

OF MEN AND ANGELS: The Role of the Icon in Iris Murdoch's
THE TIME OF THE ANGELS

'Sweet love, renew thy force —'

(Sonnet LVI)

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In her novel The Time of the Angels, Iris Murdoch makes use of a visual device - a painting - that not only reflects, as a mirror, the situation of conflict and tension between the characters, but also functions as a vital element driving forward the plot.

The present study aims at analysing the novel from the point of view of this dual role of the device: that of oblique illustrator and that of structural agent.

The picture is an icon representing three angels round a table. It belongs to Eugene Peshkov, a Russian porter at the rectory where father Carel has just moved to. Eugene's relation with his only son Leo is painful, though he cannot explain why. One of the problems is Eugene's cult of his 'Russianness', reassured by the icon, and Leo's disdain for it. The icon reminds him of the paradise he lost in Russia when he was a child — a time of wealth, love and happiness. Later it accompanied him in refugee camps, where it continued to give him the feeling of property. The sense of permanence, totally beyond human suffering, kept something of crystallized beauty for him. It is a link between his glorious past, the time in the camps and the present in England. As a kind of detached reality, more real than Eugene's in the camps, it has preserved goodness from the fall that he experienced in his own life.

When Pattie, the ignorant black servant, sees the icon, she feels reassured by the fact that Eugene must believe in God. She accepts God as a taken-for-granted idea, acquired at the orphanage, that there is a kind of love between Him and herself. As Carel was the only person ever to show any affection for her when she came to work for his family, she immediately identified him with God, and physical contact, when they later became lovers, naturally replaced divine devotion. The fact that Carel was a priest did not awaken her guilt, on the contrary, it only reinforced her faith. But when Carel's wife Clara died, guilt began to take hold of Pattie: Clara was a white woman, and innocent, too. And when one day Carel left her bed with no explanation, her insecurity developed. She felt he was gradually losing his faith, and realized he had always seemed to her a damned soul. The meeting with Eugene now is a renewal of faith: he represents the goodness. Pattie feels she has lost forever, the innocent world she has withdrawn from.

On the other hand, Eugene feels Pattie as an outsider like himself, and therefore as an ally. She and the icon are the only things he relies on now. He fears Carel in some vague way, as if a contagious, mysterious fear emanated from the Rector.

Muriel, Carel's daughter, and Elizabeth, her semi-invalid cousin, also feel that Carel is a damned soul. Muriel has an inexplicable sensation of loss of innocence, and a vague fear of menacing evil, which she unconsciously manifests in a long poem she is writing. She often has nightmares about it. It makes her long for a change, whose nature she cannot explain, either. Eugene's presence, the

antithesis of fear, is the only thing that brings her peace.

The girls are engaged in a jigsaw puzzle representing a sea battle, which they haven't been able to identify yet. It is being formed in Elizabeth's room, where a big French mirror reflects the sick girl, who represents for Muriel beauty and innocence, as a sleeping beauty secluded in her enchanted castle.

Carel's brother Marcus Fisher is writing a book on Morality, in which he contrasts pure morals to religion, and he discusses the matter with a retired head-mistress called Norah Shadox-Brown and the Bishop. According to Marcus, an absolute in morals, to be inferred from Man's inherent ethics, must resist the destroying power of logic on the one side, and the inadequacy of myth on the other. Beauty is set as 'a revelation of the spiritual,'¹ thus having an ethical as well as an aesthetic function. The book denies God's existence but paradoxically confirms it by juxtaposing it to the existence of Absolute Good. It analyses the nature of good. Since an absolute Good would be an imposition on human freedom, and, on the other hand, a relative Good determined by human laws would run the risk of being corrupted, Will would be the solution for the establishment of moral values. But Marcus opposes such a theory, in so far as he considers 'will' as a category within human laws, therefore relative and ambiguous. Moreover, he considers Good as intrinsically perfect, transcendentally authoritative. What Marcus fears in Carel is precisely, although he fails to grasp it, his awareness of the non-existence of such Absolute Good. Carel's loss of

faith indirectly shakes his own faith and reflects the fallacy of his own theory. The whole discussion upsets Marcus, as he feels that concepts such as that of the Holy Trinity are not to be questioned. Belief in such entities reassures him of the stability of moral order, just as happened with Pattie when she first saw the icon.

