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"At my age, you live in your mind": Reviewing the Past in *Bruno´s Dream* by Iris Murdoch

"A mi edad, se vive en la mente": Repaso al pasado en *Bruno's Dream*, de Iris Murdoch

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Abstract: This paper analyses the way in which the ageing Bruno, the central character of Iris Murdoch´s *Bruno´s Dream* (1969), approaches his death and confronts the meaning of finitude. His last stage of life is understood as a time of reminiscence that brings up past conflicts. This study offers an opportunity to explore the moral and psychological aspects of guilt, regret and forgiveness, which trigger the process that Robert N. Butler called "life review." It also aims to examine Murdoch's philosophical concepts about love and her idea of *unself*.
Keywords: Ageing Studies; finitude; life review; Iris Murdoch; love.
Summary: Introduction. Finitude in the Face of Death. Living in the Mind. Experiencing the *Unself*. Conclusion.

Resumen: Este artículo analiza el modo en que el anciano Bruno, protagonista de la novela *Bruno´s Dream* de Iris Murdoch (1969), aborda su muerte y se enfrenta al significado de la finitud. La última etapa de su vida emerge como un momento en el que los recuerdos reviven conflictos del pasado. Este estudio ofrece una oportunidad para explorar los aspectos morales y psicológicos de la culpa, el arrepentimiento y el perdón que conlleva el proceso que Butler denominó "revisión de la vida." También pretende examinar los conceptos filosóficos de Murdoch sobre el amor y el concepto que ella concibió como negación del yo (*unself*).
Palabras clave: Estudios de la edad; finitud; revisión de la vida; Iris Murdoch; amor.
Sumario: Introducción. La finitud ante la muerte. Viviendo en la mente. Experimentar la negación del yo. Conclusión.

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INTRODUCTION

The year 2019 marks the centenary of the birth of Dame Jean Iris Murdoch (1919–1999), considered one of the most influential and prolific English writers of the second half of the twentieth century. She was recognised with the most prestigious literary awards and distinctions in Britain. Her career reached its peak during the seventies, with prizes like the Whitbread Book Award in 1974 for *The Sacred and Profane Love Machine*. Although nominated four times for the Booker Prize, she finally won it in 1978 for *The Sea, the Sea*. The culmination of her literary career came two years before her death, when she was awarded the Golden Pen Award for her life's work and her dedication to writing, an obvious fact from the scale of her legacy, which includes twenty-six novels, two plays, two volumes of poems, a radio play, a booklet for an opera and a short story. To this corpus, we should add five philosophical works and numerous essays. Unfortunately, her career ended four years before her death, with her novel *Jackson's Dilemma* (1995).

Most of the critical analysis of her work is framed between the seventies and eighties when researchers like Elizabeth Dipple, Richard Todd, Peter J. Conradi, Hilda Spear, Peter Wolfe and Deborah Johnson analysed her narrative from perspectives as diverse as philosophy, morality, religion, realism or even the use of postmodern strategies. After Murdoch's passing twenty years ago, her career has been eclipsed by the focus on the devastating effect that Alzheimer's disease had on the mind of such an outstanding woman at the end of her life. The author's struggle with Alzheimer is depicted in the books *Iris. A Memoir* (1998) and *Iris and the Friends* (1999). In them, the literary critic John Bayley, who was also Murdoch's husband for forty-three years, reconstructed his life with her, focusing on the later stages of her dementia and making public her deterioration. This oversimplification of Murdoch's remarkable career was heightened in the cinematic representation of her *Iris* (Eyre 2001). From the moment of its release, an amount of biographical literature on the writer and philosopher was added, such as her authorised biography written by Peter J. Conradi, *Iris Murdoch. To Life* (2001) and a more sensationalist account by A. N. Wilson, *Iris Murdoch, as I Knew Her* (2003). This fascination with Murdoch's private life has increased with the enormous epistolary production that has become public in recent years in compilations such as the one edited by

Peter J. Conradi, *Iris Murdoch. A Writer at War* (2010) and *Living on Paper* (2015).

Because of this attention and on the occasion of her centenary, the work of Murdoch is eliciting reevaluation and a number of insightful critical reviews from different academic perspectives such as art, philosophy, theology, politics, and ethical imagination, among others. Researchers such as Anne Rowe, Avril Horner, Mark Lupretch, Gary Browning, Lucy Bolton, Maria Antonaccio, and Miles Leeson are re-examining her work. This paper adds a new focus to existing Murdoch scholarship and, in particular, to the revived interest in her work. It will examine her literary contribution from the perspective of ageing studies, a term coined by Margaret Morganroth Gullette in 1993, and provides a contribution to critical debates. Mainly, this research offers an opportunity to explore the psychological discourse on the life review, philosophical questions of morality and literary matters.

