Morality by Words: Murdoch, Nussbaum, Rorty*

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Abstract
Despite the initial strangeness of grouping Iris Murdoch (a Platonist), Martha Nussbaum (an Aristotelian), and Richard Rorty (a pragmatist) together, this paper will argue that these thinkers share a strong commitment to the moral purport of literature. I will also show that their shared idea of moral engagement through literature interlocks the individual's sense of self and the world of others. After considering their accounts, I will conclude by raising the question of literature's moral limits.

Key terms *Murdoch, Nussbaum, Rorty, literature, ethics*

An admission: It is bizarre to place these three philosophers in one text. Iris Murdoch (1919–1999) is a *Platonist,* Martha Nussbaum (1947–) is an *Aristotelian,* and Richard Rorty (1931–2007) is a *pragmatist*. These labels, which situate them too conveniently within their respective

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intellectual traditions, imply that it is difficult, perhaps even futile, to make them speak with each other. What would be the point? What insight can one possibly glean from exploring thinkers who seem so autonomous and set in their own ways?

This paper will brave this challenge. It will show that between the three of them a significant insight exists, and that this insight is a *moral* one. It stems from their common guiding thought that, quoting Murdoch, "language is soaked in value."[1] My work is thus an attempt to dissolve the initial strangeness between Murdoch, Nussbaum, and Rorty. I will argue that while they adhere to different philosophical traditions, they share a strong commitment to grasp the moral meaning of literature. I will also show that their shared version of moral engagement through literature interlocks the individual's sense of self and the world of others. Based on their accounts, I will conclude by provoking the question of literature's moral limits.

The Moral Thread

For Murdoch, Nussbaum, and Rorty, the moral question pulses along the blurred margins of an individual's personal world and her world of interaction with others. When seeking answers to *What is good?* or *Who must I aspire to be?*, she tarries between two concerns: on the one hand, her responses bear a significance to her sense of self—in Rortyan terms, some sort of private universe, where beliefs and desires are created, shattered, and remade; on the other, these questions also figure within her environment, where other people, with their respective histories and complexities, connect with her reality. For these three philosophers, it is integral in morality not to lose sight of life *interior* and *exterior*—in this "human, all too human" battle, both worlds equally matter.

[1] Iris Murdoch, "Art as Imitation of Nature," in *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1997), 253.

This is not, of course, a claim that these philosophers share a common account of the private-public distinction. Murdoch divides morality between private contemplation and public action. She sees a person's inner life as composed of personal attitudes and visions, and outer life as constituted by actions and choices. She does not, however, deny the progressive nature of their interaction.[2] Nussbaum, meanwhile, sees no harsh separation between the two dimensions. Following Aristotle, she thinks that "the good human life is a life with and toward others; membership in a polis is an important part of one's other-directed activity."[3] Who we are at home, hence, is interwoven with our social being. Rorty, in contrast to Nussbaum, cuts moral responsibility in half, arguing that personal and public goals cannot be unified in a single vision. He believes that self-fulfillment and social responsibility are equal ends, and follows the liberalist credo that people should be allowed to pursue their own versions of happiness, provided that their behavior does not inflict harm on others. This is Rorty's rationale behind his statement that "J. S. Mill's suggestion that governments devote themselves to optimizing the balance between leaving people's private lives alone and preventing suffering seems to me pretty much the last word."[4] Notwithstanding the differences between Murdoch, Nussbaum, and Rorty, it is clear that what they share is a general belief that an individual should attend to both the understanding of herself and of others when it comes to morality.

Aside from their recognition of the private and public nature of our moral concerns, what is even more fascinating to explore between them is why they argue that at its best, *literature* engages this moral relationship between personal ends and the common good. They assert that reading

[2] Iris Murdoch, "Vision and Choice in Morality," in *Existentialists and Mystics*, 76–98.

[3] Martha Nussbaum, "The Discernment of Perception: An Aristotelian Conception of Private and Public Rationality," in *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 98.

