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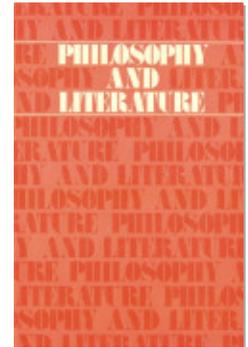
Truth and Art in Iris Murdoch's *The Black Prince*

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Philosophy and Literature, Volume 2, Number 2, Fall 1978, pp. 209-222 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/phl.1978.0020>



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TRUTH AND ART IN IRIS MURDOCH'S  
*THE BLACK PRINCE*

I

"Art," writes Bradley Pearson, protagonist and narrator in *The Black Prince*, "is concerned not just primarily but absolutely with truth."<sup>1</sup> Bradley Pearson is also concerned with truth. And understandably so, as he has just taken the rap, and been imprisoned, for a murder he claims he never committed. There are two rather different concerns here with truth: there is the high-minded concern of the artist and there is the more pragmatic concern of the despised and falsely convicted man writing his "apologia." The careful juxtaposition of these two appeals to truth is a central theme in *The Black Prince*.

The bulk of the novel purports to be a first-person narration of events in the later life of Bradley Pearson. Bradley is a writer who has been waiting patiently and silently for the inspiration, "the dark blaze," to produce a great work of art. This "dark blaze" eventually shows itself as the "black Eros," in a passionate but short-lived love affair with the young Julian Baffin. Bradley is reflecting on these events from his prison cell, guided by his mentor and fellow prisoner, the "editor" P. Loxias (a witty reference to Apollo, god of truth). He sees his art and his love as stemming "from the same source" (p. 172) and, although sensitive to his shortcomings as an artist, he believes that through a divine inspiration he has attained a kind of Platonic tranquillity in the presence of truth and self-knowledge. However, through the device of "postscripts," purportedly written by other characters, we are presented with another picture of him rather different from his own. His former friends, more down to earth, though variously self-interested, depict him as a pitiful, even contemptible, charlatan lost in fantasy and delusion and a suitable case for psychoanalysis. What, then, is the real Bradley Pearson? Is he the pathetic, fantasy-ridden creature of the "postscripts"? Or is he, as he thinks, the great artist inspired by the gods and by Eros who has seen the revelation of truth?

By forcing us to raise these questions about the novel, Iris Murdoch, I suggest, is inviting us to reflect on, and relate, two concerns we might have with truth in works of fiction. The first is with truth *internal* to the novel, truth-within-fiction, which informs us about the fictional characters and events. In *The Black Prince*, our attention is focused on unravelling and assessing the "truth" of Bradley's account. The second is with truth proper, as it might be revealed *through* fiction. This is truth not about the fictional world but about the non-fictional real world. It is often maintained that novels can instruct us in acquiring knowledge of the world. This, I suggest, is the type of truth that Bradley, so grandly and solemnly, and frequently, identifies with art. The nature of such truth is the main topic of this article.

## II

What sense can we make of Bradley's repeated claims to the effect that "good art speaks truth" (p. xi)? One answer, reflecting an obvious feature of *literary* works, is that propositions about the world are often expressed, explicitly, within a fictional context; they might be uttered by one of the characters or directly by the author. *The Black Prince* offers many such propositions, some of which, on the nature of art, I shall be considering in detail. Examples are plentiful. Thus, Bradley remarks on marriage: "People who boast of happy marriages are, I submit, usually self-deceivers, if not actually liars. The human soul is not framed for continued proximity . . ." (p. 64). He meditates on love: "The foreverness of real love is one of the reasons why even unrequited love is a source of joy" (pp. 173-74) and discusses jealousy (p. 207). He also reflects on human consciousness and responsibility (p. 155) and on selfishness and goodness: "The burden of genuine goodness is instinctively appreciated as intolerable, and a desire for it would put out of focus the other and ordinary wishes by which one lives" (p. 149).

