

Iris Murdoch

Against Dryness

A Polemical Sketch

THE complaints which I wish to make are concerned primarily with prose, not with poetry, and primarily with novels, not with drama; and they are brief, simplified, abstract, and possibly insular. They are not to be construed as implying any precise picture of "the function of the writer." It is the function of the writer to write the best book he knows how to write. These remarks have to do with the background to present-day literature, in Liberal democracies in general and Welfare States in particular, in a sense in which this must be the concern of any serious critic.

We live in a scientific and anti-metaphysical age in which the dogmas, images, and precepts of religion have lost much of their power. We have not recovered from two wars and the experience of Hitler. We are also the heirs of the Enlightenment, Romanticism, and the Liberal tradition. These are the elements of our dilemma: whose chief feature, in my view, is that we have been left with far too shallow and flimsy an idea of human personality. I shall explain this.

PHILOSOPHY, LIKE THE NEWSPAPERS, is both the guide and the mirror of its age. Let us look quickly at Anglo-Saxon philosophy and at French philosophy and see what picture of human personality we can gain from these two depositories of wisdom. Upon Anglo-Saxon philosophy the two most profound influences have been Hume and Kant: and it is not difficult to see in the current philosophical conception of the person the work of these two great thinkers. This conception

consists in the joining of a materialistic behaviourism with a dramatic view of the individual as a solitary will. These subtly give support to each other. From Hume through Bertrand Russell, with friendly help from mathematical logic and science, we derive the idea that reality is finally a quantity of material atoms and that significant discourse must relate itself directly or indirectly to reality so conceived. This position was most picturesquely summed up in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*. Recent philosophy, especially the later work of Wittgenstein and the work of Gilbert Ryle derivative therefrom, alters this a little. The atomic Humian picture is abandoned in favour of a type of conceptual analysis (in many ways admirable) which emphasises the structural dependence of concepts upon the public language in which they are framed. This analysis has important results in the philosophy of mind, where it issues in modified behaviourism. Roughly: my inner life, for me just as for others, is identifiable as existing only through the application to it of public concepts, concepts which can only be constructed on the basis of overt behaviour.

This is one side of the picture, the Humian and post-Humian side. On the other side, we derive from Kant, and also Hobbes and Bentham through John Stuart Mill, a picture of the individual as a free rational will. With the removal of Kant's metaphysical background this individual is seen as alone. (He is in a certain sense alone on Kant's view also, that is: not confronted with real dissimilar others.) With the addition of some utilitarian optimism he is seen as eminently

educable. With the addition of some modern psychology he is seen as capable of self-knowledge by methods agreeable to science and common sense. So we have the modern man, as he appears in many recent works on ethics and I believe also to a large extent in the popular consciousness.

We meet, for instance, a refined picture of this man in Stuart Hampshire's book *Thought and Action*. He is rational and totally free except in so far as, in the most ordinary law-court and commonsensical sense, his degree of self-awareness may vary. He is morally speaking monarch of all he surveys and totally responsible for his actions. Nothing transcends him. His moral language is a practical pointer, the instrument of his choices, the indication of his preferences. His inner life is resolved into his acts and choices, and his beliefs, which are also acts, since a belief can only be identified through its expression. His moral arguments are references to empirical facts backed up by decisions. The only moral word which he requires is "good" (or "right"), the word which expresses decision. His rationality expresses itself in awareness of the facts, whether about the world or about himself. The virtue which is fundamental to him is sincerity.

IF WE turn to French philosophy we may see, at least in that section of it which has most caught the popular imagination, I mean in the work of Jean Paul Sartre, essentially the same picture. It is interesting how extremely Kantian this picture is, for all Sartre's indebtedness to Hegelian sources. Again, the individual is pictured as solitary and totally free. There is no transcendent reality, there are no degrees of freedom. On the one hand there is the mass of psychological desires and social habits and prejudices, on the other hand there is the will. Certain dramas, more Hegelian in character, are of course enacted within the soul; but the isolation of the will remains. Hence *angoisse*. Hence, too, the special anti-bourgeois flavour of Sartre's philosophy which makes it appeal to many intellectuals: the ordinary traditional picture of personality

and the virtues lies under suspicion of *mauvaise foi*. Again the only real virtue is sincerity. It is, I think, no accident that, however much philosophical and other criticism Sartre may receive, this powerful picture has caught our imagination. The Marxist critics may plausibly claim that it represents the essence of the Liberal theory of personality.

