

Against Unreality

A Literary Ethics of Attention to Suffering

with Simone Weil, Iris Murdoch, and Elsa Morante

Michela Dianetti

Head of Discipline and Research Supervisor: Prof. Paolo Bartoloni

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements

for the degree of *Philosophiae Doctor*

Italian Studies

School of Languages, Literatures and Cultures

College of Arts, Social Sciences and Celtic Studies

University of Galway, Ireland

September 2024

Declaration:

I, Michela Dianetti certify that this thesis is all my own work and I have not obtained a degree in this University, or elsewhere, on the basis of this work.

Acknowledgements

This thesis, like my thoughts, would not exist without the meaningful encounters I've had along the way of my education. My deepest thanks go to my mother, for her patience and dedication during my early studies; my father and brother, for introducing me to music; my grandfather, for teaching me the value of play and encouraging my move to Ireland; my grandmothers, for teaching me every day without knowing it; Diletta and her family, for opening my eyes to culture; my teacher Marcello, for sparking my first intellectual enthusiasm; Maria Giulia, for introducing me to reading and creativity and for her daily presence; Professor Biazzo, for showing the harmony of passion and rigour in study; Enea, for encouraging me to apply for the PhD; Deki, for being my patient university-exams listener; Fabrizio, for passionate conversations about life and philosophy; Simone, for growing beside me; Agnese, Daniela, and Lorenzo, for helping me find time to apply for the IRC; Mia, for being my first student. All the others, near and far: Antonella, Gimbo, Eleonora, Chiara, Michi, Stella, Aidi, Ghiara, Francesco, Borghesi, Claudia, Giacomo, Chiara L., Anna, Marco, Gianluigi, Amanda, Vale, Colomba, Ann-Venette, Anna G., Camille, Mar, Ramon, Cian, Clodagh. A deep thanks to Galway for welcoming me and for being the space of my encounter with Julie, Nicola, and Ronan, with whom, in different ways, I learned a joyful way of doing philosophy together and cherishing friendship.

Special thanks to Prof. Paolo Bartoloni, for taking me to the end of this journey; the Italian Department, especially Michela for her daily support and Andrea for his trust; fellow PhD students Ananya, Paula, Shauna, and Martin, for never-ending days at the Hardiman; the Centre for Ethics as Human Value in Pardubice; the Iris Murdoch Society, especially Miles Leeson and Frances White for believing in my research at its very early stage; Barbara Heusel and Dennis Moore, for their generosity; Prof. Chiara Zamboni and the Diotima community, for being a guiding light since my BA; and the American Weil Society, in particular Ronald Collins, for three years of collaboration. Finally, my heartfelt gratitude to Silvia Caprioglio Panizza, for her intellectual generosity; to Lucy Elvis, for her guidance and inspiration; and to Chiara, for being the first real reader of this thesis.

Above all, my love and deepest gratitude go to Joshua, for keeping me afloat every day.

Abstract

This thesis positions literature as a privileged space for attending to suffering, examining the moral value of attention as theorised by Simone Weil and expanded by Iris Murdoch. I explore the relationship between attention and literature, establishing what I define as a ‘literary ethics of attention’. From this, I develop a framework I term ‘mystical realism’, which proposes that literature can bear ‘attentive’ witness to suffering. A case study of Elsa Morante’s novel *La Storia*, viewed through the lens of Murdochian philosophy of literature, serves to illustrate this idea, as the text is rooted in Weil’s concept of attention to *le malheur*. Through this analysis, the thesis suggests that *La Storia* is an example of ‘mystical’ attention to the darkest and most invisible aspects of reality, and thus a literary endeavour to restore the integrity of the real.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	4
Abstract	5
Abbreviations	9
Introduction	13
Thesis outline.....	18
Biographical information	26
Three ‘attentive’ lives.....	26
Simone Weil	26
Iris Murdoch	33
Elsa Morante.....	42
1. Unreality and the mystery of <i>le malheur</i>	48
1.1 Introduction	48
1.2 Necessity & force	50
1.3 Force as social oppression	52
1.4 Power.....	54
1.5 The anonymous collectivity.....	56
1.6 The void.....	61
1.7 The mystery of <i>le malheur</i>	66
1.8 Unreality, human personality, and human potential	73
1.9 Conclusion.....	78
2. The potential of attention within a secular mysticism	80
2.1 Introduction	80
2.1 Reading reality.....	81
2.2 Weil’s idea of attention: a potential for reality	86
2.3 Murdoch’s ‘vocabulary of attention’: attentive reading?	93

2.4	The meaning of transcendence in Weil and Murdoch	102
2.6	Why is Attention Valuable?	113
2.7	Beauty attracts attention	117
2.8	Murdoch's secular mysticism.....	125
2.9	Conclusion.....	132
3	Attending to the Other and to suffering	133
3.1	Introduction	133
3.2	Engaging with the Other: empathy, compassion, and sympathy	134
3.3	Attentive compassion for the in-humane.....	140
3.4	Sustained attention to the Other.....	142
3.5	Public in-attention to suffering.....	145
3.6	Attention is political: the example of bearing attentive witness	148
3.7	The 'use' of suffering	151
3.8	Weil: 'dangerously ascetic and/or masochistic'? And the 'Weil factor' in Murdoch	159
3.9	Conclusion.....	168
4	Attending to suffering through literature: a mystical realism	170
4.1	Introduction	170
4.2	The writer and the crisis of language.....	171
4.3	Attention & literature.....	174
4.3.1	The author <i>evokes</i> the human condition: the novel is an act of attention	175
4.3.2	A novel <i>shows</i> the characters' attention or inattention	181
4.3.3	The moral value of literature: it <i>extends</i> our vocabulary	186
4.3.4	Beauty that stems from the narration <i>attracts</i> and <i>sustains</i> attention	190
4.4	Attention to suffering through literature.....	194
4.4.1	Why is photographic / documentarist realism not enough?.....	194
4.4.2	Suffering through beauty can sustain our attention	196
4.4.3	The example of tragedy	201
4.4.4	The problematic idea of redemptive suffering.....	207

4.5	A ‘spiritual use of suffering’ through a ‘mystical realism’?.....	210
4.6	Literature can <i>inspire</i> attention.....	212
4.7	Murdoch’s radio-opera <i>The One Alone</i>	217
4.8	Conclusion.....	221
5	Elsa Morante’s ‘mystical novel’ <i>La Storia</i> : a case of literary ‘attentive witness’ to suffering.....	223
5.1	Introduction.....	223
5.2	Morante’s poetics ‘against unreality’	223
5.3	<i>La Storia</i>	234
5.3.1	An ‘Iliad of our times’	238
5.4	Suffering force: the victims of the ‘scandal’	242
5.4.1	Ida: a woman	243
5.4.2	Davide Segre	247
5.4.3	<i>Le malheureux</i>	250
5.5	Moments of attention.....	253
5.5.1	Useppe.....	253
5.6	‘the Beautiful, derided and unconscious of its own worth’: joy between tragic and comic.....	259
5.7	A vocabulary of attention	265
5.8	A Mystical realism	271
5.9	An act of attention: bearing attentive witness.....	279
5.10	Conclusion.....	288
	Conclusion	289
	Bibliography.....	300

Abbreviations

- Works by Simone Weil

BB: *Le beau et le bien*

FLN: *First and Last Notebooks*

GG: *Gravity and Grace*

I: *The Iliad or the Poem of Force*

LP: *Lectures on Philosophy*

N: *The Notebooks of Simone Weil*

NFR: *The Need for Roots: Prelude To a Declaration Of Duties Towards Mankind*

OL: *Oppression and Liberty*

SE: *Selected Essays 1934-1943*

SN: *On Science, Necessity and the Love of God*

SL: *Seventy Letters*

VS *Venise Sauvée*

From WG: *Waiting on God*

FILG: Forms of the Implicit Love of God which contains:

LN: The Love of Our Neighbour

LOW: Love of the Order of the World

F: Friendship

LGA: The Love of God and Affliction

LT: Last Thoughts

RSS: Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God

SA: Spiritual Autobiography

From LPW: *Late Philosophical Writings*

CC: Notes on the Concept of Character

ECR: Essay on the Concept of Reading

GP: God in Plato

HP: What is Sacred in Every Human Being? – abbreviation from *Human Personality*

LM: Literature and Morals

RL: The Responsibilities of Literature

C: *Cahiers*

CO: *La condition ouvrière*

CS: *La connaissance surnaturelle*

FJ: Factory Journal from *Formative Writings, 1929-1941*

- Works by Iris Murdoch

BBC: BBC Radio Talk on Simone Weil

SRR: *Sartre. Romantic Rationalist*

From *Existentialists & Mystics*:

LP: Literature and Philosophy: A Conversation with Bryan Magee

TL: Thinking and Language

NP: Nostalgia for the Particular

ME: Metaphysics and Ethics

VCM: Vision and Choice in Morality

NM: The Novelist as Metaphysician

EH: The Existentialist Hero

IM: The Image of the Mind

EPM: The Existentialist Political Myth

HMD: Hegel in Modern Dress

KV: Knowing the Void

TSEM: T. S. Eliot as a Moralist

HT: A House of Theory

DPR: The Darkness of Practical Reason

SG: The Sublime and the Good

EM: Existentialists and Mystics

SW: Salvation by Words

AIN: Art is the Imation of Nature

SBR: The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited

AD: Against Dryness

IP: The Idea of Perfection

OGG: On 'God' and 'Good'

SGC: The Sovereignty of Good over other Concepts

FS: The Fire and The Sun: Why Plato Banished the Artists

MGM: *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*

Novels:

OA: *The One Alone* (broadcasted in 1987)

SS: *The Sea, the Sea*

U: *The Unicorn*

UN: *Under the Net*

- Works by Elsa Morante

TSW: *The World Saved by Kids*

From PoC: *Pro o contro la bomba atomica e altri scritti*

SR: Sul romanzo

POC: Pro o contro la bomba atomica

SS: Il poeta di tutta la vita

BPP: Il beato propagandista del paradiso

P: I personaggi

PMC: *Piccolo manifesto dei comunisti (senza classe né partito)*

A: Alibi

Novels:

HL: *House of Liars*

AI: *Arturo's Island*

H: *History: A Novel*

Ac: *Aracoeli*,

O: *Opere*

I have personally translated passages from Weil's *Cahiers* that have not yet been published in English, using the *Œuvres Complètes* as my source (the original French text is provided in the footnotes where applicable). All translations of Morante's works that lack an official English version are also my own. Additionally, I have translated secondary literature originally written in Italian or French, though in these cases, the original texts are not included – in these cases, when they appear in the bibliography with the original title in Italian or French it means that the translations are mine, otherwise they appear with the official English title. For translations of Morante's works appearing in the body of the thesis, the original text is cited in the footnotes. However, when my translations only appear in the footnotes, I have not included the original text. This thesis was submitted before the publication of Ann Goldstein's new translation of Morante's *Pro o contro la bomba atomica* in *Annali d'Italianistica* (2024). Therefore, all translations of quotations from *PoC* are my own. However, in the event of this thesis being published, the new translation, along with the latest studies on *La Storia* included in the 2024 *Annali d'Italianistica* volume, will be incorporated where appropriate.

A mia madre,
e alle mie nonne

Ora rivoglio bianche tutte le mie lettere,
inaudito il mio nome, la mia grazia richiusa;
ch'io mi distenda sul quadrante dei giorni,
riconduca la vita a mezzanotte.

...

Devota come ramo
curvato da molte nevi
allegra come falò

per colline d'oblio,
su acutissime lamine
in bianca maglia d'ortiche,
ti insegnerò, mia anima,
questo passo d'addio...

(Cristina Campo, *Passo d'addio*)

Introduction

Contro l'alienazione contemporanea
i misteri luminosi e parlanti della realtà¹

(Elsa Morante, *L'isola di Arturo*)

This thesis explores the problematic experience of suffering,² the moral value of attention, and develops a literary ethics of attention to suffering. Through the latter, it envisions a literary 'mystical' realism as a privileged space for attending to suffering. To investigate this complex matter, I have chosen to explore the work of three 20th-century women philosophers and writers. Simone Weil placed suffering at the centre of her philosophy; Iris Murdoch explored the moral affordances of literature's connection to attention, and its dwelling with suffering; and Elsa Morante translated all this into literary form. These authors stand in opposition to our culture of inattentiveness and self-indulgence and advocate the rehabilitation of reality with all its complexity, particularity, and difficulties (the most problematic of which is suffering). This thesis reinforces the relationship between philosophy and literature (through both its methodology and its content), showing that a certain type of literature, engaging attentively with reality and the harshness of suffering, is pivotal for human flourishing, especially in our times.

'We are today', Murdoch writes, in a 'remarkable situation' where, thanks to technical means, humanity has the potential to cure age-old causes of suffering, 'such as hunger and homelessness and poverty', which we also can't fail to see. She writes,

On television we see the sufferings of the world, we see how other lives go to waste. As our latter-day prophets keep telling us, technology is making the

¹ 'Against contemporary alienation / the luminous and speaking mysteries of reality'. Subtitle of Elsa Morante's novel *L'isola di Arturo*, 1969 edition.

² In this thesis I focus mostly on human suffering although occasionally extending it to non-human animals. For more on attention to non-human animals see footnote n. 116.

world into a village, bringing us closer to each other and generating immense new powers: while at the same time, we see that we are still even now patently unable to set things to rights, unable to stop famine in India or war in Africa. I think this is fundamentally the situation which drives young people into a kind of frenzy (EM 230).

This condition of being constantly exposed to images of suffering yet feeling that sense of ‘impotence’, which often slides into indifference, is a common human experience today. A thinker whose extreme philosophy and actions stand out against this background of apathy and indifference is the French philosopher Simone Weil, whose work is increasingly popular. Weil’s lasting impact is not limited to philosophers but has a particular appeal for poets, writers, and activists.³ Indeed, her writing attracts whoever is willing to explore what pushes humans to evil and violence, while at the same time urging them to care for each other. Her philosophy considers contradictions to be the locus of truths, making her sometimes difficult to pin down and define.

In her view, there is a natural human tendency towards moral degradation, and thus towards the use of what she calls ‘force’,

the well-known phenomenon that makes hens rush upon one of their number if it is wounded, attacking and pecking it. All men bear this animal nature within them. It determines their attitude toward their fellows, with or without their knowledge and consent (LT 92).

³ Simone Weil’s work began to appear in English translation in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Gabriella Fiori, author of *An Intellectual Biography*, in ‘A Story of a Friendship’ (2019) highlights how poets and intellectuals started to notice Weil’s work soon after her death. Fiori writes that on 5 February 1957, the writer Leslie Paul paid £ 12 for a grave for Weil, as she had been buried in a pauper’s grave in Ashford. In 1958, Paul, together with Eric Walter Frederick (who wrote a monograph on Weil), Richard Rees (translator of many of Weil’s writings into English), the poet T.S. Eliot (who wrote the preface to the English translation of *L’enracinement*), and Herbert Read (poet, art critic, philosopher, and pacifist), ‘affixed a very sober tombstone modelled on the commemorative plaques (for the fallen of the Resistance) in the Parisian Luxembourg gardens. It was inaugurated on May 1, 1958’ (Fiori 2019). For more on Weil’s increasing impact, especially on writers, see Cynthia Wallace (2024), particularly p. 2, footnote n.7, and pp. 171-173 for Weil’s influence on North American writers. Weil was considered, praised, and criticised by many of the greatest intellectuals both of her time and today, including Albert Camus, Paul Ricoeur, Emmanuel Lévinas, who criticised her take on Judaism in ‘Simone Weil Against the Bible’ (1990), and Giorgio Agamben (who wrote his thesis on her notion of ‘personality’ (on their connections see Ricciardi (2009)). But as Wallace also observes, she had a particularly long-lasting impact on women writers and intellectuals. She also inspired popular artists such as Patti Smith in her 2017 *Devotion*, the Italian film director Liliana Cavani (see Moscati and Cavani (1974); Dianetti (2023a) and many others).

This tendency coexists with what she calls the eternal obligation ‘towards the human being not to let him suffer from hunger when one has the chance of coming to his assistance’ (NR 5).

Caring for those who suffer was Weil’s primary concern, especially in the troubled times at the beginning of the last century. The obligation to care for and help those in need only becomes apparent to us, in Weil’s view, when we manage ‘to see’ them, and this requires a selfless effort of attention. Attention, for this reason, and for many more that I explore in this thesis, acquires a central and foundational place in moral life.

The difficulty of attending to suffering lies in the human tendency to look away when faced with their own suffering and that of others. We end up telling ourselves comforting stories and ignoring the reality of suffering that surrounds us. By default, we ‘fight against’ suffering. Instead, as the authors studied in this thesis argue, we need to move ‘against’ the causes of suffering, force and unreality, and literature is essential to this task.

I titled this thesis ‘Against Unreality’. By unreality, these authors mean self-illusions, that is, the human tendency to force things into order and meanings, the logic of power and force. Against this, they suggest that we accept the contradictions and impossibilities in human existence and the inexhaustibility of human experience which takes the shape of unsolvable mysteries. What these authors share is what I call a vocation for the real, shaped by their common struggle against ‘UNREALITY’,⁴ which Morante calls ‘the opium of the people’, whose cure ‘is an exercise of heroic difficulty’ (WSK 161). This ‘exercise’ is attention undertaken by the writer, who depicts the contingency of human relations through fiction and the necessity that subjects existence while simultaneously presenting a transcendence, a mysterious presence of the Good, as conceivable. The Good, as both Weil and Murdoch argue (with differences which I later explore), is unattainable, yet it can be approached through the variousness of reality unfolded through human attention, which ‘counteracts the system’ of egocentrism. The ‘mysteriousness’ of the Good follows the fact that, as Murdoch writes quoting Weil ‘is mysterious because it does not address itself to the intelligence, but to love’ (N

⁴ Capitalised by Morante.

I 375, quoted in MGM 505). Selfishness, from which follows the logic of power, violence, and prestige, both feeds on and is a result of unreality, as I explain in the first chapter.

‘Attention is the effort to counteract ... states of illusion’ (IP 329), Murdoch writes, and ‘What counteracts the system is attention to reality, inspired by, consisting of love’ (OGG 354). Selfless respect for reality is, from this perspective, the virtue of humility. The emblematic figure that embodies this humility is the utopic figure of the saint, who refuses to adhere to unreality in her own life. Nowadays, the idea of selfless attention offered by these authors may serve as a crucial counterbalance to the invasive commodification of attention inherent in the contemporary ‘attention economy’,⁵ in which human attention is treated as a commodity. This thesis regards attention neither as economically quantifiable, nor as a mere cognitive activity. Instead, it presents attention as a fundamental human faculty with an inherent moral value.⁶

Today, in different areas of study, the danger of the ‘attention economy’ that thrives on what in this thesis I call ‘inattention’ (the opposite of the selfless effort of letting reality exist independently in its particularity), seems to have ignited a greater recognition of the role of attention as one of the fundamental human

⁵ I use ‘attention economy’ to refer to the idea that in our technological era, human attention is continuously fragmented and commodified. Besides the growing scholarship on the role of attention in Weil’s and Murdoch’s philosophies – which I address throughout this thesis – there is an increasing focus on attention in fields such as philosophy of education, philosophy of mind, cognitive studies, and political philosophy. Attention appears to be a key concept in discussions of social injustice, epistemic injustice, and hermeneutic injustice. On this matter, see Citton (2017) and (2019); Burnett and Smith (2023); Doyle and Roda (2019); Elliott (2018); Gardiner (2022); Lipson and Lipson (1996); Mole (2024); Painter (2006); Reynolds (2022); Schuster and Lazar (2023); Smith and Archer (2020); Burnett and Knauss (2022), (about their movement see also Burnett, Loh, and Schmidt (2023)); Watzl (2022); Whiteley, (2024); Wu (2016) (I say more on the role of attention in philosophy of education, art education, and the community of philosophical inquiry in the Conclusion). An outstanding recent book on the ethics of attending, in dialogue both with moral psychology and writers such as Jan Zwicky and with both Weil and Murdoch, is Warren Heiti (2021). As this thesis demonstrates, attention is also fundamental when discussing the role of art, particularly its relation to ethics. Although attention may not have been explicitly theorised under this concept in earlier times, it has long been central to philosophy, as evidenced by figures such as William James and Henri Bergson. Bergson wrote to James, stating, ‘The more I think about the question, the more I am convinced that life is from one end to the other a phenomenon of attention’ (quoted in Schwartz (2020, 73-74)). Attention has also been long crucial in art, meditation, and prayer. As Casey Schwartz notes (2020), many writers, including David Foster Wallace and Aldous Huxley, explicitly viewed attention as fundamental to their artistic practice and human life in general.

⁶ As my research shows, it is particularly in the work of women philosophers and writers that the concept of attention, particularly in its epistemic sense, intersects with ethics and merge with the concept of care.

faculties, the most valuable but also the most exploitable resource in our digital era. Timothy Wu, for instance, in his *Attention Merchants*, suggests that ‘the exploitation of human attention is in some deeper way the exploitation of our persons’ (Wu 2016, 32). In a time when our attention is continuously fragmented, captured by platforms based on profit (a process inevitably encouraged by current technology), it feels, as Silvia Caprioglio Panizza writes in *The Ethics of Attention: Engaging the Real with Simone Weil and Iris Murdoch*, like we are always ‘training our minds towards distraction’ (Caprioglio Panizza 2022, 10).

For the philosophers I consider in this thesis, being inattentive (self-involved, indifferent, through fantasy and reverie⁷) is a failure to meet/see reality, while paying attention involves giving up the comforting fantasies that human beings constantly project onto reality.⁸ In today’s individualistic and consumer-driven society, those comforting fantasies seem to have become the fabric of everyday life: everything from advertisements to the distorting mirror of social media tries to arouse material desires in us. Consequently, our capacity to pay ‘sustained attention’⁹ (‘the capacity to maintain attention to an object over time’ (Caprioglio Panizza 2022, 21)) has become increasingly narrow. This becomes a problem when we consider, as Weil and Murdoch did, that our self-centred perspective is a limited one constituting the constellations of values at our disposal; for, what we see, and the values we discover in the world, are the net in which our actions can unfold.

Individual attention or inattention is always embedded in the environment of collective attention or inattention. If our times, as Murdoch writes in the opening quote here, are marked by collective inattention to suffering, which is instead often spectacularised or isolated, it follows that our potential to ‘see’ and thus ‘meet’ reality is increasingly difficult, for, as another writer concerned with attention, David Foster-Wallace, said in his 2005 Kenyon College commencement speech,

⁷ For a thorough analysis of forms of inattention see Silvia Caprioglio Panizza (2022, 30).

⁸ Murdoch writes that ‘Human beings need fantasies’ (EM 233) to cope with reality, echoing T. S. Eliot in the *Four Quartets*: ‘Human kind cannot bear very much reality’ (Eliot 1944).

⁹ MacKay Moore Sohlberg and Catherine Mateer, as Caprioglio Panizza reports, propose different types of attention: ‘focused attention (the basic capacity to attend to stimuli); sustained attention (including vigilance and mental control or working memory; this is the capacity to maintain attention to an object over time); selective attention (the capacity to shut out irrelevant stimuli); alternating attention (the mental flexibility required to switch attention from one task or stimulus to another); and divided attention (the ability to attend to more than one task or object at the same time)’ (Sohlberg and Mateer 1989, 131, in Caprioglio Panizza 2022, 21). See also Unsworth and Robison (2020).

we are like the fish who are unaware of the water in which they swim. In fact, Wallace concludes, ‘the most obvious, ubiquitous, important realities are often the ones that are hardest to see and talk about’ (Wallace 2022, 8), and to see the water, which is ‘the really important kind of freedom’ (Wallace 2022, 120), ‘involves attention, and awareness, and effort ... for we have to keep reminding ourselves, over and over: “This is water, this is water”’ (Wallace 2022, 132-3). Indeed, for the writers on whom I focus here, the sufferer’s condition is often silent, or as Weil describes it in the extreme condition of *le malheur* (which I explore in chapter 1), the human cannot communicate their suffering. This impossibility calls for others to restore the sufferer’s voice. Incommunicability is not a limit, but a possibility, one that was always inhabited by poets and writers. In response to Theodore Adorno’s profound question of whether it is still possible to write poetry after Auschwitz,¹⁰ these authors placed their faith in the Good and the moral value of attention and literature.

Thesis outline

The main research question of this thesis is whether literature can be a privileged space for paying attention to suffering. Weil’s philosophy, particularly her concepts of attention and *le malheur*, alongside Murdoch’s elaboration of these ideas, provide the theoretical foundation to this work, while the literary exploration is conducted through Morante’s novel *La Storia*.

I begin by presenting Weil’s idea of *le malheur* (in chapter 1), which she describes as a state of physical suffering, distress of the soul, and social humiliation, occurring when force reduces a human being to a thing. Weil posits that paying attention to one’s own *malheur*, or that of others, is often a contradiction or even an impossibility for human beings. The inclination to obscure *le malheur* through illusions, projections, and the temptation to look away or transform suffering through sadomasochistic sublimations is inherent to human nature, carrying multiple existential, metaphysical, and moral implications. According to Weil, this natural tendency to overshadow reality by projecting the self onto it and transforming it into an object – especially in the face of *le malheur* – is the primary reason for which we become blind to reality. This blindness in postwar Europe, and

¹⁰ However, Weil did not live to see the final horrors of the Holocaust.

the exploration of potential remedies, are central to the work of both Iris Murdoch and Elsa Morante.

Chapter 2 contains a thorough analysis of the concept of attention in Weil's philosophy, and of Murdoch's re-elaboration of this concept. Weil defines attention as a selfless passive-activity that makes it possible to approach reality. In fact, for Weil, humans consistently cover reality with projections and illusions dictated by the logic of power and force. Attention lifts the veil of unreality, bringing us closer to reality. After outlining the convergences and divergences between Weil and Murdoch's views of attention and situating my thesis within the ongoing academic discourse on the topic, I clarify my own definition of attention in the context of this thesis and the contemporary relevance of attention.

Next, I introduce the problem that, while our attention is often drawn to beauty, it is simultaneously repelled by suffering – both our own and that of others. This leads to another essential concept for this thesis: the idea of 'the mystical'. This encompasses 'the feeling of reality as a whole', defined by Weil as the experience of viewing the world devoid of our attachments (which is Weil's definition of beauty). I argue that Murdoch's secular mysticism¹¹ serves as an ideal lens for examining the role of literature today within a Weilian ethics of attention. Attention is 'mystical' because it is directed towards reality and oriented by the non-graspable Good. If we also pay attention to what we usually avoid – suffering and death – then we can engage with reality in its entirety.

In chapter 3, I discuss the type of attention focused solely on the other human being, defining the concepts of empathy, sympathy, and compassion, and identifying attentive compassion as the result of sustained attention (imaginative and analogical thinking in a sympathetic disposition) towards the suffering of others. I explore why we often look away from suffering in the world and introduce a crucial discussion for the subsequent chapters regarding Weil's and Murdoch's perspectives on the potential (moral/spiritual) 'use' of suffering, which I suggest can be emblematically shown in art. The idea emerging from this discussion, and

¹¹ For a detailed analysis of contemporary scholarship on mysticism, and on the crucial women's presence in the tradition of mysticism, see Bingemer (2023).

that I explore further in the next chapters, is that suffering can have a moral value *only* when attention is paid to it.

The question of whether there can be a ‘positive use’ of suffering has cast a problematic shadow over both Weil’s and Murdoch’s philosophies. I address allegations of Weil’s ‘masochism’ and the resulting ‘Weil factor’ in Murdoch scholarship. This same topic is then reassessed in chapter 5 where I connect this debate to my analysis of Ida, the protagonist of *La Storia*, and I investigate Morante’s narrative representation of women, addressing criticisms that portray her novels as perpetuating images of female submissiveness. In Morante’s novels, the mystical-mysterious and the submissive are combined in women’s timeless and archaic condition through a narration that frames them as submissive, enslaved, and uneducated, but also as selfless, other-orientated, and caring. Still in chapter 3, I examine the debate in Murdoch scholarship, contrasting Sabina Lovibond (2011) – who links Weil’s concept of obedience to internalised assumptions about femininity and critiques Murdoch as an ‘unconscious misogynist’ – with Nora Hämäläinen (2015), who regards Murdoch’s views on obedience as complementary to the structuralist perspective that Lovibond deems essential in feminist theory. In chapter 5, by juxtaposing these discussions with those concerning Morante, I clarify that while the ethics of obedience and notions of *malheur* may imply an elevation of traditional feminine virtues, they do not advocate for female subordination.

Our capacities to see reality with greater attention, and to see the Other as existing independently, can narrow depending on the objects of attention that we hold in our gaze throughout our lives, and the quality of our attention. We are more or less likely to see other people or situations depending on the intricate life of our consciousness, which relies on learned concepts that delineate the limits of our world. Alongside the question of how to pay attention to suffering, we must also consider whether certain objects of attention can inspire greater attention. I propose that a particular type of literature, rooted in attention, can indeed inspire attention.

In chapter 4, I explore the connection between attention and literature, showing how literature can be the privileged *milieu* through which a logic that differs from the logic of force that rules over human existence and human relationships can be seen, namely, the logic of attention. I argue that by great literature, or, as Weil calls it ‘literature of the first order’, these writers meant a type

of literature that i) is the result of (the writer's) attention, ii) is about the attention (or inattention) of the characters, iii) is presented through an impersonal 'vocabulary of attention', and iv) can inspire attention. All these forms of attention are what enable beauty to emerge within the context of literature. The writer's attention is directed towards reality and towards the story and its characters. I explore how literature needs to meet an attentive reader, which is what allows it to be transformative and thus inspire greater attention. While I briefly touch on how the reader's attention can be cultivated, a detailed discussion of the moral discourse relating to the training of attention lies outside the scope of this thesis.

I explore Weil's perspective on literature and its connection to morals. Through Murdoch, I elaborate on Weil's perspective also presenting Murdoch's philosophy of literature and her response to Plato's ban of literature from *The Republic*. I present Weil's reading of tragedy, which she finds in a privileged relationship with *le malheur*, therefore expanding on the mystery of its connection to transcendence through *catharsis*, alongside Murdoch's consideration of tragedy. From a Weilian perspective, if tragedy is the space for 'the miracle' of attention to *le malheur* (of the character) that can become a bridge towards transcendence (a redemption for the character, and a purification for the audience/reader), then a 'tragic' novel like *La Storia* (while containing comic elements), shows a logic other than that of force (that of loving attention), and can thus provide an account of reality as a whole. Rather than opening a redemptive space, it creates a just space for bearing attentive witness to reality. This constitutes the foundation of the mystical realism that I ascribe to Morante's *La Storia*. Moreover, I indicate Murdoch's 1987 radio-opera *The One Alone* as her most Weilian literary work where she attempts to bear witness to the extreme suffering of a political dissident who sacrifices herself through an act of attentive witness.

In chapter 5, starting from Weil's view of the *Iliad* as the emblem of a literary space that accords attention to *le malheur*, and demonstrating how Morante's novel *La Storia* was intended to be 'an Iliad of our times' (O lxxxii) in the sense that Weil attributed to the epic in her famous essay, I syllogistically attribute to Morante the aim of making *La Storia* a literary space for attention to suffering. Thus, I explore the actual literary outcome of her intentions and, after a brief account of Morante's poetics, I trace the ethics of attention that shines through the content of *La Storia*

and the author's literary style by showing two things. The first is the image of force and attention within the novel (I focus, in particular, on the three major characters – Ida, Davide and Useppe – as examples of different ways of suffering force, with Useppe under the star of attention – meaning with a destiny marked by an essential attentive disposition towards reality). The second is the author's use of 'a vocabulary of attention'. This is a 'particular' but 'impersonal' narration that speaks of the truth of human relationships with reality and portrays the human condition without any consolation, encompassing the scene with total compassion. I highlight these two points to present, in the second part, Morante's much-debated realism as one rooted in attention. By drawing on Murdoch's philosophy of literature, and the literary ethics of attention developed throughout the thesis, I construct the idea of a 'mystical realism' grounded in attention and suggest that Morante's *La Storia* is a mystical novel, one that bears 'attentive witness' to suffering and exposes the tension between 'reality' and 'unreality'. In an anti-metaphysical age like ours, a mystical novel like *La Storia* is an act of attention to suffering that 'gives back the integrity of the real' (PoC 102).

To conclude, this research posits that literature grounded in attention actively participates in the ethical formation of individuals and communities. It aims to demonstrate how literature, thus considered, can create a space for readers to encounter and engage with the suffering of others, fostering attentiveness. By immersing readers in the lived experiences of characters, literature can cultivate an ethical sensibility that is sensitive to suffering.

The intersection of literature and ethics has long been a fertile ground for academic inquiry, engaging scholars with questions about how narratives shape and reflect moral values and how they elicit ethical responses from readers. This research situates itself within the inherently interdisciplinary field of literary ethics.¹² My approach spans literary criticism, theoretical philosophy, ethics, and

¹² Scholars in this area draw from a range of theoretical perspectives, including philosophy, narrative theory, and cultural studies, to analyse the ways in which literature and ethics inform each other and overlap. Key contributions to the field include Martha Nussbaum's advocacy for the moral impact of literature, Hillis Miller's exploration of narrative ethics, and Wayne Booth's concept of the 'ethical critic'. Recent scholarship has expanded to address diverse and contemporary issues, such as the ethics of representation, the role of literature in social justice, and the impact of digital narratives on ethical engagement. Cynthia Wallace's *Of Women Borne: A Literary Ethics of Suffering* (2016) developed a Weil-inspired literary ethics of suffering and focused on the ethical implications of narratives of suffering, emphasising the reader's ethical responsibility.

the philosophy of literature, aiming to think philosophically through literature, exploring specific works (Morante's novel in particular) through the lens of the philosophical concepts that inform them while elaborating on the role of literature in relation to contemporary society.

Ultimately, this research aspires to contribute to what I term 'a literary ethics of attention', specifically attention to suffering, by including Elsa Morante's novel as a literary example and employing the philosophies of Weil and Murdoch as a hermeneutical framework. Through a close examination of Weil's and Murdoch's accounts of the moral value of attention and its role within the literary framework, alongside an in-depth exploration of *La Storia*, this study contributes to the ongoing development of an ethics of attention – particularly in attention studies engaged with Weil and Murdoch – and to the ever-present dialogue about the role of literature in ethical education and the evolving discourse within literary ethics.

The theoretical framework of this research also engages with the ongoing discussion about Weil's influence on Murdoch and their similar yet distinct accounts of attention and the role of the self. I clarify a usually overlooked element of Weil's idea of *le malheur*, namely its social characterisation, and I emphasise the particular-oriented and imaginative trait of Weilian attention, similarly overlooked by scholarship. Furthermore, I propose a philological reconstruction of the Weil-Murdoch encounter, which has so far remained problematic and unresolved in Murdoch studies, suggesting that Gabriel Marcel's 1949 essay may have been the first possible contact Murdoch had with Weil's philosophy. I present an interpretation of Weil's influence on Murdoch which argues that Weil's and Murdoch's perspectives are closer than traditionally acknowledged. I suggest that Weil's concept of 'reading otherwise', which I call 'attentive reading', is an exercise in attention similar to Murdoch's notion of attention, where the self retains a significant role. Weil's idea of attention involves passively 'suspending our thoughts' and is linked to the effacement of the self (the concept of *décréation* I discuss in chapter 1). I suggest this can be seen as an ideal of 'pure attention', different from 'reading otherwise' and more akin to Weil's notion of 'non-reading', which involves 'non-action' rather than action. Ultimately, I build the concept of 'normative impossibilities' to suggest that Weil's idea of attention presents an ideal of 'pure attention' in which the self is effaced, while including reading reality

‘otherwise’, a process where the self is necessary (as in Murdoch’s account of attention). Additionally, I offered a new interpretation of Murdoch’s 1987 radio-opera *The One Alone*, which I present as an attempt to bear witness to the extreme suffering of a political dissident who sacrifices herself through an act of attentive witness. Therefore, this portion of the thesis may also be of interest to Weilian and Murdochian scholars, particularly in relation to attention, suffering, and the role of literature. Similarly, it contributes to Morante studies by offering a wider picture of the role of Weil’s philosophy in Morante’s poetics. In fact, this research is substantiated by archival research in both Morante Archive at the National Library of Rome and in Murdoch Archive at Kingston University to provide further insights into Weil’s influence on both Murdoch and Morante. Moreover, it redefines *La Storia* as a mystical novel positioning Morante as a philosophically rich and valuable author deserving of rediscovery by English-speaking audiences. Exploring these three authors together reveals new dimensions i) in our understanding of them and ii) opens new horizons for considering suffering and re-evaluating the role of art and education, in our ‘inattentive’ times, all in pursuit of an idea of human flourishing grounded in the moral value of attention.¹³

Additionally, this research extends the ongoing project of delineating Simone Weil’s impact not only on philosophers and activists but also on artists, especially writers. I incorporate various Weil-influenced authors and philosophers in my discussion to highlight Weil’s enduring influence, particularly on women writers,¹⁴ to gain a deeper understanding of Weil through the diverse perspectives of women across different contexts. Notably, I frequently refer to Cristina Campo, Ingeborg Bachmann, María Zambrano, Jan Zwicky, and Susan Sontag.

¹³ Surprisingly, Weil scholarship is often compartmentalized, with studies on Weil typically remaining confined to the language in which they were originally written. Consequently, many significant non-English works on Weil are rarely translated. This thesis, however, adopts an intercontinental and interdisciplinary approach, integrating Anglo-American, Italian, and French traditions of scholarship – traditions that have historically remained somewhat isolated from one another. Similarly, Murdoch’s work is sometimes examined through a more continental lens, particularly in the context of Luisa Muraro’s interpretations.

¹⁴ It is a transversal aim of this thesis to shed light on a subterranean *fil rouge* that connects various women writers and philosophers by virtue of Weil’s influence on them. Weil’s influence on twentieth and twenty-first century philosophy and literature should be rediscovered as being as relevant as such as the other male philosophers of her time, despite of being a woman philosopher in a male-dominated field.

Although I could have drawn on these philosophers to establish a connection between Weil's philosophy and Morante's literature, I chose to focus on Murdoch due to her engagement with suffering, her identity as a novelist like Morante, and the pivotal role that attention plays in her philosophy. It is noteworthy that women readers of Weil, from different times and countries, arrived at remarkably similar views of literature.

Biographical information

Three 'attentive' lives

I will now sketch the three authors' lives and the cultural climate in which they found themselves. The investigation of their historical and intellectual contexts provides the background against which their vocation 'against unreality' (in my words) is built.

This preliminary section on the three authors' lives serves as a foundation for the rest of the thesis for three major reasons:

i) It highlights their biographical connections and the significance of Weil's influence on both Murdoch and Morante, and provides evidence that allows me to clarify, later in the thesis, how Murdoch offers the hermeneutical tools to read Morante's attempt to address Weilian *malheur* in her 1974 novel;

ii) It presents their lives as similarly marked, though to varying degrees, by the war, and thus shows how their philosophical and literary thinking was shaped by the same historical backdrop and driven by the same concerns about 'unreality' (evil, power, violence);

iii) It establishes a necessary framework for my philosophical argument, which is developed through my engagement with the philosophy and literary imagination of these three authors who, in different ways, embody a 'lived philosophy'. Therefore, their work cannot easily be separated from the context of their lives.

Simone Weil

Simone Weil was born in Paris on 3 February 1909, to a wealthy intellectual Jewish family. She attended the Lycée Henri-IV, one of the most prestigious schools in Paris, where she was taught by the philosopher Émile Chartier, known as Alain. In 1928, she was admitted to the École Normale Supérieure,¹⁵ where she continued her studies in philosophy.

¹⁵ Simone de Beauvoir was also preparing for admission to the École Normale at that time. In *Mémoires d'une jeune fille rangée*, the author recalls finally meeting Weil, whose reputation for activism preceded her, only to be dismissed at first impression as a *petite-bourgeoise*. ('Elle me toisa: "On voit bien que vous n'avez jamais eu faim", dit-elle. Nos relations s'arrêtèrent là. Je

On 30 September 1931, she was appointed as a teacher of philosophy at a secondary school for girls in Le Puy. In 1932/33, she taught in Auxerre, and in 1933/34 in Roanne. At Saint-Etienne, she provided free lessons to miners. On 4 December 1934, she began working as a manual *labourer at the Société de Constructions Électriques et Mécaniques*, Alsthom. From that experience, Weil concluded that when humans are deprived of justice, beauty, or love (in Weil's words, what is real), submissive silence results; the oppressed lose their voice and, unable to express their lack of what constitutes human life, they become invisible to the rest of humanity. Weil argued that such conditions do not incite revolution, as Marxism suggested, but lead to eternal submission.

In her educational efforts, Weil held literature in high regard, incorporating it into her political activism, as one and the same project. She used literature,¹⁶ particularly tragedies, which are deeply connected to suffering and death, in her lifelong educational practises, which were not confined to her classroom¹⁷ but occurred in factories, mines, or trade union meetings. She would read ancient Greek tragedies to the workers, believing that those afflicted in her own time could relate to the conditions narrated (or better, translated) through literature.

In 1936, she joined the Durruti Column in the Spanish Civil War as a 'war correspondent'. She returned after sustaining a severe burn from boiling oil.

Indeed, Weil's life was one of activism. As Jane Doering writes, 'For Weil, theory was never separate from action' (Doering 2010, 3). Her philosophy originates from the pressing need to acknowledge sufferers and help them, especially by giving them a voice and restoring their capacity to pay attention, which had been abolished by the 20th-century factory system. She writes,

compris qu'elle m'avait catalogue "une petite bourgeoise spiritualiste" et je m'en irritai') (de Beauvoir 2007, 195).

¹⁶ As Simone Pétrement observes: 'In the outlines of the courses that have been found, those that can be dated for the year at Bourges [1935–36] with certainty or great likelihood show that more than ever she offered her students the concrete, living examples to be found in literary works, novels, or poetry' (Pétrement 1976, 250, quoted in Heiti 2021). Heiti follows Weil's example, with his book on attention employing various examples and images from literature, films, visual arts, etc. This method is said to be in opposition to the use of 'thought experiments' in anglophone moral philosophy, for Heiti says that 'Using examples from art or life is like taking the inquiry out of the lab and into the field' (Heiti 2021, 22).

¹⁷ She became a teacher in 1931 and taught philosophy first in Le Puy, then in Auxerre (1932/33), and then in Roanne (1933/34).

I knew quite well that there was a great deal of affliction in the world, I was obsessed with the idea, but I had not had prolonged and first-hand experience of it. As I worked in the factory, indistinguishable to all eyes, including my own, from the anonymous mass, the affliction of others entered into my flesh and my soul (SA 66).

Born Jewish but attracted to Christianity, Weil never joined the Catholic Church due to her anti-institutional spirit and her refusal to accept definitions and labels. For the same reason, she never joined the Communist Party. However, her philosophy is imbued with a strong religious spirit, especially after what she described as a ‘mystical’ encounter in Solesmes in 1938.¹⁸ This experience did not transform her thought but represented a coherent evolution.¹⁹ The concept of God, always present in her early philosophy under names like the Absolute, Eternity, Infinity, the Invisible, Transcendence, and the Good, finally took on a Christian connotation.

After the German invasion in 1940, she moved with her family to Marseilles, where she wrote *L’Iliade ou le poème de la force*. During this period, she began exploring the works of mystics such as John of the Cross, Meister Eckhart, Saint Therese of Lisieux, and the Upanishads. Weil also formed a friendship with the Dominican priest Father Perrin, with whom she discussed her unique view of Christianity and her refusal of baptism. Perrin introduced her to his friend Gustave Thibon, for whom she worked in the grape harvest in the fall of 1941, so she could experience labour in the fields. Here, she read Plato to her fellow labourers.

¹⁸ In Weil’s biography, Fiori describes Weil’s readings between 1938 and 1940: She engaged with a wide range of historical texts, including works by ancient historians such as Herodotus, Thucydides, and Tacitus, as well as medieval and modern chronicles, from the *Chanson de la Croisade* to Richelieu’s *memoirs* and the *Diary of Pepys*. She also immersed herself in classical poets like Ovid, Juvenal, Plautus and Terrence, and reread the *Iliad*. In addition, Weil translated tragedies by Aeschylus and Sophocles and delved into the history of religions, studying the *Book of the Dead* and Egyptian religious texts. She read the Old Testament, becoming indignant at the portrayal of God commanding massacres, though she still admired certain parts of the Bible, like the Psalms, the Canticle of Canticles, Isaiah, Daniel, and Job above all. Weil was also interested in Manichaeism teachings, particularly how the great masters maintained ‘firmness in the eyes of men, they manifest sadness and express laments to God in their prayers’ (Pétrement 1988, 220 quoted in Fiori 1989). She praised their rejection of fanaticism. ‘In the spring of 1940 she read the Bhagavad Gītā (which she will reread, this time in Sanskrit, in 1941)’ (Fiori 1989, 181–82).

¹⁹ In regards to Solesmes, Weil would write to Father Perrin: ‘After this I came to feel that Plato was a mystic (the father of Western mysticism (SN 92)), that all the *Iliad* is bathed in Christian light, and that Dionysus and Osiris are in a certain sense Christ himself; and my love was thereby redoubled’ (SA 70). But this new understanding can only be seen in continuity with her early writings See Chenavier (2009).

In 1942, she moved to the United States but soon decided to go to England, where she became a civil services editor for the Commissariat for the Interior and Labour of the 'France Libre', the organization in exile headed by General Charles De Gaulle (French resistance summit). Consistently seeking to engage with the horrors of her century, she presented a project (emblematic of her personality) for front-line nurses to De Gaulle. In a century marked by war and totalitarianism, Weil proposed a project based on frailty as a moral symbol, contrasting with the prevailing notion of virile power and force. This project involved recruiting a group of self-sacrificing women, chosen for their quality of mind, for a humanitarian mission to provide medical and spiritual support on the battlefield. With a Platonic spirit, Weil proposed extreme ideas based on an ideal of perfection, approachable through intellectual and moral effort. As Weil wrote in *Réflexions sur les causes de la liberté et de l'oppression sociale* (1934), 'L'idéal a rapport à la réalité': the ideal provides a model, even if it seems impossible. A battlefield, an inherently impossible and absurd scenario, becomes a stage for her proposal, opposing force precisely where it is most powerfully exerted. If humans can create scenarios of impersonal violence that completely dominate individuals, it follows that the equally absurd idea of introducing figures symbolic of utmost care into the same scenario remains possible.

Weil's short life ended on 24 August 1943, in London's Ashford Sanatorium, her death attributed to 'self-starvation'. Her relationship with food and her metaphor of hunger as the soul's desire for the absolute Good have been widely discussed. In her *Cahiers*, she wrote about wanting to be the food for the afflicted: 'transformed into the substance of Christ, and given to the unfortunate to eat, whose body and soul lack every kind of food' (CS 205).²⁰ This echoes the Egyptian *Book of the Dead*, which she knew well, where the soul must say, 'I have never let anyone go hungry'. She stopped eating to share the deprivations of her brothers at the front, in a spirit of absolute compassion that likely led to her death.

The sanatorium admissions form prompted her to state her religion. She answered, 'I'm a philosopher and I'm interested in humanity' (Fiori 1989, 2). Throughout her philosophy, from her initial interest in Descartes and a certain kind

²⁰ 'transformé en substance du Christ, et donné à mangr à des malheureux don't le corps et l'âme manquent de toutes les espèces de nourriture'.

of Marxism and materialism to her love for Plato, the Upanishads, and Eastern philosophies, she consistently indicated that anything pertaining to the logic of power was ‘unreal’. She maintained the ‘Antigonian’ logic of love as what is real and recognised the impossibility of discursive understanding of the Good (which she termed God after 1938) due to human limitations. Consistently, she acknowledged the essential human desire for the Good, resulting in a philosophical approach that embraces and accepts the contradictions of human existence – the constant striving for unity in a world marked by separation.

Weil saw Plato’s philosophy as a corrective to modern utilitarian society. Her interests in Plato, the Ancient Greek world, and world religions were balanced by her interest in Marxism and materialism, particularly in considering labour as a human value. However, despite her interest, she firmly criticised Marxism, a subject explored further in the first chapter.

It is interesting to notice, for the purpose of this thesis, how in Weil’s life, moments of attention, or mystical moments, were often ignited by her encounter with art: art inspires her greater mystical attention. In her ‘Autobiographie spirituelle’, written to Father Perrin in May 1942, Weil recalls that what she calls her 1938 mystical experience was sparked by encountering George Herbert’s poem ‘Love’²¹ in a religious setting, as well as her recitation of it as a prayer. She recalls how she was similarly moved by Gregorian chants: ‘The beautiful is that which we can contemplate. A statue, a picture which we can gaze at for hours. The beautiful is something on which we can fix our attention. Gregorian music’ (GG 149). As Marie-Magdeleine Davy observes in her book on Weil’s mysticism, ‘Gregorian music, as in such hymns as *Media Vita*, *Te lucis ante terminum* or say, a fresco of Fra Angelico’s, have the same quality of witness as the death of a martyr’ (Davy 34).

²¹ On Weil’s literary readings, see Caprioglio Panizza and Wilson, where they report: ‘Marie Cabaud Meaney offers a helpful list of some literary authors that are mentioned by Weil in her essays, notebooks or letters. It is not short. We find Homer, Sophocles, Aeschylus, but also Euripides, Sappho, Virgil; Villon, Marlowe, Shakespeare, Cervantes, Molière, Racine, Scève, d’Aubigné, de Viau, Lamartine, Vigny, Mallarmé; Rabelais, Montaigne, La Boétie, Descartes, Retz, the authors of Port-Royal, Molière, Montesquieu, Rousseau; Goethe, Rimbaud, Anouilh, Buck, Proust, del Vasto, Wilde, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Stendhal, Balzac, Hugo, Verlaine, Baudelaire, Romain, Mauriac, Claudel; Dante, Donne, Michelangelo, Francis of Assisi, Brooke, Valéry – and more (see Cabaud Meaney 2007, 23-6)’ (Caprioglio Panizza and Wilson 2023, 48).

While Weil did not write extensively about her ideas on literature²² – unlike, for example, Murdoch – it is impossible to overlook her use of literature in her *Cahiers*, where she employed literary references to think philosophically and convey her ideas. In fact, her writing style in the *Cahiers* is often poetic, sometimes more so than her poems.²³ This is why, as Cynthia Wallace observes in her fundamental book *The Literary Afterlives of Simone Weil* (2024), artists, and especially writers frequently return to her work. Katherine Brueck – whose work *The Redemption of Tragedy. The Literary Vision of Simone Weil* (1995) is also fundamental for this research, especially in chapter 4 – observes that Weil

was teaching philosophy by means of literary works, finding it far more helpful in getting her point across than many other, more traditional, means. It is therefore not surprising that in her writings she frequently turned to comment on literary subjects. Why exactly she taught this way, and why she spent a great deal of time on literary topics, especially in her later writings, is of particular interest. At one point in her notebooks, she comments, ‘The Gospel contains a conception of human life, not a theology.’ This is at least to say that it can be positively misleading to state certain important truths in strictly objective and clearly defined propositions; many truths breathe only within the context of lived experience. They have to be seen in order to be entertained and comprehended. Literary works are therefore crucial, unique places to understand those truths (Brueck 1995, xv).

Weil’s own literary works are, indeed, a result of her attention, which is mystical, as I will show in this thesis. They are mystical in essence, as they are objects in which her mysticism is tangibly realised: they are the result of her mystical attention as a writer. In *Mirror of Obedience*, Caprioglio Panizza and Wilson²⁴ write:

In 1935, while labouring in a factory, she [Weil] had written: “Perhaps later on I shall find the right words, but at present it seems to me that I should need a new language to convey what needs to be said.” (SL 6) In poetry, she found that language (Caprioglio Panizza and Wilson 2023, 43).

Weil’s poetry originates from this urge to give words to the sufferer and to the condition of suffering in general (‘The afflicted silently beg that somebody give them words to express themselves’ (HP 117). She is the author of nine poems written between 1922 and 1942, as well as works of prose like ‘Les Lutins du Feu’

²² One fundamental essay explicitly on literature is her 1941 essay ‘Morale et littérature’ now included in *Late Philosophical Writings*.

²³ Weil ‘sees her essays as similarly open-ended exercises in conceptual clarification, rather than as attempts at systematisation or theory-building’ (Von der Ruhr 2006, 51).

²⁴ I am grateful to Caprioglio Panizza for letting me read the forthcoming entry on ‘Literature’ (by Caprioglio Panizza and Wilson) in *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Simone Weil* (Forthcoming in March 2025).

(The Fairies of the Fire), written in the winter of 1920–21 when she was eleven; a text (*Le Conte des six cygnes dans Grimm*) on Grimm’s tale ‘The Six Swans’ from 1925²⁵; and *Venise Sauvée*, which she began writing during the German invasion of France in 1940 (Caprioglio Panizza and Wilson 2023). These writings are infused with a Platonic mystical spirit.²⁶ As Caprioglio Panizza and Wilson argue in *The Philosopher at the Gate of the Word*, ‘Her literary work is a mysticism that is realised’ (2024, 356). In particular, as I demonstrate in this thesis, her play – in which the protagonist’s attention to the beauty of the city results in his action to save that beauty from the Spanish conspiracy in which he was participating – serves as an illustration of her commitment to action, a commitment that is sometimes questioned in scholarship due to her description of attention as a passive-activity and her notion of non-action, which I explore further in this text.

When we think of the mystic or the saint, we often envision an ‘immobile’ being who has achieved perfection and balance with the world. As I argue in this thesis, Weil’s mysticism presents this figure as a model of perfection, recognising that the only viable path to ascend the ladder of perfection is one that goes ‘against unreality’, which encompasses a rejection of power, injustice, or, as she calls it, force. The journey of the aspiring mystic – or the devotee of selfless attention –

²⁵ The story of the seven brothers by the Brothers Grimm features a king’s daughter, Elisa, and her six brothers. Concerned over the hatred of their stepmother, who is a witch, the king hides his children in a forest. However, when the stepmother finds the brothers, she turns them into swans by throwing six silk shirts over them. Elisa only manages to escape. The only way to save her brothers and restore them to human form is for Elisa to sew a shirt made of anemones for each brother over the course of six years. During these years, Elisa must neither laugh nor speak. She immerses herself in silence sewing tirelessly, until a king, who falls in love with her, marries her. Elisa gives birth to a son who is immediately kidnapped by the king’s mother, who accuses Elisa of killing him. Despite her grief, Elisa cannot despair or explain; she can only continue sewing. This also happens with her subsequent children, until the king is forced to sentence her to death. Elisa is about to be executed when the six white swans fly above her; she quickly throws the six shirts at them, breaking the spell. Finally, Elisa is able to explain herself to the King. The story ends with a happy reunion, except for one brother whose shirt was not completed, leaving him permanently with a swan’s wing. In her essay, Weil asserts that it is the protagonist’s non-action that brings the action to its fullest expression. Caprioglio Panizza and Willson observe that ‘The “girl in Grimm” is also compared to the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53, who is cruelly mistreated and humiliated, but whose silent acceptance of affliction saves his people. (Isaiah was one of the few books of the Hebrew scriptures that Weil was able to accept.)’ (Caprioglio Panizza and Wilson 2023, 81). Isaiah is also a constant reference in Morante’s notes.

²⁶ ‘Weil’s poetics are Platonic rather than Catholic’ (Caprioglio Panizza and Wilson, 2024, 356).

entails a continuous and active refusal of unreality; this, I argue, constitutes Weil's true activism.²⁷

Our capitalistic Western world appears absurd and paradoxical when we consider that our luxurious and comfortable lives serve as a counterweight to the misery and poverty experienced by many. Keeping this truth in mind, the extreme example of Weil's life becomes less absurd. Her singularity and indefinability, along with her example of 'lived philosophy', contribute to Albert Camus' description of her as 'du seul grand esprit de notre temps' (the only great spirit of our time).

Iris Murdoch

Before the *caesura* caused by the war, which for Murdoch coincided with the beginning of her studies at Oxford, Peter Conradi's biography of the Anglo-Irish philosopher describes her childhood as happy. Born on the 15 July 1919 at 59 Blessington Street, North Dublin, Murdoch grew up in Protestant Ireland. Her father was a British army civil servant working in London; soon after the Irish Free State was established, the family moved to London but repeatedly returned to Ireland during holidays. In England, Murdoch was given the best education. In 1932 she was enrolled in Badminton, an exclusive girls' school in the suburbs of Bristol.

Murdoch grew as a philosopher in Oxford in the early twentieth century, a place philosophically transformed by logical positivism. She began her studies in 1938, graduated with a first-class degree in 1942, and returned as a fellow in philosophy in 1947.

At the beginning of the 20th century, Oxford's philosophical scene was dominated by idealist metaphysics, which posited that reality is rationally ordered and constituted by consciousness. This Hegelian-influenced perspective, in which

²⁷ Weil's writings have often been considered, as Silvia Caprioglio Panizza and Philip Wilson write, 'as writing in two unconnected fields: politics and mysticism'. However, they explain, following Deborah Nelson, 'that the tendency to see a split in Weil between the radical and the mystic is caused by "publishing history and academic taste" rather than by any split in the writing' (Nelson 2017, 177 n.12). Both Weil's later work and her biography reveal a mystic and a thinker committed to action in the world' (Caprioglio Panizza and Wilson 2024, 344). As Caprioglio Panizza and Wilson write, 'A consideration of the literary Weil, the philosopher at the gate of the word, shows how activism and mysticism can unite' (Caprioglio Panizza and Wilson 2024, 363) in literature.

speculation is crucial, emphasised that the Absolute could be recognised through self-transcendence, with art, poetry, and religion playing key roles-

However, just before the First World War, realism began to take centre stage, focusing on analytic observation. Thinkers like G. E. Moore rejected the idea that reality is comprised of subject and object, reframing philosophy as the task of describing objects independently of the observing subject. This marked a shift from the romantic spirit of Hegelianism to a more scientific and pragmatic approach. In ethics, intuitionist realists like H. A. Prichard argued that moral reality could be intuited through empirical observation, independent of the subject.

By the late 1920s, Cambridge philosophy, seeking scientific clarity, increasingly focused on language. A. J. Ayer was instrumental in this shift, combining British empiricism with logical analysis, influenced by Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Ayer pushed philosophy towards science, asserting that meaningful statements must be verifiable through experience. He argued that moral statements are mere expressions of personal judgments and not worth analysing if they cannot be logically or empirically verified. Strict formalisation and symbols made the everyday particularity of the world fade away, and, as Murdoch would note in 'Metaphysics and Ethics' made 'a violent impact upon ethics' (ME 60). This approach, as Murdoch criticised, led to a reductive view of human beings, devoid of moral truths and the transcendent, mysterious aspects of reality that inspire art.

This is the intellectual context²⁸ in which Murdoch began her academic journey. As previously mentioned, before she rediscovered Plato through Weil,²⁹ Murdoch 'despised' his philosophy. Conradi notes that this was the result of an opposing dichotomy she saw between Plato and Marx. In that first year at Somerville, Murdoch, fresh from the 'communist atmosphere' of Badminton, immersed herself in an active political environment aroused by the Spanish Civil War, joining the Communist Party and developing her pacifist views, which lasted at least until 1941. As her Platonism grew, and the outcomes of applied communism emerged, Murdoch left the Party in 1945 believing that it offered 'too obtuse and

²⁸ For a detailed (and engaging) narration of this context see Mac Cumhaill and Wiseman (2022a).

²⁹ On this see Larson (2009).

partial an explanation of the world's evil and of human goodness' (Conradi 2001, 54).

In Oxford, Murdoch met her lifelong friends, Mary Midgley, Philippa Foot, and Elizabeth Anscombe, ('the quartet')³⁰. The war in the Oxford microcosm also meant something else, as Mary Midgley recalls: 'by the time I was doing philosophy, the men had all gone to the war except a few, and there were as many women as men in the classes that I went to. And a lot of them were rather harmless' (Mac Cumhaill and Wiseman 2022a, 70). The agents of the logical positivist turn, such as Ayer and Gilbert Ryle, were dispatched for war duties, and so besides this 'world of women',³¹ Oxford's philosophical scene revisited the classical tradition as a means of recovering the losses of previously dominant scientific approaches. This involved revisiting Plato and Aristotle, in particular the *Republic* and the *Nicomachean Ethics*, and thus the Ancient Greek perspective of philosophy as active speculation interwoven with everyday life.³²

After graduating, Murdoch applied to work for UNRRA, which dealt with more than eight million refugees.³³ She resigned in 1946 in search of a scholarship

³⁰ As Mac Cumhaill and Wiseman call them.

³¹ On 12 June 1948, Murdoch writes: 'Back from Oxford. A world of women. I reflected, talking with Mary [Midgley], Pip [Philippa Foot] & Elizabeth [Anscombe], how much I love them.' (Conradi 2001, 268).

³² In an interview with Simon Price in 1984 about her rediscovery of Plato much later in Oxford, Murdoch recalls: 'I think Plato was just not very well taught. He was regarded as fantastic, or some sort of poetical fellow' (Dooley 2003, 151). Mary Glover, a philosophy tutor at St. Hugh's, is worth mentioning for keeping Platonic ethics alive in Oxford. Her preoccupation is primarily with the role given to action in the landscape of moral theory. Moral action can be observed through movements of the body, yet for Glover these are not what comprises the human act. As Mac Cumhaill and Wiseman suggest in *Metaphysical Animals*, Murdoch, Midgley, and Foot likely came to know, through Anscombe's intercession, Glover's words: 'morality has a transcendent reference', 'an objective standard that may be progressively discovered by us, but which is not our creation' (Mac Cumhaill and Wiseman 2022a, 179). Plato's metaphysics, for Glover, reveals a transcendence 'progressively discovered' in everyday reality through love. It is this Plato's *eros* that provides the model for that selfless desire, which is central in both Weil and Murdoch. It is of note that Glover resigned her lectureship in 1945 to work in a factory (like Weil in 1937) to experience the effects of mechanised factory for herself.

³³ Murdoch's experience at the refugee camp will later echo in her imaginative universe. Conradi notices: 'At Cambridge in 1947 her four closest friends were to be an Indian, a Palestinian, an Italian-speaking Jewish Egyptian and an Austrian half-Jew; the philosophy scene at Cambridge was dominated by another expatriate, Ludwig Wittgenstein. On being criticised in 1957 for portraying characters in her first two published novels who are misfits, oddities, exiles or displaced, all with something of the refugee about them, Iris replied that 'we are not so comfortable in society as our grandfathers were. Society itself has become problematic and unreliable. So it is that the person who is literally an exile, the refugee, seems an appropriate symbol for the man of the present time' (Conradi 2001, 239). Murdoch states: 'These [refugees in her novels] are images of human suffering, kinds of people that one has met. Such persons are windows through which one looks into terrible

to start her academic career. She was provoked by a similar drive to Weil who enlisted as a Spanish Civil War volunteer in 1936: the urge to participate in the unfolding of history, wherever it was most needed. Murdoch wanted to attain ‘first-hand experience’, hoping to be sent abroad.³⁴ At first, she was sent to the London offices, but in 1945 she was finally sent overseas, first to Brussels (where she attended Sartre’s lecture), then to Innsbruck. Having read *Being and Nothingness* in French when it came out in 1943, her interest in religion first brought her closer to existentialism.

During those years working for UNNRA in Belgium and France, Murdoch delved into the existentialist atmosphere which she saw, at first, as the ‘philosophy of this age’.³⁵ In existentialism, she saw a religious spirit keeping in question the matter of ‘eternal Good & Evil’, holding that ‘the Church is very much with them still’ (Conradi 2001, 84). At first, this made her regard existentialism as distant from the ‘the shallow stupid milk & water “ethics” of English “moralists” like Ross & Prichard’ (Conradi 2001, 216). In fact, she was amused by the number of novelists inspired by existentialism. Soon, she grew interested in Gabriel Marcel, ‘whose Catholic Existentialism was often opposed to Sartre’s atheistical variety’ (Conradi 2001, 226). In 1946 she quoted Marcel in her journal ‘that we are condemned to exist with the same degree of reality that we attribute to others’ (Purton 2007, 43).³⁶

worlds’ (Conradi 2001, 239). Finally, in Murdoch’s biography, Conradi writes: ‘If she felt displaced, she before long found in Simone Weil’s *Need for Roots* and *Gravity and Grace* a way of thinking that put decentring and displacement at the centre. One of the worst evils committed by totalitarian dictators entailed the uprooting of entire peoples; yet the moral life itself was a task of unselfing, asceticism, or voluntary deracination. Weil resolves the paradox by speaking of ‘moral levels’ above which the agent cannot proceed without danger. Only for the saintly, Weil appeared to argue, can virtue have no fixed address’ (Conradi 2001, 122-123).

³⁴ Conradi recalls that she complained throughout the war as follows: “I feel very bitterly about the second-handness of most of my knowledge of life,” and felt “savage jealousy” of those – mainly men – who had escaped England for the duration. Her application form records that she wanted “to serve the liberated peoples ... whether in a refugee camp or at a desk, being as near as possible to the actual scene”, and expresses particular interest in France’ (Conradi 2001, 206).

³⁵ Murdoch describes existentialism as: ‘a group of theories descended from Hegel & Kierkegaard, via Jaspers & Heidegger [sic] & now incarnated in Jean-Paul Sartre (non-Catholic variety) & Gabriel Marcel (Catholic variety) and others. It’s anti-metaphysical & phenomenalist in flavour – concerned with the concrete puzzle of personal existence, rather than with general theories about the universe ... it’s a theory of the self, & the self’s attitude to death’ (Conradi 2001, 215).

³⁶ Alongside her interest in the Existentialists’ doctrine of self-liberation, Conradi notes that Murdoch ‘engages with Christianity, with its investment in self-purgation’ (Conradi 2001, 250). Conradi anticipates the equation between religious spirit and everyday ‘difficult’ effort, in an anecdote of a conversation about Christianity between Murdoch and her cousin Cleaver Chapman: ‘Iris asked Cleaver how you became a Christian. Cleaver, who stayed for life with the Brethren,

In the spring of 1947, she obtained a Sarah Smithson studentship in philosophy at Newnham College in Cambridge. During that year Oxford was, as she describes it, ‘more “logical positivist” than ever, & anyone interested in psychology, history or religion is regarded as “romantic” & ergo unsound. Sartre is mentioned only with derision & no one reads Kierkegaard’ (Conradi 2001, 253). In the summer of 1947, she travelled to France with Mary Midgley. Although Edmund Husserl was the planned focus of her research, thanks in part to her tutor Donald MacKinnon, she started to find what she was looking for in Gabriel Marcel.³⁷

Thus, Murdoch focused her application on a discussion of Marcel’s dichotomy of ‘problem and mystery’ and Martin Buber’s *I-It* and *I-Thou*. She wanted to show why ‘Sartre is wrong to make the free act alone the crucial feature of his ontology’.³⁸ For Murdoch, Buber’s ‘I-It’ (a stance that views others as things that can be treated through objective concepts) related to Marcel’s idea of ‘problem’, whose solution can in principle be comprehended by anyone, while Buber’s ‘I-Thou’ (relating to the Other as a complex fabric that evades objective

replied that you simply “Let Christ into your life and He will take away your sins.” Iris scornfully, vehemently replied, “It can’t possibly be as easy as that.” She evidently felt that in order to be “saved” you had to do something strenuous and continuous, engaging yourself in an arduous quest’ (Conradi, 251). By this point, Murdoch already had a clear idea of the ‘arduousness’ of the human quest, and, unsurprisingly, in those years she was reading Rainer Maria Rilke, in particular *Letters to a Young Poet*. In Rilke, the path of the poet is difficult, as he describes to his young apprentice Kappus. Murdoch eventually found this vocation for the real through the ‘arduous’ quest in Weil’s concept of attention. (On Weil and Rilke’s affinity see my article *La cosa come un frutto di Cézanne nel pensiero di Simone Weil e Rainer Maria Rilke* (2020)). Conradi notes: ‘It was not that Existentialism was wrong to remind its adherents to live in the present moment. More that it underestimated, unlike religious disciplines, the difficulties of doing so. Existentialism left out of account the daunting power of the personality and of its secret, obsessive, fantasy-ridden inner life. It praised being in the present but ignored the training necessary to the attempt. The messy incompleteness of things provoked in Sartre “nausea”, but might also more appropriately induce a healing reverence before the sheer alien, pointless multiplicity of the world’ (Conradi 2001, 272). Existentialism’s ‘being in the present’ oversimplified the human being.

³⁷ Gabriel Marcel is a fundamental figure in Murdoch’s philosophical education, especially for his idea of ‘mystery’. Mac Cumhaill and Wiseman note that in 1945 Murdoch was already copying notes into her journal from Marcel’s *La soif*, focusing on the distinction between mysteries and problems, and his idea that the artist should not degrade the former by transforming them into the latter. They explain: ‘A “problem”, Marcel taught her, can be publicly formulated, using concepts that are “objective”, and its solution can be discovered by anyone (Sweetman 2011, 5). But a “mystery” belongs to a realm of human experience that cannot be formulated publicly using objective categories, and its solution must be personal and individual. Among the mysteries of being are our experience of our own bodies, the nature of sensation, and love, hope and faith.’ (Mac Cumhaill and Wiseman 2022a, 136). On Murdoch’s relationship with Marcel see also their book chapter ‘The importance of Murdoch’s early encounters With Marcel and Anscombe’ in Caprioglio Panizza and Hopwood, 2022, 27–39).

³⁸‘Scheme of Work for Sarah Smithson Studentship’, n.d. [May 1947], p. 4, NCA, AC/5/2/20, quoted in Conradi (2001).

explanation) is in Marcel's words, a 'mystery'. This, as Murdoch wrote, is not 'an obscure mystical conception, but a normal experience which most people will recognize if they consider their own lives' (Conradi 2001, 3). Sartre does not see the others as *Thous*, but threatening, reified, and reifying things.³⁹

In the autumn of 1947, she started her fellowship at Cambridge.⁴⁰ During those years, she retained her interest in existentialism against Wittgenstein's⁴¹ lack of 'magic' ('For me philosophical problems are the problems of my own life ... Reading Sartre or [Gabriel] Marcel, we say: yes, that rings a bell. I recognise that & that's how I work, is it?' (Conradi 2001, 269)). Murdoch's supervisor at Cambridge was John Wisdom, who, with Murdoch's tutor Donald MacKinnon, saw Oxbridge as dried up and lacking the philosophical horizon that lay beyond what Murdoch called the world of Ryle's *Concept of Mind*, which she mentions in her 1953 book on Sartre when she argues against Ryle. This is a world, she writes, 'in which people play cricket, cook cakes, make simple decisions, remember their childhood and go to the circus, not the world in which they commit sins, fall in love, say prayers, or join the Communist Party' (SRR, 78–79). The wisdom of poets and novelists, as MacKinnon (and later Murdoch) suggests, can help to explore facets

³⁹ Murdoch finds kinship between Ayer's and Sartre's views. They create an 'ethical loneliness' and a 'state of war with other selves'. Sartre's *La nausée*, Murdoch observes, describes 'logical loneliness' akin to logical positivism. Sartre's and Ayer's 'lonely' human beings, 'are people from after the deluge'. Murdoch writes in 'The Existentialist Hero' that 'The values of the nineteenth century are gone. The destruction for which Nietzsche called has taken place' (EH 109). Existentialist characters are thus symbolic, for Murdoch, of 'the plight of modern man'.

⁴⁰ Here, it is worth mentioning that she met Pierre Riches, an Italian-speaking Jewish Alexandrian who later became a Catholic priest, and travelled with him to Italy in 1948. Meeting Riches was a significantly impactful for Murdoch. The image of Job, which he recalls as a topic of conversation with Murdoch in an interview with *Repubblica*, was also deeply influential on Weil's and Morante's imaginations. After leaving Cambridge, Riches moved to Rome and, perhaps unsurprisingly, became a spiritual friend of Morante. It is unknown whether he and Morante spoke about Murdoch (the research for this thesis began the year after his passing), but it is possible that he recognised in each of them a kindred spirit. In the interview, he recalls that after leaving Cambridge, he began his spiritual maturation. In 1950, he met Murdoch, with whom he formed a close friendship. Riches fondly recalls their deep and meaningful discussions. Although he is sometimes referred to as Murdoch's spiritual advisor, he clarifies that Murdoch was not someone who could be easily advised. However, she did occasionally seek his thoughts, such as when she asked for his opinion on existentialism while working on Sartre. Riches told her that the best example of existentialism could be found in the Bible, specifically the story of Job (Gnoli 2016b).

⁴¹ Another important figure in those years is Wittgenstein. Murdoch arrived at Cambridge after he had resigned his chair and travelled to the west of Ireland, too late to meet him. She later pondered the extent to which fellow students of Wittgenstein may have influenced her at Cambridge. Nonetheless, she managed to meet him once in October of 1947. She criticised him as 'a world without magic' (Conradi 2001, 267) but retained many commonalities with his philosophy, especially his insights on the limit of language and the idea of the mystical which I refer to various times in this thesis.

of life excluded by analytic philosophy. Literature in this sense is regarded as a model for ethics. As Conradi observes: ‘It was not that Iris was casual or lacked discipline. What put her at odds with “dried-up” orthodox philosophy was that she was simply interested, as philosophers once in the golden age all were, in everything on earth’ (Conradi 2001, 268). Later, in 1948, she obtained a Fellowship at St. Anne’s College and returned to Oxford to teach philosophy until 1963.

During those years, despite initially being enamoured with existentialism, from the time that Murdoch first attended Sartre’s lecture in Brussels in October 1945, she started to notice its ‘deadly’ note, a theme that she first developed in her monograph on Sartre but whose themes have been anticipated since her aforementioned application.⁴² In October 1947 she wrote: ‘there is something demonic about Sartre which is part of his fascination’ (Conradi 2001, 269). Soon enough Murdoch started to see existentialism’s promise of freedom as flawed and focused instead on the ideas of love and goodness. In September 1947 she wrote “‘Learning what goodness is” is changing oneself’ (Conradi 2001, 272). Conradi observes that ‘Iris’s picturing of Sartre became increasingly deadly; but even in 1947 she opposes his “authentic” hero to Dostoevsky’s good men – Myshkin in *The Idiot*, Alyosha in *The Brothers Karamazov*’ (Conradi 2001, 272).⁴³ It was during these years, most likely in 1949–1950 that Murdoch started gravitating towards Weil’s philosophy. Murdoch’s beloved French philosopher Marcel wrote an essay

⁴² For more on this, see Allen (1974).

⁴³ Conradi explains that in October 1947, when Murdoch gives a talk on Sartre in St. Anne’s College, her notes already show the shift towards Marcel’s Christian objections to Sartre. He writes: ‘Echoing Marcel, she noted that Sartre’s heroes are heroic not in terms of self-mastery, but merely as bandits. Existentialism, “an anguished, tortured liberalism”, was excessively individualistic. Sartre “does not give value to the other as such. Hence he does not conceive of [the] fact of love”, ... she charged Sartre with “a drunken, luciferian, refusal of those calls of which love would make man conscious – love, & not that phantom of it which arises when it reflects itself, instead of accomplishing itself”’ (Conradi 2001, 270-271). Mac Cumhaill and Wiseman argue that ‘Murdoch’s close study of the Christian existentialist philosopher and playwright Gabriel Marcel (1883-1973) in the academic year 1946-1947 came to infect both her early critique of Jean Paul Sartre’s existentialism and her early attempts to show the limits of logical positivism’ (Mac Cumhaill and Wiseman 2022b, 27). I argue that Marcel played a crucial role in Murdoch’s approach to Weil, whose philosophy ultimately influenced her critique of Sartre. The danger in Sartre’s existentialism that brought Murdoch closer to Marcel is the lack of recognition of the absolute value of the Other. As a consequence, in Murdoch’s view, Sartre’s novels suffer from being a mere mirror of his philosophy. This lends clarity to why Murdoch does not see her literature as ‘philosophical novels’ (see footnote n. 195; 220). In MGM, as I will explore further, her judgment on Sartre becomes harsher. This initial appraisal of Sartrean thought led to Murdoch’s gravitation towards Marcel and finally Weil.

on Weil⁴⁴ in the journal *The Month* published in London in July 1949. It is possible that Murdoch first encountered Weil through Marcel.⁴⁵

She found all that was missing from Oxbridge philosophy and existentialism in Weil. In her review of Weil's *Cahiers*, she writes, 'we are presented with a psychology whose sources are in Plato, in Eastern Philosophy, and in the disciplines of Christian mysticism, and yet which bears upon contemporary problems of faith and action' (KV 158). It is no mystery that in Murdoch's adoption of Plato's philosophy and her discharging of Sartre's existentialism, Weil played a fundamental role (see Conradi 2001; Larson 2009; Broackes 2017). It is realistic to say that Murdoch discovered Plato through a deep and thorough immersion in Weil's philosophy.⁴⁶ She recalls: at Oxford 'there was no wide consideration of [Plato], he was simply misunderstood. I learnt nothing of value about him as an undergraduate (he was regarded as "literature") ... Simone Weil helped me very

⁴⁴ Marcel (1949).

⁴⁵ However, it is unclear when and how Murdoch's reading of Weil's books started. To Conradi, she said: 'Yes, Simone Weil helped me very much. I can't recall just when I discovered her – probably in the late 1950s. My copy of *La source grecque* is dated by me January 1961' (letter to Peter Conradi dated 13 January 1992 quoted in Horner and Rowe 2015, 572). To a student writing about her work in 1968, she wrote: 'About Simone Weil: I don't myself think that *The Bell* (published in 1958) is deeply influenced by her and I'm not even quite sure that I had read her at that time. I had certainly not studied her, as I did later' (letter to David Beams dated 17 September 1968, quoted in Horner and Rowe 2015, 372). Justin Broackes observes how this 'forgetfulness' stands for something true: Murdoch certainly knew Weil by 1951, but it was only after in the 60s that she rediscovered her. Broackes explains: 'By the time of the first draft of *The Bell* (in mid-1957), Murdoch had reviewed close on a thousand pages of Weil: the two volumes of *Notebooks*, along with *Waiting for God*, which, even for the 1951 radio talk, Murdoch had discussed in connection with three other publications of Weil's that at that time were only available in French. Murdoch read these works with perceptiveness, admiration, and attention, and surely no little labour' (Broackes 2017, 17). Larson (2014) states that Murdoch started reading Weil in 1949 but does not justify this claim, I instead propose that Murdoch might have encountered Weil through Marcel's 1949 essay. In the 1950s, Murdoch had already taught Weil's philosophy to undergraduates and postgraduates. As Purton reports: Murdoch's 'room for tutorials is in Musgrave House, 1 South Parks Road. Among her students for political theory is Jennifer Dawson: both hate the prescribed text, Rousseau's *Social Contract*, so instead they study Plato, utopian philosophy and Simone Weil's *Waiting on God*' (Purton 2007, 57). In 1964, Murdoch supervised Miklós Vető, a young philosopher (a Hungarian refugee of the Revolution) from La Sorbonne, on a D. Phil. on 'The Ethics of Simone Weil', which later became *La Métaphysique religieuse de Simone Weil*, translated as *The Religious Metaphysics of Simone Weil* (1994), which remains a fundamental text in Weilian scholarship, and in this thesis. Vető, in a letter to Conradi on 31 December 1998, describes Murdoch as 'a marvellous adviser.' It is relevant that Vető's thesis, much to the surprise of Murdoch, was initially rejected at its first viva in Oxford. This might be symptomatic of the reception of Weil's in Oxford during those years.

⁴⁶ Murdoch's copies of Weilian texts reside in the Archive in Kingston. These include: Weil's notebooks in English (both the edition in two volumes and *First and Last Notebooks*), and all three of the French editions, *Intuition Pre-Chretiennes*, *L'enracinement*, *La connaissance surnaturelle*, *Attente de Dieu*, *La condition ouvriere*, *Sur la science*, *Leçon de philosophie*, *La source grecque*, *Oppression et liberté*, the English edition of *Selected Essays* and *Waiting on God*. She read these in the original French the copies contain markings, notes, and underlining.

much' (Conradi 1994, 333)⁴⁷.’ Indeed, Murdoch explicitly refers to her ‘great debt to Simone Weil’, who, she writes, ‘is a marvellous thinker and who opened my eyes to many things and set me on to various paths that I have followed since’ (Dooley 2003, 76).⁴⁸

In her diary, she writes: ‘I once was a kind of existentialist and now I am a kind of Platonist’ (Conradi 2001, 260). Conradi defines Weil as ‘the only woman among Iris’ great teachers’ (Conradi 2001, 260). In October 1951, she recorded a BBC radio talk discussing Weil’s philosophy extensively for the first time (thirteen pages in its manuscript version) and introduced the topic of ‘the use of suffering’, showing that the core topic of this thesis, was present in her first reading of Weil, perhaps constituting what most attracted her to Weil’s philosophy.

Murdoch’s review of the English translation of Weil’s *Notebooks* was originally published in ‘The Spectator’, on 2 November 1956, and reprinted in, *Existentialists & Mystics* with the title ‘Knowing the Void’.⁴⁹ In *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, based on the 1982 Gifford lectures, Weil is present throughout the text, especially, in the chapter ‘Void’ and the conclusion and summation of the lectures.

Murdoch married John Bayley in 1963, and their supportive intellectual partnership lasted throughout her life. During the 1970s and 1980s, she wrote several acclaimed novels, including *The Black Prince* (1973) and *The Sea, The Sea* (1978), which won the Booker Prize. Murdoch’s fascination with existentialism waned as she saw its limitations, shifting her focus towards themes of love and goodness, leading to her most relevant philosophical works, like *The Sovereignty of Good* (1970), which have a Weilian spirit, often explicitly mentioning Weil, especially her idea of attention.

⁴⁷ See Conradi (1994,).

⁴⁸ Indeed, as she wrote to Gabriele Griffin, Murdoch experienced a ‘total love at first sight’ (Griffin 1993, 58) for Weil’s ‘deep radiant thinking’ (Griffin 1993, 59, n.15) and ‘Yes, I love her’ she answers John Haffenden in 1983 when asked in an interview about her ‘evidently deep response to Simone Weil’ (Dooley 2003, 135).

⁴⁹ As Broackes points out: ‘Weil becomes visible in the 1959 articles “The Sublime and the Good” and “The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited” (e.g. at EM, p.215, though Weil’s name isn’t explicitly mentioned, and at EM, p.270, where it is). And the three articles that came to constitute *The Sovereignty of Good* (1970) show a progressive and great outpouring of ideas derived, reworked, and transformed, from Weil: first in “The Idea of Perfection” (1962; publ. 1964), then in “On ‘God’ and ‘Good’” (1966; publ. 1969) and “The Sovereignty of Good over Other Concepts” (1967)’ (Broackes 2017, 18).

The last of Murdoch's twenty-six novels, *Jackson's Dilemma*, was published in 1995 prior to her Alzheimer's diagnosis in 1997. She passed away on 8 February 1999.⁵⁰

Elsa Morante

Elsa Morante was born on 18 August 1912, at Via Anicia 7 in Rome. Her mother, Irma Poggibonsi, a Jewish elementary school teacher from Mantova, and her biological father, Augusto Morante, a Sicilian probation officer, raised her Catholic to avoid persecution. Soon after Morante was born, the family moved to the working-class district of Testaccio, in Via Amerigo Vespucci 42. The family environment was marked by contempt and exclusion, with Irma often having breakdowns. Irma and Augusto decided to conceive children with Francesco Lo Monaco, who later committed suicide. In his book *Maledetta, Benedetta* (1986), Daniele Morante hints at the possibility that Augusto might have sexually abused Morante when she was a child (Ceccatty 2020, 21).

Irma, a modest writer interested in education and women's rights, recognised Elsa Morante's precocity and introduced her to the Montessori educator Maria Maraini Guerrieri Gonzaga. Morante attended the prestigious high schools Visconti and Mamiani in Rome and developed a love for Baudelaire and classical languages. She began collaborating on children's books and published her first short story – 'Story of Children and of Stars' – at eighteen.

Morante's literary career can be divided into two phases (Cecchi and Garboli, 1990), with the Second World War as the turning point.⁵¹ Between 1930 and 1937, she struggled to make a living from her writing and might have resorted to prostitution (Bernabò 2016, 46). Additionally, she may have had an abortion at 19, as Adriano Sofri writes in his journal where he describes Morante's last days in the

⁵⁰ For a shorter biography of Murdoch than Conradi's, see White (2014).

⁵¹ From 1933 she published stories for children and later for adults, first on *Corriere dei Piccoli*, *Novella*, *I diritti della scuola*. Then in 1936 her first novella 'Qualcuno ha bussato alla porta' was released episodically. In later years, aside from *Corriere dei Piccoli*, she collaborated with other journals in Rome like *Oggi* and *Meridiano di Roma* (she wrote about 120 articles in all, as Lily Tuck reports (Tuck 2009)). Indeed, the first phase officially ended with two publications: one collection of short stories in 1941 (titled *Il gioco segreto*) and the children's story in 1942 *Le bellissime avventure di Cateri dalla trecciolina*. During these years, she also translated *Scrapbook* by Katherine Mansfield into Italian in 1941, and published with Longanesi under the title *Il libro degli appunti* (in her archive other translations are of Sylvia Plath, Emily Dickinson, John Keats, Goethe, Ginsberg and Kerouac, Rimbaud, Dylan Thomas).

hospital (Fofi and Sofri 2011, 181). Throughout the 1930s, Morante faced the dual challenge of establishing herself as a writer and earning a living. To make ends meet, she wrote academic works and theses for money, despite having to leave university herself due to financial constraints.

1938 (the year of Murdoch's enrolment at Oxford and Weil's mystical experience in Solesmes) marked the declaration of the racial laws in Italy, and is also the year in which Morante started to write a journal (later titled *Diario 1938*).⁵² Financial stability came only after her marriage to the writer Alberto Moravia in 1941. Morante's writing, slow and meticulous,⁵³ often drew from her tumultuous childhood.

In 1943, she began to write her first novel, (which would not be completed until 1948,) *Menzogna e sortilegio* (translated as *House of Liars* or *Lies and Sorcery* in the 2023 edition), just before she became a refugee in Fondi. In September 1943, after a friend revealed that Moravia was on an official list of names of intellectuals to be arrested because of his Jewish heritage, the couple left Rome, which felt no longer secure, and moved towards southern Lazio. Expecting a short exile, they left with only summer clothes, however, their stay in the village of Sant'Agata among a community of women, who lived in the purest conditions while the men were away fighting in Russia, lasted nine months. The family that hosted them lent their name to the 'Marocco' family that hosts Ida in *La Storia*. After *Menzogna e sortilegio*, Morante published *L'isola di Arturo* in 1957. I will return to these novels in the last chapter of the thesis within an analysis of Morante's poetics.

⁵² In this journal, some details about her private life can be found, although she carefully only uses initials rather than full names. Even today, it remains somewhat difficult to piece together Morante's life, as she was opposed to the idea of narrating her personal experiences. In the last year of her life, she stated: 'The private life of a writer is gossip and gossip no matter about whom offends me. Novels are more autobiographical than anything else one could say about oneself. My life is in *House of Liars* and *Arturo's Island* ... not in the facts of my life. But it does not matter. It does not matter how the facts occur in life, it matters how they are told. In books, the facts always have a disguise, conscious or unconscious, but that disguise is their truth. It occurs in novels the way it occurs in dreams: a magical transposition of our life that is perhaps even more significant than life itself because it is enriched by the strength of the imagination. As far as I am concerned, I don't want to be considered a living person' (*Il Messaggero*, 26 November 1985, p. 5; quoted in Tuck 2009, 220).

⁵³ Cecchi and Garboli note that the incubation of her ideas was like a pregnancy, 'her novels follow one another at more or less regular intervals, like true pregnancies' (O xiv).

Morante probably encountered Weil's philosophy by the end of the 1950s. Gabriella Fiori,⁵⁴ in her 2009 article on 'Cahier Simone Weil' titled 'Elsa Morante, lectrice des Cahiers de Simone Weil', explains that it was during the 1950s that Weil's thought started to spread within Italy.⁵⁵ As noted, Weil is more than an influence on Morante. Fiori uses the word '*rayonnement*', 'radiance', instead of 'influence', which, she writes, 'in physics, means "the emission of radiation from a source" and, in the figurative sense, it is the "communication of a state of mind, a feeling or a quality, a spiritual or intellectual gift". In a capillary and inevitable manner' (Fiori 2009, 65). Morante's thought, as I hope to have made clear through this sketch of her intellectual development, life and education, naturally converged towards Weil's 'radiating light' around the 1950s, early 1960s.

A strand of Morante scholarship has been excavating the presence of Weil's philosophy in Morante's poetics, a 'magistero', as Concetta D'Angeli writes, which 'among her contemporaries, few appreciated and even fewer understood' (D'Angeli 1993, 25).⁵⁶ One evident finding is that philosophical themes in Weil's *Cahiers* were already crowding Morante's mind before reading Weil. As Giancarlo Gaeta

⁵⁴ Gabriella Fiori is one of the most renowned Italian readers and scholars of Weil. She is Weil's first Italian biographer and the translator of seven of Murdoch's novels. Additionally, she authored one of the first articles on Weil's influence on Morante. For an interview with her on the aforementioned topics, see Dianetti (2023b).

⁵⁵ In my interview with Fiori (Dianetti 2023b), she observes the differences between the Anglo-Saxon early reception of Weil compared to the Italian context. She says: 'Perhaps the biggest difference between the two was this: above all, Italian scholars were interested in Simone's social experience and work-life, while the English-speaking writers published relatively early on (1965, translated by Richard Rees) things like Weil's letters'. In 'Elsa Morante, lectrice des Cahiers de Simone Weil', she describes the Italian context as 'a period "when there was a claim to rethink and renew Italian politics: progressive or traditional Catholics, orthodox or critical communists reacted [to Simone Weil's ideas, very early mixed into the very heated political debate] in different ways, selected and translated her texts, privileging some and discarding others" (Canciani 2004, 201-221)'. She goes on to write that 'A knowledge initially "underground, confidential" through her books in French, lent among friends, became more and more an adventure, an inspiring commitment. For Adriano Olivetti, the first publisher in Italy of Simone Weil's works as they appeared in France, this knowledge was the guide and confirmation of an ideal that was both social and existential.' (Fiori 2009, 66) Fiori reports that Olivetti commissioned Franco Fortini to translate the following between 1951 and 1956: *La pesanteur et la grâce* in 1951, *La condition ouvrière* in 1952, *L'enracinement* in 1954, and commissioned Carlo Falconi to translate *Oppression et liberté* in 1956. In 'The History of a Friendship', Fiori also recalls that in 'Florence since the fifties there was a very vivid Weilian fire around the writer Cristina Campo, with the psychoanalyst-writer-artist Gianfranco Draghi, the poet Mario Luzi, and the essayist Margherita Pieracci Harwell, who had already translated *Intuitions pré-chrétiennes* with Campo (on the reception of Weil's thought in Italy in the 1950s, see Fiori (2019). For english translation see Fiori (2023).

⁵⁶ On Weil's influence on Morante, by the same author, see also D'Angeli (2015).

states in *Contro il dominio dell'irrealtà: Elsa Morante a confronto con Simone Weil*:

Those thoughts [S. Weil's thoughts] did not reach her entirely from the outside, they did not fall on virgin ground; I would say rather that in part they resonated with thoughts that she had already experienced, strengthening them from within, and then they went on to illuminate vast areas of her poetic research (Gaeta 2016, 25).

The most relevant links between Weil and Morante frequently noted by the scholarship are: a) Morante's well-documented 'frequentazione' of Weil's texts;⁵⁷ b) the role of *la pesanteur* in Morante's life;⁵⁸ and c) the explicit mention of Weil in *Il mondo salvato dai ragazzini* (1968) in the list of the 'Felici-Pochi' (the Happy-Few).⁵⁹ I explore Weilian ideas in *La Storia* in the last chapter.

