GETTING TO KNOW YOU: "THE OTHER" IN CONTEMPORARY BRITISH AUTHORS

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by

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Experience and relation. These are the two choices Martin Buber gives us in his formidable treatise on human perception, I and Thou. In it, Buber explores the interaction man has with his world and with those who inhabit it. He claims that "the world is twofold for man in accordance with his twofold attitude" (53). This twofold attitude Buber is talking about refers to man's two states of perception - the state of I-It (experience) and the state of I-you (relation).

To clarify what is meant, it is necessary to understand that Buber is discussing the mindset that one experiences when confronted with "the Other" - someone or something outside of one's own being. Normally, the experience is in reference to two people and how they perceive one another, but Buber also discusses man's relation to nature or beings of a spiritual nature (i.e. God).

In any case, Buber claims that there are two possible states of perception. The first, and most common, is known as I-It. Buber describes this state of mind as "experience" or actively thinking about the Other in a categorical manner, "bringing back...some knowledge of their condition - an experience" (55). As an example of this state of mind, Buber discusses the contemplation of a tree. One can look at it, classify it, listen to the sound of the wind blowing through its leaves. One can feel the bark or even break it down into the expression of some natural law. Through all of this, one experiences the tree, "(it) remains (an) object and has its
place and its time span, its kind and condition" (58). However, there is another manner of experiencing the tree. This is the I-You "relation.\ Now, instead of seeing the tree as an "It", as an object, one comes to "know" the tree in a manner that is almost essentialistic, but with one important difference. In essentialism, there is a certain "tree-ness" that one instinctively knows and it is definitive for all trees. In the instance of an "I-You" relationship, however, one comes to know the essence of this particular tree. There is no "tree-ness", there is "this specific tree-ness". All aspects of the tree, its form and color and scent and chemistry all fuse into one exclusive entity that "confronts (one) bodily and has to deal with (one) as (one) has to deal with it - only differently" (58).

It is important to realize that there are not "I-It" type people and "I-You" type people; these are states of mind that people slip into and out of every day of their lives. No matter how close two people may be, or how well a certain area or object is known, it is the doom of every "You" to slide back into "It" status. "Genuine contemplation never lasts long; the natural being that only now revealed itself to me in the mystery of reciprocity has again become describable, analyzable, classifiable" (68).

It is with these thoughts in mind that I would like to probe into several works by three contemporary British writers, John Osborne, Peter Shaffer, and Iris Murdoch. The question of how we perceive each other seems to have become a pertinent and prevalent theme in many of the books that have been written in the past forty years (John Osborne's Look Back in Anger having appeared in 1956 and acting as the start of the "contemporary" British Age). This theme is important because it deals with the manner in which we see one another and the depth of our
feelings when we interact. Never was there a period more desperately in need of the serious introspection that these works give to us; a period where it seems that everybody is an "Angry Young Man".

"John Osborne's Look Back in Anger: Regarding an Angry Young Man"

When John Osborne's play first hit the London theaters in 1956, it created such a sensation that English theater was changed forever. Now, nearly forty years later, one finds that one can still identify with Jimmy's rage, and the play is still as relevant today as it was then, if not more so. It seems like today, there are so many angry young men out there. What makes them angry, and how does Osborne's play apply to our everyday lives?

To understand the purpose behind Look Back in Anger, one must realize that Jimmy is our subject (our "Other") and we are all the objects of this play's complex message. The audience turns into a crowd of voyeurs looking into a standard British apartment at an unhappy couple and their friends. This point of view seems to become apparent simply from the manner of the play. The simplicity of the play makes it seem as if we are observers of a "day in the life" of Jimmy and his victims. It is the story of three Sunday afternoons that look surprisingly similar. This similarity helps to drive home the major difficulty that Jimmy is trying to cope with, that there is nothing for him to direct his tremendous passion towards. Indeed, the very first line of the play is a comment upon the monotony and drudgery, "Why do I do this every Sunday?" A monotonous existence is truly hell for someone with Jimmy's passion and fire. The outlet for his nearly limitless emotional burdens are few. He has his trumpet, which he plays "almost as if he wanted to kill someone with it" (41), and his other great outlet, his roommates. However, these are of little comfort for someone
whose "heart is so full, (he feels) ill" (59). No one can better express his frustration than Jimmy himself:

