ODD, UNNATURAL ACTIVITIES: THE WRITING OF A PHILOSOPHICAL NOVEL

SAMANTHA HARVEY

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to find which practical aspects of craft are open to the realist novelist when writing philosophical fiction. Plato began a long tradition of intelligent thought on the subject, but even amongst novelists the discussion does not often sit at the practitioner's level, and does not address the how-to questions that arise when an author tries to write philosophical content into a fictional narrative.

In Section I, this study defines 'philosophical content' to characterise not only a body of enquiries that belong to western philosophical discourse, but also the mode these enquiries take, which, it is contended, is that of directness and discursiveness. The study then explores how such content can enter a novel's narrative in a way that is not unduly compromising to either the philosophy or the novel. The author's own novel, *All Is Song* – which is the creative counterpart to this study –provides the portal for this exploration. Sections II, V and VII revisit the philosophical content of a particular scene in the novel to see how it evolves with each rewrite and to trace the decision-making involved in the management of that content. Section III deals with an objection to the study's definition of philosophy and a 'philosophical novel', after which the remaining sections, IV, VI and VIII look respectively at the problems abstract ideas pose to literary realism, some responses to those problems as they pertain to the author's novel writing, and the degree to which *All Is Song* could be considered successful in fulfilling both its philosophical and literary aims.

Through this analysis and reflection, the study finds that while dialogue, in the Socratic tradition, is and remains one key way of realising discursive philosophy within a narrative, a far wider and deeper structuralising of that content is needed to make the contending ideas lived and felt. It holds that once such structuralisation has taken place, a

novel is not bound to the full execution of a discursive argument of the sort that exists in Platonic dialogues, say, and can express and sort philosophical ideas using an array of literary tools. The Conclusion (Section IX) suggests that this in part signals a move towards a less Platonic, more phenomenological sense of the way in which ideas can be given reality, and thus given form in the realism of the novel. The study does not conclude, however, that all discursive content should thus be 'dissolved' into extra-philosophical situations and events, but that the latter should act always to structuralise, exemplify, amplify and animate an idea or principle, and to give it as full a literary life as possible.

Contents

Introduction

Famously, according to Plato, there is an 'ancient quarrel' between the philosophers and the poets. By the 'philosophers' he did not mean generally those who think or who entertain large questions, but, more strongly and specifically, those who engage in the formal practice of reasoned thought and argument, with the ambition of arriving at a position of greater clarity about the nature of the thing or concept in question. By 'poets' he meant those who use words to create fictions and illusions, who evoke the real world with representative images of it; 'novelists' were not a known entity in Plato's time, but we can reasonably assume he would have included those also in this definition.

It is precisely because Plato regarded philosophy as a formal, truth-seeking discipline that he perceived there to be a quarrel at hand. This quarrel was given unequivocal expression in the *Republic* when he banished the poets from his ideal state, and it expresses an old and deep-set fractiousness between what we might call the mind and the heart. For Plato, the mind that philosophises concerns itself with fixed forms and concepts that reach for what is real, and aims to get there by the process of reasoned investigation, to 'behold the things in themselves' as he says, rather than the way they appear to the senses. To behold, that is, the things that 'can only be seen with the eye of the mind'.[1] And then, into this purity of vision steps the poet who aims not at all at what is real but at the counterfeit representations of it, the simulacra, the sensual, emotional and non-rational. The poet, he believes, is concerned with appearances rather than essences and with the vicarious and the removed.

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[1] Plato, *Republic* (Penguin, 2007) p.263. The 'ancient quarrel' is talked about at *Republic* 607a.

Plato's banishment of the poets is extreme; he holds that the poet's aims are not only unlike those of the philosopher's, but are also a menace to the philosophical cause, which is a menace to anybody who wants to live a life of self knowledge - that is, a good life. For Plato, no true philosophy can be done in the poet's obscuring presence. As the philosopher Stephen Mulhall says, 'Against this background, merely banishing the poet might seem like an excessively charitable response.'[2]

I might as well say from the outset that I find Plato's position hard to swallow if for no other reason than that banishment of the so-called problem seems a very unphilosophical way of resolving it. But this thesis isn't meant as a critique of Plato; whether or not I agree with the full flourishing of his views as they appear in the *Republic*, I find it impossible not to accept the basic contention that exists between philosophy and literature, where the two are distinctive forms, distinctive practices. I am making no theoretical point when I say this; I find it impossible to disregard the ancient quarrel because, and only because, I feel I've experienced something of it first hand in the writing of *All Is Song*, the novel that accompanies and prompts this thesis.

All Is Song attempts to answer the question: what might happen to Socrates if he were alive today? Its main character is loosely modelled on Socrates and through that character I try sometimes to carry out the methods of the Socratic *elenchus* – the use of questions and answers to render the opponent's views untenable. Thus the subject matter makes it an inherently philosophical novel to a degree, by which I mean one that argues out philosophical questions, as Socrates did, and one which implies a certain amount of discussion of ideas on matters such as truth, morality, divinity, freedoms and rights. Yet it's also one that has striven to be realist and to engage the reader in a world of events and

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[2] Stephen Mulhall, *The Wounded Animal: J.M.Coetzee and the Difficulty of Reality in Literature and Philosophy* (Princeton University Press, 2009) p.2

relationships that feel meaningful and true, and to be emotionally, as well as philosophically, alive.

I am using the word 'philosophy' and its derivatives here more or less as Plato did, in the stricter sense of its being a formal discipline, and not in the more general sense of thoughtfulness, even if that thoughtfulness is profound. This discipline implies not just an act of thinking, but a *mode* of thinking which is inherently reasoned, rigorous and discursive. I define my terms and my rationale for them more closely in Section I, but it seems important to clarify this single point now because it is only with that stricter sense of the word that the issues I go on to confront come into being.

In the writing of *All Is Song* I have produced some forty or so computer files of discarded material; on glancing through these files I find that much of what has been discarded is that which is directly philosophical in the sense outlined very briefly above: philosophical in the discursive mode, the mode employed by Socrates and thus borrowed by me. These are scenes in which characters have detailed conversations about truth or wrongdoing, say, or in which I subject a character to the grilling of the *elenchus*. Very few of these passages made it into the final draft of the novel; none made it in their original uncut form.

Why? On a reread I found those episodes wooden and difficult to follow. So much of the character work I'd done hitherto seemed to flatten and fade once those characters were talking philosophically; it was as if they were little more than mouthpieces for a viewpoint I, the author, wanted to put across. Hence they seemed contrived, slightly didactic or pompous, or maybe just irrelevant.[3]

In her discussions on philosophy and literature, Iris Murdoch states that philosophy is 'a very odd unnatural activity'. Where literary modes, like the novel, are 'very natural to us, very close to ordinary life', philosophy is far from it; it asks us to think in

[3] An opinion that was shared by readers of the novel in these early stages.

ways that are difficult for us - it is not a playful subject, she says, and it is practised in earnest by very few people.[4] Philosophical fiction is therefore, in her view, extremely difficult to write, impossible almost – an assertion about which she is so vehement that she goes so far as to say that the 'philosophical novel' is a very rare thing, and the only example she will name is Sartre's *Nausea*.[5]

It is not that I accept Murdoch's claims without question and I will come back to them in this thesis in the context of my own process. But again, I find I must agree at least on the face of it – the directly philosophical episodes in my novel have felt to me odd and unnatural to write and to read. Yet it has never been acceptable for me to concede that my novel had to have moments of oddness, or of pomposity, distance and irrelevancy, if it wanted to be philosophical. For myself, the novel is nothing without heart. The way I see this manifest in my own writing is in beauty – the creation of a beautiful thing no matter what its subject, and I don't mean by this merely lovely writing, descriptiveness, ornamentation – though to some limited extent I mean that. I mean something for the heart as well as for the senses, something that doesn't only please but deeply resonates (and maybe at times it will resonate at the expense of pleasing). I don't think something resonates for a reader because it's beautiful, but rather that it becomes beautiful because it resonates - so I am always trying to find that low boom that sounds beneath the details of human life and use the artistry of the novel to communicate it.

This is all to say that there was something about those directly philosophical passages that broke the resonance, and thus dispelled the beauty. As soon as my protagonist, William, started analysing concepts like justice or morality in a Socratic way to try to reach a definition of terms, the novel's stride was broken. A nerve was touched recently when I read the words of Hermione in *Women in Love*: 'I really do not want to be

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[4] Iris Murdoch, 'Literature and Philosophy' in *Existentialists and Mystics* (Chatto & Windus 1997) (hereafter 'LP') p.8 & p.6 respectively for each quotation

[5] 'LP', p.20

forced into all this criticism and analysis of life,' she says. 'I really *do* want to see things in their entirety, with their beauty left to them, and their wholeness, their natural holiness.'[6] It sounded like a complaint somebody in my novel could make after a conversation with William. It does seem that there is something sniping at best and destructive at worst about the constant analysis and criticism of things. 'Something must be left to the Lord', Ursula then says to Hermione, which means I think that some things must be left as they are and always have been, undissected by human thought. If this is true for life, it's true too, at least in part, for the realist novel which attempts to emulate life; maybe there are some terrains this sort of novel finds difficult to negotiate, the philosophical being one, and maybe, for its own sake, it should not bother to try.

But any advice to steer clear of the subject is of no use to me; I wanted to face philosophical questions because I think philosophy is important, it matters; and I chose to write on the theme of Socrates precisely because I'm interested in this apparent lack of fit between philosophy and life, and because I wanted my novel to comment on it; I chose Socrates because no other human being exemplifies this lack of fit more than he, who was – if Plato is to be believed – killed for the relentless criticism and analysis of life of the sort that Hermione above (and Athens) so disliked.[7] I didn't want to back away from the difficulty, but to face it. In a way, my problems with writing the novel illustrate the very problem the novel is aiming to expose: the seeming lack of ease between the kind of practical, improvised thought that sees us through daily life and the lengthy, analytical and critical thought that sees us through a philosophical problem.

One might say that unease is the point – in being about Socrates, the novel is about a man whose attitudes *do* jar and *are* difficult. Indeed, it *is* the point; it is the dramatic heart of the novel. Yet, while I wanted to write a novel that might challenge, I didn't want

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[6] D.H. Lawrence, *Women in Love* (Wordsworth Classics) p. 146

[7] Whether Plato is to be believed is another story altogether, but there isn't time for it here. Insofar as my novel goes, I've based almost all of my interpretions of Socrates on the Platonic accounts and took it as read that he did die at least in part for his philosophical methods, and not entirely for other political reasons.

to write one that is jarring and difficult. This has been the ongoing contention of the project - how to portray the intolerance of a community to continued philosophical probing, while not making my novel – in its philosophical probing – intolerable to the reader. I'm not sure I have ever completely resolved that question, though the whole endeavour of this discussion lies in my attempts to.

Most critical approaches to questions about philosophical fiction arise from within the various disciplines of philosophy or from the areas of linguistics or literary theory.[8] Even where they are motivated by writerly concerns, that is, written by novelists who are interested in the debate precisely because it concerns their own writing practice, still these authors rarely write as *practitioners*, at the level of craft. Even Iris Murdoch, who is one of the most eminent speakers for the bridge between the two subjects, writes mainly as a philosopher and essayist on this subject, not as a novelist. This lack of attention to the writerly question of the philosophical novel points maybe to the fact that writers, no matter how challenging or thoughtful, are reluctant to make any claims to philosophy, or to their status as philosophers.[9]

There is both a practical and a theoretical dimension to this subject. It is the practical, let's say writerly, dimension I will focus on most here, because my interest in the subject is as a practitioner: it concerns the technical craft of working philosophical content

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[8] I will go on to mention some of these – I am thinking of Bakhtin's *The Dialogic Imagination*, Richard Rorty (in particular *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*), Iris Murdoch in her extensive writings on philosophy and literature in *Existentialists and Mystics*, Martha Nussbaum's *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature*, the debate taken up in the 1990s by the philosophers Cora Diamond and Onora O'Neill, and carried forward more recently by Stephen Mulhall, as a small sample.

[9] Other examples of novelists who have written in this way: Milan Kundera in *The Art of the Novel*, J.M. Coetzee in 'What is Realism?' and in various other essays, and John Gardner in *On Moral Fiction.*
Of those spokespeople for literature and philosophy, I'd say that J. M. Coetzee is one of the most prevalent now. His piece *The Lives of Animals*, which appears in the novel *Elizabeth Costello*, is generally taken by philosophers to be a work of philosophy. And yet I quote him saying, 'I am not a philosopher. I have neither the learning nor the intellectual equipment.' (quotation from p.422, 'An interview with J.M. Coetzee conducted by Richard Begam', *Contemporary Literature*, Vol.33 No.3 (Autumn 1992) pp 419 – 431
I think he is being disingenuous here – he clearly does have both of those qualities and must know it, but nonetheless he seems reluctant to don the title 'philosopher'. Why, I wonder? Is it modesty, or self-defence, or a general nervousness about what being a philosopher would require of him within and outside of his novels? I say more about this perceived tension in Coetzee in Section IV.iii

into a realist novel, given the type of subject philosophy is and the specific types of problems it poses. To undergo the how-to nature of this project, I use Sections II, IV and VII to draw on my experience of writing *All Is Song* by visiting the same philosophical content three times to see how it evolved within the novel. In the intervening sections I then address the questions these visits have made. Why is it, for example, that a scene that works on its own might not work in a novel? What has to be added novelistically to a scene that compromises it philosophically? How can formal ingredients of the novel, such as characterisation and point of view, be used philosophically? How can philosophical ingredients be used novelistically?

The theoretical dimension concerns whether a work of literature (here, specifically, a novel) can be truly philosophical, and it is a question that is in turn really asking, *what is philosophy?* This dimension to the subject is too broad and deep for the focus of my discussion here, but I do acknowledge it. In fact my acknowledgement of it is more profound than courteous; the question and my sense of what philosophy is and what it asks of us is something I come to in Section III. I then return to it in the Conclusion when I make a bigger point about where – between the writer and the reader - the responsibility for 'being philosophical' lies, a point which I draw from some of the more practical conclusions reached in this thesis.

But I shouldn't speak only of the difficulties of writing philosophical fiction as if philosophy is the novelist's enemy, since I'm sure that the two disciplines present new possibilities for one another that are mutually rewarding. After all, if philosophy is a difficult subject in the world then the novel has much to offer it, since part of the glory of writing fiction is in the compressing, shaping, tilting, skewing and lighting of old forms into new forms. If they don't look that interesting or valid in the world, no matter – the novel is brilliant at looking into dark and narrow corners and finding light and life there. So although much of what follows involves a grappling with adversity, some of that

grappling lies not only in trying to overcome the difficulties, but also in exploiting their wealth.

In short, then, my specific and practical question is simply this: how might a novelist succeed in putting philosophical content into a novel? And I think that, like most simple questions, the exploration is complex. What do I mean by philosophical content, or for that matter a novel, and what would count as 'succeeding'? Also, the inroads are multiple; so my point of access to it here is through one single philosophical scene in *All Is Song*, which acts as a portal to a set of questions and concerns. I say one single scene, but the truth is far from that; it underwent several incarnations before it found its final and radically transformed life within the novel. I will therefore trace its journey to examine how and why I changed it, and how 'philosophical' it and the novel as a whole really looked by the end.

I also return regularly to Murdoch's unexplained – and to me intriguing - assertion that *Nausea* is 'very rare' in its being a novel that can be counted as truly philosophical. What might she mean by this? What does *Nausea* do that makes it exemplary in this sense? By returning to her comment and to *Nausea* itself, I aim to anchor some of my own reflexive process in an external text, and by doing so hope to come closer to answering my central question.

I. Brief definitions

i. A novel

Firstly, when I consider how to put philosophical content into a novel, I mean a realist novel. Literary realism isn't meant here in the strict sense of its belonging to any specific era of writing, or having any political or ideological motive. It is meant more as a statement about the novel's attempt to show life as it is rather than as it should be (as in a romantic, heroic novel, or a fable, say) or could be (as in science fiction). This isn't to say that a realist novel is shackled to how things are and can never refer beyond them - out of that attention to life 'as it is' there might of course grow a suggestion of how it could or should be. But its premise is the representation of reality as it is in a particular time and place, one that matches our experience or, if outside of our experience, the things we can reasonably believe to be true.

ii. Philosophy

What, then, do I mean by 'philosophy'? It could mean many things, but, as I indicated in the introduction, I take it to mean that subject which deals discursively – through reason and logic – with arguments that enquire after the nature of knowledge, existence and reality, questions like, 'What can be known about the world external to us?' or 'What constitutes selfhood over time?' or 'To what extent are non-human animals conscious?'

That enquiries into these questions should be discursive is crucial in marking out where everyday contemplation and curiosity ends and philosophy – as I understand it here - begins. Of course, we think all the time, but philosophy is not synonymous with thinking

any more than maths is synonymous with counting. And of course, philosophy deals with the stuff of life – who am I? What is there? Am I free? What can I believe? How should I behave? Being part of the stuff of life these concerns will reach into our ongoing experience of being alive – our actions, decisions, thoughts and emotions. They will also present themselves in anything which confronts life, as a novel does. A novel incorporates the questions of philosophy in the same sense that it incorporates words and grammar – by implication and inevitably. But that does not mean that we are all philosophers, or that every novel is philosophical. The presence of a question like 'Am I free?' is not enough to constitute philosophy; it is the discursive working out of a response to that question, with rigour, reason and logic and a systematised scrutiny, that begins to make it philosophical.[10]

I ask forgiveness for the narrowness of this definition; I make it in full awareness of its narrowness and also in awareness of the critics who would dismantle it (whose arguments I visit briefly in Section III). My choice of this straitened definition comes because it represents the type of philosophy I have tried to do in my novel. I don't claim that there are no ways of reaching an understanding about the nature of knowledge, existence and reality other than through these discursive means, or even that these means are the best way. Nor do I claim that it is better to be 'philosophical' (in this sense) than not.[11] There are many brilliantly and deeply thoughtful people who wouldn't claim to be philosophers as such (Coetzee, as mentioned in the footnote on page 10, is one). And certainly there are many brilliantly and deeply thoughtful novelists who would probably

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[10] I recognise that this definition of discursiveness is distinctly Western, and isn't assumed to speak for philosophy worldwide. See for example this from Martha P.Y. Cheung: 'Philosophy, in the sense in which the term has been defined, however vaguely, in the West, with its emphasis on the features of systematicity, reflection, rationality and division into sub-disciplines such as metaphysics, logic and epistemology, is not something universal.' ('From p. 394,'Theory' to 'Discourse': The Making of a Translation Anthology' *Bulletin of the School of African and Oriental Studies*, University of London vol.66 No.3 (2003) pp.390 – 401 She writes this in relation to a 'battle for the power of discourse' between the Eastern and Western approaches to both philosophy and science. My definition only pertains to the 'Western discourse' which is the one that is relevant to the subject in hand, and I fully realise its limited and partial nature.