[4] Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 63.

literature both intimates the modulation of our personal experiences and counts as a tool for the improvement of our moral imagination. Murdoch thinks that it cultivates *unselfing* to lead us closer to the Good, Nussbaum believes that it helps in the envisaging of good and unique lives, and Rorty thinks that literature encourages both self-fulfillment and the recognition of suffering. While these thinkers do not guarantee that a person nurtured by beautiful words will grow into a moral one, their views suggest that the more literature we consume, the better our chances of enriching our sense of the moral. Reading literature—especially novels—can simultaneously help us become insightful and creative individuals within our personal space, and compassionate fellows with a bountiful sense of empathy in the community.

However, we can cast doubt upon this optimistic claim. Perhaps a more humble and reasonable approach is to say that the most literature can do is teach us how to comprehend ethical situations and perceive the good when it shines. Interestingly, it is also stimulating to inquire if literature can rouse negative consequences. Can reading literature intensify the fragmented quality of our existence instead of helping us envisage and compose a good life? More frighteningly, can stories lure us to take immoral turns? Can they motivate us to do something wrong, scrupulously and willfully? What follows now is an articulation of the relationship between literature and morality as explored by Murdoch, Nussbaum, and Rorty. I conclude by questioning the moral limits of literature.

Iris Murdoch: How can one be good?

The modern age, for Murdoch, is plagued by a sense of existential emptiness. The contemporary view of man is that each person is free and responsible for the generation of his or her own beliefs and actions. The subject is essentially perceived as the maker of his or her own fate. But in actuality, this position of self-control is illusory, for it is evident that we are imprisoned by the limits of human finitude and contingency. As Murdoch expresses, "we are what we seem to be, transient mortal creatures subject

to necessity and chance."[5] While she takes this human condition to be true, she also believes that emphasizing the pessimism behind this existentialist diagnosis is misguided. Our preoccupation with the helpless self, for her, is actually one of the grand modern delusions that we need to get rid of. She thinks that instead of obsessing over the failures of the finite, imperfect self, our true task is to redirect our attention toward making the Good "the magnetic centre of reflection."[6]

Following Plato, Murdoch thinks there exists a battle between truth and falsity. The belief that the self creates and negates its own values and principles, and the notion of our solitary helplessness in this endeavor, are examples of these moral falsities in Murdoch's reading. This is because the True, the Good, and the Beautiful are not *within* the self; rather, they are ideals that an individual is predisposed to struggle and aspire for. Murdoch asserts that the Good is beyond us, but that within each of us beats the impulse toward it. We hope to reach that "distant transcendent perfection, a source of uncontaminated energy, a source of new and quite undreamt-of virtue."[7] Our natural inclination, then, is to look for ways to come closer to this tripartite perfection. But as frail and finite souls, this goal is unachievable. The most we can expect from this life is to receive glimpses of this ideal. At times we recognize it, such as when we are arrested by the radiance of "great art" or when we feel its presence in "humble people who serve others." So the question now is this: How can we lend solid weight to the experience of the blinkered beauty, truth, and goodness in our lives, how can we prolong our chance encounters with them?

Murdoch answers that it is by displacing the gravity of the self to gain a keener perception of our common world. This is called *unselfing*, or the clearing away of the selfish ego. By deflating our interests, we become better prepared to appreciate the goodness that exists in others and in

[5] Iris Murdoch, "The Sovereignty of Good Over Other Concepts," in *Existentialists and Mystics*, 365.

[6] Ibid., 384.

[7] Ibid., 383.

things, as "goodness is connected with the attempt to see the unself, to see and to respond to the real world in the light of a virtuous consciousness."[8] The process of being watchful and attentive, and of being considerate of other lives and contexts, are indicative of this gracious form of unselfing. It is from our seeing of what is external from us, of preventing ourselves from falling into delusion or succumbing to morbid self-interest, that we are able to love and appreciate the existence of others and of the world. But contra Plato, who is infamous for banishing the poets from his Republic,[9] Murdoch believes that literature can actually serve as a valuable tool for moral, righteous reflection.[10] Her revisionist reading of Plato argues that instead of viewing literature as falsifying our perception of life, we should consider how reading invites us to participate in the many ways of living in truth and virtue. But how exactly does literature do this?