It will be pointed out that other phenomenological theories (leaving aside Marxism) have attempted to do what Sartre has failed to do, and that there are notable philosophers who have offered a different picture of the soul. Yes; yet from my own knowledge of the scene I would doubt whether any (non-Marxist) account of human personality has yet emerged from phenomenology which is fundamentally unlike the one which I have described and can vie with it in imaginative power. It may be said that philosophy cannot in fact produce such an account. I am not sure about this, nor is this large question my concern here. I express merely my belief that, for the Liberal world, philosophy is not in fact at present able to offer us any other complete and powerful picture of the soul. I return now to England and the Anglo-Saxon tradition.

THE WELFARE STATE has come about as a result, largely, of socialist thinking and socialist endeavour. It has seemed to bring a certain struggle to an end; and with that ending has come a lassitude about fundamentals. If we compare the language of the original Labour Party constitution with that of its recent successor we see an impoverishment of thinking and language which is typical. The Welfare State is the reward of "empiricism in politics." It has represented to us a set of thoroughly desirable but limited ends, which could be conceived *in non-theoretical terms*; and in pursuing it, in allowing the idea of it to dominate the more naturally theoretical wing of our political scene, we have to a large extent lost our theories. Our central conception is still a debilitated form of Mill's equation: happiness equals freedom equals personality.

There should have been a revolt against utilitarianism; but for many reasons it has not taken place. In 1905 John Maynard Keynes and his friends welcomed the philosophy of G. E. Moore because Moore reinstated the concept of experience, Moore directed attention away from the mechanics of action and towards the inner life. But Moore's "experience" was too shallow a concept; and a scientific age with simple attainable empirical aims has preferred a more behaviouristic philosophy.

WHAT HAVE WE LOST HERE? And what have we perhaps never had? We have suffered a general loss of concepts, the loss of a moral and political vocabulary. We no longer use a spread-out substantial picture of the manifold virtues of man and society. We no longer see man against a background of values, of realities, which transcend him. We picture man as a brave naked will surrounded by an easily comprehended empirical world. For the hard idea of truth we have substituted a facile idea of sincerity. What we have never had, of course, is a satisfactory Liberal theory of personality, a theory of man as free and separate and related to a rich and complicated world from which, as a moral being, he has much to learn. We have bought the Liberal theory as it stands, because we have wished to encourage people to think of themselves as free, at the cost of surrendering the background.

WE HAVE never solved the problems about human personality posed by the Enlightenment. Between the various concepts available to us the real question has escaped: and now, in a curious way, our present situation is analogous to an 18th-century one. We retain a rationalistic optimism about the beneficent results of education, or rather technology. We combine this with a romantic conception of "the human condition," a picture of the individual as stripped and solitary: a conception which has, since Hitler, gained a peculiar intensity.

The 18th century was an era of rationalistic allegories and moral tales. The 19th

century (roughly) was the great era of the novel; and the novel thrived upon a dynamic merging of the idea of person with the idea of class. Because 19th-century society was dynamic and interesting and because (to use a Marxist notion) the type and the individual could there be seen as merged, the solution of the 18th-century problem could be put off. It has been put off till now. Now that the structure of society is less interesting and less alive than it was in the 19th century, and now that Welfare economics have removed certain incentives to thinking, and now that the values of science are so much taken for granted, we confront in a particularly dark and confusing form a dilemma which has been with us implicitly since the Enlightenment, or since the beginning, wherever exactly one wishes to place it, of the modern Liberal world.

IF WE CONSIDER 20th-century literature as compared with 19th-century literature, we notice certain significant contrasts. I said that, in a way, we were back in the 18th century, the era of rationalistic allegories and moral tales, the era when the idea of human nature was unitary and single. The 19th-century novel (I use these terms boldly and roughly: of course there were exceptions) was not concerned with "the human condition," it was concerned with real various individuals struggling in society. The 20th-century novel is usually either crystalline or journalistic; that is, it is either a small quasi-allegorical object portraying the human condition and not containing "characters" in the 19th-century sense, or else it is a large shapeless quasi-documentary object, the degenerate descendant of the 19th-century novel, telling, with pale conventional characters, some straightforward story enlivened with empirical facts. Neither of these kinds of literature engages with the problem that I mentioned above.

