

MORALTY AND FAMILY IN THE MODERN
ENGLISH NOVEL c. 1960-1975.

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ABSTRACT.

The thesis proposes a model as a framework within which general outlooks on human behaviour evident in fiction - the "morality" of the title - can be discussed.

The model is a trichotomy whose terms are: Augustinianism, Pelagianism and Agnosticism. They correspond, speaking generally, to (respectively): moral pessimism, moral optimism, and moral neutrality.

Six novelists are discussed, in detail, in three pairs of two, corresponding to the categories above. The pairs are: I. Compton-Burnett and Margaret Drabble, Angus Wilson and Iris Murdoch, and Beryl Bainbridge and Paul Bailey.

The thesis is topical and thematic, not authorial or literary historical. Essentially, it is conceived as an exercise as well as an argument; the object of the exercise being to demonstrate how critically productive the categories can be.

The family has been chosen as a limiting focus, and is not in itself of primary concern.

The following publications, which are also listed on the form of entry, are submitted in conjunction with the thesis:

1. An edition of Charlotte Bronte's Villette (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979.)
2. "The Novels of B.S. Johnson" in Planet, Vols. 26/27, Winter 1974, pp. 33-40.
3. "Nabokov: Homo Ludens" in Peter Quennell, ed., Vladimir Nabokov: A Tribute (London: Weidenfeld, 1979), pp. 88-102.

Statement of share in conjoint publication (see I. above) as required under regulation 23.6:

My share of the edition of Villette consists of:

- a). the provision of exegetical and literary critical notes, and translations of the French.
- b). the establishment of the text based on the first edition of 1853, with collation with the British Library holograph.

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PREFACE.

This thesis contains some of the material contained in an earlier thesis with the same title which was submitted in October 1978 and rejected by the examiners under regulation 25.6. For reasons of acknowledgement, it is proper to give a brief account of the major changes made.

The two chief objections were to chapters one and six. Chapter one, a setting out of the critical premises on which the study was based, was felt to be largely irrelevant, and chapter six, a study of the sociological content of novels of the middle and working classes, was felt to be out of phase with the concerns expressed elsewhere in the thesis. Both these chapters have been abandoned and none of the material in them has been transposed elsewhere.

A further objection was that there was insufficient examination of individual novels and, correspondingly, too much space given to generalized discussion. Accordingly, I have written entirely new sections on Drabble's The Garrick Year, Compton-Burnett's The Last and the First, Wilson's Late Call and Bailey's Trespasses. I have retained, in a greatly modified form to suit the developing argument, the accounts of Murdoch's The Italian Girl, Wilson's No Laughing Matter and Bainbridge's A Quiet Life.

The examiners also felt that the individual chapters of the original study needed to be more closely related, and it was suggested that a thematic scheme might be adopted. This I have done, giving it expression in the trichotomy which is explained in the introduction.

I was also asked to use the introduction to define my use of the term "morality" and to explain the choice of texts and period, and the subject of the family. This I have tried to do.

The original thesis was 66,000 words; this thesis is 63,000.

NOTE ON STYLE

The M.L.A. Style Sheet (2nd. ed.) suggests giving full bibliographical details of a cited work in the footnotes at first mention. I have followed this practice except in one respect: implementation does not begin until after the introduction. The purpose of this is to have full references of authors' works together, which seems to me more convenient for the reader.

References to classics not in the period covered (e.g. David Copperfield or the plays of Shakespeare) have not been given bibliographical listings.

PART ONE: INTRODUCTION.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION.

Section One.

This is a study of the way that certain novels convey a particular attitude, or philosophy, of human behaviour, and an examination of what that attitude is. This general attitude is the "morality" of the title; a more detailed definition of this term is given in section two below.

The family has been chosen as a focus for this enquiry, and is not, in itself, a central preoccupation. Reasons for the choice of this focus rather than another are given in section three.

The study is a model rather than a survey. By this I mean that there is no attempt at comprehensiveness - either of the period or of the works of the authors concerned - but instead, a pursuit of the moral theme within the context of ^{terms.} set / . The rationale of this model, and its terms, are explained in section four.

In section five I try to account for the choice of novels, and the introduction concludes with an outline of the argument.

Section Two: The Two Meanings of "Morality".

There are two meanings of "morality" that I am going to use in this study: the first describes the behaviour of the fictional characters, and the principles which seem to underlie it; the second describes the general view taken by the novelist of man's behaviour. In both cases, the term (and the associated adjective, "moral") is neutral - that is to say, it does not imply the laudatory. I shall say more about these two meanings before explaining how they can be connected; how, indeed, the study of one is inextricably bound up with the study of the other. For the purposes of the arguments that follow in this chapter, I am going to make some generalizations about the novelists whom we are to consider later. Readers should not look for substantiation of these points until discussions of the individual novels in question.

Compton-Burnett is one of those writers who, in novel after novel, portrays one particular social milieu in such a way that commentators begin to speak of her "world". It is true that each work holds individual delights, but, without suggesting the sort of uniformity which is mere mechanical repetition, one can point to a consistent ethos among the groups of characters in the various novels which is illuminated and consolidated by each successive

work so that, viewing the entire canon, one sees the complementarity of each part. It has therefore become standard critical practice (to which I conform) to consider that there is sufficient among the fictional families in common for them to be considered together, or in groups. What I have done, therefore, in parts of chapter two, is to suggest certain principles and generalizations which are appropriate in the description of the characters' behaviour. These generalizations, based on a critical account of typical examples of behaviour, indicate the nature of the characters' morality in the first meaning of the latter term.

The sort of confidence that I, along with others, have felt in making such generalizations about Compton-Burnett, is present to a far lesser extent when the novels of Drabble are in question; although one can separate the heroines off from the rest, and these seem to share very many moral attitudes.

With Wilson's fiction, all sense of a "world" in the sense indicated, disappears. Certainly in the two novels examined, there is no evidence of what we have in Compton-Burnett: characters sharing basic moral assumptions, often acting in similar ways and being similarly situated. The two Wilson novels are strongly connected to each other, and the connections are moral ones; but they are thematic rather than predominantly of character. The Calvert family is quite unlike the Matthews family, but in depicting them Wilson, in both cases, raises questions about the nature of gratitude, duty, social class, and the interaction of all three.

It seems to me reasonable that if one is intent on exploring the morality of the characters of these authors, then the sort of difference outlined above - how close or distant they are to a consistent ethos of behaviour - which is only one of many differences, not merely validates but requires a separate critical approach in each case. For example, the sensibility of the narrator in Drabble, and the ironic distance between reader and narrator, and between narrator and narration, is a feature which demands a great deal of our critical attention; but there is no narrator to speak of, and certainly not a narrative sensibility in the meaning that I am to suggest later, in the novels of Compton-Burnett. Again, certain devices used by Wilson to illustrate facets of his characters' behaviour - the barring of device, the pastiches - simply are not present in the same way in Drabble. In differing the approach to each author, I hope that I am respon-

ding appropriately to what is being offered to the reader in each particular case.

The differences in practice, and therefore the differences in approach, are equally moot in considering morality in the second sense. Novels themselves, individually or in groups (by author, period, theme, etc.) can be said to have a morality, or embody a stance towards morality. This second sense of morality is the subject of the thesis. It might be helpful to draw on some generalizations from various hands, concerning Compton-Burnett's novels, in order to give an idea of what this second sense entails.

Robert Liddell wants us to believe that "Nearly every novel ends in some kind of reconciliation and pardon, not a sentimental happy ending but a kind of sober calm, like the close of Greek tragedy." (1.) On the other hand, Johnson sees wickedness as triumphing: "But in the end they [malefactors, tyrants] devour the small and valiant prey, and no keeper ever comes in the last chapter to lock them up or shoot them down ... Evil is achieved, and the results of it are assimilated into the life from day-to-day." (2.) Glynn Grylls is sure that "the dominant theme in Dame Ivy's novels is vanity", (3) but Charles Burkhart is ready to claim that "The central theme of the novels can be regarded as the search for truth." (4.) John Ginger calls Compton-Burnett "the most compassionate English novelist since George Eliot" (5) but "The truth is that she is a denouncer", (6) says Johnson.

These comments relate to an overall moral vision, an implied judgement about the capacity or incapacity of mankind in general to behave well. There is a particular difficulty which is associated with any consideration of morality in this second sense, namely: is the implied judgement of the novel to be inferred as local, specific and exclusive to the society depicted, or does that judgement constitute, or purport to constitute, a statement of universal truth about human nature? "All's cheerless, dark, and deadly" is a representative reflection of the moral situation in King Lear (5, iii, 290) but readers and audiences have to settle for themselves whether the implied moral analysis has to do with ancient Britain, Renaissance England, or all mankind across history. The commonplace answer to this difficulty is to point out that there is usually a combination of universals and specifics. The issues raised by this fact should be borne in mind as we proceed; in the work of Compton-Burnett, the question has seemed to me to

be so insistent that I have set aside a whole section devoted to it.

I found that a useful structure which would allow the most fruitful discussion of the second sense of morality was the thematic trichotomy whose terms and rationale are explained below. I now want to explain the connection between the two sense of morality.

One of the crudest ways in which the connection has been made in the past has been to say that novels containing descriptions of what are contemporaneously thought of as immoral actions are themselves automatically immoral; that is to say, no account is taken of all those features of a work (the narrative tone, the ironies, the diction, the contexts) which are the true indicators of a text's morality. This crude perspective appears in the courtroom (in prosecutions of such works as Lolita, Last Exit to Brooklyn and Ulysses) and the council chamber (in the 1950s, the authorities in Swindon are supposed to have banned The Decameron from their public libraries) rather than in informed literary debate. Nevertheless, I draw attention to such an approach here because less ridiculous, but also erroneous, views of the morality of a novel do thrive amongst certain critics, and the error in each case often has its source in a refusal to grant the plurality of items and issues in the text that must be considered before any inference about the novel's morality can safely be drawn. For example, any account of Compton-Burnett's novels which confined itself to weighing the evidence of the characters' actions, and failed to take account of the literary mannerisms, the contexts of class and looming poverty and isolation both physical and emotional, would be incomplete. In Drabble, the unreliable narrator is crucial because the way that the narrator interprets life is itself a part of the life of the novel which must be adduced in our own interpretation. Novels' endings also play a major role in our assessment insofar as they often constitute terminal auto-blurbs and have a force of emphasis lacking in otherwise similar passages occurring elsewhere. The fact that there is no rule about what can be considered as relevant in the business of inferring the novels' morality means that a different critical approach is required in each case.

Thus we discover the morality of a novel by studying all those features which, in each case, seem relevant; and the morality of the characters (morality in the first sense) is invariably one of those features - though not always the predominant one.

Section Three: The Family.

As I have said, the way in which the writers deal with the issue of morality is the central concern of this study; the family is merely a focus for that investigation. I want, here, to explain why the family was chosen for this purpose.

One of the most obvious reasons is also the most prosaic: the family is an extremely popular subject in the fiction of the period, and this leads to a situation in which a wide range of novelists is available from which a selection can be made for discussion.

Secondly, insofar as we are concerned with the relationship between the fictional characters in novels, and the moral nature of mankind in general as seen by the author, the choice of the family as a focus is particularly useful. Families are societies in miniature; in them, people live in constrained proximity. Family membership often confers a right of abode, and individuals have little discretion in excluding other members who might be unfavoured. As with neighbours in society at large, family members are often forced to make the best of a situation in which they must live side by side with those whom they feel to be uncongenial or worse. Again, both families and larger societies enjoin obligations and confer privileges, both of which are embodied in quite complex moral codes. There is a similar kind of difficulty in renouncing membership; certainly, in the novels we are to examine, there is an overriding sense that whatever actions individuals might take to sever familial ties (divorce, physical removal, internal renunciation) a deeper emotional commitment persists like a rugged strain. These parallels between family and society become so important that the novelists use their depiction of families as a vehicle for their views on the wider community. Familial depiction is repeatedly paradigmatic.

Thirdly, the family is ideal for studying moral questions because its intimacy often leads to emotionally intense and behaviourally extreme situations; and such situations not only represent opportunities for dramatic development, but also shed much light on moral problems.

Section Four: The Model.

This study is intended to be a model rather than a survey. In a survey, there is a commitment to representing the chief literary

characteristics evident between the given dates; whereas a model is an attempt to suggest a way of looking at certain questions, with the choice of texts dictated by the inner logic of the model itself.

I am going to attempt to suggest a model for thinking about the moral attitudes evident in the fiction of the period. The purpose of this, as of all models, is not to define an objective reality, but to use an intuitive structure, which is deliberately simple, as the basis of a cluster of issues which can then be discussed in disciplined relation to it.

The model itself is a trichotomy, whose terms are: Augustinian, Pelagian, and Agnostic. The first two are borrowed from the last volume of Anthony Burgess' Enderby trilogy (7), the third is my own.

For Burgess, Augustine and Pelagius represent two opposing views about the moral nature of mankind. Pelagians believed in the intrinsic goodness of man, although they accepted that he was inevitably corrupted by temptation. For Augustinians, however, a darker and more Calvinistic view prevailed; one which said that man had a fundamental propensity to evil, which even sustained effort could do little to mitigate. Pelagians aspired to the kingdom of God on earth, and at least an approach to perfection while alive; Augustinians expected only ransack and pillage, and prayed for grace in their sin. One group is informed by what I shall be referring to as moral optimism, the other by moral pessimism.

What I shall be doing will be to take these terms, and apply them to the authors' own general moral views - the second category of morality indicated in section two. Then, in part four, we shall examine what I have chosen to call the Agnostic novelists.

Agnostics, in my definition, differ from both Augustinians and Pelagians in one fundamental respect: they do not share a preoccupation with the assessment of morality; on the contrary, there is a deliberate attempt to withdraw from the moral arena altogether. Typically, they try to effect this through innovation in fictional procedures.

The purpose of the three terms is not to turn the study into an exercise in cramming texts into simplistic or unsuitable pigeon-holes, but to provide a truly useful taxonomy which will shed light on the whole question of morality and fiction. The usefulness is precisely in the lack of rigidity of classification. In placing

novelists in the categories, I am not saying that each work evinces either fully, or equally with others, the characteristics which are definitional for that group. It is far more a question of an author's tendency towards, or away from, one of the three categories, even when his work might in some part resemble novels in another group. For example, Wilson plays on the artifice of art, which is a typical feature of postmodernist anti-illusionists like Bailey; but these two writers are in different categories. The similarities between Wilson and Compton-Burnett are quite pronounced, and these similarities are fully acknowledged in the relevant pages; nevertheless, neither are they in the same grouping, for reasons which, obviously, are set out in situ.

The justification for the use of terms which are obviously extremely general must reside in the reader's practical experience of the way that they are used in the argument. However, insofar as it is not unheard of that terms have been attacked merely on the grounds of latitude, it is not out of place to advance a theoretical justification of my own. (8.)

Certain literary terms derive their usefulness precisely from the fact of the facility with which they can be defined. Examples that I have in mind are: "sonnet", "stanza", "prose", "oxymoron". Right at the other end of the scale are terms elusive of definition, like the notorious "Romantic". The usefulness of the latter resides in that elusiveness. Such general terms stand at the very centre of a web of meanings and tangential associations which are respectively nearer to or further from the quiddity of the thing which the term attempts to capture. The terms actually hold all these associations and concepts in a relationship, which is constantly being altered as perspectives change in literary scholarship, criticism and taste. Each time that a term like "Romantic" is used, a whole range of notions is evoked in the mind of the reader at once which, if such a term were not available, would require several paragraphs to set out. The fact that these notions will not be exactly the same for each reader indicates that the status of this, as of similar general terms, is one of constantly shifting perspective. Once we have accepted this movement, and therefore elusiveness, we can settle into using the term to advantage.

Section Five: Dates and Novelists.

The specification of dates in the title is a bibliographical shorthand designed to replace a bare list of the six major authors whom we are to study. The dates merely indicate when those works of the six which we are to examine were written. It remains to explain the choice of the six.

Having read hundreds of contemporary novels, I came to the conclusion that almost all of them could usefully be looked at as tending towards, or fully evincing the basic characteristics of, one of the three categories specified in the model. One of the values of framing the study in this way is that it provides the opportunity for considering moral issues within a disciplined structure which the reader can then use in thinking about other novels in the period, and outside it, which are not themselves examined here.

I have already explained why I chose the family as a convenient focus, rather than any other focus. Perhaps I should say now why any narrowing of the field was desirable. First, it provides one of the few constants; in a study dealing with radically different authorial postures, the business of identifying similarities and differences is greatly helped by a common subject. Secondly, morality in the second sense is a massive area, and quite unwieldy without some sort of restriction.

Thus, the choice of novelists was restricted to those addressing themselves to the task of family depiction on a thorough level. The choice was further restricted because I wanted to confine the study to what is sometimes called "serious" literature: novels with at least some pretensions to literary merit. (This because criticism of "popular" literature calls for quite different criteria, and is a job for the sociologist as much as for the critic.) Thirdly, I wanted to consider novelists who had already received a certain amount of critical attention, and were likely to receive more, so as therefore to be part of an on-going literary debate. Fourthly, I wanted to represent as wide a variety as possible in the matter of aesthetic and narrative techniques, and this because it is not in the mere events of the plots, but in all the manipulations of artistry by which the story is related, that the questions of morality are brought to our attention, and it is a major theme of this study that this sort of plurality should be properly re-

cognized. Fifthly, I wanted to select novels which would be especially telling in illustrating the model around which the arguments are based. Clearly, some variations could have been admitted in the novels discussed without altering the general nature of the study. After all these considerations had been taken into account, the authors almost selected themselves.

I say "authors", but as I am sure is by now clear, it is particular types of novels in which I am interested. This has not prevented me from talking about novels by one author in a group, or groups, but I do this only if they seem to warrant such treatment because of the connections, inter alia, that they afford, and not because of any interest in the personal development of the individual human creator. It is to be assumed throughout that, unless the context makes it abundantly clear that the contrary is the case, the "author" always means the "implied author"; biographical and intentionalist considerations have been eschewed.

I have implied by my use of the term "contemporary" that I would be taken to mean novels of the post-1960 period. This, however, does not mean that I consider 1960 to be definitional. In any study, the dates which define the area to be discussed are of two sorts: definitional and given. A work with a title like Modernism: 1900-1930 is quite likely to be one in which the dates constitute in themselves a kind of argument; for example, it might be one of the contentions of the writer that Modernism can properly be thought to have got under way in 1900 and to have exhausted itself by 1930. Equally, one can examine a group of novelists - each of whose novels sheds light on others in the group - without implying that the period from which the novels have been taken frames a distinctive literary school. In such a case, the dates can be thought of as given.

In this study, the dates are not "given" if that is to be taken to mean arbitrary; but nor are they so precise as to be definitional. What I have to say about morality is not directly linked to any argument about literary movements - except in the case of the Agnostics of part four, which does seem to be a specifically post-1960 development. On the contrary, I hope that the views adduced will not only shed light on post-1960 fiction, but also on earlier (perhaps much earlier) texts too. (For example, many nineteenth century novels could be classified according to the first two terms of the trichotomy.) The dates, therefore, do not

represent the beginning and end of some definable set of literary characteristics manifested exclusively between them; they provide a quarry. The interest is thematic, not authorial or literary historical.

Section Six: The Argument.

As I have said, the thesis aims to examine attitudes towards human behaviour - and ways in which such attitudes can be inferred - and to set the examination within the disciplined context of a trichotomy. The resulting model, it is hoped, will be of use in thinking about the novels discussed, the novels of the contemporaneous period, and novels from other periods.

We start with Compton-Burnett, and the first section deals with the nature of the novels as records of conflict. The next two sections consider the characteristics of the moral code by which the characters live, and in the final section there is an attempt to show how universal (as opposed to merely local) moral significance is achieved.

The discussion of Drabble also begins with an account of the presentation of familial discord; it then moves on to consider how the narrators' sensibility - which I identify with the author's in one extended example - and other factors such as the novels' structure, produce that sense of ennui and futility which I suggest is Augustinian. A concluding section discusses the conceptual framework within which Drabble's notions about morality are aired. Throughout the pages on Drabble, there are references to Compton-Burnett which serve to emphasize the common areas in their moral outlook.

Wilson differs from Compton-Burnett and Drabble in that, as it seems to me, there is a distinct maturation of moral viewpoint (between the two novels discussed) and it therefore seemed appropriate to divide the discussion into two unequal parts, one for Late Call, the other for No Laughing Matter, to chart both the differences and the echoes. My main contention about Wilson's position is that he is a ruthless exposé of the bad, but he takes an indulgent view because, as he repeatedly shows, his characters' motives almost always have some honesty and goodness mixed up with the baser urges. They are preoccupied with the

effort of right doing, however unsuccessful they might be in that effort. This indulgent view is reflected in the humour and in the experimental techniques, and both these aspects of Wilson are discussed.

When we come to Murdoch, we see that her novels, like Wilson's attract a Sartrean label. (I am aware that the Murdoch-Sartre parallel is overworked - not, of course, something that makes it less telling - so I should like to make the following point: I do not use the existential parallel in any strictly academic-philosophical sense; rather, I use it, and as I think, quite properly, as the most suitable label for something which is absolutely central to the novels, namely, the ideas of commitment to action and the need for personal fulfilment. These ideas are essential to Sartrean existentialism; invoking them does not imply any reference to, or interest in, the finer points of academic philosophy.)

Murdoch earns her Pelagian label on account of two features in particular: the positive assertion of self through action which her characters show, and an ubiquitous and incredibly powerful (albeit sometimes havoc-making) love. Before we can discuss these two Pelagian manifestations, we have to explain why it is that certain novelistic features cannot be taken into account at all; why, that is, any inference about morality based on them would be unsafe. These explanations include the justification for placing so much emphasis on The Italian Girl, and comprise, essentially, a brief list of artistic flaws.

Finally, in part four, we consider two Agnostic novelists: novelists of extraordinary originality who find themselves embarrassed by the novel's traditional role of moral arbiter, and consequently wish to write their fiction outside that tradition. Both take as their starting point ~~or rather, the tone of the texts takes its cue predominantly from~~ the American grotesque, which I describe. But after the similarities which that entails have been absorbed, we see that each develops a unique style. A crude version of the difference between them is this: Bainbridge's force is a result of the creation of a particular domestic scenery - grubby, depressing, limiting - joined to zany events; Bailey's world is far more desperate (physically and mentally) and much greater care is lavished on complex patterning. Both use technical experiment as part of their retreat from moral commentary.

Footnotes.

1. Robert Liddell, The Novels of I. Compton-Burnett (London: Gollancz, 1955), p. 35.
2. P.H. Johnson, I. Compton-Burnett (London: Longman, 1951), p. II.
3. R. Glynn Grylls, I. Compton-Burnett (London: Longman, 1971), p. 7.
4. Charles Burkhardt, I. Compton-Burnett (London: Gollancz, 1965), p. 49.
5. John Ginger, "Ivy Compton-Burnett" in Charles Burkhardt, ed., The Art of I. Compton-Burnett (London: Gollancz, 1972), p. 184.
6. Johnson, op. cit., p. 43.
7. cf. Anthony Burgess, The Clockwork Testament (London: Hart-Davis, MacGibbon, 1974), pp. 113-122.
8. When I say that it is my "own" I mean, like everyone else, that I cannot recall seeing it in print.

PART TWO: THE AUGUSTINIANS.

CHAPTER TWO: IVY COMPTON-BURNETT.

Ivy Compton-Burnett.

I have divided the discussion of Compton-Burnett's novels into four sections. The first is an attempt to suggest the basic nature of domestic life as it is depicted; that is to say, one that is dominated by conflict. In the second section, the actual behaviour of the characters is shown to be based on the two principles of dissembling and authoritarianism. Then, in the third section, I suggest that, at a deeper level, the nature of those principles is shown to be expedient and crude.

These three sections, insofar as they demonstrate Compton-Burnett's scathing attack on the moral standards represented, are all a vital part of the attempt to show that Compton-Burnett is an Augustinian. To make that argument even more persuasive, I have added a fourth section arguing that the novels have a universal moral relevance, rather than one limited in application to the specific society described.

Section One: The Novels as Records of Conflict.

Just as it is fair to say that Compton-Burnett's families are partly isolated from their defining contexts of period and class (a point to be fully debated later), so the families themselves are found to be physically isolated in their rural mansions. The restricted field of vision presented to the reader by virtue of the exclusion of non-family matters is paralleled by the social isolation which the characters experience.

Any attempt to describe the Compton-Burnett family must, I believe, place a sufficient emphasis on this isolation. The emotional energies and ambitious strivings which conventionally find outlets in the wider community are, in Compton-Burnett's world, turned inwards to the home. Even the jobs held by the various characters are of little help in distracting their attention from the domestic scene; for either the work is to do with running the estate itself (hardly an escape) or it is work (like Reuben's teaching in A God and His Gifts (I)) which hardly seems to impinge on the individual's life at all.

The result of this familial solitariness, this enclosed world of parents and children thrown, perforce, upon each other's company, is conflict of such intensity as to turn drawing room and dining room into battlefields, where the weapons are stinging words and

dirty tactics, and the contest is ceaseless. If we consider for a moment, none of this is surprising. For those whose life is confined to the hearth, the questions as to who is to appoint the governess, who is to tend on father, who is to hold the purse-strings, are bitterly divisive.

My argument will be that, in essence, Compton-Burnett's novels are records of such conflicts, and that the examination of the nature of how family members struggle against each other is Compton-Burnett's central preoccupation. (The binary nature of the novels' titles has a very strong flavour of opposed sides.) I shall try to illustrate these points with reference to The Last and the First. (2.)

It is no accident that the novel opens with a series of squabbles; the questions as to who has the power to decide the breakfast hour and when the fire should be lit prefigure the more serious and central conflict in the novel, between Hermia and her step-mother Eliza. In the first chapter Hermia announces her hope of leaving home in order to help run a large school in the nearby town; but it is clear that her projected departure has its origin in Eliza's antagonism towards her. The step-mother's penny-pinching meanness - such as when she takes Hermia to task over having a fire in her room, even though it is cold - is not merely thrift for its own sake, but one of the manifestations of the exercise of power, which most of these family conflicts are about.

Hermia, realizing that her step-mother will always practise favouritism towards her own children, is in a sense conceding defeat in her plan to leave home; she is acknowledging that she will never change her subordinate position, let alone gain any power. But Eliza, typical of a Compton-Burnett character, can not rest satisfied unless she has a greater surrender:

'Mater may be grateful to me for going. That is where the gratitude will lie.'

'I don't know why my name is brought into this,' said Eliza, in a cold tone. 'I have nothing to do with it. The change is being made without reference to me. Hermia has had her full rights here. She would have had no more with her own mother. I don't know why she is a martyr.' (p.23.)

It is clear from this exchange that, although Eliza will gain from Hermia's absence (insofar as a potential challenge to her domestic authority will be removed) she resents any such move towards independence which releases Hermia from her sphere of

influence. In other words, it is a blow to her pride; and she resents, too, the money that Hermia will need to buy into her school partnership.

Compton-Burnett is keen to establish in these opening pages that the two antagonists are not likely to be able to reach a compromise very readily, as this exchange, concerning the fire, shows:

'This house is my home,' said his daughter. 'I remain in it as I have no other. I am entitled to human comfort under its roof.'

'Oh, come, you will have to meet each other,' said her father. 'Hermia will ask you another time, and you will arrange what she needs. That settles it for both of you.'

'If I feel disposed to arrange it. It is for me to decide. Whose house is it? Hers or mine?' (pp.19-20.)

A prominent feature of all three novels in the period is that they not only centre on power conflicts; the characters themselves are frequently to be heard talking about the nature of power. For example, Eliza, in what appears to be a kind of justification for the sway to which she lays claim, announces: "But the yoke is not always easy, or the burden light." (p.20.) The obvious irony here - underlined by the comedy of such hypocritical Biblical citations with all their dourness (such citations being an actual feature of Edwardian society, they constitute one of the specific markers which help us to identify the period) - is caught in Angus' splendidly deflating remark a little later: "I should delight to have a place of power, and fall into the pitfalls that beset it." (p.20.)

Relentlessly, Eliza battles on, but with a change of tactics. She replaces the shrill insistence with an attempt at a pathetic appeal; she pretends to be sacrificing herself for the rest of the family:

'Not a very great best is asked of you,' said Eliza, with a faint smile. 'I sometimes wonder if I am right in letting you all go on so easily, taking everything and giving nothing, indeed having nothing asked of you. But I don't see how I can help it, being as I am. I am not a person to expect much. Perhaps I have learned not to be. If a mistake is being made, it is mine.' (p.21.)

Of course, Hermia is not taken in by this for a moment, but it is interesting that her retort is slightly oblique, reflecting her weaker position. Her point is that the family owes nothing financially to Eliza, but she has to put it indirectly: " 'We take the necessities of life,' said Hermia. 'And ask nothing beyond them. It is Father who gives us everything we have. We take nothing from anyone else.' " (p.21.)

A little later, this difference in tone between the two women, with Eliza revelling in her ability to be more emphatic, is brought out again:

'We could manage for ourselves if things were in our hands. There would be no trouble.'

'Well, they are not in your hands,' said Eliza, with a little laugh. 'It is a contingency that need not be considered, as it will not arise. Who and what do you imagine you are ? ' (p.21.)

The phrase "with a little laugh" splendidly captures Eliza's sneering triumph. At the end of the chapter, she allows herself to become agitated, reverting to pathetic appeal, and expressing regret that she has had to do most of the thinking and managing: "I wish I had not done it. I would not do it again. I will not go on doing it. I will follow Hermia's example and think of myself." (p.23.) The first three sentences are blatantly untrue, the fourth is true already. As Eliza sinks into tears and the chapter closes with her husband giving consolation, we see how extraordinarily practiced Eliza is in familial conflict.

In chapter two the clash over the school plan continues, with Eliza determined that, if she cannot prevent Hermia's departure, she can at least humiliate her:

'There will be things to learn before I can take my part in it.'

'There will be one thing,' said Eliza. 'How to consider a number of people besides yourself.' (p.32.)

Chapter three opens with our first glimpse of the Grimstones, and it is significant that right away we are faced with squabbles - about cutting the ham and the fat, and punctuality - which directly echo the Heriot breakfast table. Such counterpointing serves to point out that, whatever financial disagreements might develop later

between the families, they at least share a common bond in their exploitation of trivia. Amy's quip about the ham ("It dominates the sideboard, but it need hardly do the same to our lives" (p.41)) is not merely comic; it emphasizes the point that such trivial matters do dominate their lives.

These opening chapters of The Last and the First are typical of Compton-Burnett's presentation of conflict: there is a conflict of real interests (such as involve status or money, for example) and there is a verbal sparring. Sometimes that verbal sparring takes up the fundamental issues directly; more often, it reflects them obliquely through a trivial squabble. It is an obliquity in keeping with the characters' practice of dissembling.

Section Two: Dissembling and Authoritarianism.

Most of the adult characters in these novels live by a code of behaviour whose chief features are dissembling (and I include here both outright deception and less obvious deviousness) and authoritarianism.

We see the force of the practice of dissembling in Eliza's expositional "Nothing goes deeper than manners." (L.F., p.16.) At first glance a comic paradox, it in fact enshrines the supremacy of "seeming", which sometimes prevails against ludicrous odds. For example, so wanted are the conventions of untruth, that even statements manifestly absurd even in their figurativeness are unhesitatingly deployed; " 'You don't mean that she will die ?' said Joanna. 'You know she will not. You must know no one will, who is here.' " (G.G., p.78.) This goes beyond conventional reassurance into habitual distortion.

So much depends upon how individuals project themselves. In the confrontation between Merton and his father at the end of chapter eleven of A God and His Gifts, Hereward saves face by simply ignoring the hostile tone, and pretending to construe the ironic words as merely literal. The important feature of this manoeuvre is that both men know exactly what the other intends, but Hereward can nevertheless feel that he has negotiated some tricky rapids deftly. To appear to have won, even when not only the attacked but the attacker is aware of the real case, is tantamount to having won.

When exposed, culprits express no remorse; this, in itself, is not a deceptive manoeuvre, but one necessary to save face in many cases.

They evince only a sullen offhandedness at having to put up with the consequences of discovery. This, too, is a matter of self-projection; if you appear not to feel the weight of guilt, it may be that you will not be associated with the immoral at all. Lavinia, on her discovery, and fully realizing the potential for evil in all that surround her, attempts this kind of nonchalance, but she is not so successful as Ninian, whose brilliance resides in his daring. He, of course, is found not only to have destroyed Ransom's will, but is shown up for the worst kind of hypocrite, by his having been so censorious over his daughter's fault. His bravado takes him further even than self-exoneration; he almost congratulates himself on falling to temptation: "I met it and felt I did better to yield to it. It was in a way a temptation not to yield. It would have spared me much." (The Mighty and Their Fall (3), p.154.) Nobody is deceived, but the outrageous daring and sheer brazenness of Ninian's posturing allows him to retain family power.

Those who would seem important, making extravagant claims for themselves, are likely to succeed through sheer nerve. Jocasta is able to say unflinchingly: "My sons were not equal to me. There is often an outstanding member in a family." (L.F., p.71.) Hereward tells Rosa: "I know I am a man of full nature. I know I am built on a large scale." (G.G., p.7.) They are the ones to dominate. On the other hand, those who present themselves as ordinary - Reuben, for example, who forever pleads his lack of uniqueness ("I am treading in the usual steps" (G.G., p.136), "I share the general view of that. We are all like everyone else." (p.137)) - are the ones with least power.

So insidiously pervasive is the doctrine of "seeming" that even those characters whom we might consider good, like Sir Michael Egerton, are shown to utter subtle but heavy ironies - and irony is, par excellence, the method for cloaking innuendo and disapproval in apparently harmless literal sense. When Zillah tells Sir Michael that she has news for him, he at first assumes that she is to marry Alfred, but soon ascertains that it is Hereward who is to wed. In congratulating both Zillah (mistakenly) and then Hereward, Sir Michael manages to introduce a note of dissent with an obliqueness all the more objectionable for its not being openly voiced. To Zillah he says: "And if he [Alfred] was younger and not a widower, he would not be the man you choose." To Hereward he says: "We rejoice with you, if you rejoice. And of course you do", and "We must

choose from the people we meet." (G.G., p.48.)

In a sense, the most conclusive factor of all in our awareness of "seeming" is in the dialogue of all the characters. The very fact of surface restraint, the preservation of sang froid, and the use of efficient, measured tones giving expression to what are, so often, deeply agitated feelings ranging from extreme humiliation to murderous rage, illustrates the pretence. In the divorce between words and what they truly purport lies the essential masquerade.

Adult falsehood in Compton-Burnett makes perhaps its most dramatic impression when it is contrasted with the naive innocence of the children; not an innocence which makes them blind to hypocrisy and selfishness, but one which, notwithstanding their acute perception of adult foibles, fails to warn them to be silent. Thus, Hengest, at eleven, is easily able to grasp the real issue involved in Ninian's forthcoming marriage. He asks about the fiancée: "Will she be over Grandma, or will Grandma be over her?" (M.F., p.13.) The adults immediately move in with the lies; Miss Starkie affects mild shock ("What a question to ask! They will not see things in that way" (p.30)) while Ninian's approach is slightly more subtle; "She will manage the house, and Grandma will advise her." (p.31.)

In chapter four of A God and His Gifts, we have another typically brilliant example of effective contrast, as the prattling perspicacity of the children is shown alongside Ada's giving vent to her chagrin, for the first time, over Hereward's liaison with Emmeline. Seven-year old Salomon blurts out: "Father ought to love you, and not Aunt Emmeline." (p.55.) It is Salomon, a little later, who realizes that the party games are a cover-up: "The game isn't a real one. It is only meant to hide something." (p.56.)

It is clear from both these examples that Compton-Burnett children let nothing elude them, and are able to grasp the crux of a given situation, to the great embarrassment of their elders. Their innocence resides in their not having learnt the rules of discreet silence. It is therefore a central preoccupation of the adults to instil these rules, and suppress any overplus of spontaneous observation. At fourteen, Agnes has absorbed sufficient of the doctrine to say of the revelation of Lavinia's guilt: "I haven't said a word ... I knew it was that kind of thing." (M.F., p.115.)

Elsewhere, children are fobbed off to discourage inquiry. Hengest, when he asks about Teresa's age, has to repeat his question before he is accorded an answer, and in this extract, Leah's curiosity is

doused by evasive abstraction: " 'I wonder what began the being under people,' said Leah.

'Examine into your heart and you will know' said her father." (M.F., p.12.)

Once again we see the juxtaposition of simple utterance with empty rhetoric. But if rhetoric is not enough, then religion is made to serve. Although herself a disbeliever, Selina uses God as a disciplinary device: "Hengest, you thought we did not know. But there was Someone Who knew. Can you tell me Who saw what you did, and saw into your hearts as you did it?" (M.F., p.21.) Later on, Ninian agrees with his mother who tells him that God is useful because "the idea of being watched is discouraging." (p.72.)

We can see that the children are given a rigorous training in hypocrisy and "seeming"; at a telling moment, when the newly-weds are returning home, Miss Starkie instructs Leah and Hengest: "Seem to be glad to see them." (p.97.) But perhaps the best example of all is that of Henry's experiences towards the end of A God and His Gifts. When he asks for his deceased grandfather, he is told: "He has been too ill." (p.217.) Then Merton tries to deflect interest away from Sir Michael by talking about Maud. Even the servant Galleon says nothing when Henry "corrects" him over the "Sir" address to Hereward (who has inherited the title). Finally, Henry is told by his father: "You will not see Grandpa again" (p.218) which, being insufficiently clear and explicit, remains unregistered by the child. The nurse comments: "He is too young to understand." (p.218.)