Eugene has also lost his faith, but he believes the icon has a miraculous power of breaking loose things. And one day, when it disappears mysteriously, things are set going, and tension runs its course towards tragedy. The keeping of the icon maintained Eugene's illusion that he possessed something, that some goodness had been preserved after all despite all evil. Leo's confession of the theft destroys what goodness had remained, and now Eugene feels he doesn't want it any more. The difference between father and son becomes more evident, since the painting is the linking point between past and present, Russia and England, which Eugene cherishes so desperately and Leo hates so deeply. A Russian box Muriel gives him as a present strangely reinforces the feeling of deprivation, instead of consoling him. When Leo begins to tell him about the theft, he feels the boy already knows he is going to be upset, as if he felt some pleasure in hurting his father. His own evil begins to show itself to him: he knows that he owes Leo something, that he has somehow failed as a father.

The scene with Leo forces him out of his passive endurance, makes him, as it were, take part in the wrong deed. It revives the deadened grief he experienced in the past,

and Muriel's intervention only increases his humiliation and awakens his hate.

On the other hand, when Leo tells Muriel about it, she feels astonished at the total lack of moral sense and guilt in him. She is partly responsible for the theft, once she suggested it to him indirectly. That was when her fall began, and the more tragic because she was unconscious of it. A promise that she will introduce him to Elizabeth makes him say he will try to recover the painting. She confronts Leo's vitality with Elizabeth's inertia, and concludes their meeting will be profitable for the latter, since the boy's behaviour is, after all, harmless and even pure in its vital force. Although, after overhearing his quarrel with Eugene, she is persuaded he has been wicked and she herself has contributed to his wickedness Muriel feels she must use Leo to shake their enclosed world, where Carel's evil paralyses any manifestation of the will. Leo's relative misbehaviour consists merely of little white lies, and he has still got his will, whereas Carel seems to be guided by an overpowering force beyond his control.

Pattie is also influenced by Carel's strange power. Her will is numbed in such a way that, although she foresees innocent happiness with Eugene, she knows this is an impossible dream, an already unsuccessful attempt to escape from Carel, so that his absurd fantasy of living isolated from the world is, to her, much more real than the perspective of an 'ordinary' life as Eugene's wife. Carel tries to feed his faith on Pattie's absolute love for him, turning her into another Christ to replace the one whom he doesn't believe in any more. Their love-making is a profession of anti-faith

preceded by a mock-religious ritual in which he calls her his 'dark angel ', 'black goddess ', 'counter-virgin' and 'Anti-maria '². Once more Pattie's colour, dubious origin and immoral conduct are indirectly set against his white legitimate innocent wife Clara.

The atmosphere of tension is but for a moment relieved by Norah's rational, self-confident words to Muriel assuring her that there is no real cause for fear, only to be intensified soon afterwards. Muriel foresees the fall of her established world when she is about to introduce Leo to Elizabeth. What she sees in her cousin's room is much worse than anything she could ever have conceived of, or anything poor Leo could ever have done in his naïve wickedness. Muriel and Leo are then described as angels falling down from their innocent world. The inevitability of the scene imposes itself on her through a crack in the linen room beside Elizabeth's bedroom. It is reflected in the mirror which protects the lovers, Elizabeth and Carel, with 'a faint concealing veil,'³ so unreal and impossible it first seems to her; and yet, 'it was like looking into clear water,'⁴ like seeing reality for the first time with 'perfect clarity.'⁵

In the meantime, Marcus's concern for Leo has made him buy the icon back at an antique shop. He then takes it to the Rectory, where he tells Carel of his apprehension for Elizabeth, and they discuss Carel's faith. The rector tries to explain the truth he has had a glimpse of, the truth that there is no God. But it is not simply atheism: the negation of God's existence leads on to the confirmation of the existence of evil, but not as such, since the absence of God

as a point of reference annuls the dualism good-evil. The only reality he perceives is man's subjection to chance and his consequent unattainable spirituality. That is when he sees the icon and feels fascinated by the three angels, God's thoughts, even more unattainable to man than God Himself. Marcus realizes he must change his book now. Instead of proving the existence of Goodness for nothing, he will write about the existence of Love, the only way to human salvation.

