Traumatic Repetition and Writing as Awakening in Iris Murdoch’s *The Black Prince*

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“The Black Prince,” Peter Conradi remarks, “concerns the jealous, implicitly murderous hostility that underlies the friendship between a facile artist-protégé and his serious-minded discoverer-patron. Both parties, Arnold Baffin and Bradley Pearson, are aspects of Iris herself” (519). Such a view which regards the novel as a manifestation of the author’s autobiographical aspects forms the critical mainstream of *The Black Prince*. Indeed, many critics have seen Bradley Pearson the protagonist of the novel as a mouthpiece for Murdoch herself; and examining how Murdoch’s moral philosophy is embodied in Bradley’s writing, critics have concentrated their critical efforts on bridging the gap between Murdoch’s and Bradley’s ideas. For example, Dipple who interprets “the unflayed . . . BP[Bradley Pearson] as the primary narrating voice and the flayed BP . . . as the secondary voice” (138) connects Bradley’s metamorphosis with that of “the prisoners in the cave”¹; Nussbaum also approaches Bradley’s view of love in terms of “a source of insight and a source of egoistic fog and delusion” (691), taking the cue from Murdoch’s concept of Eros. In the same vein, Heusel demonstrates the deconstructive effect of postscripts, basing her argument upon the assumption that Murdoch’s voice is at the center of Bradley’s multi-voiced personae.²

Such viewpoints, however, prevent us from examining Bradley’s writing itself, because their main concern is only with the revelation of Murdoch’s philosophy. Furthermore, such viewpoints are incompatible with Murdoch’s attitude toward her literary works:

¹ Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 98. In this paper, all citations of Murdoch’s *The Black Prince* will be parenthetically referenced with page numbers only. For her other works, all quotations will be also parenthetically referenced, but identified by the following abbreviation: *EM* for *Existentialists and Mystics*.

A literary presence if it is too bossy, like Lawrence’s, may be damaging; when for instance one favored character is the author’s spokesman. Bad writing is almost always full of the fumes of personality. . . . I do not mind owning a personal style, but I do not want to be obviously present in my work. (EM 9, underlines added)

Murdoch’s statement that any particular character should not represent author’s voice implies that we try not to read Bradley’s writing in terms of Murdoch’s philosophical ideas. That is, when we read *The Black Prince*, Murdoch maintains, we must investigate his narrative without relying on any outer frame or extrinsic idea, since the story is not about Murdoch, but about Bradley himself, who is at the center of this story as well as the center of the consciousness dominating the story. (Bradley’s narrative is wholly concerned with Bradley himself as well as his love, whose meaning and nature he tries to investigate and define through this writing. Besides, postscripts written by other major characters are solely concerned with Bradley and his statements).

This fact naturally leads us to pay close attention to Bradley’s consciousness as well as his psychological aspects themselves, rather than to Murdoch’s philosophy. It is Nicol who first notices the necessity of psychoanalytic reading of the book: “[W]hile Murdoch’s literary theory recalls a range of theories of authorship from romanticism (e.g. Schiller, Coleridge, Keats) to modernism (Eliot and Joyce) and poststructuralism (Barthes, perhaps even Bakhtin), the body of thought it most resembles is psychoanalysis” (150). Maintaining that “[m]asochism shares its ability to simultaneously generate and confound interpretative endeavour with the work of art, which by definition encourages a multiplicity of interpretations” (158), Nicol tries to trace Bradley’s masochistic aspects. Nicol’s analysis, however, is confined to connecting “the implications of masquerade in masochism” with Bradley’s authorship in the first person.

Though masochism whose image is represented by the “flayed” artist in this novel may be considered as an important aspect of Bradley’s personality, it is trauma that exerts the greatest influences on the life of

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3 It is not by chance that one of characters, Francis Marloe, in his postscript analyzes Bradley’s story in the light of Freudian ideas. Although Bradley treats him as “a subsidiary, a sidesman” or “an excellent fifth wheel” (6), Francis should not be considered as such. He not only opens Bradley’s story as “the mascot of the tale” (6), but also, and more importantly, reveals Bradley’s repressed memories.