This remark by the nurse is, of course, heavily ironic. Certainly Henry is too young to interpret the double-talk of the adult world, but he's not too young to appreciate the fact of death if put to him with the sort of straightforward honesty he desperately needs. In all his verbal contacts throughout the novel he is hardly able to get a simple answer or explanation. The next generation of cunning talkers is in the making.

Henry is actually already suffering the consequences of his phoney environment; he is egotistical and mendacious. The adults, unaware of what they are doing, blind to the bad example that they are setting, put this down to his being spoilt. In a typical episode, Henry impulsively rips up a picture of a horse that he has drawn: " 'The god-like spirit,' said Salomon. 'He creates life and destroys it. His father's son.' " (p.220.) Not far beneath

the surface humour, we see the awful prospect of a child being cheated of his potential for good, and steered relentlessly along the road of "seeming", towards similarity with his father.

Such foreboding for Henry's future is immeasurably strengthened in the final scene of the novel. Maud and Henry are being encouraged to be on good terms: Henry should give Maud his pencil. Maud should show Henry her picture. But they remain surly and antagonistic. Then Hereward jocularly inquires whom Henry would wish to marry, and the novel closes with: " 'Dear little Maud,' said Henry, in a tone of ending the matter to everyone's content." (p.224.) Horrifically, it seems that he has already understood the dreadful lesson of his father - that the woman you despise or feel indifferent towards is the woman you marry. The dissembling affection and fake prettiness of Henry's three words illustrate his precocity in false seeming. The final irony is that, if the marriage were to go ahead, it would of course be incestuous, as the children are half-brother and half-sister.

It should be clear from the examples that we have looked at so far that the characters do not dissemble merely for the sake of it; the practice is used to strengthen their position in the domestic conflicts which form the bases of the novels. We can see the truth of this in one particular area of dissembling - secrecy.

The theme of secrecy is rather complex because Compton-Burnett appears to have an ambivalent attitude towards it. On the one hand, there are occasions when someone withholds crucial information for purely selfish reasons; but on the other hand, secrecy is supported by characters presented in a morally superior light.

For example, it seems to me that Hugo is portrayed as morally superior to his brother Ninian, not because his ambitions or desires are less, but because he admits to his nature. Ninian always tries to turn his pique into advantage ("Of course I am disappointed. I might be a lesser man, if I were not." (p.166)) whilst Hugo owns up: "I want to live on inherited means and consider only one person besides myself. I knew I was a lesser man." (p.166) (4.)

Now, this morally superior Hugo actually warns Teresa away from trying to unravel the family secrets: "A family is itself. And of course things are hidden in it. They could hardly be exposed. You will be wise not to know about them. Think of Miss Starkie, spending her life trying to keep them hidden." (pp.49-50.)

On the other hand, Compton-Burnett presents us elsewhere with equally non-villainous characters who are against hiding things.

Ada Merton remarks: "I do not think feelings should be hidden. I have never subscribed to that school of thought. Anything that is there must give its signs. Anything does, as far as I have seen." (G.G., p.211.) The first two sentences seem to be the voice of virtue, for they oppose dissembling, but the final two sentences establish the pragmatic rationale for that virtue - effectively, one will never be able to deceive others completely, so one might as well come clean from the start.

Having made it clear that this ambivalence about secrecy exists, it should be said that it is still true that secrecy is used by the wrongdoers to maintain their positions; not just by concealing wrongs already committed, or in the offing, but also in matters like marriage. For example, it is rarely commented on that suitors in Compton-Burnett veil the identity of their prospective wives until the fiancée is actually introduced to the household. Thus, in chapter two of The Mighty and Their Fall, Ninian's announcement of his forthcoming marriage doesn't include any mention of the name of the intended. The male Egertons in A God and His Gifts display a similar squeamishness over names. At first, one might be tempted to attribute this to the sort of extreme prudery which links all sexual matters with the disreputable, until a marriage service magically transforms the situation by presenting, as it were, a fait accompli, agreeable for its respectable familiarity. According to this theory, the mention of a fiancée's name at an early stage of the courtship would be a minor indecency, comparable to an open acknowledgement of susceptibility to desire. This view might be seen to gain support from the fact that physical desire is alluded to in Compton-Burnett with extreme infrequency, and in the few examples which do exist, the coyness is exaggeratedly circumspect, as in this extract from The Last and the First (Hermia has received her offer of marriage from Hamilton, and comments that the overbearing Eliza must now see her in a new light): "We must all do that in a way," said Madelaine. "It does suggest there is something about you that we missed in our family life. Though that may hardly be the sphere for it."

'For what arouses feeling at first sight?' said Roberta. 'No, it is not the sphere. Its opportunities are different.' " (p.79.) And the subject is dropped.

But there is another force far more powerful than this prudery which makes the would-be husband reluctant to dwell on the proposed

wife: she is an outsider, an unknown figure who is to be installed in the midst of the family, made privy to all their thoughts and aspirations. The physical and emotional isolation of the Compton-Burnett family makes its members hostile to the inevitable shock which the introduction of a new member entails. How much they dread the embarrassment of having their "ways" examined unsympathetically, and feeling their faults and weaknesses secretly jeered at! This sense of vulnerability to outside criticism occurs time and again in the novels, when a marriage is in the offing.

How much more is their apprehension, therefore, in contemplating not merely a newcomer but a new power, someone who, in Teresa Chilton's case, will occupy the second place ex officio, and in the process actually supplant an outraged Lavinia. We are back with the preoccupation with power in the home, over who is to direct, to appoint, to preside. It is, therefore, far more the family's fear and dread of a new power to reckon with, than a retreat from sexuality, which informs the furtiveness of the potential husband in discussing his approaching marriage. In maintaining a veil of secrecy he is the better able to manage potential opposition.

Compton-Burnett's depiction of servants is intended to reinforce the pessimistic view of human nature which is evident in the presentation of their masters and mistresses. This holds true in the matter of dissembling. In this extract, Galleon has overheard the discussion of the adoption plan:

Galleon entered as Hereward went on, wearing a face so expressionless as to suggest control of it.

'Oh, you have heard, Galleon!' said Salomon. 'Oh, we ought to have thought of it.'

'I did not hear, sir,' said Galleon, specifying no further.

'I did not mean you could help it.'

Galleon again did not hear.

'We know you will keep your own counsel.'

'It is best as I have said, sir.'

'You will forget anything you heard?'

'No, sir, it is best as I have said.' (G.G., pp. 118-119.)

Galleon here is not really lying to the family, of course, because he knows full well that they know that he is not speaking the truth. Furthermore, they admire him for his dissembling, because it is the

ideal solution to the problem of hushing up the adoption plan; the admiration is expressed in Reuben's "We can only look up to you, Galleon." (p. 119.)

Not all the cases of dissembling are similar; some are outright lies, some are mild deception but some, such as the example above, are habitual pretences. What unites them all is a fear and a distrust of openness and plain dealing, emphasized in this exchange between Jocasta and Erica: "... it is not a day for betraying the hidden side of yourselves."

'Which days are the ones for that?' said Erica. 'I have never known them.' " (L.F., p. 96.)

Dissembling, then, is adopted as part of the moral code, part of the approved behaviour. But it is not only in individual cases, but in the very nature of the presentation, that we come to realize it. We are made very aware when reading Compton-Burnett that what is presented is a partial rendition of an imagined whole; the consequence of not having faces, gestures, physical descriptions, explicit commentary on locale and setting, even authorial pronouncement, is to make the reader feel that he has been left blindfold in a room, with only voices as a guide. Of course, even this image grants too much, for readers are rarely helped directly in the matter of tone and enunciation. Reinforcing the problem are two other considerations. First, the frequent deception and lack of straightforwardness of the characters that we have already noted (which includes the chasm between the demure remarks and the seething passions that so often lie beneath), and secondly, the extraordinary "understanding" which prevails in family conversations by which points can be scored and weighty matters decided almost without anything explicit having been uttered at all.

A good example of this last occurs in A God and His Gifts during the debate about the adoption plan. Merton and Hereward are the speakers:

'The decision would shape your life.' [Hereward]

'If I made it, I should mean it to. It would be the reason of it.'

There was a pause.

'Have you not made it?' said Hereward gently, bending towards him.

'I have, Father. There can only be one. I can make no other.'

'You are sure, Merton ? Sure in your heart ? Sure for the years of your life ?'

'I am, Father. I have no doubt. I see I could have none.'

'Then it is the best one ...' (pp.100-101.)

The most obvious point to be made is that the actual decision is not directly made known to the reader who, in this example as elsewhere, has to infer it, often with little confidence, from the context. Secondly, there is uncertainty surrounding the nature of the moment of decision, which obviously occurs during the pause. The two alternative possibilities are: either Merton gives some facial gesture suggesting resolve, or Merton's total silence is interpreted by Hereward as itself signalling the making of a decision. But even as Hereward expresses assurance that his son has come to a decision - when he says, "Have you not made it ?" - we can't be sure whether he also has equal (or indeed any) assurance about what that decision is. One's experience of passages such as this is that, far from being equally torn between alternatives, one is almost certain of the true meaning; almost, but not completely. That lurking area of doubt, it seems to me, is deliberately cultivated by Compton-Burnett. Insofar as the reader is required to make taxing inferences - not only in interpreting dialogue, but in establishing the minute details of when a character enters a room, and how much has been overheard - the whole reading process creates the sense of a world based on shifting sands, a world in which judgements need to be provisional.

The need for such provisional judgements is borne out by the nature of the plot developments, which are characteristically suspense-laden and lead to dramatic developments which require us to reassess our previous views. Eliza Heriot's sanctimonious posturings at the start of The Last and the First end up as actual wrongdoing when she conceals the correspondence. In The Mighty and Their Fall Ninian denounces Lavinia when she is exposed, but the whole picture of relative guilt is radically altered when he himself gives in to the temptation to destroy the wrong will. It is of course true that these moral reassessments cease to be a surprise to those who frequent Compton-Burnett's novels; but the sense of the unknown, of characters who are blacker than they seem at first, forces all readers to feel that they are in a world which calls for provisional rather than fixed judgements.

Although I think that Compton-Burnett disapproves of that part of her characters' behaviour that I have called dissembling, there are reservations to be made, as there were when we discussed her attitude to secrecy. The sort of forthright speaking which characterizes Trissie in A God and His Gifts does not seem to me to be offered to us as the complete answer. Consider this exchange between her and Hereward: " 'Do you always speak the truth ?'

'If I can. Then there is nothing to remember. And words mean something.' " (p.145.)

At first sight this appears to have a homiletic simplicity, with Trissie's honesty ironically contrasting with the central villain of the story. That element is certainly there, but surely Compton-Burnett is also poking fun, in a very mild way, at Trissie's ingenuousness. It is particularly apparent in the rest of the conversation with Hereward, with the latter's sexual innuendos passing unnoticed by her. It is hinted at in her name: Beatrice, the type of innocence. In the quoted exchange, Trissie makes an astute point, but I think that the ironic distance between her and Compton-Burnett should warn us not to assume that Compton-Burnett is an advocate of absolute forthrightness on every occasion.

No, the reasons we must give to show that Compton-Burnett disapproves of her dissembling characters are not doctrinaire; they emerge from the nature of the portrayed situations. First, the dissembling is frequently based on selfish and even evil motives. It is frequently tied up with the desire to conceal some wrongdoing, such as Hereward's attempts to hide his paternity. Secondly, the way that the children are fobbed off in their genuine enquiries, and the way that parents pretend to respect principles (such as those of Christianity, in the example we saw) are forceful indicators. The practice is so pervasive that, even when the danger of a damaging revelation is no longer in question, it persists as a kind of conventional routine - such as in our example of Galleon denying what he had overheard. Thirdly, there is a strong air of stealth and unwholesome guile which accompanies the various instances of dissembling; we become aware of it by virtue of the nature of the characters' supposedly confidential conversations. The untimely interruptions and eavesdropping to which they are subject form a particularly sordid context. Finally, Compton-Burnett has made it a rule of her fiction that, notwithstanding all their efforts, the characters' secrets will be revealed. At the very least, one would be justified in concluding from this that

pretence, of the kind we have been considering, is mostly shown to be futile; and, at the worst, one could say that the inevitability of revelation is not unlike the most principled stories in which evil is always punished; and, following this parallel, we could conclude that those who are shown to be caught every time must be engaged in something which the author considers wrong.

The second basic principle which underlies the morality of Compton-Burnett's powerful characters is authoritarianism. I don't think we need to spend too much time establishing that this is so: Jocasta's enjoining silence during a meal because of her "nervous strain" (L.F., p.46), Selina in The Mighty and Their Fall telling a man of twenty-two (Hengest) to take his hands out of his pockets; these are routine examples of Compton-Burnett's families' petty domestic tyranny. They offset the far from petty exercises of rigid authority which vie more determinedly for our attention. For example, from what I have already suggested about The Last and the First, I think we can see that, at one level, the novel is about Eliza and Jocasta trying to impose their will on their respective families. Eliza's conflict with Hermia is unsettling to the former because Hermia's departure, and consequent independence, in reducing the number of people under her sway, automatically reduces Eliza's power and authority. Jocasta's high-handedness, and her successful attempts to embarrass Amy when the girl is with her friends at the school concert, are not examples of mere petulance. They are unpleasant reminders of the enormous scope available to the powerful to affect the lives of those around them. In A God and His Gifts, that sort of power is strong enough to force Reuben into deferential politeness even when he is protesting to his father that the latter should stop fostering the growing intimacy between him and Reuben's fiancée.

One of the chief characteristics of Compton-Burnett's authoritarian world is a rigid hierarchy, which is based on fear and contempt: fear of the more powerful, contempt of the less. The low regard in which governesses are held has been a constant element in Compton-Burnett's work, from the Miss Bunyan of Daughters and Sons (5), despised because of her meek submissiveness, to the Miss Starkie in The Mighty and Their Fall, who, on the very first page, is the subject of deflating remarks about her weakness for food. It is the children, who have learnt this contempt but not yet appreciated that it must be clothed in urbanity, who make us see the

situation so forcefully.

Servants, of course, fare worse than the governesses, who are saved from the worst indignities by their occupancy of an undefined middle ground in social status of which few feel very sure. It is a typical Compton-Burnett joke that, in The Mighty and Their Fall, Selina should tell Ainger that the new boy, whose name is Percival, must get used to being called James, for the family's convenience, James being the name of the previous incumbent. It is a joke, however, with a bitter edge, for it indicates the insidious extent to which even basic feelings are disregarded. Indeed, there is an implied assumption that, being a servant and therefore lowly, Percival is unlikely to have this kind of woundable sensibility.

The irony of the servants' position is that it is a continuation and extension of the authoritarian regime upstairs, insofar as the servants' dealings with each other are concerned. For example, senior servants lord it over the juniors with the same lofty arrogance to which they in turn are subjected by their employers. Thus, although quite different in age and temperament, Ainger and Cook have a bond between them deriving "from their position above their fellows, which held them to a life apart." (M.F., p.25.)

The contempt accorded to servants and governesses extends, of course, to members of the family. Jocasta "did not esteem people for being dependent on herself" (L.F., p.43), she is "not disposed to afford him [Osbert] more than this, or esteem him more for his enforced acceptance of it" (p.43); and, to cite a hilarious case of vague intimation which also comes under the "contempt" heading, "Jocasta felt to him [Hamilton] as her son, but had her own view of him as a man, and was in no danger of her namesake's history." (p.43.)

It is this all-pervading contempt, the result of the families' hierarchy, rather than that hierarchy itself, which makes it clear to us that Compton-Burnett is attacking a rigid structure of power. It makes Hermia compare home life to "the forces that crush the impulses of life." (L.F., p.39.)

We hardly need more proof of Compton-Burnett's antagonism to authoritarian hierarchies, but this passage seems to be as clear an indicator as one could hope to find that the truism concerning the tendency of power to corrupt is being affirmed in these novels:

The power in the family was vested in Eliza, as her husband left it wholly in her hands, and had moreover willed the prop-

erty to her, in trust at her death, but subject to her control during her life. She wielded the power as she thought and meant, wisely and well, but had not escaped its influence. Autocratic by nature, she had become impossibly so, and had come to find criticism a duty, and even an outlet for energy that had no other.

Hermia resented her power and her use of it ... and Madeline cultivated an affection for her [Eliza] ... (L.F., p.17.)

We see explicitly here the view that autocracy leads to the exercise of power for its own sake, and that it alienates those under its sway. It gets out of control ("Autocratic by nature, she had become impossibly so") and is partly a result of a life of confined opportunity ("an outlet for energy that had no other").

Such confined opportunity leads to others being confined, and in ways far more insidious than those resulting from mere penny-pinching. Characteristically, we are offered one of Compton-Burnett's most penetrating insights into how far this can go in a tone of apparent insouciance: Miss Murdoch has suggested that Amy has "a vein of independent thought": "'I can't imagine it in Amy's case,' said Jocasta, as if this would prevent it, as it was probable that it would." (L.F., p.61.)

Another criticism that Compton-Burnett can be seen to level against the hierarchical structure is connected with the elaborate rules governing names and naming. Autocrats must be suitably addressed, and distance must be preserved, with different "ranks" allowed different degrees of familiarity. Thus, in The Mighty and Their Fall, Teresa's position in the authoritarian structure has a direct bearing on what she is to be called. The Latin "mater" is suggested, as it is a "compromise between the actual word and familiarity." (p.43.) This idea is abandoned, along with "Mother". "Mrs Middleton" is briefly canvassed but wins no favour; finally, Ninian gives an adjudication: "Well, Lavinia and Egbert can say Teresa, and the rest of you nothing ... That will serve for the time." (p.46.)

The question of naming is connected with the domestic power structure, and critics normally approach it from this angle. But we can also view it in another light. I suggest that the tedious rigmarole needed to settle the naming problem represents that pettiness of mind and attention to trivia which perforce looms large in a social system in which people stand on ceremony. Such ceremony, however quaint, is meant to reinforce the hierarchical values, but

Compton-Burnett shows us that concern for the ceremony itself, rather than its value as an instrument, becomes obsessive. We recall that Erica's comment about the discussion of the ham was, "It dominates the sideboard, but it need hardly do the same to our lives." (L.F., p.41.) But the fact that these lives are dominated by trivia, bogged down in disputation over the rules of precedence - whether it be naming, the power to hire servants, one's position at the dinner table, the control of the purse strings - is an obvious indictment of a hierarchical society which needs those rules in the first place.

One of the most rigid forms of authoritarianism in the family which is subjected to critical scrutiny is the subjection of women by men, and it is usefully considered because critics often fail to pick it up in discussing Compton-Burnett. I think there are two reasons for that: first, they see it as merely reflecting the society depicted, and not a theme which can shed light on the moral preoccupations of this particular writer; secondly, the fact that there are many female tyrants in the canon might seem to argue that women's subjection to men can hardly be a real issue in these novels.

I want to explain why I disagree with these premises before presenting the case itself. The first premise overlooks the way that Compton-Burnett integrates the material on women's roles with other manifestations of the authoritarian structure; we shall be seeing how this works not only in terms of what happens, but the outspokenness with which it is recorded. In considering the second premise we can refer back to the passage I cited about Eliza's power, noting again the phrase "an outlet for energy that had no other", which already suggests that the drift into stricter autocracy is partly involuntary. Thus, the fact that both men and women fall to the same temptation - the improper exercise of power - has nothing to do with the separate matter of the ingrained habit of masculine supremacy. The strength and oppressiveness of that supremacy we shall now examine, largely with reference to A God and His Gifts.

To begin with, there are attitudes of basic contempt for women. When Hereward is trying to explain to the family the financial difficulty, in chapter two, Joanna interposes a plea: "I don't understand money matters." Hereward takes this up as a general truth for all women, for he continues: "But I must ask my father to hear me. He cannot keep his eyes from the truth. I have no

choice but to force it upon him. He is not a woman." (G.G., p.19.) At the beginning of the novel, when Hereward has been rejected by Rosa as a husband, he tells her: "You could be the first person in my life. You choose to be nothing, and it is what you will be."

(p.9.) Women who are not married - or not connected to men in some power alliance - may easily become "nothing". The fact that the women know this forces them to accept that they will be used, and it is these relationships of exploitation to which I now want to turn.

The way in which Zillah ministers to Hereward's artistic talent, acts as a buffer between him and his responsibilities, protects his amorous secrets by backing schemes like the adoption plan, is a typical case. Compare it with this speech of Ada's to her father: "You are to have more than a son, Father. You will have a fellow-worker. There will be a healthy rivalry. The scholar and the novelist pitted against each other. With me as the intermediary, ensuring that it remains healthy. Well, it is a character I can fill. It is the sort of secondary one that fits me. Indeed all the parts I am to play will be suited to myself." (p.42.)

The woman's role as "secondary", as an "intermediary", is complemented by the reference to the playing of parts, which suggests a sort of mechanical domestic routine, a world in which individual personality is not recognized.

Ada has to accept that men are allowed to get away with more than women, that special rules apply. Speaking of her own life and that of Hereward's, Ada says: "Not that we can enter on it on quite equal terms. That is a thing that cannot be. Mine is an open sheet, with everything written on it plainly for your eyes. Yours will have its spaces and erasures. A man's life is not a woman's. I am not a woman to expect it." (p.43.) Ada's statement is a circumlocutory granting of permission to Hereward to continue his infidelities; as a woman, she hasn't the power to deny permission, but by alluding to it at all, however obliquely, she has put herself in a stronger position. Again, when Emmeline is pregnant, she has to be sent away; Hereward, on the other hand, outfaces his accusers.

In The Mighty and Their Fall, it is clear that most of the family are aware that some of the blame for Lavinia's deceit is owing to Ninian's using her, and then discarding her when he wished to marry. Ransom, who speaks with a certain moral authority in the novel, comments tersely: "You needed a companion and used her as one. And threw her away when you chose another." (pp.131-132.)

Even the "good" characters see women in a subsidiary role. Sir Michael, expressing pride in his children, declares that he is "Proud of my son for what he achieves, and of my daughter for the help she gives him." (p.23.) Forced to accept this subsidiary role, the women compete in order to secure a favoured place beside a powerful man. Thus, Teresa challenges Lavinia's place next to Ninian, and Ada feels cheated of the closest place next to her father: "I did hope to be his right hand in other ways, and to be seen by him as such. But it was not to be. Aunt Penelope loomed too large." (p.35.)

Especially in A God and His Gifts, Compton-Burnett uses the theme of women's inferiority in status as one more vehicle for her attack on the authoritarian structure. The fact that that inferiority is pernicious can be seen from the results: strife among women themselves, and the enormous conceit of men like Ninian and Hereward which is partly the result of finding themselves with willing female helpers.

Section Three: The Nature of the Characters' Morality.

Compton-Burnett's attack is not merely effected through a rendering of such specific features of behaviour as we have discussed; she also makes it clear that the foundations of her characters' morality can be explored and exposed too.

One of the points most insistently urged is that the characters' morality is based on the expedient rather than the ideal. In order to develop this point, I want to refer briefly to J.O. Urmson's essay, "Saints and Heroes". (6.) Urmson points out that certain groups of people - those suggested by the title among them - act according to their own moral codes, which latter are superior to those generally agreed by society at large. Urmson is concerned to discuss the difficulty we have of saying on the one hand that the saints' code is better for society, and on the other, being unwilling to advocate that it should take the place of the inferior one: an unwillingness stemming from a recognition of what one can reasonably expect of frail humanity.

Urmson wants to add a fourth factor to the old trichotomy of actions: duties, permissible actions, and wrong actions. The factor to be added is any case of acting beyond the call of duty, or what he calls "going the second mile". (p.65.)

In his essay, Urmson points out that, because people do act beyond the call of duty, and we need to describe their actions in moral terms, moral philosophers need to distinguish between ideal and ordinary codes. Those who live by an ideal code consult an abstract notion of virtue; those who live by an ordinary code consult an abstract notion of duty.

Now, Compton-Burnett's characters on the whole eschew ideal codes and adopt an ordinary one, as I shall try to demonstrate shortly. Such a contention might sound rather insignificant, but if we look at the morality prevailing in the fiction of Wilson, Murdoch and Drabble, there is an almost universal respect for, and attempt to live by (however doomed the attempt), ideal codes. That is to say, the characters inhabit a world in which "going the second mile" is expected. Any lack of generosity, warmth, forgiveness, charity - the sort of virtues which would be part of an ideal code - results in disapproval from the other characters. The eschewing of an ideal code in Compton-Burnett is not, therefore, an insignificant characteristic of her fiction, but one of the very important hallmarks by which it can be distinguished from the work of others.

Let us look at some examples. When Madelaine suggests to Osbert that Jocasta is "glad" to help him, the latter replies: "She does it, and would like it to be more. But I don't think she is glad. She wishes there were no need for it, as we do." (L.F., p.52.) Jocasta is acting out of a sense of duty rather than any altruistic motive. Indeed, any hint of altruism appears actually to be distasteful to her.

When the Ninian children are schooled to accept the notion of God as "An All-seeing Eye" which is watching their behaviour, it is not because of the spiritual conviction of their guardians, but "in fairness to Miss Starkie" (M.F., p.72) the governess. Apart from the hypocritical aspects of this, to which we have already referred, this approach to religion is typical of the way the pragmatic side of morality is attended to at the cost of the ideal.

Many of the money transfers in The Last and the First proceed from a sense of duty rather than generosity. Hermia assumes that Sir Robert will provide the money needed for her school plan, even though it is not specifically mentioned. There is no suggestion at all of her being grateful. Similarly, Hermia gives Jocasta half the money left to her in Hamilton's will, and signs over the rest of the money to her father, at the end of the novel, when she marries Osbert. Gratitude is neither expected nor given - indeed, it would

be taken as a sign of weakness.

The lack of esteem with which, in my view, we are invited to judge this code of duty increases when we appreciate how closely connected it is with expediency; an expediency which emerges not only in the machinations of the plots (though that is significant enough) but in the characters' discussions. For example, Ada is opposed to people hiding their feelings not because of some commitment to frankness for its own sake, but because those feelings will be found out anyway: "Anything that is there must give its signs. Anything does, as far as I have seen." (G.G., p.211.) Similarly, Trissie speaks the truth out of convenience, as this exchange already quoted shows: "Do you always speak the truth?"

'If I can. Then there is nothing to remember. And words mean something.' (G.G., p.145.)

This basic attitude of expediency means that many of the characters abide by the code of conduct they adopt, in order to be better placed in the conflicts of power and interest. Many of these points can be seen to apply to the scene in The Mighty and Their Fall in which Lavinia is discovered to have intercepted Teresa's letter to Ninian; it shows clearly how the moral themes are intimately bound up with the domestic struggle.

From the moment that the letter is accidentally dropped and she is quizzed, Lavinia's adjustment to her exposure is nicely observed. There appear to be three stages. In the first, she responds with nervous lies: "That? Oh, I don't know. What is it?" (p.112); "Has it? What of it? I must have picked it up in her room." (p.112.) Then she moves into the second stage: a truculence embodying a confidence in the belief that attack is the best means of defence: "You tell it [the truth] to me. You know more of it than I do. The matter means nothing to me." (p.112.) Finally, and much later, a depression sets in about the future: "There is [no help] for me, Grandma. I feel I am hardly alive. I am afraid to hear or feel. I hardly know if I do. Or if I ever shall again. I suppose I shall not dare to." (p.120.)

The first two stages are defensive pragmatism; the third is a self-pitying lament rather than remorse. (This lack of remorse, we should note in passing, is a convincing argument in favour of labelling Compton-Burnett an Augustinian. It is not just the repeated depiction of wrongdoing which makes that label appropriate, but the characters' scheming attempts to extricate themselves from the consequences of discovery, unbothered by any guilt or prick of

conscience.)

Meanwhile, Ninian has assumed the role of moral superior (a role which, of course, we later see to be hypocritical and false) and his bogus solicitude is well-rendered in a locution modelled on that of priests in the confessional: "Tell me about it, my daughter" (p. II2), "Why did you put the letter in the desk, my child?" (p. II3.)

The fact that the moral code is frequently treated with scant respect is evident in the discussion: Egbert can hardly take his sister's transgression very seriously, addressing her as he does in these terms: "Lavinia, I have seen you as the heroine of a drama. And you have emerged as the opposite. But it is the latter who carries our sympathy. Think of the examples in books, the very best ones." (pp. II6-II7.) Twice she is indirectly congratulated for her courage in breaking the code: "You took a great risk. Few of us would have dared to take it. So much depends on our courage" (p. II5), and Hugo asks Egbert: "Would you have dared to do it?" (p. II6.) Later in the novel, when it is Ninian's turn to be exposed, he actually turns his guilt to advantage by boasting of his succumbing to temptation.

The offensive nature of the expedient attitude is increased by the fact that some of the characters pay lip-service to specifically Christian ideals and speak in language reminiscent of biblical righteousness. Compton-Burnett invests her novels with a biblical aura in order to highlight the discordance between sententious speech and exceptionable conduct. We shall be discussing other aspects of these biblical echoes later.

Apart from this theme of the expedient, Compton-Burnett levels another charge against her characters' morality, which is that it is culpably crude. It is a truism that many, if not most, moral quandaries stem from two conflicting principles or precepts, rather than the inherent difficulties of subscribing to one alone. Suppose that one is committed to telling the truth and protecting the weak; if a gunman subsequently calls at your house asking for the whereabouts of your aged grandmother, you are almost certainly in a situation in which you will be forced to break one of your two principles.

However, those who have done no serious moral thinking often claim to live by moral codes in which principles do not conflict in this way. The most naive form of morality is that represented by the man who claims that he always sticks to the letter of all his principles; for this means that either his principles do not

actually conflict (in which case they must be very few, and/or very crude) or he is unaware of the occasions on which they do conflict.

Now, although it is evident that Compton-Burnett's characters are almost always shown as intelligent and perceptive, and display an incisive appreciation of the multi-faceted nature of moral dilemmas, they allow their conduct to be informed by a crude moral code; one which, by virtue of their cleverness, they are culpable in accepting.

A characteristic incident which can be used to illustrate these points occurs in chapter one of The Last and the First:

'Hermitia,' said Eliza, 'I gave you money to pay the trades-people, on your errand to the village yesterday.'

'They were paid,' said Hermitia.

'I have a sense of grievance,' said Eliza, in a light tone. 'Something must be owing to me.'

'Often an untrue belief, Mater,' said Hermitia. 'This time it is not. I left your change in the library.'

Eliza signed to her son, who left the room. There was a pause.

'And I took it to pay a parish subscription,' said Madeline. 'Angus is perplexed and taking time to find it.'

Her brother returned and laid some coins at his mother's hand.

'Why, where did you get it, my boy?'

'Oh - Hermitia said the library.'

'It was not there. It had been taken and used.'

'Oh well, I thought you wanted it.'

'Not those particular coins. Just some change for my purse. Why did you not say it was not there?'

'Oh, I thought perhaps it ought to be.'

'What an empty episode!' said Eliza. 'It seems to have no meaning.'

'It has none,' said Sir Robert. 'So we will not give it one. We will not pretend that something has happened when nothing has. Another time deal openly, my son.'

'As things are, Angus is paying the subscription,' said Madeline.

'I will pay it as a penalty. I took too much on myself. It is all a storm in a teacup.'

'If it stays there,' said Roberta. 'I never think teacups can be equal to the tempests they contain.' (pp.18-19.)

Angus has been faced with the conflict of two precepts - on the one hand, not to deceive, on the other, not to betray - and one has had to be sacrificed. However, on discovering Angus' deception, both Eliza and Sir Robert condemn him. We are therefore left to infer one of two situations. In the first, Eliza and Sir Robert are speaking the truth when they claim that the incident has no meaning, and nothing has happened; they genuinely don't know why Angus has been deceptive. (It is interesting to note in passing that Angus has the typical Compton-Burnett character's skill in deception; for his formulae are evasions rather than outright lies.) If we take this reading, husband and wife appear as morally unimaginative.

In the second reading - to my mind, far more preferable - the Heriots know perfectly well why their son has tried to deceive them, but they pretend otherwise because they are afraid of the implications of a morality which allows scope for personal discretion, as between following one precept or another. The authoritarian family structure which I outlined earlier is only happy with absolute rigidity and certainty; and correspondingly alarmed by the prospect of elaborate and searching examination of moral behaviour. The irony is that, in using mendacious phrases like "We will not pretend that something has happened" to put out of their minds the fearful prospect of moral debate, they are themselves breaching the principle of honesty and plain dealing - something for which they have rebuked Angus. Indeed, their breach is clearly more culpable than his. Whichever of these two readings is taken, it is clear that the characters' moral horizons are unduly circumscribed.

One of the strongest feelings we get as a result of this is that the nature of moral rules as useful instruments for social regulation tends to be lost in an attention to what might be called the minutiae or the "small print". This is comically rendered in A God and His Gifts:

'And a mother has to forgive everything. It has always been recognized.'

'I suppose a father should too.'

'I don't think it matters about a father. Anyhow there is no rule.' (p.158.)

A major part of the criticism that Compton-Burnett is levelling against her families is that they have failed to realize that moral rules exist not only to be followed, but to be modified or even abandoned as circumstances dictate. In other words, the characters' moral rigidity is not only a matter of pretending that rules don't conflict; it is in the obsequious homage that they pay to rules which should be their servants.

Section Four: Universal Moral Relevance.

We have seen how Compton-Burnett has exposed the wrongdoing of her families; but that in itself isn't sufficient to establish that she is an Augustinian writer. What we need to show is that her moral scrutiny is relevant not merely for ~~one~~ particular social class at a specific historical period, but that it has a universal relevance; that her moral castigation of this specific social group represents, as I believe, her morally pessimistic view of human nature itself.

Even for readers without an especial interest in morality, it must always be a question whether the wrongdoing depicted in a particular novel is to be accounted for by referring to the specific set of social and domestic circumstances, or whether that wrongdoing is advanced by the author as a particular instance of a general theme of man's delinquency. The most usual impression is that of a combination of these, so that the real area for critical debate is in the matter of emphasis. It seems to be generally taken for granted that the wrong done by Compton-Burnett's characters is a direct result of the sort of isolated and inward-looking existence of the shabby-genteel rural squirearchy of around 1900. I want in this section to argue that Compton-Burnett uses techniques to give us an even stronger disposition to view the events as a general paradigm.

One of the ways in which this is achieved is through the suppression of the sort of local details which, in other novels, serve as constant reminders of the particular historical and social context. In the exclusion from these novels of almost all non-familial matter, Compton-Burnett has not only concentrated attention in a unique way on her job of critically dissecting the families; she has increased the sense of the universal by removing many features which define and "place". There are no references

to the wider political world, and hardly any to parochial events. Even the environment in which the action takes place is briefly sketched rather than fully drawn; we get an impression of large houses, but no detailed account of estate acreage or the disposition of rooms, or any geographical locale. The censorship of the extraneous is unapologetically conspicuous; thus, Miles (in an earlier novel) announces to his family, not that he is going to Europe or to America, but that he is "soon to cross the seas". (7.)

Wolfgang Iser puts the point even more strongly than I would want to myself in claiming that the reader is "deprived of any background" (8), and the characters are "devoid of context". (9.) I don't think that we actually forget the specific society that is being depicted; but I do feel that our sense of the specificity of that society is subdued in order correspondingly to increase our feeling that the emerging lessons have a universal relevance, and are good for societies and periods other than that depicted. It seems to me that the very fact of the conspicuous exclusion of certain details constitutes, in itself, a kind of aesthetic signal to the reader that the moral inferences he is to draw are not to be merely local. Where Iser claims that readers are manipulated into forgetting about the specific society altogether, I would say that Compton-Burnett uses the exclusions as a technical device to predispose us to the wider view.

A second technique in these novels working for the same effect, is the evoking of a biblical aura, which in turn suggests some aspects of moral (Christian) tracts.

Such evocation begins even before we begin reading, with the titles. What Compton-Burnett does is to introduce a heavy irony into them, so that they do not merely describe the stories, but act as wry moral comments on them.

For example, Hereward is the eponymous central character of A God and His Gifts, and there is a double irony in investing him with titular deity: it is both a mock at his inflated egoism, and a sombre reminder of his access to that domestic power, the misuse of which is so flagrantly ungodlike. I think that we can see how much more there is to this title than the admittedly amusing. A similar irony is at work in the title, The Mighty and Their Fall. Most evocative of all three is The Last and the First, which is a multiple allusion: first, it evokes Christ's warning (recorded in Luke, 13) that many of those expecting to be saved may knock in

vain at the lord's door, that there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth, and in general a rather dreadful surprise in store for the unwary. Secondly, there is the parable of the vineyard (recorded in Matthew, 20) in which the labourers who have worked for only one hour receive the same wages as those who have worked throughout the day; this reference to an apparently unequal distribution of financial resources is not hard to relate to the themes of money and windfall wills in the novel. Thirdly, there is Christ's admonition to the apostles who, on the way to Capernaum (see Mark, 9) disputed amongst themselves over precedence, until Christ decreed: "If any man desire to be first, the same shall be last of all." (Verse 35.) Again, this injunction can clearly be connected to the reversal of fortunes between Eliza and Hermia; that reversal being the subject of the closing sentences of the novel, where the title figures again: "She is established on the heights, and Mater is cast down from them. How the first can be last, and the last first!" (p. 147.)