[11] Plato, on the other hand, would say that it *is* better to be philosophical, and Socrates that it is tantamount to a lack of humanity to fail to properly examine one's life. So again, and perhaps needless to say, what I write here is just my definition and not meant to speak for philosophers and philosophy per se.

not want their novels to be thought of as philosophical – Lawrence and Woolf being two.[12] I don't say for a moment that novels not containing discursive philosophy are by necessity any less thoughtful, challenging or wonderful, only that they are driven by different concerns.

iii. Philosophical novels

Thus, when I talk about 'philosophical novels' in this work I mean those which concern themselves directly and as discursively as possible with philosophical questions. To say 'this novel is about freedom' – as you might about Updike's *Rabbit, Run* for example - is not enough in itself to make it count as a philosophical novel. To say, however, 'this novel is about the existentialist doctrine of freedom' - as we do about Camus' *The Outsider* - might be enough. Even then it would depend on the extent to which the novel really did concern itself with that doctrine; if it toyed with it thematically, then probably not. But if it played out an exploration of it through the narrative then it might well (and *The Outsider* does); if it used its various literary elements to contrive towards the direct expression of that doctrine – as, arguably, *The Outsider* doesn't, but Sartre's *Nausea* does - perhaps then, if there is such a thing as a philosophical novel at all, you have it. [13]

I say that such a novel will deal 'as discursively as possible' with philosophical questions because it isn't realistic to think that the narratives of these novels must be

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[12] There was the view amongst the modernist writers – a view to which Woolf subscribed – that philosophy was a danger to human intimacy, sensitivity, connection; the most obvious expression of this was perhaps between Mr and Mrs Ramsey in *To the Lighthouse*. What about, in Woolf's words, 'the little daily miracles, illuminations, matches struck unexpectedly in the dark' – the little human, relational things that stand opposed to the philosopher's logical aiming at Truth.
As for Lawrence: 'Damned philosophers,' he once said. 'Because (the philosopher) can think, he decides that nothing but thought matters.'

[13] Some people think there isn't and can't be such a thing; Iris Murdoch is one (her curious exception of *Nausea* notwithstanding) - but I'm only going to distract myself briefly with that debate, in the short section following this.

arranged in the style and language of a philosophical argument. There is no doubt that literary concessions have to be made to an argument in order for it to work in a novel – concessions which I will begin to explore much more after this section, given that they are part of the subject of this thesis. But I should add hastily that I don't have in mind a clear and definitive list of philosophical novels and I don't engage in a debate over whether this novel or that qualifies. I think that the tendency to classify breeds a tendency to be arbitrary; certainly all attempts I've made to identify 'philosophical novels' have ended in ambivalence and contradiction.

I only look in any depth at one novel here and that is Sartre's *Nausea*, and I choose that, as I have said, because it is the one novel Murdoch singles out as exemplary of the genre, and as such I want to understand why.[14] Perhaps there is already some indication here as to why; *Nausea* has the overt presence of some form of discursiveness within its narrative, a direct arguing out of existential principles as they are embodied in its protagonist, Antoine Roquentin. *All Is Song* is not at all like *Nausea* as a novel, nor as a piece of philosophy (if it is a piece of philosophy at all), and nor is it meant to be - but insofar as it also includes overt discursiveness, and also uses embodiment as a device, it does share my approach and I am fascinated to see how it goes about a project I myself have found so difficult.

Why Murdoch should have singled out *Nausea* and not any other canonical novels of the philosophical genre, such as *The Outsider*, is a matter of curiosity to me; it prompts me to wonder what Camus' novel might lack in her eyes, in this respect. She does say in her essay 'Against Dryness' that Camus does 'make a serious attempt upon the truth', which constitutes for her 'eloquence'; but she seems unwilling to go much further than this.[15]

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[14] I quote Murdoch: 'I can think of one good philosophical novel which I admire very much, Sartre's *La Nausée*. That does manage to express some interesting ideas about contingency and consciousness, and to remain a work of art which does not have to be read in the light of theories which the author has expressed elsewhere. It is a rare object.' LP, p. 20

[15] 'Against Dryness' in *Existentialists and Mystics*, p. 294

I have said myself above, in passing, that arguably *The Outsider* doesn't contrive towards the direct expression of existentialism in the way *Nausea* does. According to Paul Somers in a short comparative essay on *Nausea* and *The Outsider*, this lack of such direct expression in the latter is indeed the case and is to Camus' credit as a novelist. I am interested in a distinction Somers makes between a 'philosophical novel' and a 'novel by a philosopher', where *Nausea* is the former and *The Outsider* the latter. I glean from his argument, which clearly favours *The Outsider*, that to him the term 'philosophical novel' is slightly pejorative; what separates out *Nausea* and *The Outsider* is that the latter is an 'illustration of the existential theory of absurdity [which] is well conceived and well executed' whereas the former is a work that 'expresses [Sartre's] existential philosophy in an obvious and didactic manner', and he commits himself to that philosophy 'at the expense of the novel'.[16]

For all that Somers' essay is short and, in my view, amusingly over-opinionated, it is also sharp. His distinction between 'philosophical novel' and 'novel by a philosopher' seems to suggest that the former is by its nature didactic, and that it must sacrifice something novelistic to obtain something philosophical; Camus gets his dogmatic and didactic work out of the way in his essay *The Myth of Sisyphus*, says Somers, which can be read as a companion piece to *The Outsider* (though certainly not instead of it). Camus is 'spared the embarrassment' of using the word 'absurd' or 'exist' in its existential context in the way Sartre does – instead of labouring over philosophical terminology he can create passages that are 'less specific but more poetic'. He can, in other words, be free to be a novelist, not a philosopher.[17]

In one important way, Somers' comparison of these two novels indicates to me not only why Murdoch might have singled out *Nausea* as she does, but also why *Nausea* is

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[16] Paul Somers, 'Camus Si, Sartre No' p.699-700 in *The French Review*, vol XLII No. 5 (April 1969)
[17] 'Camus Si, Sartre No' p.696

more aligned than *The Outsider* to my own project. As Somers points out, Roquentin's intellectualism is the vessel for the novel's philosophy and he is aware of this philosophy and its terminology, he grapples directly with it, as here: 'The essential thing is contingency. I mean that, by definition, existence is not necessity. To exist is simply *to be there*'.[18]

Camus' Meursault, on the other hand, would never be caught with such words in his mouth. He is not an intellectual, he doesn't himself grapple with the questions but instead quite unconsciously lives them. As such, Somers holds, Meursault as the narrator makes *The Outsider* an easier novel – for all his deep faults and strange traits, Meursault is more likeable and unassuming, more 'human', less critical, less of a tortured intellectual and more a rogue (even if a sociopathic one). In a way, he is even childlike in his simple reactions and desires, and in his credulousness. 'He is setting an example on how to live, rather than passing judgement on how we live' says Somers.[19] And examples, for a reader, are easier to swallow than judgements, especially if those judgements might extend towards the way we ourselves live.

I agree in many ways – Meursault is the easier character and *The Outsider* is the easier novel. But what if an author *wants* to pass judgement on how we live? What if she wants to allow her character/s that role? I think Sartre did, and I know I have too. My protagonist needs to be able to present philosophical points and arguments in direct and discursive ways, he needs to be able to generate the philosophy and not only have it happen symbolically, and unwittingly, through him. In this way at least I am more sympathetic to Sartre's task than Camus', in the sense that there is more I can learn from it.

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[18] J-P. Sartre, *Nausea*, (Penguin Modern Classics, 1978) p.188
[19] 'Camus Si, Sartre No', p. 698

I have no idea if Murdoch would agree with Somers' distinction between a 'philosophical novel' and a 'novel by a philosopher', though she certainly does say, in her essay 'The Novelist as Metaphysician' that *Nausea* is didactic. My point is not to second guess this, nor to spend time comparing Sartre and Camus, but only to suggest some support for my notion here that a philosophical novel will deal directly and discursively with its philosophical content - perhaps also didactically - and that this is what 'earns' it its title, and what might make that content awkward to include. In any case I will say more along these lines in what follows after this section.

iv. Philosophical content

When, in turn, I talk about a novel's 'philosophical content' I mean the content within it that is dealt with, in some way, by reasoned and logical argument, and in such a way that is direct. This means that the presentation of the discursive material comes transparently, and not only (though probably as well as) by diffusion through literary means such as allusion, allegory and metaphor.

An example from *Nausea*. I extend the quotation from the previous page:

> The essential thing is contingency. I mean that, by definition, existence is not necessity. To exist is simply *to be there*; what appears exists, lets itself be *encountered*, but you can never *deduce* it. There are people, I believe, who have understood that. Only they have tried to overcome this contingency by inventing a necessary, causal being. But no necessary being can explain existence: contingency is not an illusion, an appearance which can be dissipated; it is absolute, and consequently perfect gratuitousness . . .

> that is what the Bastards – those who live on the Coteau Vert and the others – try to hide from themselves with their idea of rights.[20]

With the Bastards of the Coteau Vert we are plunged back into novel territory, since the author of a philosophical text cannot very well call all those who don't agree with him bastards – much as he might like to - whereas a character in a novel can. Until that point, though, the excerpt reads much like a textbook – in fact much like Sartre's own non-fiction text, *Being and Nothingness*. Compare this with Voltaire's allegorical novella *Candide*, which famously questions the philosophical principle of optimism - the idea that we live in the 'best of all possible worlds' - and was intended as a critique of Leibniz.

In the concluding chapter of *Candide*, the character known as 'the old woman' asks which is worse – to have suffered the kind of incredible misfortune that has befallen Candide, Pangloss and most of the novella's characters ('to be ravished one hundred times by negro pirates, to have one buttock cut off . . . to be whipped and chained . . . to be dissected'), or to 'remain here doing nothing'.

> 'This,' said Candide, 'is a big question.'
>
> This discourse gave birth to new reflections, and Martin especially concluded that man was born to live in the convulsions of disquiet, or in the lethargy of idleness. Though Candide did not absolutely agree to this; yet he was sure of nothing. Pangloss avowed that he had undergone dreadful sufferings; but having once maintained that everything went on as well as possible, he still maintained it, and at the same time believed nothing of it.[21]

Note here we do not see these 'new reflections'; nothing is argued out within the text even in this, the novella's philosophical crescendo if you like. While there is a strongly

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[20] *Nausea*, p. 188
[21] Voltaire, *Candide*, in *Candide and Other Tales* (Everyman, 1962) p. 204

philosophical point being made here about the naivety of optimism as personified in Candide, there is no directly discursive treatment of this material within the book as there is of existentialism in Sartre's *Nausea*, say. The point is entirely played out in events, situations and actions which form a web of cross-referencing symbols, from which a clear philosophical meaning can be teased (though maybe not a clear conclusion).

The same goes for other allegories such as Saramago's novel *Blindness* or *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ*, or Huxley's *Island*, or many more besides, and also for fables and biblical parables. Is this too why Murdoch doesn't cite, say, *The Outsider* as a philosophical novel, and why I hesitate to here, at least by my own definition? Because Camus uses the poetic, as Somers says, almost allegoric, to deliver his point, and steers quite clear of the discursively direct.

The fact that I don't include allegories, fables and parables in my consideration of philosophical fiction is only because they don't engage the discursive mode, and not because I discount them as examples of the genre - in fact they are probably the clearest examples of literary philosophy in that their narrative contrivance towards a particular philosophical (usually moral) outcome is what defines them. In this sense they are excellent guides for what I have aimed to do non-allegorically – that is, in a more realist fashion - in *All Is Song*: to coax the narrative into the Socratic conclusion that an unexamined life is not worth living. So, they warrant more attention and will get it in Section VII, when I talk more about how to build philosophical content into a narrative.

For now, let it be understood that whenever I refer to 'philosophy' or 'philosophical content' those terms should be taken as described here, and when I refer to novels I mean realist novels unless otherwise stated.

v. Success

As for 'success', what do I mean by succeeding in making a novel philosophical? The only unequivocal answer I can give is a negative one: I don't mean that its success as such would be its commercial viability, since that - if it's anything at all – is a measure and not a definition. A far more equivocal answer is that a successful philosophical novel should do true philosophy in a truly novelistic way – to find within in its own narrative structure entry points for philosophy and ways of carrying that philosophy along in its narrative flow. Whenever an art form is at its best it is because it's being absolutely and entirely that art form, in both justification and celebration of itself. At its best an encounter with another form or discipline won't impede it but rather enhance it, just as a good human relationship will enhance the qualities of the people partaking in it. Success, then, would for me lie in the marriage of these two disciplines without compromise to what is essential to each. What this definition means in practice is nebulous, I know, but I hope that one of the achievements of this thesis will be in making it less so, and in working some of these statements out into examples.

Lastly, then, in this section, why do I want to know how to do philosophy as understood in this particular way? The answer is simply because I have chosen to write a novel about Socrates who, as a matter of daily routine, makes discursively argued enquiries into the nature of things. That is the plain and practical reason. The reason is also, and equally, itself philosophical. If philosophy matters in life in some way, as I believe it does, and if fiction deals at least sometimes with the things that matter in life, then fiction should at least sometimes deal with philosophy. How it should do this is another matter, and one I came up against as soon as I began handling philosophical material in my fiction.

II. *All Is Song* – a scene (1)

All Is Song began life as a stand-alone episode modelled on Plato's *Euthyphro*, and it is the evolution of this scene that I will trace throughout what follows.

The *Euthyphro* is one of Plato's Socratic dialogues and it sees Socrates and Euthyphro near the Archon Basileus courthouse in Athens discussing piety.[22] My own rendition is between William (the Socrates character who went on to appear in my novel) and a man called Saul, and it takes place outside the Old Bailey in London. Where the *Euthyphro* is structured around a philosophical investigation of piety, mine is around the definition of moral rightness, but nevertheless it contains a relatively sophisticated and sustained line of discursive argument – lifted directly from Plato I confess - that is, like Plato's, presented almost entirely in dialogue between the two characters.

So, I lay out the bones of the argument here. Saul has taken the initial position that there are some things that are 'just right' and some things that are 'just wrong', and we know instinctively what they are. Murder that is not committed in self defence, for

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[22] See Appendix I for this scene.
Plato's *Euthyphro* appears in *The Last Days of Socrates* and I chose to reinvent it because I find its premise brilliant and uncannily modern. Euthyphro is prosecuting his father who ordered the death of a hired hand, who he thought was a murderer. Euthyphro is an unusually credible and thoughtful interlocutor whose position is liberal – he believes the hired hand has every right to justice, for a life is a life and a wrongdoing a wrongdoing, it makes no difference whether the victim is a hired hand, or the killer is an 'outsider or a relative.'
And yet liberal and thoughtful though Euthyphro might be, Socrates still undoes him – because Socrates' point is that *no* belief is right to hold unless its concepts have been fully examined first. All beliefs are circumspect and dogmatic until that point, no matter how fair-minded they appear; even liberal humanitarian positions can be the result of conditioning and/or kneejerk responses – stumbling blindly on a laudable view does not make the blind stumbling laudable. There is always a deeper thought we can have if we can only be bothered to have it; this seems to me an assertion we have still not come to grips with in contemporary thinking, and it makes Socrates eternally relevant and worth reading. So, I attempted my own resurrection.

example, is 'just wrong'. From this he is forced to say that moral rights and wrongs are in some way absolute, rather than relative. William goads him into the following claims:

a) that their absolute truth does not come from any external or metaphysical edict, such as God;
b) that their truth is established by evolutionary principles; physical evolution has universally agreed that it is better for humans to have one head than two. Likewise moral evolution has universally decided that it is better to be honest than to lie (i.e. even though we *do* lie, and even where lying seems preferable, our social systems are predicated on a basic principle of honesty);
c) that, therefore, what is right is what is accepted by (fits the facts of) society;

At this point, a short break; William enthuses about Saul's intelligence and the rarity of finding somebody willing to truly think and talk about such issues. Then, quite suddenly, he asks Saul to clarify whether he means 1) that society accepts something because it's right or 2) that a thing becomes right because society accepts it. Saul maintains the second position which forces the following line of argument:

d) to say that a thing becomes right *because* society accepts it is a different and stronger position than to say what is right is what is accepted by society; Saul's assertion has moved from a *correlation* between the two (moral rightness and societal acceptance) to a *causal relation* between the two (societal acceptance causes moral rightness);
e) if one thing causes another, the two things can't be the same;
f) if moral rightness isn't the same as societal acceptance, it is once again incumbent on us to define what it is.

I present the scene in this way, by the structure of its philosophical argument, for two reasons. Firstly, because that structure *is* the overarching narrative structure of the piece – it is what scaffolds its character dynamics, its drama and very content. It is the primary element of the scene. To present it any other way would be to misrepresent it. Secondly, because presenting it this way does I think demonstrate what is difficult about it; even though the philosophical content here isn't a tenth as labyrinthine as philosophy can often be, it is still quite awkward to follow and potentially off-putting for readers who are expecting a work of narrative fiction.

Strangely perhaps, it does not matter whether the reader agrees with this argument or not; there are contentious claims throughout and it was never my intention that William should win either Saul or the reader over by proving beyond doubt that the points being argued were right. Their rightness is not their point. The point is larger still – it is that Saul does not know what he claims to know (i.e. that some things are 'just right' and some things are 'just wrong'). Moreover, he is ignorant of this – ignorant of his own ignorance. As with Socrates, William takes it upon himself to point this out by interrogating some of the cardinal concepts involved and thereby forcing some peculiar or untenable positions.

One of my questions around how to build philosophical content into a novel is implied and explored in the writing of this scene: a Platonic dialogue is a piece of dramatic philosophy; what has to be added to it to make it novelistic? In one respect the answer to this question is obvious – one adds some novelistic elements. For example, a point of view (in my case William's), a greater sense of time and/or place (in my case, central London, a hot Wednesday morning), of movement and 'stage direction', some characterisation and a sense of character motives (who are these two men? What fuels them, what limits them?), some back story perhaps, some virtual time and space outside that of the scene itself. In other words, something that goes around and between the dialogue so that it no longer issues forth as if from a vacuum.

The knottier question that follows is: what does the addition of these novelistic elements do to the philosophy? Has it been compromised, weakened, obscured by all these other demands on our attention? Has it kept its clarity of purpose, but at the expense of the novelistic elements? Do the characters sound unreal? Is the narrative slowed by the philosophy? Does the reader *care* about reaching a definition of moral rightness?

In fact I think as a discrete, self-contained piece of writing my episode does work – albeit for what is probably quite a small readership[23]. I think the characters sound real enough, as far as the situation goes, and the philosophical argument is what puts something at stake in the piece, and gives the narrative some pace and point. The reader might well care about reaching a definition of moral rightness here if not for the definition itself but for the outcome of the play of power between the two men, and to see if any of this is going to bear upon either man's fates in the law courts. Moreover, William's dogged pursuit of clarity, and of Saul himself, contains some humour; we can laugh at him, at his tenacity, and at Saul's resistance. So, on one hand, as with Plato's *Euthyphro*, William and Saul are the argument's mouthpieces, wrapping speech marks around ordered points of analysis of the concept, as here:

> 'Is what's right accepted by society because it's right, or is it right because it's accepted?'
>
> 'Pardon me?'
>
> 'Does society accept something because it's right, or does the thing *become* right when society accepts it?'
>
> With a short pause he weighs up whether to rise to the question. 'It's right because it's accepted. It becomes right when society accepts it.'
>
> I nod in thought, and my failure to respond further prompts him to relaunch his answer. 'If I use an umbrella in the rain, William, I don't get

[23] It must be worth stressing that everything I say here about how to write philosophical fiction is geared towards the modest aim of making it enjoyable and fulfilling for that relatively tiny number of people who read such things, and not to the mass market.

laughed at or called mad, because an umbrella is the right thing to have in the rain. Having it fits the facts of the weather. Why does a hummingbird have a long bill and a lack of smell? Because the flowers it gets nectar from are long and without any fragrance. That design isn't objectively right everywhere and always, but it's right in this case because it fits the facts of the flower.'