It may readily be noted that if our prose fiction is either crystalline or journalistic, the crystalline works are usually the better ones. They are what the more serious writers want to create. We may recall the ideal of "dry-

ness" which we associate with the symbolist movement, with writers such as T. E. Hulme and T. S. Eliot, with Paul Valery, with Wittgenstein. This "dryness" (smallness, clearness, self-containedness) is a nemesis of Romanticism. Indeed it is Romanticism in a later phase. The pure, clean, self-contained "symbol," the exemplar incidentally of what Kant, ancestor of both Liberalism and Romanticism, required art to be, is the analogue of the lonely self-contained individual. It is what is left of the other-worldliness of Romanticism when the "messy" humanitarian and revolutionary elements have spent their force. The temptation of art, a temptation to which every work of art yields except the greatest ones, is to console. The modern writer, frightened of technology and (in England) abandoned by philosophy and (in France) presented with simplified dramatic theories, attempts to console us by myths or by stories.

On the whole: his truth is sincerity and his imagination is fantasy. Fantasy operates either with shapeless day-dreams (the journalistic story) or with small myths, toys, crystals. Each in his own way produces a sort of "dream necessity." Neither grapples with reality: hence "fantasy," not "imagination."

THE proper home of the symbol, in the "symbolist" sense, is poetry. Even there it may play an equivocal role since there is something in symbolism which is inimical to words, out of which, we have been reminded, poems are constructed. Certainly the invasion of other areas by what I may call, for short, "symbolist ideals," has helped to bring about a decline of prose. Eloquence is out of fashion; even "style," except in a very austere sense of this term, is out of fashion.

T. S. Eliot and Jean-Paul Sartre, dissimilar enough as thinkers, both tend to undervalue prose and to deny it any *imaginative* function. Poetry is the creation of linguistic quasi-things; prose is for explanation and exposition, it is essentially didactic, documentary, informative. Prose is ideally transparent; it is only *faute de mieux* written in words. The influential modern stylist is Hemingway. It

would be almost inconceivable now to write like Landor. Most modern English novels indeed are not *written*. One feels they could slip into some other medium without much loss. It takes a foreigner like Nabokov or an Irishman like Beckett to animate prose language into an imaginative stuff in its own right.

TOLSTOY WHO SAID that art was an expression of the religious perception of the age was nearer the truth than Kant who saw it as the imagination in a frolic with the understanding. The connection between art and the moral life has languished because we are losing our sense of form and structure in the moral world itself. Linguistic and existentialist behaviourism, our Romantic philosophy, has reduced our vocabulary and simplified and impoverished our view of the inner life. It is natural that a Liberal democratic society will not be concerned with techniques of improvement, will deny that virtue is knowledge, will emphasise choice at the expense of vision; and a Welfare State will weaken the incentives to investigate the bases of a Liberal democratic society. For political purposes we have been encouraged to think of ourselves as totally free and responsible, knowing everything we need to know for the important purposes of life. But this is one of the things of which Hume said that it may be true in politics but false in fact; and is it really true in politics? We need a post-Kantian unromantic Liberalism with a different image of freedom.

THE technique of becoming free is more difficult than John Stuart Mill imagined. We need more concepts than our philosophies have furnished us with. We need to be enabled to think in terms of degrees of freedom, and to picture, in a non-metaphysical, non-totalitarian, and non-religious sense, the transcendence of reality. A simple-minded faith in science, together with the assumption that we are all rational and totally free, engenders a dangerous lack of curiosity about the real world, a failure to appreciate the difficulties of knowing it. We need to return from the self-centred concept

of sincerity to the other-centred concept of truth. We are not isolated free choosers, monarchs of all we survey, but benighted creatures sunk in a reality whose nature we are constantly and overwhelmingly tempted to deform by fantasy. Our current picture of freedom encourages a dream-like facility; whereas what we require is a renewed sense of the difficulty and complexity of the moral life and the opacity of persons. We need more concepts in terms of which to picture the substance of our being; it is through an enriching and deepening of concepts that moral progress takes place. Simone Weil said that morality was a matter of attention not of will. We need a new vocabulary of attention.

IT IS HERE that literature is so important, especially since it has taken over some of the tasks formerly performed by philosophy. Through literature we can re-discover a sense of the density of our lives. Literature can arm us against consolation and fantasy and can help us to recover from the ailments of Romanticism. If it can be said to have a task, now, that surely is its task. But if it is to perform it, prose must recover its former glory, eloquence and discourse must return. I would connect eloquence with the attempt to speak the truth. I think here of the work of Albert Camus. All his novels were *written*; but the last one, though less striking and successful than the first two, seems to me to have been a more serious attempt upon the truth: and illustrates what I mean by eloquence.

IT IS curious that modern literature, which is so much concerned with violence, contains so few convincing pictures of evil.

