

Exploring the Connections between Attention and Literature with Simone Weil and Iris Murdoch

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Abstract: In this paper, I explore the relationship between attention and literature and attempt to oppose the ‘attention economy’ with the moral value of ‘good’ literature. In a world where attention seems to have become a luxury, provided by expensive yoga retreats or weekend escapes in nature that we seek as a break from our self-inflating overachieving lives, and where education seems to progressively become a synonym for winning, achieving, and success, literature can still be valuable for our moral life. For it can show ‘the utter chanciness of human life and the fact of death’¹, and the ordinary existence of others which allows space for the valuable moral potential of attention.

Keywords: Simone Weil, Iris Murdoch, ethics of attention, literature, moral values, beauty.

1. Attention today

In our times, in different areas of study, the danger of the ‘attention economy’ seems to have ignited a greater recognition of the role of attention as one of the fundamental faculties of the human being: the most valuable but also the most exploitable resource in our digital era. Timothy Wu, for instance, in his *Attention Merchants*, suggests that ‘the exploitation of human attention is in some deeper way the exploitation of our persons’². In a time when our attention is continuously fragmented, always captured by platforms based on profit (a process that is inevitably encouraged by current technology), it feels like we are always ‘train-

¹ Iris Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature*, ed. Peter Conradi, New edition (London: Penguin, 1999), 233.

² Tim Wu, *The Attention Merchants: The Epic Scramble to Get Inside Our Heads* (New York: Alfred A Knopf Inc, 2016), 32.

ing our minds towards distraction'³.

For the philosophers I consider in this paper, Simone Weil and Iris Murdoch, being distracted (together with other forms of inattention like fantasy and reverie⁴) implies failing to meet/see reality, while paying attention has something to do with giving up comforting fantasies that human beings constantly project onto reality⁵.

In today's individualistic and consuming society, it seems that those comforting fantasies have become the fabric of our everyday life (everything from the outside tries to arouse in us material desires, from advertisements to the distorted mirror of social media) and that our capacity to pay 'sustained attention'⁶ ('the capacity to maintain attention to an object over time'⁷) has become always more narrower.

This becomes a problem when we consider, as these authors did, that our Self-centred perspective is a limited perspective which constitutes the constellations of values at our disposal, for what we see, and the values we discover in the world, are the net in which our actions can unfold.

³ Silvia Caprioglio Panizza, *The Ethics of Attention: Engaging the Real with Iris Murdoch and Simone Weil* (New York: Routledge, 2022), 10.

⁴ For a thorough analysis of forms of inattention see Silvia Panizza, *The Ethics of Attention*, 2022, 30.

⁵ Murdoch writes that 'Human beings need fantasies' (Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics*, 233) to cope with reality, echoing the verses of T. S. Eliot in the Four Quartets (a great admirer of Weil): 'Human kind cannot bear very much reality' (T. S. Eliot, *Four Quartets* (London: Faber and Faber, 1944)).

⁶ MacKay Moore Sohlberg and Catherine Mateer (McKay Moore Sohlberg and Catherine A. Mateer, *Introduction to Cognitive Rehabilitation: Theory and Practice*, First Edition (New York: The Guilford Press, 1989), 131), as Panizza reports, propose different types of attention: 'focused attention (the basic capacity to attend to stimuli); sustained attention (including vigilance and mental control or working memory; this is the capacity to maintain attention to an object over time); selective attention (the capacity to shut out irrelevant stimuli); alternating attention (the mental flexibility required to switch attention from one task or stimulus to another); and divided attention (the ability to attend to more than one task or object at the same time)' (Caprioglio Panizza, *The Ethics of Attention*, 21).

⁷ Caprioglio Panizza, *The Ethics of Attention*, 21.

2. Moral value of attention

Starting from Weil's 1941 'Essay on the Concept of Reading'⁸, I, following Murdoch, move from the premise that we as humans always 'read' the world as a text, and suggest that attention can help us navigate this never-ending reading and become able to read new and different meanings. In this essay, Weil uses Descartes' example of the blind person's stick to portray the idea of reading. Through the stick, the blind human being feels the world; she does not feel the pressure of the stick on her hand, but rather she feels reality directly through the point of the stick, while the sensations of the fingers do not even register. This is because we read the impact of the stick; we read, in fact, meanings.