For one thing, Murdoch thinks that we are all storytellers; we operate by weaving sentences and pictures in a comprehensible form to relay both the ordinary and the extraordinary. Storytelling is a natural impulse for human beings, because "we are interested in the quality of our own self-being or consciousness—we brood on it—and because we are endlessly interested in other people."[11] Literature, being composed of stories about others, takes our attention away from our own lives and helps us appreciate other contexts. For Murdoch, this quality makes the study of literature essential in understanding our human culture. She regards it as the most accessible of the human arts, for we recognize a portion of what it means to be alive, in the spectrum of weakness and greatness, when we discover characters in a story. Greek tragedies are understandable to us; we remember Patroclus, Antigone, Cordelia, Mr. Knightly, and Alyosha. As beings toiling the soil of one earth, "we make, in many respects though not

[8] Ibid., 376.

[9] On the ancient quarrel between poetry and philosophy, see Book X of Plato's *The Republic*.

[10] Iris Murdoch, "The Fire and the Sun: Why Plato Banished the Artists," in *Existentialists and Mystics*, 461.

[11] Murdoch, "Art as Imitation," 253.

in all, the same kinds of moral judgments as the Greeks did, and we recognize good or decent people in times and literatures remote from our own."[12] Art (especially literature), then, educates and reveals, for we uncover fresh perspectives which do not belong to the humdrum of our everyday vision. Our lives become more meaningful upon considering "the characters of Shakespeare or Tolstoy or the paintings of Velasquez or Titian."[13] In the process of self-understanding and world-discovery, our rendezvous with novels can also increase our chances of acquainting ourselves with many of the Good's "scattered intimations," for Murdoch considers literature as a battle between real people and images.[14] The works of Shakespeare, Jane Austen, George Eliot, and Leo Tolstoy[15] are among those which impart lessons about how to be conscientious human beings for Murdoch. Their power comes from having both a realistic and aesthetic grip on the world.

Martha Nussbaum: How should one live?

Nussbaum does not share Murdoch's judgment that it is our existentialist preoccupation with the self that is fundamentally problematic in moral formation. In contrast, she argues that it is actually our inability to properly assess the issues and circumstances that surround the individual that serves as the source of our moral inadequacies. She, in fact, recommends that we focus on the continuous exercise of self-examination when it comes to ethics.

Nussbaum examines the theme of the good life in the exploration of our personal significance. She recognizes the disenchanting fact that we cannot imagine unchanging life-projects; the surprises of luck and chance

[12] Iris Murdoch, "Existentialists and Mystics" in *Existentialists and Mystics*, 229.
[13] Iris Murdoch, "On 'God' and 'Good,'" in *Existentialists and Mystics*, 353.
[14] Iris Murdoch, "Against Dryness," in *Existentialists and Mystics*, 295.
[15] Iris Murdoch, "The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited," in *Existentialists and Mystics*, 271–72.

may affect how things will eventually turn out to be. While our narratives can be illuminated in parts or at times be reasoned away, a solid, reliable story is impossible to plan or project. For Nussbaum, there is no ultimate answer to the ideal of the good life, nor is there a way to achieve it. What we know for certain is only that our human condition compels us to organize life with our own hands as best as we can. But how can we do this? Following Aristotle,[16] Nussbaum makes a case for practical intelligence[17]—a function that allows us to see the difficulty, contingency, and indeterminacy of the elements that govern and particularize our lives. She believes we can make ourselves capable of examining the actors, reasons, emotions, and events that populate concrete encounters. What we do can be subjected to a skillful deciphering, no matter how conflicted they are in the muddle of a moral moment. By developing this power to discern acutely, our chances of making decisions that will help us approximate the good life, or whatever shadow of a good life, are increased. Simply put, we can generate order amidst the disorder present in moral situations.

Literature trains this practical intelligence, for the stories we read are patterned after the spirit of life itself. Literature educates "not only horizontally, bringing the reader into contact with events or locations or persons or problems he or she has not otherwise met, but also, so to speak, vertically, giving the reader experience that is deeper, sharper, and more precise than much of what takes place in life."[18] Nussbaum prizes

[16] Her interpretation of an Aristotelian ethics of the good life can be found in the essay "Introduction: Form and Content, Philosophy and Literature" (in *Love's Knowledge*, 3–53), where she highlights four points: first, the non-commensurability of the valuable things; second, the priority of perceptions (or the priority of the particular); third, the ethical value of emotions; and fourth, the ethical relevance of uncontrolled happenings.

