

VINTAGE MURDOCH

THE SEA, THE SEA



VINTAGE CLASSICS

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About the Author

Iris Murdoch was born in Dublin in 1919 of Anglo-Irish parents. She went to Badminton School, Bristol, and read classics at Somerville College, Oxford. During the war she was an Assistant Principal at the Treasury, and then worked with UNRRA in London, Belgium and Austria. She held a studentship in Philosophy at Newnham College, Cambridge, and then in 1948 she returned to Oxford, where she became a Fellow of St Anne's College. Until her death in February 1999, she lived with her husband, the teacher and critic John Bayley, in Oxford. Awarded the CBE in 1976, Iris Murdoch was made a DBE in the 1987 New Year's Honours List. In the 1997 PEN Awards she received the Gold Pen for Distinguished Service to Literature.

Following her writing debut in 1954 with *Under the Net*, Iris Murdoch wrote twenty-six novels, including the Booker Prize-winning *The Sea, The Sea* (1978). Other literary awards she received include the James Tait Black Memorial Prize for *The Black Prince* (1973) and the Whitbread Prize for *The Sacred and Profane Love Machine* (1974). Her works of philosophy include *Sartre: Romantic Rationalist* (1953), *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (1992) and *Existentialists and Mystics* (1997). She wrote several plays including *The Italian Girl* (with James Saunders) and *The Black Prince*, adapted from her novel of the same name.

ALSO BY IRIS MURDOCH

Fiction

Under the Net
Flight from the Enchanter
The Sandcastle
The Bell
A Severed Head
An Unofficial Rose
The Unicorn
The Italian Girl
The Red and the Green
The Time of the Angels
The Nice and the Good
Bruno's Dream
A Fairly Honourable Defeat
An Accidental Man
The Black Prince
The Sacred and Profane Love Machine
A Word Child
Henry and Cato
Nuns and Soldiers
The Philosopher's Pupil
The Good Apprentice
The Book and the Brotherhood
The Message to the Planet
The Green Knight
Jackson's Dilemma

Non-Fiction

Sartre: Romantic Rationalist
Acastos: Two Platonic Dialogues
Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals
Existentialists and Mystics

THE SEA, THE SEA

Iris Murdoch

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
John Burnside

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

To
Rosemary Cramp

Introduction

The mid-Seventies saw the culmination of an apparent spiritual awakening in Europe and America. Buddhism, the teachings of Meister Eckhart, Sufi, Hindu and Native America myth, the emergence of the ecology movement – all suggested the beginnings of a paradigm shift away from the dominant patriarchal-reductive-consumerist model by which we had become accustomed to living, and a real engagement with principles such as mercy, compassion and right action. It was, looking back, a far more hopeful time than might be imagined, and as we entered the Reagan/Thatcher years, hope seemed more essential than ever to the fabric of decent life: ‘Hope not being hope,’ as Marianne Moore remarked, ‘until all ground for hope has vanished.’ It’s probably too early to say, but it seems that the general shift in attitudes people had hoped for has been effectively subverted: the greed of the Eighties; the continuing pollution of the land, the oceans and even near-space; cynical wars and the triumph of presentation over content or values in political life, all seem to indicate a victory for the old (new) world order. On the surface of our spiritual lives, there has been a twofold shift: on the one hand, a commodification of religious ideas, reducing the spiritual to a series of products (self-help books, celebrity videos and various superficial, but harmless paraphernalia to do with ‘New Age’ beliefs); on the other, a denial of the very existence of that soul sickness which lies, almost necessarily, at the heart of a competitive, poisoned, overcrowded society. For many of us, the only sphere of authenticity is the personal: the public realm, the political and social, appears to have become corrupted beyond redemption. The desire to withdraw, to be quiet, to stake

out some limited, controllable space, is widespread, and the longing for authenticity is presented, not as a profound spiritual need, but as a form of treatable neurosis. Now, if I am uncomfortable with my condition, I am suffering from stress – a purely work-related phenomenon – or depression, which can be treated with drugs, exercise regimes and an effort on my part to get out more. Most important of all is the way in which we have been persuaded that what we need/want is paraphernalia, rather than a path; entertainment, rather than thought; tidiness, rather than order.