For Weil, what we read affects what we believe and how we act: 'I believe what I read, my judgments are what I read, I act accordingly to what I read'⁹. These meanings are not thoughts but arise from the outside: 'from every corner taking possession of my soul and shaping it from one moment to the next in such a way that, to borrow a familiar English phrase, "my soul is no longer my own"'. Once my beliefs are shaped, my acting follows them. She explains:

If I read in a noise honor to be won, I run towards the noise; If I read danger and nothing else, I run far from the noise. In both cases, the necessity of acting the way I do, even if I regret it, is imposed on me in a clear and immediate way, as the noise, with the noise¹⁰.

In Weil and Murdoch's view, our perspectives on the world are 'something infinitely perfectible', for attention to reality is an 'endless task'¹¹. Panizza explains:

Reality is a complex concept which (...) takes up normative dimensions in both Weil and Murdoch. Its moral relevance is both that of being a standard to aim at (ever progressing knowledge and understanding), and that of being something outside ourselves,

⁸ Simone Weil, *Simone Weil: Late Philosophical Writings*, trans. Eric O. Springsted (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2015).

⁹ Weil, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 25.

¹⁰ Weil, *Late Philosophical Writings*, 25.

¹¹ Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics*, 317.

which does not bend to our wishes and hopes, the opposite of self-absorption or fantasy'¹².

Both philosophers recognised that our minds are formed by attention and therefore that attention not only plays a fundamental role in how we “read” the world but also in how we act in it: how we pay attention, and what we pay attention to, shapes the moral quality of our consciousness.

Murdoch, inspired by Weil, observes that ‘as word-users we all exist in a literary atmosphere’¹³. We are always making distinctions, shaping the encountered world into a story, into order and pattern. For both philosophers, this constant storytelling is the fabric of our existence. Attention, instead, is the opposite of fantasy and its passivity. Its activity lies in the truth-seeking and this is what makes it morally relevant:

We attend because we want to find out. There is something we don’t know. Our attention is captured by something that is salient, that needs to be known. (...) Attentive engagement with reality, whatever its other aims or mood or contexts, seeks to discover something. Attention interrogates reality, it is stretched in the direction of—a ‘tension towards’—reality’¹⁴.

What prepares the moral agent for the choice, writes Murdoch, is their attention or inattention to reality (‘our ability to act well ‘when the time comes’ depends partly, perhaps largely, upon the quality of our habitual objects of attention’¹⁵). Grounding her argument on Plato, Freud, and Weil, she observes that in our lives, what we pay attention to and how we pay attention constitutes the background against which, in the moment of choice, we make decisions. We act according to what we see, and according to the constellation of concepts and values we are provided with: the action is not an effort of the will in the single moment of choice. This view portrays a picture of morality as a Platonic pilgrimage from self-illusions to a clearer vision of reality, and which defines goodness as a form of realism. To be good, for these authors, is ‘to see

¹² Caprioglio Panizza, *The Ethics of Attention*, 24.

¹³ Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics*, 6/7.

¹⁴ Caprioglio Panizza, *The Ethics of Attention*, 15.

¹⁵ Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics*, 345.

things as they really are'. In this view, the absolute value of reality and truth are crucial, for they allow the background of perfection against which moral improvement becomes possible¹⁶. Selfless attention, as Weil defines it, is the ideal of this kind of realism that involves giving space to an individual reality and waiting for it to unfold itself, as Weil defines it: 'Attention consists of suspending our thought, leaving it detached, empty and ready to be penetrated by the object'¹⁷.

Human beings daydream all the time because of their difficulties in accepting 'the utter chanciness of human life and the fact of death', and the truth that 'all is vanity'. Vanity, selfish fears, and projections are what is present in mediocre art¹⁸. Instead, 'selfless' attention allows to realise 'that something other than oneself is real', and so 'the perception of individuals' in their 'separateness and differentness'¹⁹, which is the essence of morality. Ultimately, attention in this sense is what can make us realise 'that another man has needs and wishes as demanding as one's own', and so it is what makes it harder to 'treat a person as a thing' (a danger that preoccupied Weil for her entire life).