Such explicit propositions carry us beyond the confines of the fictional world and invite our consideration as reflections on our own world. But is any special significance attached to them by virtue of their appearance in fiction? Is it more than just a contingent fact that it is in the context of fiction that an author chooses to express certain views? Might an essay form, for example, serve just as well? In some cases no doubt it might, but fiction does seem able to provide a peculiar, and possibly unique, context. As Bradley suggests: "Art . . . is the only available method for the telling of certain truths" (p. 55) and "the artist is learning a special language in which to reveal truth" (p. 40). For it might even be that precisely what *is* expressed can be

conveyed and understood only in the context of some particular fiction. How is this so?

There are at least two ways of accounting for the special significance that fiction can give to explicit assertions about the nonfictional world. The first concerns irony. As Bradley himself says, "We may attempt to attain truth through irony. . . . Irony is a form of 'tact'" (p. 55). Being tactful, like being ironic, is a matter of dressing up what is said, conveying a thought indirectly or by implication, not bluntly and explicitly. In general, ironic utterance forces a gap between the standard meaning of the words used and the particular sense and purpose of their use in context. In a work of fiction, we cannot always identify the meaning of an assertion independently of the precise context in which it occurs, the character who utters it and the circumstances surrounding the utterance. And in this contextualization can lie the uniqueness of what is conveyed. At its simplest, the author can manipulate the meaning of what is said by selecting a particular speaker to say it. Only fiction affords this possibility.

Consider, as an example, Bradley's remark, "The foreverness of real love is one of the reasons why even unrequited love is a source of joy" (pp. 173-74). It would be wrong, in the first instance at least, to take this as a bald assertion about love by Iris Murdoch. In giving the remark to Bradley, whom we later discover has suffered badly from the lack of "foreverness" in love but who nonetheless claims that love has been a source of inspiration, even of joy, Iris Murdoch has invested it with a rich ironic force. Against the whole background of the novel, which explores the relation between "real love," as a form of perception, and the failings and transience of an ordinary "love affair," this otherwise unremarkable and unconvincing generalization acquires a new interest and significance. This is the working of irony.

There is a second way in which fiction can provide a special, perhaps unique, context for making explicit assertions about the world. This arises from the peculiar means afforded to fiction of supporting the assertions it makes. Although it is common enough to find argument, reasoning and evidence used in fiction to support a certain proposition, this logical or scientific method is not an essential, or even important, characteristic of fiction. Fiction is unique in being able to provide not only argument but a special kind of *illustrative support* for the assertions it contains. The assertions in themselves might even be trite or jejune, as are many of Bradley's: life is horrible, the world is a place of suffering, and so on. But their carefully placed appearance in a novel can give them new authority, added conviction. Reading the novel might provide us with further reasons for accepting them as true. Perhaps the views are so completely justified in the context of events in the novel that

the reader's involvement in these events is sufficient alone to make the justification irresistible. Or perhaps by noting parallels between his own life and that of a fictional character the reader might see added force in the pronouncements made by that character.

A good example of the way a novel can provide illustrative support for such explicit assertions is the relation in *The Black Prince* between the substance of the novel, particularly the complex character of Bradley, and the assertions it contains on truth and art. This takes us into altogether more difficult and controversial issues concerning the cognitive status of fiction. It is to these that I shall now turn.

### III

The main idea I want to consider is the possibility of a writer's conveying truth through fiction other than directly through explicit assertion. For when Bradley says that "good art speaks truth, indeed *is* truth," it seems clear that something rather more complex than explicit assertion is meant. What emerges is the suggestion that art is able to *show* as well as to *state*, that not all we learn from a literary work is explicitly stated in it, or indeed could be so stated.

It is a compelling feature of the complexly ironic and self-reflective structure of *The Black Prince* that through the use of explicit statement, irony, and illustration, a clear and finely worked thesis emerges about the very possibility and limits of using art to express any thesis at all, either explicitly or implicitly. Many of the claims about truth and art which I shall be discussing are asserted by characters in the novel. I shall attempt to be sensitive to their ironic force though in a novel like *The Black Prince* it is never absolutely clear which claims to take at their face value. For this reason, where necessary, I shall seek support for my reading of the novel from views expressed elsewhere by Iris Murdoch.