[17] The word "intelligence" seems to encompass her view better than the refurbished Aristotelian notion of *perception* (See Nussbaum, "Discernment of Perception") or *judgment* or *public reasoning* (See Martha Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life* [Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1995]). These terms may appear as misleading conceptions since they emphasize the blur between private contexts and public situations. However, Nussbaum evidently thinks that the general capability to discern intelligently and judiciously is necessary in both spheres.

[18] Nussbaum, "Introduction," 48.

the genre of the novel as that which most effectively engages both thought and feeling. Since its form parallels the living structure of human experience, the novel helps its readers critically reflect on situations of freedom, limitation, and possibility. Its metaphorical value opens our eyes to "see the world in this way, and not in that,"[19] thereby permitting our familiarity with the foreign. Through stories, we bridge the distance with the previously unimaginable, and in a hundred pages meet thrice more characters and contexts than we could ever hope for in a year. Furthermore, the novel plays "back and forth between the general and the concrete."[20] This quality, for Nussbaum, grants us the power to streamline grand ideas—great and powerful things such as love, hate, or compassion—as they manifest themselves in imaginary circumstances. They allow us to comprehend how small chance encounters can flavor these hypothetical lives. The novel, then, is a bountiful resource for cultivating our practical intelligence. Nussbaum thinks that the Greek tragedies, and the novels of Charles Dickens, Emily Bronte, and Henry James are works that respond to the call of living good, unique lives. These are literary texts which, for her, can be treated as allies of moral philosophy. She thinks that they are indispensible sources of insight, for "without them we will not have a fully adequate statement of a powerful ethical conception." [21] They teach us to cast our stories in a way that emphasizes our interaction with others and the world, and this can help us create a gracious unity from the plurality of our joys and sorrows.

Richard Rorty: How can we be both self-fulfilled and kind to others?

As a pragmatist, Rorty is in the business of questioning and dismantling the traditional arguments of Western philosophy. An assumption ingrained in this philosophical tradition is the idea that a unified human identity is

[19] Ibid., 43.
[20] Ibid., 8.
[21] Ibid., 27.

not only possible, but also that it is our natural ideal. Rorty thinks that "the attempt to fuse the public and the private lies behind both Plato's attempt to answer the question, 'Why is it in one's interest to be just?' and Christianity's claim that perfect self-realization can be attained through service to others."[22] It is his view that we are misguided in following the traditional belief that man's private life must be harmonized with his communal life. This is because what accounts for private bliss and what constitutes social justice are too incongruous when put together. Hence, Rorty suggests that we do not frame life according to the formula of an integrated whole. For him, it makes more sense to divide our responsibilities to ourselves and to others and consider them equally pressing and valid. We can be concerned with both our *private fulfillment*—from the intensification of experiences toward the possibility of self-creation—as well as *social utility*—the expansion of moral imagination and the development of empathy.

Unlike Murdoch, who views literature as a way toward the Good, and Nussbaum, who believes that literature can be effective for moral training, Rorty focuses on the power of literature to cater to a more specific set of private and public goals. In relation to the activity of reading, Rorty argues that there are books of two different natures that can promote these two ends. Some can illustrate "what private perfection—a self-created, autonomous, human life—can be like" (e.g., the philosophical and fictional works of Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Baudelaire, Proust, Heidegger, and Nabokov), while there are others that are "engaged in a shared, social effort—the effort to make our institutions and practices more just and less cruel" (e.g., the political treatises of Marx, Mill, Dewey, Habermas, and Rawls).[23] As critical readers we are hence urged to qualify the material we confront, and appropriate their impact as relevant to either our personal objectives or the public good.

[22] Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, xiv.
[23] Ibid.