'Yes?' He knows about hummingbirds; I couldn't have predicted it, but I am not surprised. He extends his right arm in avid appeal.[24]

But this is interspersed with descriptions of place or person, or William's inner monologue, such as would not be found in Plato, and which, when included, give the piece a greater feeling of narrative storytelling:

'Saul?' I call after him. He waves an arm behind him without looking back. 'Saul, wait.'

Once again he turns.

'So something is right because society accepts it?'

I have to shout this. Perhaps I shout it louder than I need to. He is embarrassed and digs his hands into his pocket as he strides back. He has a very easy way of moving, any moments of ill-grace that I might have thought I'd seen when he shifted around the confines of the steps now blanched out by space, and his natural affinity for filling it. This street has known a lot of disturbances, people pitched up on the ground in protest, the press and the public snatching shots of Christine Keeler, the sensuous drama of the trial of Oscar Wilde. One solitary bare-footed man at its steps probing some tender philosophical matters to save his skin will hardly make history. But Weckman is a proud man, and while he wants coffee more than ethics, he wants dignity much more than both. Thus, to avoid a scene, he comes back to the steps.[25]

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[24] Appendix 1, p.125
[25] Appendix1, p.126

Yet when I later came to re-house the argument within the novel I began to encounter problems. What was permissible and entertaining in the stand-alone version – the cross-questioning of Saul by William, the extended dissection of the meaning of the word 'right' - became refractive, awkward and contrived within the novel.

I want to look first at what I believe is a general reason for this, which is to do with the difficulty of realising abstract ideas. Of course, if this is a difficulty at all then it is one for short pieces of literature as well as long, and thus as much a difficulty for (what I will grandly call) my Euthyphro piece as for the novel I tried to introduce it to. But I think the problem is exaggerated in a long piece. How does one realise an abstract idea? If, as I contend, it is an awkward thing to do, how does one keep doing it for 90,000 words and make it feel integral to the novel? It is like holding one's body in an awkward position for a long time without any appearance of strain. Whatever has to matter to us in a short piece has to matter for longer in a novel; whatever is plausible in the former has to be plausible for longer in the latter. A style that works for the duration of one, two or three scenes might become tedious after fifty, and an amusing or interesting contrivance might duly become wearing. [26]

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[26] I think there are also deeper differences between novels and short narrative fictions as genres which are too substantial to be dealt with here, but which are peripherally relevant. In *Fires*, Raymond Carver makes reference to the greater responsibility the novelist has – compared to the short story writer - to the consistency and plausibility of his/her fictional world: '[In order to write a novel a writer] should be living in a world that makes sense, a world that the writer can believe in, draw a bead on, and then write about accurately. A world that will, for a time anyway, stay fixed in one place.' And likewise the critic Charles May, writing about Carver, offers Walter Benjamin's theory that 'realistic narrative forms such as the novel focus on the relatively limited areas of human experience' whereas 'stories do not demand plausibility or conformity to the laws of external reality.'
If this is true, and short fictions don't have the same duty towards conformity to reality, this might be another reason as to why material and forms that are successful in short fiction are less so in novels. Interestingly I think the conformity applies to non-realist novels too; even if those novels do not aim at a world that looks like the one we know, are not figurative representations of it, it isn't to say that their world is illogical and unexplained. Whereas the world of the short story can and often does hover with an essential mystery above our own. In short, in terms of realism, perhaps there is just much more a writer can *get away with* in short fiction. (Both quotations are from Charles May, 'Do You See What I'm Saying?: The Inadequacy of Explanation and the Uses of Story in the Short Fiction of Raymond Carver', *The Yearbook of English Studies* vol. 31 (2001) p. 41)

Moreover, the development of a character in a novel must go far and deep relative to a short piece, and to utilise a character as a mouthpiece as Plato does and as I did is, over time, to sabotage other attempts to make him/her realistic. Once the character flattens, the views they hold and expound lose currency too. This is the tight space in which a novelist works – a novel can evince and enlarge our sympathies *because* the characters aren't real, therefore we can use them as motifs or symbols that perform multiple emotional, social, moral functions. But if they are too unreal, they no longer demand our sympathy. *All Is Song* is very much a character-led novel so the balance here is vital between 'real enough' and 'not too real', although it is important, I think, even for novels whose emphasis is elsewhere.

To a large degree, the evolution of my Euthyphro scene consists in a process of moving away from a reliance on dialogue as a means of expressing philosophical views and arguments, and towards other, more embedded, means. But before describing what this movement is, and where the scene went next, I will say what I mean when I refer to the 'difficulty of realising abstract ideas', and how this came into play for me as I went about building philosophical content into the world of my novel.

III. An objection

> [The] process of coming to see other human beings as "one of us" rather than as "them" is a matter of detailed description of what unfamiliar people are like and of redescription of what we ourselves are like. This is a task not for theory but for genres such as ethnography, the journalist's report, the comic book, the docudrama, and, especially, the novel . . . This is why the novel, the movie, and the TV program have, gradually but steadily, replaced the sermon and the treatise as the principle vehicles of moral change and progress.[27]

Assertions like this one, from the philosopher Richard Rorty, raise a big and important objection to one of my definitions, namely that philosophy is that which is done discursively, and as such in modes that traditionally fall outside of the creative, such as films, docudramas and, especially (as Rorty says) novels.

The specific relevance of this objection to my own project is that I create a rod for my own back in unnecessarily – perhaps even dogmatically – narrowing down philosophical modes to the discursive: that of the text and the treatise. Surely the discursive mode is not a necessary prerequisite for a philosophical novel – or even a desirable one. There are other modes of thought – ways of being philosophical, and of delivering 'moral change and progress' as a result – that do not depend on a specific, narrow type of argumentation, and novels that use these modes are just as philosophical, and often more readable and affecting. If I were to allow such modes, it could allow greater possibilities in the way I go about making *All Is Song* a 'philosophical novel'.

I address this objection now, not least because I hope my response will give more clarity to the specific scope and purpose of this thesis.

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[27] Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, (Cambridge University Press, 2008) Introduction, p.xvi

i. The discursive mode

This objection is connected to the question, referred to in the Introduction, as to whether a novel can be truly philosophical. And as I said there, it is too broad and deep a subject for me to do it justice by putting it at the periphery of this discussion - as such I'll make no attempt to do it justice, but will attempt instead simply to show exactly how it *is* peripheral (though not trivial) here.

To reiterate the objection: why should we accept that a philosophical novel must contain discursive philosophical arguments? There are other ways philosophy can enter a novel and still be called philosophy. This is the objection. It is connected to the question of whether a novel can be truly philosophical because, if philosophy is the systematised working out of concepts through discursive argument, then it is rather difficult for a novel to be so, and, as Murdoch suggests, very few novels would qualify. While Murdoch holds that both literature and philosophy are both 'truth seeking, truth revealing activities', the latter is done in a manner that is virtually anathema to the former: 'Philosophy aims to clarify and to explain, it states and attempts to resolve highly technical problems and the writing must be subservient to this aim,' she says.[28]

I quote here Bertrand Russell: 'Morally, a philosopher who uses his professional competence for anything except a disinterested search for truth is guilty of a kind of treachery.'[29] These are strong and heartfelt words. Presumably then he thinks that anything that is not a disinterested search for truth is not philosophy, or at least not good philosophy. And by their nature, realist novels that situate philosophy within a character or characters, or in a time, space and context of the author's choosing so as to make optimal

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[28] 'LP', p.11/4 respectively for each quotation
[29] Bertrand Russell, *History of Western Philosophy*, (Routledge, 1995) p.788

the philosophical position, are not disinterested, but in fact extremely partial and contrived.

If, on the other hand, philosophy is more broadly the pursuit of understanding, as the philosopher Martha Nussbaum holds, it is far easier for a novel to fulfil that condition, and it often does.[30] For Nussbaum the search is not *disinterested*, therefore it doesn't indicate a particular and removed authorial stance or style, nor a suspended enquiry that engages no sense of historicism or context; in fact, the styles of writing available to literary texts can probe philosophical matters much more deeply and affectingly than can the argumentative styles available to philosophical texts. She writes: '[T]here may be some views of the world and how one should live in it — views, especially, that emphasize the world's surprising variety, its complexity and mysteriousness, its flawed and imperfect beauty — that cannot be fully and adequately stated in the language of conventional philosophical prose.'[31]

Murdoch thinks that philosophy has a particular and ideal style that can't be translated to a work of literature, whereas Nussbaum thinks that, in being broadly a search for understanding, literature is capable of revealing insights that more rigid philosophical prose cannot. If Nussbaum is right, philosophy doesn't have to confine itself to the philosophical textbook, nor to the discursive mode, and the objection raised above about my definition of a philosophical novel is valid and pertinent.

ii. A taste of the recent debate

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[30] See Nussbaum's *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature*, (OUP, 1990) pp. 138-9, 142. Here she puts forward Henry James' *The Golden Bowl* as a work of moral philosophy, thereby admitting 'philosophy' a far greater remit than Murdoch would.

[31] *Love's Knowledge*, p.3

It *is* valid and pertinent. The debate over what constitutes a philosophical novel - and by turn what philosophy is and should do - goes on in both contemporary philosophy and literature. It has found recent expression between the philosophers Onora O'Neill and Cora Diamond, where Diamond writes that *Great Expectations* and *David Copperfield* are Dickens' 'attempts to enlarge the moral imagination of his readers', and that as such novels do have the capacity to be philosophical.[32] Diamond is responding here to a previous claim O'Neill had made, a claim which said that enlarging moral sympathies is not enough to constitute philosophy, and that appeals to morals have to 'reach beyond assertion into argument', and to engage in critical reasoning.[33] We only know about the moral relevance of facts that novels bring to our attention – i.e. in Dickens' case those about the moral rights of children – by employing a model of reasoning.

Diamond replies that this is 'sheer comedy' – we do not work out the 'facts' (i.e. about children) and then find a principle which tells us how to respond emotionally. If anything it is the reverse; based on our emotional response we are able to derive a principle which will help us work out the 'facts' – what we can find out about a thing is governed by the way we approach it, the way in which we respond to it.[34]

The terrain of this debate, as it begins with Plato and manifests in debates among contemporary philosophers like O'Neill and Diamond, is laid out in Stephen Mulhall's brilliant book about philosophy and literature in J.M. Coetzee's work. He argues early on that it is by way of the views of those like O'Neill, who hold that critical argument is the

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[32] Cora Diamond, 'Anything but Argument?' in *The Realistic Spirit* (Cambridge MIT Press, 1991) p.300. Even – Diamond seems to say – novels that we wouldn't normally call 'philosophical'. So in this respect her point is quite different to any I am making here, since I have been considering a much narrower range of novels which doesn't include Dickens, for example.

[33] Onora O'Neill, 'Critical Review of Clark, *The Moral Status of Animals*', *Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 77 (1980) p.445. This is a review of Stephen Clark's *The Moral Status of Animals* which engages in a discussion of how appropriate it is to argue for animal rights with the types of rationality and philosophy which do not engage, as Clark says, the 'heart's affections and the plain evidence of sense'.

[34] Diamond makes this point in 'Anything But Argument', p.301

only way philosophy can 'acknowledge the claims of reason', that Plato's problematic ancient quarrel is kept alive.

In order to defend a less restrictive view of philosophy, Mulhall pays much attention to Coetzee's *The Lives of Animals* – a self-standing book within the novel *Elizabeth Costello*. In *The Lives of Animals*, the fictional character Costello argues against the notion that, since animals can't speak or think as humans do, rights are not applicable to them in the way they are to humans. She cites a story from Camus:

> As for animals being too dumb and stupid to speak for themselves, consider the following sequence of events. When Albert Camus was a young boy in Algeria, his grandmother told him to bring her one of the hens from the cage in their backyard. He obeyed, then watched her cut off its head with a kitchen knife, catching its blood in a bowl so that the floor would not be dirtied.
>
> The death cry of that hen imprinted itself on the boy's memory so hauntingly that in 1958 he wrote an impassioned attack on the guillotine. As a result, in part, of that polemic, capital punishment was abolished in France. Who is to say, then, that the hen did not speak?[35]

Mulhall refers to this story of Camus and the hen in order to ask if Costello's 'argument' against the notion (that animals cannot speak or think) is really an argument at all in the conventional philosophical sense. It is a powerful and resounding response, but it does not argue discursively on the concepts of language, thought, or indeed what it is to confer rights upon something or one. To put it another way, if Camus were to have made a story or novel of that anecdote, arguing (in this case) against capital punishment by means of his experience with the hen, would that have constituted a philosophical novel?

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[35] J.M. Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals*, (Princeton University Press, 1999) p.62

Weighing up the viewpoints of both O'Neill and Diamond, Mulhall does ultimately argue that the morals that can be drawn from the story of Camus and the hen *do* constitute philosophy and do take seriously the 'conventions of argumentation':

> [These morals] seem to me to be better characterised as other familiar, everyday ways of attempting to convince others of one's way of seeing the world . . . They would therefore seem to be forms of discourse that philosophy need have no qualms about admitting as modes of thought or ways of reflecting about the world, hence as possible ways of meeting its own distinctive burden – that of acknowledging the claims of reason.[36]

What I set out here by no means gives proper representation to the debate and is intended only to make clear that I recognise and am sympathetic to the stance of the likes of Nussbaum and Mulhall, and accept the objection that to limit the philosophical scope of literature to that which is discursively argued is to limit it greatly and probably – in a wider context - unnecessarily.

My only response is to reiterate that my project here is to address my own writerly needs, and these needs were very much to do with the management of discursive material within my novel. Thus, I do not argue, like Murdoch, that there are very few examples of 'philosophical novels', which are this or that or the other, in fact I place myself adamantly outside of that debate. I am looking here at novels like *Nausea* only because they do something I am trying to do, that is, confront directly and discursively philosophical material in a fictional narrative.

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[36] Stephen Mulhall, *The Wounded Animal*, p.77
Some chapters back from this, he states: 'There are other forms of critical reflection as well [not only those exemplified by analytical philosophy] – ones with which we are perhaps more familiar in extraphilosophical contexts, but which are no less concerned to deepen our understanding and enrich our thought by embodying certain kinds of affective responses to things, and inviting us to share those responses, as well as to critically evaluate them.' P. 9

In this sense perhaps my question for this thesis is, literally, more prosaic than those raised in the above debate: I have a philosophical argument to deploy in the novel; how do I best do it? Through dialogue, through plot, through theme, through character? These are practical, technical questions. Of course they feed into more profound ones, and the question of whether a philosophical novel must handle discursively argued material is one of those - certainly it gives insights and clues that will be useful in the practical sense. For that reason it is always peripherally present. And it may be that the likes of Rorty, Nussbaum, Diamond and Mulhall (and possibly Coetzee, if we can take Costello's views to represent his) are absolutely right in their insistence on a wider range of philosophical 'forms of discourse' – Camus' hen being one of them – and that in a different and itself more philosophical discussion I would agree with these thinkers entirely.

IV. Philosophy as abstract ideas

i. The real and the abstract

> Realism has never been comfortable with ideas. It could not be otherwise: realism is premised on the idea that ideas have no separate existence, can only exist in things. So when it needs to debate ideas, as here, it is driven to invent situations – walks in the countryside, conversations – in which characters give voice to contending ideas and thereby in a sense embody them . . ideas do not and indeed cannot float free.[37]

In this quotation from J.M. Coetzee in his essay 'What is Realism?', there is a statement that is very relevant to my project here. 'Realism is premised on the idea that ideas have no separate existence', he says. This should help matters for me, as a novelist who is trying to put a particular kind of idea – the philosophical – into a realist novel. For all that Plato speaks of realms, the ideal and the objective, where occupancy of one means abandonment of the other, there is in fact and practice only one realm. Ideas have no life outside of their manifestation in reality. If this is so, an answer to the question of how novelists can write philosophical fiction must in part consist in recognising that the ideas in which philosophy trades are to be conveyed, not as free-floating entities abstracted from the world of things, but as that which is anchored to things, to situations, and as such *cannot float free*.

This is to echo some of the discourse theory of the twentieth century, and is important to acknowledge here particularly because that specialised meaning of the word 'discursive', as originating with Foucault, is quite different to the meaning I've given the

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[37] J.M. Coetzee, *What is Realism?* (Salmagundi, 1997) p.65

word so far in this discussion, where I've used it solely to mean acquiring knowledge through reason and argument, through modes of philosophical discourse.

For Foucault, a discourse is a thought-system that is built from actions, ideas, beliefs, attitudes – and these complex discourses of knowledge construct the world and those living in it. 'Discursive' in the Foucaultian sense means that which relates to this *specific* kind of discourse, one that not only speaks about the thing it analyses – as the discourses of doctors, say, speak about the state of medicine and health in a particular culture – but actually *creates* the thing it analyses. These actions, beliefs, ideas and attitudes come together in a discourse that is very creatively productive. An idea is bound up in action; it *has* no abstract form. It is always already embedded, always occurring at a particular moment in history, always contextualised, always addressed by somebody to somebody else – and for Foucault, specifically, always part of a striving for power.

For Foucault discourse must have 'surfaces of emergence' in order to exist, and these surfaces are social and cultural, things like family, work groups and religious communities. Thus, discourses of knowledge – which consist in part of ideas as well as actions – are manifest in these surfaces that make up the doings of our everyday lives, and that are also exactly the kind of planes of being that realist novels exist on. If an abstract idea or belief is manifest in the discourse of a family, say, then there is no tussle between that idea and the lives the family lead. In playing out the lives of that family a novelist reveals its discourse, and that discourse contains within it the abstract as well as concrete landscape of those peoples' existence. In this sense perhaps, discourse theory is the triumph of realistic novelisation over notions of dualism, abstraction, Platonism. There simply is no essential division between the levels of 'idea' and 'thing' or 'idea' and 'action'

in the way that Plato described, nor in the way that Descartes described when he distinguished between mind and matter.[38]

The phenomenological step that was then taken in philosophy, most famously by Husserl, Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, was in a similar direction, that is, one that aimed to say something about the way we experience our existence in a non-Cartesian way. Phenomenological accounts of the world attempt to close the gap between inner and outer life, and also between my inner life and yours. Again, there is the assertion that the abstract – the contents of consciousness – is manifest in the real – the contents of the world of things.[39] Philosophically at least, we have come a long way since Plato's notion that ideas exist on a level that is ontologically distinct from objects, and that there is a realm of pure concepts towards which we must aspire, moving, as Alain de Botton puts it 'from the phenomenon of the idea to particular ideas to the highest and most universal.'[40] That difficult journey has been taken away from us by Foucault and the phenomenologists.

Taking this perspective does help me as a novelist; it directs my thought towards these 'walks in the countryside' that Coetzee says we are driven to invent, and to the embodiment of an idea that he also mentions. I do very pointedly embody my Socratic position in William, as I will go on to describe in a later section – just as Sartre embodies his in Roquentin - and that is one central way in which I am able to deliver the novel's abstract content. And to some extent I think that a shift from the Platonic or Cartesian to

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[38] In her memoir, Mary Midgley says that 'there is something badly wrong with [Plato's] talk about the 'quarrel of philosophy and poetry' in the Republic.' It betrays what she thinks is a 'sharp alienation' of soul from body, a distinction that, like the phenomenologists, she calls misleading. (*The Owl of Minerva: A Memoir*, Routledge 2005 p.65); Midgley is just one among many critics of these dualist ideas.