While Carel is waiting for the consummation of his destiny, Muriel's fate has also started its way towards the end. Her last hope lies in Eugene's power to purge her of the sin of having violated the secret of Carel and Elizabeth and thus revealed the horrifying truth. Seeing the icon in Carel's desk increases her sensation of imminent tragedy, as if there were still things he could do. As Carel compels her to leave the Rectory, she tells him she hates him and runs away with the icon, which she believes to be her salvation. But she leaves it on the hall table and it is Pattie who takes it back to Eugene. This infuriates Muriel and a consequent quarrel with Pattie expresses their mutual hate.

The recovery of the icon gives Eugene a perspective of happiness. It has all been a miracle for him and Pattie, the way it has come back. Now he is convinced it is really miraculous, and relies entirely on it as a good omen, a renewal of faith. Muriel's sudden appearance brings his fear back, and then she tells him the truth about the return of the painting, and Pattie's liaison with Carel, which Pattie painfully confirms as something inevitable. Evil follows evil:

the girl tells Pattie about Elizabeth and Carel, which Pattie seems to have expected somehow as inevitable, too. Muriel still believes there is a way out of the whole mess, but total destruction is the only thing left, and Pattie pours down the last drop of evil telling her that Elizabeth is Carel's own daughter. This places Elizabeth as the counterpoint of Pattie in relation to Carel: she is his white, young and beautiful Anti-maria. It is evident to Muriel now that she must follow her own fate, see the jigsaw finished. She waits for Carel's death without calling for help because she knows it has been his choice, maybe even his fate to make such a choice. The non-existence of God is clear to her now, chance being the only absolute entity before which there is no will, no choice. She feels that his suicide is the only escape from his unbearable awareness of that. Letting him go is what is left of her love for him. Only now is she given to understand his desperate eagerness for redeeming love, which no one would ever be able to give. Pattie leaves him not as an escape towards 'normal' life, but due to her awareness of the ultimate impossibility of such absolute love.

Marcus apprehends Carel's death as a matter of chance and his conscience of such chance as the cause of the suicide. But he doubts whether what Carel envisaged is really the truth.

Muriel and Elizabeth's fate is to be together now, without ever being able to love each other absolutely. Their look when they leave the Rectory reminds one of the angels in the icon.

And the last terrible act of chance finally comes out: Mrs Barlow, the psychiatric social worker from the pastorate who has called so many times at the Rectory and been sent away every time, is the cause of the whole tragedy, the woman whom Carel, Marcus and their third brother Julian had been in love with in the past. Had Carel known it, had he seen her and talked to her, that could perhaps have made all the difference.

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The icon as a source of light illuminates to the characters their own reality and that of those around them. Eugene, Marcus, Pattie, Muriel and Carel all suffer from moral blindness, and the development of plot consists of their gradual perception of reality. The icon works not only as a mirror reflecting at the same time appearance and reality, but as a structural device contributing to the development of a process in which those two ideas are opposed and appearance finally collapses to show the reality that lies behind.

Let us begin with Eugene, its owner, and whom it influences more deeply and more directly than the other characters. What Eugene fails to understand is the fact that the permanent beauty of the icon exists totally apart from his life, and that it can never replace what he has lost. The icon is not a linking point between past and present, but precisely a warning that such a link cannot exist in human life, by nature fragmented and chaotic. Its preserved beauty is a reality, but Eugene's belief in its miraculous powers is an illusion. It really is a visual representation of

goodness, but as such it simply cannot be touched or possessed, just contemplated. This leads on to his second illusion: the icon suggests a feeling of property, and only when it is stolen does Eugene realize the precariousness of such possession, indeed of any human possession. The theft awakens in him a greater feeling of loss, which started when he was a boy and his English terrier died. The fact that this is recalled by means of a gift — the Russian box Muriel gives him — is significant: instead of representing something given, it reminds him of something taken, teaching him that nothing is really 'possessed.'

Having to accept not only the theft, but the fact that it has been Leo's deed, is even more painful to Eugene. He remembers sad things of the past, which he'd rather remained forgotten, and feels he has lost not only the icon, but the belief in its magic power.

