *TTL*, p.222.
126. Banfield, *TPT*, p.379.
127. Woolf, *TTL*, in Banfield, *TPT*, p.379.
128. Banfield, *TPT*, p.379.
129. Russell, *OP*, p.161.
130. Russell, *ML*, p.18.
131. Iris Murdoch, 'The Idea of Perfection', in *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge Classics, 2001 [1970]), pp. 1–44 (p.23).
132. Virginia Woolf, *Night and Day* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jonanovich, 1948 [1919]), p.487.
133. Banfield's helpful phrase.
134. 28 November 1928, *Diary III*, p.210. 'The Moths' was Woolf's early working title for *The Waves*.
135. Woolf, *TTL*, in Banfield, *TPT*, p.374.
136. Woolf, *MD*, p.13.
137. 26 January 1920, *Diary II*, pp.13–14.
138. Woolf, *TTL*, p.60.
139. Woolf, *TTL*, p.78.
140. Banfield, *TPT*, p.374.
141. Woolf, *MB*, p.85.
142. 16 February 1930, *Diary III*, p.286.
143. 23 November 1926, *Diary III*, p.118.
144. 16 February 1930, *Diary III*, p.287.

145. See Virginia Woolf, 'The Lady in the Looking-Glass: A Reflection', in *The Complete Shorter Fiction of Virginia Woolf*, ed. by Susan Dick (London: Harcourt Inc., 1989), pp. 221–25.
146. See C. Ruth Miller, *The Frames of Art and Life* (London: Macmillan Press, 1988), pp.2–3. Miller comments that 'In Fry's essay and Virginia Woolf's short story, the frame is perceived as a representative of the ordering powers of art, whether it is the order that art imposes upon life or design upon vision. The narrator's attitude towards the frame in 'The Lady in the Looking-Glass' is indicative of the suspicion with which Virginia Woolf viewed any such imposition.' (Miller, *The Frames of Art and Life*, p.3.)
147. See Roger Fry, 'An Essay in Aesthetics', in *Modern Art and Modernism: A Critical Anthology*, ed. by Francis Francina and Charles Harrison, assisted by Deirdre Paul (London: Harper and Row Publishers, 1982), pp.79–87. The source for the anthology is Roger Fry, *Vision and Design* (London: Pelican, 1961), pp.23–9. 'An Essay in Aesthetics' was first published in *New Quarterly*, 1909. *Vision and Design* was first published in 1920.
148. Fry, 'An Essay in Aesthetics', p.80.
149. Fry, 'An Essay in Aesthetics', p.80.
150. Fry, 'An Essay in Aesthetics', p.80.
151. Fry, 'An Essay in Aesthetics', p.80.
152. Woolf, *LLG*, p.221.
153. Woolf, *LLG*, p.221.
154. Woolf, *LLG*, p.221.
155. Fry, 'An Essay in Aesthetics', p.80.
156. Bell, *Art*, p.52.
157. Woolf, *LLG*, p..221.
158. Woolf, *LLG*, pp.221–2.
159. Woolf, *LLG*, p.222.
160. Woolf, *LLG*, p. 223.
161. Woolf, *LLG*, p.223.
162. Woolf, *LLG*, p.224.
163. Woolf, *LLG*, p.225.
164. Woolf, *LLG*, p.222.
165. Woolf, *LLG*, p.222.
166. 28 November 1928, *Diary III*, p.209.
167. Woolf, *LLG*, pp.221–2.
168. Murdoch, *SoGOOC*, p.84.
169. Bell, *Art*, p.36.
170. Bell, *Art*, pp.9–10.
171. Bell, *Art*, p.8.

172. Bell, *Art*, p.16.
173. Bell, *Art*, pp.51–2.
174. Woolf, *TTL*, p.64.
175. Bell, *Art*, p.68.
176. Woolf, *TTL*, p.60.
177. Banfield writes, 'Woolf's aesthetic, while reserving a place for the personal, is itself impersonal,' (Banfield, *TPT*, p.384).
178. Banfield, *TPT*, p.385 (7 November 1928, *Diary*, III, p.203).
179. Banfield, *TPT*, p.386.
180. Banfield, *TPT*, p.361.
181. Woolf, *AROO*, p.17, in Goldman, *FAVW*, p.24.
182. Mark Hussey, *The Singing of the Real World: The Philosophy of Virginia Woolf's Fiction* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1956), p.96.
183. Hussey, *The Singing of the Real World*, p.97.
184. Hussey, *The Singing of the Real World*, p.99.
185. Hussey, *The Singing of the Real World*, p.100.
186. Hussey, *The Singing of the Real World*, p.100.
187. Hussey, *The Singing of the Real World*, p.101.
188. Hussey, *The Singing of the Real World*, p.102.
189. Hussey, *The Singing of the Real World*, p.102.
190. Hussey, *The Singing of the Real World*, p.102.
191. Hussey, *The Singing of the Real World*, p.103.
192. Hussey, *The Singing of the Real World*, p.103.
193. Again, I utilise Banfield's phrase here.
194. Hussey, *The Singing of the Real World*, p.97.
195. Andrew McNeillie, 'Bloomsbury', in *The Cambridge Companion to Virginia Woolf*, ed. by Sue Roe and Susan Sellers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp.1–28 (p.9).
196. Hermione Lee writes that 'A Greek notebook, started in Greece in 1906 and continued in the next two years . . . shows how thorough Janet Case had encouraged her pupil to be, and suggests her teaching methods. Sophocles' *Ajax*, Plato's *Symposium*, Aristophanes' *The Frogs*, are carefully annotated; and there is an eloquent commentary on the *Odyssey*, concentrating on the style and beauties of Homer's narrative, its human interest, its evocation of place, and its probable effect on the audience:' (Hermione Lee, *Virginia Woolf* (London: Vintage, 1997), p.144).
197. 13 November 1920, *Diary II*, p.74.
198. *Diary II*, p.196.
199. 4 October 1922, *Diary II*, pp.205–6.
200. 7 January 1923, *Diary II*, p.225.

201. 3 August 1924, *Diary II*, p.309.
202. McNeillie, 'Bloomsbury', p.14.
203. McNeillie, 'Bloomsbury', p.15. In her *Continuing Presences: Virginia Woolf's Use of Literary Allusion* (London: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1979), Beverley Ann Schlack presents an impressive catalogue of 'Allusions in the Novels', where Woolf's indebtedness to Hellenic thought is particularly well documented. See pp.134–153.
204. Brenda Lyons, 'Virginia Woolf and Plato: The Platonic Background of *Jacob's Room*,' in *Platonism and the English Imagination*, ed. by Anna Baldwin and Sarah Hutton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp.290–297 (p.290).
205. Lyons, 'Virginia Woolf and Plato', p.292.
206. Lyons, 'Virginia Woolf and Plato', p.290.
207. Tom Regan, *Bloomsbury's Prophet: G. E. Moore and the Development of his Moral Philosophy* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986), p.111.
208. McNeillie, 'Bloomsbury', p.14.
209. 29 October 1934, *Diary IV*, p.257.
210. See Anne Sheppard, 'Plato and the Neoplatonists', in *Platonism and the English Imagination*, ed. by Anna Baldwin and Sarah Hutton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp.3–18 (p.5).
211. The full passage reads: 'I become mystical as I grow older and feel an alliance with you and Jacques which is eternal, not interrupted, or hurt by never meeting.' See Virginia Woolf's letter to Gwen Raverat, 11 March 1925, in *A Change of Perspective: The Letters of Virginia Woolf 1923–1928 (Vol.III)*, ed. by Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann (London: The Hogarth Press, 1977), p.171. Quoted in Alex Owen, 'The 'Religious Sense' in a Post-War Secular Age', *Project Muse: Scholarly Journals Online*, 1 (2006) http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/past_and_present/v2006/20 [accessed 21st May 2008] (pp.159–177), p.177.
212. Owen, "The "Religious Sense"", p.159 (Virginia Woolf to Jacques Raverat, 30 July 1923, *LettersVW*, p.59: 'Gwen [Darwin] is a militant atheist: the world renews itself: there is solid ground beneath my feet.')
213. Virginia Woolf's letter to Jacques Raverat, 30 March 1923, *LettersVW*, p.24.
214. Owen, "The "Religious Sense"", p.159.
215. Owen, "The "Religious Sense"", p.173.
216. Owen, "The "Religious Sense"", p.160.
217. Owen, "The "Religious Sense"", p.171.
218. Owen, "The "Religious Sense"", p.172.
219. Owen, "The "Religious Sense"", p.173.
220. Owen, "The "Religious Sense"", p.161.
221. Owen, "The "Religious Sense"", p.161.

222. Evelyn Underhill, *The School of Charity: Meditations on the Christian Creed* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1954 [1934]), p.6.
223. David Jasper, *Rhetoric, Power and Community: An Exercise in Reserve* (London: Macmillan, 1993), p.161.

3 The Point of Departure: Readdressing the Mystical in Iris Murdoch

1. Iris Murdoch, *Sartre: Romantic Rationalist* (London: Vintage, 1999 [1953]), p.148.
2. Maria Antonaccio entitles her study of Murdoch *Picturing the Human: The Moral Thought of Iris Murdoch* (see Bibliography).
3. Woolf, *LLG*, p.223.
4. Woolf, *LLG*, p.224.
5. Woolf, *LLG*, p.225.
6. Woolf, *LLG*, p.222.
7. Woolf, *LLG*, p.222.
8. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.243.
9. Marije Altorf, *Iris Murdoch and the Art of Imagining* (London: Continuum, 2008), p.50.
10. Murdoch, *SRR*, p.58.
11. Murdoch, *SRR*, p.32.
12. Murdoch notes that Sartre's *La Nausee* was translated first into English under the title *The Diary of Antoine Roquentin*, and later as *Nausea*. Murdoch, *SRR*, footnote on p.39.
13. Murdoch, *SRR*, p.39.
14. Murdoch, *SRR*, p.39.
15. Murdoch, *SRR*, p.39.
16. Murdoch, *SRR*, p.40.
17. Murdoch, *SRR*, p.40.
18. Murdoch, *SRR*, p.40.
19. Murdoch, *SRR*, p.41, Murdoch quoting Sartre's *La Nausee*.
20. Murdoch, *SRR*, p.41, Murdoch quoting Sartre's *La Nausee*.
21. Woolf, *BTA*, p.181.
22. Murdoch, *SRR*, p.42.
23. Murdoch, *SRR*, p.43.
24. Murdoch, *SRR*, p.43.
25. Murdoch, *SRR*, p.43.
26. Murdoch, *SRR*, p.43.
27. Murdoch, *SoGOOC*, p.98.
28. Iris Murdoch, *The Fire and the Sun: Why Plato Banished the Artists* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978 [1977]), p.29.