[39] In his extremely dense but beautifully written book on phenomenology *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty describes the problem of selves and others by saying that we see ourselves as 'little subjectivities' which are assembled like flowers in a bouquet, and each subjectivity, each flower as it were, reduces the other subjectivities into objects. 'We will get out of the difficulty,' he says, 'only by renouncing the bifurcation of the 'consciousness of' and the object.' And he then goes onto to speak of 'one sole body before one sole world, through a possibility of reversion, reconversion of its language into theirs, according to which the little private world of each is not juxtaposed to the world of all the others, but surrounded by it, levied off from it . . .' (*The Visible and the Invisible*, Northwestern University Press, 1968, p.141/2)

[40] *The Essential Plato* (The Softback Preview, 1999) Introduction, p.lvii

the phenomenological does, as I look back on it now, characterise the evolution of my novel in some ways. As Merleau-Ponty says, 'the meaning is not on the phrase like the butter on the bread, like a second layer of 'psychic reality'[41]; thus I might remove the buttering of philosophy that had formed on my novel, mainly through dialogue, and find ways to make that abstract content more deeply manifest in the very structure of the narrative.

And yet, and yet. To me, shifting the ontological status of ideas from the realm of abstraction to the realm of things does not, for my practical purposes anyhow, remove the problem, but only really changes the way the problem is expressed. I want to debate ideas around moral rightness: granted, if I turn my gaze from Plato towards Foucault, I now no longer need to contend with how to paste these ideas onto reality, to deal with the ideas here while reality – the walk in the countryside – is going on over there, since the ideas are mobilised in these walks. My problem is no longer metaphysical. But still, I am not relieved of the practical problem. *How* do I now write such a walk in a way that has both philosophical currency and also narrative interest and motion – that is as true to the idea as it is to the walk? That is vivid, interesting, furthers both the story and the philosophy?

Coetzee's quotation begins with the assertion that 'realism has never been comfortable with ideas', and that it 'could not be otherwise'. So while ideas must find existence in objects, situations, conversations, they will not find complete comfort there. The author is 'driven to invent' these situations, as if to imply that the invention is something of a cross she must bear, or even a last resort. Why the discomfort? Why, if ideas are so fully manifest in reality, should it be any more difficult to express and debate them than it is to express or debate any other thing that is manifestly real – the mileage of a car, or the size of an apple?

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[41] M. Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, p.155

ii. Realising abstract ideas

An idea isn't an activity. Sure enough, philosophising is an activity, but how should that philosophising be done in the novel? In order to be shared and traded, ideas have to be mobilised and, as Coetzee says, embodied, either by a person or situation or thing. The realist novel, in its attempt to deliver and interpret the world in some form, is exactly the kind of thing that tries to deal with reality and ideas at once, and the philosophical novel tries harder than any other. It doesn't so much want to throw ideas decoratively, like confetti, into the arena of everyday life, as to present them systematically, methodically, so that they inform and underpin everyday life. And this is the problem – how to make an idea an activity, how to embody it, how to make it walk and talk, without detracting from the idea itself? If it is made into an activity by the process of philosophising, how is this to be done without detriment to the idea or the reality it walks in on?

Much of what Iris Murdoch says on the subject of literature and philosophy throughout the book *Existentialists and Mystics* dwells on this very problem. With a decisively Platonic bent to her thought she holds adamantly that the two disciplines aren't only fundamentally different, but in conflict with one another. When philosophy becomes material for a novel, in the way that sailing ships might, for example, it is no longer philosophy as such, she says.

> I think as soon as philosophy gets into a work of literature it becomes a plaything of the writer, and rightly so. There is no strictness about ideas and argument, the rules are different and truth is differently conveyed.[42]

[42] 'LP' p.19

This statement reminds me of one of Mikhail Bakhtin's in his influential essay 'The Epic and the Novel', despite the fact that he and Murdoch are coming from very different places. Bakhtin was a great and valorous speaker for the novel, saying that it is, as a genre, inherently 'claylike', malleable, in an ongoing process of change and incompleteness, and unique in its ability to take in other genres and forms while retaining its own essential 'novelness'. This would seem to suggest that it would have no problem taking in philosophy and all its incumbent abstractions. Yet I quote Bakhtin, who writes that when the novel absorbs other genres (and there is no reason to assume philosophy couldn't be one of these), these genres:

> . . . become more free and flexible, their language renews itself by incorporating extraliterary heteroglossia and the 'novelistic' layers of literary language . . . the novel inserts into these other genres an indeterminacy, a certain semantic openendedness, a living contact with unfinished, still evolving contemporary reality (the openended present).[43]

Indeterminacy? Semantic openendedness? Are these goals philosophical language would pursue? Typically, the language of discursive philosophy tries to determine and define, and to close down semantic ambiguity. What Bakhtin says here, encouragingly, about the novel's ability to make other genres more 'free and flexible' is, I think, very much like what Murdoch is saying, more cautiously, about its tendency to make 'playthings' of those

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[43] Mikhail Bakhtin, 'The Epic and the Novel: towards a methodology and study of the novel' pp. 3-40 in *The Dialogic Imagination* (ed. Michael Holquist, University of Texas Press, 1981) p.7

others. And indeed Bakhtin does say that in the process, it is the novel that becomes 'the dominant genre'.[44]

Of all speakers on the subject of philosophy and literature Murdoch is probably the most defensive of philosophy as a pure, serious, distinct subject carried out by a small number of specialists. Art is made at least in part by the unconscious mind, she thinks, and 'the unconscious mind is not a philosopher.'[45]

In her conversation with Bryan Magee in *Literature and Philosophy*, she lays out two main incompatibilities between the two disciplines. One concerns their differing styles of delivery, and the other their differing agendas. On the question of style, which I have touched on above, she writes:

> Philosophical writing is not self expression, it involves a disciplined removal of the personal voice. . .Of course literature too involves a control of the personal voice and its transformation . . but there is a kind of self-expression which remains in literature, together with all the playfulness and mystification of art. The literary writer deliberately leaves a space for his reader to play in. The philosopher must not leave any space.[46]

Space for play and interpretation is to Murdoch one of the key factors that sets literary writing apart from philosophical. Where the former is 'mystical', exploring aesthetic forms, writing for writing's sake, the latter needs to be above all clear - writing for the sake of transparent exposition of ideas only. 'Nobody has ever claimed that Husserl wrote well', says Graham White of this great phenomenologist – an observation that seems to back up

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[44] 'The Epic and the Novel', p.7
[45] 'LP', p.21
[46] 'LP', p.5

Murdoch's claim that writing well is not a cross the philosopher has to bear.[47] If her point is a little overstated (there are some very fluent and idiosyncratic philosophical texts around), her general point about the subjectivity of the literary writer and the objectivity of the philosophical writer does seem to bear scrutiny. If a philosopher became too immersed in the joys and aesthetics of the words themselves, or of journeys into consciousnesses not one's own, the philosophy would risk being lost, diffused or buried within. And if the literary writer became too immersed in the logical concerns of the delivery of philosophical argument, the literary aspect would likely be minimised. Stylistically there is a difference in potential between the two modes so that what is possible or even optimal for one is inhibitive or even impossible for the other.

Point of view is one such example. The empathetic mode is one far more available to the literary writer than to the philosopher, a point which is raised again and again amongst those who argue that creative and imaginative works can affect greater moral responses than philosophical, theoretical ones. '*What is it like?*' is a question the novel can deeply and empathetically explore; its business is, as Rorty says, 'the matter of detailed description of what unfamiliar people are like and of redescription of what we ourselves are like.'

To see the asymmetry between the two modes, consider, for instance, the philosopher Thomas Nagel's famous musings on what it is like to be a bat.[48] His enquiry takes the shape of a thought experiment that incorporates considerations about the philosophy of mind as it applies to animals. A literary writer's response to the question might well, by contrast, be far more *literal*: what *is* it like to be a bat? He or she might also

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[47] Graham White, 'Edmund Husserl' in *An Introduction to Modern European Philosophy*, (Macmillan Press 1998) p. 103
Murdoch does say that some philosophers are more literary than others, and cites Nietzsche and Kierkegaard as both great writers and thinkers ('LP', p.4). But then, she says, they are not real philosophers. She doesn't explain why. Perhaps she is going so far as to imply that the ability to write in a fully fledged literary style precludes one from being a real philosopher?

[48] Thomas Nagel, 'What Is It Like To Be a Bat?', *Mortal Questions* (OUP, 1977) p.166

use the imagination to turn out a thought experiment (namely, a story or novel) but this time one that has a point of view attached, and this could feasibly be the bat's. That immersive and partisan viewpoint is pushing the remit of a philosopher, whose imagination has to step tentatively (in this case towards another consciousness) rather than leap wildly (into it). On the other hand, it is pushing the novelist's remit to approach the question like a philosopher, with method and rigour, and with absolutely no leap into the lived experience as framed by a point of view or several.[49]

As for the other conflict between the two, the conflict of agendas, Magee sums this up when he says that the novelist or playwright is 'trying to create an illusion', whereas the philosopher is 'trying to dispel illusion.'[50] In creating an illusion the (realist) novelist is working to drum up a plausible sense of reality based on what we widely perceive to be real and true – even if only to distort, shrink, expand or explode this perception. Conversely, the philosopher – in this sense absolutely exemplified by Socrates - is trying to defrock all these wide and general perceptions. The philosophical process scrutinises and often sets out to dismantle many of our instinctive beliefs and responses, our habitual behaviours, our deeper concepts and assumptions – and thus, maybe like having the covers pulled from us when in bed, it makes us uncomfortable and vulnerable. It performs a critical analysis of those givens we shape our lives by. So in effect, the illusion the novel works hard to make, philosophy works hard to break.

Magee's point seems to me crucial in isolating what it is about philosophy, qua abstract ideas, that makes it resist the literary mode. In the novel writing process there is an unmistakable attempt, conscious or otherwise, to spellbind – to watch that the web one

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[49] There is an interesting piece about this 'literalness' of fiction writers in Stephen Mulhall's *The Wounded Animal*, ch.2. He contends that a philosophical thought experiment is so emptied out of context and complicating details that rather than elucidating a subject, i.e. the nature of moral responsibility, it fundamentally *changes* the subject. The 'literal' mind on the other hand – i.e. the literary writer's mind – will want to take these situations 'as seriously meant' and 'imaginatively responsible to their subject matter'. Such a mind will in that case examine more deeply than philosophy itself can the ways in which reality makes an impression on us.

[50] 'LP', p.5

weaves, which offers such precarious suspension of belief, tremors slightly with the weight of its own world but never breaks. Without this unbroken spell – this *dreamstate*, as Coetzee calls it - a narrative can hardly flow. It's obvious when it breaks; the writer might feel the whole hopeless collapse of it in one scene, sometimes one piece of dialogue. 'Breaking into the dream draws attention to the constructedness of the story, and plays havoc with the realist illusion,' Coetzee says. [51]

iii. 'Breaking into the dream'

It is fascinating to me that Coetzee himself, in his capacity as a novelist, seems to experiment with ways of 'breaking into the dream', and to do so particularly in his attempt to include philosophical content in his fictional narratives. The quotation that began this section, from 'What is Realism?', also, later, appears in the novel *Elizabeth Costello*, and indeed that novel contains a mosaic of his writings that previously had appeared elsewhere as non-fiction (the lecture *The Lives of Animals* being the biggest example), and which together have created a novel that many critics at the time of its publication agreed was not, exactly, a novel at all.[52]

What is Coetzee's rationale for this? It isn't possible for me to talk in depth about Coetzee himself, as a novelist who tries to penetrate the boundaries between the literary and the critical. That would deserve another thesis entirely.[53] The fascination, where my thesis is concerned, lies in what I perceive to be his *struggle* at these boundaries. Maybe

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[51] J.M. Coetzee, *What is Realism?*, p.68

[52] David Lodge, for example, in the New York Review of Books (20 November 2003), calls it a novel 'for want of a better word'.

[53] And actually there already is at least one - Stephen Mulhall's *The Wounded Animal*, which I have mentioned already and which deals deeply and very rigorously with Coetzee's position in the ongoing topic of philosophy and literature.

this is a presumptuous reading of his work, but the more I read of his, the less I am convinced otherwise.

The novels of his that I have most loved (probably *Disgrace* and *Life and Times of Michael K*) have been those that stay within the literary mode and do not try to engage the critical *as* critical, in that discursive mode. Of course, they may and do embrace all sorts of issues that can be discussed critically elsewhere – that he himself discusses critically elsewhere, such as the moral and political issues of apartheid, say. These novels do not lack depth, but they do 'lack' discursive (and didactic) treatment of their themes.

Whereas the novels that do, bravely and intelligently, take these critical discussions upon and into themselves - *Elizabeth Costello* and *Diary of a Bad Year* primarily – are far less successful in my view, as novels that is. *The Lives of Animals* is a strong piece of philosophy on animal rights – but in the middle of a novel? Some of the short essays that appear in *Diary of a Bad Year* are provoking and brilliant – but actually at the expense of the two fictional narratives that run alongside, which seem comparatively thin and a little tired.[54]

I have always felt that Coetzee is grappling not quite successfully with the question of how to marry the critical and philosophical modes with his realism (for realism is most definitely what he writes), and that in knowing how uncomfortable literary realism is with ideas, he has decided to sacrifice it when he wants to have ideas at any length or depth. 'The tone is explicatory,' the *Literary Review* says of *Elizabeth Costello*, 'Coetzee seldom seeks to dramatise or animate the dilemmas and problems that confront his characters.'[55] In other words, he seldom takes these dilemmas for walks in the countryside, as if he

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[54] *Diary of a Bad Year* takes the innovative form of three discrete but interlinked narratives, all of which appear on each page, separated from one another by line breaks. This means the reader is reading three narratives at once – two fictional (one in the point of view of a female protagonist, the other in the point of view of a male who is in love with her and who is transparently Coetzee himself), and the third a non-fiction set of mini-essays with titles such as 'On Anarchism', 'On English Usage', 'On Having Thoughts', which are the ideas of the male protagonist, and hence (since this man is Coetzee) of, we might assume, the author himself.

[55] Jason Cowley, *Literary Review*, September 2003

cannot see a way of doing them or the countryside justice in the process. And because he is a masterly and inventive writer he has found alternative narrative forms that can accommodate or disguise these hiatuses of realism – the meta-narrative, the multiple simultaneous narratives, the enclosure of a book within a book, the creation of characters who are avatars for himself, through whose views he can both express and also comment upon his own, and so on.

These narrative elaborations create what has seemed to me a hall of mirrors in which Coetzee represents his critical, political, philosophical ideas while also evading them, that is, without directly, as a novelist, owning them – but also without having his characters themselves own them outright either, since those characters are also him. The lecture Elizabeth Costello gives in *The Lives of Animals* is the one Coetzee gave as two Tanner Lectures at Princeton, called 'The Lives of Animals'; the fictional protagonist who writes the mini-essays in *Diary of a Bad Year* is Coetzee himself – an aging, eminent, South African novelist living in Australia called, by the female protagonist, Señor C. In order to convey his ideas with any discursiveness, directness and thoroughness, Coetzee seems driven to these difficult representations of himself as their author, representations that are both oddly confessional and oddly evasive.

I have not wanted to go down that route myself. In *All Is Song* I have been in dogged pursuit of a way of preserving the realism, the *dreamstate*, without recourse to these narrative gymnastics. This could be another area in which Murdoch deemed *Nausea* to be a rare success in its domain, since at the very least it does never step across the boundary from the literary mode to the out-and-out critical, where narratives are partitioned off from the story in some formal way. This is not to say that *Nausea* is an unmitigated success in terms of its convincingness or the ability of the unsympathetic Roquentin to ever really recruit us to its existential causes, but it does manage to give its ideas direct and rigorous currency whilst remaining decidedly literary.

This isn't to overlook the fact that, like *Elizabeth Costello*, *Nausea* has been accused of being less a novel and more an intellectual exposition. I happen not to agree, I think that regardless of whether or not it is a good novel its novelistic elements are always present; but the point is that Sartre has managed, in a way I think Coetzee has not, to expound on ideas in such a way that will 'dispel illusions', while at the same time conjuring a dreamstate that will 'create illusions'.

iv. Philosophical ideas in particular

If ideas sit uncomfortably with realism, 'philosophical ideas' appear doubly uncomfortable: firstly, they are ideas, and I have looked a little at why that is a problem; secondly, they are philosophical. They are not just ebbing and flowing thoughts about this or that – typically they arrange themselves as methodologies that are employed to work out theoretical frameworks, and, if not to construct, then to deconstruct what is given and to analyse its constituent parts. To do this effectively they are most commonly presented as discursive arguments which tend towards clarity and, if necessary, at the expense of literariness.

Moreover, it isn't just the form of philosophical ideas that is awkward, it is also the content. Their methodologies are designed to press for definitions that elude us and to clarify the nebulous (even if only to clarify how nebulous it is). I quote Bryan Magee here: 'Philosophy is counter natural. [It] involves us in the critical analysis of our beliefs, and of the presuppositions of our beliefs, and it is a very striking fact that most people neither like doing this nor like having it done to them.'[56] And as Elizabeth Costello says in *The Lives of Animals*: 'We resist being pressed, and we rarely press ourselves.'[57]

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[56] 'LP', p.8
[57] *The Lives of Animals*, p.33

Why do we dislike analysing beliefs, why do we resist? I think Socrates exemplifies an answer in a sense, albeit a dramatic one; his Athens was a fledging democracy, war-scarred and politically unstable. The powers that be wanted to inspire the people's confidence in the state and to instil, if not peace exactly, then the quiet of the status quo. The presence of a person who put everything to question was problematic; Socrates was, as he said himself, the 'gadfly' that kept biting the state, agitating its rest and overturning its principles. We might say that the state was corrupt in trying to silence him, and probably it was – and yet also there is something that *feels* very legitimate (even if it is not) in the desire to install equilibrium, to *get on with things*, especially after a troubled time, a feeling which almost any individual can relate to. Most of us would neither like doing what Socrates did, nor like having it done to us, any more than Athens did.

The methods of Socratic philosophy itself exemplify also what is problematic here for novels, not only for the effect of philosophy (as ideas) on the realism, but also on the demands of the narrative to drive forwards in some way – *to get on with things*. The hallmark of Socratic dialogues is a necessary circularity of argument that is aimed at dispossessing the interlocutor of his prior knowledge on any given subject. The dialogues proceed along a line of questioning that aims to answer the question, *What is X?* where X is piety, or virtue, or rightness, or justice, say. The answer is never forthcoming; Socrates will systematically reject definitions as being inappropriate, incomplete or question-begging until the interlocutor is forced to admit defeat or to invent an excuse for a hasty exit.

There is a maddening and futile aspect to this kind of exchange that made Socrates many enemies. Not all philosophers are like Socrates of course, but he does embody something fundamental about the subject's method which Murdoch picks up on. She agrees that both literature and philosophy are truth-seeking exercises that aim to explain and clarify, but that philosophy is unlike literature and most other pursuits in its

confrontation with questions we 'do not know how to answer, or perhaps even quite how to ask.'[58] It is not an activity as such, but a methodology which insists on analysis, and is unable to ever truly resolve that which it analyses.