Iris Murdoch has claimed that an artist, through the medium of fiction, is able to provide a *view* of the world. She lays much stress on the visual metaphor; the artist offers us a *vision* or *picture* of the world and invites us to *see* the world in new ways. In *The Sovereignty of Good*, she says that the "study of literature . . . is an education in how to picture and understand human situations."<sup>2</sup> And in other passages in that book the same idea is emphasized:

. . . what we learn from contemplating the characters of Shakespeare or Tolstoy or the paintings of Velasquez or Titian . . . is something about the real quality of human nature, when it is envisaged, in the artist's just and compassionate vision, with a clarity which does not belong

to the self-centred rush of ordinary life. . . . [T]he greatest art . . . shows us the world . . . with a clarity which startles and delights us simply because we are not used to looking at the real world at all. (*SG*, p. 65)

Furthermore, the artist's "just and compassionate vision" is precisely analogous to, if not identical with, the "just and loving gaze" of the "active moral agent" (*SG*, p. 34).<sup>3</sup> "A great artist," she writes, "is, in respect of his work, a good man . . ." (*SG*, p. 64). And "Virtue is *au fond* the same in the artist as in the good man in that it is a selfless attention to nature" (*SG*, p. 41).<sup>4</sup> On this, Bradley speaks for Iris Murdoch when he says, "I have always felt that art is an aspect of the good life" (p. 152). One way, then, in which art "speaks truth" might be by giving us a picture of the world as it appears in the vision of the good man. How is this possible?

In *The Black Prince* I think two criteria are offered and illustrated whereby the artist can attain truth, through non-explicit means, by revealing a "just and compassionate vision" of the world. What the novel also illustrates, in the character of Bradley, is how difficult it is to reach such a vision. The criteria are *objectivity* and *particularity*. The artist should attempt a *selfless* and *particular* vision of the world. In good art, these are brought together, "fused," by imagination, for "without imagination you have stupid details on one side and empty dreams on the other" (p. 26). I shall examine each in turn.

#### IV

Bradley's early advice to Julian is, "If you write, write from the heart, yet carefully, objectively" (p. 40). The problem of achieving objectivity, or selflessness, is one on which Bradley often reflects. He has two worries which gain particular significance in the circumstances of his writing: what sort of picture has he presented of himself and has he given a fair and just account of the others? "How can one describe a human being 'justly'? How can one describe oneself?" (p. 55).

In his metaphysical moments, he feels that a just and true description of a human being is impossible, save for some "ineffable understanding"; indeed, "almost all speech," he writes cryptically, "which is not so illumined is a deformation of the truth" (p. 337). This fear of deforming the truth underlies his creed of silence for the artist: "Art has its martyrs, not least those who have preserved their silence. There are, I hazard, saints of art who have simply waited mutely all their lives rather than profane the purity of a single page with anything less than . . . what is true" (p. xii).

His more immediate concern, though, is with the impression his readers have acquired of him. He is aware of the different images he projects. Thus, he twice speculates that his readers will dismiss him as merely sexually frustrated (pp. 113, 173). Of his "Foreword," he says, "how meagrely it conveys" him (p. xviii) and he admits in his "postscript" that he was "heartily hated" (p. 334) during his court case and that "the court saw [him] as a callous fantasy-ridden man" (p. 335). Perhaps in the context of *The Black Prince* we should see this concern of Bradley's primarily as an ironic confirmation of the egoism and *lack* of selflessness that we are clearly invited to attribute to him. But his views about the intrusion of self and the striving for objectivity take us farther than that. The device of first-person narration in the novel highlights the problem of acquiring an objective point of view, particularly of oneself. In the end it comes down to a problem of self-knowledge: "There is . . . an eternal discrepancy between the self-knowledge which we gain by observing ourselves objectively and the self-awareness which we have of ourselves subjectively: a discrepancy which probably makes it impossible for us ever to arrive at the truth. Our self-knowledge is too abstract, our self-awareness is too intimate and swoony and dazed" (p. 155). Here we have an explicit assertion which is carefully illustrated in the substance of the novel. We come to *see*, in Bradley, just what the discrepancy is that he speaks of.