⁵⁷ Morante's copies of Weil reside in the Morante Archive in the National Library of Rome. In this collection includes: all the *Notebooks* in French and two copies of the Italian translation of *La pesanteur et la grâce, La source grecque, Oppression et liberté, Pensées sans ordre concernant l'amour de dieu, La connaissance surnaturelle, Écrits de Londres et dernières lettres, L'enracinement, Poèmes suivis de Venise sauvée Lettre de Paul Valéry, Écrits historiques et politiques, La condition ouvrière* both in French and Italian (for further information on Morante's private library see Zagra and Buttò (2006)). From Morante's own copies of Weil's *Cahiers* it is clear that, as Fiori writes, Weil 'devient [fully] son maître spirituel' (Fiori 2009, 71) between 1960 and 1964. Fiori, in her fundamental essay in 'Cahier Simone Weil' titled *Elsa Morante, lectrice des Cahiers de Simone Weil*, underlines how Morante's opinion on Weil never changed over the years, and how she was from the first encounter 'una maestra' for the Italian writer. This 'magistero' became more frequent, as Fiori also underlines, 'à une époque où Elsa pâtit du malheur' (Fiori 2009, 71), referring Morante's separation from Moravia (1962); the death of Bill Morrow the same year, and the death of her mother the following year. In this period, Morante's reading of Weil's notebooks become 'una frequentazione vorace', as Garboli wrote in the 'Preface' to *Pro o contro la bomba atomica* (xix). Even though Giorgio Agamben (who wrote his theses on Weil's notion of 'person'), in his interview on 15 May 2016 in *Repubblica* recalls that he was the one to introduce Morante to Weil in 1963, the special encounter between Morante and her 'maestra' might have occurred earlier. Rossellini's movie *Europa '51* (reviewed by Moravia in *L'Europeo*, 22 January 1953) was based on the life of Weil, and Moravia's 1959 collection *Moralisti moderni* co-edited with Elémire Zolla included Simone Weil's first Italian translation of *La personne et le sacré*. Moreover, Angela Borghesi shows in her *Una storia invisibile* how reviews of Weil's works, extracts of her writings, and entire essays were already being published from as early as 1947 in Italian journals close to Moravia and Morante, like Adriano Olivetti's journal *Comunità* or Nicola Chiaromonte's reviews in the journal *Mondo* and in the monthly journal *Tempo presente* (Borghesi 2015, 35).

⁵⁸ See Cesare Garboli's 'Preface' to Morante's *Pro o contro la bomba atomica*. Moravia also spoke about this in an interview in 1990. See Elkann and Moravia (1990, 158).

⁵⁹ Weil is placed by Morante in an ideal cross she draws in a page in *Il mondo* together with Spinoza, Gramsci, Bruno, Rimbaud, Jean d'Arc, Mozart, and Bellini, and further in the text she refers to Weil as: 'Simone Weil (the intelligence of saintliness) Died of voluntary starvation in hospital aged 34 in 1943' (WSK 163). And: 'immaculate little sister / last cut down dove of the floods / beauty of the Song of Songs camouflaged behind those / funny, short-sighted schoolgirl glasses you wore ... I know / that for a girl starting out on the ordeal of the Cross / and arriving alone at the delirious guilt of exile / the foreign hospital bed is a harrowing mazed of barbed wire / where her Jewish little body yields itself up / to suicidal fever / so as to consume inside itself the slaughter of all death camps' (WSK 166-67).

In 1959, Morante met a young painter named Bill Morrow from Madisonville, Kentucky in New York. She fell in love with him and began an affair.⁶⁰ Morrow died tragically after falling (or possibly jumping while under the influence of drugs) from a New York skyscraper in 1962. This profoundly impacted Morante, plunging her into a dark period that influenced *Il mondo salvato dai ragazzini* (1968) and later *La Storia*. After publishing *La Storia* in 1974, she began work on *Aracoeli* in 1975, which was eventually published in 1982.

Shortly after the publication of her last novel, in March 1980, Morante broke her femur but refused surgery. She later attempted suicide on 6 April 1983 and was diagnosed with hydroencephalitis, a disease that took her life in 25 November 1985.

To conclude, I would like to recall the words on the plaque affixed at Morante's house which contain her ethos *in nuce*: 'A visionary mind / A deep sense of suffering / A strong complicity [empathy] with the humble / Capable of transforming history into myth / Life into a cruel and mysterious tale' (2004)⁶¹.

A kindred 'vocation for the real', draws both Murdoch and Morante to Weil. In Weil they found an example, or as Murdoch states, 'a standard'. I argue that what attracted them the most to Weil pertains to the way she dealt with the 'unreality' that constitutes human lives, the problem of suffering, and her attempt to provide new 'pictures' of the human being (based on selfless attention) for a reconstruction of Europe after the world conflict. Both Murdoch and Morante independently struggled with the question of *le malheur* in the aftermath of war following the extreme violence caused by the logic of power, and what the role of the writer could be in the face of all this.

In both Murdoch's and Morante's lives, Weil herself served as an 'example'. For these writers, ideals and moral sources are fundamental for the moral life. High moral pictures and standards show that 'it can be done' (MGM 429). They represent 'the positive experience of truth ... [which] remains with us as a standard or vision, an orientation, a proof of what is possible and a vista of what might be' (MGM

⁶⁰ Morante and Moravia had an open relationship of sorts. Before meeting Morrow, Morante had an affair with the film director Luchino Visconti, whom she met in 1955. Moravia was aware of these affairs and even supported Morrow by helping to showcase his art in Italy.

⁶¹ 'Una mente visionaria / Un profondo sentimento del dolore / Una viva complicità con gli umili / Capace di trasformare la storia in mito / La vita in favola crudele e misteriosa'.

508). Weil would not have relished being regarded in this 'saintly' light. Nonetheless, her life and philosophical efforts remain inspiring for many of her readers. We can get a hint of how both Murdoch and Morante considered Weil an 'example' from Murdoch's radio talk,

She [Weil] moves us precisely because of the way she has taken the impact upon herself of the particular extremities of the present time: the age of the factory worker, the D.P., the concentration camp. She says to Perrin that 'today it is not nearly enough merely to be a saint, but one must have the saintliness demanded by the present moment'. [Letter VI, 1950, p.105] What this saintliness is we have yet to discover. But Simone Weil is a pioneer whose experience, whatever we may finally think of it, should not be neglected (BBC 16).

As mentioned, Weil also explicitly appears in Morante's *Il mondo salvato dai ragazzini* in the list of 'I Felici-Pochi', standing, as Morante writes, as an image of 'the intelligence of saintliness'. Further on in the text, she mentions her as an 'immaculate little sister', referring to her death as an attempt 'to consume inside itself [Weil's body] the slaughter of all death camps' (WSK 166-67). The example of Weil is that of a 'Happy-Few', and her manifesto is that of reality, as Morante writes:

The great revolutionary manifesto of the extremist H.F. / has been printed in myriads of copies by day & night / ever since before languages / & scriptures existed. But for all legible things / there always exists another, hidden reading, / & if the living lose the code books, / so does the author of the scriptures, / even though he's called God. In fact, the living are the house of this one God, / so if they close their windows, the dweller in the house will go blind. / We must open again the lights of our eyes / for him to regain his sight (WSK 185).⁶²

⁶² 'Il grande manifesto rivoluzionario degli estremisti F.P. / è stampato a miriadi nei giorni e nelle notti / da prima ancora che esistessero le lingue / e le scritture. Ma per tutte le cose leggibili / si dà sempre un'altra lettura nascosta, / e se i viventi ne smarriscono i cifrari, / anche l'autore delle scritture li smarrisce, / per quanto sia chiamato Dio. Difatti, la casa di quest'unico Dio sono i viventi, / e se questi chiudono le loro finestre, l'abitatore della casa / resta cieco. / Noi dobbiamo riaprire le luci dei nostri occhi / perché lui riveda' (136-37).

1. Unreality and the mystery of *le malheur*

Sea, docile at ebb. Sea, slave to the silence. / Sparse sea, chained for eternity to the flows. / Mass open to sky, mirror of obedience. / The distant stars, effortlessly, have the power / to weave into you every night these new folds. / Vast sea, show favour to mortals: afflicted, / crushed at your edge, and lost within your desert. / Speak to those who sink, before they are drowned. / Enter into our soul, o sea, our sister. / Deign to wash it clean, with waters that are just.

(Simone Weil, *La mer* [The Sea])

1.1 Introduction

In this research, I suggest that certain literature can work ‘against unreality’ opening a privileged space for attention directed towards what Weil calls *le malheur*. To do this, I begin by clarifying how Weil defines ‘unreality’ and its relation to *le malheur*.

Le malheur is a complex and multifaceted concept in Weil’s philosophy. In *L’amour de Dieu et le malheur* (1942), she defines it as a state of physical suffering, distress of the soul, and social degradation that persists over time. Weil’s fellow factory workers were emblematic of those ‘marked’ by this condition during her era – a time of working-class struggle, annihilation by new machines in factories, ascendent totalitarianism, and the early years of the Second World War.

Here, I have chosen to keep the term *malheur* in its original French to preserve its connotations, which are often lost in translation. Weil notes in her *Cahiers* that *malheur* is an ‘admirable word, without its equivalent in other languages’ (N I 3). For instance, in Italian, *malheur* is translated as *sventura* (although Franco Fortini’s first translation of GG uses *infelicità* [unhappiness]). *Sventura*, more akin to *disgrazia*, better captures the notion of chance and destiny expressed in the original French – a concept fundamental to Greek tragedies and the idea of *Ananke*, which, as I will show, is a central concept for Weil. In German, Ingeborg Bachmann (2021) translates it as *Unglück*. In English, the term has been translated as ‘affliction’, ‘woe’, or ‘misfortune’, but ‘affliction’ is most common in Weil and Murdoch scholarship. Retaining the original French *malheur* preserves its rich connotations

in the original language and avoids oversimplification since *malheur* encompasses more than mere suffering, sadness, or anguish for Weil. Indeed, Weil drew the meaning of *malheur* from her experience as a factory worker, referring to a type of suffering that includes ‘an overwhelming, bitter fatigue, painful to the point that one wishes for death ... for this kind of fatigue, we would need a unique name’ (CO 271).⁶³

This chapter aims to clearly define *le malheur* in Weil’s philosophy, its relationships to necessity and what Weil calls ‘force’, and to expand on the often-overlooked social component of *le malheur*. Through these clarifications, I will anticipate Weil’s problematic idea of *décréation* and discuss her criticism of rights based on personhood. I aim to reveal Weil’s philosophy as dealing with the particular human being more deeply than scholarship has previously highlighted. Exploring the mystery of *le malheur* will lead, in chapters that follow, to a discussion of the possibilities of paying attention to suffering.

Weil describes *le malheur* as the experience of a void, a fundamental concept in her thought. A void, in Weil’s view, is integral to the state of *le malheur*, to moments of attention (another key concept in her philosophy), and to the experience of beauty. While both *le malheur* and attention/beauty involve an experience of a void, the void in *le malheur* represents extreme suffering and a lack of meaning; it is an emptiness we receive from the outside world. Instead, in attention/beauty, the void signifies emptying the self and thus the distance that can be placed between our gaze and the perceived reality (‘To love purely is to consent to distance, it is to adore the distance between ourselves and that which we love’ (GG 65)), it is the making empty of the soul in a purer sense, making space within. In chapter 2, I will discuss attention in detail. For now, I will explore the state of *le malheur*, its connections to what Weil calls void, and how the latter can, *potentially*, lead to a new awareness. Finally, I examine the relationship between *le malheur* and ‘unreality’ clarifying Weil’s concept of unreality.

⁶³ ‘La fatigue, accablante, amère, par moments douloureuse au point qu’on souhaiterait la mort. [...] Pour cette fatigue-là, il faudrait un nom à part’.

1.2 Necessity & force

In order to address both *le malheur* and unreality, we must examine two fundamental, deeply correlated concepts in Weil's philosophy— necessity and force.

The premise of Weil's philosophy is that humanity is hopelessly bound by the law of necessity. Necessity, in a broad sense, encompasses all determinations to which the world and the human beings within it are subject, including time, the law of cause and effect, and transience, from which no being can escape. For Weil, the human condition is no different from that of a plant in terms of the necessity we are exposed to but differently from plants we can choose our disposition: 'The plant exercises no control, no choice in the affair of its own growth. We, though, are like a plant that can choose whether or not to expose itself to the light' (LGA 130). What might seem at first a deeply pessimistic view will instead reveal a profound utopian spirit. Before addressing how, in Weil's view, one can expose oneself 'to the light', let us first explore the constraints to which human life is subject.

Weil knew the laws of thermodynamics and mechanical physics well. Her brother André was one of the founding members of the mathematical Bourbaki group, and she often attended their meetings. For Weil, the limits the laws of thermodynamics and mechanical physics (therefore also of time) impose on the world define what she calls 'the laws of necessity'. These are laws to which the world, and the humans within it, are subject. When she speaks of 'necessity', she means the world of the constraints of time, finitude, mechanical forces, and transience involving constant states of disequilibrium always attempting to reach a state of equilibrium. If Weil views stillness, eternity, and perfect balance as definitions of the transcendent reality (what, after 1938/9, she calls God),⁶⁴ then movement, transience, and disequilibrium are definitions of the world of necessity. This world is, in fact, ruled by forces that press things down and work against each other. In physics, force is an agent that acts on a body by direct or remote contact. Mechanical forces operate on any substance in the world, and any movement involves the transformation of energy. To this, Weil adds:

Every phenomenon is a modification of the distribution of energy, and consequently is determined by the laws of energy. But there are many forms of energy, and they are disposed in a graduated order. Mechanical force, gravity or gravitation in the Newtonian sense, whose compulsion we are

⁶⁴ I will explain this passage from Good to God in the next chapter.

continually made to feel, is not the highest form. Light, impalpable and weightless, is a form of energy that, in spite of gravity, makes the trees and the blades of corn shoot upwards. We consume it in corn and in fruit, and its presence inside us gives us the necessary force to stand upright and go about our work (NFR 287).

Weil analogously translates this physical concept of energy onto the human plane. Here, ‘spiritual energy’ exists in addition to ‘vegetative energy’, the mere striving for survival. The former is an impersonal push to ‘rise’ upwards, opposing gravity. Upward energy, as seen in the non-human realm (for example, the attraction of plants towards light), is an analogy, in the moral sphere, for the human capacity to be attracted to the Good/God.

As Weil states in the aforementioned quote, there are many types of energy. On the human plane, she indicates two fundamental kinds: the upward attraction towards God/Good, and the energy exchanged between humans and the things of the world, which always tends towards degradation. In contrast with upward energy, gravity that pushes down, which she calls *la pesanteur*, is the main force that pulls humans towards ever lower and baser emotions. We are constantly caught in this dual game of tensions: necessarily pushed down by gravity but always striving for the light; a unity that humans can never reach.

But why is there this human tendency, caused by necessity, towards lower emotions? Since humans are subject to the ‘laws of the world’, they end up filling any empty space that they encounter with a sort of mechanical and automatic movement. This ‘filling’ of voids is carried out either by daydreaming or by the use of force, although these two – dreams and force – often entail one another. Human beings fabricate private and collective illusions in an attempt to hide from their miserable condition. Humanity falls under the illusion that, to respond to that necessity, they can use ‘another force’: the logic of power, oppression, prevarication, and violence. With the word ‘force’, Weil refers to the opposite of equilibrium, adopting the laws of thermodynamics to explain the movements of the psyche.

The second law of thermodynamics states that the entropy of any isolated system always increases. Following this, Weil states that the human psyche moves towards a degradation of order (like ‘the world lives toward death’, explains Wallace (2024, 81)). The first law of thermodynamics states that within any isolated

system, energy remains constant and can neither be increased nor decreased. Therefore, for a system to gain energy, it must make contact with something external. Humans, analogically, to approach ‘higher’ emotions, need assistance from something outside of the self. As Weil explains: ‘the source of man’s moral energy is outside him, as does that of his physical energy (food, respiration)’ (N I 222). As physics explains, since energy cannot be created or destroyed, it follows that as long as we, humans, exist as substances, our energy will naturally be exchanged with the world. There cannot be any cessation of our natural tendency to expand our own self towards the outside. As with a liquid or a gas, we naturally tend to expand ourselves into the external environment.⁶⁵ This mechanism characterises the self-perpetuating trait of force, a notion that Weil retrieved from the Greek idea of *Até*. Force unceasingly passed from human being to other being (humans, non-human entities). I will explain this further with Iris Murdoch’s help in chapter 3.

Let us now explore how, for Weil, this natural tendency in modern (industrial) times equates to social oppression.

1.3 Force as social oppression

I will now situate Weil’s discourse on *malheur* within her historical context. As aforementioned, Weil views factory workers as emblematic of *les malheureux*, just as fascism and totalitarianism are the emblem of force – two features (force and *le malheur*) that follow from and perpetuate unreality. Indeed, in Weil’s modern technological age (and even more so in ours), force, which was present for primitive human beings in their natural needs and subordination to nature, manifests itself in a person’s submission to social collectivity.

In *Réflexions sur les causes de la liberté et de l’oppression sociale* (1934), Weil explains that both Marx and the Bolsheviks, mistakenly fed the myth of progress, albeit through a logic completely opposite to capitalism. As Weil writes, Marx thought that once capitalist economies were eradicated and technology developed independently from capitalistic specialisation and degradation, the result

⁶⁵ Weil often uses metaphors of hunger and food. In relation to the human tendency to expand on the outside reality, she often uses the image of a phagocytosis of the external world. Murdoch also often uses food to convey this meaning for example through Dora in *The Bell* or Charles in *The Sea the Sea*, or the metaphor of ‘the fat relentless ego’ consuming reality.

would be lightening ‘more and more, day by day, the burden of material necessity, and as an immediate consequence that of social constraint’ (OL 42). However, in Weil’s view, Marxist progress is a lie resulting from a lack of scientific rigour. Marxist doctrine, in fact, is nothing more than a mutation of Hegelianism. What Hegel identified in Spirit, Marxist theory attributes to matter, which acquires ‘an unceasing aspiration towards the best’ (OL 43):

to transfer the principle of progress from mind to things is to give a philosophical expression to that ‘reversal of the relationship between subject and object’ in which Marx discerned the very essence of capitalism. The rise of big industry made of productive forces the divinity of a kind of religion (OL 43).

Nonetheless, Weil felt that Marx’s greatest intuition was his analogy between nature and society, grounded in the notion of matter: ‘in human society as well as in nature nothing takes place otherwise than through material transformations’ (OL 44).

From this perspective, one must reflect on these material conditions as determinants of the human being’s ability to act, focusing on how human beings respond: ‘in the social sphere these conditions are defined by the way in which man obeys material necessities in supplying his own needs, in other words, by the method of production’ (OL 44). According to Weil, Marxism failed to provide an analysis of progress. Especially regarding technical progress, Weil states that ‘the problem is fundamental’:

It is enough that the productivity of human effort should have increased in an unheard of manner for the last three centuries for it to be expected that this increase will continue at the same rate. Our so-called scientific culture has given us this fatal habit of generalizing, of arbitrarily extrapolating, instead of studying the conditions of a given phenomenon and the limits implied by them; and Marx, whose dialectical method should have saved him from such an error, fell into it on this point just like other people (OL 45).

In *Réflexions*, Weil noted that constantly-increasing progress, beyond any limit, is actually inconceivable: ‘It is solely the frenzy produced by the speed of technical progress that has brought about the mad idea that work might one day become unnecessary’ (OL 52).⁶⁶ She writes that in primitive forms of production, the human being is free from other human beings and ‘in direct contact with the conditions of

⁶⁶ Weil was not entirely against technology. She believed that machines should be used for heavy, tedious tasks that do not require intellectual intervention. See *The Need for Roots*.

his own existence' (OL 60), yet also constantly subjugated by her needs and therefore subjected to the dominion of nature. Weil adds that the deification of nature is a clear sign of this subjugation.

Observing this historical process, the human being ostensibly transitions gradually from subservience to nature to domination over it. However, Weil argues that this is only an appearance. What suggests this is the collateral slow process of submission to another external force: not nature but social collectivity.

According to Weil, the quality of human actions has changed due to new means of production and industrialisation. Previously, human action sought to satisfy present needs and respond to natural threats. However, in the realm of production and labour, action is geared towards production that happens in the present in the service of future needs. Despite these appearances, Weil warns that the pressure of nature is still felt indirectly. In fact,

human action continues, as a whole, to be nothing but pure obedience to the brutal spur of an immediate necessity; only, instead of being harried by nature, man is henceforth harried by man ... oppression is exercised by force, and in the long run all force originates in nature (OL 60).

However, social oppression derives from objective conditions, such as the existence of privileges, which are not sanctioned by human beings but, as Weil explains, by the nature of things. Privileges, by their very essence, cannot be shared among many; by definition, they only belong to a few. In the past, those with spiritual power belonged to the privileged circle. Today, 'this monopoly is no longer made up of rites but of scientific processes, and when those in possession of it are called scientists and technicians instead of priests' (OL 61).

1.4 Power

In *Réflexions*, Weil mentions the struggle for power alongside privilege as the cause of oppression. Weil defines power as a logic that is essentially unstable. Stable power does not exist; instead, there can only be a perpetual race for power, which 'enslaves everybody, strong and weak alike': 'so it is that Agamemnon sacrificing his daughter lives again in the capitalists who, to maintain their privileges, acquiesce light-heartedly in wars that may rob them of their sons' (OL 64). Weil writes:

The real subject of the *Iliad* is the sway exercised by war over the warriors, and, through them, over humanity in general; none of them knows why each

sacrifices himself and all his family to a bloody and aimless war, and that is why, all through the poem, it is the gods who are credited with the mysterious influence which nullifies peace negotiations, continually revives hostilities, and brings together again the contending forces urged by a flash of good sense to abandon the struggle. Thus in this ancient and wonderful poem there already appears the essential evil besetting humanity, *the substitution of means for ends* (OL 65, my emphasis).⁶⁷

The lack of adherence of action to reality, the impossibility of grasping its results due to the indirect mode that nowadays characterises human action, has led, according to Weil, to a paradoxical existential condition: ‘that here each one sacrifices human life – in himself and in others – to things which are only means to a better way of living’. This condition, which sacrifices the human being, is caused by power and the impossibility of its stability. Since having power means having means to oppose force, and since the race for power is destined to fail, the end of the action falls into oblivion. The search for power, which is a means, ‘finally comes, through an inevitable reversal, to take the place of all ends’ (OL 66). She notes:

It is this reversal of the relationship between means and end, it is this fundamental folly that accounts for all that is senseless and bloody right through history. Human history is simply the history of the servitude which makes men – oppressors and oppressed alike – the plaything of the instruments of domination they themselves have manufactured, and thus reduces living humanity to being the chattel of inanimate chattels (OL 66).

Objects become what provides limitations and laws to the race for power, which for Weil has now become the very essence of human social existence, an undisputed end sanctioned only by material conditions. However, the phenomenon of power contains an ‘internal contradiction’. Power inevitably tends to press against the limits dictated by the nature of things: ‘It extends beyond what it is able to control; it commands over and above what it can impose; it spends in excess of its own resources’ (OL 72). Weil calls it ‘a seed of death’, internal to any oppressive system, and inevitably the harbinger of its end: ‘Thus it is the nature itself of things which constitutes that justice-dealing divinity the Greeks worshipped under the name of *Nemesis*, and which punishes excess’ (OL 73). The excess implied in power, which

⁶⁷ I will return to the *Iliad* in chapter 4 as for Weil the epic novel stands as the emblem of a space for attention to *le malheur*.

inevitably breaks down power itself, is not something that occurs suddenly. History only knows ‘slow transformations’,

the sudden reversal of the relationship between forces which is what we usually understand by the term ‘revolution’ is not only a phenomenon unknown in history, but furthermore, if we examine it closely, something literally inconceivable, for it would be a victory of weakness over force, the equivalent of a balance whose lighter scale were to go down ... But whatever may be the patterns taken by social transformations, all one finds, if one tries to lay bare the mechanism, is a dreary play of blind forces that unite together or clash, that progress or decline, that replace each other, without ever ceasing to grind beneath them the unfortunate race of human beings (OL 74).

There is, therefore, a ‘mysterious balance’ that proportionally unites social oppression and progress as power over nature: the more human beings delude themselves into believing they can control nature at their will, the more their adherence to nature weakens, replaced by equally oppressive social stratifications. This is because force, while changing form, remains dominant in the human world. As Weil writes: ‘it seems as if man cannot manage to lighten the yoke imposed by natural necessities without an equal increase in the weight of that imposed by social oppression’ (OL 75).⁶⁸

1.5 The anonymous collectivity

The human being has thus surrendered herself to the collectivity, the only entity capable of freeing her from the grip of nature, but at the price of allowing the collectivity to take nature’s place, thereby maintaining the individual’s oppression. In this way, while the primitive human was completely subservient to her needs and thus to nature – which was therefore considered divine – humanity now, thanks to technology, views itself as a collective dominating nature, able to control it at will. However, Weil argues that this dominating role does not translate to the individual

⁶⁸ Weil explains further: ‘Thus, in spite of progress, man has not emerged from the servile condition in which he found himself when he was handed over weak and naked to all the blind forces that make up the universe; it is merely that the power which keeps him on his knees has been as it were transferred from inert matter to the human society of which he is a member. That is why it is this society which is imposed on his worship through all the various forms that religious feeling takes in turn. Hence the social question poses itself in a fairly clear manner; the mechanism of this transfer must be examined; we must try to find out why man has had to pay this price for his power over nature; form an idea of what would constitute the least unhappy position for him to be in, that is to say the one in which he would be the least enslaved to the twin domination of nature and society; and lastly, discern what roads can lead towards such a position, and what instruments present-day civilization could place in men’s hands if they aspired to transform their lives in this way’ (OL 76).

level; in the modern era, individuals are just as enslaved as primitive humans to a brutal force, if not more so:

However tied and bound a primitive man was to routine and blind gropings, he could at least try to think things out, to combine and innovate at his own risk, a liberty which is absolutely denied to a worker engaged in a production line (OL 76).

Progress, understood positively as the means for modern humans to secure their survival more easily than primitive societies, can exclusively be attributed to human collectivity. Conversely, individuals, without exception, remain 'subjected to the implacable demands of the struggle for power' (OL 76). Indeed, a collective cannot 'think', and the blind, anonymous collectivity that Weil identifies as the social machinery oppressing humans in modern times is 'a machine for manufacturing irresponsibility, stupidity, corruption, slackness and, above all, dizziness' (OL 102). She concludes:

The reason for this painful state of affairs is perfectly clear. We are living in a world in which nothing is made to man's measure; there exists a monstrous discrepancy between man's body, man's mind and the things which at the present time constitute the elements of human existence; everything is disequilibrium (OL 102).

According to Weil, this disorder, evident in all aspects of human life, is particularly conspicuous among younger generations, 'who have grown and are growing up in it, inwardly reflect the chaos surrounding them more than do their elders' (OL 102). It is impossible not to see the relevance of this for our times. Weil may not have foreseen our digital epoch, but the symptoms of contemporary concerns are all discernible in her insightful analyses.

According to Weil, the erosion of meaningful connections with the world originates in social life; what Plato termed, in Weil's words, '*le gros animal*',⁶⁹

⁶⁹ Here is the passage from the *Republic* (VI 493 a-d) translated by Weil in her essay 'God in Plato': 'Imagine a large and strong beast; its keeper learns what angers it and what it wants and how one needs to approach it, where one can touch it, at what times and then what causes it to be irritable or gentle, what cries it makes when it is in such and such a mood, what words might appease it and which annoy it. Imagine that having learned all that by experience, he then calls that knowledge wisdom. He even writes a textbook on it and gives a course on it. Among all these opinions and desires, he does not at all know in truth what is beautiful or ugly, good or bad, just or unjust. He applies all these terms to the various functions of the great beast. Whatever pleases the beast, he calls good; whatever it rejects he calls bad, and he has no other criterion for this subject. Things that are necessary he calls just and fine, for he is incapable of seeing or showing to anyone else that in reality there is a difference between the essence of the necessary and that of the good' (GP 55).

which confines relationships to the illusory realm of unreality. However, this imaginary construct, despite its divergence from reality, carries ‘real’ repercussions; every idol, every monster conceived in the collective consciousness has the power to stir souls and thus affect actual reality (Zamboni 1993).

Understanding the structure of social life, its organisation, and its historical evolution, Weil argues, is a moral imperative for intellectuals. This theme guides her research, since only through such analysis can one grasp the mechanisms that reduce human beings to mere objects and thus envision new ways of looking at those who are irremediably turned into things, *les malheureux*:

Since collective thought cannot exist as thought, it passes into things (signs, machines...). Hence this paradox: the thing thinks, and man is reduced to the state of a thing. The individual’s dependence on the collective, and man’s dependence on things: *eademque res* (C I 98).⁷⁰

Weil’s life in the 1930s was marked by a period of activism against power: from her labour at the Alstom and Renault factories to her involvement in syndicalism, her educational efforts for those uneducated,⁷¹ and her participation in the Spanish Civil War with the Durruti column. Maurizio Zani’s introduction, ‘Un pensiero inquieto’ (A Restless Thought), characterises Weil’s anarchism during this period as a direct challenge to Marx’s historical materialism.⁷²

Weil acknowledges the limitations inherent in syndicalism, which tends towards hierarchical structures of internal power. Her reflections consistently scrutinise oppression and power dynamics, both within individual human interactions and on a collective scale. Her alignment of human psychology with the social and political spheres sets her apart from Marx. As Zani explains:

Anarchism ... provided her with a scheme of interpretation of the history of societies and revolutionary processes very different from that of historical materialism. While Marx makes class hatred the psychological vector of

⁷⁰ ‘Comme la pensée collective ne peut exister comme pensée, elle passe dans les choses (signes, machines...). D’où ce paradoxe: c’est la chose qui pense, et l’homme qui est réduit à l’état de chose. Dépendance [de l’]individu à l’égard de collectivité, et de l’homme à l’égard des choses: una eademque res’.

⁷¹ Weil believed that education was the most crucial ‘root’ to combat the storm of violence in her time, particularly advocating for educational efforts directed towards the disenfranchised. These groups, such as factory workers, lacked access to education. As Weil observes: ‘The equality of *possibilities* is not a *real* equality, especially when such possibilities are only present at the beginning of one’s life’ (Quoted in Pétrement 1988, 323).

⁷² The following discussion of Zani’s interpretation of Weil’s anarchism was published on Attention Simone Weil (blog). See Dianetti (2022).

instances of social transformation that can lead to revolutionary results, Weil appeals to the ‘spirit of revolt’ which is inherent in the very nature of human beings (Zani 2001, 11).

In the *Cahiers*, Weil frequently refers to the spirit of revolt as ‘the turning point’, drawing analogies with the laws of physics, where it stands as a pivotal term in the contradiction of human existence. This spirit opposes what Zani terms the ‘*condizione gregaria*’ – ‘a natural human inclination to passively submit to active minorities, thus forfeiting their full autonomy’ (Zani 2001, 11). Just as nature reaches a turning point when matter seeks a new equilibrium, the spirit of revolt emerges from dormancy when individuals face severe political or economic subjugation.

Weil critiqued Marx for overlooking the role of the individual in history, in favour of a historical model centred exclusively on social relations of production. In contrast, Zani posits that ‘the spirit of revolt, unlike the class struggle, makes the individual, and not a social group, the vector of history’ (Zani 2001, 12). Non-libertarian systems such as Bolshevism and Nazism, according to Zani, obliterate individuality under the guise of collective ideals, leading to an exponential increase in state power, an expansion of public economic interests, and the systematic, violent imposition of ideological conformity (Zani 2001, 13).⁷³

Weil’s rejection of collectivity as an anonymous machine that stifles rational thought, which she believes belongs exclusively to the individual sphere, extends to Marxist discussions on collective entities like class, state, and party. Her focus on individual complexities and her aversion to false unity and abstraction present a historical narrative grounded in real, flesh-and-blood human beings.⁷⁴ This

⁷³ In his introduction, Zani through Weil points out the limits of communism and the reasons for its failure: ‘Marx’s and Marxism’s emphasis on the historically determining role of these collective subjects (class, party, state, etc.) is implicitly responsible for the non-libertarian orientation of achieved Marxism, that is, of Stalinism, as it has led to underestimating the individual value of the individual human subject all to the advantage of party or state bureaucratic apparatuses’ (Zani 2021, 12). While many European parties, including the Italian ones, regarded the October Revolution with admiration, Weil maintained a critical eye. She did not see the authoritarian outcome in Russia as a casual event, but the necessary result of the Marxist narratives developed by Lenin and then Stalin.

⁷⁴ Murdoch notes that Adorno is another figure who warns against the idea of totality in her later Introduction to *SRR*. It is interesting to note Adorno’s similarities with Weil (which Murdoch briefly touches on) and to Murdoch herself. Adorno, for Murdoch, ‘preaches the primacy of the object’: ‘Adorno constantly denies the claim of any “totality”. This picture of cognition which “favours the object” also favours conceptions of truthfulness, of sacredness, of respect and duty and love which belong to ordinary traditional morality and might be more clearly expressed (as they are by Simone

perspective, a lesson Elsa Morante would draw from Weil and attempt to convey in *La Storia*, underscores the oversimplification in accounts of Weil's philosophy as inattentive to singularities and the particular human being. Zani observes,

For Weil, Marxism contains an unequivocal authoritarian and non-libertarian vocation because it does not know how to escape the obscure fascination of the idea of the State and does not know how to get rid of the myth of a political party of the working class which results to be only for the interests of a ruling élite. The combination of a mythical conception of the state and the party is therefore responsible, in her eyes, for the absolute lack of freedom in the USSR and the violence perpetrated by the Stalinist bureaucracy and technocracy against dissidents (Zani 2001, 14).

Reforming the state does not alter its inherent potential for oppression. While it may temporarily adopt a more libertarian inclination, Weil, as Zani recalls, asserts that 'sooner or later, the true authoritarian vocation of the State will take over showing its brutal face' (Zani 2001, 14).

During those years, Weil's primary concern was to comprehend, without oversimplification, the fundamental causes behind the Nazis' rise to power – specifically, their ability to garner support and entrench themselves in German society. She investigated the reasons why the working class backed Hitler, examined the role of the Stalinist state in facilitating Nazism's ascent in Germany, and critiqued the traditional left's failure to adequately grasp the National Socialist phenomenon and the contemporary movements – political, social, and economic – that led to its rise. Zani notes that this underestimation stemmed from 'the cultural poverty of the elites leading the Social Democratic and Communist Parties' (Zani 2001, 14).

Thus, as Zani argues, Weil's essays of the 1930s convey a sense of resignation towards the inevitable decline of the workers' movement. She staunchly opposed entrenched political parties that failed to perceive the latent forces poised to emerge. Consequently, she remained sceptical about allegiance to any institutional party, preferring instead, as Zani contends, a militant opposition characterised by

Weil) in ordinary-language reflections without the compulsory use of Hegelian-Marxist terminology. It suggests a philosophy better suited to a world in which respect for rights (human rights, rights of citizens, rights of blacks, rights of gays, rights of whales) has made innumerable places for the meeting of theory and practice' (SRR 36-37, my emphasis).

anarchism, which prioritises individual subjects, their needs, and their aspirations for freedom (Zani 2001, 19).

Weil's commitment during the 1930s to safeguarding individual autonomy against 'the anonymous collectivity', institutions, and state powers underscores the moral value she placed on the singular subject's affordances for thinking. This perspective is crucial when examining the later stages of her philosophy, particularly as she delves into concepts such as attention, obedience, and *décréation*. The controversial nature of these concepts seems to suggest the dismissal of individual experiences, but Weil's focus on *le malheur* – as I will elucidate in chapter 3 – consistently centres on the private, intimate *malheur* of flesh-and-blood individuals.

1.6 The void

As stated, the self tends to expand. When we encounter an externally imposed limit, such as through oppression or bereavement, we experience a void – a sense of 'nothingness' in our existence due to the apparent absence of any sign of God or Good in the external world. What Weil calls the experience of 'void' is inherently contradictory; accepting voids in the world, given our natural tendency to expand, is unnatural.

Our natural tendency, like that of all naturally occurring processes bound by the laws of thermodynamics, is towards degradation (on the level of human relationships, moral degradation). Weil notes, 'to accept the void in ourselves is supernatural. Where is the energy to be found for an act which has nothing to counterbalance it? The energy has to come from elsewhere' (GG 10). We alone cannot create the energy needed to counteract our natural tendencies and approach higher emotions.

Weil writes that in 'sudden death, betrayal, absence of one we love, sudden loss of something to which our thoughts for the future were attached' (N I 198), we experience a void. For instance, in the loss of a loved one, our desire to love remains but encounters a void left by their absence.⁷⁵ Their death deprives us of the present and future with them (N I 136). When this distress is coupled with social

⁷⁵ 'When the object disappears, the energy, conserving the same orientation, is emitted in a vacuum, in the void which lies below, the unreal void, nothingness. This is a partial death' (N II 472).

humiliation (or the fear of it), as in oppression experienced by workers in a factory or in war, we enter the condition of *pure malheur*. Like slavery, *malheur* is ‘an uprooting of life, a more or less attenuated equivalent of death’ (LGA 118) numbing the intellect by depriving us of the ability to pay attention, which Weil sees as the greatest crime against a human soul.

Malheur differs from simple suffering. It stains the soul with ‘the mark of slavery’ (LGA 117). Physical pain is always part of *malheur*, whereas suffering not tied to physical pain is considered by Weil as ‘artificial’, ‘imaginary’, and something that ‘can be eliminated by a suitable adjustment of the mind’ (LGA 117). She uses the example of the death of a loved one, where the ‘irreducible part of grief’ feels like physical pain – ‘difficulty in breathing, a constriction of the heart, an unsatisfied need, hunger, or the almost biological disorder caused by the brutal liberation of some energy, hitherto directed by an attachment and now left without a guide’ (LGA 117-118). Humiliation, considered a ‘violent state’ that affects the body, contrasts with suffering that does not mark the corporeal being, which she sees as ‘mere romanticism or literature’ (LGA 118).

While physical pain alone is not always relevant, it ‘leaves no trace in the soul’ if it is a sudden, quickly passing violent pain. However, when physical pain is prolonged or frequent, it becomes *malheur*:

Affliction is an uprooting of life, a more or less attenuated equivalent of death, made irresistibly present to the soul by the attack or immediate apprehension of physical pain. If there is complete absence of physical pain there is no affliction for the soul, because our thoughts can turn to any object (LGA 118).

Prolonged physical pain becomes unavoidable and obsessive, affecting our psychological and social existence. Weil suggests the suffering that constitutes *malheur* must relate to other human beings and power dynamics. Suffering from a headache is a natural necessity, whereas suffering at the hands of criminals or being humiliated affects every part:

There is not real affliction unless the event that has seized and uprooted a life attacks it, directly or indirectly, in all its parts, social, psychological, and physical. The social factor is essential. There is not really affliction unless there is social degradation or the fear of it in some form or another (LGA 119).

While we are subject to ‘the blind play of mechanical necessity’, the true burden of human existence is the realisation that *le malheur* is ‘given’ by God:

The great enigma of human life is not suffering but affliction. It is not surprising that the innocent are killed, tortured, driven from their country, made destitute, or reduced to slavery, imprisoned in camps or cells, since there are criminals to perform such actions. It is not surprising either that disease is the cause of long sufferings, which paralyze life and make it into an image of death, since nature is at the mercy of the blind play of mechanical necessities. But it is surprising that God should have given affliction the power to seize the very souls of the innocent and to take possession of them as their sovereign lord. At the very best, he who is branded by affliction will keep only half his soul (LGA 119-20).

Weil argues that degrees of *malheur* are an inevitable, almost ontological, condition of human existence. *Le malheur* is the extreme state of that ever-present latent contradiction. Experiencing this contradiction, which is involved in our striving for unity in a world pressured by necessity, is often painful. If human beings recover from *malheur* with their souls intact, they might become aware of the necessity to which human existence is subject. Although this is almost always impossible. Humans tend to turn away from their own *malheur* and that of others, deceiving themselves. However, the physical pain experienced in our own *malheur* is precisely what prevents us from turning away, as ‘physical pain [or the fear of it], and that alone, has the power to chain down our thoughts’ (LGA 118), this is why Weil likens *la malheureuse* to ‘a butterfly pinned alive into an album’ (LGA 135). As Miklós J. Vető, who wrote his thesis on Weil’s philosophy under Murdoch’s supervision, explains, ‘only physical suffering has the power to make us realize, by suspending or abolishing it, how much our autonomy is only a misleading outgrowth’ (Vető 1994, 74).

Those in the state of *le malheur* either fall into apathy or untruth to escape that condition, or, if they still have the strength, they try to pass on suffering to free themselves from it.⁷⁶ Passing on suffering is a constant danger in human life ‘Whoever suffers tries to communicate his suffering – either by ill-treating another or by provoking pity so as to lessen it, and really does lessen it in this way.... the suffering remains inside him and poisons his existence’ (N I 122). It is, again, the idea of *Até*: ‘The sin which lies in us comes out of us and is propagated exteriorly, as a result of contagion, in the form of sin’ (N I 506).

⁷⁶ See Doering (2010).

To summarise, Weil's concept of *le malheur* involves experiencing daily subordination to the law of necessity. We should think of *le malheur* as the extreme point of a spectrum. 'Pure' *malheur* is:

anonymous before all things; it deprives its victims of their personality and makes them into things. It is indifferent; and it is the coldness of this indifference – a metallic coldness – that freezes all those it touches right to the depths of their souls. They will never find warmth again. They will never believe any more that they are anyone (LGA 125).

In human existence, we all experience, at different levels, ordinary and extreme suffering, which throws us into a sudden state of void (as with the death of a loved one). From these degrees of suffering, we can recover and perhaps learn about the fragility of human existence. However, from 'pure' *malheur* – a state involving physical pain, distress of the soul, and social humiliation, prolonged over time – recovery is 'impossible'.

Here, I will refer to extreme suffering on the spectrum of *le malheur* as either suffering or *malheur* and will only use pure *malheur* for the extreme condition of complete reduction to a thing. 'Imaginary' suffering will refer to ordinary suffering stemming from the self and self-illusion, which, according to Weil, is not necessarily less painful, but can often be resolved with a change of perspective.

What we experience in this ordinary suffering is not really a void – the lack of correspondence between our needs and the exterior reality – but more a mismatch between our desires and the external world, which does not lead to the experience of a void. In this 'imaginary' suffering, the subject covers reality, by adding layers of her human personality, while the void experienced in the spectrum of *le malheur* is the experience of something taken from reality leaving an empty space, a vacuum.

We tend to fill voids using what Weil calls 'compensative imagination', helping us to cope with our condition of being drawn by the Good/God while oriented towards lower emotions under the law of chance and necessity. The void is a state, as Weil puts it in italics in her notebook, '*when there is nothing external to correspond to an internal tension*' (N I 147). Voids are ubiquitous in our existence but are generally covered with illusions. Hence, humans end up seeing the laws of mechanical forces (necessity) as the truth of the world, while, according to Weil, they are the true manifestation of a transcendent reality (of God/Good, as I will explain in the next chapter). In animals (and also humans to some extent) this

necessity is manifested in brute force, but the peculiar fact about humans is that we are the only entity who can be discordant with the law of necessity, who can choose to disobey these laws. However, this disposition only permits humans to hide from necessity through the use of ‘compensative’ imagination.

It is a common belief that Weil saw imagination as fully deceiving. In her early works, when she is working her way out of Descartes’ philosophy (she wrote her 1929 thesis on a different interpretation of the *Cogito ergo sum* founded on action rather than thinking (in ‘*Je puis, donc je suis*’)), Weil designs a theoretical framework and epistemology in which imagination plays a fundamental role.

She recognises two types of imagination, ‘which are found separated, one in emotions, the other in geometry. Perception is the geometry that through work takes possession in some way of the passions themselves’ (SN 61). As Wanda Tommasi explains in *Simone Weil: segni, idoli, e simboli* (Simone Weil: Signs, Idols, and Symbols):

the transition from one to the other can be described as a transition from passivity to activity: fantasy is what dominates while we are in a state of inertia; correct perception comes into play when we ‘measure’ space, preparing the body for action (Tommasi 1993, 25).⁷⁷

⁷⁷ Tommasi, dealing with the role of imagination in Weil’s reflection, argues that this faculty is fundamental for the ‘practical orientation’ of perception, which is indeed understood by Weil as a ‘reading of signs’: ‘in the case of relief, one “sees” what corresponds to the body’s relationships; in the case of form, there is a sketch of movement with which one “embraces” the object: for example, when facing three points, one ideally traces a triangle that unites them, so one does not see three isolated points, but sees, as Gestalt psychology teaches, a triangle’ (Tommasi 1993, 31). It is therefore possible to identify two main influences in Weil’s conception of imagination. On the one hand, a conception of imagination very close to Kant’s *Einbildungskraft* – a productive and ordering imagination of experience (and thus having nothing to do with *Phantasie*) – and on the other, the influence of Gestalt psychology. Tommasi writes: ‘However, in Weil’s theory, [*Einbildungskraft*] appears not only significantly expanded compared to the functions attributed to it in the first Critique of Kant, but is especially interpreted from a practical-utilitarian perspective, which was essentially foreign to Kant’s theoretical approach. The Kantian legacy – the structuring function of productive imagination – is present in the *Leçons*, thanks to the reference to Gestalt psychology. What allows Weil to highlight the utilitarian aspect of perception, the interaction with the environment it entails, is the reference to the pragmatist and behaviourist perspective. Based on these influences, perceptual processes turn out to be complex sign inferences, readings of signs in a practical-utilitarian direction, interpretative hypotheses that are gradually corrected in interaction with the environment’ (Tommasi 1993, 32). Obviously, this interpretation leaves open some questions and related contradictions; since Gestalt tends to conceive perception as ‘self-sufficient’, while pragmatism alludes to an idea of imagination as part of an adaptation process between organism and environment. However, despite these difficulties, the fact remains that Weil’s conception alludes to the role of the body as an element of contact between subjectivity and things. By understanding the human being as constitutively anchored to the world in a vital horizon that closely resembles the phenomenological idea of being-in-the-world, Weil manages to give an answer of reciprocal interaction (perception as

Therefore, perception is not pure passivity, as it already involves ‘work’ to measure space, in which ‘reading’ signs from the instinctive reaction to the things of the world occurs. Imagination is thus fundamental in perception, as in geometry; however, ‘compensative’ imagination remains a faculty to be tamed, a bearer of illusions and eradicator of limits. The only truth that the human being would see if she did not live in dreams is that of the docility of the natural world under necessity. Throughout the following chapters, it will become clearer how Weil’s philosophy is actually centred on attention’s creative and imaginative aspects, for, ‘imagination responds to the call of reality’ (Heiti 2021, 213).

1.7 The mystery of *le malheur*

Weil defines *le malheur* not as a problem but a mystery. Using Marcel’s theorisation of the difference between a problem and a mystery – also fundamental for Murdoch – a problem is something publicly solvable through language, while a mystery, by essence, does not ask for a solution. I argue that *le malheur* cannot be articulated through analytic language as it pertains to personal experiences and unsayable contradictions, making literature a privileged space for its expression.

The mystery of *le malheur* results from its contradictory essence. *Le malheur*, as explained, can mean both ‘complete darkness’ and the potential for a new glimpse of reality. Indeed, in experiencing *le malheur*, ‘we lose the world’ (N I 22), but this also bears the potential of a renewed insight into reality. In Vető’s words, ‘suffering is in her [Weil’s] view the privileged moment of the human condition, revealing its truth and making its cure possible’ (Vető 1994, 70). As Weil writes:

Physical pains. Some of them make one ‘lose’ the world whilst they last: e.g. dentist. Others constitute a contact with the world: e.g. gathering up sheaves full of thorns in one’s arms. The same with fatigue which comes from work; it is of two kinds ... Criterion: feeling of reality (N I 4).

a dance around things (on this idea see both Winch (2008) and Heiti (2021)) between man and the world despite the Cartesian starting point. Imagination – according to Weil’s interpretation, which is in this aspect influenced by Alain’s thought – is defined as a faculty that is initially anchored to the world, meaning it always builds from sensible data, sensations perceived, and therefore structures the perceptual process itself, being what allows the recognition of the identity of objects and thus difference. Moreover, imagination opens the dimension of space, which in Weil’s terms coincides with the field of every possible action, ‘it provides us with the necessary coordinates to orient ourselves in the world, in a continuous interpretation of signs, in which the body does not act as a recording instrument, like a sort of mirror, but as a decoder of messages, with a predominant practical purpose’ (Tommasi 1993, 32). See also footnote n. 86.

The experience of *le malheur* is mysterious because it gains ‘privilege’ only when placed in relationship with a transcendent reality, approachable only through the acceptance of death and obedience to reality, and so as an experience that can awaken us from unreality.

The concept of *malheur* is closely related to Weil’s idea of ‘the impersonal’ (what is sacred in the human being: an infinitely small space at the centre of the human heart where God can descend through grace if the human being is freed from the self). It also relates to a metaphysically grounded political vision of obligations (which I will discuss in the following pages). The idea that suffering bears the potential for acceptance and obedience is not novel. Notions of the closeness between suffering and a clear vision of reality run deep and culminate in the image of Christ.

The phrase from Aeschylus’s *Agamemnon*, *tò pàthei màthos* (‘knowledge [gained] through suffering’), recurs in Weil’s writings (and in Murdoch’s), indicating her idea of suffering as ‘transformation’. In the *Cahiers* Weil writes:

πάθος denotes at the same time *suffering* (more particularly suffering unto death): ‘He suffered ...’, and *modification* (more particularly transformation into an immortal being). Knowledge through suffering. Knowledge through transformation (N II 428).

This kind of suffering finds its perfect image in the crucifixion. In lower degrees of suffering, it can be like the fatigue we can experience in a dream, which helps us awaken. However, when we reach the apex of the spectrum, pure *malheur*, it becomes impossible for the afflicted to positively transform their experience, unless through grace, or if they are a mystic or saint. In her journal from her time working in a factory, Weil notes how the pain of daily labour did not ignite in her and her fellow workers the will to revolt, as Marx suggested, but led them to docility.

Docility and fragility are common traits of those afflicted by *le malheur*.⁷⁸ For Weil, when someone is turned into a thing (‘The agony of extreme affliction is

⁷⁸ In a letter she writes: ‘It meant that all the external reasons upon which my sense of personal dignity, my self-respect, were based were radically destroyed. And don’t imagine that this provoked in me any rebellious reaction. No, on the contrary, it produced docility... It is the kind of suffering no worker likes to talk about ... When I was kept away by illness, I became fully aware of the degradation into which I was falling, and I swore to myself that I would go on enduring the life until the day when I was able to pull myself together in spite of it. I reconquered the sense of my human

the destruction of the 'I' from outside (GG 30)), others naturally tend to fill the void left by their absence, exerting force in the presence of what was once a person. She writes:

Men have the same carnal nature as animals. If a hen is hurt, the others rush upon it, attacking it with their beaks. This phenomenon is as automatic as gravitation. Our senses attach all the scorn, all the revulsion, all the hatred that our reason attaches to crime, to affliction (LGA 122).

Weil tells us that those who are *malheureux* feel the evil inhabiting them with a sense of their own culpability, a sense not felt by criminals, but only by the innocent *malheureux*. Not accepting *le malheur*, for Weil, implies a misdirection of one's gaze, which, if focused solely on their *malheur*, causes culpability and resentment:

Another effect of affliction is, little by little, to make the soul its accomplice, by injecting a poison of inertia into it. In anyone who has suffered affliction for a long enough time there is a complicity with regard to his own affliction. This complicity impedes all the efforts he might make to improve his lot (LGA 122-23).

She calls them 'the irredeemably wounded', whom only the grace of God can redeem. The 'infinite distance between God and God, this supreme tearing apart, this agony beyond all others, this marvel of love, is the crucifixion.' (LGA 123-24). The world of necessity exists in this infinite distance between creator and creature, where human sin is not the distance, which is necessary for God's creation, but a false orientation, as humans should accept distance and, thus, necessity:

It is true that there is a mysterious connection between this distance and an original disobedience. From the beginning, we are told, humanity turned its gaze away from God and walked in the wrong direction for as far as it could go. That was because it could walk then. As for us, we are nailed down to the spot, only free to choose which way we look, ruled by necessity. A blind mechanism, heedless of degrees of spiritual perfection, continually tosses men about and throws some of them at the very foot of the Cross. It rests with them to keep or not to keep their eyes turned toward God through all the jolting. It does not mean that God's Providence is lacking. It is in his Providence that God has willed that necessity should be like a blind mechanism. If the mechanism were not blind there would not be any affliction (LGA 124-25).

Because of the horrific nature of this condition, in which the human being is 'nailed in place', the voids we experience through degrees of *malheur* are usually filled by

dignity, a sense which relied, this time, upon nothing outside of myself and was accompanied always by the knowledge that I possessed no right to anything, and that any moment free from humiliation and suffering should be accepted as a favor' (SE 11).

an illusive movement towards the internal, the self, and illusive consolation. When we are ‘thrown at the foot of the Cross’, we are left in complete darkness:

Affliction makes God appear to be absent for a time, more absent than a dead man, more absent than light in the utter darkness of a cell. A kind of horror submerges the whole soul. During this absence there is nothing to love. What is terrible is that if, in this darkness where there is nothing to love, the soul ceases to love, God's absence becomes final. The soul has to go on loving in the emptiness, or at least to go on wanting to love, though it may only be with an infinitesimal part of itself (LGA 120-21).

The most dangerous condition for Weil is that of the human being who ceases to love, as the desire for the Good (another definition of love) is the most essential trait of humanity. In *La personne et le sacré* (1943), she writes that upon being born every human being expects and thus asks to receive good – in other words, to be cared for. As I will show in the next chapter, this attraction to the Good is the premise that aligns Murdoch with Weil, placing both within an ethics of attention. As Murdoch writes, ‘There is an orientation toward goodness in the fundamental texture of human nature’ (MGM 474). Weil likewise writes:

There is at the bottom of every human heart something that goes on expecting, from infancy to the grave, that good and not evil will be done to us, despite the experience of crimes committed, suffered, and observed. This above all else is what is sacred in every human being (HP 105).

The ‘childlike cry’ of Christ, ‘Why have you hurt me?’ announces the realm of injustice to which we are condemned. It is the cry of ‘fragility’ that must be protected by others.

What complicates Weil’s perspective on suffering is that where *le malheur* is the condition of ‘destruction from the outside’, what she calls *décréation* is destruction from the inside, the effacement of the human personality to make space for reality.⁷⁹ In her view, what I have called the law of necessity is the result of God’s creation, for She withdraws in order to create, and Her absence becomes our necessity.⁸⁰ Hence, for Weil, the world of necessity lies in this infinite distance

⁷⁹ I will return to this in chapter 5.

⁸⁰ For Weil, the greatest contradiction in human life is that God is always absent from this world, while necessity, God’s absolute opposite, is constantly present. Weil writes about a theological creation of the world in which God had to withdraw Herself in order to create, to let the world of necessity, of finitude, of a limited reality, come into being by so doing. God’s creation is, indeed, an abdication of Herself and of Her power, as She limits Herself, creating necessity to create the world. Weil’s God is a suffering God who suffers ‘from being separated from himself by the obstacle

between creator and creation. Sin is not found in this distance, which is necessary for God's creation, but in the wrong orientation. *Décréation* is, therefore, what God does in creation and what human beings should aspire to. It involves a complete detachment from anything that pertains to the human personality which necessarily involves a certain degree of suffering. I will return to this concept when I introduce attention in the next chapter, which is a kind of *décréation*, or 'unselfing' in Murdoch's vocabulary.

The role of anonymity as a condition in both *le malheur* and the aspirations of the moral agent, makes Weil's perspective on this point complicated. Weil defines *le malheur* as 'a marvel of divine technique' (LGA 135), which can allow a new perspective on reality, yet it is important to highlight two conditions for a positive interpretation of the state of *le malheur*. The first is that Weil constantly emphasises the impossibility of intentionally pursuing or seeking *le malheur*, as that would make it merely imaginative suffering. The second is that one can learn something from *le malheur* only when it involves a degree of suffering that does not completely reduce the individual to a mere thing, and only if the soul does not cease to love. It can be transformative only when experienced by a perfect (ideal) being. Only in the realm of perfection, such as in the case of a saint or a mystic – on the level of ideals – could pure *malheur* mean the absence of self in making space for reality ('The saint makes no effort. He achieves the good just as a bee finds its way to the flower.' (Devy 1951, 31)).

Indeed, to keep loving the Good from a state of *malheur* is almost impossible. Let us return to the condition of the workers in the factory. They have no 'ends', no finality, no future, for the state of 'workers' only exists in the condition of submission, for 'a worker who succeeds in bringing a factory under his control is no longer a worker but a factory manager' (Bachmann 2021, 199). Thus, for Weil, workers live caught between monotony and chance. Speaker 2 in Bachmann's radio text explains:

of human autonomy' (Vető 1994, 73). This means that the things of the world are subject to a limit, and so they exist marked by a necessity that comes from God, which is in turn, a sign of God in the world despite Her absence from it. Therefore, we live in a world that lacks God, in which the absolute Good cannot be achieved. In fact, Weil often describes this world as 'evil', meaning imperfect and inexorably distant from God (absolute Good).

What remains to the enslaved, considering the monotony of their days, is the short-lived wish for variety, entertainment; and alongside those loom the temptations: sloth, loathing, *dégout*. Oscillation between meals and work and rest and more work, ‘eating in order to be able to work’ and ‘working in order to be able to eat’, the absence of a goal, a ‘*finalité*’, are the attributes of this bare existence (Bachmann 2021, 199).

The contradictory essence of *le malheur* is that it is a state ruled by a lack of faith, hope, and the possibility of paying attention, a lack of potential; while at the same time *les malheureux* are the only ones ‘pinned down’ to the here and now. As the Narrator in Bachman’s radio talk observes: ‘A human being without the prospect of focusing his desire or goals, on anything that might be or will be, can only direct his desire toward something that exists’ (Bachmann 2021, 200). Bachmann explains that when we desire the things that we see to be as they are, this brings with it the experience of beauty. As Speaker 2 observes:

The gaze of a human being whose view is unobstructed by any wishes, any goal, need only to be raised and in looking up he realizes that nothing separates him from God. The only difficulty would seem to be to get him to lift his head (Bachmann 2021, 201).

But this ‘impossible’ potential does not suggest that one should seek this condition. Speaker 1 observes, ‘That said, it would be wrong to assume that she attempts to justify the existence of social misfortune, grievances of any sort’. The example of Weil’s life would be enough to dismiss this claim.

In her eyes, only the existential misfortune of the human being is irremediable, not the attendant circumstances, the accidental misfortune that deprives the human being of the strength to raise his head. Later she formulates as it follows: ‘We must eliminate affliction as much as we can from social life, for affliction only serves the purpose of grace, and society is not a society of the elect. There will always be enough affliction for the elect’ (GG 215 quoted in Bachmann 2021, 201).

Vetó can help with this difficult controversy. He explains that ‘suffering, obviously, is not always decreative’, and therefore does not always hold a privileged position but can be, as Weil writes in her *Cahiers* ‘needless and degrading’ (NI 222), indeed, ‘infernally’ (NI 229/231) when, as Vetó writes ‘it is only a purely external destruction of the I without the soul’s consent and cooperation’ (Vetó 1994, 74). Only the suffering of the ideal decreated being, instead, ‘uncovers’, writes Vetó, ‘the ontological truth of the human condition only by actualizing it’ (Vetó 1994, 74). By this, he underlines the aforementioned connection between *le malheur* and the

ontological contradiction of human existence; being at once subject to necessity while aspiring to the Good. Indeed, Vető continues,

what is the void if not the realization that there is nothing resistant, substantial, ‘unbreakable’ in us – that is to say, that we are vulnerable, fragile, destructible, mortal? In the void one meets death. The acceptance of the void implies the acceptance of death, that is, of a state without attachments, desires, and goals. Death is at once theoretical and practical truth of our condition; I am already dead because *my self is unreality*, but to be able to realize that I am only a fiction, my self must reach ‘zero, its maximum’ (F, 354). The self fights with all its might against even a merely theoretical realization of our mortality because it feels anguish before its own nothingness (Vető 1994, 75, my emphasis).

We are already nothing because we live in unreality. Setting aside the self is the only way to let reality appear. Through *décréation*, we cease to be a mirror between God and creation. As Vető explains:

There is a mysterious relationship between seeing God and experiencing pain; in both cases one cannot avoid understanding that one is nothing. Each blow of suffering brings us this revelation, being ‘an injury brought by necessity making one experience that one is mortal’ (N I 60) (Vető 1994, 75, my emphasis).

This contradiction makes *le malheur* a mystery. *Le malheur* bears potential for *décréation*, for ‘To see the truth of the world, one must be subject to necessity, undergo what one does not want to (SN, 191)’ (Vető 1994, 75). The potential for doing good, for not being a screen between creator and creation or reality and itself, is offered in the experience of suffering accepted through attention. Weil ultimately defines this as ‘a supernatural use of suffering’.

Weil is clear on this: we should not love suffering. Rather, as Vető explains, ‘what we must pursue and love in suffering is the reality of our very being’. Suffering is an irreducibility;

it is contradiction in the full sense of the term. The self wants to advance and prosper, and, being oriented toward life, it must necessarily choose the path leading toward its conversion and expansion. Now its advance is suddenly halted by suffering, the veritable negation of self-expansion, because it gives birth to the void (Vető 1994, 76).

Indeed, accepting our mortality is difficult (at its highest level, impossible) because it prevents us from ignoring our fundamental misfortune: we are not God, and we cannot approach God/Good. This is the core sadness of our existence, a truth the self continuously seeks consolation for.

When a human being is forced to face her nothingness, her mortality, and loses her desire for Good, she is ultimately in complete darkness, becomes a thing, losing her capacity for expression. This, as I will show in chapter 5, is the condition of the protagonist of *La Storia* at the end of the book.

The true *malheureux* have no words to communicate their *malheur*, and are incapable of desiring help. Having ceased to desire the Good; their essential, connatural trait as human beings who ask to receive good (care) has faded away:

for those who have themselves been mutilated by affliction, they are in no state to help anyone at all, and they are almost incapable of even wishing to do so. *Thus compassion for the afflicted is an impossibility.* When it is really found we have a more astounding miracle than walking on water, healing the sick, or even raising the dead (LGA 120, my emphasis).

In becoming things, they become invisible and silent. Our world is a world of unreality, where the fear of looking directly at our miserable condition (and thus the fear of the truth uncovered by *le malheur* itself, that we are like matter under necessity) pushes us towards the dream of force, which in turn throws the oppressed into the state of *le malheur*. They are left blind and voiceless, in a state furthest from what is real. ‘Affliction is by its nature inarticulate’ (HP 117). Moreover, our noticing *les malheureux* often stems from a desire to exploit their suffering to our advantage. Attending to *le malheur* is the most difficult task. Besides great literature and mystical experiences, however, accessible ways to practice attention exist. In the next chapter I will explore the affordances of attention in relation to this matter.

1.8 Unreality, human personality, and human potential

Living in unreality is connatural to the human being and has multiple existential (existence is governed by force), metaphysical (the Good is covered by unreality), and moral consequences (we become blind to others’ suffering), as I hope to have made clear. Unreality is both the premise and the result of the use of force, which stems from the fear of *le malheur* and results in *le malheur*. *Le malheur* then feeds unreality. The fear of *le malheur* and *le malheur* itself are the main reasons that we become blind to reality, retreating to unreality (self-illusions, the human tendency to force things into order and meaning, power dynamics, the tendency to always swallow up the real by projecting the self onto reality and transform the latter into an object at our disposal). The structure of our society, as explained at the beginning of this chapter, in which the development of technique seems to be proportional to

the degree of estrangement from nature, seems to abandon human beings to live in inevitable unreality. The latter therefore constitutes the modern society that Weil describes, and it is unsurprising to her that this kind of society has led to episodes like fascism in Europe.

In her masterpiece *L'engracinement* (1943),⁸¹ Weil explains how Hitler and fascism were direct consequences of the zeitgeist, grounded in the idea that force rules the world. Force is always present in some form in human societies: translated into money, as in economic liberalism, or in the Marxist equation of history as force, or force expressed in the supremacy of one race, as in fascism. In the face of the catastrophic Second World War, Weil tried to condense in *L'engracinement* her ideas for the reconstruction of Europe, based on her criticism of two fundamental concepts: the person and rights.

Weil stands against the Catholic philosopher Emmanuel Mounier's idea of personalism, which sees the person as what is sacred in the human being. Instead, Weil indicates what is impersonal in the human being is the sacred; what is outside the historical logic of power which stems from the self. Additionally, conferring value to the person implies the danger of idolatry. According to Weil, everything that pertains to personality is the result of chance and necessity. Instead, it is the possibility for the person to do good (her potential for attention), which is impersonal in the sense that it becomes accessible when one 'unselfs' or 'decreates', that is sacred and thus requires protection ('The infinite that is in man is at the mercy of a little piece of iron; such is the human condition; space and time are the cause of it' (N I 26)). This impersonal possibility means that what is sacred in the human being is not her personality but her whole being, her intrinsic value due to her relationship with a transcendent reality.

In the text *La personne et le sacré*, Weil, starting from her opposition to Maritain's idea of human rights, argues against what seems to her a reiteration of an individualistic logic that shares its foundations with the logic of power, prestige, and prevarication – the logic of force. Indeed, rights are, in Weil's view, contracts that gain their meaning only against the background of a society grounded on

⁸¹ Written when she was working as a civil services editor for the Commissariat for the Interior and Labour of 'France Libre', the organisation in exile headed by General De Gaulle.

power. The latter, as Zamboni observes, ‘is a logic based on the quantity of goods and on equality as the accounting of profits ... It is precisely this that [Weil] attributes to the failure of European democracies’ (Zamboni 2023, 7). Instead of human rights, Weil speaks of obligations towards the human being. For Weil, the invocation of ‘rights’ to address extreme human suffering is ‘ludicrously inadequate’. From this point of view, her idea of justice finds its foundation in paying attention to others, recognising the fact that *les malheureux* are the ones who are left incapable of asking for the recognition of their rights, being deprived of their individuality and left in a state of anonymity. She writes in the *Iliad*: ‘Only he who has measured the dominion of force, and knows how not to respect it, is capable of love and justice’ (I 34). In this sense, justice flourishes in the possibility of attending to others. Despite the previously discussed natural tendency to use force, for Weil, human beings contain an opposing principle – justice:

Force is not a machine for automatically creating justice. It is a blind mechanism which produces indiscriminately and impartially just or unjust results, but, by all the laws of probability, nearly always unjust ones ... Where force is absolutely sovereign, justice is absolutely unreal. Yet justice cannot be that. We know it experimentally. It is real enough in the hearts of men. The structure of a human heart is just as much of a reality as any other in this universe, neither more nor less of a reality than the trajectory of a planet. It doesn’t lie within the power of any man absolutely to exclude all justice whatsoever from the ends which he assigns to his actions. The Nazis themselves have not been able to do this. If it were possible for men to do so, they would no doubt have managed it (NFR 237-238).

Justice resides with truth and reality. Thus, within unreality (our daydreaming world ruled by force), justice is only distantly echoed within the hearts of human beings. In fact, as Zamboni observes, Weil does not provide a positive definition of justice. Instead, she approaches justice negatively, in a method akin to negative theology. The ‘passive activity’ of refraining from harming others and the attempt to heed the unspoken pleas of those who are suffering remain as premises for justice.

This equity is aware of the ‘defenceless exposition to the hazards of fortune’ (FLN 94) of each person (the time, place, and conditions in which they were born). For Weil, rather, the category of ‘person’ is a fixed one that assumes all persons are equal when they are not, because their personhood is a consequence of chance and necessity. Therefore, ‘each of those who have penetrated into the domain of the impersonal encounters there a responsibility towards all human beings. It is the

responsibility of protecting in them, not their persons, but all the fragile possibilities that the personal has covered over of passing into the impersonal' (HP 110). This possibility of finding one's 'responsibility towards all human beings' arises with the acceptance of finitude, our being submitted to necessity.

On first reading, Weil may seem to dismiss the singularity of the human being, since she sets as an ideal the effacement of individuality. Indeed, she advocates a perspective that sees the sacred not in the person (*a result* of chance and necessity) but in the human being's *potential*, concealed in her capacity to approach reality through selfless attention and thus become a 'door' to reality instead of a screen. On deeper examination, it becomes clear how what actually gains value in her perspective is the absolute singularity of the present human being's condition. Her idea of obligations prioritises the responsibility towards *les malheureux* (vulnerability, exposure to finitude and loss, implies moral obligation towards others), and thus, approaching the Other, the fundamental question shifts from self referential logic to the fundamental query 'what are you going through?'. As Weil writes in her 1942 essay 'Reflections on The Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God':

The love of our neighbor in all its fullness simply means being able to say to him: 'What are you going through?' It is a recognition that the sufferer exists, not only as a unit in a collection, or a specimen from the social category labeled 'unfortunate', but as a man, exactly like us, who was one day stamped with a special mark by affliction. For this reason it is enough, but it is indispensable, to know how to look at him in a certain way. This way of looking is first of all attentive (RSS 115).

Les malheureux are in a state of anonymity. The difficulty in 'seeing' *la malheureuse* is, as Vetó explains, paraphrasing Weil's *Cahiers*, 'when one is face to face with affliction, one has the impression that it is not a particular human being, but affliction itself confronting one' (N I 252-53). He further explains that, in order to attend *la malhereuse*, one would have to be a 'decreated' being, because 'attention violently turns away from wretchedness because it reveals our own nothingness in the fragility and vulnerability of another human being' (Vetó 1994, 83). However, as Zamboni explains, this perspective contains a deeper validation of particular, intimate suffering. For Weil, asking 'What is your suffering?' shifts the focus from striving for general collective well-being to personally engaging with the suffering of those around us. This approach emphasises the importance of

practising genuine attention to the the particular suffering of *la malhereuse*: ‘The grand dreams of doing good on a large and abstract scale melt away in the sun, and instead, with more humility but much more reality, one allows oneself to be touched by those near us, knowing how to ask about their absolutely particular suffering’ (Zamboni 2023, 8).

We recognise the ultimate truth – death – in *les malheureux*. A truth that we cannot bear. That everything can be taken from us at any time. Indeed, to acknowledge the reality of *le malheur* means saying to oneself:

I may lose at any moment, through the play of circumstances over which I have no control, anything whatsoever that I possess, including those things which are so intimately mine that I consider them as being myself. There is nothing that I might not lose. It could happen at any moment that what I am might be abolished and replaced by anything whatsoever of the filthiest and most contemptible sort (HP 122).⁸²

It may seem controversial to state that ‘human misery is a precondition of justice and love’ (I 34). This is the case for Weil because evil is analogous to everything that comes from the ego, while at the same time being necessary: ‘God entrusts to evil the work of teaching us that we are not. The desire of creatures to be, and their illusion that they are, stirs up evil; and evil teaches them that they are not’ (FLN 218). Everything that comes from the self is error⁸³ because what is good, as Weil explains, is always anonymous. The constant projections of the self obscure reality. However, it is these same illusions – reinforcing the logic of force and provoking violence and suffering – that bring the human being face to face with her finitude. The premise of love is our vulnerability and mortality (‘The vulnerability of the precious things of life is beautiful, because vulnerability is a sign of existence’ (N II 366));⁸⁴ the premise of attention and care is each human being’s cry for help.

⁸² ‘The truth that it is a dead thing, a thing analogous to matter ... what we think to be our self is a product of external circumstances as fleeting and as automatic as the form of a wave on the sea’ (SN 188).

⁸³ Weil explains: ‘If a child does addition, and if she fails, the error bears the mark of her personality. If she proceeds in a perfectly correct manner, her person is absent from the whole operation. Perfection is impersonal. The person in us is the part in us of error and sin. Every effort of the mystics has always sought to reach the place when there is no longer anything in their soul that says “I.” But the part of the soul that says “us” is still infinitely more dangerous’ (HP 108).

⁸⁴ Thinking about the vulnerability of the others as the premise for love, Weil writes, ‘Never to think of a thing or being we love but have not actually before our eyes without reflecting that perhaps this thing has been destroyed, or this person is dead. May our sense of reality not be dissolved by this thought but made more intense. Each time that we say “Thy will be done” we should have in mind all possible misfortunes added together’ (GG 15).

When one suffers destruction from both within and without, then in Weil's view, there is 'redemptive suffering':

If a human being who is in a state of perfection and has through grace completely destroyed the 'I' in himself, falls into that degree of affliction which corresponds for him to the destruction of the 'I' from outside – we have there the cross in its fullness. Affliction can no longer destroy the 'I' in him for the 'I' in him no longer exists, having completely disappeared and left the place to God (GG 27).

Pure *malheur* exists in the human being only when force is suffered and not used on others. Only those who do not use force, and thus halt this self-perpetuating mechanism, are completely innocent. These are ideal figures; mystics and saints. They are beyond discursive understanding. In this sense, pure *malheur* is ungraspable through rationality, and it is not a problem to be solved, but a mystery to attend to.

1.9 Conclusion

In this chapter, I attempted to present Weil's idea of *le malheur* and its connection to reality and unreality. I explored the declinations of *le malheur* in Weil's technological age, where force perpetuates itself through social oppression and the anonymity of social collectivity. After clarifying the concept of force, and its connections with power and its social dimension, I indicated *le malheur* as the beginning and end of the logic of force.

In the state of pure *malheur* one experiences the same subordination of matter to the law of necessity daily. This is the only sense in which this state can be seen as 'throwing' *la malheureuse* closer to reality. Pure *malheur* being the result of the use of force complicates things. Pure *malheur* can occur only when one human being is reduced to a thing by a system or another human being. Keeping in mind that Weil consistently claims that this state cannot be desired or sought, what makes this state both miraculous and the greatest contradiction of all, is that *la malheureuse* who finds herself in this state is prevented from allowing her self to expand onto the outside reality.

I defined unreality as everything that pertains to the logic of force, which in turn is the natural outcome of the affirmation of the self. *Le malheur* is a result of the logic of force and, also, a condition that makes the use of force impossible. In this lies its essential contradictory trait, making it a 'marvel of divine technique'.

The difficulty in this is that according to Weil, one who has fallen into the condition of *le malheur* struggles to see their own *malheur*, whilst those that surround them also struggle to see them, due to the human tendency to obscure harsh reality with comforting illusions. *Le malheur* is that which is most unbearable, and we naturally and inevitably eschew it.

In the next chapter, I will introduce the notion of attention, and the role of beauty in attracting our attention, contrary to the repulsive power of *le malheur* ('The affliction of the weak is not even an object of attention – when, indeed, it is not an object of repulsion' (NFR 215)). Later, I will speak of *malheur* as extreme suffering caused by oppression, war, and violence, on the spectrum just below the extreme condition of what I call 'pure' *malheur*. The exploration of Weil's account of the extreme notion of *le malheur* was fundamental in clarifying how this perspective on suffering sits within a framework in which Good/God is outside the picture, but present in its/Her absence. Following Weil's philosophical pattern, which moves between what I will call 'normative impossibilities' – ideals to look up to like the Platonic sun – I began by exploring the extreme condition of 'pure' *malheur*, and its connection to unreality. This paves the way to exploring how we might pay attention to suffering.

2. The potential of attention within a secular mysticism

Quando vuole pregare/ lei va alla piscina comunale/ mette la cuffia e gli occhialini/ entra nell'acqua ma non è capace/ di domandare, o forse non ci crede./ Allora fa una bracciata e dice/ eccomi/ poi ne fa un'altra/ e ancora eccomi. / Eccomi dice/ ad ogni bracciata. Eccomi a te/ che sei acqua e cloro/ e questi corpi a mollo come spadaccini. / E nello spogliatoio, dopo, alla fine / prova sempre una gioia – / quasi l'avessero esaudita,/ di qualche cosa che non ha chiesto/ che non sapeva. / Che mai saprà/ cos'era.⁸⁵

(Mariangela Gualtieri, *Bestia di gioia*, 2010)

2.1 Introduction

In chapter 1, I explored Weil's concept of *le malheur* and how humans instinctively 'look the other way' from it in everyday life. I examined how our fears and the illusions that we use to hide from suffering contribute to the maintenance of 'unreality'.

In this chapter, I aim to provide a comprehensive account of the moral value of attention, presenting it as the 'passive-activity' that reveals reality by cutting through our distorting projections. I begin by further exploring Weil's concept of how we 'read' reality (2.2) and always end up living in 'unreality'. I then examine Weil's notion of attention and her use of ideals like 'pure attention' in conjunction with the other 'limit-ideas' of 'non-reading' and '*décréation*' (2.3). This chapter analyses several of Weil's works, such as her 'Essay on the Concept of Reading' (1941), 'The Love for Our Neighbour', 'Reflections on The Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God' (1942), *Venise Sauvée* (written between 1940 and 1943), and 'Le Beau et le Bien' (1926).

As I specify below, with the aim of presenting this thesis' account of attention, grounded in Weil's and Murdoch's conceptions, I exhibit how their perspectives are closer than scholarship has indicated. I conjugate their

⁸⁵ 'When she wants to pray / she goes to the public swimming pool / puts on her cap and goggles / enters the water but is unable / to ask, or perhaps she doesn't believe in it. / So she takes a stroke and says / here I am / then takes another stroke / and again, here I am. / Here I am, she says / with every stroke. Here I am to you / who are water and chlorine / and these bodies floating like swordsmen. / And in the locker room, afterwards, in the end / she always feels a joy – / almost as if she had been answered, / for something she did not ask / something she did not know. / Something she will never / know what it was'.

philosophies analysing the following crucial points: i) Murdoch's idea of attention (and a 'vocabulary of attention'), which I describe as 'attentive reading', is in line with Weil's notion of 'reading otherwise' (2.4); ii) their notions of the self, and of transcendence, do not exclude each other and I demonstrate this by building the concept of 'normative impossibilities' (2.5); iii) their mysticism is cut from the same cloth, inherently Platonic. To do this, I engage with previous scholarship investigating Weil's influence on Murdoch (2.5) and analyse Weil's writings through Murdoch's philosophical lens. In particular, I explore various essays in *Existentialists & Mystics* (1956 'Knowing the Void', 1961 'Against Dryness', 1962 'The Idea of Perfection', 1967 'The Sovereignty of Good over Other Concepts', 1969 'On "God" and "Good"') and chapters from *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (in particular 'Void', 'Comic and Tragic', and 'Metaphysics: a Summary'). These texts all validate Murdoch's acknowledgement of her 'evident' debt to Weil in 'On "God" and "Good"' (OGG 340).

After defining the moral value of attention that I examine in this research (2.6), I explore how beauty can attract our attention and how, conversely, attention to the world can help us see beauty in reality (2.7). In this thesis, I use the term 'mystical' to describe this 'potential of attention': the possibility of feeling reality outside our projections (which Weil and Murdoch also view as the definition of beauty); a reality to which we belong and of which we are a part, and the fact that it 'is' (2.8).

This analysis sets the stage for the next chapter, in which I investigate the difficulties of directing attention towards *le malheur*. Eventually, this will lead to a discussion of the connection between attention and literature in chapter 4, where I propose a type of literature that is mystical because it is grounded in attention, and thus the opposite of 'unreality'.

2.1 Reading reality

Before I explain the moral value of attention, I will clarify Weil's idea of 'reading', on which basis attention to the world becomes a modality of 'reading otherwise' ('Every being silently clamours to be read otherwise'(N I 43)), and in its purest form a way of 'non-reading'. Firstly, I present how this notion of reading works on the level of perception and how our readings depend on the contexts they generate from. As I will emphasise further, reality, in both Weil and Murdoch, is normative

and independent from the subject. In fact, the existence of multiple possible readings of reality does not entail a form of relativism, since, although reality stays undefinable, it can be approached through attention. For Weil, besides the essential desire for the Good and the natural tendency towards degradation, explained in chapter 1, there is another characteristic essential to the human being. This is an immediate sense of respect when the Other's existence is attended. As I discuss, the problem with these context-based multiplicity of reading is that in seeing the Other, we often read them through the logic of force, or through our projections. The way to counteract misreading reality (and the Other) is through attention. Let us now explore how this reading works.

For Weil, 'the sky, the sea, the sun, the stars, the human beings, everything that surrounds us is in the same way something that we read. What we call a correction of a sensory illusion is actually a modified reading' (ECR 23). As mentioned, imagination is a necessary precondition for perception and it never stops⁸⁶, however, we can attempt to clarify the images provided by our imagination

⁸⁶ As mentioned in chapter 1, Weil, in her *Leçons*, already sees the role of the body and of the imagination involved in perception as pivotal in our experience of the world. In these lessons, she observes that human beings encounter the world already ordered for their body; upon this order, thought then operates: 'The body thus presents reflexes, that is, reactions provoked by determined stimuli ... If we examine the relationship between reactions and stimuli, we see that the stimuli are unlimited in number, while the reactions are limited. For example, the salivary gland always secretes saliva, whatever the food may be, as if it were capable of discerning the general character of food through the infinite diversity of foods ... The body thus establishes a classification in the world prior to any thought. (Example: the chick hatching from the egg establishes a classification between what is pecked and what is not pecked). Thus, simply by having a body, the world is ordered for this body; it is arranged in relation to the body's reactions' (LP 19). The world is therefore 'classified' by our immediate, non-reflective reflexes that respond to 'unlimited' stimuli from nature. According to Weil, bodily movement is key to understanding this process. Our body, prior to mediation by thought, positions itself in relation to the world; for example, in front of a chair, we have the reflex to sit: 'The sight of an object always imposes a hint of movement, however imperceptible it may be. (A chair imposes sitting, a staircase climbing, etc.) What strikes our body are thus wholes and not details. (The staircase can be wooden or stone, covered by a carpet or not, etc., it first evokes the idea of a staircase)' (LP 19). It is, in fact, the body and imagination which grasp relationships, not particular things: 'the body is impressed by wholes and relationships. When we generate thought, it will be born in an already ordered universe' (LP 21). On this point, Weil is very close to gestalt psychology. Similarly, the concept of space is given by our disposition to grasp the objects around us, and as Peter Winch explains, 'since movement is essentially a temporal notion, time is necessary for the framework within which this concept formation is described. The framework is not that of a "timeless present" of sensation' (Winch 2008, 45). In fact, our imagination gives us space. This is because perception, for Weil, contains a kind of 'elementary geometry.' For example, if we see three dots, the thought of the dots becomes the thought of a triangle: 'It is as if our body knew geometric theorems that our mind still ignores ... It is the essential relationship between us and the outside, a relationship consisting of a reaction, a reflex, that constitutes for us the perception of the external world. The simple perception of nature is a sort of dance; it is this dance that makes us perceive' (LP 45). On the notion of the dance of perception, where imagination is 'the bond' between the body and the mind, and between the world and thought, see Heiti (2021).

by ‘connecting’ them together, and stop the kind of imagination that Weil names ‘compensative’ which instead simplify things by isolating them from one another.

In her 1941 ‘Essay on the Notion of Reading’, Weil explains further these earlier ideas and observes that the levels of reality (the natural, the psychological, and the metaphysical) are subject to the practice of reading. Our encounter with the world, she explains, occurs as follows: ‘I touch something hot and I jerk my hand back before I even know that I burned myself. Something seizes me here – it is the universe, and I recognise it by the way it treats me’ (ECR 21). In Weil’s view, we are not grasped by the feeling or its content, but by the meaning that we gather:

Thus at each instant of our life we are gripped from the outside, as it were, by meanings that we ourselves read in appearances. That is why we can argue endlessly about the reality of the external world, since what we call the world are the meanings that we read; they are not real. But they seize us as if they were external; that is real (ECR 22).

Weil often uses Descartes’ example of the blind person’s stick to portray the idea of reading. Through the stick, the blind human being feels the world; she does not feel the stick’s pressure on her hand, but rather feels reality directly through the stick’s tip, the sensations in her fingers do not register. This is because the blind person reads the stick’s vibrations; she encounters the sidewalk, or the road, or the stairs, things that have meanings for our bodies and our consciousness. Weil gives the example of two women receiving letters about their sons’ deaths. The first, able to read, is devastated, physically changed by the news. The second, illiterate, remains unaffected. The meaning of the words impacts the first woman, striking her mind ‘immediately, as a brute fact’, as sensations do, without conscious involvement. It is as if the pain resides within the letter itself. The actual physical sensations, such as the colour of the paper or the ink, remain unnoticed. The pain is what becomes visible (ECR 22).

However, this example reveals a contradiction: ‘what we call the world are the meanings that we read’, which means that what grabs hold of us is not real, and yet evidently, comes from something external that is real and impacts us. These meanings, as Weil states, are not ‘real’ in same sense as the physical world but they shape the world as we encounter it. Weil gives the example of a German soldier: just the sight of his uniform would cause her physical pain due to the meaning it

bears. For Weil, this leads us to a higher level of understanding: that what is most ‘real’ can be, and is, something invisible.⁸⁷

The notion of reading is crucial on both the always intertwined epistemological and moral level. In Weil’s essay, she explains that if, for instance, we mistake a tree for a man on a dark, lonely road, we perceive a threatening human presence that frightens us instantly, prior to understanding what it is. Fear vanishes only after we approach and realise that it is just a tree. Weil emphasises the inseparable nature of appearance and interpretation. Like the example of the tree, if we hate someone, our hatred is not separate from them; when they come near, ‘it is odiousness itself that approaches’.⁸⁸ Whatever their appearance, they are hateful to us (ECR 23).

We consistently read meanings in reality, and, as Warren Heiti, in his *Attending: An Ethical Art*, explains, ‘our problem is not how to explain the “projection” of meaning onto allegedly meaning-free facts, but how to transition from a less accurate reading to a more accurate one’ (Heiti 2021, 139). In fact, what we read, according to Weil, affects what we believe and *how we act*: ‘I believe what I read, my judgments are what I read, I act accordingly to what I read’ (ECR 25). These meanings are not thoughts, explains Weil, but arise externally, ‘from every corner taking possession of my soul and shaping it from one moment to the next in such a way that, to borrow a familiar English phrase, “my soul is no longer my own”’. Therefore, once my beliefs are shaped, my actions follow, for, as Weil writes, ‘how could I act any other way?’ (ECR 25). She explains:

If I read in a noise honor to be won, I run towards the noise; If I read danger and nothing else, I run far from the noise. In both cases, the necessity of acting the way I do, even if I regret it, is imposed on me in a clear and immediate way, as the noise, with the noise (ECR 25).

Actions and judgments are immediate. In her essay, Weil provides a brilliant account of the difficult yet urgent question that resonated with both Murdoch and Morante: how did conceiving the destruction, injustice, and annihilation of the Second World War become possible in Europe? Weil gives the example of unarmed

⁸⁷ As I show in chapter 5, this idea lies at the core of Morante’s perspective of the world and her poetics.

⁸⁸ This is similar to what Weil says about the feeling of *malheur*; rather than seeing *la malheureuse* we feel as if *le malheur* itself is approaching.

human beings killed in wartime, saying that during civil unrest or war, unarmed men are sometimes killed because something about them penetrates through the eyes to the souls of the armed men, making them appear as though they must be annihilated. In peacetime, the idea of killing another human being ‘comes from the inside’. We read in appearances that we owe respect to others: ‘we read in the colors that penetrate our eyes that when a human being is standing in front of us that there is something to which we owe a certain measure of respect’ (ECR 25). Thus, read in the appearances, the perception of respect comes ‘from outside’. In *The Iliad*, Weil states:

Anybody who is in our vicinity exercises a certain power over us by his very presence, and a power that belongs to him alone, that is, the power of halting, repressing, modifying each movement that our body sketches out. If we step aside for a passer-by on the road, it is not the same thing as stepping aside to avoid a billboard; alone in our rooms, we get up, walk about, sit down again quite differently from the way we do when we have a visitor (I 7).

In wartime, this perception instantly shifts. The idea of sparing life becomes weak, and the necessity to kill seems real and justified: ‘Each reading, when it is current, appears as the only real, only possible way to look at things; the other one seems purely imaginary’ (ECR 25). She concludes that meanings impose themselves on us rendering opposing views unreal.

In his book on Weil, regarding this ‘immediate’ disposition towards the world, Peter Winch observes: ‘because of the way concepts are formed and applied and because of their connection with action and the aspirations and values that go with action, the world of which we are aware is one that is impregnated with values’ (Winch 2008, 32). To better understand this, it is helpful to refer to Weil’s example of the ship’s captain in her essay on reading:

For the sailor, for the experienced captain, his boat has become in a sense an extension of his own body; it is an instrument by which to read the tempest, and he reads it very differently than a passenger does. Where the passenger reads chaos and unlimited danger, the captain reads necessities, limited dangers, resources for escaping, and an obligation to be courageous and honourable (ECR 26).

The captain, owing to his apprenticeship, perceives a necessity, and consequently, an obligation, like a soldier during wartime, who, encountering another soldier in a different uniform, perceives a necessity and thus an obligation to kill. The apprenticeship accessible to humans is an ‘apprenticeship in reading’ that requires

effort, because humans have the potential to ‘change the meanings’ that they ‘read in appearances’, which are ‘imposed’ on them (ECR 26).

It follows that training our capacity to read the world, aiming to derive meaning as close as possible to the truth of things, is an ethical task. If the ‘compensating imagination’ transports humans into a state of unreality, the apprenticeship of reading that Weil proposes entails instead learning to recognise the multiplicity of possible readings of things in the world, thus changing what appears to us through effort: ‘Action on oneself and action on others consist in transforming meanings. A man, a head of state, declares war, and new meanings rise up all round forty million people’ (ECR 26). Indeed, writes Weil, ‘War, politics, eloquence, art, teaching, all action on others essentially consists in changing what they read’ (ECR 26). In chapter 4, I will return to art’s potential to inspire us to read the world differently. In chapter 3, I will focus on the possibility of being open to changing our readings of others, especially others who are suffering, which, according to Weil, is a form of justice.⁸⁹

Justice. To be continually ready to admit that another person is something other than what we read when he is there (or when we think about him). Or rather: to read in him also (and continually) that he is certainly something other than what we read – perhaps something altogether different. ‘I have not turned a deaf ear to just and true words.’ Every being silently clamours to be read otherwise. Not to be deaf to such cries (N I 43).⁹⁰

If, as humans, we always ‘read’ the world as a text, then attentive reading can help us to navigate this never-ending process and enable us to discern new and different meanings. But how?

2.2 Weil’s idea of attention: a potential for reality

In Weil’s view, we need to become aware of the fact that we are constantly ‘reading’ the world, and also that one thing or human being could contain multiple

⁸⁹ This notion of reading resembles what Jacques Derrida said in ‘Hospitality, Justice and Responsibility’: ‘In order to respect the transcendence or the heterogeneity of the other, we have to pay attention. Sometimes, however, attention is not sufficient to surmount hallucination. But in order to overcome hallucination we have to pay attention to the other, that is, to listen to the other and to closely read the other. Reading, in the broad sense which I attribute to this word, is an ethical and political responsibility’ (Derrida 1999, 77-78).

⁹⁰ ‘Every being cries out silently to be read differently. We read, but also *we are read by*, others. Interferences in these readings. Forcing someone to read himself as we read him (slavery). Forcing others to read us as we read ourselves (conquest). A mechanical process. More often than not a dialogue between deaf people’ (GG 135). And also: ‘I also am other than what I imagine myself to be. To know this is forgiveness’ (GG 9).

reserves of meaning; other possibilities for being read that are not necessarily apparent. However, this ‘awareness’ does not come from an act of the will, nor through reason, but through a kind of habit to which we must expose ourselves.

As Weil concludes her 1942 essay ‘Reflections on The Right Use of School Studies’, a person tempted to keep a deposit for themselves is unlikely to be deterred merely by reading Kant’s *Critique of Practical Reason*. Instead, they act because the deposit itself seems to demand its return, ‘something in the deposit itself cries out to be given back’ (ECR 27). This phenomenon, Weil maintains, is a common human experience: sometimes one feels compelled to act rightly despite a desire to do otherwise, while at others, one wishes to act well but finds it impossible. Weil suggests that determining whether a person who perceives the urge to return a deposit reads ‘better’ than someone who sees the potential for personal gain involves seeking ‘a technique that would permit one to pass from one reading to another’ (ECR 27).