It is tempting to despair; not surprisingly, for despair and hope are inseparable companions, like beauty and ugliness, good and bad, cold and hot. The only way to break out of the circle they form is to work towards a steady and provisional detachment. In almost every tradition of spiritual and aesthetic practice – whether it be the Platonist's pursuit of the good, the Buddhist's disciplined search for right action, or the early Christian's *caritas* – detachment is a recurrent theme. Perhaps, in our rush to take in the ideas of Eastern thought, we have misunderstood this central concept; certainly, there have been many who see detachment as a form of smug quietism, practised by those who feel somehow superior to the ordinary run of human affairs. Yet one may be passionate and also practise detachment. It is central to the work of the artist, for example, that the self, and the desire for rewards of various kinds, are set aside, at least temporarily, in pursuit of an elusive excellence. 'If I do well I am blessed whether any bless me or not,' Marianne Moore also said, 'and if I do ill I am cursed.' Her source for this sentiment appears to have been *The Bhagavad Gita* (18: 23–5):

When work is done as sacred work, unselfishly, with a peaceful mind, without lust or hate, with no desire for reward, then the work is pure.

But when work is done with selfish desire, or feeling it is an effort, or thinking it is a sacrifice, then the work is impure.

And that work which is done with a confused mind, without considering what may follow, or one's own powers, or the harm done to others, or one's own loss, is work of darkness.

The thing to understand, then, is that the practice of detachment has nothing to do with an easy withdrawal into a saint-like, wise, complacent seclusion. More often than not, the demons of our nature love a recluse; nobody is more vulnerable to himself than the solitary. To imagine that one can simply withdraw, and somehow achieve peace, or wisdom, or detachment, is a mistake. It is also, in most cases, inappropriate, selfish and even cowardly. With a few exceptions, the only valid withdrawal is a temporary one: a kind of spiritual *reculer pour mieux sauter*. In some Buddhist countries, a person may retire for a year to spend time in a local temple, taking refuge. When such people emerge, they are ready to resume life in 'the outside world', bringing a fresh strength and compassion to their relations with others. There is no doubt that such retreats are spiritually, morally and even physically beneficial: we need some such mechanism in our own, relentlessly secular societies. Yet only a small proportion of any population is fitted for the life of the monk or the hermit. The temptation to withdraw, to achieve a seeming detachment, to be above or beyond the cacophony of 'the world' may be an attractive one, but it usually has nothing to do with a spiritual path, or the search for wisdom, or – heaven help us – saintliness. To practise detachment one must be *in* the world, in the chaos of emotions and needs and conflicts that make up ordinary life. If that world is sometimes disappointing, so be it: a just life is one that must be lived in the midst of disappointment.

Withdrawal can provide the illusion of perfection – self-governance, order, a quietist's idea of peace – but it is not, for most of us, worthwhile. The example of the saints, of the Bodhisattvas, of the Sufi masters, is that mere withdrawal from confusion and misery is not enough; how can I enjoy my peace, if others are confused, hurt, and in need. What distinguishes the Bodhisattva is the decision not to leave the circle until all sentient beings attain enlightenment; the saint who has shed the illusions of the world returns to that same world in order to assist others. This return is not that of a cool, detached, superior being; it is a return to the thick of things, to the chaos and pity of the human condition. To accept imperfection – this is the key. To engage, with compassion, in the serious game of being, is the only acceptable choice. Prospero's powers, Prospero's cell, may beckon, but as Shakespeare also said, 'the world must be peopled'.

The central character of *The Sea, the Sea* is Charles Arrowby, an ageing theatrical celebrity who decides, one day, to withdraw from the world and dwell in seclusion in a house by the sea. He has what might be called Prospero's Syndrome: as an actor, he had been a compelling figure, not only to audiences, but also to his peers. Now, he thinks, the time has come to surrender his powers, to live in wise seclusion, in tune with nature, swimming and walking, concocting simple, if rather eccentric, meals, and writing a diary/journal/novel (he never quite makes up his mind what it is to be), reflecting on his life and times. He is selfconsciously literary, and theatrical, as he considers his undertaking:

But now the main events of my life are over and there is to be nothing but 'recollection in tranquillity'. To repent of a life of egoism? Not exactly, yet something of the

sort. Of course I never said this to the ladies and gentlemen of the theatre. They would never have stopped laughing.

The theatre is certainly a place of learning about the brevity of human glory: oh all those wonderful glittering absolutely vanished pantomimes! Now I shall abjure magic and become a hermit: put myself in a situation where I can honestly say that I have nothing else to do but to learn to be good.