29. Murdoch, *SRR*, p.43, Murdoch quoting Sartre's *La Nausee*.
30. Murdoch, *SRR*, pp.43–4.
31. 27 February 1926, *Diary III*, p.62.
32. Murdoch, *IP*, p.30.
33. Murdoch, *SRR*, p.148.
34. Murdoch, *GandG*, p.72.
35. 27 February 1926, *Diary III*, p.62.
36. Murdoch, *SRR*, pp.43–4.
37. Murdoch, *SRR*, p.44.
38. Murdoch, *SRR*, p.60.
39. Murdoch, *SRR*, p.93.
40. Murdoch, *SRR*, p.45.
41. Murdoch, *SRR*, p.45.
42. 'Salauds' refers to the 'bourgeoisie'.
43. Murdoch, *SRR*, p.45.
44. Murdoch, *SRR*, p.46.
45. Murdoch, *SRR*, p.46.
46. Murdoch, *SRR*, p.46.
47. Murdoch, *SRR*, pp.46–7.
48. Murdoch, *SRR*, p.46.
49. Murdoch, *SRR*, p.41, Murdoch quoting Sartre's *La Nausee*.
50. Murdoch, *SRR*, p.49.
51. Murdoch, *SRR*, p.50.
52. Murdoch, *SRR*, p.51.
53. Murdoch, *SRR*, p.57.
54. Murdoch, *SRR*, pp.57–8.
55. Murdoch, *SRR*, p.57, referring to Sartre's *Les Chemins*.
56. Murdoch, *SRR*, p.58.
57. Murdoch, *SRR*, p.57, referring to Sartre's *Les Chemins*.
58. Murdoch, *SRR*, p.56.
59. Murdoch, *SRR*, p.59.
60. Murdoch, *SRR*, p.60.
61. Murdoch, *SRR*, p.59.
62. Murdoch, *SRR*, p.108.
63. Murdoch, *SRR*, p.59.
64. Murdoch, *SRR*, p.59.
65. Murdoch, *SRR*, p.61.
66. Murdoch, *SRR*, p.61.
67. Murdoch, *SRR*, p.108.
68. Murdoch, *SRR*, p.61.
69. Murdoch, *SRR*, p.60.
70. Murdoch, *SRR*, p.58.

71. Murdoch, *SRR*, p.60.
72. Murdoch, *SRR*, p.62.
73. Murdoch, *SRR*, p.63.
74. Murdoch, *SRR*, p.68.
75. Murdoch, *SRR*, pp.67–8.
76. Murdoch, *SRR*, p.68.
77. Murdoch, *SRR*, p.68.
78. Murdoch, *SRR*, p.68.
79. Murdoch, *SRR*, p.69.
80. Murdoch, *SRR*, p.69.
81. Murdoch, *SRR*, p.69.
82. Murdoch, *SRR*, p.69. (My emphasis.)
83. Murdoch, *SRR*, p.70.
84. Murdoch, *SRR*, p.71.
85. Murdoch, *SRR*, p.71.
86. Murdoch, *SoGOOC*, p.85.
87. Murdoch, *SRR*, p.76.
88. Murdoch, *SRR*, p.75.
89. Murdoch, *SRR*, p.76.
90. Russell, *OP*, p.161, in Banfield, *TPT*, p.383.
91. Murdoch, *SRR*, p.76.
92. Murdoch, *SRR*, p.76.
93. Murdoch, *SRR*, p.131.
94. Murdoch, *SRR*, p.131.
95. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.1.
96. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.3.
97. Murdoch, *SRR*, p.131.
98. Murdoch, *SRR*, p.131.
99. Murdoch, *SRR*, p.43.
100. Murdoch, *SRR*, p.77.
101. Murdoch, *SRR*, p.88.
102. Murdoch, *SRR*, p.90.
103. Murdoch, *SRR*, p.84.
104. Murdoch, *SRR*, p.87.
105. Murdoch, *SRR*, p.79.
106. Murdoch, *SRR*, p.80.
107. Murdoch, *SRR*, p.107.
108. Murdoch, *SRR*, p.113.
109. Murdoch, *SRR*, p.109.
110. Murdoch, *SRR*, p.112.
111. Murdoch, *SRR*, p.113.
112. Murdoch, *SRR*, p.92.

113. Iris Murdoch and Bryan Magee, 'Literature and Philosophy: A Conversation with Bryan Magee', in Iris Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1997 [1978]), pp.3–30 (p.4).
114. Murdoch, *EM*, p.8.
115. Murdoch, *EM*, p.8.
116. Murdoch, *EM*, p.10.
117. For a critical consideration, see the 'Introduction' to Marije Altorf's *Iris Murdoch and the Art of Imagining* (London: Continuum, 2008), pp.1–18.
118. Murdoch, *EM*, pp.3–4.
119. Murdoch, *EM*, p.5.
120. Murdoch, *GandG*, p.74.
121. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.215.

4 Exploring the Cataphatic Dimension of Virginia Woolf's Work: Virginia Woolf and Plotinus

1. 29 October 1934, *Diary IV*, p.257.
2. Pierre Hadot, *Plotinus: or The Simplicity of Vision*, trans. by Michael Chase (London, The University of Chicago Press, 1998 [1989]), p.112.
3. Hadot, *Plotinus*, p.112.
4. Hadot, *Plotinus*, p.112.
5. Hadot, *Plotinus*, pp.112–3.
6. For a full account of Chase's translation of Hadot's text and alterations to Hadot's citations of Plotinus, see Hadot, *Plotinus*, p.x.
7. I consult, for this purpose, Stephen MacKenna's translation of *The Enneads* (London: Penguin Books, 1991).
8. 7 November 1928, *Diary III*, p.203.
9. 10 September 1927, *Diary III*, p.196.
10. Carl Woodring, 'Virginia Woolf', in *Six Modern British Novelists*, ed. by George Stade (London: Columbia University Press, 1974), pp.175–217, (p.195).
11. Woodring, 'Virginia Woolf', p.200.
12. Woolf, *MB*, p.85.
13. Fry, *Vision and Design*, quoted in Banfield, *TPT*, p.329.
14. Woodring, 'Virginia Woolf', p.175.
15. Woodring, 'Virginia Woolf', p.194.
16. Woolf, *TTL*, p.221.
17. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.339.
18. 30 December 1930, *Diary III* p.343.

19. Murdoch, *SoGOOC*, p.84.
20. Just as Kevin Hart recognises that ‘the cataphatic and apophatic do not cancel each other so much as engage one another. It is not the positive and negative annihilating one another that makes mystical texts so intriguing, rather the patterns of disturbance that are set up by their engagements.’ (Kevin Hart, ‘The Experience of Nonexperience’, in *Mystics: Presence and Aporia*, ed. by Michael Kessler and Christian Sheppard (London: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), pp.188–206, (p.201).
21. Woolf, *TTL*, pp.185–7.
22. Woolf, *TTL*, p.65.
23. 10 September 1927, *Diary III*, p.196. (My emphasis.)
24. Woodring, ‘Virginia Woolf’, p.182.
25. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.250.
26. 27 February 1926, *Diary III*, p.62.
27. Jane Goldman, *The Cambridge Introduction to Virginia Woolf* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p.38.
28. 18th February 1922, *Diary II*, pp.169–70.
29. 16 July 1935, *Diary IV*, p.331.
30. 30 September 1926, *Diary III*, p.113.
31. Evelyn Underhill, ‘Bergson and the Mystics’, in *The English Review*, 10 no.2 (1912), 511–22 (p.511).
32. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.306.
33. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.319.
34. Woodring, ‘Virginia Woolf’, p.200.
35. 7 February 1931, *Diary IV*, p.10.
36. 8 April 1921, *Diary II*, p.107.
37. 27 February 1926, *Diary III*, p.62.
38. Banfield, *TPT*, p.374.
39. 28 November 1928, *Diary III*, p.209.
40. 20 December 1927, *Diary III*, p.167.
41. 4 January 1929, *Diary III*, p.218. (My emphasis.)
42. Charles Taylor, *Hegel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), p.495.
43. Woolf, *TTL*, p.65.
44. This self-reflexive technique represents a typically modernist preoccupation with the art-work understood as end-in-itself.
45. Woodring, ‘Virginia Woolf’, p.201. Woodring’s conception of ‘uniform flux’ here captures the possibility of the simultaneity of uniformity and flux which Goldman does not recognise when, stating a preference to avoid unifying mystical readings of *The Waves* in favour of owning the dissonances and discontinuities of the text, she assumes the mutual exclusivity of these terms (Goldman, *FAVW*, p.188).

46. Gilpin, 'Afterword', in Virginia Woolf, *To The Lighthouse* (London: CRW Publishing Limited, 2004), pp.241–47.
47. 21 November 1935, *Diary IV*, pp.353–4.
48. 18 June 1927, *Diary III*, p.139.
49. 23 June 1929, *Diary III*, p.236.
50. 16 February 1930, *Diary III*, p.287.
51. Banfield, *TPT*, p.128.
52. Banfield, *TPT*, p.128.
53. (My emphasis.)
54. 30 December 1930, *Diary III*, p.343.
55. 31 May 1933, *Diary IV*, p.161.
56. 22 September 1931, *Diary IV*, p.45.
57. 13 July 1931, *Diary IV*, p.116.
58. Hadot, *Plotinus*, p.20.
59. MacKenna, *Enneads*, VI 9 1, p.535.
60. MacKenna, *Enneads*, VI 9 3, p.539.
61. Arnold I. Davidson, 'Introduction', in Pierre Hadot, *Plotinus: or The Simplicity of Vision*, trans. by Michael Chase (London: The University of Chicago Press, 1998 [1989]), pp. 1–15 (pp.6–7, quoting Hadot, p.58).
62. 10 September 1928, *Diary III*, p.196.
63. Banfield, *TPT*, p.128.
64. Banfield, *TPT*, p.128.
65. Hadot, *Plotinus*, p.20, Ennead V3, 17, 15–25. MacKenna translates: 'for the understanding, in order to its affirmation, must possess itself of item after item; only so does it traverse all the field: but how can there be any such peregrination of that in which there is no variety?' (MacKenna, *Enneads*, p.385).
66. Hadot, *Plotinus*, p.58.
67. Hadot, *Plotinus*, p.39.
68. Hadot, *Plotinus*, p.45.
69. Hadot, *Plotinus*, p.58, Ennead VI 7, 33, 30–31. MacKenna translates: 'Shape is an impress from the unshaped; it is the unshaped that produces shape, not shape the unshaped.' (MacKenna, *Enneads*, p.502).
70. Banfield, *TPT*, p.128.
71. Hadot, *Plotinus*, p.58.
72. 16 July 1935, *Diary IV*, p.331.
73. Hadot, *Plotinus*, p.58.
74. Hadot, *Plotinus*, p.36, expressions from Henri Bergson, *La vie et l'oeuvre de Ravaisson*, in Henri Bergson, *The Creative Mind*, trans. by Mabelle L. Andison (New York: The Philosophical Library, 1946), p.258. (My emphasis.)