She argues that building this technique or habit is a more concrete matter than merely deciding between keeping or returning the deposit. In Weil’s view, as human beings, we consistently seek the Good (as explained in chapter 1). However, a lack of ‘attention’, causes us to misapprehend the merely ersatz good. Indeed, whenever the self is involved, reality gets altered and turns into degrees of unreality.

In her 1942 essay, Weil explores this possible ‘technique’, and defines it as follows:

Attention consists of suspending our thought, leaving it detached, empty, and ready to be penetrated by the object; it means holding in our minds, within reach of this thought, but on a lower level and not in contact with it, the diverse knowledge we have acquired which we are forced to make use of. Our thought should be in relation to all particular and already formulated thoughts, as a man on a mountain who, as he looks forward, sees also below him, without actually looking at them, a great many forests and plains. Above all our thought should be empty, waiting, not seeking anything, but ready to receive in its naked truth the object that is to penetrate it (RSS 111-112).⁹¹

⁹¹ ‘The authentic and pure values – truth, beauty and goodness – in the activity of a human being are the result of one and the same act, a certain application of the full attention to the object’ (GG 120).

According to this perspective, the absolute value of reality and truth are crucial, and indeed, attention is fundamentally ‘truth-seeking’.⁹² This trait differentiates it from distractions or mere looking or knowing. As Caprioglio Panizza explains:

Both knowing and looking may be detached, attention is engaged. Knowing and looking may be superficial, attention is imaginative. Looking (but not knowing) may be distorting, attention is truth-directed. Attention is directed at reality and, specifically, at an individual reality: not ‘people’, not ‘animals’, not ‘nature’, but this person, this animal, this blade of grass (Caprioglio Panizza 2022, 2).

Attention is selfless and involves giving space to reality and waiting for it to unfold. It is therefore the opposite of the de-realising fantasy and thus its passivity towards reality. Its activity lies in the truth-seeking and this is what makes it morally relevant:

We attend because we want to find out. There is something we don’t know. Our attention is captured by something that is salient, that needs to be known ... Attentive engagement with reality, whatever its other aims or mood or contexts, seeks to discover something. Attention interrogates reality, it is stretched in the direction of – a ‘tension towards’ – reality (Caprioglio Panizza 2022, 15).

When we pay attention, we want to discover the truth of the individual reality to which we attend. In fact, reality itself ‘cries out’ to be read properly, with attention because, as I said, whenever there is an ‘I’, reality is distorted into degrees of unreality.

As Mario von der Ruhr writes, attention contrasts ‘with attachment, illusion, prejudice, the projection of personal desire, false fascination, obtuseness, pride and vanity’ (Ruhr 2006, 29). Attention is not an action in the canonical sense, since it

⁹² C. Wallace gives a very clear account of the etymology of attention, which I report here for sake of clarity: ‘The word “attention” is a nominalization of the verb “to attend”: “attention,” or “the act of attending to,” is an abstraction of an action that always has an object. As the Oxford English Dictionary defines it, the verb “to attend,” which derives from the Old French *attendre*, meaning “to stretch to,” carries the following primary definition: “to direct the mind or observant faculties, to listen, apply oneself; to watch over, minister to, wait upon, follow, frequent; to wait for, await, expect.” The first cluster of meanings focuses primarily on the mental work we might call “paying attention”; the second emphasizes the actions of service or servitude, care, and accompanying; and the third highlights the act of waiting, of expecting, of focusing with hope (or dread) on the future. All three divisions of signification imply a certain self-abnegation or opening of the self: first, in the work of noting details, accepting information, welcoming insights or stimuli; second, and more literally, in the act of following in the path of the other or seeking to comfort or provide for the other; and, third, in the forward-looking but otherwise inactive act of waiting for the other whose own agency must bring herself or himself to the waiting subject. In all these cases, attending is an act that places the object of the attention in some sort of primary position and places the self in a secondary or receptive position’ (C. Wallace 2016, 217).

is characteristically passive, and because it is not an effort of the will, attention can both be paid and trained.

In her essay, Weil depicts this ‘technique’, and the possibility of training attention, through school studies – in particular, the study of Greek, Latin, and geometry, since they lack concrete utilitarian purposes. She connects this technique to the possibility of attending to the sufferer, reminding us that

Those who are unhappy have no need for anything in this world but people capable of giving them their attention. The capacity to give one’s attention to a sufferer is a very rare and difficult thing; it is almost a miracle; it *is* a miracle. Nearly all those who think they have this capacity do not possess it. Warmth of heart, impulsiveness, pity are not enough (RSS 114).⁹³

She then observes that studies that cultivate the ‘habit of attention’ possess a unique approach to ‘waiting upon truth’. This approach involves focusing our hearts on truth without making it an object to be grasped. For example, she writes, in geometry we should pay attention to the details of a problem without trying to solve it immediately, or in translating Latin or Greek texts, we should consider the words without rushing to interpretation: ‘a way of waiting, when we are writing, for the right word to come of itself at the end of our pen, while we merely reject all inadequate words’ (RSS 113).

According to Weil, these studies can prepare us to see in a way in which ‘the soul empties itself of all its own contents in order to receive into itself the being it is looking at, just as he is, in all his truth’ (RSS 115). When approached correctly, they ‘may be of great service one day, provided we devote the right kind of effort to them’. She concludes: ‘Should the occasion arise, they can one day make us better able to give someone in affliction exactly the help required to save him, at the supreme moment of his need’ (RSS 115). The effort involved in learning and attending to school studies, is not about acquiring practical, useful skills. Instead, it aims to develop a habit of attention, which will be valuable in our future moral lives, particularly when encountering the suffering Other.

To make the following discussion clearer, it is necessary to elucidate my use of the concepts of attention and *malheur*/suffering. Weil and Murdoch use these

⁹³ As Sophie Bourgault observes, she ‘calls for both genuine concern for the plight of others and for concrete actions to address their needs’ (Bourgault 2014, 13, quoted in Heiti 2021, 44).

concepts slightly differently, and thus they require careful explanation. In the subsequent chapters, when I refer to attention, and similarly to suffering as I mentioned in chapter 1, I will speak of degrees of attention and degrees of suffering.⁹⁴ I will use Weil's liminal concepts of pure attention and pure *malheur* only as guiding ideals. What Weil usually addresses is, I argue, 'pure attention'.

Pure attention is for Weil herself a liminal point: in other words, like the Good itself, or the sun in Plato's metaphor, it cannot be fully reached but can guide us. In her *Cahiers* Weil writes 'To silence the motives and incentives in oneself, and act – this is a miracle analogous to that of the incarnation' (N I 248). To completely silence the ego is the ideal end of an infinite ladder, as is looking at one's own pure *malheur* or that of the Other. Achieving this is impossible in the realm of the 'naturelle' (it is a 'miracle' because it can only occur on the side of the 'surnaturelle' or in moments in which the *surnaturelle* enters the *naturelle*). At the same time, it involves the impossibility of improving without keeping this liminal ideal as the pole star. As Weil states in *Refléxions* (1934), now contained in *Oppression and Liberty*:

For the better can be conceived only by reference to the perfect. One can only steer towards an ideal. The ideal is just as unattainable as the dream, but differs from the dream in that it concerns reality; it enables one, as a mathematical limit, to grade situations, whether real or realizable, in an order of value from least to greatest (OL 79–80).

We can only initiate an improvement if an ideal stirs us. We could say that the degree of improvement, and thus movement, involves Weil's idea of 'reading otherwise' reality, which is, ultimately, an effort of attention. Whereas perfection, and thus immobility, involves 'pure attention', which Weil often describes as God's perspective, the impersonal perspective, or 'non-reading'. This level is the apex of the ladder: in terms of improvement, things are read on a spectrum from the least to the most genuinely good for us (from what contains less to more reality), while from God's 'apex' perspective (non-reading) everything matters in the same way and everything has the same value.

⁹⁴ As I said in chapter 1, when I say 'suffering' in this thesis I mean the kind of suffering that aligns with the degrees of Weilian *malheur*, which results from exterior forces and not 'imaginary suffering' stemming from the self.

These two perspectives, for Weil, are captured in the symbol of the Cross: the vertical axis from unreality to reality, towards the Good, or God (in which we need attention and the self's reading of things), and the horizontal axis (the perspective of pure attention, God's 'non-reading'), where even a pine needle falling to the ground has the same value as Christ's crucifixion. As Weil writes:

Certain events are no more charged with significance than others; even Christ's crucifixion is charged with no more significance than a pine needle which falls to the ground. God wants all things that are to an equal degree. Time and space make us feel this equality. Christ's body occupied no greater portion of space, occupied space no differently than does the trunk of any tree, and disappeared in no less certain a fashion through the action of time (N II 400).

The horizontal axis coincides with the idea of the indiscriminate diffusion of the sun's light, making all worldly things 'of the same title' worthy of attention under the transcendent that makes them what they are. A conception of all things in the world existing 'in the same title' is rooted in 'existence' as their common denominator. The existence of things, transience, and therefore their frailty, is what places them in an absolute horizontality. According to Weil, this is what Giotto's painting expresses and what art, particularly poetry, should express: the absence of perspective. Weil writes:

The non-hierarchical representation of the world (science) and the hierarchical representation are combined in the great works of the painters. Franciscan frescoes of Giotto. St. Francis, the father, the bishop, the gardener exist on precisely the same grounds in space. That is the significance of space in painting. The empty space (which Giotto more often than not places in the centre, procedure of extraordinary power) has itself just as much existence, and, from yet a third point of view, more existence. But, from another point of view ... Whence the need for composition on several planes (which is perhaps the key to all the arts). Music. Poetry (measure). [In poetry, if verses devoid of feeling have as much existence ...] Ceremony: I – who am the whole universe! – am, nevertheless, a part. And other people too are parts. They exist as I do. As much. Neither more, nor less (N I 8).

This 'indifference of all things', she adds, is (as I will explain later) 'the subject-matter of the arts'. For both Weil and Murdoch, Cézanne serves as an exemplar, attempting to do justice to everything equally by bringing out its absolute uniqueness. Instead, what we all almost always see are things as better and worse, against the background of degrees of perfection and ideals. As Murdoch also says: 'We come to perceive scales, distances, standards' (OGG 350). Ultimately, for Weil, there is a vertical path towards the Good, and reaching this threshold, we

could *potentially*, if only for a moment, view the equity of everything. What comes before that is ‘setting the stage’ (Murdoch’s expression, which I explore shortly), or climbing the ladder.

We need to improve ourselves, attentively read reality, to get closer to ‘pure attention’, and thus closer to the Good.⁹⁵ Weil explains:

The Cave ... ὥστε μένειν ... Without movement. State of passivity. Activity as a condition of knowledge ... We are to intelligible things exactly like what a completely paralysed person is to sensations: quite incapable of reading. *It is necessary that we should read in order to arrive at non-reading.* Plato and the mysteries. The Cave; Republic, book VII; the reference to the ‘slough’ – Phaedrus; the myth of the soul, the word ‘initiate’ used continually – Philebus; ‘a certain Prometheus’ – The chariot in the Phaedrus, cf. the Upanishads; therefore traditional. Reminiscence in the Phaedrus, cf. Orphic inscription – The head thrust out of the skies: ἀτελείς θέας, those not initiated in the science of contemplation. This myth resembles an initiation test (N I 319, my emphasis).

Pure attention is the ideal that sets us on a path ‘against unreality’. From this viewpoint, our whole life seems like ‘an initiation test’, in Murdoch’s words ‘a pilgrimage from unreality to reality’, in which improving our actions requires improving our attention, such that they progressively resemble what Weil calls ‘non-active action’:

Detachment from the fruits of action. Escape from this fatality. How is it to be accomplished? Acting not on behalf of a certain object, but as a result of a certain necessity. I am unable to do otherwise. This is not action, but a sort of passivity. Non-active action ... That is what the saints understand by obedience (N I 124-125).

Non-active action is desiring without an object. Hence, we are not moved by what we want, an outwardly real object we desire, but action comes after paying attention, in the only way of seeing possible after paying attention, which means necessarily obeying (or loving) reality. It does not entail inaction (a frequent misunderstanding of Weil’s philosophy that contradicts the evidence of her own

⁹⁵ As explained in chapter 1, to accept a void ‘The energy has to come from elsewhere’ (GG 10). Introspection, although criticised by Weil, can prepare us to receive outward reality. Introspection and action are needed to ascend the ladder of attention. Weil criticises introspection since it is not the solution.

lifestyle), but that our actions follow our attention immediately and necessarily, thus expressing our consent to the Good.⁹⁶

It is interesting to note Weil's use of language when speaking about this 'ideal'. In her famous sentence from the *Cahiers* praising 'the beauty of a landscape when nobody is looking at it' (N II 423), she uses the hypothetical conjunction 'if' introducing the conditional clause: 'If I go, then the creator and the creature will exchange their secrets. To see a landscape as it is when I am not there ...' (GG 42).⁹⁷ As in her famous sentence: God loves 'not as I love, but as an emerald is green ... And I too, if I were in the state of perfection, would love as an emerald is green. I would be an impersonal person' (FLN 129). Her use of the conditional to address the idea 'pure attention' suggests its ideal nature.

2.3 Murdoch's 'vocabulary of attention': attentive reading?

Examining Weil's notion of 'reading otherwise', before transitioning to the more ascetic concept of 'non-reading', reveals clear similarities with Murdoch's idea of attention.⁹⁸ However, when it comes to what I term 'pure' attention, notable differences emerge. When we consider Weil only in relation to her notion of reading, there are evident similarities with Murdoch's idea of attention. However, when we look at Weil on the level of 'pure' attention, complexities begin to surface. Contrary to some interpretations in the scholarship, I contend that Weil and Murdoch share a closer philosophical proximity than has been traditionally acknowledged by scholars (Griffin 1993, Lovibond 2011, Broackes 2014, Caprioglio Panizza 2017, Düringer 2022) who read what I identify as a difference

⁹⁶ Rita Fulco notes that for Weil, 'all knowledge depends solely on ourselves because, indeed, knowing a power is nothing but exercising it. If we were God, there would be nothing left for us to know; instead, we always deal with foreign matter that presses us, towards which our only power is that of refusal. Our will, that is, cannot properly modify things, but can refuse or not our assent to them ... Yet even the power of refusal is an act that has consequences: through it, we either give or withhold credit to things. They do not have an inexplicable influence on us, but are, indeed, the obstacle' (Fulco 2002, 50).

⁹⁷ Full quote: 'May I disappear in order that those things that I see may become perfect in their beauty from the very fact that they are no longer things that I see. I do not in the least wish that this created world should fade from my view, but that it should no longer be to me personally that it shows itself. To me it cannot tell its secret which is too high. If I go, then the creator and the creature will exchange their secrets. To see a landscape as it is when I am not there' (GG 42).

⁹⁸ On Murdoch's idea of attention see Corder (2016); Freeman (2015); Gomes (2013). On Murdoch/Weil relationship see also Bok (2005). Most scholars focus almost exclusively on Murdoch's re-elaboration of Weil's notion of attention, first pointed out by Peter Conradi (1986). Attention is the only Weilian concept that Murdoch explicitly said (in SGC) she borrowed from Weil.

of emphasis as divergence. I have argued that Weil's concept of 'reading otherwise' – which I will henceforth call 'attentive reading' – is already an exercise in attention and aligns with Murdoch's notion of attention, wherein the self maintains a significant role. Weil's idea of attention as a passive-activity in which we 'suspend our thoughts', is interrelated with the effacement of the self (the idea of *décréation*, addressed in chapter 1). This should be understood as a limit-idea, an ideal of 'pure attention' that does not align with 'reading otherwise', but rather with Weil's notion of 'non-reading', which entails 'non-action' rather than action. Importantly, Weil's idea of attention encompasses both the ordinary and the ideal perspectives, with the ordinary functioning only in relation to the ideal. Conversely, while Murdoch does not dismiss the ideal, she focuses predominantly on ordinary attention. Her retention of the ideal, however, is what sometimes creates problems, and has led scholars to point to a Weilian obscure metaphysical influence on Murdoch. The need to transition from Weil's to Murdoch's account of attention arises from Murdoch's emphasis on the linguistic and psychological dimensions of attention, which are more relevant to my discussion – particularly in the context of a literary ethics of attention.

Murdoch, inspired by Weil, writes that 'as word-users we all exist in a literary atmosphere' (LP 6-7).⁹⁹ We constantly make distinctions, shaping the world into stories, order, and patterns. For her, as for Weil, this storytelling is the fabric of our existence. Murdoch, grounding her argument in Freud, Plato, and Weil, remains focused on the level of moral psychology. She asserts, 'in the moral life the enemy is the fat relentless ego' (OGG 342) and describes humans as 'an obscure system of energy out of which choices and visible acts of will emerge at intervals in ways which are often unclear and often dependent on the condition of the system in between the moments of choice' (OGG 344). In our lives, what we pay attention to and how we pay attention constitutes the background against which, at the moment of choice, we make decisions. Murdoch explains that acting rightly 'when the time comes' depends on the quality of our usual attachments, the energy and discernment available to us, emphasising the relevance of the entire 'life of the mind' (SGC 375).

⁹⁹ ('words are where we live as human beings and as moral and spiritual agents' (SW 242))

Murdoch does not view choice as concerned with the chosen content, but as a reflection of our spiritual inclination at the moment of choice, rendering moral choice ‘a mysterious matter’ (OGG 343). Choices are pre-determined by the quality of our attention, since the quality of our attention to external reality shapes the subterranean forces within us, obscure even to ourselves, that come into play at the moment of choice. (‘If I attend properly I will have no choices and this is the ultimate condition to be aimed at’ (IP 331)).¹⁰⁰ However, this view does not negate the possibility of freedom. For Murdoch, freedom is the experience of accurate vision prompting appropriate action, rather than the exercise of will: ‘By the time the moment of choice has arrived the quality of attention has probably determined the nature of the act’ (OGG 353-54).

Murdoch’s concept of freedom is intertwined with understanding. Freedom is liberation from fantasy and egotistical views. Moral choices require an apprenticeship in attention, leading to ‘obedience’ to reality. Actions follow our attention rather than following willpower at the moment of choice. Viewed thus, morality resembles a Platonic pilgrimage from self-illusion to a clearer vision. (‘The idea of a patient, loving regard, directed upon a person, a thing, a situation, presents the will not as unimpeded movement but as something very much more like “obedience”’ (IP 331)). It is also interesting to notice how Murdoch speaks hypothetically about this Weilian idea of obedience: ‘an obedience which *ideally* reaches a position where there is no choice’ (IP 332, my emphasis).

¹⁰⁰ Weil writes, ‘The reaction of a human being with respect to determinate circumstances that force him to get involved in some manner or other depends upon the circumstances and his character; the possibility of a choice is illusory. When we have to choose, the choice is in fact already made’ (CC 88) and ‘Our own power ... of modifying our character is indirect; exactly in the same way as our power over matter, defined by work, is indirect ... It is exercised on the one hand by the possibility of putting ourselves in such and such circumstances that in the course of things will act on us from the outside. On the other hand, it is exercised by the orientation that we give to our attention in the moments that appear to be the most insignificant, the most indifferent moments of our lives, the moments that do not engage us, where circumstances do not solicit any choice from us’ (CC 88). On this, Heiti adds: ‘Aristotle tells us that character comes from habit. [Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, II.1.1103a17] Hence, the way we orient our attention is never neutral: the orientation of our attention now, while standing in a queue for the theatre, will partly determine what orientation is available to us later, when we are called upon to help someone in need. (It is in this sense that our own past actions are included in the exterior circumstances which modify character.) Action is not the sudden effect of a free choice; instead, a particular action follows from a particular way of reading. Character is a way of reading circumstances which is developed by a gradual process. And this process consists in practising repeatedly in particular circumstances’ (Heiti 2021, 129-30).

In Weil's and Murdoch's views, our perspectives on the world are 'something infinitely perfectible', for attention to reality is an 'endless task' (IP 317). Ultimately, this is the meaning of Murdoch's 'moral perfectionism'. Caprioglio Panizza explains:

Reality is a complex concept which ... takes up normative dimensions in both Weil and Murdoch. Its moral relevance is both that of being a standard to aim at (ever progressing knowledge and understanding), and that of being something outside ourselves, which does not bend to our wishes and hopes, the opposite of self-absorption or fantasy (Caprioglio Panizza 2022, 24).

Murdoch criticises contemporary moral philosophy for neglecting the meaningful background of human life and its particulars, prioritising rational and logical arguments over the complexity of experience. She argues that moral understanding begins with how we see, feel, and think about reality (Caprioglio Panizza 2022, 17). The facts left out from the contemporary discourse on morality become, instead, the starting point of Murdoch's philosophy. She criticises the assumption that moral 'values' depend on the 'will' (NM 105-106). In her early-1950s essays (now collected in *Existentialists and Mystics*) she starts to see existentialism and British analytic philosophy as cut from the same cloth.¹⁰¹

In her 1952 essay 'Nostalgia for the Particular', Murdoch argues against Ryle's dismissal of inner experiences in *The Concept of Mind*. She suggests that philosophers abandoned inner experiences because they were seen as useless, hard to 'pin down' or 'describe precisely'. This dismissal, for Murdoch, generated a gap between the meaning investigated by (for example) analytic philosophers, and the meaning investigated by poets.

Thoughts have, as it were, a life and dynamic of their own. They are not always, or not altogether, under our conscious control. They emerge unexpectedly, they become hazy or clear for no apparent reason. They display a sense of direction which may go beyond what the conscious mind can account for ... They elude close observation (though so do many physical sensations), they are difficult to sum up (so is the smile of the Mona Lisa), their movement is hard to characterise (so is that of the waves), they have to be defined in terms of their intention (so would a sketchy drawing) and described as part of a total process (so would a movement made as part of a game). Is there anything which, granted all this, still puts 'thoughts' into a special category? All experiences are 'private' and may be hard to describe (NP 48-49).

¹⁰¹ For a thorough exploration of Murdoch's early writings, see Jamieson (2023).

Not only inner events, but also external experiences themselves contain a degree of inexhaustibility (the movement of the waves, the smile of the Mona Lisa...). ‘Any experience is infinitely rich and deep’ (NP 54), as well as any perception of a human being. What happens in our minds does not exclusively pertain to the domain of the ‘rational’, but it occurs with a degree of vagueness and inexhaustibility.

In her 1951 ‘Thinking and Language’, Murdoch explains that thoughts are particular ‘inner events’ that like many of the events in the world, we can only describe metaphorically. ‘We constantly recover and fix our mental past by means of a descriptive technique, a sort of story-telling, whose justification is its success’ (TL 39). Let us now discuss Murdoch’s famous M&D argument to emphasise my claim that her idea of attention can be read as the Weilian concept of ‘reading otherwise’.¹⁰²

In this example, Murdoch wants to revalidate the world and its particularities as a starting point for philosophy, arguing that words that are deeply impregnated with value judgments are always used in our attempts to comprehend human situations. Indeed, when questioning a moral fact, we do not just ask if an action was good or bad, but for example, whether a certain person was ‘tiresomely juvenile’ or ‘delightfully youthful’. This famous example comes from Murdoch’s essay ‘The Idea of Perfection’: a mother-in-law (M) who outwardly acts as if she loves her daughter-in-law (D) while in reality, she inwardly dislikes her. However, after time (something has changed, maybe D has died), she continues an internal dialogue with herself: ‘I may be prejudiced ... let me look again’ (IP 313). She reconsiders / tolerates / learns to love her (she then sees her not as vulgar but as refreshingly simple, not undignified but spontaneous). Through this example, Murdoch provides an image of a moral achievement that involves no action (and thus cannot be externally observed), but an effort of ‘attentive’ imagination which resembles Weil’s previously discussed example of the man on a lonely road. M

¹⁰² Marcel’s ‘mystery’ of the world given by its inexhaustibility, together with the lesson of Elizabeth Anscombe’s 1947 Oxford paper on the possibility of changing one’s own past by a change in narrative perspective, seem to have incubated in Murdoch’s mind in the late 1940s and created the foundation of her famous M&D argument. This argument reappeared in her 1962 essay ‘The Idea of Perfection’, where Murdoch illustrates a mother-in-law learning to ‘un-despise’ her daughter-in-law. On this see Mac Cumhaill and Wiseman (2022b, 27–39). Anscombe’s paper I refer to here, ‘The Reality of the Past’, was presented in a talk in Cambridge in October 1947. After attending it, Murdoch develops the idea that one’s relationship with the past should continually shift, emphasising that ‘re-thinking one’s past is a constant responsibility’.

learns to love D by learning to look at her differently, closely. This example illustrates that love is a virtue that we cultivate by working on our quality of attention rather than action.¹⁰³ The factual sphere and the moral sphere are inseparable, as is observable in the moral questions that always already use concepts that contain a coagulation of descriptive meaning, and moral value. In Murdoch's view, there is no neutral description to which a moral judgment is attached, but rather an abiding comprehensive and particular description and the possibilities of 'reading differently', 'deepening' our readings of a person or situation through an effort of attention.

One difficulty with Murdoch's idea of values lies in her definition of values as both discovered in the world and 'a ubiquitous constituent of consciousness' (Caprioglio Panizza 2022, 5) that we creatively shape through our constant evaluation of the world. As Caprioglio Panizza observes, this

apparent tension between value being part of reality and of the structure of the mind has led to a lively discussion about Murdoch's brand of moral realism, and interpretations vary: from Antonaccio's (2000) 'reflexive realism', to the Platonic 'earthy realism' supported by Robjant (2011), through Bagnoli's (2012) constructivist reading (Caprioglio Panizza 2022, 5).

Here, given that it is not the aim of my work to resolve this complicated matter, I follow Caprioglio Panizza's observation that 'Whether value is there independently of the activity of evaluation, or whether it is something that is determined by such activity, attention enables the proper relationship to the world where value, in various ways, is encountered' (2022, 5). In 'Against Dryness' (1961) Murdoch writes:

We need to be enabled to think in terms of degrees of freedom, and to picture, in a non-metaphysical, non-totalitarian and non-religious sense, the transcendence of reality. A simple-minded faith in science, together with the assumption that we are all rational and totally free, engenders a dangerous lack

¹⁰³ In one of her own copies of Weil's books, Murdoch notes in the margin: 'Virtue is knowledge / is attention' (in Weil's *Intuitions Pré-Christiennes*, 1952 edition, 21). Heiti defines this 'ethical psychology' as 'Platonic', which he finds as inherited in the twentieth century by Simone Weil, Iris Murdoch, John McDowell, and Jan Zwicky (he lists 'Weil, "Attention and Will" and "Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies"; Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*; McDowell, "Virtue and Reason"; and Zwicky, "Imagination and the Good Life," and "Alcibiades' Love") (Heiti 2021, 3). He writes: 'According to this psychology, the ethical agent is a *witness*: her primary responsibility is not to change the world but *to understand it*. Her fundamental temperament is *patience*. Her proper work is *attending*, and its ἄρετή (*aretē*) is *clarity*. Clear perception is a function of an integrated character. Insofar as this agent does act, her action is *responsive to* and *determined by* what she understands. In this image of agency, action is always interaction. The energy needed for action is not generated by the agent herself; she receives it, like light, from others' (Heiti 2021, 3).

of curiosity about the real world, a failure to appreciate the difficulties of knowing it. We need to return from the self-centred concept of sincerity to the other-centred concept of truth. We are not isolated free choosers, monarchs of all we survey, but benighted creatures sunk in a reality whose nature we are constantly and overwhelmingly tempted to deform by fantasy. Our current picture of freedom encourages a dream-like facility; whereas what we require is a renewed sense of the difficulty and complexity of the moral life and the opacity of persons. We need more concepts in terms of which to picture the substance of our being; it is through an enriching and deepening of concepts that moral progress takes place. Simone Weil said that morality was a matter of attention, not of will. We need *a new vocabulary of attention* (AD 293, my emphasis).

Human beings find themselves in a world replete with values, interpretations, and coagulations of meanings. Things are never isolated but always in mutual and continuous relationships thus, the world we move through is always a moral one. Concepts are what we find already connected to values in our experience of the world; like Weil's meanings that arise from the outside, which we read, they are a feature that we learn in our exchange with the world.¹⁰⁴

In the aforementioned 'Against Dryness', Murdoch speaks of a vocabulary of attention, showing how attention operates as much on the level of language, and therefore the self, as the level of vision. Nonetheless, she almost always employs the Platonic metaphor of 'seeing' when speaking of attention. Weil's notion of 'attentive' reading seems to include the combination of sight and language, rather than 'pure attention' which resides beyond language. Weil's pure attention is non-reading, a liminal idea that Murdoch takes into account without fully exploring¹⁰⁵. Yet, 'reading' would not be possible without the idea of 'non-reading' since, for Weil especially, but also for Murdoch, everything is on a ladder from the lowest degree to perfection.

¹⁰⁴ Murdoch explains that we learn to use concepts publicly, with others: 'We learn through attending to contexts, vocabulary develops through close attention to objects, and we can only understand others if we can to some extent share their contexts' (IP 325). Nonetheless, Caprioglio Panizza observes that concepts and values are not rigid entities merely collected from reality. We human beings contribute to their formation, restriction, use, misuse, and especially their deepening. Conceptual deepening, which corresponds to an extension of our vocabulary, entails a progressive approach towards reality and its truth, which is not only approachable through an increase in factual knowledge, in keeping with the scientific spirit of our time, but through, as Caprioglio Panizza observes, 'the individual's faculties, her imagination, her character traits, her ability for empathy, her particular interests, and so on' (Caprioglio Panizza 2022, 74). 'The idea of "objective reality", for instance, undergoes important modifications when it is to be understood, not in relation to "the world described by science", but in relation to the progressing life of a person' (IP 320).

¹⁰⁵ 'This echoes the distinction in Plato between *dianoia* (discursive thinking) and *noesis* (mystical, imageless attention to what is unconditional)' (MGM 108).

If for Weil ‘pure attention’ works as an ideal for attentive reading, because reality is seen as a text with multiple readings, Murdoch emphasises the linguistic component of this hermeneutics of the world. To the linguistic dryness of the scientific spirit of our time, Murdoch identifies two antidotes: i) the revaluation of the inner life to enrich the ‘vocabulary of attention’, and ii) literature. She critiques her contemporaries for failing to consider the meaningful background of human life, (ideas, judgments, narrations, motives, desires) which forms the transcendent, metaphysical background of our surrounding reality. As I will explore in chapter 4, Murdoch believes literature can provide this new vocabulary, offering words and concepts to navigate reality, discerning patterns and meanings while reminding us of our tendencies towards fantasy and self-deception.

In ‘Metaphysics and Ethics’ Murdoch provides a concise historical overview of what caused modern philosophy (by which she means analytic philosophy) to distance itself from metaphysical ethics.¹⁰⁶ She claims G. E. Moore shifted the question from

‘What is goodness?’ – where an answer was expected in terms of the revelation of some real and eternally present structure of the universe – into the question – ‘What is the activity of “valuing” (or “commending”)?’’, where what is required is to see what is in common to people of all ages and societies when they attach value to something (ME 60).

Good is no longer ‘real or transcendent’, something to be discovered through effort, but a value attached to things¹⁰⁷. She speaks of ‘the elimination of metaphysics from ethics’ and so of any transcendent background from the picture of morality. Indeed,

¹⁰⁶ Murdoch identifies the origin of the modern view of morality, what she calls ‘the anti-metaphysical argument’, in several places: in Kant, whom she sees as the initiator (for the role he gives to the rational will); in ‘the anti-naturalistic argument’ (Hume) which holds that we cannot derive ought from is; and in John Stuart Mill whose picture of the individual is ‘a free rational will’. For Murdoch, these three are the ancestors of what she calls ‘the “current view”’, which comprises Rylean behaviourism and its associated view of meaning, together with its anti-metaphysical corollaries, and Russell and the British empiricists. For Murdoch, ‘on this view, the moral life of the individual is a series of overt choices which take place in a series of specifiable situations’ (ME 77). Moral life is reduced to choices made from a common world of facts. If all human beings see the same world and we can all, through rationality, seek universally valid reasons (as Kant declared) amid a world of disconnected facts (Hume), then moral words seem to occur only in the ‘specification’ of the situation (description of facts and their evaluation) and in moralistic ‘recommendations’.

¹⁰⁷ Nonetheless, Murdoch also acknowledges that Moore is a realist and regards goodness as a property: ‘Moore himself, however, was not wholly of the modern time in that although he pointed out that ‘good’ was not the second name of any other natural or metaphysical property, he could not rid himself of the conviction that it was nevertheless the name of a property, the unanalysable non-natural property of goodness, which inhered in certain actual states of affairs’ (ME 60).

the latter ‘is presented simply in terms of exhortations and choices defended by reference to facts’ (ME 63).

In ‘Vision and Choice in Morality’ Murdoch clearly states she is trying to oppose ‘the behaviouristic treatment of the “inner life”, the view of moral concepts as factual specifications plus recommendations, the universalizability of the moral judgement, and the accompanying picture of moral freedom’ (VCM 78). These arguments all lack the notion of transcendence, a ‘transcendent non-empirical framework’ within which, in Murdoch’s view, morality finds its place. For Murdoch, the dictum ‘you cannot attach morality to the substance of the world’ expresses ‘the whole spirit of modern ethics’. Nonetheless, Murdoch notes that ‘people on the streets’, not philosophers, ‘think of it [of morality] as continuous with some sort of larger structure of reality, whether this be a religious structure, or a social or historical one’¹⁰⁸ (ME 65). Murdoch observes that the dismissal of ‘morality as a sort of fact’ in favour of morality conceived in terms of value that we attach to facts, is symptomatic of a fear that comes from the dangerous possibility of ‘moral degeneration’. She finds this fear in philosophers, R. M. Hare for example, and existentialist writers. The fear resulting from an idea of morality seen ‘as part of a larger conceptual framework’ and so ‘not as a set of values which only exist through your own choices’ is incompatible with a view of Liberalism¹⁰⁹ based on personal freedom¹¹⁰ and autonomy. From the perspective of our liberal society,

¹⁰⁸ Murdoch notes: ‘Indeed the man in the street, and this goes for most ordinary non-philosophical Christians, is often a sort of non-metaphysical objectivist. That is, he believes that moral values are real and fixed - that is why he is so scandalised by the emotivists and the existentialists – but he has no clear view of nature or of history which is to explain the fixing of the values – and in this respect of course he differs, for instance, from the Marxist’ (ME 71).

¹⁰⁹ She opposes the Natural Law moralists (Thomists, Hegelians, Marxists) [for whom ‘The individual is seen as held in a framework which transcends him, where what is important and valuable is the framework, and the individual only has importance, or even reality, in so far as he belongs to the framework’ (ME 70)] to the Liberal, whose individual is ‘entirely free to choose and responsible for his choice’. It is in this frame that she states that ‘the most systematic exposition of modern Liberal morality is existentialism’ (ME 70).

¹¹⁰ However, how much this freedom can be put into question has been widely discussed. As Alison Scott-Baumann explains in her ‘Murdoch and Sartre’, ‘Liberalism traditionally measures the world in terms of personal freedoms and tolerance of the views of others. As critics of liberalism have pointed out, this tolerance and respect for freedom has often been restricted to the relatively homogeneous members of privileged groups, with women, slaves and others having been historically excluded from the liberal project. Liberal ideologies also often encompass world views such as the neo-liberal free-market economy and can thus evoke fears about excess privilege, entitlement or solipsism through concepts such as neo-liberalism’ (Scott-Baumann 2022, 293).

Murdoch writes, behaviourism seems to have ‘immediate confirmation’. She explains:

We, in our society, believe in judging a man’s principles by his conduct, in reflecting upon our own values and respecting the values of others, in backing up our recommendations by reference to facts, in breaking down intuitive conclusions by argument, and so on. Our morality is, on the whole, conceptually simple. We approach the world armed with certain general values which we hold simpliciter and without the assistance of metaphysics or dogmatic theology – respect for freedom, for truth, and so on. We study the facts, and we make our choices in the light of the facts and our values. Our disagreements among ourselves concern the application of principles – our disagreements with other societies concern what principles to hold (ME 67).

In this view, ‘ultimate moral differences will show as differences of choice and recommendation in a common world of facts’ in which, as a result of the empiricist tradition, moral will is separate and autonomous, and the world is a totality of ‘simple facts which have no necessary connection with each other’ (ME 68). It is what she calls ‘the logical picture of morality’, for which ‘all moral agents are seen as inhabiting the same world of facts’ (ME 71), but, for Murdoch ‘we see different worlds’ (VCM 82). Worlds that we can learn how to look at, by practising attention which, as Weil writes, shows the relation among the things of the world. Hume’s ‘ultimately disjointed character of the world’ (ME 69), instead, shapes a morality based on choice in which relations are seen as ‘made up’ by imagination (which ‘covers up the world of disconnected facts that lies behind it’) and not, as both Weil and Murdoch write, as discovered by imagination. The latter, thus considered, is at work when we pay attention and, as I will show in chapter 4, is the essence of attentive art.

2.4 The meaning of transcendence in Weil and Murdoch

After having presented Murdoch’s account of attention, which I define as inhabiting a more psychological and linguistic level than Weil’s, and before applying it as a lens to discuss my account of literature, let us now discuss how this level falls inside Weil’s ontological horizon. This analysis of transcendence leads to the clarification of the authors’ account of the self and their idea of mysticism.

Like Weil, Murdoch thinks we can only come closer to the Good (without fully reaching it), through our encounter with the reality from which it is absent, much like Weil’s God is absent. The Good can only be approached through our orientation towards this reality, thus through attention to everyday reality.

Both Weil and Murdoch characterise the Good as transcendent. In MGM, to explain the ‘beyond’ of the Good (which can be misleading) Murdoch asserts that it is actually the person in the cave who resides in ‘an elsewhere’. She states, ‘The original role of the Forms was not to lead us to some attenuated elsewhere but to show us the real world. It is the dreamer in the cave who is astray and elsewhere’ (FS 426–427). Murdoch further elucidates that ‘Our confused conscious being is both here and elsewhere, living at different levels and in different modes of cognition. We are “distracted” creatures, extended, layered, pulled apart’ (MGM 296). Thus, the ‘beyond’ of the Good is the reality cleared from our projections. It encompasses us, individuals who dwell elsewhere due to perpetual daydreaming (‘So much of our lives is thus passed and wasted “elsewhere”’ (MGM 264)).¹¹¹ In the Platonic Cave, the prisoner moving from the wall towards the fire is an allegory for the initiation.

In her philosophical works, she interrogates whether the Good is contingent (and therefore dependent) upon historical context, whether it is ‘universal’ (as Plato thinks), or a categorical imperative. She posits that the Good is not a predicate; nor is it, as existentialists argue, a matter of free will. Values do not depend on the subject’s free interpretation, nor are they a Kantian achievement of the recognition of reason. As previously explored, Murdoch contends that the Good entails looking with increasingly greater attention at the particularities of the world, attempting to understand ‘moral facts’ in all their complexities.

The process of ‘looking with increasingly greater attention’ as previously mentioned, embodies the ‘potential for reality’ a notion that Weil held (and Camus later echoed) as the inherent value of every human being, who is a unique access point to reality.¹¹² From this premise follows the obligation to protect, within the

¹¹¹ ‘But we can in general see and appreciate the difference between anxious calculating distracted passing of time when the present is never really inhabited or filled, and present moments which are lived attentively as truth and reality. In selfish obsessional calculation or resentment we are “always elsewhere” ... So much of our lives is thus passed and wasted “elsewhere”, as with the tourist who does not look at the famous monument, but fiddles with his camera to get a good “view” which he can display later to his neighbours’ (MGM 264). ‘Some or much of the time when we are “aware” we do not have any vivid sense of presentness. Simone Weil expressed her wish for a lively present by saying that she wanted to be able to perceive without reverie. An inability to be fully present is something which we often feel’ (MGM 212).

¹¹² As anticipated, Weil explains this in *Human Personality*.

human being, not merely the individual but their capacity to approach the Good, or their potential to refrain from covering reality with unreality.

In this framework, the only stable concept is the goodness of the humble human being who tries to see beyond her own 'self' in an attempt to 'see' reality. This idea, which refers to the wider notion of 'unselfing', directly correlates with Weil's idea of *décréation*. In this process one gives up ('compensative') imagination and thus the production of fantasies that reflect the self onto the world, containing the self's energy to prevent it from filling the empty spaces of the world. It is therefore a process of withdrawing from the world as God does in Weil's view of creation. Ultimately, it involves waiting for something external to occur instead of actively grasping the object of perception.

Only by accepting the reality of our human condition (through 'obedience to reality') can we experience moments of 'void'. Goodness, in this view, has something to do with accepting the void; accepting that there is nothing external to ourselves that can correspond to our tension with the Good because we cannot encounter the Good in visible reality, only through voids. As we saw in chapter 1, void is a state 'when there is nothing external to correspond to an internal tension' (NB I 147). In fact, for Weil, feeling a correspondence between the internal and external, indicates the self is operating to fill the voids. A void can be endured only in instants that arise from one's own consent to *décréation*. This obedience is connected to the acceptance of death, consent to the deprivation of all particular goods (which, ultimately, are only surrogates of the Good).¹¹³ For Weil, this consent allows the only possible relationship with the absolute Good. If we expect the Good as a reward for our detachment, it disappears. In her *Cahiers* Weil uses the example of Orpheus, who loses Eurydice when he looks at her. Eurydice herself needs to remain invisible. Indeed, as Murdoch observes in her review of Weil's *Cahiers* (titled 'Knowing the Void') 'When we truly realise the impossibility of good we love it, as we love the mysteries of a religion. (there is a theory of art implicit here. All art is religious)' (KV 158). In the chapter of MGM titled 'The Ontological

¹¹³ As Weil writes, 'Does this Good exist? What does it matter? The things of this world exist, but they are not the Good ... and what is the Good? I have no idea, but what does it matter? It is that whose name alone, if I attach my thought to it, gives me the certainty that the things of this world are not goods. If I know nothing more than that name, I have no need to know any more, provided only that I know how to use it in this way' (FLN 315-6).

Proof', Murdoch writes that Weil, with reference to the poet Paul Valéry, calls love 'an orientation of the soul toward something which one does not know, but whose reality one does know' (MGM 401).

For Weil, human existence is irremediably in the grip of chance and necessity, but this possibility of orientation is independent of it. The orientation of one's gaze is the only hope left to those who are touched by *le malheur*: 'It is only necessary to know that love is a direction and not a state of the soul. If one is unaware of this, one falls into despair at the first onslaught of affliction' (LGA 135). Murdoch, following Weil, finds that 'There is an orientation toward goodness in the fundamental texture of human nature' (MGM 474). As for Weil, we are attracted to the Good in the guise of particular contingent objects that we evaluate as good for us, which often are not. We take these objects to be valuable in our situations, and therefore they become what matters the most to us, becoming most salient. As Caprioglio Panizza explains, given the elusive nature of the Good, individuals perceive its manifestations and direction in varied ways, from slight to significant differences. For Murdoch, this orientation structures consciousness, defines the self, and serves as the primary and 'most ubiquitous marker of individuality' (Caprioglio Panizza 2022, 75).

Murdoch's use of the terms 'individuality' and 'self' raises the divergent interpretations of self in Murdoch and Weil. In Weil's philosophy, the self is ultimately non-substantial, an illusion. Attention's role is crucial not only on the epistemological and moral levels, but also on the ontological, since Weil's view is constructed according to a metaphysical architecture of the world based on analogical relations. However, I argue that Weil's perspective coexist with Murdoch's once Murdoch's view is presented as a first step towards the former.

Let us open the discussion by looking at how Murdoch defines Weil's idea of *décréation*:

A discipline of meditation wherein the mind is alert but emptied of self enables this form of awareness, and the disciplined practice of various skills may promote a similar unselfing, or '*décréation*' to use Simone Weil's vocabulary. Attend 'without thinking about'. This is 'good for us' because it involves respect, because it is an exercise in cleansing the mind of selfish preoccupation, because it is an experience of what truth is like (MGM 245).

When Murdoch talks of ‘unselfing’ (her version of *décréation*), it seems that ‘self’ refers to the ego, and not a substantial self which she retains, apparently *contra* Weil.¹¹⁴ As Caprioglio Panizza explains,

While she [Murdoch] does claim that we need to suppress the self, more often she calls for the suppression of selfishness. Unselfing, then, is removal not of self, but of selfishness. Because it fits with much of Murdoch’s overall interests, especially her recovery of a substantial self as the centre or locus of moral progress, this solution has been endorsed by many and diverse readers of Murdoch, such as Antonaccio (mostly in her earlier book, 2000), Hämäläinen (2015) and Meszaros (2016). Beyond scholarship, this view enables us to make sense of the idea of making moral progress as improving ourselves through attention (Caprioglio Panizza 2022, 71).

Caprioglio Panizza refers to this as the Tame View¹¹⁵, in contrast to the Radical View, which represents ‘Murdoch’s temptation towards a self-less view of attention, where the individual seeks to see (and, in the case of the artist, to represent) as if she were not there’ (Caprioglio Panizza 2022, 95). Within Murdoch studies, it is reasonable to support the Tame View. As Caprioglio Panizza observes, ‘The self gets in the way, but the self is also the locus of morality’ (Caprioglio Panizza 2022, 71). Nonetheless, although Caprioglio Panizza endorses the Tame View for the purposes of her study on attention, and particularly in the second part of her book on animal suffering¹¹⁶, she acknowledges that both perspectives – Murdoch’s maintenance of a substantial self¹¹⁷ and her advocacy of its effacement – pose significant challenges.

¹¹⁴ In some passages in both EM and MGM, Murdoch is ambiguous on what unselfing entails: ‘Even the individual’s consciousness, which Murdoch typically presents as rich and coloured and morally important (in both good and bad ways) is here silenced. In these passages, found in the chapter “Consciousness and Thought – II”, we encounter together artists and poets (Cézanne, Rilke), Zen philosophy through Katsuki Sekida, and Simone Weil’ (Caprioglio Panizza 2022, 95).

¹¹⁵ ‘This view is “tame” insofar as it does not require entirely giving up the personal element of perception, nor a familiar sense of selfhood which we ordinarily, at least in Western cultures, hold. Unselfing, on this view, contrary to what the word may lead us to expect, means not a removal or suppression of the self, but only of self-concern or ego, in other words, of the “parts” or tendencies in us which lead to fantasy’ (Caprioglio Panizza 2022, 87).

¹¹⁶ ‘The human soul needs above all to be rooted in several – natural environments and to make contact with the universe through them.’ (Weil 2005a, 229). Lately, various scholars have been connecting Weil’s philosophy to environmental studies, such as Lawson (2024), and the last chapter of Heiti’s book (2021), titled ‘Exodos’. Additionally, on animals’ attention and attention to animals see the works of Aaltola (2012; 2018b; 2019) and Ward (2024) on ecological attentiveness.

¹¹⁷ Indeed, Caprioglio Panizza writes that she is more attracted to Weil’s view and ‘not fully satisfied with’ the view popular in Murdoch studies (Caprioglio Panizza 2022, 82). She adds, ‘In my view, the RV is more consistent with the idea of attention as concerned for what is there, and with the experience of what it means to come into contact with truth. It is also consistent with Weil’s view, with its rich background drawn from different philosophical and religious traditions. But if Murdoch

She states that employing attention as a path to the subject's moral improvement, as the Tame View endorses, 'can be dangerous for attention itself, and therefore for moral progress' (Caprioglio Panizza 2022, 90). Caprioglio Panizza argues that as long as the self remains, there is a risk of falling into a dangerous pattern:

I am paying attention. I am making progress and seeing the situation more justly. 'I am making progress.' 'I am making progress!' 'So, I am better than I used to be.' 'It feels nice to be attentive and improved.' 'See how inattentive all these other people are?' Sadly that's not an unfamiliar pattern' (Caprioglio Panizza 2022, 91).

This suggests, Caprioglio Panizza explains, that avoiding considerations of a substantial, real self and its constant improvements might be preferable.

When Murdoch mentions her idea of unselfing as Weil's *décréation* in the aforementioned passage, she adds that

The notion of achieving a pure cognitive state where the object is not disturbed by the subjective ego, but where subject and object simply exist as one is here made comprehensible through a certain experience of art and nature. (Dualism is overcome: not such an arcane idea after all) (MGM 254).

Regarding this passage, Caprioglio Panizza states, 'But for a philosopher who cherished the individual as the source of variety and colour, the impersonality advocated by Zen and Weil might have felt alien and dry' (105). There appears to be an issue with how Caprioglio Panizza addresses Weil's concept of unity. She seems to suggest that Weil's notion of impersonality overshadows her interest in, and attention to, individual realities. After all, this is also echoed in Murdoch's first account of Weil's philosophy in 1951. In this radio talk, Murdoch was indeed critical of Weil, especially on the void and *le malheur*. She finds her too austere 'to the point of deleting the particular person altogether' (BBC 14), and too ready to discard the idea of particularity. She says, 'her model for the spiritual life is not the particular human bond, it is the life of the intellect'. I argued that Weil speaks mostly of 'pure attention', as the intellect's only 'passive activity' (that part of the intellect that is imageless attention, i.e., Love). Instead, Murdoch is more interested in the infinite area of human experience that precedes 'pure attention' but is still

is right, and there is no truth that is 'unfiltered', the TV is the more appropriate account' (Caprioglio Panizza 2022, 106).

attention to an extent. I call this ‘attentive reading’, the meditative, imaginative moral exploration that deals with the messy background of our experience of the world, which often occurs in relationships. Murdoch continues, ‘the intellectual work is not only attention – it is also *setting the stage for attention*. And where most human matters are concerned we are never able to finish for long with the task of setting the stage’ (BBC 15, my emphasis). As I have stressed, attentive reading is a first step towards pure attention; we necessarily move towards the impersonal on the personal level, and the path towards transcendence is through everyday reality. Caprioglio Panizza further notes, ‘The worry is also raised by David Robjant (2011: 1003), who points out that conceiving of love as the “realisation that something other than oneself is real” (MGM 215) requires duality, not the end of it, which the removal of the self would occasion’ (Caprioglio Panizza 2022, 105).

To address this problematic point, I propose a different perspective on Weil. As mentioned in chapter 1, Weil maintains the impossibility of unity with God/Good through *décréation* (instead, we remain perpetually on the threshold). Weil’s concept of relation is crucial: her dualism is overcome not through unity, but through trinity.¹¹⁸ Removing the self is thus an ideal, an unattainable endpoint. For Weil, unity and oneness are illusions in this world.

Caprioglio Panizza concludes by stating that ‘Both the RV [radical view] and TV [tame view] ... can be endorsed in an account of attention in morality, with somewhat different outcomes’ (Caprioglio Panizza 2022, 106). I suggest, however, that they can coexist within a single concept of morality/mysticism, with one as the walkable road justified and prompted by the other as the never-reached destination. We must thus ask whether Murdoch’s idea of attention aligns with Weil’s vertical axis, i.e. ‘attentive reading’. If so, both require the self’s contribution to perception and judgment formation while removing egotistical tendencies. This aligns with my account of Weil’s attentive reading as a technique that brings us closer to pure attention’s perspective where there is no more self. In other words, the Tame View need not necessarily exclude the Radical View but rather retain it as a regulative ‘normative impossibility’.

¹¹⁸ See Gabellieri (2004).

Caprioglio Panizza said that Murdoch ‘ultimately cannot take that route, because that would render it impossible to base morality on the “personal vision” that she wants to recover’ (Caprioglio Panizza 2022, 106). However, Murdoch held that moving towards total unselfing required self-understanding. Likewise, Weil held that we need to read (an activity of the self) to approach non-reading. We need the vertical to approach the horizontal. My suggestion is that instead of choosing between the TV and the RV, it could be possible to view the TV as an achievable, describable stage that brings us closer to unattainable, normative RV. We must start with the self and its ‘attentive reading’ to *potentially* get to a level of pure attention where the self no longer exists.

The parable of the Buddhist monk, frequently referenced by Weil, Murdoch, and Morante, can illustrate this point: initially, the monk studies and learns, striving to improve himself. However, eventually, the intellect, which, as Weil reminds us, is ‘useful only for servile tasks’ (N II 418),¹¹⁹ must aim to reaching a threshold beyond which lies only pure attention and the absence of self.¹²⁰

In Murdoch studies, in keeping with her own suggestion, there is a fairly common view that Weil’s philosophy is less concerned with individual realities than Murdoch’s. In this field, Weil’s philosophy is frequently interpreted through Murdoch’s voice and previous Murdoch scholarship. For instance, Maria-Eva

¹¹⁹ Here is the full passage: ‘The only thing which doesn’t ever become exhausted is my will to good. Pure and inexhaustible good resides only in this will itself. All that is necessary is to realize the fact. We must want the good solely and unconditionally, whatever it may be, that is to say, no particular object of any kind. We must only want particular objects subject to conditions. We must want life if it is to be for us a good, death if ma ... joy if ... pain if ... and that while knowing all the time that we don’t actually know what the good is. In all our acts of willing, whatever they may be, over and beyond the particular object, we must want gratuitously, want the void. For this good which we can neither visualize nor define represents for us a void. But this void means more to us than all plenitudes put together. If we manage to reach this point, we are out of trouble, for it is God who fills the void. All this has nothing whatever to do with an intellectual process in the sense in which the word ‘intellectual’ is understood to-day. The intelligence is not called upon to discover anything, but merely to clear the ground. It is useful for carrying out servile tasks’ (N II 417-418).

¹²⁰ Too much knowledge blinds, as Caprioglio Panizza explains, ‘thinking that we know means becoming blind to what may be surprising, interesting, different; it blocks discovery, and does not give the object in front of us a chance’ (Caprioglio Panizza 2022, 96). ‘Knowledge, habit, concepts, even knowledge that is true and concepts that are appropriate, dull our perception, making us less alive to what can be wonder-inducing (as we know all too well in personal relationships)’ (Caprioglio Panizza 2022, 97). Indeed Morante, as I will elaborate in chapter 5, uses the birds to speak through Koans about this negative side of knowledge (Murdoch defines ‘koans’ as ‘a paradox or contradiction which defeats imagination and conceptual thought, but which must be held in sustained attention’ (MGM 244)). As Caprioglio Panizza explains: ‘The Zen koan ... helps to cultivate the attitude of receptivity without reliance on mental habit, by jolting us out of habitual thinking, and demanding our attention’ (Caprioglio Panizza 2022, 97).

Düringer's entry on Weil and Murdoch in *The Murdochian Mind*, highlights the popular distinction between Weil and Murdoch, noting that one speaks of God while the other secularises this concept by speaking about the Good.¹²¹ Düringer states:

Instead of grace as the seed of God's love which we should allow to grow, Murdoch turns to something more active: virtue enabled by lovingly seeing 'ordinariness simpliciter' (Milligan 2014: 96), by lovingly seeing everyone and everything around us exactly as they are and working from there. Instead of loving without an object, we should try to love anything (Düringer 2022, 310).

However, to love without an object, in Weil's terms, means not wanting something for our self-concern. Only by eliminating this self-involvement, and thus loving without a specific object, can one ultimately strive to love everything. This aligns with the perspective of the horizontal axis.

Moreover, Düringer adds: 'unlike Weil, Murdoch does not seek spiritual connectedness with and worship for God, but ways in which to see things in the light of the Good. These different goals are the reason why, when it comes to suffering and affliction, their approaches differ, too' (Düringer 2022, 315). I contend that the term 'worship' here may be misleading. While Weil indeed speaks about God and Her love, it would be contradictory to suggest that our love should, or can, be directed directly towards God. God is absent from reality, and Her presence can only be intuited through the things of the world (such as the ruins of the temple that allude to the temple as a whole in her 1926 essay 'Le beau et le bien'). Weil's 'ways in which to see things in the light of the Good' better encapsulates her philosophy. In Düringer's view, Murdoch's and Weil's perspectives appear distant, whereas, like the integration of TV and RV I propose, or reading and non-reading, they could be seen as one inside the other.¹²²

Later, Düringer writes: 'This is perhaps the most marked point of departure from Weil: we get closer to the Good not via the annihilation of the personal, but only via gradual, patient exercises in improving the personal capacities of loving

¹²¹ C. Wallace (2024) in her book on Weil recalls what Eric Springstead stated as a hope that Weil readers see Weil's Christianity not as 'an addendum' but also take her philosophy rigorously 'not just as an anthology of mystical insights' (Springsted 2021, 1–2).

¹²² Springstead, in his introduction to *The Beauty that Saves* (1999) reminds the reader of Weil's conception of the universe as 'a composition on several planes', using the image of the Russian doll, where the planes are one inside each other (Springstead 1999, 1).

we possess' (Düringer 2022, 315). I argue instead that the horizontal axis is only approached through the vertical, where the self remains inherently present, necessitating a gradual, patient effort to improve 'the personal capacities of loving'.

Furthermore, Weil emphasises that no individual is consistently focused or completely self-decreated; we all require breaks ('we have to press on and loosen up alternately, just as we breathe in and out' (RSS 111)). Only the ideal human being – who is, indeed, an ideal – could be consistent in this task. However, both Weil and Murdoch utilise the saint or mystic as an exemplary moral figure to look up to, another 'normative impossibility', often described in the conditional tense ('What does it all look like to a saint? Can we imagine? (What does it look like to a great artist?' (MGM 106)). Weil also, contrary to Düringer's contention, allows 'ordinary virtuous individuals' to exhibit beauty and grace.

The difficulty of keeping the cross – the vertical and horizontal – together in the same perspective poses challenges within Weil's philosophy. The aphoristic almost poetic style, particularly in her *Cahiers*, sometimes overshadows the humility present throughout her work. She frequently acknowledges finding herself only just 'acquainted with goodness'. Moreover, the states of perfection depicted through figures such as the saint, the mystic, or Weil's concepts of *décréation*, pure attention, non-reading, non-active action, God's perspective, and the impersonal, are on the side of the *surnaturelle*, of the non-natural, serving as 'normative impossibilities' that set the bar for what is (or better, could be) possible. In contrast with her seemingly pessimistic view, the insistence on the possible is what infuses her philosophy with a utopian spirit.

Weil's assumption that any attention to God needs to start from attention to the world sometimes gets lost in her philosophy. Instead, Murdoch scholarship seems to prevailingly suggest that this is the sole preserve of Murdoch, who indeed writes that 'the direction of attention is ... towards the great surprising variety of the world, and the ability so to direct attention is love' (OGG 354). However, Murdoch observes:

I have used the word 'attention', which I borrow from Simone Weil, to express the idea of a just and loving gaze directed upon an individual reality. I believe this to be the characteristic and proper mark of the active moral agent (IP 327).

Whether the object of attention is the Good or God, the absolute object, as Caprioglio Panizza explains, is defined through its role: ‘Acts of attention reveal an aspiration to something “higher”, and in turn what is absolute shows its existence in human life through attention’ (Caprioglio Panizza 2022, 19). From this perspective, Caprioglio Panizza observes, attention is crucial for morality;

because it reveals that there is something beyond ourselves (the whole world) which is always and necessarily beyond us (Murdoch’s idea of the ‘transcendent’) because our capacity to grasp reality is constantly perfectible. The realisation of this fact through attention causes elation and provides a sense of direction, for we learn that we can see better, more, more clearly, ad infinitum. Hence, attention to God/Good is morally important because of the way it shapes, guides, and inspires us ... attention to God or to the good, for Murdoch, is not attention to a ‘thing’, but the revelation of a distant (never clearly known) idea which both guides us in all our encounters with the world, and changes us the more we are guided by it. It is the Platonic Idea of the Good (Caprioglio Panizza 2022, 19).

By the end of this chapter, I will elucidate that whether we discuss God or the Good, there remains a sense of the mystical – a guiding light always ‘somewhere beyond’ (SGC 376) which exerts a profound transformative attraction. For Weil, ‘Plato was a mystic’ (SA 70), just as Murdoch’s works is to reintroduce mysticism into morality along the lines just sketched: ‘The background to morals is properly some sort of mysticism, if by this is meant a non-dogmatic essentially unformulated faith in the reality of the good, occasionally connected with experience’ (OGG 360). However, Murdoch’s insistence on a secularised interpretation of mysticism does not imply that Weil’s religious metaphysics gives rise to one type of mysticism and Murdoch’s another. On the contrary, mysticism serves as the common starting point.¹²³ As I mentioned in chapter 1, before 1938, even Weil had no concept of God, which was later intertwined with her initial mystical ideas. The mystical essence remains inherently Platonic. The difference between Weil and Murdoch lies not in the essence but in the extent of their exploration: Murdoch’s inquiry stops earlier, while Weil reaches the threshold of the ultimate limit. Caprioglio Panizza writes that,

Based on Murdoch’s secular philosophy, the necessity of attention is more difficult to ground. Human life, Murdoch writes, ‘has no external point or

¹²³ The roots of Weil’s mysticism are in Ancient Greece, and Eastern traditions, its Christian connotations only follow this ancient ground. From her view, every religion is necessarily rooted in mysticism, and not viceversa, in fact, ‘mysticism should provide the key for all knowledge and all values’ (FLN 98).

τέλος' (SGC 364). This goes together with her stress on the chanciness and messiness of life, and attention is no exception. There are revelations, but there is mostly an ordinary, piecemeal effort. All this makes it harder to explain why, as I argue, we ought to try to pay attention, and why as philosophers we should re-consider the moral grounding of thoughts, acts, and situations, and explore how they arise from attention, or the lack thereof. But it is also what makes it worthwhile to attempt to clarify and justify the great importance of attention for those who, like Murdoch, live in a world without a personal, omnipotent, creator God (Caprioglio Panizza 2022, 20).

If Caprioglio Panizza intended this in opposition to Weil, I contend, consistently with my previous arguments, that Weil's philosophy also involves an absence of a powerful, omnipotent God (Weil herself did not identify as Jewish primarily due to Judaism's conception of such a God), as well as a lack of teleology in human life. Indeed, Weil posits that the absence of meaning and direction is what renders death and suffering unbearable for humans.

I do not dispute that Murdoch's work places more explicit emphasis on ordinary attention, making Weil's ideas more accessible. However, I maintain that Murdoch successfully preserves the essence of Weil's philosophy. In fact, due to this, and Murdoch's deeper exploration of the role of literature, I consider Murdoch an ideal intermediary to my exploration of Morante's poetics and her literary work *La Storia*.

2.6 Why is Attention Valuable?

After clarifying the differences between 'attentive reading' and 'pure attention' and those between Weil and Murdoch's positions on attention, let us formulate a general idea of attention, based on both Weil and Murdoch, that will serve as a core concept throughout this thesis. I do not intend to provide an exhaustive definition of the concept of attention *tout court*. Instead, I aim to expand the idea of an ethics of attention inspired by Weil and Murdoch – that Caprioglio Panizza offers in her book *The Ethics of Attention* – and apply this to the salient aspects of attention within and to literature, and thus building a literary ethics of attention. Additionally, I will explore the possibilities of an ethical engagement with the suffering Other provided by this view of attention and attention-based literature.

As mentioned, I use 'attention' to mean a spectrum that extends from attentive reading to the ideal of 'pure attention'. In ordinary language, as in psychological

and cognitive contexts,¹²⁴ attention is often perceived as something always present. However, from this perspective, which aligns with Caprioglio Panizza's 'moral account of attention', 'attention is not present in all conscious activity' (Caprioglio Panizza 2022, 25).¹²⁵ For Murdoch and Weil, inattention or distraction is human beings' 'natural' tendency (see chapter 1). Attention, instead, requires effort and apprenticeship while, as Murdoch writes, our ordinary experience is predominantly of the 'anxious, calculating, distracted passing of time' (MGM 264). This always-present 'inattention' is more akin to what Weil called 'reading', which refers to our constant evaluative activity in the world, continually interpreting values during our encounters with reality.

Attentive reading, by contrast, requires engagement. What is always present, though, is 'the potential of attention', that is, 'the potential for encountering reality' instead of unreality. As Caprioglio Panizza writes, 'at every moment attention is at stake' (Caprioglio Panizza 2022, 31).

The very fact that Weil and Murdoch both define attention as an effort or an apprenticeship to counteract illusion, while simultaneously something that does not involve the 'will', inevitably makes us question how attention can be initiated. Caprioglio Panizza indicates two faces of attention:

eros (joining) and unselfing (letting be). These two aspects are interdependent: when we seek truth, our self recedes; when our self recedes, attention can disclose truth. Reality and unselfing, united in attention, are the instruments of moral change (Caprioglio Panizza 2022, 35).

From this perspective, the role of the will is to consent (or not consent) to orientation towards the Good. In other words, to consent to orient our attention towards reality and not the self and its comforting illusions. Giving up illusions and granting acceptance to being redirected by the Good is the ultimate apprenticeship, and it is inherently difficult:

The inhibition of unworthy fantasies is perhaps the most accessible discipline ... There may be a place here for the idea of an effort of will ... We have (gravity, necessity) a natural impulse to derealise the world and surround

¹²⁴ For more on this, see Caprioglio Panizza, 2022.

¹²⁵ Caprioglio Panizza (2022, 31) reminds us of Murdoch's expression of preference in IP, where she writes: 'I would like on the whole to use the word "attention" as a good word and use some more general term like "looking" as the neutral word' (IP 329).

ourselves with fantasy. Simply stopping this, refraining from filling voids with lies and falsity, is progress (MGM 503).

As Caprioglio Panizza also observes, the role of the will ‘is mostly in directing or initiating attention. During attention, we are doing something different’ (Caprioglio Panizza 20220, 27-28). ‘The agency of attention, more often and perhaps more properly, is then a sort of *receptivity or allowing*’ (Caprioglio Panizza 2022, 28).

Heiti explains how this receptivity does not mean passivity. He references Steven Burns and Alice MacLachlan (2004), who argue that there is an active element in preparing oneself to be receptive. For instance, you do not fall asleep by forcing yourself, but by creating the right conditions – clearing your mind, finding a quiet place, and so on. Similarly, you cannot simply will yourself to become more attentive, but you can take steps to create the conditions that facilitate attention (Heiti 2021, 41)¹²⁶, for our self-centred perspective is limited, constituted by the constellation of values at our disposal. What we see and the values we discover in the world are the net within which our actions can unfold.

How we attend, and what we pay attention to, shapes the moral quality of our consciousness (‘consciousness is a form of moral activity: what we attend do, how we attend, whether we attend’ (MGM 167)). What prepares the moral agent for moral decisions, Murdoch writes, is the quality of their attention to reality and the habitual objects of attention at their disposal throughout their lives, since these constitute the background against which, in the moment of choice, we make decisions (OGG 345).

But *how* should we pay attention?¹²⁷ Murdoch and Weil have different metaphysical frameworks supporting their ideas of attention, but they agree on the necessary selflessness of attention. ‘Selfless’ attention allows us to realise, as Murdoch writes, ‘that something other than oneself is real’ (SG 215). This realisation involves ‘the perception of individuals’ in their ‘separateness and differentness’, which is the essence of morality. It is an attempt to let the singular entities we encounter in the world be, refraining from projecting our self onto them:

¹²⁶ See Burns and MacLachlan (2004).

¹²⁷ Caprioglio Panizza (2022) explores possible failures of attention such as: sadism; monomaniac (attending to something at the expense of something else); unwanted attention to something or someone; and the difference between scrutinising and attending. I will mention some of these in footnote n. 173 in chapter 3.

it implies waiting for reality to unfold instead of grasping it. It is an attempt, as Murdoch describes it, to stop our ‘fat relentless ego’ (OGG 342).¹²⁸ Ultimately, attention in this sense is what can make us realise ‘that another man has needs and wishes as demanding as one’s own’ (OGG 353). Attention makes it harder to ‘treat a person as a thing’ (a danger that was a lifelong preoccupation for Weil).

It follows that, whether we pay attention or not implies the possibility for reality to emerge, to be accounted for. It is then also a matter of justice towards other human and non-human entities, for, as Weil observes, focusing attention on something or someone, permits their existence and restores their value and dignity. This makes attention not only a descriptive and normative passive-activity but also a creative one because it can return what had become invisible.¹²⁹

What, then, should our objects of attention be? For these authors, attention is worth practising towards anything: ‘this exercise of *detachment* is difficult and valuable whether the thing contemplated is a human being or the root of a tree or the vibration of a colour or a sound’ (OGG 353). However, considering the arts’ potential for being a ‘*clue* to morals’ (DPR 202), as Murdoch states, I suggest that an ideal object that can inspire selfless attention is literature that is not the product of vanity, selfish fears, and projections which these authors see in mediocre art.¹³⁰ As Weil observes in the first *Cahier*, good literature displaces us from the centre of our self by making us spectators of a narration about another, in their independence and in their needs and desires. It is an exercise of displacing our habitual standpoint and habitual thinking, and, as Murdoch also writes, this ‘is automatically to become

¹²⁸ ‘To attend is also to wait’ (MGM 400).

¹²⁹ Weil says that attention is directed towards reality, it ‘shows us what is there, not what we make up’, as Murdoch notes: ‘at its highest point, love is the determination to create the being which it has taken for its object’ (MGM 506), for she writes quoting Weil – who was quoting Paul Valéry -, love is ‘an orientation of the soul toward something which one does not know, but whose reality one does know’ (MGM 401). In ‘The Love of Our Neighbour’, Weil asserts that ‘Love for our neighbour, being made of creative attention, is analogous to genius. Creative attention means really giving our attention to what does not exist. Humanity does not exist in the anonymous flesh lying inert by the roadside. The Samaritan who stops and looks gives his attention all the same to this absent humanity, and the actions which follow prove that it is a question of real attention. ‘Faith’, says Saint Paul, ‘is the evidence of things not seen’. In this moment of attention faith is present as much as love. In the same way a man who is entirely at the disposal of others does not exist. A slave does not exist either in the eyes of his master or in his own ... Love sees what is invisible’ (FILG 149).

¹³⁰ She writes that the ‘novelist is potentially the greatest truth-teller of them all, but he is also an expert fantasy-monger. This is too cosy an art form not to be often degraded in the interests of the self-indulgent fantasy of both the writer and the reader’ (EM 233). Murdoch explores the dangers of art that made Plato ban the artists from his Republic in her essay ‘The Fire and the Sun’.

more moral; to see the real is to see its independence and ergo its claims' (FS 425). This will become clearer in the next chapter. For now, before I discuss Murdoch's secular mysticism (which I take as fundamental to accounting for the role of literature in contemporary non-religious times), it is essential to understand what can attract our attention and make us, even for one moment, selfless. This is beauty.

Exploring human attention to beauty is crucial because beauty, in this sense, is the opposite of the experience of *le malheur*. Indeed, the problem for Weil, as explained in chapter 1, is that human beings tend to look the other way when they encounter the condition of *le malheur*. It is interesting to notice that, while Weil controversially indicates *le malheur* as a state that puts us closer to the truth of existence, she also positions experiences of beauty as another point of access to reality. Beauty seems like the opposite of *le malheur*, since the former attracts attention and the latter repels it.

Therefore, before delving into the mystery of paying attention to *le malheur*, I will focus on the opposite experience of beauty, where attention is not repelled but attracted and engaged.

2.7 Beauty attracts attention

Weil gives an example¹³¹ of a moment in which attention is attracted by beauty in her unfinished play *Venise Sauvée*.¹³² This tragic play, set in 1618 in Venice, recounts group of Spanish conspirators who are planning to destroy the city and hand it over to the King of Spain. The morning that the conspiracy is to be carried out, the protagonist Jaffier, one of the conspirators, foresees the violence and shadow of force that is about to descend upon the city. This fate seems inevitable. As Pierre (one of the conspirators) says, 'the evil we will do is necessary': 'When I see this city, so calm, and I think that in one night, we, a few dark men, will be its lords, I seem to dream' (VS 57). Nonetheless, Weil reveals that the seemingly necessary force is a mere daydream obscuring the truth that conspirators and citizens alike are caught in the same illusion, where the only hero is force itself.

¹³¹ Weil comments: 'reality enters into him, because he has paid attention' (VS 23).

¹³² Below are my translations from the first Italian edition (1963). During the writing of this thesis, the first English edition was published by Bloomsbury (2019).

Weil describes Jaffier's moment of realisation as brought about by the beauty of the city, pulling him out of the dream. In that moment, he can truly 'see' Venice, in its vitality, singularity, and beauty. Through attention to beauty, Jaffier can accept his condition and love necessity with a 'supernatural' love. 'Jaffier's gesture lives elsewhere: the city is intact'. What he does not yet know is that he has 'replaced it' (VS 13). His decision is incomprehensible to everyone; no one can understand that, while looking at the city from the top of the bell tower, Jaffier momentarily awakened by beauty has paid attention. In that moment of grace, he does not know his decision will lead to his ruin; he only perceives the justice of the moment, which ends with the inevitable return of the dream of unreality. Indeed, 'after the immediate implications of the story, he too arrives at the flat world of unreality/dream' (VS 12), for 'he is the traitor, not only in the eyes of others, but in his own eyes' (VS 12), as his friends' lives are not spared. At the end of the story, Jaffier is again pressured by *la pesanteur*; and seeks refuge in the 'veil of the flesh' (VS 13). Weil writes:

A man without reality, it takes little to make him an object. The collectivity always distrusts man who breaks the course of the law of necessity; and the passion of the just is a perfect horror because the world around him stand still, that world that, among all, only he could see (VS 12).

When Jaffier 'sees' Venice existing, he feels the impersonality of the city and of himself, losing the habitual sense that dulls the true relationship with reality, that false sense of immediacy covered by layers of subjectivity. Jaffier's gesture, which saves the city by revealing the impending conspiracy, stops the time of necessity, and 'eternity enters time'. Jaffier sees the city exist, and from this, he gains the awareness that he cannot dominate it. Seeing the city exist means perceiving the flow of time as inescapable while contemplating the total impossibility for a human being to control or dominate time.

In the 1926 essay 'Le beau et le bien',¹³³ which Weil wrote for her teacher Alain at the age of 16, she defines beauty as 'the object par excellence' and the Good as something related to the subject and its intentions and motives, using the example of an ancient temple and its parts. She explains that every part of the temple alludes to a unity that we are asked to respect, which we cannot dominate

¹³³ The following quotes are all my translation.

or possess. This implies the recognition of a reality without our projections, an experience that pulls us out of the unreality in which we usually live. Through the experience of beauty, the perceiver says, ‘I am not that’, which means ‘*to place the temple as perfect in itself without me, namely put it as beautiful*’ (BB 29). This is the same distance granted in Jaffier’s attention in *Venise Sauvée*. In front of the temple, our thought is shattered, because the object contemplated is no longer a mere obstacle; beauty is what has a purpose in itself, recognised but not ordered by me (the subject), and therefore hints at something irreducible and not understandable.¹³⁴

For Weil, the encounter with beauty is the highest example of a non-possessive encounter with reality, and the realisation of this is somehow immediate. One renounces interpretation by only privileging existence. Simply put; this is how to acknowledge the irreducibility, the unbridgeable otherness: ‘In Beauty– for example the sea, the sky – there is something irreducible; exactly as there is in physical suffering: the same irreducibility; impenetrable for the intelligence’ (N I 308).

For Weil ‘detachment’ does not mean closure to the world in the name of a silent contemplation of interiority, but rather a distance that allows love and attention to all things. Comprehending this, we can finally see that the moment of beauty is the bridge between human beings’ constant dreaming and the moment of detachment. Experiencing the things of the world as beautiful, means seeing them in their existence, their singularity and frailty: ‘The vulnerability of the precious things of life is beautiful, because vulnerability is a sign of existence’ (N II 366). Transience resists self-imposition; the possession of things happens only when these are conceived in an instrumental logic. Indeed, our desires for things understood as objects of use are the result of the imagination producing dreams.

According to Weil, beauty is perceived in relation to the order of the universe. It is, she writes, a *metaxù*,¹³⁵ a term dear to Weil which she retrieves from Plato that means a ‘bridge’ to transcendence. Beauty can only be contemplated, never

¹³⁴ On Weil’s aesthetic vision see also *The Beauty that Saves* (1999).

¹³⁵ On the role of *metaxù* in Weil see Emmanuel Gabellieri (2004; 2019; 2024). Massimiliano Marianelli, (2004; 2020; 2022) and Cacciari (1982). For the role of *metaxù* both in Weil and Murdoch, see Kate Larson (2014). Weil describes *metaxù* as walls that both separate and connect, and this in-between space is where poets reside. They are the inhabitants of bridges.

consumed. It is like a mirror that reflects the purpose of our desire, which is the Good. It shows the gap between the fragility of transient things subject to the course of time, and the dimension of the eternal to which they constantly hint. Moreover, according to Weil, order is recognised as such thanks to the classification of the external world as an ‘obstacle’ to the projects of the corporeal subject, to which the subject responds reflexively. But, as I indicated, the ‘beautiful’ object does not present itself as an obstacle; on the contrary, it brings the subject’s plans to a stop by inspiring respect, which prompts hesitation. In other words, like the hesitation experienced when facing the Other that draws attention and respect, the ‘hesitant’ moment arising from beauty implies the recognition of the limit to which human existence is always subject, and of the limitation of the contemplative subject’s perspective.

Hesitation is the recognition of independence: the beautiful object’s existence remains unaffected by my intentions; it exists as an end in itself, for contemplation only. The requisite distance between subject and reality in attention distinguishes it from distraction. While distractions abound in daily encounters, for instance when advertisements tempt us with possessions that could define us, attention is selfless. Distractions follow the outward expansion of the self onto everything that can be grasped, filled, owned, or suppressed. This selflessness should not be conflated with unconscious actions; distractions, often affect our subconscious, pulling us, unawares, from reality. Conversely, attention, as exemplified in Murdoch’s famous example of the kestrel,¹³⁶ can happen inadvertently. Distraction, driven by utilitarian motives, laziness, or self-contempt, diverts our non-moral attention, whereas attention is directed towards the existence of the thing in itself. This distance afforded to the object under contemplation fosters an awareness of the equilibrium that emerges in the experience of beauty, offering it as a model. This realisation, as Winch elucidates, manifests as a reluctance to alter the thing contemplated; ‘I violate my own nature in violating the nature of something else’:

the response of *not wanting to change* the object of my response. It is the only way I can come by the conception of something as having independent reality is recognizing the limited nature of my own reality (Winch 2008, 174).

¹³⁶ See below.

Recognising the limited nature of our own reality, we embrace the independent reality of the thing. Not wanting to change what is beautiful means not wanting to 'eat' it, as Weil says, rejecting the urge to assimilate and transform it with our subjective operation. In this sense, beauty, good, and truth cannot be thought of separately, as Weil says in her 'Essay on the Notion of Reading'. All three imply letting the real be as it is: beauty demands that the ego does not change the thing, the Good requires the non-acting action of an 'unselfed' human being, and the truth implies that the ego does not cover reality with the lies of the imagination.

Evidently, when it comes to the Good, which is always involved in moral action, it is much more complex to speak of not changing reality. Indeed, to want good is not to accept everything that happens but to accept the necessity in which contingencies happen, as Winch explains:

If I contemplate misappropriating a deposit that has been entrusted to me I am failing or refusing to recognize the temporal conditions defining my present possession of the money: the past conditions under which it came into my hands and the resulting future conditions concerning my obligation to return it. These conditions define the necessity, the desire to respect which constitutes what Simone Weil means by the desire for good: it is those necessities that one does not wish to change. And this amounts to much the same as not wanting to change 'my own importance in the world', which is 'limited by other souls, my equals' (Winch 2008, 178).

To love a beautiful thing means to renounce the logic of ends, since it has as its end only itself and, therefore, the order of the whole universe. This lack of purpose makes beauty, in a Platonic fashion, the door to the transcendent because it arouses hunger without providing any possibility of nourishment, at least for the part of the sensitive soul that always tries to assimilate the Other and reality. Beauty is not something attributable to an object; in fact, it is not an attribute but flourishes in the relationship between us and the world, through our sensitivity associated with attention. Without attention, there would be no escape from the compensative imagination because the first desire in front of something beautiful is always to become one with it.

Beauty emerges in this detachment that renounces attachment and appropriation, because beauty is what we can desire without wanting to eat it (to use Weil's image of eating):

Beauty is the supreme mystery here below. It is a radiance that entices attention, but does not give it any motive for enduring. Beauty always

promises and never gives; it creates hunger, but it has no nourishment for the part of the soul trying here below to fill itself; it only nourishes the part of the soul that gazes. It creates desire, and it gives the clear sense that there is nothing in it to desire, for one wants that nothing in it should change. But should one not look for ways to get out of the delicious torments that it inflicts, then this desire bit by bit is transformed into love, and it forms a seed of the faculty of pure and gracious love (HP 123).

What can *immediately* attract our gaze, and yet do nothing to sustain it, is beauty. Following Plato's lesson¹³⁷ (and Weil's) Murdoch indicates that beauty¹³⁸ is 'the only spiritual thing which we love by instinct' (SGC 370) and which attracts unselfish attention. Murdoch describes it best in her famous example of the 'kestrel moment' as an occasion for what she calls a moment of 'unselfing'. She writes:

I am looking out of my window in an anxious and resentful state of mind, oblivious of my surroundings, brooding perhaps on some damage done to my prestige. Then suddenly I observe a hovering kestrel. In a moment everything is altered. The brooding self with its hurt vanity has disappeared. There is nothing now but kestrel. And when I return to thinking of the other matter it seems less important. And of course this is something which we may also do deliberately: give attention to nature in order to clear our minds of selfish care (SGC 369).

Murdoch notices that contemplation of beauty in art requires the same quality of detachment needed for contemplation of beauty in nature and that the attention fixed on art and nature is in both cases 'rewarded by the enjoyment of beauty' (OGG 354). She observes that when we witness good or bad actions, the sustained attention that could bring moral change is more challenging, for in morality the component of aesthetic pleasure is missing. The latter is felt only through aesthetic encounters with the world ('We are attracted to the real in the guise of the beautiful and the response to this attraction brings joy' (FS 425)), instead, Murdoch writes, 'in the case of morality, although there are sometimes rewards, the idea of a reward is out of place' (OGG 353).

'The spectacle of the good', as Murdoch calls it, can certainly be seen when, for example, we witness a good human being and their actions. She does not deny

¹³⁷ 'For beauty alone this has been ordained, to be most manifest to sense and most lovely of them all' (Plato, *Phaedrus* 250 c-d).

¹³⁸ Weil's view is more extreme on this than Murdoch's. For Weil, the beauty of creation is everywhere, it is us human beings who, with the logic of force, cover it and hide it from our view. In reality, beauty is everywhere in creation, and it is thus a *metaxù*, a bridge that connects creation to transcendence (God). God is always absent from the world, but we can see Her signs through the beauty that attracts our attention.

that ‘morality is quite largely a matter of actions’ and that ‘the practice of personal relations is the fundamental school of virtue’ (FS 453). However, what Murdoch tells us in ‘The Fire and the Sun’ is that witnessing a moral action is perhaps ‘more mixed and less efficacious’ and will ‘tend to be less clear’ (FS 453). I believe the reason for this is that our self, encountering actions, can easily get involved in self-centred projections, while the immediate ‘unselfing’ experience is more likely to occur with beauty. Beauty requires a distance (‘Distance is the soul of the beautiful’ (GG 149)); a step back that allows attention, which makes of art-beauty, while ‘not essential’, something that still ‘provides work for the spirit’ (FS 453).¹³⁹

In chapter 4, I will delve into the differences between attention paid to beauty in nature and beauty in art, particularly in literature. At present, I contend that the image of a beautiful action, as Weil illustrates in her aforementioned essay *Le beau et le bien*,¹⁴⁰ which features Alexander the Great (drawn from Plutarch’s *Parallel Lives*),¹⁴¹ further elucidates the notion that it is the beauty in the narration of the Good more than the Good itself that most attracts attention. The Good itself instead works on a more difficult level, since witnessing it through action is ‘less efficacious’ (FS 453).

Alexander’s action is a ‘ceremony’ or ‘ritual’, embodying both goodness and beauty simultaneously. Weil reads Alexander’s refusal of water in the desert as a form of waiting that binds him and his soldiers in a moment that is described, almost poetically, as connected to immobility and eternity. The beauty of Alexander’s detachment resonates with Jaffier’s moment of attention in *Venise Sauvée*, where his non-action is described as ‘immobile’. It appears that an act embodying both goodness and beauty finds its most fitting expression within the narrative

¹³⁹ ‘Beauty is, as Plato says, visibly transcendent’ (FS 453).

¹⁴⁰ This text is not yet translated in English. I used the Italian edition published by Mimesis (2013).

¹⁴¹ Alexander is in the desert with his army. Although the extreme thirst of all men, Alexander included, when he is offered a glass of water he refuses it. This gesture, under the watchful eyes of the waiting army (‘the universe is filled with the silence and the waiting of all those men’ (BB 22)), becomes a symbol of unity and reciprocity between the sovereign and his soldiers (‘once completed, everyone feels that it had to be this way’ (BB 22)). It is a ‘free and necessary act’ (BB 22); Weil writes: ‘the beauty of the act is not solely in Alexander. In truth, the soldier who brings the water and the army that watches also renounce the water. They give it up for Alexander; Alexander renounces it for them: each man is like the stones of the temple, both an end in himself and part of the whole. If even one of them desired the water, the act of pouring it out would no longer be possible. What would have changed, however? Nothing, except the agreement among men. The beauty of Alexander’s action is, therefore, the same as that of a ceremony – one could say that Alexander’s action is a ceremony’ (BB 23).

framework of literature. We can thus perceive such an act as aesthetically pleasing, akin to a ceremony, since, as Weil asserts, art can teach us to see beauty in the world.

Weil narrates a sense of unity through the story of Alexander. She explains that beauty lies not only in Alexander's renunciation but also in inspiring his soldiers. They are inspired because they identify themselves as part of a unity for which Alexander's action is the pinnacle. Both the soldiers and Alexander forgo the glass of water in the desert, in this joint renunciation they are an expression of balance and justice. In this sense, his action can be called a ceremony.¹⁴² As Maria Elisabetta Trini notices in her article 'Il ritmo dell'azione in "Le beau et le bien" di Simone Weil',

This is the favoured situation of literature, novels, myths, and even tragedies, in which a scenario is presented to us where particular realities are made the object of attention. It is through these realities that the plot develops, and we are led to approach these figures through perpetually ambiguous feelings that reflect our perception of the existing distance between their particularity and the universality or generalization of the substance to which they refer – an absent, changing substance that appears at its apex, in the distance, by default, when the particular figures are most accentuated (Trini 2022, 41).

To conclude, for Weil beauty is always present everywhere when the world shows its necessity; it is our daydreaming that prevents us from seeing it. Only attention can allow our limited and over-inflating self to access a beauty we otherwise would not see (N I 319 'Beauty: reality without attachment'). As she writes in a famous passage, the sea is not less beautiful because boats sink in it.¹⁴³ It is force (the dynamic of power, prestige, and violence, which constitutes the evil of this world and that human beings constantly use upon each other – the Greek idea of *Até*) which excludes beauty, not the necessity of the world.

¹⁴² It would be interesting, but I do not have the space here, to explore whether this ceremonial act can be considered an act of communal attention, meaning the soldiers witnessing Alexander's attention are therefore paying attention as well.

¹⁴³ 'The sea is not less beautiful in our eyes because we know that sometimes ships are wrecked by it. On the contrary, this adds to its beauty. If it altered the movement of its waves to spare a boat, it would be a creature gifted with discernment and choice and not this fluid, perfectly obedient to every external pressure. It is this perfect obedience that constitutes the sea's beauty. All the horrors produced in this world are like the folds imposed upon the waves by gravity. That is why they contain an element of beauty. Sometimes a poem, such as the *Iliad*, brings this beauty to light' (LGA 129).

In this section, I attempted to elucidate how beauty attracts our attention. I examined how Weil thinks beauty aligns with the recognition of the independence of the thing contemplated. Murdoch describes this process as follows:

The beautiful in nature (and we would wish to add in art) demands and rewards attention to something grasped as entirely external and indifferent to the greedy ego. We cannot acquire and assimilate the beautiful (FS 417).

Additionally, I explored how we can try to see beauty in the world through practicing attention, and how sometimes we are just ‘hit’ by it.

However, neither Weil nor Murdoch suggest that we can become more selfless solely by exposing ourselves to beauty, or that we should pay attention only to beautiful things. Other ‘salient’ things in the world ask for our attention, and (perhaps more loudly) ask ‘to be read otherwise’. As Caprioglio Panizza observes:

And yet like good things, beautiful things cannot override other possible objects of attention, because attention is not only directed to what is valuable, but to what is salient – to what needs our attention. And that, sometimes, is not so good: climate change, animal (human or non-human) suffering, and so on (Caprioglio Panizza 2022, 47).

In the following chapters, I will delve into the difficulties of paying attention to what is salient, namely, suffering. Ultimately, I will explore how, through art, we can be attracted by beauty to these other salient issues, which are more challenging to approach in everyday life. Therefore, an account of how beauty attracts our attention was necessary to transition into how we can see suffering ‘through’ beauty in great art.

2.8 Murdoch’s secular mysticism

If, as we saw, beauty attracts our attention in an immediate way that requires no effort (as in the example of Murdoch’s kestrel), to exercise a habit of attention requires an everyday apprenticeship. Eventually, for these authors, practising attention makes us more sensitive to beauty in the world.

Attention purifies our moral vision, but it involves a long and difficult path, much like that of a mystic. Re-orienting someone’s gaze is not a simple practice and does not occur with a mere ‘jump of the will’. For example, Murdoch invites us to consider the challenge of attempting to re-orient someone’s attention when

they want to deliberately fall out of love. She notes that this process is more difficult than just making a decision,¹⁴⁴ and that requires time.

In MGM, Murdoch explores the concept of mysticism and its relevance in secular contexts. Beginning from the Oxford Dictionary definition of the mystical as ‘having a certain spiritual character or import by virtue of a connection or union with God transcending human comprehension’ (MGM 73), she expands this definition, suggesting that a mystic is someone who transcends superficial religious symbols and idols through deep knowledge of the divine, and selfless living, and she compares this transcendent state to Plato’s concept of *noesis* (intuitive understanding) and the teachings of the mystic theologian Meister Eckhart, adding that being a mystic does not necessarily require belief in a personal deity.

Mystical experiences and insights can occur with or without traditional religious faith (‘Julian of Norwich’s showings are for all humanity’ (MGM 73)). At the same time, she writes, the mystical state is rare and, remote from the everyday experience of ordinary individuals. Nonetheless, she argues, we should not misapply the term ‘mystical’ to esoteric or occult practices (Gnostic beliefs and power-seeking magic), which differ from genuine mysticism. In fact, Murdoch acknowledges that people can experience moments of losing their sense of self or intuitions about something beyond the material world. Such everyday mystical experiences may be beneficial and lead to moral improvement. ‘There can no doubt be a mysticism of the extreme ascetic. But there is also a natural way of mysticism ... which involves a deepened and purified apprehension of our surroundings’ (MGM 30). For Murdoch the path of the everyday mysticism is the same as the moral agent: that of selflessness.

As mentioned earlier, Murdoch believes that religion¹⁴⁵ like moral philosophy¹⁴⁶ share the same discussion of the ‘fat relentless ego’ (OGG 342) and

¹⁴⁴ Heiti clarifies: ‘For Murdoch, an ethics of attending is an alternative to the class of moral theory that is transfixed by the idea of the agent as a decision-making, problem-solving doer’ (2021, 27).

¹⁴⁵ Donald MacKinnon is certainly partially responsible for Murdoch’s growing interest in religion and the figure of Christ during her years at Oxford. On his alleged ‘fascination’ with pain and the similarities with Simone Weil, see Conradi (2001, pp. 125-26)

¹⁴⁶ Murdoch was already growing increasingly interested in Christianity during the 1940s. In a review of those years for the journal *Adelphi*, she noted that Christianity needed to make a stand against ‘a disintegrating capitalist society which can offer only an endless prospect of exploitation and war’. Christianity, in Murdoch’s view, needed to ‘grapple with the real world’, to ‘return to the

the aim of finding techniques for its defeat, such as prayer. This kind of non-religious realism is, for Murdoch, necessarily connected to virtue and can be practised any time we put ourselves in front of something that transcends us and that asks for our attention and obedience. For example, practices such as learning a musical instrument or a foreign language, or praying, because of their selflessness, are connected to virtue. If so, she writes:

one of the main problems of moral philosophy might be formulated thus: are there any techniques for the purification and reorientation of an energy which is naturally selfish, in such a way that when moments of choice arrive we shall be sure of acting rightly? We shall also have to ask whether, if there are such techniques, they should be simply described, in quasi-psychological terms, perhaps in psychological terms, or whether they can be spoken of in a more systematic philosophical way ... Much closer and more familiar to us [than the technique indicated by Plato] are the techniques of religion, of which the most widely practised is prayer (OGG 344).