That 'recollection in tranquillity' suggests an identification, not only with Prospero, but also with Wordsworth – 'nature's priest'. Early on, Charles rather theatrically adopts the pose of the Romantic loner, confronting the wild forces of the natural world, in *his* pools, *his* land, *his* sea:

At one point, near to my house, the sea has actually composed an arched bridge of rock under which it roars into a deep open steep-sided enclosure beyond. It affords me a curious pleasure to stand upon this bridge and watch the violent forces which the churning waves, advancing or retreating, generate within the confined space of the rocky hole.

What Charles Arrowby is buying into here is a whole set of appealing Romantic, theatrical myths: the figure of the wise hermit; communion with nature; the voluntary (and so magnanimous) surrender of worldly powers. Not surprisingly, his plan very quickly goes awry. The rather grim house he buys, called Shruff End, would appear to have a 'history' of its own and may even be haunted; the locals are unimpressed by their celebrity neighbour, and Arrowby is quickly besieged by the very people – theatre types and former lovers – he had intended to leave behind. Meanwhile, 'nature' is proving to be other than the comfort and the solace he had hoped for; he has difficulties with the

sea when swimming, is troubled by a sense of cold in the air and, finally, sitting alone on the rocks near his house, he sees a monster rising from the waves. This vision strikes terror into his heart:

The shock and the horror of it were so great that for some time I could not move. I wanted to run away, I feared beyond anything that the animal would reappear closer to land, perhaps rising up at my very feet. But my legs would not function and my heart was beating so violently that any further exertion might have rendered me unconscious.

At around the same time as he sees the monster, Arrowby meets an old flame: his first love, in fact, a woman called Hartley with whom he had grown up, and had once innocently planned to marry. Hartley is now a dull, physically unattractive and rather timid woman, married to a brutish ex-soldier called Ben Fitch. She makes for a singularly unappealing romantic lead; yet, perhaps *because* she is so plain, Arrowby is drawn to her as if nothing had changed, and decides to rescue her from a marriage which, he quickly concludes, must be a form of slow torture. The remainder of the novel follows his pursuit to this end, aided and sometimes hampered by his old theatrical friends, his Tibetan Buddhist cousin James, and the Fitches' adopted child, Titus. Parallels with *The Tempest* abound, though many of these have to do more with Charles's imagination than with the real state of affairs. As he fights to win back his love, Charles becomes blind, wilful and even more foolish, a danger to himself and others. Events take an ugly, violent turn; people are killed, injured or debased. Instead of wishing to be rescued, Hartley is frightened by the whole affair, torn between two men who, by the end, are more preoccupied with a shared desire for violence than they ever were with her.

Interestingly, the view of marriage presented by almost all of the characters in *The Sea, the Sea*, including Charles Arrowby, is entirely negative. Eavesdropping on Hartley and Ben, Charles remarks that 'marriage is so hideously private'; earlier, his friend Peregrine (who has had more than his fair share of matrimonial discord) offers a caustic view of wedded bliss:

'Every persisting marriage is based on fear,' said Peregrine. 'Fear is fundamental, you dig down in human nature and what's at the bottom? Mean spiteful cruel self-regarding fear, whether it makes you put the boot in or whether it makes you cower. As for marriage, people simply settle into positions of domination and submission. Of course they sometimes "grow together" or "achieve a harmony", since you have to deal rationally with a source of terror in your life. I suspect there are very few happy marriages really, only people conceal their misery and their disappointment.'

Elsewhere marriage is seen, at best, as an arrangement of mutual support and convenience, a state of war, or a cage. It is interesting to think that all these actors, with their love of Shakespeare, never seriously ask themselves why the comedies always end with a marriage. Or is it simply that they see weddings as part of the theatrical illusion: good endings, rather than significant beginnings? Part of the logic of Charles's withdrawal is to escape any such attachments, even in their sub-matrimonial form: most of the demons who plague him in his 'cave' are former lovers, such as the charming, vacillating Lizzie, or the aggressive Rosina. Why he should wish to marry Hartley at all, given what he has seen of marriage and of her new circumstances, is hard to understand; yet he resolves that this is what he will do. As the novel progresses, the depth of his obsession is terrifying; his ability to clutch at the thinnest of straws, quite

pitiful. It is only when he is left alone, abandoned and utterly beyond hope, that he obtains a vision, of sorts, a kind of reconciliation with the world:

I pulled myself up, knelt, and began to shake my blankets and my pillow which were wet with dew. Then I heard, odd and frightening in that total stillness, a sound coming from the water, a sudden and quite loud splashing, as if something just below the rock were about to emerge, and crawl out perhaps onto the land. I had a moment of sheer fear as I turned and leaned towards the sea edge. Then I saw below me, their wet doggy faces looking curiously upward, four seals, swimming so close to the rock that I could almost have touched them. I looked down at their pointed noses only a few feet below, their dripping whiskers, their bright inquisitive round eyes, and the lithe and glossy grace of their wet backs. They curved and played a while, gulping and gurgling a little, looking up at me all the time. And as I watched their play I could not doubt that they were beneficent beings come to visit me and bless me.