Having claimed that the novels have something about them of the moral tract, I want to avoid the suggestion that they are like Christ's parables; they lack both the terseness and the simplicity for that. Rather, their insistent focus on morality and its dilemmas invites comparison with a work like Flaubert's Trois Contes, where aesthetic and technical complexity are combined with a preoccupation with morality.

One feature which is strongly reminiscent of simple didactic tales is the theme of exposure. First, Compton-Burnett gives us the routine exposure of facile homespun philosophy, on which P.H. Johnson has commented: "One character propounds some ordinary, homely hypocrisy, the kind of phrase from which mankind for centuries has had his comfort and his peace of mind. Immediately another character shows it up for the fraud it is, and does it in so plain and so frightful a fashion that one feels the sky is far more likely to fall upon the truth-teller than upon the hypocrite." (10)

Secondly, Compton-Burnett's characters are, in certain matters, invested with extraordinary ability in seeing through cant, or perceiving deeper motives in people than those openly avowed. This exchange between Eliza and Cook is typical of what I mean:

'I am in no hurry to lose my daughters. I feel I hardly want to lose Miss Roberta at all.'

'No, my lady, that is the face to put on it,' said Cook, in approving encouragement as she went her way.' (L.F., p.146.)

Thirdly, all the novels are full of trenchant pronouncements on the foibles of human nature, delivered in language not unlike that to be expected from an admonishing moral superior: "Temptation is too much for us. We are not always unwilling for it to be." (M.F., p.121); "You are taking hasty steps on the path of life. I watch them with misgiving." (G.G., p.81); "People never speak of that [success] ... And they pretend it is not in their thoughts. There is something shamefaced about it." (L.F., p.74); "Self-satisfaction is their snare ... That is what they should pluck out and cast from them." (M.F., p.22.)

Fourthly, the fact that secrets are always revealed, hidden machinations always come to light, greatly increases our sense that there is a probe going on which reaches into the dimmest corners allowing nothing to escape scrutiny. Furthermore, when wrongdoers are exposed, it is frequently in a group setting, and the reprehensible act is commented on and discussed in an atmosphere not unlike that of an informal moot.

My fifth point is rather difficult to establish for sure, and has something of the intuitive about it; but one has the impression that the actual wrongs exposed are frequently the major offenses traditionally associated with those railed against in sermons and Christian tracts (murder, lies, incest, hatred, if we think of the whole canon) and much less emphasis is placed on the finely delineated niceties of moral conduct with which novelists such as Wilson attempt to deal. I am not saying that Compton-Burnett gives us no sense at all of these niceties, but that there is a preference for concentrating on conduct which seems to exist on a large, even melodramatic, scale.

The final point that I want to make in this section concerns the improbable plots, stylized dialogues and quaint names. I follow the many critics who believe that Compton-Burnett deliberately sacrifices verisimilitude in her plots so that they appear, in Iser's phrase, "quite absurd". (II.) But whereas Iser accounts for this absurdity by saying that it demonstrates Compton-Burnett's view that human nature is unpredictable, I see it as another way of detaching the story from its context, so that the reader does not merely apply the moral lessons contained in the novels to that specific context alone. Surely it is the case that these extraordinary events -

especially the inevitable slip or overheard conversation, leading to discovery - the unreality of epigrammatic exchanges (a sodality of pregnant wit made even more unlikely in its embracing the supposedly untutored servants), force us to view the novels as paradigmatic? The names - Egbert, Hengest, Leah, Lavinia, Selina, Ninian, Ainger, Ransom, Hereward, Zillah, Salomon, Viola, Galleon, Hermia, Jocasta - fit in with this purpose; for although it would be difficult to argue that they were individually unusual, their conjunction presents no such problem. Additionally, many of these names have an Old Testament air about them which constitutes another aspect of the biblical evocation.

Footnotes.

1. A God and His Gifts (London: Gollancz, 1963).
2. The Last and the First (London: Gollancz, 1971).
3. The Mighty and Their Fall (London: Gollancz, 1961).
4. Here is another example. On the day of Selina's death, knowing that he has been left a large legacy, Hugo charmingly asks the vulgar detail of the amount, aware of his improper curiosity: "I may as well show my full self ... It will cause no surprise. Did you see the amount of the legacy?" (p. 195.)
5. Daughters and Sons (1937; rpt. London: Gollancz, 1974.)
6. J.O. Urmson, "Saints and Heroes" in Moral Concepts, ed. J. Feinberg (1969; rpt. Oxford: O.U.P., 1975), pp. 60-73.
7. A Father and His Fate (London: Gollancz, 1957), p. 16.
8. W. Iser, The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett (1974; rpt. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1978), p. 153.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 153.
10. P.H. Johnson, I. Compton-Burnett (London: Longmans, 1951), p. 8.
11. Iser, *op. cit.*, p. 162.

CHAPTER THREE: MARGARET DRABBLE.

Margaret Drabble.

I intend to discuss Drabble's novels in three sections. In the first, I shall show how family life is characterized as depressing and disharmonious. In the second, I shall illustrate how other features of the novels, aside from the mere events - the narrative sensibility, the structure and ending - reinforce our sense of Drabble's Augustinianism. In the third section, I shall try to place the conceptual framework of Drabble's view of familial morality.

Section One: Familial Discord.

We can begin our discussion of the way that the members of Drabble's families actually behave towards each other by considering the parent-offspring relationship. Two themes tend to recur persistently here: puritanism and social snobbery. (I.)

In Jerusalem the Golden (2) Mrs. Maugham has both these traits. Indeed, they appear together; for Mrs. Maugham sees puritanical thrift as a form of good taste and breeding. A particularly amusing extract about her attitude to television makes this point:

Clara often thought that Mrs Maugham's attitudes towards the television typified her whole moral outlook; before acquiring it, she had considered it infinitely vulgar and debased; after acquiring it she considered all those without it as highbrows, intellectual snobs, or paupers, while still managing to retain her scorn for all those who had had it before the precisely tasteful, worthy and perceptive moment at which she had herself succumbed to its charms. (p.42.)

We find passages like this throughout Drabble; I mean passages satirizing human absurdity with wit and humour. In a sense they are misleading, for they imply a kind of light-hearted approach which is belied in the rest of the narrative, where gloom prevails; the sort of gloom felt in this passage, which details the result of the Maugham parents' parsimony:

For her parents had no friends. Nobody ever visited their house except through obligations, and such family celebrations as still persisted had been transformed into grim duties. Christmas came, and the family groaned, and dourly baked its cakes and

handed round presents; birthdays came, and useful gifts were unfailingly proffered. Nobody ever dropped in, and her parents never went out, save to large and joyless civil functions, or to the cinema. Clara could feel her friendly spirit choking her at times; she had affection in her, and nowhere to spend it. (p.55.)

The puritanism is not merely a question of penny-pinching, though that is significant enough. It entails a lack of human warmth, an emotional austerity, which is quite close to psychological deprivation. When Clara, for example, who has been worrying for some time over which school subjects to pursue, finally reveals to her mother that she is opting for French, Mrs. Maugham's dismissive "Suit yourself" (p.45) is a good indicator of the mother's coldness. Even when Clara had presented gifts as a child, the maternal austerity had not softened: "she had been afraid, afraid of rejection, afraid of that sour smile with which so many years ago her mother had received her small offerings of needle cases and cross-stitch pin cushions and laboriously gummed and assembled calendars." (p.198.) Clara's whole life, subsequently, is lived in the shadow of moments such as this. She recalls, for example, her father's death:

The only reality of the event had been her mother's reaction, which was silent, grim, and grudging to the last; not a tear did she shed, and after the funeral, as she turned away from the graveside and started to walk slowly through the cemetery mud she set her mouth in that prophetic way, and straightened her thick body, and then, as she passed a gravestone announcing that death is but a separation, she opened her mouth and said, 'Well, he's gone, and I can't say I'm sorry.' (p.28.)

(This is the sort of coldness which reminds us of the Drabble families' horror of touching each other. See for example A Summer Bird-Cage (3): "He's the only member of our family who ever touches anyone without wincing." (p.29.)) In order to emphasize the extent of Mrs. Maugham's emotional aridity, she is contrasted with the Denham family. The kind of life that they lead is the complete opposite of Clara's own family experience. She is astounded that the two sisters Clelia and Annunciata are devoted to each other; her own experience is that sisters are usually rivals. The whole Denham household is full of a sense of freedom and love. (We get

a measure of the contrast by comparing the description of Clara's Northam home (4) with that of Clelia's bedroom, with its glass jars, plants, photographs, doll's house and other charming junk: "Clara was staggered and bewitched; she had never in her life seen anything like it." (p.92.)) And presiding over this marvellous and loving little community is the mother whose name (Candida) provides an accurate reflection not merely of her but of the whole family.

The Denhams are an aberration for Drabble. In the other six novels of the period no other family is used in this way as a brilliant contrast to the central misery. It may be that, in using scenes of harmony to highlight the paucity of Clara's own domestic background, Drabble runs the risk of sabotaging her effects of bleakness. Her art seems to sit better when there are no sunny intervals amongst the clouds. Furthermore, it could be that the sort of exaggerated felicity that the Denhams enjoy may come to seem actually ridiculous to the reader. (This is certainly the danger in a novel which goes even further down the same road: Susan Hill's Strange Meeting (5) in which the horrors of the trenches are juxtaposed to the absurdly faultless domestic idyll of the Bartons in England.)

Another theme which characterizes the parent-offspring relationship is the dominating force which parents use to propel their children in predetermined directions. The fact of such parental influence is, of course, in the very nature of things. But in Drabble it assumes an unusual importance and an insistent presence.

Simon Camish and Rose Vassiliou, in The Needle's Eye (6) are striking examples. Simon's career (union lawyer) has partly been determined by his sense of a debt to be repaid to his father, the victim of an industrial accident. Getting him into the job in the first place is "his driving, neurotic, refined mother, who had worked so hard for him, who had insisted so on his rights, who had pushed him and pushed him to where he now was, through Junior School and Direct Grant Grammar School and through Oxford and on, whether he liked it or not, to the Bar." (p.131.) Both he and his friend Nick bear the burden of their parents' need of at least vicarious worldly achievement; these parents "had bent on their sons the peculiar weight of their own thwarted ambitions." (p.31.)

I think it is clear from the way Simon behaves that he is of a meek disposition. We have only to consider his row-strategy with his wife (he simply waits till her railing stops) and his diffidence with Rose, to see how unassuming he is. This trait

seems to be connected with his experience of the strongly protective instincts of his mother, a fine example of which is her reassuring him over psalm 137. The boy Simon is distressed by the threat "that the sins of the fathers shall be visited upon the children, and that the brains of the children of one's enemy should be dashed out upon the rocks." (p.30.) His mother tells him that the psalm is wicked, that he should pay no attention: "she had tried to undo it for him." (p.30.) Considering this incident in retrospect, one sees not only that Simon's mother intervenes in a protective way, but the relevance of the matter of the psalm to the issue of parents and children. It is a sinister message, and comes to seem frighteningly apt not only in this but in other Drabble novels.

Just as Mrs. Camish is the driving force behind her son's early life, so Rose's father towers over his daughter's life, but in a far more negative way. His petty domestic tyranny, closely reminiscent of Compton-Burnett situations, reveals itself, for example, in the scene in which Rose refuses to succumb to tacit pressure in the matter of when she should go to bed. His wealth allows him an additional rein once Rose has grown up; by controlling her allowance, he can to some extent control her behaviour. It is no longer the case that he feels that he can dictate the specific terms; he is now happy if he can merely prevent a scandal over Rose's liaison with Christopher: "I hadn't thought he would care, and he said he didn't care as long as I kept my name out of the papers." (p.100.) However, when Rose flouts him and actually marries Christopher, the father disinherits her. The relative poverty of her subsequent north London home is of course the result; the breakup of the marriage with Christopher is greatly owing to his disappointed financial expectations. (It would be unfair to say that he is entirely mercenary, but mistaken to say that the lure of money is an insignificant factor for him.) We see again the controlling hand of the parent. Rose's financial dependence is as crucial as Simon's emotional one; and both are presented in terms of familial pathology.

Parental interference, great or small, is a stock feature of the novels. Frances Wingate's mother, in The Realms of Gold (7), intimidates all of her daughter's male friends, with the result that they drift away and disappear from sight. The dialogue between Sarah and her mother about the former's resolve to leave home and live in London is typical of the underlying distrust and general bad feeling between the generations. The mother's anxiety over the

vagueness of the proposed arrangements doesn't prevent her from darting nimbly down those alleys of enquiry which, because they seem so unconnected with the main business ("Oh yes, the girl in grey with all the long hair ... I thought she was married" (p.62) - the motherly innuendo being that all is not well) are all the more amusing and true to life.

Janet Bird's mother, in The Realms of Gold, is wonderfully adept at these oblique verbal stabs: "How unusual" she comments, as her daughter prepares a combination of peaches and chicken (p.128) and, no doubt silently outraged that Janet should allow a cat anywhere near the baby, says: "I do admire your confidence ... I'd never have dared. But you mothers these days are so sure of yourselves." (p.129.)

Actually, this Mrs. Ollerenshaw is so able a practitioner that she hardly needs to speak at all in order to intimidate: "Nevertheless, as Mrs Ollerenshaw nibbled her biscuit - was she trying to imply by the movement of her lips that it had gone soft? - Janet asked, 'And how's Dad keeping?' " (p.131.)

At the root of many of these tensions is the personal hypocrisy which, as we saw, plays such a large part in the fiction of Compton-Burnett. The need which Drabble's parents have to conform to social norms creates the sort of emotional dishonesty which is at the root of many of the features we have illustrated. It is well characterized in this extract from The Waterfall (8), in which Jane is talking about her parents:

I don't know what had gone wrong between them; perhaps they did not like having to share their mutual knowledge. Some people conspire to deceive the world and find in their conspiracy a bond, but they did it, I think, with a sense of profound mutual dislike. They presented a united front to the world, because their survival demanded that they should, because they could not afford to betray each other in public: [colon sic] but their dissension found other devious forms, secret forms, underhand attacks and reprisals, covered malice, discreet inverted insults, painful praise. Children are lost in such a land, where appearances bear no relationship to reality, a land of ha-has and fake one dimensional uncrossable bridges and artificial unseasonal blooms: a landscape civilized out of its natural shape. (p.57.)

It is precisely this fake emotional landscape that has affected Jane even more than she herself suspects. As we follow her account, with its switches from first to third person narrative, and the corresponding discrepancies of detail, we see in her pained recollections the parental example. Her narrative - which is, in part at least, an obfuscating mask - is part of a direct inheritance of the parental manner of simulation.

This passage about Jane's parents is of particular importance because it illustrates a feature which Drabble is especially keen to bring to our attention. From many of the examples of parent-offspring disharmony in the novels, the reader begins to develop a conviction that that disharmony can be easily explained, that it is an "understandable" consequence of certain types of parental behaviour. Mrs. Maugham's meanness of spirit, Rose's father's imperiousness, can be expected to produce the effects that we actually see. Now, I certainly believe that a part of Drabble's purpose is to make that connection, and thereby expose the parental faults. But she is also eager to portray a sense of inevitability about discord in the family, in line with the Augustinianism which I believe she exemplifies. She wants to describe discord without necessarily linking it on every occasion to some social or cultural explanation; she wants it to represent, that is to say, the inexplicable nature of human perversity.

I think that the passage quoted above puts that across; in the strange behaviour itself, in the narrator's bemusement over it ("I don't know", "perhaps"), and in the notion of a secret "mutual knowledge", which has the slightest flavour of post-lapsarian man. It can usefully be compared to another passage, about Clara's father:

...as he himself had managed to purchase by his own labours a three bedroomed semi-detached house in a pleasant suburban district, he might have been thought to have cause to feel fairly content with life. But he did not. He was perpetually in the grip of some obscure, nigging, unexplained bitterness, which led him to repudiate most of the overtures which Clara would from time to time make towards him; she made these attempts because she was less frightened of him than she was of her mother ... (J.G., p.28.)

There it is: "some obscure, nigging, unexplained bitterness." How precisely Augustinian this is, in tone, suggesting as it does

envy and self-centredness, and a preoccupation with securing for oneself the best possible arrangements. The bitterness is "obscure" and "unexplained" because it has no source in the local or contingent; it has no specificity. It arises from something endemic to humanity itself: the inherent tendency to evil.

A further way in which Drabble illustrates this human perversity is to present discord even in those cases where we would, consulting the author's own guidelines, least expect it. In The Millstone (9), Rosamund's parents measure up to every criteria for good parentage which we might have inferred from the other novels, especially Jerusalem the Golden and The Needle's Eye. They are tolerant, non-interfering, and classic liberals. They support all good causes. But Rosamund is disaffected because she feels that the independence rammed down her throat is just as harmful as regimes like Mrs. Maugham's: "My parents did not support me at all, beyond the rent-free accommodation, though they could have afforded to do so: but they believed in independence. They had drummed the idea of self-reliance into me so thoroughly that I believed dependence to be a fatal sin. Emancipated woman, this was me: gin bottle in hand, opening my own door with my own latchkey. (p.9.)

Rosamund is being pressed to accept an extensive freedom; because it includes the freedom to drink gin, it begins to appear unappetizing. This parental attitude entails, among other things, introducing the char to friends, encouraging cockney accents, and not questioning the children when they return at three in the morning. Rosamund has a low estimate of this attitude: "It's all been a disastrous experiment in education, that's all one can call it." (p.28.)

In A Summer Bird-Cage, Sarah's parental home is quite devoid of the parsimony we saw in Northam; the sort of bourgeois comfort, we might have been led to think by inference, which oils the wheels of a family's relationships (as surely it does among the Denhams). But Sarah senses danger in this seductively cosy and inviting environment, in the fitted carpets and the wall-lightings. Somehow, in a way not made explicit, but having to do with the very vaguest sense of peril for her moral stamina, Sarah despises herself "for giving in to the bargain comfort of meals provided and beds made." (p.16.)

One episode in particular helps us to see that Drabble is offering her view of discord from an Augustian position. In The Realms

of Gold, Janet's mother suggests that her daughter use spirits of salts to clean the sink stain, even though she herself dislikes it, and actually considers it dangerous, along with Janet: "She didn't know why she'd ever suggested it. She couldn't help herself, that was the solemn truth." (p.133.) This is about as close as we ever get in Drabble to an "explanation" for the pervasive parent-offspring antipathy.

There is, then, a quandary for Drabble, who is intent at once on criticizing certain specific types of family behaviour and suggesting causal relationships, and on supplying the reader with an Augustinian context. There is a certain contradiction here, which accounts for the reader's occasional sense of uncertainty as to where, precisely, he is being led. (We shall take up points related to these questions in the third section.)

Drabble's quandary is equally evident when she deals with marital disharmony. On the one hand there is a whole series of reasons why the various marriages are under stress - mercenary motivation in getting married in the first place, class differences, conflicts of interest over jobs, male intransigence, infidelity on either side - but on the other hand, she wants the reader to avoid thinking merely on the level of cause and effect. The attempt to combine these two ambitions is well illustrated in the epigraph to A Summer Bird-Cage, which is a quotation from the Renaissance dramatist John Webster: " 'Tis just like a summer bird-cage in a garden: the birds that are without despair to get in, and the birds that are within despair and are in a consumption for fear they shall never get out." (p.6.) The tantalizing nature of the cage of marriage for those outside it, and the sense of claustrophobia felt by those inside it, are well described throughout the seven novels and constitute that first part of an ambition which does wish to air marital, feminist and simply human questions in a cause/effect social criticism. But the quotation also contains a strong sense of the birds' perversity, their almost blind stupidity. They are expected, inevitably, to choose unwisely whatever the circumstances, and to suffer the consequences. Furthermore, Webster's lines describe a state for the birds of guaranteed dissatisfaction in whichever of the two alternative predicaments they find themselves. This second aspect of the quotation reflects Drabble's Augustinianism.

Of course, the very fact that most marriages depicted have a good share of conflict is, in itself, an indicator of an Augustinian sensibility on the part of the author. Even more indicative is the

fact that reconciliations - moments which, whatever meanness has prevailed in the past, are traditionally characterized by at least a semblance of devotion - are seen to be based on expediency. At the beginning of The Needle's Eye, it is bourgeois comfort that keeps Nick and Diana together. They cannot function properly alone; they cannot take "the responsibility of independence." (p.13.) Two pages later, this is reduced to a much simpler formula: "They had parted because it seemed the easiest thing to do, and because it seemed the easiest thing to do, they had come together again." (p.15.) It seems that Simon stays with his wife because he pities her; in The Realms of Gold, Karel stays with Joy out of a sense of duty. Whatever of love there is in the various marriages - and, in its infrequent manifestations, it does have a stinting quality - is poisoned at the roots.

In the portrayal of familial bickering there is an area of great brightness, almost of optimism. This is the experience of motherhood: "When she got home, she gave the children their presents, and listened to their stories, and kissed them, and was pulled around by them; they were an excitable, assertive, healthy, resolute, daring bunch, her children, constantly milling and seething with an excess of energy ..." (R.G., p.49.)

Whatever anxieties and disputes might put adults at each other's throats, the mothers treasure their young in a way which provides a conspicuously happy contrast. Despite Emma's brag ("I have always made a principle of suiting myself rather than the children" (10)) we can see in the routine of her daily life how lucky Flora is, as a child basking in constant maternal warmth. Even the trivial business of visiting the launderette is turned to account; Emma loads the machine in such a way as to give Flora the impression that she herself has done it. Later the mother is careful "to give her the treat of putting in my second instalment of soap powder." (p.148.) Emma's acerbity towards David is never in evidence in her dealings with her daughter. Similarly, although Jane Gray can snub her husband brutally, she is all tenderness with Laurie. Rosamund and her Octavia present a similar case.

We begin to see that a favourable attitude towards motherhood is actually an indicator of the heroines' growing maturity. Thus: "Babies, mothers, and fathers had hitherto been for her the very symbols of dull simplicity. She saw that she had been wrong about them." (J.G., p.22.) When we read this we know that Clara is being

initiated into a mysterious truth.

It is mistaken, of course, to think that Drabble makes motherhood glamorous. On the contrary, she is forever illustrating its discomforts: "I often think that motherhood, in its physical aspects, is like one of those prying disorders such as hay fever or asthma, which receive verbal sympathy but no real consideration, in view of their lack of fatality; and which, after years of attrition, can sour and pervert the character beyond all recovery ..." (G.Y., pp. 9-10); "I was appalled by the filthy mess of pregnancy and birth" (G.Y., p. 27); "my children are always making me suffer emotions" (G.Y., p. 54); "I had had enough of maternity. I was sucked dry" (G.Y., p. 63); "There was no reason why I shouldn't have [a baby] either, it would serve me right, I thought, for having been born a woman in the first place." (M., p. 16.)

These sentiments speak for themselves; yet the joy, the sheer felicity of mothering, is keenly felt by the heroines and, equally, is impressed upon the reader, despite the heavy sacrifice involved. This "holy" suffering is a central paradox; a definite aura of sanctity and dedication persists among all the wet nappies. Pain and joy help to define each other: " 'Christ,' they would say to each other, clutching small wailing babies, stewing scrag end, wandering dully round the park. 'Christ, if only we'd known what we had to go through, if only we'd known -' but in the very saying of it, betrayed (in Emily's case) bruised (in Rose's case) and impoverished (in both cases) they had smiled at each other, and laughed, and had experienced happiness. Life had been so much better, and so much worse, than they had expected." (N.E., p. 243.)

Drabble's graduate wives, disillusioned and resentful, have, it seems, found a worthy role. Not only that, but they find escape from the petty bickering of the adult world, as they immerse themselves in their maternal roles. They are no saints by any means; they are capable of meanness of spirit and pettiness of mind. They can wound dreadfully (we shall be seeing this with Emma shortly). But the experiences of childbirth and rearing give them a certain selfless aspect. Rose Vassiliou's giving way to her husband Christopher, at the end of The Needle's Eye, for the sake of the children, is a typical action. The novels do not encourage any kind of panegyric; rather, the matronly virtues emerge almost in spite of themselves; in spite of their intellectual commitment to personal hedonism, in spite of their thirst for independence. Like Janet's mother

recommending a cleaner that she doesn't believe in, they cannot help themselves.

Unfortunately, we can only extract a minimum satisfaction from these portraits of motherhood, which appear to mitigate the severity of Drabble's Augustinianism. Just as it is clear in Compton-Burnett that the children, however frank and amiable some of them may be, will be tainted by adulthood, so it is clear from Drabble's treatment of both marriage and the parent-offspring relationship that the love and affection lavished on Flora, Laurie and Octavia will not be able to save them from the discord which, Drabble appears to be saying from her determinist position, is the inevitable consequence of flawed human nature.

Section Two: Sensibility and Structure.

Drabble's novels have a feature which, in the Compton-Burnett novels, is almost entirely unobtrusive: narrative voice. Drabble's first three novels are written in first person narration, three of the next four in third person narration, and The Waterfall in both. These narrative voices are another fictional layer which we need to decipher in order to decide the authorial attitude towards morality. Together with many Drabble readers, I feel that both narrative voices convey a sensibility which is, in general, that of the author herself (I shall try to justify this assumption a little later); a sensibility emphatically Augustinian in character.

What I shall do now is to take a detailed look at how this sensibility is conveyed, and I shall be using Emma Evans, the narrator of The Garrick Year, as the central example. Then, I shall argue that some of the features of the novels, such as their structure, emphasize this Augustinianism.

This is how The Garrick Year opens:

While I was watching the advertisements on television last night I saw Sophy Brent. I have not set eyes on her for some months, and the sight of her filled me with a curious warm mixture of nostalgia and amusement. She was, typically enough, eating: she was advertising a new kind of chocolate cake, and the picture showed her in a shining kitchen gazing in rapture at this cake, then cutting a slice and raising it to her moist, curved, delightful lips. There the picture ended. It would not have done to

have shown the public the crumbs and the chewing. I was very excited by this fleeting glimpse as I always am by the news of old friends, and it aroused in me a whole flood of recollections, recollections of Sophy herself, and of all that strange season, that Garrick year, as I shall always think of it, which proved to me to be such a turning point, though from what to what I would hardly like to say. (p.7.)

It's quite clear, I think, that our interest is centred on the character of the teller rather than on her banal observations. Here, as throughout, Emma's emotions and reactions, much more than the events themselves, constitute the novel's theme. Hence the high ratio of passages expressing states of feeling as opposed to those whose purpose is the advancement of the action. The particular observations that we see here are banal partly in order to ensure that our attention is thus properly focused on Emma's sensibility; the features of which, as evident in the passage, recur throughout the novel.

Emma's feelings establish themselves as immediate and authentic, and not merely by virtue of the space devoted to them. Part of the reason for this sense we have of their immediacy is the result of the sort of first person narrator that Drabble allows Emma to be. Some first person narrators (Lockwood in Emily Bronte's Wuthering Heights, for example) render accounts which have an almost objective authority. Others (say, Lemuel Gulliver and Nick Carraway) give us accounts in which there is enough irony for the reader to recognize that what is being offered as supposedly dispassionate observation is, in fact, heavily subjective. Emma's account doesn't even pretend to be anything but the most one-sided version it is, and therefore represents a kind of deliberately extreme form of subjectivism. Furthermore, not only are we acutely aware of the subjective status of Emma's vitriolic judgements of those around her, but we also see Emma devaluing herself and, in many cases, expressing self-contempt. These various features confer on Emma's narrative a sort of outrageous honesty; and it is that sense of honesty which provides one of the reasons which make me assent to the view that Emma's narrative embodies a sensibility which is Drabble's own.

Many of the Augustinian characteristics of that sensibility are present in that opening paragraph to which we can now revert.

One of the first impressions that we register is that it embodies the view that watching television is the defeatist's resort from intellectual boredom; and watching advertisements is a sort of additional degradation. The novel's first sentence is not offering that as a view to take seriously in realistic terms; it is offered on a symbolic level. Bearing in mind Emma's own preoccupation, in her account, with mental stagnation, it is quite clear that she is using the watching of television commercials in this way.

In the second sentence, the word which is of particular interest is "amusement". It indicates Emma's posture of mild contempt for her fellows which persists up till the last page, and, indeed, is immediately echoed in, "She was, typically enough, eating". Sophy Brent's significance here is not as a character; she is a convenient vehicle for the misanthropy underpinning Emma's narrative.

The advertisement itself has a double function. On the one hand, its fatuity and commercial vulgarity are intensified by its devaluing of women. The way that Sophy is eating is overtly salacious; the way she is shown "in a shining kitchen gazing in rapture at this cake" makes her seem feeble-minded and obsessively domestic in the classic stereotyping tradition. Right away, some of the feminist flavour of the novel is apparent. The second function of the advertisement in the passage is that it provides the occasion for Emma to imply a strong condemnation of Sophy for allowing herself to be exploited in this way, as well as self-contempt for watching it. In the same way, throughout the novel, women don't get off the critical hook just because they have a raw deal as women.

The contempt which Emma shows, throughout her account, for other people, is so evident - because so absolutely explicit - that we need not spend too much time in illustration. On the other hand, the self-contempt, which is at least as strong, is conveyed to the reader by modulations in tone sometimes so slight that this aspect is more likely to be missed, and therefore deserves attention. A phrase in point is, "I was very excited by this fleeting glimpse ..." which contains only the smallest hint of something that, when we have read page after page, we recognize as an established and characteristic tone. It suggests a view of Emma as childlike, one immature in her over-reaction to quite ordinary events; a view that also emerges, albeit minimally, from the diction of "that Garrick year, as I shall always think of it". Here, it is almost as if Emma represents herself as someone who needs the facile aid of both

labels ("that Garrick year") and cliches ("as I shall always think of it"). The end result is that she imputes to herself (quite inappropriately) a certain laziness. Above all, the diction is chatty ("I have not set eyes on her for some months") and symbolizes that domesticity for finding herself in which (for acquiescing in which) Emma sneers at herself.

I have said that Emma's vitriolic comments on those around her hardly need to be listed or established; but it is valuable to pause briefly over the terms in which they are expressed. For example, in the marvellously caustic presentation of the actors in chapter four (see especially p.57) with their interminable low-brow chit-chat about the nature of theatre, Emma comments:

And so they went on, pointlessly, messily. As I say, I had heard it all before, but I nevertheless found something touching and pathetic in David's assertion of his own positive wonderful self: poor David, who has no more self than a given quantity of water, and who is always trying to contain his own flowing jelly-like shapelessness in some stern mould or confine ... (p.59.)

There is something about the strength of this, something about its extremity in ill-naturedness, which one is tempted to label misanthropy - by which I mean a distaste for people quite disproportionate to what might be suggested from the facts about their behaviour. Earlier in the same chapter, Emma comments on her husband's ambitions: "It was to become heard of that he had joined the company at all. He wished, for some reason, to be a classical actor, did David." (p.46.) The first sentence is a routine stab, but the terminal descent into slang has a much stronger force, a more malicious sneer.

Emma is disabled, by her intelligence, from accepting even the most innocent occurrence at face value. In describing a tranquil domestic moment between David and Flora, Emma cannot relent: "'She's always cross,' said David, and started to play this little piggy with her fingers. She was overcome with delight, she thinks David is the most amusing person in the world." (p.100.) There is a suggestion lingering in that last phrase that Flora is sadly misled in such a view, and that David is somehow managing to get away with a dishonest masquerade whose geniality hides his true nature.

The seduction sequence on the train to Tonbridge brings out, in the same way, Emma's attributing the lowest motives to any act:

We had not reached London Bridge before David said, in his pronounced Welsh voice, which he uses to be charming, 'Haven't we met somewhere before ?'

'Yes, we have,' I said. 'We met in a lift at the Television Centre last week.'

'Oh, really ? Is that all ? I had an impression that I knew you ...'

I did not reply to that; I was watching him closely. He was wearing a jacket that he still has, a navy blue, short, lumpy jacket. He looked like an actor, he had all the air of self-projection, of slightly extra physical delineation that I associate with actors. Even the stubby roughness of him was not mere roughness; it was roughness that amounted in itself to gloss.

'Are you an actress ?' was his next question. 'I'm sure I have seen your face somewhere before. Before that lift, I mean.'

'Certainly I am not an actress,' I said, 'though I'm quite well aware that you're an actor, if that's what you mean.'

'Oh ?' he said. 'What do you mean by that ?'

'Well,' I said, 'I assumed that your curiosity about myself amounted to nothing more than a stimulation to my curiosity about you. That you were giving me a lead-in, as it were.'

He took that very well. We could always make each other fun.

'You're wrong about that,' he said, 'but since you've broached the subject, I gather that you do know who I am.'

'Certainly I know who you are. I saw you last Sunday night. David Evans, I believe.'

(p.21.)

The marvellous stiffness of Emma's use of "Certainly", the Compton-Burnett-like bluntness of her accusations, the presence of mind and delight in baiting evident throughout (and especially in "He took that very well") attest to her misanthropy. So too does the sneering. One of the features of a certain type of sneering is that it centres on characteristics which cannot be considered at all odd, odious, or contemptible in the cold light of reason, and in fact derives some of its force precisely because it is based on prejudice and unreasonableness, or pure whimsy. Using such a sneering, Emma is able, for example, to suggest that there is something

ridiculous in a Welsh voice per se, quite apart from the way that it might be used for ingratiating purposes.

Having said all that, there is a difficulty in that, in parallel with these severe implied and explicit criticisms there is a jaunty good humour. In this dialogue, we can't help feeling that it also operates on the level of a Beatrice/Benedict raillery. It's obvious that there is nothing theoretically against combining these objectives - the history of comedy is a record of the success of the combination - but Drabble doesn't manage to pull it off, doesn't make us feel comfortable with the two elements juxtaposed. And I think a major reason for this is that her criticisms sometimes seem so severe that any kind of banter or light-heartedness is bound to come to seem out of place.

The sort of difficulty, which the reader has, in trying to reconcile these elements in his reading, closely mirrors the difficulty which Emma herself has in coming to an understanding of the world in which she lives. This bemusement is a major ingredient of the Augustinian sensibility which I am trying to define.

Emma's bemusement about her identity allows her to make a joke out of incidents which, without such a blurred perspective, hardly seem funny at all. If we turn up the novel's opening again, we notice this element of comedy along with the elements of disillusionment. Another passage which brings out particularly well the way that comedy, or a preparedness to accept life from a humorous angle, constitutes a kind of indicator of the narrator's feelings and the way they are confused, occurs when Wyndham is trying to seduce Emma as she lies ill in bed (it's useful to compare this with the situation in The Waterfall, in the opening pages, where Jane is recovering in bed, and James is hovering in a threatening-seduction manner):

We struggled there for a little, and after a while I began to think that I really might as well give in: there was after all everything on the side of submission, and nothing to be gained by resistance except a purely technical chastity. For we are what we seem to be, and there can be no doubt about what I seemed to the world to be at that moment. So I let him get on with it, and I wish to God that I could say that I enjoyed it. At the end I looked around limply for my handkerchief: then, not finding it, blew my nose loudly on the corner of the sheet.
(p.161.)

Farcical, perhaps, but we smile uneasily, like Emma herself. Her bemusement emerges not only from these uneasy moments, but in the tone she uses when describing herself; one which is, above all, detached:

So I dressed for this public event alone; I knew that it was going to be entertaining. There is nothing that I enjoy more than watching, from some safe, anonymous position, such as that of wife, the magnificent, [sic comma] guerrilla warfare of such absurd human functions, and I have found that where actors are concerned, the gaiety for the observer is doubled. I took a great deal of trouble over my appearance, for I too wished to look absurd. (p.44.)

Emma is watching other people with her wonted contempt; but she is watching herself, too, aware of the judgement she invites upon herself. She is, unlike Lemuel Gulliver (to revive our earlier comparison) acutely aware of herself as the potential object of someone else's contempt. This is clear enough in the previous paragraph, in which she describes breaking a fine teapot: "It was my own fault, and I had never broken anything in removal before. I was white with fury for an hour after. It is frightening, how little I can bear any slipping off of my own perfection." (p.44.) Using this sort of ironic language, Emma not only gives us a glimpse of her own weaknesses, but manages to give the impression of being able to stand outside herself and judge them detachedly.

When David forgets about his invitation to Hugh, and makes other arrangements, Emma's response is to think about her attitude to his conduct, and her narrative therefore gives us no first-hand account of her emotional reaction to it:

I did not see him again until he got into bed with me at two o'clock the next morning. I spent the rest of the day wondering whether I was annoyed or not, and whether his forgetfulness had or had not been a serious matrimonial offence: I decided finally as I sat watching the television with Pascal and eating three helpings of chocolate mousse that I was not annoyed at all. I did not expect him to remember, and I did not blame him when he forgot. What I did feel, and this was quite a different matter, what I did feel was envy. A more serious affair than annoyance,

though not perhaps so much to my discredit. (p.72.)

The cold, analytical language shows us, as in the previous example, an Emma watching herself. The television image crops up again as a self-accusing mechanism, particularly as it is combined with the anxiety-eating of babyish carbohydrates.

Emma's personal bemusement, and the resulting sense of futility which she experiences, become evident in her attempt to present the feminist case. On the one hand, there are passages of classic complaint which are no doubt mainly responsible for this novel being linked with feminism:

'You're not in a position to complain,' he said. 'It's my lovely self that paid for those chops and that television and that dress you're wearing and that roof over your head.'