Self-creation is most important for people who desire to construct a novel identity that is freed from the constraints of an inherited intellectual tradition. Rorty thinks that achieving mental and linguistic freedom are valid possibilities in the private sphere. One can juggle words, ideas, concepts, and identities to create a self, in the same way that Proust, Nietzsche, and Derrida were able to do so. Rorty argues that the self is expanded when it encounters unfamiliar terrain and learns to speak new vocabularies through the help of literary texts, and this is why literature is important for this cause.[24] He thinks that the enlargement of our semantic consciousness happens when we "get acquainted with strange people (Alcibiades, Julien Sorel), strange families (the Karamazovs, the Casaubons), and strange communities (the Teutonic Knights, the Nuer, the mandarins of the Sung)."[25] These texts enrich our personal bearing and our perception of the world. Literature's social function, meanwhile, lies in its ability to aid us in becoming more sensitive individuals. Rorty believes that our most primal bond is our frailty: there is "no common core to men and women of all ages and climes distinct from their shared susceptibility to pain and humiliation."[26] The source, nature, and extent of human suffering vary, but when our differences are watered down, we run the risk of becoming judgmental and even intolerant. Rorty suggests that we must learn how to put ourselves in another's shoes, so that we can avoid being cruel out of ignorance or indifference. And novels . . .

[24] Self-expansion is the aim of Rorty's ironist. He provides three guideposts to define the ironist: (1) she has radical and continuing doubts about the final vocabulary she currently uses, because she has been impressed by other vocabularies, vocabularies taken as final by people or books she has encountered; (2) she realizes that argument phrased in her present vocabulary can neither underwrite nor dissolve these doubts; (3) insofar as she philosophizes about her situation, she does not think that her vocabulary is closer to reality than others, that it is in touch with a power not herself. Ironists who are inclined to philosophize see the choice between vocabularies as made neither within a neutral and universal metavocabulary nor by an attempt to fight one's way past appearances to the real, but simply by playing the new off against the old. (Ibid., 73.)

[25] Ibid., 96.

[26] Richard Rorty, "Habermas, Derrida, and the Functions of Philosophy," in *Truth and Progress: Philosophical Papers III* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 320.

> help us imagine what it is like to be a cradle Catholic losing his faith, a redneck fundamentalist adopting hers, a victim of Pinochet coping with the disappearance of her children, a kamikaze pilot of the Second World War living with the fact of Japan's defeat, a bomber of Hiroshima coping with the price of America's victory, or an idealistic politician coping with the pressures that multinational corporations bring to bear on the political process.[27]

Reading teaches us to identify with suffering that we otherwise would have been blind to, and perhaps develops the disposition to protect the ones who are hurting. Hence, for Rorty, literature sensitizes us to become empathic, tolerant, and more loving men and women.

Tensions

What is shown in the discussion above is that for the three thinkers, traversing the moral possibilities of literature is an interesting and enriching venture. However, there are problematic issues about their treatment of literature and morality which are worth pointing out. In this final section, I will show that on a practical level, the idea behind "morality by words" leads one to overestimate literature's capacity as a program of ethical reflection, that the blatant endorsement of "great works of literature" indicates a form of moral elitism, and finally, that there is a need to examine further not only literature's capacity to lead readers toward the good, but also its ability to incite evil.

Murdoch, Nussbaum, and Rorty do not think that morality is impossible without literature, but they concur that our moral imagination today will be impoverished without its lessons. Hence, the three thinkers may give the impression that to be kind and adequately informed about

[27] Richard Rorty, "Redemption from Egotism: James and Proust as Spiritual Exercises," in *The Rorty Reader* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 394.

morality in the modern world, a person should be exposed to what we have achieved in literature. But this is not the case. An individual need not be familiar with great literature to genuinely care—for cannot a poor, uneducated Filipino be more compassionate than a rich, educated man in the First World? Murdoch herself recognizes this reality: "Art, though it demands moral effort and teaches quiet attention (as any serious study can do) is a kind of treat; it is, like Kant's sublime, an extra. We can be saved without seeing the Alps or the Cairngorms, and without Titian and Mozart too."[28] This observation can weaken the argument that there is a significant value in exploring the moral power of literature, and opens the proposal that perhaps our philosophical energies are better devoted to more progressive causes. Literature appears here at best a helpful ally to ethics, and nothing more. Going a step further, we can also posit that the three philosophers are vulnerable to the accusation of moral elitism. In their paradigm, most of their preferred authors and works—proven by their preference for the likes of Shakespeare and Austen and Tolstoy, the great names of the Western literary canon—are generally more accessible to the highly educated and those with an interest in refined reading. For example, Murdoch follows a canon of literary classics she deems as exemplary in moral education, Nussbaum recommends reading Aristotle and James to flesh out the intricacies of practical intelligence, and Rorty even admits that only intellectuals have "the brains and the guts to keep their self-image flexible."[29] Only a few, it seems, are equipped to take such privileged footsteps in the literary path toward the moral if we follow the case of the three philosophers. The unfortunate consequence of this observation is that it implies that only the leisured intellectual can come in closer touch with the lessons of an articulate morality—a level of morality which, it now appears, is richer than the ordinary.