It follows that whether we pay attention or not, implies the possibility for reality to emerge, to be accounted for. It is then also a matter of justice towards other human beings, animals, and things, for, as Weil observes, by focusing attention towards something or someone, we let

¹⁶ The characteristic of 'truth-seeking' is the fundamental trait of attention, and what makes it different from only looking or knowing. As Panizza explains: 'Both knowing and looking may be detached, attention is engaged. Knowing and looking may be superficial, attention is imaginative. Looking (but not knowing) may be distorting, attention is truth-directed. Attention is directed at reality and, specifically, at an individual reality: not 'people', not 'animals', not 'nature', but this person, this animal, this blade of grass' (Caprioglio Panizza 2022, 2).

¹⁷ Simone Weil, *Waiting on God*, trans. Emma Craufurd (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul LTD, 1951), 56.

¹⁸ She writes that 'novelist is potentially the greatest truth-teller of them all, but he is also an expert fantasy-monger. This is too cosy an art form not to be often degraded in the interests of the self-indulgent fantasy of both the writer and the reader' (Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics*, 233). The dangers of art which made Plato ban the artists from his Republic are explored by Murdoch in her essay 'The Fire and the Sun'.

¹⁹ Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics*, 353.

them exist and restore a sense of their value and dignity. This trait makes of attention not only a descriptive and normative passive-activity, but also a creative one. It is creative, but selfless: a loving gaze that makes us realise that something other than ourselves exists.

Ultimately, this selfless gaze is the same prescribed to the “good” writer. As Weil writes:

The poet produces the beautiful by fixing his attention on something real. It is the same with the act of love. To know that this man who is hungry and thirsty really exists as much as I do—that is enough, the rest follows of itself²⁰

Hence, for Murdoch, morals and art are deeply correlated as both have to do with ‘the discovery of reality’ through a type of realism grounded on attention²¹.

3. Attention & literature

When I say ‘literature’, I refer here to the type that Weil describes as ‘literature of the first order’ and that Murdoch calls ‘great literature’. Weil is clearly more ‘exclusive’ in what can be considered as literature of the first order²². Murdoch instead is more open²³ but still very critical

²⁰ Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, trans. Emma Crawford and Mario von der Ruhr (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 119.

²¹ Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics*, 215.

²² Weil explicitly wrote about Homer’s *The Iliad*, Aeschylus’ *Prometheus* and Sophocles’ *Antigone*, *Electra*, and *Philoctetes*, but her writings and especially her notebooks are full of references to the other authors she loved, among others: Shakespeare (above all Shakespearean works she loved *King Lear*), Cervantes, Racine (especially *Phèdre*), Paul Valéry, George Herbert, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Francis of Assisi, Villon, Mallarmé, Molière, Dante, Goethe, and others. On her idea of literature see her essay ‘Literature and Morals’ in *Late Philosophical Writings*.

²³ About what she means by ‘great literature’, Murdoch writes in her essay ‘The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited’: ‘The persons whom I have here in mind, and whom I have called the great novelists, are of course Scott, Jane Austen, George Eliot, Tolstoy, especially Tolstoy - one could add other names, but these suffice to make the point. I realise it is paradoxical to call, for instance, Scott an un-Romantic writer; but I do not mind the paradox so

of existentialism, romanticism, and of philosophical novels²⁴. What I draw from their similar views on literature, is that attention is the essence of good literature. I highlight three features: a) it is beauty in literature that can *attract* and sustain our attention; b) by fixing her attention upon reality, the writer can *show* our human condition; c) this type of literature is morally valuable for it *extends* our vocabulary.

a) Beauty *attracts* attention

Following Plato's lesson, both Weil and Murdoch indicate beauty²⁵ as

long as the meaning is clear. In calling these novelists the great ones I do not exclude other types of greatness - though it is part of my thesis that this is probably the greatest sort of greatness. It is true that we find in the nineteenth century other remarkable novelists (Dostoevsky, Melville, Emily Brontë, Hawthorne) to whom we would not want to deny a first place, and to whom the title 'Romantic', in my sense, could more readily be applied: writers who give the impression of externalising a personal conflict in a tightly conceived self-contained myth; and it would be perverse to argue that they are great in spite of their Romanticism' (Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics*, 272).