Although Murdoch was both a writer and philosopher, she viewed these two disciplines as separate branches of study which should not be mixed. As she stated, her philosophical perspective should be viewed apart from literature, which she used as an instrument to lay the foundations of moral life and to achieve a better understanding of human behaviour. However, it is undeniable that both disciplines intertwine in her work: she blends her philosophical reflections into her literary creations. Therefore, her novels function "both as popular narrative and as philosophical discourse" (Turner 56). In fact, her twelfth novel examined in this paper, *Bruno's Dream* (1969), and her book of moral philosophy, *The Sovereignty of Good over Other Concepts* (1970), were conceived at the same time and published only one year apart. This proximity in time is reflected in some of the ideas present in both. As professor Mark Luprecht points out, the novel and the essay both share the same core: death and the implications of truly grasping one's mortality (114).

Despite being shortlisted for the 1970 Booker Prize, *Bruno's Dream* is not considered by critics as one of Murdoch's best novels. Only Harold Bloom considered it to be Murdoch's "first permanent achievement" (vii). Nevertheless, *Bruno's Dream* explores as no other novel does the meaning of advanced age. Constructed as a mythical novel within a dramatic convention, this novel can be read in an allegorical way as a series of ritualistic events enclosed by the Eros/Thanatos myth (Thomson 377).

This paper deals with its protagonist, Bruno Greensleave, a man in his nineties who embodies all of the most feared aspects of ageing that modern society has placed into the category of the "fourth age" of the human lifespan, the "oldest old." According to Paul Higgs and Chris Gilleard, this end of life stage that in developed countries generally starts around age 80, constitutes a social imaginary which operates as a set of powerful assumptions concerning the dependencies and indignities of the 'real' old age. Unlike the positive aspects of growing old that are associated with the concept of the "third age," such as the active and "successful" ageing, the "fourth age" is characterised in negative terms by a lack of autonomy, individuality, decrepitude, the blurring of ageing, infirmity and dependence on others (368). Bruno is depicted as an old man who is slowly dying, alone and immersed in his own consciousness. He is cared for by Danby, his son-in-law, Adelaide, the housekeeper, and her cousin Nigel, the nurse. His love for spiders and his stamp collection are the only lifelong passions that he can still enjoy. His terminal illness has disfigured his body, metamorphosing it in such a way that he resembles the spiders that live in the corners of his room. In fact, he is described as a lonely old spider in the centre of an intricate web which holds in its strands the interconnected lives of the surrounding characters. Bedridden and waiting for his death, the very elderly Bruno lives on reminiscing, trying to face the mistakes of his past. In his old age, he confronts his moral corruption and his traumatic memories with guilt and atonement. These memories are often related to his wife, a physically absent yet present character in this story, who died of cancer years before after a bitter period of quarrels that occurred when she discovered that Bruno had taken a mistress. Bruno also remembers his children, and in particular the only one still alive, Miles, from whom he became estranged when Miles decided to marry Pavarti, an Indian girl who died thereafter in a plane crash. As he nears death, Bruno longs to be reunited with his son and asks to see him. Miles reluctantly responds to his father´s call for reconciliation, but the ghost of the past haunts their encounter. Bruno has no choice but to confront his guilt over his past selfish behaviour by attempting to self-justify his mistakes. Later, Miles's second wife, Diana, and her sister Lisa, also visit and listen to Bruno's accounts of his life on his deathbed. Their loving kindness encourages Bruno to let go of his egocentric narrative and his fear of death, and progress toward goodness. The climax of this moving novel is reached with the flooding of the nearby river Thames that ravages Bruno´s household and his stamp

collection but also releases him from his past. Bruno's life review concludes just before his long-awaited death, with his recognition that love is all that matters in the end.

1. FINITUDE IN THE FACE OF DEATH

There is no doubt that time is a construct of the human mind since, as stated by the laws of physics and general relativity, it is relative and there is no absolute time. The perception of its passing is a subjective experience that takes on greater meaning in the later stages of one's life, when this abstract perception of one's temporal consciousness alters. The proximity of death and the irreversibility of time acquire an existential dimension that confronts the ageing person with the mutability and transience of human life. This is what happens to Bruno, whose experience of the passage of time in his extreme old age intensifies his experience of finitude.

In old age, the remains of the person's future seem to diminish, while the extent of the lived time seems to become longer. Considering life as following a linear trajectory that moves "toward an ultimate purpose: the telos of death" (DeFalco 23), Bruno would be about to reach the end of the road. He is conscious that he has a long life behind him, but a very limited amount of time ahead, and this perception heightens his awareness of the passing of time. This temporal awareness is dynamic since the human mind experiences it as flying or crawling; it is therefore distorted depending on a person's circumstances. Although several studies support the fact that the perception of time speeds up with increasing age (Wittmann and Lehnhoff 921), a focus on the passage of time may also result in the sensation of time creeping, as in the case of Bruno for whom, perhaps due to his ongoing suffering and physical deterioration, time seems to slow down.

