Hierarchy, Self, and Valuation in Murdoch’s *The Black Prince*

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The limited criticism dealing with Iris Murdoch’s *The Black Prince* pays particular attention to the structure of the novel. In various ways, critics such as Darlene Mettler, William Slaymaker, David Gordon and Elizabeth Dipple see the novel’s structure as illustrative of Bradley Pearson’s development. However, other critics put the novel’s form in the service of a postmodern agenda. Most notably, Richard Todd places Iris Murdoch in a group of British writers “frequently characterized by a wide range of examples of the Postmodernist modes of parody and pastiche” (Todd 106). Speaking specifically of *The Black Prince*, Todd remarks that the novel, challenges its own text and reliability and speculates on fictionality…The entire fiction is given in editorial format, so that the central narrative is enclosed in disclaimers from some of the participants who are asked to comment on it at the end. Attitudes toward saint and artist are reversed…and the first person narrative relates the inability of the slightly ludicrous saint-figure, Bradley Pearson, to write his great work, while at the same time claiming a status as that work. (Todd 115)

Identifying elements in *The Black Prince* that are traditionally postmodern, Todd goes on to say that these British writers also offer a challenge to solipsism and “attempt, both formally and thematically, to escape the constraints of self” (Todd 105). While I find much of Todd’s argument appealing, in the case of *The Black Prince*, Murdoch’s treatment of solipsism takes root in a foundationalism that runs counter to a postmodern reading of the novel.

Iris Murdoch’s philosophical background is as impressive as it is expansive, and in *The Black Prince*, she draws heavily on Wittgenstein to ground her discussion of solipsism. That Murdoch has an affinity for Wittgenstein is not a profound statement. Her philosophical work is laden with his thought and the title of her first novel, *Under the Net*, evokes Wittgenstein. *The Black Prince*’s palimpsestic construction stands as a metaphoric hierarchy illustrating Wittgenstein’s proposition 6.41: “The sense of the

1 See Darlene Metter’s *Sound and Sense: Musical Allusion and Imagery in the Novels of Iris Murdoch*, William Slaymaker’s “Myth, Mystery, and the Mechanisms of Determinism: The Aesthetics of Freedom in Iris Murdoch’s Fiction,” “Iris Murdoch’s Comedies of Unselfing” by David Gordon, and Elizabeth Dipple’s “*The Black Prince* and the Figure of Marsyas.”

2 While my interests here run in other directions, anyone pursing Iris Murdoch’s relationship with postmodernism would be well served by reading “Philosophy’s Dangerous Pupil: Murdoch and Derrida” by Bran Nicol. Therein he sharply takes Murdoch to task for her misrepresentations of postmodern philosophy, specifically Derrida’s work.

3 The group of British writers to which Todd refers are “William Golding, Iris Murdoch, John Fowles Angus Wilson, and Angela Carter” (Todd 106).
world must lie outside the world. In the world everything is as it is, and everything happens as it does happen: in it no value exists—and if it did exist, it would have no value. If there is any value that does have value it must lie outside the whole sphere of what happens and is the case” (Wittgenstein 86). Here Wittgenstein introduces a hierarchy of valuation. Values cannot have value within the context in which they operate but must derive their value from exterior sources.

With Wittgenstein’s hierarchy in tow, Iris Murdoch takes up her recurring theme of selflessness, the dominant value within the novel, in order to show how values must take their value from exterior sources. The novel is a set of nesting narratives: the editor’s foreword and postscripts containing the other characters’ forewords and postscripts, which in turn enclose Bradley’s novel. The Black Prince, then, functions on four levels. The lowest level is Bradley’s novel; next Bradley, the author; third P. Loxias; and finally the readers themselves. By carefully following the theme of solipsism as it operates from the lowest level up, one sees that the value of selflessness always comes from the level above, and the last level, that of the reader, extends the text’s message to the living world as another level in Wittgenstein’s hierarchy.

The lowest level is Bradley’s fiction itself. The author, as character, begins the tale ready to depart London for the country and his long-delayed writing. From the outset, Bradley is entirely self-absorbed. The first-person, singular pronoun occurs seventeen times on the opening page, and his concerns exclusively pertain to his own comfort and interests: “had I got enough sleeping pills? Had I packed the belladonna mixture? Had I packed my notebooks? I can only write in a certain kind of notebook with the lines a certain distance apart” (Murdoch 13-14). Even his reason for leaving is a selfish act, as he feels finally ready and free to write his great work.