²⁴ Murdoch does not see her novels as 'philosophical novels'. In her view, for instance, Sartre's novels display 'the structure of his own thought' (Iris Murdoch, *Sartre: Romantic Rationalist* (London: Vintage, 1999), 49), but in this he fails to be a great novelist, as his novels are not meant to try to represent 'something more' that philosophy cannot rationally explain. The perpetual analysis carried out by his characters gives the reader a sense of detachment and so a 'drying and emptying effect'. In the search for everyday life, Sartre's novels end up showing, for Murdoch, only neurosis and abstraction. Murdoch had at first welcomed Sartre's 'passionate desire to analyse' the details of human life, but she later comes to consider him as lacking 'an apprehension of the absurd irreducible uniqueness of people and their relations with each other' (Murdoch, *Sartre: Romantic Rationalist*, 146). His characters are worlds with no magic, she writes, and so they do not 'enchant', failing to portray the contingency and messiness of human life.

²⁵ Weil's view is more extreme on this than Murdoch's. For Weil, the beauty of creation is everywhere, it is us human beings who, with the logic of force, cover it and hide it. In reality, beauty is everywhere in creation, and it is thus a *metaxù*, a bridge which connects creation to transcendence (God). God is always absent from the world, but we can see Her signs through the beauty that attracts our attention.

‘the only spiritual thing which we love by instinct’²⁶ and which attracts unselfish attention. Murdoch describes it best in her famous example of the ‘kestrel moment’ as an occasion for what she calls a moment of ‘unselfing’²⁷. She writes:

I am looking out of my window in an anxious and resentful state of mind, oblivious of my surroundings, brooding perhaps on some damage done to my prestige. Then suddenly I observe a hovering kestrel. In a moment everything is altered. The brooding self with its hurt vanity has disappeared. There is nothing now but kestrel. And when I return to thinking of the other matter it seems less important. And of course this is something which we may also do deliberately: give attention to nature in order to clear our minds of selfish care²⁸.

Murdoch notices that contemplation of beauty in art requires the same quality of detachment needed for contemplation of beauty in nature and that the attention fixed on art and on nature is in both cases ‘rewarded by the enjoyment of beauty’. She observes that when we witness good or bad actions, instead, it is more difficult to pay the sustained attention that could bring moral change, for in morality what is missing is the component of aesthetic pleasure. The latter is felt only through our aesthetic encounter with the world (‘We are attracted to the real in the guise of the beautiful and the response to this attraction brings joy’²⁹), instead, writes Murdoch, ‘in the case of morality, although there are sometimes rewards, the idea of a reward is out of place’³⁰.

Murdoch, following Weil, observes that through beauty we can be attracted to art even if the content is something unpleasant³¹. For in-

²⁶ Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics*, 370.

²⁷ A concept for which she takes inspiration from Weil’s idea of *decréation*. For a thorough analysis of the difference between Weil’s and Murdoch’s perspectives on the role of the Self in attention see Panizza, *The Ethics of Attention*.

²⁸ Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics*, 369.

²⁹ Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics*, 425.

³⁰ Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics*, 353.

³¹ Attention (or love) towards works of art like *King Lear*, which portrays something terrible, is happiness, says Murdoch (Gillian Dooley, ed., *From a Tiny Corner in the House of Fiction: Conversations with Iris Murdoch* (Columbia, SC: University South Carolina Press, 2003), 135).

stance, things we socially isolate, reject, or exclude because we fear them or because they disgust us, through art they can become the subjects of our gaze. Indeed, the experience of beauty in art does not follow the content of what is portrayed, for instance, in its positive harmonic elements, but for the modalities in which, for example the story, even an unpleasant story, is narrated. The artist allows the viewer (or the reader) the experience of beauty through her effort of unselfing and through paying attention. If on hand it is true, as Murdoch points out, that from beauty in nature to beauty in art we move to 'a more difficult region' (for 'Art is less accessible than nature'), on the other, it is 'also more edifying since it is actually a human product'³².

Nonetheless, there seems to be a difference between beauty which emerges in literature, and beauty in other forms of art. The beauty that emerges from the narration is not like the one that grabs hold of us in front of the kestrel, nor it is the same as the one we experience in front of a painting or a piece of music. Beauty through literature does not attract us immediately but requires a duration in time to manifest itself and so while it attracts it also asks for 'sustained attention', which is also engaged through a 'truth-seeking' quest (we want to know how the story ends) which, as I mentioned earlier, is a crucial characteristic of attention³³. I argue that literature has a privileged relation to sustained attention which, as I said at the beginning of this paper, is the one that in today's time we feel more difficult to achieve. 'Sustaining attention helps us not to skip forward, and to stay with what is there, even if it hurts'³⁴. Literature helps us to practice maintaining the grip, which is morally valuable because in life we tend to seek comfort and retreat into illusion when facing 'passages' of our life-story that we do not want to hear or see.