To illustrate this point, I'll make a brief comparison between philosophy and science. Questions are everywhere, that's true, and in every discipline are spawned by answers. But the answers that we get in areas of science are stepping stones that make progress possible – or at the very least make the illusion of progress possible. With each answer we get, we know more. When we think of the path of science since Copernicus, say, we can trace a story of human knowledge, a journey, an accumulation and growth. Because once we knew the real relationship of the earth to the sun, we were able to understand many other things. All these ingredients - journey, growth, progress - seem key aspects of a narrative, in all senses – the narrative of history, of a human life, or of a spoken or written factual or fictional story.

But think of the path of philosophy since Kant's own so-called 'Copernican Revolution'. Kant argued in infinite detail, with direct analogy to Copernicus, that rather than passively receive the world, the human mind constructs the world it experiences. In the sense that this turned upside-down all previous thinking about the mind-world relationship (as Copernicus turned upside-down the earth-sun relationship), it was a major landmark in philosophical history, and had huge impact. But where we can trace a story of progress in scientific knowledge since Copernicus, can we trace a similar story of philosophical progress since Kant? Do we all now *know* – in the way that we now know the earth orbits the sun – that the mind constructs the world we experience? Can we say Kant was right about consciousness in the same way we can say Copernicus was right about the earth and the sun? Of course we can't, plenty of philosophers have come along since who have argued against him, and the debate continues because it is a debate that is impossible

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[58] 'LP', p.8

to settle. Here is a subject full of those questions we do not know how to answer, or even ask.

Thus a narrative, which will traditionally consist of a discernible form of chronology, might struggle with the very achronological, tenseless characteristics of philosophy. A fictional narrative, which strives also to represent a discernible resolution or set of resolutions, will struggle even further. As Aristotle says in his *Poetics*, the fictional narrative emulates a contained world that begins, continues and ends. It can be seen through from start to finish in a way an individual human's life-narrative cannot.

In their essay on narrative and self, Ochs and Capps write, 'Narrative activity provides tellers with an opportunity to impose order on otherwise disconnected events, and to create continuity between past, present and imagined worlds.' [59] Where our own lives arc without a graspable start or end point, a fictional narrative closes its own circle on its events to some significant extent. And if by design it doesn't, this too will be part of the way we are asked to apprehend and interpret the story we have been told, which in turn allows resolution of some sort. As Ochs and Capps remark, in their considerations on the role of narrative thinking in current cognitive psychology, 'The proclivity to organise experience in terms of plots is characteristically human.'[60] This brings to mind Murdoch's assertion that we are all literary artists, that 'literary modes are very natural to us'. [61] Perhaps philosophy, as a pursuit, doesn't serve that proclivity very well, and reminds us too much of the frustration of all life's ungraspable things. In a sense it is this we aim to be rid of temporarily when we read or tell stories, and when we shape our own pasts into manageable, rounded and chronologically ordered anecdotes and tales.

I will stop here, however, because I think that actually this unresolved, unresolving nature of philosophy is not in and of itself a hindrance to the novel – I don't believe that

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[59] Ochs and Capps, 'Narrating the Self', *Annual Review of Anthropology* vol. 25 (1996) p.19
[60] 'Narrating the Self', p.26
[61] 'LP', p.6/7

any content is inherently more difficult than any other, it is more a question of finding apposite treatment of the material. In fact, if one were to take Bakhtin's view as he expresses it in *The Dialogic Imagination*, the unresolved nature of philosophy might be apt indeed, since the novel, too, is in this perpetual state of incompleteness – it has, Bakhtin says, a 'spirit of process and inconclusiveness'[62] which might prove it a very good vessel for thought systems that are that way inclined too.

While I don't have time to explore this idea in full, I am trying in this study to look at the prosaic expression of it, namely how I can find and write the novelistic drama in William's perpetual questioning and upending of things. In *All Is Song*, the 'unnaturalness', the repetitive nature of William's lines of questioning, had always presented itself to me as an opportunity and not an obstruction – and after all, it *is* the story. It is Socrates' story, and Plato proved that its dramatic potential is great. What could I do with this philosophical material, how could I exploit it novelistically? What effect would such content have on character, relationships and plot?

I have suggested in this section, then, that the problem of realising philosophical ideas dwells in form and not in content. In other words, the intransigent problem isn't the content of these ideas but the form they most naturally take in expressing themselves. Firstly, as ideas, they 'can only exist in things' as Coetzee says, but they find few straightforward ways of doing so. Secondly, as philosophical, they require a discursive, systematic working out – an enterprise that is itself narrative, and which must find a way of existing in or with the narrative storytelling of the novel. Much of the writing of *All Is Song* has been a process of trying, on one hand, to exploit the philosophical content for its drama, and on the other finding ways to limit the formal problems that come when one introduces ideas to literary realism and asks them to manifest, to walk and talk.

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[62] Bakhtin, 'The Epic and the Novel', p.7

On this note, I will now look at the next stage of the Euthyphro scene in *All Is Song* and at the steps I took to build it more successfully into the novel.

V. *All Is Song* – a scene (2)

The philosophical content of my Euthyphro episode was reborn into a novel which was, I thought, ready to receive it. I will explain what I mean by this.

I talked, in Section IV. i, about taking a less Platonic and more phenomenological stance towards the existence of ideas in the world of things. I said that this stance changed rather than removed the problem, since even if ideas are not ontologically distinct from this world, but rather manifest in it, the question still remains as to *how* to express that manifestation in a novel. Yet, of course, such a stance does help. The problem may not be removed, but it takes on new, more applied terms. It is no longer about metaphysics, but about writing practice and about what tools are available to the novelist when she wants to include abstract ideas. In other words, the problem itself becomes less philosophical and more writerly. Some of my writerly responses are described here.

Like Socrates, William has a wife and three sons, and spends his time engaging in philosophical discussion with others which interrogates abstract ideas in the form of *What is X?* type questions – where, as I have said, X is morality, justice, etc. In the case of my invented world, the platform for these discussions is an informal group of ex-students called the Bellevue Group (so called because they meet at the Bellevue Cafe). The argument about moral rightness was thus transposed into a meeting of that group. Primarily it is a discussion group in which William invites debate and argument on any number of topics. Philosophically the argument goes much the same as it did in the Euthyphro scene, though shortened and freed of digressions; it isn't supposed to feel like a natural conversation one might strike up on the street – it is supposed to feel more like a one-man-show in which William demonstrates to his enthusiastic students his flair for dismantling an argument

and for drawing the Socratic conclusion that the best we can know is that we do not know.[63]

The upshot of this constant undoing of his students' assertions will be a creeping sense of moral nihilism: if one can know nothing, morally speaking, one can do as one pleases. There is nothing to discriminate right from wrong. The tragedy of the book, if it works, is that this is at no point William's intention – he intends instead for his group to learn to think for themselves, to invite examination of their beliefs rather than act from assumption, to be better people ultimately.[64] Yet for all his gentle resolve in this respect, one particular member of the group commits an act of arson in which William becomes implicated, and so his downfall begins.

Unlike Socrates, William also has a brother, and it is his brother, Leonard, who narrates the entire novel. Leonard is the exploration of some wider emotional, social questions that go beyond the philosophical content itself, and reach into the literary terrain. This refers back to my comments in Section IV. ii about the literal approach to the *what is it like?* kind of questions that the novel as a form is so well equipped to ask and to offer answers to. In this case: What is it like to be subjected to philosophical scrutiny? How does it affect a human relationship? How does it impact upon the love one has for another, the past they have shared? How does it ramify into the world? Leonard is able, amongst other functions, to comment on that philosophical oddness and unnaturalness of his brother, to say, *This manner, this view, is strange to me; this view is difficult, frustrating, upsetting.*

I was anxious before I started writing *All Is Song* that William shouldn't be an entirely unsympathetic character, and anxious as I wrote that he was becoming one

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[63] For this scene, see Appendix 2

[64] As an aside, this is only my interpretation of Socrates' intention and is akin to that of one of Socrates' foremost commentators, Gregory Vlastos, who calls this encouragement of moral autonomy in others Socrates' 'strongest and deepest concern.' There are a number of other theories around what exactly it was Socrates was trying to do in his endless and energetic conversations.

regardless. Looking at novels like *Nausea* and *The Outsider*, the protagonists are both characters to whom it is difficult to relate, and who 'feel' according to a philosophical position; these positions can be read as symptoms of unexpressed emotion – in the former Roquentin's loneliness perhaps, or sense of failure, and in the latter, Meursault's grief. Where a philosophical position stands in for a feeling the novel acquires an emotional coolness which is difficult for a reader to get a handle on. I wanted to write a novel that was emotionally warm and was aware that William was haemorrhaging warmth in his tendency to philosophise more than to feel. Leonard, then, is one answer to that; we see William through the lens of Leonard's love (as well as his frustration and anger).

So, when I say that the novel had become 'ready' to receive its philosophical content it was not only that I had novelised (i.e. added novelistic elements to) the philosophical dialogues as in my Euthyphro scene, but also tried to prepare the novel as a whole for its abstract content – tried in every way I could to make sure there were no ideas 'floating free'. They were all embedded, embodied and contextualised.

To this end I had 1) established William as a searching, provocative character for whom deep examination of questions was ingrained; 2) opened up a forum for argument and debate of these questions, namely the Bellevue Group, and also provided for it through conversations between William and Leonard; 3) introduced, through Leonard, an interpretative, reactive and emotional point of view that could mediate between William's philosophies and the reader; 4) given the philosophical principles expression through the plot, namely the act of arson and what follows.

My hope was that when I then plugged the philosophical argument of the Euthyphro episode into this set-up, I would have the beginnings of a novel whose emphasis was spread quite evenly between philosophy and fiction, between mind and heart; on one hand the pure, direct interrogation of concepts, and on the other the complex living world of relationships. The literary content – characters, situations, Coetzee's 'walks in the

countryside' – could begin to emerge in their own right as opposed to their contrived subservience to the project of *doing philosophy*, as previously.

I suggested in the section on Definitions that the success of a philosophical novel might lie in harmoniousness between the expression of its two disciplines, philosophy and literature. Its success is a balance between the two, whereby both are fully present as disciplines in their own right, each working off the other, adding to the other. The relocation of the Euthyphro argument into a scene in the Bellevue is an illustration of my attempt to make that happen, but, by my own reckoning at least, it didn't succeed.

The philosophy itself faltered – it worked less here than in the Euthyphro episode, for where it was permitted primacy of place there in a scene whose agenda was to *serve the purpose* of the argument about moral rightness, it was only one of several agendas in the Bellevue scene. The argument was one thing, its implication for the plot was another, the dynamics of the group was another, the narrative eye of Leonard was another, the fraternal relationship was another still; those literary aspects were not balanced with the philosophical but were eclipsing it. As a result the feeling was that either the philosophy was an unwelcome imposter on the emotional charge of the novel, or that the emotional complexity was an unwelcome imposter on the philosophical meaning.

'A great writer,' Iris Murdoch says, 'can combine form and character in a felicitous way . . so as to produce a large space in which the characters can exist freely and yet at the same time serve the purposes of the tale.'[65] When I read this I think again, in terms of novelists who have written powerful philosophical fiction, of Camus and of Sartre. It is no groundless bias that has determined their novels to be some of the least contested examples of this kind of fiction (even if the former isn't considered so by Murdoch). They do conjure the artful trick of at once granting what seems like autonomous life to their characters while all the time enslaving them to the philosophical purpose of the novel. But

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[65] 'LP' p.28

this felicity must happen deep within the novel, within its very structure and not merely within its elements. To make relevant and potent the philosophical questions/arguments one wants to raise, one has to structuralise them so that they appear necessary to its very shape.

What Murdoch says here bears upon, and may give some grounding for, her otherwise ungrounded claim that *Nausea* is one of very few novels that is truly philosophical, and maybe it also hints at where I was going wrong. To say I 'plugged in' my philosophical content to the novel suggests that the felicity between form and character was far from deep. In *Nausea*, the protagonist Antoine Roquentin is submitted to the experience of Sartrean existentialism. He experiences increasingly, over the course of the novel, 'dread' (as Heidegger would phrase it) or 'angst' (as Sartre and Kierkegaard do): a confrontation with the meaninglessness of his existence and of all things that exist. Existentialism comes upon him. It effects a 'softly horrible metamorphosis of all his sensations' as Sartre says in a summary of the book.[66] Everything that happens to Roquentin happens to serve the purpose of the tale – to unveil for the reader the full manifestation of existential principles.

In *All Is Song*, the philosophical content was 'plugged in' by way of dialogue, as in the Bellevue scene. When I look at novels like *Nausea*, *The Outsider*, and also Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* – all distinctive from one another in their own way but all novels that have, for me, dealt elegantly with their abstract content – I find that very little of that content is delivered through dialogue. In *Nausea* it comes largely and directly through Roquentin's inner monologue; in *The Outsider* it comes largely through the sheer machinations of the plot and Meursault's response to those (which is only sometimes verbal, and even then taciturn at best); in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* it

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[66] M. Contat & M. Rybalka, *The Writings of Jean-Paul Sartre*, Vol.1 'A Biographical Life' (Northwestern University Press, 1974) p.52-3

comes largely through authorial intervention, whereby Kundera tells us where his characters stand in relation to the Nietzschean principle he has pitched them against.

So? Does that mean dialogue isn't a valid means for doing philosophy in a novel? It doesn't mean that at all – but it does suggest something cautionary. The philosophy must grow from within the realism and not be pasted onto it. And certain novels that do rely on dialogue for this simply don't, in my view, work as well. Murdoch's first novel, *Under the Net*, is an example – though not a philosophical novel nor aiming to be, it does turn out for the reader a more than cursory presentation of Marxism which is forced quite cumbersomely through dialogue between the protagonist Jake Donaghue and a character (invented, it seems, just to vocalise a political/philosophical position) called Lefty. What results in these five pages of conversation is exchanges such as:

> 'What about the dialectic?'
> 'There you go,' said Lefty. 'It's like the evil eye. You don't really believe in it yet it paralyses you. Even the adherents of the Dialectic know that the future is anyone's guess.'
> . . . 'Do you recognise certain mysteries?' I asked Lefty.
> 'Yes, I'm an empiricist,' he said.

In recognition of the difficulty of her content, Murdoch has her speakers lead us gently into arguments. "Let's take this slowly now. What was the most profound thing Marx ever said?" says Lefty, in an attempt to take both Donaghue and the reader by the hand through his (Murdoch's) thoughts.[67] I think Murdoch herself recognised the battle she was fighting here between the articulation of ideas through dialogue and the having of a realistic, animated conversation; earlier in the book, when Donaghue is reporting a series of enlightening philosophical conversations he'd had with another character – ones that had

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[67] Iris Murdoch, *Under the Net* (Chatto & Windus, 1982) pp 109 –113

helped him 'see the whole world anew' – he comments, 'Some of the most illuminating moments of our talk had been those which, if recorded, would have sounded the flattest.'[68] In fact, when I think of it, the whole novel is somehow about that battle, which she herself, as both novelist and philosopher, was struggling to resolve.[69]

In Murdoch's perceived struggle I recognise my own. How am to say things I want to say? How am I to argue a point? If it comes refracted through another's mind or situation I have invented, how do I pass it off as belonging absolutely to and arising inevitably out of that invented world, to gain that felicity of which Murdoch speaks?

While this is a concern for all novelists, it is made harder in my experience where the things you want to say are philosophical, because the arguments these things come bound in are by nature didactic, to an extent coercive; it is harder to pass them off as your character's thoughts and arguments, and as such it is harder to maintain that dreamstate, that spell. They are also often complex, difficult and 'unnatural', which means that if you *do* manage to pass them off, well, it is then harder for the reader to relate to the character who is having those thoughts, as it is harder to relate to Roquentin, say, than Meursault.

With the creation of William, Leonard, the Bellevue Group, I had tilled the soil, if you like, by addressing certain matters of technical craft by means of the four ways I mentioned near the beginning of this section – put simply, characterisation, setting, point of view and plot. Yet, because the philosophical content wasn't implanted deeply enough, the balance between philosophy on one hand and fiction on the other was not there. The question of how to make that 'large space' in which characters roam freely while serving the purposes of the novel is a million dollar question for a philosophical novel whose 'purpose' is in fact a real limiting factor: the novel must contrive towards a particular principle or doctrine, whilst still appearing free, somewhat organically occurring.

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[68] *Under the Net*, p.70

[69] In the novel Donaghue writes a novel based around these enlightening conversations, which turns out to be not much of a novel at all and a commercial flop. It is as if Murdoch were trying to mitigate the writerly difficulties she was experiencing by showing herself to be aware of them – a syndrome I myself know well.

It is a trick the author must pull off: what she aims at is for the reader to conclude: Look, this philosophical position is so undeniable that even the characters in this novel have come up against it. Rather than: Look, author X is so intent on taking this philosophical position that she has made the characters in this novel come up against it. In the first case the reader will feel gratified, in the second, perhaps, manipulated.

As I have said, to achieve real balance between the literary and philosophical content is a process – I had by now come to realise - that begins deep within the novel's structure, and for me that meant loosening my reliance on dialogue, and instead finding another way. This isn't to say I had to give up on dialogue; Socratic philosophy is delivered by way of direct conversational exchanges, and my commitment to that approach has never wavered. The very premise of the novel lies in the intolerability of that direct, unrelenting exchange and therefore it isn't an approach I have ever wanted or been able to dismiss.[70] But I had begun to see that where the dialogue was delivering direct and often discursively argued philosophical content, there was also need and scope for carrying that content over into extra-philosophical elements in the novel where it might be mirrored and amplified, and in turn where the pressure of argument was taken off the dialogue and spread across the novel and through its structure. This structuralisation of the philosophical content is the 'other way' I mention at the beginning of this paragraph, and it is in that other direction that I will look now.

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[70] I really don't mean to imply that dialogue always occupies a surface layer in a work of fiction. Good dialogue is often part of the deep structure of a novel, and in the case of playwrighting it is a major resource, in which all manner of narrative elements are inherent and on which they are often reliant – this is a skill I aspire to, and writers like Harold Pinter continue to teach me about the potential of dialogue to convey elements of story, character, theme and place that go far beyond the words themselves. If my movement away from a dependence on dialogue in *All Is Song* says anything about limits, it is about the limits of philosophising in novels and/or of my skills as a writer of dialogue, and not about the limits of dialogue itself.

VI. Structuralising the philosophy

i. Parables

I mentioned parables in Section I. iv, and I said that their narrative contrivance towards a particular philosophical outcome makes them good examples of literary philosophy.[71] Their function is, by definition, to illustrate a doctrine or moral point. Take the parable of Lazarus and Dives: Dives, who is rich, does not help Lazarus who is sick and poor and lying for years outside Dives' gates. When they each die, Dives goes to Hades and Lazarus is taken by the angels. The parable teaches us not to neglect the needs of others, and at a more specifically biblical level, teaches us that one cannot be neglectful on one hand and be welcomed into the kingdom of God on the other.

A parable is a closed tale; it shuts off all of its possible exits so that it can steer us towards one, and only one, outcome. It does not invite us to ask why Lazarus was lying outside Dives' house for so long, nor why he was poor and sick in the first place, nor why he had no friends or family who might have put him up. We don't know how old either man is, where they were born, what they like to eat. We aren't even asked to deliberate about finer ethical points within the tale, i.e. does Dives actually have a moral obligation towards Lazarus, and if he does, how much? How best should he help – with food, with medical help, with shelter? Or should he commit himself to longer term help – offer him a job, an education? These doors of exploration – subplots, themes, characterisation, back-story - are kept locked. They do not matter; they are not relevant to the teaching.