'Ah well,' said I, getting to my feet, 'perhaps that's why I'm so keen on getting myself an independent income, so I can throw all this rubbish back in your charming face.'

And I left the room. I went upstairs to bed: (p.17.)

It is quite clear, I suppose, to all, that this pace suited me far more than it suited Wyndham Farrar, men being what they are and women being what they are said to be. (p.128.)

What was wrong with me, I wondered, what had happened to me, that I, who had seemed cut out for some extremity or other, should be here now bending over a washing machine to pick out a button or two and some bits of soggy wet cotton? What chances were there now for the once-famous Emma, whose name had been in certain small circles the cause for so much discussion and prediction? They would not think much of me now, I thought, if they could see me, those Marxists in Rome, those historians and photographers in Hampstead, those undergraduates in two universities. There were more odds against me than there had been against Mrs. von Blerke, and she had gone under. (p.108.)

In many instances, and this is true for all the novels, husbands are blatantly oppressive in their attitude to marriage: Christopher Vassiliou refuses to do "women's work" (N.E., p.148), David does not allow Emma to drink anything but stout (G.Y., p.8), Tony orders Gill about: "Once he said to me, 'Put the kettle on,' and

I said, 'Put it on yourself, I'm reading'; and he said, 'Put it on, what the hell do you think you're here for' ". (S.B.C., pp.39-40) Karel Schmidt, in The Realms of Gold, beats his wife regularly. Janet Bird, in the same novel, is half-crazed with boredom and antipathy to her husband Mark, who bullies her: "Mark asked Janet where the candles were just in case (he asked this in quite a friendly fashion, but Janet could see he was going to punish her at some point for having enjoyed talking to his friend Ted)." (p.146.)

And yet, the force of these incidents is continually modified by Emma's refusal to identify men as conscious oppressors. Time and again, we see men represented as pathetically helpless agents of a malign order - a helplessness underlined by the constant use of the word "poor" to describe husbands throughout the canon. In The Waterfall, Jane's husband Malcolm unexpectedly returns home to find his wife in bed with James. Leaving them there uninterrupted, he vents his ire on a front window before slinking off. The helplessness of men means that they attract contempt rather than real blame. They are the instruments, rather than the willers, of the patriarchal society. Thus, insofar as Drabble airs feminist preoccupations, it is in the broader context of the view that men and women are alike victims of a futile universe which makes the wrongdoings of both inevitable.

(It's interesting to compare The Garrick Year with Marilyn French's The Women's Room (II) from the feminist perspective. French's anger is sustained, hardly modified, and certainly not hedged about with the sort of pensive ironies of style which constitute in Drabble's writing a retreat from full-blooded commitment to the movement. This argument can, of course, be put differently, with French simply being described as the cruder, less competent artist. For our purposes, the important contrast is in the way French's narrative sensibility is direct, lacking the sort of unsettling ambivalence of Drabble's.)

The contempt for others, the self-criticism evident in the ironic distance that she effects when describing her own feelings, and the sense of bemusement about life's purposes, all lead to the sense of futility. When Emma speaks of sex as "lying on beds and so forth" (p.131) she is speaking out of the same pool of experience which allows her, a little later, this philosophical generalization: "We conflict because we cannot communicate, because there is nothing to be said." (pp.148-49.) It is, as I shall now try to

show, an Augustinian futility which is paralleled in the very structure of the novel.

There is one feature of The Garrick Year which has something of the flavour of a picaresque novel like Smollett's Humphrey Clinker. As one event succeeds another, there is hardly any development in the general philosophical outlook of the narrator, no sense that the past of the novel is an experience for, and still fresh in the mind of, the narrator who takes the story still further. Drabble's novel occupies a place on the right of a scale which, on its left side, has great developmental histories like Villette and David Copperfield. The Garrick Year takes up one incident after another, and each is retailed with a uniformity of outlook; whereas, in the Bronte and Dickens, we have an overwhelmingly strong appreciation of a structured development, of events leading one to the next, of echoes and resonances placed with studied deliberation, of thematic and figurative patterning. As my argument here is in the form of a claim that a particular set of characteristics is lacking, it follows that there is no obvious way of actually establishing such a case through illustration. I can only record my impression and let the reader test the truth of it for himself. If it is conceded, the effect of this type of structure - one which we can see present, in varying degrees, in the other novels too - is to reinforce the tone of futility already coming so strongly from the protagonist's commentary.

Something lending itself far more satisfactorily to illustration and questioning is the use to which the ending is put to further the Augustinian purpose. These are the last sentences:

In my book on Herefordshire it says that that part of the country is notorious for its snakes. But 'Oh well, so what', is all that one can say, the Garden of Eden was crawling with them too, and David and I managed to lie amongst them for one whole pleasant afternoon. One just has to keep on and to pretend, for the sake of the children, not to notice. Otherwise one might just as well stay at home. (p.172.)

Everything about books' endings - what happens, what sentiments are expressed and in what terms - is usually (and usually properly) construed as of peculiar significance. For example, many believe that the key to a major part of the meaning of Villette resides in the

opinion each reader holds as to the nature of M. Paul's fate, as cryptically discussed in the closing paragraphs. This is, admittedly, an extreme example, but it helps to convey the point that the ending of a novel, even if ostensibly not a matter of contention, difficulty, or special authorial contrivance, is felt by most readers to constitute an especial call to their attention. The ending is the final communication, the last impression; and these, by their very nature, are invested with power, not only in fiction but in autobiography, letters and conversation.

What, then, is Drabble's meaning in these last lines, which are part of a description of a summer's day visit in the car? Three impressions strike me forcefully. First, the snakes-in-the-grass theme is supremely appropriate for a novel of rancour, discontent, treachery and infidelity (the latter - Emma's affair with Wyndham and David's with Sophy - being partly responsible for the others).

The second impression is that the stoical resolve to win through, the sort of hardiness and determination which leads Valerie Myer to label one side of Drabble as puritan, is also appropriate as an ingredient for this ending: appropriate because it embodies Emma's attitude throughout. David the actor has an inflated ego, but she can still thrill to his performance in The White Devil; motherhood is terrifying and messy, but also joyful. Always, Emma will make do, will make the best of things - lie in the snake-infested grass rather than stay at home. But the nature of the world as a threatening environment remains.

The third impression is that the ending is a very quiet, inconsequential moment. The picture of the couple with their daughter and friends suggests domestic harmony, marital reconciliation. But this is as clearly a transient calm as the ending of Joseph Andrews suggests the opposite, a forever-and-ever happiness. What we are given is an inconsequential moment which has very much the character of a lull. Especially as it is set in a pleasant rural setting whence they must repair to the grimy metropolitan opposite of London. Taken together, these three impressions lead me to see the ending as of a piece with the Augustinianism of the narrator.

I promised earlier that I would try to justify my linking Emma's sensibility with Drabble. My justification lies in the fact that the handling of the narrative wins the sort of sympathy for Emma which makes such a link inevitable; as inevitable

as the link between Lucy Snowe and Charlotte Brontë, even for the reader ignorant of biographical parallels. Consider the following passage in first person narrative:

We sat there for two minutes or so in silence: I had reverted my gaze to the television and to my book, and he was staring gloomily at the carpet. As he continued not to speak, I wondered if he were noticing the patch where Flora had spilt her cocoa earlier in the day: I did not think so, it was I that noticed such things. And when he did finally break our quiet interlocking, I realized that the carpet was far from his thoughts, as indeed was the subject that he broached. (p.15.)

In the diction there is a suggestion of the erudite - "reverted my gaze", "our quiet interlocking", "broached" - which is in ironic dissonance with the sentences' content: television, domestic trivia, boredom. This contrast of diction and content successfully reflects Emma's plight as an educated woman trapped in domestic banality; so much, one might say, is fairly clear. But Emma's disaffection with life's humdrum is not merely a personal condition, unique to this one character; the whole mood of the novel is bleak, and Emma's experience is only the central manifestation of a feature present in the whole work - a sense of universal ennui. (Episodes in the novel such as Julian's suicide by drowning illustrate the truth of this point.) The fact that Emma's mood is thus in harmony with the general mood of the book is one reason why the reader tends towards sympathy for her and her predicament.

A second reason is that she obviously has a case; she is landed with an apparently empty-headed husband who stares vacantly at the floor noticing nothing. The tendency that the reader has to side with Emma is strengthened because first person narration is much more direct and immediate - for this purpose of creating sympathy with characters and their views - than impersonal narration. We can test this quite simply by imagining the above passage changed into third person narration and then asking ourselves whether our tendency towards sympathy would be as great as before.

Let me anticipate an objection at this stage. It might appear to some readers that I have overlooked the ironic distance which is so evident in the paragraph. Surely, they will say, the very phrases which I earlier described as erudite, indicate a smugness

and affected superiority in Emma, who clearly seems to be sneering? My answer is twofold: first, to sympathize with a character is not necessarily to agree with him or sanction his conduct. Secondly, phrases like "reverted my gaze" seem to me to be self-consciously facetious. Emma, in using them, is aware, and exploiting the effects, of their inherent pomposity. Therefore, the reader assimilates a pleasing mood of wry humour which further conduces to sympathy with her.

Such effects are not confined to first person narration, as this passage from the conclusion of The Waterfall shows:

On the fifth night she lay awake, unable to sleep, unable to bring herself to swallow the sleeping tablets she had been given: restless, hot, oppressed by the central heating, oppressed by remorse, upon the verge of that final encounter, that final trial; that long-dreaded process - the slow death of love, its slow lapsing into insensibility, its ultimate decease. It would drain away from her like water from a sieve, and no effort would restrain it: and with it would go her last sanction and her last defence. How can love preserve itself in death? No hope, no hope of eternal preservation, of an ambered corpse, motionless in its glass coffin as he in his hospital bed, untouched by treachery or fidelity. What do the dead care for fidelity?
(p.201.)

The passage begins as an impersonal narrative but by extraordinary degrees (I2) turns into erlebte Rede. By the time we reach the sentence beginning, "It would drain away" we are starting to feel uncertain about the attribution of sentiment (I3) and I feel that the questions "How can love preserve itself in death?" and "What do the dead care for fidelity?" should certainly be considered as erlebte Rede. (Later in the paragraph all doubt disappears. The question "What on earth had they thought they were doing?" can hardly be attributed to the impersonal narrator.) (I4.)

In considering the effect of using erlebte Rede (and these points will be useful when we come to consider the novels of Murdoch), we can usefully refer to two points made by Derek Oldfield, in an essay on Middlemarch. (I5.) The first point is that the device allows us to be taken right inside the minds of the characters. Now, although I agree with this and feel it is important to mention

it here, it seems to me that in this respect erlebte Rede is not necessarily markedly more effective than other modes. Oldfield's second point is the crucial one: he refers, approvingly, to Leo Spitzer's description, which is that "what erlebte Rede presents us with is the subjective voices of the characters but [they are also] meant to count as pseudo-objective presentation by the author." (16.)

Spitzer's use of "pseudo" suggests that the novelist is openly giving us something which is ersatz, expecting us to recognize it as such. This I discount, because the device seems to me essentially a kind of deceptive tactic. I mean nothing derogatory, only that it is a way of writing which usually depends for its success on not having an emphatic presence and not drawing attention to itself. The fact that it merges smoothly with other types of narrative - so smoothly, as we have seen in this passage, that it is difficult to detect the transition - reinforces this sense we have of its being deceptive. That reservation apart, Spitzer's description is accurate; erlebte Rede enjoys the best of both worlds in that it gives us the inner feelings of characters while "dressed up" in the objective authority of impersonal narration.

Whether or not one finds in this something devious on the part of the novelist, it is clear that erlebte Rede is ideal in those cases where a writer wishes to win approval or sympathy for a character and his predicament, or general outlook; and that is exactly what is happening in the passage from The Waterfall. Jane is endowed with "authority" in her dismal introspection, and this is an integral part of the way Drabble effectively wins sympathy for the Augustinianism of her heroines.

Section Three: The Conceptual Framework.

In section one, we saw Drabble's portrayal of family disharmony. In section two, we saw how the narrative sensibility of The Garrick Year, and the structure and ending of that novel, put forward an Augustinian perspective. In this final section, I want to bring together various themes to show how the central weakness in Drabble is an indecision as to the artistic use to which the portrayal of familial morality should be put; an indecision that I have already touched on in the argument leading up to and including the

comparison between The Garrick Year and The Women's Room.

I want to start by looking at the reasons why the heroines seem so reluctant to accept familial obligations per se; so that, for example, Clara resents having to go and visit her mother in Northam, Sarah resents having to help her sister Louise, and Frances Wingate wants to establish a firm distance between herself and the rest of her family.

Part of the reason seems to be that family life, far from providing a sense of unity of purpose and an enduring spiritual community, comes to represent the aridity of life. The organization of people in family groups is made to seem almost ridiculous, something out of touch with a notional reality that is going on somewhere else. Family life, thus, comes across very often as unreal, a kind of pretence or masquerade. Consider this passage from

A Summer Bird-Cage:

We all went to bed fairly early, wishing Louise a solemn good night: at dinner my mother had suddenly and unexpectedly turned sentimental, reminiscing about her own honeymoon in a solitary unsupported monologue. I felt sorry for her as my father wouldn't cooperate at all: poor brave twittering Mama, pretending everything had always been so lovely, ignoring the facts because they were the only ones she knew. My father is a bit of a brute and that phrase really fits him; at such times he rudely and abruptly dissociates himself from everything Mama says, so she has no retreat except repellent Louise and soft, dishonest, indulgent me. So I asked the right questions and listened to the old stories, which would have been charming if true, and went to bed feeling sick with myself and sick with the whole idea of marriage and sickest of all with Louise, who didn't even seem to realize the courage and desperation of Mama that underlaid the nonsense and fuss and chirruping. (p.21.)

Many of the phrases ("unsupported monologue", "my father wouldn't cooperate", "she has no retreat", "I asked the right questions") suggest that the family is engaged in a series of ritual moves, a futile game. The unreality of the family - its life being far from the centre of the narrator's notion of emotional honesty - is brought out well in the lifeless cliches ("My father is a bit of a brute") and the assumed insouciance of the diction in the

in the first half which turns into that explicit despair that we find elsewhere in Sarah's account. Many of the passages that have already been quoted elsewhere in this discussion of Drabble also bear the same marks of familial unreality.

Intimately connected with this is the sense that kinship is accidental and, being foisted on individuals rather than chosen by them, it is felt that the sort of familial obligations which society expects to see fulfilled have little authority. It is a view strongly represented in Jerusalem the Golden and The Realms of Gold, and the Sarah of A Summer Bird-Cage makes it explicit: "After all, I said to myself, what had Louise and her marriage got to do with me? She was merely and accidentally my sister whereas Simone was a personal person of my own." (p.72.) Such an attitude places the sort of increased emphasis on individual choice which we associate with the period during which the novels were written; and it is that desire for individual freedom to which we can now turn as another reason for the protagonists' resentment at familial obligations.

These obligations restrict such individual freedom, and this is where some of the feminist issues fit into the moral picture. Drabble has taken us through a whole series of tableaux in which women are forced to be drudges, to play second fiddle to their husbands, and so forth. They marry for money, they are forced to abandon their ambitions for careers; in short, they suffer the conventional marriage. Similarly, they fare badly as offspring when they have to put up with parental tyranny or meanness. In all these family situations their plight is unhappy; so much so that they question why they should continue allegiance to a social institution which has not only reduced their freedom, but done so in so unpleasant a manner that Clara thinks of her obligations in bitter terms: "Her friends, all equally indecisive, had no need to hurry their decisions, for nothing lay at their backs, pulling them, sucking them, dragging at their sleeves and at their hems. But Clara knew that her mother expected her to go home." (J.G., p.81.)

An obvious point to make is that marriage is different from other types of family relationship precisely because it comes about by choice and is not accidental; and that is a good reason why we should not be discussing it in the same terms as filial or parental obligations. To justify the inclusion, I would say that Drabble deliberately de-emphasizes this choice factor in marriage and, to

the contrary, returns again and again to the theme of the marriage which isn't really the result of free choice at all, but of various insidious social and personal pressures: the classic example of such a marriage being Louise's to Stephen Halifax.

The suggestion that conventional families might actually be superceded by better and more appropriate social structures comes across with much greater force eleven years after Emma's problems, with the Frances Wingate in The Realms of Gold. Frances is forthright in rejecting the old regime:

The truth was, she concluded, that she could no longer admit the concept of a two-parent family. Such symmetry, such ideal union utterly excluded her. She could not even smile at a nuclear family's pleasure as it cycled along a road. She wanted them split, broken, fragmented. She couldn't believe they were really happy as a foursome: one of the parents must be a drag, and if it wasn't the man, then it must be the woman. Any other balance was impossible, unthinkable. (p.214.)

It is not merely a question of affirming a position. Frances' whole life is a testament to the success of her alternative to familial and marital conventions. Perhaps we might think of her as embodying all the things for which Emma yearned: she has her children, she has an intellectually demanding and prestigious job, and she travels. The travelling in particular is an image for her escape from domestic confines and mental stagnation.

Like many others in Drabble, this passage bears an extraordinary likeness to Lawrentian prose: the conceptual repetition ("split, broken, fragmented", "impossible, unthinkable") and the insistent force of the three consecutive sentences starting with "She". I mention this because the effect of this sort of prose in the works of both writers is to lead the reader towards viewing them as writers concerned with conveying energy in an impressionistic way, rather than advancing intellectual analysis in a sombre George Eliot mode. Such a view is in accord with the idea that I am going to advance in this section that in Drabble there is no consistent conceptual framework within which the various ideas are explored.

Having illustrated the protagonists' hostility to kinship obligations, we can see that they do, albeit with reluctance, accept these obligations. Their ambivalence towards these obligations is

represented in the blood metonymy: "because blood is thicker than water, I suppose" (S.B.C., p.192) Sarah comments, in trying to explain why she is doing a favour for a sister whom she dislikes. Frances Wingate admits that she feels guilty about Connie's death because, as she says to herself, "Blood is thicker than water" (R.G., p.264); and perhaps most illustrative of all is Clara's belief "that there is no such thing as severance, that connexions endure till death, that blood is after all blood, however fanciful and frivolous such a notion might seem." (J.G., p.131.)

There is, then, a grudging acceptance of kinship, although the protagonists tend to find it extraordinary (in the same way that Clara found the Denhams extraordinary) that other people should fulfil this kind of obligation. In The Realms of Gold, David Ollershaw tells Frances about the French brother and sister that he had met on the boat, who were going all the way to Algiers to visit their dying mother. With a cynicism characteristic of a Drabble protagonist (nobody begins to suspect that affection or love might be involved) her reply to his "I wondered why they bothered" is a terse "Families are incomprehensible." (p.240.) That is about all that Drabble herself offers us, too.

The use of the blood metonymy is characteristic of the heroines' pronouncements in two respects: it represents a bemused state of mind, and it is intellectually superficial. The fact is that the heroines, and more importantly Drabble, do not offer us a very coherent conceptual framework within which we can view familial morality.

This should not necessarily be thought of as a major criticism. For one thing, Drabble does not appear to be interested in the sort of exploration of abstract moral questions which so intrigue Compton-Burnett. It might be useful to stay with this comparison for a moment.

Compton-Burnett is repeatedly addressing herself to the question: given this situation, what should X and Y do? There is often in Compton-Burnett situations (as also in Murdoch's, as we shall see later) something of the moral philosopher's quirky example: have hypocrites the right to reprimand wrongdoers (Ninian/Lavinia)? should inherited wealth be given up if there is a close relative left penniless (Hermia)? ought one to do a wrong to do a greater right (Angus covering up for his half-sister)? The whole endeavour in Drabble's fiction seems to be the attempt to convey a particular sensibility, almost impressionistically - certainly in quite a

different way to the sort of fiction we have from Compton-Burnett. Drabble incorporates observations of (usually bad) family behaviour without bringing it before the reader in such a way as to suggest that a coherent set of moral principles is in dispute. The fundamental point that I am trying to establish is that the Compton-Burnett reader feels that, at the end of a novel, he has emerged from a sort of coherent debate about morality, however ⁱⁿ conclusive, and the Drabble reader does not.

The coherence is lacking because of the novels' contradictions as to purpose. On the one hand, many explicit passages and obviously symbolic events are designed to win us over to some particular view about the family in this period: that women are unfairly placed, that the two-parent bond leads to friction, that parents and their children are inevitably deeply antagonistic. These points can come under the heading of the sort of social criticism which has, historically, been a major preoccupation of the English novel since Defoe.

On the other hand, the same points are often felt to be part of the authorial registering of a general bitterness, an Augustinian pessimism, in which the specific examples are not the central concern but merely the illustration. As I feel that Compton-Burnett manages to combine these two elements more successfully than Drabble, we might continue our comparison of the two authors.

The first point I would make is connected with the two types of society depicted. In Compton-Burnett's world, family members know all the rules by which their behaviour is designed to be regulated; the rules are clearly traditional, and have been institutionalized. However characters may break them, they have an almost unwavering stability.

By contrast, the world of Drabble's novels reflects the contemporaneous society, in which tradition is felt to be of less importance in moral matters than individual judgement. The dictates of private conscience supercede the previously accepted authority. No character in Compton-Burnett would question whether there was still a justification for continuing to honour kinship obligations; no character in Compton-Burnett would doubt that marital fidelity was right and proper. It is not just that the morality has changed between one period and another, but that the basis of morality in the one is certainty, and in the other dubiety.

Another reason I would give for Drabble's novels seeming to be

unsure in their moral emphasis has to do with the way that the characters are depicted. Both Compton-Burnett and Drabble show, in their novels, how the individual exists in relation to his society, and they are concerned to illustrate the powers and responsibilities of each. If I say, then, that Drabble's protagonists are more obviously individuals than Compton-Burnett's, I don't mean that this sense of their discreteness from society is lacking in the Compton-Burnett works. What I do mean can best be indicated by considering a situation such as Emma's dilemma, at the beginning of The Garrick Year, as to whether she should give up her own career interests to follow David to Hereford. The way Emma finally decides what to do sheds light on familial, marital and feminist issues that we have discussed. But there is also strongly present a further dimension: the presentation, and the making the reader acutely aware of, the single individual, alone and alienated from her life, faced with a whole set of social and domestic pressures which represent the fundamentally hostile world; the individual, as it were, cut off from the purposes and interests of society. There is something about the very way that the various narratives are conducted - obsessed, as they are, with personal, prolonged, and often gloomy introspection - which reminds us of the isolated individuals in certain of the Bronte novels. This dimension, so common in the nineteenth and twentieth century novel, is not a felt force in Compton-Burnett; and its insistent presence in Drabble makes the latter's work more complex. It means, for example, that the isolated and independent protagonist searches for moral criteria within her own experience, rather than following Compton-Burnett's characters and relying on established precepts. Both of these features then - the presentation of a society in which moral consensus is absent, and the portrayal of a certain type of individuality - mean that Drabble's world is morally more confused than Compton-Burnett's.

Footnotes

- I. cf. Valerie Myer, Margaret Drabble: Puritanism and Permissiveness (London: Vision, 1974), *passim*.
2. Jerusalem the Golden (1967; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976).
3. A Summer Bird-Cage (1963; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975).
4. "so ugly a hole", J.G., p.28
5. Susan Hill, Strange Meeting (1971; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974).
6. The Needle's Eye (1972; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976).
7. The Realms of Gold (London: Weidenfeld, 1975).
8. The Waterfall (1969; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975).
9. The Millstone (1965; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976).
10. The Garrick Year (1964; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), p.34.
- II. Marilyn French, The Women's Room (1978; rpt. London: Sphere, 1979).
12. It is no part of my argument that producing such a passage is subtle or difficult, but that the change itself, as perceived by the reader, is subtle.
13. There is a brilliant study of uncertainty of attribution in Virginia Woolf's To the Lighthouse in John Mepham, "Figures of desire: narration and fiction in To the Lighthouse" in The Modern English Novel: the reader, the writer and the work, ed. Gabriel Josipovici (London: Open Books, 1976), pp.149-185.
14. This novel is something of an oddity in that there is a first person and an impersonal narrative, both written by Jane; so that, technically, to distinguish as I do here between the narrator and Jane might seem inherently absurd. In practice, however, the experience of reading the passage is that we feel the distinction between the two modes as fully as we would in ordinary circumstances.
15. Derek Oldfield, "The Language of the Novel: the character of Dorothea", in Arnold Kettle, ed., The Nineteenth Century Novel. Critical Essays and Documents (London: Heinemann, 1972), pp. 224-247.
16. *Ibid.*, p.244.

PART THREE: THE PELAGIANS.

CHAPTER FOUR: ANGUS WILSON.

Angus Wilson

In the sixteen years of our period, Wilson published two novels in which the family and its morality are central issues; these are the novels we shall be discussing here.

The first, Late Call (1) is an altogether less ambitious work than No Laughing Matter (2), as we shall see when we come to consider the expanded scope of the latter. Because of this, it seems to me appropriate to give fuller coverage to that work in which Wilson's perceptions and subtleties about morality are the more especially keen.

That moral issues are in point in Late Call is immediately established in the opening prologue. The use of this label by Wilson, together with the fact that the events described in it are separated off from the main story by a time gap of half a century, clearly indicate to the reader that the self-contained story of these first pages is offered as a grounding in some of the moral issues to be developed later; the reader is invited, as it were, to think back to these incidents as exegetical aids.

The nub of the prologue comes when the intoxicated Mr. Tuffield returns home, lurches upstairs, and savagely beats his daughter for her misdemeanour over the clothes. The farmer's brand of jurisprudence is based on prevention: "If it's that girl that's been botherin' you, that won't bother you no more." (p.32.) Mrs. Longmore is outraged at his brutality, and tells him, as she had earlier in the day told his wife, that verbal remonstrations are the proper thing.

We see, then, that the different social classes take opposite views on the appropriate forms of punishment; and one of the reasons for that difference is the way each class thinks about life, as this extract shows:

'Oh, don't talk to her like that, Mrs Tuffield,' Mrs Longmore cried. 'I know she's done wrong. But she can be good. She can be quite a special little thing when she likes.'

'Special! There's nothing special about 'er! Nor about none of us, ma'am. God put 'er here to work for others. That's what's she's to do. Special!' Such a rage against Mrs Longmore and her foolish wicked ways seized Mrs Tuffield that she turned away from her for fear she should lose control and strike her. She concentrated on her daughter. 'You wanted to be different!

Well, you're nothin'. And you always will be.' With each word she pulled the girl roughly by the arm. (p.30.)

The life of a farmer's family in 1911 is not one which allows that sense of individual value which, on the contrary, Mrs. Longmore's bourgeois experience encourages. If Mrs. Tuffield is a brute, we must also see that Mrs. Longmore is uncomprehending in the face of this working community; she cannot guess, for example, how absolutely ineffective her use of pathetically evocative phrases like "little thing" is. (Indeed the doomed nature of her attempt is suggested by the violent language of the other woman.) Both the women fail to understand each other because of their class-bound circumstances.

This is only a crude outline of the moral issues raised. Wilson makes the reader's task of adjudication more taxing than this, because there are further features to be considered. For example, the reader can understand Mrs. Tuffield's rejection of middle class indulgence because she makes a case of sorts: the girl's whole life will be nothing but work, so that games should be discouraged as tending to counteract the economically essential commitment to labour: "That's all right for the gentry, but that's not for 'er." (p.29.) On the other hand, Mrs. Tuffield predicts that the likelihood of corporal punishment is increased by an extraneous factor: "She'll get a bastin'. A real bum bastin' from her father. That's what you'll get, my girl. 'Es angry enough, the wheat being crackly and that." (p.29.) However much the fair-minded might baulk at the practice of linking punishment to anything other than the specific merits of each case, the whole tough ambience of the Tuffields' life seems to establish some kind of de facto justification. Similarly, although Mrs. Longmore shows solicitude for the girl, this is to be considered together with all the evidence which shows how Myra, at the tender age of seven, has been inculcated with the attitudes and class prejudices of her mother. All these factors in the prologue which contribute to the difficulty of deciding what, in the end, is for the best, prefigure the dilemmas of the novel proper, which centre on moral responsibility and moral choices. Late Cal is scrupulous in making the reader aware of the multi-faceted nature of moral problems, and is eager to avoid any suggestion of the simple solution.

Sylvia Calvert provides the focus for the novel, not only because

she is at the centre of the action, and it is her story that the novel tells, but because it is through her eyes that it is presented to us; for this purpose, Wilson uses erlebte Rede, liberally spiced with Sylvia's slang and colloquial usages. We shall return to the importance of this choice of this type of narrative.

I have said that the novel centres on moral responsibility, and one of the manifestations of this is that Wilson portrays the characters as finding themselves with divided loyalties, which in turn leads to domestic conflict. This is certainly true of Arthur, Ray and Mark, but I want to concentrate on the novel's most important relationship: that between Harold and his mother.

Harold wants his mother to feel that, if she likes, she can think of the house "as a hotel without the responsibilities" (p.43) and he takes this attitude not only out of allegiance to his deceased wife's fervent hope that Sylvia would live with them when the latter retired from her hotel management job, but because he recognizes his responsibilities as a son. On the other hand, his feelings of duty towards his children make him worry that Sylvia will be a bad influence (if she continues to mope about the house in idleness); hence the various attempts he makes to find her something to occupy her time.

For her part, Sylvia's commitment to family ideals is made clear at the beginning of chapter one: "Keep your feelings for your own flesh and blood was what she had come more and more to think" (p.33), "It was unbearable to go about where strangers discussed and criticized your own flesh and blood." (p.144.) This family feeling means that it is an article of faith with Sylvia to be loyal and to try to help with any problems in the family of which she is now a part. Having been taken in, as it were, her sense of allegiance to Harold and his family is increased through gratitude. On the other hand, she is determined to try to preserve her loyalty to her husband Arthur, despite his cruelly tasteless sentimentality over their dead son Len, his inconsiderateness, his deceit, his falling into debt; and she does this not only because he is her husband, but because the injury that he sustained in the war places an additional obligation on the hale. Excuses must be made for him: "The warmth of her cheeks gave her warning. I mustn't get worked up and bitter. A man who's been badly gassed and become a life-long invalid couldn't do other than live in the moment." (p.49.)

Sylvia, like the other characters, finds that her loyalties can clash, so that she finds herself in a quandary each time Arthur is found doing something which Harold feels is setting a bad example to his children.

As the novel develops, Wilson makes it clear that his interest is both in the exploration of the domestic tension which is the result of these divided loyalties and in showing that Sylvia and Harold base their judgements on fundamentally different criteria. Those criteria come out in the full light of day at the end of the novel, when the arguments over Ray's homosexuality are aired by the family.

There is a clever irony in Wilson's use of Sylvia and Harold as the characters through whom this and other moral points are contested. The irony resides in the fact that Harold has so many of the sort of credentials which would appear to fit him for the role of championing the creed of liberal humanism which is so often associated with Wilson; and, on the other hand, Sylvia would seem most likely to be illiberal. Harold, after all, is the one who fusses about the environment, criticizes the French for failing to follow the impetus of their revolution of 1789, writes textbooks for the less able and E.S.N. pupils, and is committed to maintaining his roots in the community by staying in Carshall new town when others with similar incomes are moving out. Sylvia is the old woman completely out of touch with sexual mores (she is amazed when her remarks about Harold "playing hard to get" (p.255) with his daughter are construed as having to do with sex, and she remarks of the word "homosexual": "I never knew how to pronounce it before, but you see the word so often in the papers and books and things nowadays, don't you?" (p.286.))

Yet it is Harold who turns out to be intolerant and prejudiced; he talks of cures for Ray, forbids his name to be mentioned, calls him a "whore" (p.298), renounces his love for his son, and iterates the cliches of bigotry: "only a passing phase", "Sexual choice is a small, often exaggerated part of life", "he's got seriously to consider having some decent up-to-date treatment" (p.292), "People in that sort of world are old for their years, you know" (p.298). Such remarks are a symptom of Harold's failure to make a genuine emotional commitment, to allow feelings to have a hand in the forming of opinion.

By contrast, Sylvia's comments show that that sort of commitment

is precisely what she has, whatever the technical arguments might be: "But I'll tell you this, if nobody else goes to stay with Ray, I shall. He's been a lovely boy to me." (p.298.) It is a difference in perspective which emerges even more emphatically in Harold's comments on Arthur's death: "It seems sad to say it, Mother, but one can't help thinking Dad's was a wasted life. He had genuine ability and considerable personality, but he never settled to anything." (p.295.) The cold judgement, the second sentence of which is in the language, appropriately enough, of a headmaster's report, could not be more telling. Harold's is the voice of spurious intellection, Sylvia's that of emotional wisdom. As in the prologue, Wilson is demonstrating how moral questions cannot be settled merely on the basis of cold intellectual analysis, however scrupulous, and that emotional conviction also confers a certain validity. In contrasting Sylvia and Harold, we are shown that emotional sympathy is not some kind of antiquated impediment to moral honesty but an almost indispensable framework within which it can operate.

Having seen the moral antagonism in the final chapter, we can see that its roots were always there in earlier and lesser incidents; we come to see, in fact, the sort of thematic development so noticeably lacking in Drabble.

From the beginning, Harold's actions are informed by that kind of superficial heartiness which masks his coldness. The signs are there in every paragraph of his letter to his mother in the first chapter: the reference to himself in the third person, the fake self-denigration, the facetiousness, the pronouncements: "the whole country seems to be dying of a surfeit of nostalgia. But you'll hear H.C. on that theme when you come to live here: the children blow a whistle now for what they call TFFTST (Time for Father to Stop Talking!) So - you have been warned!" (p.42.)

What is particularly admirable is the way that Harold's nature is revealed to us with delicacy and understatement, so that the way we come to appreciate his character is similar to our experience in real life: a gradual dawning.

Sylvia is intuitive where Harold is coldly analytical, and from an early stage in the novel we begin to suspect that the various values which are in question are tested against Sylvia's reaction to them. For example, Sylvia's distaste for the new town is contrasted with Harold's pride: not a genuine pride, but one propped

up by transient dogmas and fashion in planning:

' There used to be a high fence on this side of the garden. The architects made these concessions to the English mentality in their efforts to woo the executive group. Beth and I had it taken down at once. After all, if the New Towns have done nothing else they've taught us the one valuable lesson the famous American way of life has to offer - good neighbourliness. Now we're no more cut off from our neighbours than we were at 592. There!' pointing down a road of white weather-boarded houses each with a door painted a different bold colour, 'that's Higgleton Road. And that road to the left, which by the way will take you to the shops, is Mardyke Avenue.' The houses in this street were set on top of a grass slope; their concrete porch roofs were supported by black painted metal tubes. To Sylvia it all seemed strangely like the other parts of Carshall that she'd seen on previous visits; but she could tell from the proud note in Harold's voice as he said the names of the roads that she must not say this. She sought for an observation to make. 'It's very quiet, isn't it?' Harold frowned. However, a moment later two young men in black leather jackets and white crash helmets came out of a house in nearby Higgleton Road and started revving up their motorcycles. As the noise became more deafening, Harold's frown changed to a friendly smile. As soon as the motorcyclists had roared off, and they could speak again, 'I like these ton-up types,' he said. (p.68.)

Harold's pathetic attempts to latch on to the modern are evident in his comic pleasure with the motorcyclists. When it is expressed in a doctrinaire fashion - and the beginning of the passage shows us a Harold holding forth pompously and proprietorially - it becomes offensive as well as funny. The town itself is gaudy, ludicrous, ugly; even the names of the streets are ugly. But Harold likes it; that is to say, he likes the idea of it, just as Orsino likes the idea of love rather than the experience itself. Here and throughout, it's made clear that Harold likes what it is fashionable to like, and once committed to a position, clings to it for fear lest his abandonment of it impugn his judgement in the public eye, and in the opinion of his family. Sylvia, on the contrary, sees all the ugliness and uniformity at its face value.

I promised earlier to return to the question of narration and say why I think Wilson has chosen erlebte Rede through Sylvia. It is an appropriate moment for dealing with this subject, as it sheds light on what we have just been looking at: the way that the two central characters are used as representatives of two quite different outlooks. Consider this passage about Harold's educational handbook:

Sylvia sat in her room reading The Blokes at the Back of the Class. It seemed a funny sort of title to give such a high-brow book. She couldn't make much of it - mnemonics and Gestalt and emotive conceptual barriers - but then it was intended for teachers, not for the blokes themselves. It was so like Harold that - talk like a dictionary and then throw in a bit of slang to show there were no hard feelings. (p.300.)

Like much effective satire, the implied criticism of Harold and his book residing in the heavy ironies depends very heavily on the fact that it is unfair and one-sided, that Sylvia is a most unsuitable and inadequate judge. She nevertheless reveals its pretensions unwittingly. There can be few arguments against handbooks for teachers, and yet the way Sylvia puts the same point to herself ("but then it was intended for teachers, not for the blokes themselves") has the effect of making the reader feel that a genuine point has been scored against the book - although it is obvious on reflection that the implied criticism (that the book should really be for the blokes) is spurious. The implied criticisms are based on Sylvia's intuitive nature, which is specifically non-intellectual; and yet, because of the moral authority she has won through her honesty of response, the reader sides with this intuitiveness. Again, when we read that Sylvia "couldn't make much of it" a rational response would be to tell ourselves that this is hardly surprising in a woman addicted to historical romances and television soap operas, and having little educational background. What we actually feel is that some of those features which, it should hardly have surprised us, confuse her ("mnemonics and Gestalt and emotive conceptual barriers") may well be unnecessary, pretentious or merely fashionable. Similarly, the patronizing nature of the title is made to seem all the more exceptionable because in Sylvia's eyes it is "a funny sort". One reason, then, for presenting

the narrative through Sylvia is to build up the case against Harold's system of values without having recourse to crude authorial pronouncements; to build it up, in fact, by showing the superiority (because of the integrity of its simplicity) of Sylvia's system of values. Like the Garth family in Middlemarch, Sylvia is used as a moral yardstick.