Bruno's preoccupation with the slow passage of time is reflected in the watch he always carries with him. Even though he lies in bed and has no daily responsibilities, he keeps on living according to the rigidity of a standardised and self-imposed schedule, trying to preserve the continuity of a life based on repetitive and predictable patterns synchronised with his watch. Despite the Western concept of chronometric time as linear and unidirectional, Bruno's perception of the circularity of time resembles a web, one of the central symbols in this novel. Therefore, he spends his time in occupations that recur every day at the same time as if

they were rituals. His dull daily routine is divided into temporal units, beginning when he is at his most lucid, at 5 p.m., with the British ceremony of tea and the subsequent reading of *The Evening Standard*. At 6 p.m. he listens to the news on the radio until his son-in-law, Danby, returns from work and tells him some funny things that have happened to him. Then comes the moment he devotes to intentionally dialling wrong telephone numbers and later to his philatelic interest. Defying socially constructed stereotypes associated with old age, 7 p.m. is the time he starts drinking champagne. This is also the time when he distracts himself by reading detective novels or books about spiders, his main interest. Later, after dinner and before falling asleep, he chats with Nigel, his charming male caregiver.

These routines are scheduled as a way of resisting the disorder in which he lives, and provide him with what Simone de Beauvoir identifies as "ontological security" (469), a stable mental state derived from a sense of order and continuity. The predictability of his cyclical routines underpins his everyday life, protecting him from his anxieties by assuring him that tomorrow will be a repetition of today. Thus, Bruno's world also becomes static and repetitive; it could be said that he is stuck in a time that seems to have stopped flowing and becomes incapable of projecting himself into the future. His static time also reflects how he has arrived at a point of moral and psychological stagnation. The flow of time in his later life turns out to be an illusion, as the merging of his past, present and future in the same space provides Bruno with a kind of timeless eternity.

All the characters around Bruno are portrayed from his perspective as the "healthy others," representing a binary power structure. They focus on Bruno's remaining lifetime, waiting for his heart to stop beating. The doctor who visits him from time to time is the one who predicts his "expiration date," like an oracle or a countdown timer that shows the time Bruno has left to live. He warns the old man that he might live for years: "'You'll outlive us all!' he had said, laughing healthy laughter and looking at his watch" (18). The pressure of the ominous ticking of the watch reminds the reader that there is not much time left, conveying a feeling of anxiety for Bruno's impending passing. At the same time, it functions as a literary device: an internal clock, a kind of countdown timer that keeps the narrative plot moving until its end. This asphyxiating ticking of his internal clock also parallels the restriction of Bruno's domestic space, home-bound and excluded from the social space

inhabited by "the *normals*" (Goffman 5). In his fourth age, his freedom is reduced to the small, dirty cell-like bedroom in his son-in law's old house in south London and finally to his bed. Because of these limitations, Bruno becomes a prisoner not only of time but also of space as "time and space crumple slowly" (42). This dwindling creates the image of an old man living in "a contracting world" (Shield and Aronson 45).

This contracting effect also involves Bruno's physicality, as "he aged like Tithonus" (55). Recalling the homonymous poem "Tithonus" by the Victorian poet Alfred Lord Tennyson, written in 1859, the very aged Bruno can be compared with the Trojan prince in Greek mythology, a subject that Murdoch studied at Oxford under Professor Eduard Fraenkel, a prestigious German Jewish Hellenist. Tithonus was a mortal loved by Eos, the goddess of the Dawn. She begged Zeus to give her lover eternal life but forgot to ask Zeus for eternal youth. Since Tithonus was immortal, he could not die and was destined to live forever, growing older and older with each passing day. Tithonus was subsequently moved into a separate chamber to live out of sight. Mirroring Tithonus, Bruno feels he is condemned to live forever, imprisoned in a circular web from which it is impossible to escape. This explains why for Bruno, ageing becomes an existential trauma: "being in time and unable to get out of it" (Kaplan 173). Moreover, as Tithonus withered, he shrank into a grasshopper. The physical image of this insect is reminiscent of the physical appearance of Bruno's body, described by his son Miles not as a human, but as "a huge bulbous animal head attached to a body shrunken into a dry stick" (141), thereby representing his aged body as an object of disgust.

As in Tennyson's poem, Bruno confronts his "immortal age" with the presence of "immortal youth," represented by the memories of the women he loved but died young: his wife Janie, his mistress Maureen, and his daughter Gwen. They remain fixed and static in Bruno's memory as frozen and unchanged objects. As if no time had passed since their death, they are preserved in a suspended and eternal present "immersed in [his] consciousness like specimens in formalin" (23). This image also resembles the spiders Bruno preserves in alcohol, imprisoned in the tubes stored in his bedroom.

2. LIVING IN THE MIND

Everybody around Bruno focuses their attention on his “hypervisible body” (Woodward, *Aging and its Discontents* 66), which intrudes upon Bruno’s daily life and becomes a disturbance for him. As this physicality limits his ability to express his inner essential self, it threatens his sense of integrity and makes it difficult to preserve the unity between body and self (Charmaz 657). Therefore, transcending the progressing disintegration of his body, Bruno’s mind offers him a sense of continuity since, as he argues: “in his own consciousness he was scarcely old at all” (20). This disembodied identity suggests the idea of a self that is ageless, that is to say, “an identity that maintains continuity despite the physical and social changes that come with old age” (Kaufman 7). Peter Öberg links this idea of the ageless self with the perception of body and mind as separated entities derived from Descartes and the Platonic-Christian tradition (702). In this hierarchical opposition, the body is subordinated to the mind: it is the body that transforms while the mind remains unchanged. This explains why Bruno tries to transcend his body and lives immersed in his thoughts: “‘At my age, you live in your mind, …’ . . . ‘At the end, there’s nothing left to do. It’s all just thought’” (157). In contrast to his contracting world, his mental activity seems to expand at the same rate as his oversized head, suggesting the embodiment of his mental capacity.