I suppose people of our generation aren't able to die for good causes any longer. We had all that done for us, in the thirties and the forties, when we were still kids. There aren't any good, brave causes left. If the big bang does come, and we all get killed off, it won't be in aid of the old-fashioned, grand design. It'll just be for the Brave New-nothing-very-much-thank-you. About as pointless and inglorious as stepping out in front of a bus. (84-85)

The sense of uselessness, of lack of purpose, that Jimmy is trying to express in this speech is what is crushing him and what has turned him into this explosive and abusive young man.

What makes this situation even worse in terms of Jimmy's poor friends is the fact that he can't understand how everyone else around him can be so passive while he is about ready to explode. The worst culprit of this passivity, in Jimmy's eyes, is Allison. She just sits and takes what the world and Jimmy force her to take and remains silent about it, a cardinal sin in Jimmy's eyes. He rails at her, he rants, he raves, trying to get a reaction out of her. "I rage, and shout my head off and everyone thinks "poor chap!" or "what an objectionable young man!" But that girl there can twist your arm off with her silence" (59). It is only when he finally goes too far and Allison falls to her knees, grovelling and crawling, that Jimmy sees what he has been asking of her. Suddenly, he can't stand the sight of such pain, the pain and fury that he has been trying to goad out of her all along. "Don't. Please don't...I can't-" (96). Finally, Jimmy is at a loss for words.

Now can we better understand the gangster? The young, disrespectful ruffian? We don't Carlson
need to condone the behavior, but can we see it's source? Does this play give a perspective, an inside look at the helplessness and directionlessness that they must feel? This play gives the audience an Other which they can study and ponder, an Other with which they can hopefully identify. It gives us a relationship with a dangerous but all too common state of mind that has nurtured the violence that has become all too apparent in the past few decades. Having been victims of the angry young men of our society for so long, here is a chance to look them full in the face and try to understand why they are as they are.

"Peter Shaffer's Equus: The Death of an Identity"

Like Osborne's Look Back in Anger, Equus is about passion and the need to feel and release it. The "hero" of the play is doctor Martin Dysart. He is a psychiatrist who is asked by Hesther Salomon, a magistrate, to take a special case for her, due to the fact that she feels like no other psychiatrist would look kindly upon the boy due to the nature of the crime that he had committed. It turns out that the boy is named Alan Strang. Alan blinded six horses by poking their eyes out with a hoof pick. Slowly, Dr. Dysart learns the reasons for Alan's strange obsession with horses and finds that instead of wanting to cure him, Dr. Dysart wishes that he could join Alan in his nearly religious devotion.

The first sign that Dysart is struggling with his role as psychiatrist comes in the form of a dream in which he is a head priest in Homeric Greece (24-25). In the dream, he is presiding over the sacrifice of hundreds of children where he cuts out their innards. This is obviously symbolic of his work, where he feels as if the "madness" that these children possess is as much a part of them as Carlson
as the intestines that he is ripping from their bodies. He feels that he is stealing something integral from them. In the case of Peter Strang (all of the sacrificed children bore his visage), Dysart sees something passionate, a fire that his own life is missing. He says,"All right, he's sick> He's full of misery and fear...But that boy has known a passion more ferocious than any I have felt in any second of my life. And let me tell you something; I envy it" (82).

Martin Dysart has looked into the world of Alan Strang, seen his true self, his "You", and realized that as shocking and as disturbing as that world is, it is at the core of Alan Strang. In truth, one could even say that Alan has nothing else in his life but his religion. To take away Alan's worship of Equus is to strip away the very core of his being, his "You". The image that Martin invokes when he speaks of curing Alan reinforces that image of Alan loosing an integral part of himself; "When Equus leaves - if he leaves at all - it will be with your intestines in his teeth " (107). This image also recalls Dysart's nightmare. Not only dos Dysart feel the loss of Alan's passion, he feels responsible for that loss.