In discussing the prologue, I suggested the class basis of the value antithesis as between Mr. Tuffield and Mrs. Longmore. This class element is also very strong in the depiction of Harold and Sylvia; so much so that, throughout the novel, however many reservations he might imply, Wilson does seem to give support to the generalization that the working class can be associated with instinct, emotion and passion (Mr. Tuffield, Sylvia) whilst the middle class can be associated with the rational and the cerebral (Mrs. Longmore, Harold). One also has a sense, though perhaps not quite so strongly, that there is a second axis besides that of class, which is sex: Sylvia as woman is intuitive, Harold as man is rational. Both of these ideas, about social class and sex, are unfortunate for the contemporary reader who, annoyed at this sort of implied stereotyping, might not be patient enough to bear with those aspects of the novel which are likely to date far less quickly on account of their perceptiveness and universal truth. The absence of this blemish in No Laughing Matter is one indicator of the distance Wilson travelled in three years.

I can now say why Late Call seems so morally positive, so Pelagian a work. Wilson gives us not only a sense of the antagonistic value systems of mother and son; he also traces an increasing assertiveness in the former, which means that the story takes on the aspect of a struggle for good to prevail, and with Sylvia's increasing independence being a symbol of that good.

Sylvia begins to rebel against the management of her life by Harold. She gives up the job with the "Save the Meadow League", and stands firm in the face of Arthur's fury (the latter based on the sense of moral obligation):

'There wasn't any job there really, Arthur. It was silly ...'

'What the hell do you mean silly? Harold wanted you to do it, didn't he? I've never heard such damned selfishness. After all he's been doing for us.' (p.176.)

The moving away from Harold's sphere of influence, and the rejection of her passive role in favour of an active one, is registered in the sort of blatantly symbolic episode in which Wilson delights. Sylvia rescues Amanda Egan from the threat of lightning. To emphasize the new usefulness which Sylvia has attained, the tree under which Amanda had been foolishly sheltering is struck by the lightning just after the rescue is effected.

Sylvia's increasing independence is then marked by her making friends with the Egans, and finding that she has to admit to herself that in many ways their way of life is pleasanter than that prevailing in Carshall. She grows more assertive. At her birthday party in chapter seven, for example, she tells them all to shut up and stop criticizing the Barclays; later she tells Harold she is not going to the protest meeting over the proposed development of the Goodchild's meadow as a punishment for his having spoken rudely to Arthur. In general, her increasing intervention in domestic affairs is judicious, as when she defuses the tension building up between Judy and her father about the former's proposed trip to France. At the end of the novel, with Arthur dead and her relationship with Harold soured, she establishes her independence in a physical sense. She now has enough bravery to leave the Calvert home and set up on her own: "She only looked forward to finding a place of her own. Somewhere near Town Centre, if she could get it. That would be a good centre for operations." (p.303.)

The end of the novel looks expectantly to the future. Sylvia's intuitive values have clearly triumphed over Harold's analytical approach; not because she has won the arguments, or even come off best, but because her values are upheld, and Harold's satirized, in passages such as those about Carshall and the teachers' handbook which I quoted.

With a uniform narrative method, and a readily identifiable value antithesis, Late Call has far fewer problems for the critic than No Laughing Matter. The later novel, as I have said, is altogether more complex; and it is more complex because its moral presentation is more mature and its narrative is more diffuse. Wilson stays with erlebte Rede but, adopting Murdoch's practice, employs it with each character in turn, so that there is no longer a single

personalized focus. Uniformity is eroded by the variety of modes of narration, including plays, pastiches, and a recurring self-conscious preciousness. This variety means that the centre of the work is less readily located; and this obviously affects the moral issues of the book, which too are elusive of ready inference.

In trying to label this work as Pelagian, there is a considerable obstacle in the form of its resemblance to those works of Compton-Burnett to which we have resolutely attached a contrary label. We must meet this obstacle squarely, so I propose to examine some of the similarities that exist and show that, nevertheless, we can make our case.

The most immediate similarity between No Laughing Matter and the novels of Compton-Burnett is that they both take the family as their central preoccupation. Wilson is clearly interested in the same kind of domestic questions as those posed in novels like The Last and the First. And almost the first datum about the Matthews is that they have the unremitting misery and antagonism of a Compton-Burnett family. Already, in only the second paragraph of the novel, we see the family enjoying "for some minutes ... a union of happy carefree intimacy that it had scarcely known before and was never to know again." (p.8.) This sentence is a kind of announcement; we prepare ourselves as for a tragedy. And what a keen interest is excited in the reader on the basis of this knowledge alone - that we are to be concerned with meanness and spite and disaster, rather than their opposites.

Like Compton-Burnett, Wilson presents the family as torn by strife and its life as a kind of battlefield. This is particularly emphasised in Book II, including as it does both "The Family Sunday Play" and "The Game". Clara's Machiavellian tactics - she flatters Regan to get her own way, humiliates Sukey over her teeth brace to disarm criticism over the kittens, lies flagrantly to Grammy and Mouse over the finances - becomes a model for them all. The six children unite to oppose their parents, but at the same time remain divided amongst themselves. Marcus attacks Quentin, whom he accuses of enjoying the spectacle of family quarrelling, and of acting like God. Margaret cannot accept Sukey on terms of intimacy; theirs is merely an alliance: "We're not a team, Sue. We're a coalition. Like Mr Bonar Law and Mr Lloyd George. For limited practical purposes." (p.60.) Nor can Margaret accept Gladys' offered friendship. Rupert and Marcus can't talk about sex without arguing. Indeed, the

disharmony between the children points to the end of the novel, whose closing dialogue is a heated exchange between Marcus and Margaret. Here too, Wilson follows Compton-Burnett in avoiding the fake resolution of a neatly happy ending.

In the conduct of these incessant family squabbles, the Compton-Burnett influence is again evident. There are echoes of the epigrammatic repartee:

MRS MATTHEWS junior: Oh, really, Mouse. She's got to earn her living. Why, Billy can hardly make a living out of writing.
MOUSE: He's almost made one out of not writing. (p.95.)

The viciousness of an attack is often cloaked in urbanity: "Mother laughs to make herself more frightening - like the ogress" says Gladys, giving an example of one of the methods. Margaret backs this up: "And he laughs to make her more angry." (p.30.)

Clara even has a theory of invulnerability through superiority which is heavily reminiscent of the contempt ~~for~~ weaklings evident in Compton-Burnett's characters. She tells her favourite son Rupert: "One's either born into this world as a conqueror or one's not. You and I were. But it isn't simple, darling heart. It's a battle, a very old battle. In which we conquerors don't get hurt. The casualties are the little things, people like that red-haired girl." (p.79.)

It is truly a household of misery, in which even the nicknames (Podge, Wendy, the Countess) are intended to be wounding. The perversity of the Matthews' life is emphasized when we recall Sukey as a girl musing about the "real ~~family~~ life she had always read of in stories, heard of from other girls at school, dreamed of over the nursery fire. No scenes, no 'words', no clever laughing at good, ordinary things." (p.15.)

Another area of similarity between the two authors is the consequences of financial dependence: the father eating his children's food rations, the mother using the fees of Sukey's cookery classes and Margaret's ballet lessons for her own purposes, the humiliation of being called to account by Mouse and Granny, forced into deception, and finally into complicity in the absurd whimsy of the old ladies - the kittens' execution. Gladys is charged rent for the tiny box-room, when she gets a job at the Food Ministry, and being the weakest of the six in the business of opposing the parents,

has to put up with William cajoling her into lending him money.

It is not only in these evident similarities with Compton-Burnett that the novel appears Augustinian; one of the devices that Wilson uses at the start of the novel - the day-dreams at the Wild West Exhibition - acts as a symbolic prognosis in a way reminiscent of the prologue in Late Call. Insofar as these day-dreams have their symbolic force in prefiguring the disasters and character defects which lie in the novel's later stages, they have a doom-laden and ominous aspect which does tend to suggest the Augustinian.

Let us now see how these day-dreams actually work as schematic locations for later significance. The process by which Gladys is exploited, and then abandoned to her prison sentence, taking the blame for Alfred, is actually prefigured in a depressing section of her reverie in which she recalls a classroom incident: "Horrid Marian Sargeant's nasty whispers sounded in her ear and Marian's grubby little notes passed by a sweaty hand far down the room. Miss Baker looked up and frowned; oh they would be caught and it was nasty." (p.13.) In the real world outside the classroom, the Ahrendt picture fraud turns out for Gladys to be very "nasty".

Similarly, Rupert's images of himself as an eagle soaring majestically, supremely, above the family, are telling:

But now from the wagon rose the second eagle, smaller, raven-black, fleeter perhaps on wing, yet with only a female's strength. Together they rose and floated, rose and floated, flying above, around and beneath one another ... a glorious dance to make the whole prairie sing if there had been anything but a scuttling woodlouse (now almost a dustspeck) to inhale this wonderful triumph of mother and son. And then something glittered in the black eagle's eye, her beak snapped. Rupert made himself the red spaniel at his parents' feet down in the happy, housewarm family-smelling wagon, and snuffled and licked at their hands ... (pp. 13-14.)

The future actor's self-confidence is evident here, but more important is the fall from grace, Rupert's proud dominance deliquescing into cowering submissiveness, which we have reason to remember as we later witness Clara's ability to turn on her favourite son. Normally he is included with her as "we conquerors" (p.79) and

described as "indecently beautiful for a young man" (p.83) but let him once cross her, the maternal venom is released: "You smell of failure like your father, with all your sloppy good looks and your weak mouth and your chocolate box smile." (p.89.)

Like Rupert in the air, Quentin on his horse experiences a solitary exhilaration:

Under his quizzing, unity fell away and even the prairie which had called it forth threatened to dissolve into void, but Quentin, the eldest son, lean, eager, simple and straight as a die, forced himself to feel only the horse beneath him and the wind blowing his hair. I'm only a schoolboy, he said, no time for looking on, time only for tree felling, the lasso and the steers - too much to do to have time for comment. And if he thought he heard a mocking sound it was no doubt only the coyotes howling where the winds are free. (p.12.)

Quentin's subsequent obtuse single-mindedness about politics and, later still, public morality, are present embryonically in some of the details here: the threatening collapse which Quentin forces himself to ignore, the impatience with "looking on", the blindness to mockery which symbolizes the immovable certainty of righteousness characterizing his real life.

Margaret's day-dream concerns the diary that she is keeping of prairie life. The first part of the entry is of happiness and idyll; the family members are compared to kings and queens, with Mouse being "the embodiment of courtly dignity" while the parents "both look so beautiful and young and so dedicated as they are about to enter their new kingdom." (p.14.) Together, they march towards Eldorado. It is all too fanciful and optimistic a picture for Mouse, who laments the lack of humour, and also complains that "Life isn't all icing sugar, my dear." (p.14.) In the second part of the entry, therefore, Margaret changes tack: "Their jaws [the collies] were dripping with blood and out of Trusty's huge maw hung the mangled remains of a prairie marmot." (p.14.) The crude alternative visions of life in the diary are later sophisticated in the adult woman's fiction. The novelist is haunted by creative conflict just as the girl is dissatisfied that "still she had not made these hours immortal." (p.15.) And there is a second importance in the diary entry. It shows Margaret transmuting

life and her experience into art, as she is to do in her adult writing career; but whereas the twelve-year old feels a chagrin merely aesthetic, the compulsive struggle to change raw material into significant form, which characterizes the mature writer, costs her dear. To take the obvious example, Clifford Arbuckle is outraged that he should be fiction-fodder for a woman purporting to love him, especially as she writes about him just when he is undergoing a tooth extraction. Leaving her in disgust, he writes: "Seriously I don't see how we can maintain a real relationship if I (and other human beings) are so totally unreal to you that you can love them when they're with you and write this sort of thing when they're away an hour from you." (p.199.) Art, Wilson wants to insist to the potentially incredulous reader, can be damaging and risky; the Arbuckly incident is a parable of that danger.

As Sukey's section opens, we learn that she "fed the few hens ... " (p.15), and that she is more concerned to feed "the poor hens and the dogs" (p.16) than her own family. In a discussion of the film, Sukey proclaims: "I only liked the horses" (p.20) and it is she who is most concerned with the fate of the kittens before and after their drowning. Her disillusionment, then, takes the form of a preference for animals over people, which in later life is replaced by husband domination ("Hugh's quite happy with pocket money for his old tobacco" (p.281)) and later still by a kind of vague, emotional commitment to Christianity. At the core of her life, however, there is a complacency (we see it in her attitude to both politics and her own family) which is savagely punished in the death of her youngest son, P.S.

As for Marcus, his exotic and colourful vision of being borne along triumphantly in an elephant howdah, a serene beturbaned presence, is an appropriate image for the flashy vacuity of his hedonist life - one which, as I think we must see it, fails to come to anything, despite the philanthropy and the good intentions.

The day-dreams are prognostic, and therefore all the more effective on a second reading of the novel, when we know what is to follow. They also illustrate the incredible complexity of motif which underlies the whole novel, an elaborate jigsaw puzzle of interlocking themes which sometimes appears actually to have been constructed with the exegetical critic in mind. But most of all, they show that reliance on irony which is everywhere brought to bear on the issue of moral judgement.

Where in all this is the Pelagianism? Part of the answer that I want to give has to do with the way this novel differs in conception from Late Call. Instead of the restricted focus brought about by a certain unity of time and place, Wilson in the later novel presents us with a sort of geographical and historical extravaganza: we go through London, Egypt, Russia, Morocco, Spain, France; and, more importantly perhaps, we travel through a series of key historical moments like Abyssinia, the rise of fascism, Palestine and Suez. No longer restricting his interest to the domestic, Wilson is now concerned to explore the interaction between individual family members and political circumstances. It is an interaction having a predominantly moral bearing.

Thus, placed in their trans-global setting, the Matthews are human foci for larger political questions. That they are properly thought of as symbolical figures is further suggested by the way the six children seem to be put forward as representatives of a whole generation.

Consider the most immediate surface data. That there are as many as six children is, to start with, an indicator of the attempt to characterize more than merely a private family history. There are three of each sex. They represent a singularly wide (albeit within a middle class band) occupational range: aesthete, political activist and pundit, housewife/broadcaster, novelist, actor, and small-time entrepreneur. They are caught up in Abyssinia (Quentin), in the anti-fascist marches (Marcus), in Suez (Margaret), in the emergence of Israel (Sukey), and in the domestic political controversy which is aimed at the Kingsway Hall meeting (Rupert et al.) One is happily married, one is "deceived", one is gay, one is promiscuous, and so on.

Wilson places these six characters in various political situations which are by way of being moral tests. The results of those tests help us to see that the author retains the moral optimism of the earlier novel. In the examples that follow we can see that Wilson does not relax his critical stance, or let his characters appear to triumph; the irony still operates to deflate their achievements and mock their postures, but this does not negate the Pelagianism, as I hope to show.

Marcus' involvement in the Tooley Street fracas is a typical incident of this pivotal kind. He is caught up in the street scene involuntarily, on his way to Devon Mansions and Ted. He is soon

in sympathy with the anti-fascist group, and overhearing a reactionary political remark, he hears himself say: "Oh, God! They'll bring order all right, if we let them. The order of death. That's why we've got to stop them." (p.337.) Nevertheless, he is still more concerned with his own affairs than with the demonstration and actually approaches a policeman to ask how to get out of the crowd. The attempt to reach Ted and leave the crowd is an image of Marcus' hedonistic pursuit of pleasure - with its natural corollary, political apathy. And yet, in an episode reminiscent of a Sartrean existential moment of dramatic choice, Marcus, a little later, finds himself in unison with the anti-fascists, shouting: "We've got to get rid of the rats." (p.340.) Typically, Wilson avoids any simplification of motive. Marcus is committing himself, but that choice is not a calmly rational, or indeed exclusively political one. The frenzy and agitation of the event demand an equally urgent decisiveness which has little in common with considered intellectual assent. And in the threat of violence is a specifically sexual appeal: "Angry, cruel and arrogant, beyond even Marcus's wet dreams, the mounted policemen appeared as seen from below." (p.340.)

The tension rises, the language becomes more abusive. At the highest pitch of dizzy enragement, Marcus shouts "Fascist cunt" (p.342) at the inappropriately christened Dulcie, all notion of self-restraint now abandoned. He is now recognized by the crowd as a leader, as they all march triumphantly together. The whole incident ends in his arrest on a trumped-up charge, the result of his trying to intercede for a lady whose arms are being wrenched by the police. But these apparently impulsively heroic actions are placed in the deflating context of heavy ironies; the black-haired young woman who joins Marcus in voicing the exhilaration of defiance (" 'Oh, the heaven of victory!' he said. / 'Marvellous,' she answered ... " (p.343)) is as removed from her fellows as is Marcus. It is significant that both of them are from Hampstead. Marcus' thoughts, distracted by this encounter from the weightier issues, thinks: "My God! What on earth am I doing talking to a nut-eating, jet-eared woman like this, she'll offer to show me her hand loom in a minute." (p.343.) His intercession with the police also lacks heroic stature: "He meant to sound like a commanding, substantial colonel, but, of course, it came out in high pansy dudgeon." (p.344.) Thus, at moments of high personal drama, a deflating irony is employed to introduce comic absurdity.

In a teleological perspective, the result achieved by his political intervention is seen (largely as a consequence of the comic irony) as nugatory; his actions are as pathetically insignificant as they are transient. But on the mechanistic level, the forces which impelled him towards decisiveness now being in question, Marcus' actions are vitally important. He has taken sides, he has acted; and through that action implied a renunciation of the political indifference which characterizes his life of elaborate parties and exquisite prints.

But of course it is not a lasting renunciation; rather, it is a freakish aberration, a once-only engagement with what political reality can mean, from which Marcus retreats once again to the safety of his more private world. It seems to me mistaken to view the Moroccan factory scheme - because non-profit-making and philanthropist - as a sort of blossoming of the political awareness and involvement acquired in Tooley Street. It costs nothing in real human terms; it is an effortless charity. And it too has its accompanying ironies which make the moral issues so much more complex. For example, although it is providing employment and no doubt helping the Moroccan economy, its business is to make perfume, and the underlying incongruity of impoverished workers manufacturing such a luxury cannot be evaded. (We have only to think, in our own day, of Cuban women endlessly rolling tobacco leaf to make Havana cigars.) The whole enterprise is to some extent based on a contradiction. This feeling is reinforced when we learn that Marcus' friend Hassan, who is to inherit the business, is to abandon the philanthropic approach for a more worldly, capitalist one of "seemly ambition, high profits, and determined management" (p.479) as recommended by Hassan's favourite journal, Time Magazine.

For all the critical irony with which the Tooley Street incident, and Marcus' role in it, is described, there is a fundamental Pelagianism indicated by one feature in particular: Marcus' involvement is prompted by a sudden access of real emotional commitment. It might not be very successful, it certainly isn't glorious, but it is good; the same sort of goodness evident in Sylvia's emotional commitment in Late Call.

Similar moral subtleties are evident in the portrayal of Quentin. Returning embittered and cynical from the Great War, it is he who organizes the opposition to Clara and Matthew which comes to the fore in "The Family Sunday Play". Later, he becomes a dedicated

Oxford radical, even going so far as to give up his teaching post. In 1935, he's taking an independent stand in the Soviet Union over a joint communique to be issued by delegates, as a result of which the preferential treatment which he has been receiving very quickly evaporates. Two years later, although still very much a socialist, he constantly puts forward unfashionable criticism of the left, for which he suffers ostracism.

But once again, Wilson is quietly dismantling the very integrity which he has simultaneously been suggesting by such facts as the above. Even in the early days, Quentin's Young Turk profile changes into stale conventionalism when Doreen announces that she is pregnant. She herself tells him later: "When we made the mistake, you couldn't hide your shock from me. You talked about our marrying as though it was some inevitability that you'd learnt from a Victorian novel." (p.161.) In his political isolation, combined with physical squalor, he seems ardent enough to appear almost as a caricature of George Orwell. By the end of the novel, he is recognizably a second Malcolm Muggeridge. All the ingredients are there: socialist past leading to unshakeable moral righteousness, sexual puritanism (by this time he is opposing the birth control pill), the fake dialectic of the television (we are treated to a splendid example at pp.448ff.), the unctuousness of voice and, above all, the plausible eloquence and linguistic skill. Quentin's sincerity, we can see now, was always informed by a dangerous love of the extreme position, and his independence always had something in it of pride.

Wilson conveys his satirical intent not merely in the unfolding events; we find it lurking in apparently harmless passages:

In the stuffy little parlour a bee, trapped between the pots of Busy Lizzie and the never opened windows, buzzed a continuo to Quentin's impassioned explanation. Every now and again he would glance across at it angrily but he was too eager and too voluble to spare time to put an end to its interruption. The noise of the others, consuming the ample spread the pub offered, also make him stop his discourse two or three times with an impatient look that settled now upon Vernon Seymour stirring sugar into his tea, now upon the chap from Balliol cracking his eggs unnecessarily loudly, now upon John Ballard chewing crisp lettuce, at last upon Marian Powell who for some

annoying woman's reason had started to stack the disused plates. (p.156.)

We see that Quentin's abstaining from killing the bee, because he cannot "spare time to put an end to its interruption", has two noticeable aspects. He is actually disposed to kill the insect, whose survival is therefore purely fortuitous, and his leaving it unharmed, far from constituting a kind of mercy, is actually the result of one vice having the stronger pull over another: he needs to go on with what is so aptly called his "discourse" (and later, at p.157, his "recital") and this need is stronger than his urge to kill the bee. Of course, Wilson doesn't use the word "kill" (far less an emotive word like "squashed") because, like Compton-Burnett, he recognizes the dramatic value of understatement; in this case, understatement through the euphemistic "put an end to". The word "interruption" is well chosen too; it is a reference to the bee's activity seen entirely from Quentin's standpoint as a distracted speaker. As such, it accords no significance to the bee on its own account, and this in turn increases the (admittedly very slight) pathos implicit in the insect's predicament as described in the first sentence. The phrase "buzzed a continuo" is essentially good-humoured and flippant, and is typical of Wilson's use of irony: for its mood doesn't quite fit the way that the reader is invited to view the whole bee motif - as an image telling us something about Quentin's callousness and arrogance.

The passage uses a very subdued, minimal kind of erlebte Rede; indeed, there are only two words which indicate it with any force. These are "unnecessarily loudly" and "annoying woman's reason"; they represent feelings which the reader must associate with Quentin rather than the narrator. As we move from the theme of the bee to that of the other sources of noise, the implied disapprobation of Quentin continues. Not only is he impatient of the noises that the people are making, but we are invited, through the device of simple juxtaposition, to assume that Quentin sees the bee and the people as similar - as noise sources. It is also a feature working against Quentin that the activities responsible for the noise - the stirring of sugar, cracking of eggs, chewing of lettuce and stacking of plates - will be associated in the reader's mind with a comforting domesticity (and even humour in the case of the lettuce) and this will lead him all the more into disapproval of

the man who is intolerant of them.

By the end of the novel, Quentin emerges with even less credit than Marcus; and yet, in the portrayal of his affairs too, there is a strain of moral optimism. For all his faults, Quentin decides the moral issues using idealistic values as reference points.

I introduced this concept of the ideal in the discussion of Compton-Burnett, in which I used Urmson's definition of "going the second mile" or acting beyond one's duty. The sort of moral bravery we see in Quentin's history - facing up to the parents, refusing to sign the communique in Russia, despite the cowardice of the other delegates who will not join him, giving up the Oxford job - seem to me to be informed by this ideal code of Urmson's.

Margaret also emerges as a positive moral force and, as with Marcus and Quentin, this fact is illustrated in political contexts. I want to take just one of these events as an example. Margaret is in Egypt during the Suez crisis. To make matters worse, her husband Douglas is seriously ill and she is desperately worried about how to manage flying him out. Obviously, the claims that others have on us and our charity appear less strong when we ourselves are suffering some crisis; conversely, therefore, he who exercises charity when in great distress acts even more commendably. Margaret, with all her worries, does not forget the legless boy beggar on his wheeled board:

She gathered together more money than was really right, but why not? Why shouldn't one legless boy know a sudden rain of gold from the disguised caliph's hand? ... She gave him a special version of her daily smile - she knew that she was near to tears, but she held them back, for what had it to do with him? ... she put all the notes and coins into his little upturned monkey paw. He rapidly shovelled it all somewhere into his ragged blouse. She waited for that enchanting smile that always transformed a best forgotten missing link into a Murillo urchin. He spat twice, very deliberately on to her candy pink cotton dress, then propelled himself at breakneck pace away on his wheels. (p.447.)

The fact of her generosity despite her own personal worries is only one aspect of this incident. Margaret has succeeded in learning generosity in spite of the lack of that virtue in the

family home; a lack that is a conspicuous theme in the novel.(3.) Additionally, the fact of her being rewarded with contempt confers on her something of the aura of one whose habits of giving are not conditional on receiving gracious thanks. The reader's expectation of a happily ending fairy story (encouraged in that expectation, as he is, by the phrase "a sudden rain of gold from the disguised caliph's hand" with all its exoticism) receives the sort of jolt which is a parallel to Margaret's own shock when the expected gratitude turns to venom. The pathetic irony of the whole incident resides in the fact that both Margaret and the boy are the victims of circumstances, and their emotions are uncertain and experimental. Just as Margaret is impelled to an act of massive generosity which is born out of her personal turmoil and experience of stress, so the boy is making a gesture of defiance because of the political situation, but certainly without the years to know how that situation came about or whom one can reasonably blame.

In his account of the six brothers and sisters, what Wilson is concerned to establish is that, for all their considerable faults, they repeatedly consult their moral convictions. In the account of the Kingsway Hall meeting of 1937, we see both the comic irony of their different attitudes, inter alia, and the fundamental altruism which they all share and which brought them to the meeting in the first place.

We find that Margaret is embarrassed at Rupert's speech: "And to have involved Rupert was unforgiveable. To have made a person of talent and charm make a fool of himself - though, even with her knowledge of theatre people's extraordinary [sic] feeble grasp of reality, she could hardly have guessed that he would have treated them to a sort of adolescent's anthology ..." (p.391.) Rupert, on the other hand, thinks of his own speech as an impressive success, and Margaret's as a disaster. He reflects on "the appalling delivery of all the others" and of how "dear, unhappy Mag should never be allowed to speak in public." (p.394.) Quentin thinks that they are both bad: "better to hear the Comrades spout the gospel than all this liberal rubbish. Margaret and 'the irony of history that will defeat Hitler', Rupert and Shelley - God help us!" (p.392.)

It's an amusing scene, but not a slight one. The difference in assessment is dictated by the functions of each. Rupert the actor is concerned with a speech's "delivery" and whether its words are

"ugly" (p.394), not its contents. Margaret the novelist is concerned with style - she is embarrassed by her brother's use of the clichéd "bliss it was in that dawn to be alive" (p.391) - and, like Rupert, seems to take the content for granted. Quentin doesn't concern himself with either style or delivery, but the sloppy poeticality of the actual sentiments expressed. The whole incident is a parable of the subjectivity of assessment, and the consequent difficulty of establishing "truth" even with intelligent Matthews brains. Rupert tells himself, "the audience with a rapt silence had responded (as all audiences do) to the great language of the past well spoken" (p.394), but in the reader's mind that silence is probably construed quite another way. The situation is completed by the presence of Marcus in the body of the hall, shouting insults at his brother Quentin. They disagree, and there is something ridiculous in their disagreements; but they are united in their altruistic concern.

It seems that Wilson is using the historical perspective to add depth to what he has to say about morality; and what he has to say is very similar to the Sartrean insistence on being true to oneself and avoiding mauvaise foi. In particular, Sartre's notion that one must commit oneself, become engaged, despite life's apparent hopelessness, is illustrated by the very ineffectiveness of these characters political acts; for I think that it is one of the ways that the novel works that we feel the utter insignificance of the individuals as they appear one after another against the historical back-drop.

That historical back-drop has much to suggest of global misery, and therefore parallels the individual personal dilemmas. The distrust evident between nations is reflected in the domestic situation; each feeds off the other in an insidious reciprocity. Public affairs teach the six a salutary lesson about the prevalence of evil, which perhaps might explain a certain air of the blase that some of them manage even when outraged by the excesses of the elders of the family.

In their double disillusionment, then - with the domestic world and the political - there is a greater excuse for misanthropy, for throwing one's hands up in despair. The fact that they struggle, at considerable cost, against that sort of defeatism, is all the more commendable. When, for example, Gladys maintains her loyalty to the worthless Alfred (to such an extent that she is sent to prison

as a direct consequence), that loyalty appears as a contrast to the depressing betrayals of world politics set before our eyes through evocations of fascism, Palestine, Suez and so forth.

Their disillusionment does not lead, then, to mere disgust; it is capable, rather, of galvanizing them into a reforming zeal, at the same time sharpening their critical faculties. Here is Quentin's attitude on his return from the Great War: "To hell with England, Home and Beauty if they got in the way. To this he, like others, would lend all his tested strength and discipline and trained intelligence. And, do not forget you Parents, Brasshats and Hard Faced Men that we don't believe a bloody word you say." (p.41.)

Throughout, this sort of iconoclasm is tempered by a zeal for, and confidence in, amelioration. At the end of Margaret's savagely critical story, "The Wedding", which mocks the family posturings that occur during hymeneal gatherings, we have this: "She could have cried Yoicks or Tally Ho! as she hunted her heartless family on behalf of the ordinary, the decent, the simple." (p.156.) Earlier, we had heard of "the Carmichael hunting instinct when confronted with silliness and mediocrity." (p.154.) The acerbity of her social criticism is strongly rooted in a belief in moral amelioration; her hope is that, in showing them their true faces, people will achieve self-knowledge; a hope which seems to me to inform the whole spirit of No Laughing Matter.

I want to stress the feeling I have that the six children are characters to whom questions as to the rectitude of actions are almost always in point; a feeling that the reader is more likely to share with me if he recollects, by contrast, how conspicuous is the absence of a similar moral sense in Drabble's protagonists. I am not, of course, making claims for the relative "goodness" of the two sets of characters, either as construed by the reader or implied in the texts (if these are different); for, as we have seen, both sets can be ungenerous and even base. The difference lies in the fact that Drabble's heroines approach moral questions with a sort of insouciance which is reflected in the diction of the narratives as well as in their actual striving for independence, whereas Wilson's ^{characters} have a moral seriousness which leads them to engage with moral issues in a way which suggests their central importance to their lives; a way which I hope has been borne out in the exemplified incidents and passages.

So far I have been concentrating on the way that Wilson uses character. I now want to move on and consider a second field of interest which also indicates a Pelagian perspective.

I am referring to what is variously known as the baring of device, or self-consciousness of technique, whereby a writer draws attention to his fictive methods, rather than concealing them in order to procure a response of suspension of disbelief. Let me suggest an illustration. When we read David Copperfield, much of the narrative is designed to woo us away, if only temporarily, from the real world, so that we might enter that curious state of empathy with the events of the story which is meant by the phrase "suspending disbelief". We don't, of course, leave the real world behind completely, for we need our experience of its values and realities in order to judge the fiction. There is a literary tradition in opposition to this, embracing writers like Sterne, Nabokov and Barth, which is dedicated, as a major purpose, to exposing the mechanics of writing and putting them on display, rather than employing them as vehicles of seductive illusion. The results are often spectacular displays of virtuosity, which also serve to remind the reader that what he has before him is the superior invention of the conjuror, not the illusion of reality. Even writers astonishingly successful in weaving spellbinding plots (Shakespeare is a good example) nevertheless cannot resist combining their illusions with reminders of the artificiality of the art.

In No Laughing Matter, Wilson too is keen to remind us of that artificiality, though he is clearly not nearly so interested in the anti-illusionist school of thought as are the writers mentioned above. Wilson uses a multiplicity of forms and techniques so that the resulting instability of "point of view" will render us conscious of the devices themselves. Thus, in a minor key, impersonal narration is constantly changing into erlebte Rede, and vice versa. More conspicuously, conventional narrative is interrupted by dramaturgical dialogues, the unique style of "The Game", extracts from Margaret's stories and diaries, and constant literary pastiches (of, among others, Dylan Thomas, Macbeth, T.S. Eliot and Samuel Beckett). The *dramatis personae* has a distinctly self-mocking tone: "Husbands, wives, lovers of various kinds ... Russians, members of Society ... members of Lloyd's and of the Bloomsbury Group, Cockneys, German refugees, staffs of preparatory schools ..." (p.5.) In this list,

the humour is in the juxtapositions, and perhaps also there is a slight sense of the author engaging in mock denigration of his ambition in conceiving a fictional project which is to comprehend all these. Whatever the case, it is important that we notice the narratorial levity as starting at the very beginning. The effect of the *dramatis personae* is immediately consolidated in the second paragraph of Book One: "The Matthews family, as they came that hot July afternoon through the crowds, from the Stadium, might so easily have been frozen and stored away in the files of the National Film Institute." (p.7.) But alas, as we learn only a few lines later, "no such camera poised in waiting." (pp.7-8.) Not that the loss matters greatly, for that kind of filming "would ill serve to dissolve the limbs into that delicious, sunbathed, pleasure-sated rhythm which alone could bring back the exact feel of that far-off afternoon. In any case, what no recording machine yet invented could have preserved was the pioneer happiness, the primitive dream that for some minutes gave to that volatile, edged and edgy family a union of happy carefree intimacy ..." (p.8.)

Here is an authorial impishness at work as old as the Chaucerian *occupatio*. Smiling through the surface meaning of the words comes a clear announcement: I, the narrator, can "dissolve the limbs", can "bring back the exact feel of that far-off afternoon." The superior medium of creative writing can do what the "recording machine" cannot. Right at the start here is a boast, and one made in good humour. It is all the more ironic in that the very sentences which explain what cameras could never convey, themselves convey it in tones of lyrical enthusiasm which, nevertheless, are just sufficiently overdone to be recognized as deliberately conspicuous.

These manoeuvres make the implied author into a felt presence on occasion; sometimes we wonder if we are being laughed at. Referring to the Kingsway Hall, the impersonal narrator asks, "was it classical? was it baroque? no, eclectic" (p.383) and three pages later, Marcus announces to Jane Farquhar: "Not the happiest use of baroque. Perhaps it would be wisest to excuse it by calling it eclectic." (p.386.) Such narrator/character echoing is a stock feature of the anti-illusionists. (4.)

A great deal more could be said about Wilson's anti-illusionism, but our chief purpose must be to ask what is its connection with morality. At a first glance, perhaps, these elements appear too disparate to be connected, but I would like to suggest two ways in

which the emphasis on art's "artificiality" engages with the moral issue.

First, the "staginess" of the devices we are discussing gives them a comic appeal - not only the obviously funny (the pastiches, for example) but the echoes, the mini "plays" and the "Game" are all enlivened and made delightful in this way. I suspect that this is largely owing to the reader detecting an impish narrator behind the various techniques, and wanting to share in the joke. Whatever the case, the comedy itself conduces to attitudes of indulgence. Meredith's famous essay puts the matter lucidly. Although, he says, comedy ruthlessly pursues folly, "never fretting, never tiring, sure of having her, allowing her no rest", it is a stranger to severity: "Contempt is a sentiment that cannot be entertained by comic intelligence. What is it but an excuse to be idly minded, or personally lofty, or comfortably narrow, not perfectly humane?" (5.) For Meredith, comedy is an agent of humane values, allowing the reader to experience the exposure of folly without, in his words, being chilled by it. There are those who advance an even stronger version of this, predicating that comedy actively instills an attitude of tolerance in the reader.

Thus, Wilson's technical devices are part of the comedy (we must not overlook the more conventional comedy of manners and situation, which are both heavily represented in the novel) which leads the reader towards an indulgent standpoint.

Secondly, the unusualness of the devices engages our aesthetic interests and distracts us somewhat from our traditional concern for moral assessment. This notion is explicitly advanced in "The Game": "simulation and mimicry also demand observation ... and identification is distanced by the demands of technique." (p. 131.)

The self-conscious aesthetic devices work to present moral issues in quite a different way to that evident, for example, in the Augustinian Drabble. They are part of the novel's taking up a posture of understanding indulgence, in contrast to the shrill contempt for human weaknesses with which Drabble's novels seem to be imbued. Wilson doesn't fudge the moral issues, or present man as morally better than he really is. Indeed, the investigation of degrees of compromise, mixed motive and endangered integrity are nicely observed. But, crucially, there is that deep, underlying good humour which I have been trying to suggest, which is an earnest that reform is possible, and hearts may be swayed to the good. It is a good humour

quite different from the bitter comedy of Drabble and Compton Burnett.