I think what emerges of particular interest from Iris Murdoch's complex use of point of view in the novel, is an interplay between our two types of truth in fiction. On the one side, we find ourselves closely involved in trying to reach a fair assessment of Bradley and the other characters. That is, we try to construct some sort of "truth" about the fictional characters from the shifting and distorted points of view we are given. Our concern for fairness reflects and parallels Bradley's own concern. On the other side, we find that this exercise in perception and understanding takes us beyond the confines of the fictional world. The mark of a good novel, on Murdoch's view, is that it shows us how to *see*, and thus understand, other human beings. The good novelist, with the use of fictional invention and literary form, can instruct us by guiding and clarifying our perceptions and judgments. We might as a result come to view the real world, and people in it, in a different way, perhaps more fairly and justly.

Certainly *The Black Prince*, with its devices of "editor," "forewords," and "postscripts" and its first-person narration, makes us acutely aware of point of view. By way of prompting us even further to raise questions of objectivity, Bradley's account is filled with warnings of his own shortcomings: "How prejudiced is this image of Arnold, how superficial this picture of Priscilla! . . . When I write of Arnold my pen shakes

with resentment, love, remorse, and fear. . . . When I think of my sister I feel pity, annoyance, guilt, disgust and it is in the 'light' of these that I present her, crippled and diminished by my perception itself" (p. 56). He offers detailed descriptions of both Arnold (pp. 8-10 and 151-53) and Priscilla (pp. 43-46 and 153-54), the two who die during the events of the narration and are thus unable to speak for themselves in the "postscripts." But the descriptions, particularly of Arnold, cause him concern: "I am anxious . . . about the clarity and justice of my presentation of Arnold" (p. 8). One curious effect of these disclaimers is that they tend to increase, rather than diminish, our confidence in Bradley as a speaker of the truth. We give him credit, at least for being aware of the difficulties. His self-conscious efforts to attain an objective vision give to his point of view an authority lacking in that of the "postscript" writers precisely because the latter are so unashamedly self-centered and self-justifying.

Furthermore, Bradley's consciousness of the dangers of prejudice and self-centeredness serves to emphasize what a complex process it is for a reader to acquire knowledge of fictional characters. A novel like *The Black Prince* reminds us that what we are entitled to take as true-within-fiction is not automatically co-extensive with the set of descriptive statements in the fiction. These statements might best be thought of as the *data* which, if scientific language is appropriate here, provide something like the *evidence* from which we form *hypotheses* about the characters. The accumulation and assessment of this evidence and the drawing of conclusions from it calls for an effort of both investigation and imagination. It will involve, for example, identifying points of view, unravelling ironies and filtering the narration through what we know of the narrator. No doubt we require and use for this process a great deal of our knowledge of the non-fictional world as an assumed background for drawing what inferences we may about the fictional characters.

What precisely are the dangers that Bradley faces in his striving for objectivity? Iris Murdoch often contrasts objectivity in art and morality with fantasy. Fantasy, she has written, is the "proliferation of blinding self-centred aims and images" (*SG*, p. 67). And: "We can see in mediocre art, where perhaps it is even more clearly seen than in mediocre conduct, the intrusion of fantasy, the assertion of self . . ." (*SG*, p. 59). Indeed she believes the escape into fantasy is deeply rooted in our perception of the world: "We are . . . benighted creatures sunk in a reality whose nature we are constantly and overwhelmingly tempted to deform by fantasy."<sup>5</sup> Bradley seems to be just such a benighted creature. To what extent is his quest for objectivity hampered by fantasy?