Many would argue that Alan is dangerous to himself and to others in the state that he is in and that of course he should be cured. A normal, healthy child is always preferable to an insane child. Yet, there are others that would argue that this is not so. Alan's life, as strange and disturbing as it may be, is touched with passion, with feeling. "He's a modern citizen for whom society doesn't exist. He lives one hour every three weeks - howling in a mist. And after the service kneels to a slave who stands over him obviously and unthrowably his master. With my body I thee worship!...Many men have less vital with their wives" (81). The passion of his beliefs towards Equus, and the central role that it plays in his life cause Martin to truly regret having to kill that part
of Alan that gives his life meaning, for what good is life if there is nothing to strive towards, to live for? The question is left to the audience to decide, at what price is normalcy?

"Peter Shaffer's The Royal Hunt of the Sun: The Destruction of Ideals, Society vs. Morals"

Whereas Equus looked at a young boy and how society forced him to play a role that was not true to his real self, The Royal Hunt of the Sun seems to look more closely at the direct effects of a society upon its individuals. In this play, Shaffer has given us two God driven societies, the Spanish conquistadors and the Incas of Peru. Their Gods, Jesus in the case of the Spaniards and Atahuallpa the Man-God in the case of the Incas, are the center of these two societies. In the case of the Spaniards, they claim that the Incas are a people who live under the thumb of a repressive and totalitarian blasphemer. They call him evil and Peru "Hell". Fray Marcos De Nizza, Franciscan friar claims that the Incas are "a population of eunuchs, living entirely without choice", to which Pizarro, the General of the Spanish Army, replies, "They're no fools, these sun men. They know what cheats you sell on your barrow. Choice. Hunger. Tomorrow. They've looked at your wares and passed on. They live here as part of nature: no hope and no despair" (82). It is here that one can see the main conflict of the play, which society does Pizarro follow, Spain, to whom he is loyal or the newly discovered Incan empire, with whom he seems to feel some sort of bond.

This play hinges on a decision. The Spanish have captured Atahuallpa, the Incan Man-God. Pizarro has sworn that he shall be set free if he will fill a temple full of gold for he, his men and Spain. A bond grows between he and the Sun god, but once the time comes for

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Pizarro to let the sun god go, he realizes that he cannot do that without losing the lives of his men. Now the question becomes one of moral value, does one respect the promise that one has given at such a high price, or does one go against one's word in the name of country and loyalty to his men? What values can a man hold and are we to blindly accept the values of the society in which we live?

There are those who say that to blindly accept the rules of any given group is a path that leads to the death of an individual's identity. The root of conformity, or what Sartre called "the herd-feeling" can be traced to following blindly the dictates of a society. This "herd-feeling" can "inspire a lot of galley-slaves, despite the fact that none of them has any direct relationship with the others" (Mounier, 74) It is this "herd feeling" that Pizarro is talking about when he claims that "man cannot just stand as men in the world. It's too big for them and they grow scared. So they build themselves shelters against the bigness, do you see? They call the shelters Court, Army, Church. They're useful against the loneliness, Martin, but they're not true. They're not real, Martin. Do you see?" (22). We find Pizarro arguing for finding your own way, your own beliefs. But what is it that in the end breaks Pizarro and makes him kill Atahuallpa but his feelings for his army? He is given the chance to set Atahuallpa free and save his soul at the cost of his men, but the price was too high, and in the end, he is thrown from one set of values to another, at one point thinking of God and country and demanding for gold in the name of both, and later hoping for Atahuallpa to rise from the dead and prove his divinity to him. He is a man torn between two worlds, and with the death of his identity comes the death of Atahuallpa and everything for which he wished to stand.

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"Iris Murdoch's *The Italian Girl*: Learning to Deal with the Other"

The *Italian Girl* has often been called a "Gothic" piece due to the heavily somber texture of the piece. It is the story of Edmund, who returns home for his mother's funeral only to find his brother's family in what Iris Murdoch would surely call "a horrible muddle". There is Otto, Edmund's brother who is having an affair with the sister of his apprentice, David. David and his sister, Elsa, are Russian Jews who had escaped from a Russian concentration camp to try and find a new life in England. Then there is Otto's wife and daughter (Isabel and Flora, respectively) who are both in love with and have slept with Otto's apprentice, David. Finally, there is Maria, the Italian girl who was one of a string of live-in servants that used to take care of Otto and Edmund when they were children. It is into this mixture of betrayal and lies that Edmund finds himself expected to act as healer, assessor, judge, inspector and liberator (*Italian*, 36).