The use of Regan as a moral commentator reflects the truth of these points. Regan has the kind of authority which derives from down-to-earth common sense, and it is an authority enhanced by virtue of her colloquial speech - which becomes, that is to say, an authentic voice amongst all the posturings. She tells Sukey, who claims that Clara and William had no intention of being proper parents: "Intentions they ad from the start and good ones. As good as any of yours, Miss Sukey, with all your ideas aving fifteen kids and raisin them as easy as cuttin butter. But intentions need a bit of splosh to back em up." When Sukey suggests that "thousands of poor people are wonderful parents" Regan is unconvinced: "Well, I've lived where they're very poor and I never seen it." (p.81.) Earlier, when Regan tells the story of old Mr. Stoker, and of how he is consigned to the Seamen's rest, Gladys and Sukey are mildly shocked. Regan retorts: "Kind! Blame! We was too poor for notions!" (p.31.)

Moral issues are at the heart of these exchanges, but Regan's name (it is, of course, the name of the nastier of the two ingrates in King Lear) and character link her to certain aspects of the novel - especially the Shakespearean pastiches - which are very much a part of the self-conscious artistry. These features, as I have said, create a context of good humour which lessens the impact of observations which might otherwise appear as Augustinian as the world of Compton-Burnett.

Footnotes.

1. Late Call (1964; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976.)
2. No Laughing Matter (1967; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976.)
3. It is a theme brought to our attention from the very start.

At the Wild West Exhibition, we have the following exchange:

'Stop it at once, you disgusting girl. Horrible little creatures all of you. What a way to repay us for giving you the afternoon of your lives.'

'We didn't know we were meant to repay you,' Margaret made comment.

'I'm afraid the gel's made an excellent point, Clara. Repayment of kindness. What a sordid idea, worthier of a stockbroker than an artist.' (p.24.)

Clara is also "sordid" because she sacrifices moral considerations when appeasing the demands for gratitude made by Granny and Mouse: " 'Now Gladys, say thank you to your great aunt for your winter coat. And Margaret you'd better curtsy for your party dress. Will that satisfy you, Mouse?' Young Mrs Matthews pulled her tall daughter to her feet. 'Go on. Curtsy. Show your Aunt Mouse you haven't wasted her kind dancing class fees.' " (p.25.) When the two old ladies order the destruction of the kittens, they are demanding an outrageous gratitude for their financial support, which of course Clara is unscrupulous enough to render.

During the Pascoe row preceding Frau Liebermann's departure for the quakers, the Jewess' tirade is interrupted by Hugh impatiently exclaiming: "Stop that. If you don't feel any gratitude, then at least spare us this exhibition ... (p.360.) She replies with sarcasm, throwing his appeal back in his face: "Oh, we must feel gratitude. We know that. Gratitude when the little Pascoe always sleeps here at his home but Arnold is to sleep at the school." (p.360.)

4. The novelist B.S. Johnson gets himself into his novel Christy Malry's Own Double-Entry (see bibliography) where he talks with the eponymous hero about how the latter can be neatly finished off at the end of the book. Nabokov constantly appears in his novels, now as an elderly professor collecting butterflies, now as a bogus anagrammatic annotator such as Vivian Darkbloom in Ada.

5. George Meredith, "An Essay on Comedy", in Shakespeare's Comedies, ed. L. Lerner (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967), p. 306.

CHAPTER FIVE: IRIS MURDOCH.

Iris Murdoch

Iris Murdoch's interest in morality makes itself apparent on an altogether more abstract plane than that we have seen in Compton-Burnett, Drabble and Wilson. One of the ways that this feeling has found expression is in the description of the novels as philosophical, and this is a useful label provided we think of it as describing a general ontological interest which is evident in the novels, rather than a claim that the novels embody some elaborate and uniform conceptual system.

The abstractness makes itself felt as we see that the moral interest lies not so much in the actions of the characters, as in the general attitudes to life and living, the motives and bases, from which they spring. It is a question of degree rather than a fundamental change of category, but it would be fair to say that whereas a writer like Wilson addresses himself to the task of indicating what is best to do, Murdoch is concerned with exploring the problem of how we decide what the best is in the first place.

I believe that the key to understanding what these novels have to say about morality lies in our appreciation of the protagonists' (and others') relentless, albeit frequently interrupted, search for self-fulfilment; that this self-fulfilment involves keeping faith with oneself and breaking through the barriers which impede it: barriers put up not only by the outside world in the form of such things as social conventions or human opponents, but those erected in the inner mind.

There are two features of this protagonists' search in particular which illustrate a Pelagian perspective. The first is that the search is dominated by the presence of love - or rather, the dominating and all-embracing power of love. The second is that each story takes on the aspect of a struggle to win through, and the representation of this fighting spirit indicates a positive and optimistic view of human endeavour.

I am going to use The Italian Girl⁽¹⁾ as an extended illustration of these points. The choice may appear odd insofar as this novel is often considered untypical both in its length and in its being considered rather feeble. The reason for the choice is that, as it seems to me, this novel is the clearest and simplest embodiment of Murdoch's Pelagian perspective, as evident in the two features listed above. The other novels share these features, but they are

disguised and obfuscated by excessive prolixity and random incident. It is as if The Italian Girl is the perspicuous skeleton, and later novels share this skeletal structure which, however, is no longer evident beneath layers of muddle. The problem about these later novels is not that they do not lend themselves to the sort of exegetical treatment which would establish the skeletal structure I suggest; it is that they also lend themselves to a multitude of equally plausible interpretations. My hope is that, because of the relative simplicity of The Italian Girl, my account of its treatment of morality will be, if not the only allowable view, then at least one which actually and unmistakeably reflects what is there in the text, rather than some fantastic system which is the habitual result of sciolist enthusiasts.

Much more needs to be said about this Murdochian obfuscation and muddle; not only to make a stronger case for the argument outlined above, but because the muddle actually means that our critical criteria must be rather different to those which we brought to bear, for example, in the Wilson discussion. Put baldly, there are areas of literary evidence from which we can only infer points of moral interest with the very greatest caution. We are, that is to say, entering the terrain of the novelist *manquée*, which means that the question of the reader's confidence in the author - confidence in the authorial control of the moral effects - which is always a feature of attentive reading, here looms massively. Murdoch's failure of control in many areas means, quite simply, that certain basic approaches to moral inference are ruled out. There is no question, for instance, of repeating our practice in the Drabble and Wilson discussions, and examining passages in detail for niceties of diction.

There is no space here for a full examination of the profound flaws in Murdoch's novels. But that they are flawed is vital to my argument, and explains and justifies my critical approach. I would therefore like to refer in passing to Martin Seymour-Smith's appraisal of the novels, so that we can see what general criticisms can be made. Seymour-Smith talks of the "inability to write novels", says that "None of her books can survive"; he claims that there is no sense of character, no "world" of her own; there are accusations of faddishness, that her audience is "tuned into fashion rather than to creative achievement". The novels, he says, "are a concatenation of current ideas and fads ... cobbled together without any imaginative faculty" and they show "the inability to

treat goodness except in a helplessly sentimental manner." (2.) The particular aspect of Murdoch's unsatisfactoriness that I want to deal with - because it provides a rationale for my method of proceeding - is what I have called the muddle.

This muddle is evident, for example, in the introduction of mysterious and magical elements in the novels. Linda Kuehl talks about Murdoch creating a fantasy world "remote from the daylight world of everyday human affairs" (3) which is invested with a sense of the uncanny. She tells us that, in The Unicorn (4), "even ordinary sites like a London flat, Liverpool Street Station or an elegant mews undergo unearthly transformation" and that, throughout, there is a prevalence "of candlelight, fog, sulphurous odors [sic], incense fumes." (5.) In The Black Prince (6), Julian strews litter in the wake of passing cars as part of an esoteric personal ceremony; in Bruno's Dream (7), Nigel's weird antics are even more opaque. In both The Unicorn and The Time of the Angels (8) the other-worldly aura of the residences with their oddities and daunting secrets (including incest and self-incarceration) blend with the everyday mundanity of Norah Shadox-Brown and her ilk. The muddle arises out of the fact not merely that there is a juxtaposition of mysterious and mundane, as that it involves a change of register which is not properly attuned to the artistic development of the stories.

An Accidental Man (9) provides a fine example of this. One of the main features of Austin's life is that he is dogged with bad luck, whereas his brother Matthew is far more fortunate. The rivalry between the two brothers is one of the main themes in the novel, and of course Austin's bad luck plays a part in making him all the more bitter about Matthew's worldly success. In other words, this bad luck is clearly connected with the fraternal relationship.

Many of its features combine chance with human culpability, so that there is a successful merging of symbolism and conventional character portrayal. Thus, although he is very unlucky to have a young girl run straight out in front of his car, he is blameworthy for having agreed to drive after drinking. This situation is made all the more intriguing because it is made clear that the girl would have been killed anyway, however skilful the driver might have been. This accident, of course, creates a new situation between the brothers, when Austin unsuccessfully pleads with Matthew (who is not tipsy) to pretend that he was driving.

Similarly, it is extraordinarily bad luck for Austin that his wife Dorina, standing outside his door, overhears his rather unenthusiastic gropings with Mitzi, but nobody would suggest that chance alone can be blamed. As with the car accident, this eavesdropping leads to new developments and twists in the plot which can be seen to have coherence.

But what are we to make of the incident in which Austin is attacked by an owl? Here is yet another instance of bad luck, of accident-proneness, but one in which he can have had no hand. Whatever its symbolic force, it reduces the binary character of Austin's accidents. Unlike the other two examples, it tells us nothing about Austin or about his developing relationships. The reader may be unsettled by this quasi-supernatural portent into assuming that the writing has slipped into a register whose significance eludes him. In fact the owl incident seems to exist as a useless enigma, clouding the waters.

Muddle also results from the complexity of symbolism. For example, physical objects, which are often financially valuable objets d'art, play a major structural role, as their vicissitudes run parallel to those of the characters. I am thinking of the oriental bowls in An Accidental Man, the buffalo statuette in The Black Prince, the Russian icon in The Time of the Angels, the stamps in Bruno's Dream, the Tintoretto painting in An Unofficial Rose (IO.) They are passed from hand to hand, are treasured, ignored, donated, smashed, restored. But there is no lightness of touch; their symbolic force is too oppressively endowed. Even more disturbingly, they are so starkly and blatantly offered as symbols (not incidentally, but principally) that one feels they are deliberately contrived for the exegetical critic or the literary sleuth in mind - something not out of place in "decadent" or solipsistic art, but quite inappropriate here. Far from clarifying the central issues of each plot, their individual histories tend to mirror the tortuous and convoluted events.

The symbolism associated with characters has also confused many critics. Kuehl claims that Murdoch "invests her characters with excessive philosophical connotations. For instance, Hannah Crean-Smith is a cipher for the following: Is she a Circe, a Christian martyr, an incarnation of the Greek concept of At ? Is the remedy for her condition freedom, humility, patience or contrition? Yet these riddles are irrelevant since Hannah is too obscure,

unemotional and overintellectualized to invest them with real meaning ... she never comes alive as an actual person." (II.)

One of the more considerable difficulties is the task of establishing when details are significant, and when they are mere padding. Consider the following: "Marian came of timid parents who had moved quietly through life in a little Midland town where her father owned a grocer's shop. Marian's earliest memories were shop ... She was an only child. She was fond of her parents and not, as far as she knew, ashamed of them; but it was her abiding fear that she might, in the end, come to resemble them." (I2.) One is uncertain here as to whether the impression one actually receives is intentional: namely, that the town in which the parents live is described as "little" because this is a facile way of strengthening the impression of harmless insignificance. Timid grocers do not live in large towns. The very fact of its being in the Midlands seems to represent a wishy-washy obscurity (England's traditional regional myths concentrate on north and south).

Marian is not ashamed of her parents "as far as she knew". Do we infer from this that most children are ashamed of their parents and that this girl is an exception? or that her parents' behaviour was such as to warrant shame on their behalf, the temptation to succumb to which Marian manages to suppress? or that Marian is insufficiently mature to judge her own inner feelings?

Sometimes these short little potted histories of the family are so arbitrary as to appear absurd. They are crammed with details which are a kind of random verbal stodge. They mean little in relation to the rest of the novel; they do not signify:

Diana had a very positive conception of her role as a woman. It was in fact her only role and one which had absorbed her since she left school. She grew up in Leicester where her father was a bank clerk. Her parents were vague people and she and her sister did what they pleased. Diana went on a scholarship to an art school in the London suburbs but left it after two years. She became an unsuccessful commercial artist, she worked in an advertising agency. But mainly she just lived. She moved to Earls Court. She had adventures. She lived with men, some rich ones who found her puzzling and gave her expensive presents, and some poor ones who took her money and got drunk and wept. (I3.)

Notice the characteristic features: the meaning of the first two sentences is befuddled, the parents are insubstantial figures (Marian's father, in the earlier example, was a grocer, and therefore lived in a "little" town. Diana's father is a bank clerk - society's type for dull conservative habits - and is therefore, together with his wife, "vague") whom the reader is encouraged to scorn. The last sentence seems to me to have arisen out of an attempt to produce effects of cleverness, and to be amusing. I suspect its content owes its existence to the neat rich-poor antithesis, rather than to any consideration of artistry (even here, it is not clear whether the paupers wept habitually, or only when drunk.) On the whole, it is the sort of writing which is bad enough to make one squirm even in the darkest and most private recesses of the study.

Two pages after this passage, we have an even better (that is, worse) example, when Diana's sister, Lisa, is described. Lisa joins the Communists, becomes a Catholic and joins the Poor Clares, contracts tuberculosis, teaches in the East End and so on. What we are given, in the case of both sisters, is no more than a list, the contents of which hardly matter. There is no attempt to define the quality of these melodramatic sequences of experience and event, or to show proper causal links between one and another. The contrast in the lives of the sisters is merely a recorded set of facts, not an emphasized distinction.

Part of the reason for the confusion experienced by the reader is that the novels appear to be pulling in two aesthetically opposed directions. There is, on the one hand, a series of devices - most notably the convoluted and rambling plots - which appear to be meant to parallel, and suggest, the haphazard and contingent nature of the often inexplicable real world. On the other hand, as critics like William Hall have insisted (14), Murdoch's novels usually have some central key which can unlock the secret of the relation between many of the incidents: a key likely to be in the nature of some erudite allusions. Because of this, we are aware of rigid structures forced on the stories, to the detriment of characters who thereby become lifeless symbolic embodiments. This rigid structure is reinforced by the symbolism of object to which I referred earlier.

It seems to me that these two endeavours conflict; that trying to represent people in the world as, at every juncture, having available to them multiple possibilities, is not in accord with the

heavily-directed structure and symbolism which leads to a coherent and almost predestined sense of the world.

In order to avoid misrepresenting the case, I should say that it doesn't seem to me that Murdoch ever invites us to see a particular character in terms of one symbol alone: Hannah Crean-Smith is a Circe and a Christian martyr. Even so, this ubiquitous symbolism combined with quirky randomness leads to muddle rather than creative ambiguity.

One of the factors which might be said to create the greatest muddle of all is Murdoch's inability to write English with either appropriate style or even clarity. My previous complaints about symbolism and so forth are not new, and I have therefore felt justified in stating my position with a few examples, rather than trying to establish it at length. However, my view of the linguistic incompetence is stronger than I have seen it expressed elsewhere, so that I feel an obligation to pay detailed attention to it. The space required is considerable, and if I were to include it in the main body of the argument, it would give a sense of disproportion. On the other hand, to leave it out would be unthinkable, for I need the reader to feel, with me, that we can have no confidence in the method we have used with Drabble and Wilson, of examining individual passages in order to infer authorial positions on morality. I have therefore put the case about the language in an appendix.

I stated at the beginning that there was a uniformity of moral outlook in Murdoch. I have talked about the bemusing features of the novels at some length in order to illustrate how difficult it is to use certain features (characterization, symbolism, plotting) to make the case for that uniformity; difficult because one has little confidence in knowing how these features are to be construed.

In The Italian Girl, that moral outlook is at its clearest, and precisely because the novel lacks many of the confusing characteristics, or has them in manageable proportion. I therefore propose to illustrate how the moral outlook is presented in this novel, and then point to some examples showing that the other works share it.

The Italian Girl charts the progress of the narrator, Edmund, as his whole personality opens out and he gradually learns to accept,

and then embrace, the opportunities from which, hitherto, his diffidence shrank. It is a central irony of the story that he comes to this personal enlightenment through his being enmeshed in the domestic misery of his family.

The key to Edmund's character lies in the nature of his profession of engraver, especially as represented to him by Isabel: "God, how I hate engravings! Sorry Edmund, but there's something about those black cramped things - it's a Gothic art, a northern art. And why do engravers always choose such gloomy subjects? Hanged men, wailing women. You can't be gay in an engraving. No colour. God, how I hate the north!" (p.33.) [Notice in passing the association with the north; I shall be coming back to it.]

That Edmund's own personality is cramped has been made plain to us at the very start when we appreciate the full measure of maternal domination, even from the grave. Lydia completely dominated her husband and the rest of the household. Only she could "control Otto" (p.28) or "control the little girl [Flora]" (p.16.) She "took over Maggie as she took over Flora. She took everything." (p.32.) It was she, not her husband, who used to beat the two boys, she who interfered with, dominated, and finally wrecked Otto's marriage with Isabel. Her possessiveness was such that Edmund explains her relationship with himself and Otto as "a series of love-affairs". (p.15.) She hated the words "wife" and "mother", presumably because of their gentle matronly connotations. It is made clear that Edmund's escape from the rectory years before, after a quarrel, was a merely physical emancipation. Her dreadful influence stood undiminished over the distance. Even as her corpse lies before him, Edmund is yet in thrall:

I looked at what lay before me with a horror which was not love or pity or sadness, but was more like fear. Of course I had never really escaped from Lydia. Lydia had got inside me, into the depth of my being, there was no abyss and no darkness where she was not. She was my self-contempt. To say that I hated her for it was too flimsy a saying: only those will understand who have suffered this sort of possession by another. And now the weird thought that I had survived her did not increase my being, but I felt in her presence mutilated and mortal, as if her strength, exercised from there, could even now destroy me. (p.17.)

It is not to be thought surprising that, with such a mother as Lydia, Edmund is a reclusive misanthrope. His distaste of people, the natural corollary for the solitary, is soon established: "Otto's laughter, Otto's reek of alcohol, the messy, muddled personal smell of it all seemed suddenly to represent everything I detested. There was no dignity, no simplicity in these lives." (p.27.) He hates drunkenness, he detests "scenes and drama" (p.26), "coarse talk in women" (p.34) and "I had often been near to thinking of married people as obscene animals". (p.85.) He himself has rigid puritanical habits: he prefers always to stand rather than sit, he neither smokes nor drinks alcohol, he is a vegetarian. On a number of occasions, early in the narrative, Edmund longs for the moment when he can get away from the other members of his family. But as Edmund, innocent enough to be repeatedly shocked, desires only to extricate himself from the messy personal entanglements of the rest of the family, so he is actually dragged further and further into the centre.

The various family members recognize how deeply they have sunk, and see Edmund as a sort of liberator who will solve their problems and set them free. Thus, when Isabel hears that Edmund intends to leave after the funeral, she becomes almost desperate and pleads with him to stay: "You are a good man. You are a sort of doctor. You are the assessor, the judge, the inspector, the liberator. You will clear us all up. You will set us in order. You will set us free." (p.36.) Again, literally at the moment of intended departure on the same day, Flora tells him of her pregnancy and tries to enlist his aid. In chapter six, we see how Otto's wholly sexual, and wholly successful and fulfilling, affair with Elsa intoxicates Edmund - so much, indeed, that it makes him forget his breakfast appointment with Flora (his failure to appear ironically producing the very result to which he is morally opposed - the abortion). Thus, these three - Otto, Isabel, Flora - repel him by their behaviour, yet sufficiently intrigue him to make him stay at the rectory, albeit without any definite plan.

I use the word "intrigue" but perhaps "enchant" is more suitable. In order to emphasize the strange processes by which Edmund is held captive at the rectory, the novel provides a series of words and phrases reminiscent of the occult: "trance", "enchantments" (p.47), "enchantress" (p.66), "enchantment", "captured by magicians" (p.71), "under a spell" (p.129.) The first chapter in particular

(which details the arrival of Edmund at the rectory) has this atmosphere. We notice the chapter's title (A Moonlight Engraving) and read of a "reproachful ghost" (p.20), "a mausoleum" (p.19), a house that "creaked about me as if in recognition." (p.17.)

The very diction of certain passages in this first chapter skillfully imitates that of early American romancers like Hawthorne and Poe. Could not this be from The House of the Seven Gables or The Fall of the House of Usher?

I must have been standing there for some time in a sad reverie when I saw what for a weird second looked like a reflection of myself. I had so vividly, I now realized, pictured myself as a dark figure upon that silver expanse that when I saw, emerged into the dim light in front of me, another such figure I thought it could only be me. I shivered, first with this weird intuition, and the next moment with a more ordinary nervousness of this second night intruder. (p.12.)

It is not merely the vocabulary (in this last passage, "reverie" and "silver expanse" are particularly noticeable) and the phrasing which creates a weird or magical atmosphere. The events themselves do it. One has only to consider what happens in this first chapter. Edmund arrives by moonlight and is frightened by the unfamiliar figure of David. Going inside the house (with its dim electric lights) he surveys the corpse of his mother, with its "yellowish white" (p.15) face. In his own room, he discovers a girl asleep on his bed, and lighted by moonbeams: "For a moment it seemed like a hallucination, something hollow and incompletely perceived, some conjuration of a tired or frightened mind." (p.18.) He then hears a voice from the past addressing him, and turns to face his old nurse, the Italian girl. She is dressed in black: "in the solemnity of the hour, she seemed like an attendant nun." (p.19.)

These indeed are dark, magical events. An examination of chapter six, with respect once again to diction, phrasing and event, produces the same conclusion.

Nor is this all, for the rectory itself, with its extensive grounds, provides an ideal setting for the sense we have in this novel of an Edmund held prisoner. It is, of course, an isolated location, such as we find also in other Murdoch novels like The Unicorn (Hannah Crean-Smith's "Gaze") and The Time of the Angels (Carel Fisher's

house), and its grounds hold a profusion of tangled vegetation, "a luscious miniature jungle scene such as would have delighted the eye of Henri Rousseau". (p.47.) Here, perhaps a little too obviously drawn to the reader's attention, is a setting whose untamed nature corresponds to that of the human protagonists: "The camellia bushes, indeed most of them were by now trees, unkept and running wild, had grown into an almost impenetrable tangle of implicated vegetation. The course of the stream was marked by the greener line of bamboo, while high up above a birch grove led away into the open country. For us children it had formed a vast region of romance." (p.29.)

The grounds, like everything else, are magical; but it is a black magic. All is minatory. If the jungle-garden provided the child Edmund with "a vast region of romance", then it takes revenge on the adult. For it is at the cascade, a secret innocent place in Edmund's memory, that Flora first appals Edmund with her talk of abortion. It is in the summer-house that he is confronted with the gross physicality of Otto and Elsa. It is from the undergrowth that he and Maggie see the leaping flames that portend the death of Elsa.

Unlike its employment elsewhere in Murdoch, the theme of enchantment brings out with full clarity the binary nature of Edmund's experience of his family: he is afraid of its messy dilemmas and sinister implications, but drawn to it because he increasingly feels it to be the sort of real and authentic life compared to which his own reclusive existence is, however ordered and free from sordidness, empty.

Each of the three characters works on Edmund to effect his personal liberation; and of these, Flora is the most important, for she manages not only to make him less morally censorious, but she dispels in him the myth of human innocence which he had supposed she embodied and under whose distorting influence his perception of human affairs has been muddled.

Almost from the moment of arrival, Edmund is enchanted with Flora, and in describing her dress and demeanour he shows that the pervasive impression is one of innocence. Eight years previously, he had known a girl who was "spontaneous", who had "sheer directness", who "loved me then, naturally and carelessly, just because I was her uncle, and accepted me utterly." (p.21.) Edmund believes that nothing can have changed, that the child and the young woman are the same. Towards the end of his talk with Isabel, in chapter three,

his despondency is alleviated as he catches sight of Flora from the window: "In acute distress I turned to the window. Then, out in the garden, slowly crossing the lawn in the bright sunshine, I saw Flora. She had changed into a white summer dress and carried a big sun hat which she swung idly in one hand from a blue ribbon. Her hair was still undone. It was indeed not an engraver's task. It was a subject for Manet." (p.35.)

Here is the girl of whiteness, and the sun, fit to be painted by the master of bright celebration. Her undone hair adds to the impression of informal gaiety. A few lines later, Edmund describes her as "Alice in Wonderland." (p.35.) Her appearance on this occasion is like a tonic to Edmund, struggling against the pressure to become enmeshed in Isabel's sordid problems.

In chapter five, Flora and Experience, these fairy-tale notions about the girl persist. Edmund sees her as "like some little ageless nymph of the woods, some gracious sprite from an Italian painting, too smooth, too slim, too luminous to be really made of flesh." (p.46.) But this is the first of a series of bitter ironies; for this girl, who seems so elevated from the physical (and therefore sexual) world, is shortly to make her grand revelation, to tell Edmund of her pregnancy. The shock to Edmund, inevitable to one of his moral views, is all the greater because of his belief hitherto in the angelic purity of his niece.

Before the revelation is made, there are other ironies. For example, Edmund discovers that Flora's dress is not white as he had supposed from viewing her at a distance out of Isabel's window, but "a very pale blue and covered with little black sprigs of flowers". (pp.47-48.) White is the colour of purity; these black sprigs might be seen as sins staining the soul, and only visible on close inspection. Black is also the colour of Edmund's cramped engravings which, more significantly, are associated in Isabel's mind with doleful scenes of wailing and hanging. Flora's misery duplicates the funereal mood of such depictions. The revelation itself takes place at a spot associated in Edmund's mind with childhood innocence and play; reaching this spot, he sees Flora "picking white daisies from the bank and laying them out on her skirt". (p.50.) (It occurs to me that Flora is unwittingly covering the black sprigs of her dress with the white daisies in a symbolic attempt to solve her problem or expiate her "sin". However, I have

insufficient confidence in this notion to leave it unclothed of brackets, or to urge it with emphasis.)

Little wonder, then, that Edmund is appalled at what Flora has to tell him, bearing in mind his notion of her as an unsullied innocent: "I was shocked and horrified to the centre of my being. I could barely stop myself from shuddering." (p.51.)

Edmund, then, has been blind to the truth. His unworldliness led him to see innocence where, in fact, there was sexual experience. He had seen Flora as the very opposite of Isabel, but it transpires that they have shared the same lover in David Levkin. This blindness of Edmund's is symbolized in his failure correctly to identify the colour of Flora's dress.

But this initial removal of Edmund's blinkers is only the beginning of Flora's effect on her uncle. For not only does she disabuse him of his naive belief in her innocence, she is instrumental in awakening his own dormant sexuality. However he might explain Flora's attraction for him in ethereal terms, the unacknowledged sexual aspect of their relationship is unmistakable, and it comes to the fore at the end of chapter ten. At the culmination of their argument over the abortion, which Flora has had performed, they get into a sort of grapple which changes, in turn, into a kind of embrace:

As I saw her furious face close to mine, saw her tongue and her teeth, she kicked me painfully in the shin, I released her hand and slid my arm round her waist and drew her so tightly up against me that she could no longer struggle. As I felt her become limp in my arms I lowered my face with a groan into her hair which was becoming undone and falling down on to my sleeve. I stared at the long strands of golden-red hair on my dark sleeve. (p.100.)

Then they are suddenly interrupted by David Levkin, just as Isabel's clumsy embrace with Edmund was interrupted by the appearance of Maggie. These interrupted embraces represent the lack of fulfilment in Edmund's sexual life, a fulfilment to be granted only at the very end of the novel. Then, the incidents with Isabel and Flora are seen in retrospect to have kindled his sexual awareness and made him bold with Maggie; a happy consequence.

But Flora is not only Edmund's sexual liberator. In chapter ten,

during the argument, she reveals to her uncle exactly how narrow is his view of life: a message which, although he never overtly acknowledges the truth of it, gradually takes effect. First, she exposes his insensitivity, evident in his questions. Secondly, she tells him how useless he has been with his "namby-pamby ideas" (p.99), how unable he has been to give any useful kind of help or succour. She laughs at his antique standards: "I don't care what you do, Uncle Edmund. You're of no further interest to me. Oh, you don't like it, do you, I can see you don't like it! But you can take yourself away now. There's nothing more to stay for. The show's over. You've been living in a monastery, haven't you? Now your head's turned because you've seen some real women. Well, go back to it, go back to your crippled life. Leave real living to people who are able for it." (p.99.)

Her talk of Edmund's "crippled life" is slightly reminiscent of Isabel's abhorrence of the "cramped" figures in engravings. Both women, however anguished their plight, live in the open, take risks, have a vitality that is the opposite of Edmund's careful and dreary certainties. The title of this chapter, Uncle Edmund in Loco Parentis, implies this type of observation. The use of "uncle" is sarcastic; it captures the cosy-but-righteous flavour which Edmund has unmistakably. And his being worsted by Flora in the argument gives a hollow ring to his position of assumed parental authority.

If Flora seemed to be an angel but turned out to be a woman, then Otto seemed a brute who turned out to be a kind of helpless, artless child. Isabel is afraid of him, afraid of his rage if he should discover her infidelity with David. She shows Edmund the scar on her arm which Otto has inflicted with one of his masonry tools. We are constantly reminded of Otto's reputation for rages and tempers. And yet, in tandem with this brutality, there are childlike features in Otto. He is absurdly trusting to a succession of apprentices who, as it happens, are mostly dishonest. He dreams of tigers and marzipan telephones. His eating habits are endearingly crude. He is good-natured enough to withstand David's mocking banter without taking offence. When Edmund, in chapter four, is keen to read Lydia's will and be gone from the rectory, Otto bursts into tears at this reminder of a mother whom even the most charitable of offspring could be forgiven for detesting. In

short, Otto is a mass of contradictions, and the two-sided nature of his character reflects the epistemological theme. In other words, once Edmund has started to read the signs properly, Otto like Flora is a medium through which he can learn about the world.

Edmund's discovery of, and fascination with, Otto's relationship with Elsa, is just as instrumental in awakening his own sexuality as are the incidents with Isabel and Flora. As he looks at the sleeping pair, his puritan guilt combines with an appreciation of physical tenderness: "Otto moved slumbrously at her contact and for a moment the two bodies quivered and shifted in sympathy before settling down conjoined, her head against his neck, her knees within his knees, her hand in his hand. They looked unbearably, cosily conjugal. I stared at them for a while, Adam and Eve, the circle out of which sprang all our woes." (p.64.)

Edmund's ambivalence is clear. This pair is at once erotic and tenderly comforting; Adam and Eve, though sinners, are also universally cogent symbols of an ancient virtue and simplicity. Edmund finds the sleeping pair "unbearably ... conjugal" because he cannot, as yet, reconcile sexual passion with tenderness. Otto helps him to that reconciliation.

Initially, Edmund backs away from involvement with Otto just as he is reluctant to get involved in Isabel's affairs: "An old old affection for Otto stirred within me. In a sort of fright I looked at my watch. I wanted to leave promptly ... " (p.42.) He does not approve of Otto's drinking, his brutality, or his adultery (or even his allowing himself to be made a butt for David's jokes) and yet he detects a fraternal bond which cannot be shrugged off: "I was affected by some old sense ... of our being, though so dissimilar, identical" (p.72.) Otto has the same attitude to life as Flora and Isabel: nothing venture, nothing win, to live is, of necessity, to take risks. Edmund feels an affinity with his brother because he realizes, if only unconsciously, that were he only to venture, to abandon the safe haven of correctness, he might be lying in Otto's place, in the summer-house, beside Elsa.

Edmund, in fact, does abandon his cautiousness to this extent: when Otto finally learns about his wife's infidelity he rushes upstairs to attack her. Edmund intervenes and is knocked out by his brother. He has, manifestly, become involved in the life of the family, he no longer watches from the sidelines as a spectator. His action here contrasts with his inaction over Flora early in

the novel, and it is appropriate that on recovering the next morning he feels at peace with the world, almost joyous: "In an odd way the incident had not only established between Otto and myself a sort of rapport which we had not had since childhood, it had also liberated in us both an extraordinary vitality which was almost like cheerfulness." (p.128.)

Isabel, too, helps Edmund to self-discovery. In contrast to his monasticism and solidity, she is mercurial, a "sexual queen" (p.93) stifling in her ornate boudoir. (The exoticism of the boudoir in marked contrast to the austerity of Edmund's existence, makes him feel uncomfortable.) Isabel asks him for help. She leaps at the chance of change which his appearance seems to make possible. Initially he holds back: "I did not want to dally in the mess of Isabel's world." (p.36.) As we know, Edmund does not actually want to dally in the mess of any sort of world outside the safe boundaries of his own cramped existence. But Isabel finally breaks through to him when she makes a sexual approach. He is too awkward and surprised to behave graciously, but a genuine bond is formed between the two of them, a bond which results in an abandonment of his outmoded view of sexual morality and the beginnings of a wider and less dogmatic view. This change is evident in the penultimate chapter when he is at least partially able to share in Isabel's joy at her pregnancy by David Levkin: "She smiled at me through a gilded haze. I stared in confused amazement, not yet sure what to feel. 'David?'

'Yes, of course. Isn't it splendid?' She laughed with a laugh of sheer joy.

'Oh, Isabel - if you're glad I'm glad, very glad. Does David know - or Otto - ?' " (pp.163-4.)

Nothing as crude as a complete transformation is evident here. Edmund is still unsure of his emotions, and cautious of consequences; but he does manage to say that he is glad. Like the foolish princes in Love's Labour's Lost, we are quite sure that he is set on the road to maturity and greater understanding, even if we never see him arrive.

Otto, Flora and Isabel all contribute to Edmund's reappraisal of the world. He acknowledges the familial ties, rather than trying to shun them, or flee from them. This new release from his old lifeless existence is, of course, symbolized by his joining forces

with Maggie, the Italian girl, and setting off for the Eternal City. His solitariness is replaced by the warmth of a new companion, his sexual inhibitions have given way, and he travels from the north, the place of darkness and cramped Gothic figures, to the sunshine of the south.

It is through Maggie, finally, that Edmund comes to terms with the ineluctable memory of his mother Lydia. Maggie is presented throughout as a warm, sensual motherly figure, knowing and seeing all the weird transactions of the house and discreetly exercising benign influence. (It is Maggie who finally lends Flora the money for her abortion, when Edmund has refused his help. It is through her generosity that Otto is given the rectory.) And she is, we do not forget, Edmund's former nurse. But there is a much closer link to Lydia than merely these matronly characteristics. Lydia and Maggie formed a strange but powerful alliance in the house, and although it is never made clear, there is a very strong suggestion that the two had formed a homosexual relationship. Edmund's liaison with Maggie represents an exorcism of his hatred of his mother, and a final triumphing over all the timidity towards life which he felt and for which she was so plainly responsible. The final satisfaction of the novel comes in Edmund's awareness of how he has changed, what he has learned: "I had had no power here to heal the ills of others, I had merely discovered my own." (p. 170.)

The manner in which Edmund gradually casts aside his comfortable isolation and steps gingerly into the exhilarating, if murky, waters of life's challenges, is a classic example of a Murdoch character battling for self-fulfilment against difficulties erected not only by the world and other people, but by the individual's own inner state of mind. It is the attempt at salvaging personal integrity in this battle which constitutes a major part of the moral interest offered by these novels.

It is clear that this sort of morality has similarities to Sartrean existentialism: the need for commitment to action, leading to self-definition; the need to avoid bad faith. (Edmund's initial failure to commit himself to life in an honest and open way is strongly suggested in the circumstances surrounding his return to the rectory at the beginning of the novel. It is of course dark, symbolizing stealth. Even though his hated mother is dead, he shows extreme diffidence in his approach: "I pressed the door gently.")

(p.II.) He creeps about guardedly, regretting that he has come at all. He is "a solitary excluded man, an intruder." (p.II.) It is almost as if he is an invisible spectre - the invisibility suggesting his ineffectiveness - and this notion is reinforced by the fact that he literally cannot see or be seen in the dark, which accounts for his bumping into David Levkin.)

The existential morality of the novel is revealed not only through Edmund's immersion in the familial dilemmas, which we have been examining. He also has the example of the Levkins before him.

Both the Levkins are as free-ranging and unfixed as the Narraways (the surname is a typically crude reference to their limited vision) are inextricably rooted to their places. Neither David or Elsa gives a thought to conventional morality (they both lie, they both ignore sexual prohibitions and exult in their sexual affairs, David is frequently caught eavesdropping); perhaps just as important is a wonderful lack of sober, stuffy deportment: Elsa's nocturnal observation of the worms' dance, and David's irrepressible gaiety of spirit, show how an anguished past (in their case a life in Russia culminating in a hair-raising escape) can be defied. Their Jewishness is only the most obvious badge of their status as outsiders - again, the outsider theme is strong in existential fiction by Sartre and Camus - and that status is made even more manifest in actions unrestrained by the superficial probity such as under the compulsions of which the others tend to act. The Levkins are outsiders because they have chosen that status as part of their commitment to personal integrity. Edmund, at the beginning, is an outsider because he has chosen not to risk, not to dare to, live fully.