Undoubtedly, in his process of introspection, the mechanism of memory plays an important role in providing access to the past. The study of memory and aging occupies a key place in literary gerontology. In Western tradition memory is associated with the constitution and preservation of personal identity and integrity, as it serves the sense of self and its continuity (Butler 75). The obsession with memory and remembering hides a fear of forgetting, and of the possible consequences of amnesia; oblivion is associated with destruction and silence, and thus invokes death. The emphasis Murdoch places on memory, which she paradoxically lost at the end of her life due to Alzheimer's disease, is echoed in many of her plots (e.g. *The Sea, the Sea* or *The Good Apprentice*), as in the novel here analysed. Not only in the character of Bruno but also, for instance, in the character of Aunty, the aunt of Adelaide´s twin cousins Will and Nigel. She is a comic elderly woman who seems to be losing her memory while, paradoxically, she is recovering it. Like many of Murdoch´s characters, neither Aunty nor

Bruno conforms to simplistic and ageist clichés which prevail in Western societies, typical of the so-called "decline narratives" (Gullette 28) that relate old age with detriment in memory performance. From the beginning of the novel the reader realises Bruno's preoccupation with his brain:

> One million brain cells were destroyed every day after the age of twenty-five. Danby had told him once, having read it in the Sunday paper. Could there be any brain cells left at that rate when one was well over eighty? (19)

Bruno is identified as a great representative of logos and as a mentally fit and active person and, as Danby affirms, "certainly still a rational being" (94). Despite his physical deterioration, he continues to struggle to stay mentally active, developing strategies which allow him to be empowered. He still retains his narrative abilities and his emotions: "these million-times thought thoughts could still blind him, make him gasp with emotion and absorb him into an utter oblivion of everything else" (29). His leisure interests are stimulating intellectual occupations related to his long-life interest in spiders and the daily reading of books and newspapers, occupations that are good training activities for his brain. Thanks to his active mind, he retains his agency and he is not described as a vulnerable or passive person, but as someone full of power and who still has a voice of his own: "He was pleased at these moments when he felt that he had not been simplified by age and illness. He was the complicated spread-out thing that he had always been, in fact more so, much more so" (97).

Bruno is approaching death on account of his age and also close to it on account of the proximity of his house to Brompton Road Cemetery. This closeness prompts the necessity to look back from a distance and revisit the long path walked, finding a new sense of self and peace with the past. As a narrator, Bruno can analyse his life because old age gives him the possibility to face his mistakes from an end-of-life perspective. Psychologists such as Erik Erikson found it remarkable how many people feel the urgent need to tell their story in the face of death and feel pressure to face and rework unsolved problems. Therefore, as a response to the certainty of his death, Bruno turns back the clock and begins to live with a focus on his past. This constructive re-evaluation of his past plays a significant role causing him to understand life both back to the past and

forward to the future, a process defined by Butler as a looking-back process set in motion by looking forward to death (67).

Murdoch herself created a distinction between what she called a "frozen" and an "unfrozen" past, meaning a past that flows and one that remains fixed. As she alluded to when speaking about an individual's view of the past, so long as one lives, one's relationship with one's past should keep shifting since "re-thinking one's past is a constant responsibility," an operation of conscience in evidence (Murdoch, in Conradi 329). This idea recalls the Socratic statement from Plato's *Apology*, that is at the heart of Murdoch's fiction, and that affirms that an unexamined life is not worth living. In this way, examining his past opens up new opportunities for Bruno, who follows the model that psychiatrist and geriatrician Robert N. Butler called "life review" (65), and is based on his groundbreaking research on reminiscence in old age. Butler defines the life review process in elderly people as "a naturally occurring, universal mental process characterised by the progressive return to consciousness of past experiences, and, in particular, the resurgence of unresolved conflicts" (66). This model provided a significant contribution to the field of ageing studies. It links with the perspective of old age promoted by developmental psychologist Erik Erikson in his Life Cycle model. As Erikson states, a person progresses through eight psychosocial stages, each of which involves a central conflict between harmonious and disruptive elements. This conflict must be resolved in order to progress to the next stage of life. As he claims in his psychosocial theory, the last stage of life is aimed inward and deals with the central issue of ego integrity versus despair. Ego integrity is defined as the acceptance of one's life, while despair, in contrast, is associated with feelings of resentment, guilt, regret and also with a deep fear of death at the realisation that time is too short to make up for missed opportunities. According to Erikson, the individual must resolve unsettled feelings about the past to achieve wisdom and come to grips with the inevitability of death. Erikson viewed life review as imperative to passing through this eighth stage associated with old age, since it provides the key to resolving this final psychosocial crisis. Although it is obvious that people may reminisce and review their lives throughout their lifespan, Erikson assigned life review exclusively to old age because it is processed differently later in life when, as was previously stated, the amount of life to be reminisced about or reviewed is larger. Besides, in old age remote memory is usually preserved better than recent memory.