In Murdoch's view, 'Prayer is properly not petition, but simply an attention to God which is a form of love' (OGG 344).¹⁴⁷ Also for Weil, attention is synonymous with prayer, and it can be exercised 'quite apart from any particular religious belief' (RSS 116). But what happens to attention when there is no reference to any God, 'and can those who are not religious believers still conceive of profiting by such an activity?' (OGG 344).

Murdoch believes that our world emptied of God does not 'affect what is mystical'. She suggests:

The loss of prayer, through the loss of belief in God, is a great loss. However, a *general* answer is a practice of meditation: a withdrawal, through some disciplined quietness, into the great chamber of the soul. Just sitting quiet will help (MGM 73).¹⁴⁸

cave' (Conradi 2001, 173). In relation to her growing interest in Christianity, she wrote to Frank Thompson in 1942: 'After June I must a) read the Bible and b) go into the history of the Roman Catholic Church which fascinates me ... Christianity, you know, when you get away from it a bit and really see it, is a most amazing and almost incredible phenomenon. How does it look from Galilee? What a beautiful, queer, unexpected world it is. Christ, what a miserable, humiliated, broken, & altogether bloody world it is. I do believe in the future though – I believe tremendously. My God, we'll make something of this hole-&-corner planet of ours' (Conradi 2001, 173-174). And again, in 1943: 'better than being an Epicurean, to be a Kantian, and better still to believe in the True Gospel' (Conradi 2001, 174).

¹⁴⁷ Immediately after this, she gives her own definition of 'grace': 'a supernatural assistance to human endeavour which overcomes empirical limitations of personality' (OGG 344).

¹⁴⁸ Here she adds: 'Teach it to children'. For more on Murdoch's idea of education, and of children's education, see the conclusion of this thesis.

The loss of belief in God leads to the significant loss of prayer, but, as Murdoch writes, that does not affect the mystical.¹⁴⁹ A type of selfless meditation, traditionally sought through prayer, as the passive-activity of attention that I presented in here, can serve as a secular alternative.

Religion can be returned to contemporaneity in a different shape through attention (in the form of a secular mysticism). For Murdoch, ‘To bring religion in’¹⁵⁰ is not to detach from reality and from the here-and-now in favour of a transcendent realm, but to attend to the particulars of reality. As Conradi correctly writes:

Bertrand Russell, in a famous essay, opposed Mysticism and Logic, as if a mystic or saint were by definition an irrationalist or a dreamer. Iris’s saints, so far from inhabiting an alternative reality, are attuned to the here-and-now. Attention – that crucial concept in Simone Weil – and looking, valued above ‘will’, ‘movement’ and the ‘leap’ of choice, are the indispensable preliminaries to moral action (Conradi 2001, 272).¹⁵¹

Ultimately, as we saw, between analytic philosophy and existentialism¹⁵², Murdoch places herself on a third path: a sort of Platonic moral realism focused on virtues, which envisages an ‘arduous’ pilgrimage for the moral agent from self-illusion to a

¹⁴⁹ Another work that connects Murdoch’s mysticism to the mystical writing of a woman writer (Virginia Woolf) is Lazenby (2014).

¹⁵⁰ Conradi notes that the idea of goodness, as opposed to existentialist egoism, is also prevalent in her earlier novels. He argues: ‘But the urge to find an accurate description of our condition drove both her philosophy and her fiction from the start. Jake in *Under the Net* is a solipsist, and the novel comically charts his awakening out of solipsism towards a better understanding of the nature and needs of others. Hugo, the novel’s saint or mystic, is Jake’s awakener. Iris’s notes for *Under the Net* pose the question: ‘How to bring religion in?’ (Conradi 2001, 270).

¹⁵¹ Here, Conradi adds: ‘And attention and looking were what Sartre ignored’. For Conradi, Murdoch’s ‘own characters’ predicament is Existentialist, (but) their solution is not’ (Conradi 2001, 272). Or, as Byatt puts it, her early novels ‘ask Sartrean questions, they do not offer Sartrean answers’ (Byatt 1994, 308). The solution is always attention, a clearer vision of the character’s reality outside of their selfish daydreaming based on power. For Murdoch, the existentialist novelist shares the vision of the phenomenologist who by putting into brackets (through the *epoché*) our prejudgments that filter what we see, invites us to rediscover our vision by showing us what surrounds us ‘suddenly as strange, seen as if for the first time’. However, when it comes to the human condition, and the problem that contingency and individual experience coexist with the essential human ‘yearning for the order of the world’, Sartre (as ‘Hume and present-day empiricists’ (SR 43)) does not look ‘for a metaphysical solution’ (SR 43) in his novels. Murdoch observes, ‘*La nausée* offers no clear answer to the ethical problems which it raises’ (SR 45). The problem of the particular and the human search for order is at the foundation of Weil’s and Murdoch’s philosophy. Nonetheless, the solution offered to this question of the human condition (of being limited yet aspiring to the unlimited) is immensely different from Sartre’s, as the resulting picture of the human being.

¹⁵² See footnote n. 43 on Sartre and Marcel.

better vision of reality achieved by looking with attention. In ‘The Sovereignty of Good’, she writes:

I shall suggest that God was (or is) a single perfect transcendent non-representable and necessarily real object of attention; and I shall go on to suggest that moral philosophy should attempt to retain a central concept which has all these characteristics (SGG 344).

Murdoch attributes *only* to the Good the same qualities that Weil *also* attributes to God and indeed, Weil was exploring ‘mystical stuff’ (as Murdoch calls it)¹⁵³ even before incorporating God into her philosophy in 1938 (see chapter 1).

Murdoch’s idea of morality is, in fact, the opposite of anything dogmatic, although one might say the same of Weil’s God. In fact, Weil’s religious spirit was undogmatic, in the same sense that Murdoch describes in the following:

all my argument assumes that religion is not only a particular dogma or mode of faith and worship, but can exist, and indeed exists, undogmatically as for instance in Buddhism, and potentially everywhere, forming a deep part of morality. Especially now, when we are better able to understand the nature of myth, religious concepts should come home to morals, or let us say be welcomed in the whole area of morality’ (MGM 336).

I argue that what made Weil paradoxically so easy to ‘secularise’ is her undogmatic religious spirit,¹⁵⁴ which ultimately is cut from the same cloth as the secular mysticism at the foundation of Murdoch’s idea of morals and, at the foundation of her idea of art. This secular sacredness, which innervates both Morante’s *ethos*, and Murdoch’s idea of morality, corresponds to Weil’s ethics of attention. It is a non-dogmatic faith in something that transcends our possibilities of knowledge teaching us that every small and poor thing within reality really exists, marked by the same vulnerability and so, beauty. Recognising this, is the result of apprenticeship of attention.

If, as stated before, the Good is not a thing, not ‘elsewhere’, then there is nothing in this vision of morality related to moral structures or dogma, for the Good is ‘as various as reality’. This characteristic makes the Good undefinable and makes

¹⁵³ I refer here to the question I found in Murdoch’s copy of *Waiting on God*: ‘How to read this sort of mystical stuff?’. This is the result of my archival research in both Morante Archive at the National Library of Rome and in Murdoch Archive at Kingston University.

¹⁵⁴ As Davy writes in *The Mysticism of Simone Weil*, ‘The qualities of Simone Weil’s mysticism are identical in all religions, for in her they were developed to the extreme limit. At a certain height there is no multiplicity of routes, and Simone Weil had reached that height’ (Davy 1951, 18).

Murdoch's idea of morality a non-dogmatic 'unesoteric mysticism' which, as Justin Broackes writes,

arises from love of the Good [attention] [...] unaccompanied by illusory 'consolations' [...] It is *mystical* in involving (as in mystical religion) 'a non-dogmatic essentially unformulated faith (in this case in the reality of the Good), occasionally connected with experience'. It is *unesoteric* in being available and 'essentially the same' for all (OGG 360)' (Broackes 2014, 72).

As Broackes explains, Murdoch's morality does not have universal principles but operates through a form of particularism. Each individual case gives the example of the context of morality and highlights its inevitable distance from ideal perfection, thereby demonstrating the Good (as varied as reality and therefore undefinable). Thus, the Good is 'occasionally connected with experience' (OGG 360) through 'the very varying degrees in which goodness is present in the world' (Broackes 2014, 86), manifesting in the individual experiences of human beings. It is 'present' through a person's accurate cognition or perception of the world, free from egoistic illusions.

Because the Good is connected to reality through individual experiences, Murdoch considers mysticism as the proper 'background' for morals, for 'we live in a world whose mystery transcends us and that morality is the exploration of that mystery' (VCM 88). In her view, morality has always been connected with religion, and religion in turn with the mystical. Therefore, in a world without a place for religion, the relationship between morality and the mystical must be re-evaluated.¹⁵⁵

In this imagery inspired by Plato's cave, attention is 'mystical' because, while expressed through a selfless gaze on the ordinary, it is attracted to a 'transcendent magnetic centre'.¹⁵⁶ As Caprioglio Panizza writes, because 'attention is necessary to achieve an apprehension of something that lies beyond immediately perceptible reality, but also governs the whole of it, [Murdoch] can refer to the effort to attend

¹⁵⁵ C. Wallace grapples with the sociohistorical phenomenon of secularisation interpreting it 'postsecularly', meaning 'not as the end of religion but as the proliferation of possibilities for belief and unbelief, a fracturing of previously assumed shared religious understanding – another point of resonance with Weil, whom E. Jane Doering and Eric Springstead insistently connect to the question of "just what it might mean to recover a usable spiritual tradition" (Doering and Springsted 2004, 7)' (C. Wallace 2024, 124).

¹⁵⁶ As mentioned in the introduction, Weil's and Murdoch's mysticism is first and foremost Platonic. According to Arthur Versluis, Platonic mysticism can be understood as the pursuit of direct, experiential knowledge of the transcendent forms or ideals, particularly the form of the Good. See Versluis (2017).

as a mystical aspiration, and to the rare successful instances of attention as experiences that are mystical in nature’ (Caprioglio Panizza 2017, 355).

In ‘The Sovereignty of Good’, Murdoch paraphrases Wittgenstein, stating, ‘not how the world is, but that it is, is the mystical’ (SGC 370).¹⁵⁷ Through her view of morality as attention to the Good, Murdoch presents an understanding of the mystical as an approach to the absolute via the encounter with reality as a whole, free from our egotistic projections (‘The feeling of the world as a limited whole is the mystical feeling ... *Tractatus* 6. 44-6. 5.’) (MGM 78)). This approach, which goes ‘against unreality’, is achieved through the difficult path of attention. This realism does not attempt to describe or analyse reality but to explore it imaginatively as a whole through its particulars, accepting its mysteries and contradictions (‘The contradictions the mind comes up against – these are the only realities; they are the criterion of the real. There is no contradiction in what is imaginary. Contradiction is the test of necessity’ (GG 98)). This ‘obedience’ to reality (to use Weil’s vocabulary) or ‘mystical realism’ (as I define it) – ‘seeing things as they are’ (SGC 358) – is, in Murdoch’s vocabulary, a moral achievement.¹⁵⁸

Finally, if cultivating attention through secular mysticism allows us to perceive beauty in all aspects of reality, how does this apply to places of suffering? How should we approach suffering in a world devoid of the divine? In what manner can we observe and engage with suffering, and what relationship, if any, does it hold with beauty? Is it appropriate or even ethical to seek beauty in suffering? This notion is particularly contentious, echoing the concerns Murdoch highlighted about Weil’s perspective in her review of the *Cahiers*. These questions set the stage for a

¹⁵⁷ Also in MGM (78). On the idea of the mystical and on the fact that ‘What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence’, See Bachmann (2021), particularly ‘The Vienna Circle: Logical Positivism – Philosophy as Science’; ‘Ludwig Wittgenstein – A Chapter of the Most Recent History of Philosophy; Logic as Mysticism; and The Sayable and the Unsayable’ (51-109), where silence is defined as ‘a protest against the tendencies of our age that place implicit faith in science and progress, against the know-nothing attitude toward “total reality”’ (109).

¹⁵⁸ Caprioglio Panizza quotes Sophie Grace Chappell on this concept, noting its presence in both Weil and Murdoch. Chappell cites Dostoevsky’s Father Zosima’s exhortation to ‘love all God’s creation, the whole and every grain of sand in it. Love every leaf, every ray of God’s light. Love the animals, love the plants, love everything. If you love everything, you will perceive the divine mystery in things’ (Dostoevsky 1952, 167; quoted in Chappell 2014, 311).

deeper exploration of the intersection between beauty, suffering, and attention in the chapters that follow.

2.9 Conclusion

In this chapter, I examined Weil and Murdoch's shared claim that humans live in 'unreality' due to their immediate 'reading' of values in reality. I showed how Weil's and Murdoch's account of attention, the self, and transcendence have more in common than previous scholarship has entertained by building the concepts of 'attentive reading' and of 'normative impossibilities'. I then provided my interpretation and developed the concept of attention that underpins my research. I clarified that when I refer to attention, I mean a spectrum from 'reading otherwise' to threshold of 'pure attention'.

I demonstrated how the selfless practice of attention to reality can awaken us from our egocentric dreams and reveal beauty we usually overlook. However, beauty can also attract our attention in an immediate way, as Murdoch's famous example of the kestrel illustrates. Beauty is the *metaxù* to the mystical, the feeling of reality as a whole and the feeling of its independent existence.

The more problematic notion is that extreme suffering, or *le malheur*, could (and here the conditional is essential) also wake us from our dreams throwing us face to face with reality. This role of *le malheur* and whether this experience can be fruitful and not only destructive (if there can be 'a spiritual use' of suffering) while challenging Weil also draws readers like Murdoch and Morante to her work.

In the next chapter, I will examine Murdoch's reading of Weil to address the controversial idea of a 'spiritual use of suffering'. This discussion will set the stage for chapter 4 in which I will explore how this 'spiritual use of suffering' can be understood through literature, where attention can be paid to suffering *through beauty*. To reach this point, I will now explore the challenges of directing attention towards suffering.

3 Attending to the Other and to suffering

Quanto al tuo *prossimo*
tu (parlo anche a te, mezza I.M., che qui scrivi)
Puoi riconoscerlo naturalmente in chi nasce
Venuto non si sa da dove, e muore per andarsene non si sa dove
Senza nessuno per salvarlo dal dolore né risparmiarlo dalla morte:
Né padri né madri né in cielo né in terra.
Zingaro e solo: né più né meno
di te.¹⁵⁹

(Morante, 'La canzone degli F.P. e degli I.M.')

3.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I will clarify what it means to pay attention to the Other by distinguishing attention from related concepts: empathy, compassion, and sympathy. I will introduce the idea that compassion requires attention, calling it 'attentive compassion'. Additionally, I will address the challenges of directing attention towards individuals who have committed horrible crimes. I will demonstrate that sustaining the selfless attention Weil and Murdoch advocate (through imagination and analogy) towards the suffering Other can lead us to action. This discussion culminates in the concept of publicly 'bearing attentive witness', a notion crucial in chapter 5, where I explore the possibility of the writer bearing attentive witness to suffering through her novel.

In chapter 1, I examined the difficulties Weil observed with paying attention to *le malheur*. 'Pure' attention to 'pure' *malheur* is impossible. The attention required by pure *malheur* sets the standard for all other degrees of attention required for lesser forms of *malheur*. Again, when I refer to *malheur* or suffering here, I refer to extreme suffering caused by external factors, rather than the 'imaginary' suffering that stems from the self. 'Pure' *malheur* refers to Weil's concept of a suffering that reduces the human being to a thing. For Weil, this suffering is always

¹⁵⁹ 'As for your *neighbour* / you (I'm speaking to you too, you half U.M. writing here) / can recognize him naturally in those who are born / nobody knows where from & die to go nobody knows where / with no one to save them from grief or spare them from death: / no mothers or fathers on earth or in heaven. / Alone and homeless: no more, no less / than you' (WSK 186).

degrading and useless for someone not completely ‘decreated’. However, it is transformative for the saint or the mystic, a being capable of ‘a spiritual use’ of that suffering, who can resemble matter under necessity and thus exit the constant logic of power and force that governs human beings (‘there is something impersonal in quasi-infernal affliction as there is in perfection’ (GG 29). Nonetheless, as explained, Weil also refers to *malheur* in the context of bereavement, and other similar experiences, and I operate within this wider spectrum.

Having presented Murdoch’s expansion on Weil’s concept of attention, I will now explore her interpretation of Weil’s idea of suffering and explore the scholarly discussion regarding the alleged ‘enchantment’ of Murdoch’s philosophy and novels by this aspect of Weil. This situates my research within the broader academic conversation and justifies the use of both Weil and Murdoch in my analysis of Morante’s novel. In particular, I will anticipate Murdoch’s suggestion that art might be the most effective means of paying attention to extreme suffering, suggesting that literature can provide a ‘use’ for suffering, for suffering can have a value not in itself but when attention is paid to it.

3.2 Engaging with the Other: empathy, compassion, and sympathy

Before exploring how we can pay attention to others’ suffering, let us first consider the level of attention directed towards other human beings in general. When we consider paying attention to others, we often think of empathy and compassion. I will explore these concepts here.

What is the difference between attention to others and feeling empathy towards another? In Edmund Husserl’s phenomenology, empathy (*Einfühlung*) is the capacity that allows a human being to relate immediately to others’ mental states, emotions, and affective states. For Husserl, empathy enables us, through analogical thinking, to recognise another human being as such, seeing the Other as an intentional embodied consciousness ‘similar to our own’ rather than as an object.¹⁶⁰ From a phenomenological perspective, empathy is seen as the foundation

¹⁶⁰ Weil explains something similar in the *Iliad*, where she writes about how as humans we immediately respond to other humans differently from how we respond to objects, with the exception of persons who have been deprived of their personality through force. She writes: ‘Anybody who is in our vicinity exercises a certain power over us by his very presence, and a power

for any form of intersubjectivity. As Husserl states in his *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*,

By means of empathy, all Ego-relations are ascribed to the subject of the other Body ... The other's Body is for me a passageway ... toward the understanding of the Ego there ... he is the center of a surrounding world appearing to him ... which to a greater extent he has in common with me and with others ... there then arises the field of social relations of subjectivity (Husserl 1983, §5, 358).

Husserl's student, Edith Stein,¹⁶¹ who expanded on his work on empathy in her dissertation *On the Problem of Empathy*, describes empathy as the transportation of oneself into another's experience, writing, 'empathy is a kind of act of perceiving *sui generis* ... is the experience of foreign consciousness' (Stein 1989, 11). This 'transportation' is not merely intellectual but essentially embodied and affective – something widely investigated by the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty.¹⁶²

In contemporary scholarship, empathy remains crucial in phenomenology, philosophy of mind, and ethics. Space does not permit a detailed analysis of empathy here, so I will adopt the definition of empathy as a non-inferential and immediate part of perception. As Caprioglio Panizza observes, 'empathy allows us to detect and respond to others' inner states without any inferential process' (Caprioglio Panizza 2022, 154).

But what happens when we are faced with a suffering Other? Here compassion must be clarified. Indeed, especially in the presence of a sufferer, empathy is insufficient to motivate us to care, feel compassion, and eventually act: we need attention.¹⁶³ I do not dispute scholars who argue that empathy can be a necessary step towards compassion, however, I argue that attention is necessarily

that belongs to him alone, that is, the power of halting, repressing, modifying each movement that our body sketches out. If we step aside for a passer-by on the road, it is not the same thing as stepping aside to avoid a bill-board; alone in our rooms, we get up, walk about, sit down again quite differently from the way we do when we have a visitor' (I 5).

¹⁶¹ Stein is sometimes studied in tandem with Weil as a Jewish convert to Christianity and is concerned with philosophical topics akin to Weil's. See Boella (1998) and Courtine-Denamy (2001).
¹⁶² See Merleau-Ponty (2013).

¹⁶³ Bourgault also holds that 'attentive listening' may be more apt in cases that resist empathy. She writes: 'we ought not to insist on strong empathy as a necessary requirement to listening ... For one thing, most socio-political situations entail listening to others with whom we have fairly little in common – and at times, with people we do not like very much. And it is precisely in these tough cases that listening is of utmost importance' (Bourgault 2016, 327).

interdependent with compassion, more so than empathy. Without attention, our initial relation to Other's affective states (through empathy), may be lost by the self-preserving drive to look away, resulting in a lack of moral motivation and, consequently, inaction (such as failing to change the conditions that cause suffering). Instead, when perception is accompanied by *sustained* attention and our conscious effort to maintain it even as we wish to look away, 'attentive compassion' can emerge. In such cases, initially blocked empathy can be re-enabled, along with moral motivation and the urge to act.

In our paper *Emotion, Disequilibrium, and Compassion: Confronting Emotions in the Community of Philosophical Inquiry*,¹⁶⁴ Lucy Elvis and I defined compassion as the result of attentively looking at the Other's situation. As Düringer explains, quoting Stuart Jessen,

What I need when I am troubled is that someone is 'paying attention not just to me but to the situation to which I am attending, in the way that I am attending to it' (Jessen 2017, 133).¹⁶⁵ Attentive compassion is then a form of 'attending-with' someone (Düringer 2022, 314).

Attention seems to be a precondition for compassion, as compassion is ultimately an attending-with the Other to *their* personal experience, neither neutrally nor subjectively, but as *they* are looking at it: jointly paying attention with them to their situation. This resembles what the writer does with her characters, their world, and the experience she offers her readers.

This attentive compassion implies three things: the first is a renunciation of our egotistic way of looking at the Other: 'The man accepts to be diminished by concentrating on an expenditure of energy, which will not extend his own power but will only give existence to a being other than himself, who will exist independently of him' (FILG 147). The second implication is a recognition of the independence of the Other, and the third is a cessation of 'reading' the Other through the meanings that I project onto them.

From this perspective, the difference between attention, (attentive) compassion, and empathy is as follows:

¹⁶⁴ Forthcoming in 2024 in *Journal of Philosophy in School (JPS)* 'Philosophy and Literature in School Special Issue'.

¹⁶⁵ See also Jessen (2014).

- i) Attention is a selfless gaze towards the Other and the situation they find themselves in.
- ii) Compassion (attentive) arises when a selfless gaze is directed onto someone else's world of experience. It is a '*cum-pathos*', being moved by another person's situation, to which I pay attention, allowing me to see what is salient to them (as Caprioglio Panizza explains).
- iii) Empathy involves relating to another person's mental states and emotions, or, on a more colloquial level, being moved by another person's feelings. However, this does not necessarily entail paying attention to the situation they are in.

By distinguishing these concepts, we can better understand the unique role of attention in fostering genuine compassion.

Empathy, therefore, differs from attention. As Weil and Murdoch note, if we truly pay attention, actions follow; with empathy, however, sometimes we look away precisely because we empathise. In moments of empathy, we are moved by the affective states we perceive in the Other and inevitably relate them to our own experiences. Instead, as we saw in chapter 1, attention involves valuing the Other and their potential, and the essential recognition of their existence and independence.¹⁶⁶

While empathy can be the initial step towards understanding others prompting interest in them, recognising them as fellow human beings, compassion requires an additional step: attention. In empathy, we acknowledge the Other's humanity and emotions by experiencing those emotions ourselves in response. However, in attentive compassion, we implicitly recognise the Other's independence, mortality, and vulnerability ('Every created thing is an object for

¹⁶⁶ To further explain this difference, consider the appeal of YouTube videos like marriage proposals and soldiers returning home to their dogs, and similar content. Their popularity clearly indicates a generational apathy fostered by a mass entertainment society, indulgence, and overstimulation. These videos nonetheless reveal our desire for empathetic stimulation. When watching, we appear to be moved by someone else's emotions. We feel joy watching the joyful reaction of the people involved in the marriage proposal and terror at someone discovering their prison sentence. Yet we do not care about the people in these videos. We do not truly see them. Instead, the emotions which we internalise are our focus, amounting to appropriation by the 'greedy self'.

compassion because it is ephemeral' (FLN 104)), asking Weil's fundamental question: 'What are you going through?'

Neither Weil nor Murdoch talk much about empathy; both speak more about sympathy and compassion. Murdoch, for instance, highlights how compassion acts as a barrier against harming others.

Compassion impedes the sufferings which I intend to cause another person. It calls out to me 'stop!', it stands before the other man like a bulwark, protecting him from the injury that my egoism or malice would otherwise urge me to do (MGM 63).

Sympathy, instead, seems to be ever-present when we engage attentively;¹⁶⁷ it is intrinsic to an attentive disposition, involving a sense of distance, where we acknowledge and feel something in response to another's *malheur* as we pay attention to their condition. In contrast, empathy is more immediate; we mostly perceive another's emotional state and, in a sense, experience those emotions ourselves. Although empathy has value in developing an interest in someone else's suffering, it involves an appropriation that does not occur in sympathy.

Caprioglio Panizza notes that Elisa Aaltola, in her recent study of empathy, includes compassion as part of empathy, defining it broadly as 'feeling with or identifying the mental states of another' (Aaltola 2018, 25), as opposed to sympathy, which maintains a detachment (Caprioglio Panizza 2022, 153). Weil, on the other hand, defines attention to the sufferer, which she also calls compassion, as '*by sympathy* to transport our own soul into theirs for a time' (FILG 183, my emphasis). This is not empathic feeling, it is done by analogical thinking. (WG 89, my emphasis). Attentive compassion entails a deeper engagement with someone else's situation, acknowledging its complexity and looking at it with 'a just and loving gaze'.¹⁶⁸ This gaze is directed not only at the person herself, a contingent being subject to chance and necessity, but at her circumstances. For Weil, attention

¹⁶⁷ On the relationship between empathy, compassion and sympathy, see the section 'Compassion' in Martha Nussbaum (2003).

¹⁶⁸ Compassion is for Weil the only admissible kind of self-love, 'One should love oneself only with a compassionate love. Every created thing is an object for compassion because it is ephemeral. Compassion directed to oneself is humility. Humility is the only permitted form of self-love' (FLN 104).

to *les malheureux* involves looking at their suffering and what is salient to them, such as the need for protection or assistance.¹⁶⁹

When we look away from another's suffering, Caprioglio Panizza explains 'what is there is cancelled or distorted' (Caprioglio Panizza 2022, 155). This can occur when we refuse to look, as in the case of the criminal, or when we look but then turn away because witnessing suffering prompts empathy, leading to discomfort that we seek to alleviate by avoiding further observation, 'we feel bad, and we want that feeling to stop, so we stop looking' (Caprioglio Panizza 2022, 155).

Looking at the suffering Other, can either provoke empathetic suffering in us or distress for having our preconceived notions shaken, whether individual or social. For instance, when we see a rough sleeper on the side of the road, we may avert our gaze because acknowledging their plight forces us to confront the societal injustices that allow, if not perpetuate, their circumstances. Similarly, when we change channels when we witness images of boats crossing the Mediterranean, to avoid discomfort about the fact that our Western culture is built on the suffering and exploitation of others. Sontag, in *Regarding the Pain of Others*,¹⁷⁰ captures this sentiment when she speaks of

how our privileges are located on the same map as their suffering, and may – in ways we might prefer not to imagine – be linked to their suffering, as the wealth of some may imply the destitution of others (Sontag 2004, 92).

¹⁶⁹ Cristina Campo explained it best in her essay 'Attention and Poetry', where she writes, '*Souffrir pour quelque chose, c'est lui avoir accordé une attention extrême.* (So Homer suffers for the Trojans and contemplates the death of Hector; so the Japanese sword master does not distinguish between his own death and that of his adversary.) And to have given something extreme attention is to have accepted suffering it to the end, and not only suffering it but suffering for it, placing ourselves like a shield between it and everything that can threaten it, both inside ourselves and outside ourselves. It is to have taken upon ourselves the weight of those dark, incessant threats, which are the very condition of joy. Here attention attains perhaps its purest form, its most precise name: responsibility, the capacity to respond on behalf of something or someone, which is equally vital to poetry, understanding between beings, opposition to evil. Because truly every human, poetic, or spiritual error is nothing, in essence, if not inattention. To ask a man to never be distracted, to be continually turning his faculty of attention away from the errors of imagination, the laziness of habit, the hypnosis of custom, is to ask him to realize his highest form. It is to ask him for something very close to holiness in a time that seems to be pursuing, with blind fury and bone-chilling success, nothing so much as a total divorce of the human mind from its capacity for attention' (Campo 2024, 154).

¹⁷⁰ This book, in which Sontag explores the human response to images of horror captured by photographic lens, especially in places of war, will be fundamental in Chapter 4 where I explore attention to suffering within art.

However, there are various occasions in which it becomes difficult to empathise. The most emblematic case being that of looking at those who have committed horrific crimes.

3.3 Attentive compassion for the in-humane

Weil identifies the root of evil in the world as the impossibility of seeing the Other, which comes about due to a life lived without the habit of attention. This failure to acknowledge the existence of others results from an individual's inherent self-deception. Weil contends that if murderers were fully aware of their victims' existence, they would be unable to commit violent acts:

If murderers knew their victims really existed, they would not be able to thrust their knives into them. Not to see obstacles is the terrible secret of the carnage of the victorious warrior, and of the misdeed of the criminal (N I 109).

Moral action, according to Weil, is a matter of attention, of closely reading not just victims, but criminals. In Weil's view, evil is not a substance; it is a lack of reality. It is the unreality stemming from the self that takes good away from good, and that is what Weil calls evil ('evil retains this characteristic mark of unreality' (N I 110)). Outside unreality there is reality, and that reality is good. Hence, evil is committed by those who do not have knowledge of this real presence and thus, as she writes: 'No one is wicked voluntarily' (N I 109). From this comes what Weil calls – echoing Hannah Arendt's 'banality of evil' – the simplicity of evil: 'whence comes perhaps the simplicity of criminals; everything is simple in the dream state' (N I 110).¹⁷¹ This point holds particular significance for this thesis, as I will explore in chapter 5, for it informs the essence of Morante's compassionate gaze in *La Storia*.

Witnessing a criminal who has committed a horrific crime receive a death sentence, many may not feel empathy towards them. Our judgements often hinder our capacity for empathy. We distance ourselves immensely from the criminal, viewing them as in-human, beyond empathy. However, if we have learned to live

¹⁷¹ In a letter to Gershom Scholem in July 1963, Arendt writes: 'you are quite right: I changed my mind and do no longer speak of "radical evil" ... it is indeed my opinion now that evil is never "radical", that it is only extreme, and that it possesses neither depth nor demonic dimensions. It can overgrow and lay waste the whole world precisely because it spreads like a fungus on the surface ... the moment [thought] concerns itself with evil, it is frustrated because there is nothing. That is its "banality". Only the good has depth and can be radical' (Arendt 1978, 251). On the different influence that both Weil and Arendt had on Morante's *La Storia* see the chapter 'Simone Weil and Hannah Arendt: Ethics of La Storia' in Lucamante (2014).

life through a perspective that sees personality as shaped by chance and necessity, with actions following the horizon that we are provided, and thus recognise all humans as interconnected under these conditions, compassion becomes possible. Caprioglio Panizza discusses the importance of ‘broadening’ our understanding of individuals who commit crimes beyond their singular criminal action. She writes:

To see the killers as individuals requires a broadening of the understanding of their lives, which includes their difficult past, their own trauma, and so on. But that is not a mere accumulation of facts. It is using those facts to shed light on the people who went through such lives, to understand their influences, and in the end to come out with a different and more complete knowledge of those people (Caprioglio Panizza 2022, 40).

She further emphasises that this is not about condoning, minimising, or ‘making excuses’ for them, but rather attentively looking at their lives in a non-fragmented way. In this passage, she speaks about imagination and empathy. She writes that the ‘facts that enable empathy with those people also become more salient, and when salience changes the whole picture changes’, because imagination and empathy can help us ‘to wonder what it may have felt like to be them’ (Caprioglio Panizza 2022, 41). Nonetheless, as I tried to argue, feeling empathy for individuals who have committed horrible crimes is challenging.¹⁷² However, looking with attention to their circumstances can cultivate deeper understanding of their lives, thus, compassion, and eventually regain the capacity for empathy, so often inhibited by our preconceptions and judgments, while maintaining moral judgment on their actions.

Our daily pursuit of what we perceive as good, often entails turning away from distressing or painful realities. As we saw in chapter 1, Weil regards the desire for the Good as the inherent essential characteristic of human beings. Murdoch also describes human beings as driven by inexhaustible energy, which she likens to desire, attaching itself to what it perceives as good and shaping our perception of reality. Most of the time, we are blind to the fact that realities that distress us (like persons who committed horrible crimes) or that make us suffer because we empathise (like looking at the suffering Other) are the realities that demand our

¹⁷² It is common in our comfortable Western lives to overlook the plight of prisoners and even advocate for the death penalty for grave offences. This tendency stems from our inability to truly see others, as Caprioglio Panizza suggests, ‘as wholes’ rather than ‘crystallised by their deed’ (Caprioglio Panizza 2022, 41). However, thinkers like Weil and Murdoch suggest that training our attention aids the development of compassion towards those who commit serious crimes.

attention most.¹⁷³ We fail to see that in constituting a potential for our creative attention, they are ‘what is most good for us’, more than any comforting reality that masquerades as good. In this view the most invisible parts of reality that we usually recoil from or hide are what claims the most for our attention. In fact, paying attention to these darker parts of reality avoids mutilating reality and thus obscuring reality as a whole, the feeling of which, as I anticipated, is what I define as the mystical.

3.4 Sustained attention to the Other

As aforementioned, moral actions stem from attention, and true attention to others’ suffering leads to a desire to alleviate that suffering. However, even if we direct attention for ‘some’ time to suffering, we may still falter because it becomes too difficult to bear. The real challenge lies in maintaining *sustained selfless* attention¹⁷⁴ which motivates us to act. As Murdoch notes,

there is the almost insuperable difficulty of looking properly at evil and human suffering. It is very difficult to concentrate attention upon suffering and sin, in others or in oneself, without falsifying the picture in some way while making it bearable (OGG 359).¹⁷⁵

¹⁷³ I am aware that, in looking at suffering, there are also other kinds of response, which entail enjoyment from it, as in masochism and sadism. Caprioglio Panizza, outlining Weil’s and Murdoch’s take on sadism and masochism, gives a compelling account of these responses, defining them as perceptive rather than attentive (Caprioglio Panizza 2022, 155). In sadism, for instance, the focus is not on the reality of the individual in its fullness but rather on extracting suffering for pleasure. If the sadist were to truly pay attention, they would recognise what is salient to the sufferer: the cessation of that suffering. Caprioglio Panizza describes the sadist’s gaze as ‘razor-thin’ (Caprioglio Panizza 2022, 159) and notes that their attention is not directed towards the truth of the object but their own gratification. In sadism, she observes, ‘the filtering of the self is at peak level’ (Caprioglio Panizza 2022, 159). Similarly, in masochism, attraction to our own suffering can stem from a sense of numbness, guilt, or other motives which result from the self. We sometimes feel a peculiar attraction to others’ suffering, or at least the idea of it. The latter is a more subtle yet recognisable form of sadism, prompting us to look away just as we satisfy what Susan Sontag calls our ‘appetite for sights of degradation and pain and mutilation’ (Sontag 2004, 86). When, for instance, we encounter a car crash and feel the urge to look, it is not that we do not feel repulsed; rather, one could say that something about witnessing the suffering of others makes us feel strangely comfortable operating as a reminder we are not in that condition. Again, this pertains to the realm of the self, its conservation, its fears, and its search for comfort: this scenario, evidently, is not an act of attention.

¹⁷⁴ See chapter 2.

¹⁷⁵ ‘Our inability to imagine evil is a consequence of the facile, dramatic and, in spite of Hitler, optimistic picture of ourselves with which we work.’ (EM 294) As Zamboni explains: ‘Human beings are often tolerantly blind towards themselves and do not wish to confront the darker and more ambiguous aspects of their actions. This leads to a difficulty in imagining these shadowy sides not only in themselves but also in others. Great literature, on the other hand, knows how to dwell on the ambiguous attitudes of humans – those detestable ones like deceit, mediocrity, pettiness, compromise, gratuitous hostility, and destructive envy. These ways of being are shown [in literature] with precision and recognised with a sharp gaze, as they are endured and imagined, without becoming identified with them’ (Zamboni Forthcoming).

Even when we manage to pay attention, there is always the risk that our self-preservation instincts kick in, causing us to turn our focus inward, towards our own response to what we are witnessing (Caprioglio Panizza 2022, 155). Sustained selfless attention to suffering, which leads to attentive compassion, yields practical affordances, as Caprioglio Panizza explains:

The capacity to sustain attention to suffering despite empathetic distress, and while overcoming it, can be linked to two features of attention: the fact that in attention we are focused on the other, therefore reducing our reactions based on our own emotions ... but also the fact that what we perceive is not only the suffering, but the need for ending the suffering, and our possibility to contribute to that end' (Caprioglio Panizza 2022, 157).

The potential of sustained attention and compassion goes along with our potential contribution to ending that suffering, which, in turn, is connected to the role of imagination in attention.

Attention is inherently interactive and relational. It allows us to perceive what is salient in a particular context, such as giving a glass of water to a thirsty person in front of us. Attention reveals connections and relationships, like the link between the thirsty individual and the glass of water. When I pay attention, I see the necessary action, and I simply act. In this sense, attention is imaginative, as it enables us to perceive a line that connects two dots,¹⁷⁶ a line that we imagine and draw through action.¹⁷⁷

In Weil's philosophy, the role of imagination is pivotal not only in perception, as we saw in chapter 1, but also on the moral level. As Weil writes,

The owner of a factory [says]: 'I enjoy this and that expensive luxury and my workmen are miserably poor.' He may be very sincerely sorry for his workmen and yet not form the connexion. For no connexion is formed if thought does not bring it about. Two and two remain indefinitely as two and two unless thought adds them together to make them into four (GG 139).¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁶ On the role of imagination in perception see footnote n. 77.

¹⁷⁷ 'The true difficulty, not to do what is good when one has seen it, but to see it with such intensity that the thought passes automatically into action; as when one reads a piece of music, and the notes which enter through the eyes come out in the form of sound at the tips of one's fingers – as when one sees a Rugby football, and there it is in one's arms' (N I 56).

¹⁷⁸ Not wanting to see the connections, the habit of it, can lead to not being able to see them, 'We do not want to know it, and, by dint of not wanting to know it, we reach the point of not being able to know it' (GG 138). As Heiti comments on this passage, 'ignorance of certain internal relations is the default for those of us who are privileged, we tend not to understand that being ignorant is a political act' (Heiti 2021, 299).

For Weil, it is not about empathy, but analogical thinking through attentive imagination. Heiti writes: ‘Perceiving her [the Other’s] vital needs as analogous to mine is imagining’ (Heiti 2021, 292).

There are cases where a thing is necessary from the mere fact that it is possible. Thus to eat when we are hungry, to give a wounded man, dying of thirst, something to drink when there is water quite near. Neither a ruffian nor a saint would refrain from doing so. *By analogy*, we have to discern the cases in which, although it does not appear so clearly at first sight, the possibility implies a necessity (GG 44, my emphasis).

To see possibilities is a matter of attention. Through attention, the possibility becomes a necessity that asks for action. For Weil, as discussed in chapter 1, in relation to her essay *La personne et le sacré* and the good Samaritan in *Attente de Dieu*, helping others is not rooted in rights or worthiness but in their need. The Samaritan’s actions exemplify attention; she is simply attending and aiding because reality, once attended to, demands it. It is a moment of creative attention to suffering (LN 149).

When we obey, i.e., accept because we paid attention or because an external cause showed us that ‘we are nothing’, then, Weil says, certain actions become impossible for us, which means, for instance, that if we really ‘see’ the condition of someone suffering, if we really are aware of that suffering, it will become impossible for us to look the other way.

The clear vision of reality, with its healing potential, stems from ‘moral imagination and moral effort’, (IP 329) as Murdoch illustrates.¹⁷⁹ Selfless attention embodies hopefulness, recognising the potential of reality and our responsibility to protect and preserve its inherent vulnerability. As Murdoch writes, ‘innumerable individual things, of innumerable kinds ... crave for our attention and ... our protection’ (MGM 299). Weil argues that the world claims ‘to be read otherwise’, attended to, and protected. When we understand this, action follows: ‘We have to see things in their right relationship and ourselves, including the purposes we bear within us, as one of the terms of that relationship. Action follows naturally from this’ (GG 48). Similarly, Murdoch asserts that ‘One must see what is happening, what is there, in order to be able to see what ought to be done’ (MGM 218). We

¹⁷⁹ On the topic of imagination in Murdoch’s philosophy, see Altorf (2008) and on literary imagination see Leeson and White (2023).

must perceive the reality of a situation, and the relationships to its possibilities through imagination, to determine what needs to be done.

In conclusion, attention directs itself to individual realities (IP 329), ultimately addressing their needs and claims. When encountering suffering, Weil argues, we tend to transform the sufferer into an object that embodies suffering itself. Only by paying attention to a sufferer's individuality can our concepts evolve, as explained in the previous chapter. When we change our concepts, thanks to the encounters with individual realities and our attention towards them, our concepts can become increasingly detailed, change in degree, but also transform. And if it is true that there are 'actions that are just not compatible with holding a given concept' (Caprioglio Panizza 2022, 167), then extending our vocabulary of attention – changing the way we read the world – will allow new affordances in our understanding and agency.

3.5 Public in-attention to suffering

Our capacity to pay sustained attention to the Other greatly depends on how the particular suffering Other is represented by our society, and the relationship between that society and suffering. Our ability to pay attention is always situated within a broader historical/cultural/social/public attention.

Our quality of attention and the objects of our attention are also shaped by the world presented to us. Caprioglio Panizza observes: 'Although we have some agency in perception, it is not a secret that perception can be manipulated, so that some aspects are presented as more salient, or some uncomfortable facts are simply, quietly, hidden' (Caprioglio Panizza 2022, 143). In fact, how images of suffering are shown to us is significant. As Sontag observes, 'public attention is steered by the attentions of the media – which means, most decisively, images. When there are photographs, a war becomes "real"' (Sontag 2004, 93). Our elective attention is directed towards groups we learn to care about. Those of us in the Western world, far removed from conflicts, are exposed to an overwhelming amount of visual information, which often leads, for Sontag, to a sense of callousness. This, Sontag writes, originates from 'the instability of attention' (Sontag 2004, 94) that television is designed to provoke and satisfy with its overload of images. This abundance 'keeps attention light, mobile, relatively indifferent to content'. The constant flow of images prevents any single image attaining privilege. Television normalises

restlessness and boredom, consumers become lethargic requiring continuous stimulation, and the content ends up merely serving as a stimulant. By contrast, ‘A more reflective engagement with content would require a certain intensity of awareness – just what is weakened by the expectations brought to images disseminated by the media, whose leaching out of content contributes most to the deadening of feeling’ (Sontag 2004, 95).

Caprioglio Panizza, for instance, uses the example of pictures of cows used in butcher’s stores or on the branding of meat. ‘Such gigantic effort to deflect attention away from the real thing is a testament that, as humans, we already believe in moral perception, and we believe in the power of (in)attention’ (Caprioglio Panizza 2022, 144). She adds:

Social, political and economic forces are at work all the time to direct, thwart and blunt our attention, as we are increasingly aware. And Murdoch was too (although most of her arguments target the individual), suggesting that ‘Modern industrial mass-productive society impairs our power to perceive’ (MGM 377) (Caprioglio Panizza 156).

Our societies seem to be set on a path where the more that we exclude the experience of real suffering from everyday life (usually, people no longer die at home, clinics and hospices now take care of the dying, removing them from the familiar sphere, upholding the social isolation and stigma for ‘modern sufferers’), the more we enhance our daily exposure to images and videos of suffering people with whom we have no emotional connection.

The distance imposed by technology, and the way that suffering people we see on screens daily fall outside our sphere of care, seems to have created a sense of inevitable inaction. Weil almost prophetically anticipated this inability in her famous 1934 essay *Réflexion*¹⁸⁰, discussed in chapter 1, where she underlines the modern disconnection between attention and *le malheur* as the deeper evil of today’s time.

Sontag, discussing the Bosnian War in the early 1990s, writes that compassion (non-attentive, so not intended as a result of attention) is unstable and

¹⁸⁰ ‘Marx said prophetically, and indeed this still has something of the status of a prophecy, that now for the first time in history the human race had the technical means to cure many of its age-old ills such as hunger and homelessness and poverty. We today are in an even more remarkable situation. We are not only coming into possession of the means to cure the ills, we are in the position of not being able to avoid quite literally seeing them’ (EM 230).

‘needs to be translated into action or it withers’ (Sontag 2004, 90). She points out that apathy, often seen in our times, arises from knowing about distant suffering yet feeling powerless. This apathy is one of the counter-concepts of attention prevalent in our experience today, when the possibility of learning in detail about distant suffering goes hand in hand with our feeling of impotence. She states that apathy is filled with feelings of rage and frustration, and adds:

The states described as apathy, moral or emotional anesthesia, are full of feelings; the feelings are rage and frustration. But if we consider what emotions would be desirable, it seems too simple to elect sympathy. The imaginary proximity to the suffering inflicted on others that is granted by images suggests a link between the faraway sufferers – seen close-up on the television screen – and the privileged viewer that is simply untrue, that is yet one more mystification of our real relations to power. So far as we feel sympathy, we feel we are not accomplices to what caused the suffering. Our sympathy proclaims our innocence as well as our impotence. To that extent, it can be (for all our good intentions) an impertinent – if not an inappropriate – response (Sontag 2004, 91).

Indeed, if sympathy within sustained attention can lead to attentive compassion that reveals the moral obligation to act, sympathy without attention can make us feel absolved from responsibility.

In front of a modern life in which our attention (or better, inattention) is fragmented and commodified, as Sontag writes, photographs of suffering and the reality of war can still be ‘*an invitation to pay attention*, to reflect, to learn, to examine the rationalizations for mass suffering offered by established powers’ (Sontag 2004, 104, my emphasis). She underlines both the potential and the limits of photography:

Certain photographs – emblems of suffering, such as the snapshot of the little boy in the Warsaw Ghetto in 1943, his hands raised, being herded to the transport to a death camp – can be used like *memento mori*, as objects of contemplation to deepen one's sense of reality; as secular icons, if you will. But that would seem to demand the equivalent of a sacred or meditative space in which to look at them (Sontag 2004, 107).

In fact, she writes, ‘Space reserved for being serious is hard to come by in a modern society, whose chief model of a public space is the megastore (which may also be an airport or a museum)’ (Sontag 2004, 107). At the same time, she seems to suggest that literature might be a more proper space for attention to suffering. In fact, as I will explore in the next chapter, literature requires an attentive engagement through time, in an intimate silent space.

Sontag suggests that the impact of photographs depicting suffering might be better preserved in a book, where individuals can privately and attentively contemplate the images ('look privately, linger over the pictures, without talking' (Sontag 2004, 109)). However, even in this context, the strong emotions elicited by photographs are temporary. Over time, the specific accusations and denunciations captured in the photographs lose their original intentions, eventually becoming generalised indictments of human cruelty and savagery. Sontag concludes her essay by questioning whether images can mobilise people to actively oppose war as effectively as a narrative might. She posits that narratives might be more effective in engendering opposition to the issues narrated, like, for instance, capital punishment: 'A narrative seems likely to be more effective than an image. Partly it is a question of *the length of time* one is obliged to look, to feel' (Sontag 2004, 110, my emphasis). I shall explore this point further in the next chapter. Let us now look at another way of counteracting public in-attention to suffering.

3.6 Attention is political: the example of bearing attentive witness

When we manage to pay attention to the suffering of others, action follows. This places attention at the intersection of ethics and politics, making it inherently political. Expanding on the concept presented in the introduction and in 3.5 – the 'attention economy' and the 'commodification of attention' – we see that our individual capacity for attention exists within a broader societal, historical, and cultural context of attention¹⁸¹. This context constitutes a sort of hierarchy of what is most visible to us, and thus presented to our attention, through media for instance. However, what our societies pay more attention to can be counteracted through our attentive efforts which also include forms of paying attention together,¹⁸² such as 'bearing attentive witness'.

¹⁸¹ Again, attention here is not taken as the selfless kind that I address in this thesis, indeed, we could call it inattention in opposition.

¹⁸² The exploration of communal, joint, shared, and mutual attention cannot be addressed here for a matter of space, and many critical issues would arise since, for instance, Weil sees attention as something that we can do only alone ('attention of rare quality [...] is only possible in solitude' (HP 108)), and as Murdoch writes 'indeed it is rarely mutual' (MGM 463). Therefore, I will speak for now of paying attention together. At the same time, the concept of suffering would also require an analogous study of joint, shared, mutual suffering. Weil's 'vocation of loneliness', as Murdoch calls it, is connected to her view of the void, and the experience of the void, *le malheur*: 'If our present suffering ever does lead to a moral reorientation, it will not be accomplished by slogans, but in silence and moral solitude, through pain, misery, terror, in the deepest part of each spirit' (RL 154).

Sontag argues that acknowledging suffering is important, even if we do not know how to alleviate it. She emphasises that no one has the right to remain ignorant or indifferent to human depravity:

Someone who is perennially surprised that depravity exists, who continues to feel disillusioned (even incredulous) when confronted with evidence of what humans are capable of inflicting in the way of gruesome, hands-on cruelties upon other humans, has not reached moral or psychological adulthood. No one after a certain age has the right to this kind of innocence, of superficiality, to this degree of ignorance, or amnesia. There now exists a vast repository of images that make it harder to maintain this kind of moral defectiveness. Let the atrocious images haunt us (Sontag 2004, 102).

Images of suffering, ‘Even if they are only tokens, and cannot possibly encompass most of the reality to which they refer’, serve as vital reminders of what humans are capable of, they tell us ‘Don’t forget’ (Sontag 2004, 102). Weil, whose actions mirrored her thoughts, demonstrated this with her life choices. While her approach may seem ‘unrealistic’, it represents an ideal that many still strive for. The fact that it sounds ‘unrealistic’ does not exclude that it might be instead the most ‘real’ way of acting. Indeed, her way has been, and still is, a standard for many. Nonetheless, despite her extreme example, one need not lead a ‘saintly life’ but can still pay attention by focusing one’s gaze on the surrounding reality ‘at hand’: one’s community.

Besides ‘the food and shelter level’,¹⁸³ which Murdoch also saw as the most urgent, bearing witness to others’ suffering could be another, perhaps underestimated, way to act towards the suffering Other within an ethics of attention. This can be done through literature, art, by regenerating spaces, or other means such as silent vigils as political protest, in which we can acknowledge the existence of suffering. Caprioglio Panizza suggests that

attention can have the value of acknowledgement even if the object does not know about it. This is shown in practices such as holding moments of silence for victims of oppressive regimes, or in the practice of ‘bearing witness’ to animals being killed, outside slaughterhouses. Attention says: this is real, this deserves to be seen or known – and even ‘I am here’ to those who cannot hear it (Caprioglio Panizza 2022, 41).

¹⁸³ Murdoch writes: ‘When I was young I thought, as all young people do, that freedom was the thing. Later on I felt that virtue was the thing. Now I begin to suspect that freedom and virtue are concepts which ought to be pinned into place by some more fundamental thinking about a proper quality of human life, which begins at the food and shelter level’ (EM 231).

One example of this type of attention ‘together’ is, I argue, explored by Lisa Guenther in her article ‘Memory, Imagination, and Resistance in Canada’s Prison for Women’ (2022). Guenther speaks about ‘counter-memories’¹⁸⁴ spaces where former places of suffering challenge dominant public memories, often based on positive images of peace and progress. The ethical dimension of collective memory demands our responsibility and constitutes a form of communal attention – or a joint bearing attentive witness to past violence inflicted on those who fall outside of the canon of public memory – urging us to listen and respond to these marginalised stories. From this perspective, an ethical imperative to remember past violence to prevent it from happening again becomes urgent. This attentive and communal remembering is a generative practice for the future. Sontag notes that collective memory often involves stipulating which stories are important (Sontag 2004, 76), as seen in the proliferation of memory museums, suggesting that some memories are deemed too dangerous to social stability (Sontag 2004, 78).¹⁸⁵

Another possibility of bearing attentive witness to suffering within the framework of Weil’s philosophy is to bear attentive witness to the future threat of climate collapse. For Weil, the moral obligation in front of the suffering Other is to provide them with witness and words about their suffering, which they have lost under the grip of the de-realising *malheur*. In her view, vulnerability, exposure to finitude, and loss imply a moral obligation towards others. In a time of indulgence and inattention like ours, with the threat of climate change looming over future generations, Weil’s idea of obligations (instead of rights)¹⁸⁶ within an ethics of attention seems particularly fitting. Replacing *les malheureux* with future generations (potential *malheureux*), who currently cannot fight for (or speak of) their rights and their potential *malheur*, the idea of obligation as the starting point for any human agency seems ineluctable.

We can express the moral value of attention towards distant wars, past events like the Holocaust, present or past suffering within prisons, or future generations facing climate disaster through paying attention together. An exploration of these forms of ‘bearing attentive witness to suffering’ cannot be accommodated here. I

¹⁸⁴ Such as the garden built by P4W (Prison for Women) described by Guenther (2022).

¹⁸⁵ For instance, she questions why there is no Museum of the History of Slavery in Washington.

¹⁸⁶ See chapter 1.

will only explore art and literature as ‘forms of attention’ that can bear witness to suffering and reality. ‘Literary witness’ to suffering, albeit an individual act by an attentive writer, nonetheless has the potential for a political and social impact by enabling readers to view that suffering, their own responsibility, and themselves with greater attention. Weil said that what is valuable in a human being is not their personality but their potential to get closer to the Good (or as she puts it, not to be a screen between the creator and its creation). Attentive compassion for others involves recognising their condition and potential for reality. Great literature recognises this potential in its readers.¹⁸⁷ This perspective, as I will show in chapter 5, is ultimately a type of optimism, or perhaps ‘secular’ faith, which holds together literature and its educative, enriching, inspiring, and moral side.¹⁸⁸

3.7 The ‘use’ of suffering

I opened this chapter by delving into the analysis of attention to suffering, particularly suffering inflicted by external forces such as violence, war, and oppression. Now, our analysis will move from others’ suffering to our own to explore whether we can learn from it or derive anything positive from looking at our own and other people’s suffering.

To address this, I continue examining Weil’s concept of *le malheur* and Murdoch’s interpretation of it, introducing the potential for a ‘positive’ use of suffering¹⁸⁹. This will involve comparing Weil with Sartre through Murdoch’s philosophical perspective, which will clarify some difficult points.

¹⁸⁷ On the potential of literature to inspire attention in readers, C. Wallace quotes Rozelle-Stone, who writes: ‘our attentiveness, being creative in its renunciation, makes it more likely that others will see reality as well’ (Rozelle-Stone 2013, 137).

¹⁸⁸ This thesis provides an account of ‘bearing attentive witness’ explored through Morante’s novel *La Storia* and its mystical realism, demonstrating literature’s role in education and moral development. I believe that this concept opens the door to further studies on an ethics of attentive witness, relevant to collective memory studies, testimonial injustice, and art theories, at the threshold of ethics and politics.

¹⁸⁹ Murdoch’s first encounter with the idea of a positive role of suffering likely occurred in Eduard Fraenkel’s Agamemnon class in Oxford’s autumn term of 1938. That was probably her first encounter with the Aeschylean idea of *pathos*, which played an important role in her investigation of Weil’s view on suffering. Fraenkel examined the meaning Aeschylus conveys in Agamemnon’s suffering, gone ‘rooted into the very conditions of life’ at the mercy of divine justice. Fraenkel’s research into human destiny and guilt through *Agamemnon* was inevitably related to the approaching war. His 1938 classes, which discussed of the problem of evil and human suffering, could be seen as a laboratory to explore the building drama in Europe. The moral lesson of the ancient Greeks, that suffering can be ‘healing’ (‘suffering teaches’ she also writes in 1945), is a starting point for Murdoch. Her experience of the Agamemnon class, as she describes it in her 1977 poem titled

As we have seen, Weil's concepts of the void and *le malheur* are intertwined. Experiencing *le malheur* always entails a sense of void, though encountering a void does not always lead to *le malheur*. Instead, the experience of a void can also occur in moments of attention and selflessness.

Murdoch's exploration of Weil's ideas is most evident in her 1951 BBC radio talk¹⁹⁰ and in the chapter 'Void' in MGM. In the talk, her first extensive discussion of Weil's philosophy, Murdoch indicates what she takes to be its core thematic: 'For Simone Weil the main fact of human life, and the fact which we must not flinch from if we are to find out any truth about it, is the fact of affliction. *Le Malheur*' (BBC 11). Here she provides her own definition of Weil's *malheur*: 'When the necessity of the world cuts across our path, when we experience both its violence and its utter lack of purpose, then we are afflicted', adding '*This puts us in a privileged situation*' (BBC 11, my emphasis).

This 'privileged situation' is potentially problematic in Weil and Murdoch's reading of her. Murdoch elaborates by quoting from *La pesanteur et la grâce*:

Contradiction alone proves to us that we are not all ["Contradiction alone is the proof that we are not everything" from GG 2003, 95]... The experience of suffering is the experience of reality. For our suffering is not something which we invent. It is true. That is why it must be cherished. All the rest is imaginary (GG 10).

In relation to this, Murdoch writes: 'The greatness of Christianity, Simone Weil says, lies in its seeking not a supernatural remedy for suffering but a supernatural *use* for the suffering' (BBC 11). This *use* of suffering through art needs further exploration in a secular setting.

'Agamemnon Class, 1939', sounds like the stirrings of a moral awakening, the unfolding of an adult consciousness shaken by dramatic current events, awakened by the Greeks. The atmosphere evoked by the poem is that of the threshold between innocence – 'the playtime of the '30s has come to an end', as she writes to Thompson (Conradi 2001, 108) – and what is yet to emerge. The war is the line that makes the still-distant idea of 'how absolute death is' conceivable. In her lines 'The Holy One / Having suffered too long / Eventually dies', Murdoch seems to allude to the death of the idea of God wrought by human hands, and the death of religion with Her, so that 'the sanctuary is bombed and lies / Open and unmysterious' because there is nothing there to be kept anymore: 'Was there a god there? We never saw him' (quoted in Conradi 2001). Towards the end, the almost lapidary words 'What was it for?' question all the suffering, death, and self-sacrifice of 'heroes'. This question resonates throughout Murdoch's thought, eminently so in the radio-opera *The One Alone*, where it is posed with urgency.

¹⁹⁰ In this talk, Murdoch introduces Weil's decision to stay 'outside' the Catholic Church, for 'she feared' its 'social structure', 'its authoritarian character, and what one might call its "cosiness"' (BBC 11).

Murdoch touches on the comparison between Weil and Sartre here, their shared attention to *le monde vécu*, but observes that, unlike Sartre, Weil escaped ‘the dash of romanticism’:

No existentialist could excel her in picturing the pointlessness of the natural world – and yet, how she has transformed this idea! She makes of it a picture of obedience, a form of beauty, something which can command our love (BBC 13).

The notion of attention to pure *malheur* I have sketched so far is akin to living within contradiction, as *le malheur* represents loss of hope while attention embodies hope: attention to *le malheur* is impossible for it is hope directed towards its loss (the Other’s *malheur*) or hope coming from a place of hopelessness (our own *malheur*). Weil writes: ‘But if the soul stops loving it falls, even in this life, into something almost equivalent to hell’ (LGA 121).

The void if not experienced through obedience, through our consent, cannot be – as Weil calls it – ‘a spiritual achievement’. The void experienced in *malheur*, if not accepted, remains empty, full of pain and remorse leaving us in complete darkness at the furthest distance from God.

This possibility of orientation, rooted in transcendence, is what makes the void radically different from Sartre’s nothingness and its angst;¹⁹¹ ‘This void is

¹⁹¹ Sartre and Murdoch (and Weil) start from similar premises arriving at different conclusions. The human condition at the foundation of their philosophy is similar but Sartre, in Murdoch’s view, ends up giving a stoical and romantic answer, from which Murdoch firmly distances herself. In Murdoch’s view, Sartre argues that humans inhabit a universe without transcendent objective truth, where truth depends on the individual, and there is no inherent human nature, only a human condition (EPM 134). Murdoch refers to Sartre’s view as the ‘romantic answer’, where the individual consciousness is seen as absolute, leading to the idea of the ‘free and lonely self’. For Sartre, humans face a world of ambiguities that must be resolved through action or inaction, and we are ‘condemned to choose’ within the limits of our situation (NM 104). Ultimately, Sartre believes ‘man is nothing other than what he makes of himself’ (Sartre 2007, 23). Murdoch critiques Sartre’s idea that consciousness (*pour-soi*) is nothing, with no inherent meaning but serving as the source of all meaning. Sartre shows that ‘angst, angoisse, dread’ arise from this nothingness, as we must contend with the world and the Other, whose gaze objectifies us (*pour-soi* into *en-soi*) (SRR 11). This leads to ‘ethical loneliness’ and a perpetual ‘state of war with other selves’ (NM 106). Murdoch critiques Sartre for equating value with the nostalgia for a stable, lived totality (SRR 93). While Sartre sees value as a lack or incompleteness, Murdoch argues that value resides in the ordinary variousness of reality. Sartre’s claim that value does not exist prior to action contrasts with Murdoch’s belief in the absolute value of reality and truth as prerequisites for moral development. For Sartre, individuals create value through their choices, with responsibility not only for themselves but for the image of humanity which their behaviour suggests (SRR 102). This responsibility, without the guidance of any pre-existing ‘rational nature’, adds weight to Sartre’s pessimistic view of human possibilities. His belief in only Reason brings him to consider irreducibility, what cannot be comprehended by Reason, as evil. ‘His Evil is not human misery or the social conditions, or even

somehow more convincing than angst', Murdoch notes in her copy of *Notebook 1*. Reviewing Weil's Notebooks in 1956, she observes:

Her concept of 'the void', which must be experienced in the achieving of detachment, differs from the Angst of popular existentialism, in that Angst is usually thought of as something which circumstances may force upon a man, whereas experience of the void is a spiritual achievement, involving the control of the imagination, that 'restorer of balances' (KV 159).¹⁹²

In her MGM Chapter 'Void', Murdoch starts from the premise that 'It is terrible to be human', that the condition of 'despair' or 'affliction' is a condition 'of desolation such as many or most human beings have met with', since 'the average inhabitant of the planet is probably without hope and starving'. After presenting the dangers of looking for consolation, she tackles the danger of masochism:

another approach is to say that suffering is good for the soul, the experience of desolation can be a kind of teaching. This may be so, though perhaps (how can one know) more often not so (MGM 500).

Nonetheless, despite learning from suffering being almost impossible, she writes that in experiencing the void, the lesson: that 'we are nothing' can, finally, make us humble at least. In other words, experiencing the void, we realise 'There is nothing that cannot be broken or taken from us. [That] ultimately we are nothing' (MGM 501). This 'teaching' retains validity even before another's suffering: in them, we could, if we pay attention, recognise our nothingness.

The experience of the void can serve as 'a reminder of our mortality, a recognition of contingency' (MGM 501). This is, I believe, the 'use' of suffering that, as I will show in chapter 4, is best achieved through great art. Murdoch states: 'it is possible, but very often just too difficult, to "learn" from deep despair' (MGM 501-02). She acknowledges that 'one's persona or self-protective personality or "life illusion" is part of one's working gear as a human being' (MGM 501). Likewise, I argue, she sees the 'spiritual or moral use of suffering' as an ideal in Weil that should not be dismissed. Following Weil, Murdoch insists (perhaps more

the bad will, which may produce it, but the unintelligibility of our finite condition' (SRR 106). Ultimately, the Sartrean world lacks complexity and mystery, which instead Murdoch finds first in Marcel, and then Weil.

¹⁹² 'Spiritual progress is won through meditation: a view which is a contrast (and some may think a welcome corrective) to contemporary English ethics with its exclusive emphasis on act and choice, and its neglect of the 'inner life'. Here, oddly enough, English philosophy and popular existentialism are on the same side, with their urgent cry of 'we have to choose!' – a doctrine which is, after all, consoling for us sinners who blunder on through a life of continual mistakes' (KV 159).

firmly) on the difficulty of that use. For instance, in the MGM chapter ‘Comic & Tragic’, she writes:

No doubt this very rarely, perhaps never altogether, happens; and indignation at the cosmos may often seem more proper than a selfless sympathy with natural law! Who are *we* to feel such sympathy? We are not gods. (It is a new blessing in our modern age that we are learning to love the planet and care for its natural ways. This too teaches something) (MGM 109).

As I outlined, Murdoch shares Weil’s deliberate use of ‘ideals’ to discuss reality.¹⁹³ MGM contains frequent references to ‘extreme suffering’, for example, ‘innumerable unknown saints and martyrs, such as the dissident who is shot down crying out the truth, or perishes incognito in prison’ (MGM 429)¹⁹⁴. This ‘extreme suffering, [which] from one cause or another, is likely to be the lot of everyone at some time in life’, and the condition that ‘every individual is ultimately alone’ (MGM 504) is central to Murdoch’s *The One Alone*, which I explore in chapter 4, where Murdoch plays with¹⁹⁵ the possibility of transforming a dark, empty void into a ‘live’ one:

Experiences of void can also, sometimes perhaps ‘in the long run’ when they have been lived with, be put to more positive and creative use, or as one may put it, assume a different meaning. The ‘dead’ void may become ‘live’, or ‘magnetic’ (MGM 504).

¹⁹³ ‘If we reflect upon “human nature” or wish to use the concept, we may be led to think of “types” and of the function of various “ideals”’ (MGM 354).

¹⁹⁴ The hero-saint is often present in Murdoch’s novels. Usually, it is a Buddhist-like man active in life and inwardly idealist. In *The Saint and the Artist*, Conradi defines them as a Weilian character. Murdoch’s first love, Frank Thompson seems to have embodied this idea. Murdoch met Thompson in her first year at Oxford. After he left Oxford, they exchanged letters throughout the war until his death in June 1944. Thompson, unlike Murdoch, despised institutional Roman Catholicism, but he appreciated, the figure of Christ: ‘thinking Christ’s death an even more splendid gesture than Socrates’ (Conradi 2001, 174). Sacrificial death is central for Thompson during those years informing his thought and eventually his death (See ‘Polliciti Meliora’ in Conradi (2001, 174-175)). He believed something good had to flourish from wartime’s suffering, through ‘imagination, help and sympathy’ (Conradi 2001, 182). In Thompson’s words, ‘If we should meet again, why then, we’ll smile’ (Conradi 2001, 183). His answer is that: ‘If not, why then those that follow us will be able to smile far more happily and honestly in the world we all helped to make. No men are more disarming in their gaiety than these men our allies, who have known more suffering than we can easily imagine’ (Conradi 2001, 183). Thompson’s ideal was ‘building a new communal ethic’ (Conradi 2001, 185), and thus, like Weil, a new imaginary for Europe. ‘When this war is over’, wrote Thompson in August 1942, ‘there will have to be an enormous deal of kindness to atone for all the senseless hate & suffering of these years’ (Conradi 2001, 205). Thompson died in 1944, executed with a volume of Catullus in his pocket. In 1988, Murdoch said she would have married him writing ‘He was pure gold’, she wrote (Conradi 2001, 194).

¹⁹⁵ In her literary writings, Murdoch plays with philosophical ideas. Stretching, confusing and clarifying them. As such, while it’s impossible to take the novels as an extension of her philosophy they remain a cauldron where her ideas and the ideas she opposed, can be questioned in imaginative ways. In this sense, as she claims in opposition to Sartre’s novels, hers are not philosophical novels.

Murdoch explores the idea of a possible ‘positive and creative use’ of suffering, more cautiously than Weil, who defines pure *malheur* as ‘a marvel of divine technique’. Yet, Murdoch does not see Weil as a romantic masochist, as for Weil, ‘needless suffering’ is ‘degrading’ (N I 222).

I argue that the moral/spiritual use of suffering is not about self-inflicted or romanticised suffering. It can mean enduring the occurrence of suffering to attain reality and understanding that ‘all is vanity’ and that ultimately ‘we are nothing’. This is somehow related to goodness, while for Weil, and also for Murdoch, evil concerns *unreality* – the self-illusions we use to hide from suffering.¹⁹⁶

To lose somebody: we suffer at the thought that the dead one, the absent one, should have become something imaginary, something false. But the longing we have for him is not imaginary. We must go down into ourselves where the desire which is not imaginary resides ... The loss of contact with reality – there lies evil, there lies grief ... *The remedy is to use the loss itself as an intermediary for attaining reality.* The presence of the dead one is imaginary, but his absence is real, it is henceforth his manner of appearing (GG 23, quoted in MGM 502).

I argue that this spiritual or moral use of suffering means, for Weil and Murdoch (to some extent), trying to conceive a new orientation from a state of void, achievable only after accepting the void’s reality. Murdoch writes:

We must experience the reality of pain, and not fill the void with fantasy. The image of balance: the void as the anguished experience of lack of balance ... Void makes loss a reality. Do not think about righting the balance, but live close to the painful reality and try to relate it to what is good. What is needed here, and is so difficult to achieve, is a new orientation of our desires, a re-education of our instinctive feelings (MGM 503).

Living close to the ‘painful reality’, and thus to the void, and trying ‘to relate it to what is good’ is the ‘moral/spiritual use of suffering’ that I ascribe to the attentive writer. Using suffering this way, can make art ‘an intermediary for attaining reality’ (GG 23) offered to the attentive reader.

Murdoch’s 23 September 1951 journal states: ‘I call Sartre “romantic” and would not call her [Simone Weil] so’ (Conradi 2001, 260). Murdoch recognises that

¹⁹⁶ Although Murdoch also sees the Good as totally transcendent and totally absent in its purest form, Weil’s conception of evil is more extreme, for she sees the whole visible reality as ‘other’ from God, who is absent from it, and therefore tends to consider reality under the law of necessity as evil. This has sometimes attracted criticism of Manichaeism, however, this evil is not an entity in itself, but it is always connected to the human being, as it is the self that creates a ‘screen’ in between God and creation.

Weil's ideas of void and *malheur*, while possessing a metaphysical framework and possible 'spiritual/moral use(s)', provide no consolations. In contrast, Sartre, in the emptiness of a world without God, offers, in Murdoch's view, a romanticised view of suffering, making 'despair' an absolute, 'a universal human characteristic' as stated by Lukács. Sartre's lonely self hides a romantic consolation. As Lukács writes:

they [the existentialists] welcome a philosophy which says that all human life is essentially senseless and that man lives *vis-à-vis du néant*. So they can feel that their miserable lot is the lot of all humanity, and not just their historical fate (EPM 137).¹⁹⁷

As Scott-Baumann observes in *The Murdochian Mind*, 'for Murdoch we are indeed defined by lack, loss and longing but – in contrast with Sartre's fatalism – she believes that this can give us agency' (Scott-Baumann 2022, 295).

However, Murdoch critiques Weil's readiness 'to embrace evil and to love God as its author; many readers may find a repellent and self-destructive quality in her austerity' (KV 160)¹⁹⁸. She adds:

She endorsed the Greek view that 'to philosophise is to learn how to die' – and it is hard not to believe that she in some way willed her own early death. Yet the other side of this is the sense of a profoundly disciplined life behind her writings: the union of a passionate search for truth with a simplicity and austerity of personal living, which gives to what she writes an authority which cannot be imitated ... [she] is most properly to be understood as an example (KV 160).

In 1951 Murdoch critiques Weil's concept of the void and *malheur*. She finds her too austere 'to the point of deleting the particular person altogether', therefore too ready to discard the idea of particularity as, she says, 'her model for the spiritual life is not the particular human bond, it is the life of the intellect' (BBC 14). I argued that Weil speaks mostly of 'pure attention', as the only 'passive activity' of the

¹⁹⁷ The dreadful sense of emptiness experienced by the protagonist of *La nausée*, Roquentin, is given by the contingency of the world and the vain human aspiration to be God. (L'homme est une passion inutile). The conclusion to such 'passion inutile' in Sartre is 'Why bother'. Ultimately, any motivation is insincere, the 'I' is always unreal and reified by the others. It is in this sense that Sartre is for Murdoch a stoical romantic – believing in nothing except Reason – and a nihilist for whom the process of self-knowledge is 'negative and destructive' (HMD 149).

¹⁹⁸ 'There is something immediately commanding about the austerity of Simone Weil's thought' (BBC 12).

intellect (of that part of the intellect that is imageless¹⁹⁹ attention, that is Love) operating on the ‘ideal’ level where no self remains. Murdoch’s philosophy instead operates within the infinite area of human experience that precedes ‘pure attention’ but is nonetheless attention; what I called ‘attentive reading’. This is the meditative and imaginative moral exploration of the messy background of our experience which is often relational (‘the intellectual work is not only attention – it is also setting the stage for attention. And where most human matters are concerned we are never able to finish for long with the task of setting the stage’ (BBC 15)).

Murdoch described Weil in an annotation to *Notebook 1*: ‘Not an attractive personality – but in a way, such is her power, that doesn’t matter’. Despite the controversy surrounding Weil’s person and philosophy, and Murdoch’s reading of Weil, Murdoch still considers Weil one of the finest voices on suffering. As she writes in ‘Void’ in MGM:

Sartre’s *néant*, ... is more like an exciting springboard than a void. (I do not mean that Sartre did not suffer, but that the reality of suffering is not expressed.) ... A fine writer on the subject, outside art, and *sui generis* philosophical, is Simone Weil. It is just, for reasons which have their own obviousness, very difficult to ‘touch’ this dark condition. Perhaps art does it best after all (MGM 499-500).

This ‘perhaps art does it best after all’, receives vague support in Weil’s writings, but Murdoch definitely accounts for it in her philosophy of literature. Thus in the next chapter, I will transition from Weil to Murdoch’s philosophy of literature which I will use as a lens to examine Morante’s mystical realism as an example of ‘a spiritual use of suffering’ translated into a literary ‘attentive witness’ to suffering²⁰⁰.

¹⁹⁹ ‘The imageless austerity of Zen is impressive and attractive. It represents to us ‘the real thing’, what it is like to be stripped of the ego, and how difficult this is. (Plato’s distance from the sun.) Simone Weil felt a natural affinity with this “extremism” which indeed she practised in her own life. She had studied Hindu and Buddhist philosophy. She at the same time loved Plato and the mystical Christ. Relentless asceticism may be suspect simply because we “do not know what is going on”. This indeed may never be known, even by the ascetic himself. (God only knows.) In religious houses, doubts constantly return: is it a spiritual dark night or is it just egoistic despair?’ (MGM 247-248).

²⁰⁰ Wallace, in her exploration of writers influenced by Weil also finds the same effort in American writers such as Adrienne Rich. In her book, she writes, ‘Rich turns her gaze outward to women suffering in other parts of the world and in bearing witness to their suffering in the poem in some sense creates them’ (C. Wallace 2024, 58).

3.8 Weil: ‘dangerously ascetic and/or masochistic’?²⁰¹ And the ‘Weil factor’ in Murdoch

After exploring the idea of a moral use of suffering, it is essential to examine how this controversial and problematic concept has created challenges in the scholarship on both Murdoch and Weil. As we have seen, the prevailing view tends to interpret Murdoch’s thought as a secularisation of Weil’s ideas.²⁰² In this framework, The ‘Weil factor’²⁰³ plays an ambiguous role in Murdoch that stems from Weil’s idea of suffering²⁰⁴ and its consequences on her private life, predominantly framed ‘masochism’ by scholars leading to critiques of misogyny. Weil’s influence is seen as projecting opacity in Murdoch’s fiction, resulting in awkward representations of the oppressed, especially women. Let us now examine this issue outlining the ongoing scholarly discussion and locating my research in it.

A. S. Byatt’s *Degrees of Freedom* (1965) was the first engagement with the relation between Murdoch’s concept of freedom and Weil’s idea of *malheur*, especially in the chapter dedicated to *The Unicorn*, a novel which, Byatt rightfully suggests, cannot be fully understood without reading Weil.

Byatt explores the ‘difficult idea’ of ‘redemptive suffering’ (Byatt 1994, 182), which Weil sees as ‘the acceptance of injustice, the acceptance of suffering, as an apprehension of reality’ (Byatt 1994, 183). She describes Hannah’s attitude in *The Unicorn* from a Freudian point of view. Her ‘passive suffering, her religion of guilt and withdrawal’, Byatt suggests, ‘can be seen, not as “real” religious act, but as an obsessional neurotic fantasy’ (Byatt 1994, 173). She fails to follow the ‘real’ good

²⁰¹ (Larson 2014, 155).

²⁰² As Broackes writes, and Caprioglio Panizza confirms in her 2017 article (although she is less of this opinion in her later book): Murdoch ‘has transposed much of Weil’s thought into a new key, and made it her own. Where Weil talked of God and the methods and training for coming to a love of God, Murdoch will talk of Good and the methods and training for coming to a love of the Good’ (2017, 19). As I hope to make clear in my work, I argue that Murdoch, instead, creatively re-shaped something that was already there; something that was at the same time non-religious and religious together.

²⁰³ Sabina Lovibond’s expression in her book on Weil and gender (Lovibond 2011, 28).

²⁰⁴ How problematic can be to speak about suffering in these terms in modern times is well examined by Sontag. When reporting on Georges Bataille and the picture, taken in China, of atrocious suffering of a prisoner undergoing ‘the death of a hundred cuts’, he kept on his desk and looked at every day, she says something interesting for our argument: ‘Bataille is not saying that he takes pleasure at the sight of this excruciation. But he is saying that he can imagine extreme suffering as something more than just suffering, as a kind of transfiguration. It is a view of suffering, of the pain of others, that is rooted in religious thinking, which links pain to sacrifice, sacrifice to exaltation – a view that could not be more alien to a modern sensibility, which regards suffering as something that is a mistake or an accident or a crime. Something to be fixed. Something to be refused. Something that makes one feel powerless’ (Sontag 2004, 88).

that would involve ‘the recognition of particular individuals, the love of other men as they are, the compassionate agnosticism’ (Byatt 1994, 197). Hannah follows ‘the “Romantic adoration of necessity”, and she makes a symbol of the concept of negative love, rather than a contingent and unknown reality with its transcendent quality’ (Byatt 1994, 199).

Accepting suffering is the opposite of comforting imagination, but Hannah’s suffering, for Byatt, does not express Weil’s idea: Hannah’s suffering ‘is not real’. Her attempt at selflessness is instead covertly an ‘obsessional fantasy’. Besides the fact that Hannah’s suffering is not real in the sense that it is a self-constructed illusion in which she cages herself and prevents herself from really seeing the others around her, Byatt notes an interesting point fundamental in distinguishing Murdoch’s incorporation of Weil from Morante’s and the reason why I use *La Storia* as a case study. Byatt, discussing *The Unicorn* (something I suggest applies to most of Murdoch’s fiction), observes that ‘Weil’s religious experience...is uneasy in terms of wealthy Anglo-Irish...of vague “distant” suffering, of magic garden and beautiful lady’ (Byatt 1994, 236). What differs most in Murdoch and Morante’s novels is their attention to different forms of suffering. Murdoch writes mostly about (the imaginary/ordinary) suffering of upper-class characters who experience individual and existential crises, entangled in private (often romantic) relations of power and subordination. These characters’ suffering reveals their incapacity to truly see reality. Therefore, she focuses on the modalities of deceiving themselves and others, fabricating dreams and submitting themselves to their (or to others’) illusions and power. Morante, especially in *La Storia*, focuses on the dichotomy of oppressor and oppressed from lower social classes, like Weil. These outcasts of humble origins appear in narratives focused on the representation of forms of collective and private power (for example, the false idea of revolution and the explication of power through the social bureaucratic machine), which are, again, fabricated illusions that obscure reality as it is. Regarding these different ‘kinds of suffering’ in Weil and Murdoch, Byatt notes:

I am not saying that a rich and beautiful woman locked up by her husband does not suffer as Simone Weil and her outcasts suffered (however she created her own suffering to parallel theirs). I am only saying that as an image of suffering she is much less likely to do more than stir the fantasy in us. It is a point that Miss Murdoch could make but does not make that there is a difference between these kinds of suffering, particularly since the religious

ideas without which we cannot understand Hannah's suffering at all are Simone Weil's and Simone Weil drew them from her experience of the real outcasts (Byatt 1994, 236, my emphasis).

Byatt reconnects Hannah's suffering to Weil's, especially regarding Hannah's worries about her own imagination, which was always Weil's first concern. Moreover, she notes that Hannah created her own suffering as an illusion that prevented her from getting close to or loving anyone, like Weil 'created her own suffering to parallel theirs [of the outcasts and the refugees]'. Nonetheless, Byatt portrays Hannah's self-creation of suffering as a self-centred fantasy with 'a touch of frivolity, a lack of seriousness' (Byatt 1994, 236), while 'Weil's own self-created suffering is again different in kind from anything we can even attribute to Hannah' (Byatt 1994, 136).

What is this different 'kind' that Byatt sees in Weil? It seems to be a 'creation' of suffering inspired by an other-centred disposition, a wish to share the suffering of the oppressed. This disposition is exemplified by Weil's experience in the Spanish Civil War, in her work in the factory, and her death (presumably) from starvation. Nonetheless, the verb 'creating' could confuse Weil's complex idea of suffering and *malheur*. For Weil, as discussed in chapter 1, *le malheur* is never created. Hers was suffering for the extreme suffering of the world that found its 'peak' in the experience of war. It is the constant day-dreaming 'created' by the human being to survive the terror that flows from the fact that human life is essentially submitted to chance and necessity.²⁰⁵

Byatt's suggestion is further elaborated by Gabriele Griffin in *The Influence of the Writings of Simone Weil on the Fiction of Iris Murdoch* (2005). Griffin adopts a psychoanalytical approach to explore gender in Murdoch's fiction. Where Byatt

²⁰⁵ Besides the concepts of necessity and gravity, and that of affliction, Byatt also explores the Weilian notion of uprootedness in *The Flight from the Enchanter* (Byatt 1955, 306). This novel most recalls Morante's literary imaginary, portraying more of the pressure of mechanical forces on the social and political realm rather than usual moral-individual realm. Frances White also explores displacement in *The Flight from the Enchanter*, focusing on the author's political idea of diaspora. She argues: '*The Flight from the Enchanter* is an indictment not only of individual failures of attention but also of the failure of English society as a whole to attend to the plight of the displaced' (White 2010, 11). In this novel, as Griffin notes, the character Nina seems to be based on Weil, and the topic of the Second World War, of refugees, destruction and displacement converge with Morante's *La Storia*. Conradi says: 'Murdoch found in Weil's *Need for Roots* and *Gravity and Grace* a way of thinking that put decentering and displacement at the centre' (Conradi 2001, 260). The same can be said regarding Morante. On these topics in Murdoch's writings, see Browning's chapter 6, 'Outsiders: Migrants, the Displaced, Refugees, and the Holocaust' (2024).

focused on freedom, uprootedness, gravity and suffering, Griffin examines what has remained unexplored: notions such as ‘good, God, love, and selflessness’. She notes that Byatt ‘does not deal with the question of why Weil’s writings should be able to exert an influence on Murdoch’ (Griffin 1993, 61).

Griffin borrows Kristeva’s distinction between semiotic and symbolic order, in turn polarising Murdoch’s writings through the masculine/feminine distinction. She argues that the concepts of attention, obedience, affliction, and selflessness are traditionally associated with the feminine sphere like other-centred concepts of submission. She claims:

Weil and Murdoch essentially propose a philosophy which perpetuates an already existent female attitude towards morality, ... [as they] attempt to validate and elevate to a universal principle of moral conduct ... what is basically the female position and experience in Western culture ... For women this moral philosophy implies remaining in and perfecting the state of complete other-orientedness they are socialised into anyway (Griffin 1993, 281).

Griffin elaborates on Byatt’s analysis of Weil’s ‘masochism’, a concept taken for granted by most critics, often without further explanation. In *The Saint and the Hero: Iris Murdoch and Simone Weil* (2011), Anne Rowe and Pamela Osborn write:

although the life Murdoch observed was in so many ways the antithesis of her own, in Weil’s fanatical asceticism, her contempt for pleasure, her denial of happiness, her grand political gestures, her physical frailty and her masochism, Murdoch felt an alter-ego, very close. (Rowe and Osborn 2011, 111).

But what are pleasure and happiness for Weil? These questions remain unanswered. For Weil, happiness is felt when one gains a clear vision of reality, a reality outside our ego-centred projections. It is also a happiness that stems from the acceptance of suffering. ‘No one would want to imitate Weil’s dedication to martyrdom’, suggests Sontag in *Against Interpretation* (1987), yet ‘we are moved by it, nourished by it’. She adds that as readers we often accept the mystery of lives like Weil’s (similarly Lovibond says she accepts Weil’s thought like ‘nature’) because of the belief that ‘some kinds of insanity, unhealthiness, fanaticism can be truth-giving, health-creating and life-enhancing’ (Sontag 1987, 51).

Griffin traces Weil’s philosophical concepts to the ‘sense of inferiority’ (Griffin 1993, 236) she experienced in her personal life, which led her ‘towards a

philosophical and religious position expressive of the typical experiences of being a victim: a sense of powerlessness, helplessness, suffering, and passivity' (Griffin 1993, 82). She connects Weil's 'experiential' and 'theoretical' positions through an awkward attempt at psychoanalysing Weil, stating: 'yet she was desperate for recognition, and wanting to be active was a function of her responding to her own needs rather than those of others' (Griffin 1993, 83). Griffin, more than Byatt, arguably sees Weil as Hannah of *The Unicorn*. Maria Antonaccio,²⁰⁶ as Kate Larson²⁰⁷ recalls, considers Weil's influence 'as something dangerously ascetic and/or masochistic' (Larson 2014, 155). I argue that Weil's religious spirit is more complex than Griffin allows when she claims: Weil 'saw Christianity as the spiritual or religious expression of her sense of being a slave'. She adds:

Weil had come to see herself as part of an oppressed, powerless group and, in identifying herself with that group, accepted her position as a victim, as someone who was controlled rather than in control. Embracing Christianity at this point was the 'logical' conclusion (Griffin 1993, 84).

This conclusion dismisses Weil's philosophical work before 1938. In fact, Weil refers to God only in her later writings. In her early writings, she spoke of a transcendental reality that is sometimes called 'the human spirit', sometimes 'the Good', and progressively 'silence', 'transcendence', 'the supernatural', and 'the invisible'. 'Where Weil wanted to experience the reality of God Murdoch wants the reality of this world to be accurately perceived' (Griffin 1993, 196), Griffin writes. However, Weil consistently claims we cannot experience the reality of God except through the reality of this world, just as for Plato (in her view) the sun cannot be looked at directly but through the light it projects onto the things of the world.

In summary, Griffin addresses Weil's idea of suffering by focusing on Weil's life experiences, reducing Weil's views to her 'sense of inferiority' thus defining her as a willing 'victim', incapable of being in control of herself. Her choice to lean on Christianity thus defined as the obvious result of her submissive inclinations. However, a 'use' of suffering understood as accepting our mortality, as Murdoch suggests, retains moral value even outside a religious framework. As I showed in

²⁰⁶ See Antonaccio's 'The Ascetic Impulse in Iris Murdoch's Thought', in *Iris Murdoch: a reassessment* (2007).

²⁰⁷ Larson reads the connections between the two philosophers 'in terms of Plato', suggesting that 'Murdoch rediscovered Plato through Weil, and her key concepts are therefore as Weilian as they are Platonic in their origin' (Larson, 156).

chapter 1, *le malheur* is the greatest cause of living in unreality. It repulses us from reality and so from the others, it makes us live in comforting lies. Acceptance of our own *malheur* is what has potential for reality: possessing potential for us to see reality in its fullness, in our limitedness and frailty. Suffering has moral value not in itself, but when attention is paid to it. Indeed, the creative trait of attention is activated especially when engaged with the suffering Other (this is what makes literature that pays attention to suffering the greatest art of all).

In her book *Iris Murdoch, Gender and Philosophy* (2011), Sabina Lovibond draws on Murdoch's fiction and philosophy to address the larger problem of the relationship between philosophy and women and the topic of women's equality in gaining access to education. She does this by adopting Michèle Le Doeuff's approach to the study of the patriarchal imaginary depicted in Murdoch's novels.²⁰⁸ She explores the question of gender in Murdoch, developing a chapter on what she calls 'the Simone Weil Factor', asking 'if Weil's influence on Murdoch extends to her treatment of this issue' (Lovibond 2011, 28).

Lovibond connects 'the image of obedience' to internalised assumptions of the feminine, and her concerns regarding integrating this topic with women's emancipation. In response, Nora Hämäläinen presents the view that Murdoch's consideration of the inner life complements the poststructuralist perspective that Lovibond finds fundamental in feminist theory, in an attempt to dispel Lovibond's view of Murdoch as an 'unconscious misogynist'. Lovibond's investigation focuses on the symbolic imaginary that narrates women as subordinates, which can be found in Murdoch's writings and which the writer might have 'unconsciously' (Lovibond 2011, 6) adopted and therefore ideologised. As David Robjant highlights, Lovibond's general thesis is 'that Murdoch's work offers "unconscious endorsement" of female subordination' (Robjant 2011, 1021). Lovibond suggests that Weil's odd influence on Murdoch contributed to the prevalence of patriarchal concepts of submission and passivity that, as Griffin suggests, are incompatible with any emancipatory agenda. This applies especially to her focus on the inner life in the moral sphere, which, as Hämäläinen explains, Lovibond presents as 'antithetical to the kind of communal and structural criticism of society that has

²⁰⁸ Another important Murdoch scholar who extensively wrote on Murdoch and feminism is Marje Altorf (see 2011; 2013; 2020).

been essential for the advance of feminism’ (Hämäläinen 2015, 743).²⁰⁹ In response, Hämäläinen suggests that a more thorough reading of Murdoch can help to overcome this ‘problematic (though not unusual) antagonism between moral self-scrutiny and social criticism’ (Hämäläinen 2015, 743), claiming the problem arises in the incongruence Lovibond identifies between ‘unselfing’ and ‘political action’, and the related translation of ‘obedience’ into the political and social realms (Lovibond 2011, 33–46). If, as we saw, everyday attention can be considered as self-regulation or self-moderation,²¹⁰ and the ‘effacement’ of the self as the natural outcome of reaching perfection, then we can see Weil’s thought as not endorsing oppression, and especially women’s oppression, even if that self-moderation is linked to an idea of care that has the characteristics of motherly care.²¹¹ In this regard, Sophie Bourgault defends Weil’s work, arguing that it offers valuable insights for feminist care theories, ‘By attaching so much importance to the existence of universal and concrete political obligations to care for all those who suffer or who have needs in a community, Weil offered a theory that is, in my view, feminist’ (Bourgault 2014, 20, quoted in Heiti 2021, 73). As Heiti observes, Weil’s emphasis on needs over rights helps bridge the gap between justice and an ethics of care, showing that caring for others’ essential needs is not just an act of charity, but ‘a requirement of justice’ (Heiti 2021, 73).²¹²

²⁰⁹ ‘In 1970 she recorded a fear that “Women’s Lib [might] mix up what makes one miserable ... because one is a human being,” and later felt that “lots of present day literary criticism, feminism etc.” were simply not worth pursuing in detail. There is no period, however, in which the cause of women’s rights is not close to her hear’ (Conradi 2001, 279).

²¹⁰ Heiti explains, ‘there is a difference between self-abnegation (which can indeed be a vehicle for oppressive violence) and something like self-moderation or self-regulation. Self-control is similar to abnegation in its attitude to the self. Both abnegation and wilful control assume that the self is a threat and must be either eliminated or muzzled. Moderation, on the other hand, assumes that the self, as self, is a neutral medium of relation that can be in or out of tune’ (Heiti 2021, 76).