When the Levkins make their exits, they remain undiminished in their fiery pride of determination. Elsa's self-destruction is also a deliberate destruction of the house which had caused such anxiety. The chapter's title (Elsa's Fire Dance) reflects the destructive glee of the enterprise. For his part, David returns to Leningrad, whence he had escaped at such cost so many years before. The reasons for his voluntary return validate my placing him in the opposite category to Edmund, above. David actually courts his danger where Edmund could only shrink away. He firmly rejects Edmund's counsel's of safety: "It is my own place and one must suffer in one's own place", and again, "You may not understand, but

nothing means anything to me outside Russia. Your language is dry, dry in my mouth. Here I am a non-man ... I would rather die than be a meaningless man." (p.151.) He subjects himself to possible reprisal and imprisonment, as Elsa to death, out of inner necessity.

My argument has been that such a view of moral necessity informs all the novels, to greater or lesser extent; and that it is rarely as clearly perspicuous as in The Italian Girl by virtue of the obfuscating effects of the features conducing to muddle which we examined earlier. Some examples of the moral necessity in other Murdoch novels must now be given.

Let us begin with Ludwig Leferrier in An Accidental Man. His dream is to win the Oxford fellowship and devote himself to a serene life of studying the classics. What at first appears to be the chief moral objections to this plan emerge in the letters of his father. The latter urges Ludwig to return to the United States and face the consequences of his draft evasion; a whole series of epistolary exchanges delves into the various moral arguments for and against, and I mention it here because it is clear after these exchanges that Ludwig has satisfied himself that the paternal criticisms have no validity for his case. But at the end of the novel, even though his abhorrence of the Vietnam war is still strong enough to justify, in his eyes, an ignoring of ordinary judicial processes, he gives up his fellowship and returns home. With the same kind of apparent perversity as David Levkin, he deliberately places himself in danger from a position of comfort and safety. Ludwig's moral reasoning is that he cannot face the idea of his conscience coinciding with his convenience. It is the sort of nicety the reader can hardly be expected to credit; any more than he can credit the dispatch of Gracie's eight hundred pound ring into the Atlantic ocean. Indeed, in the latter case, the whole gesture is made ridiculous, inadvertently, through cliché: "He did not see it hit the water. And, as he saw it go he thought, a greater man would have kept it." (p.435.)

But the complete failure to endow these moral gestures with conviction doesn't interfere with our perception of their nature, which is mirrored in other characters in the novel. Matthew, in particular, should be seen as one who forces himself into difficult situations out of a sense of guilt for the feeling of safe immunity

conferred on him through wealth and eminence. He returns from the Far East, deliberately choosing to confront the problem of his obnoxious brother rather than taking the originally intended course of meditative seclusion. Matthew actually feels the need to subject himself to the insults and humiliation which result from the fraternal meeting at pp.168 ff. (there are no chapter divisions); his guilt is not the result of the childhood accident that left Austin mildly deformed (that view is an obsession of the latter, not of Matthew); it stems from the feeling which Ludwig has - the discomfort at finding himself morally "in the clear" without effort. Both Matthew and Ludwig have to satisfy inner moral demands which no public moral code would dream of exacting.

In The Black Prince, Bradley Pearson's disaffection with his own confined existence - the measure of the confinement indicated by the marvellously rendered smugness with which he describes his tiny flat, dotting on its minutiae - is not unlike Edmund Nerraway's. Bradley, too, comes up against an unusual possibility, in daring to take advantage of which the whole perspective of his life widens: this is, of course, his affair with a woman thirty eight years his junior, and the daughter of his best friends. Bradley's is a useful case to set against those of Edmund, Matthew and Ludwig because it illustrates how keen Murdoch is to establish that her principle of truth to self has no necessary connection with altruism, kindness, or similar ideals of behaviour towards others. Bradley is particularly pompous and egotistical, even obsessive; indeed, the novel is rigged out with spurious forewords and postscripts which seem to constitute a direct invitation to the reader to compare the novel with Lolita, and Bradley with Humbert Humbert. (15.) Nevertheless, the book is as obviously concerned with tracking the labyrinthine course of the protagonist's quest for self-realization as is The Italian Girl. As with that novel, subsidiary themes reflect the main character's progress. For example, we see Bradley in the early stages having a rather unsatisfactory "understanding" with Rachel and being in a state of estrangement from his wife. These circumstances we gradually come to recognize as part of his fear of sexual inadequacy; something to which we are directed, with characteristic subtlety, by the repeated use of the Post Office Tower as a taunting phallic symbol ("the serene austere erection", p.22.) Much later in the novel, his ability to achieve satisfactory

sexual performance with Julian is one of the many other circumstances - another being the physical escape from the cramped city flat to the country - which act as markers to his fuller life.

Some of the novels have a weirdness much in excess of that evident in those discussed so far. In The Time of the Angels we have an incestuous vicar without a church who has lost his faith but retains a mistress; in The Unicorn, we have the self-incarcerated Hannah Crean-Smith in her remote "Gaze". I want to suggest how this weirdness appears to be intended to contribute to Murdoch's purpose as I have been expressing it.

Every reader brings to a novel his own moral values, which come into play in his judging the scenes depicted. Insofar as there is an authorial ambition to advance a particular moral viewpoint which the author feels is likely to meet some resistance from the reader, it can be accomplished by the sort of deft artistry which, whilst staying amongst realistic and credible scenes, so fashions the story that the reader is skilfully engineered into accepting the moral values of the tale - Jane Austen is frequently cited as consummate at this. Bernard Harrison explains Austen's skill thus: "Put generally, the technique by which she achieves this consists of the arrangement of the fictional 'facts' of the novel, so that whenever we endeavour to put a different moral construction on events from the one Jane Austen intends, we are driven back from it - unless we wilfully refuse to see certain things which are 'there' in the text - by the remorseless pressure of 'reality': that is, of the fictional reality presented to us by the novel." (16.)

But there is an easier route. I think it is true that the more bizarre events become - the more they depart from what the reader can recognize as realistic or credible (in the context of novels purporting to be realistic and credible) - the easier it is to succeed in advancing an authorial view. For the effect of the weird is to disconnect the reader from his set of moral values, to convince him that they are inappropriate or redundant (a process taken much further by the authors studied in part four), and thus to make him all the more receptive to the authorial voice.

Readers are not tempted, in The Time of the Angels, to censure Norah Shadox-Brown for not minding her own business in the Carel Fisher affair, or to frown at Carel's dereliction of duty, or his treatment of his brother. The aura of weirdness which invests the

circumstances of the novel helps to sustain the quite different moral interests which Murdoch has: interests which, as I have tried to show, are of an abstract and conceptual nature.

Now, one of the more obvious ways of asking the reader to consider moral questions more conceptually (and with less emotional involvement) than is perhaps usual in fiction is to present bizarre situations which very much resemble the fantastic hypotheses of moral philosophers. When the latter postulate whether six one-armed Catholics on a desert island may in good faith immolate and consume a volunteer, we have a moral question which has an abstract intellectual dimension but is too ludicrous to have any emotional one. The more we move away from the unwonted and the bizarre, the more we move towards the kind of realistic portrayal which inevitably leads to the greater participation of the reader's emotion. Murdoch's bizarre situations occupy a middle ground between these two: the abstractness of moral philosophy, and truly realistic fictional depiction. But they are sufficiently removed from the latter to avoid being anything like Wilson's situations in which emotion is an emphatic part, as I have tried to show above. Thus, the weirdness and improbability of the plots has the effect of encouraging the reader to adopt a detached pose and view the events as a kind of ethical puzzle; a puzzle which resolves itself along the Sartrean lines I have indicated.

Murdoch's novels record struggles towards self-fulfilment, and that struggle seems to me to have an intrinsic positiveness and an implied support for the belief in the efficacy of personal endeavour which is as clearly Pelagian as anything can be. It may appear more than inconvenient to this view that the result of such endeavour is so often catastrophic; one thinks of the ending of The Unicorn, for example, in which Hannah shoots Gerald and jumps off a cliff, Denis drowns the returned husband Peter, and Pip shoots himself.

This brings us to the nub of the stories. If we consider what is the single most persistent motivating force of the characters throughout the canon, the answer is love. Certainly it can be as destructive as it is in The Unicorn, but I think that Murdoch is after the effect of high tragedy, wherein the value of emotions is not devalued because of their awful consequences. It is a routine notion that Othello's murder of his wife is prompted by an excess

of love; "one that loved not wisely but too well" (5,ii,343) is his own judgement of himself, a judgement having the double authority of a repentance and an epitaph. In the same way, love can be seen as one of the chief stimuli, and even obsessions, in the various machinations of Murdoch's characters.

The great bulk of the novels is concerned precisely with explaining who loves whom, to what degree, and with what result. In The Black Prince, Arnold is in love with both Christian and Rachel; Rachel is in love with Bradley as well as her husband; Bradley is in love with Julian, and to a certain extent with Rachel; and, to complete the circle, Christian wants Bradley back even though she is keen to receive the attentions of Arnold. In The Time of the Angels Carel has affairs with both Pattie and Elizabeth; Leo becomes interested in Muriel, who in turn is wooed by Eugene; Marcus joins forces with Anthea, thus fending off the advances of Norah and putting out of mind his desire for Leo. The ubiquity of love in Murdoch is established in the recognition readers will feel that these cases are typical rather than extreme; it is one of the two main reasons I gave at the start for labelling the novels Pelagian. It is a feature of the novels which, despite the great importance that I attach to it in my argument, hardly needs illustrating or establishing. For the only critical consensus that one is likely to find about Murdoch's fiction is that, if her novels can be said to have a persistent "subject", then that subject is love. It is a love, certainly, that can lead to upheaval and misery, but what is important for our argument is that an author who presents love as perhaps the chief motivating force behind the actions of her characters, and allies that love with the characters' determination for self-fulfilment, is properly described as Pelagian.

Rather than go through each of the novels in turn in order to see to what extent they conform to the pattern that I have suggested, my concern has been to present that pattern in such a way that the reader can test its validity for himself. There is, of course, a difficulty in so doing, which I have mentioned earlier; a difficulty residing in the fact that, far from there not being enough evidence, there is sufficient to illustrate almost any theory, including this one. The pluri-significance of most of these works is precisely what makes The Italian Girl - successful

because its significance is limited and therefore both telling
and clear - such a useful yardstick.

Footnotes.

1. The Italian Girl (1964; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967).
2. Martin Seymour-Smith, Who's Who in Twentieth Century Literature (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1976), p. 253.
3. Linda Kuehl, "Iris Murdoch: The Novelist as Magician/The Magician as Artist", M.F.S., 15 (1969), p. 348.
4. The Unicorn (1963; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975).
5. Kuehl, p. 348.
6. The Black Prince (1973; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975).
7. Bruno's Dream (1969; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970).
8. The Time of the Angels (1966; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975).
9. An Accidental Man (1971; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975).
10. An Unofficial Rose (1962; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974).
11. Kuehl, pp. 354-55.
12. The Unicorn, pp. 28-9.
13. Bruno's Dream, p. 59.
14. William Hall, "Bruno's Dream: Technique and Meaning in the Novels of Iris Murdoch", M.F.S., 15 (1969), pp. 429-43.
15. I am only suggesting two specific similarities, viz: both novels make something of a joke about the complex narrative layers, and both feature a girl and an older man who enjoy their sexual liaison as much as society disapproves of it.
16. Bernard Harrison, "Muriel Spark and Jane Austen" in The Modern English Novel: the reader, the writer and the work, ed. Gabriel Josipovici (London: Open Books, 1976), p. 230.

PART FOUR: THE AGNOSTICS.

CHAPTER SIX: THE AGNOSTICS; BAINBRIDGE AND BAILEY .

The Agnostics

That which unites both Pelagians and Augustinians is their acceptance of the same kind of role in terms of the relationship between morality and the novel. Their novels not only centre on moral questions, but also take up identifiable positions on those questions: they can be seen to have a general moral viewpoint.

The third group to be described, the Agnostics, is concerned to withdraw from this function of seeming to advance a moral viewpoint. Such a withdrawal is extremely difficult because the whole tradition of novel writing, indeed the whole tradition of Occidental artistic endeavour, is based on the view that one of the two main purposes of art is to instruct (the other being to delight).

Two English novelists stand out as having been successful in using innovative ways of "de-moralizing" their fiction. By this I mean that they make it as absurd for the reader to look for moral stances, as Jane Austen makes it absurd for the reader not to do so. In this last part of the study, I shall be examining how, in their different ways, Beryl Bainbridge and Paul Bailey qualify as Agnostics. The two novels on which most of the discussion will rest have been chosen because the family is a major theme in both, and because the fictional methods employed are typical of the authors' respective work.

Here are the opening paragraphs of Bainbridge's A Quiet Life:

Alan was waiting in the Lyceum café for his sister Madge. He hadn't seen her for fifteen years and she was already three-quarters of an hour late. The waitress had asked him twice if he cared to order anything. He said he would just hold on if it was all the same to her.

He felt in the pocket of his black overcoat, to make sure that the envelope containing Mother's engagement ring was still safe. Madge had never liked jewellery. His wife Joan had told him he must ask Madge to foot the bill for having it insured all these months. It was only fair. He'd paid for the flowers and the notice in the newspaper. Madge hadn't even bothered to turn up at the funeral. Instead she had sent that distasteful letter written on thin toilet paper, from some town in France, suggesting that if they were going to put Mother in the same grave as Father it might be a waste of time to carve 'Rest in

Peace' on the tombstone.

He was about to order a pot of tea when Madge came into the café, carrying a bunch of flowers. She had an old cloche hat pulled down over her hair. He thought, how changed she is, how old she has become. She's forty and she's wearing a school rain-coat.

'This isn't the Lyceum,' Madge said. 'It's the Wedgewood.' (I.)

This is a good starting point, for we have here many of the features which characterize the novel throughout. The meeting between brother and sister is a potentially sombre one, but the combined effect of certain of the details - the toilet paper letter, Madge's sartorial oddity, the mistake over where they were to meet - tends to the ludicrous. Such a combination of moods is characteristic of the grotesquerie which I shall define and illustrate later.

These opening paragraphs also establish the contrast in the characters of the two, which is to be one of the major axes of the novel. Alan is timid and self-effacing; the last line of the first paragraph suggests that he is a little afraid of the waitress, and something of his marital subjugation - which the novel's last paragraph brings forward again - is evident in the commission in which he has been instructed so firmly.

These two features - ambiguity of tone, and contrasting characters - help us to think about what sort of novel this is, what it is about, and where it is going; questions which have been perhaps more straightforward in the study so far; questions to which we shall now address ourselves.

I want to start with the suggestion that we view A Quiet Life as a satire on human behaviour (especially, of course, behaviour in the family) and an attempt by Bainbridge to render such behaviour ridiculous. Just as Swift works primarily through political and public instances to this end, in Gulliver's Travels, so Bainbridge works through the private and the domestic.

If we see the novel as satirical in this way, we can more readily appreciate the purpose of Bainbridge's insistence, throughout, on the physical discomfort of the home. This physical discomfort is a major part of the effects which are employed to create the

desired sense of the ludicrous:

He went out into the hall to hang his coat over the banisters. He could hear his father muttering on the porch. He had to tread carefully. If he moved too boisterously he would catch the net curtains with his shoulder and tip the vase of cut flowers from the window-sill. The marble statue of Adam and Eve, recently brought down from the landing, was shaky on its pedestal. Even the row of decorative plates, painted with roses and hunting scenes, might roll on [sic] their shelf above the door and bounce upon the red carpet. Madge said it was like walking through a minefield. His mother had a flair for interior decorating; he had heard her remark upon it throughout his childhood. Everything in its place, though never for long. There was a constant rearrangement of rooms, a yearly shifting of ornaments. They had only to grow used to the dancing girl, painted dazzling-white on the dining-room mantelpiece, and she was gone, holding her skirts, now dark green and luminous, above the mahogany bookcase in the lounge. (p.14.)

'Shut that door,' called his mother. 'You'd think you were born in a barn.'

He would have liked to go to his room then, but it would be too cold and if he wanted to meet Ronnie he must coax Mother into a better frame of mind. Besides, he would have to take off his shoes if he went upstairs. Madge said they might as well be Hindus, creeping around in stockinged feet, getting chilblains in winter, but he could see that you couldn't have nice carpets and tramp all over them in muddy boots. When Madge was older and less rebellious she would see the point. He turned off the hall light and went back into the kitchen, attempting to close the door behind him. The catch was stiff with paint.

'You're making the fire smoke,' said Mother.

He shoved harder. He was quite proud of his ability to suppress his feelings when she nagged at him.

'Don't be loutish,' she snapped.

The grandfather-clock under the stairs chimed in protest. (p.15.)

One of the points to make is that, starting from a position in which they lack commodiousness and need all their ingenuity to deploy their goods effectively, the parents actually make themselves (and their children, of course) suffer more discomfort than the circumstances alone would impose: they cram the rooms with wobbly bric-a-brac and precariously-perched kitsch; they have a "best" room that is hardly ever used.

The physical discomfort is paralleled by the sense we have, throughout the novel, of their being ill at ease in the world in which they find themselves. They are uneasy with each other; notice how skilfully, in these extracts, Bainbridge blends in with the theme of the obstructiveness of physical objects, the family bickerings and parental regulations which tend to make human encounters as irritating as any obtruding sideboard. They are also uneasy with their possessions; something which is shown both in the inappropriateness of their presence in so small a house, and in the lack of taste evident in their selection and arrangement: the irony of "His mother had a flair for interior decorating", in view of the juxtaposition of painted plates and a red carpet, is not meant to be anything other than obvious.

Towards the end of the second extract, Alan's struggle with the kitchen door is typical of the absurd battle that these characters are permanently waging against physical objects. The most basic domestic actions, like entering a room or attending to a fire, involve hazard: "He bent to poke the fire, cautiously resting his hand on the mantelshelf above. Mostly he misjudged the distance and straightened up too soon, striking his head in the process. He had a small scab, dark brown and never quite healed, to show for it." (p.25.)

But it is not only the fact that objects seem to thwart or exasperate members of the family, but the way in which they allow the objects to make such inroads into their mental serenity, which helps to make them seem ludicrous.

Two examples of this will suffice. Here is the first:

The wireless was balanced behind the curtains. It was too big for the window-sill and jutted out into the room; the valves never burnt out, but it had cracked across the front in three places and been patched together with strips of black adhesive. Because of its size Father was forced to sit at an acute angle

at the table, eating his food hunched over his plate. Mother wanted it thrown out. Once she nearly succeeded. She was upstairs shaking the bathroom mat out of the window. It was damp and heavy and slipped from her fingers on to the aerial stretched from the kitchen window to the top of the fence post. Father was sitting listening to the news at the time. The wire-less leapt on the sill and toppled between chair and table. A man inspired, Father flung himself forward and caught it in his arms. He swore like a trooper. (p.24.)

A man who allows himself to be inconvenienced to this extent, by a mere object, is a figure of fun. It is Father, again, in the second example. He has become more and more incensed by the rickety utility chair, the arm of which is apt to fall off. Finally, he incinerates it: "Father spat with anger. His cheeks wobbled as he tried to find words. Something fell from him and landed in the fire. Sparks eddied upwards into the trees. He clutched his mouth and Mother turned away in disgust. Alan knelt and groped in the warm ashes for the dentures. As Mother ran back up the garden, she began to laugh." (p.92.) The venting of rage on inanimate objects is universally considered as a childish indulgence. Here, it is made actually farcical by the loss of the dentures.

A more important theme which Bainbridge uses for her satirical purpose is the constant bad humour and rowing between the four. Before entering on the details of this point, I should like to say that the story of A Quiet Life is essentially the records of the four separate attempts by the four members of the nuclear family to establish identities for themselves outside the home, so that the effect is centrifugal. This in itself is hardly remarkable, but the "outside" relationships have an extraordinary or exceptional quality in marked contrast to the tedious mundanity of their family life, so that the forming of these relationships seems to constitute a kind of repudiation of the domestic environment. The relationships in question are: Madge and the German P.O.W.; Father and Aunt Nora; Mother and her "fancy man", whom we assume to be the enigmatic Captain Sydney; Alan and Janet Leyland. The relationships are mentioned here because they lead to much of the familial tension, bickering and sullenness.

It is a bickering and sullenness that is unreservedly farcical,

as these extracts suffice to show:

Since his grandparents' visit, his mother and father were not on speaking terms. It was back to Madge carrying messages between the two of them. 'Mum says can I have the money for the Insurance man? ... Dad says has Roly Davies rung yet from South Wales? ... There's a funny noise coming from the pipes in the loft. Will you have a listen? ...' Father came home at his usual time and sat upstairs in the cold. There wasn't anywhere else for him to go. Maybe he called at Aunt Nora's and she gave him food - he didn't eat anything Mother prepared. When she went upstairs directly after tea, he came down. He rushed past her violently in the hall, making the clock chime, averting his face as if her breath smelled. He listened morosely to the mutilated wireless. Mother read her library book at the bedroom window. (p.44.)

One night Father caught him in the scullery preparing a cheese sandwich. He'd thought he was safe and that Father was keeping his vigil for Madge under the sycamore tree - but Father had sneaked up the side path and rushed through the door, catching him with the bread in his hand. Father spat with fury. He got down on his hands and knees and picked up the crumbs one by one from the string mat and hurled them into the fire.

'Do you think it's a blasted hotel?' he shouted. (p.84.)

We are in a world in which the wireless is turned up to drown the sound of arguments and slamming doors, in which Father accuses Mother of hiding the tea-pot out of spite, in which Maggie coughs at night to keep the others awake, and in which Father stays in the scullery refusing to greet his relations when they call.

The lack of communication inter alia is especially well illustrated in the various cross-purposes dialogues. For example, after the disastrous family row, chapter two ends with an exchange between Alan and his mother:

'He thought it would be a good idea. It's in all our interests.'

'What shall I do with the left-overs?' he asked.

'You see, he thought the solicitor might sort things out.'

'Shall I put them on the fire in the back room?'

'The lounge,' she said.

'Or in the bin?' (p.40.)

An even better example comes when Alan is trying gently to prepare his father for an expected bad school report; but Father is preoccupied with the snub that he has just received from a former acquaintance:

'That fellow Wilkinson ... [text's dots] When I think what he was before the war - '

'I won't get a good report this term.'

'Do you know, when I was a big shot in cotton, that Wilkinson was no more than an office boy. That's all he was.'

'I've fallen back in Latin,' Alan said.

'He lived in a one-up-and-one-down at the back of Huskinson Street. Now look at him ... a house on the Wirral - '

'And Maths - '

'He hadn't even the common courtesy to invite me into his office.' (p.64.)

But it is right at the end, as Father lies ill in bed and Mother is "titivating for the doctor" (p.153) - the comic force of the phrase immeasurably increased by the omission of the reflexive - that Bainbridge manages to give us three speakers at cross-purposes:

'I'll never see him again. Never in all my life.'

'You shut up,' he cried fiercely. 'There's nothing wrong with him. He just needs a bit of a rest.'

'Alan,' cried Mother. 'He's here!' (p.154.)

Of course, they are all talking about different men. Madge refers to her German P.O.W., Alan to his father, and Mother to the doctor.

There are, I think it is fair to say, two characteristic tones which make up Bainbridge's satire. We have, on the one hand, scenes which are pure farce, of which kind this is perhaps the most extreme

example:

He bent her over backwards and kissed her as he'd seen them do on the films. It took a lot of stamina not to over-balance and topple to the floor; the heel of her shoe dug into his foot. He kept one eye open just in case they stumbled against the chest of drawers and knocked over the vase standing on its paper doily. One side of Janet's cardigan hung down to the floor - he saw Madge lying in the sand with her blouse unbuttoned. He moved so abruptly Janet fell against the wardrobe.

'What's wrong now?' she cried, eyes sparkling, her cheeks rosy.

'Sorry,' he said. 'Cramp.' (p.146.)

There are, on the other hand, instances which retain a comic appeal, but of a far more subdued type. In this extract, which tells of how affecting Madge and Father have found a radio play, there is a whimsical sentimentality which makes us more uneasy in our appreciation of the humour:

'It was grand,' she said. 'When his little girl went missing ...'

Father nodded. They were both overcome. They stared, harrowed, into the flames.

'You look as if you've had a good laugh,' Alan said, struggling to sit at the table.

Father gave him a sheepish look and blew his nose. He was moved to tears by a good play. He was often found mooning in the firelight, hankerchief at the ready, listening to the Third Programme. It afforded him some sort of outlet. (p.25.)

The last sentence is of particular interest because it represents that uncertainty of tone, in this case a blend of gentle mockery and warm sympathy, which I suggested at the beginning of the discussion.

There are passages in which that uncertainty is sustained, as in the concluding paragraph of chapter five:

Doors closed, water ran in the sink. Nobody shouted. A knife clattered on the draining board - Father was fixing

himself one of his little snacks. He heard the swish of Mother's clothes as she climbed the stairs. She murmured something to Madge, who began to cough mutedly as though she buried her face in the pillow or in Mother's arms. Father stayed silent downstairs - in the kitchen that wasn't his, in the house he didn't own. (p.102.)

There may be true pathos here; certainly the circumstances warrant it, as Mother has been on her mysterious outing, and Father feels the traditional mixture of anger and apprehension. On the other hand, we are not completely sure whether or not Bainbridge is parodying what is, after all, a fairly routine situation.

This sort of uncertainty also attaches to the portrayal of the contrasting characters of Alan and Madge; it is not the nature of the characters themselves that is in doubt, but the tone in which they are presented. There is no doubt that the novel goes into these two characters, and the contrasts between them, in elaborate detail; suggesting, actually, a far more conventional fiction than this is. Alan is represented as cautious, nervy, spiritless. He is conscientious at school, afraid of parental censure, self-effacing ("Alan had the delusion that if he kept very still at the table, they would think he had gone away." (p.110).) He is schooled in iron self-discipline: "To survive he had learned not to show his feelings. ... When he was shouted at he stood very still and kept his face blank. He never batted an eyelid." (p.122.) In chapter three, we see the sort of future he envisages for himself:

He tried to envisage himself returning home from work to Janet Leyland, sitting in a similar kitchen, fully furnished, with the proper quota of cutlery and china in the cupboards. He imagined he would be sentimental and talkative; he'd tell her about politics and history and she'd listen, nodding, holding his hand, her slightly popping eyes looking into his. She'd wear a nightie, he assumed, when she went to sleep. His mother wore her slip and cardigan in bed, and Father retired in his combinations; Alan had never seen either of them without clothes. He supposed they would come to tea on Sundays. He knew, somewhere at the back of his mind, that he could only hope to be an extension of his parents - he'd step a few paces further on, but not far.

His progression was limited, as theirs had been. He'd read Mendel's theory in the fourth form - colour of eyes or structure of mind, it was all the same. It needn't mean he'd end up with nothing to talk about, only that there'd be some things over which he had no control, certain preferences and priorities. He'd always be polite and watch his manners. Most likely he'd vote Conservative, in rebellion against his father. He would want the house to be decorated nicely. If possible, there'd be a willow tree in the garden. (p.42.)

If there is a rich comic dimension to Alan's hypothetical future - and the thought of a vote for the Conservatives constituting a rebellion is one of the more obvious confirmations of that dimension - the passage is also part of the sustained contrasting of the values of brother and sister, which is an enterprise very often serious and quite non-farcical.

This is especially apparent in the second part of chapter 0 - the part which concludes the novel - in which Alan has achieved his suburban dream, along with many of its attitudes: "It was a pity about the council estate, but then he supposed people had to live somewhere. The houses were quite decent: there were ornaments in the windows." (p.156.) Family history is beginning to repeat itself, for Alan's wife spends much time sitting upstairs pretending to be doing the pools. We learn nothing more than that, but it is enough - Bainbridge's marvellous economical suggestiveness is at work - to indicate in what a sterile and hopeless place Alan's aspirations have resulted. The novel's last paragraph could not emphasize this more, could not be more like the overt use of symbolic events which, as we have seen, Wilson delights in, and which is elsewhere so very scarce in this work: "Turning his back on the house, in case his wife watched from the window, he let the flowers [those given to him by Madge] spill from his folded newspaper on to the pavement. Then, squaring his shoulders, he walked up the path." (p.156.)

A good indicator of the difference between brother and sister is this exchange:

'Madge,' he said. 'You're too young. It's not right to go with men of that age.'

'There's no rules,' she said. 'You can't lay down rules.'
(p.135.)

Madge's conduct is as wanton, thoughtless and erratic, as Alan's is stolid. Just one more example of her conduct can be usefully cited here; the ingrained recklessness is so well rendered that, in her case, further examples would be a sort of duplication: "When Madge was younger she used to lie face downwards on the polished surface of the table and spin round and round, scuffing the wall with her shoes. It was sheer vandalism. Then, as now, she could do with a thundering good hiding." (p.47.) In the first part of chapter 0, Madge is shown to be unconventional (her clothes), non-materialist (she spurns the repeated offer of the ring), perceptive (of Alan's boyhood loneliness), whimsical (her request for the dancing lady), and associated with blooming nature (she gives Alan the flowers).

I have been dwelling on the brother-sister contrast because I want to establish firmly that their characterization very much has the flavour of a moral argument: behave in this way, and you will end up like this; behave in that way, and you will end up like that. In embodying such a message, chapter 0 appears, quite blatantly, to be simplistically moral, to be presenting the 'results' of two individuals' coping with the same domestic environment.

I talked earlier about the book's uncertainty of tone, and I did so because this perspicuous moral contrasting runs parallel to zany episodes and utterly farcical events which seem to have nothing to do with anything outside their own wit, verve and linguistic virtuosity. The switching from one element to the other - and to various intermediary stages - makes the reader entirely confused as to register, and it is this confusion which prevents (and is specifically designed to prevent, a label such as Augustinian or Pelagian from being applied.

The point about register confusion is one of the central pillars supporting the argument for Bainbridge's Agnosticism. It is also central to a sub-genre which I shall call the American grotesque, and with which Bainbridge's fiction has extraordinarily close affinities. (The same is true of Bailey's novels.) I shall illustrate what I mean by this term and then return to Bainbridge.

Here are two passages from Joseph Heller's Something Happened (2.)

The second follows the first immediately; the break indicates a new chapter:

I've got bad feet. I've got a jawbone that's deteriorating and someday soon I'm going to have to have all my teeth pulled out. It will hurt. I've got an unhappy wife to support and two unhappy children to take care of. (I've got that other child with irremediable brain damage who is neither happy nor unhappy, and I don't know what will happen to him after we're dead.) I've got eight unhappy people working for me who have problems and unhappy dependents of their own. I've got anxiety; I suppress hysteria. I've got politics on my mind, summer race riots, drugs, violence, and teen-age sex. There are perverts and deviates everywhere who might corrupt or strangle any of my children. I've got crime in my streets. I've got old age to face. My boy, though only nine, is already worried because he does not know what he wants to be when he grows up. My daughter tells lies. I've got the decline of American civilization and the guilt and ineptitude of the whole government of the United States to carry around on these poor shoulders of mine.

And I find I am being groomed for a better job.

And I find - God help me - that I want it.

.....

My wife is unhappy. She is one of those married women who are very, very bored and lonely, and I don't know what I can make myself do about it (except get a divorce, and make her unhappier still. I was with a married woman not long ago who told me she felt so lonely at times she turned ice cold and was literally afraid she was freezing to death from inside, and I believe I know what she meant).

My wife is a good person, really, or used to be, and sometimes I'm sorry for her. She drinks now during the day and flirts, or tries to, at parties we go to in the evening, although she really doesn't know how. (She is very bad at flirting - poor thing.) She is not a joyful woman, except on special occasions, and usually when she is at least a little bit high on wine or whiskey. (We don't get along well.) She thinks she has gotten

older, heavier, and less attractive than she used to be - and, of course, she is right. She thinks it matters to me, and there she is wrong. I don't think I mind. (If she knew I didn't mind, she'd probably be even more unhappy.) (pp.72-75.)

Something Happened is Heller's dissection of affluent America through the medium of narrator Bob Slocum, the tyrannically harassed Corporation Man. Some of his worries are petty, but many of them - as the passages amply illustrate - are not. For example, the plight of his subnormal son Derek is a source of continual worry. The title of the novel seems to be an ironic promise to the reader that, despite the wordy analyses and reflections which comprise 90% of the 559 pages, there will actually be an important event sooner or later; accordingly, in the closing pages, Slocum's other son (the healthy one) dies tragically. The event is additionally poignant and ironic because Slocum has caught himself musing, several times earlier in the novel, about how convenient Derek's death - or, more commonly, consignment to an institution - would be. There is, thus, a sort of ghastly retribution in his becoming a two-time loser. All this is offered to us as legitimate social comedy.

John Cheever's Falconer (3) is the story of professor Zeke Farragut, and his detention in Falconer prison. A great deal of the novel is an attempt to represent anti-social crime as comic: "They murder ... they rape, they stuff babies into furnaces, they'd strangle their own mother for a stick of chewing gum." (p.6.) There is a scene in which Farragut undergoes extreme physical pain whilst in a state of drug withdrawal, and his plight is exacerbated by guards who humiliate him; again, the horrifying is rendered funny. Towards the novel's end, the inmate known as "the Cuckold" gives an account of his wife's sexual antics which is as hilarious as it is spectacularly obscene.

Robert Coover's story, A Pedestrian Accident (4) begins: "Paul stepped off the kerb and got hit by a truck." The rest of the story consists of the arrival of a variety of spectators, including a policeman and a woman called Mrs. Grundy, who become enmeshed in trivial semantic confusions while Paul lies dying. At the end of the story, a scraggy dog is biting fresh pieces of flesh from the still undead victim, no rescue in sight. While a beggar waits on the sidewalk for Paul's death (so that he can acquire a replacement

set of clothes), a classic pantomime of misunderstanding, humorously enlivened by idiomatic speech, proceeds: "Listen lays and gentmens I'm a good Christian by Judy a decent hardworkin fambly man earnin a honest wage and got a dear little woman and seven yearnin younguns all my own seed a responsible man and goddam that boy what he do but walk right into me and my poor ole trike. Truck, I mean." (p. 149.)

The gruesomeness of Coover's story, and the way it is introduced right at the start in so casual a tone, are reflected elsewhere in United States fiction. Donald Barthelme's City Life begins:

An aristocrat was riding down the street in his carriage. He ran over my father.

After the ceremony I walked back to the city. I was trying to think of the reason my father had died. Then I remembered: he was run over by a carriage. (5.)

This is the beginning of Richard Brautigan's The World War I Los Angeles Airplane:

He was found lying dead near the television set on the front room floor of a small rented house in Los Angeles. My wife had gone to the store to get some ice cream. It was an early-in-the-night-just-a-few-blocks-away store. We were in an ice-cream mood. The telephone rang. It was her brother to say that her father had died that afternoon. (6.)

In Kurt Vonnegut's Slaughterhouse-Five (7), the human catastrophe^h of the bombing of Dresden during the Second World War is a repeated point of reference which stands juxtaposed to zany sci-fi accounts of the planet Tralfamadore and the imprisoning in a zoo of Billy Pilgrim and Montana Wildhack. In Ken Kesey's One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest (8), the gruesome specifics of criminal insanity become the occasion for sustained literary humour. As early as Vladimir Nabokov's Lolita (9), the sadistically-prolonged murder of Claire Quilty becomes a kind of hilarious ballet. The type of approach I am trying to characterize is certainly not confined to fiction; we see it at work throughout United States culture: in television series like "Soap" and "Mash" (which exploit the

comic potential of neuroses and terminal illnesses, and bloody warfare, respectively) and the humour of stand-up comedians, as well as in satirical and literary newspapers and journals.

There seem to me to be two defining characteristics to this grotesquerie: first, it is quite openly and deliberately shocking and tasteless, if judged by norms which were in force immediately before the works which we are talking about were written. Indeed, for most readers, that sense of the shocking and the tasteless will remain, however wonted the practices of the grotesque have now become. Secondly, as far as the novel is concerned, a serious unease besets the reader unused to the strange mix of tragic material presented in jocular terms.

Both of these features testify to the need that these novelists have felt, to escape somehow from appearing to have implanted moral precepts, or indeed a moral view of the world in the wider sense, in their work. The reasons for this literary historical development are likely to involve complex historical, philosophical, aesthetic and socio-economic factors which, even if they could be set out with brevity, have no place in this study. I merely wish to assert that such a development has taken place, and that the retreat from morality that it aspires towards is less straightforward than might first appear.

It is not quite straightforward because the central premise on which the whole of Western literary discourse is based is that art must instruct as well as delight. Aristotle's assertion to this effect in his Poetics has been maintained and repeated right through to our own day by both practitioners and pundits. Readers are so accustomed to thinking of novels as latent or blatant repositories of instruction that this aspect is taken for granted.

It is therefore clearly insufficient for the Agnostic novelist merely to refrain from the outer appearance of instruction; unless he gives some radical sign, whatever he writes will be construed in a moral context.

One of the "signs" given by the American writers is the confusion of registers that I suggested earlier in connection with Bainbridge and which I hope I have shown is very obviously present in the grotesque works. A second sign is the prosecution of a campaign against the concept of the writer as detached observer. Nabokov's narrator in The Eye concludes his account thus:

And yet I am happy. Yes, happy. I swear, I swear I am happy. I have realized that the only happiness in this world is to observe, to spy, to watch, to scrutinize oneself and others, to be nothing but a big, slightly vitreous, somewhat bloodshot, unblinking eye. I swear that this is happiness. What does it matter that I am a bit cheap, a bit foul ... (10.)