‘That,’ Charles continues, ‘is how the story ought to end, with the seals and the stars, explanation, resignation, reconciliation, everything picked up into some radiant bland ambiguous higher significance.’ However, this being an Iris Murdoch novel, the seal-vision is not where our story is concluded. There is a Postscript, entitled *Life Goes On*, which, to use Charles’s own words, illustrates ‘the impossibility of living happily or virtuously ever after’. Life, we know, is more complex and interesting than that: the world must be peopled and we leave Charles in a new place, surrounded by his cousin James’s possessions, and contemplating a return, not only to the theatre, but also to the amorous intrigues of yore. *The Sea, the Sea* is a

beautiful, complex, ironic novel, which confronts our major demons: fear, jealousy, vanity, envy, the pain and confusion of misplaced love, and the impulse to violent action, whether on the battlefield, or in the privacy of the home. It is impossible to isolate any single strand in such a work. Yet, as the space available here does allow for a full exploration of this masterpiece, I would like to concentrate on one slim thread, one notion, which captured my attention when I first read this book, and which continues to intrigue me.

There are only a few references to Milarepa, the Tibetan poet-mystic, throughout the course of *The Sea, the Sea*, yet they are there, nonetheless, laid down like clues to a possible reading of the book. The teaching and person of Milarepa are most closely associated with Charles Arrowby's cousin, James, an army man who has spent time in Tibet, and who once lost a Sherpa companion, nicknamed Milarepa, during a blizzard. James is an enigmatic figure, something of a poet-warrior himself, a man who has learned to carry out feats of Tibetan magic (which he dismisses as 'tricks'). From childhood onwards, Charles had come to see him as a rival; yet in many ways James is, in fact, his complement, more of a twin brother than a cousin. In spite of his early doubts and antagonisms, Charles ends up living in James's flat, amongst James's things, and there are times when we also cannot help but see the two cousins as aspects of a single self. For example, though we associate James with all things Tibetan in the novel, it is Charles who, however unconsciously, re-enacts the story of Milarepa (though in his own, idiosyncratic way). Like Milarepa, he withdraws from the world, is brought low, and is changed by the experience; yet in spite of all this – and in spite of the clues offered by his cousin – he never discovers Milarepa's true identity. Even at the end, he tells us that he 'cannot find the works of Milarepa. Is he an Italian poet?' This in

itself is an interesting question. Who was Milarepa? And why is he important to our thinking about this novel?

In *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism*, a meditation on the nature of the spiritual path, and the misunderstandings brought to the practice of Tibetan Buddhism by Western converts, Chogyam Trungpa tells the story of the Tibetan poet-sage Milarepa, contrasting his methods with those of his predecessors, Marpa and Naropa.

In Milarepa's case, the situation developed quite differently. He was a peasant, much less learned and sophisticated than Marpa had been when he met Naropa, and he had committed many crimes including murder. He was miserably unhappy, yearned for enlightenment, and was willing to pay any fee that Marpa might ask. So Marpa had Milarepa pay on a very literal physical level. He had him build a series of houses for him, one after the other, and after each was completed Marpa would tell Milarepa to tear the house down and put all the stones back where he had found them, so as not to mar the landscape. Each time Marpa ordered Milarepa to dismantle a house, he would give some absurd excuse, such as having been drunk when he ordered the house built or never having ordered such a house at all. And each time Milarepa, full of longing for the teachings, would tear the house down and start again.

Finally Marpa designed a tower with nine storeys. Milarepa suffered terrible physical hardship in carrying the stones and building the tower and, when he had finished, he went to Marpa and once more asked him for the teachings. But Marpa said to him, 'You want to receive the teachings from me, just like that, merely because you built this tower for me? Well, I'm afraid you will still have to give me a gift as an initiation fee.'