The other characters are equally self-involved. Bradley’s departure stalls, as Francis arrives with news of Christian’s return and the frantic call from Arnold Baffin: “I think I may have killed Rachel” (20). Bradley’s initial thoughts are, by his own admission, self-absorbed: “my first general feeling on hearing what Arnold had to say was one of curious joy” (20). He goes on to explain, “We naturally take in the catastrophes of our friends a pleasure which genuinely does not preclude friendship. This is partly but not entirely because we enjoy being empowered as helpers” (20). Even Bradley’s charity is motivated by self-interest, and the other characters seem almost to compete for the role of the most self-absorbed. Francis comes to Bradley’s door to tell him of Christian’s return and to ask if Bradley could “intercede” for him with his sister, which as Bradley explains, means “prizing money out of Christian for her delinquent brother” (19). Arnold strikes his wife with a poker for saying “something hurtful about [his] work,” and, in the midst of Priscilla’s attempted suicide, Julian pesters Bradley with trivialities: “this little thing. I wonder if I could buy it? Would you sell it to me?” (28&70). Christian moves Priscilla into her home to spite Bradley; Roger and Marigold are “so sorry for poor Priscilla” but refuse to allow her any of her valuable possessions, and Rachel implicates Bradley in a kind of affair to stir jealously in Arnold. Every character in the novel is an entirely selfish creature.

Having collected a cast of hopelessly solipsistic characters, Bradley’s novel offers a parody of selflessness, as Bradley goes through a kind of transformation when he falls in love with Julian. Part one ends with Bradley’s apparent act of selflessness: “I fell on my knees and then lay full length face downward on the rug in front of the fireplace.
Something very extraordinary indeed had happened to me” (194). His literal prostration before a fire parodies a loss of self but actually illustrates the selfishness that comes from his relationship with Julian. Bradley quickly betrays his self importance regarding his new love when he remarks, “I was a god and I was involved with her in some eternal activity of making to be which was of sole and absolute value” (200). Instead of losing the self, Bradley elevates it to the point of godhead.

Bradley’s selfishness defines his course from start to finish in his relationship with Julian. In hopes of “bringing them both through this darkness” and of fully consummating their union, Bradley decides not to tell Julian of Priscilla’s suicide or even to go to his sister after her death. He justifies this decision and his decidedly violent handling of Julian with the thought that “now empowered, I would be able to create. Though still in the dark, I had come through my ordeal” (323). Bradley’s brash and darkly romantic view is that his actions have provided a kind of trial that will allow him to write. Nevertheless, his language betrays his utter solipsism as it is he, empowered to create, who has come through his ordeal. The failure to speak of Priscilla’s death undermines Julian’s trust in Bradley and contributes to the dissolution of their relationship. The relationship ends as it began. Absolute solipsism sets in, and Bradley elevates his love to apocalyptic proportions when Arnold takes Julian away leaving Bradley as “a corpse awaiting its Saviour” (343).

Having offered a parody of selflessness, the text provides the literal loss of self as a foil for the absence of selflessness. At Priscilla’s funeral, no one concerns themselves with the deceased. Francis worries over his future well-being and blames himself for Priscilla’s suicide in a thinly veiled bid to remain in Bradley’s home. Roger makes a show of offering Bradley “family things” from Priscilla’s will although it “favours” her estranged husband. When snubbed by Bradley, Roger calls after him, “I’m very upset too, very—but what’s the use—” (338). The unanswered question speaks volumes about the absence of selflessness in the text. “The use” is an opportunity for self-examination and perhaps even a relinquishment of the collective self-involvement that led to Priscilla’s death. Bradley gives no answer to Roger and turns away from his chance to develop concern for something beyond himself. Tellingly as one of the characters literally loses her self (Priscilla) the rest of the novel’s cast, cannot be bothered even to pause over her passing.