The violation of human dignity involved in aloof observation was a theme in United States literature long before the postmodern movement, of course. The tales of Hawthorne and Twain are obvious examples. The pivotal moment in Rappaccini's Daughter is not Beatrice's death, but her reproach to Giovanni which immediately precedes it: "Oh, was there not, from the first, more poison in thy nature than in mine?" (11.) Giovanni's suspicious spying from his window overlooking the garden is seen as more poisonous than the actual physical venom created by the diabolical Rappaccini.

In the works under discussion, which have generally been labelled as postmodernist, the sense of shame at the old pose of objectivity is acute. Instead, therefore, of purporting to be the holder of Stendal's mirror, to be the superior and innocent novelist-bystander, the postmodernist deliberately implicates himself in the evil world which he is describing; and he implicates himself by encouraging us to laugh callously at the cruel, the sad and the desperate. The reader's unease at this is partly at realizing that the fiction he is reading does seem real enough to be part of the world rather more, and a commentary on it rather less. (In the most extreme form of American grotesque - the so-called "snuff" film - actors and actresses are actually mutilated and murdered in front of the cameras. This hideous practice takes to the limits the notion of "artist" as participator in evil.)

Such grotesquerie is not common in English fiction - in the theatre, perhaps the nearest thing is Howard Brenton's Sore Throats (12), which makes a comedy out of wife-battering, obscenity, and extreme malice - but A Quiet Life has close affinities with it, and these I now want to explore.

We have seen enough to recognize A Quiet Life as a comic novel, at times a farcical novel. Much less obviously to the fore - Bainbridge emulates Nabokov in presenting this in a tangled form, with ambiguous clues, the reading process thus becoming a matter of sleuth work - is that the humour is based on the portrayal of a

truly pathetic family. I don't feel, as perhaps is already clear, that A Quiet Life represents the grotesque in the full-blooded way evident in the Americans. Nevertheless, there is undoubtedly an exploitation of the pathetic here which has the sort of tastelessness, although in minor form, of Heller, Coover and Cheever.

There is pathos in the family's decline from affluence, and in the mysterious subterfuges to which Father resorts in order to provide for the family; in Father's being spurned by Wilkinson, now that the former is necessitous; in Alan's almost entirely joyless boyhood, as he attempts to moderate and mediate and take responsibility for the other three; especially in the personal estrangements: between Father and Mother (see particularly the account of Mother's attempts to leave Father at pp. 32-3), between parents and children, between Madge and Alan. A sense of chilling loneliness is rarely absent from these pages; it is to be felt even when the pathos has given way to a tone of dreary reminiscence characteristic of the nostalgia of a Dylan Thomas story:

The afternoon wore on; the day darkened. They cut into the sponge cake and drank several cups of weak sweet tea. Madge begged to be allowed out to the shore. Grandpa dozed before the fire.

It was time to play cards. Alan fetched the Indian table with the brass tray, from under the stairs. The closet was damp and smelt of mildewed clothes. He leant his face against the old raincoats and thought of Janet Leyland at Evensong. (p. 35.)

There is a more direct - a more American - variety of mockery, which appears in moments such as this:

'There's a girl at school,' said Madge. 'Her mother died. She was right as rain one moment and the next she was dead. The daughter wasn't allowed to go to the funeral.'

'Stop it,' he said.

'She couldn't cry. She knew her mam wasn't coming back but she couldn't help grinning.' (p. 109.)

The spirit of the whole novel is informed by a glee at the failure of people to accommodate themselves to others, thereby

precipitating their own misery. It is a profane and unholy mirth, and deliberately so. Elsewhere in Bainbridge, the tasteless actually becomes gruesome and macabre. In The Bottle Factory Outing (I3), a mysterious murder is committed, and the body has to be stashed away. In Harriet Said (I4) there is also a murder: two schoolgirls, Harriet and the narrator (the latter aged thirteen), engage in a series of pranks, many of them designed to bait the pathetic Mr. Biggs ("the Tsar"). They lock the latter in the church at night, for example. Harriet, throughout the novel, is pure nastiness and malice, and slowly corrupts the narrator, whose few remaining qualms are blotted out. At the end of the novel, the two girls go to the Biggs' house. Harriet tells the narrator to hit Mrs. Biggs, which she does. Mr. Biggs returns home to find his wife dead. The two girls fix a story that will ensure that Mr. Biggs will take the blame for the murder.

A Quiet Life is primarily a successful satire; but it is also an Agnostic work in its attempt to withdraw from appearing to hold moral positions. It does this through a confusing of registers and by employing a mild version of the grotesque mode.

Paul Bailey's use of the grotesque is as marked as Bainbridge's, so that if I make rather less of it in what follows (compared to my treatment of it in Bainbridge) it should not be supposed that I think of it as less significant here; I merely wish to avoid too much repetition.

There are two fundamental points that I want to establish about Bailey; more specifically, about his finest novel, Trespases⁽¹⁵⁾, which deals centrally with the family. The first is that his fiction is informed by a profound sense of futility, in which the world is represented as a friendless and inexplicable place. The second is that Bailey prevents us from seeing this as a moral judgement. Unlike the Augustinians (especially Drabble) with whom we would otherwise be tempted to place him, Bailey seeks to portray this futility without in the least suggesting any human culpability. In the case of Trespases, Bailey achieves this sense of mankind as blameless by inviting us - perhaps directing us - to identify him with his own central character: Ralph's uncritical acceptance of all around him becomes Bailey's own, and Ralph's "absence" from

the story is Bailey's authorial withdrawal.

The first of these two points is the easier to establish, and the less contentious. Its truth can be seen in the obvious physical details of Bailey's nightmare world. Horrors appear in all four novels and are most evident, perhaps, in the sustained portrayals of murder and suicide, to which latter Bailey seems especially drawn: Ellie hacking away at her flesh in the Dinsdale bathroom, Nancy trying to jump off Lambeth bridge, James Belsey plunging his knife into another victim, the German P.O.W. dangling from an apple tree, Mrs. Capes' son with his head in the gas oven. Horrors are also evident in the portraits of insanity, from Peter's grandmother and his wife Nancy in Peter Smart's Confessions (16), to Harry and Ralph in Trespases.

It is in this area of madness that Bailey introduces one of his grotesque techniques. Side by side with those actually committed to lunatic asylums, he places characters of a certain eccentricity: in Trespases these are Mr. Basil and Mrs. Goacher. The point lies not merely in the contrast between the hilarity of Mr. Basil's voyeuristic rubber fetishism and the infinite pathos of plump, pale Harry, who at thirty is discovered with trouser buttons undone and is told by the nurse that "Boys who do that go blind." (p.72.) There is an implicit suggestion that eccentricity is a halfway house to the asylum, or at least that Harry and Mr. Basil have sufficient in common for us to be forced to pull ourselves up short in delayed shock at the idea of laughing at the one whilst being confronted with the tragedy of the other.

Ralph Hicks is both narrator and protagonist of Trespases and he shares with the central characters of the other three novels the status of victim; a status the purpose of which is to combine with the more physical aspects of nightmare which we have seen, to produce a version of the world as a place of utter futility.

In the first novel, At the Jerusalem (17), Mrs. Gadney's uprooting from home and her being placed in the institution is, in itself, a sort of incarceration reminiscent of the asylums. But whilst there, her inability to exercise any sort of control over her own predicament or future, her incomprehension of all the behind-the-scenes manoeuvres on the part of both the family and the medical authorities, as she is shunted about from open ward to "isolation" and finally to the madhouse itself, is terrifying - and all the

more so because of the kindness and solicitude with which those directly responsible for her mental agony treat her. As the process of psychic withdrawal and social isolation takes its inevitable course, Bailey's grotesquerie emerges in the depiction of the uproarious fellow inmates. The toothless Maggy Affery, with her bad dreams and bent back, and the Irish Peggy O'Blath, who can't stop laughing at the decrepitude of the others, are typical of the ward. Ignoring their physical ruin, they courageously defy approaching death through an enthusiastic abandonment to coarseness and triviality which allows no room for sombre contemplation. Vulgarity saves them; but Mrs. Gadney is too "sensitive" for this kind of redemption to work for her, and her rejection of the proffered mateyness - her rejection, even more, of the more "refined" company of Mrs. Capes - seals her doom.

Peter Smart is just as much of a victim, at the mercy of those who might choose to harm his interests; for despite his recognition of the drag-weight of his neurotic wife and his incredibly mean-spirited mother, he has insufficient resolve to pull away. Similarly, Frank White drifts about in a world in which he counts for nothing, or in which he is actually despised. His past successes on the force win him no credit. His ghost-writer takes up with his wife and both scoff at him. Even the relatives of the murderer Belsey try to render him nothing through their jeers.

Ralph Hicks is one with these others in being a victim. Like them, he becomes socially and emotionally marooned as a result. The extraordinary daring of this novel lies in the fact that Ralph is, as it were, missing as a character. In the other novels, Bailey gives us a direct record of what Peter Smart felt as he played his definitive Reynaldo, what Faith Gadney feels living with her stepson Henry and his wife Thelma, but what Ralph is like must be inferred almost entirely from the actions and words of the others.

But there is a paradox in this arrangement, for Ralph is not at all like, say, Nick Carraway in Scott Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby, whose character also emerges via this reflector-like system. The paradox is that Ralph, although so obviously the central character, remains formless and featureless even after we have finished the novel. That is to say, with this method we are hardly able to infer anything about him. There are two reasons:

first, most of the account that he has written has as a conspicuous characteristic a featureless objectivity, effected through simplicity of diction. We shall be returning to this point. Secondly, the family and friends who surround him and act as reflectors for his character are unable to establish with him that degree of contact or rapport necessary for insight into his actions and life.

It may be, of course, that Ralph doesn't react to the people and events around him; that it is precisely the point of the novel to show us someone who has already been rendered insensate by the world's futility. It is not clear whether this is the case, or whether Bailey refuses to give Ralph's reactions as an integral part of his artistic purpose; as if he were saying, what does it matter what my central character feels, when life is meaningless anyway?

We couldn't come to a proper resolution of this point without taking into account something which only gradually becomes evident: that the whole account is written by a man now himself committed to a lunatic asylum, and whose narrative act is an attempt, in an almost literal sense, to find out who he was and is, through memorial reconstruction. His task, in a way, is the same as ours.

Insanity is used in the other novels as an extreme metaphor for isolation, but having a mad narrator obviously has consequences other than intensifying the effect of that metaphor. For example, Ralph must be seen as a highly "unreliable" narrator, and this makes us wonder whether we should add to our two propositions above the third possibility that Ralph reacts fully to the events described in the novel, but cannot recall his own feelings when he comes to set them down on paper - cannot remember them partly because they have made him crazy.

The novel closes as Ralph is told to examine his fellow inmates:

He invited me to look again and again. Blank faces. Dead eyes and open mouths. A man of seventy skipping, a woman with a dummy between her lips. A long ward of idiots laughing and dribbling.

My fellow ruins. My fellows.

I walked back to this room alone. I wept.

I end these fragments with a new word. I write down

MAN

in the hope that I will one day earn the right to use it about myself. My name is Ralph Hicks and I hope I will become a man. It is a beginning. (p.189.)

The optimistic note in the final sentences seems to be ill-considered; it belies the drift of all that has gone before. In the other three novels, the despair of the close is so clearly in keeping with the stories' purposes that it is odd Bailey should here introduce a promise of hope, as it seems, gratuitously. That apart, I think the closing lines cited above can be used to support my view that the whole account has, as its raison d'etre, Ralph's attempt to find himself in his past. Secondly, it gives a concluding taste of that preoccupation with physical decay which is so appropriate as an image for the rendering of futility, and which occurs in all four works in varying degrees: "The proper reason for writing is to let you know that Miss Potter is dead. I thought you would be interested to learn. It was a quick cancer according to Mrs. Dacre who saw the item in the local paper, over and done with in a fortnight. Galloping, is that the word Ralph or do you only use it for T.B.? It was all very sudden anyway." (pp. 48-49.) This insistent dwelling on disease - it has to be cancer, of course, the most dreaded of all, just as it had to be for Johnson (18) - is even more to the fore in At the Jerusalem. And the grotesque humour is contained not merely in the obvious (words like "Galloping" which, incidentally, show how similar Bailey and Bainbridge are in their exploitation of the comedy of the colloquial) but in that would-be discreet revelling in the details of pathology which is surely, in the medical sphere, what prurience is in the sexual.

In concentrating on Ralph, the central victim of the novel, I have ignored the Hicks family, and yet the novel is as much about them as it is about him.

If we go down the list of family members and their closest friends, we can see that the role of each individual is dual: it is to demonstrate the distance between Ralph and them, but it is

also meant to show us that they are all, individually, similar to Ralph in their isolation; an isolation either brought about, or intensified, by trial and suffering. Ellie's suicide is a ghastly event for Ralph, but it is the result not merely of marital failure. Her limitless social conscience and compassion force her into suffering; she must needs pin to the wall photographs of the dispossessed: "... an African child, a Sicilian peasant. They were to remind us, she said." (p. 101.) Her death is a resignation from all life, not just, not especially, life with Ralph.

Similarly, the isolation he feels from his mother Mary has a counterpart in her own personal tragedy: her having been ignored, and then deserted, by her husband. Even as a grown man Ralph cannot get through to his mother, or express his deeper feelings, because Mary is being "protected" by the intimidating and hostile Mildred Harroway; it is a protection for which Mary seems to pay as high a price as her son.

Ralph cannot come into intimacy with his parents-in-law, or with Bernard. The gross snobbery of the one (the passage at pp. 57-8 is one of the funniest in the book), the self-pity and loneliness of the other, block his way to their hearts. But they, in their turn (especially Bernard, the deuteragonist) have lives of isolation independent of Ralph. For example, Miss Potter's rejection of Ralph's sexual advances increase^s the latter's sense of solitude, but Potter herself is a pathetic figure once death has deprived her of George. The most extreme example of this duality is Harry, whose own demented inner world is as hopeless as his response to his cousin Ralph lacks any power of human affiliation. Bailey's family is not unlike the Ardsley family in Somerset Maugham's For Services Rendered, who have the double misfortune of having no collective cohesion, no unifying principle to which they can all agree, as well as individually having to bear their personal crosses, from blindness to a desperate (and unrequited) love.

The central difference between Bailey and Maugham leads us to the second of the two points that I advanced in my opening remarks. Both writers are bitter and cynical about society, and the message of their work is underpinned by the sense of futility. But whereas Maugham is prepared to lay moral blame (in the case of For Services Rendered, mainly at the feet of bungling and venal politicians),

it is of course my argument that Bailey neither attacks the moral behaviour of his characters nor implies a moral critique of society.

How does he avoid doing so? The three methods which seem to me to be the most important are as follows: narrative fragmentation, minimalism, and parodies of idiomatic speech.

Before discussing each of these in turn, I want to suggest how Bailey invites the reader to identify him with his narrator. Consider this passage, from one of the "Boy" sections; it is Ralph speaking for himself, not through a persona:

The whole street was there. After all, it was an occasion. It wasn't likely that Charlie Harroway would get married again. He'd waited forty-two years before taking the plunge, so you could be as sure as you ever were of anything in this world that he wasn't making a mistake: he'd found the right girl in Joyce Edmonds. Joyce was no oil painting, everyone in the district who knew her agreed, her bones were far too big for prettiness, but then Charlie himself was not on the handsome side either: when his jacket was undone you could see the beginning of a drinker's tummy and what a strain it was on his top trouser buttons. (p.33.)

There is a simple homeliness of outlook here which is in tune with that of some of the other characters; a homeliness evident both in the subject and in idioms like "Joyce was no oil painting". (Even words like "tummy" are far cosier than alternatives of slang ("pot") or formal English ("stomach").) But this homeliness is deceptive because there is evidently an element of satire in the depiction, however subdued, and we are left in a quandary of attribution. Are we meant to think that Ralph is the satirist - a view which might appear incongruous in the light of his madness and his lack of narratorial assertiveness - or that, as one reader suggested to me, Bailey expects us to think of his narrator as unaware of any perspective in such passages other than the attempt to recreate his past in straightforward recollection?

It seems to me most probable that Ralph is pretending to adopt the kind of simple communal sensibility which evidently informs the diction of the passage. But it is a pretence because Ralph's isolation would make his tolerance of this kind of fraternity

almost nil. He therefore adopts this tone as a disguise, another mask serving the same purpose as his adoption of personae: by indirections to find directions (his identity) out. The connection with Bailey is that both "authors" set up an obfuscating smokescreen which prevents any perception of a unified account. For the demented Ralph to do this is the opposite of his desire to discover himself through a simple "telling" process and may therefore be a token of his failure. (One of the features of his illness is presumably a need for disguise.) For Bailey, it is of a piece with his authorial withdrawal, to the three already specified features of which we now revert.

Although Ralph writes the whole account, he does not deal with each family member or friend in the same tone. On the contrary, he tries to write in a style which, as he imagines, reflects the individual personality concerned. Here, for example, is Ralph's first person account of his mother's fussing prior to the asylum visit to see Harry:

She insisted, before we left the house that morning, that I wore a tie. I was to show some respect; in the course of the day I would be meeting important people like doctors, who would be offended by slovenliness. And I was to wear my weddings and funerals suit that old Mr Marks had made up for me out of that lovely piece of left-over cloth. She knew it was on the heavy side, but I owed it to the poor boy we were going to visit to look my smartest. (p.68.)

Compare it with this, on the gay Bernard Proctor:

Welcome to Auntie Bernard's palatial parlour and mind your head on the chandelier - it hangs low, like all the best things.

Nothing gives me greater pleasure than to talk about myself. I once said to Mums - after she'd gone over to Rome, that is - that if I ever went too, the priest would never get away, I'd have him fixed with my glittering eye, he'd be in that box all day and night while I had a good old wallow. You have been warned. (p.III.)

These passages illustrate the diversity of style with which Ralph recreates the various characters. His story alternates

between first and third person narration, between erlebte Rede and direct attribution of sentiment; it includes letters, monologues and pastiches. By itself, the very fact of this succession of technically diverse sections makes for a sense of narrative fragmentation; that sense is heavily emphasized by the fact that a great many of the passages are short, some only a few lines in length. The reader's experience of the way such devices work, borne out in the two passages quoted, is that, as we have noted before, Ralph is an excellent guide to the ridiculousness of others, who nevertheless manages to reveal very little of himself. This leads to a weakening of the central narrative presence so as to allow the described characters ^{to} occupy the stage alone: a process most clearly successful when Ralph actually assumes personae, as he does with Bernard (pp. III-127) and his own mother (pp. 127-150.) Thus, at times the novel assumes the guise of a collage of miscellaneous items from various hands. Furthermore, the skipping from one character to another, and from one event or period to another, creates the sense of disordered recollection appropriate to Ralph's mental confusion.

The second feature in my list is what I have called minimalism. In Bailey, it is characterized by a complete lack of ornateness in literary diction, a crudeness of syntactic structure, and a monotony of thoughts and the words giving them expression:

I went, the following evening, to Miss Potter's flat. I waited for half an hour on the landing before knocking at her door. She did not appear surprised to see me. She smiled and invited me to drink some coffee. We discussed her plants, when they bloomed, how they grew. She spoke slowly, thinking out each sentence carefully. She did not mention my father.

I left, hours later. She kissed me. She ruffled my hair, then apologized.

I ran down the stairs and along the street.

As my mother stirred the cocoa I realized that I had been happy. (pp. 14-15.)

This sort of minimalism gives the reader an illusion of objectivity, as though the writer's purpose was the making of a true factual record and nothing else. As there is a large body of commentary on the link between the attempt at a "blank" style and the

apparent withdrawal of authorial presence (see, for example, Barthes' Writing Degree Zero (19)), I shall not rehearse the arguments here.

The parodies of idiomatic speech are the third feature which I listed, and it is important to stress that they are not merely successful and happy ornaments added to an already completed structure, but fundamental to that structure.

Their most important function is to provide a linguistic comedy which suggests an underlying human absurdity. Sometimes, what we have is a full-blooded vulgarity such as Mrs. Goacher provides, the effect of which is to offset the real horrors of the novel with a tasteless triviality; it thereby forms a part of Bailey's grotesque:

Men. She eats them. Honesty compels me to say it, even though she is my flesh and blood. I was never like that - quite the reverse, as a matter of interest. She doesn't take after me. She can never have enough. You've seen how ever so genteal she is, haven't you? A right Lady Muck? Well, it's all show, all bloody show. She goes on heat worse than any dog when the fit's on her. She's doing it this very minute, I'll wager, with one of her so-called gentlemen friends. She spent hours this afternoon beautifying herself, so it must be roll me over in the clover night tonight. Finished your gin? (p.21.)

Equally interesting, however, are those more numerous passages in which the farcical is replaced by something more subdued. Here is part of the letter Mildred Harroway writes to Ralph:

I do not complain, it is my lot in life, I would rather be with your mother than any other person. We are happy as two sandpipers most of the time. I must get straight to the point. I am beating about the bush. I write this short message to ask you not to call on us again unless a case of emergency arises. Sickness or accident, God forbid. I ask you in all good faith. We are nearing the end, the two of us. It would be nice if whatever time is granted to us could be passed without hurts.

Have no fear. Your mother loves you. But it is me who cares for her. I am sorry about your wife. It would not be Christian of me to be otherwise. Of course I feel sorry for you. However

we make our beds and we must lie on them.

M. HARROWAY (p.57.)

On first reflection, I was inclined to think that the humour underpinning these tired sentiments was meant to suggest a false feeling or insincerity, a fobbing off of a difficult issue by resort to facile formulae; the sort of resort so well illustrated in Compton-Burnett. But then I began to see that when Bailey's characters use idioms in this way there is always an attendant feeling of their not having managed to achieve the realization of intended meaning for which they have so obviously striven. Bailey records that failure through a humour of verbal infelicity which reaches not only the reader but the fictional characters, the latter thus sharing with us in the awareness of the communication's failure.

The parodies of idiomatic speech are thus part of the failure to communicate, which in turn is a part of the characters' isolation. They also act as a collective symbol for Ralph's failure to exhumate his own personality from the past, his failure to recreate that personality either for the reader or for himself. Finally, they act as a symbol for Bailey's own refusal to come into the open and ^dassume an unequivocal authorial posture. One of the "Me" sections, which I shall give in full, is a marvellous scholium to the authorial withdrawal:

ME

Mummy's Ralphie wrote his name out. Ralph Hicks: the letters sloping right. Ralph Hicks: the letters sloping left. The letters now bold and upright, now bunched together. Ralph Hicks: there were hundreds of different ways of writing the two words that proclaimed his identity.

Mummy's Ralphie had a new signature every day. Unlike the other boys. They never changed: what they wrote said who they were. (p.59.)

As Ralph Hicks slopes right and left, so Bailey gives us an extraordinary variety of literary styles. Both character and author hide behind a Protean diversity; their multi-perspective approach to life is an attempt to discover what identity can mean.

And, as with Ralph, it cannot be said of Bailey that he is one of those novelists for whom it is true that "what they wrote said who they were."

Footnotes

1. Beryl Bainbridge, A Quiet Life (1976; rpt. Glasgow: Fontana/Collins, 1977), p.7.
2. Joseph Heller, Something Happened (1974; rpt. London: Corgi, 1976.)
3. John Cheever, Falconer (London: Cape, 1977.)
4. Robert Coover, "A Pedestrian Accident" in Pricksongs and Descants (1971; rpt. London: Pan, 1973), pp.146-164.
5. Quoted in The Novel Today, ed. Malcolm Bradbury (Glasgow: Fontana, 1977), p.187.
6. Quoted in *ibid.*, pp.187-8.
7. Kurt Vonnegut Jr., Slaughterhouse-Five (1970; rpt. St.Albans: Panther, 1977.)
8. Ken Kesey, One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest (London: Methuen, 1962.)
9. Vladimir Nabokov, Lolita (1959; rpt. London: Corgi, 1969.)
10. Vladimir Nabokov, The Eye (London: Weidenfeld, 1966), p.103.
11. Nathaniel Hawthorne, "Rappaccini's Daughter" in The Celestial Railroad and Other Stories (New York: Signet, 1963), p.252.
12. Currently (August, 1979) playing at the Warehouse Theatre, London.
13. Beryl Bainbridge, The Bottle Factory Outing (1974; rpt. Glasgow: Fontana/Collins, 1976.)
14. Beryl Bainbridge, Harriet Said (1972; rpt. London: Quartet, 1973.)
15. Paul Bailey, Trespases (London: Cape, 1970.)
16. Paul Bailey, Peter Smart's Confessions (London: Cape, 1977.)
17. Paul Bailey, At the Jerusalem (London: Cape, 1967.) *
18. This dwelling on cancer and decay is only one of many similarities with Bailey. A reader comparing At the Jerusalem (1967) with Johnson's House Mother Normal (London: Collins, 1971) will find so much in common - in matter and treatment - that he might wonder, as I do, whether the line between literary influence and plagiarism has not been crossed. Johnson's novels will be of interest to those wishing to see other examples of the grotesque in contemporary English fiction.
19. Roland Barthes, Writing Degree Zero (1953; trans. A.Lavers and C.Smith, rpt. London: Cape, 1967.)

* Details of the fourth Bailey novel, A Distant Likeness, which is not named in this chapter, are given in the bibliography.

APPENDIX: MURDOCH'S LANGUAGE.

Appendix: Murdoch's Language.

The purpose of this appendix is to illustrate why it is that the reader can have no confidence in inferring points about the morality of novel or character (that is, either senses one or two); the sort of inference which, on the contrary, we have seen is possible from individual passages in the works of Drabble and Wilson.

We might start by considering this passage, which shows how even the least complex incidents can be bungled:

'Ann,' said Felix, 'do you love me?'

She was silent, and then still staring at the hankerchief said in a dull hoarse voice, 'Yes. But not enough I suppose. Or not in the right way.'

Felix went cold and rigid. He said stiffly, 'Well, why didn't you say so at once? This makes everything much simpler. Of course, I shall go. But you should have told me sooner.'

'Ah, I don't mean that!' she said, raising her head, and her face was wild with some appeal. 'I don't mean that. I do love you. God knows I love you ...' (p.251.)

Now, I think that I know what this passage means. When Ann tells Felix that she doesn't love him "in the right way", she is saying that she is not sufficiently committed to him. Felix misconstrues her remarks to mean that she feels no physical tenderness or desire for him. She corrects this misconception by insisting that, in purely physical terms, she is of course in love with him. I say that I think that this is the "correct" interpretation, but I am by no means sure. It could be that Felix understands her perfectly, but is still chagrined, and Ann then mistakenly thinks that Felix has misinterpreted her words. Or it could be that initially Ann is referring to sexual appetite, Felix thinks that she is talking about a more comprehensive sort of love, and Ann then tries to set him right again.

Some readers may see no problem. It is characteristic of readers that, once they have settled on an interpretation, it begins to appear so obviously the "correct" one that the very existence of reasonable alternatives in interpretation is called into question.

But even if we were to accept, for the purposes of argument, that in this case there is one obvious reading, it cannot be claimed that that reading is arrived at without first contending with doubts and misgivings, of however short a duration. Let me illustrate this point from another novel. In the phrase, "Have you ever noticed how naturally small children accept the doctrine of the Trinity ... " (1) no intelligent reader is going to take "naturally" as describing "small"; half a second will dispel the possibility. But there is that fractional hiatus to reckon with. It irritates us, especially as the ambiguity is so easily removed (by placing the word "naturally" after "children" or after "accept"). Actually the sloppiness is usually more marked, as in "He suffered occasional fits of severe depression, but not very often" (2.)

If the complaint were only concerned with the occasional stray sentence, it would be trivial indeed; but whole passages are in question. Here is one dealing with the two brothers from An Accidental Man:

Something or other had, in however ghastly a sense, done Austin 'good'. Perhaps it was simply Dorina's death. And perhaps the 'good' was temporary, a prelude to some new and different phase of obsession. If Austin now seemed 'free' without going through any of the procedures of spiritual reconciliation and liberation recognized by Matthew, could it still be that he was, in this respect at least, really free? Was it genuinely the case that Austin didn't care any more? It almost seemed to Matthew at one point that Austin had simply forgotten, as if some banal almost impersonal relationship had been slipped into the place where the horror had been. The fear seemed to have gone and the hatred was changed. To say that the hatred was gone would be to say too much. But again, in some way quite outside Matthew's calculations, it had changed. (pp. 436-37.)

Much of what confuses (and displeases) us here is attributable to Murdoch's enormous ambition to record every swerve of sensibility, every conscious and unconscious motive in her characters; and to do it in the sort of provocative ambiguity

of terms that we find in Henry James. The way in which the words "good" and "free" are used so that the reader is deliberately left to work out for himself what these terms might mean, is a classic Jamesian ploy. But Murdoch takes James' open-endedness too far, so that the whole passage is a mass of inconclusiveness: "Something or other ... Perhaps [twice] ... seemed [twice] ... could it still be ... in this respect at least ... almost seemed ... as if ... almost impersonal ... would be too much to say". The word "some", in the sense of indefinable, is used in the passage thrice. There are two rhetorical questions. In the penultimate and antepenultimate sentences in particular, we are conscious of a descriptive endeavour that seems almost to parody its own intentions. The passage illustrates Murdoch's abstractness at its worst; the attempt at "realizing" the scene is lost in the aridity of a plethora of terms.

There is a more technical issue connected with the confusion arising out of Murdoch's use of language: this is the handling of erlebte Rede (almost all the novels in the period - though not, of course, The Italian Girl - use the device). In chapter thirty-three of An Unofficial Rose we learn of Lindsay: "Her ignorance of Italian art and indeed of anything pertaining to the past staggered him ... (p.260.) However, on the very next page we read: "Whatever her occasional blanks where the quattrocento was concerned, Lindsay could sufficiently impersonate a great lady." (p.261.) An unpractised reader will sense an inconsistency; there is, after all, such a marked difference in emphasis between the two statements as to amount to a contradiction. But both pages, including our two extracts, are written in erlebte Rede from Randall's point of view. The process is this: Randall initially laments his spouse's ignorance of art. As he continues to muse, however, his disposition towards her changes, and he begins to think of her more affectionately. He recalls her sense of style, and at this point his sense of her inadequacies is muted, so that what he had earlier thought of as staggering ignorance comes to seem more like a trivial matter.

The problem is in knowing precisely when we are reading impersonal narration, and when we are reading erlebte Rede. Unless the author inserts sufficient codes and semantic signals (e.g. Randall thought ... Randall hoped ...) at reasonable intervals, to remind us that erlebte Rede is still in use, we may not recognize it.

With maddening frequency, the Murdoch reader encounters what appears to be a crux until, reading back (sometimes many pages) he discovers himself following the thoughts of a character, rather than the narrator, or vice versa. The two narrative modes are rarely marked off and identified with sufficient nicety.

And that distinction is vital for the reader. When we read that Harriet's love for David "could not end, could not in the faintest detail of its being diminish ever" (3) the fact that we know it is written in erlebte Rede makes us slightly sceptical, though not unsympathetic. If the same phrase had occurred in the impersonal narration, we should consider it the most glaring naivety. The authority of the two modes is radically different. If the reader is not even able to tell who is thinking what, because of a confusion between the two, a major part of the fictional enterprise is thereby sabotaged.

Just as freshness of diction or inventiveness of locution does not remain a linguistic matter, but actually constitutes a major part of the artistry itself, so a sluggish inability to rise above blandness of prose poisons everything. Murdoch's language is full of hackneyed expressions which have a disastrous effect on the attempted portrayals. Here is the first paragraph of An Unofficial Rose:

Fanny Peronett was dead. That much her husband Hugh Peronett was certain of as he stood in the rain beside the grave which was shortly to receive his wife's mortal remains. Further than that, Hugh's certainty did not reach. The promise meant little to him that the priest had uttered. He did not even know what Fanny had believed, let alone anything concerning the possible consequences of her beliefs. After more than forty years of marriage, and although his wife had not been a mysterious woman, he had not really known what was in her heart. He looked across the open grave. The tiny coffin opposite to him, under its pile of sodden roses, was like that of a child. She had shrunk so much in her last illness. (p.9.)

The whole passage, but the first two sentences in particular, seems to be a burlesque of inferior detective stories - the ponderous repetition of the surname is particularly telling. Secondly,

even in 1962, when the novel first appeared, the would-be evocative power of rainfall during a funeral is archaic, echoing a standard cinematic cliché of French cinema. Thirdly, the phrase "mortal remains" is so self-conscious that its status as a vulgar euphemism should be unthinkable in a non-jocular context. Fourthly, the details of the coffin ("tiny", "like that of a child", "sodden roses") manage to be embarrassingly sentimental without enkindling the tiniest spark of true pathos. Fifthly, the attempt to make of the graveside scene a drama - through the type of detail, the immediacy and shortness of the first stark sentence - falls flat under the groaning weight of hackneyed utterance. Sixthly, the ludicrousness of two details in particular - the ignorance about Fanny's beliefs and the shrinking body (they are ludicrous not because impossible but because they aspire to pathos so unsuccessfully) - adds to the extreme difficulty that the reader already experiences, of accepting the passage on the serious level on which it is apparently offered.

It is not simply that many of these things are clichés, but that as clichés they have undesirable results from an artistic point of view. In this passage, for example, there is a general mawkishness in the funeral details, used to enlist sympathy for the widower. Our instinct, I suspect, is rather to grin at the ineptitude of the writing than to commit ourselves to its purposes. The effect of the whole paragraph is of fake emotion and second-hand experience.

Here, from the same novel, is a description of Grayhallock:

The sense of unhappiness at Grayhallock had been, since his return there, almost intolerable to him. The house was a melancholy one at the best of times, and had always seemed to him, if not exactly hostile to Ann and Randall, certainly indifferent to them. It had never, he felt, taken them altogether seriously. It had known quite other things, and there were times, especially at night, when one could feel it thinking about them. Grayhallock was only partly an old house, it had few pretensions to beauty, and such pretensions as it had to grandeur were now gentle and absurd. (p.21.)

There is nothing upsettingly novel about personifying a house; even the prolonging of the figure is as nothing compared to the

intricate conceits of a Nabokov. But the passage fails nevertheless, and for the same sorts of reasons that the novel's opening paragraph fails; it is tired writing, it is self-conscious and unskilful, above all it tries too hard. And what, we wonder, does it actually mean. In the last sentence, for example, we are accustomed to this use of the word "pretensions" as it is applied to inanimate objects (it is another standard cliché which has been mocked for decades in all the wine-snob jokes) but can we fathom what "gentle and absurd" pretensions might be? The point about figures of speech is that they elucidate. Any extravagance (such as the celebrated compasses of Donne) is acceptable if we have the path cleared for us and an exciting new vista before us. But in this case, when we are told that the house was "certainly indifferent" we can only scratch our heads. Certainly the general sense of the passage - the Peronetts feel unsettled living at Grayhallock - is never in doubt. But it is so hedged about with inept figurative usages, and we are so acutely aware of verbal redundancy, that the overall effect is of mismanagement. We do not have a proper notion of the relation between the house and the family, except in terms that seem almost comic. These reactions are reinforced later: "It was as if the house feared Miranda", "The house groaned and huddled" (p.230), "The cold watchful house had relished the little scene." (p.235.)

All the novels are crammed full of what we might call the bogus oracular. In just a few pages of Bruno's Dream, we have: "We all interpret and idealize our faces" (p.122), "Philosophers say we own our deaths", "Death contradicts ownership and self" (p.124), "Perhaps one just suddenly saw the dimensions of what love would have to be - like a huge vault suddenly opening out overhead." (p.125.)

Originating from both the narrator and the characters themselves, the proliferation of these would-be epigrams obscure rather than illuminate the relevant characters and situations, and are antipathetic to clarity: "Like so many of those whose only troubles are the troubles of others, she had carried her girlish looks well on into middle age ... (4), "But to be understood is not a human right. Even to understand oneself is not a human right" (5), "Real compassion is agnosticism" (6), "After the war, poetry, like so much else, seemed to have come to an end" (7), "the first generation that

can really envisage the end of the human race." (8.) A seductive charm and ingenuity masks the emptiness of these, but only for a moment. Perhaps their purpose is not so much a matter of intellectual cogency as of verbal éclat in the Wildean mode; they would assume the guise of amusing items. But the wit is lacking, and the result is an effect of mere sciolism.

In conclusion, the point to be made is a simple one. Bad writing prevents any coherent or artistic portrayal of familial moral matters. The rampant clichés, the uncertain hold on erlebte Rede, the irritating ambiguity, the sheer inappropriateness of the vocabulary, the lack of discrimination and "telling" detail, and the absence of any pregnancy in this prose, constitute a sufficient indictment. What we have is a fustian language. On every hand, the linguistic potential is left unexploited, and creaking devices are used with scant attention to the weaknesses that inhere. Noting the general linguistic insensitivity, it sometimes seems in extreme moments that those who can read Murdoch without at least some distaste cannot be alert. They have been so tantalized by the intricate arrangement of plot and symbol that they have not noticed the lack of the more simple writerly skills.

Footnotes

1. Bruno's Dream, p. 58.
2. A Fairly Honourable Defeat (1970; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975), p. 223.
3. The Sacred and Profane Love Machine (1974; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), p. 17.
4. The Time of the Angels, p. 12.
5. An Unofficial Rose, p. 279.
6. Ibid., p. 280.
7. Bruno's Dream, p. 56.
8. A Fairly Honourable Defeat, p. 20.

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2. Literary Studies.
3. Sociology of the Family.
4. Moral Philosophy.

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Addenda.

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To section two: Seymour-Smith, Martin. Who's Who in Twentieth Century Literature. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1976.