

‘Usually The Better Ones’: Into Crystalline with Murdoch and Kuan Yin

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In her seminal essay ‘Against Dryness’ (1961), Iris Murdoch offers a perceptive, prescient, and self-consciously ‘polemical’ appraisal of mid-20th century writing. Prescriptively evaluating the modern novel in terms of modern poetry (whilst denying she is doing so), Murdoch condemns ‘dryness’ in modern (ist) literary texts. Yet certain aspects of this selfsame ‘dryness’ are qualities vital to the successful dynamic of Murdoch’s best writing: ‘clearness, self containedness (sic)’, foregrounding of myth, metaphor, symbol, precision, an organic musicality of structure, and conceptual coherence.

So what can we make of the apparent paradox? Murdoch calls certain types of literature ‘crystalline’ (in opposition to the ‘journalistic’ or ‘documentary’): such works turn art into ‘a small quasi-allegorical object . . . portraying the human condition’ and demonstrate a too ‘shallow and flimsy an idea of human personality’. ‘Reality is not a given whole,’ she boldly declares: ‘Against the consolations of form, the clean crystalline work, the simplified fantasy-myth, we must pit the destructive power of the now so unfashionable naturalistic idea’. I think Murdoch is brilliant here, craftily disingenuous, knowingly donning the mantle of devil’s advocate-apologist for crucial elements of her own writing, and the tension she engenders between the poetic and the journalistic here is worthy of further exploration.

The question I endeavour to address in this paper, then, is: How might Murdoch’s provocative pronouncements in ‘Against Dryness’ be usefully applied to her own work? Avowing that her ‘complaints . . . are concerned primarily with prose, not with poetry’, Murdoch again turns dissembler: ‘crystalline’ aspects of art that she seemingly decries in ‘Against Dryness’ openly feature, in fact arguably characterize and dominate, much of her best prose, and certainly underpin her strongest poetry. One thinks of her later novels (particularly *Jackson’s Dilemma*), and important poems such as ‘Music in Ireland’ in this respect. Economically to unpick Murdoch’s typically mischievous, agile-minded position here, I will examine two Murdochian works: the poem ‘The Phoenix-Hearted’ (1938), and the novel *A Severed Head* (1961), both of which ‘crystalline’ pieces employ what might be termed *symboliste* strategies in an attention to the East Asian bodhisattva, Kuan Yin (觀音). By doing so, I hope to demonstrate that, if read in the light of Murdoch’s own enigmatic instruction, these cornerstone ‘crystalline’ texts are vital to those of us who wish more fully to appreciate Murdoch’s multifaceted, maverick attitude(s) to criticism, to life, and to art.