

Book reviews

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Marije Altorf *Iris Murdoch and the Art of Imagining*. (London: Continuum, 2008). Pp. 150. £65.00 (Hbk). ISBN 978 0 8264 9757 4.

Marije Altorf's monograph is a welcome addition to the growing secondary literature on the philosophical writings of Iris Murdoch, a thinker who maintains in her late work *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (MGM) that 'God does not and cannot exist', yet who describes herself in the same book as a 'neo-Christian or Buddhist Christian or Christian fellow-traveller' and who worries about the future of religious ritual and the King James Bible. Altorf's concern, however, is not primarily with the religious aspect of Murdoch's thought, though the last of the book's five main chapters discusses in some detail her treatment of Anselm's 'ontological proof'. Instead, the unifying idea is that of Murdoch as a philosopher inspired by literary (or in general 'imaginative') rather than by natural-scientific modes of discovery, and thus at variance from the outset with the more austere epistemological presuppositions of mid-twentieth century analytical philosophy, whose dogmatic 'fact-value distinction' she did so much to destabilize.

Beyond this, the argumentative thread of the book is a little hard to follow, and there is some sense of a collection of free-standing essays rather lightly stitched together. Altorf undertakes at different moments to offer an 'exposition of Murdoch's philosophical writings' (9); to act as a general-purpose advocate, with the aim of '[confirming] Murdoch as a thinker of great originality and importance' (16); to '[focus] on Murdoch's understanding of literature' and to show that her work 'represents an important challenge to many suppositions about philosophy', indeed to 'examine the presence of imagery in philosophy' quite generally (17); and in particular to show the 'indebtedness [of Murdoch's thought] to Le Doeuff's notion of the philosophical imaginary' (65) – i.e. that of the French feminist philosopher Michèle Le Doeuff, publishing from the 1970s onwards and still active. ('Indebtedness' is perhaps not quite the right word here, since to the best of my knowledge there is no evidence that Murdoch was aware of Le Doeuff; the point is rather that Murdoch's style of thought can be fruitfully described in Le Doeuffian terms.)

On the whole, though, the different chapters seem to strike out on their own distinct paths: much of chapter 2 ('Philosophy and its imagery') consists of

exposition of Le Doeuff, during which Murdoch herself fades from view, only to reappear in the chapter's concluding section where we hear that the subsequent reading of Murdoch is inspired by Le Doeuff's ideas, but that '[t]his inspiration is not always marked' (42). A bit more sign-posting would in fact have been helpful: for example, when Altorf claims in the conclusion to chapter 3 to have exhibited Murdoch's 'references to character and to literature ... as a structuring principle in [her] thought', and in doing so to have '[shown] its indebtedness' to the French theorist, the reader may reasonably ask: how exactly has this been shown, given that Le Doeuff has not been mentioned since the opening lines of the chapter?

This question requires attention, since despite the undeniable excitement promised by an encounter between Le Doeuff and Murdoch, there is a significant mismatch between the roles attributed to imagination in each of these writers. What Altorf's discussion seems to suppress is that Le Doeuff's 'philosophical imaginary' (as presented in her book of that title, published in English in 1989) is essentially a tool of criticism, designed to interrogate philosophical texts for evidence of problems or preoccupations which the author is unable to address explicitly, but which declare themselves through less intellectually guarded gestures such as the choice of imagery (appetite as a many-headed beast, the domain of knowledge as an island, and so forth).

True, Murdoch and Le Doeuff are linked by the conviction that philosophy could benefit from a more active recognition of ourselves as image-deploying creatures, but the element of agreement between them in this area appears on closer inspection to be fairly thin and abstract. Murdoch's aim, as Altorf correctly notes, is the didactic one of distinguishing between the ego-boosting fantasy that characterizes human consciousness most of the time, and on the other hand a 'high imagination' (85) expressed in genuine works of art and in the effort to make ourselves receptive to reality, especially (though this is hardest of all) the reality of other persons. Le Doeuff by contrast, while clearly no moral sceptic (since her work reflects a fierce commitment to the Enlightenment egalitarian project), applies her distinctive conception of the imaginary – an instrument not of moral teaching but of rhetorical analysis – to the negative task of disclosing the unofficial or 'shameful' face of philosophy; any ethical benefit drawn from this exercise will be an indirect one due, as with other forms of ideological critique, to the overcoming of a certain kind of naïvety, rather than a direct one due to the defeat of 'original sin'. Readers may wonder if it would have been more revealing to scan Murdoch's novels and other texts for the traces of her own 'imaginary' (in Le Doeuff's sense of a symptomatically significant routine of figurative thinking) than to enlist the often 'sarcastic and corrosive' (41) Le Doeuff in support of a thinker whose natural instincts tend strongly – as Murdoch's do – in the direction of reverence. (It is hard, for example, to picture Le Doeuff listening with a straight face to the suggestion of Murdoch in *MGM* that we live in a spiritually benighted age reduced to awaiting a 'new revelation', or in which 'a genius is needed'.)