By this time Milarepa had no possessions left whatsoever, having spent all his time and labour building towers. But Damema, Marpa's wife, felt sorry for him and said, 'These towers you have built are such a wonderful gesture of

devotion and faith. Surely my husband won't mind if I give you some sacks of barley and a roll of cloth for your initiation fee.' So Milarepa took the barley and cloth to the initiation circle where Marpa was teaching and offered them as his fee, along with the gifts of the other students. But Marpa, when he recognised the gift, was furious and shouted at Milarepa, 'These things belong to me, you hypocrite! You try to deceive me!' And he literally kicked Milarepa out of the initiation circle.

At this point Milarepa gave up all hope of ever getting Marpa to give him the teachings. In despair, he decided to commit suicide, and was just about to kill himself when Marpa came to him and told him he was ready to receive the teachings.

Later, Trungpa continues:

In The Tale of Red Rock Jewel Valley, when Milarepa went back into his cave after a comforting vision of Marpa, he was confronted with a gang of demons. He tried every way he could to get rid of them, all kinds of tactics. He threatened them, cajoled them, he even preached the Dharma to them. But they would not leave until he ceased regarding them as 'bad' and opened to them, saw them as they were. This was the beginning of Milarepa's period of learning how to subjugate the demons . . . By being willing to accept the demons and gods and goddesses as they are, Milarepa transmuted them. They became dakinis, or the energies of life.

The parallels here with Charles Arrowby's seaside sojourn are not difficult to see: like Milarepa, Charles gathers and moves stones, making circles and constructions with them (though his labours are infinitely less demanding than the building of a nine-storey tower); in an ironic echo of the Tibetan master's trials (and like St Anthony and several other Christian saints), he is attended by demons and

monsters, who must be transformed, by an act of the imagination, into 'beneficent beings'; on his path to an enlightenment of sorts, he must be stripped of everything, especially of hope. In the course of the novel, Charles Arrowby is reduced to the condition of 'earth' and trampled on by others; he has even become the object of mockery that he most feared he might appear, at the start of his journal. Yet he has achieved a kind of understanding.

What an egoist I must seem in the preceding pages. But am I so exceptional? We must live by the light of our own self-satisfaction, through that secret vital busy inwardness which is even more remarkable than our reason. Thus we must live unless we are saints, and are there any? There are spiritual beings, perhaps James was one, but there are no saints.

Well, I will try to reflect, but not today. When this is all done, will I ever write anything else? The story of Clement? Or that book about the theatre that my friends kindly profess to think so necessary? Or shall I simply sit by the fire and read Shakespeare, coming home to the place where magic does not shrink reality and turn it into tiny things to be toys of fairies? There may be no saints, but there is at least one proof that the light of self-satisfaction can illuminate the whole world.

Something has been achieved here, just as something was achieved in the transformation of the sea monster into a vision of friendly seals – but the achievement is always, and necessarily, temporary and provisional. The spiritual life leads, not to a transcendence, but to a fuller expression of one's true nature. There is a story that a disreputable-looking man came to a Zen Buddhist master and asked him for the teachings. The man, no doubt tired of his wayward existence, wanted to be changed in some way, to become someone else, a monk or a recluse, someone he imagined

as comfortable and at peace with the world. The master, however, simply gazed at him for a time, then asked, 'What are you?' After a moment's confusion as to the nature and depth of the question, the supplicant replied that he was a thief. The master nodded. 'Then be a good thief,' he said. We cannot change ourselves utterly; we can only change how we are in the world: how we see, how we act, how we tell our stories. Milarepa himself said that, 'Insofar as the Ultimate, or the true nature of being is concerned, there are neither Buddhas nor demons. He who frees himself from fear and hope, evil and virtue, will realise the insubstantial and groundless nature of confusion. Samsara will then appear to be Mahamudra itself.' *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism* concludes with this account of Milarepa as an old man:

The rest of *The Hundred Thousand Songs* deals with Milarepa's development as a teacher and his relationships with his students. Towards the end of his life he had completely perfected the transmutation process to the point where he could be called the Vidyadhara or 'Holder of the Crazy Wisdom'. No longer could he be swayed by the winds of hope and fear. The gods and goddesses and demons, his passions and their external projections, had been completely subjugated and transformed. Now his life was a continual dance with the dakinis.

Finally, Milarepa reached the 'old dog' stage, his highest attainment. People could tread on him, use him as a road, as earth; he would always be there. He transcended his own individual existence so that, as we read his last teaching, there is a sense of the universality of Milarepa, the example of enlightenment.