The court, we remember, thought of Bradley as "fantasy-ridden"

(p. 335) and the burden of Rachel's "postscript" is to condemn his account as a "mad adolescent dream": "Perhaps the kindest thing to say is that he wanted to write a novel but found himself incapable of producing anything except his own immediate fantasies" (p. 351). In the circumstances, such judgments are hardly reliable, but there seems little doubt that we are invited to see the "intrusion of fantasy" into Bradley's story. He admits to being prone to fantasy. In his "Foreword," talking of earlier love-affairs, he writes: "The majority of my conquests belonged to the world of fantasy" (p. xv).

Perhaps the surest indication of fantasy, of "blinding self-centred aims and images," in the novel is the emphasis on the "grip of destiny" (p. 113) which Bradley sees as impelling him towards "great art" and "intense love" (p. 155). This is where his histrionic nature is most in evidence. He admits that he "nourished . . . the notion that before [he] could achieve greatness as a writer [he] would have to pass through some *ordeal*" (p. xvii). His self-confidence is at times self-indulgent: "I had within me at last a great book. There was a fearful urgency about it. I needed darkness, purity, solitude" (p. 97). Shortly before his Shakespeare discussion with Julian, he feels "an increasingly powerful sense of the imminence . . . of a great work of art" (p. 155) and he "felt the hand of destiny heavy upon" him (p. 158).

It is not so much the "grip of destiny" that holds him but the grip of a self-image, of fantasy: perhaps the two are not ultimately distinct. In a telling passage, he admits himself that "a 'feeling of destiny' can lead . . . into the most idiotic of servitudes. A dramatic sense of oneself is probably something one ought never to have and which saints are entirely without" (p. 114). Inevitably, in the circumstances, Bradley possesses just such a "dramatic sense" of himself and it is a nice irony of the novel that this fact alone is sufficient, on his own criterion, to prevent his work (though not of course Iris Murdoch's) from being a great work of art. At one point he even condemns the "thought of anything so vulgar as writing 'about' Julian" (p. 176) and, by way of final irony, he asserts that "Life and art must be kept strictly separate if one is aiming at excellence" (p. 176).

If the artist and the good man must strive for objectivity, or selflessness, their surest way, according to Iris Murdoch, is through love. For her, "It is in the capacity to love, that is to *see*, that the liberation of the soul from fantasy consists" (*SG*, p. 66). And also: "Love, and so art and morals, is the discovery of reality" ("The Sublime and the Good," p. 51). Echoing this, Bradley says: "Love brings with it also a vision of selflessness" (p. 174). There are powerful descriptions and evocations of love in *The Black Prince* (e.g. pp. 169-71 and 204-205). For Bradley, love of Julian brings about a "transformation of the world" (p. 171);

he looked younger (p. 178), he became open and friendly with other people and, most importantly, he felt a "release from self" (p. 174). Only then, he claims, did he come to *see* Julian (his earlier failure to *see* her is emphasized quite literally, on their first encounter in the novel, when he thinks she is a man [p. 30]). "Now," he says, "I could see. Can any lover doubt that *now* he sees truly? And is the possessor of this enlivened vision not really more like God than like a madman?" (p. 171). He dismisses as "false" the view that "love is blind" (p. 171).

Soon, though, after the initial intensity of his love, when he was "simply a saint" (p. 204), practical realities reassert themselves: physical desire (p. 206) and jealousy (p. 207) become manifest, "self was reviving" (p. 205). He talks of the "false loss of self" involved in the "early phase of this madness" (p. 204). With this revival of self and self-consciousness, and a sense of the impossibility of the situation, a harshness comes over Bradley, which shows itself in a brutal confrontation with Julian outside the opera (p. 221-30). When Julian tries to talk about his love he rebuts her: "I endlessly *imagined* talking to you about it, but that just belonged to the fantasy world. I can't talk love to you in the real world. The real world rejects it" (p. 222). Finally, at the violent consummation of their love, as it exists in the real world, "the black Eros" (p. 283) takes over. The "dark" and hidden powers of the ego, so familiar in Iris Murdoch's novels, had won the day. Bradley had failed in love just as he had failed in art, and for the same reasons.