75. Woolf, *TW*, p.29, in Banfield, *TPT*, p.271.
76. Woolf, *TW*, p.75, in Banfield, *TPT*, p.271.
77. Woolf, *TW*, p.148, in Banfield, *TPT*, p.271.
78. Hadot, *Plotinus*, pp.20–1.
79. Woodring, 'Virginia Woolf', p.197.
80. Woolf, *TTL*, p.64.
81. Woodring, 'Virginia Woolf', p.197.
82. Woodring, 'Virginia Woolf', p.197.
83. 10 September 1927, *Diary III*, p.196.
84. 30 December 1930, *Diary III*, p.343.
85. 31 May 1933, *Diary IV*, p.161.
86. Woolf, *TTL*, p.65.
87. Woolf, *BTA*, p.191.
88. Hadot, *Plotinus*, p.44.
89. Woodring, 'Virginia Woolf', p.196.
90. Hadot, *Plotinus*, p.38, Ennead II 9, 16, 11. MacKenna translates: 'it remains none the less certain that this world holds from the Supernal and is not deserted and will not be.' (MacKenna, *Enneads*, p.128).
91. Hadot, *Plotinus*, p.58, Ennead VI 7, 33, 30–31. MacKenna translates: 'Shape is an impress from the unshaped; it is the unshaped that produces shape, not shape the unshaped.' (MacKenna, *Enneads*, p.502).
92. Banfield, *TPT*, p.128.
93. 10 September 1927, *Diary III*, p.196. (My emphasis.)
94. Hadot, *Plotinus*, p.20, Ennead V3, 17, 15–25. MacKenna translates: 'for the understanding, in order to its affirmation, must possess itself of item after item; only so does it traverse all the field: but how can there be any such peregrination of that in which there is no variety?' (MacKenna, *Enneads*, p.385).
95. See Aristotle's *Metaphysics* Book XII: vii.8–9, in *The Loeb Classical Library: Metaphysics: Books X–XIV*, trans. by Hugh Tredennick (London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1935), pp.123–175.
96. Hadot, *Plotinus*, p.48.
97. Gilpin, 'Afterword', in Woolf, *TTL*, p.247.
98. Hadot, *Plotinus*, p.48.
99. Hadot, *Plotinus*, p.57. (My emphasis.)
100. MacKenna, *Enneads*, VI 7 34 1, p.502.
101. Banfield, *TPT*, p.128.
102. Banfield, *TPT*, p.372.
103. Banfield, *TPT*, p.261.
104. Banfield, *TPT*, p.261.
105. Hadot, *Plotinus*, p.32.

106. C. Ruth Miller, *The Frames of Art and Life* (London: Macmillan Press, 1988), pp.17–18.
107. Woolf, *TTL*, pp.75–6.
108. Woolf, *TTL*, pp.76–7. The ‘lie’ Mrs Ramsay refers to is the thought that ‘we are in the hands of the Lord.’
109. ‘She asked him what his father’s books were about. ‘Subject and object and the nature of reality,’ Andrew had said. And when she said, Heavens, she had no notion what that meant. ‘Think of a kitchen table then,’ he told her, ‘when you’re not there.’ (Woolf, *TTL*, p.31).
110. Woolf, *TTL*, p.76.
111. Murdoch, *SRR*, p.59.
112. Woolf, *TTL*, p.64.
113. Woolf, *TTL*, p.172. ‘The grey-green light on the wall opposite. The empty places. Such were some of the parts, but how bring them together? she asked. As if any interruption would break the frail shape she was building on the table, she turned her back to the window lest Mr Ramsay should see her.’ (Woolf, *TTL*, p.171).
114. Woolf, *TTL*, p.184.
115. Woolf, *TTL*, pp.208–9.
116. 22 August 1922, *Diary II*, p.193.
117. Woolf speaks directly of this relationship: ‘What is the point of it – life-when I am not working – suddenly becomes thin, indifferent,’ (8 February 1932, *Diary IV*, p.74). Conversely, writing is an antidote to chaos: ‘. . . something terrifying: unreason – shall I make a book out of this? It would be a way of bringing order and speed again into my world,’ (25 May 1932, *Diary IV*, p.103).
118. Woolf, *TTL*, p.209.
119. Clive Bell, *Art* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1928 [1914]), p.70.
120. Hadot, *Plotinus*, p.25.
121. MacKenna, *Enneads*, IV 8 1 1–2, p.334.
122. MacKenna, *Enneads*, V8 11, p.422. MacKenna footnotes, ‘There is here envisaged, I think, a spiritual exercise.’
123. Hadot, *Plotinus*, p.34.
124. Hadot, *Plotinus*, p.22.
125. Mark Hussey, *The Singing of the Real World: The Philosophy of Virginia Woolf’s Fiction* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1956), p.xix.
126. Davidson, ‘Introduction’, in Pierre Hadot, *Plotinus: or The Simplicity of Vision*, pp.13–14.
127. Woolf, *TTL*, p.77.
128. Woolf, *TTL*, p.76.
129. Davidson, ‘Introduction’, in Hadot, *Plotinus*, p.4, quoting Hadot, *Plotinus*, p.65.

130. 22 August 1922, *Diary III*, p.193.
131. Hadot, *Plotinus*, pp. 46–7, Ennead VI 5, 12, 13–29. MacKenna translates, 'In that you have entered into the All, no longer content with the part; you cease to think of yourself as under limit but, laying all such determination aside, you become an All . . . By the lessening of the alien in you, you increase . . . engaged in the alien you will not find the All. Not that it has to come and so be present to you; it is you that have turned from it.' (p.467).
132. Woolf, *TTL*, p.75.
133. Davidson, 'Introduction', in Hadot, *Plotinus*, p.13, quoting Hadot, "Le mythe de Narcisse," pp.105–6, with internal quotation from Plotinus *Ennead*, VI, 5, 12, 22. (My emphasis.)
134. Ray Monk, 'This Fictitious Life: Virginia Woolf on Biography, Reality and Character', in *Philosophy and Literature*, 31 (1) (April 2007), 1–40.
135. Monk, 'This Fictitious Life', p.9.
136. Monk, 'This Fictitious Life', pp.10–11, citing *Jacob's Room*.
137. Monk, 'This Fictitious Life', p.8.
138. Woolf, *TTL*, p.77.
139. Davidson, 'Introduction', in Hadot, *Plotinus*, p.14: citing Hadot, *Plotinus*, p.21.
140. Hadot, *Plotinus*, p.25.
141. 26 January 1920, *Diary II*, pp.13–14.
142. Hadot, *Plotinus*, p.44.
143. Banfield, *TPT*, p.55.
144. Hadot, *Plotinus*, p.44.
145. Holly Henry, *Virginia Woolf and the Discourse of Science: The Aesthetics of Astronomy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p.37.
146. Henry, *Virginia Woolf and the Discourse of Science*, p.44.
147. Hadot, *Plotinus*, p.6.
148. Hadot, *Plotinus*, p.92.
149. Iris Murdoch, 'The Idea of Perfection', in *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge Classics, 2001 [1970]), pp. 1–44 (p.32).
150. Holly Henry's and Ann Banfield's studies give detailed treatments of these.
151. *Diary V*, p.289.
152. Hadot, *Plotinus*, p.44. (My emphasis.)
153. Hadot, *Plotinus*, p.44, Ennead VI 7, 15, 24–32. MacKenna translates: The Intellectual-Principle 'might be likened to a living sphere teeming with variety, to a globe of faces radiant with faces all living . . . But this would be to see it from without, one thing seeing another; the true way is to become Intellectual-Principle and be, our very selves, what we are to see.' (p.485).

154. Banfield, *TPT*, p.128.
155. Woodring, 'Virginia Woolf', p.190.
156. Woolf, *TTL*, p.76.
157. Hadot, *Plotinus*, p.29.
158. Hadot, *Plotinus*, p.28. (Hadot's emphasis.)
159. Murdoch, *GandG*, p.69.
160. Hadot, *Plotinus*, p.30, Ennead I 6, 8, 25–27. MacKenna translates: 'you must close the eyes and call instead upon another vision which is to be waked within you, a vision, the birth-right of all, which few turn to use.' (p.54).
161. Hadot, *Plotinus*, p.36, quoting Henri Bergson's, 'La vie et l'oeuvre de Ravaisson' in Henri Bergson, *The Creative Mind*, trans. by Mabelle L. Andison (New York: The Philosophical Library, 1946), p.258.
162. Gilpin, 'Afterword', in Woolf, *TTL*, p.247.
163. Hadot, *Plotinus*, p.44, Ennead V 3, 6, 5–8; 12–18. MacKenna translates: 'As long as we were Above, collected within the Intellectual nature, we were satisfied; we were held in the intellectual act; we had vision because we drew all into unity-' (p.370).
164. Hadot, *Plotinus*, p.62.
165. Woolf, *TTL*, p.76.
166. This is the focus of Jane Goldman's study, *The Feminist Aesthetics of Virginia Woolf: Modernism, Post-Impressionism and the Politics of the Visual* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).
167. Woolf, *TTL*, p.132.
168. Hadot, *Plotinus*, p.43, Ennead III 8, 11, 26–33. MacKenna translates: 'The Intellectual-Principle; beautiful; the most beautiful of all; lying lapped in pure light and in clear radiance; circumscribing the Nature of the Authentic Existents; the original of which this beautiful world is a shadow and an image . . . this, too, must overwhelm with awe any that has seen it, and penetrated it . . .' p.247.
169. Hadot, *Plotinus*, p.69, Ennead V3, 8, 27–31 (my emphasis). MacKenna translates: 'In the intellectual, the vision sees not through some medium but by and through itself alone, for its object is not external: by one light it sees another . . . a light sees a light, that is to say a thing sees itself . . . the Intellectual realm [which] is this light . . . draws [the Soul] inward, preserving it from such diffusion . . .' (p.373).
170. 4 January 1929, *Diary III*, p.218.
171. 20 April 1919, *Diary I*, p.266.
172. 15 August 1924, *Diary II*, p.310.
173. 28 November 1928, *Diary III*, p.209.