Our inability to imagine evil is a consequence of the facile, dramatic and, in spite of Hitler, optimistic picture of ourselves with which we work. Our difficulty about form, about images—our tendency to produce works which are either crystalline or journalistic—is a symptom of our situation. Form itself can be a temptation, making the work of art into a small myth which is a self-contained and indeed self-satisfied individual.

We need to turn our attention away from the consoling dream necessity of Romanticism, away from the dry symbol, the bogus individual, the false whole, towards the real impenetrable human person. That this person is substantial, impenetrable, individual, indefinable, and valuable is after all the fundamental tenet of Liberalism.

It is here, however much one may criticise the emptiness of the Liberal idea of freedom, however much one may talk in terms of restoring a lost unity, that one is forever at odds with Marxism. Reality is not a given whole. An understanding of this, a respect for the contingent, is essential to imagination as opposed to fantasy. Our sense of form, which is an aspect of our desire for consolation, can be a danger to our sense of reality as a rich receding background. Against the consolations of form, the clean crystalline work, the simplified fantasy-myth, we must pit the destructive power of the now so unfashionable naturalistic idea of character.

Real people are destructive of myth, contingency is destructive of fantasy and opens the way for imagination. Think of the Russians, those great masters of the contingent. Too much contingency of course may turn art into journalism. But since reality is incomplete, art must not be too much afraid of incompleteness. Literature must always represent a battle between real people and images; and what it requires now is a much stronger and more complex conception of the former.

IN MORALS AND POLITICS we have stripped ourselves of concepts. Literature, in curing its own ills, can give us a new vocabulary of experience, and a truer picture of freedom. With this, renewing our sense of distance, we may remind ourselves that art too lives in a region where all human endeavour is failure. Perhaps only Shakespeare manages to create at the highest level both images and people; and even *Hamlet* looks second-rate compared with *Lear*. Only the very greatest art invigorates without consoling, and defeats our attempts, in W. H. Auden's words, to use it as magic.

Christopher Hollis

The Wind of Change

THE FIRST white settlers came to the Highlands in 1904 and therefore an old man like Kungo could remember a time before there was a white man in the land. He had seen the Serkali, as the Kikuyus called the British Government, come, and if he could only manage to live a few years longer, there seemed every likelihood that he would see them go. The whole business was turning out to be that of but one long lifetime. Kungo sat outside his *thingira*—his bachelor's hut—and watched the hot equatorial sun going down the sky. He had called to his senior wife to bring him some beer. She made her beer out of sugar-cane and he preferred her brew to that of any of his other wives. She brought him a calabash and he sat drinking it, and as he drank, he meditated. The memories of a life came back to him.

The first white men to come to Nanyuki were the missionaries, and the first of them whom Kungo ever met was Father McCarthy. That was a very long time ago—more, far more, than a hundred seasons—for Kungo always reckoned his time by the seasons of six months, since the rains and the crops come every six months. He did not reckon in years as the white men so absurdly do. Kungo remembered Father McCarthy well—a tall, white old man with piercing eyes. He was a good man and a kind man, and he and his fellow priests had taught Kungo and the other tribesmen some lessons which they had been glad to learn. They had shown them how they could plant their crops and tend them so that the yield would be increased. They had cast a spell on the tsetse fly so that it did not eat their herds and they could now drive their herds into

districts where herds had never been able to go before. They had shown them how to build up their land on the hillsides in terraces, so that the rain no longer washed all their soil away. All these were good lessons. Once when his first wife was ill, Father McCarthy had taken her to Nyeri to a bad-smelling house called a hospital, where a white witch-doctor had cut her open with a panga and snatched out from her stomach the devil by which she was bewitched within. He had then sown her up with a needle, and, after a time she had come back to him cured and able to bear more children. This, too, was a good thing to have done, and seemed to show that the white witch-doctors—their *mundumugu*—had more powerful spells than had the *mundumugu* of the Kikuyu. If so, it must be that their God was more powerful than the Kikuyu's Ngai, and indeed Kungo had for a time accepted the God of Father McCarthy—had become a servant of the Bwana Jesus—and had defied the old law of Ngai. It had seemed to him clear when his wife came back from the hospital that it was the Christian God who now sat on Kerinyaga in place of Ngai. But in his old age he did not feel so sure. A hyena had left its droppings near his *thingira*. He looked at them with disgust and with terror. Father McCarthy, he well knew, would have said that a hyena's droppings were a hyena's droppings and nothing more. But all the Kikuyu believe that there is a *thahu*—a curse—in a hyena's droppings. Would it not be as well to go to the *mundumugu*, to kill a goat and get purification from the *thahu*? He did not say that the Bwana Jesus was not powerful for evil, as Father McCarthy had taught. But was