When discussing the psychological discourse of the "life review," it seems useful to distinguish between two terms applied to this phenomenon: life review and reminiscence. Reminiscence is part of the life review, but not synonymous with it. Butler draws the following distinction between both concepts. On the one hand, reminiscence is the process of recollecting personal memories from one's past experience. On the other, the life review includes reminiscence but also involves the re-construction and evaluation of these meaningful memories. Additionally, it promotes the resolution of conflicts from the past as the person gets older. For Professor Kathleen Woodward, reminiscence is less analytical and cognitive and does not promise the totality of the life review, since it is more fragmentary and partial and has a fleeting emotional quality (*Telling Stories* 10). Nevertheless, the life review mechanism does not consist of a simple concatenation of memories of past experiences or an "aimless wandering of the mind" (Butler 66). Neither does it mean older people obsessively repeating the same story. Although the life review is frequently treated as insignificant and has pejorative connotations of senility and dysfunctional behaviour, according to some gerontologists, it represents a crucial beneficial process. Butler supports this idea, believing that this phenomenon implies an exhaustive and analytical process that is not produced by any pathology, cognitive deterioration, or the presence of depressive states (65). On the contrary, it appears in response to the forthcoming end of life that brings up material from the unconscious (Butler 68).

Gerontologists consider that this act of looking back can lead the elderly person to the integrity of self, since reviewing their whole life, the ageing persons perceive their uniqueness and individuality that remain the same throughout their lives (Laforest 108). This reconstruction and reassessment of the past plays an important role in the person's ability to adapt to the different changes that can occur in old age, such as widowhood, retirement or physical deterioration. Bearing in mind the role of narrative in the construction of self-identity, the accumulation of memories that come back to the present contribute to the maintaining of Bruno's identity. This idea also suggests Erikson's concept of "existential identity" (73), that is, an individual´s sense of self over time.

In examining his past, Bruno reconstructs his personal history, integrating previous stages of his life and producing a sense of continuity and unity. His life review narrative gives access to different versions of his former selves. Recalling his childhood, he experiences the self as it

was originally, and acknowledges that he is still "the same person as the child who yet dwells within a time-altered body" (Myerhoff 319). His most vivid memories have to do with his family experience, as parents are central figures in an older person's memories. The memory of his mother, whose death was a traumatic experience that "shook him more than the Holocaust" (52), reconnects and attaches him to "the proper happiness of his life" (22). Thus, he connects his mother to his innocence and his image of moral goodness: "How had he become corrupted and lost the innocence which belonged to his mother's only child, and how could the child of such a mother ever have become bad?" (44). In contrast, Bruno's sad memory of his father "as a source of negative energy" (21) appears when he evokes his traumatic childhood memories. This resentment and anger towards his domineering father lies in his behaviour towards Bruno, from the time he was forced to ride horses as a child, to when he was made to go into the printing business, not being allowed to follow his dream of becoming a scientist: "Only through business, only through money, had he ever really communicated with his father" (21). Surprisingly Bruno reproduces the same attitude as a father when interacting with his son Miles. They drifted apart when Bruno rejected Miles' wife because she was Indian; in his old age, the bait with which he tries to trap Miles in his net again is his inheritance.

The reader might suppose that the turning point that altered Bruno's sense of identity in his adulthood would be his serious illness, which split his life in two: on the one hand, a youthful identity as a healthy, able-bodied, independent person leading an eventful, dynamic life; on the other hand, as a stigmatised individual, what sociologist Erving Goffman called a "spoilt identity" (55), an ill, dependent, elderly man released from social participation. However, this division based on agency and health does not coincide with Bruno's own narrative, which offers two alternate identities that correlate to these two phases of his life. The painful event that separates them is his wife´s accidental discovery in Harrods of his extramarital affair with his mistress Maureen. This discovery wounded Janie deeply and left a mark in Bruno's memory. As Bruno recalls, after the incident, he perceived that "the quality of time had altered, perhaps forever" (45). His first identity with Janie before she learnt of his infidelity is defined by their participation in a well-to-do social life. They lived beyond their means, bore two handsome and talented children and played the roles society expected of them. After the discovery, his world changed. Although they still lived together, their

relationship was based on solitude. Their social identity disappeared, and they became extremely hostile to each other until the moment of Janie's death from cancer.

As Ruth and Vilkko claim, autobiographical remembering awakens intense emotional states (169). Repressed memories that have not been assimilated come back to the present bringing pain, anger and despair. There is also an inevitable tendency when looking back, to concentrate on one's failures and mistakes (Holloway 50), those acts that can never be undone or reversed. What Bruno recalls consists mainly of distressing events related both to his disloyalty towards his wife and his son. Even though forty years have passed since Janie's death, this traumatic experience has become a haunting presence. He is tormented by the pain he inflicted on her, when he abandoned her on her death bed, remaining indifferent when she begged him to come to her just before she died. Bruno ignored her screams and let her die alone because he feared she would curse him for his infidelity. This bitter memory brings about great psychological suffering:

> He could not bear it. He had heard her crying out, calling his name. He had not gone up. He feared that she would curse him at the end. But perhaps she had wanted to forgive him, to be reconciled with him, and he had taken away from her that last precious good thing? The groans and cries had continued for a while and become silent at last. (30)