174. Hadot, *Plotinus*, p.63, Ennead V3, 17, 28–38. MacKenna translates: ‘And this is the true end set before the Soul, to take that light, to see the Supreme by the Supreme and not by the light of any other principle – to see the Supreme which is also the means to the vision; for that which illumines the Soul is that which it is to see, just as it is by the sun’s own light that we see the sun. But how is this to be accomplished? Cut away everything.’ (p.386).
175. 26 January 1920, *Diary II*, p.14.
176. Hadot, *Plotinus*, p.62.
177. Woolf, *TTL*, p.75.
178. 27 February 1926, *Diary III*, p.62.
179. Davidson, ‘Introduction’, in Hadot, *Plotinus*, p.14, Ennead I, 6, 9, 7–24. MacKenna translates: ‘When you know that you have become this perfect work, when you are self-gathered in the purity of your being, nothing now remaining that can shatter that inner unity . . . when you find yourself wholly true to your essential nature, wholly that only veritable Light which is not measured by space, not narrowed to any circumscribed form nor again diffused as a thing void of term, but ever unmeasurable as something greater than all measure and more than all quantity – when you perceive that you have grown to this, you are now become very vision: . . . strain, and see.’ (p.55).
180. Woolf, *TTL*, p.76.
181. Woolf, *TTL*, p.76.
182. Hadot, *Plotinus*, p.21. (My emphasis.)
183. Davidson, ‘Introduction’, in Hadot, *Plotinus*, p.10. (My emphasis.)
184. See, for example, Clive Bell, *Art* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1928 [1914]), pp.3–6.
185. 10 September 1927, *Diary III*, p.196.
186. Hadot, *Plotinus*, p.63, Ennead VI 8, 16, 20–21. MacKenna translates: ‘[God] if He pre-eminently is because He holds firmly, so to speak, towards Himself, looking towards Himself, so that what we must call his being is this self-looking . . . He created himself because his Act was inseparable from Himself.’ (p.529). Although, obviously, Woolf does not consciously engage with the specifically ethical and theistic intonations of these passages.
187. Woolf, *MB*, p.85.
188. Woolf, *MB*, pp.78–9.
189. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.463.
190. 26 January 1920, *Diary II*, p.14.
191. Woolf, *TTL*, p.59.
192. Woolf, *TTL*, p.60.

193. Woolf, *TTL*, pp.58–9.
194. Woolf, *TTL*, p.78.
195. Woolf, *TTL*, p.76.
196. Hadot, *Plotinus*, p.43, Ennead III 8, 11, 26–33.
197. Woolf, *TTL*, p.232 and pp.208–9.
198. Davidson, ‘Introduction’, p.5, in Hadot, *Plotinus*, quoting Pierre Hadot, “Histoire de la pensée hellénistique et romaine: Réflexions sur l’Expérience mystique plotinienne” in *Annuaire du Collège de France, 1990–91: Résumé des cours et travaux* (Paris, 1992), p.482.
199. Woolf, *TTL*, pp.208–9. (My emphasis.)
200. Woolf, *TTL*, p.78.
201. Woolf, *TTL*, pp.58–9.
202. Woolf, *TTL*, p.63.
203. Woolf, *TTL*, p.44. (My emphasis.)
204. Woolf, *TTL*, p.59.
205. 26 January 1920, *Diary II*, p.14.
206. Jean-Luc Marion, ‘Introduction: What Do We Mean By “Mystic”?’, in *Mystics: Presence and Aporia*, ed. by Michael Kessler and Christian Sheppard (London: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), pp.1–7 (p.5).
207. Woolf, *TTL*, p.63.
208. Woolf, *TTL*, p.63.
209. As Murdoch writes: ‘Love is knowledge of the individual’, (Murdoch, *IP*, p.27).
210. Woolf, *TTL*, p.78.
211. Woodring, ‘Virginia Woolf’, p.194.
212. Woolf, *TTL*, p.44.
213. Woolf, *TTL*, p.44.
214. Woolf, *TTL*, p.45.
215. Woolf, *TTL*, p.78.
216. Hadot, *Plotinus*, p.58.
217. MacKenna, *Enneads*, V3, 8, p.373.
218. Woolf, *TTL*, p.63.
219. Woodring, ‘Virginia Woolf’, p.200.
220. Woolf, *TTL*, p.58.

5 Exploring the Cataphatic Dimension of Iris Murdoch’s Work

1. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.455. (Murdoch’s emphasis.)
2. Quoted by Murdoch, *MGM*, p.255.
3. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.334.

4. Megan Laverty, *Iris Murdoch's Ethics: A Consideration of her Romantic Vision* (London: Continuum, 2007), p.4.
5. Maria Antonaccio, *Picturing the Human: The Moral Thought of Iris Murdoch* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p.85.
6. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.296.
7. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.7.
8. Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p.15.
9. Hugh Herbert, 'The Iris Problem', *Guardian*, 24 October 1972, p.10, in Rowe, Anne, and Avril Horner, eds., *Iris Murdoch and Morality* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p.178.
10. John Haffenden, 'John Haffenden Talks to Iris Murdoch', in *Novelists in Interview*, ed. John Haffenden (London: Methuen, 1985), p.206, quoted in Rowe and Horner, eds., *Iris Murdoch and Morality*, p.178.
11. Turner, *The Darkness of God*, pp.17–18.
12. Murdoch, *GandG*, p.68.
13. Marije Altorf, *Iris Murdoch and the Art of Imagining* (London: Continuum, 2008), p.72.
14. Turner, *The Darkness of God*, p.22.
15. Murdoch, *GandG*, p.54.
16. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.165.
17. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.1.
18. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.1.
19. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.3. (Murdoch's emphasis.)
20. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.235.
21. Murdoch, *SoGOOC*, pp.94–5.
22. Murdoch, *GandG*, p.71.
23. Murdoch, *SoGOOC*, p.95.
24. Murdoch, *SoGOOC*, p.95.
25. 27 February 1926, *Diary III*, p.62.
26. Murdoch, *SoGOOC*, p.97.
27. Murdoch, *GandG*, pp.48–9.
28. Murdoch, *GandG*, p.49.
29. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.51.
30. Murdoch, *IP*, p.9.
31. Murdoch, *GandG*, p.45.
32. Iris Murdoch, *The Fire and the Sun: Why Plato Banished the Artists* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978 [1977]), p.2.
33. Murdoch, *The Fire and the Sun*, p.24.
34. Murdoch, *GandG*, p.55.
35. Murdoch, *MGM*, pp.292–3. (Murdoch's emphasis.)

36. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.296.
37. Altorf, *Iris Murdoch and the Art of Imagining*, p.84, quoting Murdoch, *MGM*.
38. Banfield, *TPT*, p.376.
39. Banfield, *TPT*, p.379.
40. Mark Hussey, *The Singing of the Real World: The Philosophy of Virginia Woolf's Fiction* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1956), p.97.
41. That we are 'in the hands of the Lord.' Woolf, *TTL*, pp.76–7.
42. Murdoch, *SoGOOC*, p.96.
43. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.73.
44. Murdoch, *MGM*, pp.292–3.
45. Murdoch, *GandG*, p.72.
46. Murdoch, *IP*, p.29.
47. Murdoch, *IP*, p.71.
48. Murdoch, *GandG*, p.58.
49. Woolf, *TTL* p.221.
50. 10 September 1927, *Diary III*, p.196. (My emphasis.)
51. Murdoch, *GandG*, p.49.
52. Murdoch, *IP*, p.39.
53. Murdoch, *SoGOOC*, p.97.
54. Murdoch, *IP*, p.37.
55. Murdoch, *GandG*, p.72.
56. Murdoch, *GandG*, p.72.
57. Heather Walton, *Imagining Theology: Women, Writing and God* (London: T&T Clark, 2007), p.132.
58. Murdoch, *GandG*, p.45.
59. Altorf, *Iris Murdoch and the Art of Imagining*, p.4. See interview with Bryan Magee: in Iris Murdoch and Magee, Bryan, 'Literature and Philosophy: a Conversation with Bryan Magee', in Iris Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1997 [1978]), pp.3–30.
60. Murdoch, *GandG*, p.61.
61. Murdoch, *GandG*, p.46.
62. Murdoch, *GandG*, p.52.
63. Murdoch, *SRR*, p.105.
64. Murdoch, *GandG*, p.52.
65. Murdoch, *GandG*, p.52.
66. Murdoch, *GandG*, p.53.
67. Murdoch, *GandG*, p.53.
68. Murdoch, *GandG*, p.53.
69. Murdoch, *The Fire and the Sun*, p.4.
70. Murdoch, *SoGOOC*, p.98.