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[71] But not of 'philosophical fiction'at least as I am using the term here.

In a sense, a philosophical novel is rather like a parable. It has a 'teaching' of sorts. Of course a novel is longer and thus more complex, and some of those other doors of exploration will have to be opened. In *The Outsider* and *Nausea* we know a certain amount of biography about the main characters and we know what makes them tick, what they like and dislike, the kind of women they are attracted to, where they live, etc. Nevertheless, these details are not elaborations away from the main contrivance of the tale, they are themselves part of the contrivance. Each of these doors the reader is taken through will, by and by, end up back on the main path: there is only one destination and that destination is determined by the philosophical argument to which the novel is committed.[72]

In *The Outsider*, we are not invited to ask whether, in fact, Meursault is sentenced to execution because he shot and killed another man. We are told outwardly by Camus, and the novel conspires to tell us, that he is executed because he doesn't cry at his mother's funeral.[73] We are told this because it conspires towards a philosophical principle of absurdism: since there is no meaning to be found in the world one must live by one's own small truths, refuse to lie, refuse to say more than is true or more than one feels. Thus, Meursault refuses to say he felt grief at his mother's death when really all he can say in truth is that he'd have rather she hadn't died.[74]

Similarly, in *Nausea*, we are not invited to ask whether, in fact, Roquentin is just experiencing some form of pathology – a breakdown perhaps. We are told that he is experiencing 'the nausea' because this conspires towards the philosophical principle of

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[72] All well-written novels have this narrative control, contrivance and artfulness – but they don't necessarily have an *argument*. It would often be an inappropriate question to ask of a novel what its argument is, and more appropriate to ask about its story, or themes. Even if we talk of teachings, we speak more of those that can be drawn from it, not those that were put there.

[73] In the Afterword to *The Outsider*, Camus writes: 'A long time ago, I summed up *The Outsider* in a sentence which I realise is extremely paradoxical: 'In our society any man who doesn't cry at his mother's funeral is liable to be condemned to death.' I simply meant that the hero of the book is condemned because he doesn't play the game.' *The Outsider* (Penguin, 1982) p.118

[74] *The Outsider*, p. 65: 'The only thing I could say for certain was that I'd rather mother hadn't died. But my lawyer didn't seem pleased, He said, 'That's not enough.''

existentialism; this is the *teaching* of the novel. If this 'nausea' weren't a philosophically framed and bolstered phenomenon there could be no existential under- or overtone at all.

This doesn't imply of course that we are not permitted to ask questions *outside* of the parable or novel. We can and do discuss alternative reasons for Meursault's execution and what kind of a person he was, and also what on earth was happening to Roquentin during that bad winter in Bouville. Did he really discover an existentialist truth at the end of it, or in fact did he just have and then begin to recover from a nervous breakdown? Likewise, the sense and implications both religiously and otherwise of Jesus' parables is contested at length; the Lazarus parable has sparked much contention over the bible's treatment of heaven and hell and whether that treatment is consistent. So yes, most definitely we can debate these tales, but the point is that we are not given space to debate them within the tale itself.

ii. Being (and not being) didactic

Parables are inherently didactic; in the bible they are Jesus' teachings and their purpose is to illustrate a doctrine or moral point. They need make no bones about this. But novels are not teachings primarily, even if they do teach, and most readers do not want to pick up a novel and feel they are being taught; there is something quite autodidactic about the reading of a novel, the sense that one can take one's own understanding from what is laid, as if quite neutrally, before them. Perhaps the best novels are the ones that enable the reader to gain insights or sympathies not usually accessed. Or, to frame it slightly differently, ones whose arguments don't goad but rather, as Mulhall says, elicit 'a deep and transformative imaginative response in other human beings.'[75]

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[75] *The Wounded Animal*, p.75. I can relate to this in my experience of several books – I always feel something like this transformative response after reading Graham Greene, for example, who is the master of readerly

So, outside of a parable, and within a realist novel, how can the same purpose (to illustrate a doctrine) be achieved in a non-didactic way? How can the quite visible engineering present in a parable become more or less invisible in the novel, so that its 'dreamstate' isn't interrupted? I quote here the lovely, wry voice of Jose Saramago, from his novel, *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ*:

> When critics discuss the rules of effective narration, they insist that decisive encounters, in fiction as in life, should be interspersed and criss-crossed with countless others of no real importance, so that the hero of the story does not find himself transformed into a singular human being to whom nothing ordinary ever happens. They also claim that this is the narrative process which best serves the ever desirable effect of verisimilitude, for if the episode imagined and described is not and is never likely to become or supplant factual reality, then there must be at least some similitude. Not as in the present narrative, in which the reader's credence has clearly been put to the test.[76]

Saramago, in fact, gets around my very problem of how to be non-didactically philosophical in a novel (if he ever saw it as a problem, that is) by writing allegories and fables – thereby not always pursuing the 'ever desirable effect of verisimilitude'. *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ*, I would say, is a fable, based on that word's dictionary definition: 'any tale in literary form, not necessarily probable in its incidents, intended to instruct or amuse.' His novel *Blindness*, however, about an entire country struck by a sudden and unexplained 'white blindness' which renders its society monstrous, is more of an allegory - 'a narrative intended to be understood symbolically', or, more specifically, a narrative which sets up a system of reference so that everything in it cross-references to

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elevation. He seems to give such easy access to his brilliance that I can borrow from it, and see places my own insights and imagination do not usually reach to.

[76] José Saramago, *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ* (Vintage, 2008) p.165/6

something else. In both cases, though, there is something of the parable – the complete contrivance of its situations and incidents towards a moral point or points.[77]

Before going any further here, though, I should say that some novels *are* successfully didactic and make no attempt to keep an argument invisible, nor to leave the dreamstate intact. And indeed, meta-narrative of the sort Saramago uses in the quotation above, and in many of his novels – in which he makes an intervention on his own story - provides one method by which an author might state a principle, a point of fact, an interpretation or an aspect of craft, without recruiting his or her characters to the task.

One very clear example of this in the philosophical sub-genre is Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, whose meta-narrative allows the author to be outspoken about his philosophical designs on the novel. Its characters are subjected collectively (by the author) to Nietzsche's principle of eternal return, and their lives are applied to this principle as a chemical to litmus paper. *Einmal ist keinmal*, Kundera suggests in connection to Nietzsche's principle. *Once is not at all.* To live just once and disappear into nothing is not to have lived and to render one's existence 'light as feathers', or unbearably light, as he says. Through meta-narrative, Kundera engages directly and didactically with philosophical themes – he tells us what his agenda is and he updates us periodically on his characters' progress in relation to it. 'It would be senseless for the author to try to convince the reader that his characters once actually lived,' he writes at the beginning of Part 2.

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[77] In *Blindness*, the proximity of our civilisations to anarchy; and perhaps a more diffused point about humanity's blindness to itself. In *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ*, the moral questioning of religious faith.
Cees Nooteboom's *The Following Story* is another example of a philosophical novel told as allegory (and fable?). A difficult book to define and interpret, but I see it as a brief but lucid moment that occurs just before the main character's death, and since he had in life dwelt on philosophical matters (to a fault, and his nickname is Socrates) that expanded moment is itself a philosophical enquiry into the nature of dying. Towards the end in fact he seems to imagine he is the real Socrates, as appears at the end of *The Last Days of Socrates*. The novel does very little of its philosophical work through discursive means, but through symbols, metaphor and a kind of magic realism, and to its great credit is completely non-didactic – though so much so that it isn't really clear to me what philosophical point it is making. And if it is making none, I'm not sure what it is about at all (a shortcoming that might lie with me and not the book).
Of course allegories have played a specific role too in expressing that which it is difficult or forbidden to talk about, often politically and/or morally.

'They were not born of a mother's womb; they were born of a stimulating phrase or two from a basic situation. Tomas was born of the saying "Einmal ist keinmal."'[78] And thereby Tomas lives out some of the implications of that saying.

In this sense at least Kundera does what Camus and Sartre do; he sets out early a principle and in essence the whole novel is then a staging of that principle. Kundera's novel received enormous critical acclaim, and is also one I like and respect too – so, when I consider here how to introduce discursive philosophical content with a minimal sense of 'teaching', as it were, I ask, again, because that is what I have tried to do in *All Is Song*, and not because I assume there is simply no other right or good way of doing it.

My query in this section is how to emulate the contrivance of a parable in a realist novel, but the question does come with refinements: how to do so directly (so, not as in an allegory that refracts its point through symbols) and realistically (so, not as in a fable that may make itself improbable), and also without recourse to meta-narrative. I look here again to *Nausea*, which is neither fable nor allegory, nor uses meta-fiction as a form. What else might Murdoch mean when she says it is a very rare example of a true philosophical novel?

iii. Embodiment

When I began *All Is Song*, it was never in question that I should use the character of William to embody a philosophical position. The decision was all but necessitated by the fact of my writing about a philosopher, especially where that philosopher is Socrates, the living, breathing and also, as it turned out, dying testament to his method of philosophical

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[78] Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (Faber, 1985), p.39

inquiry. As Robert Nozick says of him: 'It is not his method alone that teaches us but rather that method . . . as *embodied* in Socrates . . . Socrates teaches with his person.'[79]

The decision was right, if unoriginal. I was well aware of the legacy of novels like *Nausea* and *The Outsider* that had used this device. I was also aware, though, of its pitfalls, since embodying a philosophical position in a character can create a character who, as I said before, philosophises in lieu of feeling, and thus appears cold, abstracted, unsympathetic, and with whom the reader has little incentive to identify. Roquentin is clearly a case in point. I return to Somers, speaking here of Roquentin's experience of 'the nausea': 'In order to make such intense personal distress artistically or even didactically successful, the character must inspire in the reader some feeling of sympathy, so that he may identify with the character.' Which, according to Somers, Roquentin doesn't: he is a character with him we are 'more often bored than sympathetic'.[80]

This idea of being 'didactically successful' is intriguing; Somers seems to say, and I agree, that a novel's teaching becomes effective if and only if it is conveyed in such a way that inspires the reader's sympathy; if it fails to do so, its didactic purpose falls flat. The novel feels to be just that – didactic. It is not enlarging our sympathies, moral or otherwise, it is if anything closing them down by making us feel preached at or, worse, manipulated. While I don't feel as strongly as Somers that Sartre fails on these counts, I agree that didactic success requires sympathy with the character who is embodying the teaching, and this is indeed something I have striven to do with William, in himself as a character and, as I've said, through the lens of Leonard.

So, that difference between my own approach and the approaches of Sartre and Camus notwithstanding, how have those two novelists made hay with the embodiment device? In *Nausea*, Roquentin lives out Sartre's existentialist principles, just as Meursault

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[79] Robert Nozick, *Socratic Puzzles* (Harvard University Press, 2000), p.154

[80] Paul Somers, 'Camus Si, Sartre No', p.698. He also goes on to say that 'the book is a 238-page epiphany, or, less charitably, a self-induced orgasm.'

does in *The Outsider*. It seems to me more and more an absolutely appropriate device for a philosophical novel since it allows the author to begin to heal that fracture between the idea and the reality in which it must embed itself. Embodiment of an idea in a character – and here I really mean the *main* character[81]- is one way to realise an idea, to make it quite literally, as Coetzee says, walk and talk, to take it out into the countryside, animate it, subject it to the concerns of ordinary life. It can be an extremely effective way of making real the abstract, because it allows revelation of an idea through the whole collective being (belief, thought, feeling, speech, behaviour) of that person, thus freeing the idea from its confined space between his or her ears.

Embodiment then has at its disposal quite a phenomenological stance because it situates the individual in a world of objects that reveal to him or her aspects of being – in *Nausea* this stance was exploited and is particularly pronounced in famous episodes like that of the chestnut tree. Says Roquentin, 'I *was* the root of the chestnut tree. Or rather I was all consciousness of its existence. Still detached from it – since I was conscious of it – and yet lost in it, nothing but it.'[82] Embodiment of existentialism in Roquentin is precisely one way in which Sartre *did* affect a kind of phenomenological solution to the expression of his ideas in a realist novel; Roquentin lived the ideas, and thus they were manifest everywhere in what he did, thought, felt and said. I wonder again, then, if this is in part why Murdoch singles *Nausea* out as she does – because Sartre manages, with a certain grace, to find the full, lived expression of his position as a philosopher without (as *Under the Net*'s Donaghue laments) flattening all the illuminating moments.

I have tried from the first page of the first draft of *All Is Song* to find this full, lived expression of Socratic philosophy through William, and to do what I like to do most as a

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[81] Of course Lefty in *Under the Net* embodies a Marxist position, but his character is too peripheral for Murdoch to be able to make full use of the device – we don't know enough of his character to see the principles manifesting through it. On the contrary his character, his humanness, is crushed into the principles and loses a dimension. He doesn't live out his philosophy (there isn't the page space for this because he isn't a central character), he merely speaks it, and this is what I mean by too much reliance on dialogue.

[82] *Nausea*, p.188

writer, which is to pay great attention to character so that it seems the events that occur in the novel do so as if falling inevitably into that character's wake. I came to the novel equipped with the knowledge that I must situate and ground every philosophical thought the novel was to have; the philosophy was always supposed to be embodied. So when William asks his students, for example, 'Do you sometimes do things that don't benefit you?' (as he does), we might understand that this isn't a question thrown randomly at the novel for the sake of starting a theoretical discussion about why we do wrong, but a question asked because it is deeply within William's character to ask, and because this is a situation that has been set up in which he might ask it; then, from that character and that situation the plot will begin to unfold.

But my attention had been on the subject of how to insert this idea, say, of moral rightness, or of the reasons we do wrong, into the narrative, which often reduced down to the technical question of how I might work its expression naturally into a dialogue between William and another (and then finding out that it is really very *awkward* to work it in naturally). It occurred to me much later that this is only half of the issue. As I said in Section IV, a philosophical idea is one that requires a systematic working out. We are not only considering philosophical positions, but philosophical arguments – the discursive working-out of these positions – and arguments have narratives. The question is not only one of how to install a philosophical idea or principle, but how to install a whole narrative argument, and this I think is where the device of embodiment is exceptionally useful and provides enormous potential for the philosophical and the literary to touch surfaces. Embodiment of a principle in a character allows not just the revelation of that principle but also the systematic, methodological revelation of it – because building a character is a methodology in itself, to which the philosophical idea can now attach and argue itself out.

The difficulties I experienced with the philosophical content of *All Is Song* were, I think, to do with the fact that I hadn't fully exploited all the possibilities embodiment offers

as a literary device. Whilst I had thought about how that content – housed within William - would interact with the plot so as to be relevant – i.e. William would have philosophical discussions with his students which would influence their actions and bring on his undoing - I hadn't found a narrative element in the content itself that could form part of the novel's structure – i.e. I hadn't taken a particular argument and lived it out through William so as to braid it through the whole.

This is something *Nausea* does *par excellence*; the narrative element Sartre finds in his existentialist principles is the condition of nausea to which Roquentin is subjected and by which he begins to live his days. I don't mean to say that every reader will understand or accept the philosophy the book argues or like or empathise with Roquentin as he lives it. But the very structure of the novel facilitates the day-by-day unfolding of existential principles as this condition within Roquentin; his confusions, depressions, epiphanies, understandings, his work, his relationships, his decisions – all laid out in diary form from one day to the next until 'the nausea' grows in him to such an extent that it begins to colour each of his experiences.

Camus too finds a narrative expression for his philosophical position in *The Outsider*; he interrogates absurdism by seeing what happens to a human who fully embraces it. It manifests through Meursault, first in the small things; 'for want of something to do, I picked up an old newspaper and read it. I cut out an advertisement for Kruschen Salts and stuck it in an old exercise book where I put things that amuse me in the papers.'[83] An almost comically small and pointless thing for an adult to amuse himself with. But the ramifications of that absurdist pointlessness he adheres to amount, by the end of the book, to something that is far from comic – Meursault awaiting the death

[83] Camus, *The Outsider*, p.25

penalty for his murder of a man, whereby he reflects, '(E)verybody knows that life isn't worth living . . . it doesn't matter very much whether you die at thirty or seventy.'[84]

As I got deeper into a second draft of *All Is Song*, and after discarding scene upon scene of philosophical dialogue, I found that such a narrative element was starting to emerge. The following section describes what that was. But before going to that I think it is worth touching on one other point, which is the question as to whether some schools of philosophy are more available to novels than others.

iv. Continental philosophy and the literary mode

I ask this – though I realise it is an enormous question – because, for all that I might admire and learn from novels like *Nausea* and *The Outsider*, I am writing about Socratic philosophy and not existentialism or absurdism, both of which sit within twentieth century 'continental' philosophy. So, are those last two schools of thought more given to the novel than others – say, empiricism or positivism or Kantian ethics, or indeed the Socratic? And if so, are some of the methods employed there less applicable to me? Is it possible for me to build Socratic philosophy into my novel as a narrative element in the same way Sartre and Camus do?

On the face of it I do think the twentieth century continental schools of thought are more obviously available to novels than the analytic, or at least more available to the technique of embodiment.[85] There are two reasons for this. Firstly, the continental style is

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[84] *The Outsider*, p.109

[85] By the continental schools of thought I mean for example existentialism, phenomenonology, the French feminism exemplified by Simone de Beauvoir, Marxism, and Nietzschean and Kierkegaardian philosophy. By the analytic, I mean specifically that system of logic that began with Bertrand Russell and Ludwig Wittgenstein in the early 20th century, and which held that the problems of philosophy could be dissolved away by logical analysis of the propositions involved.
Also, it coud be argued that empiricism, as the bedrock of a modern way of thinking, is not only openly available to novels but is almost the Western novel's default philosophical position. Whether the case or not,

grounded in a model that unites theory and practice, rather than isolating out theory as separate from practice as the analytic does. It places emphasis on philosophy as that which is historically and politically contextualised – a body of ideas that are of their time and place, not removed from context to a supposed realm of pure reason. It also deals with the human subject's lived experience of these contextualised ideas; existentialism is, as Iris Murdoch says, a breed of philosophy that deals with the 'predicament' of being a self in a world of other selves [86]. Both this historical, social, political context, and the presence of this self in a world of other selves, is precisely and literally the very currency of most novels; that context can contain and give form to the philosophical ideas, and that self can stand for, embody, the experience of being amongst others, and more specifically the predicament and struggle of that being.

Continental philosophy is much to do with the experienced 'predicament' of life. It is a first person kind of philosophy, one which trades in experience. It seems to me that Roquentin's capacity to embody existentialism in *Nausea* is somewhat to do with this; it manifests as a physiological/emotional sensation - Roquentin *feels* the nausea in a way we feel anxiety or despondency or fear (even if, as I've suggested, that feeling is really just at the service of the philosophy and at the expense of a more genuine emotion). Existentialism comes upon him as mid-life crises come upon others.

But analytic philosophy is, broadly speaking, rather more third-person, holding its objects of study at arm's length in order to conduct a logical analysis of its properties. It wouldn't make sense to call Socrates an analytic philosopher as such, since that term was coined two thousand years after he died, yet in the sense that his method is epitomised by a detached observation of concepts and propositions as a means to finding essential

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again, I am only considering ways in which philosophical content enters a novel's narrative directly, discursively, and at least in part on its own terms. To say we are all empiricists insofar as we all accrue knowledge based on the evidence of our senses is to describe a generic human experience of the world. It is not to say we are empiricists in the sense John Locke or David Hume were, or that we express our empirical position in the way they, as philosophers, do.