²¹¹ As C. Wallace writes, ‘ethical stance of attention – an open and caring direction of energies – strongly resembles the self-sacrificing stance associated with Christian ethics or with motherly care’ (C. Wallace 2016, 217).

²¹² The association of other-centered care with female submissiveness, often seen as problematic, should not lead to rejecting care ethics. Instead, it calls for a re-evaluation of care as a fundamental human concern, not an exclusively female one, while acknowledging the historical marginalisation of women and the relegation of care to the private sphere. Sandra Laugier’s ethics of care emphasises attention to human needs and shared vulnerability. She writes that ‘we need others in order to satisfy our primordial needs... Precariousness and vulnerability are features of the human life form. Ethics, then, is not about living a good or right life and making the right choices, but just about living a life, and this transforms ethics towards the descriptive and the “ordinary”’ (Laugier 2016, 208). Echoing Weil’s notion of the ‘child-like cry’ for goodness from birth, Laugier stresses that vulnerability and the need for care are universal. She argues, ‘Care is everywhere’, so pervasive in human life that it’s often invisible – central to ‘how we organize our world’ to live as well as possible (Laugier 2016,

Lovibond introduces Weil as ‘the French religious thinker’ (Lovibond 2011, 28), and talks about her ‘enchantment’ on Murdoch. As mentioned, this thesis does not dispute Murdoch’s secularisation of Weil’s thought but claims that Weil’s philosophy can also be viewed from a secular standpoint without losing meaning and validity. Mono-dimensional readings of Weil’s multifaced philosophy can give the impression of an obscure ‘enchantment’ that Weil’s ‘religious’ attitudes had on Murdoch. The trend, evident in Griffin and Lovibond, is to psychoanalyse this ‘Simone Weil factor’, an expression that, as Larson noted, resembles the ‘clinical’ dimension. Alternatively, as Andrew Wilson stated, other accounts claim Weil ‘haunted’ Murdoch, evoking an indecipherable, spiritual presence. Weil’s thought has many layers, but looking at it as ‘nature’ (Lovibond 2011, 28) like a landscape that transmits something that is somehow impossible to grasp as a whole, with ‘dissociation’ and ‘estrangement’ (Larson 2014, 155) seems to be an approach marked, as Larson suggests, by an ‘unphilosophical manner’. This understatement of Weil’s theoretical value, her reduction to a ‘religious thinker’, leads to misunderstandings of her influence on Murdoch.

At the same time, I consider Weil’s philosophy as purposely ‘extreme’, due to the role of ideals outlined in chapter 2, and her use of the vertical and the horizontal axes. In this sense, while I reduce the distance separating Weil and Murdoch, I avoid the danger that Hämäläinen observed of ‘domesticating Weil into a context of secular moral philosophy where she does not quite fit’ (Hämäläinen and Dooley 2019, 268). Nor do I end up considering Murdoch’s contribution as derivative, framing Murdoch as focused on ‘setting the stage for attention’ which is on the realm of the self (and thus moral psychology), which Weil envisions (in her notion of ‘reading’) yet leaves underexplored. Far from ‘a pale copy of Weil’s

213). Laugier draws on Carol Gilligan to show how care ethics offers a distinct moral voice, one traditionally associated with women and centered on maintaining relationships, in contrast to the traditional male focus on justice, autonomy, and impartiality. Historically, caregiving activities have been undervalued due to their association with the domestic sphere and women’s labor. This devaluation reflects broader social structures that privilege the public sphere, dominated by men, while neglecting the importance of care. In contrast to traditional moral theories, Laugier sees care ethics as focusing on the particular, contextual, and relational aspects of human life. This makes care ethics inherently political, as it advocates for the recognition and dignity of those traditionally excluded from public discourse and decision-making. Laugier, along with other thinkers discussed in this thesis, argues that an ethics of care based on the ordinariness of life requires a more contextual and narrative approach, rather than one that is formal and abstract. For this reason, art – particularly literature, or cinema, and TV series in Laugier’s view – becomes a privileged space for exploration. See Laugier (2015; 2016b; 2019; 2016a; 2024).

central ideas’, Murdoch presents a deeper exploration of a realm within Weil’s ontological horizon which the French philosopher overlooks. On the other hand, Hämäläinen observes, ‘another potential risk is that a reader who experiences a rebarbative quality in Weil’s writings will be more likely to project her spiritual “extremism” on Murdoch’ (Hämäläinen and Dooley 2019, 268). As I explained, Murdoch’s ‘attentive reading’ stays on the ‘vertical axis’ and therefore loses Weil’s extremism, its complexity, and multi-layered perspective, while retaining them as a ‘normative impossibility’, an ideal.

Hämäläinen argues that Weil indicates that attempting not to fill the void is ‘excruciatingly painful because it goes against our natural impulse’ (Hämäläinen and Dooley 2019, 269), and at the same time necessary. Attention – like attention to the suffering Other – is also an attempt to prevent the expansion of the self and not fill the void, but for Weil this need not always be painful. Attention to a geometry problem, a Latin or Greek text, or to art, is not painful, indeed she even speaks of pleasure in these kinds of attention. It is *décréation* in its pure form, complete detachment, and attention to *le malheur*, which instead entails enduring an ‘excruciatingly painful’ void. But attention, void, and *le malheur* are not the same despite each having the power to pull us out of unreality. Suffering for Weil is not, as Hämäläinen observes, ‘an indispensable passage’ (Hämäläinen and Dooley 2019, 269) for *any* moral improvement; yet it is progressively present as we renounce unreality in detachment.

Ultimately, suffering is a necessary consequence for the saint because when the saint or mystic pays attention and does not fill the void, then she renounces force and is therefore exposed to the force that rules among human relationships and is thus exposed to suffering. However, this is a consequence of the rule of force over human affairs, and is not due to a romanticised vision of suffering. Pure *malheur* of the saint or mystic is what Vető calls ‘decreative suffering’,²¹³ which has the ‘spiritual use’ of throwing an ideal being in the face of reality, while ‘pure’ *malheur*, occurring for a non-decreated being, is ‘needless and degrading’. (N I 222). At the same time, on the spectrum of *le malheur*, extreme suffering resulting from outward

²¹³ See chapter 1.

causes can, as I hope to have explained, also have a ‘moral use’ as a *memento mori* when attention is paid to it.

3.9 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have explored the type of attention directed exclusively towards the Other. I provided definitions for the concepts of empathy, compassion, and sympathy, and identified attentive compassion as the form of selfless, sustained attention towards the suffering Other. I explained that sustained attention allows us to envision possibilities, through imagination and by analogy, that can then lead to action. I examined why we turn away from suffering towards unreality and introduced the idea of an ‘attentive witness’ to suffering. This discussion, along with Weil’s and Murdoch’s concept of a possible moral or spiritual ‘use’ of suffering, which I suggest can be explored emblematically in art, will be fundamental for the next chapters. The final subchapter was dedicated to the discussion of previous scholarship on the Weil/Murdoch relationship and the problem of suffering to better situate my argument within the ongoing academic discussion.

We identified two possible experiences of pure *malheur*: one’s own *malheur* and encountering someone else’s. In the first occurrence, we saw that for these authors the only ‘positive’ role of this experience would be making us realise that we are nothing, thus revealing the vanity of the self. In the second occurrence, encountering the suffering of others, we could realise that we are all brothers under necessity.

I argue that the second possible experience, although still an impossibility if we take pure *malheur* in the Weilian sense at the apex of the spectrum, becomes more conceivable through the medium of literature, which places *le malheur* at a particular distance, enhanced by the *metaxù* of beauty.

In fact, in this chapter, I argued that certain objects of attention, such as photographs that ‘invite to pay attention’ (with Sontag), spaces for attentive memory, or actions of bearing attentive witness together such as silent vigils, can inspire us to pay attention. I concluded that some mediums can be better than others in allowing attention to suffering.

Returning to Weil, her writings advocate practising attention through physical labour in contact with nature, and through school studies. These studies should not be pursued for self-complacency, self-aggrandisement, or success, but for the sake of practising attention (such as translating from ancient dead languages, or contemplating geometry problems). Murdoch echoes this sentiment, suggesting that such studies, foreign languages or great art and literature, which demand our attention for extended periods, teach us ‘how real things can be looked at and loved without being seized and used, without being appropriated into the greedy organism of the self’ (OGG 353). In fact, for Murdoch, literature may be the most effective tool we have against a distracted and self-indulgent society (‘Literature can occasion “deepenings” of the perception of suffering in someone else, which attention can encourage’ (Caprioglio Panizza 2022, 142)).

4 Attending to suffering through literature: a mystical realism

His body twists in vain, under constraint;
and his screams are heard only by the wind;
affliction takes his flesh: alone, with no name.

(Weil, *Prométhée* [Prometheus], 1937)

4.1 Introduction

This chapter is divided into two parts: the first explores the connections between attention and literature, while the second investigates, more specifically, the possibilities of attending to suffering through literature. Its aim is to lay the foundation for a literary ethics of attention to suffering.

In the preliminary section titled ‘The writer and the crisis of language’, I discuss the impact that the linguistic crisis at the dawn of the twentieth century had on literature, which forms the backdrop for these authors’ reconsideration of literature.

Building on Weil’s account of literature and its connection to morals, I elaborate on Weil’s perspective and present Murdoch’s philosophy of literature, including her response to Plato’s ban on literature from his Republic. I argue that ‘good literature’ – what Weil calls ‘literature of the first order’ and Murdoch calls ‘great literature’ – arises from the writer’s attention. Literature can show characters’ attention or inattention, becoming a privileged *milieu* to display a logic different from the force that dominates human existence and relationships. The attentive writer uses an impersonal vocabulary of attention, where beauty itself *can* attract and sustain the reader’s attention.

In the second part, I delve into the problem of dealing with suffering through art, examining its difficulties, dangers, and modalities. If beauty in art sustains our attention also towards suffering, as I suggest, then beauty (which is the result of the writer’s act of attention) is what makes art something ‘miraculous’, capable of maintaining our focus even on suffering.

I then explore Weil's interpretation of tragedy, which she sees as having a privileged relationship with *le malheur* and a mysterious connection to transcendence through catharsis, examining this further through the lens that Murdoch's writings provide, especially in the chapter 'On Comic and Tragic' in MGM.

In line with my interpretation of Murdoch's account of literature in the first part of the chapter, and its connections with attention, thus through a literary ethics of attention to suffering, I aim to lay the foundation for the mystical realism that I will attribute to Morante's *La Storia* in chapter 5, where the novel is presented as a case study in bearing 'attentive witness' to suffering. If, from a Weilian perspective, tragedy is the space for the 'miracle' of a character's own *malheur* constituting a *metaxù* towards transcendence for both character and reader, I argue that a mystical novel, viewed through Weilian and Murdochian lenses, can be the just space where the author can bear witness to others' suffering. This leads, in the chapter's final section, to an exploration of the literature's potential to inspire attention.

4.2 The writer and the crisis of language

Before delving into the exploration of the connection between attention and literature, and the way these authors consider literature as morally valuable, let us discuss the historical and intellectual context that ignited their reflections, at the dawn of the crisis of language. To address this issue, Murdoch, who wrote extensively on this topic in her philosophical texts, serves as the best interlocutor.

In *What is Literature?*, Sartre, who for Murdoch resembles the British analysts in this regard, states: 'I distrust the incommunicable; it is the source of all violence'²¹⁴. Murdoch, in her early writings, especially in her 1953 book titled *Sartre. Romantic Rationalist*, explains that this distrust arises from a historical shift. She notes that language, particularly in England starting with Hobbes and Locke, and increasingly over the twentieth century, is no longer taken for granted as a medium for communication. 'We are like people who for a long time looked out of a window without noticing the glass – and then one day began to notice this too' (SRR 64).

²¹⁴ Quoted by Murdoch in SRR 64 (from Bernard Frechtman's translation of *What is Literature?* 210-211).

According to Murdoch, the writer has suffered the most from this linguistic crisis:

A sense of the desperate rapidity of change, the responsibility of speech in an incomprehensible situation, a feeling of being 'left out', obscure guilt at the inhumanities of a materialistic society: all these may have contributed to his malaise (SRR 65).

This crisis of language is accompanied by the disappearance of a common background. The portrayal of the human being as a rational entity, for whom different things are seen from different perspectives depending on the self, and who is free to confer meaning and values, implies the absence of any steady, shared value. This situation gave rise to the upheaval of language.

Murdoch identifies this shift in language as moving from the discovery of 'deeper observation' to a sophistication of language to describe that sophistication. Instead, she argues that widening our vocabulary (not through formalised analytic language, but through language provided, for example, by literature) can help us to rediscover this lost common background. Murdoch detects a variety of reactions 'to this breaking of the social and moral fabric' where 'we can no longer even imagine that all reflective men have common purposes and common values' (SRR 70)²¹⁵. She observes: 'When purposes and values are knit comfortably into the great and small practical activities of life, thought and emotion move together. When this is no longer so, when action involves choosing between worlds, not moving in a world, loving and valuing, which were once the rhythm of our lives, become problems' (SRR 75).

With the development of the scientific method in the nineteenth century, language started to be viewed by philosophers not as a communication tool but a means of delimitation and analysis, thus, philosophy began to suggest that words determine the 'framework of reality'. However, if the meanings comprising the framework of reality are drawn only from science, this framework becomes 'extremely restricted'. As Murdoch explains, 'the meaning of poetry, of religious and theological statements, and of statements in morals and political theory remained problematic.' (SRR 67–68). Indeed, language is seen as problematic in

²¹⁵ 'In the world everything is as it is and happens as it does happen. In it there is no value' (Wittgenstein: *Tractatus* 6.41, quoted in Murdoch's SRR 75).

these spheres because, while ‘language as exact communication seems possible only against the background of a common world’, in areas such as morals, theology, ‘and even political philosophy’, Murdoch writes, increased sophistication about the function of language resulted in ‘a weakening of that sense of a common world’:

The linguistic philosophers (in their early phase) took as real the facts of science and everyday life; they regarded as unreal the world of art, politics and religion, emotion, fantasy and dream. Value, failing to be in the world, was a sort of exclamation. Truth was correspondence with fact, was the sensibly verifiable. Interpretation of human conduct was left to behaviouristic psychologists. This was followed by a more sophisticated and self-consciously anti-dualistic phase, wherein language came to be viewed, no longer as the mirror of the world, but as one human activity among others (SRR 76).

For Murdoch, the result was that words like ‘Good’ ended up being seen as ‘commendatory cries’. She writes: “‘Good’ was no longer thought to name an objective quality, nor ‘democracy’ an identifiable form of government’ (SRR 69). This upheaval in the perception of language created that ‘real sense of loss’ that, in her view, is visible in Sartre.²¹⁶

If the Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, asserted that the limits of our language mean the limits of our world, continental thinkers, such as Fritz Mauthner, perceived the crisis of language as a crisis of representation, and regarded language as inherently flawed and incapable of fully capturing reality. Rather than striving for logical clarity, continental philosophy engaged with the ambiguity and limitations of language, viewing it as a source of alienation and misunderstanding. Samuel Beckett, for instance, explored the failure of language, depicting characters trapped in a world where words no longer convey meaning. Later on, analytic philosophers, particularly Wittgenstein in his *Philosophical Investigations*, began to echo continental concerns by highlighting language’s social and contextual nature.

²¹⁶ Nonetheless, for Murdoch, Sartre ‘is not prepared to go as far as certain British empiricists in the direction of identifying mind or intelligence with its observable concomitants. His interests are psychological rather than semantic. He is concerned with the actual varying quality of our awareness of things and people, rather than with the question of how, in spite of these variations, we manage to communicate determinate meanings; he is concerned with a study of the phenomena of awareness, and not with the delineation of concepts’ (SRR 90). As Murdoch stresses, unlike in British philosophy, ‘The hero of *La nausée* saw language and the world as hopelessly divided from each other. “The word remains on my lips: it refuses to go and rest upon the thing”’ (SRR 79).

Murdoch believes that Lukacs neatly describes the inability to face the crisis of language in his work *Studies in European Realism*:

the western writer, Lukács says, has made his characters pale and empty or (if his technique is psychological and subjectivist) eccentric or pathological. That is, ... Lukács charges the western writer, who has evidently lost the aspiration to truth ... with portraying his characters in a static monistic manner, as denizens of a simple 'factual' world or an equally simple emotional world, rather than as active beings who can only be properly characterised by being shown in reciprocal connexion with the society they inhabit. And he picks on the introspective technique of the modern novelist as a symptom of a neglect of the complexity of what he takes to be the real nature of human personality (SRR 83).

Ultimately, the loss of the aspiration to truth, the simplification of the individual's world as a world of relationships with other individuals, and the psychoanalytic technique of the novelist, despite representing a challenge to literature, are not elements Murdoch sees as ushering in the doom of literature. She acknowledges that this inability to engage with reality's complexity, nonetheless, is indicative of a situation that can thus be the premise for a transformation.

The problem in literature, for Murdoch, is as follows: 'We know that the real lesson to be taught is that the human person is precious and unique; but we seem unable to set it forth except in terms of ideology and abstraction' (SRR 148). Murdoch, eschewing this ideology and abstraction, as Weil did in her philosophy, turns her attention to the ordinary, and finds the space opened by the novel ('the messy accidental world of the novel, so full of encounter and moral conflicts and love' (SRR 21)) to be the most suited for this particular *moral* operation, grounded in Weilian attention. But what is the relationship between literature and attention?

4.3 Attention & literature²¹⁷

By 'literature', I refer here to what Weil describes as 'literature of the first order' and Murdoch calls 'great literature'. Weil is clearly more 'exclusive' about what

²¹⁷ Part of this chapter has been published with the title 'Exploring the connection between attention and literature through Simone Weil and Iris Murdoch' (Dianetti 2023c).

can be considered literature of the first order.²¹⁸ Murdoch although more open,²¹⁹ is still very critical of existentialism, romanticism, and philosophical novels.²²⁰ What I draw from their views on literature – and builds my literary ethics of attention – is that attention is the essence of good literature. I highlight four features of the literature in question: i) *it is an act* of attention because by fixing her attention upon reality, the writer can *evoke* our human condition; ii) it is about attention *showing* the characters' attention or inattention; iii) it has moral value by *extending* our vocabulary of attention; and iv) it is beauty in literature that *can attract and sustain* our attention.

4.3.1 The author evokes the human condition: the novel is an act of attention

In 'Morale et littérature' (1941), Weil articulates a Platonic view of art that Murdoch adopts both in her philosophy and in her novels. Weil writes:

Nothing is so beautiful, marvellous, ever new, ever surprising, so full of sweet and continual delight, as the good. Nothing is so barren and dismal, monotonous and boring as evil. That is the way it is with real good and evil. Fictional good and evil are quite the opposite, though. Fictional good is boring and flat. Fictional evil is varied, interesting, attractive, profound, and seductive (LM 145).

²¹⁸ Weil explicitly wrote about Homer's *The Iliad*, Aeschylus' *Prometheus* and Sophocles' *Antigone*, *Electra*, and *Philoctetes*, but her writings, especially her notebooks are full of references to the other authors she loved, including: Shakespeare (above all *King Lear*), Cervantes, Racine (especially *Phèdre*), Paul Valéry, George Herbert, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Francis of Assisi, Villon, Mallarmé, Molière, Dante, Goethe, and others. On her idea of literature see her essay 'Literature and Morals' in *Late Philosophical Writings*.

²¹⁹ Of 'great literature', Murdoch writes in 'The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited': 'The persons whom I have here in mind, and whom I have called the great novelists, are of course Scott, Jane Austen, George Eliot, Tolstoy, especially Tolstoy – one could add other names, but these suffice to make the point. I realise it is paradoxical to call, for instance, Scott an un-Romantic writer; but I do not mind the paradox so long as the meaning is clear. In calling these novelists the great ones I do not exclude other types of greatness – though it is part of my thesis that this is probably the greatest sort of greatness. It is true that we find in the nineteenth century other remarkable novelists (Dostoevsky, Melville, Emily Brontë, Hawthorne) to whom we would not want to deny a first place, and to whom the title 'Romantic', in my sense, could more readily be applied: writers who give the impression of externalising a personal conflict in a tightly conceived self-contained myth; and it would be perverse to argue that they are great in spite of their Romanticism' (SBR 272).

²²⁰ Murdoch does not see her novels as 'philosophical novels'. In her view, for instance, Sartre's novels display 'the structure of his own thought' (SRR 49), meaning he fails to be a great novelist, as his novels are not meant to try to represent 'something more' that philosophy cannot rationally explain. The perpetual analysis carried out by his characters gives the reader a sense of detachment creating a 'drying and emptying effect'. In the search for everyday life, Sartre's novels end up showing, for Murdoch, only neurosis and abstraction. Murdoch had at first welcomed Sartre's 'passionate desire to analyse' the details of human life, but she later comes to consider him as lacking 'an apprehension of the absurd irreducible uniqueness of people and their relations with each other' (SRR 146). His characters are worlds with no magic, she writes, and so they do not 'enchant', failing to portray the contingency and messiness of human life.

Weil asserts that ‘In reality there is a necessity, like gravity, governing us that is missing in fiction’ (LM 145). However, as previously discussed, human beings are made for gravity as much as they hide from it.²²¹ In fact, ‘the substance of our life is made nearly entirely of fiction’ (LM 147). As Weil elaborates, ‘we tell ourselves stories ... [and] we wrap them in a fog of inverted values, inverted just as they are in all fiction, where evil attracts and good bores’ (LM 147). Instead, as previously stated, for both Weil and Murdoch, the Good is as various as reality, while evil, the product of the self’s projections, is simple and monotonous.

We are constantly making distinctions and shaping the encountered world into a story, creating order and pattern. As Murdoch often states, as word-users, ‘we are all literary artists’ if we consider that ‘artwork and value judgments are everywhere in human self-expression’ (MGM 94).

We are only free from this logic when ‘reality gives us a strong enough shock’, such as when we confront our finite condition through suffering, or experience beauty. In these moments, we can, potentially, sense ‘the horrible monotony of evil or the unfathomable marvel of goodness’ (LM 147). However, for Weil, this awareness is fleeting, as ‘soon enough we fall back into the half-dream peopled by our narrational fancies’ (LM 147).

The human condition is, as we saw, that we cover reality, but at the same time aspire to the Good. To evoke this condition, the artist/writer herself needs to pay attention and ‘unself’, thus not to cover reality. Plato did not acknowledge the possibility of such an artist. In fact, in line with Weil’s worries about fiction, Plato banned the artist from his Republic because he saw art as a way to detach from reality. He speaks of the ‘old quarrel between philosophy and poetry’ (Plato, Republic 607B),²²² placing the tragic poet, along with other mimetic artists, at three removes from reality, mere copyists of appearances (MGM 10-14; 122-23). To copy reality means to bypass the matter and the effort of trying to understand it,

²²¹ Weil explains that ‘A harsh necessity, quite like gravity, condemns humans to evil, forbidding them all good except a strictly limited good that is obtained only with difficulty and is mixed and soiled with evil. Except when the supernatural that suspends the effect of earthly necessity appears on earth’ (LM 145-46).

²²² On this matter see Lindbäck (2024).

providing instead a false unity that makes the human being feel satisfied with an ersatz.

Murdoch acknowledges that, indeed, art suggests unity and completeness: ‘We intuit in art a unity, a perfection, which is not really there’, and that it ‘apes a sort of insight, a unified vision, which in its true form is a spiritual achievement’ (MGM 19). This spiritual achievement, in Plato’s view, should instead be reached through dedicated apprenticeship and practical application. According to Plato, the danger of this false unified vision is that it might ‘resemble the good’ and thus offer a ‘spurious short-cut to instant wisdom’ (MGM 19).

In her discussion of Plato’s banning the artist in ‘The Fire and the Sun’, Murdoch suggests a distinction between the ‘bad artist’ and ‘the mediocre’, through the idea of art based on attention. She describes the ‘bad artist (who resides in all of us)’ as a ‘naive fantasist’ who creates art based on ‘his personal dream-life’ (think of the bad thriller or facile romance and its audience) (FS 452). On the other hand, the ‘mediocre artist’ is a self-reliant, self-knowing individual, with will-power, much like the cynical sophists depicted in Plato’s dialogues and modern literature. This artist is blind to the necessity, the *ἀνάγκη* (*ananke*), of the world and is tempted to find solace in transforming ‘the work of art into a small myth which is a self-contained and self-satisfied individual’ (AD 294). On the contrary, instead of presenting a false unity, art should involve ‘a respect for the contingent’ and attention towards ‘the real impenetrable human person’ (AD 294).²²³

In Plato’s view, the artist, even one as eminent as Homer or the Greek tragedians, remains ‘a charming illusionist’ because he imitates and thus ‘offends’ reality. While Murdoch acknowledges this as an unavoidable danger, she also moderates Plato’s perspective suggesting that Plato himself was a great artist, and that his myths are evidence of the redemption of art itself.²²⁴ Indeed, ‘art is power’, which can lead to the illusion of omnipotence and the temptation to egoism.

²²³ Murdoch references Weil on this, stating: ‘Even at its most exquisite, art is incomplete. Simone Weil, that admirable Platonist, said that a poem is beautiful insofar as the poet’s thought is fixed upon the ineffable. Art, like (in Plato’s view) philosophy, hovers about in the very fine air which we breathe just beyond what has been expressed’ (FS 460-61).

²²⁴ ‘Plato is a great artist attacking what he sees as bad and dangerous in art. His warnings are apt today. Popular literature and film argue the dullness of the good, the charm of the bad. The violent man is the hero of our time. The technical excellence of television (the Cave) leads us to accept vivid scrappy images and disconnected oddments of information as insight into truth’ (MGM 13).

Nevertheless, the artist who pays Weilian (and thus Murdochian) attention— ‘the good artist’ – is someone who constantly strives to ‘unself’. This idea of the author’s unselfing does not entail that the author uses an objective and neutral language, or that she does not have a particular style of writing. To elucidate this point, let us go back to Weil’s idea of *décréation*, where Murdoch’s unselfing comes from, and the idea of the impersonal.

As stated in the previous chapters, Weil defines the ‘impersonal’ as a place ‘made for God’ at the centre of the human heart, where the self no longer obstructs the view from creation to creator. The impersonal, the seed into which God can descend, even for Weil only exists within the human being: ‘God loves the perspective of creation which can be seen *only from where I stand*, and I obscure it’ (FLN 72, my emphasis)). Similarly in the literary framework, the author’s voice emerges impersonally from her standpoint on the world. As for Weil, the poet de-creates, imitating God: ‘The poet is a person; yet in moments when he reaches poetic perfection, he is shot through by an impersonal inspiration. It is in his mediocre moments that his inspiration is a personal one’ (‘A work of art has an author and yet, when it is perfect, it has something which is essentially anonymous about it’ (GG 149)). Murdoch adds, ‘Of course great artists are “personalities” and have special styles’ (OGG 352), rooted in their time and place. It is the impersonal inspiration, free from the filter of personal fantasies, that enables the poet to represent the truth of human relationships compassionately and with reality. For both Weil and Murdoch, Homer in *The Iliad* is an exemplar, taking no sides, and thus ‘one is barely aware that the poet is a Greek and not a Trojan’ (I 32).

When discussing the artist’s unselfing, Murdoch often refers to Rilke’s view of Cézanne: ‘The consuming of love in anonymous work’ (IP 333) (a sentiment that she extends to Shakespeare). She does not exclude the possibility that the artist might be ‘a dreadful egoist’, which may mean that the virtues of the artist ‘reside entirely in the work’ (FS 460). The author is as fallible as anyone else, and her just vision might be fully ‘attainable’ only in the work of art. The perfect poet is entirely unselfed in her art, while the mystic or saint is unselfed in the entirety of her life. Although the saint or mystic may be one step higher on the ladder of perfection, within the realm of art, the unselfed poet or artist can still reach heights of perfection. But why doesn’t the artist’s habit of attention always translate into her

everyday life? Weil seems to suggest that, in many cases, this translation does occur with truly great poets and artists. However, as Murdoch reminds us, some great artists are yet egoists in their everyday lives. This tension can be addressed by considering that while the habit of attention cultivated through artistic creation can inspire greater attention in other areas of life, this does not mean that if we achieve the highest peak of attention during artistic creation, it will automatically extend to every area of our lives. I maintain that art – whether we create it or ‘consume’ it – can make us better by inspiring greater attention. However, Although I have suggested that once we pay attention, action follows immediately, the crucial point here is that attention needs to be practised continuously and in every context of our lives. The immediacy of action that follows from attention only happens when we are attending *this* individual being/situation/entity. Over time, by consistently practicing attention, we can develop a habit that translates into different contexts and aspects of our lives. Yet, it is only the saint or mystic who operates through attention in every part of her life.

Ultimately, Murdoch’s overall judgment of the great artist is that she is good and free ‘*in respect*’ of her work (FS 460, my emphasis), she writes: ‘The egoism of the good artist or craftsman is “burnt up” in the product’ (MGM 429).²²⁵ The greatest virtue of the artist is humility in the moment of creation, and her genius arises from her effort to remove herself, making space for reality in her work.

Murdoch recalls Rilke’s observation that Cézanne, did not paint ‘I like it’, but rather ‘There it is’. This difficult task requires moral and artistic discipline. She writes:

One might say here that art is an excellent analogy of morals, or indeed that it is in this respect a case of morals. We cease to be in order to attend to the existence of something else, a natural object, a person in need. We can see in mediocre art, where perhaps it is even more clearly seen that in mediocre conduct, the intrusion of fantasy, the assertion of self, the dimming of any reflection of the real world (OGG 348).

The artist’s selfless language exemplifies what we, as word-users, ‘should endeavour to be worthy of’ (SW 242). Quoting T.S. Eliot on artist’s ‘continual extinction of personality’ from her art, Murdoch adds: ‘Art is not an expression of

²²⁵ ‘Art is a human product and virtues as well as talents are required of the artist. The good artist, in relation to his art, is brave, truthful, patient, humble’ (SGC 370).

personality, it is a question rather of the continual expelling of oneself from the matter in hand' (TSEM 163). Silencing the ego is essential for what she calls 'the realism (ability to perceive reality) required for goodness' (OGG 353).

In this sense, art can be redeemed from Plato's criticism and serve to save its audience. Murdoch writes: 'Great art points in the direction of the good and is at least more valuable to the moralist as an auxiliary than dangerous as an enemy.' (FS 454).²²⁶ When the author 'unselfs', she can make space for reality, in which the readers can read their existential condition. In fact, according to Weil, great art reveals 'the true relation of good and evil' (LM 148).²²⁷ In other words, it unmasks unreality's monotony; resisting it, it points towards the variousness of reality. Art's difficult task is to evoke human existence: caught between striving for the Good and a natural tendency towards fantasy and evil, where the Good's nature, as an unreachable ideal of Perfection, makes our existence, as Weil says, a mix of good and evil. Literature due to its connection to 'the ordinary familiar world of love and egoism and human need' (EM 234) is particularly suited to this task. For Murdoch, morals and art are deeply correlated, both involving 'the discovery of reality' through a type of realism grounded in attention and secular mysticism (SG 215).²²⁸

Even if great art is, to some extent, imperfect, as 'the material of art is contingent limited historically stained stuff' (MGM 85), it remains 'a great source of revelation' (MGM 85), which is neither moralising nor comforting. Weil writes,

Great artists go beyond fiction, and they take us with them. Under the form of fiction, they give us something in writing that is equivalent to the depth of reality, the depth that life itself presents us with every day, even though we do not know how to grasp it because we are making ourselves feel good by lies (LM 133).

Art, therefore, transcends fiction, directing us towards reality. Murdoch states, '[art] is *an act of attention* because it shows us the world, our world and not another one,

²²⁶ 'The spiritual ambiguity of art, its connection with the 'limitless' unconscious, its use of irony, its interest in evil, worried Plato. But the very ambiguity and voracious ubiquitousness of art is its characteristic freedom. Art, especially literature, is a great hall of reflection where we can all meet and where everything under the sun can be examined and considered' (FS 461).

²²⁷ 'Good and evil. Reality. That which gives more reality to beings and things is good, that which takes it away from them is evil' (N I 8).

²²⁸ By the end of this chapter, I will clarify how this realism becomes a mystical 'realism.'

with a clarity which startles and delights us simply because we are not used to looking at the real world at all' (OGG 352, my emphasis).²²⁹

While most art is 'mere fiction and consolation which distorts reality' (SGC 372), great art exposes vanity and instils humility (MGM 97). It is an accusation of unreality, and at its best, it can evoke the human condition without consolation, encompassing it with selfless compassion.²³⁰

4.3.2 A novel shows the characters' attention or inattention

Murdoch asserts that 'Art is about the pilgrimage from appearance to reality (the subject of every good play and novel)'. Indeed, novels expose characters' moral journeys: 'They are amazingly moral' (MGM 97). She writes:

A portrayal of moral reflection and moral change (degeneration, improvement) is the most important part of any system of ethics. The explanation of our fallibility in such matters as seeing the worse as the better is more informatively (though of course less systematically) carried out by poets, play-wrights, and novelists. It has taken philosophy a long time to acknowledge this: the famous 'quarrel' is indeed of long standing, and the suspicion that art is fundamentally frivolous. It is only comparatively recently that moral philosophers have condescended to enlist the aid of literature as a mode of explanation (FS 457).

Literature is privileged among art forms because it focuses on 'moral beings' and their relationships with each other. It is proof of the writer's attention, as stated above, portraying varying degrees of attention and inattention through the characters' narratives.²³¹ Through this, we may recognise human beings – ourselves

²²⁹ On literature as a form of attention see Cristina Campo, *The Unforgivables*, especially 'Attention and Poetry', where she writes: 'Poetry, too, is attention. In other words, it involves reading, on multiple levels, the reality around us, which is truth in images. And the poet, who takes these images apart and recomposes them, is also a mediator: between man and God, between man and other men, between man and the secret laws of nature' (Campo 2024, 150). And also Murdoch: 'We today have no great or essential difficulty in understanding plays written by Greeks in the fifth century BC. We make, in many respects though not in all, the same kinds of moral judgements as the Greeks did, and we recognise good or decent people in times and literatures remote from our own. Patroclus, Antigone, Cordelia, Mr Knightley, Alyosha. Patroclus's invariable kindness. Cordelia's truthfulness ... And this, when one reflects on it, is a remarkable testimony to the existence of a single durable human nature' (EM 229).

²³⁰ Murdoch writes: 'Consider what we learn from contemplating the characters of Shakespeare or Tolstoy or the paintings of Velasquez or Titian. What is learnt here is something about the real quality of human nature, when it is envisaged, in the artist's just and compassionate vision, with a clarity which does not belong to the self-centred rush of ordinary life' (OGG 353, my emphasis).

²³¹ Characters offer 'paradigms of a sort of attention' (Diamond 1982, 32). In her essay 'I personaggi', firstly published on *Il Mondo* on 2 December 1950, Morante exemplifies the possible relationships between human beings and reality through three examples of three emblematic characters: i) 'il pelide Achille', embodying the Ancient Greek harmony of humans with the natural and lively reality; ii) 'don Chisciotte', representing the character who fights against reality through

and others – as inherently moral beings. ‘Other people are, after all, the most interesting features of our world and in some way the most poignantly and mysteriously alien’ (AIN 257).

Indeed, literature encompasses both aesthetic and moral pleasures. As Murdoch explains,

In portraying characters, the author displays most clearly his discernment, his truthfulness, his justice, or his lack of these qualities, and one of our enjoyments lies in considering and judging his judgments. The highest pleasures of literature and, one might say, of art generally, are in this sense moral pleasures (AIN 257).

As ‘a human product “about” human affairs in a direct sense’ (SGC 370), literature is thus the site of our ‘most fundamental insight.’

Murdoch’s (and Morante’s) characters can be placed on a spectrum from self-deluded individuals living in a daydream and spreading evil to those approaching the ideal state of a mystic/saint, with various human types in between. The dichotomy between saint and artist (as archetypes of the human being, and thus of literary figures) is a recurring theme in Murdoch’s philosophical texts and, as she admitted, many of her novels. Similarly, Weil frequently uses ‘type-figures’ to discuss human beings. The ‘artist’ of this dichotomy represents the self-centred urge to rationally shape the world and explain the inexplicable (exemplified by characters like Jake in *Under the Net*, Charles in *The Sea, The Sea*, and as I will show, Davide Segre in *La Storia*). In contrast, ‘saint’ figures, in a Platonic and Weilian sense, embody a silent approach to non-discursive intuition of reality, as Plato describes in the *Meno* (99d). These figures, such as Hugo, James, and Useppe, represent the selfless and humble acceptance of reality’s ineffable, ungraspable nature and the human condition’s incompleteness.

In chapter 2, I anticipated Weil’s use of ideals (‘the better can be conceived only by reference to the perfect’ (OL 79-80)). Murdoch often employs ‘ideals’ to discuss reality, recognising in Weil an effort to envisage ‘an ideal definition in

imagination; iii) ‘Amleto’, standing for the human being who does not fight back and thus chooses not to be. As Bérard observes, this characterisation of the three figures ‘actually contrasts three types of dreams – three visions of the world that are equally arbitrary and therefore destructive: that of Achilles, that of Don Quixote, and that of Hamlet. The happy hero, the furious hero, the unhappy hero. None of them is the perfect hero’ (Bérard 2006, 22). For, as Bérard also suggests, the perfect hero is the Weilian saint/mystic, like Jaffier.

terms of an ideal moral achievement' concluding that 'moral philosophy may work from a conception of an intensely imagined ideal man' (MGM 110).²³² The saint, using Weil's expression, is the image of a de-created being who has, Murdoch writes, 'broken the barriers of the ego', representing a 'true', 'ever-present' 'religious ideal' (MGM 354) that should, in Murdoch's view, 'come home to morals' (MGM 336). Murdoch argues that looking through these ideals through literature is a way to look into the mystery of the Good, hence literature can be a '*clue* to morals'.

Ideas related to saintliness can function as 'magnetic moral pictures' (MGM 354) and, as magnetic ideals of perfection, are beyond understanding.²³³ As icons, saints stand as proofs of perfection. In life, and in novels that address the messiness and incompleteness of life, 'the contingently existing saint' stands as 'a demonstration' that is both religious *and* moral. As Murdoch writes, the saint, 'the selfless unrewarded doer of good', 'may or may not have any sort of religious vision' but is 'self-evidently "religious"':

If we were ever fortunate enough to meet him or her, [the saint] might stand to us in the guise of a demonstration (to show it can be done), might be some quiet unpretentious worker, a schoolteacher or a mother, or better still an aunt. ... In the activity of such workers, egoism has disappeared unobtrusively into the care and service of others (MGM 429).

Narrating the possible human orientation toward the Good through fiction, as Murdoch does, is essentially non-didactic (I will discuss this further in this chapter's final section). As I mentioned, Weil also attempted to offer such inspiration through her unfinished tragedy *Venise Sauvée*, but also, outside the literary framework, in her Front-line Nurses proposal she sent to Maurice Schumann, which she describes as 'a spectacle to human imagination never seen before' that could 'strike the imagination more than any of Hitler's conceptions have done' (SE 144-153). This work could be seen as Weil's explicit redemption of the role of imagination, which is often dismissed by the scholarship. In it, hypothetical nurses operate like certain characters in the novels of Murdoch and

²³² On realism as a moral achievement see Antonaccio (2003) (see also Antonaccio 1996; 2012).

²³³ The 'imagined ideal man', or saint, is at the highest apex of the spectrum from unreality to reality, beyond our full comprehension, as her cognition of reality is non-discursive: 'The virtuous man sees and knows what is more real, the saint what is most real. The idea of the perfect object is one with its reality, which is not the case at other levels, where the light is obstructed and something is always to be intuited beyond' (MGM 400).

Morante, providing examples of a logic directly opposed to the logic of evil, rather than evil's didactic suppression. Pure Good does not triumph by suppressing evil, for pure Good is transcendent and, thus, cut from a different cloth. Evil, as we saw, is stopped only when one accepts a void, meaning not exercising the will or using power against others, nor reiterating the force suffered by inflicting it on others. Working with ideals, 'normative impossibilities', stressing the 'potential' of the human being for attention, makes Weil's philosophy always already an imaginative effort.²³⁴ Picturing a new spirit for Europe was her objective in *L'enracinement*, and this inherent creativity of attention, that I stressed especially when it comes to paying attention to *le malheur*, renders her philosophy a utopian, mystical, realism.

In Weil's writings, the clearest literary example of an act of attention that stops the self-perpetuating force is Jaffier's, the protagonist of *Venise Sauvée*:

Jaffier. Passion. One of the meanings of passion is perhaps that the pain, the shame, the death that one does not want to inflict on others falls back on oneself, *without wishing it to be so*. As if mathematically *le malheur* were obliged to compensate for the prevented crime; so that the soul remains subject to evil (but subject in a different way) (C II, 249-250, my emphasis).²³⁵

In Weil's view, as explained in chapter 1, this world is ruled by forces that press down and work against each other. The evil committed from person to person is never defeated because, like any other physical force, it cannot be destroyed but only transformed. The evil causing others to suffer can be converted only through love by the saint. This transformation of energy is invisible, but can be glimpsed through art. As Murdoch elaborates: 'sin, evil, is the evasion of the idea of death;

²³⁴ Murdoch opposes the imaginative trait of attention to Sartre. Weil's and Murdoch's acceptance of the human condition, its essential characteristics of striving for unity, of self-illusion and constant projections which cover reality, and of an essentially contingent, infinitely various world is imaginative and therefore active. Their acceptance results from a deeper look, of an understanding stemming from the other-centred practice of attention, which is imaginative. Sartre by contrast, uses imagination to create solipsism, as he isolates the self in such a way that it views others not as subjects of understanding, but as entities to be feared, controlled, and imagined about. If in Weil's epistemology the corporal other is first perceived as an obstacle and then recognised through attention in his *real* existence, in Sartre, others always constitute 'opaque obstacles'. As Scott-Baumann observes in *The Murdochian Mind*, 'for Murdoch we are indeed defined by lack, loss and longing but – in contrast with Sartre's fatalism – she believes that this can give us agency' (Scott-Baumann 2022, 295).

²³⁵ 'Jaffier. Passion. Un des sens de la passion est peut-être que la douleur, la honte, la mort qu'on ne veut pas infliger autour de soi retombe sur soi, *sans qu'on l'ait voulu*. Comme si mathématiquement le malheur devait compenser le crime écarté; pour que l'âme reste soumise au mal (mais autrement soumise)'.
(C II, 249-250, my emphasis).

refuge is taken in the exercise of power, heroic fantasies of will or fate, cults of suffering or the passing-on of pain as damage to others' (MGM 104).

Ultimately, the perfect saint is one who sacrifices herself, but the act of renouncing, of stepping back and not projecting the self onto reality, is what makes the saint and the great artist similar in their recognition of evil. As Murdoch says: 'we only experience [evil] in abstaining from it or in repenting of it. In doing it we do not experience it, for it is wrapped up in imagination' (BBC 12). In this shared effort of holding the self from projecting onto reality, Murdoch says, 'the work of great artists and great saints is in a certain sense anonymous' (BBC 12). The crucial difference is that 'the contingently existing saint' demonstrates through her life, while the artist, as explained above, manifests this in her work.

Saint-like characters in the novels of Murdoch and Morante show, as Murdoch says, that 'it can be done' (MGM 429). They represent 'the positive experience of truth ... [which] remains with us as a standard or vision' (MGM 508). In an 'unreligious age', marked by a crisis of imagery and the incapacity 'of looking' (MGM 327), both Murdoch and Morante attempted to provide a 'stirring image' of the mystery of transcendence in their novels, representing 'contingently existing' saint-like figures in a non-religious gaze. They proved that art can play the crucial role of intermediary, thanks to which religious concepts like 'saintliness' can, as Murdoch says, 'come home to morals' (MGM 336).

The attempt to represent the Good through a saint-like character is evidently difficult, if not impossible, as stated at the beginning of this chapter quoting Weil. Dostoevsky²³⁶, for instance, in a letter to his niece discussing his attempt to represent 'a truly perfect and noble man' in his novel *The Idiot*, writes:

this is more difficult than anything else in the world, particularly nowadays. All writers, not ours alone but foreigners also, who have sought to represent Absolute Beauty, were unequal to the task, for it is an infinitely difficult one. The beautiful is the ideal; but ideals, with us as in civilized Europe, have long been wavering. There is in the world only one figure of absolute beauty: Christ. That infinitely lovely figure is, as a matter of course, an infinite marvel ... of all the noble figures in Christian literature, I reckon Don Quixote as the most perfect. But Don Quixote is noble only by being at the same time comic.

²³⁶ Murdoch on Dostoevsky: 'In a published interview for an edition of *Soviet Literature* 12 (1981), IM talks about the importance of Dostoevsky: he shows the centrality of religion in human life; he addresses the battle between good and evil; he shows how to be both extremely serious and extremely funny. She counts him as a great inspiration for her own work' (Purton 2007, 156).

And Dickens's Pickwickians (they were certainly much weaker than Don Quixote, but still it's a powerful work) are comic, and this it is which gives them their great value. *The reader feels sympathy and compassion with the Beautiful, derided and unconscious of its own worth.* The secret of humour consists precisely in this art of wakening the reader's sympathy (Dostoevsky 1914, 135-36, my emphasis).

In the next chapter, I will emphasise the efficacy of Morante's attempt to represent beauty and moments of attention in *La Storia* through the character Ueseppe who evokes, in the reader, sympathy and compassion for 'the Beautiful, derided and unconscious of its own worth'. This, as Murdoch also observes, is one of the mysteries of art that is both comic and tragic at the same time. As Murdoch points out:

Plato said at *Republic*, 395 A that no one can write both comedy and tragedy. As the Symposium ends Socrates is telling Agathon and Aristophanes that this can be done. One would like to have an account of this conversation. Plato, with a perverse negligence, never favours us with any serious literary criticism (FS 456-57).

4.3.3 The moral value of literature: it extends our vocabulary

As explained in chapter 2, Murdoch emphasises the importance of narration and story-telling in ethics as an aid to better understanding ourselves and others.²³⁷ In our lives, we constantly create images of ourselves and others, of our experiences, of the events that occur around us, and the situations in which we find ourselves. These images cohere through a sort of storytelling, a narration. Seen this way, narration becomes the starting point for moral philosophy. Therefore, literature, which deals most truthfully with that narrative process and those images, becomes a rich source for morals.²³⁸

Instead of dismissing the value of narration (which most of her philosophical contemporaries would consider 'naïve'), Murdoch argues that philosophy²³⁹ should investigate and, if possible, 'make more accurate' this natural technique, which is part of everyday living. That is, to 'use metaphors to describe states of mind, or to describe "thought processes"'. Philosophy should do so because 'this is what

²³⁷ On Murdoch and narrative ethics see Cattaneo (2011).

²³⁸ On the crossroad between philosophy and literature in Murdoch's thought, see Araújo and Vieira (2011).

²³⁹ 'In philosophy, as in everyday language, the use of metaphor is inevitable and perhaps necessary. However, in discussing Marcel's methodology, Murdoch observes: 'unless the metaphors are accompanied by a close critical commentary the result is often vague and confusing' (IM 127).

thinking is like’: inner experiences we do not grasp entirely, but which we naturally attempt to express through the use of metaphors and analogies.

Murdoch explains that since language and thought are not co-extensive, something can be ‘obscurely apprehended’ in the life of the mind without being linguistically expressible. Therefore, a renewal in language, seeing it as more than an analytical tool, can occur through expanding the vocabulary of our constant narrations.

Not all our new concepts come to us in the context of language; but the attempt to verbalise them may result not in frustration but in a renewal of language. This is par excellence the task of poetry. So there is give and take; words may determine a sense, or a fresh experience may renew words (TL 36).

We must sharpen our vision using imagination, allowing us to draw new pictures that can be expressed through a wider moral vocabulary.²⁴⁰

As I explained in chapter 2, Murdoch thinks that morals depend more on reflection and understanding than on action, and moral differences are seen as conceptual differences more than differences in behaviour.²⁴¹ She explains:

our freedom is not just a freedom to choose and act differently, it is also a freedom to think and believe differently, to see the world differently, to see different configurations and describe them in different words. Moral differences can be differences of concept as well as differences of choice. A moral change shows in our vocabulary. How we see and describe the world is morals too - and the relation of this to our conduct may be complicated (ME 72-73).

Both our use of words and our descriptions of the world are moral. This again emphasises the moral attitude that a writer ought to have and her capacity to widen

²⁴⁰ As Ingeborg Bachmann observes in ‘The first Frankfurt Lecture’: ‘A new language is what responds to reality where a moral, epistemological jolt has occurred, and not where one attempts to make language new by itself, as if language itself could drive knowledge home and reveal an experience one has never had. Where it is only manipulated to produce a novel feel, it soon takes revenge, unmasking the intention. A new language must have a new gait, and it has this gait only if a new spirit inhabits it’ (Bachmann 2021, 269).

²⁴¹ Murdoch holds that ‘moral differences look less like differences of choice, given the same facts, and more like differences of vision’ (VCM 82). ‘When we apprehend and assess other people we do not consider only their solutions to specifiable practical problems, we consider something more elusive which may be called their total vision of life, as shown in their mode of speech or silence, their choice of words, their assessments of others, their conception of their own lives, what they think attractive or praiseworthy, what they think funny: in short the configurations of their thought which show continually in their reactions and conversation. These things, which may be overtly and comprehensibly displayed or inwardly elaborated and guessed at, constitute what, making different points in the two metaphors, one may call the texture of a man’s being or the nature of his personal vision’ (VCM 80-81).

her vocabulary.²⁴² We need a meta-narrative about the pictures that we make and a vocabulary to forge new images. This is the role of moral philosophers, and, operating in different dynamics, the role of writers and poets. Ultimately, maintaining images of the world as fundamentally incomprehensible and impossible to formalise (as Ayer wanted)²⁴³ is dissatisfying. Accepting this, we begin to understand what Murdoch meant by ‘widening’ our vocabulary. She is referring to our capacity to understand our own pictures and to conceive them: a continuously perfectible effort. In ‘Metaphysics and Ethics’, she concludes:

The difficulty is, and here we are after all not so very far from the philosophers of the past, that the subject of investigation is the nature of man – and we are studying this nature at a point of great conceptual sensibility. Man is a creature who makes pictures of himself and then comes to resemble the picture. This is the process which moral philosophy must attempt to describe and analyse (ME 75).

Morality is a matter of analysis *and* exploration, not just analysis, as analytic philosophers claimed. Exploration is different from analysis as it is not neutral but imaginative. This element is what philosophy and literature share – an essentially imaginative exploration.

Murdoch traces the hostility towards this view of morals to assumptions that it threatens moral freedom, or, better, Liberalism’s account of moral freedom. It makes it impossible to reduce ethics to logic, since it suggests that morality must be studied historically (VCM 84).

There are people whose fundamental moral belief is that we all live in the same empirical and rationally comprehensible world and that morality is the adoption of universal and openly defensible rules of conduct. There are other people whose fundamental belief is that *we live in a world whose mystery transcends us and that morality is the exploration of that mystery in so far as it concerns each individual* (VCM 88, my emphasis).

Murdoch embraces the world’s inexhaustibility and ‘ambiguity’ (twin fears for analytic philosophies) through attention to particulars. This, she finds, induces humility and is an expression of love (VCM 88). Inexhaustibility is inherently connected to religious imagery. In fact, when understanding is accepted as an ever-perfectible practice, ultimate understanding is excluded and it is accepted that ‘there are even moments when understanding ought to be withheld’ (VCM 90). On this

²⁴² Someone who coins new vocabulary for Murdoch is, for example, Marcel (ME 74).

²⁴³ See introduction.

view, ‘where the attempt fails, and one has to choose without having understood, the virtues of faith and hope have their place’ (VCM 90). Therefore, Murdoch speaks of a belief in transcendence that moral philosophers and poets should explore and describe:

The task of moral philosophers has been to extend, as poets may extend, the limits of the language, and enable it to illuminate regions of reality which were formerly dark (VCM 90).

Belief, faith, and hope are religious virtues fundamental to Murdoch’s view of morals, even if her philosophy does not include a personal God. These virtues, which gain their legitimacy from transcendence, are better evoked by literature. Murdoch finds them particularly in fables and parables. Indeed, all three authors in this research hold such stories in high regard, seeing them, in Murdoch’s words, as ‘sources of moral inspiration’.²⁴⁴ She explains:

Certain parables or stories undoubtedly owe their power to the fact that they incarnate a moral truth which is paradoxical, infinitely suggestive and open to continual reinterpretation. ... Such stories provide, precisely through their concreteness and consequent ambiguity, sources of moral inspiration which highly specific rules could not give. ... It may be said, that a moral attitude which lays emphasis on ambiguity and paradox is not for everyday consumption. There are, however, moments when situations are unclear and what is needed is not a renewed attempt to specify the facts, but a fresh vision which may be derived from a ‘story’ or from some sustaining concept which is able to deal with what is obstinately obscure, and represents a ‘mode of understanding’ of an alternative type (VCM 90–91).

Moral life involves dealing with life’s inexhaustibility and contradictions, and with ‘the moral dangers of such attitudes’ (e.g., of ‘hope’ and ‘love’). Indeed, mystery plays a crucial role in the mystical realism I am about to define.

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

²⁴⁴ Cristina Campo, in her essay ‘On Fairy Tales’, writes: ‘Attention is the only path to the unsayable, the only path to mystery. In fact, it is firmly anchored in the real, and only through allusions hidden in reality is that mystery manifested. The symbols of the Holy Scriptures, myths, and fairy tales, which have nourished and consecrated life for millennia, are clothed in the most concrete earthly forms: from the burning bush to the talking cricket, from the apple of knowledge to Cinderella’s pumpkins’ (Campo 2024, 151). See Negri’s book on Weil’s and Campo’s accounts of fairy tales (2005). On Campo’s Weil-inspired idea of fairy tales see Mazzoni (2011; 2012). On the role of fairy tales in ethical imagination, see also McKinnell (2019).

We need more concepts in terms of which to picture the substance of our being; it is through an enriching and deepening of concepts that moral progress takes place. Simone Weil said that morality was a matter of attention, not of will. We need a new vocabulary of attention (AD 293).

The relevance Murdoch gives to the interior life of the mind, allows her to make narration fundamental to moral development, and thus, to present literature, among other forms of art, as the richest source for morals. For ““becoming better” is a process involving an exercise and refinement of moral vocabulary and sensibility” (MGM 324). This refinement can occur through our engagement with literature since novels especially provide a picture of the writer’s ‘total vision of life’, and so of her ‘moral nature’ or ‘moral being’ (VCM 81), providing food for our attention (‘if stories are told, virtue will be portrayed’ (EM 233)).

4.3.4 Beauty that stems from the narration *attracts* and *sustains* attention

I will now examine how the beauty that stems from narration – so from the artwork’s form – attracts and sustains our attention. This will be necessary in my discussion of the way beauty can sustain our attention when the content of art is unpleasant, like in the case of suffering (4.4.2). As we said in chapter 2.7, beauty lies in the recognition of the independence and existence of something other than ourselves. The author, in this sense, lets the world represented in her work be and exist, independently of her. We said in 2.7 that beauty is not something attributable to an object, and we underlined how it flourishes in the attentive relationship between us and the world. Beauty in literature is the result of the selfless relationship between the author and her story.

Following Plato’s lesson, both Weil and Murdoch indicate that beauty is ‘the only spiritual thing which we love by instinct’ (SGC 370) and that attracts unselfish attention. In Plato’s *Phaedrus*, it is noted that ‘beauty alone has this privilege, to be the most evident and the most loveable’ (250, c-d). As explored in chapter 2, Murdoch describes this best in her famous example of the ‘kestrel moment’ as an occasion for what she calls a moment of ‘unselfing’. Murdoch observes that the contemplation of beauty in art requires the same quality of detachment needed for the contemplation of beauty in nature, and that attention fixed on art and nature is rewarded by the enjoyment of beauty in both cases.

However, Murdoch points out that moving from beauty experienced in nature to beauty experienced in art involves entering ‘a more difficult region’ because ‘art is less accessible than nature.’ However, art is also more edifying since it is a human creation (SGC 370) that speaks about humans and values. If beauty provides an occasion for ‘unselfing’, this might seem more easily achievable by attending to the non-human realm,²⁴⁵ which, by its very nature, has the power to draw us out of ourselves. Literature, in fact, requires an additional step. However, literature, through beauty, puts us *vis a vis* with our human nature in all its complexity, and yet it has the potential to pull us out.

Additionally, there seems to be a difference between how beauty in literature and beauty in other forms of art attract our attention. The beauty that emerges from narration is not like the more immediate impact of seeing a kestrel or experiencing a painting or piece of music.²⁴⁶ Beauty in literature requires a duration to manifest. While it attracts us, it demands sustained attention, which is engaged through a truth-seeking quest (as Caprioglio Panizza suggests, we want to know how the story ends). As mentioned earlier, this is a crucial characteristic of attention and requires an effort of our imagination. Literature has a privileged, albeit more difficult, relation to sustained attention, which is increasingly challenging in today’s world.²⁴⁷

²⁴⁵ Clearly, what I mean here is not that it is easier to pay attention to the non-human realm. Our current climate disasters are the perfect example of our ‘inattention’ towards nature. However, once attention is engaged, ‘unselfing’ seems more achievable because it is occasioned by something that is already non-human centred.

²⁴⁶ I do not mean to elevate literature over all the other forms of art. I am suggesting here that engaging with a book requires a more active, imaginative, and sustained attentive effort. It is not the aim of this thesis to compare literature with the other forms of art, however, I choose to give space to a comparison between photography and literature in 4.4.1.

²⁴⁷ ‘As David Foster Wallace explains on The Charlie Rose Show in 1996 on ‘The future of fiction in the information age’: ‘Commercial entertainment – its efficiency, its sheer ability to deliver pleasure in large doses – changes people’s relationship to art and entertainment, it changes what an audience is looking for.’ Indeed, in our technological time, reading has become something that seems to require too much effort, too much attention, too much time. He gave the example of television, and how ‘that requires very little of the recipient of the art ... [and that it] affects what people are looking for in various kinds of art.’ Indeed, our habits of attention are changing together with the perception of the time we have in our lives. (Transcribed by me from YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cj0JgqOnK2M&t=46s>).

Sontag's 'Letter to Borges'²⁴⁸ from June 13, 1996, discusses the dangers of changing our habits of attention and our perception of books. She writes:

Books are not only the arbitrary sum of our dreams, and our memory. They also give us the model of self-transcendence. Some people think of reading only as a kind of escape: an escape from the 'real' everyday world to an imaginary world, the world of books. Books are much more. They are a way of being fully human. I'm sorry to have to tell you that books are now considered an endangered species. By books, I also mean the conditions of reading that make possible literature and its soul effects. Soon, we are told, we will call up on 'bookscreens' any 'text' on demand, and will be able to change its appearance, ask questions of it, 'interact' with it. When books become 'texts' that we 'interact' with according to criteria of utility, the written word will have become simply another aspect of our advertising-driven televisual reality. This is the glorious future being created, and promised to us, as something more 'democratic'. Of course, it means nothing less than the death of inwardness – and of the book (Sontag 2001, 112).

Sustaining attention helps us to remain with what is there, to refrain from skipping forward even if it hurts (Caprioglio Panizza 2022, 143). Hence, literature helps us to practice not losing our grip, which is morally valuable given our tendencies toward comfort and illusion rather than confronting difficult passages in our life-story.

Following Weil, Murdoch notes that beauty can attract us to art even when its content is unpleasant.²⁴⁹ For instance, subjects that society isolates, rejects, or excludes due to fear or disgust can become objects of our gaze through art. The problem obviously lies in the danger of romanticising or diminishing what is being portrayed, raising the question of how to treat the difficult matter narrated justly. The experience of beauty in art does not necessarily align with the positive or harmonic elements of the content but rather with *how* the story is narrated. For both Weil and Murdoch, the artist allows the viewer (or reader) to experience beauty through their effort of unselfing and paying attention. It is the beauty emerging from the narrative that captures our attention, the author's 'impersonal vocation', striving

²⁴⁸ About Borges she writes: 'You were very much the product of your time, your culture, and yet you knew how to transcend your time, your culture, in ways that seem quite magical. This had something to do with the openness and generosity of your attention. You were the least egocentric, the most transparent of writers, as well as the most artful. It also had something to do with a natural purity of spirit' (Sontag 2001, 111).

²⁴⁹ Attention (or love) towards works of art like *King Lear*, which portrays something terrible, is happiness, says Murdoch (Dooley 2003, 135).

to depict ‘reality without attachments’ – the reality of the story itself, devoid of the author’s projections. The outcome of this endeavour is the beauty that draws us in.

Depending on the subjects depicted within the artwork, this beauty can either delight us or unsettle us like in tragedy (‘we enjoy art, even simple art, because it disturbs us in deep often incomprehensible ways’ (LP 10)). Murdoch articulates this by stating:

The good artist helps us to see the place of necessity in human life, what must be endured, what makes and breaks, and to purify our imagination so as to contemplate the real world (usually veiled by anxiety and fantasy) including what is terrible and absurd (FS 456).

As I emphasised earlier, Murdoch notes that art often trivialises and embellishes evil, (‘art is (often too) jauntily at home with evil and quick to beautify it’ (FS 457)) yet ‘good literature’ manages to both illuminate evil and portray virtues. One of ‘the heights of aesthetic endeavour’, ‘To see misery and evil justly’, and ‘how this becomes beautiful’ is art’s greatest mystery (FS 458). Murdoch cites examples from Shakespeare and Homer, who masterfully extract splendour and beauty from malevolence and tragedy.²⁵⁰

But how can one avoid romanticising (and thus distorting) disaster? Murdoch maintains that suffering is ‘interesting’, often charged with magical and sexual undertones. We hide from it, and escape it through sadomasochism,²⁵¹ as it almost always provides a pathway back to the self, often through resentment, false solace, or morbid indulgence. Nonetheless, Murdoch suggests that art’s potential to engage attentively with suffering is tied to its ability to reveal without explaining (FS 457–58). Let us now examine how.

²⁵⁰ ‘Shakespeare makes not only splendour but beauty out of the malevolence of Iago and the intolerable death of Cordelia, as Homer does out of the miseries of a pointless war and the stylish ruthlessness of Achilles’ (FS 458).

²⁵¹ ‘Suffering is interesting, our views of it are often magically, sexually, charged. Real deathly suffering, such as we see in King Lear, is very difficult to portray, and in life terrible suffering is very difficult to contemplate. Of course if it is remote from us, something seen on television, even if we think it is ‘very important’, we arrange to be hardened enough to forget it fairly promptly. If, because the sufferer is oneself or a close other, we cannot do this, we use our life-energy to transform the experience as soon as possible, as we do in bereavement. Suffering, mercifully, offers a route back into the ego. Sado-masochism is also an escape route well known to its devotees. It is difficult to suffer well, without resentment, false consolation, untruthful flight’ (MGM 130).

4.4 Attention to suffering through literature

4.4.1 Why is photographic / documentarist realism not enough?

In her book *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Sontag examines how humans respond to photographic images of horror, particularly of war zones. Sontag critiques Virginia Woolf's assumption in *Three Guineas* that making the horrors of war vivid enough would universally awaken a sense of outrage and a rejection of war (Sontag 2004, 12). Sontag argues that human reactions to images of war and suffering are not uniform, but widely varied. Consequently, we cannot generalise about how people engage with depictions of suffering. She asserts, 'No "we" should be taken for granted when the subject is looking at other people's pain' (Sontag 2004, 6).

Sontag notes that images are more susceptible to interpretation and manipulation than texts. Since the invention of photography, opposing sides have used photographs to publicly shame their adversaries. Moreover, the interpretation of these images depends on the viewer's psychological and moral background, each viewer bringing their own biases and ways of 'reading' to the world. Sontag notes that the aesthetic experience of viewing a photograph is more fleeting than engagement with literature, making photographs more prone to misinterpretation. These images provoke diversely: they might call for peace, incite revenge, or simply remind us that 'terrible things happen' (Sontag 2004, 11–12).

While Sontag acknowledges photographs' role in building an understanding of war in those who have not experienced it ('Something becomes real – to those who are elsewhere, following it as "news" – by being photographed' (Sontag 2004, 19)), she also highlights their limitations. Horrors, especially those that occur far from our Western 'world', sometimes begin to exist on our horizon by virtue only of their shock value.²⁵² At the same time, if photographs 'bore witness to the real', they are also 'simply a crude statement of fact addressed to the eye' (Sontag 2004, 23).

²⁵² 'Being a spectator of calamities taking place in another country is a quintessential modern experience, the cumulative offering by more than a century and a half's worth of those professional, specialized tourists known as journalists. Wars are now also living room sights and sounds. Information about what is happening elsewhere, called "news", features conflict and violence ... to which the response is compassion, or indignation, or titillation, or approval, as each misery heaves into view' (Sontag 2004, 16).

Sontag argues that this ‘crude realism’ with its challenge – ‘can you look at this?’ – is something literature cannot achieve. This raises the question of whether an artist, particularly a writer, can sustain our attention differently. I argue that beauty²⁵³ plays a crucial role in this alternative form of ‘bearing witness’ found in the works of authors like Morante, which I term ‘attentive’ and characterise as mystical realism. Photographs are designed to shock, arresting attention (Sontag 2004, 20), through a fundamentally short-lived effect, especially in our modern, media-saturated lives. Instead, as discussed in chapter 2, encounters between human attention and beauty require a certain distance. This distance may be what is needed to sustain our attention, allowing us to engage with the reality of suffering.

Art sustains our attention in a way that differs from the fleeting impact of images we scroll through daily on social media. I do not mean to suggest that photographs of distant wars are not impactful. Activism that rises in response to news reports directly challenges this. As Katrin Wehling-Giorgi²⁵⁴ notes, in *On Photography* Sontag recalls the impact that pictures of the Holocaust had on her aged twelve, ‘Nothing I have seen ... ever cut me as sharply, deeply ... something broke. ... I felt irrevocably grieved, wounded’ (Sontag 1977, 17-18). Certainly, the viewer’s habit of attention plays an important role, and no general ‘we’ should be assumed in human response to others’ suffering.

²⁵³ Sontag provides the example of Leonardo da Vinci giving instructions for a battle painting. She notes that for da Vinci, ‘the image should appall, and in that terribilità lies a challenging kind of beauty’, adding, ‘That a gory battlescape could be beautiful – in the sublime, awesome, or tragic register of the beautiful – is a commonplace about images of war made by artists’ (Sontag 2004, 67).

²⁵⁴ In their work, Wehling-Giorgi and de Rogatis highlight the potential of looking at *La Storia* through the notion of traumatic realism, and in particular through the ‘analysis of History’s ekphrastic portrayal of photographs which synechdochally mimic the workings of trauma’ (Wehling-Giorgi and de Rogatis 2021, 179). Wehling-Giorgi sees Morante’s as a successful ekphrastic portrayal of what is otherwise deemed inexpressible; see also the introduction to *Trauma Narratives in Italian and Transnational Women Writers*, especially the section on ‘Towards a New Aesthetics of Trauma’. As Wehling-Giorgi explains, trauma alters one’s sense of self, in this sense, I add that trauma can be another name for a past *malheur*, hence literature that is attentive to suffering shares various similarities with trauma literature. As also Lucamante points out, Morante’s ‘most arduous task was to build a comprehensible plot out of an unjustifiable trauma. It was a subjective, personal trauma with respect to what the author saw before her eyes, offended like Usepepe by the war pictures at the newsstand. An artist, a witness, a profound listener of human dramas, Morante brings testimony to it.’ (Lucamante 2014, 195).

Nonetheless, a book about war, like the *Iliad*, can be transformative in a different way.²⁵⁵ This reflects the *potential* impact of certain literature rather than an inevitable effect, given Sontag's claim that no universal 'we' exists when it comes to experiencing (or witnessing through art) others' pain. The habitual, psychological, social, and political background of each reader, and their 'moral vision', to use Murdoch's expression, determine how 'attentive' and thus how affected they become.²⁵⁶

4.4.2 Suffering through beauty can sustain our attention

As explained earlier (4.3.4), beauty manifests in great literature through the author's 'unselfing'. For Weil, this involves the selfless loving attention the great writer pays to reality during creation, maintaining a balanced distance from work and characters. When it comes to representing suffering in literature, this kind of selfless attention in artistic creation is most needed. We already said that it is beauty that stems from narration (which extends in time) that can attract us and sustain our attention, and this is especially required in the case of evil and suffering. In this section, I will underline and connect this requirement for narration to the content narrated. Art can be about anything, however, for our three authors, there is a fundamental trait that distinguishes 'great literature' from the rest: the transcendent Good present through a sense of the ephemeral and contingency infused throughout the story.

For Murdoch, attending to suffering through art is difficult: 'It is not easy to picture either great evil or great good in literature without sentimentality or caricature'. (MGM 101).²⁵⁷ The author's attention to the human condition and to suffering, during creation, is crucial. Through her impersonal tone, extreme suffering becomes 'beautiful' without turning into lamentation or sentimentality, which results from comforting lies that deprive evil of its colour²⁵⁸ or from sadomasochism (art can make something terrible beautiful, a feature that Weil and

²⁵⁵ Franz Kafka writes in a letter to Pollak in January 1904, that we should read books that profoundly affect us, comparing them to disasters that awaken us ('A book must be the axe for the frozen sea within us' (Quoted in Bachmann 2021, 283)).

²⁵⁶ On an ethics of 'attentive readerly' see Cynthia Wallace's *A Literary Ethics of Suffering*, where she suggests that literature requires active and critical reflection on the part of the reader.

²⁵⁷ Next to this, Murdoch adds Weil's name to point out where this was further discussed.

²⁵⁸ On Arendt's view on evil see footnote n. 171.

Murdoch call a ‘mystery’). Using Schopenhauer’s words, she observes that great art,

shows us the greatest misfortune, not as an exception, not as something occasioned by rare circumstances or monstrous characters, but as arising easily and of itself out of the actions and characters of men, indeed almost as essential to them, and thus brings it terribly near to us (MGM 101).

Suffering and evil in literature should not be represented as a matter of the will or as something rare and distant, but resulting from the characters’ vision of life in all its complexity and ‘inattention’.

In my discussion of beauty, I do not intend to provide a fixed definition of how beauty operates, or should operate, in great literature *tout court*. Instead, I will now focus on one literary example that Weil, Murdoch, and Morante all regarded as the greatest instance of attentive literature: Homer’s *Iliad*. In this work, beauty not only arises from the author’s selfless narration but is also beautifully woven into the story itself.

Weil points out that in the *Iliad*, brief ‘luminous’ moments are scattered throughout (I 27), where human beings reduced to things suddenly reacquire their souls. These moments, emerging from the desolation of war and then sinking back into it, she calls moments of justice and love. They are moments of grace, such as Hector facing his destiny before Troy’s walls; moments where ‘the tradition of hospitality persists’ even in war; and moments where love, in all its ephemerality,²⁵⁹ transcends the horror of war and encompasses the narration with its silence.

In the *Iliad*, according to Weil, the facts of war represent the use of and submission to force, while also revealing the common submission of all human beings to the same destiny. As previously stated, for Weil, this compassion manifests in ‘a kind of accent’ (I 30) in which Homer portrays what has been destroyed or is going to be destroyed. The irruption within the narration of, for instance, peaceful but lost pasts, or the lives of the living compared to those now reduced to things, makes us feel ‘with sharp regret what it is that violence has killed

²⁵⁹ Weil mentions forms of love including: sons for their parents, parents for their sons, brotherly love, and conjugal love, friendships between comrades-at-arms as the most beautiful friendship of all, such as between Priam and Achilles: ‘before it a murdered son or a murdered friend no longer cries out for vengeance. Before it – even more miraculous – the distance between benefactor and suppliant, between victor and vanquished, shrinks to nothing’ (I 29).

and will kill' (I 29). In the poem, whatever is temporarily spared from violence is 'wrapped in poetry', 'the cold brutality of the deeds of war is left undisguised; neither victors nor vanquished are admired, scorned, or hated' (I 32). Those who escape the dominion of force are loved 'but loved sorrowfully because of the threat of destruction that constantly hangs over them' (I 33).

Outside the logic of force, necessity and its indifference rule over the natural world and humans. In a beautiful passage in the *Cahiers*, Weil observes how no one would claim the sea is less beautiful because sometimes boats sink in it. Everything that is not unreality, and thus under the logic of force, is ultimately beautiful. Those who suffer force, in an extreme sense, resemble matter under necessity and only in this sense allude to beauty. Weil writes, 'All the horrors produced in this world are like the folds imposed upon the waves by gravity. That is why they contain an element of beauty. Sometimes a poem, such as the *Iliad*, brings this beauty to light' (LGA 129).

Beauty, in the sense of the ephemeral inherent to suffering, finds its privileged space in art. 'Perhaps art does it best' (MGM 500), better even than philosophy, because literature, though it employs language, is not constrained by rationalisation or formalisation. The great artist does not offer a fixed definition of reality. Instead, her realism refrains from dictating what reality is or prescribing a clear path to it. Given the variety of reality, the imaginative exploration in literature may be more suited to capturing it than philosophy's analytical approach.²⁶⁰

Another writer influenced by Weil, María Zambrano,²⁶¹ addresses this in her 1939 essay *Filosofía y poesía*. She argues against Plato's ban on poetry, tracing the ancient quarrel between poetry and philosophy. Poetry, she argues, is on the side of openness and care, while philosophy is on the side of difference and justice. Poetry is more accessible because it is immediate and quotidian, whereas philosophy

²⁶⁰ 'Literature, in curing its own ills, can give us a new vocabulary of experience, and a truer picture of freedom. With this, renewing our sense of distance, we may remind ourselves that art too lives in a region where all human endeavour is failure' (AD 295). 'However good a life is, it includes moral failure. Is this an empirical hypothesis or a tautology or a synthetic a priori proposition? Never mind, let it be in this context a metaphysical conjecture.' (MGM 509). The idea of failure always works against an ideal of perfection which is the foundation of Murdoch's metaphysics.

²⁶¹ The Spanish philosopher lived in Rome where she met Elsa Morante. Zambrano's sister Araceli became the inspiration for the name of the protagonist of Morante's last novel. On her connection also with Weil and Murdoch, see Laurenzi (2016).

requires intellectual effort and seeks explanations. Poetry, instead, inhabits mysteries.²⁶²

Similarly, Murdoch observes that art, more than philosophy, can ‘touch’ the most mysterious features of human existence. Art contains both order and messiness, contingency within form. ‘Even at its most exquisite, art is incomplete’,

because of the muddle of human life and the ambiguity of aesthetic form, art can at best only explain partly, only reveal almost: and of course any complex work contains impurities and accidents which we choose to ignore (FS 460).

Art, differently from philosophy, allows the inexhaustibility of the world to emerge. While art gives form to its content, its matter is still the incomplete and inexhaustible particular. Evil and suffering embody this ephemerality at its peak. Attending to them through art gives us back ‘the integrity of the real’ (to use Morante’s vocabulary). Zambrano’s essay brings together poetry and mysticism, particularly Spanish mysticism like that of Juan de la Cruz. Spanish mysticism differs from German mysticism, in which, as Pina De Luca explains in the introduction to the Italian edition, ‘there is the absolute solitude of the human being in front of God, the giving up, drowning, to His power emphasises absolute solitude before God, yielding to His power’ (Zambrano 2010, 22). By contrast, Spanish mysticism celebrates the presence of the world and its creatures. This realism makes the poet an empty space (a void, in Weil’s language) where ‘things’ can exist, reminiscent of Rilke’s *Weltinnenraum*.²⁶³ The poet becomes a place of encounter

²⁶² The difference with the philosopher’s unity is that the latter would be an absolute unity, with no trace of the particular, ‘the unity reached by the poet in poetry, on the other hand, is always incomplete; the poet is aware of this and his humility consists in being content with the fragile unity achieved.’ It is a gracious unity, not one sought after as the philosopher does. In Zambrano’s view, the philosopher wants unity to possess everything, while the poet doesn’t want everything but rather any particular thing: ‘the poet’s object is never the conceptual object of thought, but something infinitely complex and real – the phantasmagorical and imagined thing, the invented one, the thing that once was and the thing that will never be. The poet desires reality, but poetic reality is not only what exists, what is, but also what is not; it embraces both being and non-being with admirable charitable justice, for everything, absolutely everything, has the right to exist, even that which could never be. The poet draws from the humiliation of non-being what groans within it, draws from nothingness itself and gives it a name and a face ... The poet does not fear nothingness’ (Zambrano 2010, 45). Therefore, for Zambrano, the poet sees with attention what is not there, and gives an attentive testimony of the invisible. She concludes: ‘The “everything” of the poet is different, as it is not an “everything” as a horizon, nor as a principle. It is an “everything” that comes a posteriori, which will only be such when each thing has reached its own fullness’, or we could say, reached perfection (Zambrano 2010, 46).

²⁶³ The poet, through the expansion of linguistic experience against the very limits of language, tears open a breach (*das Offene*) (Rilke 1989, VIII Elegy, v.8) within the physical world – and thus within the human and finite world. An ‘inner space of the world’ (*Weltinnenraum*), interior because it opens within the poet’s inner world, who transforms the things of the world through the poetic word.

where things are not possessed but exist gracefully in an ‘impersonal’ space. Zambrano calls this ‘creative justice’: ‘a hand extended towards what has not yet come into being, so that it may ultimately be. Continuity of creation’ (Zambrano 2010, 102), akin to what I will define in the next chapter as Morante’s ‘attentive testimony’.²⁶⁴

Without anticipating too much about the mystical realism that I will sketch by the end of this chapter and in the next, Zambrano, with this idea of the poet becoming a void, gets close to a Weilian account of the writer’s responsibility and potential achievement of reality. She writes that ‘the poet remains empty, available, always’, referring to grace as a receiving reality from the outside, from the outward reality:

Nothing is achieved by oneself. It is not only impossible to possess oneself, but it is also impossible to possess anything, no matter how small or insignificant its existence may be. In each miserable creature, there is the mystery of its being and that of the entire creation; so how could they be possessed? Truly, *whoever manages to penetrate completely into the existence of the most miserable creature in the world will have penetrated into the entire world.* But this is impossible, just as it is impossible to possess oneself (Zambrano 2010, 119, my emphasis).

‘To contemplate what cannot be contemplated (the affliction of another), without running away, and to contemplate the desirable without approaching – that is what is beautiful’ (FLN 71). This is what the author does with her ‘attentive testimony’: naming vulnerable ‘things’ before they are gone; it is the only ‘salvation by words’ that can occur in ‘the time of Loss’, as Cristina Campo puts it.²⁶⁵ Reality as a whole is potentially accessed by looking at ‘the most miserable creature in the world’, thus paying attention to what is most difficult, the Hölderlian ‘Wo aber Gefahr ist, wächst / Das Rettende auch’,²⁶⁶ there lies beauty that can sustain our attention, for the promise that it bears is the revelation of the truth. If this openness and promise of the work of art encounters the attentive reader seeking truth, the ‘sustaining’ of

²⁶⁴ As Heiti writes, ‘The poem makes an argument for attending to the smallest things. It argues not by debating, but by bearing witness.’ (Heiti 2021, 310).

²⁶⁵ In ‘The Flute and the Carpet’, Campo writes: ‘What does any examination of man’s condition come down to today if not a list – stoical or terrified though the list-maker may be – of his losses? From silence to oxygen, from time to mental equilibrium; from water to modesty, from culture to the kingdom of heaven. And there really isn’t much to offset the horrifying catalogues. The whole picture seems to be that of a civilization of loss’ (Campo 2024, 109).

²⁶⁶ ‘Patmos’: ‘The shadow always seems darkest when the sunlight is brightest’ (quoted in Davy 1951, 76).

attention can occur. It is in the relationship between the author and the story narrated that this truth emerges. It is reality without our attachments, that is, beauty. As we saw (2.7) beauty requires a distance that allows the existence and independence of the object contemplated. When we see suffering in art, beauty is what puts a distance between us and the distressing object of attention. In chapter 3, we saw how the same distance is a precondition for the experience of compassion, different from that of empathy. In this sense, the reader's attentive compassion is fostered by the author's narration who interpose a distance between the reader and the suffering depicted. This distance might work as an auxiliary in sustaining our attention towards suffering, which instead of repulsing, not only can attract, and sustain our attention, but also provide the space for compassion to emerge. Through attentive compassion, we recognise the Other's independence, mortality, and vulnerability ('Every created thing is an object for compassion because it is ephemeral' (FLN 104)).

As we saw in chapter 1, attention to extreme suffering is for Weil the most creative form of attention, for it re-creates its object of attention (the invisible sufferer). Art essentially re-creates its object of attention in the same way. Hence, attention paid to suffering and attention through artistic creation are the most creative moments of a human life.²⁶⁷ The combination of the two in the form of the art that attends to suffering is 'a miracle', or 'a mystery'. The attempt at this, carried forward by Morante in *La Storia*, is what I explore in chapter 5.

4.4.3 The example of tragedy

Tragic drama is emblematically about extreme suffering, and great tragedies such as Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, *Antigone*, or Shakespeare's *King Lear*, can, for Weil and Murdoch, allow what they called 'the miracle' or 'the mystery' of sustaining our attention to the most difficult thing – suffering – which we usually eschew.²⁶⁸

²⁶⁷ Murdoch reports: 'Simone Weil quotes Valéry: 'The proper, unique and perpetual object of thought is that which does not exist.' Here we may make sense of the idea of loving good. 'At its highest point, love is a determination to create the being which it has taken for its object.' Here indeed we come back to the Ontological Proof in its simpler version, a proof by perfection, by a certainty derived from love. The good artist, the true lover, the dedicated thinker, the unselfish moral agent solving his problem: they can create the object of love. The dog's tooth, when sincerely venerated, glows with light. Compare, God cannot be thought of except as real' (MGM 506). 'Art and high thought and difficult moral discernment appear as creation ex nihilo, as grace' (MGM 506).

²⁶⁸ Weil: 'The book of Job is a miracle because it expresses in a perfect form things which a human mind can only think and conceive under the torment of intolerable suffering, but which are formless

According to Weil, great art like tragedies hints at a Good beyond the distinction between good and evil while, at the same time, affirming this distinction.

In Weil's view, the Good is on the level of what she calls *le surnaturelle*, but great art, as said above, shows 'the true relation of good and evil' (LM 148). Brueck (1995) compares tragedy seen through Weil's metaphysics with modernist drama like Camus' *Caligula* or Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, where suffering is presented, in its essence, as meaningless. She explains that differently from the modernist, the classical tragedian 'posits the existence of supernatural forces'. While this on the one hand does not alleviate the suffering, 'it often imbues pain with meaning' (Brueck 1995, 2) where 'affliction can afford meaning on a level above the rational' (Brueck 1995, 3).

Tragedies, for Weil, display the suffering of the innocent (like *Antigone* or *King Lear*) which, as Brueck explains, can lead to 'an apprehension of the transcendent' and therefore to redemption for the character. The matter of tragic art is not suffering or evil made more bearable, but the reader/audience's encounter with the harsh reality of suffering while hinting at the transcendent Good.

Murdoch can help us account for this role of tragedies in more secular language. She suggests that great literature is able to show 'the only sense in which the permanent and the incorruptible is compatible with the transient' (SGC 372). On the level of the transient, good and evil relate to the Good, to the incorruptible, just as Plato's *Timaeus* shows the Demiurge shaping chaos and moving it towards the Good, implying that the Good can only be approached by the experience of everyday necessity. This is what we learn when we read of Antigone burying her brother Polyneices following an unwritten (divine) law which is above human laws. As Weil recalls:

The good begins at a point beyond the reach of will, as truth begins at a point beyond the reach of intelligence. Beyond the intelligence, and therefore beyond the law. The true law is an unwritten law, as Sophocles knew. For the letter kills (FLN 262).

at the time and which fade away and are irrecoverable when the suffering abates. The composition of the book of Job is a particular instance of the miracle of attention being paid to affliction. The same is true of the *Iliad*' (FLN 327).

The mediocre artist, Murdoch observes, fails to consider justly necessity itself, the *Ananke* of the world. Acknowledging *Ananke* teaches that every human being is equal in misfortune. For both Weil and Murdoch, one great tragedy that teaches this is Shakespeare's *King Lear*. Brueck observes,

Lear says, 'Thou art the thing itself; unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare forked animal as thou art' (III.iv.1057). Affliction teaches Lear that the distinctions the world makes between human beings, high and low, king and outcast, are meaningless; all persons are but two-legged beings exposed to forces indifferent to the good; variations between them are the result of pure accident. This understanding evokes not cynicism but compassion (Brueck 1995, 103).

In tragedies like these, our compassion for the characters arises because what is transmitted is not a judgment on the wrongdoing of the character, of an evil choice for which they are punished, but their suffering follows the entirety of what they are. They act according to what they are, they cannot do differently, and for this, they inspire compassion. Tragedy makes us face the idea of 'a realm where unmerited misfortune is a universal and serious possibility' (Brueck 1995, 63) and acknowledge that morality is both about rational choice *and* the other subterranean forces that come into play when we act, and which come to constitute the background against which we make decisions.

Indeed, before great art, we do not experience only aesthetic pleasure but a spiritual, moral one:

one could say that the art form of tragedy is the *image* of a (rarely achieved) moral condition. (Compare the image of Nirvana.) Plato (*Phaedrus*) said that enjoyment of beauty was the only spiritual pleasure that was natural to us. Hence we must think not of mere aesthetic gratification but of something high. What does it all look like to a saint? Can we imagine? (What does it look like to a great artist?) (MGM 106).

I suggest that great art, like tragedies such as *Antigone*, or *King Lear*, is educational but non-didactic, evoking attentive compassion. In this sense, we can say with Murdoch that art is 'the most educational thing we have' in facilitating a moral outlook (FS 461). When we rule out the idea of art for art's sake, and do not reduce the moral to the didactic, instead envisioning literature as preoccupied with morals, we understand how the absolute exemplarity that characterises great tragedy can be educational yet non-didactic. This follows the fact that the single events and characters are set against a background that transcends them. Indeed, the fruition of

tragedy ‘must be connected to, enlightened by, seen in the light of, something good (pure, just)’ (MGM 140).

In this sense, tragedy can teach by revealing rather than explaining, showing that ‘[w]e are all mortal and equally at the mercy of necessity and chance’ (OGG 360). These commonalities are, for Murdoch, ‘the true aspects in which all men are brothers’ (OGG 360). The sensitivity of all persons to the changeability of fate shows that ‘all is vanity’, exposing the hubris of our attempts to control the world exhaustively, which is, in Murdoch’s words, ‘the beginning and the end of ethics’ (OGG 358). The Good can be approached through what these authors call selfless attention only if we accept the fact that we live in a world ruled by chance and necessity, where force, suffering, and illusions are the fabric of ordinary life, where fragility and the possibility of calamity are not obscured by comforting fantasies.

But how does this act of revelation occur in tragedy? Tragedy disturbs us, it shocks us. As previously explained, in our everyday lives, our attention gets attracted and sometimes sustained, for instance, in our encounter with beauty or when we experience a big enough shock that throws us momentarily outside of our habitual thinking. In these moments of attention, which resemble, on a lower degree, the cathartic ending moments of tragedies, Weil thinks that we can sense ‘the horrible monotony of evil or the unfathomable marvel of goodness’ (LM 147). This can only be momentary, because ‘soon enough we fall back into the half-dream peopled by our narrational fancies’ (LM 147). Through tragedies, our attention can be engaged in the direction of suffering, and the traumatic essence of this literary genre allows its cathartic affordances, for, as Murdoch writes, it ‘shows us the world, our world and not another one, with a clarity which startles and delights us simply because we are not used to looking at the real world at all’ (OGG 352).

Quotidian encounters with suffering result in either looking away or the conferment of meaning. But explaining suffering, as Weil observes, entails its transformation through comfort, or sadomasochistic illusion. Weil notices that this difficulty in attention hinders compassion. As shown in the previous chapter, compassion follows attention, it implies accepting that we are all brothers at the mercy of chance and necessity, and a step back from our egos. If tragedy allows us ‘to see misery and evil justly’ this creates a space for attentive compassion. In this sense, Murdoch can say that literature, among other forms of art, is the richest

source for morals, for, as with tragedy, it creates a space where virtues can be portrayed against a background that transcends the individual characters and encompasses them with compassion:

We may judge a man's virtue by his actions, but also demand or hope to know the "substance" which lies behind them, as in our own case we apprehend a value-bearing base of being from which actions spring. Here a part of our understanding of 'the good man' may be thought of in terms of a spectator of a tragedy. How are we to think of, to dare to think of, to make sense of, the awful sufferings and awful wickednesses of the human race? We should not always, and cannot always, refrain from judging. In making use here of the concept of tragedy we may further reflect upon the deep working of imagery as analogy in our understanding of morals' (MGM 109-110).

How suffering becomes beautiful in great literature and yet not made comfortable or magnified (what Murdoch calls the 'mystery' of great art) is connected to the fact that 'the utter chanciness of human life and the fact of death make virtue always, really, perhaps, when the illusory backgrounds [placed by religion and society] are removed, something gratuitous, something which belongs in the absolute foreground of our existence' (EM 233). Echoing Weil's studies in *Intuitions pré-chrétiennes*, Murdoch refers to 'the gentleness of Patroclus in the middle of a ruthless war, the truthfulness of Cordelia in a flattering court' or Antigone in her claim for justice, to stress how virtue 'can be portrayed independently of precise social background through some more general appeal to our knowledge of man and his frailty' (EM 233). We already saw the centrality of the idea of the ephemeral in 'great literature'. In fact, virtue is always essentially connected to the ultimate idea that 'all men are brothers' and that the logic of power and force that rules among human relationships is merely a dream:

Tragedy, which deals with what is most difficult, is dense non-generalised non-abstract work, herein resembling states of absolute pain in real cases where generalities are irrelevant; the tragic vision of such pain is condensed and non-discursive as is the condition itself. We are placed, as it were, right up against it; close to a real awareness of death, of the senseless rubble aspect of human life which is concealed under grand illusory names such as fate, destiny, history, providence (MGM 142).

By engaging with tragedies, we are 'placed right up against' death, and so our condition as mortal beings, in whose face any egotistic striving loses its salience. Tragedy shows the reality of death. As Murdoch writes, it shows

A proper understanding of contingency, it apprehends chance and its horrors, not as fate, but as an aspect of death, of the frailty and unreality of the ego and

the emptiness of worldly desires. So, our evil part is condemned 'not to suffering but to death' (MGM 106-07).

Murdoch often returns to Weil to investigate suffering and tragedy, and their relationship. Murdoch emphasises that tragedy involves more than just suffering; it fundamentally concerns death.²⁶⁹ Tragic art as such is rare because it encompasses the harsh realities and significance of death. In a 'secular' context, evil is seen as an attempt to escape the reality of death, through power, heroic fantasies, or inflicting pain on others. If tragedy as an art form requires boundaries and a certain 'magic', it likewise resists more familiar and consoling uses of magic, the sentimentality and abstraction that characterises unreality.

The mystery of great art is that through fiction ('the unreal') it disrupts the unreality we inhabit to reveal a deeper reality: in this way, it is against unreality. As Murdoch writes, 'The concept of tragedy is paradoxical because it attempts to display horror through charm' (MGM 127). This movement is achieved through great art's capacity to reveal 'the reality of death' and unmask the 'unreality' with which we cover it.

Antigone, Oedipus, and King Lear never cease to be oriented towards the Good, to love the Good, despite their conditions of affliction. Let us take the example of Antigone, the 'saintly' figure loved by Weil, Murdoch, and Morante. As Brueck notices,

The movement of catharsis in the *Antigone*, then, according to a Weilian reading, is Antigone's own purification in the kommos. In this, the final scene in which she appears, the heroine is emptied of all security and self-regard. Yet she does not lose a love of the good. Here, specifically, that good constitutes an act she herself performed: the burial of her brother, Polyneices. By the act itself, as by her refusal to repent it, *Antigone bears witness to the supernatural good* which undergirds moral law. (Brueck 1995, 91, my emphasis)

²⁶⁹ 'Tragedy concerns the difference between suffering and death. Simone Weil says that exposure to God condemns what is evil in us '*pas à la souffrance mais à la mort*'. Not to suffering but to death ... Tragedy is a paradoxical art because to succeed it must really upset us while exhibiting, but not as mere consolation, some orderly and comprehensive vista of evil and catastrophe. Death threatens the ego's dream of eternal life and happiness and power ... Tragedy must break the charmed completion which is the essence of lesser art, revealing the true nature of sin, the futility of fantasy and the reality of death. Since it is art it must have borders, it must be some kind of magic, but must also inhibit magic in its more familiar and consoling uses' (MGM 103-104).