71. Murdoch, *SoGOOC*, p.98.
72. Murdoch, *GandG*, p.66.
73. Murdoch, *GandG*, p.51. Also *SoGOOC*, p.81.
74. Murdoch, *GandG*, pp.53–4.
75. Murdoch, *GandG*, p.54.
76. Murdoch, *The Fire and the Sun*, p.25.
77. Murdoch, *GandG*, p.71.
78. Murdoch, *GandG*, p.54.
79. Murdoch, *GandG*, p.55.
80. Murdoch, *GandG*, p.55.
81. Murdoch, *GandG*, p.55.
82. Murdoch, *GandG*, p.55.
83. Murdoch, *GandG*, p.55.
84. Murdoch, *GandG*, p.56.
85. Murdoch, *GandG*, p.56.
86. Murdoch, *GandG*, p.56.
87. Murdoch, *GandG*, pp.55–6.
88. Murdoch, *GandG*, p.56.
89. Murdoch, *GandG*, p.56.
90. Murdoch, *GandG*, p.56.
91. Murdoch, *GandG*, p.54.
92. Murdoch, *SoGOOC*, p.97.
93. Murdoch, *GandG*, p.68.
94. Murdoch, *GandG*, p.68.
95. Murdoch, *GandG*, p.68.
96. Murdoch, *GandG*, p.71.
97. Murdoch, *GandG*, p.56.
98. Murdoch, *GandG*, p.57.
99. Murdoch, *GandG*, p.57.
100. Murdoch, *GandG*, p.57.
101. Murdoch, *SoGOOC*, p.98.
102. Murdoch, *GandG*, p.57.
103. Murdoch, *GandG*, p.57.
104. Murdoch, *GandG*, p.57.
105. Murdoch, *GandG*, p.58.
106. Murdoch, *GandG*, p.58.
107. Murdoch, *GandG*, p.58.
108. Murdoch, *GandG*, pp.58–9.
109. For a discussion, see Altorf, *Iris Murdoch and the Art of Imagining*, p.90.
110. Murdoch, *GandG*, p.59.
111. Murdoch, *GandG*, p.59.
112. Murdoch, *GandG*, p.59.

113. Murdoch, *GandG*, p.59.
114. Murdoch, *GandG*, p.59.
115. Murdoch, *GandG*, p.59.
116. Murdoch, *GandG*, p.60.
117. Murdoch, *GandG*, pp.60–1.
118. Murdoch, *SoGOOC*, p.95.
119. Murdoch, *GandG*, p.61.
120. Murdoch, *GandG*, p.60.
121. Murdoch, *GandG*, p.61.
122. Murdoch, *GandG*, p.61.
123. Murdoch, *GandG*, p.55.
124. Murdoch, *GandG*, p.62.
125. Murdoch, *GandG*, pp.62–3.
126. Murdoch, *GandG*, p.62.
127. Murdoch, *GandG*, p.63.
128. Woolf, *TTL*, p.76.
129. Woolf, *TTL*, p.76.
130. Woolf, *TTL*, pp.76–7. The 'lie' Mrs Ramsay refers to is the thought that 'we are in the hands of the Lord'.
131. 26 January 1920, *Diary II*, p.14.
132. Murdoch, *GandG*, p.63.
133. Murdoch, *SoGOOC*, pp.94–5.
134. Woolf, *TTL*, p.63.
135. Murdoch, *GandG*, p.64.
136. Murdoch, *GandG*, p.64. (Murdoch's emphasis.)
137. Altorf, *Iris Murdoch and the Art of Imagining*, p.9.
138. Murdoch, *GandG*, p.69.
139. Altorf, *Iris Murdoch and the Art of Imagining*, p.9, citing Maria Antonaccio.
140. Murdoch, *GandG*, p.60. (Murdoch's emphasis.)
141. Murdoch, *SoGOOC*, p.95.
142. Murdoch, *GandG*, p.68. (Murdoch's emphasis.)
143. Murdoch, *GandG*, p.68.
144. Murdoch, *GandG*, p.68.
145. Murdoch, *GandG*, p.68.
146. Murdoch, *GandG*, p.68.
147. Murdoch, *GandG*, pp.68–9.
148. Murdoch, *GandG*, p.69.
149. Murdoch, *GandG*, pp.69–70.
150. Murdoch, *SoGOOC*, p.84.
151. Murdoch, *GandG*, p.70.
152. Murdoch, *GandG*, p.72.
153. Murdoch, *GandG*, p.73.

154. Murdoch, *GandG*, pp.73–4.
155. Robert Hardy, *Psychological and Religious Narratives in Iris Murdoch's Fiction* (New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2000), pp.79–80.
156. Murdoch, *GandG*, p.74.
157. Murdoch, *GandG*, p.74.
158. Murdoch, *GandG*, p.74.
159. Turner, *The Darkness of God*, p.20.
160. Murdoch, *GandG*, p.54.
161. Murdoch, *GandG*, p.55.
162. Murdoch, *GandG*, p.55.
163. Murdoch, *SoGOOC*, pp.94–5.
164. Murdoch, *MGM* p.265. (Murdoch's emphasis.)
165. Janet Martin Soskice, *The Kindness of God: Metaphor, Gender, and Religious Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p.26.
166. Murdoch, 'The Idea of Perfection,' (*IP*), p.43.
167. Murdoch, *IP*, p.2.
168. Murdoch, *IP*, p.3.
169. Murdoch, *IP*, p.3.
170. Murdoch, *IP*, p.3.
171. Murdoch, *IP*, p.3.
172. Murdoch, *IP*, p.4.
173. Murdoch, *IP*, p.4.
174. Murdoch, *IP*, p.5.
175. Murdoch, *IP*, p.5.
176. Murdoch, *IP*, p.5, Murdoch quoting from Professor Hampshire's *Thought and Action* and *Disposition and Memory*.
177. Russell, *OP*, p.161, in Banfield, *TPT*, p.383.
178. Murdoch, *IP*, p.15.
179. Murdoch, *IP*, p.5, Murdoch quoting Hampshire.
180. Murdoch, *IP*, p.5.
181. Murdoch, *IP*, p.6.
182. Murdoch, *IP*, p.6, Murdoch quoting Hampshire.
183. Murdoch, *IP*, p.7.
184. Murdoch, *IP*, p.7.
185. Murdoch, *IP*, p.7.
186. Murdoch, *IP*, p.8.
187. Murdoch, *IP*, pp.8–9.
188. Murdoch, *IP*, p.9.
189. Woolf, *LLG*, p.222.
190. Murdoch, *IP*, p.12.
191. Murdoch, *IP*, p.13.
192. Murdoch, *IP*, p.13.

193. Murdoch, *IP*, p.14.
194. Murdoch, *IP*, p.16.
195. Murdoch, *IP*, p.17. (Murdoch's emphasis.)
196. Murdoch, *IP*, p.17.
197. Murdoch, *IP*, p.17.
198. Murdoch, *IP*, p.18.
199. Murdoch, *IP*, p.19. (Murdoch's emphasis.)
200. Murdoch, *IP*, p.21.
201. Murdoch, *IP*, p.21.
202. Murdoch, *IP*, p.22.
203. Murdoch, *IP*, p.22. (Murdoch's emphasis.)
204. Murdoch, *IP*, p.15.
205. Murdoch, *IP*, p.33.
206. Murdoch, *IP*, p.22. (Murdoch's emphasis.)
207. Murdoch, *IP*, p.23.
208. Murdoch, *IP*, p.24.
209. Murdoch, *IP*, p.26.
210. Murdoch, *IP*, p.27, my emphasis on 'in her seeing knowing mind'.
211. Murdoch, *IP*, p.27.
212. Murdoch, *IP*, p.27.
213. John Burnside, quoting Murdoch's *Times* obituary, in his Introduction to *The Sea, The Sea*, (London: Vintage, 1999 [1978]), pp.ix–xxi (p.xxi).
214. Murdoch, *IP*, p.41.
215. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.348.
216. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.183. (Murdoch's emphasis.)
217. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.389, quoting Plato, *Laws* 805c.
218. Goethe, *Zur Farbenlehre* (1810), in Soskice, *The Kindness of God*, p.27 (Soskice's translation).
219. Murdoch, *IP*, p.30. (Murdoch's emphasis.)
220. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.218.
221. Murdoch, *IP*, p.33.
222. Murdoch, *GandG*, p. 72.
223. Murdoch, *IP*, p.32.
224. Murdoch, *IP*, p.33.
225. Murdoch, *IP*, p.34.
226. Murdoch, *IP*, p.36.
227. Murdoch, *IP*, p.39.
228. Murdoch, *IP*, p.3.
229. Murdoch quotes from Simone Weil's *Notebooks* in her article review in *The Spectator*, November 1956. See Iris Murdoch, 'Knowing the Void', in Iris Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1997 [1956]), pp.157–160 (p.160).

230. Murdoch, *IP*, p.15.
231. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.8.
232. Soskice, *The Kindness of God*, pp.26–7.
233. Soskice, *The Kindness of God*, p.27.
234. Soskice, *The Kindness of God*, p.8.
235. Soskice, *The Kindness of God*, p.11.
236. Soskice, *The Kindness of God*, p.11.
237. Soskice, *The Kindness of God*, p.8.
238. Soskice, *The Kindness of God*, p.9.
239. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.410.
240. Murdoch, *MGM*, pp.337–8.
241. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.339.
242. Consider the tactics of the so-called 'New Atheists'.
243. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.339.
244. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.339.
245. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.347.
246. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.339.
247. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.435. (Murdoch's emphasis.)
248. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.437.
249. Murdoch, *SRR*, p.113.
250. Murdoch, *SoGOOC*, p.100.
251. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.436.
252. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.393.
253. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.57.
254. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.335.
255. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.83.
256. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.347.
257. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.497.
258. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.497.
259. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.347.
260. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.179.
261. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.295.
262. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.329.
263. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.301.
264. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.330.
265. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.435.
266. Murdoch's review of Simone Weil in *The Spectator*, 1956. See Murdoch, 'Knowing the Void', in *Existentialists and Mystics*, p.160.
267. Murdoch, 'Knowing the Void', in *Existentialists and Mystics*, p.160.
268. See Michael Kessler and Christian Sheppard, 'Preface', in *Mystics: Presence and Aporia*, ed. by Michael Kessler and Christian Sheppard (London: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), pp.vii–xvi (pp.vii–viii).

269. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.436.
270. Murdoch, *SoGOOC*, pp.98–9.
271. George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth classics, 1994), p.688.
272. David Jasper, *Rhetoric, Power and Community: An Exercise in Reserve* (London: Macmillan, 1993), p.161, cited in Walton, *Imagining Theology: Women, Writing and God* (London: T&T Clark, 2007), p.48.
273. Walton, *Imagining Theology*, p.47.
274. Soskice, *The Kindness of God*, p.23.
275. Soskice, *The Kindness of God*, p.18.
276. Soskice, *The Kindness of God*, p.23.
277. Sonja Zuba, *Iris Murdoch's Contemporary Retrieval of Plato: The Influence of an Ancient Philosopher on a Modern Novelist* (New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2009), pp.234–5.
278. Murdoch, *GandG*, pp.51–2.
279. Murdoch, *GandG*, p.48.
280. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.497. (Murdoch's emphasis.)
281. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.334.
282. Murdoch, *IP*, p.72.
283. Soskice, *The Kindness of God*, p.31.
284. Soskice, *The Kindness of God*, p.25.
285. Murdoch, *IP*, p.2.
286. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.428.
287. Soskice, *The Kindness of God*, p.23.
288. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.339.
289. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.429.
290. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.429.
291. Soskice, *The Kindness of God*, p.23.
292. Soskice, *The Kindness of God*, p.13.
293. Murdoch, *SoGOOC*, p.100.
294. Murdoch, *GandG*, p.72.
295. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.347.
296. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.328.
297. Woolf, *LLG*, p.222.
298. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.228.
299. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.238.
300. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.241.
301. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.268.
302. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.269.
303. Murdoch, *SoGOOC*, p.93.
304. Murdoch, *IP*, p.42.

