

Iris Murdoch's Worlds of Sounds and Silences in *The Sacred and Profane Love Machine*

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When we think of Iris Murdoch's relationship with other art forms, the visual arts come readily to mind. Murdoch's imagery, when describing an atmosphere or a setting, is also very often richly visual. However, music and other sounds can also be very important. Murdoch orchestrates her sound-worlds as much with ambient noise, birdsong and human sounds overheard, as with actual music.

Every musician knows the importance of silence. Music could not exist without the silences surrounding it, and silences come in different qualities, moods and textures. And like the experience of listening to or hearing music, the attributes of silence are necessarily perceived, consciously or unconsciously, and perhaps even created, by a listener or hearer. In Murdoch's novels, when silence is described it is rarely just a matter of scene-setting – it almost always tells us about the state of mind of the character who is experiencing it. In this article I will consider some of the ways silence is manifested in her 1974 novel *The Sacred and Profane Love Machine*.

Silence appears at the very beginning of this novel when David Gavender, teenage son of Blaise and Harriet, looking out of his bedroom window, notices a small boy standing in the garden and watching the house. 'Why did the none of the dogs bark?', David wonders (7). Harriet has seen the boy too, and 'had noticed the silence of the dogs', and 'a great fear invaded her heart' (10). Later we find out that the child is Blaise's other son from his long clandestine relationship with Emily McHugh. The fact that the Harriet's seven 'neurotic' dogs did not bark, which makes Luca's presence seem other-worldly and sinister to both David and Harriet, is explained by the fact that Luca 'saved his dinner and took it to the dogs' (104). Nevertheless, Luca's silent appearance at the comfortable middle-class Hood House – 'bourgeois' according to Emily – is both a portent and a catalyst for the dramatic events of the novel.

Silence – quietness – is also an attribute of Hood House and of Harriet, the home-

maker and ministering angel of the house. Harriet comes out into the garden at the start of the novel to breathe 'the rich polleny fragrance of the silent air' (10), when she catches sight of Luca. 'How thick the silence was,' Harriet thinks, despite the house being on the suburban fringes of London (12). In turn, Harriet's husband Blaise is watching her from the house. 'Harriet's motionless figure seemed brimful of the stillness of the evening, her quietness made the garden more quiet' (23).

In this opening part of the novel, we see these characters watching each other silently, pondering their feelings and revealing something of their own personal obsessions and fears. There is no conversation between them until nearly twenty pages into the novel. The first words spoken are from Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, read aloud by Blaise to his wife and son in a regular family ritual which he and Harriet both cherished, while David had long outgrown it but could not resist 'the silent will of both parents beseeching him, compelling him to come' (25). For Harriet, 'The presence of both the men [Blaise and David] in this sort of quietness filled her with a kind of happiness which was also anguish, was terror' (25). These fears, though inexplicable to her at the time, are based on a sound intuition and are borne out by the terrible events that follow.

Once Harriet and Blaise start to talk, after Blaise's reading, it is obvious that they are not communicating perfectly – there are irritations and insincerities already showing up in their dialogue. David has returned to his bedroom to continue his indulgence in the silent misery of fastidious youth. When he is told that his father has another family he 'listened in silence' (150) and subsequently becomes even more cut off from his parents.

The opening of this novel, with its emphasis on isolation and silence, contrasts with Murdoch's other novels of the period such as *A Fairly Honourable Defeat* (1970) and *An Accidental Man* (1971), which both start with dialogue, and *The Black Prince* (1973), which begins with forewords situating and framing the narrative. Each novel's beginning sets the tone for what is to come. The stillness and watchfulness of the characters in this first section of *The Sacred and Profane Love Machine* is appallingly matched at the climax in the airport at Hanover when Harriet, fleeing with Luca from the unbearable situation at home, notices police watching two young men standing alone 'in the midst of deadly quietness' before the shocking, deafening sound of gunfire (334). In the opening, too, there is fearful silence, the calm before the storm, before the cataclysmic events set in train by Luca's silent vigil in the Hood House garden.

All page references are to Iris Murdoch, *The Sacred and Profane Love Machine* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976)