Antigone maintains her love for the Good, she ‘bears witness to the supernatural Good’²⁷⁰ through her actions and her whole existence. In the next chapter, I will show how in *La Storia* nobody bears witness ‘voluntarily’ (Useppe is naturally under the star of attention), and how the author accepts the responsibility to bear witness, giving testimony to the attentive reader.

4.4.4 The problematic idea of redemptive suffering

If, as we saw, truth and beauty emerges in the relationship between the author and the story narrated, we have now to emphasise how this truth calls for an attentive reader. In this section, I show how an idea of redemption in art can be retained when considered as the combination of the author’s attentive witness to suffering (and to the innocent sufferer, or redeemer) and the reader’s attentive reception. Let us now see the historically problematic idea of ‘redemptive suffering’ through a Weilian-Murdochian lens.

Death, which does not bring salvation, consolation, or peace, is the centre of great tragic art. Murdoch asserts that ‘masochism is the artist’s greatest and most subtle enemy’ (SGC 371), since portrayals of real, raw, unromanticised death are difficult. She suggests that ‘even Tolstoy did not really manage it in *Ivan Ilyich*, although he did elsewhere’ (SGC 371-72).

The danger of romanticising despair has been a constant throughout history. Christ’s death, Murdoch observes, often beautified in religious narratives, becomes disconnected from real, awful human suffering. She points out that ‘The Gospel narratives show defeat turning into victory, the triumph of suffering over death, suffering set up as the adversary of death’ (MGM 128). Christ’s death becomes ‘a supreme cosmic event’, with ‘terrified’ and ‘abandoned’ disciples becoming ‘heroes’. This narrative (‘the story we want to hear’) suggests ‘that suffering can be redemptive, and that death is not the end’. Suffering, in this sense, is given meaning becoming a path to redemption: ‘Suffering need not be pointless, it need not be wasted, it has meaning, it can be the way. The dying Christ redeems suffering itself, even beautifies it, as well as overcoming death’ (MGM 128).

²⁷⁰ C. Wallace, writing about *Pearl* by Mary Gordon, observes as one of the characters, Maria, remembers that ‘*martyr* means witness in Greek’ (Wallace 2024, 135).

However, the idea of redemptive suffering is ‘ambiguous and deep.’ Murdoch reminds us that claims that suffering purifies the soul are often false. Yet, I argue that a kind of redemptive suffering can be found in certain literature where redemption means not spreading evil. Revisiting the Greek idea of *Até*, Murdoch writes in her novel, *The Unicorn*:

Até is the name of the almost automatic transfer of suffering. Power is a form of *Até*. The victims of power, and any power has its victims, are themselves infected. They then have to pass it on, to use power on others. This is evil, and the crude image of the all-powerful God is a sacrilege. Good is not completely powerless. To be powerless, to be a complete victim, may be another source of power. But Good is non-powerful. And it is in the good that *Até* is finally quenched, when it encounters a pure being who only suffers and does not attempt to pass the suffering on (U 98).²⁷¹

For Weil and Murdoch, the being capable of this is the ideal figure of the saint/mystic. In fact, in Weil’s words, the saint is a completely ‘decreated’ being, and only in the saint can *le malheur* be ‘beautiful’:

If a human being who is in a state of perfection and has through grace completely destroyed the ‘I’ in himself, falls into that degree of affliction which corresponds for him to the destruction of the ‘I’ from outside – we have there the cross in its fullness. Affliction can no longer destroy the ‘I’ in him for the ‘I’ in him no longer exists, having completely disappeared and left the place to God (GG 27).

Putting aside this idea of ‘redemption’ as salvation via a fully ‘decreated’ being, there are other degrees of redemption within the framework of an ethics of attention. As we saw in chapter 1, ‘Whoever suffers tries to communicate his suffering ... the suffering remains inside him and poisons his existence’ (N I 122). What sufferers need is someone to see them, to understand what is salient to them (the cessation of whatever is causing them to suffer), to be imaginatively returned into the world, and to escape the condition of being reduced to a thing wrought on them by force. Ultimately, they need to receive words about their suffering, to communicate it, and have their suffering witnessed. Additionally, the witness of their suffering provided through literary narration can provide a sort of redemption to the reader.

²⁷¹ ‘The redeemed one is *bought* at the *expense* of another and thereby *set free*. The transaction is effective through the *virtue*, or relevant *pure intent* (or pure love), of the one who makes the sacrifice. The beneficiary must internalise the spectacle of suffering as a lesson whereby he is changed’ (MGM 131).

In Weil's or Morante's idea of redemptive suffering, there is no notion of redemption as 'the living peace of a renewed being'. For Murdoch, 'the absolute cancellation of this idea constitutes the tragic climax of *Lear*' (MGM 119). The sufferer without consolation 'produces in the spectator shame, then love, then the creative energy required for amendment of life' (MGM 132). The sufferer claims to be seen through art, claiming the reader's attention, and in this art can provide redemption through the author's attentive effort, and the attentive effort of the reader. Perhaps this, as C. Wallace also argues, is the site of what she calls a literary ethics of suffering.

Murdoch explains this further by stating that the virtuous suffering of others can often make us aware of our own sins (in this philosophical framework, sin means living within the unreality of our projections). For example, she writes, 'dissident protesters against oppressive regimes' (like the protagonist of *The One Alone*) may inspire this awareness, with or without the concept of *imitatio Christi* (MGM 131). Nonetheless, the difficulty in redemptive suffering lies in the fact that illusions can tempt us during this contemplation, such as 'passive admiration', 'sodomasochistic identification', or taking pleasure in the fact that someone else, and not us, is in trouble. This is also a constant risk for the reader.

Additionally, in redemptive suffering, Murdoch points out, there is the delicate matter of finding 'the right redeemer', which given the scarcity of unblemished examples, is challenging. She highlights a necessary characteristic of innocence and the inevitable death of the redeemer. 'The redeemer must be, in respect of his suffering, innocent' ('A Christ who is a terrorist cannot be a redemptive figure' (MGM 132)). Particularly, in stories, suffering 'may be perfected by death'. She adds: 'That is the perfect, the most impressive lesson, when another person dies for you. This is an image of the way in which the redeemer's suffering must enter into the being and body of the redeemed, who then suffers creatively in bringing about the death of evil in himself' (MGM 132).

In the framework of these authors, morality involves the acceptance of death, not just suffering. Weil asserts that we must fight against the causes of suffering (oppression, power, violence, prestige, injustice) for others and ourselves, but when suffering exists, we should not hide it but endure it. Morality is about enduring the void and accepting death. For Weil, 'truth is on the side of death'. This revelation

is our only salvation. Redemption is not liberation from suffering; it is on the side of death ('the arcane message that redemptive suffering does not overcome death' (MGM 121)), it is, thus, acceptance of death and thus liberation from unreality.

Therefore, besides aspiring not to transmit our suffering to others in our everyday lives (like the saint or mystic who quenches the process of *At e*), another way to be 'on the side of death', without beautifying or romanticising suffering is, I argue, to bear 'attentive' witness not only to the Good, but also to our own and others' suffering, like Antigone. Murdoch notes: 'Lear dies a helpless victim, as so many people do on this planet, prisoners who are quietly shot in the back of the head on some unrecorded morning' (MGM 121).

She emphasises that there are innumerable silent deaths and sufferings that attentive art can dignify and account for. This is what Murdoch explores in her radio-opera, which is analysed in the last section of this chapter, and the aim that orients Morante in writing *La Storia* which makes it 'an act of accusation'. As Peter Conradi also observes in his Preface to EM,

Murdoch often in this collection expresses doubts about a direct role for politics in art, yet might be said in some very general sense to have brought mysticism and politics together in her superb (unpublished) short radio opera, *The One Alone* (BBC Radio 3, 13 February 1987), which concerned the spiritual struggles of a brave opponent of political tyranny, subject to solitary confinement' (Conradi, 1999, xxx)

Indeed, bearing attentive witness to 'the integrity of the real' (to anticipate Morante's words) means to pay 'mystical' attention especially to the darkest and most invisible parts of reality. This is the ultimate meaning of mystical realism, making literature a form of activism. As Conradi adds, 'To term oneself a mystic does not have to mean being a-political – consider the examples of Walter Benjamin and, indeed, Simone Weil herself' (Conradi, 1999, xxx).

4.5 A 'spiritual use of suffering' through a 'mystical realism'?

Murdoch suggests that every writer experiences tension between themselves and an external reality, a sense of 'something utterly other' than themselves. She describes a good writer as aware of the deceiving power of their fantasy and conscious of the tension between themselves and the outward, transcendent reality. She writes: 'this sense of distance and otherness belongs to the good artist as it belongs to the

religious man, and it is in this way that one might understand Tolstoy's view of art as something religious' (AIN 255).

Murdoch, reflecting on the nineteenth-century novel as a significant product of religious contexts, notes that art is constantly 'reformulating in every generation something of our relationship to what one might call our metaphysical background' (AIN 256). Even at the dawn of religion and metaphysics, this metaphysical background can still be imaginatively explored with 'mystical' attention through art, and particularly through literature.

Literature can sometimes reveal this 'integrity of the real', 'the realization of a vast and varied reality outside ourselves' (SBR 282).²⁷² However, this does not imply that the author had a mystical experience or is a mystic. Rather, it means that the author can convey this experience by 'unselfing', allowing things to be as they are (a process, as we saw above, that is 'burnt up in the product').

This openness to reality (against unreality) through art, inspired by Weil and Murdoch's notion of selfless attention, is what I refer to as mystical realism. It is realism because, according to Murdoch, art (and morals) has to do with 'the discovery of reality' (SG 215) and 'love for the particular' in its independent existence, and since the author 'produces the beautiful by fixing his attention on something real' (GG 119). It is 'mystical' because this realism, which Murdoch finds in Weil's concept of obedience, has its inherent meaning in being 'exposed to good' (MGM 111). Through her attention and her 'impersonal inspiration', the author gives back to the attentive reader, in the form of beauty, the fleeting feeling that 'something', and its rich world, exists. When that 'something real' is the sufferers and their world, then mystical realism is impregnated with attentive compassion thus resembling love.

²⁷² This awareness of an absolute reality, which is also inherent in experiences of beauty, is what both Weil and Murdoch define as joy. In chapter 5, I further explore the relationship between mystical realism and joy, specifically in the context of Morante's 'Felici-Pochi', and discuss the idea that the mystic experiences joy. Bruecks concludes: 'In opposition to the escapist tendency of structuralism and poststructuralism, the whole purpose of art and art theory, for the traditionalist, is to convey truth about human existence, including its deepest, most mysterious dimensions. Only a torturous death-of-the-ego, the fruit of a head-on encounter with the world outside the ego, may lead to an unveiling of that which is really real. The ultimate reality, rationally indescribable though evocable through metaphor' (Bruecks 1995, 157). Weil: 'Art is an attempt to transport into a limited quantity of matter, modelled by man, an image of the infinite beauty of the entire universe. If the attempt succeeds, this portion of matter should not hide the universe, but on the contrary it should reveal its reality to all around' (FILG 168).

By witnessing the ‘real’ suffering of the ‘fictional’ sufferer, the author restores their value and dignity, thus their status as human beings. As Murdoch writes, ‘The realism of a great artist is not a photographic realism, it is essentially both pity and justice’ (SGC 371). This demonstrates human beings’ inseparable connection between ‘clear realistic vision and compassion’ (SGC 371). Mystical realism is always compassionate because it is grounded in attention. It encompasses the narrative with attentive compassion ‘where the certainty and the absolute appear incarnate and immediate in the needs of others’ (MGM 430).

Ultimately, this mystical realism makes spiritual use of suffering by accepting it within the work of art without consolation or romanticisation, thereby offering the reader a different experience of *le malheur* through the beauty that results from the author’s impersonal inspiration. In everyday life, the sufferer might repulse one because, as Weil suggests, encountering them feels like confronting *le malheur* itself. However, through literature, and the distance beauty and the artistic framework impose, we encounter *this* specific *malheur* and *this* individual through the narration. This personal relationship allows the reader to gain a sense of the ‘*sentimento della sventura*’ (to use Morante’s words) – the feeling of *malheur* – as a whole, and glimpsing reality outside unreality. If, in everyday life, when confronted with suffering we tend to abstract, rationalise and give meaning, literature gives us the feeling of the particular²⁷³: it tells us that things are, not how they are. It puts us on the path of understanding but does not provide an answer. In the next chapter, I will show how this concentric coexistence of particular and absolute perspectives translates into Morante’s literary voice in *La Storia*.

4.6 Literature can *inspire* attention

Here, I show how literature can be seen as educational yet non-didactic, how its moral and political character lies in its bearing attentive witness to the parts of reality that remain unheard and invisible, and thus how this redirecting of attention towards reality can inspire greater attention in the readers.

²⁷³ In this, literature is similar to the experience of the world when we are dreaming. We wake up with the feeling of the things we encountered, of the dialogues we had, the faces we have seen, or the places we inhabited. Only after, we attach to them a meaning. It is worth noting that dreams were, in fact, the cauldron where Morante’s literary imagination often originated.

I explained how art's capacity to reveal, especially when it comes to suffering, differentiates it from philosophy. As mentioned, in Murdoch's and Weil's sense, the kind of 'teaching' provided by literature is educational but non-didactic.²⁷⁴ Great literature does not offer explicit messages. Its teaching is not about content; it is about providing a new orientation towards reality. It shows and evokes rather than teaching didactically.²⁷⁵ It indicates the unreality we all live in, the logic of force, revealing another logic, ultimately that of love. Murdoch states:

Art and morality are, with certain provisos ... one. Their essence is the same. The essence of both of them is love. Love is the perception of individuals. Love is the extremely difficult realisation that something other than oneself is real. Love, and so art and morals, is the discovery of reality (SG 215).

If literature can expand our 'vocabulary of attention' and teach us 'loving attention', and if, following Murdoch, we think of attention as shaping the moral quality of our consciousness, since attention determines what we see and that what we see is what affects what we do, then the relevance of literature in moral life becomes evident.

Art teaches us to see beauty in the world and by exercising a habit of attention in everyday life we can also, in turn, become more sensitive, and thus attentive to art.²⁷⁶ The books we read become part of our moral vision, they shape our character. As Zamboni observes, 'We act in the right way ... thanks to our way of being at a certain moment in our lives, which has been shaped by the vision offered by the texts, stories, and novels we have read.' (Zamboni, Forthcoming).

'Good' literature, as Jan Zwicky observes in *The Experience of Meaning* (2019), does not provide a ready-made enclosed story to be passively read. Instead,

²⁷⁴ When Weil sent to Paul Valéry her poem *Prometheus*, which she wrote in 1937, the poet told her that her poetry was too didactic, as Caprioglio Panizza and Wilson write, 'Overall, he [Valéry] sees it as too didactic, too instructive and too content to list Prometheus's achievements. There is a rule in creative writing classes: poets must show, not tell; or at least they must tell by showing. Weil breaks the rule here and elsewhere in her poems, but the work after 'Prometheus' is generally less didactic, possibly indicating how she was attentive to Valéry as mentor' (MO 24).

²⁷⁵ Already in SRR, Murdoch writes: 'It might certainly be argued that the great novelist always has some kind of social seriousness. George Lukács says that the writer is a natural progressive because he is sensitive to the situation of the most suffering class. But this seriousness and sensitiveness that have to be sought and defined in what the writer shows, perhaps malgré lui, and not in what he professes or sets out to teach' (SRR 144).

²⁷⁶ I often said that what we called truth in art calls for an attentive reader, but how do we become attentive readers? By developing a habit of attention in everyday life, often prompted by art which teaches us how to pay attention to the world, we can become, at the same time, more attentive to reality and the literary reality.

it gives multiple detailed inputs the reader can imaginatively connect in infinite constellations of meanings encompassed in the narrated whole.²⁷⁷ It mirrors our lived condition, showing yet not telling. Zwicky writes,

When we are being shown something, it is as though the mind holds its breath; attention is focused, the experience of time is suspended. We wait for all the pieces ‘to fall into place’; and when they do, insight flashes on the mind’s eye (Zwicky 2019, 97).

In this sense, literature does not provide closed analytical arguments (like philosophy) offering instead the possibility for imaginative exploration. This trait marks its potential to inspire attention, by being an object of attention (for the reader), exhibiting attention (through the writer), and exploring possible degrees of attention and inattention (in the characters). Consequently, it can extend our vocabulary of attention. The more our vocabulary about values extends, the more we can read reality differently and pay deeper attention. This primary connection between attention and literature makes the latter ‘not a diversion or a side issue’ but ‘something that enlarges our sensibility’ (‘a kind of goodness by proxy’ (SGC 371)) through engaging with ordinary life, thus, as Murdoch writes, ‘the most educational of all human activities and a place in which the nature of morality can be seen’ (SGC 372).

The mystery of art occurs in the relationship between three components: the artist who bears attentive witness to reality through art, the viewer’s orientation towards the attractive forces of art’s beauty, and the work of art and its content becoming the recipient of the ‘miracle’ of attention. This is the fabric of the literary ethics of attention developed in this thesis thus far.

The reader is inspired not only by the work of art but also by ‘the act of attention’ accomplished by the author. Murdoch writes:

Art is informative and entertaining, it condenses and clarifies the world, directing attention upon particular things. This intense showing, this *bearing witness*, of which it is capable, is detested by tyrants who always persecute or demoralise their artists. Art illuminates accident and contingency and the general muddle of life, the limitations of time and the discursive intellect, so as to enable us to survey complex or horrible things which would otherwise appal us (MGM 8).

²⁷⁷ See also Zwicky (2014c; 2014b; 2014a).

In this same passage, Murdoch observes that art constructs an ‘authoritative public human world’, preserving past experiences and offering reflective space. Additionally, art acts as a ‘defence against materialism and pseudo-scientific attitudes to life’ (MGM 8). Literature’s ultimate educative potential consists in creating this space for the reader’s reflection, where suffering can be contemplated. She writes:

In this sense art also creates its client; it inspires intuitions of ideal formal and symbolic unity which enable us to co-operate with the artist and to be, as we enjoy the work, artists ourselves. The art object conveys, in the most accessible and for many the only available form, the idea of a transcendent perfection. *Great art inspires because it is separate, it is for nothing*, it is for itself. It is an image of virtue. Its condensed, clarified, presentation enables us to look without sin upon a sinful world. It renders innocent and transforms into truthful vision our baser energies connected with power, curiosity, envy and sex (MGM 8, my emphasis).

The author-reader relationship is not a power dynamic (like the teacher-pupil). Weil, following Plato’s concerns in Book X of the *Republic*, is cautious about the role of artists in society but does not advocate for a moralistic view of art. Instead, she suggests:

Writers do not have to be professors of morals, but they do have to give expression to the human condition. For nothing is so essential to human life, for all people and at every moment, as good and evil. When literature becomes deliberately indifferent to the opposition of good and evil, it betrays its function and has no pretense to excellence (RL 154).

Through the author’s engagement with the opposition of good and evil and her effort of attention, art can become emblematic of another potential of attention, further to those explored in chapter 2. I refer to the possibility of being inspired to pay attention by witnessing others attending. One example outside the artistic framework is silent vigils, which in bearing witness make something invisible visible, acknowledging the existence of something unjust that has happened or is happening. In art, this translates into the reader witnessing the author’s witness or efforts of attention, and in the creation of a space of attention and reflection for the reader.

This is a central theme in C. Wallace’s book, where she argues that narratives of suffering, especially those focusing on women’s experiences, have the power to challenge dominant cultural narratives revealing the often hidden or marginalised

aspects of suffering.²⁷⁸ In her concluding chapter, 'Learning to Learn', Wallace uses the example of Denise Levertov's poem about the Biafran War and 'the suffering of its massacred Igbos and starving children, about the lack of Western media attention and governmental aid', observing how the attentive effort of the author engages with the literary ethics that she is trying to sketch. C. Wallace writes,

The very existence of the poem in a book published in 1970, the year the short war ended, stands as *a witness*, a challenge ... Levertov as a Western writer does not seek to stand as a representative for the Biafran people, telling their stories; instead, she narrates her own distance. Indeed, the poem represents not so much the Biafran people but the Western lack of awareness and response, and in so doing, it raises awareness of the situation. In this way, the poem, while in a certain sense representing Biafra, could be said also to thematize the ethics of readerly attention, implicitly raising the questions, To whom do we give our attention? To whom do we give our care? To whom are we responsible? How, in a modern era of televised and reported violence, injustice, and suffering from across the globe, can we both demand to have the truly important stories reported but then also learn how to divide our attention and our resources to respond? (Wallace 2016, 209).

The challenging testimony of this poem, she notes, does not entail a utopian ideal wherein readers immediately respond with ethical action; 'knowledge of a situation, however new and attitude-changing, does not always lead to knowledge about what to do in response, and knowledge itself does not always lead to action' (Wallace 2016, 209). I investigated this problem of apathy and inaction earlier with the help of Sontag. It is interesting to notice how, facing this problem, Wallace at the end of her book also turns to a thematization of attention, stating that the writers she explores in her book,

seek to represent under-represented sufferings or injustices, for the sake of bearing witness, for the sake of possible reparations, and even for the sake of encouraging readers toward responsive political action. With writer or text as lawyer, advocate, or even witness, the reader is put into the position of judge or jury. From this perspective, literary texts complicate comfortable lethargy or oblivion (Wallace 2016, 213).

²⁷⁸ C. Wallace integrates feminist and postcolonial frameworks to analyse how gender, race, and other intersecting identities shape experiences and representations of suffering. She critiques the ways in which certain narratives can perpetuate oppressive structures, while also highlighting texts that offer more ethical and just representations. Wallace underscores the importance of paying attention to who is telling the story, whose voices are heard, and whose suffering is acknowledged. Through detailed readings of various literary texts, Wallace illustrates her arguments about the ethical dimensions of literature. She engages with works by authors such as Toni Morrison, J.M. Coetzee, and Alice Walker, among others, to demonstrate how literature can serve as a space of ethical inquiry and reflection.

As a great reader of Weil, and like others deeply influenced by her,²⁷⁹ it is notable that Wallace shares the view that art grounded in attention is a form of activism, and has the potential to bear ‘witness’ to suffering, as Morante did. ‘This is the understanding of literary representation that emphasises “breaking silences,” not just of under-recognized “voices” but also of injustices and sufferings, that seeks to bring that which was hidden into the light’ (Wallace 2016, 213).

This literary ethics of attention to suffering brings together politics and mysticism, which is, in Conradi’s view, what Murdoch did in her 1987 radio-opera *The One Alone*, where she attempts to bear witness to the extreme suffering of a political dissident who sacrifices herself through an act of attentive witness.

4.7 Murdoch’s radio-opera *The One Alone*

In *The One Alone*, Murdoch deals with extreme suffering and the self-sacrifice of her heroine who stands for all anonymous dissidents.²⁸⁰ This opera is the quintessential extreme/ideal of ‘bearing witness’ to extreme suffering explicated through art, and the existential matter of dying ‘for nothing’ (in this respect probably the most Weilian of Murdoch’s literary works).²⁸¹

The crucial question throughout the play is the possibility of a completely selfless act, and by extension the possibility of dying for nothing, without the motivation of a sense of reward. There are three characters: i) a prisoner who finds herself in a dark cell which is also a limbo following a ‘self-sacrifice’ against an unspecified tyrannical regime; ii) an interrogator who comments on the prisoner’s actions driving her to despair claiming her action was futile; and iii) an angel who offers a different interpretation of, but no consolation for, the prisoner’s motivations. The kind of sacrifice that is ‘for nothing’, that the prisoner might have performed, despite the interrogator’s allegation, writes Murdoch, does not seek recognition, it is instead a pure, selfless, act, for the sake of the Good itself. This ultimate doubt mirrors those of other redemptive self-sacrificial figures, such as

²⁷⁹ C. Wallace (2024) focuses especially on Adrienne Rich, Annie Dillard, and Mary Gordon.

²⁸⁰ As Heiti writes: ‘And yet there have always been a handful of radicals and protesters. (*Radical*, from Latin for *root*; *protest*, for *witness*.) Those who have offered their own bodies to defend the body of the earth. Those who have not been able *not* to attend to the smallest things. Those who have tried to live, now, in the *kallipolis*, the beautiful polis, even if no such polis has ever existed or ever will exist.’ (Heiti 2021, 313).

²⁸¹ For an insightful analysis of *The One Alone* in comparison with T.S. Eliot’s *Murder in the Cathedral* see White (2012).

Antigone who also questions – waiting for the gods’ judgement – whether she acted rightly, even though she never repents or regrets that self-sacrificing act. Christ too, as Brueck reminds her reader, lost his sense of righteousness in the end (Brueck 1995, 113).

The ‘nothing’ is described in the play by the unconsoling angel, as a void (to use Weil’s term), that Murdoch seems to place in opposition to Sartre’s nothingness. As the angel states:

There is a nothing which is simply deprivation, / Bitterness and remorse and negation. / There is another nothing which is real / And full of pain, but *if you can*, / Full of joy as well.’ ‘Pain’ is ‘the precious stuff’ (OA, Section 4).²⁸²

The play questions whether the protagonist accomplishes this ‘nothing which is real’, free from reward. This resonates with MGM, where Murdoch writes:

Relentless asceticism may be suspect simply because we ‘do not know what is going on’. This indeed may never be known, even by the ascetic himself. (God only knows.) In religious houses, doubts constantly return: *is it a spiritual dark night or is it just egoistic despair?*’ (MGM 248, my emphasis).

A spiritual dark night is always ‘for nothing’ and with no consolation. As Murdoch writes in *The Sovereignty of Good*:

The Good has nothing to do with purpose, indeed it excludes the idea of purpose. ‘All is vanity’ is the beginning and the end of ethics. The only genuine way to be good is to be good ‘for nothing’ ... That ‘for nothing’ is indeed the experienced correlate of the invisibility or non- representable blankness of the idea of Good itself (SGC 358).

This ‘motive’ is the opposite of what the interrogator accuses the prisoner of, reducing her action to stupidity, self-interest, and vanity, motivated by her desire to be a celebrity or a hero and be loved (‘You stood there with your little placard / Saying “no” to this and “no” to that, / You wanted to be a celebrity.’ And ‘You were a slave to your vanity / To your private selfish insanity / You have failed to serve your country / You have failed to serve humanity’ (OA, Section 1)). The ‘saying no’ the Interrogator refers to is a ‘no’ to injustice (like Socrates’ *daimon*), to the self-protective, self-promoting fantasy that may be our only possible action: a non-powerful action rooted in another world, transcendent, that has different laws, in which obedience is freedom.

²⁸² The pages are not numbered.

When the prisoner responds ‘I acted for all but I acted alone’, the interrogator responds: ‘Now you are one alone / you have achieved your one alone’ (OA, Section 1). The angel, instead, who represents an entity of another fabric belonging to another realm, acknowledges the prisoner’s motives, saying they are inevitably ‘always mixed’, and recognises her ‘love for truth’ and ‘hatred for cruelty’. Nonetheless, he cannot console her, and he only reminds her that what she did, she did ‘for nothing’, which is a nothing that is different from what the interrogator spoke of:

Your nothing is different from his. / His nothing is filled with bitterness and remorse / And desire for what is unreal and false. / Your nothing, which seems like a black hole, / Brims over with what is most real / And with that precious stuff your cup is full. (OA, Section 2)

In conclusion, to the angel’s words that ‘There is another nothing which is real / And full of pain, *but if you can*, / Full of joy as well’, the prisoner cries out ‘*I can’t*, I can’t, it is not for me’, and the angel’s last words before he leaves the ‘one alone’ alone again are, ‘*No, I suppose you can’t* – I got carried / Away – I am sorry – it’s true all the / Same’ (OA, Section 2, my emphasis).

The Prisoner’s cry ‘I can’t’ reminds us of the inherent contradiction in any act of accepting a void to attend to reality. From the angel’s perspective, that is from outside the reality of chance and necessity, joy and pain are linked together in their pureness without being mixed.

Weil defines happiness as ‘the sensation of the real’ felt through the experience of beauty: ‘Through joy, the beauty of the world penetrates into our souls’, while through *malheur* it penetrates through our body. Both experiences are ‘equally precious things’.²⁸³ At the same time, attention (or love) towards works of art like *King Lear*, which portrays something terrible, is happiness, says Murdoch (Dooley 2003, 135). In this chapter, I explored how the *use* of suffering (a moral reorientation starting from the place of the void, from the condition of *malheur*) effected through the great art capable of making suffering beautiful, is the only point of access from which suffering and joy can stand unmixed yet in proximity. As Weil writes, great art shows ‘the true relation of good and evil’ (LM 148).

²⁸³ ‘We have to feel the universe through each sensation. What does it matter then whether it be pleasure or pain? If our hand is shaken by a beloved friend when we meet again after a long separation, what does it matter that he squeezes it hard and hurts us?’ (GG 141).

As explained, for Weil, *malheur* is related to ‘death’, and so to the fact that as human beings we are subjected to chance and necessity. For a being that is completely ‘decreated’, or ‘unselfed’, the suffering that comes with *malheur* would be null, perhaps even turning into its opposite of joy (as it is for the angel in Murdoch’s *The One Alone*). Suffering can only occur when there is an ‘I’, it derives from unreality (evil, the projections of the self onto reality), while pure joy comes from perfect selfless attention to reality, it is indeed grace.²⁸⁴ It follows from this view that human beings are more prone to evil and *malheur* than they are to joy/happiness. Despite this extreme view, if life is seen as an ever-perfectible moral pilgrimage, can one creatively imagine perfect ideals, where pure joy stands close to pure *malheur*, stirring us towards images of ‘degrees of joy/happiness’ that are radically different from the ‘liberal’ idea of happiness forged through self-fulfilment and success?²⁸⁵ As both Weil and Murdoch believe, imagining ideals is essential for moral improvement. These ideals can be portrayed as standards like the ‘innumerable unknown saints and martyrs, such as the dissident who is shot down crying out the truth, or perishes incognito in prison’ (MGM 429),²⁸⁶ or the protagonist of *The One Alone*, and Useppe in Morante’s *La Storia*.

At the end of the radio-opera we hear the indecipherable Children’s song which offers only the suggestion that truth (which ‘shall tell / And ring like bell’) and the word (which ‘is heard’) may somehow stand fast beyond the destinies of individual lives. Those lives²⁸⁷ are the locus of inspiration offering an example of

²⁸⁴ ‘la grazia, ossia / la felicità’, Morante writes in ‘La canzone degli F.P. e degli I.M.’ (*Il mondo*, 135).

²⁸⁵ Morante in *Il mondo* thus describes the joy of the ‘Happy-Few’: ‘The unfathomable arabesque / is given for the joy of its movement, not for the solution of its / theorem. / In the end your differences don’t matter / because / every step of joy, that has joy as its departure and direction, is destined / always to the only place of rest / and freedom from all desires, first and foremost / from the absurd desire for a solution / to the theorem’ (WSK 164).

²⁸⁶ ‘That loss of promised redemption and wise gentle stoical peace is something which speaks especially to our, Hitler and after, age when warfare and tyranny have achieved an intensity of cruelty which previous generations might have consigned to the barbaric past ... It has in this century been the fate of so many to be confronted with totally ruthless unshakeable evil and to have to choose between degrees of compromise and an absolute opposition which will tear mind and body to tatters, ruin the lives of friends and family, and perhaps never even be heard of or known of to be an example to others. Such situations break hearts, breed weary cynicism, weaken the sense of absolute; and also of course reveal a small number of the hero-saints of our time. Many, no doubt, have gone unrevealed’ (MGM 429).

²⁸⁷ As the one of Morante’s *Happy-Few*, among whom we find Simone Weil, see below.

selfless goodness that ‘can stir us’. This play thus suggests that it is the artist’s duty to depict such figures and to raise awareness of the nature of their sacrifices.

4.8 Conclusion

To summarise, after outlining the historical context marked by the crisis of language that prompted these authors’ reflections on literature, I explored the relationship between attention and literature, emphasising the crucial role of beauty. I then investigated the moral value of literature that depicts suffering without reducing its horror, confronting the attentive reader with an experience of *le malheur*. I presented the difference between art and documentary realism in engaging with suffering, highlighting how the former differs in retaining a role for beauty, and suggesting with Sontag that there can be no generalisation on the way ‘we’ respond to suffering, but that any ‘reader’ brings her habits of attention. Unlike in everyday life, within the literary framework this experience can be perceived not as repulsive but compelling through the attractive force of beauty.

I then investigated how tragedy engages with *le malheur* and analysed the difficult idea of ‘redemptive suffering’, arguing the idea of redemption (seen as not overcoming death) can be retained when considered as the combination of the author’s attentive witness to suffering and the reader’s attentive reception. I suggested that ‘a spiritual use of suffering’ involves the author’s acceptance of suffering and its representation with attentive compassion, thus bearing attentive witness to suffering.

Having laid a literary ethics of attention to suffering as a foundation, I defined mystical realism as the literary attentive effort to bear witness to reality, encompassing the ephemeral, which hints to the ‘integrity of the real’, with compassion. This attentive effort translates into maintaining a logic of height and distance, an idea of Perfection and the Good as always outside the picture, a transcendent and mysterious presence depicted simultaneously through the contingency of human relations and the necessity to which existence is subject. This mystical realism gives an image of how the incorruptible co-exists with the transient (SGC 372) and, while depicting the harsh necessity of human existence, shows, as in the case of the *Iliad*, a logic distinct from that of force – one of loving attention. Attention in a mystical novel like *La Storia* is not only present through the attentive testimony of the author herself, but also through glimpses scattered throughout the

novel, as I anticipated in this chapter in my discussion of the *Iliad*. I concluded this chapter by showing how literature can be educational yet non-didactic, and how, by revealing reality and bearing attentive witness to the invisible (or the invisible sufferers) it has the potential to inspire attention. I therefore explored a literary example of this witness in Murdoch's *The One Alone*.

5 Elsa Morante's 'mystical novel' *La Storia*: a case of literary 'attentive witness' to suffering

‘Sentii parlare di realismo. Che cos’è questo?’
‘Dovrebbe essere’ rispose il conte un po’ impacciato
‘un’arte di illuminare il reale.
Purtroppo, non si tiene conto che il reale è a più strati,
e l’intero Creato, quando si è giunti ad analizzare l’ultimo strato,
non risulta affatto reale, ma pura e profonda immaginazione’.²⁸⁸

Anna Maria Ortese, *L’iguana*

5.1 Introduction

In the first part of this chapter, after a brief account of Morante’s poetics in relation to her intellectual context, I trace back the ethics of attention that shines through both the literary style and content of the novel by showing i) the image of force and attention within the novel, and ii) the author’s use of a vocabulary of attention. I highlight these two points to show, in the second part, that Morante’s much-debated realism is a realism based on attention. With Murdoch’s help, using the idea I developed of a ‘mystical realism’ grounded on attention, I suggest that Morante’s *La Storia* is a mystical novel bearing ‘attentive witness’ to suffering, thus bearing witness to the tension between ‘reality’ and ‘unreality’. I conclude that, in an anti-metaphysical age like ours, a mystical novel like *La Storia* is an act of attention.

5.2 Morante’s poetics ‘against unreality’

The concept of ‘realism’ is multifaceted, varying across philosophy, visual art, literature, and cinema. In 18th-century European literature, realism focused on an external, verifiable reality, closely examining the emerging bourgeoisie. With industrialisation and scientific progress, writers turned their attention to lower social classes, exploring the psychological forces shaping individuals’ lives amid

²⁸⁸ “‘I heard about realism. What is that?’”. “It should be,” replied the count, somewhat awkwardly, “an art of illuminating the real. Unfortunately, it is not taken into account that the real has many layers, and the entire Creation, when one reaches the final layer, turns out not to be real at all, but pure and profound imagination.”

historical changes. In Italy, Alessandro Manzoni's works already exhibited this focus on reality.

French naturalism, led by writers like Honoré de Balzac and later by writers like Guy de Maupassant, Emile Zola, and Gustave Flaubert, adopted a scientific approach to human relationships and society, emphasising a moral perspective in which truth – sought through literature – is independent from humans, and adopting a documentary tone inspired by Positivism. This movement rejected romantic individualism, prioritising the writer's responsibility to depict harsh realities objectively. Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (1946) highlights how 19th-century writers like Stendhal and Balzac broke classical style rules by portraying everyday life in a serious manner, paving the way for modern realism.²⁸⁹

Italy's Verismo movement, associated with figures like Giovanni Verga and Luigi Capuana, mirrored this ethos, influenced by industrialisation and capitalism. However, the rise of fascism disrupted this realist focus, replacing it with themes aligned with fascist ideology, exemplified by Gabriele D'Annunzio and the Futurist movement led by Filippo Tommaso Marinetti.

During the 1920s and 1930s, the arts grappled with the writer's societal role and art's relationship to reality. Themes included the lives of marginalised individuals and the impact of historical events like the Second World War. Despite censorship, literature subtly critiqued contemporary events. In the early 1940s, 'neorealismo' emerged, characterised more as an ethical and political attitude than a unified school of thought. Writers assumed the role of *witnesses*, documenting

²⁸⁹ 'When Stendhal and Balzac took random individuals from daily life in their dependence upon current historical circumstances and made them the subjects of serious, problematic, and even tragic representation, they broke with the classical rule of distinct levels of style, for according to this rule, everyday practical reality could find a place in literature only within the frame of a low or intermediate kind of style, that is to say, as either grotesquely comic or pleasant, light, colorful, and elegant entertainment. They thus completed a development which had long been in preparation (since the time of the novel of manners and the comédie larmoyante of the eighteenth century, and more pronouncedly since the Sturm und Drang and early romanticism). And they opened the way for modern realism, which has ever since developed in increasingly rich forms, in keeping with the constantly changing and expanding reality of modern life' (Auerbach 2003, 554). The renewal of literary language fusing different linguistic registers and collisions of styles made it possible, for writers, to approach reality in its particularities and ordinary character in the attempt of adhering to reality.

wartime realities and the rebuilding of society, aiming to prevent future atrocities.²⁹⁰

Morante neither adhered to neorealism nor described herself as a neorealist. I argue the major difference was that if for neorealism reality was ‘a starting point’, for Morante, instead, it seems to be the opposite. Reality is an achievement, marked by the fact that the reader is left with a sense of reality. As she writes in ‘Sul romanzo’ (1965)²⁹¹:

A true novel, therefore, is always realist, even the most fantastical one! And too bad for the mediocre who cannot recognise its reality. Only fools, for example, could deny the realism of Alighieri: even though his novel claims to narrate the adventures of a living person in the afterlife and brings angels and devils onto the stage (SR 50).²⁹²

Morante, as I will explore here, bears witness to human suffering and, by doing so, attentively bears witness to ‘The difficult relationship between human reasoning and the mysterious reasons of reality.’²⁹³ (O, lxx)²⁹⁴.

Morante, being self-taught, as Concetta D’Angeli points out, was free from academic constraints, favouring personal tastes and influences (such as friends like Pier Paolo Pasolini). This included, above all, Weil.²⁹⁵ In her early writing, the influences that guided her style were already evident: Homer, Dante, Cervantes, Ariosto, Saba, Penna, Stendhal, Proust, Kafka, and, more generally, 19th-century psychological literature, epic literature, and fairy tales. The fable-like component, as I will explore further, and the element of wonder and magic distinguish Morante

²⁹⁰ Neorealism was particularly a matter of Italian cinema, which instead had started this renewed look onto reality earlier (On realism in Italian cinema see Brunetta, (1979)) between 1942 and 1949. Directors like Luchino Visconti, with films such as *Ossessione* and *La terra trema*, (the readaptation of Verga’s *I malavoglia*), reflect the Verismo tradition. However, by 1948, Visconti criticised the term ‘neorealismo’ as a limiting label, arguing that it had become an absurd constraint rather than a true representation of diverse approaches to reality (In *Rinascita*, 12 December 1948. Passage also in Bernabò 2016, 107).

²⁹¹ Originally published as ‘Nove domande sul romanzo’, in *Nuovi Argomenti*, n. 38-39, May-August 1959, 17-38.

²⁹² ‘Un vero romanzo, dunque, è sempre realista; anche il più favoloso! E tanto peggio per i mediocri che non sanno riconoscere la sua realtà. Soltanto gli sciocchi, a esempio, potrebbero disconoscere il realismo di Alighieri: per quanto il suo romanzo pretenda narrare le peripezie di un vivente nell’oltretomba e metta gli angeli e i diavoli sulla scena.’

²⁹³ ‘il difficile rapporto fra le ragioni umane e le ragioni misteriose della realtà’.

²⁹⁴ In *Italia Domani*, 15 March 1958.

²⁹⁵ As Concetta D’Angeli points out, ‘Rather than “sources”, which can only be discussed in certain cases, it is more appropriate to speak of reminiscences (in addition to the ‘magistero’ of Simone Weil and some contemporaries like Pier Paolo Pasolini, as well as ideological, poetic, and emotional interaction and concord).’ (D’Angeli 2015, 12).

from literary realism of her times, while also setting her apart from the more cerebral component of surrealism.²⁹⁶ This is visible since her first novel, *Menzogna e sortilegio*, where magical elements distinguished her writing style from neorealism, at its height in those years. Morante's style is not realism, nor is it neorealism or surrealism, but, using Murdoch's definition, a 'mystical realism', which this thesis aims to define. As Garboli²⁹⁷ and Cecchi say:

The taste for enchanting reality, already evident in this earlier phase before becoming so imperative in the subsequent one, arises in Morante from entirely different origins than 'mental' ones, because it has roots in the depths; and it cannot even be defined as a taste, but rather as a force, a current of imaginary energy coming from the heart of objects (O, xii).²⁹⁸

Lily Tuck explains that Morante takes from Kafka the 'method of mixing the picturesque and the squalid with the fantastic and the magical' (Tuck 2009, 35) and, as noted by Saskia Ziolkowski, a 'Gothicism' (2015, 54) and a taste for blurring 'the line between human and animal characters' (60).

Let us now present an overview of Morante's poetics following her novels chronologically.²⁹⁹ I do this to emphasise her literary ethics of attention leading up to *La Storia*.³⁰⁰ Morante's first novel, *Menzogna e sortilegio* (translated in its first edition as *House of Liars*), was published in Italy in 1948. The story was inspired by a real-life incident about a blind woman deceived into believing that her son (who died during the war in Ethiopia) was alive through fake letters sent by her family. Morante's works often spring from personal experiences or observations

²⁹⁶ In her essay on Saba, she writes about her dislike of abstract art: 'One could say that Saba's *Canzoniere* is the poem, or novel, of the man who, having emerged from the 19th century, through the anguished experience of the present era, searches for the signs of what Saba calls the "new world." Those values that, to borrow a phrase from Saba, could be defined as *values of death*, can be recognised in our contemporary aesthetics by the strange cult they have for the formless (and this formlessness may well hide under the exteriors of *abstraction*, superficial naturalism, or philological virtuosity). Now, the formless is precisely the opposite of life: for (and this, in truth, sounds too common to even be said!) poetry, like life, seeks to give absolute form and order to the objects of the universe, drawing them out of the formlessness and disorder – that is, out of death' (OS 34-35).

²⁹⁷ Garboli noted Morante's mystical qualities. See anecdote reported by Tuck (2009, 173-74).

²⁹⁸ 'Il gusto di stregare la realtà, già evidente in questa fase giovanile prima di diventare così imperioso in quella successiva, sorge nella Morante da tutt'altre origini che "mentali", perché ha radici nel profondo; e non lo si può definire neppure un gusto, quanto una forza, una corrente d'energia immaginaria provenienti dal cuore degli oggetti'.

²⁹⁹ A fundamental and extensive study of Morante's poetics is Bardini (1999).

³⁰⁰ Hence, for this reason, I dedicate more space to *House of Liars* and *Arturo's Island* and elaborate less on *Aracoeli*.

and witnesses, which spark her delving into the inner forces driving human existence.³⁰¹

The novel spans three generations of Sicilian women, narrated by Elisa, who feels compelled to recount her family's history. Elisa tells the story having survived her whole family, narrating out of a sense of duty to the ghosts inhabiting her house whispering in her ears to bear witness to their sufferings. The narrative, filled with illusions and deceptions, reflects the family's tragic experiences and psychological struggles. Elisa's storytelling, influenced by her own memories and the illusions of her family, imbues the novel with a sense of mystery and unreality.³⁰²

The whole story is impregnated by Elisa's identity: self-narrations of familiar events and family memories, give a sense of a predestined madness due to an unreality emerging and stretching from past generations, of which she is a result and an extension. Among the events in the misguided, and deceiving lives of her family, the only reality in the book seems to be that Elisa, who survived them all and is left alone with Alvaro the cat, eventually forgives them all, and gives them words through her testimony.

Menzogna e sortilegio won the Premio Viareggio and was praised by literary critics, including Lukács, who called it the greatest modern Italian novel.³⁰³ Despite

³⁰¹ Indeed, as she also said in an interview, Morante's life is all in her novels. In this novel, in particular, as she said in an interview in 1968 to Michel David, she wanted to include all herself, her torment, her suffering that she had experienced in her life. For instance, in the character of Nicola Monaco, Morante hides her biological father, Francesco Lo Monaco, who died by suicide in 1943. Tuck recounts the episodes that sparked the inspiration for both *La Storia* and *Aracoeli*. They both seem two Murdochian moments of attention. The first one occurred when she read in newspapers of a mother found in her apartment gone mad after her child's death. For *Aracoeli* it was attention to art: Giorgione's *La Tempesta*, and *Madonna col bambino*. Tuck reports these moments as Cecchi narrated them to her: 'Somehow, standing in front of those paintings, Elsa felt as if she could traverse time and see the young girl who had posed for the Madonna in the Bellini painting as well as the girl who posed for the woman nursing the baby in the Giorgione painting, and both would become the inspiration for the character Aracoeli. It was a moment that, later, she could see contained everything that would be important in the novel.' (interview with Cecchi, Iesi, January 2006, in Tuck 2009, 197).

³⁰² In this painful coming of age of Elisa and her detachment from her childhood through a jump into her family's past, resonates what the experience of the war had been for Morante, a shadow in her life that had meant the passage into adulthood. As she writes: 'My youthful imaginings – recognisable in the stories of *The Secret Game* – were shattered by the war, which occurred during that time. The transition from fantasy to awareness (from youth to maturity) is, for everyone, a tragic and fundamental experience. For me, that experience was anticipated and embodied by the war: it was there, prematurely and with devastating violence, that I encountered maturity. I have expressed all this in my novel *House of Liars*, even though the war is not mentioned at all in the novel' (O, xlv).

³⁰³ As he said in an interview with Andrea Barbato in *L'Espresso* on 20 May 1962.

attracting criticism for its archaic style, romantic atmosphere, and Freudian taste, Morante's work stands out for its deep exploration of human psychology and its break from contemporary literary trends like neorealism. It was a novel outside of its time: written in the 20th century when realism and neorealism were the *dictat*, and embodying a way of writing that resembled a 19th century novel.

Morante's approach, influenced by classics like *Don Quixote* and *Orlando Furioso*, aimed to 'kill' the novel genre by encapsulating the end of romantic and post-romantic literature (O Ivi).³⁰⁴ The novel's mythic dimension, combined with its detailed portrayal of personal and family history, subtly unmasked the upheaval caused by the war, emphasising that the present world was irreversibly different from the past. She accomplishes this by presenting her characters as if they were seen through old, faded photographs, representing a bygone era that likely predates the First World War; a distant world of ladies and knights, peasants, and prostitutes. Within this setting, Elisa, the narrator, navigates different times, freely recounting her own version of events. When Morante sent the book for publication to the publisher Einaudi on 22 January 1948, she wrote in the letter that it was not a fable-like novel because everything in it was *verosimile*, nor was it a realistic novel, because her characters were poorly suited to real life. She, therefore, defined it as: 'A painful myth as old as the world'.³⁰⁵ Ultimately, through her story, Morante conveys a sense of human destiny and the interplay between reality and unreality.

Instead of psychoanalysing her past or seeking a rational explanation for her heritage, Elisa delves into the myths and mysteries emerging from her family history, without attempting to solve them. According to Graziella Bernabò, this storytelling allows 'The transition from the squalor of the chronicle to the myth of evocation', transforming the mundane into myth. This 'matrilinear genealogy' (or 'painful women genealogy') (Bernabò, 90) concludes with Elisa forgiving her

³⁰⁴ As she writes in the Introduction to the 1975 edition of the novel, about herself and her work: 'The supreme model for *Menzogna e sortilegio* was *Don Quixote*, without forgetting, in a different form, *Orlando Furioso*. In fact, just as those exemplary pioneers of modern narrative marked the end of the ancient chivalric epic, so, in the youthful ambition of Elsa Morante, this first novel also sought to be the last possible of its kind: to bid farewell to romantic and post-romantic narrative, that is, the bourgeois epic' (O Ivi).

³⁰⁵ 'un mito doloroso e vecchio come il mondo'. Letter of 22 January 1948, preserved at the Archivio Morante, quoted in Bernabò.

mother, Anna, and the neurotic characters who impacted her life, now mythically transfigured.

In *Menzogna*, as in many of Murdoch's novels, tales of lies, dreams, and illusions do not only serve to charm the reader but highlight the unreality we live in, revealing our human condition and evoking compassion. Morante's realism in this novel doesn't start from reality but from a Kafkaian, almost delusional, state. Reality is filtered by a realism that is rendered surreal or fable-like by the neurotic deluded characters of the story and Elisa's emotive filter. This surreal realism is never 'irrational', but respects contradictions and ambiguities, avoiding simplistic rationalisation.³⁰⁶ Tiziana de Rogatis calls Morante's realism in *Menzogna* a 'bewitched realism' that opens a 'bewitched labyrinth, in which the reader is forced to wander in a state of disorientation. Taking, at every turn, opposite and contradictory directions, emerging line by line, paragraph by paragraph at times appearing decisive, at other times more digressive, the reader becomes lost in the meanders of Elisa's deception.' (de Rogatis 2019, 121).

Morante's realism embraces a dream-like confusion but does not advocate for art as an escape. Her 1947 poem *Alla favola* reflects her belief that fiction is intrinsic to reality, with no conflict between the real and imaginary, urging artists to penetrate deeper into reality:³⁰⁷

O Fiction,³⁰⁸ I draw about me / your concealing garment // and adorn it with golden plumage / that was mine in the great lost season / before I grew all fire / and rose a radiant phoenix! // But the needle is flame, the cloth is smoke, / and the vain hand lies withered away / under its golden rings – /even if in the game of "loves me, loves me not" / I invent a consoling reply: / an illusory voice from heaven (HL).³⁰⁹

³⁰⁶ De Ceccatty opposes Moravia's realism – harsh, concrete, trusting abstract rationality, resolving in cold intellectualism, lucid and cynycal – with Morante's, in which 'the narrator does not aim to expose complex relationships between the characters to derive rules from them. On the contrary, she is intent on imposing a dreamlike confusion and demonstrating, through style and narrative, that reality is perceived by human beings only through a filter of irrationality and passion' (Ceccatty 2020, 117).

³⁰⁷ See Tuck (2009, 152).

³⁰⁸ In the 1951 edition of *House of Liars*, the poem begins with the word 'illusion' instead of 'fiction'.

³⁰⁹ 'Di te, Finzione, mi cingo, / fatua veste. // Ti lavoro con l'auree piume / che vesti prima d'esser fuoco / la mia grande stagione defunta / per mutarmi in fenice lucente! // L'ago è rovente, la tela è fumo. / Consunta fra i suoi cerchi d'oro / giace la vanesia mano / pur se al gioco di m'ama non m'ama / la risposta celeste / mi fingo.' (Opening poem to *Menzogna e sortilegio*).

Morante began writing *L'isola di Arturo* in 1952. The novel, set on the island of Procida, explores childhood and its magical connection with the world. Arturo, the protagonist, lives on this wild, mythological island, experiencing solitary adventures and fantastical dreams. His idealised father is often absent, leading Arturo to alternate between poetic contemplation of the island (Arturo's love for fables and stories of chivalry are projected giving the narration the same tone) and fantasies about the world beyond the sea. The story changes when Arturo's father returns with a young bride, sparking the protagonist's first experiences of jealousy, remorse, and loss, marking his collision with adult unreality.

Morante opposes the world of the adults, who can come and go on the island, with the self-contained world of childhood represented by the island of Procida, where truth and goodness are found in nature and animals. *L'isola di Arturo* won the prestigious Strega Prize in 1957. Morante described the novel as akin to 'Robinson Crusoe', capturing a boy's first encounters with life's wonders and harsh realities, set in the beautiful and fantastical island of Procida.³¹⁰ Some argue that Morante's retreat into an unreal world was her form of resistance against the harsh material and ideological concerns of her time, but as she says in the interview at Premio Strega, 'Perhaps this is why someone referred to it as a fairy tale, but for me, my book is one of the most real that has been written in recent times'.³¹¹

For Moravia, Morante seems to attach to childhood the ability to create through fantasy an unreality where one is sheltered from the outside reality that comes with adulthood. At the same time, others, like De Ceccatty held that: 'In an era when material concerns (even survival) or ideological issues (such as resistance to fascism) were prevailing, Elsa sought refuge in an unreal world: it was her form of resistance' (Ceccatty 2020, 82). I argue that if in Morante's works until *Menzogna* the dichotomy was that between mystification and truth, what *L'isola di*

³¹⁰ 'With this book, I wanted to write a story that in some ways resembles *Robinson Crusoe* – the story of a boy who discovers for the first time all the greatest, most beautiful, and even the ugly things in life. For him, everything is an adventure, wonder, and beauty because he sees things for the first time and has no experience of either good or evil. And since he lives on one of the most beautiful islands I have ever known, which is the island of Procida, everything that catches his eye has a particular beauty, and so life appears to him in a fantastical light' (Interview of Elsa Morante, transcribed by me from Youtube').

³¹¹ 'Forse per questo qualcuno ha parlato di una fiaba, ma per me il mio libro è uno dei più reali che siano stati scritti in questi ultimi tempi.' Transcribed by me from YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R_gDhFlyJyw.

Arturo opens up, which will become even more evident in *La Storia*, is that the world of innocents (children, mystics, saints, and animals) is more real than the dry unreality of adult ambitions. By the end of the novel, Arturo's mythic childhood is shattered along with his idealised image of his father. What is left is the reality of Arturo's choice to leave the island and the reader is left with the sense that he is heading to war.

Moreover, Morante portrays Arturo, like Elisa, from a fantastical perspective. He speaks from a sideral dimension, for he is probably dead, or (worse) a grown-up. His narrative voice is reflective, recounting his story (which probably took place around 1938) from a later perspective. Indeed, Arturo was supposed to be imprisoned in Africa remembering his island, as Morante said in an interview on 'L'Unità' on March 24th 1952. Cesare Garboli observes:

It is not the writing of a boy, that of Arturo, but neither is it that of a man. It is a dualistic writing, surpassing itself, a writing of both mother and child, lived and amazed, wise and playful, the writing of an adult who has not lost any of their joyful, fierce, childish irreverence. ... Thus, Morante, narrating in the first person and identifying with her child-hero, can strike two chords with a mixed timbre without false notes: wonder and irony, the trivial and the magnificent, myth and the opposite of myth (Garboli 1995, 81-82).

Morante is Arturo and Arturo's mother at the same time. With a playful tone, she teases him but also understands him. The story is narrated by an Arturo who can now see what he could not in the past. Arturo, as Morante imagined, is now a prisoner close to death, he is a *malheureux*, to whom Morante is granting a moment of fabulistic remembrance; a long glimpse of his own past. He is returned to the point of view of his former eyes and not those he looks through in his condition of *malheur*. From that vantage point, the realist and mythical lens work together and give the sense of the mystical, for Arturo can look at his past and the beauty of things by virtue of his closeness to the end of things.

Morante spares Arturo the contaminating unreality of adulthood and war by ending his self-narration as he leaves Procida. In a poem dedicated to Arturo, Morante emphasises the enduring, untouchable beauty of his first love and childhood memories, which remain untainted by adult rationality and pain.³¹² The

³¹² 'What you thought was a tiny point on earth / was all. / And no one can ever steal that matchless treasure from your / jealous sleeping eyes. / Your first love will never be violated. // Virgin, she is

1969 edition's introduction underscores this theme, highlighting the hope that Arturo's memories of his childhood island ('as a joyful testimony of reality'³¹³) will protect him from the unreality of the adult world.³¹⁴

Bernabò calls this kind of realism, already visible in *L'isola di Arturo*, a 'loving realism' (Bernabò 2016, 136). She explains: 'The writer offers, with enchanting prose, a complete and simultaneously fascinated acceptance of reality in its phenomenological immediate immediacy'. This realism does not escape into childhood dreams and fables; rather, it suggests that children, like poets, are closer to reality.

This theme is central in 'La canzone degli F[elici]. P[oci]. e degli I[nfelici]. M[olti]', ('The Song of the Happy Few and the Unhappy Many'),³¹⁵ part of the collection *Il mondo salvato dai ragazzini* (1968).³¹⁶ This collection begins with the poem 'Addio', dedicated to Bill Morrow.

The 1960s, and possibly the late 1950s, marked Morante's first encounter with Weil's philosophy and her influence becomes explicit in *Il mondo*. Morante's engagement with Weil's *Cahiers* and *La pesanteur et la grâce* likely intensified after the deaths of Morrow in 1962 and her mother in 1963. During this difficult period, Morante crafted a journey in *Il mondo* that begins with personal grief and extends to cosmic suffering. In the introduction to the 1968 edition, Morante writes:

In our era, the collective drama, historically understood, has acquired unprecedented visibility and scope. Today, no conscious individual is allowed to remain ignorant. The means of science daily place even the most common person in the presence of the innumerable misery and slaughter that populate

wrapped in night / like a gypsy in her black shawl, / star suspended in the northern sky / for eternity: no danger can touch her. // Young friends, handsomer than Alexander and Euryalos, / forever handsome, protect the sleep of my boy. / The fearful emblem will never cross the threshold / of that blesses little island. / And you'll never know the law / that I, like so many, have learned – / and that has broken my heart: / Outside Limbo there is no Elysium.' (IA) Outside of the island, in the unreality in which adults live, there is the attempt of understanding, the cold rationality, and therefore the painful exit from childhood, metaphorically represented by Morante as the painful exit from the borders of the island of Procida that, along with the she-dog Immacolatella, had been like a mythical mother to Arturo.

³¹³ 'quale testimonianza festosa della realtà' (IA 10).

³¹⁴ 'Thus, Arturo's story, which seemed unique and fabulous, merges with the fate of all others. We already know the various challenges that await him as he enters the adult world: among which, if he survives, the last and most perilous will be that of our time – unreality. However, it is hoped that the first image of his childhood island, as a joyful testimony to reality, will help save him from this danger.' (IA 10).

³¹⁵ It previously came out in *Nuovi Argomenti* in 1967.

³¹⁶ Between *L'isola di Arturo* and this collection, Morante wrote the essay 'Sul romanzo' (1959) and delivered the lecture 'Pro o contro la bomba atomica' (1965), both fundamental to this research.

the world in every part. Even the most ordinary person today has, before their own eyes, the proof that all living beings on earth are their equals in substance and in suffering. But in front of this spectacle, which should awaken their conscience, individuals and the collective often react instead, perhaps as an ill-fated defence, with the opposite choice. Science itself, while providing the physical means to see, offers the system to blind oneself. To all the evils that have always belonged to nature, today the infection of unreality, which is against nature, looms above, necessarily leading to disintegration and true death (*Il mondo* v).³¹⁷

These words clearly resonate with Weil's *Réflexions*, and Murdoch's and Sontag's reflections on how modern technology makes us aware of global misery, but often we choose ignorance, as I explored in chapter 3 in the section on 'Public inattention'. The latter, as Morante argues in 'Pro o contro la bomba atomica', continuously feeds a dangerous disconnection between attention and *le malheur* that constitutes today's deeper evil. *Il mondo* is an unusual rumination on unreality. Our inability to act, as Morante articulates in 'La canzone degli F.P e degli I.M', follows the fact that we (the 'Unhappy-Many') live in unreality governed by degrading power.³¹⁸ Only the 'Happy-Few'³¹⁹ (children, animals, mystics, saints, great poets, among which she includes Weil), are in touch with beauty, truth, and joy and thus can see 'under the dust' (to use Weil's closing words in the poem *La porte*). As Antonella Rubinacci observes, the Happy-Few are 'those who have come to know *la pesanteur*, accepted suffering and the void, and then freed themselves

³¹⁷ This translation is mine, since the Nota Introduttiva was not included in Vitti's translation. The following version is from *Il mondo*: 'Nella nostra epoca, il dramma collettivo, storicamente inteso, ha acquistato una evidenza e un'estensione senza precedenti. Oggi, a nessun individuo cosciente sarebbe permesso di non sapere. I mezzi della scienza pongono anche l'uomo più comune, quotidianamente, in presenza di tutta l'innumerabile miseria e strage che affolla il mondo in ogni sua parte. Anche l'uomo più comune oggi ha, davanti ai suoi propri occhi, la prova che tutti i viventi della terra sono suoi uguali nella sostanza e nel dolore. Ma davanti a questo spettacolo, che dovrebbe aprirgli la coscienza, spesso l'individuo e la collettività reagiscono invece, forse per una difesa malaugurata, con la scelta opposta. La scienza stessa, mentre fornisce i mezzi fisici per vedere, offre il sistema per accecarsi. A tutti i mali che da sempre appartengono alla natura, oggi sovrasta l'infezione dell'irrealtà, che è contro natura, e porta necessariamente alla disintegrazione e alla vera morte.'

³¹⁸ Morante's complicated and almost untranslatable work, which contains poems, songs, experimental writing, some written crosswise on the page, and a play (a parody of Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*, titled *La serata a Colono*) was probably best described by her friend Pasolini on his review on the journal *Paragone*. As Tuck reports: 'Writing in free verse, the same form used by Morante, he said the book was certainly a political manifesto but written like a fable, with humor and joy. He coined the phrase *nonna bambina* ("grandmother child") to describe the author and praised her ability to scandalize not only bourgeois society but all social classes and her refusal to follow literary trends. He admired her willed childishness as well as her love for children and the adults who remain like them' (Tuck 2009, 28).

³¹⁹ In *Il mondo* she writes that the Happy Few 'even / when vulgarly denominated ugly, / in REALITY they're beautiful; but REALITY / is seldom seen by people' (WSK 159).

from a mortal body' (2022, 70). They are the real revolutionaries, those who have the potential to see beauty while accepting the reality of *le malheur*.³²⁰

After *La Storia* (1974), Morante wrote *Aracoeli* (1982), influenced by Pasolini's death (1975) and Aldo Moro's kidnapping (16 March 1978). Morante wrote a letter to the Red Brigades, Moro's kidnappers, just two days after it happened. She draws powerfully on the heart of Weil's 1934 *Refléxions*, the inversion of means and ends in modern times which I discussed in chapter 1. In this context, accompanied by her re-readings of Dante and Proust's *Recherche*, Morante wrote *Aracoeli*, a psychological novel exploring narcissistic love, reflecting on the ephemeral vanity of human existence.³²¹

With *Aracoeli*, Morante ultimately arrives at a more pessimistic view, having gone through a journey in *Il mondo* that shifted her perspective from personal to cosmic suffering. In the last pages of *Il mondo*, she condemns the Holocaust and every war, suggesting that unreality is merely a game,³²² setting the ground for *La Storia*.

5.3 La Storia

This juxtaposition of real and unreal, and of attention and force, as I have shown so far, lies at the core of Weil's philosophy and at the heart of Morante's realism. For this reason, I will now explore the ideas of force and attention in Morante's novel. In relation to the latter, I will focus especially on Useppe's attention, which makes him a version of a Murdochian 'mystical hero'. Murdoch's secular mysticism is the lens through which I examine the ethics of attention that pervades Morante's language in *La Storia* (its 'vocabulary of attention'). If in her second novel, *L'isola di Arturo*, Morante provided a 'a joyful testimony of reality' (IA 10), celebrating the magic and wonder of childhood, in *La Storia*, she offers a stark contrast,

³²⁰ If *Il mondo* is almost undefinable, as it is all together, the author describes it thus on the back cover of the book: 'It is a manifesto. It is a memorial. It is a philosophical essay. It is a novel. It is an autobiography. It is a dialogue. It is a tragedy. It is a comedy. It is a documentary in colour. It is a comic strip. It is a magic key. It is a testament. It is a poem.' Indeed, as Gabriella Fiori also noted, this book is a key to Morante's constellations of sources and references, where Weil is the primary star (Fiori 2009).

³²¹ On Morante's 'realismo impossibile' in *Aracoeli*, see Sgavicchia (in Calderoni 2018, 61-72).

³²² 'NIENT'ALTRO / CHE UN GIOCO' (*Il mondo*, 220).

presenting an attentive testimony of suffering, of attention, and thus of the tension between reality and unreality.

Exploring *La Storia* this way allows me to inaugurate the definition I propose of Morante's literary style as 'mystical realism' – a concept I developed from Murdoch's account of the mystical novel and the literary ethics of attention I built so far. First, for the sake of clarity, I will briefly summarise the novel's plot.

La Storia is Morante's most acclaimed and criticised novel. Upon its release in 1974, it quickly became a cultural phenomenon. Some praised it as a masterpiece, while others offered ideological criticisms.³²³

The narrative follows Ida Ramundo, a half-Jewish schoolteacher, and her son Useppe, as they navigate the horrors of the Race Laws, the bombing of their neighbourhood San Lorenzo in Rome, their life as refugees,³²⁴ and the first aftermath of the war. The novel opens in 1941 with Ida's rape by a German soldier named Gunther, resulting in the birth of Useppe. It ends with Useppe's tragic death from an epileptic seizure at almost six years old in 1947.

Every chapter, marked by years in chronological order from 19**, 1941 to 1947 and with the final 19**, is anticipated by the summary of historical events (with capital 'H') of that year which Morante gives in dry, neutral language that contrasts with the loving, compassionate tone of the narration of her characters (their histories with small 'h'). As Tuck reports, the inspiration for the novel's plot

³²³ Paul Hoffmann, writing for *The New York Times* from Rome, observed, 'For the first time since anyone can remember, people in railroad compartments and espresso bars discuss a book – the Morante novel – rather than the soccer championship or the latest scandal. The critics write endlessly about the meaning of 'La Storia' and the reasons for the exceptional stir it is causing.' (quoted in Tuck 2009, 177).

³²⁴ Her protagonists are uprooted refugees: Ida who comes from Cosenza, the displaced persons of the Pietralata shelter (looking for a shelter was also what Morante and Moravia had to do in 1943), the thousand Jews deported from the Tiburtina station (October 18, 1943), the Italian partisans moving along the countryside and Rome. Weil, Murdoch, and Morante, albeit in different ways, experienced displacement during the war years: Weil as a self-exiled Jewish woman, Morante as a half-Jewish refugee, and Murdoch as an uprooted Irish woman. Murdoch, in 1983, told John Haffenden in an interview that 'I feel as I grow older that we [her family] were wanderers, and I've only recently realised that I'm kind of exile, a displaced person' (Dooley 2003, 130). To different degrees, they all experienced the sense of precarity that comes from what Weil calls *déracinement*. These women felt 'entirely at home nowhere', as Conradi writes of Murdoch, for biographical reasons and also because their porous and non-monolithic thinking belonged nowhere. Moreover, as intellectuals, all three wandered along the borders of their disciplines, Murdoch for example between philosophy and literature, finding a comfortable home in neither. All also struggled to find a welcoming home in their male-dominated intellectual environments.

came from a newspaper article in June 1947 about a tragic event in Rome. Tuck writes:

A mother, her six-year-old boy and their *maremmana* (a big white sheepdog from the Maremma region of Italy) were discovered in an apartment in the Testaccio; the boy was dead, the mother insane with grief, the dog so aggressive in its attempt to protect its owners that it had to be killed in order for the authorities to gain entrance into the apartment. What, the writer of the newspaper piece asked, brought this poor little family to such a tragic end? (Tuck 2009, 181).

Morante began writing *La Storia* during the Christmas of 1971, discarding, but not completely, the fantastic elements of her previous novels in favour of a more objective portrayal. Her influences shifted away from Kafka, Stendhal, Tolstoy, and Rimbaud, towards a more realistic depiction shaped by her personal experiences of the Second World War,³²⁵ the death of Bill Morrow, her hopes in the student movement, the Beat Generation, and her criticism of power. Her work was also influenced by her engagement with Marxist thought through Weil, Weil's take on the *Iliad*, and her deep interest in Plato, ancient Greece, the Upanishads, and Buddhism, as is already evident in *Il mondo*.

The novel begins in 1941. Gunther, a German soldier passing through the city of Rome, whom Morante describes as a lost boy missing home, rapes Ida Mancuso (née Ramundo), a schoolteacher returning home in the district of San Lorenzo. Ida is described as shy and afraid of everything, especially her half-Jewish heritage, or 'her family secret', which led to the death of her mother Nora. In a neurotic impulse one night by the shore, Nora attempted to escape the forthcoming persecution and reach Israel. Ida often visits the Jewish ghetto in Rome, where she feels a sense of belonging and where she sees Vilma, the mystic fortune teller who foresees the deportation of 1943.

During the rape, Ida has an epileptic fit, which Gunther does not even notice; she had suffered from epilepsy in her childhood, but this had long since disappeared. Later, she believes that she passed the illness to her son through this conception. As Tuck notices, Gunther fixes a light in her apartment before leaving – a symbolic act as he impregnates her with Useppe, thus bringing 'light' into her life.

³²⁵ See Introduction.

Gunther, Morante later tells the reader, was killed on his way to Libya. He is, in the novel, the first perpetrator and victim of the scandal. Ida already has a teenage son (with her now-deceased husband Alfio) named Nino, who is full of life and restless. She secretly gives birth to Giuseppe, known as Useppe, who also suffers from epilepsy, with the help of the Jewish nurse Ezechiele. Fragile and beautiful, as I will explore further in this chapter, he has a poetic approach to the world and a compassionate gaze on others, and he speaks with animals. The novel is full of animals, compassionate companions like Bella, the maremmana to whom Useppe recites his poems, and pure innocents like Useppe.³²⁶

As the war progresses, Nino joins the Fascist Blackshirts. Ida's apartment in San Lorenzo is bombed in 1943, and she and Useppe become refugees, joining other families in the Pietralata shelter just outside Rome. In the dormitory, they meet Davide Segre who has escaped from a German prison camp where he was tortured. Davide is a former poet from a bourgeois family that he abandoned out of ideological resentment. He is an intellectual who voices Morante's views and a drug addict; his character is the explicit embodiment of Weil. On a trip to the city, Useppe and Ida witness the train bringing the Jews to Auschwitz. In the shelter, they reunite with Nino, who is now a Communist partisan and comes and goes at the shelter. Later, he becomes a black-market racketeer and dies in an accident, and his dog, Bella, returns to watch over Useppe whose seizures are increasing.

³²⁶ Morante writes about animals in *Mondo*, 30 December 1950, under the title *Il paradiso terrestre*: 'The Scriptures, in narrating Adam's expulsion from Eden, do not pay much attention to a detail that the sacred author of Genesis clearly did not consider important enough: namely, the extreme act of mercy that, even in His severity, the Eternal Father granted to man by allowing him the companionship of other animals, who, unlike him, had not eaten the fruit of knowledge [...] And it frightens us to think how bitter our exile would be if we were without this consolation [...] Yet, in the company of our dog and cat, we find rest from the exhausting battles of hope and pride.' (PoC 19-20). Animals are ever-present in Morante's novels. They belong to the realm outside reason and therefore are always inherently innocent. In fact, they appear as devoted companions of her protagonists. In *La Storia*, there are many: the dog Blitz, the cat Rossella, the she-dog Bella, and the calf which is the centre of a fundamental episode in the life of Useppe. Bernabò observes: 'This way in which the characters merge with animals is, for them, "the only possible form of defence against evil," in the forgetfulness of time and space. Animality thus becomes "the metaphor of an existence that does not belong to history," in contrast to the horror of "the cattle cars transporting Jews to the extermination camps."' (Bernabò 2016, 215). 'Only humans know farewell. / The all-seeing gods are content with the one, / and innocent animals are happy in the many. / Only humans are given to know / That no face is the same as another face.' (Elsa Morante, *Senza i conforti della religione*, quoted in Bérard 2012, 2. See also D'Angeli 2003, Ziolkowski 2015, and Maria Giménez Cavallo 2016).

By the spring of 1947, Ida goes back to teaching in Rome and finds a room sublet by the Marocco family who are waiting for Giovannino, who will never return from Russia. Davide and Useppe become friends; Useppe admires him and trusts him with his thoughts and poems. Davide finds comfort in Santina, a prostitute who will be brutally murdered by her pimp. Soon, though, Davide dies of overdose. Bella and Useppe, unaware of both Nino and Davides' deaths, go on adventures by the Tiber River discovering an idyllic spot where birds sing. It's an oasis amidst the noise and confusion of Rome and the suffering that they have endured. After dedicating a few pages to this enchanted space, which Morante grants out of compassion for Useppe and Bella, readers are filled with the awareness that this fragile beauty cannot last. Ultimately, Useppe has a last fatal epileptic fit while Ida is out at school. When, upon her return, she finds him she is driven mad, reduced into a 'thing' state, of complete absence, apathy and numbness. The shot that kills Bella, who tries fiercely to protect Useppe's body when strangers enter the apartment, 'was the last stimulus to which the woman reacted as long as she remained alive'³²⁷ (H 547). She remained in that state until her death in an asylum nine years later.

The final section of *La Storia* lists the violent events occurring from 1948 to 1967, and finally ends with the words '...and History continues...', testifying the self-perpetuating force which, as discussed previously, delineates the division between reality and unreality.

5.3.1 An 'Iliad of our times'

Angela Borghesi (following D'Angeli) paved the way to consider the *Iliad*, rather than the Manzonian historical novel,³²⁸ as the model of *La Storia*. Indeed, Weil's *L'Iliade* and *Réflexions* lay the groundwork for Morante's novel and her idea of 'the scandal' of *force* and the notion of force as contagion, explored in chapter 1.

³²⁷ 'fu, sembra, l'ultimo stimolo a cui la donna reagì, finché rimase viva' (S 648).

³²⁸ As Borghesi writes: 'The hallmark of the historical novel is its ability to introduce fictional situations and characters into the accepted narrative of "official" history, intertwining and making the two levels interact. Morante, however, excludes the history of the real protagonists from the lives of the "outcasts" her novel portrays, limiting herself to summarizing it and using it as a backdrop. Thus, the History of the "greats", external to the narrative, becomes the equivalent of Fate. Although one suffers its effects, it is impossible to establish any relationship with it, not even the intellectual one of understanding.' (Borghesi 2020, 95)

The scandal of force lies in the fact that force, in Weil's and Morante's systems, equates to unreality. T.U.S. ('tutto uno scherzo' – 'All a joke'),³²⁹ the original title of *La Storia*, is often found in Morante's manuscripts and in the message delivered by the birds to the child Usepe. The birds point out to him that the 'dream of force' is only a game: 'to a tempo of *Allegretto con brio*. And the words (quite clear to Usepe's ears) went exactly as follows: *It's a joke a joke all a joke!*'³³⁰ (H 229), reminiscent of the birds of Aldous Huxley's last novel *Island* who remind the Palinese to pay attention, 'Attention! Attention!'.³³¹ The joke/game is what is impossible to explain rationally. Its meaning echoes Weil's idea of contradiction,³³² and the notion that what is invisible is often 'more real' than the 'unreality' we live in, with our world being ruled by the dream of force.³³³

³²⁹ The abbreviation 'T.U.S' (tutto uno scherzo / All a joke) is connected to different episodes in *La Storia* and to *Aracoeli's* sentence: 'Ma, niño mio chiquito, non c'è niente da capire' ('But my little one, there is nothing to understand'). In *Il mondo* Morante defines existence as a 'game': 'EVEN IF IT SETS US SHAKING / IN FEAR AND AGONY, / ALL OF THIS, / IN TRUTH AND SUBSTANCE, / IS NOTHING / BUT A GAME.' (WSK 197). As Borghesi recalls, this is the same meaning that we find in *La smania dello scandalo (The Yearning for Scandal)*: 'The only secret is: there is no secret. / You have never strayed from the garden of the first day. / The baseness of forms usurping it from you / is nothing but a risible theatre of your mirages. / It is still the first day. // The span of your millennia / was really but a little flight on our swings.' (WSK 141).

³³⁰ 'a tempo di allegretto con brio. E le parole (chiarissime agli orecchi di Usepe) dicono esattamente così: È uno scherzo uno scherzo tutto uno scherzo!' (S 269).

³³¹ Quoted in Schwartz 2020, 93. She reminds Huxley's appreciation of a book very dear to Weil as well, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, where it is written: 'O Nobly Born! Let not thy mind be distracted. ... [the dying must] go on practising the art of living even while they are dying. Knowing who in fact one is, being conscious of the universal and impersonal life that lives itself through each of us. That's the art of living, and that's what one can help the dying to go on practising. To the very end.' (quoted in Schwartz 2020, 95).

³³² See chapter 1.

³³³ Agamben, about Morante, recalls: 'She was serious, wildly serious. Serious does not mean someone who takes everything as true and with gravity. Even without considering her readings of the Indian classics, Elsa was all too aware that the world is merely an appearance (remember the "subversive refrain" from *The World Saved by Children?*). Her seriousness was rather that of someone who believes entirely and without reservations in Fiction and, therefore, means everything she says.' (Agamben 1996, 165. See also Agamben 2011). Moravia: 'Put simply and plainly, I loved the rough edges of reality, so to speak, while Elsa had as much fondness for reality as her numerous cats had for water. The curious thing, however, is that while in my novels the characters and situations are invented from general personal experiences, in Elsa's novels, only slightly transfigured, you find her, the people in her life, and the situations between her and those people. This shows that realism is a very imprecise word, and that, in our case, the realism that Elsa found so horrifying took its revenge in her surprising ability to represent everyday and autobiographical reality'. (Elkann and Moravia 1990, 159). When De Ceccatty says that Morante 'detested reality' and 'thus created a fantastical, barely realistic, hallucinatory world where her personal mythology reigned', he seems to suggest she dislikes what I have so far been calling 'unreality'. I do not agree with his claim that 'Morante used the concept of "reality" to refer to what appeared real only in her eyes' (Ceccatty 2020, 23). Much rests on what we mean by reality. However, I share his take on Morante's idea of reality as equal to what is disclosed through (attentive) imagination.

The scandal of History is that ‘è tutto uno scherzo’, it is all a joke, or as Weil puts it, a ‘dream’ which makes power and prestige appear as the essential laws of reality. Humans have reversed ‘the relationship between means and ends’, and the power for which we sacrifice our lives is in fact an illusion. The joke lies in the fact that power, like other forces that submit humans, while non-existent in reality, has substantial and real effects on human existence. As Weil states in her *Cahiers*:

Time, strictly speaking, does not exist (except the present, as a limit), and yet is that to which we are subjected. Such is our condition. *We are subjected to that which does not exist.* Whether it be a question of duration passively endured, physical pain, waiting, regret, remorse, fear; or of time actively handled – order, method, necessity – in either case, that to which we are subjected does not in fact exist. But our subjection exists. Really bound by unreal chains. Time, itself unreal, covers everything, ourselves included, with a veil of unreality (N I 71).

For Morante, ‘i ragazzini’, and perhaps the poet, are the only ones who receive the suggestion from the ‘impersonal’, as Useppe does from the birds, that it is ‘tutto uno scherzo’; that we all still live in Plato’s cave, as Weil writes in 1942 *Dieu dans Platon*: ‘this world where we are and of which we see only shadows (appearances) is an artificial thing, a game, a simulacrum’ (GP 65).

If this world ruled by History is ‘a game, a simulacrum’, then the original title of Morante’s novel (retained only for the American edition) becomes clearer: ‘History: A Novel.’ It seems that Morante wants to suggest that human history is the opposite of reality (akin to Weil’s account of reality that has already been explained), that is to say, a fantasy, or we could say ‘fiction’. Human history is a novel, as historiography is the narration made by the winners as Weil states in *L’enracinement*. In the same sense, the law of necessity is a novel, for *la pesanteur* that weighs on humans is the only manifestation of God in Her absence, as Weil writes: ‘Creation is a fiction of God’s’ (FLN 218). As also Stefania Lucamante in *Forging Shoah Memories: Italian Women Writers, Jewish Identity, and the Holocaust* points out, ‘The artist’s duty – if he or she truly cares for humanity – lies in making the difference between fiction as a lie (as unreality) and fiction as poetry in speaking about the world. Only this can save us from the negative flowers we ourselves produce’ (Lucamante 2014, 196-97).

As we saw in chapter 1, for Weil, the *Iliad* is the best literary mirror of force. The Homeric poem teaches that no one in this world can truly possess what she

calls force, and that every human being is indistinguishably at the mercy of blind destiny, exposed ‘to the hazards of fortune’ (FLN 94), which can suddenly transform the winner into the loser. Force is like an unceasing ‘contagion’; it is the idea of *Até*. Using force, humanity ends up being divided into oppressors and oppressed, for its use ‘exercised to the limit’ turns the human being ‘into a thing in the most literal sense’ (I 3). Everything, for Weil, is degraded by contact with force. The real disgrace for the human being is to ignore this inevitable condition, in which ‘the strong are ... never absolutely strong, nor are the weak absolutely weak, but neither is aware of this.’ (I 14). Humans who are turned into things in the context of war become ‘impersonal’ entities as the winners who, Weil notices, are portrayed by Homer like natural causes of destruction: ‘which liken the warriors either to fire, flood, wind, wild beasts, or God knows what blind cause of disaster, or else to frightened animals, trees, water, sand, to anything in nature that is set into motion by the violence of external forces.’ (I 26)

What needs to be accepted, for Weil, is the tragic human condition that made Greeks and Trojans fight for a phantom Helen, ‘the idea of a destiny before which executioner and victim stand equally innocent, before which conquered and conqueror are brothers in the same distress’ (I 19). Accepting this, unravelling the dream of winners and losers, and thus the dream of power and prestige, is for Weil the only ground where love and justice could grow.³³⁴

Cecchi and Garboli’s report on the gestation of *La Storia* provided substantial evidence of Weil’s influence in the novel:

December: between the end of the year and January 1971 she starts writing *La Storia* ... [Morante] formulated the idea of the novel, as an ‘Iliad of our times’: an idea born and developed through her intellectual engagement with the Greeks, that she found in Simone Weil’s notebooks. (O lxxxii)³³⁵

History, in Morante’s view (and Weil’s), starts with the logic of power and force. As in the *Iliad*, where the Gods are taken as responsible for the outcome of the war,

³³⁴ ‘He who does not realize to what extent shifting fortune and necessity hold in subjection every human spirit, cannot regard as fellow-creatures nor love as he loves himself those whom chance separated from him by an abyss. The variety of constraints pressing upon man give rise to the illusion of several distinct species that cannot communicate. Only he who has measured the dominion of force, and knows how not to respect it, is capable of love and justice.’ (I 34-35).

³³⁵ ‘Dicembre: tra la fine dell’anno e il gennaio 1971 comincia *La Storia* ... [Morante] formulò l’idea del romanzo, come un’‘Iliade dei giorni nostri’: idea nata e maturata attraverso la frequentazione dei greci, ritrovati nelle pagine dei quaderni di Simone Weil.’

the characters in *La Storia* perceive the progression of History through the events of the Second World War as destiny itself, as a necessity to which the protagonists cannot relate. This ‘dream of force’ is the meaning of ‘the scandal’ of unreality that Morante addresses in the subtitle to the first edition of *La Storia* (1974), which was excluded from other editions. In the American edition though, she further explains the nature of this scandal:

A scandal [referring to human History] that has lasted for a few thousand years ... Historiography, no matter how much it explores, finds everywhere the same unending scandal. Remote or near, every human society turns out to be a tormented field, where a group performs violence, and a throng suffers it. But the fact that this evil has always existed is not a reason that gives it the right to exist. (O lxxxiii)³³⁶

‘The scandal that lasts for a few thousand years’, which Morante addresses in her novel, is the everlasting game of power-seeking which produces the ‘reversal of the relationship between means and ends’ and the eternal logic of winners and losers, which eclipses the only truth that stands behind all this: that both oppressed and oppressors are ‘the plaything of the instruments of domination they themselves have manufactured, and thus [human history] reduces living humanity to being the chattel of inanimate chattels’ (OL 66).

If, as we saw in chapter 1, suffering that is ‘imaginary’ stems from the self, the suffering that Morante’s characters experience is what is closest to Weilian *malheur*, which we will now explore.

5.4 Suffering force: the victims of the ‘scandal’

Morante preannounces that the protagonists of the novel are the victims of the scandal in her choice of cover, which also hints at her attempt to bear witness to reality through fiction. Morante chose Robert Capa’s photograph of a dead partisan from the Spanish Civil War, reproduced chromatically at her request. The colours of the image intensify the raw facts of war, reflecting the novel’s literary attention aimed at bringing to the reader a vivid, real, testimony through art.

³³⁶ ‘Uno scandalo che dura da diecimila anni ... La storiografia, per quanto esplori, ritrova dovunque lo stesso scandalo incessante. A distanza o da vicino, ogni società umana si rivela un campo straziato, dove una squadra esercita la violenza e una folla la subisce. Ma il fatto che questo male sia sempre esistito non è un motivo che gli dia diritto di esistere’.

Let us now focus on the major characters of the novel: Ida, Davide, and Useppe. They suffer the contagion of force³³⁷ and suffering. Ida, as mentioned, feels that she has irreversibly ‘passed on’ ‘il grande male’ to Useppe, a symbolic evil that manifests in his little body as epileptic seizures, while Davide is physically transfigured by his torment, which is instinctively eschewed by those around him. All three embody different modalities of suffering force: Ida represents the process of being turned ‘into a thing’, Davide represents the dream of the will in the attempt to make sense of the violence he has suffered and inflicted, and Useppe is the emblem of the innocent, of the ‘decreated’ by essence, the saint or the mystic with a poetic approach to reality.

5.4.1 Ida: a woman

Ida’s character, like Nunziata and Aracoeli, is liminal in her connection to *le malheur*. She differs from Davide, with his strong subjectivity and his urge to rationalise suffering, and from Useppe, with his privileged link to ‘the impersonal’. She does not end up ‘hating everyone and himself’ as Davide does, nor does she ‘loves [reality] compassionately’ like Useppe. While she does not deceive herself with hallucinatory dreams like Davide, she is also, because heavily rooted in immanence, incapable of communicating with *metaxù* like Useppe is. Most of Morante’s women are portrayed as semi-animal-like, and Ida’s animal inclination is especially linked to her being a mother. In Morante’s works, the realm of mothers exists outside the time of history. For example, in the novel *L’isola di Arturo*, the mother extends in the she-dog, in Nunziata, and in the island of Procida itself. In Morante’s novels, the realm of mothers is indeed the opposite of the realm of force.

By the end of *La Storia*, Ida is reduced to an object, but this impersonal state does not allow her to communicate with *metaxù*; she herself becomes a living *metaxù*: a non-self-aware mystical image, the symbol of the effacement of one’s subjectivity, as well as ‘la Signora Di Segni’, the Jewish woman who roams around the cattle wagons of the Tiburtina station in search of her family who have been

³³⁷ We already saw the concept of *Até* in Weil and Murdoch. This concept is also fundamental in *La Storia*. One example is Ida’s dream after meeting Davide: ‘It seemed to her that screams and groans were coming from the sack again, as they had in reality a little earlier. But there was nobody any longer on the sack, all red with blood. The people around did their best to hide that blood under heaps of sheets and blankets; but it seeped through everything; and in an instant sheets and blankets were soaked in it’ (H 172).

sent for extermination. She is a woman who bears ‘her great and furious untouchable’s solitude’ (H 107)³³⁸ that turns her into an invisible presence. If in ‘the impersonal’ Useppe acquires the poetic condition, Ida, instead, acquires a ‘primitive animal condition’.

Useppe speaks with animals: he is the saint and poet combined. Morante’s depiction of women, and the fact that Morante’s ‘ragazzini’, the bearer of a vitality that keeps them closer to reality, are usually men (Arturo, Useppe, Manuel), often resulted in the belief that Morante disliked women.³³⁹ Morante’s fictional women often illude themselves through blind, painful love. They have burning feelings and suffer for them, while men are portrayed as blinded by their egocentrism (Ceccatty 2020, 108). Nonetheless, women appear closer to nature, to its primitive and mysterious side, which is epitomised by their maternal traits.³⁴⁰ As Elena Ferrante writes, they are saints, goddesses, and mythical women³⁴¹, having, as Ida is described at the beginning of the book, a ‘sense of the sacred’ (Ferrante 1993, 18).

It is interesting to note how Moravia saw this image of women as connected to Morante’s interpretation of Weil’s *la pesanteur*. His statement, from an interview in 1990, is probably the first explicitly stated connection between Weil’s influence on Morante and her consideration of women (Moravia and Elkann 2000, 158). Moravia recognises in Morante a dual inclination reminiscent of Weil’s idea of the contradictory tensions that govern the world. Weil often portrays these through the

³³⁸ ‘la solitudine grande e furiosa d’intoccabile’ (S 243).

³³⁹ As Tuck observes about Morante’s *Menzogna*: ‘Critics often asked what sort of relationship the writer had to the women in the novel – where they are depicted as either crazy or evil and where love for them is a *via dolorosa* and suffering is joy. All love, the novel seems to say, is a game of force and violence; the female dream of love is masochistic (an embrace of suffering, delusion and eventual death) and the male one is sadistic (men prefer the pain of others) – which would lead one to believe that the answer might be that Morante did not like women’ (Tuck 2009, 80-81). On this, see also Fusini (1944, 6-7).

³⁴⁰ On the maternal element in *La Storia* and *Aracoeli*, see Wehling-Giorgi (2013; 2014). On maternity in her poetics see D’Angeli (in Calderoni 2018, 45-60).

³⁴¹ Cesare Garboli, for instance, defines Morante’s writing as having ‘A concept of reality written almost entirely in feminine terms’ (Garboli 2002, viii). The quality of this ‘feminine subjectivity’ in Morante, as I mentioned also in Murdoch, becomes difficult to discuss when explored against the background of the world of women depicted in their novels. In their attempt to address self-illuding egotistic lies and power dynamics that rule over human existence, they often confined men to the first category, and women to one of those ‘suffering’ power. Hence, Morante, as Bernabò writes, managed to ‘To represent, in an unprecedented way, an authentic female universe (Bernabò 2016, 284), in contrast to bourgeois feminism, like that of Beauvoir, and ‘a sympathy for an archaic, simple, and self-sacrificing femininity’, evident in the dedication of *Lo scialle andaluso* to her faithful maid Lucia Mansi, who appears to her as a privileged creature: ‘the seabird...full of grace’, capable, starting from ‘her nest / on the grim cliff, among the black sands’, of guiding ‘a childish winged court / toward terrestrial Elysium’ (Bernabò 2016, 284).

metaphor of gravity, which pulls all material beings down, and the search for light, symbolised by plants (see chapter 1). As Moravia suggests, for Morante, the latter belongs to the realm of infancy, ‘dei ragazzini’, but I would add that it extends to poets and animals. These beings are not irreversibly entangled in the ego’s efforts of rational comprehension, which inevitably projects itself on the world, thus ‘engulfing’ it.³⁴² The first is a natural force, while the second is supernatural, requiring divine intervention through *grâce* to manifest itself in the human dimension (Moravia 1987, 3). Therefore, it seems that Moravia understood the significant connection between Morante’s reception of the Weilian *pesanteur* and her ideas on women. This link, which is ‘unquestionable, even if obscure’, between women and nature, places women in an oscillation between a sort of ‘innocence’ and ‘*la pesanteur*’, never fully in the sphere of innocence, nor the realm of force. This constitutes the mysterious contradiction that Morante represents as characterising women in her novels: they have a privileged relation to nature, making them more prone to obey the law of necessity, and vice versa.