Altorf, as it turns out, is not without her own streak of scepticism, for we find her reflecting towards the end of the book that

Murdoch's idiosyncratic position [with regard to the possibility of religious belief, or of some secular successor to it] ... involves withdrawing from contemporary discussions and works. This ... creates an emptiness in [Murdoch]'s thought Despite the emphasis on imagination and the use of much imagery Murdoch's world may seem rather depleted [Her] various virtuous peasants also seem to come straight out of the nineteenth-century novels she favours so much, rather than out of life. (111, 112, 117).

While these statements need not be read as contradicting outright the attribution to Murdoch of 'great originality and importance', the terms 'empty' and 'depleted' imply some serious qualification of Altorf's earlier praise and it is surprising to find no reference back, and no clear attempt to formulate a definitive, all-things-considered judgement.

The most striking observations in this book, or so it seems to me, fall under the heading of critical comment. They relate to the famous thought-experiment set out in *The Sovereignty of Good* (SG) by which Murdoch seeks to demonstrate, in defiance of current 'existentialist-behaviourist' orthodoxy, the moral importance of the inner life. Altorf points out that what Murdoch evokes in M (the chilly but conscientious mother-in-law who struggles in solitude to take a more friendly view of her now absent daughter-in-law, D) is a character surprisingly close to the radically isolated Roquentin in Sartre's novel *Nausea*, the text through which Murdoch launches her critique of 'existentialist man' in *Sartre: Romantic Rationalist*. Her attempt to ensure the fitness of the M-and-D story for its argumentative purpose by eliminating any social (or, therefore, behavioural) context for M's experience seems to work against the 'central imagery of vision and attention' (64), which displays, in Murdoch's thought, the enduring influence of Simone Weil. 'M looks at D, she attends to D, she focuses her attention' (quoted, 63) – but 'D is not actually present' (*ibid.*) I am not sure I understand the paragraph at the end of the relevant section (65) in which Altorf summarizes the outcome of this discussion, but it is tempting to posit some connection between the purely introspective or memory-dependent 'looking' that bears the weight of Murdoch's argument here, and the previously mentioned withdrawal from 'contemporary discussions and works' identified by Altorf as a weakness in Murdoch's ethics. There is matter here for further exploration.

Also good, and so far as I know original (though not enough is made of it), is the remark in chapter 4 that 'Murdoch does not explain whether D is *really* "vulgar" or "refreshingly simple", "undignified" or "spontaneous"', etc. (70). This is strange procedure on the part of a committed 'moral realist', and points towards what may be an interesting failure of fit between Murdoch's position and the kind of view described as 'realist' in recent analytical ethics. True, we have been asked to assume that the change in M's perception is for the better. But suppose we

offer Murdoch, in exchange, a scenario in which M concludes after a period of solitary reflection: 'Well, toleration and good manners are very important, so thank goodness I never let my feelings show – at least I hope I didn't. Still, she *was* tiresomely juvenile ...'. Would that necessarily make M a less admirable person? Murdoch speaks in the relevant part of *SG* of an attempt by M 'not just to see D accurately but to see her justly or lovingly'; but what if the younger woman (as we might say, from a putative 'ideal-spectator' point of view) *really is* tiresomely juvenile, so that the 'loving' perception would part company with the 'just' or truthful one? Or is Murdoch somehow committed to the idea that at the deepest level, 'justice' and 'love' in our perception of our fellow human beings *cannot* (a priori) come apart? How might one argue for such a view? Altorf does not address these questions, but she has done well to unearth them.