The recovery of the painting has a connotation similar to that of the receiving of the box: together with it Eugene gains a vision of the whole truth about Pattie and Carel. Being deprived of Pattie's love is a suffering far deeper than the pleasure of recovering the icon. Losing it and getting it back are not two opposite stages of a temporal evolution, one after the other, but two apparently contradictory aspects of the same truth. Eugene loses on the one side and gains on the other: the momentary loss and recovery occasion a permanent acquisition of truth. The sameness of the image only emphasizes the mutability of human life, which Eugene finally understands:

The milky blue angels were infinitely sad. They had travelled a long way. When Eugene was gone they would still travel on and on, until one day no one knew who they were any more. There was only this travelling. (p. 233)

No possible happiness will ever greet him. The sacredness of the icon is sadly suffocated with a tablecloth and packed with his oddments and newspapers.

Simple-minded Pattie also deludes herself, drawing the conclusion that Eugene must believe in God just because he owns an icon. She knows Carel has lost his faith, and that is perhaps why she wants to believe in Eugene's. She hides her guilt from him, sure that the goodness that emanates from him (and from the painting) can efface it. But things cannot be undone: confronting her relationship with Carel and comparing it with Eugene's pure love, she realizes her loss of innocence. Taking the icon back to him, instead of being a good omen, provokes Muriel's rage and the consequent revelation of her own truth: 'She was unclean, she was unworthy, she was black, and she belonged to another, it was all true.'⁶ When Pattie finally learns of Carel and Elizabeth being lovers, she sees her love for him, for the first time, as it really is: human, therefore fallible. The vision is so painful that she runs away.

Muriel's illusions are also destroyed by the painting. She too hastily compensates for her fear of Carel with the peace of mind brought by Eugene's presence. Falling in love

with him is almost inevitable, and she maintains the illusion, similar to Pattie's in that respect, that Eugene is the way out of danger. Their involvement leads her, not out of danger, but, on the contrary, into the awareness of the nature of such danger: the truth about her father and Elizabeth.

Here two other illuminating devices come out in the novel: the jigsaw puzzle and the mirror in Elizabeth's room. The figure the puzzle forms is vague in the beginning, but it is there like a warning to Muriel that she is to face a much more difficult puzzle, not one of a sea battle, but of her own battle with the truth. As it is little by little revealed to her, more and more pieces fit in, until the last one, Carel's death, is placed and the game is over.

As to the mirror, it works in a much more subtle way. The first time, it reflects Elizabeth, to Muriel's deluded eyes, with a halo of fairy-like beauty and innocence, as 'a magical archway in whose glossy depths one might see suddenly shimmering into form the apparition of a supernatural princess'.⁷ The image is false, perhaps that is why it seems dream-like, but neither Muriel nor the reader perceive it. (In the case of Elizabeth, we see her through Muriel's eyes. Considering Pattie's image, for example, our knowledge antecedes Eugene's, so that we are able to observe his illusion from the outside and anticipate his suffering, whereas here we suffer with Muriel the same impact of discovery, with the same intensity). Muriel cherishes this image of Elizabeth as the incarnation of purity, and looks at it as a way of deviating her eyes from the tempting spy-hole in the linen-room beside.

The clarity and size of the mirror are obviously contrasted with the obscurity of the linen-room and the smallness of the spy-hole. The L-shape of the room itself is a trick, since it hides the bed far back in a recess. Appearance imposes itself upon a reality that Muriel intuitively foresees but tries to avoid. On the second occasion, reality shows itself reflected in the same (no more deceiving) mirror, but from a different perspective: through the spy-hole which frightened and attracted Muriel so much. The contrast between dark and light is again emphasized: from the dark room she sees into light (and so does the reader). Here the icon and the mirror become linked not only as truth-revealers, but also as elements of the plot, since it was a vision of Elizabeth in the mirror that Leo asked for in exchange for the painting. This is Muriel's first contact with reality: 'It was like looking into clear water (...) Light seemed to fall like a faint concealing veil between her and the mirror.'⁸ almost blinding her with such a significant revelation. The 'small circle of perfect clarity' (it is 'small' and yet perfect) enables her to see Elizabeth 'clear and yet unlocated like an apparition.'⁹ Reality is so astonishing that Muriel at first sight mistakes it for appearance, just as she has always mistaken appearance for reality. And it is so difficult for her to bear it, that the icon comes out as the only spark of illusion left: returning it to Eugene seems like a redeeming act; but, like the Russian box, it fails, ironically serving to increase Eugene's hostility. There is no way of overcoming the basic difference between them: her un-

friendly (though unconscious) superiority. She represents to Eugene what he hates most of all, the evidence of his social displacement: 'Englishness' is played by her as opposed to 'Russianness' played by the icon and used by him in defence against the hostility of the environment. The hate aroused in Muriel by a series of conflicts — which the icon does have the power of bringing out — is followed by her apprehension of love as the only, and never completely achieved human goal. She is described in the bedroom scene like a falling angel. In the end, when she leaves the Rectory carrying Elizabeth, they both have a similar look.