305. Murdoch, *IP*, p.42.
306. Murdoch, *IP*, p.39.
307. Murdoch, *IP*, p.40.
308. Murdoch, *IP*, p.37.
309. Murdoch, *IP*, p.30.
310. Murdoch, *GandG*, p.63.
311. Murdoch, *GandG*, p.67.
312. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.297.
313. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.430.
314. Murdoch, *SoGOOC*, p.97. (Murdoch's emphasis.)
315. Murdoch, *SoGOOC*, p.90.
316. Murdoch, *SoGOOC*, p.95.
317. Murdoch, *SoGOOC*, p.97.
318. Murdoch, *SoGOOC*, p.101.

6 Exploring the Apophatic Dimension of Virginia Woolf's Work: Virginia Woolf, Pseudo-Dionysius, and the Aesthetics of Excess

1. Carl Woodring, 'Virginia Woolf', in *Six Modern British Novelists*, ed. by George Stade (London: Columbia University Press, 1974), pp.175–217, (p.196).
2. Stephen MacKenna's translation of *The Enneads* (London: Penguin Books, 1991), p.538.
3. Ann Banfield, *The Phantom Table: Woolf, Fry, Russell and the Epistemology of Modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p.128.
4. Alexander Golitzin, '“Suddenly, Christ”: The Place of Negative Theology in the Mystagogy of Dionysius Areopagites', in *Mystics: Presence and Aporia*, ed. by Michael Kessler and Christian Sheppard (London: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), pp.8–37, (p.14).
5. Golitzin, "“Suddenly, Christ”", in *Mystics*, p. 9.
6. Woolf, *MB*, p.85.
7. Golitzin, "“Suddenly, Christ”", in *Mystics*, p.10.
8. Heather Walton, *Imagining Theology: Women, Writing and God* (London: T&T Clark, 2007), p.47, quoting David Jasper, *Rhetoric, Power and Community: An Exercise in Reserve* (London: Macmillan, 1993), p.9.
9. Michael Kessler and Christian Sheppard, 'Preface', in *Mystics: Presence and Aporia*, ed. by M. Kessler and C. Sheppard (London: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), pp. vii–viii (p.viii).
10. See Banfield, *TPT*, p.362.

11. Jean-Luc Marion, 'Introduction: What Do We Mean By "Mystic"?', in *Mystics: Presence and Aporia*, ed. by Michael Kessler and Christian Sheppard (London: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), pp.1–7 (p.4).
12. Golitzin, "'Suddenly, Christ"', in *Mystics*, p.12.
13. Pseudo-Dionysius, *Mystical Theology*, trans. by C Luibheid,, in *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, ed. by J. Farina (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), pp.133–141.
14. For a discussion of the historical controversies surrounding attempts to identify and date the life and writing of Pseudo-Dionysius, see Jaroslav Pelikan's introduction to Dionysius' work in *MT*, pp.11–24.
15. Pseudo-Dionysius, *MT*, 997A – 997B, p.135. (My emphasis.)
16. Just so, Dionysius urges caution, at the close of his cataphatic recitation of 'the divine names', that these will 'have fallen well short of what they actually mean.' See Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, trans. by C Luibheid, in *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, ed. by J. Farina (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), pp.47–131 (p.130).
17. Denys Turner argues that the apophatic is, in fact, the transcendence of positive and negative affirmations (and the logic governing distinction) *altogether*, a suggestion which, in its extreme negativity, threatens to fail to recognise the significance of the cataphatic (and its necessary presence) for the apophatic moment; see Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), especially Chapter Two.
18. See Kevin Hart, "'The Experience of Nonexperience"', in *Mystics: Presence and Aporia*, ed. by Michael Kessler and Christian Sheppard (London: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), pp.188–206, (p.201).
19. Pseudo-Dionysius, *MT*, 1000B, p.136.
20. Banfield, *TPT*, p.128.
21. Pseudo-Dionysius, *MT*, 1048B, p.141.
22. '[she . . .] could not see it even herself, *without a brush in her hand . . .* becoming, once more- under the power of that vision which she had seen clearly once and must now grope for among hedges and houses and mothers and children- her picture.' Woolf, *TTL*, p. 65.
23. Woodring, 'Virginia Woolf', p.214.
24. Woolf's final novel, published posthumously in 1941.
25. Woolf, *TTL*, p.63.
26. Woolf, *TTL*, p.27.
27. Woodring, 'Virginia Woolf', p.175.
28. Woolf, *TTL*, p.65.
29. 10 September 1928, *Diary III*, p.196.
30. Grace Jantzen, 'Mysticism and Experience', in *Religious Studies*, 25 (1989), 295–315.

31. Woolf, *TTL*, p.232.
32. Woolf, *TTL*, p.100.
33. Woolf, *TTL*, p.206.
34. Paul Fiddes, *The Promised End: Eschatology in Theology and Literature* (Oxford: Blackwells Publishers Limited, 2000), p.41, quoting Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976), p.87.
35. Paul Fiddes, *The Promised End*, p.41, quoting Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, p.87.
36. See Woolf, *TTL*, p.239.
37. Woodring, 'Virginia Woolf', p.197.
38. Woolf, *TTL*, p.207. (My emphasis.)
39. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.29. (Wittgenstein's emphasis.)
40. Pseudo-Dionysius, *MT*, 1048A, p.141.
41. Mark Hussey, *The Singing of the Real World: The Philosophy of Virginia Woolf's Fiction* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1956), p.151.
42. Pseudo-Dionysius, *MT*, 1001A, p.137.
43. Woolf, *TTL*, p.65. (My emphasis.) Again, in apophatic mood, as the artist's vision sharpens, her canvas is revealed in its comparative sparseness. Dionysius' sculptor, equally, is one who 'remove[s] every obstacle to the pure view of the hidden image, and simply by this act of clearing aside . . . show[s] up the beauty which is hidden.' (Pseudo-Dionysius, *MT*, 1025B, p.138).
44. Banfield, *TPT*, p.125.
45. Pseudo-Dionysius, *MT*, 1033B, p.139.
46. Woolf, *TTL*, p.239: 'With sudden intensity, as if she saw it clear for a second, she drew a line there, in the centre. It was done; it was finished. Yes, she thought, laying down her brush in extreme fatigue, I have had my vision.'
47. Woolf, *TTL*, p.205.
48. Woolf, *TTL*, p.205.
49. Woolf, *TTL*, p.220.
50. Woolf, *TTL*, p.221.
51. Woolf, *TTL*, p.221.
52. Hussey, *The Singing of the Real World*, p.151.
53. Woolf, *TTL*, p.198.
54. Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*, cited in Hussey, *The Singing of the Real World*, p.105. (Hussey's emphasis.)
55. Hussey, *The Singing of the Real World*, p.105.
56. Hussey, *The Singing of the Real World*, p.106.
57. Hussey, *The Singing of the Real World*, p.106.

58. 11 October 1929, *Diary III*, p.260.
59. Woolf, *TTL*, p.222.
60. Woodring, 'Virginia Woolf', p.208.
61. 12 April 1938, *Diary V*, p.133, quoted in Julia Briggs, *Virginia Woolf: An Inner Life* (London: Penguin Books, 2006), pp.372–3.
62. Briggs, *Virginia Woolf*, p.372.
63. Briggs, *Virginia Woolf*, p.385.
64. Briggs, *Virginia Woolf*, p.374.
65. Briggs, *Virginia Woolf*, p.388.
66. Briggs, *Virginia Woolf*, p.385.
67. Briggs, *Virginia Woolf*, p.391.
68. Briggs, *Virginia Woolf*, p.386.
69. Briggs, *Virginia Woolf*, p.386.
70. Murdoch, *SRR*, p.73.
71. Briggs, *Virginia Woolf*, p.383.
72. Briggs, *Virginia Woolf*, p.387.
73. Woolf, *BTA*, p.181.
74. Woolf, *BTA*, p.191.
75. Briggs, *Virginia Woolf*, p.381, quoting from a earlier manuscript of *Between the Acts*.
76. Briggs, *Virginia Woolf*, p.381.
77. Briggs, *Virginia Woolf*, p.381.
78. Briggs, *Virginia Woolf*, p.382.
79. Briggs, *Virginia Woolf*, p.382.
80. Woolf, *BTA*, p.197.
81. Woolf had intended to pursue this theme in her unfinished work, *Reading at Random*.
82. Woolf, *BTA*, p.188.
83. Briggs, *Virginia Woolf*, p.382. (My emphasis.)
84. Woolf, *BTA*, pp.188–9.
85. Banfield, *TPT*, p.386.
86. Banfield, *TPT*, p.386.
87. Banfield, *TPT*, pp.386–7.
88. Golitzin, "Suddenly, Christ", in *Mystics*, p.20.
89. see Golitzin, "Suddenly, Christ", in *Mystics*, p.22.
90. Golitzin, "Suddenly, Christ", in *Mystics*, p.22.
91. Woolf, *MB*, p.85.
92. Murdoch, *SRR*, p.92.
93. Woolf, *TW*, p.280.
94. Virginia Woolf's *Roger Fry*, p.285, quoted in Banfield, *TPT*, p.387.
95. Woolf, *TW*, p.280.