[28] Murdoch, "Fire and Sun," 453–54.

[29] Richard Rorty, *Take Care of Freedom and Truth Will Take Care of Itself: Interviews with Richard Rorty* (Redwood, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005), 80-81.

Now that this limited spectrum of readership is established, we can finally approach the primary criticism of this paper: the capacity of literature to render evil attractive. According to Murdoch, Nussbaum, and Rorty, human goodness shines as the fruit of great literature. But we cannot deny that reading literature tempts us to choose between responding to the whims of our aesthetic interests or lending a sympathetic, loving gaze to the other. It makes sense, then, to question our motivations for reading stories that depict actions that are regarded as morally deplorable. Nabokov's *Lolita* is valued not only because it allows us to identify with the suffering that Dolores, as is the case with other young victims of abuse, is led to breed in her being. It is primarily about the poetic, cruel figure of Humbert Humbert. He attracts us because it is tempting to imagine how one can be at once despicable and exhilarating a personality, because we are arrested by the viciousness of his passion for "the love of his life and the fire of his loins." Charismatic figures such as Mr. Kurtz in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and O'Brien in Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty Four* titillate because they appear as paragons of self-creation: they crystallize what it is like to be grand Men among small ones, they portray and challenge our inherited notions of nobility and excellence, they rattle the borders of reason and madness. But their ability to innovate themselves is dependent upon the sacrifice and manipulation of the characters that surround them, giving credence to the claim that we cannot isolate self-perfection from the world of others. They testify to the extreme danger of being so great.

So why are we tempted to imagine what it is like to be as exhilarating, to exercise power and glory in our heads, whenever we encounter characters of their sort? Don't their depictions fan the desire of becoming more exciting personalities ourselves, even at the risk of becoming evil? Following the spirit of Plato, Murdoch speaks: "It is easier to copy a bad man than a good man, because the bad man is various and entertaining and

extreme, while the good man is quiet and always the same."[30] This possibility is disconcerting—that those whose minds and hearts can appreciate the highest of arts should remain susceptible to plunging into the depths of human darkness. Hence the dangerous question: How potently can literature seduce us to immorality?

This compelling objection demands a more thorough examination, which is impossible at this point. For now, it may suffice to follow Rorty's guiding idea that seeing and probing our wrongdoing, of admitting and dwelling upon our mistakes, is a good way to arrive at the possibility of exposing how we can become better human beings. This can be interpreted both as a willingness to worry about our own attraction to evil, and as a willingness to form a sense of solidarity and tolerance despite it. This is an attitude that the West, for him, is already familiar with and must continue to cultivate:

> It may seem strange to attribute this sort of willingness to the recent West—a culture often said, with excellent reason, to be racist, sexist, and imperialist. But it is of course also a culture which is very worried about being racist, sexist, and imperialist, as well as about being Eurocentric, parochial, and intellectually intolerant. It is a culture which has become very conscious of its capacity for murderous intolerance and thereby perhaps more wary of intolerance, more sensitive to the desirability of diversity, than any other of which we have record.[31]

Thus, if literature incites this anxiety about evil and keeps us aware of it, then perhaps this insinuates that it serves to function more as our moral ally, rather than our foe. Murdoch, Nussbaum, and Rorty are keen to wager for the former.

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[30] Murdoch, "Fire and Sun," 391.

[31] Richard Rorty, "Heidegger, Kundera, and Dickens," in *Essays on Heidegger and Others: Philosophical Papers II* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 81.

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