The very first encounter he has with his family, the day of the funeral, turns out to be unpleasant for Edmund. Otto shows up drunk at the funeral and winds up breaking out in a fit of laughter. Edmund, who abhors drunkenness and hates scenes and drama (26), decides that he must "shake them off like insects from my sleeve" (27). Deciding to turn a blind eye to the pain and betrayal that is tearing apart his family, Edmund makes plans to leave that very day.

Slowly, however, his status as an outsider causes the other members of the house to turn to him for help. They see him as a last chance, someone who can take all of these muddles and turn them around so that life can be easy for them in the same manner that it is for Edmund, who claims to live a "simple solitary life" (23). Thus begins the pattern that seems to conduct
the movement of the book. It begins with Edmund's arrival and the funeral, then begin the first round of "interviews" of the family by Edmund (Baldanza, 117). The first horrid secrets begin to creep out during these first interviews. At first, Edmund displays the classic Murdochian hero reactions to everything that he is told. Any sign of emotion or appeal puts him on edge. "I was a little nervous of the note of appeal in her voice. I didn't want any display of Isabel's emotions. I had no wish to hear her confessions and complaints" (32). "The vehemence of her tone both touched and alarmed me. This was everything that I wanted to get away from" (34).

As one can see, Edmund is terrified of his potential gift, his understanding and support. Edmund, as an outsider, does have the potential to help these poor wretches in their problems if only he is willing to open himself up a little bit and comfort them. It is true, comfort alone is not going to stop Otto from sleeping with Elsa. Nor will support be all that is required to help Flora deal with her pregnancy, but if only Edmund would allow himself to open up and form relations with these poor souls instead of merely passing from one to the other and experiencing their misfortunes, turning them over as if they were freaks in a sideshow, then perhaps the tragedies that take place later in the book could be avoided. Unfortunately, Edmund is not up to the responsibility of helping these people. His sensibilities are much too easily wounded and he winds up stumbling from one crippling revelation to the next, unable to assimilate all that he is told and it winds up costing the price of the life of Flora's baby and eventually Elsa's life as well.

It is not until the end of the play that Edmund truly learns to open up to people. It comes to him first in the person of Maggie (Maria, the Italian girl). It has just been revealed that the house has been left to Maria by Otto's and Edmund's mother, Lydia. Suddenly, for the first time,
Maggie has "acquired what she never had before, an exterior. She was no longer invisible" (133). Thus begins the awakening of Edmund, in a rather materialistic and cold fashion to begin with, but slowly, slowly growing.

As is typical in Murdoch's novels, it is a death (sometimes a near death) that brings the theme of the book sharply into focus. Once all of the scandals have been discovered and the truth brought to the forefront, Otto and Isabel part due to the affairs that they have been involved in, but at the same time, the break off the affairs in which they were involved. This is too much for Otto's mistress, Elsa, to take and she goes slightly mad, kicking red hot coals and cinders from the roaring fireplace in Isabel's room. Her skirt ignites and she is engulfed in the flames. Edmund muses that "we had all been removed to some other plane of being... We had seen too much suddenly, too much about mortality and chance, too much about the consequences of our actions, too much about the real nature of the world" (147). Suddenly, in one fatal action, each of the characters undergoes a subtle, yet significant change, and for once, Edmund chooses to notice and remark upon these changes, and in doing so draws attention to the changes that he has undergone himself. Upon seeing David off, he is not disgusted by David's tears. Indeed, Edmund admits, "I felt near to tears myself." Upon hearing that David was returning to his native Leningrad, the place from which he had escaped all those years before, Edmund argues strongly against his return to Russia, again forsaking his custom of sitting on the fence.