In his 1995 essay ‘Elsa come Rousseau’,³⁴³ Garboli writes that Morante depicts the figure of the archaic and non-educated woman with a veil of

³⁴² Another work by Morante that plays on the dichotomy between reason and non-discursive attention is her version of the *Oedipus Rex* in WSK, where Oedipus is old in hospital, with Antigone by his side. He is tormented by Phoebus, the god of light and reason, while Antigone is depicted as an ‘animal-like’ innocent, alike the other women in Morante’s novels and their feminine archaic world. In this dichotomy, Morante anticipates that of Davide and Ida. For instance, Morante explains the role of Antigone in a passage of the manuscript from 14 May 1966. She writes that Antigone is both animal/plant-like but is also the Sphinx ‘without being aware of it’ (quoted in Bernabò 2016, 174).

³⁴³ Garboli, in his preface to ‘Pro or Against the Atomic Bomb’, on the resonance of Weilian ‘*pesanteur*’ on Morante: ‘Elsa began then [1966, 1967, 1970?] to change, undergoing a physical metamorphosis. She seemed to be invaded by a force foreign to her body and opposed, even hostile, to her soul ... She became another person and lost, or killed within herself, the joy of her grace. Was it a way of *se réduire à rien*, di *disparaître*? ... The discovery of *pesanteur*, the awkward and ridiculous condition of a cumbersome creature separated from the divine, probably appeared as the moral and intellectual effect of a dark physical sensitivity.’ (Garboli 2013; xiii-xv). On this, Bérard writes: ‘Morante, in short, was “different” not only from others but even from herself. This judgment is certainly “heavy”, not without misogynistic prejudice, and, relying on the authority of direct testimony, which cannot be verified subjectively, prejudices a comprehensive and nuanced interpretation of her work in its complexity and coherence.’ (Cazalé-Bérard 2009, 7–8). When Morante said to Garboli that she felt bound to a sort of *pesanteur*, Bernabò explains that Morante is using Weil’s term here in a different way (Bernabò 2016, 28). Here she does not mean Weil’s gravity (human tendency to lower states and to the logic of force), but *pesanteur* in the sense of being heavy / heavily serious / intense, so character traits that others would recognise in her and that she herself did not appreciate of herself: ‘Pedantry, despotism, the inability to forget or forget herself, the need to always lecture, the obsession with dotting every ‘i’ and policing both one’s own and others’ ideas.’ (Garboli 1995, 202; 2013, xii).

complacency³⁴⁴. Garboli notes that Morante seems to prefer an Ida Ramundo to cultured women, with, he observes, the exception of Weil, and he questions whether *Menzogna* should be considered a misogynistic novel.

There are similarities in how Murdoch and Morante were considered in relation to women. As explored in chapter 3, Sabina Lovibond notes that Murdoch manifested ‘sympathy with the plight of under-educated and wastefully secluded women’ (Lovibond 2011, 87). I argue that showing women’s unfavourable position does not suggest acceptance of that condition, but rather indicates a stand against any form of oppression.³⁴⁵ Their feminism, more than a demand for rights, implies a refusal to see reality through the lens of existing power dynamics. By dismantling these dynamics from within, Morante gives a privileged position towards reality and nature to those who are placed in weaker and more fragile positions.³⁴⁶

³⁴⁴ ‘Morante does not identify with women; she identifies with boys. Her relationship with the world is mediated through the radiant arrogance of Achilles or Rimbaud’s detachment from reality. Imagine that. Morante does not love women. She despises them; and the more they boast of civilisation, education, and culture, the more she scorns them. She is capable of withholding all sympathy from emancipated or intellectual women. She prefers peasant women like Nunziata or timid schoolteachers like Ida Ramundo. Were it not for Simone Weil, the women Morante admires would almost always be illiterate’ (Garboli 1995, 223-4).

³⁴⁵ As *Nuovi Argomenti*’s ‘editorial board’ writes: ‘These women, who lived confined to their homes, desiring or hoping for nothing beyond the experience of motherhood; these humiliated, neurotic, wild, uncultured, illiterate women are none other than our grandmothers, great-grandmothers, and great-great-grandmothers, stretching back through generations to the dawn of time. Morante chose to portray not the woman on the path to emancipation (that is, a woman of the future), but the woman relegated outside of historical time, as she always has been until yesterday, and often still is today’ (2020). Pointing at this is to point at the reality of women’s condition.

³⁴⁶ Morante distanced herself from the feminist movement, preferring to be called ‘un poeta’ instead of ‘una poetessa’, and rejecting the notion of gendered writing. In 1960, she expressed her views on women’s subordination: ‘In my view, there still exists a form of racism, either overt or latent, towards women all over the world ... a woman must overcome difficulties at least ten times greater than those faced by a man to achieve recognition for her intellect, and she can never, ultimately, attain the same position in society as a man with equal or even lesser qualities’ (O xxvi-xxvii). Morante’s refusal to identify with feminism, as Dacia Maraini notes, stemmed from the fact that ‘women in literature were considered inferior, sentimental, auroral, and weak in thought ... she was much more radical than many feminists’ (Ceccatty 2020, 273). Despite this, as Bernabò highlights, ‘in her writing, Elsa consistently demonstrated the ability to represent with coherence, courage, and originality a universe attuned to women’ (Bernabò 2016, 60). In Italy, the women’s movement was divided between those seeking equality with men and those, like Carla Lonzi, who focused on the specificity of being a woman. Morante rejected the former, believing it ‘aberrant for a woman to want to be like a man ... while she appeared to ignore the second, which was potentially closer to that “feminine status” present throughout her writing’ (Bernabò 2016, 193). Carla Lonzi did not appreciate Morante’s portrayal of the sufferer in *La Storia*, as it lacked recognition of ‘women’s difference’. The most authoritative voice on the matter, and a leading Italian Murdoch scholar, is Luisa Muraro (see Muraro 2004; 2014). She suggests that female freedom lies ‘on a ridge’ between self-sacrifice and individualism, balancing complementarity with equality (Muraro 2011, 122–123). This tension is evident in Morante’s celebration of archaic femininity and her call for equality in poetry. Drawing from Weil’s critique of ‘rights’ as tied to individualism, Morante’s women, though

The nurse Ezechiele, the mystic-like Vilma, and Ida's mother Nora all possess intuitive awareness, sensing and foreseeing events just as animals instinctively protect their young or sense approaching earthquakes. Ida, too, is attuned to 'the impersonal' or non-human world. She is drawn by the rhythmic 'nenia' that leads her to witness the train deporting Jews from Tiburtina station, foreshadowing her own destiny of being turned into a thing.

At the same time, when Morante describes Ida's classroom, with pictures of Hitler and Mussolini hung on the wall, she provides a glimpse into the way that even a victim like Ida can perpetuate the game of power unawares.³⁴⁷ These images propagate the logic of power from her classroom to the children and into the world.

5.4.2 Davide Segre

It is well-known that the character Davide Segre resembles Weil, particularly in their anarchism and need to confront the evil of their time.³⁴⁸ Both chose to work in a factory to experience labour firsthand.³⁴⁹ As Morante writes, Davide's aim was 'to write the infamy of the worker's experience not on paper, but on his own body, like a bloodstained text' (H 353).³⁵⁰ Both Weil and Davide come from wealthy families and worked in the factory incognito, performing arduous tasks that leave them physically marked. D'Angeli observes that 'Unstoppable vomiting crises interrupt David's experience; excruciating migraines afflict Simone Weil' (D'Angeli 1993, 110). She highlights how their factory experiences shaped their critical views on labour and reality, underscoring the imposed impossibility of paying any 'real' attention in the space of the factory.³⁵¹

traditional, possess a grandeur that reflects the patriarchal environments they inhabit. Murdoch, like Morante, does not present fully emancipated women but rather depicts them as navigating these patriarchal contexts. It is worth noting that both authors inevitably portray the patriarchal environments they experienced in different ways. Expecting them to depict independent, emancipated women would oversimplify and misalign with the philosophy informing their work, particularly Weil's. Morante's feminism is thus reflected in her representation of women who, from their subaltern positions, manage to acquire 'archaic powers from within their frailty'. (For more on 'femminismo della differenza', see Azzolini and Diotima (1990); Casarino and Righi (2018)).

³⁴⁷ Camon writes, '... History is the realm of scandal that leaves nothing out. The positive thing, then, is to disappear as a victim: contaminated, but not contaminating' (Camon 1993, 94).

³⁴⁸ See D'Angeli (1993); Bérard (2006); and Zanardo (2014a; 2014b)

³⁴⁹ On this, see Cavani and Moscati (1974).

³⁵⁰ 'scrivere l'infamia dell'esperienza operaia non sulla carta, ma sul proprio corpo, come un testo sanguinoso!' (S 415-16).

³⁵¹ Points highlighted by D'Angeli: i) '*On the solitude and the impossibility of communication among workers*'. In the journal of her factory days, Weil often refers to the impossibility of

Davide is visibly marked by his suffering and force³⁵²:

Now instead his features were marked by something corrupt, which perverted them from within. And these marks, filled with a terrible stupor, seemed to have been produced not by a gradual development, but by a lightning violence, like a rape. Even his sleep was degraded by it; and in those present, unconsciously, it created an uneasiness close to dislike. Other lost and exhausted characters had happened into this place before, but in him you could feel a difference, which almost *excluded him from the communal sympathy*. (H 170, my emphasis).³⁵³

We defined sympathy as a necessary disposition in attention. Davide, marked by *le malheur*, is excluded from sympathy and thus from the gaze of others.

Davide is often studied alongside Useppe. The latter is immediately connected to reality, possessing a privileged link with the impersonal, while Davide tries to 'see reality' through the failing exercise of reason.³⁵⁴ Davide cannot detach from his self and the 'terrible privilege of rationality'³⁵⁵ (H 519). In contrast, Useppe, untouched by unreality (the dream of force), can see and love with total

communicating among the workers. Morante: 'from the first day Davide found himself plunged into a total solitude, which isolated him not only from all the living people outside, but also from his companions in the hangar, all of them abstracted as he was, like somnambulists, in their frenzied work and in their incessant obligatory gesticulation, all of them subjected to his same undifferentiated fate.' (H 352). ii) '*On the impossibility and inappropriateness of thought while working in a factory, and on the senselessness of this kind of work*'. Morante: 'no explanations were given, and they themselves asked none, for that matter, knowing questions were useless. In fact, for the maximum material output (which was all that was required of them, imposed like a life-and-death pact), their only defense was obtuseness, to the point of stupor.' (H 352). Weil: 'Reached an uninterrupted...and only by continually repeating to myself the list of operations ... not so much to keep myself from making a blunder as to prevent myself from thinking ... I profoundly feel the humiliation of this void imposed on my thought.' (FJ 185). iii) '*On the obsession of the production rhythms and the compulsion of time*' (D'Angeli 1993, 112); iv) '*On the contraction of the concepts of time and space*'. 'In the brief course of a week, for him the earth already existed no longer, with its woods and shores and meadows, nor the sky with its stars: because these things no longer gave him any desire or pleasure; indeed he didn't see them any more. Even girls, when he left the factory in the evening, didn't attract him. The universe, for him, had shrunk to that shed' (H 354).

³⁵² Evil in Davide emerges in an 'almost obscene laugh, which corrupted his features like an infection' (H 188-89), 'his face retained, like an indelible brand, that strange mark of brutal corruption' (H 177). When that is present, the others feel 'jarred by his presence as if by a scandal' (H 172).

³⁵³ 'La sua fisionomia era segnata da qualcosa di corrotto, che ne pervertiva i lineamenti dall'interno. E questi segni, ancora intrisi di uno stupore terribile, parevano prodotti non da una maturazione graduale; ma da una violenza fulminea, simile a uno stupro ... i presenti inconsapevoli ne risentivano un malessere prossimo all'antipatia ... in lui si avvertiva una diversità, che quasi ne scansava la compassione comune' (S 199).

³⁵⁴ I add that they can be analysed as the emblematic Murdochian duo of 'the saint and the artist', which can be found in novels such as *Under the Net* and *The Sea the Sea*, and in which the saint often recalls Weil. Nonetheless, this Morantian couple is less polarised than Murdoch's opposition between Hugo and Jake, or James and Charles, as Useppe-Davide represent both efforts to 'see reality as it is': Davide through the exercise of reasoning he cannot achieve unselfing; and the child Useppe as not yet touched by unreality and therefore able to see analogies. Furthermore, both represent the inevitable destiny of experiencing *malheur*.

³⁵⁵ 'privilegio terribile della ragione' (S 613).

humility.³⁵⁶ Only morphine can ease Davide's constant reasoning and attempts to explain his suffering, which ultimately leads to his death. D'Angeli notes that the Davide/Useppe pairing recalls Oedipus/Antigone in Morante's *Serata a Colono*, highlighting the role of reason in characters like Davide and Oedipus.³⁵⁷ Morante, through Oedipus, says: 'The brain is a sly and idiotic machine nature made for us, specially / designing it / to exclude us from the real show, and amuse / herself at our misunderstandings. / Only when the machine breaks down, in fevers, / in our death throes, do we begin to make out a thread / of the forbidden scenario' (WSK 72).

The 'scenario proibito' is reality itself, obscured by human dreams and fantasies stemming from the ego's desires and will. Davide is blinded by his will to rationalise what cannot be rationalised. He believes he should exert effort to renounce drugs. If Davide believes his '*ordeal*' is a 'proof of the will', for Weil, the ordeal is *le malheur* (N I 255). By the novel's conclusion, Davide has fallen into a spiral of hate and guilt ('Finally, in himself, Davide hates all'³⁵⁸ (H 521)).

Davide's famous speech in the tavern in the last chapter of *La Storia* echoes Weil's *Cahiers* and voices Morante's thought on power. At the tavern, ignored by most and only attentively heard by Useppe, gives a speech against Power, all wars, and History, while at the same time attempting to give an account of his 'IDEA', that of anarchy,

He was accusing everyone – not only his audience, but all living people, in general – of willful reticence on the subject of the last war and its millions of

³⁵⁶ 'Morante's is a mythologizing instinct; her appeal to myth – in particular the myth of nature – and her idealized view of childhood draw on a tradition of European consciousness which is sceptical about the achievements of the Enlightenment. The world of nature, away from the city of humanity, represents innocence before the Fall, while the world of animals and children (as well as – more problematically for recent critics – peasant women) offers an alternative to the doubtful imperatives of civilization and the social order ... Morante's exaltation of nature and childhood, the space and time of innocence, is never sentimental, but a gesture towards an alternative vision to that which has led only to the gas chamber' (Wood 1995, 154).

³⁵⁷ 'The Davide/Useppe pairing mirrors that of Oedipus/Antigone in *La serata a Colono*, both revolving around the themes of guilt and innocence, participation and, conversely, complete detachment from the brutal mechanisms that drive historical events ... While Davide represents the dead end in which intellectuals find themselves when striving to understand historical Evil, Useppe is the innocent who dies for having taken on that Evil, in absolute humility and unawareness.' (D'Angeli 2014, 95-97). On this see Di Rosa (2018).

³⁵⁸ 'finalmente, in se stesso Davide odia tutti' (S 616).

dead. Nobody wanted to talk about it anymore, as if the matter were settled: this was the point he kept hammering home (H 476-77).³⁵⁹

After speaking about the blindness of his family, he desperately admits the guilt that he also carries with him:

All of us carry an SS hidden inside us! And a bourgeois! And a capitalist! And maybe even a Monsignor! And ... and ... a Generalissimo all decked with fringe and medals like Mardi Gras! All of us! bourgeois and proletarians and ... anarchists and communists! All of us ... That's why our struggle is always a hamstrung action ... a misunderstanding ... an alibi ... false revolutions, to evade the true revolution, and to preserve the reactionary inside us! *Lead us not into temptation means: help us eliminate the Fascist inside us!* (H 498-99).³⁶⁰

Davide, who we see brutally killing a German soldier with no mercy, has both been 'a devotee of happiness' (a poet), an indifferent being (abandoning his cat Rossella and the loving Useppe³⁶¹) and a murderer. Through his character, Morante reveals the harsh truth that, as Sharon Wood writes: 'We all have within us both Christ and the SS, the ability to recognise beauty and to grind it underfoot' (Wood 1995, 167).

5.4.3 *Le malheureux*

To conserve space, I will only mention one more victim of the scandal, emblematic of a Weilian *malheureux*: the Jewish survivor encountered by Useppe and Ida when they return to Rome. A survivor whose body bears stark witness to the horror of the Holocaust. He is an invisible presence, avoided by everyone. The reality he embodies is a void, a terrifying vacuum that no one wants to look into. Morante writes:

³⁵⁹ 'accusava, cioè, tutti quanti – di reticenza volontaria a proposito dell'ultima Guerra e dei suoi milioni di morti. Come si trattasse di un affare liquidato, nessuno più voleva parlarne: questo era il chiodo su cui lui ribatteva' (S 562).

³⁶⁰ "'Tutti quanti ... ci portiamo dentro nascosto un SS! E un borghese! E un capitalista! E forse anche un monsignore! E... e... un Generalissimo addobbato di granfe e patacche come Martedì grasso! Tutti quanti noi! Borghesi e proletari e... anarchici e comunisti! Tutti quanti... Ecco perché la nostra lotta è sempre un'azione monca... un equivoco... un alibi... false rivoluzioni, per evadere dalla rivoluzione vera, e conservare il reazionario che sta dentro a noi! *Non indurci in tentazione* significa: *aiutaci a eliminare il fascista che sta dentro a noi!*'" (S 588-9). As de Rogatis writes, 'his anarchic ideology is far too overwhelming, too abstract and distant from the deepest nucleus of trauma that, in the meantime, has contaminated Segre's own life with ... both indifference (the abandonment of his beloved cat Rossella), and wickedness (the ferocious rage towards the German soldier's body). That same nucleus ultimately drags Useppe and his innocence with itself (as is known, the final phase of the little boy's illness explodes right after Segre's brutal rejection of both his friendship and his ability to transfigure the disease into poetry)' (Wehling-Giorgi and de Rogatis 2021, 171-2).

³⁶¹ Following this episode of Davide rejecting Useppe, the child also gets sicker.

It's odd how some eyes visibly retain the shadow of who-knows-what images, impressed on them before, no telling when and where, in the retina, like an indelible writing that others cannot read and often don't want to. This was the case with the Jews. Soon they learned that nobody wanted to listen to their stories: some people's minds wandered at the start, others interrupted them promptly with an excuse, and others actually stepped away from them, snickering, as if to say: 'Brother, I feel sorry for you, but I have things to do right now.' In fact, the Jews' stories didn't resemble the tales of ship captains, or of Ulysses, the hero returning to his palace. They were spectral figures like negative numbers, beneath all natural sight, inconceivable even for common friendliness. People wanted to censor them from their days as normal families remove the mad or the dead. And so, along with the illegible visions swarming in their black eye-sockets, many voices accompanied the lonely walks of the Jews, echoing vastly in their brains, in a fugue, below the ordinary threshold of the audible (H 322).³⁶²

As Wood observes, Morante points out that the few Jews who survived the war and concentration camps found that their stories were not welcomed. More than being unspeakable, their experiences were often ignored or considered unreadable. Their narratives were seen as unwelcome distractions from the everyday process of moving on after the war. For these survivors, their accounts were disregarded as illegible, containing elements beyond human understanding and imagination, much like Vilma's chaotic sounds (Wood 2015, 83).

Morante's account of *le malheur* in this novel constantly returns the reader to what we don't want to see, what is erased by history books, what we look away from, and forces us to lend an ear to this 'nenia ritmata' and the deafening silence which comes from a void that is beyond any human reasoning, and which asks not for our intellect, but for our attention.

Morante also calls the evil afflicting Mussolini and Hitler a '*sventura*' (*malheur*) describing them as two dreamers: 'the two ill-starred counterfeiters ... were failures and serfs, and sick with a vindictive sense of inferiority'³⁶³ (H 38),

³⁶² 'È curioso come certi occhi sembrano visibilmente l'ombra di chi sa quali immagini, già impresse, chi sa quando e dove, nella retina, a modo di una scrittura incancellabile che gli altri non sanno leggere – e spesso non vogliono. Quest'ultimo era il caso per i giudii. Presto essi impararono che nessuno voleva ascoltare i loro racconti: c'era chi se ne distraeva fin dal principio, e chi li interrompeva prontamente con un pretesto, o chi addirittura li scansava ridacchiando, quasi a dirgli "Fratello, ti compatisco, ma in questo momento ho altro da fare". Difatti i racconti dei giudii non somigliavano a quelli dei capitani di nave, o di Ulisse l'eroe di ritorno alla sua reggia. Erano figure spettrali come i numeri negativi, al di sotto di ogni veduta naturale, e impossibili perfino alla comune simpatia. La gente voleva rimuoverli dalle proprie giornate come dalle famiglie normali si rimuove la presenza dei pazzi, o dei morti. È così, assieme alle figure illeggibili brulicanti nelle loro orbite nere, molte voci accompagnavano le solitarie passeggiate dei giudii, riecheggiando enormi dentro i loro cervelli in una fuga a spirale, al di sotto della soglia comune dell'udibile' (S 376-7).

³⁶³ 'I due sventurati falsari ... sono malati di un sentimento vendicativo d'inferiorità' (S 45).

who are also subject to History. In fact, Morante does not take any side, as in the *Iliad* ‘one is barely aware that the poet is a Greek and not a Trojan’ (I 32). When Mussolini was murdered in 1945, Morante wrote a firm letter to him (published posthumously), but especially to the Italian people. Her words interestingly already echo what Weil had said in *L’enracinement* about Hitler and the society of which he was a product, where she writes that,

it is not the forlorn youth, the wretched vagabond, with the hungry soul, whom it is right to accuse, but those who fed him upon lies. And those who fed him upon lies were our elders, whom we resemble. In the catastrophe of our time, the executioners and their victims are, both together, before anything else, the involuntary bearers of a testimony against the appalling wretchedness in which we wallow. (NFR 235)

Morante writes that Mussolini’s faults

were either tolerated or encouraged even, and applauded. Thus a people who tolerate the faults of their head of state are complicit with these faults. But if they encourage and applaud them as well, it is worse than being complicit, it makes them the perpetrator of these faults (O li-ii, trans. in Tuck 2009, 70-71)³⁶⁴.

She proceeds to offer a perfect profile of Mussolini and his co-dependence with the Italian people, which interestingly resembles Weil’s description of Hitler. He is, she writes, an ‘ammiratore della forza’ and the perfect mirror of the people of Italy (O li). In *La Storia*, in her description of the framed photographs of Hitler and Mussolini in Ida’s class, Morante calls them ‘two dreamers’ (H 38). ‘Dreamers’ is also the definition Weil gives to the Spanish conspirators in *Venise Sauvée* and to the warriors in the *Iliad* who fight for ‘a phantom Helen’. Nonetheless, Morante includes figures like Useppe who are absolute victims. *Les malheureux* are so distant from the condition of using force, that they live the tearing contradiction of human existence: bearing the potential for attention and simultaneously the potential to be erased through ‘the scandal’.

³⁶⁴ ‘furono o tollerati, o addirittura favoriti e applauditi. Ora, un popolo che tollera i delitti del suo capo, si fa *complice* di questi delitti. Se poi li favorisce e applaude, peggio che complice, si fa *mandante* di questi delitti.’

5.5 Moments of attention

Let us move from the role of force in *La Storia*, which I explored in relation to Weil's essay on the *Iliad*, to the representation of attention in Morante's novel particularly how Useppe's compassion is a form of attention.

5.5.1 Useppe

Besides the pressure of force, which Morante makes visible and present to the reader throughout, there are moments of attention in which reality is not covered with human projections, such as when Useppe 'learns to pass time *thinking*'³⁶⁵ (H 241) in the refugee shelter, talking with Davide about poetry, or in his interactions with animals. The 'thinking' of Useppe does not coincide with the rational, Western thinking, it is, rather, a poetic activity, where the use of '*come*' (as) is fundamental as it represents Weil's constant analogy between this world and the transcendent. Indeed, it is an expression of the imagination that moves by analogy, and that in chapter 3 I indicated as the precondition for 'attentive compassion'. The ability to see bridges lies in Useppe's analogical thinking. In fact, D'Angeli notes that 'It proceeds by leaps [per saltum], following a mode of expression and thought that does not belong to logic or rationality – in fact, it is structured in partial opposition to them and moves closer to the realm of metaphor, which is precisely what defines poetry' (D'Angeli 1994, 229). Useppe's immediate sense of compassion, which Morante delineates throughout, in juxtaposition with Segre's effort of rationalising suffering and force, results from attention. An example of Useppe's attention is the episode of the eyes of the calf, or the Jewish cattle-cars, in front of which Useppe's reaction is 'a stupor that demanded no explanation'³⁶⁶ (H 211).

In Useppe's exchange with the natural world and animals, we find Morante's representation of the world's constant calling for our attention to its independent existence that only a selfless being can recognise. Useppe can see beauty in the world because, as Weil puts it, doing so entails looking at it outside of the projections of the self.³⁶⁷ Indeed, Useppe's short life ends before unreality (the

³⁶⁵ 'a passare il tempo *pensando*' (S 282).

³⁶⁶ 'uno stupore che si sottrae a spiegazioni e consolazioni' (S 247).

³⁶⁷ Useppe and Bella see the beauty of the world in the same way. As Morante writes, 'Useppe laughed with contentment, because to tell the truth on the subject of beauty there was complete agreement between him and the shepherdess. Giants or dwarfs, beggars or dandies, decrepitude or youth, nothing made any difference to him. And neither the twisted nor the hunchback, the paunchy

dream of force) contaminates him. His happiness coincides with the ‘sensation of the real.’³⁶⁸ He is the novel’s only happy character, since this feeling of reality stems not from the understanding of the events of History, nor the participation in the stories of the adults. It is, on the contrary, beautifully explained by Morante in moments throughout the novel where Useppe is revealed as existing according to the rules of another world, in which time runs differently, such as in the episode of ‘the lesser panda’ (H 240).³⁶⁹

As we saw in chapter 1, dissolving the dream of force is the precondition for love and justice, except that this is not achieved through the ‘terrible privilege of rationality’ (H 519), as Segre attempted to do.³⁷⁰ Intellectual efforts can bring those who question reality closer to a clear vision of our world, but reason must leave space for acceptance, and so for love of reality,³⁷¹ as Weil writes: ‘the intelligence is not called upon to discover anything, but merely to clear the ground. It is useful for carrying out servile tasks’ (N II 418). Indeed, in the novel, Useppe embodies the love for reality that Morante finds essential to the ‘mythical’ dimension of childhood. As she reminds the reader in the epigraph: ‘... thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes ... for so it seemed good in thy sight. (Luke 10: 21)’³⁷².

nor the scrawny: to him none was less lovely than the world’s Paragon, provided all were friends equally and smiling.’ (H 472).

³⁶⁸ As Weil writes in her *Cahiers*: ‘Fulness of joy: something is. Feeling of reality’ (N I 182).

³⁶⁹ ‘panda minore’ (S 282). Morante uses the story of ‘the lesser panda’ as an image for the different temporal dimension of Useppe’s thinking: ‘Of one of these pandas it was said that he spent millennia thinking on his own tree, from which he climbed down to the ground every three hundred years. But in reality, the calculation of such periods was relative: in fact, while three hundred years had gone by on Earth, on that panda’s tree barely ten minutes had passed’ (H 241).

³⁷⁰ Davide Segre has often been studied in tandem with Useppe, for the fact that one (Useppe) is immediately in connection with reality and so has a privileged link with the natural world, while the other (Davide) is constantly trying to ‘see reality’ as well but through the failing exercise of reason. For Useppe, ‘words ... had a sure value, as if they were one with objects’ (H 112).

³⁷¹ *Alibi*: ‘Only the one who loves knows. Poor who does not love!’ (A 53). The same idea can be found in *Diario di Sils Maria*: ‘Nobody really knows another, if he does not love him. Each of the others, is known only by who loves him. And each of all the men and women, each is extraordinary, is a wonderful universe, is, ultimately, with no guilt, innocent. But only who loves knows it. Only Christ was rich enough to love them all, and to know the extraordinary and wonderful universe, and the non-imputability ... of everyone’ (O lxiii).

³⁷² ‘hai nascosto queste cose ai dotti e ai savi e le hai rivelate ai piccoli ... perché così a te piacque. (Luca X – 21)’. As Cristina Campo also writes in ‘Deer Park’: ‘In poetry, as in relationships between people, everything dies the moment any sign of technique rises to the surface. The true education of the mind has never had any other end since the world began but the death of technique, of that sad *savoir vivre* that the child, who does everything so naturally, was one day taught by adults’ (Campo 2024, 138)

In her own copy of Weil's *Cahiers*, Morante underlines this passage:

It is the refusal to accept for oneself the possibility of suffering which places an obstacle in the way of compassion. It is the refusal to recognize oneself in the misery of others – which necessarily wears an ugly appearance ... Compassion implies acceptance. (N I 284-285)

Besides this, Morante notes³⁷³: 'By vulgar people such compassion for identification is considered inferior and negative'³⁷⁴. 'Identificazione' here does not mean an empathetic process, but attentive compassion that requires acceptance and distance. As we saw, in Weil, this idea of compassion also means looking at the condition of the Other through their eyes, using sympathy and analogical imagination. D'Angeli suggests that this 'compassione per identificazione' could be used as the key to interpreting the whole novel and understanding the alleged 'sentimentalism' of which the novel has been accused. If Davide's attempt was that of an 'identificazione volontaristica', Useppe's compassion instead concerns what Weil meant by attention, for compassion implies the feeling that we are all united in being at the mercy of chance and necessity. It implies a step back from our egos, which makes compassion, first and foremost, the result of attention I called 'attentive compassion' in chapter 3.

Useppe's peculiarity is that he is under the good star of attention, not that he oriented himself towards the Good like a saint or a mystic. He is 'naturally' oriented towards the Good, and so towards reality, and he dies before being contaminated by the evil that inevitably comes with adulthood. He does not get to experience evil while trying to understand it rationally, or alongside the affliction that comes with the sense of suffered injustices. He sees it, but he does not pass it on. As Ferdinando

³⁷³ Studying Morante's copies of Weil's *Cahiers*, I could see that this passage (as well as most of the passages in which Weil writes about 'the substitution of means for ends', the impersonal, suffering, and the *Iliad*) were strongly underlined, indicating the importance that Morante saw in these ideas.

³⁷⁴ 'N.B. Da gente volgare una simile compassione per identificazione è considerata inferiore e negativa'. Another reminder she gives to herself in *Il mondo*, of practising that 'compassione per identificazione' is in the following lines: 'As for your *neighbour* / you (I'm speaking for you too, you half U.M. writing here) / can recognize him naturally in those who are born / nobody knows where from, & die to go nobody knows where / with no one to save them from grief or spare them from death: / no mothers or fathers on earth or in heaven. / Alone and homeless: no more no less / than you. / And here the Anonymous cave writer is in fact sure / that in the difficult command: *Love him as thy self* / the *as* must be read as meaning *because*. BECAUSE / the *other* – the *others* (H.F. and U.M. & sapiens & faber & dog & toad & and every other deathbound life) / ARE all yourself: not your fellows or peers or companions or brothers / but the same one / YOUR / SELF.' (WSK 186-187).

Camon writes: 'Useppe's innocence is absolute because guaranteed by the impossibility of a different choice' (Camon 1993, 88). What Morante calls Useppe's 'cognizione impossibile' is in fact the cognition of suffering, which is unexplainable.

Useppe seems to fall outside the dull apathy that Sontag and Murdoch, following Weil, wrote about. He 'sees' the calf,³⁷⁵ he 'sees' the deported Jews, and he is 'deeply disturbed on witnessing the train full of Jews about to be transported to Auschwitz from the Stazione Tiburtina, [as] he is similarly shocked by the photographs of hanged partisans that he sees in a magazine, bodies in the process of being commodified by a news-hungry press' (Wood 2015, 83). The moment he looks at those horrific pictures, interrupted by Ida's protective reaction hoping to spare little Useppe from those violent images, Morante again portrays him as almost drawn by *le malheur* but not out of curiosity or appeal, but out of a selfless, attentive, compassion. His vision of *les malheureux* is immediately connected to an 'impossible' cognition not only of suffering, but of death.

Morante makes the episode of the calf immediately precede the episode of the balloon flying away, accompanied by Useppe's first use of the phrase 'Fly away! Fly away!', which will return in different moments of the novel to accompany his cognition of death, as with the death of the dog Blitz. D'Angeli notes that in the novel 'It is possible to discern, behind the human narrative, another story with animals as its protagonists', and the 'distinction between the two narrative levels is found in Useppe, who belongs simultaneously to both the human and the animal dimensions.' (D'Angeli 1993, 124). His 'kind of impossible, childish awareness' (H 419) is on the same level of Bella's 'prescient wisdom' (H 449) and the birds' message.

³⁷⁵ 'It stood there calmly, tied to an iron bar, barely sticking out its helpless head (its two little horns, still tender, had been torn out); and from its neck, on a string, hung a tiny medal, like a tag, on which the last stage of his journey perhaps was written. None of that information had been given the traveler; but in his broad, moist eyes you could sense a dark foreknowledge. The only one who seemed to *take an interest* in him was Blitz, who on sighting him, gave out a soft, drawling whimper; but then, over the head of his brother, who held him hoisted on his shoulders, Giuseppe was also *observing* the calf. And perhaps between the child's eyes and the animal's there was some unforeseen exchange, subterranean and imperceptible. All of a sudden, *Giuseppe's gaze underwent a curious change*, never seen before, which, however, nobody noticed. A kind of sadness or suspicion crossed his eyes, as if a little dark curtain had been drawn down; and he kept looking back towards the freight car, above his brother's shoulders, as Ninnuzzo now, with Blitz, was striding towards the exit.' (H 108).

His ‘awareness’ and his ‘stupor’ in front of *le malheur* are possible because he belongs to its sphere. When he looks at it, ‘Useppe, his head upraised, was there studying these scenes in a hesitant awe, still bewildered. He seemed to be confronting an enigma, deformed and ambiguous by nature, and yet obscurely familiar’³⁷⁶ (H 315). *Le malheur* is for Useppe an ‘enigma’, but a ‘familiar’ one. Indeed his ‘stupor’ is the counterpart of his feeling ‘fatto per i maltrattamenti’. As Weil explains, and as we saw in chapter 1, oppression does not incite revolt, as Marxism suggested, but leads to eternal submission.

Le malheur is too ‘familiar’ for Useppe not only because it is all he is surrounded by in his short life, but also because Morante portrays him, through his sickness, as having a seed of *malheur* within him, essential to him. Useppe is unaware of his ‘grande male’, possessing instead a sort of shame, if not a sense of guilt (as I explained in chapter 1, Weil thought of *les malheureux* as feeling the evil inhabiting them with a sense of their own culpability). In fact, Useppe ‘neither remembered nor knew anything of his own attack ... however, he must have sensed somehow that he had undergone an offense, of which he was ashamed’ (H 393) and ‘Even his features displayed the amazement, and the repulsion, of someone at a sudden encounter’ (H 385).³⁷⁷

His ‘grande male’ is inconsolable, desolating, and Ida cannot do anything about it: ‘she saw in Useppe’s eyes a kind of impossible, childish awareness, unspeakably tormented, which said to her, “You know!” and nothing else, beyond any exchange of logical questions and answers’³⁷⁸ (H 419).

Explaining suffering, for Weil, means comforting it. Useppe’s ‘peccché’ which occur constantly throughout the novel remain unanswered, and the silence³⁷⁹

³⁷⁶ ‘Useppe, con la testa in su, stava lì a scrutare queste scene, in uno stupore titubante, e ancora confuso. Pareva interrogasse un enigma, di natura ambigua e deforme, eppure oscuramente familiare’ (S 370).

³⁷⁷ ‘della propria crisi non ricordava né sapeva niente ... però doveva avvertire in qualche modo d’aver subito un insulto, di cui si vergognava’ (S 464) ‘i suoi tratti manifestavano lo stupore, e il rifiuto, di chi si ritrova a un incontro pauroso’ (S 453).

³⁷⁸ ‘Essa vide ... una sorta di cognizione impossibile, puerile e indicibilmente straziata, che le diceva “Tu lo sai!” e nient’altro, al di là di ogni scambio di domande e risposte logiche’ (S 493).

³⁷⁹ ‘Inarticulacy and silence mark similarly the utterances of Vilma, the apparently mentally disturbed ghetto mystic, the one person who foresees the day before, unheeded, the dramatic and traumatic clearing of the ghetto on 16 October 1943. Glimpsed again at the end of the war, the narrator describes her as a mythical creature with neither age nor sex, her few clumps of white hair tied in a bow with blue ribbon, her legs bare in the winter cold’ (Wood 2015, 82).

that surrounds them echoes God's silence in the face of Christ's 'Why' on the Cross.³⁸⁰ This is a frequently recurring image in Weil's *Cahiers*. In *La personne et le sacré*, as I explained in chapter 1, Weil writes that human beings are born expecting to receive care, to receive good instead of evil. She writes: 'Every time that the childlike cry of Christ himself, 'Why have you hurt me?', cuts into the bottom of the human heart, there is certainly injustice' (HP 105).³⁸¹

Morante gives an example of this in the episode of the SS soldier killed by Davide, whom he recalls in his speech at the tavern, saying:

I, who was murdering him, had become an SS, all right. But he, who was dying, was no longer an SS or a soldier of any army! He had a look in his eyes: where am I? *what are they doing to me? why?*; his eyes were very pale and stupid, as if they were just opening, as if he were being born, not dying. Me, an SS: but he had become a baby again ... (H 502, my emphasis)³⁸²

The 'childlike cry', as Weil calls it, also resonates in Morante's epigraph of the novel 'There is no word in the human language capable of consoling the guinea pigs who do not know the reason for their death. (A survivor of Hiroshima)',³⁸³ in Ueseppe's 'pecché', and in the words: 'Where are we going? Where are they taking us? To the land of Pitchipoi'³⁸⁴ (H 125). Morante places this between the summary of the historical event of 1943 and the story of Ida and Ueseppe undergoing the bombing of San Lorenzo, the deportation of the Jewish people of Rome, and the beginning of their lives as refugees. From the silence that arises in the face of

³⁸⁰ 'And with a little animal's bewilderment, he said in a desperate voice : "Ma ... wy?" In reality, this question of his didn't seem addressed to Ida, present there, but rather to some absent, monstrous, and inexplicable Will. Ida, instead, again imagined he was accusing her for having shut him up in the house treacherously; but soon, in the following days, she became convinced this explanation was insufficient. That question: wy? had become, with Ueseppe, a kind of refrain, which returned to his lips from beyond time and place, perhaps involuntarily (otherwise, he would have taken care to pronounce it properly, with the h). He could be heard at times repeating it to himself in a monotonous sequence: "Wy? wy wy wy wy?" But though it seemed automatic, this little question had a stubborn and heart-rending sound, more bestial than human. It recalled, in fact, the voices of abandoned kittens, of donkeys blindfolded at the mill, of lambs loaded on a wagon for the Easter festivities. It was never known if all these anonymous and unanswered wys reached some destination, perhaps an invulnerable ear beyond all earthly places.' (H 424)

³⁸¹ As we saw earlier, this is the foundation of Weil's idea of moral obligations towards others, especially those who are turned into objects by force.

³⁸² 'io, che lo massacravo, sì ero diventato un SS. Ma lui, che crepava, non era più né un SS né un militare di nessuna arma! Faceva certi occhi: *dove mi portano? che mi fanno? perché?*, chiari chiari e stupidi, come si aprissero appena nati, invece di morire. Io, un SS; ma lui era tornato bambino...' (S 592)

³⁸³ 'Non c'è parola, in nessun linguaggio umano, capace di consolare le cavie che non sanno il perché della loro morte. (Un sopravvissuto di Hiroshima)'.

³⁸⁴ 'Dove Andiamo? Dove ci portano? Al paese di Pitchipoi'.

suffering and the childlike cry, the only possible response is ‘compassionate vision’ – a vision not only of the eyes but of attention: an attentive compassion that fixes on *le malheur* without revolting against it or turning into a form of sadism or personal comfort: ‘To contemplate what cannot be contemplated (the affliction of another), without running away, and to contemplate the desirable without approaching – that is what is beautiful’ (FLN 71).³⁸⁵

5.6 ‘the Beautiful, derided and unconscious of its own worth’: joy between tragic and comic

The coexistence of attention and *malheur*, the greatest contradiction in human existence for Weil, of which Useppe is a perfect image, resonates throughout the *Iliad*. What makes this poem something of a ‘miracle’ for Weil is the fact that in the context of war, justice and love appear as a contradiction disrupting the events of the war. If the facts of the war represent the use of, and submission to, force, these moments instead reveal the common submission of all human beings to the *ἀνάγκη* of the world, the human condition of equity in misfortune, which is, for Weil, the precondition for the existence of justice and love.

Human frailty, as we saw in our previous discussion of the ephemeral (4.4.2), is the precondition of love: we can only really love after seeing and accepting the equity of destiny among all human beings (our finitude), and that the use of force, and so power and prestige, is only a dream. Useppe embodies this frailty through his disease and by being surrounded by the destructive pressure of force (at its apex in wartime). He therefore appears as the only being (together with animals) inhabiting a world outside the dream of force, in which everything and every being has the same value due to the simple fact of their existence. As Morante writes:

Even the things that, in general, arouse aversion or repugnance, in him inspired *only attention and transparent wonder*, like the others. In his endless journeys of exploration, crawling on all fours around the Urals and the Amazon and the Australian archipelagos which the furniture of the house was to him, sometimes he no longer knew where he was. And he would be found

³⁸⁵ The cry of ‘fragility’ that must be protected by others constantly stressed by Weil echoes in Morante’s *La Storia*: ‘[Useppe] mingling with all those unknown people, seeming to announce: “Here I am! At last we meet again!”’ (H 159), and in *Aracoeli*: ‘Every creature on earth offers himself. Pathetic, ingenuous, he offers himself: “I am born! Here I am! With this face, this body, and this smell. Do I appeal to you? Do you want me?” From Napoleon to Lenin and Stalin to the last streetwalker, from the mongoloid child to Greta Garbo and Picasso and the stray dog, this in reality is the one perpetual question of every living being to the other living beings: “Do I seem beautiful to you? I, who to her seemed the most beautiful?”’ (Ac 101).

under the sink in the kitchen, ecstatically observing a patrol of cockroaches as if they were wild colts on the prairie. He even recognized a *ttar* in a gob of spit (H 104, my emphasis).³⁸⁶

Useppe's 'universal, spontaneous trust' (H 159),³⁸⁷ makes him sympathetic to everything and everyone, to the point that,

if an SS troop had turned up in the room with all their paraphernalia of massacre, the *comical* Useppe would not have been afraid of them ... For him strangers apparently didn't exist, only members of his family, returning after an absence, whom he recognized at first sight (H 159, my emphasis).³⁸⁸

Or, again, 'He hadn't yet been washed since the previous morning, and in that intrepid face, dirty and black with smoke, the joy of his little blue eyes was so funny [*comic*]³⁸⁹ it made everyone laugh, even on that *tragic* first day.' (H 159-60, my emphasis)³⁹⁰. Useppe's character is effective because the reader feels sympathy and compassion for, as Dostoevsky puts it, 'the Beautiful, derided and unconscious³⁹¹ of its own worth' (Dostoevsky 1914, 135-36). As Wood observes, 'Useppe is between cultures, his value for Morante lying precisely in the fact that he is of little value to anybody else, a poor scrap of humanity who is all the more human in his naked defencelessness.' (Wood 1995, 165). Useppe is the innocent and thus can only meet evil through his own suffering because to suffer evil, as we saw in chapter 1, means not to encounter force by using it but to experience it from a state of innocence. In relation to this idea, Morante underlines this emblematic passage in Weil's *Cahiers*: 'Everyone that taketh up the sword shall perish by the sword. And everyone that taketh not up the sword (or lets it drop) shall perish on the Cross. To be innocent is to bear the weight of the entire universe' (N I 229). To be an emptied

³⁸⁶ 'Le forme stesse che provocano, generalmente, avversione o ripugnanza, in lui suscitavano *solo attenzione e una trasparente meraviglia*, al pari delle altre. Nelle sterminate esplorazioni che faceva, camminando a quattro zampe, intorno agli Urali, e alle Amazonie, e agli Arcipelaghi Australiani, che erano per lui i mobili di casa, a volte non si sapeva più dove fosse. E lo si trovava sotto l'acquaio in cucina, che assisteva estasiato a una ronda di scarafaggi, come fossero cavallucci in una prateria. Arrivò perfino a riconoscere una *ttella* in uno sputo.' (S 120, my emphasis).

³⁸⁷ 'unica, spontanea confidenza' (S 186).

³⁸⁸ 'se là nello stanzone si fosse presentato uno squadrone di SS con tutto il loro armamentario di strage, il buffo Useppe non ne avrebbe avuto paura ... Sembrava che per lui non esistessero sconosciuti, ma solo gente sua di famiglia, di ritorno dopo qualche assenza, e che lui riconosceva a prima vista' (S 186).

³⁸⁹ From the Italian 'comica'.

³⁹⁰ 'Non s'era ancora lavato, dopo la giornata di ieri, e in quella sua faccia intrepida, sporca e nera dal fumo, la letizia dei suoi occhietti celesti era così comica che faceva ridere tutti quanti, perfino in quel tragico primo giorno' (S 186).

³⁹¹ As Morante writes: 'And your [of the F.P.] unparalleled, ultimate grace / is that your beauty / DOES NOT CONCERN YOU' (WSK 165).

being means to be exposed to the outside world with no reservations. Useppe, ‘That tiny, defenseless being’ (H 159),³⁹² is extraneous to force, he is, indeed, out of History and in his ‘naked defencelessness’ he is at times ‘comical’, but not in the sense that it arouses a derisive laugh but a sympathetic smile (as in the episode of the new pair of boots); he is ‘one same risible object / of compassion’ (WSK 168)³⁹³ Perhaps in this, Morante approached what Murdoch called the combination of comic and tragic. De Rogatis observes, ‘as already correctly emphasised, History is paradoxically loaded with hilarious situations, and inserts a comic register even in those parts of the text that lean towards tragedy’ (Wehling-Giorgi and de Rogatis 2021, 172). In Morante’s notes, reported by Monica Zanardo, she writes about the intention of her novel:

This novel is addressed to everyone and aims to be understood by all possible readers; indeed, its story, or tragedy, also intends to be comic, that is, to make readers laugh frequently. In fact, isn’t laughter – perhaps even more than tears – a distinctive sign of human reality?’ (in Zanardo 2012, 154).

Agamben explains this combination of a sort of ‘comic’ and tragic in *La Storia* as it follows: it is as if, Morante

adhered so tenaciously to the tragic fiction that, in the end, it opens a passage beyond itself, toward something that is no longer tragic (though it cannot be called comic either). In that passage, without pain or redemption, we contemplate, for a moment, the pure Fiction, before the demons drag it to hell or the angels lift it to heaven. And that moment – the fiction contemplated, the word fulfilled – is the farewell to tragedy. Only at that point does Elsa’s poetry reveal its shining phoenix, its eternal ashes. (Agamben 1993, 59)³⁹⁴

Murdoch said that comedy is everywhere in life. I argue that Morante’s attempt is neither tragic nor includes what we would call ‘comic’ elements, but it is something in between, or something beyond, as Agamben suggested. This is part of the originality and the beauty of the novel, and what inspires the attentive reader to feel compassion for the characters, victims of the ‘scandal’.

Beauty manifests in the novel when the narrative centres on Useppe. These moments of grace amidst destruction echo Homer’s approach in the *Iliad*, imparting

³⁹² ‘quell’essere minimo e disarmato’ (S 186).

³⁹³ ‘uno stesso oggetto risibile di compassione’ (*Il mondo*, 126).

³⁹⁴ As mentioned before, the model for *La Storia* is more ancient than Manzoni’s *Promessi Sposi*, it goes all the way to the Homeric and Indian epics. As Morante says ‘The notion of a novel, for me, is much broader; the *Iliad* and the *Bhagavad-Gita* are novels.’ (David 1968a quoted in O Ivii).

a sense of the fleeting nature and impermanence of people, places, animals, and situations – this impermanence itself holds their beauty. Beauty, fundamentally, intertwines with vulnerability, or the ephemeral. With her attentive and compassionate tone, Morante attempts the artistic miracle of bringing beauty close to *le malheur* in a fragile and precarious embrace. Such literature carries a religious spirit, striving to embody the ‘horizontal perspective’ that bids us to view the world from its standpoint. When the attentive reader aligns with this perspective, the ‘miracle’ unfolds as a sense of joy. For Weil, joy is ‘the sensation of the real’, as Murdoch contends in an interview, suggesting that attention (or love) directed at works of art like *King Lear*, which portrays terrible things and thus gives us a ‘sensation of the real’, is happiness (Dooley 2003, 135).

As we have seen, Morante attempts to let her reader attend to *le malheur* through beauty. Given this, I conclude that the ‘horizontal perspective’ of ‘attentive compassion’, which sees the equity of all the things in the world, allows an impossibility: witnessing the destruction of Useppe, his pure *malheur*, does not incite force in readers (this, in Weil’s perspective is the natural tendency when faced with vulnerability, for we tend to apply power and expand our egos into the void left by another’s annihilation). Instead, through the attentive poetic narration, which allows us to truly see *le malheur*, we are moved to compassion. In this sense, literature can, on rare occasions, break the cycle of force.

Weil explained that *la malheureuse* will inevitably suffer force if they do not use it:

To be innocent is to bear the weight of the entire universe. It is to throw away the counterweight. / By emptying ourselves, we expose ourselves to the full pressure of the surrounding universe (N I 197).

In *La Storia*, Morante attempts to grapple with the challenging and seemingly contradictory concepts of the innocent human being and a form of ‘redemptive’ suffering. Useppe serves as the ‘sacrificial lamb’, a being in whom *décréation* (a state he naturally holds as a child), and destruction intersect. As discussed in chapter 1, such a being symbolises the cross for Weil.³⁹⁵ The distinction and interplay

³⁹⁵ ‘If a human being who is in a state of perfection and has through grace completely destroyed the ‘I’ in himself, falls into that degree of affliction which corresponds for him to the destruction of the ‘I’ from outside – we have there the cross in its fullness. Affliction can no longer destroy the ‘I’ in

between the *décréé* and the *malheureuse* have been a recurring theme throughout this research. This controversial difference – between a human being reduced to a ‘plaything’ and a ‘de-created’ person – is well articulated in Morante’s 1965 speech ‘Pro o contro la bomba atomica’:

One could ... read the Holy Scriptures of any religion in the interpretation that any of them, and not only the Indian, teach, the final annihilation as the only possible point of beatitude ... Nonetheless, while the Nirvana promised by religions is achieved via contemplation, the renounce to the self, the universal pity, so through the unification of consciousness, instead its petty-bourgeois evil surrogate ... is achieved ... through the disintegration of consciousness, via organized injustice and madness, degrading myths, convulsive and furious boredom.³⁹⁶ (PoC 99-100)

This ‘maligno surrogato’, as explored in chapter 1, reached its peak for both Weil and Morante under the totalitarian regimes of the last century. These represent two different modes of ‘becoming a thing’: one through oppression and the other through the mystical effort of self-effacement.³⁹⁷ The former holds no positive use, while the latter, accessible only to a few (ideal) mystics and saints, serves as a model for the moral agent. Unfortunately, the annihilation wrought by force, resulting in the experience of *malheur*, is a reality endured by many in this world.

While Ueseppe is a selfless being, his death does not offer redemption in the traditional sense of transcending death as a transformed entity; his death is useless

him for the ‘I’ in him no longer exists, having completely disappeared and left the place to God.’ (GG 27).

³⁹⁶ ‘si potrebbe ... leggere le Sacre Scritture di tutte le religioni nell’interpretazione che tutte, e non solo quella indiana, insegnino, l’annientamento finale come l’unico punto di beatitudine possibile ... Però, mentre il Nirvana promesso dalle religioni si guadagna per la via della contemplazione, della rinuncia a se stessi, della pietà universale, e insomma attraverso l’unificazione della coscienza, al suo maligno surrogato piccolo-borghese ... si arriva ... attraverso la disintegrazione della coscienza, per mezzo della ingiustizia e demenza organizzate, dei miti degradanti, della noia convulsa e feroce’.

³⁹⁷ ‘Décréation: to make something created pass into the uncreated. Destruction: to make something created pass into nothingness. A blameworthy substitute for *décréation*’ (GG 32). ‘So long as we ourselves have begun the process of destroying the ‘I’, we can prevent any affliction from causing harm. For the ‘I’ is not destroyed by external pressure without a violent revolt. If for the love of God we refuse to give ourselves over to this revolt, the destruction does not take place from outside but from within. Redemptive suffering. If a human being who is in a state of perfection and has through grace completely destroyed the ‘I’ in himself, falls into that degree of affliction which corresponds for him to the destruction of the ‘I’ from outside – we have there the cross in its fullness. Affliction can no longer destroy the ‘I’ in him for the ‘I’ in him no longer exists, having completely disappeared and left the place to God. But affliction produces an effect which is equivalent, on the plane of perfection, to the exterior destruction of the ‘I’. It produces the absence of God. ‘My God, why hast Thou forsaken me?’ (GG 27).

and unheard.³⁹⁸ However, his suffering is redemptive because it does not perpetuate the self-sustaining cycle of force. As Weil writes:

The sin which lies in us comes out of us and is propagated exteriorly, as a result of contagion, in the form of sin ... But when one is in contact with a perfectly pure being a transmutation is effected, and the sin is changed into suffering ... Such is redemptive suffering. All the criminal violence of the Roman Empire ... came violently into collision with Christ, and in him became pure suffering ... It follows, perhaps, that redemptive suffering has to be of social origin. An ordinary illness cannot constitute redemptive suffering. Redemptive suffering has to be injustice, violence exercised by human beings. It has to consist of being subjected to force (N II 506).

Useppe is not merely suffering from his disease (Morante makes his disease the symbolic representation of force), but *malheur*, which he does not pass onto others, 'it was he really who segregated himself from the others (... he actually suggested the image of an elementary being who, sensing some virulent germ in his blood, wants to protect the others from contagion' (H 388)).³⁹⁹

However, Morante's 'spiritual/moral use' of Useppe's suffering, her bearing witness to it, constitutes what I term a 'positive use' that can be transformative for the readers. Useppe is extraneous to force; he is, in fact, out of History, and by paying attention to him, we are thrown, for a moment, against unreality.

After examining Weil's ideas of force and attention and their presence in Morante's novel, particularly defining Useppe's compassion as a form of attention, I proceed to demonstrate how this form of attention, intrinsic to a child in the novel, underpins Morante's efforts as a novelist and her vocabulary. Therefore, in the last section of this chapter, I will illustrate how Morante's *La Storia* is an 'attentive testimony', rooted in Weilian attention, and her realism is a 'mystical realism', a concept which I elaborate using Murdoch's depiction of mysticism grounded in attention.

³⁹⁸ 'his sacrifice doesn't turn into collective salvation. Not a redemption, but a pointless sacrifice.' (D'Angeli 1993, 127).

³⁹⁹ 'Era lui medesimo che si segregava dagli altri... (suggeriva addirittura l'immagine di un essere elementare che sentendosi nel sangue un qualche germe virulento voglia preservare gli altri dal contagio)' (S 457).

5.7 A vocabulary of attention

To address Morante's realism, let us return to the example of the *Iliad*. As explored in chapter 4, the moral character of the *Iliad*,⁴⁰⁰ for Weil, is due to Homer's unique way of depicting destruction and ephemerality. He presents whatever has temporarily escaped force with a poetic touch, while war's harsh realities remain starkly exposed. Homer neither glorifies nor condemns the victors or the defeated, showing an impartial and unadorned portrayal of war's brutality. This atmosphere of loss, limit, and finitude is epitomised in the *Iliad* through the representation of 'the destruction of a city', which for Weil was 'the greatest calamity' (I 31) that humanity could experience, and which she also uses as an image in *Venise Sauvée*. The image of the destruction of a city is also a recurring topic for Morante: for instance, in the bombing of Rome in *La Storia*, and in 'Pro o contro la bomba atomica', where she speaks of the possibility of disintegration epitomised by the image of the atomic bomb as the natural expression of our contemporary society. This view vividly recalls another Weilian concept, that of uprootedness, which, in *L'enracinement*, Weil indicates is the greatest evil of our times.

Only poetry remains to resonate in those moments of attention that disrupt the world of force. The constant threat of destruction becomes the engine from which loving attention is spread among all beings in their finitude. This is the ethics of attention that marks the use of language in *La Storia*. It emerges from how Morante narrates the two historical levels of the novel: the dry level of History and the fictional level where we find Ida, Useppe, and the other victims.

When Pier Paolo Pasolini criticised Morante's style, saying that it is 'all ideology' – 'inside there are Freud, Jung. Her characters resemble saints in the lives of saints written by a priest' (Pasolini 1999, 1620)⁴⁰¹ – and her awkward use of

⁴⁰⁰ In *Piccolo manifesto dei comunisti (senza classe e senza partito)* (*Communists' little manifesto (with no class nor political party)*) written around 1970-71, Morante also defined the Homeric *Iliad* as a moral work which, like the other works in history that she defines as moral, 'nega il Potere' (rejects Power) (PMC 7). As she states in point n.3: 'humans' dishonour is Power. Which is immediately configured in human society, universally and since it is always based on the binomial: masters and servants – exploiters and exploited'. On her anti-authoritarian spirit and its relationship with posthumanism, feminism, and anarchism see Maria Giménez Cavallo (2016).

⁴⁰¹ In 'La Fiera letteraria', 14 February 1967. In 1960 Pasolini had defended her saying: 'and ultimately, Morante, who gives a brilliant example of what a work: of escapist art can be without being escapist, as the author is powerfully heteronomous: its purpose is not literature, but an ethical-fantastic ideal, to which literature is subservient, and from which it is absorbed, but not erased, the ideal of immediate social commitment' in 'Vie nuove', 23 July 1960 (Pasolini 1999, 894).

dialects in *La Storia* – referring in particular to the unrealistic dialect of Segre – he did not see that, as Camon observes, ‘Morante’s fictional dialect fits perfectly into her fictional Italian, which in turn is equivalent to a fictional ideology’ (Camon 1993, 95). It is a fictional language that can speak to everyone without excluding anyone. In fact, she does not speak of ideologies, nor stand for any, but rather reaches for another level, above all ideologies,⁴⁰² which is the level of loving attention, outside the logic of force, and of History (Camon 1993, 95).

When *La Storia* came out,⁴⁰³ Italo Calvino described being perplexed by the nature of the writer’s voice, which, he argued, was quasi-omniscient, but at the same time seemed to speak as Morante herself did, full of an ‘espressività affettiva’ (emotional/sentimental tone) (Calvino 2000, 1246). There is an emotional tone in this universal compassion (which makes us almost sense the intra-textual presence of the writer⁴⁰⁴) that Morante adopts in the semi-omniscient narration, which might create some problems in defining its voice. The following words of Morante that appeared in the American edition of *La Storia* can better clarify the idea she had in mind for her narrating voice, as an ‘impersonal’ ‘testimonianza’. She writes:

With this book, I, born in a point of definitive horror (that is the 20th century), wanted to give a documented witness of my direct experience, the Second World War, exposing it as an extreme and bloody sample of the entire millennial historical body. Here it is, then, History, as it has been made and as we have contributed to making it. (O lxxxiv)⁴⁰⁵

⁴⁰² On this, Calderoni writes: ‘the novel ... becomes a ‘political and poetic instrument’ outside of any ideological conviction’ (Calderoni 2018, 11).

⁴⁰³ For a detailed analysis of the reception of the novel in 1970s Italy, see Borghesi (2019). ‘Although Berlinguer’s project ultimately failed for a number of reasons – the main one being that it was too vague – the Italian left in the early 1970s was riding along on a wave of great optimism and it viewed Elsa Morante’s novel as far too pessimistic a vision of the world and out of sync with the dominant Marxist ideology of the period. As a result, the novel polarized the Italian intellectual community. The debate was carried on in literary journals ... in 1976, History was banned in Franco’s Spain. The resistance and hostility from some Italian critics and a part of the Italian public to the novel was due, on the one hand, to their failure to understand the author’s ideology and, on the other, to Morante’s own refusal to align herself with any one political party. Nonetheless, the novel’s huge sales record was testimony to the fact that controversy may not always be such a bad thing’ (Tuck 2009, 188).

⁴⁰⁴ See Porciani (2012, 91).

⁴⁰⁵ ‘Col presente libro, io nata in un punto di orrore definitivo (ossia nel nostro Secolo Ventesimo), ho voluto lasciare una testimonianza documentata della mia esperienza diretta, la Seconda Guerra Mondiale, esponendola come un campione estremo e sanguinoso dell’intero corpo storico millenario. Eccovi dunque la Storia, così come è stata fatta e come noi stessi abbiamo contribuito a farla.’ (O lxxxiv).

The genre of the novel, for Morante ‘represents the relationships of the human being with reality’,⁴⁰⁶ but this ‘objective’ tragedy is always ‘the human tragedy of the novelist himself (that is his particular relationship with the world)’⁴⁰⁷ (SR 52). As D’Angeli explains, the peculiarity of Morante’s experiment in *La Storia* is ‘the acquisition of a tragic perspective in which events tend to place themselves, reaching that level of absolute exemplarity that characterises tragedy’ (D’Angeli 1994, 220).⁴⁰⁸ This ‘absolute exemplarity’ is reached through the poet’s personal experience of the world, and from her perspective on the world (in *La Storia*, Morante sometimes speaks like an eyewitness of the narrative).⁴⁰⁹

The ‘impersonal’ value of the poet’s representation has to be achieved through her personal experience. This view echoes the Weilian account of *décréation* as a process towards the impersonal space made for God, which is a point of view of God that is found at the centre of the human heart, in which the self no longer places a screen between the creator and creation (as Morante also says: ‘the living are the house of this one God, so if they close their windows, the dweller in the house will go blind. We must open again the lights of our eyes for him to regain his sight.’⁴¹⁰ (WSK 185)). In fact, for Weil, ‘God loves the perspective of creation which can be seen only from where I stand, and I obscure it.’ (FLN 72). As we saw in chapter 4, poets retain personal styles, rooted in their standpoint on the world (in their time and space), it is the inspiration to be impersonal, which means without the filter of personal fantasies of the narrating self which makes great poets able to represent the truth of human relationship compassionately and with reality through the witness of her particular time and space in history. As Murdoch also writes of the ‘unselfed’ writer: ‘Art is not an expression of

⁴⁰⁶ ‘rappresenta il rapporto dell’uomo con la realtà’.

⁴⁰⁷ ‘il dramma umano del romanziere stesso (cioè il suo particolare rapporto col mondo)’.

⁴⁰⁸ As Bérard states: ‘To assume the collective drama does not mean to judge or identify the guilty; rather, it means to extract from the tragic events that bloody our time their symbolic content, their exemplary value. It means to transcend the times of humiliation and revenge to attain forgiveness on the plane of the eternal’ (Bérard 2006, 11).

⁴⁰⁹ ‘A novel would be any poetical work, in which the author – through a fictional narration of emblematic events (chosen by him as a pretext, or symbol of the human ‘relationships’ in the world) – gives, *as a whole*, his own picture of the real universe (and so of the human being, in his reality)’ (SR 44).

⁴¹⁰ ‘la casa di quest’unico Dio sono i viventi, e se questi chiudono le loro finestre, l’abitatore della casa resta cieco. Noi dobbiamo riaprire le luci dei nostri occhi perché lui riveda’ (*Il mondo* 137-138).

personality, it is a question rather of the continual expelling of oneself from the matter in hand' (SBR 283).

In the 'Nota Introduttiva' to *Il mondo*, Morante observes: 'the poet has to constantly give back reality to others, understood as the always alive and intact value that is concealed in things'⁴¹¹ (*Il mondo* v),⁴¹² the poet always moves from her human experience, felt in herself, and expressed with honesty: 'His investigation [of the poet] has to turn into a value for the world: the corruptible reality has to be transformed, within him, into an incorruptible poetic truth. This is the only reason for art: and this is its necessary realism'⁴¹³ (SR 49-50).

Morante speaks of the personal experience, of the poet, which, as Weil states in a passage underlined on Morante's copy of the French edition of *Cahiers* no. 2,⁴¹⁴ has to be transformed, through poetry, into the reality (as a whole) of the human condition.⁴¹⁵ This transformation is only possible through the acceptance of the human condition for herself and others through loving compassion.⁴¹⁶ The kind of narration that transforms a personal *malheur* into the feeling of human *malheur* can only be the result of a detachment in the sense of the acceptance of *la pesanteur*

⁴¹¹ 'il poeta deve restituire continuamente agli altri la realtà, intesa come il valore sempre vivo e integro che è nascosto nelle cose'.

⁴¹² 'Nota introduttiva' is not included in the english translation of WSK, I therefore translated from the Italian edition of *Il mondo*.

⁴¹³ 'La sua esplorazione [of the poet] deve tramutarsi in un valore per il mondo: la realtà corruttibile dev'essere tramutata da lui, in una verità poetica incorruttibile. Questa è l'unica ragione dell'arte: e questo è il suo necessario realismo'.

⁴¹⁴ As stated before, the archival work for this research on Morante's copies of Weil's writings was conducted in the Morante Archive at the National Library of Rome.

⁴¹⁵ This task, for Morante, is achieved by the Italian writer Umberto Saba. She writes what sounds like the perfect definition of the perfect attentive writer: '...It could also be said that our critics...find it almost unforgivable for a work not to be content with depicting a single, limited object of the universe, moving from death to life, but instead to encompass the entire universe, that is, humanity in its entirety. The quality that distinguishes poems or novels from less extensive poetry is precisely this: works termed poems or novels are those that aim to reflect humanity in its entirety. Such is Saba's *Canzoniere*. One might wonder whether our current cultural society – with its distracted and reductive intellects – can forgive it. Like, for example, *The Divine Comedy*, *The Magic Flute* by Mozart, or *In Search of Lost Time* by Proust, Saba's *Canzoniere* is and aims to be an epic and lyrical poem of human fate. Saba encompasses man and his universe with irredeemable sympathy, even love – fortunate for Saba! For an irredeemable law of art and nature has established that there is no other way to draw the forms of life from the shapelessness of death. And Saba's loving sympathy tenderly magnifies every living thing, imbuing everything with a definitive sentiment of gratitude and forgiveness.' (SR 46-47).

⁴¹⁶ Weil writes: 'The soul must be vulnerable to the wounds of all flesh, without any exception, as it is to those of one's own flesh, neither more nor less so; to every death as it is to one's own death. This is transforming all pain, all affliction that one endures (– and that one sees being endured – and that one causes oneself) into a feeling for human misery. By a strange mystery, this feeling is akin to that for beauty and implies amor fati'. (NI 281)

which allows compassion. The outcome of this is ‘the bearing witness’ to ‘the opposite of disintegration’, which makes art an act of attention towards reality, as Morante puts it in ‘Pro o contro la bomba atomica’:

*art is the opposite of disintegration ... Its purpose is ... to prevent the disintegration of human consciousness, in its daily, consuming, and alienating use with the world; to constantly give back [to human consciousness] – within the unreal, fragmentary, and worn-out mess of external relationships – the integrity of the real, or in a word, reality (PoC 101-102, my emphasis).*⁴¹⁷

In this effort to indicate ‘la disintegrazione’, the writer is often accused, according to Morante, of not being modern. But that is because ‘being modern means being disintegrated, or in the process of disintegration’⁴¹⁸, ‘the main symptom of disintegration ... consists in taking as reality its opposite’⁴¹⁹ (PoC 111), that is the dream of force. The novelist must look at the contemporary world through the lens of these necessary conditions: ‘attention, honesty, and selflessness. All the rest is literature’⁴²⁰ (PoC 116), because the novelist is not interested in literature, in the sense that the only object of her creation is reality itself. The novelist neither withdraws from the world, nor simply gives a sterile, documentary analysis of her time, to her ‘everything that happens is dear, except for literature’⁴²¹ (PoC 117)– which in this sense equals unreality.

When Morante writes that literary narration should not reveal the author’s presence, but ‘spontaneously emerge from the things represented, as a quality of the things themselves’⁴²² (SR 48), she echoes Weil’s perspective on attention, which, as we saw, ‘consists of suspending our thought, leaving it detached, empty and ready to be penetrated by the object’ (RSS 111). The role of the ‘attentive’ writer is, for Morante, to go against unreality (‘la bruttezza’, (ugliness) as she defines it in her piece on Beato Angelico). The ‘integrity of the real’ cannot be approached in search of a pretentious pseudo-unity which imposes pattern and meaning on our contingent and incomplete existence, but only through the loving

⁴¹⁷ *l’arte è il contrario della disintegrazione ... La sua funzione è ... di impedire la disintegrazione della coscienza umana, nel suo quotidiano, e logorante, e alienante uso col mondo; di restituirle di continuo, nella confusione irreal, e frammentaria, e usata, dei rapporti esterni, l’integrità del reale, o in una parola, la realtà.* (101-102).

⁴¹⁸ ‘essere moderni significa essere disintegrati, o in via di disintegrarsi’.

⁴¹⁹ ‘il sintomo principale della disintegrazione...consiste nell’assumere come realtà il suo contrario’.

⁴²⁰ ‘l’attenzione, l’onestà e il disinteresse. E tutto il resto è letteratura’.

⁴²¹ ‘sta a cuore tutto quanto accade, fuorché la letteratura’.

⁴²² ‘esprimersi spontaneamente dalle cose rappresentate, come una proprietà delle cose stesse’.

gaze of *attention* in total humility. As she writes in her 1959 essay ‘Sul Romanzo’⁴²³:

at the peak of his attention directed towards real things (that is the moment in which he is disposed to write) the writer will have to make silence around him, and free himself from any cultural bias, from any fetish, from any conformist defect. His experienced and mature consciousness, in that moment, will have to gather and fix on one point: the real object of his choice, intended to reveal his truth (SR 55-56).⁴²⁴

By paying attention, the writer ‘in the very act of writing, ...will thus create his own language. It is the exercise of truth, which leads to the creation of language, and *not vice versa*’⁴²⁵ (SR 56). Her renewed language will possess simplicity and honesty:

The most alive secret of a new language (which means valid for opening new paths to human adventure in the real world) is found in a free disinterested *sympathy* of the novelist with the objects of nature and the human universe. This is the first vital law, without which a new language that can withstand the greatest comparisons of life cannot be produced. And the closer the novelist is to his perfect maturity, the more his language will become simple and clear. Indeed, if reality is cloudy, the truth is naturally clear in its colours. And the most difficult art, for the novelist, is to reflect in his own language the clarity of truth (SR 57, my emphasis).⁴²⁶

Through attention, the new language of the attentive writer naturally evolves towards simplicity and clarity, mirroring the interior life of the mind of her simple characters and their language.

The horizontal perspective is achieved in Morante’s own voice, which, as I said, is sometimes an eyewitness⁴²⁷ and simultaneously ‘writes from that distant

⁴²³ This was originally a survey to which Morante participated in 1959, conducted by *Nuovi Argomenti*. In this survey, she opposes the idea of the end of the novel as a genre and lists among her favourite writers: Saba, Penna, Homer, Cervantes, Stendhal, Melville, Chekhov, and Verga.

⁴²⁴ ‘al momento della sua massima attenzione verso le cose reali (al momento, cioè, in cui si dispone a scrivere) lo scrittore dovrà fare il silenzio intorno a se stesso, e liberarsi da ogni schermo culturale, da ogni feticcio, da ogni vizio conformistico. La sua coscienza provata e matura, in quel momento, dovrà raccogliersi e fissarsi su un unico punto: l’oggetto reale della sua scelta, inteso a confidargli la propria verità.’

⁴²⁵ ‘nell’atto stesso di scrivere, ... andrà così inventando il proprio linguaggio. È l’esercizio della verità, che porta all’invenzione del linguaggio, e *non viceversa*.’

⁴²⁶ ‘Il più vivo segreto di un linguaggio nuovo (ossia valido ad aprire nuovi itinerari all’avventura umana nel mondo reale) si ritrova in una libera disinteressata simpatia del romanziere con gli oggetti della natura e dell’universo umano. Questa è la prima legge vitale, senza la quale non può prodursi un linguaggio nuovo, che regga ai massimi paragoni della vita. E quanto più il romanziere sarà vicino alla sua maturità perfetta, tanto più il suo linguaggio si farà semplice e limpido. Difatti, se la realtà è torbida, la verità è naturalmente limpida nei suoi colori. E l’arte più difficile, per il romanziere, è di rispecchiare nel proprio linguaggio la limpidezza della verità.’

⁴²⁷ She uses the first person: ‘mi ricordo’ ‘penso’ ‘credo’ ‘se non mi sbaglio’ etc.

place that she claimed renders the dead and the living equal' (Garboli 1995, 190). Paying attention to the particular sufferer is allowed through a distance that respects the sufferer's vulnerability and independence. She bears witness to her characters' suffering, and their final destiny, by offering them 'narrative space, a moment of being' (Wood 2015, 78). In doing so, she is at one moment close to Useppe, watching over him like a mother, and in the next at Giovannino's side, in distant Russia under the snow, while simultaneously encompassing the whole narration with attentive compassion, giving a sense of reality to the reader. She 'gifts'⁴²⁸ her attention to them,

a sense of solidarity and ... *a moment of witness*, a rejection of the solitude of violent death, and through description, a simultaneous holding of the character within the gaze of the narrator and therefore the reader; we experience a halting of narrative time, a moment of contemplation before the character is returned to the maelstrom of 'history' (Wood 2015, 78, my emphasis).

Some have criticised this binomial of distance and explicit compassion in the narration describing it as a filter that transforms the narrated events, depriving them of objectivity, and thus stripping *La Storia* of neutrality ('she cannot help but contaminate the psychology of the characters with her compassionate nature' (Ceccatty 2020, 306)). I argued in chapter 3 that attentive compassion comprises a distance that recognises independence while 'seeing' attentively and closely *this* particular sufferer, *their* way of looking at their suffering, from *our* particular position in the world. Morante translates this into a distance that implies equity and lets beauty emerge, and a closeness that lets us see her characters' suffering. By letting her characters exist on their own, through attention, her tone cannot be but compassionate.

5.8 A Mystical realism

I highlighted the Weilian and Murdochian ethics of attention that lies at the foundation of *La Storia*, both in the novel's content (in the representation of force and moments of attention) and in its narrator's vocabulary, to present Morante's realism as one rooted in attention. From this literary ethics of attention, I now introduce the concept of mystical realism which I develop following Murdoch – a realism that shows another possible logic, beyond force, of loving attention (both

⁴²⁸ See chapter 2 for Caprioglio Panizza's definition of attention as a gift.

in the novel's imagery and the author's narration). This allows me to suggest that Morante's *La Storia* is a mystical novel.

Murdoch defines the contemporary mystical novel as one saturated with an agnostic religious vocation, both its content, often featuring a mystical hero, and its narration.⁴²⁹ Through the mystical hero, the author gives the example of a character capable of paying attention, while through the story as a whole, she provides an example of paying attention through art.

As we saw in chapter 2, Murdoch defines goodness 'as a form of realism' (OGG 347) since it is only by paying attention to what is outside the self, and extending our vocabulary of attention, that one can become more moral⁴³⁰. To summarise what I explored in chapter 2, Murdoch writes that 'the more the separateness and differentness of other people is realised, and the fact seen that another man has needs and wishes as demanding as one's own, the harder it becomes to treat a person as a thing' (OGG 353-54). This is the meaning of her realism, which is moral and mystical. It is moral because the Good is considered a reality – perfect, transcendent, non-representable, and necessarily real. Moreover, this realism implies the 'absolute value of reality and truth'. As Caprioglio Panizza explains, 'where the perception and understanding of reality and truth are considered not available to everyone, but only accessible through a mystical path' (Caprioglio Panizza 2017, 352). In this view, the Good is non-graspable; it lies beyond 'immediately perceptible reality, but also governs the whole of it' (Caprioglio Panizza 2017, 354). It can be sensed only through the effort of attention paid to everyday reality, which is what makes the path of attention 'mystical'. In *The Sovereignty of Good*, paraphrasing Wittgenstein, Murdoch writes 'not how the

⁴²⁹ Murdoch's definition is not strict but 'for purpose of diagnosis' (EM 223). From my perspective, it seems that her idea of the mystical novel does not differ from what she has to say on good literature. In her essay, she highlights the dangers for the contemporary mystical novel (that of masochism and that its hero could console us because she stands for a human intuitive attraction to the Good) and admits that all mystical novelists inevitably include in their styles existentialist characteristics. She mentions as examples of mystical novelists: Graham Greene, Patrick White, Saul Bellow, Muriel Spark, and William Golding. I argue that the mystical novel is inextricable from our anti-metaphysical age and at the same time it is still grounded in attention. In my studies, I also extend this definition of mystical realism to the Italian director Alice Rohrwacher, whose inspiration for characters like the 'happy-few' Lazzaro in *Happy as Lazzaro*, seems to come visibly from Morante.

⁴³⁰ Murdoch explains: 'The chief enemy of excellence in morality (and also in art) is personal fantasy: the tissue of self-aggrandising and consoling wishes and dreams which prevents one from seeing what is there outside one' (OGG 347-48).

world is, but that it is, is the mystical' (SGC 370). Again, this realism does not attempt to describe or analyse reality but to imaginatively explore it as a whole through its particulars, accepting its mysteries and contradictions. This 'obedience' to reality (to use Weil's vocabulary) *is* a moral achievement, as much as the sense of reality, left to the reader at the end of Morante's novel, is an achievement.

Murdoch's mysticism is 'secular' because it does not entail God (like Weil before 1938), while still allowing a non-dogmatic faith in something that transcends our possibilities of knowledge. Morante's poetics inhabit this secular mystical space, where everything in the world hints at 'the integrity of the real'. I take Murdoch's effort to transition from a religious vocabulary to an agnostic 'vocabulary of attention' as fundamental to accounting for the role of literature in contemporary non-religious times. In 'On God and Good', Murdoch writes:

In the moral life the enemy is the fat relentless ego. Moral philosophy is properly, and in the past has sometimes been, the discussion of this ego and of the techniques (if any) for its defeat. In this respect moral philosophy has shared some aims with religion. (OGG 342)

Having explained the concept of attention and what I mean by Murdoch's 'secular mysticism' in the previous chapters, I now introduce Murdoch's idea of the mystical novelist, which she illustrates in her 1970 essay 'Existentialists and Mystics'. In Murdoch's view, most art is 'mere fiction and consolation which distorts reality' (SGC 372); similarly, for Morante, it is 'the result of an escape from the first and necessary commitment of the novelist, which is the truth'⁴³¹ (PoC 49).⁴³² Conversely, the mystical novelist is the one who, amid our time's lack of any belief in the value of reality and truth, attempts 'to invent new religious imagery (or twist old religious imagery)' (EM 226) and at the same time portrays the human condition without any consolation, encompassing it with total compassion.

Murdoch argues that in the 19th-century novel, 'there is a profound belief in God, a faith in the absolute significance and *unity* of the moral world' (EM 222) that is peculiar to that age. However, in our anti-metaphysical age, we have lost this religious backdrop allowing the proliferation of existentialist novels.⁴³³ For

⁴³¹ 'il risultato di una evasione dal primo e necessario impegno del romanziere, che è la verità'.

⁴³² 'a beautiful novel (and, therefore, true) is always the result of a supreme moral commitment' (SR 48).

⁴³³ On Murdoch's take on existentialist novels, see footnote n. 39.

Murdoch, ‘this fact alone, that there is no mystery, would falsify their claim to be true pictures of the situation of man’ (HE 115). The existentialist hero, an image ‘of will-power’, embodies what Weil said of fictional evil in ‘Morale et littérature’, so that evil in literature ‘is varied, interesting, attractive, profound, and seductive’ (LM 145). In a Platonic fashion, Weil warns of the danger of ‘bad’ literature, which hides the truth that evil, which is always a product of human beings, is instead dull, and predictable, while the Good, which is undefinable, and as various as reality (when free from our attachments), is free and beautiful, and the real object of our desire. For Murdoch, the existentialist novel commits this misconception and thus its hero ends up being ‘the new version of the romantic man, the man of power, abandoned by God, struggling on bravely, sincerely and alone. [And] This image consoles by showing us man as strong, self-reliant and uncrushable’ (EM 227). In this sense, the existentialist novel denies humans’ essential frailty disguising it with the assumption that the will remains the answer to the problem of the human condition. The mystical hero, instead, ‘is the new version of the man of faith, believing in goodness without religious guarantees, guilty, muddled, yet not without hope’ (EM 226-27). If on one side, there is the assertive will which is ‘free’ to provide value to whatever is chosen as worthy in the world, on the other, freedom is the result of attention and understanding, ‘or obedience to the Good’ (EM 223).

According to Murdoch, the mystical novel ‘keeps in being, by one means or another, the conception of God...It attempts to express a religious consciousness without the traditional trappings of religion’ (EM 225).⁴³⁴ This ‘mysticism’ involves accepting the unsolvable mysteries of human existence by embarking on a pilgrimage from appearance to reality.⁴³⁵ Art, in this sense, becomes a mystical contemplation of the ordinary for, as Weil argues, transcendence is only approachable (though never fully reached) by paying attention to everyday reality.⁴³⁶ Art is, then, a *metaxù*.

⁴³⁴ ‘No (conventional) God, no Church, no social support or protective institutions. No simple or secure connection with morality. Mystics too have dispensed with these things and have inhabited a spiritual world unconsolated by familiar religious imagery. Mystics who are artists invent their own imagery, which we often find hard to understand. Other mystics are speechless’ (EM 225).

⁴³⁵ Gabriel Marcel’s theorisation of the difference between a problem and a mystery is relevant for Murdoch here. On this, see footnote n. 37.

⁴³⁶ Weil’s metaphor of the distance between creator and creation is the following: ‘Two prisoners whose cells adjoin communicate with each other by knocking on the wall. The wall is the thing

In Weil's metaphysics the world is destined to appear only through separation: the transcendental reality of this world, which is at once distant and yet very close, as in the famous Weilian metaphor of the two prison cells, is a unity that contains in itself the tension of the separation essential to our immanent reality.

Morante, like Murdoch, warned against the absence of religion in our times ('il difetto di senso religioso'), as she says in 1963:

What interests me is the religious problem, the same one that has always obsessed me since I was sixteen years old ... In the novel, the religious problem is not resolved, no solutions are indicated: only a lack is noted. The defect, the absence of religious sense in today's life, seems to me to be one of the most serious and important problems that exist. One cannot live without religion I speak of that religion which is altruism, working for others. *Art*, for example, arises from this desire to give; *it is a form of religion*. (O lxix, my emphasis).⁴³⁷

In her youth, Morante was a fervent catholic.⁴³⁸ Growing old she started to hold a different perception of religion, akin to Murdoch's. Already in the 1950s, as she said to Luca Coppola she no longer loved God but loved Christ (Schifano and Notarbartolo 1993, 99). In this sense, she was no longer a practising catholic but believed in a religion intended as altruism based on an inherent value of the human being. As Calvino recognised in a letter to her in 1956: 'You believe in humanity,

which separates them but is also their means of communication. It is the same with us and God. Every separation is a link' (GG 145). Morante echoes Weil's image of the prison cells in *Il mondo*, when she writes: 'There is never a way out of those segregations. / No corridor or courtyard for those endless houses of reclusion. / *No common wall between one cell and the next*. // The fantastic distance separating them / brooks no measure. No messages possible. / The rooms doorless: no windows, no top lights. / No post or alphabets or telephones or cypher books. // no pass you can cross through those ruinous / hanging dunes. No body of water for ships. / No body of air for voices. // But when memory is chewed up by the sands / even the pulsing of grief is cut short. // So be it.' (WSK 21, my emphasis).

⁴³⁷ *Il Giorno*, 4 September 1963 'Quel che m'interessa, è il problema religioso, lo stesso che m'ha sempre ossessionato da quando avevo l'età di sedici anni ... Nel romanzo il problema religioso non si risolve, non si indicano soluzioni: si constata solo una mancanza. Il difetto, l'assenza di senso religioso nella vita d'oggi mi sembra uno dei problemi più gravi ed importanti che esistano. Non si può vivere senza religione ... Parlo di quella religione che è l'altruismo, il lavorare per gli altri. L'arte, per esempio, nasce da questo desiderio di spendersi, è una forma di religione.'

⁴³⁸ At her request, she and Moravia had a Catholic wedding. Moravia recalls: 'It was Elsa who wanted this marriage because she was very religious...I wasn't a believer, but I agreed to please Elsa. Elsa remained religious, but I don't think she practices. She is very Christian, in a modern way. For her, the gospel is the greatest of books. She holds it above any other religious text. But we never spoke about faith between us.' (O xliii)

you have admiration for it, a sense of human beauty and uniqueness: a rare way, today, of looking at the world' (Morante 2012, 290).⁴³⁹

Demonstrating this inherent value of the human being without having to adopt a religious viewpoint is Murdoch's aim, strongly inspired by the anti-dogmatic belief of Simone Weil. Morante's dislike of the Catholic church, like Murdoch and Weil, was mostly due to her dislike of institutions.⁴⁴⁰

In 1969, she writes in the introduction to a new edition of *L'isola di Arturo* that the writer 'by reality means what the term means in its deepest sense, namely the intact, luminous and *religious* value of life and its objects, beyond the confused appearances'⁴⁴¹ (AI 8). Poets, in a very Rilkean way, are called by the things of the world to be freed from the veil of unreality and treasured in all their frailty. Things ask to be seen from the perspective of a perfect equity in which the distinction between the sacred and the profane does not subsist. Thus, the great work of art can give things back in their absolute otherness and beauty, as a surplus, a gift.⁴⁴² In her unfinished novel *Senza i conforti della religione*,⁴⁴³ Morante goes even deeper into her idea of God and the role of poets, saying:

I shall now try to present a kind of critical hypothesis which, in this regard, I flashed before me then. The following, namely: that the only true theme of poets even atheists, has always been God. Even if God is not named, it does not matter. The important thing is that, in the poems, everything named is recognized as it is at the moments of its [maximum] expression: when it

⁴³⁹ The letter dates October 25th. She replied on October 31st of the first year: 'A true dislike for someone, I believe, will eventually become almost impossible for me. It happens that every human being – even a monster – seems beautiful to me, in an absolute sense. Beautiful in the sense of respect; how can I put it? I will use the usual ancient words: made in the image and likeness of God. It's curious, at the same time, not to believe in God, as I don't, but the genuine respect for them is still of this kind. When I was younger, less so; but as you age, you become like this'. (Morante 2012, 291).

⁴⁴⁰ Moreover, her spirituality tended always more to eastern philosophies through the study of Eastern sacred texts and lives of mystics, like that of Milarepa. Within the Catholic Western tradition, she appreciated greatly Dante and Beato Angelico. See below.

⁴⁴¹ 'per realtà intende quello che il termine significa nel suo senso più profondo, e cioè il valore intatto, luminoso e *religioso* della vita e dei suoi oggetti, al di là delle apparenze confuse'.

⁴⁴² This view of beauty also belongs to Morante, as when she writes through Davide: 'God is the real essence of all existing things, which confide their secret to us through beauty. Beauty is God's modesty' (H 517).

⁴⁴³ With a very Murdochian title, this novel was supposed to stand against looking for comfort in ideology to bear reality. It was abandoned after Morrow's death but its characters inspired those of *La Storia* and *Aracoeli*. *Aracoeli*'s main character, Giuseppe, is, indeed, a grown-up Useppe for whom she had planned to solve the religious problem by becoming a poet.

reveals that, in the beginning, it was invented by God.⁴⁴⁴ (quoted in Bérard 2015, 81)⁴⁴⁵

In a 2014 article, Zanardo suggests that the character of Giuseppe in this text is a combination of three different characters: Useppe, Davide, and Manuel.⁴⁴⁶ In Giuseppe's confidential dialogues between his 'preziosa attenzione' and 'un Dio attento', an idea of poetry as a silent prayer takes shape (Zanardo 2014, 28).⁴⁴⁷ Indeed, as Morante observes in 'Pro o contro la bomba atomica':

Any moment of real and transient experience becomes, *in poetic attention, a religious moment*. And in this sense, one can speak of optimism. However, in the course of his existence, it may happen to the poet, as to every man, to be reduced by *misfortune* to the naked measure of horror, until the certainty that this horror will now remain the law of his mind, it is not clear that this will be the last answer of his destiny. If his conscience descends into *unreality*, and horror itself becomes his real response (poetry), then at the point where he marks his words on paper, he will perform an act of optimism (PoC 108, my emphasis).⁴⁴⁸

In 'Existentialists and Mystics', Murdoch defines the mystical hero as the image of the tension between nature and the Good. Nonetheless, the difference between what

⁴⁴⁴ 'Cercherò ora di esporre una sorta di ipotesi critica che, in proposito, mi era balenata allora. La seguente, cioè: che l'unico vero tema dei poeti anche atei, sarebbe sempre Dio. Anche se Dio non viene nominato, non importa. L'importante è che, nelle poesie, ogni cosa nominata si riconosca com'è ai momenti della sua [massima] confidenza: quando rivela che, in principio, è stata inventata da Dio.' Simona Cives found in a manuscript: 'Rome – 14th May '66 // ART = REALITY // It means // True art is that which, even in small ways, always gives a symbol of God.' (Cives 2006, 54).

⁴⁴⁵ (Fasc.1, c. 164 = 57). Bérard, who collected these quotes from *Senza i conforti*, explains that the two numbers refer in the case of the first to the continuous numbering introduced by the library, and the second to the discontinuous one given by Morante.

⁴⁴⁶ See also Zanardo (2017).

⁴⁴⁷ It is interesting to read what Morante writes through Giuseppe's speculations on the idea of God and heaven in *Senza i conforti* quoted by Bérard: 'So, I tried to imagine what Heaven might be like (since the existence of God, without Heaven, would be an inconsistency), but my imagination failed me. Will there be meadows, flowers? No, because grass and flowers die, and there – death is no more. Perhaps immortal flowers? Not even that, because everything that ends here – such as scent, colour, sea, songs – has no value there anymore. There's a different value, the body is left behind – it's no longer needed; – there is no air, no sounds, and all the differences – that here bring joy or sorrow – are finished. No beauty, no ugliness, no lack, no gain, no pride, no disgrace. There, a different law prevails: and all the judgments made here no longer count. There, time is over, there are no seasons, no stars. There is no place, no distance: and all numbers are like zero. There is the infinite, and everything is internal, within the soul. There is only a present without memories, which is a single happiness. And this happiness is the mystery of God. [It is equal to God: in fact, perhaps, it is God.]' (c.160 = 12). (Cazalé Bérard 2012, 31).

⁴⁴⁸ 'Qualsiasi momento dell'esperienza reale e transitoria, diventa, *nell'attenzione poetica, un momento religioso*. E in questo senso, si può parlare di ottimismo. Per quanto, lungo il corso della sua esistenza, possa accadere al poeta, come a ogni uomo, di essere ridotto dalla sventura alla nuda misura dell'orrore, fino alla certezza che questo orrore resterà ormai la legge della sua mente, non è detto che questa sarà l'ultima risposta del suo destino. Se la sua coscienza non sarà discesa nell'irrealtà, ma anzi l'orrore stesso gli diventerà una risposta reale (poesia), nel punto in cui segnerà le sue parole sulla carta, lui compirà un atto di ottimismo.'

Murdoch ascribes to the mystical hero and Morante's Usepe is that Murdoch's hero is one who 'has given up traditional religion but is still haunted by a sense of the reality and unity of some sort of spiritual world' and is 'trying to discipline or purge or diminish himself' (EM 227), which makes masochism his chief temptation. On the contrary, Usepe is not *trying*; he is not attempting an effort of attention. He lives 'naturally' under the star of attention,⁴⁴⁹ for he has, as Davide tells him, 'a religious mind' that, when looking at the universe, is capable of recognising God 'through the resemblances of all things' (H 444).