*The Black Prince* proposes objectivity as the first and crucial condition for truth in art, and indeed for moral goodness. Bradley's account expresses and illustrates the difficulties of attaining the required objective vision. What is never clear, though, is how this objective vision could be attained or how is it recognizable. The negative marks manifested in Bradley are reasonably clear, namely self-centeredness and fantasy, but the positive features are not so easy to identify. Love, which is offered as one such feature, is idealized, possessed only by saints and mystics. What we are shown, in Bradley, are the failures of ordinary mortals, "benighted creatures," to attain such love. Iris Murdoch's view of morality and art as transcendent makes this recognition all the more difficult; for by its very nature the objective vision of the artist and the good man eludes both the analysis of concepts and empirical test. There is a mystic element in it which sometimes suggests that only by *experiencing* the vision can we come to know it. This strain is present in *The Black Prince* where the conclusion is suggested that "All great truths are mysteries, all morality is ultimately mysticism . . ." (p. 337), and with its hints of "ineffable understanding" and of the merits of silence in art. The trouble is, at a more prosaic level, if recognition of objective vision, and therefore truth, in art becomes too elusive

the criterion must inevitably lose some of its bite in application to particular cases.

## V

Nevertheless, the novel does offer, I think, a further condition for determining truth in art. It is not as fully developed as the first but it does help throw more light on it. This is the idea that good art reveals the *particular*. Here particularity is not contrasted with universality, but rather with generality or theory. The view is, therefore, not necessarily in opposition to the Aristotelian doctrine that art gives us universal truth in contrast to the particularity of history (*Poetics* 1451b). There is no reason why such universal truth should not be attained through attending to the particular in fiction.

The artist's objective vision focuses our attention on the particular with an aim to "contemplate nature with a clear eye" (*SG*, p. 64). But, as Bradley notes, where fantasy and self intrude, "emotions cloud the view, and so far from isolating the particular, draw generality and . . . theory in their train" (p. 56). He goes on: "We defend ourselves by descriptions and tame the world by generalizing" (p. 56). But just what is under attack here? For how can the writer write without describing and how can we understand without generalizing? It is "theories" and "explanations" that are mainly at fault. For Iris Murdoch, they are almost invariably too coarse to capture the fine details that appear in the artist's vision. Theories, like fantasies, distort the truth. In Bradley's words, "Men truly manifest themselves in the long patterns of their acts, and not in any nutshell of self-theory" (p. xi).

The opposition between particularity and theory is a familiar theme in the works of Iris Murdoch. Nowhere is it more explicitly handled than in her first novel, *Under the Net*. Annandine, a character representing the thoughtful Hugo Belfounder in the dialogues written by Jake Donaghue, is made to say, "The movement away from theory and generality is the movement towards truth. All theorizing is flight. We must be ruled by the situation itself and this is unutterably particular. Indeed it is something to which we can never get close enough, however hard we may try as it were to crawl under the net."<sup>6</sup> The "net" which gives the book its title is Wittgenstein's metaphor for the "different systems for describing the world" (*Tractatus*, 6.341).

Following the clue from Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, it is tempting to suppose that the metaphysics underlying the shared view of Hugo Belfounder and Bradley is *atomistic*: that is, to suppose that the particulars being sought are "atomic facts." But there are suggestions elsewhere, at least in *The Black Prince*, that the metaphysics is *holistic* rather than

atomistic. A central feature of atomism is that each "atomic fact" is logically independent of any other, yet Bradley is at pains to emphasize the close interconnections between even the most slight events in the novel. Thus, he writes, "The good feel being as a total dense mesh of interconnections. My lightest whim can affect the whole future" (p. 95). For example, the kisses that he exchanges with Rachel partly, he claims, so as not to offend her and through a concern "about cutting a masterly figure," set up a chain of consequences far beyond their apparent significance. Bradley reflects on this: "A serious kiss can alter the world and should not be allowed to take place simply because the scene will be disfigured without it. . . . There are no spare unrecorded encapsulated moments in which we can behave 'anyhow' and then expect to resume life where we left off" (p. 95). This seems like a direct rejection of the atomistic and existentialist notion of the "acte gratuit." In a holistic world each particular takes its place in the "total dense mesh."