Less satisfactory is the treatment of 'Murdoch and feminism' which precedes Altorf's discussion of Le Doeuff in chapter 2. Here she seems to create gratuitous difficulties by construing a practice of 'feminist interpretation' of texts as one that '[starts] from the assumption that social, cultural, or natural differences between men and women are reflected in literary and philosophical writing' (21). Such an approach, she says, 'needs justification' – and moreover calls for 'some courage' – when an author 'refuses to address gender issues and is even averse [as we know from various interviews that Murdoch was] to singling out women's problems' (*ibid.*). This, however, sounds like the aftermath of a certain diplomatic caution that may have prevailed in Murdoch's lifetime. If 'feminist interpretation' is defined, rather, by the interpreter's own adherence to a feminist politics and by curiosity about the (perhaps merely implicit) sexual politics of this or that writer, we are released from any automatic expectation that critic and subject will find themselves in harmony. There is no philosophical impediment to a feminist reading – in this sense – of what may prove to be a misogynist text, and no particular need to defer to the views of the writer under discussion, as attested by external evidence.

We also find in this part of the book the misleading claim that Iris Murdoch was 'one of the first women to study and teach philosophy at a university' (22; cf. also 16, 114 and 116). Altorf does not specify whether she means one of the first in Britain, Europe, or the world, but limiting our attention to Murdoch's home turf, the Greats examination at Oxford has been open to women since 1890 – over fifty years before Murdoch's own finals – when a Miss Elizabeth Hodge of Somerville achieved second-class honours. Nor did Murdoch's generation of professional women philosophers, for all its undoubted brilliance, appear entirely from nowhere: Cambridge-educated Susan Stebbing, for example, gained an MA in philosophy from the University of London in 1912 – before Murdoch was born – and held a chair at Bedford College in the 1930s and 1940s, publishing abundantly on logic and other branches of the subject. Perhaps even more problematic is the statement that 'Murdoch is one of the few philosophers in the

past century who have tried to cross the gap between Anglo-Saxon and continental traditions in philosophy' (65–66). Here, at any rate, we need to know who else is supposed to be on the list. We can assume for the sake of argument that run-of-the-mill teachers and scholars are excluded (though there are contexts in which these, too, would legitimately count as 'philosophers'); but how would Altorf assess the claims (to look no further than the Anglophone side) of, say, Bertrand Russell, R. G. Collingwood, A. J. Ayer, Michael Dummett, or Richard Rorty? Even Gilbert Ryle, one of the paradigmatic 'analytical philosophers' criticized by Murdoch in *SG*, was sufficiently cosmopolitan to review Heidegger's *Being and Time* (for *Mind*) in 1929.

Again, can it be right to say of Michèle Le Doeuff that she '[avoids] the perennial question "what is philosophy?"' (27)? Many of us would be happy to have contributed as much to the understanding of this question as Le Doeuff has done in her classic early paper 'Women and philosophy', in *Hipparchia's Choice*, or in those pages of her more recent *Sex of Knowing* where she traces the emergence of a mode of learning not subject to ecclesiastical or otherwise unchallengeable authority. And in this connection, I imagine I am not the only teacher (of philosophy or any other subject) who will look askance at the following sentences: 'The distinction between teacher and student is only one of the many that the fool [i.e. Le Doeuff's persona of the 'philosopher-fool'] subverts. With a fool one is forced to think for oneself' (41). Does 'thinking for oneself' play no part, then, in the teacher–student relationship as hitherto known to Altorf? Such points may be partly a matter of careless formulation, but they still take something away from the quality of the book.

Careless formulation is not the main worry, though, in Altorf's account of Murdoch on the indispensability of imagery in philosophy, where we read that 'the Good, the sun and Love are all examples of metaphors' (28; restated on 29). Plato's use of the sun as a symbol of the Good (in *Republic*, Book VI) may be described as metaphorical, but the Good itself is certainly not a 'metaphor' or an 'image' – on the contrary, it is the very thing Socrates feels unable to describe except with the help of an image; and a statement like that of Murdoch in *SG* that 'Good is the magnetic centre towards which love naturally moves' is presumably meant to be read in the same spirit.

Finally, I must enter a protest against the alarming reference to 'appeals by Nussbaum and Lovibond to keep feminism and philosophy separate' (25). Martha Nussbaum can speak for herself, but the article of mine included in Altorf's bibliography contains no such appeal, nor do the words quoted correspond to any view I have ever held or expressed.

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