'The spectacle of the good', as Murdoch calls it, can certainly be seen when, for example, we witness a good human being and their actions. She does not deny that 'morality is quite largely a matter of ac-

³² Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics*, 370.

³³ The 'truth-seeking', as Panizza explains, 'in the Platonic world that informs Murdoch's and Weil's thinking, is *eros*' (Caprioglio Panizza, *The Ethics of Attention*, 25). It does not mean that attention involves seeking something specific, rather it means that attention implies an openness towards the outward reality, and in the case of art, it is an openness towards the reality of the work of art.

³⁴ Caprioglio Panizza, 143.

tions' and that 'the practice of personal relations is the fundamental school of virtue'³⁵. However, what Murdoch tells us is that in witnessing a moral action the experience is perhaps 'more mixed and less efficacious' and 'tend to be less clear'³⁶. I believe the reason for this is that our Self, in front of actions, can easily get involved in self-centred projections, while because of the immediate 'unselfing' experience that we can have with beauty, art-beauty, while being 'not essential', it still 'provides work for the spirit'. Weil says that when we encounter beautiful things in the world, we are filled with the immediate desire for them to exist. There is a distance that beauty requires of us; a step back that allows attention³⁷. What Murdoch points out is that although art is 'a kind of treat'³⁸, it still 'remains available and vivid as an experience of how egoism can be purified by intelligent imagination'³⁹. By fixing her attention on ordinary reality, the artist allows the beauty of the world to emerge, and by witnessing that attention through the art-object, the viewer (or the reader) is asked in turn for the moral effort of sustained attention. Through this mechanism, art's role is that of 'an educator and revealer', as Murdoch writes, it 'teaches quiet attention'⁴⁰.

³⁵ Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics*, 453.

³⁶ 'The good artist is a vehicle of truth, he formulates ideas which would otherwise remain vague and focuses attention upon facts which can then no longer be ignored' (Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics*, 235).

³⁷ 'Beauty is, as Plato says, visibly transcendent' (Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics*, 453).

³⁸ Murdoch explains: 'It is, like Kant's Sublime, an extra. We can be saved without seeing the Alps or the Cairngorms, and without Titian and Mozart too. We have to make moral choices, we do not have to enjoy great art and doubtless many good people never do. But surely great art points in the direction of the good and is at least more valuable to the moralist as an auxiliary than dangerous as an enemy. How, when, whether bad art (of which of course there is a great deal) is morally damaging is, as we know, a deep question not easily answered. For great art to exist a general practice of art must exist; and even trivial art is a fairly harmless consolation, as Plato himself seems prepared to admit in the *Laws*' (Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics*, 453/54).

³⁹ Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics*, 453.

⁴⁰ Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics*, 453.

b) The author *shows* the human condition

If most art is for Murdoch 'mere fiction and consolation which distorts reality'⁴¹, instead, the good writer is the one that, amid our time's lack of any belief in the value of reality and truth, attempts 'to invent new religious imagery (or twist old religious imagery)'⁴² by portraying the human condition without any consolation and at the same time encompassing it with total compassion. Murdoch writes:

Consider what we learn from contemplating the characters of Shakespeare or Tolstoy or the paintings of Velasquez or Titian. What is learnt here is something about the real quality of human nature, when it is envisaged, in the artist's just and compassionate vision, with a clarity which does not belong to the self-centred rush of ordinary life⁴³.

Both Weil and Murdoch describe this type of literature as the one in which the author's inspiration is impersonal⁴⁴, and in which the single events and the single individuals of the story are encompassed and put against a background that transcends them, without providing any com-

⁴¹ Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics*, 86.

⁴² Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics*, 226.

⁴³ Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics*, 353.