The life review process also includes a material side: it involves the use of mementoes that inspire memories. As Sherman and Datcher point out, "the continuing presence of cherished objects offers the individual an opportunity for reminiscence and support for ego-integrity, as means of continuing to invite connections, even in the face of an inevitable end" (77). Bruno feels very much attached to the objects he accumulates in his room and they represent his main source of entertainment. Collected from the time he was a young man, these personal possessions serve as a "memory mirror" (Krasner 214) in his old age, because transcending time, these objects allow quick access to his significant past experiences. Among the memorabilia that witness Bruno's everyday experience are bottles of champagne, a stamp collection neatly arranged in a big box, his books about spiders, a microscope, test tubes with spiders in alcohol and the picture of his deceased wife Janie framed by empty champagne bottles which call to mind the good times they had together, "before the

first war, . . . the epoch of courtship and marriage" (27). Champagne is a symbol of the success and social life they enjoyed before she discovered his adultery. The habit of drinking warm champagne every day (not chilled, on doctor's orders), and resisting the limitations imposed by his age and his sickness, is a signal of Bruno's empowerment. Other vestiges of his past are his books of spiders, his lifelong passion. Spiders lend consistency and continuity to his life, having been an interest of his since childhood. Their immense antiquity "exist[ing] a hundred million years before flies existed" (40) brings up the image of Bruno as Tithonus. The third item of both material and emotional attachment is his stamp collection, which increases in value over time. The box of stamps was inherited from his father and passed down through generations, surviving beyond the finitude of its owners' lives. This biographical object (Morin, in Hockey and James 206) transcends time and connects his past, his present and even his future, as Bruno continuously wonders who is going to inherit it.

3. EXPERIENCING THE *UNSELF*

Memories are socially constructed and are framed within a network of external supports. Although Bruno's life review usually proceeds as an interior monologue in the isolation and confinement that he experiences in his bedroom, his memory, which is by nature fragmented and selective, cannot reproduce the past as it was. It depends on the echo of a social network of shared experiences. However, the elderly man is unable to interact and share experiences with his own generation since he is the only remaining member of his social circle. His resentful son Miles is the only family member still alive with whom he can share his past and confess his sins. As if he awaits the Last Judgement, Bruno aims to express his intense guilt and ask for redemption before he dies, not from God, but from Miles, who appears in his dreams as a judge figure:

> Miles was condemning him to death. He woke up with a racing heart. He felt sudden instinctive relief at knowing it was a dream before he realised a moment later that it was true. He was condemned to death. (120)

Therefore, after ten years of silence, Bruno asks to see Miles. When Miles reluctantly comes back into his father's life, he becomes a painful reminder of his immoral behaviour: his betrayal and, moreover, the death

of his wife while still unreconciled with him. Therefore, transcending the paralysing mistakes of his past and the regret that hinders him from progressing towards self-knowledge, Bruno is compelled to deal with his feelings of culpability and shame. The confrontation with Miles and with his memories brings up a high level of emotional distress for Bruno.

The themes of guilt and forgiveness are central motifs in this novel and are repeatedly explored in Murdoch's narrative corpus. Bruno submits to his son's moral judgment on his cruelty to him and his mother. What Bruno is doing in this first encounter with Miles is not recognising himself as guilty but trying to explain everything and offload his blame. In his egocentric and distorted vision of the world, he wants to explain to Miles everything about his love affair, but play down the incident, that for him "wasn't much after all" (114). He also deemphasises his inappropriate racist remarks about Miles's first wife, Parvati, as if they were simple misunderstandings. Therefore, their communication becomes unsuccessful: while Bruno struggles to awaken his past and reconstruct it by shifting the blame off himself, Miles, also an egocentric man obsessed with finding the inspiration to write a book of poetry, is reluctant to listen to his stories and reflect on his past. He prefers to cling to the present and try to keep these painful moments at a distance, thus initiating a dilemma between remembering and forgetting. Bruno is representing Murdoch's idea cited by Gary Browning, that states that "the past lives on in the present perspective, which has emerged from reflection on the past" (3), as seen in the following dialogue taken from an early moment in their first meeting:

> "I've got to have your forgiveness. You've got to *understand*."
> "It doesn't mean anything, father. It's all over long ago, it's gone."
> "It isn't gone, it's here, it's here—". (146)

As Jan Baars points out in his article "Critical turns of aging, narrative and time" when referring to Hannah Arendt (1958), "forgiveness is connected with the promise of opening the future and freeing it from what one has suffered whereas its opposite, resentment, can be a destructive form of what Augustine called the presence of the past" (152). Likewise, Richard Holloway speaks of how the capacity to forgive enables human beings to free themselves from the binds of their past in order to move into the future, while on the contrary, "the remembrance of past hurt can rob us of our future and become the

narrative of our lives" (10). For Bruno, the possibility of forgiveness is denied in his first challenging encounter with Miles. It ends up as an unpleasant confrontation that sets off a storm of recriminations, making impossible the forgiveness that Bruno seeks. Nonetheless, following Mile's difficult visit, Miles's second wife, Diana Watkins, and later his sister-in-law, the ex-nun Lisa, arrive at Bruno's house. On this encounter and during their next visits, Bruno, as a storyteller, has the opportunity to tell his story to both Diana and Lisa, and to truly be heard by them. Even though his bodily appearance affects his social relationships deeply and weakens his self-esteem, by receiving attention from these two women of younger generations, he creates social bonds and a level of comfort that facilitates a healing space for his quest for inner peace, something that Gary Kenyon calls "a wisdom environment" (31), that is, an environment where stories are shared in an open, non-judgmental manner.