After the funeral, Rachel, having killed Arnold, lures Bradley to her home: “Bradley you must come, I beg you… it’s something about Julian” (366). Bradley rushes to the house and finds Rachel the “weeping distraught figure of the beginning of the story” (367). That the main narrative ends as it began, with Rachel’s hystericis and Bradley running to the Buffin’s house, underscores the fact that no change has occurred within any of the characters. Not surprisingly, Bradley displays no interest in anyone but himself, as he feels “a sick urgent panic, the desire to hand this nightmare over as quickly as possible to somebody else” (369). Of course, Rachel has killed Arnold and responsibility for his death shifts to Bradley.

On the lowest level, the narrative ends with Bradley wrongfully accused of murder. However the significant issue is that it concludes without any change of
perspective. That no character makes the slightest progress toward a loss of self illustrates Wittgenstein’s hierarchy. Selflessness can have no value within its own context. Bradley’s novel, thus, must remain the “literary failure” that Julian will pronounce it. In itself, it does not and cannot speak to the value of selflessness.

The second level of the story includes Bradley, the author. In essence, there are two Bradley’s in the story, and the authorial Bradley provides a context in which selflessness gains some value within the lower level of his story. As Wittgenstein’s hierarchy suggests, value must come from exterior sources. Bradley’s foreword begins by revealing that he undergoes a transformation as a result of the novel’s happenings and that his self has changed: “I shall…inhabit my past self and, for the ordinary purposes of story-telling, speak only with the apprehensions of that time, a time in so many ways so different from the present” (3). Bradley has developed into a new, present self, far different then his “past self.” Furthermore, his role as author and the hierarchy of the novel suggest that this present Bradley is more evolved than his former self and thus able to apprehend values in the lower level of the novel.

The foreword deals with Bradley’s selfishness in his past life and gives some value to selflessness missing from his novel. Bradley, echoing Murdoch herself, explains that, “good art speaks truth, indeed is truth, perhaps the only truth” (3). Murdoch goes as far as saying that “good art, not fantasy art, affords us a pure delight in the independent existence of what is excellent. Both in its genesis and its enjoyment it is a thing totally opposed to selfish obsession” (Murdoch 370). The authorial Bradley comes to an understanding of art that resembles Murdoch’s, and this understanding takes up Wittgenstein’s premise. To quote Murdoch again, “an understanding of any art involves a recognition of hierarchy and authority” (372). The hierarchy she refers to is a Platonic model not unlike Wittgenstein’s hierarchy, and she acknowledges the top-down authority of such a construction in which the value of a thing comes from without.

Bradley’s postscript gives selflessness value for the novel, as he accepts his wrongful condemnation as just punishment for his selfishness: “I felt at times, it is hard to describe this, almost mad with guilt, with a sort of general guilt about my whole life” (375). While he is not guilty of murder, Bradley embraces the fact that he is guilty of being “a timid, incomplete, resentful man” (375). The Bradley of the postscript comprehends the value of selflessness and thus his own guilt, in a way that the past Bradley could not.

Bradley’s change from an attitude of pure self-absorption appears as he recalls his feelings toward Rachel: “I did at the time accuse her, then withdrew my accusations. It is not altogether easy to save oneself at the expense of another even justly;” he even describes her as “an instrument which did me a very great service” (375). This is a far cry from the Bradley of his novel. He refuses certain legal options, which could have reduced his sentence, and after years, Bradley comes to understand, with the help of his “dearest friend,” that “without even realizing it,” he “surrendered [himself] to the trial as to a final exorcism of guilt from [his] life” (380). His “surrender” of self to the trial illustrates both that the past Bradley is gone and that the new Bradley is less self-interested. The loss of self and personal liberty transforms him into an artist now able to write the story of his former selfish self and companions. One sees Wittgenstein’s principal at work here, as the value of a truth cannot come from, or be understood within, the context in which it operates.
Providing validity for his novel and in sharp contrast to the fictional author’s closing words, the other postscripts exhibit the same characters that Bradley portrays. Christian profits from her new business, which, as Bradley implies, she thought up during the trial. She also insists that Bradley “never really hated [her] at all, but because [she] left him…he had to pretend that he did” (385). Francis actually writes the “story” of Bradley Pearson as a “Psychological Consultant” and claims that Bradley was in love with Francis himself (393). Rachel is convinced that Bradley’s crime stems entirely from “his love for her” (398). These self-absorbed characters, remaining as Bradley portrays them, provide a backdrop for Bradley’s development.