⁴⁴ Weil defines the 'impersonal' as a place 'made for God' at the centre of the human heart, a point of view where the ego no longer places a screen between the creator and creation. The impersonal, the seed where God can descend, exists only within the human being: 'God loves the perspective of creation which can be seen only from where I stand, and I obscure it' (Simone Weil, *First and Last Notebooks: Supernatural Knowledge* (Wipf and Stock, 2015), 72). The author's voice is an impersonal voice emerging from her standpoint on the world. As Weil writes: the poet de-creates, 'the poet imitates God. (...) The poet is a person; yet in moments when he reaches poetic perfection, he is shot through by an impersonal inspiration. It is in his mediocre moments that his inspiration is a personal one'. As for Murdoch: 'Of course great artists are 'personalities' and have special styles; even Shakespeare occasionally, though very occasionally, reveals a personal obsession. But the greatest art is 'impersonal' because it shows us the world, our world and not another one, with a clarity which startles and delights us simply because we are not used to looking at the real world at all' (Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics*, 352).

fort to their condition (a condition that reflects also ours, of us readers). ‘Of course great artists are ‘personalities’ and have special styles’, so they are rooted in their standpoint on the world (in their time and space). It is the inspiration to be impersonal, which means without the filter of personal fantasies of the narrating self which makes the poet able to represent compassionately the truth of human relationship with reality. For both Weil and Murdoch, an example of this is the author of *The Iliad* who does not take any side, and thus ‘one is barely aware that the poet is a Greek and not a Trojan’⁴⁵.

By engaging with good art and literature, we can get a glimpse of our existential condition, that is of beings always using fantasies to cope with reality:

We today have no great or essential difficulty in understanding plays written by Greeks in the fifth century BC. We make, in many respects though not in all, the same kinds of moral judgements as the Greeks did, and we recognise good or decent people in times and literatures remote from our own. Patroclus, Antigone, Cordelia, Mr Knightley, Alyosha. Patroclus’s invariable kindness. Cordelia’s truthfulness. (...) And this, when one reflects on it, is a remarkable testimony to the existence of a single durable human nature⁴⁶

That all is vanity and that we are subjected to utter chanciness becomes clear from within the narration of the characters’ moral journey. For Murdoch ‘Art is about the pilgrimage from appearance to reality (the subject of every good play and novel)’: Novels ‘expose vanity and inculcate humility. They are amazingly moral’⁴⁷.

c) The moral value of literature: it *extends* our vocabulary

Murdoch stresses the importance of narration in ethics as an auxiliary in gaining a better understanding of ourselves and of others. Therefore, a renewal in language, which is seen as more than a mere analytical tool,

⁴⁵ Simone Weil, *The Iliad or the Poem of Force*, trans. Mary McCarthy (Pennsylvania, 1956), 32.

⁴⁶ Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics*, 229.

⁴⁷ Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, Reprint edition (London: Penguin Books, 1994), 97.

can occur through an expansion of the vocabulary we use for our constant narrations.

Not all our new concepts come to us in the context of language; but the attempt to verbalise them may result not in frustration but in a renewal of language. This is par excellence the task of poetry. So there is give and take; words may determine a sense, or a fresh experience may renew words⁴⁸.

Indeed, if values are moral features of the world, what is needed for Murdoch is a deeper attention on ordinary life and a richer vocabulary to speak about those values:

We need more concepts in terms of which to picture the substance of our being; it is through an enriching and deepening of concepts that moral progress takes place. Simone Weil said that morality was a matter of attention, not of will. We need a new vocabulary of attention⁴⁹

This role given to narration and story-telling, which results from the relevance she gives to the interior life of the mind, allows her to indicate literature, among other forms of art, as the richest source for morals, for 'if stories are told, virtue will be portrayed'⁵⁰. Novels especially provide a picture of 'the total vision of life'⁵¹ of the writer, and so her

⁴⁸ Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics*, 36.

⁴⁹ Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics*, 293.

⁵⁰ Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics*, 233.

⁵¹ In her essay 'Vision and Choice in Morality', Murdoch writes: 'When we apprehend and assess other people we do not consider only their solutions to specifiable practical problems, we consider something more elusive which may be called their total vision of life, as shown in their mode of speech or silence, their choice of words, their assessments of others, their conception of their own lives, what they think attractive or praiseworthy, what they think funny: in short the configurations of their thought which show continually in their reactions and conversation. These things, which may be overtly and comprehensibly displayed or inwardly elaborated and guessed at, constitute what, making different points in the two metaphors, one may call the texture of a man's being or the nature of his personal vision' (Murdoch *Existentialists and Mystics*, 80/81).

“moral nature” or “moral being”⁵².