What is the nature of the interconnections between these particular events? We have already noted references in the novel to the "hand of destiny." It is suggested that some events are inevitable, necessary, even predestined (pp. 170, 337). Yet it is clear that there is no rigid determinism proposed in the novel. Destiny and "dark" forces are but two of the many factors which help create the "total dense mesh." Bradley is quite conscious of responsibility and guilt, yet also asserts that "life is full of accidents" (p. 149). Mistakes, accidents, bad decisions and fate can all set up their own chains of consequences.

There is a good example in the novel of the significance that a seemingly random and chance occurrence can acquire. Bradley's most disastrous mistake, his failure to inform Julian of Priscilla's suicide and to return immediately to London, he tried to justify at the time, he admits "absurdly," by arguing that it was a "pure accident, a mere contingent by-product of my carelessness, that Francis had known where to find me" (p. 278). He goes on: "And if that terrible telephone call had been so little determined, so casually caused, it made it seem that much less real, that much easier to obliterate from history" (p. 278). But, for Iris Murdoch, the good man and the artist know better than to make so light of the facts, however accidental and contingent they seem. It should be the artist's aim, in his quest for truth, to give life and significance to such details, to the contingent and the particular. "Contingency is destructive of fantasy and opens the way for imagination" ("Against Dryness," p. 20).

Much of the force of the attack on theory in *The Black Prince* is directed at Freudian psychoanalysis. Francis Marloe, a psychoanalyst, is portrayed as feeble and parasitic, but worst of all as a theorizer.

Referring to Francis's shallow Freudianism, Bradley writes:

. . . Francis belongs to that sad crew of semi-educated theorists who prefer any general blunted "symbolic" explanation to the horror of confronting a unique human history. Francis wanted to "explain" me. . . . But any human being is infinitely more complex than this type of explanation. By "infinitely" . . . I mean that there are not only more details, but more kinds of details with more kinds of relations than these diminishers can dream of. You might as well try to "explain" a Michelangelo on a piece of graph paper. Only art explains, and that cannot itself be explained. (pp. xiv-xv)

Perhaps the most comic part of the book is Francis's "postscript" which gives a Freudian "analysis" of Bradley and of his "novel." The glib and confident tone of the "postscript" contrasts strikingly with the hesitant, self-conscious account given by Bradley. Yet the simplicity and detail of the events, the muddles and mistakes, that Bradley describes bear an authority which makes the Freudian "explanations" seem hollow and absurd.

## VI

What can we make of the two criteria, objectivity and particularity, that the novel proposes for identifying truth in art? One obvious objection arises in relation to particularity. The particulars presented in a novel are *fictional* and how can any view, however objective, of *fictional* particulars give us truth? *Ex hypothesi*, it is not a view of the real world. I think what Iris Murdoch might reply here is that good art gives us truth precisely in as much as it instructs us in how to view the world; it shows us what it is like to see things with a "just and compassionate vision." Whether the particulars seen are factual or fictional is, in this context, of subsidiary importance to the seeing itself. The artist invites us to see a set of events from a point of view (or perhaps more than one). He shows us in detail how characters, often recognizably like humans we know, confront problems, create and resolve muddles, fall in love. And for the reader, the act of observing these characters and focusing on even the smallest details of their lives is an exercise in *seeing* which in itself might be as real as the seeing of actual human beings. Furthermore, the dangers of which Iris Murdoch warns the artist, namely fantasizing or theorizing, are dangers too for the reader.

Perhaps the most serious difficulty with this account is going to be with the concept of truth involved. It might seem that what the criteria isolate has more to do with *sensibility*, *perceptiveness*, or *sympathy* than

with *truth*. But we should not, I think, be too hasty to try to replace the concept of (non-explicit) truth in art. For what this concept captures, which mere sensibility does not, is the cognitive aspect of fiction. It contrasts with fantasy, prejudice, deception, which all entail some kind of *falsity* and it relates to the possibility of learning or acquiring knowledge from fiction. With the emphasis on seeing, we might look to some epistemological notion of truth, involving concepts like understanding and verification. If we think of a proposition (or even the “general form of a proposition”) as saying “this is how things are” we might, in the spirit of Iris Murdoch, think of literary works of art as saying “this is how to view things”. Depending on our concept of truth, the difference here might not be so great.