96. All references are to *this* text, but this aspect of Marion's phenomenology is fully developed in his *In Excess: Studies of Saturated Phenomena*, trans. by Robyn Horner and Vincent Berraud (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002).
97. Marion, 'Introduction: What Do We Mean By "Mystic"?' in *Mystics*, p.2.
98. Marion, 'Introduction: What Do We Mean By "Mystic"?' in *Mystics*, p.3.
99. Marion, 'Introduction: What Do We Mean By "Mystic"?' in *Mystics*, p.3.
100. Marion, 'Introduction: What Do We Mean By "Mystic"?' in *Mystics*, p.3.
101. Marion, 'Introduction: What Do We Mean By "Mystic"?' in *Mystics*, p.3.
102. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.228.
103. Marion, 'Introduction: What Do We Mean By "Mystic"?' in *Mystics*, p.4.
104. Merold Westphal, 'Phenomenology of Religion' in *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy of Religion*, ed. by Chad Meister and Paul Copan (London: Routledge, 2007), pp.661–671 (p.667).
105. Westphal, 'Phenomenology of Religion', p.667.
106. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.506.
107. Golitzin, "'Suddenly, Christ'", in *Mystics*, p.22.
108. Marion, 'Introduction: What Do We Mean By "Mystic"?' in *Mystics*, p.4.
109. Murdoch, *GandG*, p.69.
110. Briggs, *Virginia Woolf*, p.382.
111. Briggs, *Virginia Woolf*, p.381, quoting the later Typescript of Woolf's *BTA*.
112. 11th October 1929, *Diary III*, p.260.
113. Woolf, *MB*.
114. Briggs, *Virginia Woolf*, p.392, quoting Woolf's unfinished novel.
115. Banfield, *TPT*, p.388.
116. 16 February 1930, *Diary III*, p.287.
117. 18 February 1922, *Diary II*, pp.169–70.
118. 4 January 1929, *Diary III*, p.218.
119. 27 November, 1935, *Diary IV*, p.355.
120. Thomas A. Carlson, 'Locating the Mystical Subject', in *Mystics: Presence and Aporia*, ed. by Michael Kessler and Christian Sheppard (London: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), pp.207–238, (p.229).
121. *Diary IV*, p.360.
122. Banfield, *TPT*, p.379.
123. Hart, 'The Experience of Nonexperience', in *Mystics*, p.194.
124. Hart, 'The Experience of Nonexperience', in *Mystics*, p.194.
125. Hart, 'The Experience of Nonexperience', in *Mystics*, p.189.
126. Hart, 'The Experience of Nonexperience', in *Mystics*, p.189.
127. Hart, 'The Experience of Nonexperience', in *Mystics*, p.189.
128. Hart, 'The Experience of Nonexperience', in *Mystics*, p.195, quoting Blanchot in a letter to Bataille (24 January 1962): See Georges Bataille,

- Choix de lettres, 1917–1962*, ed. by Michel Surya (Paris: Gallimard, 1997), p.596.
129. 18th February 1922, *Diary II*, pp.169–70.
 130. Murdoch, *SoGOOC*, p.96.
 131. Hart, ‘The Experience of Nonexperience’, in *Mystics*, p.189.
 132. Hart, ‘The Experience of Nonexperience’, in *Mystics*, p.199.
 133. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.29. (Wittgenstein’s emphasis.)
 134. Hart, ‘The Experience of Nonexperience’, in *Mystics*, p.201.
 135. Hart, ‘The Experience of Nonexperience’, in *Mystics*, p.199.
 136. Woolf, *BTA*, pp.138–9.
 137. Briggs, *Virginia Woolf*, p.388.
 138. John Burnside, quoting Murdoch’s *Times* obituary, in his Introduction to *The Sea, The Sea*, (London: Vintage, 1999 [1978]), pp.ix–xxi (p.xxi).
 139. Woolf, *BTA*, p.191.
 140. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.465.
 141. *Diary III*, p.236.
 142. Paul Ricoeur, ‘The Function of Fiction in Shaping Reality’, in *A Ricoeur Reader: Reflection and Imagination*, ed. by M. J. Valdes (London: Harvester and Wheatsheaf, 1991 [1979]), pp.117–136.
 143. Marion, ‘Introduction: What Do We Mean By “Mystic”?’ in *Mystics*, p.5.
 144. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.328.
 145. Ricoeur, *FFSR*, p.127.
 146. Ricoeur, *FFSR*, p.117.
 147. Ricoeur, *FFSR*, p.128.
 148. Ricoeur, *FFSR*, p.128.
 149. Woolf, *BTA*, p.191.
 150. Woodring, ‘Virginia Woolf’, p.175.
 151. Woolf, *TTL*, p.222.
 152. Woolf, *TTL*, p.132 and *MB*, p.85.
 153. Woolf, *TTL*, p.222.
 154. Woodring, ‘Virginia Woolf’, pp.215–6.
 155. Marion, ‘Introduction: What Do We Mean By “Mystic”?’ in *Mystics*, p.5.
 156. Banfield, *TPT*, p.376.
 157. Banfield, *TPT*, p.379.
 158. Woolf, *TTL*, p.64.
 159. Murdoch, *IP*, p.33.
 160. Ricoeur, *FFSR*, p.121.
 161. Ricoeur, *FFSR*, p.123.
 162. Ricoeur, *FFSR*, p.126.
 163. Ricoeur, *FFSR*, p.127. (My emphasis.)
 164. Woolf, *TTL*, p.76.

165. 26 January 1920, *Diary II*, pp.13–14.
166. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.505.
167. Ricoeur, *FFSR*, p.126.
168. Ricoeur, *FFSR*, p.126.
169. Ricoeur, *FFSR*, p.127. (My emphasis.)
170. Fiddes, *The Promised End*, p.41.
171. Janet Martin Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), p.148.
172. Paul Ricoeur, 'The Hermeneutics of Symbols and Philosophical Reflection', (1962), in *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur: An Anthology of his Work*, ed. by C. Reagan and D. Stewart (Beacon Press, 1978); quoted in Richard Kearney, *Modern Movements in European Philosophy* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1986), p.92. (My emphasis.)
173. Walton, *Imagining Theology*, p.132.
174. See Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, trans. by C. Luibheid, in *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, ed. by J. Farina (London: SPCK, 1987), pp.47–131.
175. Michael Kessler and Christian Sheppard, 'Preface', in *Mystics*, p.viii.
176. Rowan Williams, *Grace and Necessity: Reflections on Art and Love* (London: Morehouse, 2005), p.x.
177. Woolf, *BTA*, pp.188–9.

7 Exploring the Apophatic Dimension of Iris Murdoch's Work: An Iconoclastic Pilgrimage

1. Murdoch, *GandG*, p.71.
2. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.432.
3. Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p.22.
4. Murdoch, *GandG*, p.68.
5. Murdoch, *SoGOOC*, p.96.
6. Murdoch, *GandG*, p.68.
7. Murdoch, *SoGOOC*, pp.94–5.
8. Murdoch, *SoGOOC*, p.97. (Murdoch's emphasis.)
9. Murdoch, *SRR*, p.66.
10. John Burnside, quoting Murdoch's *Times* obituary, in his Introduction to *The Sea, The Sea*, (London: Vintage, 1999 [1978]), pp.ix–xxi (p.xxi).
11. Murdoch, *IP*, p.41.
12. Murdoch, *GandG*, p.61.
13. Murdoch, *GandG*, p.69.
14. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.507. (Murdoch's emphasis.)

15. 'Void' is the final chapter of the work, as such, though followed by another entitled 'Metaphysics: a Summary'.
16. Iris Murdoch, writing in *The Spectator*, in 1956, re-printed as 'Knowing the Void', in Iris Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1997 [1956]), pp.157–160 (pp.157–8).
17. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.239.
18. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.435.
19. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.437.
20. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.237.
21. Iris Murdoch and Bryan Magee, 'Literature and Philosophy: A Conversation with Bryan Magee', in Iris Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1997 [1978]), pp.3–30 (p.7).
22. Perhaps partly derived from a description Murdoch gives in *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*: 'Yet western philosophy since the Greeks, that continuum of which Derrida announces the end, offers an area of general discourse, a hall of reflection, wherein the different conceptions of great thinkers have constantly been broken down, examined, used and passed on into our thinking while at the same time retaining their identities.' Murdoch, *MGM*, p.296. And again, reflecting on philosophical 'structure': 'But there is another way which consists of constructing a huge hall of reflection full of light and space and fresh air, in which ideas and intuitions can be unsystematically nurtured.' Murdoch, *MGM*, p.422.
23. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.422. Murdoch quotes Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* in two editions: C. K. Ogden's translation of 1922 and D. F. Pears' and B. F. McGuinness' translation of 1961. (See Murdoch's 'Acknowledgements' in *MGM*, p.514).
24. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.2. (Murdoch's emphasis.)
25. Murdoch uses Nietzsche's term. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.2.
26. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.5.
27. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.2.
28. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.10.
29. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.6.
30. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.507.
31. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.512.
32. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.7.
33. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.6.
34. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.7.
35. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.7.
36. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.7.

37. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.7.
38. See Murdoch, *MGM*, p.464.
39. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.7.
40. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.10.
41. Murdoch, *GandG*, pp.69–70.
42. Attributed by Murdoch to St John of the Cross. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.464.
43. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.465.
44. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.505.
45. Marije Altorf, *Iris Murdoch and the Art of Imagining* (London: Continuum, 2008), p.8.
46. Altorf, *Iris Murdoch and the Art of Imagining*, p.8.
47. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.36.
48. Murdoch, *MGM*, opening page.
49. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.169.
50. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.37.
51. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.37.
52. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.216.
53. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.216.
54. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.28.
55. Murdoch, *IP*, p.2.
56. Murdoch, *MGM*, pp.27–8. (Murdoch's emphasis.)
57. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.28.
58. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.48. Murdoch is quoting the second sentence of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*.
59. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.48.
60. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.28. (Murdoch's emphasis.)
61. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.28. Murdoch quotes Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* 6. 421, translated by Pears and McGuinness.
62. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.28.
63. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.29.
64. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.29.
65. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.30.
66. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.40.
67. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.403. Murdoch is quoting Plato's *Phaedo* 114DE.
68. See Altorf, *Iris Murdoch and the Art of Imagining*, p.90.
69. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.30.
70. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.27.
71. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.27.
72. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.30, quoting Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, 6. 521, 6. 522. (Wittgenstein's emphasis.)
73. Murdoch, *GandG*, p.71.

74. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.36.
75. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.36.
76. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.3. (Murdoch's emphasis.)
77. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.37.
78. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.1.
79. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.1.
80. Murdoch, *GandG*, p.68.
81. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.36.
82. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.36.
83. Murdoch, *MGM*, pp.36–7.
84. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.37.
85. Murdoch, *MGM*, pp.37–8.
86. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.38.
87. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.38.
88. She adds, 'the use of theos at Republic 597B is a *façon de parler*', Murdoch, *MGM*, p.38)
89. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.38.
90. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.38.
91. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.39.
92. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.41, Murdoch is quoting the Preface to A. J. Ayer's *Language, Truth and Logic* (published 1936).
93. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.43.
94. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.55.
95. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.235.
96. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.259.
97. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.55.
98. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.159.
99. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.55.
100. Murdoch, *GandG*, p.74.
101. Murdoch, *SoGOOC*, p.77.
102. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.1.
103. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.56.
104. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.56.
105. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.56.
106. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.57.
107. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.57.
108. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.175.
109. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.177.
110. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.174.
111. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.180.

112. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.142. Murdoch refers to Stanley Rosen's text *The Quarrel between Philosophy and Poetry*.
113. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.181.
114. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.181.
115. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.175.
116. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.181.
117. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.182.
118. Woolf, *MB*, p.85, in Goldman, *FAVW*, p.46.
119. Murdoch, *MGM*, pp.182–3. I wonder whether 'change' is a misprint of 'charge.'
120. Murdoch, *MGM*, pp.182–3. (Murdoch's emphasis.)
121. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.183.
122. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.184.
123. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.224.
124. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.216.
125. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.236.
126. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.236.
127. Murdoch, *GandG*, p.74.
128. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.236.
129. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.236. (Murdoch's emphasis.)
130. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.237. (Murdoch's emphasis.)
131. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.237.
132. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.237.
133. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.241.
134. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.241.
135. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.242.
136. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.241.
137. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.239.
138. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.239.
139. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.242.
140. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.243.
141. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.244.
142. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.244.
143. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.248.
144. Pseudo-Dionysius, *MT*, 997A – 997B, p.135. (My emphasis.)
145. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.244.
146. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.244.
147. Murdoch, *MGM*, pp.244–5.
148. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.245.
149. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.245.

150. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.245.
151. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.245. (Murdoch's emphasis.)
152. Woolf, *TTL*, pp.76–77. The 'lie' Mrs Ramsay refers to, suitably for Murdoch, is the thought that 'we are in the hands of the Lord' (the personalising of a concept of transcendent reality).
153. 26 January 1920, *Diary II*, p.14.
154. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.464.
155. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.465.
156. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.465.
157. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.247.
158. Murdoch, *MGM*, pp.246–7. Murdoch quotes from Rainer Maria Rilke, *Selected Letters* 1902–1926, translated by R. F. C. Hull (Frankfurt-on-Main: Insel Verlag, and London: Macmillan London Ltd, 1946), pp.150, 163, 151–2. All these remarks are addressed to Clara Rilke (Murdoch, *MGM*, p.247).
159. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.247. Murdoch quotes Simone Weil on Zen Buddhism from Weil's *Notebooks*, translated by Arthur Wills, (London: Routledge, 1956), pp.395, 406. See Murdoch's Acknowledgements, *MGM*, p.513. (Murdoch's emphasis on 'distance'.)
160. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.247.
161. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.248. (Murdoch's emphasis.)
162. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.248.
163. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.249.
164. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.249.
165. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.249.
166. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.250.
167. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.257.
168. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.250.
169. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.257.
170. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.257.
171. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.259. (Murdoch's emphasis.)
172. Murdoch, *MGM*, pp.259–60. (Murdoch's emphasis.)
173. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.266. (Murdoch's emphasis.)
174. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.267. (Murdoch's emphasis.)
175. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.267.
176. Murdoch, *SRR*, p.60.
177. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.267.
178. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.267.
179. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.265.
180. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.293.

181. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.292.
182. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.505.
183. Murdoch, *MGM*, pp.293–4.
184. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.301.
185. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.301.
186. The concept of not seeking God ‘outside your own soul’, partly grounding Murdoch’s appreciation for Eckhart, also draws her into sympathy with Buddhist influences: see, for example, Tammy Grimshaw, ‘Do not Seek God outside your own Soul: Buddhism in The Green Knight’, in *Iris Murdoch and Morality*, ed. by Anne Rowe and Avril Horner (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp.168–79.
187. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.301.
188. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.301.
189. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.302.
190. Murdoch, *MGM*, pp.305–6.
191. Woolf, *LLG*, p.222.
192. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.306.
193. Murdoch, *SoGOOC*, p.98.
194. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.306.
195. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.306.
196. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.307.
197. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.315.
198. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.315.
199. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.318.
200. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.317.
201. Murdoch, *SoGOOC*, p.97.
202. Murdoch, *MGM*, pp.317–8.
203. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.318.
204. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.318.
205. Murdoch, *GandG*, p.74.
206. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.319.
207. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.319.
208. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.319.
209. Murdoch, *GandG*, pp.60–1.
210. Evelyn Underhill, ‘Bergson and the Mystics’, in *The English Review*, 10 no.2 (1912), 511–22 (p.511).
211. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.332.
212. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.319, Murdoch quoting Dante’s *Letter to Can Grande*.
213. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.319.
214. Murdoch, *SoGOOC*, p.75.

215. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.319, Murdoch quoting Dante's *Letter to Can Grande*.
216. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.320.
217. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.321. (Murdoch's emphasis.)
218. Murdoch, *MGM*, pp.320–1.
219. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.321. (Murdoch's emphasis.)
220. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.319.
221. Murdoch, *MGM*, pp.323–4.
222. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.56.
223. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.328.
224. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.329.
225. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.329.
226. Murdoch, *MGM*, pp.427–8.
227. Murdoch, *SoGOOC*, p.90.
228. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.430.
229. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.393.
230. Murdoch, *GandG*, p.74.
231. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.236.
232. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.251.
233. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.236.
234. Marije Altorf, *Iris Murdoch and the Art of Imagining* (London: Continuum, 2008), p.92, quoting Murdoch on Plato's *Seventh Letter* in *The Fire and the Sun*.
235. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.236.
236. Definitions of apophaticism from Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p.19.
237. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.498.
238. Sue Yore, *The Mystic Way in Postmodernity: Transcending Theological Boundaries in the Writings of Iris Murdoch, Denise Levertov and Annie Dillard* (New York: Peter Lang, 2009), p.178.
239. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.501. (Murdoch's emphasis.)
240. Murdoch, *SoGOOC*, p.90.
241. Altorf, *Iris Murdoch and the Art of Imagining*, p.112.
242. Altorf, *Iris Murdoch and the Art of Imagining*, p.110.
243. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.346.
244. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.506.
245. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.465.
246. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.501.
247. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.400.
248. Murdoch, *SRR*, p.136.

8 Conclusion: Mystical Contributions to a Theological Aesthetic: Virginia Woolf and Iris Murdoch

1. Heather Walton, *Imagining Theology: Women, Writing and God* (London: T&T Clark, 2007), p.132.
2. Evelyn Underhill, *The School of Charity: Meditations on the Christian Creed* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1954 [1934]), p.6.
3. Walton's phrase.
4. Walton, *Imagining Theology*, p.77.
5. 10 September 1928, *Diary III*, p.196.
6. Woolf, *TTL*, p.172.
7. David Jasper, *Rhetoric, Power and Community: An Exercise in Reserve* (London: Macmillan, 1993), p.9, quoted in Walton, *Imagining Theology*, p.47.
8. Walton, *Imagining Theology*, p.72.
9. Paul Fiddes, *The Promised End: Eschatology in Theology and Literature* (Oxford: Blackwells Publishers Limited, 2000), p.7.
10. Walton, *Imagining Theology*, p.44.
11. Murdoch, *MGM*, pp.292–3.
12. David Jasper, *Rhetoric, Power and Community*, p.161, cited in Walton, *Imagining Theology*, p.48.
13. Jasper, *Rhetoric, Power and Community*, p.9.
14. Woolf, *TTL*, pp.76–7.
15. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.425.
16. Marilynne Robinson in Tom Montgomery-Fate, 'Seeing the Holy: Marilynne Robinson Explores the Sacredness of the Everyday World', in *Sojourners*, 35.6 (2006), 38–43 (p.42), quoted in Walton, *Imagining Theology*, p.132.
17. Walton, *Imagining Theology*, p.44. (Walton's emphasis.)
18. Walton, *Imagining Theology*, p.45, quoting Michael Roemer, *Postmodernism and the Invalidation of Traditional Narrative* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1995), p.56.
19. Walton, *Imagining Theology*, p.46.
20. Walton, *Imagining Theology*, p.47.
21. Paul Fiddes, *The Promised End: Eschatology in Theology and Literature* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 2000), p.41, citing Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976), p.87.
22. Walton, *Imagining Theology*, p.132.
23. Iris Murdoch, as recorded in Iris Murdoch and Bryan Magee, 'Literature and Philosophy: A Conversation with Bryan Magee', in Iris Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1997 [1978]), pp.3–30 (p.25).

24. John O'Donohue, *Anam Cara: Spiritual Wisdom from the Celtic World* (London: Bantam Books, 1997), p.126.
25. Fiddes, *The Promised End*, p.41.
26. Carl Woodring, 'Virginia Woolf', in *Six Modern British Novelists*, ed. by George Stade (London: Columbia University Press, 1974), pp.175–217, p.196.
27. John Burnside, quoting Murdoch's *Times* obituary, in his Introduction to *The Sea, The Sea*, (London: Vintage, 1999 [1978]), pp.ix–xxi (p.xxi).
28. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.465.
29. Charles Winqvist, *Desiring Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p.133, cited in Walton, *Imagining Theology*, p.54.
30. Murdoch, *IP*, p.30.
31. Their text is more nuanced than my description here, but consider for example Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Dorrance Kelly's *All Things Shining: Reading the Western Classics to Find Meaning in a Secular Age* (New York: Free Press, 2011).
32. Murdoch quotes from Simone Weil's *Notebooks* in her article review in *The Spectator*, November 1956. See Iris Murdoch, 'Knowing the Void', in Iris Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1997 [1956]), pp.157–160 (p.160).
33. Murdoch, *MGM*, p.25.
34. Marije Altorf, *Iris Murdoch and the Art of Imagining* (London: Continuum, 2008), p.109.
35. Iris Murdoch, 'Above the Gods: A Dialogue About Religion', in Iris Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1997 [1986]), pp.497–526 (p.526).

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