The second level of the novel concludes with Julian’s postscript. In contrast to the other characters, Julian seems changed by the passage of time; she, like Bradley the author, is a new character. Julian is the only character who has read the other postscripts, and this distinction along with the distinction of speaking last highlights a kind of authority in Julian’s words. The other postscripts reinforced Bradley’s change and loss of self; Julian’s postscripts, conversely, underscores how far he still has to come.

Unlike the other postscript writers, Julian addresses self-centeredness as an artistic failing: “Pearson was wrong to identify his Eros with the source of art…Love is concerned with possession and vindication of self. Art with neither” (402). Here the flaw of selfishness pertains to art and Bradley’s novel itself. While the author, Bradley, learns of the value of selflessness in the deportment of his own life, his art remains mired in self. Julian continues to speak to the flaws of Bradley’s self-invested novel: “Pearson said that every artist is a masochist to his muse…Nothing could be falar. The worshiping attitude concentrates on self. The worshipper kneels as Narcissus kneels to gaze into the water” (403). While Bradley considers the artist as one who accepts, and even desires, the punishments of inspiration, Julian identifies Bradley’s very attitude toward art and writing as self-absorbed. As her postscript concludes, Julian pronounces Bradley’s novel “a literary failure” precisely because, as has been shown, it is peopled entirely with self-centered characters (403). Furthermore, the author, while seeing his own selfishness in his previous life, has yet to relinquish the self.

While the second level of The Black Prince offers a kind of authority and therefore evaluation of the selfishness within Bradley’s novel, the text artfully shows that Wittgenstein’s hierarchy continues. In his foreword, Bradley has developed from an entirely self-absorbed, petty man, into a thoughtful writer; however, he is not totally selfless. Beginning with a lengthy discussion of how he will present himself in the story, Bradley states that, “a work of art is as good as its creator. It cannot be more so. Nor, such as he is, in this case, can it be less” (3). For all of his evolution, Bradley continues to conflate the value of his work with his self. Likewise Julian, even as she identifies the flaws in Bradley’s novel, in her postscript reveals her own a selfish agenda. She refers to poetry as “the highest art” shamelessly promoting her own writing which she mentions repeatedly. Thus the second level gives value to selflessness in Bradley’s novel, but also illustrates that while Bradley, and to some extent Julian, have grown as human beings, they are not totally free of self.

This failure to achieve completely a state of selflessness proves an important point for the novel and Murdoch herself. In The Sovereignty of Good, she explains, “virtue is the attempt to pierce the veil of selfish consciousness and join the world as it really is. It is an empirical fact about humanity that this attempt cannot be entirely successful”
Bradley and Julian are more evolved than their earlier selves and thus less invested in self than before, but they are still solipsistic. Their remaining self-interest underscores humanity’s ultimate inability to overcome the self. Murdoch goes a step further, however, and shows that total loss of self, though unattainable, has value. The final level of her novel is one in which the prime mover is not human at all.

The editor’s foreword and postscript, like the previous level, encloses the levels beneath it and bestows value upon selflessness in the lower levels of the text. P. A. Loxias is some manifestation of Apollo, and Elizabeth Dipple finds the Apollo-Marsyas myth to be the “locus classicus of th[e] phenomenon of pulling the self from the self” (Dipple 132). Within the myth, the musically gifted Marsyas loses a contest to Apollo, resulting in his being flayed. Ovid’s rendition of the myth has Marsyas cry out “Quid me mihi detrahis?”—“Why do you draw me out of myself?” (Dipple 132). The flaying of the artist as a loss of self proves invaluable to Murdoch as her novel is a treatise on the need to do exactly that.5

Certainly Loxias engenders images of flaying, yet the fictional editor speaks to a loss of in other ways as well. Loxias explains that Bradley “needed someone to believe him and someone to believe in him. He found me, his alter ego” (1). Of course, literally translated, “alter ego” means “other self.” Thus in a real sense, Bradley needed to lose or change his self in order to create his art. Loxias takes responsibility for the novel in “more than one way,” certainly as a kind of publishing agent but also as muse and second self. Classically, art comes less from the artist’s individual self than from divine inspiration. Here, as in ancient mythology, the source of that inspiration comes from P. Loxias—a source both outside and above Bradley. While Bradley cannot completely free himself from the constraints of self, his art and its subject matter can speak to values which are unreachable within Bradley’s level of existence.