[86] Iris Murdoch, 'The Novelist as Metaphysician', in *Existentialists and Mystics*, p. 107

definitions in them, he can be more identified with the analytic tradition than with the continental, at least in this limited way. His method did not process these concepts and propositions through the emotions or the body. It is true that the essential definitions were applied by Socrates to notions of happiness, in that knowledge was considered to be virtue, the practice of virtue led to living the good life, and to lead the good life was to be happy. And it is true that Socrates meant for his students to practice the art of the good life, not just to theorise about it. But even here happiness is expressed as an analysable concept and not as a personally felt state of being.

Given this, I am able to understand in a slightly different light the nature of my struggle. In order for Sartre to philosophise in *Nausea*, he had to go deeply into a perception of things, like the chestnut tree or a woman's bust or the passing of a moment, all of which effect in Roquentin sensations of desire or failure or whatever it might be, and all of which take us deeper into his indisposition. He is able to articulate an existential horror in his sometimes prolonged descriptions of everyday things, such as a seat on the Saint-Elémir tram; he sees it suddenly with an excess of existence, a lack of designation or purpose. [87]

By contrast, in order to philosophise in my novel I have had to hold concepts up and away from my characters and at a psychic distance to both them and the reader, as was the Socratic way. This inspection and diagnostic scrutiny of things is not only less intimate but also lends itself less to the rather elaborate, verbose and lyrical writing style that was so endemic amongst the continental philosophers, both in their fiction and their textbooks. The analytic style is (usually) clearer, more specific and aloof, dryer.

This gives way to my second reason as to why continental schools are more available to the literary form. Socrates was not just seeking knowledge, he was seeking

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[87] *Nausea*, p. 179/180. 'I murmur: 'It's a seat,' rather like an exorcism. But the word remains on my lips, it refuses to settle on the thing . . . Things have broken free from their names. There they are, grotesque, stubborn, gigantic, and it seems ridiculous to call them seats or say anything at all about them: I am in the midst of Things, which cannot be given names.'

truth. The millennia of practice that grew in his wake, from the rest of the Greeks to the empiricists to the German idealists, has been in the same vein – trying to find some universal, permanent, ahistorical conditions of our existence, and as such they are likely to fall prey to Plato's distaste of the poets more than practices whose aims are less universal. I quote Rorty:

> [So] the pre-Nietzschean philosopher's story goes, the particular contingencies of individual lives are unimportant. The mistake of the poets is to waste words on idiosyncrasies, contingencies – to tell us more about accidental appearance than reality . . . It was Nietzsche who first explicitly suggested that we drop the whole idea of "knowing the truth". His definition of truth as a "mobile army of metaphors" amounted to the idea of saying that the whole idea of "representing reality" by means of language, and thus the idea of finding a single context for all human lives, should be abandoned.[88]

The continental schools of thought since Nietzsche are in general less truth-seeking than the philosophies that preceded them, and more grounded in perspectivism and historicism. It is the case I think that aiming relentlessly at truth, as Socrates did and as William does in my novel, is a more fractious and awkward undertaking that is not content with the 'army of metaphors', and wants to reach beyond them, through language, to something essential about existence. As I've quoted Magee saying, 'most people neither like doing this nor like having it done to them'. To sustain a novel in which the reader herself is to some extent having this done to her, and also asked to connect to the character who is doing it, is a tall order.

But it isn't good practice to complain about a project I freely chose. And whilst I do think that the literary opportunities, both in style and content, offered by the continental

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[88] Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, p. 26/7

schools of philosophy are in some way greater, I also believe that any kind of philosophy is available to the novel insofar as it is available to be thought about in our lives. Where Socrates' method evokes more distance between thinking subject and thought-about object (or concept), it encapsulates an outlook that concerns one's deep, ongoing engagement with others, to use Mulhall's phrase, the 'dialectical examination of one soul by another'[89], the attempt to improve others' souls – note here the use of soul, not just intellect, mind or set of beliefs. Socrates was gregarious and considered a great erotic, the lover of wisdom, of men and women; he wanted the good, virtuous life, he wanted others to engage in it with him.[90] There is plenty of human scope in his method and outlook, and thus ample humanity for me to embed William's philosophies in when it came to writing them.

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[89] The quotation comes from Mulhall's discussion on Plato's *Republic*; *The Wounded Animal*, p.2

[90] Two points to note here by way of stressing that my take on Socrates's breed of philosophy as it were isn't at all definitive. Firstly, far from opposing him to existentialism, some thinkers have interpreted him as an existentialist (see Versényi's *Socratic Humanism* (Yale University Press, 1963)). Secondly, far from thinking him an out-and-out lover of humanity, Vlastos charges him with a 'failure of love'; 'Jesus wept for Jerusalem,' he writes. 'Socrates . . . has no tears for [Athens].' (See Vlastos, 'The Paradox of Socrates', *Queen's Quarterly* (Winter 1958)). What counts for me, however, isn't so much what Socrates actually was or wasn't, philosophically speaking, but what I have taken him to be for the purposes of my novel, based on my own reading and interpretations.

VII. *All Is Song* – a scene (3)

It is one of the odd vagaries of fiction writing that allows an author to say she found a possible answer to her narrative problems through chickens. But this is a true thing to say.

Early on in the writing of the novel I'd heard on the local radio news that some chickens had been found with their necks stamped on, and because I hadn't been able to rid myself of that image and of my thoughts about it, the news story ended up in the novel as something William's brother, Leonard, had heard. On the radio (in the novel) a listener suggests that a fox might have been responsible for the killing, and Leonard is indignant when the radio presenter replies that a fox wouldn't have the strength to stamp on a chicken's neck. Says Leonard: '[W]ith all due respect, I don't think it's a question of strength. It isn't that foxes aren't strong enough to kill a chicken for no reason, it's that they aren't desperate enough, they aren't lost enough, they aren't broken-spirited enough.'[91]

Initially Leonard's indignation had prompted a discussion between the brothers and this discussion became home to the kind of philosophical enquiry that had hitherto belonged to the previous scenes I have outlined here. The argument was not exactly the same – there it was an enquiry into how we define moral rightness, here it is an enquiry into what it is that makes somebody do what seems to be morally wrong. But the purpose of the two scenes was the same: to reveal the extent of assumption and ignorance in the interlocutor's beliefs about that subject. And it felt to me that to use the chickens' plight as a context for that argument was a more grounded and quotidian point of entry than that of the Euthyphro or Bellevue set-ups.

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[91] *All Is Song*, p.21

The discussion about the chickens had at first been a discrete episode – another, dare I say it - awkwardly situated conversation of abstract terms. Indeed, remnants of this conversation remain in the finished novel as does the above quotation. A hundred pages on from that first comment of Leonard's and the subject is raised again by William:

> 'I wanted you to tell me something – do you mean that there's something in the fox that's intact, then, and something in the human that's broken?'
>
> There was nothing in Leonard that was in the mood for a debate, but from the point of view of principle he thought he ought to show some willingness. 'Perhaps I mean that,' he answered. 'I can't really remember.'
>
> He waited near the door for William to speak. William didn't speak, but stared in thought at the carpet while rotating his thumbs one around the other.
>
> Leonard said, 'Yes, then. Yes, there's something amiss in the human spirit. Of course there is, look at us and the way we live.'
>
> 'And this thing that's intact in foxes and broken in humans – is it the same thing?'
>
> 'I don't know. It probably is.'
>
> 'We can't fix something if we don't know which part is broken. If we could discover what it was that's there in the fox and amiss in the human, what component I mean, wouldn't that help us fix it?'[92]

But what I tried to do was to extend this enquiry far beyond an isolated conversation and to use the subject of the chickens to open up an ordinary, day-to-day area of the novel and make it philosophically available. That means, make it present real questions rather than rhetorical ones. Rhetorical questions are not philosophically available: 'Who knows?' 'What can you do?' 'Who can say?' Questions like these invite no enquiry, nor ask for an answer. They are made available only when asked with genuine curiosity: 'Who *does*

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[92] *All Is Song*, p. 113

know?' 'What *can* you or I do?' 'Who *can* say? – can anyone? If nobody truly can, why? What can be said instead?' etc. This is what William does with respect to the chickens, and he will not relinquish the subject; he challenges both Leonard and his students with it, and takes to rescuing several battery hens for whom he builds a coop in the garden. Leonard narrates:

> The truth was that the agenda of the chicken coop was perfectly clear. You brought up the issue of the stamped-on chickens, William was trying to say. And we haven't yet settled the issue, there are still philosophical points up for debate and so much we don't understand, so much ignorance and presuming. With every nail he drove into the wood he was housing the debate, pressing the point into form and reality. Let us see this discussion through – that was what he was saying.[93]

The deeper William's problems become with regards to his students and the arson allegation, the more recalcitrant he becomes, pursuing his questions about the chickens with more vehemence – though of course while the questions begin there they do not end there. They become larger enquiries into religion, into sin, into one's motives for doing wrong, and gradually accumulate as the novel progresses. Hence the subject of the hens is not just a springboard for a Socratic style dialectic, but a part of the novel's structure that would (I at least hoped) articulate and reflect the building tension in events and relationships.

'Oh the chickens, the chickens!' narrates Leonard. 'How was one supposed to feel about it? Really, one should push oneself to keep caring if one ever cared at all; William was right about that at least.' Throughout *All Is Song* I have used Leonard as a reactive presence that mediates and interprets William's philosophising into an emotional language. I am aware that the introduction of some chickens into my novel is not the most

[93] p.118

brilliant move and nor will it revolutionise the philosophical novel; but I have not aimed to revolutionise, I have aimed to report on the Socratic method and what I see as its interface with daily life. We want to eat chickens, or not. We want to keep chickens, or not. We think or care about them, or we don't. In any case we probably do not want to be subjected to a whole strata of conceptual enquiries every time we see or hear of one, and nor do we want to be told that our lack of critical interest in this area signifies a 'lack of humanity' as Socrates would have had it (and as William at one point has it). On the whole, we just want to get on. And this interface between *critically enquiring* and *just getting on* is the plane on which my novel has come to take place. It is primarily an emotional plane; I see this as a novel that is as much about relationships, and specifically the fraternal relationship between William and Leonard, as it is about Socratic philosophy – but not, I hope, about one at the expense of the other.

As mundane as it probably seems to be, the invention of the chickens was my way of giving equal expression to the philosophical and literary forms. They open up the ground for ongoing analysis and debate which gradually develops into a wider theoretical argument about the nature of sin, as expressed towards the end, and they open up the ground for felt responses from Leonard and William's wife, for the revealing of strengths and tensions in the novel's relationships. They mobilise Leonard in his role of exploring 'wider emotional, social questions' outside of the abstract philosophic ones. He begins by asserting: 'Ah yes, his brother was the better man – guardian of the chickens, guardian of the downtrodden, gatekeeper of justice and goodness . . . He of good, bold heart.' But towards the end this has changed: 'The chickens, the damned chickens. A tree could let its fruit go. William should let the chickens go.'[94] (And I suppose the reader might well be wishing he would.)

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[94] *All Is Song*, pages 80 & 201

How does this tactic of the chickens really differ from the others I'd tried, in the previous scenes I've outlined? In those too I attempted to take grounded scenarios and make them 'philosophically available' – in the first, a scenario in which two men are about to go to court and for whom moral questions are pertinent and deeply pressing, and in the second, a scenario in which William is with his students precisely to discuss matters of moral, political and social philosophy. I think the answer is that in both of those earlier episodes, I felt under pressure to give to the reader the entire discursive philosophical argument as a *fait accompli*, whereas with the chickens, I entrusted some of that content to extra-philosophical material – to the trivial and, at times, absurd. Roquentin's confrontation with existential dread is through a great number of trivial things; *Nausea* is full of absurd objects of wonder and despair. Philosophy is found in the little things – to exhume Woolf's quotation from an earlier footnote, it is the 'little daily miracles' that we should attend to, the matches struck unexpectedly in the dark.

Unlike Woolf, I don't say here that these little things *are* philosophy, only that philosophical meaning can be found in them – in the trivialities and subtleties of character in which a philosophical stance can be grounded and allowed to live. And in living in all manner of ways, it is set free from a reliance on dialogue and allowed to be expressed in other ways – for example in William's building of the hen house. Some of the philosophical content of those dialogues is thus rearranged in other narrative ways.

Towards the end of the novel there is still a fairly substantial philosophical dialogue that aims to articulate Socrates' argument that nobody does wrong willingly. It isn't that I have replaced such discussions throughout with non-dialogue alternatives, but that where those discussions do come, I hope they arrive in a novel that is already so steeped in philosophical content that they are pre-empted, framed, and can flow from the characters and events with a certain naturalness. In other words, I hoped that, given everything else, I could get away with these dialogues. I do think that ultimately it does come down to

getting away with it, just as many novelistic devices do. It is a question of which boundaries one can push, which rules one can play with; and this often depends upon the extent to which the reader is already immersed in the novel's 'dreamstate' and is prepared to move with it.

So the material has shifted, first from the out-and-out discussion of a definition of moral rightness in the Euthyphro episode, to a relocation of that same dialogue-based material, truncated and contextualised, in the Bellevue scene, to the loss of that actual content and its dialogue almost entirely, and a structuralisation of a variety of morally philosophical concerns that spread through the novel and which relate to (but go beyond) the issue of the chicken killing. In other words, the scene as such no longer exists. But I hope that its philosophical ring exists louder than it had before.

VIII. Success and failure

Did I succeed? Have I done 'true philosophy in a truly novelistic way', to use my own earlier definition of success?

On the face of it the answer looks to be no, in the sense that I didn't do what I meant and hoped to do originally with *All Is Song*. I don't think I have done 'true philosophy'; I wanted to be so much more philosophical than I was. I wanted to (I did, in one draft) launch into a fully formed exposition of animal rights. I wanted to make stronger and more trenchant points about the role the media plays in forming cultural worldviews, and at our complicity in the fear and horror it likes to peddle. But there came for me a point, somewhere between the writing of the Bellevue scene I describe here and the invention of the chickens, that I decided quite consciously that it was more important to me to write a successful novel than a successful piece of philosophy. And so I let many of my philosophical arguments go, I looked deeper into the relationships between my characters, and began to make concessions.

These are the concessions to which I referred in Section I.iii, when I said that 'there is no doubt that literary concessions have to be made to an argument in order for it to work in a novel.' What did they turn out to be in my case? Of course, the content was one – the many direct discursive arguments that either disappeared or became so pegged back or shrouded in context that they were not the great statements I hoped they would be. I swapped fist-thrusting arguments about right and wrong, about the relation between humans and animals, about theology, for half a dozen rescued chickens. Is that really philosophy? It certainly isn't the kind of 'real' philosophy I set out to do – the interrogative examination of concepts. But in return I was rewarded with a more fluid novel, richer and

deeper characterisation and an emotional charge that I think is sustained from the first to the last page and came to be increasingly important to my sense of what the book is – namely, a fraternal love story which is finally ambivalent, as I am, about how best to live.

I made concessions to the narrative stance too, in having Leonard as a narrator who arbitrates between his brother and the reader. In truth Leonard's arbitration is as much an *apology* for William as it is an interpretation, as if indeed the author has lost her confidence in the character she has created. Though I remained determined, I did regularly lose confidence in the idea that a reader would find any of the philosophical content relevant and interesting. Is Leonard the manifestation of my lack of courage here? Perhaps he is, but, conversely, I think there is also something bold about this narrative move. His responses to William do not always dilute or reconcile William's philosophical stance, they often emphasise it and flag up the contentions very plainly and unequivocally; in making my narrator react against the constant 'What is X?' style questions with irritation, exasperation, confusion, I risk doubling the readers' experience of any of these reactions. Yet I wanted the reader to feel these things, and to confront his or her reactions while at the same time finding enough emotional and narrative traction in the novel to keep reading and being nourished, and I think in this sense the novel has succeeded in meeting my ambitions for it.

Moreover, what is my real anxiety when I speak of failure? I have come to see that it is not so much to do with whether or not the novel has succeeded, technically speaking, in being philosophical, and more with whether or not I *made my point*. Whether or not I made my point depends to a very large degree on me, and this thesis has been about what I have done and not done to that end. But it also depends in part upon the reader's willingness to *interrogate* the content for a point.

On the face of it this might sound like a churlish shifting of responsibility from myself to the reader, as if to suggest that if the philosophical material in my novel doesn't

work for whatever reason, it is the partly the reader's fault – but that couldn't be further from what I mean. My only meaning is that the experience of a novel is a triangular one between the author, the material and the reader, and it is active and dynamic. The content that the author provides gives itself to the reader, and the reader gives back to the content. She supplies it with content of her own – thoughts, feelings, beliefs, knowledge and context. Depending on what she supplies, and the extent of her willingness to supply it, the content will give back to her again, becoming – if the whole process is going well – progressively more robust and formed with each exchange. The upshot of this for me is that the nature of the philosophical content in my novel – in any philosophical novel – is not by necessity one of fully-formed and discursively argued principles for the reader to consume in their completed state. Something needs to be given, and given discursively, as a line thrown out to the reader. But then the author ought to credit her reader with the wherewithal to extrapolate from that principle and apply it elsewhere, to the non-discursive and more novelistic elements – to find existentialism in the seat of the Saint-Elémir tram, or Socratic philosophy in a chicken's tuft of feathers.

This makes me re-question whether I succeeded or failed. If the onus for interrogation, exploration and examination is entirely upon the material and not upon the person receiving it, then in my eyes I failed, for I failed to provide material that examined and interrogated as I would have liked, i.e. in complete arguments that are laid out for a reader to receive and ingest. But if this view is naive, as I now believe it is, and if at least some of the onus is on the reader to partake in the philosophical content, to enter into a dialogue with it herself, then perhaps I haven't failed – or in any case perhaps, through the novel's publication, it still remains to be seen.

I speak reflexively here in the evaluation of my own work, but there is a wider critical dimension to this issue. While reading, in my research, the many debates over whether or not a novel can be philosophical, it began to dawn on me that maybe the debate

is not what it seems in first light. It is, as I said when I wrote earlier about the differing views of Nussbaum and Murdoch, one that really asks what philosophy *is*. Is it a systematised working out of concepts through discursive argument, or is it more broadly a search for understanding? Beyond this however, there is a more specific question – where does the responsibility for the philosophical mode lie? Who works out the concepts? Who searches for understanding? Both definitions are grammatically passive, and absolutely vague about the subject. If I take philosophy to be the former, must I expect somebody – a philosopher probably – to systematically work out concepts for me, such as that all I need do is switch off all but my most logical faculties and reach the end of the argument, and be done? If I take it to be the latter, must I expect somebody – a philosopher, an author – to search for understanding for me? Is *that* what philosophy is?

Socrates would certainly say no – philosophy is the act of undertaking the search oneself, examining one's own beliefs, taking *oneself* all the way through an argument, not arguing by proxy. Others can guide in this, but nobody can do it on one's behalf. Socrates is considered the founder of the Western philosophical method precisely because of his insistence on this dialectic act that a person undertakes, one which exposes inconsistencies in his thinking and so promotes in turn greater logical consistency in the thoughts and beliefs he goes on to form. To the extent that I think philosophy matters, it is in this Socratic way – as an act which involves one's own participation.[95]

Back towards the beginning of this thesis, in Section III. ii, I referred to the debate between Diamond and O'Neill, which is a debate over ways in which philosophy might acknowledge the claims of reason. O'Neill argues that philosophy's means are restricted – it must acknowledge those claims through critical argument. Diamond argues that such restrictions are nonsensical and that there are other forms of critical reflection outside of

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[95] Likewise, in his *Meditations* Descartes insists that his readers too should undertake the 'meditation' he has undergone, and through which he arives at his famous 'I think therefore I am', rather than merely take his word for it.

analytical philosophy – ways in which our moral imagination may be enlarged – and that novels can be just such a form.