Through Usepe, Morante removes those illusory backgrounds that are part of History, and in doing so, what remains, as Murdoch says for the mystical novel, is an 'imagery of height and distance' where virtues are portrayed through the narration of human frailty. This is the only point of access through which art can let us see that 'there is more than this' (OGG 359), more than what we see, and that virtue is always gratuitous if we only see it against the background of death and chanciness.⁴⁵⁰

La Storia shows us vulnerability and ephemerality, which Murdoch considers 'the true aspects in which all men are brothers' (OGG 360) (as Morante writes: 'indeed, little, big, grown up, young, elderly, old, in the dark we are all the same' (H 329))⁴⁵¹. It is a novel that shows 'all is vanity', which is, in Murdoch's words 'the beginning and the end of ethics' (OGG 358) ('After all, however much we idolise each other, we are limited specialised animals... We are creatures of a day, nothing much.' (FS 460)). The novel shows that 'there is more', being infused with a religious vocation throughout – mystical and therefore ethical.⁴⁵² Indeed, in

⁴⁴⁹ See Wehling-Giorgi (2013) in which she explores the stage of early childhood as a pre-conceptual realm which resists totalising notions of identity and language.

⁴⁵⁰ On this, Murdoch writes: 'Virtue standing out gratuitously, aimlessly, unplaced by religion and society, surprising us as it so often does in real life: the gentleness of Patroclus in the middle of a ruthless war, the truthfulness of Cordelia in a flattering court. The utter chanciness of human life and the fact of death make virtue always, really, perhaps, when the illusory backgrounds are removed, something gratuitous, something which belongs in the absolute foreground of our existence, along with self-evident goods such as eating enough and not being afraid. And it is in this way, I think, that we see it in the greatest literature. Goodness is needful, one has to be good, for nothing, for immediate and obvious reasons, because somebody is hungry or somebody is crying' (EM 233).

⁴⁵¹ 'invero, piccolo, cresciuti o grandi, giovani, anziani o vecchi, al buio si è tutti uguali' (S 387).

⁴⁵² In her 2017 article, Caprioglio Panizza defines Weil's and Murdoch's mysticism as 'an ethical attitude' (Caprioglio Panizza 2017, 349).

Murdoch's view, in our anti-metaphysical age, mysticism can be a substitute for religion, since:

Morality has always been connected with religion and religion with mysticism. The disappearance of the middle term leaves morality in a situation which is certainly more difficult but essentially the same. The background to morals is properly some sort of mysticism, if by this is meant a non-dogmatic essentially unformulated faith in the reality of the Good, occasionally connected with experience (OGG 360).

The Good is 'occasionally connected with experience' in varying degrees through the particular case of human beings who attempt to look at reality with the selfless gaze of attention or whose attention is suddenly attracted by beauty, thus leaving space for reality.

Hence, art offers what Morante calls the 'integrity of the real', 'the opposite of disintegration'. Indeed, good literature, as we saw in chapter 4, does not provide a description of how things are (which would require a rational effort of understanding) but rather focuses our attention on the fact that they are. Mystical experience, in Weil's view, is the possibility of sensing the transcendent, but necessarily through the contingent. Art ought to mirror this paradox or contradiction and express 'a kind of healing agnosticism, a natural mysticism' (SW 242). If mysticism was always a middle ground between morals and religion, art, when founded on this mysticism, can be 'a *clue* to morals' and the last space where, in secular times, a sense of the sacred can survive.

5.9 An act of attention: bearing attentive witness

In *Dieu dans Plato*, Weil states that:

All Greek civilization is a research for bridges to throw up between human misery and divine perfection. Their art, to which nothing is comparable, their poetry, their philosophy, the science that they invented (geometry, astronomy, mechanics, physics, biology) were nothing but these bridges. They invented the idea of *mediation* (GP 46).

I already defined art as a *metaxù*. In relation to Morante's underlining of this passage about *mediation*, in Weil's essay, Borghesi observes, 'we must perhaps think of *La Storia* as an analogous search, a new bridge stretching towards the

acceptance of human misery'⁴⁵³ (Borghesi 2020, 105). I argue that the mysticism that I ascribe to Morante is founded on the idea of those mediations and bridges that also populate Weil's philosophy.

For Morante, the painter Beato Angelico was one such bridge builder. She writes about him in 1970, defining him as a 'propagandista del paradiso' (propagandist of heaven) because he managed to 'translate' through the power of analogy images of heaven to the 'idioti' ('illiterate' human beings). His work, she writes, is a 'socially engaged work' dedicated to the

audience of *idiots*: the same to whom Christ explained the light in parables, because their intellects are confined in the dimensions of space and time. Preaching to idiots, in their own language, a freedom that does not dwell within those dimensions ... The sanctity-action and the art-prayer appear in this paradox: to be free from the common limits, yet to move within these limits (BPP 134).⁴⁵⁴

Indeed, the beneficiaries of Morante's 'testimonianza' in *La Storia* are *les malheureux*, the unheard who cannot speak of their suffering ('Difficult as it is really to listen to someone in affliction, it is just as difficult for him to know that compassion is listening to him' (FILG 150)); this echoes in the epigraph that Morante chose for the novel: 'Por el analfabeto a quien escribo' by César Vallejo.

She had set herself this imperative since writing *Il mondo*, where at the very beginning, in 'La sera domenicale' (Late Sunday Dusk) we find the following reminder to herself to become a witness of cosmic *malheur*:

For the suffering of sick wards / and of all jailhouse walls / and of barbed-wire camps, hard-labour convicts & their guards, / and of ovens & Siberian & abattoirs / and of marches & solitudes & poisoning & suicides / and the shudders of conception / and the sugary taste of seed & of deaths, / for the numberless body of suffering / their and mine, / today I reject reason, majesty / denying the ultimate grace, / and choose to spend my Sunday with derangement. / ... No further sky is uncovered. No thousand-petal lotus unfolds. / You are all here, woman. And there's nothing else. / Attend to this. And stop calling out / for dead lovers, dead mothers. / Stripped bare, even poorer than you, they do not come / to this or any other dimension. Only your memory is left / as their ultimate dwelling. / ... The howl of the boy / who crashes down blinded by the sacred sickness. / The young murderer writhing

⁴⁵³ 'dobbiamo forse pensare alla *Storia* come un'analogia ricerca, un nuovo ponte gettato verso l'accettazione della miseria umana'.

⁴⁵⁴ 'pubblico degli *idioti*: gli stessi a cui Cristo spiegava la luce in parabole, perché i loro intelletti sono confinati nelle dimensioni dello spazio e del tempo. Predicare agli *idioti*, nella loro lingua, una libertà che non abita dentro quelle dimensioni ... La santità-azione e l'arte-preghiera si apparentano in questo paradosso: d'essere sciolte dai limiti comuni, eppure di muoversi dentro questi limiti.'

in the deranged dormitory. / The Christian litany cut short in the hospital / store room, around the deal old Jewess / who'd waved the cross away with her delirious little hands. / WITHOUT THE COMFORTS OF RELIGION. This house is full of blood / but blood itself, all bloods, are nothing but larval vapours / *conforming to the mind that bears witness to them.* / And when the time of the requiem comes for you, so will it come for those howls (WSK 31-34, my emphasis).⁴⁵⁵

The 'sanctity-action' and the 'art-prayer' that she ascribes to Angelico seem to be what Morante wants to accomplish in *La Storia*. Mentioning Angelico's three names, she writes, 'Beato Angelico, *in attention*; John *in discipline*; and Guidolino, in the interrogative *waiting* of that promised loving ray that does not decompose in the visible spectrum'⁴⁵⁶ (BPP 138, my emphasis). Attention, discipline, and waiting all echo the ethics of attention, the author of *La Storia*'s guiding light, as it is for the three lessons Weil reads in the *Iliad*: 'learn not to admire force, not to hate the enemy, nor to scorn the unfortunate' (I 37), which make of the novel, as Murdoch would have it, 'a display of tolerance' (SBR 271).⁴⁵⁷

What makes the relationship between art and morals privileged is that (as Weil explains in her essay on the *Iliad*) art can make the height of aesthetic and moral endeavour (which is to see misery and evil justly) become beautiful. This 'miracle', as Weil calls it, is only possible when the work of art is the result of true attention, of a selfless attending to reality no matter how hard it is to attend to the

⁴⁵⁵ Per il dolore delle corsie malate / e di tutte le mura carcerarie / e dei campi spinati, dei forzati e dei loro guardiani, / e dei forni e delle Siberie e dei mattatoi / e delle marce e delle solitudini e delle intossicazioni e dei suicidi / e i sussulti della concezione / e il sapore dolciastro del seme e delle morti, / per il corpo innumerevole del dolore / loro e mio, / oggi io ributto la ragione, maestà / che nega l'ultima grazia, / e passo la mia domenica con la demenza. / ... Nessun cielo ulteriore si scopre. Non s'apre il loto dei mille petali. / Tu sei tutta qui. E non c'è altro. / Assisti a questo. E cessa di chiamare / amanti morti, madri morte. / Denudati, più poveri ancora di te, loro non frequentano questa / né altre dimensioni. Ultima loro dimora / resta soltanto la tua memoria / ... L'urlo del ragazzo / che precipita accecato dal male sacro. / Il giovane assassino che smania nel folle dormitorio. / La mozza litania cristiana nel deposito / dell'ospedale, intorno alla vecchia ebrea morta / che scostò la croce con le sue manine deliranti / SENZA I CONFORTI DELLA RELIGIONE. Questa casa è piena di sangue / ma il sangue stesso, tutti i sangui, non sono che vapori larvali / conformi alla mente che li testimonia. / E quando per te venga l'ora del requiem, così sarà per quelle grida. (*Il mondo*, 'La sera domenicale' 27-29)

⁴⁵⁶ 'Beato Angelico, *nell'attenzione*; Giovanni *nella disciplina*; e Guidolino, *nell'aspettazione* interrogativa di quel promesso raggio amante che non si decompone nello spettro visibile'.

⁴⁵⁷ I borrow Murdoch's words in 'The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited' to address Morante's effort: 'There is in these novels a plurality of real persons more or less naturalistically presented in a large social scene, and representing mutually independent centres of significance which are those of real individuals. What we have here may be called a *display of tolerance*. A great novelist is essentially tolerant, that is, displays a real apprehension of persons other than the author as having a right to exist and to have a separate mode of being which is important and interesting to themselves' (SBR 271, my emphasis).

object of our gaze. Indeed, as I explored in the previous chapters, attention is always creative, since it creates what is hidden by multiple layers of subjectivity. It creates what is already there, and in this sense, it is a kind of faith. Weil says that attention is directed towards reality and away from fantasies and illusions, but, as Caprioglio Panizza explains, ‘the creativity of attention is the creation of what is there’ (Caprioglio Panizza 2022, 145). Murdoch, in MGM, writes that ‘at its highest point, love is the determination to create the being which it has taken for its object’ (MGM 506).⁴⁵⁸ Indeed, art-making, emblematic of a creative act, cannot be anything but a form of attention, as Murdoch observes: ‘Our attention to things properly takes the form of art, and where language is concerned takes the form of poetry’ (SBR 278). As I explored earlier, in Weil’s view, beauty is ‘reality without attachment’ (N I 319). We can see beauty only when we lift the veil of unreality and daydreaming that covers reality, for only by paying attention can beauty emerge. Therefore, the same applies to the poet who, even when describing a scene of horror, is able to pay attention and detach from the self.

As we saw in chapter 4, art deals with the contradiction of human suffering by ‘reveal[ing] without explaining’ (FS 458); not only by ‘wrapping up in poetry’ what is transient and mortal, thus always at the mercy of necessity and chance, but also by using pictures that sustain our attention and that get imprinted in our memory. Like parables and fairytales, as Borghesi observes, Morante’s use of apologues such as the ‘panda minore’,⁴⁵⁹ represents a source of inspiration for attention when readers return to their lives after reading the novel.⁴⁶⁰ Borghesi

⁴⁵⁸ Weil clarifies this point in ‘The Love of our Neighbour’: ‘Love for our neighbour, being made of creative attention, is analogous to genius. Creative attention means really giving our attention to what does not exist. Humanity does not exist in the anonymous flesh lying inert by the roadside. The Samaritan who stops and looks gives his attention all the same to this absent humanity, and the actions which follow prove that it is a question of real attention. ‘Faith’, says Saint Paul, “is the evidence of things not seen”. In this moment of attention faith is present as much as love. In the same way a man who is entirely at the disposal of others does not exist. A slave does not exist either in the eyes of his master or in his own ... Love sees what is invisible.’ (FILG 149).

⁴⁵⁹ See footnote n. 370.

⁴⁶⁰ Murdoch, on the power of moral pictures that can guide our moral pilgrimage, writes: ‘There are moral illuminations or pictures which remain vividly in the memory, playing a protective or guiding role ... Such points or places of spiritual power may be indicated by a tradition, suggested by work or subjects of study, emerge from personal crises or relationships, be gradually established or come suddenly: through familiarity with a good person or a sacred text, a sense of renewal in a particular place, a sudden vision in art or nature, joy experienced as pure, witnessing a virtuous action, a patient suffering, an absence of resentment, humble service, persistent heroism, innumerable things in family life and so on and so on. We are turning here to an inexhaustible and familiar field of human

writes: ‘The apologue, therefore, has the precise function of directing the reader’s attention to this data and allowing him to crystallize it in an image, to fix it in an evocative miniature of agile mnemonic recovery’⁴⁶¹ (Borghesi 2020, 111). Saints and mystical heroes for Murdoch, and their selfless encounter with the world narrated by the mystical novelist, like Ueseppe’s privileged link with reality (his ‘spontanea confidenza’), work ‘as a standard’ that remains available to the memory, a proof that ‘it can be done’ (MGM 429): an image of attention. Saint-like characters, as Murdoch says, can represent ‘a proof of what is possible and a vista of what might be’ (MGM 508). They, as Murdoch says of Weil, set a standard (KV 157).

‘We are all in the situation of Socrates, who, while he was in prison waiting for death, began to learn to play the lyre’, Murdoch says, quoting Weil’s first notebook in the 1951 BBC radio talk (BBC 16).⁴⁶² This passage from Weil also resonates in Morante’s ‘Pro o contro la bomba atomica’ where she gives the example of Miklós Radnóti, who despite his imprisonment, kept writing poems until the very moment of his death in the lager. Socrates and Radnóti⁴⁶³ show that

resources. Every individual has a collection of such things which might be indicated by various names and images. I have already used some: refuges, lights, visions, deep sources, pure sources, protections, strongholds, footholds, icons, starting points, sacraments, pearls of great price. Our moral consciousness is full of such imagery, kinaesthetic, visual, literary, traditional, verbal and non-verbal, and is full too of images of darkness, of stumbling, falling, sinking, drowning’ (MGM 335-6).

⁴⁶¹ As Murdoch explains, these sources are not met only through literature but can be encountered anywhere in life. Literature, however, how I hope to have made clear, is the privileged space through which selfless (or decreed) figures, who are always related to *le malheur*, can be really seen through beauty, and so the proper *milieu* where these ‘moral illuminations’ can ignite a transformation.

⁴⁶² ‘All of us, even the youngest, are in a situation like Socrates’ when he was awaiting death in prison and learning to play the lyre’ (FLN 45).

⁴⁶³ These figures are of ‘unforgivables’ to mention another great reader of Weil, Cristina Campo, another poet like Morante guided by the star of attention. In her essay *Gli Imperdonabili* she writes: ‘In an era of purely horizontal progress, in which the human group seems more and more to resemble that line of Chinese men on their way to the guillotine mentioned in the chronicles of the Boxer Rebellion, the only nonfrivolous attitude seems to be that of the man in line who is reading a book. We are astonished to see the others beating one another to a bloody pulp while they wait their turn, trying to curry favor with the executioners at work on the platform. We admire the two or three heroes who keep charging headlong at one or another executioner impartially (since it’s well understood there’s only one executioner, even if the masks do alternate). As for the man who is reading: he at least shows good judgment and a love for life. It’s wise to forget that, according to the chronicles, this man owed his head to the fact that the German officer escorting the condemned couldn’t cope with his composure and had mercy on him. It’s worth remembering the words that the Chinese man uttered when questioned, before he disappeared into the crowd: “I know that every line read is a gain.” It’s allowable to imagine that the book he held in his hands was a perfect book.’ (Campo 2024, 74).

‘there is more than this’, more than ourselves, more beyond the ego. Borghesi observes that *La Storia* is crowded by characters who, while not saints, are images of selflessness, as for instance, she recalls, the ‘countrywoman’ from Mandela who helps Ida and Usepe at the tavern after the bombing of San Lorenzo who ‘seemed prepared to wait for her grandson, seated there with her basket, perhaps for another three hundred years, like the Brahman in the Hindu legend’⁴⁶⁴ (H 147) (quoted in Borghesi 2015, 63). Those selfless mothers (including animal-mothers like the dog Bella), children, animals, who suffer force and yet can remain hopeful and human (the ‘old woman from Mandela’ who reassures Usepe and plays with him in the wake of the bombing) stay in our memory when we close the book like images of optimism.

In ‘Sul romanzo’, Morante says that the good novel can increase the reader’s vitality (‘un aumento di vitalità’ (SR 72)) because reality is lively and various, unlike the monotony of unreality and the annihilating and soporiferous powers of its daydreaming.⁴⁶⁵ Art, according to Morante is an act of accusation towards unreality, and a prayer of attention, as she writes in the American edition of *La Storia*:

Since I am by nature a poet, I could not do anything else but a work of poetry. And in this respect, experience has taught me that, unfortunately, for many, even poetry can be used as an alibi ... So I must warn you that this book, before being a work of poetry, wants to be primarily an act of accusation, and a prayer (O lxxxiv-lxxxv).⁴⁶⁶

To conclude, Morante’s realism, as explored at the beginning of this chapter, has been labelled in various ways. Often, the enchanted, mythological, and fable-like traits of her realism are emphasised.⁴⁶⁷ As mentioned, Bernabò in *La fiaba estrema* called it a ‘loving realism’ (Bernabò 2016, 136), de Ceccatty a ‘compassionate

⁴⁶⁴ ‘pareva disposta ad aspettare il nipote, là seduta con la sua canestra, magari per altri trecento anni, come il bramano della leggenda indù’ (S 172).

⁴⁶⁵ As Sgavichia notices, ‘this is also the reason why powers tend to repress it [the work of art]: vitality is subversive, it is dangerous. Not infrequently, authentic art is preferred to a false art, an art that provokes the sleep of reason, an art – as Morante writes ironically - soporific to the point of causing collapse’ (Sgavichia 2012, 62).

⁴⁶⁶ ‘Essendo, per mia natura, poeta, io non ho potuto fare altro, anche qui, che un’opera di poesia. E in proposito l’esperienza m’insegna che purtroppo anche la poesia può, a molti, servire da alibi ... Allora io devo avvertire che questo libro, prima ancora che un’opera di poesia, vuol essere un atto di accusa, e una preghiera.’

⁴⁶⁷ For instance, Cecchi and Garboli in the Preface to *Opere*, write about ‘un gusto originalmente fantastico-verista’ and of Morante’s ‘gusto di stregare la realtà’ (O xii). On this, see also (de Rogatis 2019).

mysticism' (de Ceccatty 2020, 68), I argue that it comprises her secular religious spirit, which coincides with humility and altruism and makes art a form of religion. If mysticism is a bridge between the particular and transcendence, and for this reason, we define attention as mystical, then a novel rooted in mystical attention could not avoid a narrator's voice that is both universal and particular, both outside and within the novel, both emotional and objective, and ultimately inherently compassionate. This is, therefore, Morante's vocabulary of attention.⁴⁶⁸

Morante names attention variously as: 'suprema attenzione', 'profonda attenzione', 'massima attenzione', 'preziosa attenzione', 'la preghiera dell'aspettazione', and 'l'attenzione tragica'.⁴⁶⁹ Ultimately, *La Storia* is, perhaps, her greatest act of attention, as she writes in the Introduction to the American edition:

Life, to manifest to our eyes its secret realities (our only possible happiness, and invisible to many) requires attention. It is inattention that makes us blind. And I, looking with attention at my protagonists, could read in their eyes always *one perpetual question*, which is the question of life itself (O lxxxiv, my emphasis).⁴⁷⁰

In a Weilian sense, the sufferers' 'perpetual question' about the reason for their suffering calls for attention in the sense of protection and moral obligation.⁴⁷¹ As I explored previously, for Weil this is also the premise for the only possible response to our encounter with the suffering Other, which takes the shape of the question 'what are you going through?'. These two questions shine through Morante's novel, in which, interrogated by her characters, she responds to their suffering with attention.

⁴⁶⁸ As C. Wallace observes, 'Deborah Nelson notes that Weil's style is characteristically self-erasing, bare, impersonal: Weil "voids" her writing of "location, history, and cultural specificity" so that It may be universal. At the same time, she writes with concrete though general nouns, in "horror of abstraction"' (Nelson 2017, 32–33, quoted in Wallace 2024, 85.)

⁴⁶⁹ 'Suprema attenzione' is identified by Bérard in *Il romanzo in-finito* (2012) from excerpts of *Senza i conforti della religione*: (c. 11 = 100), (c.11 v), (c. 42.3 = 103 quat), and (fasc. 1, c. 169 = 30?). 'Profonda attenzione' in (c. 42.3 = 103 quat). 'Preziosa attenzione' in (fasc. 1, c. 169 = 30?). 'Massima attenzione' appears in the aforementioned quote from *Pro o Contro* (55-56). 'La preghiera dell'aspettazione' appears in 'La smania dello scandalo' in *Il mondo* (110). 'L'attenzione tragica' in 'La canzone degli F.P. e degli I.M.' in *Il mondo*, 124.

⁴⁷⁰ 'La vita, per manifestare ai nostri occhi le sue realtà segrete (sola nostra felicità possibile, e invisibile a molti) esige attenzione. È la disattenzione che ci rende ciechi. E io, guardando con attenzione i miei protagonisti, ho potuto leggere nei loro occhi sempre un'unica perpetua domanda, che è la domanda della vita stessa.'

⁴⁷¹ 'O favolosa domanda, al tuo delirio / Non v'è risposta umana.' ('O fabulous question, to your delirium / There is no human answer') (A 55).

Attention is always subversive, dangerous, and revolutionary if we admit that it is directed towards reality and therefore against unreality. For Weil, Murdoch, and Morante, every work of art founded on loving attention stands against unreality, and in turn force and power. Ultimately, it is optimistic. The end of *La Storia*, indeed, stretches onward in the direction of the future in the final recognition of the author that the novel is the result of a moral effort and commitment. In the final lines, quoting Antonio Gramsci, who is also on the cross in *Il mondo* next to Weil and the others,⁴⁷² she states: ‘All the seeds failed, except one. I don’t know what it is, but it is probably a flower and not a weed (Prisoner no. 7047 in the Penitentiary of Turi)’⁴⁷³.

The work of art, the poet’s ‘testimonianza’ to the tension between reality and unreality, between attention and force, is the planted seed that represents an act of faith in reality, of hope, and therefore of attention. *La Storia* is an ‘attentive testimony’, bearing witness to ‘the scandal’ of force, and to the potential of attention. The latter, which in the novel belongs to animals, children and other human beings who, even for a moment, manage ‘the miracle’ of selflessness, is what gives the hope that under the scandal of force, and perhaps after it, reality is awaiting to be discovered.

From within this mystical perspective then, as Murdoch writes, the artist’s apprenticeship is an apprenticeship in attention, which recalls the Buddhist apprenticeship of detachment:

Perhaps the best that can be said, and that is indeed a great deal, is that the writer can and will in the end resemble the Buddhist master who said that when he was young he thought that mountains were mountains and rivers were rivers, then after many years of study and devotion he decided that mountains were not mountains and rivers were not rivers, and then at last when he was very old and wise he came to understand that mountains are mountains and rivers are rivers (EM 234).

The Buddhist monk in this parable, when he first begins his quest, studies and learns, but then, as Weil writes in her *Cahiers*, the intellect which is useful only ‘for servile tasks’ (N II 418) must leave space for pure attention, and to a ‘decreated’ being. We find a reference to the same parable in Morante’s notes for the

⁴⁷² See footnote n. 59.

⁴⁷³ ‘Tutti i semi sono falliti eccettuato uno, che non so cosa sia, ma che probabilmente è un fiore e non un’erbaccia’ (Matricola n. 7047 della Casa Penale di Turi)’.

introduction to *La Storia* which was only published in the American edition. She writes:

I often remembered the confession of a wise Eastern man, which I read I no longer know where. The wise man said that, before having studied, he saw mountains as mountains and waters as waters. Then, after studying for thirty years, he came to a point where he saw that the mountains were not mountains, and the waters were not waters. But in the end, he understood the real reality. That it is right to see mountains as mountains and waters as waters (Quoted in Zanardo 2012, 153).⁴⁷⁴

Too much knowledge blinds us, giving us the bias of habit that inhibits wonder and attention.⁴⁷⁵ Indeed, birds speak to Useppe in Koans ('a paradox or contradiction which defeats imagination and conceptual thought, but which must be held in sustained attention' (MGM 244)) demanding his attention. After the parable of the 'wise Eastern man', Morante adds:

That is why this novel is written in a style that some writers will perhaps find too simple! But I want to state here again (as I have stated elsewhere on several occasions) that the style of this book of mine is the highest and the best of which I am capable (quoted in Zanardo 2012, 153).⁴⁷⁶

Morante's 'simple' style aligns with the 'attentive testimony' that she wants her novel to be and with the virtue of humility, identified by both Weil and Murdoch as paramount in an ethics of attention. In her 'mystical novel', she bears 'attentive witness' to the suffering of her time portraying an attentive approach to reality through the child Useppe. By positioning her narrating voice (distant yet very intimate with each character's '*sventura*') on the level of loving attention – outside the logic of force and thus History – her compassionate tone encompasses the entire narration, leaving a sense of the 'healing agnosticism, and natural mysticism' (SW

⁴⁷⁴ 'Io mi ricordavo spesso della confessione di un sapiente orientale, da me letta non so più dove. Quel sapiente raccontava che, prima di avere studiato, lui vedeva le montagne come montagne e le acque come acque. Poi, dopo aver studiato per trenta anni, arrivò a un punto in cui vide che le montagne non erano montagne, e le acque non erano acque. Ma alla fine, capì la vera realtà. Ossia che è giusto vedere le montagne come montagne e le acque come acque.'

⁴⁷⁵ As Caprioglio Panizza explains: 'thinking that we know means becoming blind to what may be surprising, interesting, different; it blocks discovery, and does not give the object in front of us *a chance* ... Knowledge, habit, concepts, even knowledge that is true and concepts that are appropriate, dull our perception, making us less alive to what can be wonder-inducing (as we know all too well in personal relationships)' (Caprioglio Panizza 2022, 96-97).

⁴⁷⁶ 'Ecco perché il presente romanzo è scritto in uno stile che alcuni letterati giudicheranno forse troppo semplice! Ma io tengo a dichiarare qui ancora (come ho dichiarato altrove in diverse occasioni) che lo stile di questo mio libro è il più alto e il migliore del quale io sia capace.'

242) Murdoch described as capable of retaining an idea of God and a sense of the sacred in our anti-metaphysical age.

5.10 Conclusion

In this chapter, I explored how Morante's poetics, in *La Storia* particularly, follows a Weilian and Murdochian ethics of attention, bearing attentive witness to suffering and attention and thus to 'The difficult relationship between human reasoning and the mysterious reasons of reality'⁴⁷⁷ (O lxx), encompassing the novel's events, characters, animals, and places, in a narration that recognises the essential vulnerability of every being. I traced Weil's influence on *La Storia*, especially Weil's reading of the *Iliad*. I presented the different ways 'the victims of the scandal' relate to suffering, particularly Ida, Davide Segre, and Useppe. The latter plays as the emblem of selflessness, where tragic and comic coexist.

I therefore showed how *La Storia* can be a mystical novel, in Murdoch's sense. The mysticism I ascribed to Morante's realism lies in the fact that when art is grounded on attention, the kind of selfless attention that these authors had in mind, is a form of religion, it is a *metaxù* to transcendence; the kind of religion that is altruism and that is, inherently, 'against unreality'.

⁴⁷⁷ 'il difficile rapporto fra le ragioni umane e le ragioni misteriose della realtà'.

Conclusion

L'éducation de l'attention est le principal.

Weil, *Œuvres complètes*, VI.3.255

In this research I have developed a Weil/Murdoch-inspired conceptual framework that I have called a literary ethics of attention to suffering. This led me to formulate the idea of a literary mystical realism. I applied this framework to Morante's *La Storia*, which serves as a case study and exemplar of it. This mystical realism (grounded on a literary ethics of attention) could provide a hermeneutical lens for other literary works.⁴⁷⁸

I began by introducing Weil's concept of *le malheur* as the focal point of this thesis, defining it as extreme suffering caused by oppression, war, and violence. Beyond the epistemic challenges in 'seeing' suffering and its moral implications, I demonstrated the metaphysical consequences of excluding suffering and the sufferer from our gaze (a distancing from the Good) as well as its ontological consequences (we prevent reality from emerging). I also examined how *le malheur* manifests in Weil's technological age, where force perpetuates itself through social oppression and the anonymity of collective structures. After clarifying the concept of force and its ties to power and social dynamics, I identified *le malheur* as both the beginning and end of the logic of force. I further defined unreality as anything that pertains to the logic of force, which itself is the natural result of the self's affirmation.

The inherent vulnerability of human beings, and of all living creatures, is rooted in the possibility of death and suffering. Within this ephemerality also lies the potential for beauty. I argued that the selfless practice of attention to reality can awaken us from our egocentric illusions and reveal a beauty that we might otherwise overlook. However, beauty also has the capacity to immediately attract our attention, as illustrated by Murdoch's well-known example of the kestrel.

⁴⁷⁸ In my future studies, I aim to apply it to other Weil-inspired writers and movie directors such as Elena Ferrante and Alice Rohrwacher.

Beauty is a *metaxù* to the mystical, the feeling of reality as a whole and of its independent existence. In this Platonic sense, beauty embraces the ephemeral, protecting it without subsuming it, and great art replicates this. The ‘moral/spiritual’ function of suffering and death lies in this very embrace.

The embrace also extends to the notion of bearing ‘attentive witness’ to suffering, achievable through various practices of collective attention, and emblematically in literature. Having established these conceptual foundations, I defined mystical realism as the literary expression of attentive witness to reality, acknowledging the ephemeral while pointing compassionately towards the ‘integrity of the real’. This attentive effort preserves a logic of height and distance, an idea of Perfection and the Good as forever outside the frame, a transcendent and mysterious presence depicted through the contingencies of human relationships and the harsh necessities of existence. Mystical realism thus portrays how the incorruptible coexists with the transient (SGC 372), and shows a logic distinct from that of force – a logic of loving attention.

In a mystical novel like *La Storia*, attention is not only evident through the author’s own attentive witnessing but also through the scattered glimpses of attention woven throughout the narrative, as I discussed with reference to the *Iliad*. I suggested that literature can educate without being didactic, and that by revealing reality and bearing witness to the invisible (or invisible sufferers), it has the power to inspire attention (a striking example of this is Murdoch’s *The One Alone*). In this sense, art in our anti-metaphysical age serves as a *metaxù* to transcendence – a form of religion grounded in altruism and inherently *against unreality*.

This thesis has demonstrated the significance of integrating Weil and Murdoch’s philosophies into literary studies. By applying their reflections to Elsa Morante’s *La Storia*, this research has illustrated how literature can contribute to ethical education, offering new insights into the role of literature in fostering selfless attention.

In my analysis of Weil’s philosophy, I highlighted two commonly overlooked aspects, namely the social component essential to the condition of *le malheur*, and the role of the particular, flesh and blood, and unique human being that we attend to. And how, in her view, attention should be directed to *this* particular being, experiencing *this* particular suffering. This thesis has also illustrated previously

underexplored elements of the Weil-Murdoch relationship, showing that their views on attention and the self are more closely aligned than has traditionally been recognised. For scholars of Weil and Murdoch, this research offers a new interpretation of i) Weil-Murdoch encounter, resolving an issue that has remained problematic in Murdoch studies, by identifying Gabriel Marcel's 1949 essay as the likely first point of contact between Murdoch and Weil's philosophy; ii) Weil's notion of 'attentive reading' that sees it as aligned with Murdoch's account of attention. It shows that the latter can be seen as a first step (on the level of moral psychology) to Weil's ontological horizon. It does so by building the concept of 'normative impossibilities' to define Weil's use of ideals which work as standards also for Murdoch's philosophy.

In my characterisation of attention as different from empathy and connected to sympathy and compassion, I suggested that compassion is consequent to sustained attention (I, therefore, called compassion 'attentive compassion'). This attending over time allows us to see possibilities through the kind of imagination that is able to build analogies and thus transport us in the sufferer's condition 'by sympathy' and look at *their* condition as *they* are looking at it, differently from the more self-involved process of empathy. It is this capacity to see possibilities that allows us to see what is salient to the sufferer, namely the cessation of their suffering. Indeed, suffering has no moral value in itself but only if attention is paid to it. Imaging possibilities through attention shows us how to act.

With the aim of clarifying the significance of Weil's influence on Murdoch, this thesis has also demonstrated that their shared ethical focus on obedience does not advocate female subordination, countering critiques of their perceived support for submissive femininity. For this reason, this study is valuable for scholars of feminist philosophy and feminist literary criticism. By analysing *La Storia* and its protagonist Ida, I address criticisms of Morante's portrayal of women, suggesting that her characters, while appearing submissive, often embody selflessness and care. This reveals a more complex narrative that depicts traditional feminine virtues without supporting female subordination.

Furthermore, this thesis has provided valuable contributions to Morante studies by redefining *La Storia* as a mystical novel, emphasising Weil's crucial influence on Morante's poetics. For Morante's scholars, this opens new avenues for

re-evaluating her work and its philosophical significance, particularly for English-speaking audiences.

In addition, this thesis has highlighted the broader impact of Weil's thought on literature and art, demonstrating her lasting influence on women writers and philosophers. For researchers studying Weil's interdisciplinary impact, this research offers a diverse and multifaceted understanding of her legacy in literary and philosophical contexts.

In conclusion, my work's inherent interdisciplinarity, and its significance for art, literary, environmental, feminist, and social studies, reveal two transversal implications. These broader consequences, subtly present throughout all chapters, concern the fundamental role of an ethics of attention for education and politics. Indeed, having seen, especially through *La Storia*, that literature can serve as a privileged space for attending to suffering, a cynical reader might still ask: but *why* should I attend to other people's suffering? Why should I care at all? This vision of the world is exactly what an education rooted in an ethics of attention aims to counteract.

The values of an 'attentive education',⁴⁷⁹ particularly in fostering human flourishing, and the significance of attention in shaping our way of being in the world, are inherently politically relevant. The principles of a literary ethics of attention, therefore, not only contribute to our understanding of literature, moral philosophy, and the relation between them, but also have significant implications for political thought and action. This connection underscores how future research can explore how the ethics of attention, and a literary ethics of attention, can inform and transform educational practices and political engagement. Let us now briefly explore how this literary ethics of attention is infused with an educative purpose, thereby embodying a political spirit, elements already implicitly present in this thesis. After this, we shall see how education and politics can find fertile ground within this literary ethics. Highlighting these dimensions can extend the relevance of this work and address the urgency of contemporary times.

⁴⁷⁹ See Sharp (1984), Evans (2009), Laverty (2009; 2021), Yoda (2017), Roberts (2023).

My answer to the cynical reader, with the help of Weil, Murdoch, and Morante (discussed in chapter 3), is that when we truly see the sufferers, our responsibilities towards them become immediately apparent, caring becomes a necessity that doesn't leave space for a 'why'. Our obligations arise from the recognition of others' needs, which we perceive through attention, leading to compassion, since we are all bound by shared vulnerability. For Weil, the guiding principle was always the inherent value of the living and the ephemeral, and their moral claims. Human beings have the capacity to do evil but also to refrain from it, to protect the ephemeral. We may obscure reality, but we can also unveil it. This vision of humanity is built on the moral responsibility to protect: to protect nature and, protect *les malheureux* (those who suffer) precisely because they are ephemeral (FLN 104).

Let us consider for a moment the context of life-saving interventions at sea. Humanity has long upheld an unwritten rule: to save a drowning person. There is a moral obligation to rescue someone, if we can, as in Weil's example of the thirsty man and the glass of water. The example of interventions at sea is useful here because, in water, all the (illusory, as Weil would say) constructs – such as Nation, History, and Power – lose their significance in the fluidity of the ocean. What remains is the clear obligation to act. Now, if we think of attention as a force that cuts through these illusory backgrounds and the web of abstractions that dominate our existence, we might, through an effort of attentive imagination that reveals what is truly there, begin to see all living beings (both human and non-human) as if they were all drowning – at the mercy of chance and necessity, as we all are. If we change how we 'read' others and recognise their mortal condition, our actions might change accordingly.

The value of education for Weil lies precisely in training attention, the greatest evil being the inhibition of attention, an issue increasingly systemic today. To return to the cynical question – 'why should I care?' – we might respond, as Heiti suggests: 'The interlocutor who sincerely asks, "Why should I care about others?," does not need an argumentative response. He needs retraining' (Heiti, 306). It is a matter of reorientation – a matter of education. Indeed, education teaches us how to read differently the world: it's an exercise in attentive reading. The everyday practice of

attention,⁴⁸⁰ which should be trained and formed into a habit through education and art (or the combination of both), is what I have defined in this thesis as mysticism.

A particularly promising educational approach is the Community of Philosophical Inquiry (CPI),⁴⁸¹ which has recently been re-examined through Weil's and Murdoch's philosophies. CPI provides a space for philosophical thinking together, often prompted by engagement with artistic stimuli (such as literature), fostering both attentive compassion and a renewed attention to the world.⁴⁸² Indeed, this thesis aims to provide a conceptual framework for community-based practices that, through the 'moral/spiritual' use of art (especially literature), can inspire and foster attention, and thus contribute to attention activism. Weil's ethics of attention, as I have argued, is not merely a theory but a method (Heiti 2021, 14) – a non-didactic educative method aimed at human flourishing.

Throughout this thesis, I have argued that 'mystical' attention can be trained and, as Murdoch states, we need to teach it in schools (MGM 73; 337). This training involves the use of external stimuli – a book, the root of a tree, or the face of a friend – to help us approach reality. As Zwicky observes: 'Wisdom is teachable – another person can be fundamental in the recovery of insight' (Zwicky 2015, 190).⁴⁸³ When we attend to reality with genuine attention, we become more real ourselves, moving further from unreality. This is the Platonic lesson shining through these authors' works: 'The one who contemplates becomes like the object of their contemplation' (*Timaeus*, 90d, quoted in Zambrano p. 72).⁴⁸⁴

In today's 'dictatorship of entertainment', our gaze is often commodified, fragmented, or distracted. Education, in contrast, is the art of orienting others'

⁴⁸⁰ On this see Tommasi (2019) and Weil (N I 130).

⁴⁸¹ Based on the Philosophy for/with children pedagogy, developed by Matthew Lipman and Ann Margaret Sharp, where children are encouraged to think together philosophically in the space of the community of philosophical inquiry.

⁴⁸² Sharp (1984); Elvis (2023); Dianetti and Elvis (forthcoming), Zanetti (2024).

⁴⁸³ 'As Phaidros argues, we often fall in love with images of what we need to remember, and all three of Phaidros, Republic, and Symposium claim that a lover's highest calling is to be brought to virtue by his beloved. In this sense, or these senses, wisdom is teachable – another person can be fundamental in the recovery of insight' (Zwicky 2015, 190).

⁴⁸⁴ Similarly, in *The Republic*, Plato writes: 'In every soul, there is the power to learn, and an instrument designed for that purpose. Just as the eye cannot turn from darkness to light without the whole body, so too must the soul's instrument be turned away from the perishable to endure the sight of being and its brightest form, which we call the good. Isn't that so? Yes! Education is the art of turning this instrument in the simplest and most effective way; it does not infuse sight into the soul but instead orients the soul to face what it should see. This is the work of education.' (Plato, *Republic* VII 518c-d, quoted in Zambrano 2010, 74).

attention towards reality. The educator's role is not didactic, but requires attentively imagining possibilities for their pupils—namely, the possibility for them to draw closer to reality through attention. As Danilo Dolci writes: 'Each one grows only if dreamed' (quoted in Valerio 2020, 101).⁴⁸⁵ Reading great books – those that do more than merely entertain but are grounded in attention – has the potential to foster this kind of attention. As I have argued, the author entrusts the reader with this potential, having faith in their possibility to attend.

But again, the cynical reader can still ask: when confronted with the urgency of suffering, would it not be better to act directly in response to the suffering around us, instead of engaging with art?

As I explained in this thesis, art can not only bear witness to reality and thus inspire attention, but also bear attentive witness to attention through its content (like Ueseppe) and to suffering (like all the victims in *La Storia*). When it engages with suffering in this sense, literature can be an explicit form of activism.

Maura del Serra emphasises the need to unite *thought* and *action* through the poetic word, through 'saying things' and 'making words' that awaken both individual and collective responsibility. It is crucial, she writes, 'that those of us who "have the word"' use it creatively 'as a sword, shield, and gift together', reminding us that 'in Greek "*poiein logon*," literally "making the word" also means "giving the word" to someone, and being aware of his testimonial power, so hindered by the false dominant powers' (quoted in Dianetti 2024).

Bachmann (echoing our examination in chapter 4) observes that audiences have been conditioned by the numerous playful shocks that they have experienced, leading to a numbness or an 'addiction' like that caused by a drug, where they expect and crave mild shocks. It is only through the 'utmost earnestness' and a fight *against* the trivialisation of genuine and profound experiences of suffering that we can awaken audiences from 'their fantastical lethargy'. True literature, in this sense, must awaken the reader or the audience; it needs, as Franz Kafka wrote in a letter to Pollak in January 1904, to affect us profoundly. Like disasters that awaken us,

⁴⁸⁵ Here is the full passage: 'There are also those who educate without hiding / the absurdity in the world, open to every / development, but striving / to be honest with others as with themselves, / dreaming of others as they are not yet: / each person grows only if dreamed of' (Dolci 1970).

‘A book must be the axe for the frozen sea within us’.⁴⁸⁶ Indeed, it is not enough simply to read, we must read ‘great’ literature, and we must read it with attention. The attentive reader knows how to be alone, and as Chiara Valerio, another devoted reader of Weil, writes: ‘The reader [...] knows how to be alone. Who is alone is politically complex because they entertain themselves’ (Valerio 2020, 84) and thus escapes the dictatorship of the present.

In chapter 3, we saw that attention is political. The opposite of attention is more than just inattention, which implies a casual disregard for the world. It is also indifference, a consent to disengage and not observe in order to discern. Indifference creates a vision where everything appears the same – not in the sense of equal value, as Weil advocates, but as an indistinct anonymity. Attention, on the other hand, sees the particular and the universal within it, demanding that we take a stance. It involves discernment, the act of distinguishing and connecting through imagination, for there can be no separation without connection. As Weil famously writes, ‘Every separation is a link’ (GG 145).

Attention, as chapter 3 shows, implies a sympathetic disposition: something difficult that we cultivate through habit, yet something to which we must consent daily. In contrast, indifference means to avoid engagement, to ignore the particular and avoid confronting reality. It justifies complacency with the belief that ‘everything is the same’, or ‘nothing can change’. It makes us think that, since the world is unchangeable, we may as well turn away from the suffering of those around us. Those ignored by society often lack the means to express themselves, and in this neglect lies the despair from which evil arises – individual indifference becoming a social problem. When the response to criminality is exclusion or further indifference, humanity fails entirely. As Heiti notes, ‘by attending to each other, we can recognise this capacity in others – even in those who commit evil. Such faith is far from easy’ (Heiti 2021, 23).

Returning to the inherent value of the human being, which lies at the core of an ethics of attention, words merge with faith. As I showed in chapter 5, Morante brilliantly illustrated this, borrowing from Gramsci in the closing of *La Storia*, where her ‘political act’ and poetry converge. This faith rests on the belief that we

⁴⁸⁶ Quoted in Bachmann (2021, 283).

all possess the potential to attend to reality, rather than obscure it, and thus practise mystical attention.

The Irish poet Seamus Heaney, in *The Redress of Poetry* where he acknowledges Weil's *Gravity and Grace*, observes that poetry can open a space for 'a glimpsed alternative, a revelation of potential that is denied or constantly threatened by circumstances' (Heaney 1998, 3-4). Art becomes the locus of possibility and thus of reality. It can bear witness to suffering and avoid excluding entire difficult aspects of reality, as we often do in our half-asleep existences. As Wehling-Giorgi writes about Morante's voice in *La Storia*, art has the ability to 'turn silent horror into narrative memory' (Wehling-Giorgi and de Rogatis 2021, 182). When attention in literary space bears witness to suffering, then art becomes a political matter. It can 'break a silence' (Wallace 2016, xiv), calling upon those who are not afflicted to see, and bear witness. As Zamboni⁴⁸⁷ observes, 'politics involves making space for the unthought, which appears as something impossible but carries a truth that – by welcoming it within ourselves – we bring into being' (Zamboni, Forthcoming).⁴⁸⁸ This conception of politics relates to the need to extend our vocabulary and transform our 'readings' of things and people. On the 'political efficacy' of literature, Luisa Muraro observes that novels open 'here and now, in the present, the bet on what has been and what will be' (Muraro 2009, 112).

Politics, like ethics, must start from the narratives that we create about ourselves, as Murdoch suggests: 'Man is a creature who makes pictures of himself and then comes to resemble the picture' (ME 75). These narratives can hold the seeds of future possibilities. The politics of these authors is one of hope, grounded in vulnerability and an attentive consideration of suffering, death, and injustice. It is a vision that opposes today's politics of fear.

⁴⁸⁷ In her afterword to Caterina Diotto's book *Mythos, o del rapporto fra romanzo e verità. Per una teoria del romanzo femminista a confronto con Lukacs e Benjamin*, connects the notion of 'realismo femminile' with a specific view of politics that I share. She writes: 'The emergence of feminism constituted an unforeseen symbolic rupture. An "impossible" event that, however, became a reality because some women made space for it within themselves, and in doing so, they transformed, altering their way of thinking, acting, and imagining. An unexpected event appeared before their eyes. By embracing it, they brought it into being, inventing it step by step, and thereby transforming their relationship with reality'.

⁴⁸⁸ This forthcoming text was kindly provided to me by Professor Chiara Zamboni.

Through the work of these writers and philosophers, literature can be understood, as Caprioglio Panizza and Wilson suggest, as a ‘form of activism’ (Caprioglio Panizza and Wilson 2024, 345). Murdoch aptly states: ‘The good artist is a vehicle of truth; he formulates ideas which would otherwise remain vague and focuses attention upon facts that can no longer be ignored’ (SW 235). Or, as Morante writes, ‘In the sordid invasion of unreality, art, which renders reality, can represent almost the only hope for the world. In a crowd subject to deceit, the presence of even one person who does not allow themselves to be deceived can already provide a first point of advantage’ (PoC 105), this, is the poet’s destiny: to be the attentive witness of reality. This perspective aligns with the broader advocacy for literature’s transformative role in addressing issues such as climate injustice, social injustice, and epistemic and hermeneutic injustices. As Murdoch notes, the study of language and literature is vital to the ‘battle for civilization and justice and freedom’ (SW 241). It enhances our ability to communicate meaningfully, countering the dangers of misleading jargon and superficial journalism. ‘Words are where we live as human beings and as moral and spiritual agents’ (SW 242), she writes, emphasising that there is only one culture, fundamentally rooted in the power of words. We move through and with words, we inhabit them. The world of facts, analysed through dry language and where values are imposed by the self, is the unreal: reality concerns possibilities that can be actualised through creative attention and, thus, through the literary space.

Why are these authors important today? Because we are witnessing a new wave of fascisms in the guise of populism. Both share a similar spirit, rooted in the politics of fear. Populist rhetoric, especially regarding immigration or complexity, taps into ancient fears: fear of the stranger, fear of the wolf threatening the family, fear of change and the unknown, and fear of contradictions and complexities. These fears are as old as folklore itself, or, as Morante writes, are ‘a painful myth as old as the world’⁴⁸⁹. When these primal fears are manipulated and exploited, they lead to more fear, violence, and resentment, which populism uses as fuel. In such times, we need stories, art, and education that counter the politics of fear with a politics of hope – an anti-fascist vision, rejecting unreality and embracing a creative attentive

⁴⁸⁹ See footnote n. 305.

image of ourselves, one that acknowledges the past while imaginatively stretching towards the future, one that embraces the shared vulnerability of all humans (and all living beings).

Bibliography

- Aaltola, Elisa. 2012. *Animal Suffering: Philosophy and Culture*. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan.
- 2018a. “Philosophical Narratives of Suffering: Nietzsche, Lévinas, Weil and Their Cultural Roots” *Suomen Antropologi: Journal of the Finnish Anthropological Society* 43(3): 22–40.
- 2018b. “Simone Weil, Iris Murdoch and Attention as Love” In *The Routledge Handbook of Love in Philosophy*, edited by A. M. Martin. London: Routledge, 193–204.
- 2018c. *Varieties of Empathy: Moral Psychology and Animal Ethics*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield International.
- 2019. “Confronting Suffering with Narrative Theory, Constructed Selfhood, and Control: Critical Perspectives by Simone Weil and Buddhist Metaphysics” *Journal of Disability & Religion* 23(3): 227–50.
- Agamben, Giorgio (ed.), 1993. *Per Elsa Morante*. Aperture 32. Milano: Linea d’ombra.
- 1996. *Categorie italiane. Studi di poetica*. Venezia: Marsilio.
- 2011. “Il congedo della tragedia” In *Festa per Elsa*, edited by Goffredo Fofi and Adriano Sofri. Palermo: Sellerio.
- Allen, Diogenes. 1974. “Two Experiences of Existence: Jean-Paul Sartre and Iris Murdoch” *International Philosophical Quarterly* 14(2): 181–87.
- Altorf, Marije. 2008. *Iris Murdoch and the Art of Imagining*. London; New York: Continuum International Publishing Group Ltd.
- 2011. “After Cursing the Library: Iris Murdoch and the (In)Visibility of Women in Philosophy” *Hypatia* 26(2): 384–402.
- 2013. “Iris Murdoch, or What It Means To Be A Serious Philosopher” *Daimon: Revista Internacional de Filosofía* 60: 75–91.
- 2020. “Iris Murdoch and Common Sense Or, What Is It Like To Be A Woman In Philosophy” *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement* 87(July): 201–20.
- Antonaccio, Maria. 2003. *Picturing the Human: The Moral Thought of Iris Murdoch*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- 2007. “The Ascetic Impulse in Iris Murdoch’s Thought” In *Iris Murdoch: A Reassessment*, edited by Anne Rowe, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- 2012. *A Philosophy to Live by: Engaging Iris Murdoch*. New York: Oxford University press.
- Antonaccio, Maria Schweiker. 1996. *Iris Murdoch and the Search for Human Goodness*. Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press.
- Araújo, Sofia de Melo, and Fátima Vieira. 2011. *Iris Murdoch, Philosopher Meets Novelist*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Arendt, Hannah. 1978. “‘Eichmann in Jerusalem’ – an Exchange of Letters between Gershom Scholem and Hannah Arendt” In *The Jew as Pariah: Jewish Identity and Politics in the Modern Age*, edited by Ron H. Feldman. New York: Grove Press.
- Auerbach, Erich. 2003. *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Azzolini, Paola and Diotima. 1990. *Mettere al mondo il mondo: oggetto e oggettività alla luce differenza sessuale*. Milano: La Tartaruga edizioni.

- Bachmann, Ingeborg. 2021. *The Critical Writings of Ingeborg Bachmann*. Translated by Karen R. Achberger and Karl Ivan Solibakke. Rochester, New York: Camden House.
- Bardini, Marco. 1999. *Morante Elsa. Italiana. Di professione, poeta*. Pisa: Nistri-Lischi.
- Bernabò, Graziella. 2016. *La fiaba estrema: Elsa Morante tra vita e scrittura*. 2nd ed. 474. Roma: Carocci.
- Bingemer, Maria Clara. 2023. "Mystical Experience: Women's Pathway to Knowledge" *Religions* 14(2): 230.
- Boella, Laura. 1998. *Cuori pensanti: Hannah Arendt, Simone Weil, Edith Stein, Maria Zambrano*. Mantova: Tre lune.
- Bok, Sissela. 2005. "Simone Weil and Iris Murdoch: The Possibility of Dialogue" *Gender Issues* 22: 71–8.
- Borghesi, Angela. 2014. "Tra 'epos' e epicedio. Paragrafi sulla 'Storia' di Elsa Morante e Simone Weil" *Italianistica: Rivista di letteratura italiana* 43(3): 91–113.
- . 2015. *Una storia invisibile. Morante Ortese Weil*. Macerata: Quodlibet.
- . 2019. *L'anno della «Storia» 1974-1975. Il dibattito politico e culturale sul romanzo di Elsa Morante. Cronaca e antologia della critica*. Macerata: Quodlibet.
- Bourgault, Sophie. 2014. "Beyond the Saint and the Red Virgin: Simone Weil as Feminist Theorist of Care" *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 35(2): 1–27.
- Broackes, Justin, ed. 2014. *Iris Murdoch, Philosopher*. Reprint edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- . 2017. "Iris Murdoch's First Encounters with Simone Weil" *Iris Murdoch Review* 8.
- Browning, Gary. 2024. *Iris Murdoch and the Political*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Brueck, Katherine T. 1995. *The Redemption of Tragedy: The Literary Vision of Simone Weil*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Brunetta, Gian Piero, and Editori Riuniti. 1979. *Storia del cinema italiano 1895-1945*. Roma: Editori Riuniti.
- Burnett, D. Graham, Alyssa Loh, and Peter Schmidt. 2023. "Opinion: Powerful Forces Are Fracking Our Attention. We Can Fight Back" *The New York Times*, November 24.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/11/24/opinion/attention-economy-education.html>.
- Burnett, D. Graham, and Justin E. H. Smith, eds. 2023. *Scenes of Attention: Essays on Mind, Time, and the Senses*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Burnett, Graham, and Stevie Knauss. 2022. *Twelve Theses on Attention*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Burns, Steven, and MacLachlan, Alice (2004). "Getting It: On jokes and art" *Canadian Aesthetics Journal* 10.
- Byatt, A. S. 1994. *Degrees of Freedom: The Early Novels of Iris Murdoch*. London: Vintage.
- Cacciari, Massimo. 1982. "Note Sul Discorso Filosofico-Teologico Di Simone Weil" *Il Futuro Dell'uomo* 2.

- Calderoni, Sara (ed.). 2018. *Elsa Morante e il romanzo*. Milano: Marco Saya edizioni.
- Calvino, Italo. 2023. *Lettere. 1940-1985*. Edited by Luca Baranelli. Milano: Mondadori.
- Camon, Ferdinando. 1993. "Il Grande male" In *Cahiers Elsa Morante*, by Jean-Noël Schifano and Tjuna Notarbartolo. Napoli: Edizioni scientifiche italiane.
- Campo, Cristina. 2024. *The Unforgivable: And Other Writings*. Translated by Alex Andriessse. 1st ed. New York: Review Books.
- Caprioglio Panizza, Silvia. 2017. "A Secular Mysticism? Simone Weil, Iris Murdoch and the Idea of Attention" In *Filosofía, Arte y Mística*, edited by del Carmen Paredes Maria. Salamanca: Salamanca University Press.
- . 2022. *The Ethics of Attention: Engaging the Real with Iris Murdoch and Simone Weil*. New York: Routledge.
- Caprioglio Panizza, Silvia, and Mark Hopwood (eds.). 2022. *The Murdochian Mind*. 1st ed. London: Routledge.
- Caprioglio Panizza, Silvia, and Philip Wilson. 2023. *Mirror Of Obedience: The Poems And Selected Prose Of Simone Weil*. Bilingual edition. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- . 2024. "The Philosopher at the Gate of the Word: A Study of Simone Weil's Transformative Literature" In *Fictional Worlds and the Political Imagination*, edited by Garry Hagberg.
- . Forthcoming. "Literature" In *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Simone Weil*, edited by Lissa McCullough. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Casarino, Cesare, and Andrea Righi (eds.). 2018. *Another Mother: Diotima and the Symbolic Order of Italian Feminism*. Translated by Mark William Epstein. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Cattaneo, Francesca. 2011. *Etica e narrazione. Il contributo del narrativismo contemporaneo*. Milano: Vita e Pensiero.
- Cazalé-Bérard. 2006. "Morante e Weil La Scelta Dell'attenzione e La Verità Della Fiaba" *Testo e Senso* 7 (November).
- . 2009. *Donne tra memoria e scrittura: Fuller, Weil, Sachs, Morante*. Carocci.
- . 2012. "Il romanzo in-finito" *Testo e Senso* 13(November). <https://testoesenso.it/index.php/testoesenso/article/view/235>.
- . 2015. "'Senza i conforti della religione': il romanzo impossibile. Scritture al limite" *Cuadernos de Filología Italiana* 21(0): 75–89.
- Ceccatty, René de. 2020. *Elsa Morante: una vita per la letteratura*. Translated by Sandra Petriagnani. Vicenza: N. Pozza.
- Cecchi, Carlo, and Cesare Garboli. 1990. "Cronologia" In *Opere*, by Elsa Morante, edited by Carlo Cecchi and Cesare Garboli, 2nd ed. Milano: Mondadori.
- Chappell, Sophie Grace. 2014. *Knowing What to Do: Imagination, Virtue, and Platonism in Ethics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Chenavier, Robert. 2009. *Simone Weil: L'attention au réel*. Paris: Michalon Editeur.
- Citton, Yves. 2017. *The Ecology of Attention*. English edition. Cambridge: Polity.
- . 2019. "Attention Agency Is Environmental Agency" In *Communication in the Era of Attention Scarcity*, edited by Waddick Doyle and Claudia Roda. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan.

- Cives, Simona. 2006. "Elsa Morante 'Senza i conforti della religione'" In *Le stanze di Elsa: dentro la scrittura di Elsa Morante*, edited by Giuliana Zagra and Simonetta Buttò. Roma: Colombo.
- Conradi, Peter. 1986. *The Saint and Artist: A Study of the Fiction of Iris Murdoch*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- . 1994. "Platonism in Iris Murdoch" In *Platonism and the English Imagination*, edited by Anna Baldwin and Sarah Hutton. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- . 1997. "Preface" in *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature*. by Iris Murdoch. New edition. London: Penguin.
- . 2001. *Iris Murdoch: A Life*. London: Harper Collins.
- Cordner, Christopher. 2016. "Lessons of Murdochian Attention" *Sophia* 55 (2): 197–213.
- Courtine-Denamy, Sylvie. 2001. *Three Women in Dark Times: Edith Stein, Hannah Arendt, Simone Weil*. Translated by Geoffrey M. Goshgarian. 1st edition. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- D'Angeli, Concetta. 1993. "La presenza di Simone Weil ne La Storia" In *Per Elsa Morante*, edited by Alfonso Berardinelli and Giorgio Agamben. Aperture 32. Milano: Linea d'ombra.
- . 1994. "Il Paradiso Nella Storia" *Studi Novecenteschi* 21(47/48): 215–35.
- . 2003. *Leggere Elsa Morante. Arcoeli, la storia e il mondo salvato dai ragazzini*. Roma: Carocci.
- . 2014. "Visioni di sterminio ne 'La storia'" *Cuadernos de Filología Italiana* 21(0): 91–100.
- . 2015. "Reminiscenze Nella Scrittura Di Elsa Morante" In *Le Fonti in Elsa Morante*, edited by Enrico Palandri and Hanna Serkowska, 7–14. Edizioni Ca' Foscari.
- . 2018. "Relazioni difficili. La maternità nell'opera di Elsa Morante" in *Elsa Morante e il romanzo*. edited by Sara Calderoni. Milano: Marco Saya edizioni.
- David, Michel. 1968. "Interview with Elsa Morante." *Le Monde*, April 13, in *Opere*, by Elsa Morante, edited by Carlo Cecchi and Cesare Garboli. Milano: Mondadori.
- Davy, Marie-Magdeleine. 1951. *The Mysticism of Simone Weil*. Translated by Cynthia Rowland. First Edition. London: Rockliff Publishing.
- De Beauvoir, Simone. 1958. *Mémoires d'une Jeune Fille Rangée*. Gallimard.
- Derrida, Jacques. 1999. "Hospitality, Justice and Responsibility: A Dialogue with Jacques Derrida" In *Questioning Ethics: Contemporary Debates in Philosophy*, edited by Richard Kearney and Mark Dooley, 65–83. London: Routledge.
- Di Rosa, Rossella. 2018. "Portrait of Antigone as Idiot Savant: Elsa Morante's 'La Serata a Colono'" *The Italianist* 38(1): 27–47.
- Diamond, Cora. 1982. "Anything but Argument?" *Philosophical Investigations* 5(1): 23–41.
- Dianetti, Michela. 2020. "La cosa come un frutto di Cézanne nel pensiero di Simone Weil e Rainer Maria Rilke" *Per amore del mondo – rivista della comunità filosofica femminile Diotima* 17.
- . 2022. "More News From Italy: Books, Articles & Events" *Attention Simone Weil* (blog). <https://attentionsw.org/simone-weil-italy/>.

- 2023a. “Liliana Cavani’s Cinema of Fraternitas: An Interview about Her Never-Produced Movie on the Life of Simone Weil” *Attention Simone Weil* (blog). <https://attentionsw.org/from-italy-liliana-cavanis-cinema-of-fraternitas-an-interview-about-her-never-produced-movie-on-the-life-of-simone-weil/>.
- 2023b. “Weilian Lessons from Abroad: Michela Dianetti’s Interview with Gabriella Fiori” *Attention Simone Weil* (blog). <https://attentionsw.org/weilian-lessons-from-abroad-michela-dianettis-interview-with-gabriella-fiori/>.
- 2023c. ‘Exploring the connection between attention and literature through Simone Weil and Iris Murdoch’ *Sofia Philosophical Review*. 16 (1): 109-124.
- 2024. “From Italy: Translation as a Metaxù and a Play as an 'Evocation' of Simone's Life - An Interview with Maura Del Serra” *Attention Simone Weil* (blog). <https://attentionsw.org/from-italy-translation-as-a-metaxu-and-a-play-as-an-evocation-of-simones-life-an-interview-with-maura-del-serra/>.
- Dianetti, Michela and Lucy Elvis. (forthcoming 2024). “Attending to Adolescence Experience through Greek Tragedies” *JPS Philosophy and Literature in School Special Issue*.
- Doering, E. Jane. 2010. *Simone Weil and the Specter of Self-Perpetuating Force*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Doering, E. Jane, and Eric O. Springsted, eds. 2004. *The Christian Platonism of Simone Weil*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Dolci, Danilo. 1970. *Il limone lunare*. Roma and Bari: Laterza.
- Dooley, Gillian, ed. 2003. *From a Tiny Corner in the House of Fiction: Conversations with Iris Murdoch*. Columbia, SC: University South Carolina Press.
- Dostoevsky, Fyodor M. 1914. *Letters of Fyodor Michailovitch Dostoevsky to His Family and Friends*. Translated by Ethel Golburn Mayne. London: Chatto & Windus.
- Doyle, Waddick, and Claudia Roda, eds. 2019. *Communication in the Era of Attention Scarcity*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Düringer, Eva-Maria. 2022. “Murdoch and Weil” In *The Murdochian Mind*, edited by Silvia Caprioglio Panizza and Mark Hopwood. London: Routledge.
- Editorial Board. 2020. “Le donne di Elsa Morante” *Nuovi Argomenti* (blog). <http://www.nuoviargomenti.net/le-donne-di-elsa-morante/>.
- Eliot, T.S. 1944. *Four Quartets*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Elkann, Alain, and Alberto Moravia. 1990. *Vita di Moravia*. Milano: Bompiani.
- Elliott, Kevin J. 2018. “Making Attentive Citizens: The Ethics of Democratic Engagement, Political Equality, and Social Justice” *Res Publica* 24(1): 73–91.
- Elvis, Lucy. 2023. “Attentiveness, Qualities of Listening and the Listener in the Community of Philosophical Inquiry” *Childhood & Philosophy* 19(August): 1–22.
- Evans, William. 2009. “Iris Murdoch, Liberal Education and Human Flourishing” *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 43(1): 75–84.
- Ferrante, Elena. 1993. “Ho molte parole in testa...” In *Cahiers Elsa Morante*, edited by Jean-Noël Schifano and Tjuna Notarbartolo. Napoli: Edizioni scientifiche italiane.

- Fiori, Gabriella. 1989. *Simone Weil, an Intellectual Biography*. Athens: University of Georgia Press.
- . 2009. “Elsa Morante, lectrice des Cahiers de Simone Weil” *Cahiers Simone Weil* 32(1): 65–96.
- . 2019. “Storia di un'amicizia”, in *L'Europa di Simone Weil*, edited by Rita Fulco and Tommaso Greco. Macerata: Quodlibet.
- . 2023. “The Story of a Friendship”. Translated by Michela Dianetti. *Attention Simone Weil* (blog). <https://attentionsw.org/the-story-of-a-friendship/>.
- Fofi, Goffredo, and Adriano Sofri. 2011. *Festa per Elsa*. Palermo: Sellerio.
- Freeman, Mark. 2015. “Beholding and Being Beheld: Simone Weil, Iris Murdoch, and the Ethics of Attention” *The Humanistic Psychologist* 43(2): 160–72.
- Fulco, Rita. 2002. *Corrispondere al limite. Simone Weil: il pensiero e la luce*. Roma: Studium.
- Fulco, Rita, and Tommaso Greco, eds. 2019. *L'Europa di Simone Weil: filosofia e nuove istituzioni*. Prima edizione. Macerata: Quodlibet.
- Fusini, Nadia. 1944. “Menzogna e sortilegio: 50 anni dopo” *La rivista dei libri*, December.
- Gabellieri, Emmanuel. 2004. “Reconstructing Platonism: The Trinitarian Metaxology of Simone Weil” In *The Christian Platonism of Simone Weil*, edited by E. Jane Doering and Eric O. Springsted. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.
- . 2019. *Le phénomène et l'entre-deux: Pour une métaxologie*. Paris: Hermann.
- . 2024. “Between Metaphysics and Phenomenology: Metaxology in Simone Weil, Maurice Blondel, and William Desmond” *Irish Theological Quarterly* 89(3): 245–58.
- Gaeta, Giancarlo. 2016. “Contro il dominio dell'irrealità: Elsa Morante a confronto con Simone Weil” *Lo straniero* 188: 72–9.
- Garboli, Cesare. 1995. *Il gioco segreto. Nove immagini di Elsa Morante*. Milano: Adelphi.
- . 2002. “Dovuto a Elsa” In *Racconti dimenticati*, by Elsa Morante, edited by Irene Babboni and Carlo Cecchi. Torino: Einaudi.
- Gardiner, Georgi. 2022. “Attunement: On the Cognitive Virtues of Attention” In *Social Virtue Epistemology*, edited by Mark Alfano, Jeroen De Ridder, and Colin Klein. New York: Routledge.
- Giménez Cavallo, Maria. 2016. “Elsa Morante’s ‘La Storia’: A Posthumanist, Feminist, Anarchist Response to Power.” *Annali d'Italianistica* 34:425–47.
- Gnoli, Antonio. 2016a. “Giorgio Agamben: ‘Credo nel legame tra filosofia e poesia. Ho sempre amato la verità e la parola’” *Repubblica*, May 15. https://www.repubblica.it/cultura/2016/05/15/news/giorgio_agamben_cred_o_nel_legame_tra_filosofia_e_poesia_ho_sempre_amato_la_verita_e_la_p_aro_la_-139833519/.
- . 2016b. “Pierre Riches: ‘Devo la conversione a Wittgenstein. Mi spiego che la ragione non è tutto’” *Repubblica*, March 27. https://www.repubblica.it/cultura/2016/03/27/news/pierre_riches_devo_la_conversione_a_wittgenstein_mi_spiego_che_la_ragione_non_e_tutto_-136395747/.
- Gomes, Anil. 2013. “Iris Murdoch on Art, Ethics, and Attention” *British Journal of Aesthetics* 53(3): 321–37.

- Griffin, Gabriele. 1993. *The Influence of the Writings of Simone Weil on the Fiction of Iris Murdoch*. San Francisco: Mellen Research University Press.
- Gualtieri, Mariangela. 2010. *Bestia di gioia*. Torino: Einaudi.
- Guenther, Lisa. 2022. "Memory, Imagination, and Resistance in Canada's Prison for Women" *Space and Culture* 25(2): 255–65.
- Hämäläinen, Nora. 2015. "Reduce Ourselves to Zero?: Sabina Lovibond, Iris Murdoch, and Feminism" *Hypatia* 30(4): 743–59.
- Hämäläinen, Nora, and Gillian Dooley, eds. 2019. *Reading Iris Murdoch's Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*. Cham, Switzerland: Springer International Publishing.
- Heaney, Seamus. 1998. *The Redress of Poetry: Oxford Lectures*. London: Faber & Faber.
- Heiti, Warren. 2021. *Attending: An Ethical Art*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press.
- Husserl, Edmund. 1983. *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy: First Book: General Introduction to a Pure Phenomenology*. Den Haag: Kluwer.
- Jamieson, Lesley. 2023. *Iris Murdoch's Practical Metaphysics: A Guide to Her Early Writings*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Jesson, Stuart. 2014. "Simone Weil: Suffering, Attention and Compassionate Thought" *Studies in Christian Ethics* 27(2): 185–201.
- . 2017. "Compassion, Consolation and the Sharing of Attention" In *Simone Weil and Continental Philosophy*, edited by Rebecca A. Rozelle-Stone. London: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Kafka, Franz. 1977. *Letters to Friends, Family and Editors*. Translated by Richard and Clara Winston. London: John Calder.
- Larson, Kate. 2009. "Everything Important Is to Do with Passion": *Iris Murdoch's Concept of Love and Its Platonic Origin*. Uppsala: Department of Philosophy, Uppsala University.
- . 2014. "Metaxological Thinking in Simone Weil and Iris Murdoch" In *Iris Murdoch Connected: Critical Essays on Her Fiction and Philosophy*, edited by Mark Luprecht. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press.
- Laugier, Sandra. 2015. "The Ethics of Care as a Politics of the Ordinary" *New Literary History* 46(2): 217–40.
- . 2016a. "Care, Responsibility, and Coexistence" *Ethics & Politics* 18(3): 91–107.
- . 2016b. "Politics of Vulnerability and Responsibility for Ordinary Others" *Critical Horizons* 17(2): 207–23.
- . 2019. "Cultura popolare e immaginario morale" *Sociologia e politiche sociali* 22(2): 9–30.
- . 2024. "Forms of Life and Public Space" *Philosophies* 9(2): 31.
- Laurenzi, Elena. 2016. "Il particolare della persona tra estetica e politica. un confronto tra Murdoch, Zambrano e Weil" *Segni e comprensione* 30: 68–89.
- Laverty, Megan Jane. 2009. "Learning Our Concepts" *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 43(S1): 27–40.
- . 2021. "Iris Murdoch, Romanticism and Education" *Philosophy of Education* 77(3): 80–84.
- Lawson, Kathryn. 2024. *Ecological Ethics and the Philosophy of Simone Weil: Decreation for the Anthropocene*. New York: Routledge.

- Lazenby, Donna J. 2014. *A Mystical Philosophy: Transcendence and Immanence in the Works of Virginia Woolf and Iris Murdoch*. 1st edition. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Leeson, Miles, and Frances White, eds. 2023. *Iris Murdoch and the Literary Imagination*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Lévinas, Emmanuel. 1990. "Simone Weil against the Bible" in *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*. Translated by Seán Hand, Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Lindbäck, Lyra Ekström. 2024. *Iris Murdoch and the Ancient Quarrel: Why Literature Is Not Philosophy*. 1st edition. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Lipson, Michael, and Abigail Lipson. 1996. "Psychotherapy and the Ethics of Attention" *The Hastings Center Report* 26(1): 17–22.
- Loades, Ann. 1999. "The Beauty That Saves: Essays on Aesthetics and Language in Simone Weil" *Literature and Theology* 13(4): 359–60.
- Lovibond, Sabina. 2011. *Iris Murdoch, Gender and Philosophy*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Lucamante, S. 2014. *Forging Shoah Memories: Italian Women Writers, Jewish Identity, and the Holocaust*. 1st ed. Italian and Italian American Studies. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Mac Cumhaill, Clare, and Rachel Wiseman. 2022a. *Metaphysical Animals: How Four Women Brought Philosophy Back to Life*. London: Chatto & Windus.
- 2022b. "The Importance of Murdoch's Early Encounters with Marcel and Anscombe" In *The Murdochian Mind*, edited by Silvia Caprioglio Panizza and Mark Hopwood. London: Routledge.
- Marcel, Gabriel. 1949. "Simone Weil" *The Month* 2(1): 9-17.
- Marianelli, Massimiliano. 2004. *La metafora ritrovata: miti e simboli nella filosofia di Simone Weil*. Roma: Città Nuova.
- 2020. "L'essere, la mediazione e il bene. Tra hasard e necessità: l'ontologia weiliana come ricerca di intermediari" In *Studium - Simone Weil protagonista della filosofia del Novecento. Ritrovare l'umano: n. 3 - 2020*, edited by Massimiliano Marianelli. Edizioni Studium.
- 2022. "Note Su Metaxy e Armonia Dei Contrari in Simone Weil" *Síntese: Revista de Filosofia* 49(153): 143–57.
- Mazzoni, Cristina. 2011. "The Beauty of the Beast: Fairy Tales as Mystical Texts in Simone Weil and Cristina Campo" *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 11(2): 156–75.
- 2012. "Tough Magical Nuts to Crack: Cristina Campo's Reflections on Fairy Tales" *Marvels & Tales* 26(2): 240–58.
- McKinnell, Liz. 2019. "The Ethics of Enchantment: The Role of Folk Tales and Fairy Tales in the Ethical Imagination" *Philosophy and Literature* 43(1): 192–209.
- Meaney, Marie Cabaud. 2007. *Simone Weil's Apologetic Use of Literature: Her Christological Interpretations of Ancient Greek Texts*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. 2013. *Phenomenology of Perception*. London: Routledge.
- Mole, Christopher. 2024. "Emancipatory Attention" *Philosophers' Imprint* 24(1): 1–19.
- Morante, Elsa. 1951. *House of Liars*. New York: Harcourt Brace.

- 1968. *Il Mondo Salvato Dai Ragazzini*. Torino: Einaudi.
- 1969. *L'isola Di Arturo*. Torino: Einaudi.
- 1984a. *Aracoeli*. Translated by William Weaver. First Edition. New York: Random House.
- 1984b. *History: A Novel*. Translated by William Weaver. New York: Aventura.
- 1988a. *Alibi*. Milano: Garzanti.
- 1988b. *Piccolo Manifesto e Altri Scritti*. Milano: Linea d'ombra.
- 1995. *La storia*. Torino: Einaudi.
- 1996. *Opere*. Edited by Carlo Cecchi and Cesare Garboli. 2 vols. Milano: Mondadori.
- 2012. *L'amata: lettere di e a Elsa Morante*. Torino: Einaudi.
- 2013. *Pro o contro la bomba atomica e altri scritti*. Milano: Adelphi.
- 2014. *Menzogna e sortilegio*. Torino: Einaudi.
- 2015. *Aracoeli*. Torino: Einaudi.
- 2016. *The World Saved by Kids: And Other Epics*. Translated by Cristina Viti. London: Seagull Books.
- 2019. *Arturo's Island*. Translated by Ann Goldstein. London: Pushkin Press.
- 2023. *Lies and Sorcery*. Translated by Jenny Mcphee. New York: NYRB Classics.
- Morante, Marcello. 1986. *Maledetta benedetta: Elsa e sua madre*. Milano: Garzanti.
- Moravia, Alberto. 1987. "La Leggerezza Di Elsa" *Corriere Della Sera*, July 11.
- Moscatti, Italo, and Liliana Cavani. 1974. "Lettere Dall'interno. Racconto per Un Film Su Simon Weil" Torino: Einaudi.
- Muraro, Luisa. 2004. "Iris Murdoch, La Filosofia Da Vivere" *L'Unità*, March 25.
- 2009. *Al Mercato Della Felicità. La Forza Irrinunciabile Del Desiderio*. Milano: Mondadori.
- 2011. *Non è da tutti. L'indicibile fortuna di nascere donna*. Roma: Carocci.
- 2014. "La schivata: una introduzione ad Iris Murdoch filosofa." *Etica & Politica XVI* (1): 410–25.
- Murdoch, Iris. 1967. *Under the Net*. Glasgow: Avon Book.
- 1978. *The Sea, The Sea*. London: Chatto & Windus
- 1994. *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*. London: Penguin Books.
- 1995. *The One Alone*. London: Colophon Press with Old Town Books.
- 1999a. *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature*. Edited by Peter Conradi. New edition. London: Penguin.
- 1999b. *Sartre: Romantic Rationalist*. London: Vintage.
- 2000. *The Unicorn*. London: Vintage.
- 2015. *Living on Paper*. London: Penguin.
- Negri, Federica. 2005. *La passione della purezza. Simone Weil e Cristina Campo*. Padova: Il Poligrafo.
- Nelson, Deborah. 2017. *Tough Enough: Arbus, Arendt, Didion, McCarthy, Sontag, Weil*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Nussbaum, Martha C. 2003. *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions*. 1st pbk. ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ortese, Anna Maria, and M. Farnetti. 2002. *Romanzi*. Vol. I. Milano: Adelphi.

- Painter, Rebecca M. 2006. "Fiction and the Growth of Moral Consciousness: Attention and Evil" *Analecta Husserliana* 92: 235–7.
- Pasolini, Pier Paolo. 1999. *Saggi sulla politica e sulla società*. Edited by Walter Siti and Silvia De Laude. I Meridiani. Milano: Mondadori.
- Pétrément, Simone. 1988. *Simone Weil: A Life*, translated by Raymond Rosenthal. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Plato. 1961. *Meno*, translated by Richard Stanley Bluck. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- 1997. *Phaedrus*, translated by Reginald Hackforth. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- 2000. *The Republic*, edited by G. R. F. Ferrari. Translated by Tom Griffith. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Porciani, Elena. 2012. *L'autore Nel Testo. Sette Episodi Di Finti Diari, Implicature e Autofinzioni*. Roma: Perrone.
- Purton, Valerie. 2007. *An Iris Murdoch Chronology*. London: Palgrave
- Reynolds, Anna K. 2022. "'The Lost Daughter' and the Gift of Maternal Attention" *Inspire Virtue* (blog). February 25.
<https://inspirevirtue.com/the-lost-daughter-and-the-gift-of-maternal-attention/>.
- Ricciardi, Alessia. 2009. "From Decreation to Bare Life: Weil, Agamben, and the Impolitical" *Diacritics* 39(2): 75–93.
- Rilke, Rainer Maria. 1989. *Duino Elegies*. Manchester: Carcanet.
- Roberts, Peter. 2023. "Education and the Ethics of Attention: The Work of Simone Weil" *British Journal of Educational Studies* 71(3): 267–84.
- Robjant, David. 2011. "Is Iris Murdoch an Unconscious Misogynist? Some Trouble with Sabina Lovibond, the Mother in Law, and Gender" *The Heythrop Journal* 52(6): 1021–31.
- Rogatis, Tiziana de. 2019. "Realismo Stregato e Genealogia Femminile in «Menzogna e Sortilegio»." *Allegoria* 31(80): 97–124.
- Rowe, Anne, and Pamela Osborn. 2011. "The Saint and the Hero: Iris Murdoch and Simone Weil." In *Iris Murdoch, Philosopher Meets Novelist*, by Sofia de Melo Araújo and Fátima Viera. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Rozelle-Stone, A. Rebecca. 2013. *Simone Weil and Theology*. London; New York: T&T Clark.
- Rubinacci, Antonella. 2022. "Elsa Morante e il Mondo salvato dalla poesia." *Configurazioni. Ricerche sulla poesia contemporanea* 1 (1): 53–77.
- Ruhr, Mario Von Der. 2006. *Simone Weil: An Apprenticeship in Attention*. London; New York: Continuum.
- Sartre, Jean-Paul. 1938. *La nausée*. Paris: Gallimard.
- 1967. *What is Literature?* Translated by Bernard Frechtman. New York: Philosophical Library.
- 2009. *Existentialism Is a Humanism*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- Schifano, Jean-Noël, and Tjuna Notarbartolo. 1993. *Cahiers Elsa Morante*. Napoli: Edizioni scientifiche italiane.
- Schuster, Nick, and Seth Lazar. 2023. "Attention, Moral Skill, and Algorithmic Recommendation" *Philosophical Studies*: 1–26.
- Schwartz, Casey. 2020. *Attention: A Love Story*. New York: Pantheon.

- Scott-Baumann, Alison. 2022. "Murdoch and Sartre" In *The Murdochian Mind*, by Silvia Caprioglio Panizza and Mark Hopwood. London: Routledge.
- Sgavicchia, Siriana. 2012. *La storia di Elsa Morante*. Pisa: Edizioni ETS.
- . 2018. "Il realismo impossibile di Aracoeli" in *Elsa Morante e il romanzo*, edited by Sara Calderoni. Milano: Marco Saya edizioni.
- Sharp, Ann Margaret. 1984. "Work and Education in the Thought of Simone Weil" *Paedagogica Historica* 24(2): 493–515.
- Smith, Leonie, and Alfred Archer. 2020. "Epistemic Injustice and the Attention Economy" *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 23(5): 777–95.
- Sohlberg, McKay Moore, and Catherine A. Mateer. 1989. *Introduction to Cognitive Rehabilitation: Theory and Practice*. First Edition. New York: Guilford Press.
- Sontag, Susan. 1977. *On Photography*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- . 2001. *Where the Stress Falls: Essays*. First edition. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- . 2004. *Regarding the Pain of Others*. London: Penguin.
- Springsted, Eric O. 2021. *Simone Weil for the Twenty-First Century*. 1st ed. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Stein, Edith. 1989. *On the Problem of Empathy*. Dordrecht: Springer.
- Sweetman, Brendan. 2011. "Introduction" In *A Gabriel Marcel Reader*, by Gabriel Marcel. South Bend: St Augustine's Press.
- Tommasi, Wanda. 1993. *Simone Weil: segni, idoli e simboli*. Milano: Franco Angeli.
- Trini, Mary Elisabeth. 2022. "Il ritmo dell'azione in 'Le beau et le bien' di Simone Weil" *Metaxy Journal. Filosofia, Arte, Riconoscimento* (1): 25-46.
- . 2019. "La mistica, una cosa di tutti i giorni" *Per amore del mondo – rivista della comunità filosofica femminile Diotima* 16.
- Tuck, Lily. 2009. *Woman of Rome: A Life of Elsa Morante*. New York: Harper Collins.
- Unsworth, Nash, & Robison, Matthew K. (2020). Working memory capacity and sustained attention: A cognitive-energetic perspective. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Learning, Memory, and Cognition*, 46(1), 77–103.
- Valerio, Chiara. 2020. *La matematica è politica*. Torino: Einaudi.
- Versluis, Arthur. 2017. *Platonic Mysticism: Contemplative Science, Philosophy, Literature, and Art*. Reprint edition. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Vető, Miklós. 1994. *The Religious Metaphysics of Simone Weil*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Wallace, Cynthia R. 2016. *Of Women Borne: A Literary Ethics of Suffering*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- . 2024. *The Literary Afterlives of Simone Weil: Feminism, Justice, and the Challenge of Religion*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Wallace, David Foster. 2022. *This Is Water: Some Thoughts, Delivered on a Significant Occasion, about Living a Compassionate Life*. New York: Little, Brown.
- Ward, Nora. 2024. "Attending to Animals and Animal Attention" *Journal of Animal Ethics* 14(2).

- Watzl, Sebastian. 2022. "The Ethics of Attention: An Argument and a Framework" In *Salience: A Philosophical Inquiry*, edited by Sophie Archer. New York: Routledge.
- Wehling-Giorgi, Katrin. 2013. "'Totetaco': The Mother-Child Dyad and the Pre-Conceptual Self in Elsa Morante's *La Storia* and *Aracoeli*." *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 49(2):192–200.
- . 2014. "'Il Mondo Delle Madri': Pre-Oedipal Desire and the Decentred Self in Elsa Morante's *La Storia* and *Aracoeli*" In *The Fire Within: Desire in Modern and Contemporary Italian Literature*, edited by Elena Borelli. Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Wehling-Giorgi, Katrin, and Tiziana de Rogatis. 2021. "Traumatic Realism and the Poetics of Trauma in Elsa Morante's Works" *Allegoria* 83: 169–83.
- Weil, Simone. 1950. *La connaissance surnaturelle*. Paris: Gallimard.
- . 1951. *La condition ouvrière*. Paris: Gallimard.
- . 1956a. *The Iliad or the Poem of Force*. Translated by Mary McCarthy. Wallingford: Pendle Hill.
- . 1956b. *The Notebooks of Simone Weil*. Translated by Arthur Wills. 1st Edition. Two vols. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons.
- . 1958. *Oppression and Liberty*. Translated by Arthur Wills and John Petrie. E-Book. London and New York: Routledge.
- . 1959. *Waiting for God*. Translated by Emma Craufurd. New York: Capricorn Books Edition.
- . 1962. *Selected Essays, 1934-1943*. Translated by Richard Rees. Second Edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- . 1963. *Venezia Salva. Tragedia in Tre Atti*. Translated by Cristina Campo. Brescia: Morcelliana.
- . 1968. *On Science, Necessity and the Love of God: Essays*. First Edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- . 1978. *Lectures on Philosophy*. Translated by Hugh Price. Reprint edition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- . 1987. *Formative Writings, 1929-1941*. Cambridge, MA: University of Massachusetts Press.
- . 1994. *Œuvres complètes Tome 6; Cahiers (1933 - septembre 1941)*. Three vols. Paris: Gallimard.
- . 2001. *Incontri Libertari*, edited by Maurizio Zani. Milano: Eleuthera.
- . 2002. *The Need for Roots: Prelude to a Declaration of Duties Towards Mankind*, translated by Arthur Wills. London and New York: Routledge.
- . 2003. *Gravity and Grace*, translated by Emma Crawford and Mario von der Ruhr. London and New York: Routledge.
- . 2005a. *Simone Weil: An Anthology*. London: Penguin.
- . 2005b. *War and the Iliad*. New York Review Books Classics. New York: New York Review Books.
- . 2013. *Il bello e il bene*, edited by Roberto Revello. Milano: Mimesis.
- . 2015a. *First and Last Notebooks: Supernatural Knowledge*, translated by Richard Rees. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers.
- . 2015b. *Seventy Letters: Personal and Intellectual Windows on a Thinker*, translated by Richard Rees. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers.
- . 2015c. *Simone Weil: Late Philosophical Writings*, translated by Eric O. Springsted and Lawrence E. Schmidt. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.

- . 2019. *Venice Saved*. Bloomsbury Academic.
- White, Frances. 2010. “‘The World Is Just a Transit Camp’: Diaspora in the Fiction of Iris Murdoch” *Iris Murdoch Review* 2: 6–13.
- . 2012. “A Post-Christian Concept of Martyrdom and the Murdochian Chorus: The One Alone and T.S. Eliot’s Murder in the Cathedral” In *Iris Murdoch: Texts and Contexts*, edited by Anne Rowe and Avril Horner. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- . 2014. *Becoming Iris Murdoch*. Kingston-upon-Thames: Kingston University Press.
- Whiteley, Ella Kate. 2024. “Attentional Discrimination and Victim Testimony” *Philosophical Psychology* 37(6): 1407–31.
- Winch, Peter. 2008. *Simone Weil “The Just Balance”*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 2001. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Wood, Sharon. 1995. *Italian Women’s Writing, 1860-1994*. Women in Context 2. London: Athlone.
- . 2015. “Excursus as Narrative Technique in La Storia” In *Elsa Morante’s Politics of Writing: Rethinking Subjectivity, History, and the Power of Art*, by Claude Cazalé-Bérard and Sarah Carey, edited by Stefania Lucamante, E-Book. Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press.
- Wu, Tim. 2016. *The Attention Merchants: The Epic Scramble to Get Inside Our Heads*. New York: Alfred a Knopf Inc.
- Yoda, Kazuaki. 2017. “An Approach to Simone Weil’s Philosophy of Education Through the Notion of Reading” *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 36(6): 663–82.
- Zagra, Giuliana, and Simonetta Buttò. 2006. *Le stanze di Elsa: dentro la scrittura di Elsa Morante*. Roma: Colombo.
- Zagra, Giuliana. 2018. “Ritratto della scrittrice attraverso le sue carte” in *Elsa Morante e il romanzo*. edited by Sara Calderoni. Milano: Marco Saya edizioni.
- Zamboni, Chiara. 1993. *Interrogando la cosa: riflessioni a partire da Martin Heidegger e Simone Weil*. Milano: IPL.
- . 2023. “Trasposizioni di immagini. Le traduzioni da Simone Weil” *Cahiers d’études italiennes* 36.
- . Forthcoming. “Postfazione” In *Caterina Diotto, Mythos, o Del Rapporto Fra Romanzo e Verità. Per Una Teoria Del Romanzo Femminista a Confronto Con Lukacs e Benjamin*. Milano: Mimesis.
- Zambrano, María. 2010. *Filosofia e poesia*. Bologna: Pendragon.
- Zanardo, Monica. 2012. “Un Atto Di Accusa e Una Preghiera. Un Autocommento a ‘La Storia’” In *Santi, Sultani e Gran Capitani in Camera Mia. Inediti e Ritrovati Dall’Archivio Di Elsa Morante*, edited by Giuliana Zagra. Roma: Biblioteca Nazionale centrale di Roma.
- . 2014a. “Davide Segre nelle carte manoscritte della ‘Storia’ di Elsa Morante” In *I cantieri dell’italianistica. Ricerca, didattica e organizzazione agli inizi del XXI secolo. Atti del XVII congresso dell’ADI – Associazione degli Italianisti*, edited by B. Alfonzetti, G. Baldassarri, and F. Tomasi.
- . 2014b. “Le poesie di Davide Segre: un’appendice inedita a ‘La Storia’” *Cuadernos de Filología Italiana* 20: 49–71.

- 2017. *Il poeta e la grazia. Una lettura dei manoscritti della «Storia» di Elsa Morante*. Roma: Storia e Letteratura.
- Zanetti, Luca. 2024. “Learning from Suffering in the Community of Philosophical Inquiry: ‘Leaving Our Grasping Egos Behind.’” In *The Pedagogy of the Community of Philosophical Enquiry as Citizenship Education*. London: Routledge.
- Zani, Maurizio. 2001. “Introduzione” in *Incontri libertari*, by Simone Weil, edited by Maurizio Zani, Milano: Eleuthera.
- Zaretsky, Robert. 2023. *The Subversive Simone Weil: A Life in Five Ideas*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Ziolkowski, S. 2015. *Morante and Kafka. The Gothic Walking Dead and Talking Animals*, in *Elsa Morante’s Politics of Writing: Rethinking Subjectivity, History, and the Power of Art*, by Claude Cazalé-Bérard and Sarah Carey, edited by Stefania Lucamante, E-Book. Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press.
- Zwicky, Jan. 2014b. *Lyric Philosophy*. Edmonton: Brush Education.
- 2015. *Alkibiades’ Love: Essays in Philosophy*, Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press.
- 2014c. *Wisdom & Metaphor*. Edmonton: Brush Education.
- 2019. *The Experience of Meaning*. Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press.

Videography

- Wallace, David Foster. “The Future of Fiction in the Information Age”. *The Charlie Rose Show*, 1996. *Artzine Online*, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cj0JgqOnK2M&t=46s>. Accessed 15 Sept. 2024.
- Morante, Elsa. “Interview of Elsa Morante”. YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R_gDhFlyJyw. Accessed 15 Sept. 2024.