Literature is privileged among other forms of art because it is eminently about ‘moral beings’ in their relationships with each other. It is a proof of attention paid by the writer and at the same it portrays degrees of attention and inattention through the narration of the characters, and through this we are shown human beings, ourselves and the others, as always inherently moral beings. ‘Other people are, after all, the most interesting features of our world and in some way the most poignantly and mysteriously alien’⁵³, and literature is capable of letting us ‘see’ the others, in a Platonic sense. Indeed, literature not only includes aesthetic pleasures but also moral pleasures. As Murdoch explains: ‘In portraying characters the author displays most clearly his discernment, his truthfulness, his justice, or his lack of these qualities, and one of our enjoyments lies in considering and judging his judgements. The highest pleasures of literature and, one might say, of art generally, are in this sense moral pleasures’. It is the place of our ‘most fundamental insight’ for its being ‘a human product “about” human affairs in a direct sense’⁵⁴.

Art, better than philosophy, is able to ‘touch’ the most mysterious features of human existence (‘Perhaps art does it best after all’⁵⁵). Indeed, art contains, within the order given by form, the element of messiness and contingency (‘Even at its most exquisite art is incomplete’) ‘because of the muddle of human life and the ambiguity and playfulness of aesthetic form, art can at best only explain partly, only reveal almost: and of course any complex work contains impurities and accidents which we choose to ignore’⁵⁶.

‘Good’ literature, as Jan Zwicky observes, does not provide the reader with a ready-made enclosed story to be passively read, rather it gives multiple detailed inputs that the reader can imaginatively connect in infinite constellations of meanings encompassed in the one whole narrated story⁵⁷. It reproduces our condition in our lives. This type of literature

⁵² Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics*, 81.

⁵³ Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics*, 257.

⁵⁴ Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics*, 370.

⁵⁵ Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 500.

⁵⁶ Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics*, 460.

⁵⁷ Jan Zwicky, *The Experience of Meaning* (Montreal Kingston London Chicago: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2019).

shows but does not tell. As Zwicky writes: ‘When we are being shown something, it is as though the mind holds its breath; attention is focused, the experience of time is suspended. We wait for all the pieces ‘to fall into place’; and when they do, insight flashes on the mind’s eye’.⁵⁸ In this sense, literature does not provide an enclosed analytical argument like philosophy would, but rather offers the possibility for an imaginative exploration. This trait marks its potential to inspire attention, for its being an object of attention (of the reader), exhibiting attention (of the writer), about possible degrees of attention and inattention (of the characters), and which, finally, can extend our vocabulary of attention. And the more our vocabulary about values extends, the more we can ‘read’ differently reality and pay attention. This primary connection between attention and literature is what makes of the latter ‘not a diversion or a side issue’ but, as Murdoch writes: ‘the most educational of all human activities and a place in which the nature of morality can be seen’.⁵⁹

Conclusions

In Murdoch’s and Weil’s sense, the kind of teaching provided by literature is educational but non-didactic. It is not a lesson with content in the sense of ‘a message’, but rather it can inspire a new orientation of our gaze towards reality, for ‘art can reveal without explaining’⁶⁰ and extends our vocabulary on human situations.

As Weil observes in the first *Notebook*, literature displaces us from the centre of our self, by making us spectators of a narration that is about someone else, in their independence and in their needs and desires. It is an exercise of getting out our habitual standpoint and habitual thinking, and this ‘(...) is automatically to become more moral; to see the real is to see its independence and ergo its claims’.⁶¹

To conclude, Simone Weil in her 1942 ‘Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies’ suggested practising attention through certain physical labour in contact with nature, through school studies when intended as not finalised to self-complacency, self-aggrandising, or success

⁵⁸ Zwicky, *The Experience of Meaning*, 97.

⁵⁹ Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics*, 372.

⁶⁰ Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics*, 458.

⁶¹ Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics*, 425.

but for the sake of practising attention (like the study of ancient dead languages). These studies, like great art, writes Murdoch, can teach ‘how real things can be looked at and loved without being seized and used, without being appropriated into the greedy organism of the self’⁶².

Ultimately, attention is worth practising towards anything in the world: ‘this exercise of *detachment* is difficult and valuable whether the thing contemplated is a human being or the root of a tree or the vibration of a colour or a sound’⁶³. However, considering the arts’ potential of being ‘a clue to morals’⁶⁴, and especially of literature for ‘words are where we live as human beings and as moral and spiritual agents’⁶⁵, it follows that perhaps literature can be, as Murdoch writes, the most educational thing we have against a distracted and self-indulgent society.

⁶² Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics*, 353.

⁶³ Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics*, 353.

⁶⁴ Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics*, 202.

⁶⁵ Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics*, 242.