I return to this debate because I think it has a relevance to the question of philosophical 'responsibility' that now concerns me. O'Neill goes on in a paper called 'The Power of Example' to talk about novels as being detailed workings out of examples. She says that the best instances of this are the most thorough, namely canonical novels – but, because their examples are so thoroughly worked out, so nuanced, they leave 'little room for disagreement about their specific substance.'[96] Her point is that they assume a community of moral views or a shared ideology; where there is such a community, the literature only seems to reinforce what we already thought we knew. Where there isn't, we get a 'breakdown of moral communication', which results in a relativisation of views. So Dickens' novels might (and probably will) reinforce the moral stance that children should be afforded proper social rights, or, where there is no community of such views, there will be an array of reactions – children should have fewer social rights, adults should have as few as children, society should be more x and less y, etc. In either case, though, the work will allow no reasoned moral disagreement. Its moral example is too well worked out to allow for the critical appraisal of differing moral views.

O'Neill says that these nuanced canonical texts evoke too much voyeurism and 'spectator perspective' on our moral thinking to suppose that we can use literary examples to broaden and deepen our understanding. What I take her to mean is that this is philosophy vicariously done, through, as Plato would have it, simulacra and appearances, through how things seem rather than how they are. In his brief discussion of O'Neill's point, Mulhall disagrees. Far from canonical texts like those of Henry James being a 'monolith of self-reinforcing and inherently conservative agreement,' says Mulhall, they are capable of sustaining a great amount of critical attention and interpretation, and

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[96] Quoted from Stephen Mulhall, *The Wounded Animal*, p.11

indeed this might be what defines them.[97] As I've said, Mulhall believes that it is through the assertions of philosophers like O'Neill that Plato's 'ancient quarrel' lives on. To reiterate his point I quoted earlier: '[These morals] seem to me to be better characterised as other familiar, everyday ways of attempting to convince others of one's way of seeing the world . . . They would therefore seem to be forms of discourse that philosophy need have no qualms about admitting as modes of thought or ways of reflecting about the world.'

Yet my own point here is in what O'Neill might really be worrying about, which is the failure in us as literary readers, say, to take it upon ourselves to extrapolate from these issues lived vicariously by fictional characters to issues that apply outside of the fictional world, i.e. to fail to interrogate and critically examine them. The reason we might fail is that literature doesn't necessitate that we interrogate them; if we choose, we can just receive them and take them on board as matters of story, barely or only loosely applicable to us once the book is closed. We can understand and assimilate these moral issues more easily *because* the characters living them aren't real.

Do philosophical texts necessitate that we interrogate their content? Well, these texts, in the analytic tradition particularly, are interrogative acts already – they are usually presented as critical, discursive argument that is examining a point. When we approach them we expect there to be an element of study involved, or at least studious attention. So if we approach them in that way, with the resolve to divine their point, we will be engaging in an act of interrogation as we read, and the more we read and try to understand, the deeper that engagement will be. Thus, perhaps the difference between literature and philosophy in each one's potential to critically reason and enquire is not one of kind but of degree. The difference is less to do with what each discipline *is* essentially, or what it means to answer the calls of reason, and more to do with the extent to which each gives us, who consume them, the option of not answering that call.

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[97] *The Wounded Animal*, p.17

Fiction does give us this option; never mind Dickens - one could read even overtly philosophical novels like *Nausea* as mere stories: the story of a lonely man who has a strange old winter and thinks a seat on a tram is a huge upturned belly, 'bleeding, puffed up', who is rebuffed by an old flame and then at the end while waiting for a train finds a little hope in his heart to start anew. There could be no critical interrogation of existentialism in this reading at all if the reader chose to approach it that way.[98] Whereas it would surely be impossible to read Sartre's seminal text *Being and Nothingness* without acknowledging its critical interrogation of existentialism.

Yet of course philosophical texts *do* give us the option of not answering the calls of reason, that option just comes further down the line; one might read *Being and Nothingness* in all earnestness, and interrogate it for the point or points that are stated, but not apply any of its critical arguments to the world or oneself once the book is put down. This is why I think it is a matter of degree and not kind; O'Neill's worry that a novel has its philosophical views too worked out to allow a proper critical response is, in my eyes, more the worry that it won't *necessitate* a critical response. But such a response is eminently possible if the reader so chooses.

The point is that the reader must choose, since philosophy is precisely the kind of subject that cannot be done entirely on one's behalf, it cannot be passively received in the sense that a story can be. This is why it is a difficult subject for fiction, because the literary reader may not be in a frame of mind for active – not to mention at times rigorously cerebral - participation in the story she is told. It is also why it is not an impossible subject for fiction, because if the reader takes does take that extra step, the philosophy can live as if anew, richer and more nuanced, detailed, 'real' and worked out than it could ever be in a

[98] Or it could be read eco-critically – Roquentin's revulsion and fear of the natural world. Or as a novel about the suppression of emotion in twentieth century masculinity, where Roquentin's philosophical ideas are but symptoms of those myriad emotions in him that can't be expressed – loneliness, fear, failure, hopelessness; likewise *The Outsider* could be read as a novel about suppressed grief, namely Meursault's grief after the death of his mother. And I think that any of these readings, and many more, are perfectly fair and viable on the face of it, either as well as or instead of the existentialist readings.

textbook or treatise. Another way of articulating the question of this study then, now that the bulk of the work is done, is thus: how can the author present philosophical content in a novel in such a way that makes it most likely that the reader will choose to answer its calls to reason? Or, how might an author most invite a receptive frame of mind in her readers? Much of what I have discussed here in terms of practical decisions has been in the service of the goal of inviting such receptiveness. It is, I think, the task of recognising and respecting the intelligence and imagination of one's readers enough to cater to it; in other words, to not feel that one has to give over the ideas and arguments as a fait accompli.

In terms, then, of my own level of success with *All Is Song*, I am inclined to accept, happily, that my initial ambitions might have been unrealistic and unnecessary. All of the fully-fledged arguments in those discarded documents were trying to do something that didn't need to be done – that is, give those arguments full, discursive expression in order to hand them wholesale to the reader. The greatest literary concession I made to the philosophy was, therefore, as I said at the end of Section VII, in entrusting the philosophical content to some extra-philosophical narrative elements as well, and to the reader's imagination in tracing a line between what was directly and indirectly given.

The degree to which elements like the chickens have succeeded in being matters of philosophical discourse depends in part on whether or not the reader answers the call of reason the subject makes, which depends very much on the extent to which the author has invited her interest. Do the chickens speak of something essential and definitive about the nature of sin? Does the tram seat speak of the contingent and unanchored nature of human existence? It is absolutely the writer's task to convey, somehow, that they do. But the answer to those questions then depends on the reader's openness to the suggestion, for without her response to that call of reason there *is* no reason; there are just chickens and tram seats.

The chickens, and Sartre's tree roots or tram, are perhaps illustrations of what I meant earlier when I said that literature provides new opportunities for philosophy, new ways of articulating not just an idea but an argument. It has at its disposal vessels for its discursiveness – characters, situations, events, relationships, symbols and metaphors. These do not stand in lieu of the discursive content, but as three dimensional ways of expressing it.

Literature, as Mulhall says, can challenge 'the philosopher's way of understanding what it is for reality to make an impression on us.'[99]

[99]Mulhall, *The Wounded Animal*, p.35

IX. Conclusion

My question for this thesis has been: how might a novelist succeed in putting philosophical content into a novel?

Fortunately the question equivocates: it says 'might' rather than 'does' or 'should'. All I have ventured here are possibilities based largely on my own writing experience and which attempt nothing definitive – a different writer might find a different set of obstacles and solutions depending on his or her ambitions and approach.

Still, here is what I've found. Firstly, if an author wishes to put philosophical content into a novel it is helpful to think of Plato and consider the hurdles. I have said why I agree with Magee when he suggests that philosophy is trying to 'dispel illusion' and novels are trying to 'create illusion'; insofar as this is true, the two disciplines have opposing purposes, and this opposition reinforces Plato's reasons for banishing the poets from his philosophical republic. The business of philosophy pulls away from the particular and manifest, away from *appearances* to *reality*, progressively away from the perceptual world. It is, as Mulhall says, a 'slow, hard struggle' to comprehend what lies behind this world of presentations and perceptions.[100] Yet novels keep us away from that philosophical task; the best novels enable us to lose ourselves in the world of illusions, entreating us to stay there in this 'dreamstate', to bypass our critical faculties and to abandon any philosophical quest that would allow our thought to rise up and away. For these reasons alone, the problem a philosophical novelist faces is as good as insuperable.

That is the first of my findings, and it has helped me to extract from Plato's point some insight and guidance that might help with technical craft when writing philosophical

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[100] *The Wounded Animal,* p.1

fiction. What is the insight and guidance? It consists in the illumination of the problem, specifically expressed by Coetzee, of realising abstract ideas. Throughout the evolution of the scene described here, I have focussed on how this problem manifested for me and ways in which I tried to find solutions. I have suggested that where one wants to implant direct and discursive philosophical material in a novel one must prepare the ground, and because of the resistance of reality to such direct abstraction, this ground takes a good deal of preparation. Thus I have considered matters of writerly craft; in what precise form that material should appear in the novel – which in the case of *All Is Song* has been largely through dialogue, in the Socratic tradition of the *elenchus* – and then how I came to use the formal novelistic elements of characterisation, viewpoint, narrative flow and pace, and plot events themselves, to provide the most receptive environment for that material.

In this respect much of my work in the novel, and thus much of what I discuss here, is concerned with how to engage these two realms of appearances (as they manifest in objects) on one hand and reality (as it manifests in ideas and essences) on the other, and how to make them communicate with one another. I realise fully that as long as there are two realms - that of objects and that of ideas - being philosophical in a novel, if it is possible at all, means somehow straddling both. Somehow the author must defy metaphysics and be in two places at once, or force one realm temporarily onto another, or switch rapidly back and forth between the two and try to get away with it. In other words perhaps, one moment one's characters are making tea, and the next, by an authorial sleight of hand, they are trying to arrive at a definition of sin, as if the author believes that she can lull the readers far enough into familiarity and then quickly launch some discursive philosophy at them before they have time to dodge. Then back to tea.

It is no surprise to me that this attempt at meaningful communication between the two so-called realms should have been difficult since it has remained a difficulty of philosophy for millennia, and continues to be so. In my seeking of ways to make these

realms communicate in the writing of *All Is Song*, I have probably followed philosophy's well-worn path, albeit unconsciously – that of finding an exit route out of a deeply dualist stance and towards one in which the abstract is embedded in the real. This, then, has been my second finding. Once Plato's ancient quarrel has been used to illuminate and explore the problem, it is helpful to leave it, and all its assertions of insuperability, behind – as in fact did Plato himself when he came to express some of his own deepest and most complex arguments. (What, after all, is the Allegory of the Cave if it isn't the use of fiction to deliver philosophical argument?)

What this has meant for me in terms of writing craft is the following. Firstly, a movement away from a near-complete reliance on dialogue to present ideas and arguments, where philosophical dialogue is grafted onto a realist set-up in an awkward and two-tiered way: philosophy grafted onto life. There is philosophical dialogue still, plenty of it (albeit it tempered), but my hope is that where it comes, it grows out of a world that has already been made philosophically available and alive – one that is available in the sense described by William – through Leonard – in the novel:

> [William had] always said that a thing was most vital and relevant when it was being examined; it responded to the touch, and came alive in the hands. It became *available* again, was how he'd exactly put it – when he'd once, as a teenager, taken some of their parents' dahlias and pulled petals from stems from stamens, and set them out to have their veins and filaments scored open with a pin, that was what he'd said in his frank defence – that far from destroying them he'd made the flowers available again, available to be observed in all their elemental floweriness, relieved of form, reborn.[101]

How has the world of the novel been made *available* in such a way? How has it become something that is examinable? It is not as I'd first envisaged it – i.e. one creates a fictional

[101] *All Is Song*, p.60

world that feels real, one makes it ready to receive some philosophical content, as in the Bellevue scene, one sets up all the props, the scenery, the characters, and takes ideas for a walk onto the stage. This will always feel like philosophy entering life, and will always, I think, reinforce the notion that the two exist at different levels.

The answer has come for me by taking the philosophical content of some of those original dialogues and deciding how to embed that content in the novel's narrative in ways that include, but go beyond, dialogue. The Euthyphro and Bellevue scenes argue about how to define right and wrong action; I have found no better way to debate this point except by exactly that method: verbal debate – and as such where I want to put forward a 'what is X?' argument in the novel I have done so, still, through direct philosophical conversation between characters.

But what else is being done in those scenes philosophically speaking, beyond the argument itself? Not only do they debate a concept, they also characterise William as a person who relentlessly examines, and they introduce a reacting and perhaps disagreeing or intolerant point of view – that of Saul in the Euthyphro episode, and the students and, to some extent, Leonard, in the Bellevue. They also, I had hoped, tell us something about the merits of questioning and curiosity, and its illuminating rewards. These ideas form the bedrock of the novel and are in that respect more important than any specific discussion itself, which means that the discussions, when they come, must not only suggest a world that is open to examination, since William is constantly examining it, but also *exist* and play out in such a world, in the way, for example, Roquentin exists in a world that presents itself in terms of existentially framed angst, isolation and meaninglessness.

The task has then become one of structuralising those ideas so that they are present in several of the novel's narrative elements, not only dialogue. It has meant making them present in Leonard's narrative voice as an interpreter and emotional response, in the plot which conspires to make the philosophical ideas active and consequential in the world, and

in funnelling philosophical enquiry through those realist elements of the novel that deal with what is most diurnal and pedestrian, in this case, largely, the rescued chickens, and thereby allowing animation of the abstract through even the most real and daily of things.

Implicit to this shift in approach away from Plato's dualism of ideas and objects has been a more phenomenological outlook in the novel - an outlook Sartre exploits very well in *Nausea*. We do not paste meaning onto the world, the world comes already full of meaning. I quote Nicholas Davey writing here about the ideas of the philosopher Habermas:

> Perfectible structures of reasoning, as well as cumulatively liberating insights into truth, are already within our possession. They are not grounded in, or reflections of, an allegedly external reality, but emanate from those socially grounded discourses that constitute our "life-world".[102]

The notion of the 'life-world' is at the heart of phenomenology; one can engage the philosophical mode by engaging with the world, not retreating from it into a realm of ideas or one's own private state of consciousness. And this meaning-laden world of 'socially grounded discourses' is surely expressive of that 'aliveness' and 'availability' to abstract ideas that I have tried to achieve in the world of my novel.

Yet I cannot say even in hindsight that one of my technical decisions has been to take a truly phenomenological stance, nor that it would have been right to. I think it has been absolutely necessary for me to accept some dualism, to try to communicate meaningfully between the two realms I've spoken of, and to recognise Plato's quarrel here, since the very argument the novel ventures is that of this quarrel, this 'resistance of reality to direct abstraction' as exemplified by Socrates, or the Platonic Socrates at any rate. It has

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[102] Nicholas Davey, 'Jürgen Habermas' in Teichman and White, *An Introduction to Modern European Philosophy*, p. 169

been my overriding intention to *do* philosophy in *All Is Song*. I didn't want to dissolve all of the abstract content into character, place, event, object – into Woolf's 'little daily miracles', because to do that is not to treat it discursively and directly.

There are still several fairly substantial critically argued pieces of dialogue in my novel; there are ideas and arguments that I have not wanted to embed neatly in the world of things, but to let them stand out philosophically and strike at that level, as Socrates' dialogues did. And in insisting on that I have never been able to disregard Plato's reservations altogether; while a novel wishes to move on in plot and character, and get from Wednesday to Thursday and scene to scene, philosophical considerations wish to halt the proceedings and stop to analyse, to move from *this* particular thing to an understanding of the universal nature of a thing.

Thus, while I've learnt the long way that my novel has not been able to afford the discussion of protracted, complete arguments and theories, I have had to trust that these can be part-delivered and that they can then bear out in extra-philosophical ways, through chickens, through relationships, through plot. So I have managed to keep some of the discussions, and have done so by paying so much attention to those extra-philosophical elements that the philosophical can spring from them, if not inevitably then at least not, to use Murdoch's words, unnaturally and oddly.

A last point: It has taken me three years to write *All Is Song*, and the same amount of time to lose my sense of ambivalence about it, an ambivalence that has at times been very dispiriting. Finally, and only very recently, that sense is gone and I can say that I feel proud of the novel – a fact that surprises me enormously given my changeable relationship with it. My satisfaction with it arises because I think it is a good novel, not because I think it is a good piece of philosophy. In fact I have no idea if it is a piece of philosophy at all. Ultimately, this seems to say a great deal to me about how novelists might put philosophical content into a novel: they might do it in whatever way best befits their skills

and preferences as a writer, and they might add some philosophy here, take something novelistic there, tipping the scales this way and that until the balance seems even. But whatever that actually means in practice, that balance appears to be reached when the novel is good, when *the novel* (over and above the philosophy) works. In being good, it might not be that it is *equally* expert both as fiction and as philosophy, perhaps it is far better as the former than the latter – though I don't think the same could go the other way.

In this sense, although I have endeavoured to answer the question of this thesis, it is one that I also acknowledge is, by necessity of my profession, terribly skewed. Success, I have said, is to do true philosophy in a truly novelistic way, without compromise to what is essential about either discipline. I stand by that, but as a novelist I am biased beyond repair. It is always the 'truths' of the philosophical method that will get stretched at the service of the novelistic; where the compromises start to run deeper, they will always be at the expense of the philosophy and not the fiction. The philosophical novel may start as a composite being made of two disciplines, but it ends as, and will be judged as, one: a novel.

I have often wondered how Sartre felt about the criticism that *Nausea* was less a novel than a treatise; perhaps for him, as a philosopher as well as a writer of fiction, his reaction might have been mixed. But for me, such criticism would be a mark of failure. According to my protagonist, William, 'the sung word was acrobatic, sylphlike, vaulting. And philosophy was the pure song, the purest of songs'[103]; that is, in a way, an expression of what I aimed for in the novel – an articulation of the philosophical through the aesthetic. But unlike William, I suppose, it has always been for me as a writer that the aesthetic is more important. If it is in part the grandeur and profundity of philosophy that creates that song, that is to the good and that is the aim. But whatever happens and howsoever it comes, the song must be there. The artistry and the resonance must be there.

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[103] *All Is Song*, p.50

So I realise that though I pose a reasonable enough question when I ask how a novelist a can write philosophical fiction, I knock it from its starting point just by looking at it with a novelist's eyes. And maybe that suggests that, for all that I have tried to be true to my Socratic aims, I have done the same with every question encountered during the writing of the novel – the answer has always been more about how the novel, and not the philosophy, can gain; maybe that is inevitable.

I hope, though, that where the novel gains the philosophy does too in some way, and that Bakhtin is right here: 'In the process of becoming the dominant genre, the novel sparks the renovation of all other genres.'[104]

[104] Bakhtin, 'The Epic and the Novel', p.7

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