As Olsson explains, by developing the ability to consider the stories of others or to give careful attention to the things with which one interacts, the individual is increasingly directed towards what is good (168). Besides, according to Jeff and Christine Garland, life review also "aid[s] the narrator in achieving new insight and peace of mind; to bring closure to troubling events through viewing them from a different perspective" (DeFalco 25). For Bruno, the telling of his life story is in many ways like the psychotherapeutic situation in which people review their lives in order to understand present circumstances. When he reviews his life with Lisa and Diana in the role of therapists, he becomes conscious of the full seriousness of his past actions. Thus, this occasion to share his life narrative and the intimacy he experiences with these two women who both love and respect him, helps Bruno to embark on a spiritual quest into the real meaning of life. He also begins to reconnect with his son, who starts to overcome the difficulties he experienced by listening thoughtfully to his reminiscences and truly seeing his father. This causes Bruno to finally overcome his self-absorption and egotistical concerns and to embrace a loving perspective. He confronts reality, recognising he acted wrongly by not being an attentive father or husband.

As Murdoch herself claims in her concurrent work on moral philosophy *The Sovereignty of Good over Other Concepts*, human beings are "naturally selfish" (76) and often fail to perceive reality since our minds are continually active and fabricate "an anxious, usually self-preoccupied, often falsifying veil which partially conceals" (84). Also, the American moral philosopher Martha Nussbaum has suggested that

"Murdoch . . . has made us vividly aware of the many stratagems by which the ego wraps itself in a cosy self-serving fog that prevents egress to the reality of the other" (36). As a defender of Platonism, Murdoch often refers to the allegory of the cave as a metaphor for the moral transformation experienced by the characters of her novels who, to become morally better, have to be able to renounce their ego and abandon their natural tendency to live in a world centred on illusions and falsehoods. This spiritual pilgrimage towards reality, that is, that which is outside the self, leads them towards truth and goodness. In this sense, as William Hall remarks, Bruno may represent the Western ego consciousness (442), since he is described as greedy and self-absorbed in his own thoughts, resembling a spider "at the centre of the great orb of [his] life" (371). He perceives life as a dream or as an illusion (following Plato's terminology), that is, a state of ignorance. He fails to see the real world and is incapable of coming out of his web and trying to put himself in other people's position.

It is evident that Murdoch applies her philosophical ideas from *The Sovereignty of Good over Other Concepts.* Through his changing attitude and sympathising with others, Bruno finally attains a moral transformation in order to *unself* (82). The spiritual ideal of *unselfing* should be considered in relation to the idea of attention, which for Murdoch is the development of moral conscience through "a just and loving gaze directed upon an individual reality" (34). Acquiring this virtuous attention (a concept that Murdoch borrowed from Simone Weil), Bruno begins to think beyond himself, in the direction of selflessness, objectivity and realism, and make his way out of the cave and engage in moral growth.

Water, a liberating and destructive force, arrives at the end of the novel with the flooding of the nearby river Thames, caused by a heavy and incessant rain that only stops when the novel concludes. On the one hand, water evokes for Bruno a tragic connotation as a destructive force having swallowed his daughter years before, when she was trying to save a child from drowning. In Bruno's case, the flooding water ravages the lower floor of the house where he lives, moving and sweeping away everything, even his most treasured possession: the valuable stamp collection he inherited from his father. Worried about the destiny of his stamps, Bruno leaves his bed with great difficulty and, in his anguish to recover them from the water, he falls headlong. The weightiness of his monstrous head pulls him over the bannister. The image of his enlarged

head, suggesting a growing sense of guilt for betraying his wife and for his omissions of help, recalls Kafka's *Metamorphosis* as he approaches his death.

At the moment when the flood sweeps the box of stamps away, Bruno's image of the continuity and identity represented by his collection is erased and lost forever. As Hall remarks, the loss of Bruno's stamp collection indicates that at last, Bruno has been parted with his acquisitive consciousness (442). Once he *unselfs* the dominance of his ego and suppresses his egocentric fantasies, many of his problems disappear bringing about psychological freedom. Therefore, water also has positive connotations as a redeeming force that suggests a purge and liberation from Bruno's tormenting sins. Water is the element that releases him out of his circular time, breaking his web and restoring him to mortality, as after his fall, he "just seems to live in the present" (330). Water also breaks the strands of the web of relationships of the group of characters surrounding Bruno. Once they are out of the web in which they were all trapped, they start to behave freely and to reconstruct their personal attachments.