Marcus shares the illuminating power of the icon on quite a different level. Puzzled by the question of God's existence and, on the other hand, limited by his own intellectual approach and the practical nature of his own temperament, he holds on to concepts such as that of the Holy Trinity, a remote but always certain belief:

He wanted the old structure to continue there beside him, near by, something he could occasionally reach out and touch with his hand. (p. 94)

He fails to communicate with Carel because each one's mind operates on different levels. Their talking is not a dialogue, but two isolated monologues, with Marcus's speeches invariably ending in a dash indicating incomplete utterances. In bringing the painting back to the Rectory he involuntarily precipitates a crisis. The Trinity represented by the three

angels in the icon, in which he wants so much to believe, when examined by Carel , depicts the void left by God's absence: the unattained angels. Marcus says, 'It represents the Trinity, *of course*' ¹⁰ (italics mine), in a vain attempt to maintain the established values of his world. But when he leaves he is unable to get the icon from Carel, subjugated by his brother's authority. In losing hold of it, he also loses his illusion concerning the certainty of the concept of the Trinity. However, in the end of the novel, he simply dismisses the subject, deciding that a holiday will do him good.

Marcus and Carel are counterpointed characters not only in what concerns their different forms of apprehension and the problem of faith, but in relation to the icon as well. Marcus buys it and brings it back intentionally, thus re-introducing into the Rectory, and into the plot, the vital element, the image of truth, that reveals the characters to themselves and to the others, thus releasing the whole tragedy. Yet, Marcus fails to perceive the range of his action. For him, the icon depicts only the Trinity. He evaluates it in terms of the three hundred pounds he has to pay for it, and of the weakness in him that makes him pay so much, his weakness for Leo. He may eventually have looked at the image, but he is unable to see it properly. Carel's only contact with the icon, on the other hand, is when he sees it in Marcus's hands. But one single moment is enough for him to grasp the meaning of the angels, to see through it and understand its full significance. For Carel, there is no separation between physical, mental and spiritual levels, only one global consciousness:

Carel had lived this, perhaps been maddened by it and perhaps died of it. Marcus had felt its faint touch (...) only just enough to know the falsity of what he had written in his book. (p. 226)

The mystery of multiplicity in unity — represented by the Trinity in the icon — only reinforces Carel's loss of faith. He says,

If there is goodness it must be one (...) Multiplicity is not paganism, it is the triumph of evil (...) The death of God has set the angels free (...) Now he (God) has been dissolved into his thoughts which are beyond our conception in their nature and their multiplicity and their power (...) We are the prey of the angels.
(pp. 172-74)

This is the only thing he believes in now, and when he sees the icon he feels it is confirmed by the image. If the painting has failed to ratify the power of the Trinity to Marcus (that is why he is so eager to call it the Trinity), now it succeeds in illustrating the power of evil to Carel, and that is why it looks so clear and substantial. Carel unwraps it, revealing its image under a bright lamplight. The paper contrasted with the lamp once more suggests the chiaroscuro of revelation and blindness, like Muriel's vision of the mirror from the linen-room. The painting is described as a 'solid wooden rectangle (that) glowed golden

and blue' ¹¹ in the splendour of its truthfulness. The angels are infinitely helpless and, because of that, infinitely beautiful:

The three bronzed angels, weary with humility and failure, sat in their conclave holding their slender rods of office, graceful and remote, bowing their small heads to each other under their huge creamy haloes, floating upon their thrones in an empyrean of milky brightness. (p. 175)

This echoes the first description in chapter one, but only now can one see it so clearly. So that, although it is obviously the same image, it strikes one as being somehow different now, as if it had been wrapped up all the time and one were looking at it for the first time. Only now do their heads look so small, and their haloes so huge, and their helplessness so evident and so touching.