In his postscript, Loxias condemns the petty self-absorbed characters of Bradley’s novel: “Each lady, for instance, asserts (or implies) that Bradley was in love with her. Even the gentleman asserts it. However, this is a small matter and to be expected. Equally to be expected are the lies” (404). Loxias describes each postscript as “self-advertisement ranging from the vulgar to the subtle. Mrs. Hartbourne advertises her salon, ‘Dr’ Marloe his pseudo-science, his ‘consulting rooms,’ his book. Mrs. Baffin polishes the already much publicized image of herself as a suffering widow...Mrs. Belling advertises herself as a writer” (405). Each character remains exclusively interested in self. Loxias, as the highest voice in the novel, perhaps even the voice of art itself, evaluates the lowest level and its characters exclusively by their degree of self-interest. By speaking of Bradley only in relation to his death, Loxias addresses the second level of the story and Bradley’s loss of self. Granted, Bradley never develops completely beyond selfishness, but he literally loses his self in the final pages of the novel. Artistic inspiration itself evaluates humanity on the basis of solipsism, illustrating Wittgenstein’s hierarchy put in the service of Murdoch’s crusade against selfishness.

As his postscripts ends, Loxias concludes, “art tells the only truth that ultimately matters. It is the light by which human things can be mended. And after art is, let me assure you all, nothing” (408). Art’s truth is the truth of selflessness championed by

5 Of course The Black Prince is not the only place Murdoch employs the Apollo-Marsyas myth. In A Fairly Honourable Defeat, the lovers, Simon and Axel, also evoke the myth during a conversation about their relationship and the morality of humanity in general.
Murdoch herself. Furthermore, art, in telling this truth, provides the light to “mend” humanity. Thus the moral of the story is, in fact, a kind of selflessness and a warning that the value of selflessness cannot be understood within its own context. Loxias uses a second person pronoun referring to “you all” in his last words. He ends the text by including the reader as his own *alter ego*: someone to “believe him and believe in him.”

By including the reader, the novel takes its hierarchy yet one step higher, in that the reader is now the highest level. Murdoch, in *The Sovereignty of Good*, applies notions of hierarchy and selfishness to humanity in general. Therein, she defines art as “the most educational of all human activities and a place in which the nature of morality can be seen” (Murdoch 372). Thus readers are able to see the value of selflessness in the novel but also come to realize that they cannot understand that value in their own lives. Recalling that Murdoch sees human beings as entirely selfish creatures, humans cannot be entirely successful in “piercing the veil” of selfishness. Nevertheless, *The Black Prince* teaches that while the value of selflessness is not knowable within the context in which it operates, it has value which can be understood from a higher position.

This novel is not a clandestine attempt to paint into the world picture a God who dictates morality from on high. As Murdoch asserts, “we are simply here. And if there is any kind of sense or unity in human life, and the dream of this does not cease to haunt us, it is of some other kind and must be sought within a human experience which has nothing outside it” (365). Thus the hierarchies are metaphors, but, as metaphors, they posit a worldview based on the knowledge that values exist but are unknowable within their own contexts. Herein lies the foundationalism that undermines a postmodern reading of *The Black Prince*.

Murdoch has been called a neo-realist, which seems an unwarranted charge, but she certainly remains grounded in a sense of transcendent values. While she consistently insists that she does not write philosophical novels, her fictional work springs from the same mind that wrote *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*—a mind clearly indebted to Plato. *The Black Prince* is no exception. While Murdoch embraces the problematic nature of language and as such would seem to be in the tradition of Derrida, she presents the play of language as a human failing and not a universal one. While language must fail humanity, values do not suffer the same fate. Richard Todd is correct that *The Black Prince* is a novel filled with parody and pastiche, yet even while using the traditional tools of postmodernism, the novel remains loyal to a universalism and a foundation in platonic metaphysics that cannot, in the final analysis, be postmodern.

**Works Cited:**