The catastrophe sets in motion the beginning of the end for Bruno. It is only when he is released from his past bonds that he begins to die as if the ravaging water that dissolved his stamps was also melting his life force. In these last days, the dying man is consoled and comforted by the loving care of Diana, who sits beside him holding his hand. Through conversation and intimacy, Diana empathises with Bruno and comes to understand and love him. At the same time, her true and selfless love (in the Platonic sense) encourages Bruno's virtue. Diana's love is, therefore, a spiritual, contemplative, empathic and liberating love, a sublime, generous and virtuous love that recognises and cares for the other and gives meaning to human existence. As Murdoch states in her essay *The Sublime and the Good*: "Love is the perception of individuals. Love is the extremely difficult realisation that something other than oneself is real. Love, and so art and morals, is the discovery of reality" (51).

At the end of his moral journey in his near-death, Bruno achieves a new insight into what really matters and understands how love gives real meaning to human existence, although unfortunately, there is no turning back. As he reflects:

> He had loved only a few people and loved them so badly, so selfishly. He had made a muddle of everything. Was it only in the presence of death that

> one could see so clearly what love ought to be like? If only the knowledge which he had now, this absolute nothing-else-matters, could somehow go backwards and purify the little selfish loves and straighten out the muddles. But it could not. (373)

Bruno's life review process concludes shortly before his death, when he finally comes to terms with the unresolved conflicts from his past. Until that point, he had lacked the wisdom to perceive what he now knows: the realisation that his wife genuinely loved him and that before dying she wanted to forgive rather than curse him. This awareness guides Bruno away from his feelings of remorse, essential elements of Murdoch's fiction. On the verge of dying, he is capable of assuming retrospective responsibilities for having abandoned her and seeks her forgiveness, expressing his sorrow: "Janie, I am so sorry" (373).

This life review process has also fulfilled the function of death preparation, since it facilitates Bruno's acceptance of death. According to scholars Westerhof and Bohlmeijer, by drawing on the past, it is possible to arrive at a calm and accepting attitude towards our own mortality (108). This is the moment when Bruno finally gets ready to meet his death without fear. As Murdoch points out in *The Sovereignty of Good over Other Concepts*,

> [g]oodness is connected with the acceptance of real death and real chance and real transience and only against the background of this acceptance, which is psychologically so difficult, can we begin to understand the full extent of what virtue is like. (100)

On the edge of death, Bruno experiences how everything around him dissolves. He is conscious of the inevitable loss of self which death represents and of the time fading away: "Out of the dreamless womb time creeps in the moment which is no beginning at the end which is no end. Time is the crack. Darkness upon darkness moving, awareness slides from being" (381). The description of his death also depicts the disintegration of his physical memory, described as an archive in which concepts are stored, while oblivion presents itself as a great black box that invades everything:

> He felt as if the centre of his mind was occupied by a huge black box, which took up nearly all the space and round which he had to edge his way.

> Names not only of people but of things eluded him, hovering near him on the left, on the right . . . Somewhere quite else there was the past, perfectly clear, brightly coloured, stretching out quite near to him in some sort of different kind of extension. He saw moving pictures. It was not quite like remembering. (365–67)

The reader feels Bruno's anguish when contemplating the final dissolution of his consciousness as the black box of oblivion takes up his memory. This darkness will also appear years after when Murdoch herself describes her emotional experience with Alzheimer's as "being in a very, very bad quiet place, a dark place" or even "sailing away into the darkness" (in Conradi 684). It is at that point, that Bruno is finally ready to die, when he finally stops remembering.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, the character of Bruno has been analysed from the perspective of Ageing Studies and in connection with Murdoch's philosophical work, especially the Platonic concept of love and the way towards moral growth. In this way, *Bruno's Dream* can be regarded as a fictional version of the spiritual pilgrimage from the world of illusions to the vision of reality.

Transcending his ageing body, Bruno has been living in his self-centred world of fantasies, obsessions, resentment and fear without truly perceiving reality. As a response to his forthcoming death, he feels the need to review his life, confronting his past unsolved problems. His reminiscing awakens psychological feelings of guilt and regret for not attending to his wife when she was dying forty years ago, an episode which left a mark on his memory.

Following Murdoch's ideas in *The Sovereignty of Good over Other Concepts*, to become morally better Bruno would have to renounce his ego. Through the re-construction and re-evaluation of his life, he finally comes out of his metaphorical spider web. Thanks to the transformative process of *unselfing*, he wakes up from his dream and finally overcomes his egotistical concerns. In sharing his story, he has embraced a loving perspective, finding the real meaning of human existence, that is, the recognition of love as all that matters at the end.

Thus, on the basis of those arguments, it may be concluded that through his life review process, Bruno has attained a retrospective

resolution of the conflicts of his past and truly repents. Even though it involved ruminating on bitter experiences that brought about psychological distress, the process of life review ended up playing a beneficial and transformative role in Bruno's life.

In the presence of death, he has gained the wisdom to find the missing piece and decipher the message that his dying wife attempted to transmit to him. At that time, he could not truly hear what she wanted to say, which was that she loved him and wanted to forgive him. Once Bruno has made peace with his past and has come to grips with the inevitability of death, the ticking of his clock stops, restoring him to mortality. He accepts the reality of his death and is prepared to die in peace.

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