What I have tried to do is extract from *The Black Prince* a view about how art can “speak truth”. But the novel is not just a treatise on truth and art. The criteria that emerge have a direct bearing on our reading of the novel as a whole. For example, as already suggested, they help justify our inclination to take Bradley’s word for what happened rather than that of the “postscript” writers. Of course convention plays a part in this, Bradley’s account being the bulk of the novel, but inasmuch as we accept his criteria for truth in art we will give more weight to his self-consciousness than to their self-centeredness and to his detail rather than their theories and explanations. “The work of art,” says the “editor,” “laughs last” (p. 362).

The criteria also affect our assessment of Bradley. They help isolate and clarify the nature of his efforts and failures. His relations with Arnold, Priscilla, and particularly Julian become more clear when we see them in terms of a struggle against his own ego. Bradley is in many ways an unattractive figure, his actions are histrionic and violent; but his self-consciousness is disarming and endearing. His insights into the nature of art and goodness and his unsuccessful attempts to attain these make him in the end a sad and almost tragic figure. His life exemplifies for the rest of us how difficult it is to be an artist or a good man.

## VII

*The Black Prince* invites us to reflect on truth in relation to fiction. The concern with truth is focused on two sets of questions. First, is Bradley telling the truth? What are the characters like? What is he like? Second, what is it for art to give us truth? What is meant by such claims as “Art is concerned not just primarily but absolutely with truth”? Here, I have argued, we have two different, though related, types of truth: truth-within-fiction and truth about the world. Every

fiction concerns us with the first which, at its simplest, is just a concern with what happens; many, but not all, fictions concern us with the second. What *The Black Prince* suggests, through the character of Bradley and the explicit remarks about truth, is one way in which these two concerns are related. That is, the attention required for us to come to understand a character, his motives, his efforts, his failures, is precisely the attention we would, or should, use in observing people in the world. This exercise in attention and vision spans both types of truth in fiction.

I have concentrated in this article on the second type of truth in fiction, that is on the suggestion that art can in some special and even unique way express truth. I have suggested, following clues from Iris Murdoch, that this possibility might arise either from the peculiar use of explicit assertion in a novel or from the implicit manifestation of truth through the presentation of a *view* or *vision* of events. Through examining many of the explicit assertions about truth and art in *The Black Prince*, which relate to views expressed elsewhere by Iris Murdoch, I have extracted two criteria for the presence of implicit or exhibited truth in works of art: these are objectivity as against fantasy and particularity as against theory. I have also suggested how these criteria might be applied to a reading of *The Black Prince*. Part of the pleasure of the novel is its curious and ingenious self-reflection. Even after all this, I am not yet confident that I have always isolated the voice of Iris Murdoch from that of Bradley Pearson.

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*I am very grateful to my colleagues at Stirling for helpful discussions of an earlier draft of this paper and also to Mary Uhl for her perceptive comments and advice.*

1. Iris Murdoch, *The Black Prince* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1973), p. 40. All further quotations from *The Black Prince* are from this edition and the page references are placed in parentheses in the text.
2. Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), p. 34 (hereafter cited as *SG* in the text with page references to this edition).
3. Iris Murdoch has argued elsewhere for the importance of vision in morality: e.g., "Vision and Choice in Morality," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society: Dreams and Self-Knowledge*, supp. vol. 30 (1956).
4. The identification of art with morality, which I shall not directly discuss in this paper, is suggested elsewhere in her writings: e.g., "The Sublime and the Good," *Chicago Review* 13 (1959).
5. Iris Murdoch, "Against Dryness," *Encounter* 16 (1961): 20.
6. Iris Murdoch, *Under the Net* (1954; rpt. London: Penguin, 1974), pp. 80-81.