The most dramatic change, however, comes from Edmund's visit to Maggie. This is one of the most exemplary examples of an "I-You" moment in all the books that have been studied thus far in this paper. Edmund, who had been so afraid of opening up to people, not only opens
himself up to Maggie, but he makes a very difficult step in revealing himself to her fully by admitting his love to her. One can see the difficulty in this for him, and he almost does not succeed, he almost "(left) her alone forever in the sunlight" (166). However, at the last moment, he turns and utters her name.

She came and sat at the other end of the bed and we gazed at each other. I could not remember that I had looked in anyone in quite that way before: when one is all vision and the other face enters into one's own. I was aware too of a bodily feeling which was not exactly desire but was rather something to do with time, a sense of the present being infinitely large. (168)

At last, Edmund exposes himself without reservation to another person:

I rubbed my eyes. I did not want to have, yet, so many thoughts. I wanted to be, for a while, perhaps for the first time, distinguished and simple, and to deal for better or worse with another person. I saw her now, a girl, a stranger, and yet the most familiar person in the world: my Italian girl, and yet also the first woman, as strange as Eve to the dazed awakening Adam. She was there, separately and authoritatively there. (170-171)

Sartre claims that one only exists as "an object of knowledge to other people" (qtd. in Sartre, 82). Edmund remarks upon this himself, "I scarcely knew what I looked like anymore. I had no images of myself. That too I would have to learn" (171). Not only has his new found openness brought him close to others, but with it, he has gained an identity, a new existence through another. Buber claims that the present "exists only insofar as presentness, encounter and
relation, exist. Only as You becomes present does presence come into being" (63). Thus, in
finally seeing and relating to those around him, Edmund has "learned to exist". He has found
life through other people and won a chance to live for the first time in his life.

"Iris Murdoch's The Nice and the Good: Love and the Other"

In Frank Baldanza’s book, Iris Murdoch, Mr. Baldanza quotes a 1968 interview between
W.K. Rose and Iris Murdoch in which Iris Murdoch claimed that The Nice and the Good is a
very "open", or unstructured, novel. She goes on to state that this looser structure allows her
"more accidental and separate and free characters" than a "closed" novel would. Mr. Baldanza
then goes on to point out that this looser style creates a "greater diffusion and lack of
concentration; and, therefore, with it is especially important to note the thematic emphases in
this work" (138). The thematic emphasis of this book being, without a doubt, love.

The Nice and the Good is rife with frustrated or attempted love affairs. No one is happily
involved, not even Kate and Octavian Gray, who are the rich and seemingly happily married (as
they endlessly assure one another) couple who own Trescombe, a beautiful mansion housing a
group of friends and family along the Dorset coastline. It is here where the bulk of the action
takes place as each of the characters try desperately to find themselves someone with which they
can fall in love. The book is more complex than that, but when one strips away all of the
trimmings, it is in this where we find our motivating theme.

The other major storyline, in contrast to the fumbled matchmaking going on at
Trescombe is the suicide of one of Octavian's employees, Joseph Radeechy. Octavian places

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one of his good friends and a fellow employee, John Ducane in charge of an investigation into his suicide. During the course of his investigation, John has to exercise a lot of personal power to find the truth, and while this bothers him, the thought of failing in his investigation bothers him more. At last, upon learning the truth, that a fellow employee, Richard Biranne has been blackmailing Radwech with the knowledge that he had seen Joseph kill his wife, he decides that the truth and looking good to Octavian merit his destroying Richard's career.