Marcus is perhaps the most alienated of all characters (for the others, though for some time under the veil of illusion, are finally forced to face the truth and change their lives because of it). He does have a glimpse of the truth, but he certainly forgets all about it too quickly with the illusion of a holiday. In this respect, he counterpoints Leo. Leo is practical too, the range of his apprehension is also narrow but, young and naïve as he may be, he conceives of illusion as a destructive power, and of man as a helpless creature. Leo is the practical result, and

Carel is the philosophical one, of the same awareness of man's subjection to chance. He represents the outdoor vital energy (opposing Carel's indoor inactivity) which, in an inconsequent manner, steals the icon, thus removing Eugene's point of reference for his dreamy fantasy. He is able to see the icon as it really is for Eugene, a kind of escape from reality. He is always trying to tell his father about their new country, but the basic difference between their points of view hinders communication. The theft of the icon does not really mean much to him, since the icon itself doesn't. He tells Muriel of the uselessness of morality in a world which may be 'just frogspawn in somebody's pond'.¹² It is he, also, who tells Muriel to look at Elizabeth through the spy-hole. He needn't undergo a process of discovery, so he does not change during the novel. His figure is as static as that of the angels in the painting, and, in fact, Muriel once feels, looking at him, that he resembles a work of art.

Elizabeth is the only major character who has no direct contact with the icon. As a matter of fact, she acts like a painting herself, when her image in the mirror discloses the truth to Muriel. Like Leo, her physical beauty is described in terms of detached radiance, as if she, too, belonged to the world of art:

(...) and yet continued to have the slightly :
exotic feathered appearance of a favourite page.
Her straight pale yellow hair fell in even
pointed locks to her shoulders, metallic and
decorative as a medieval head-dress. Her long

narrow face was pale too (...) Only her large eyes, a dark-grey blue, glowed more richly.
(pp.36-37)

One must notice the similarity to a Byzantine painting: paleness, halolike hair, narrow face and huge eyes. She is sharply contrasted with Leo in their situation in the plot — her confinement and his exposure — but not in relation to illusion and reality: they know the truth about themselves, and Leo is always lying to maintain the others' false hope that he is adapting himself to a decent life, while Elizabeth keeps up her false innocence before the household. She does not change, either: it is the other characters that change once they come to know of her true position.

The icon as a source of light must illuminate all the characters, and its theft is a device in the plot that favours its passing from hand to hand: Leo steals it, Marcus buys it back, Carel sees it, Muriel tries to take it to Eugene, Pattie succeeds in doing so, and Eugene recovers it. These comings and goings are actually described by means of verbs indicating visually the act of holding or letting go: steal, take, get, sell, hold, snatch, hug, lay down, pick up, give, buy, leave, find, bring, wrap, pack, and so on. When touching the icon physically they touch the truth spiritually. And ironically what causes this passing from one to another character are trivial coincidences of time and space. If Muriel had not left it on the side table in the hall, for example, and if Pattie had not seen it by chance

and given it back to Eugene, part of the tragedy would not have taken place.

In The Time of the Angels Iris Murdoch has achieved personal detachment and economy of symbolism, since the authority of the icon derives not from the author's manipulation of it, but from its own artistic and religious values. On the other hand, the exploitation of the icon as a symbol is limited by the nature of the painting and of the novel itself. The anonymity of expression peculiar to Byzantine art conveys a kind of mysticism well suited to the atmosphere of mystery that dominates the novel. The icon is to remain in its apparently elementary form, always remote and obscure, as inexplicable as the meaning of life that puzzles the characters so much.

The world of transiency and circumstance inhabited by Miss Murdoch's characters finds its momentary significance in the contemplation of a form which, by providing it with an insight into the cosmic order, both reveals the burden of its own contingency, and acts as a relief to it.

NOTES

¹ Iris Murdoch, The Time of the Angels (Harmonds-Worth: Penguin Books, 1974), p. 72.

² Murdoch, p. 157.

³ Murdoch, p. 165.

⁴ Murdoch, p. 164.

⁵ Murdoch, p. 165.

⁶ Murdoch, p. 208.

⁷ Murdoch, p. 45.

⁸ Murdoch, pp. 164-65.

⁹ Murdoch, p. 165.

¹⁰ Murdoch, p. 175.

¹¹ Murdoch, p. 175.

¹² Murdoch, p. 108.