In reviewing the list of "who loves who", it is almost comical to see its length and complexity. The worst part is that no one is in love with someone who loves them in turn. Kate and Octavian seem to have a wonderful, open, relationship, but there is something missing in it. There seems to be no honesty in their "honest" relationship. John Ducane is also involved with Kate. This is not hidden from him, and they seem to have a nice, friendly relationship, but it is broken up by John's unwillingness to tell Kate about Jessica Bird, a younger girl that John has been seeing for the past four years. Jessica and John had started out in love, but John began to feel that he was trapping the much younger Jessica and decided to let her go, which she cannot comprehend or stand. Then there is Willy Kost and Mary Clothier, two friends of the Grays who live at Trescombe. Mary very badly wants to help Willy deal with his terrible past (he was in Dachau during World War II), and it is suspected that this is why she truly "loves" Willy; he is one of the only people at Trescombe whom she feels that she cannot help and this is her attempt to aid him. She is the matriarchal figure at Trescombe, it is her duty to nurture those who are unhappy, and there is no one more unhappy than Willy Kost. The one exception to this may be Theodore Gray, brother to Octavian. He left India "under a cloud" and is extremely unhappy.
about *that*. It turns out that this cloud was that he sexually approached a young novice of the Buddhist Temple where he was living at the time. Now, Theo must deal with a similar problem in the form of Pierce Clothier, Mary's young son. Theo finds Pierce maddeningly attractive, but dare not act upon it, for he would definitely not understand. In truth, Pierce is too occupied with trying to seduce Barbara, the daughter of Kate and Octavian, who becomes ceaselessly annoyed with his endless attempts to make her notice him. Pierce's final attempt to get Barb to notice him is what brings about the Murdochian near death experience that seems to bring clarity along with it.

In trying to get Barbara to notice him, Pierce swims into a cave along the shoreline that is only visible during low tide and becomes trapped inside as the tide rises to drown him. John Ducane swims into the cave as well to try and retrieve Pierce, but he too becomes trapped and together he and Pierce face nearly certain death. It is in the dark cave that John discovers two great truths. The first truth is a surprising love that he feels for Mary Clothier. He sees her face float before him in the dark on several occasions. The second truth is that he feels that he has played the rat during his life. "A busy little scurrying rat seeking out its own little advantages and comforts" (315). This strikes him strongly and he swears:

> if I ever get out of here I will be no man's judge. Nothing is worth doing except to kill the little rat, not to judge, not to be superior, not to exercise power, not to seek, seek, seek. To love and to reconcile and to forgive, only this matters. All power is sin and all law is frailty. Love is the only justice. Forgiveness, reconciliation, not law. (315)

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John Ducane lives up to this promise. He tells Biranne that "I don't want to wreck your life, why should I? It wouldn't help poor Claudia or poor Radeechy. And as for the processes of human law, human law is only a very rough approximation to justice" (324).

As for the first realization that he had experienced in the cave, John and Mary reveal themselves to one another in the first true love that is exposed in the book. John talks about wanting to be "utterly revealed to her" (346). This is an entirely new way of noticing one another, for as Mary states to John, "We've noticed each other as familiar object on a landscape, like houses or railway stations, things one passes on a journey" (340). John, however, remarks that "he and Mary communicated by means of what was good in both of them" (344). Finally, the couple are revealed and functioning in a "good" relationship. Buber states, "As long as love is "blind" - that is, as long as it does not have a whole being - it does not yet truly stand under the basic word of relation" (67-68). A relationship is reciprocity, give and take. So many of the characters in The Nice and the Good couldn't or wouldn't understand that. At last, towards the end, we have two who do.

"Conclusions"

So what can all of this mean? Why all this concern and somewhat pretentious sounding discussion of something that seems to be rife with ideas that are merely common sense?

The problem is that one thinks of the other person as a separate entity so little. It is true, an average day is seldom spent entirely alone, but how often can it honestly be said that one truly listens to and completely understands what is being said by that other person on a level beyond mere comprehension? How often do we identify with that other? Literature gives us a
chance to do this and take it to a new, higher level. There on the page is not only the actions and words of another human being, but his thoughts and emotions as well. No person is so naked as the fictional character; they can hide nothing which the author wishes to reveal, and the reader has the privilege to see them as a whole, not merely as the facade which they chose to present to the world. C.S. Lewis is quoted as saying, "We read to know that we are not alone." We read to touch the other, to know him, to understand him, to catch a glimpse of a different view on life or perhaps to find justification and support for our view on life. The other surrounds us, yet like a lover who is seen every day, one often forgets the beauty that is there until it is presented to us in a manner that is foreign to our everyday lives. The other hides in plain sight, and it sometimes is necessary to be reminded of its existence, for without seeing it as it truly is, we are like the man who cannot help but feel lost and alone in a room crowded with friends.
List of Works Cited