At the end of *The Sea, the Sea*, Charles Arrowby has reached another form of the old dog stage: downtrodden,

misunderstood, disappointed, he nevertheless reaffirms the only life-energy, the only urge to 'self-satisfaction' that he can, which is his own. As he prepares to re-enter his old world, and to be tempted into yet another love affair, he is who he must be. He may not have learned much, but at least he has learned to give up the search for perfection, whether it be through sainthood or romantic love. This recognition of the value of the imperfect is a theme which recurs time and again in Iris Murdoch's work and seems to me central to her philosophy. *The Times's* obituary expresses this notion in its briefest, and perhaps clearest, form:

Those who reproached her for publishing too much were perhaps missing the point: her project was one of imperfection, or imperfectibility even, as if the perfect – like the good, about which she meditated so deeply – was fundamentally beyond human achievement. If for her every novel was a fresh attempt to attain her ideal, she found each time that her ideal had moved on.

JOHN BURNSIDE
1999

Prehistory

The sea which lies before me as I write glows rather than sparkles in the bland May sunshine. With the tide turning, it leans quietly against the land, almost unflecked by ripples or by foam. Near to the horizon it is a luxurious purple, spotted with regular lines of emerald green. At the horizon it is indigo. Near to the shore, where my view is framed by rising heaps of humpy yellow rock, there is a band of lighter green, icy and pure, less radiant, opaque however, not transparent. We are in the north, and the bright sunshine cannot penetrate the sea. Where the gentle water taps the rocks there is still a surface skin of colour. The cloudless sky is very pale at the indigo horizon which it lightly pencils in with silver. Its blue gains towards the zenith and vibrates there. But the sky looks cold, even the sun looks cold.

I had written the above, destined to be the opening paragraph of my memoirs, when something happened which was so extraordinary and so horrible that I cannot bring myself to describe it even now after an interval of time and although a possible, though not totally reassuring, explanation has occurred to me. Perhaps I shall feel calmer and more clear-headed after yet another interval.

I spoke of a memoir. Is that what this chronicle will prove to be? Time will show. At this moment, a page old, it feels more like a diary than a memoir. Well, let it be a diary then. How I regret that I did not keep one earlier, what a record that would have been! But now the main events of my life are over and there is to be nothing but 'recollection in

tranquillity'. To repent of a life of egoism? Not exactly, yet something of the sort. Of course I never said this to the ladies and gentlemen of the theatre. They would never have stopped laughing.

The theatre is certainly a place for learning about the brevity of human glory: oh all those wonderful glittering absolutely vanished pantomimes! Now I shall abjure magic and become a hermit: put myself in a situation where I can honestly say that I have nothing else to do but to learn to be good. The end of life is rightly thought of as a period of meditation. Will I be sorry that I did not begin it sooner?

It is necessary to write, that much is clear, and to write in a way quite unlike any way which I have employed before. What I wrote before was written in water and deliberately so. This is for permanence, something which cannot help hoping to endure. Yes, already I personify the object, the little book, the *libellus*, this creature to which I am giving life and which seems at once to have a will of its own. It wants to live, it wants to survive.

I have considered writing a journal, not of happenings for there will be none, but as a record of mingled thoughts and daily observations: 'my philosophy', my *pensées* against a background of simple descriptions of the weather and other natural phenomena. This now seems to me again to be a good idea. The sea. I could fill a volume simply with my word-pictures of it. I would certainly like to write some sustained account of my surroundings, its flora and fauna. This could be of some interest, if I persevered, even though I am no White of Selborne. From my sea-facing window at this moment I can see three different kinds of gulls, swallows, a cormorant, innumerable butterflies drifting about over the flowers which grow miraculously upon my yellow rocks . . .

I must make no attempt at 'fine writing' however, that would be to spoil my enterprise. Besides, I should merely make a fool of myself.

Oh blessed northern sea, a real sea with clean merciful tides, not like the stinking soupy Mediterranean!

They say there are seals here, but I have seen none yet.

Of course there is no need to separate 'memoir' from 'diary' or 'philosophical journal'. I can tell you, reader, about my past life and about my 'world-view' also, as I ramble along. Why not? It can all come out naturally as I reflect. Thus unanxiously (for am I not now leaving anxiety behind?) I shall discover my 'literary form'. In any case, why decide now? Later, if I please, I can regard these ramblings as rough notes for a more coherent account. Who knows indeed how interesting I shall find my past life when I begin to tell it? Perhaps I shall bring the story gradually up to date and as it were float my present upon my past?

To repent of egoism: is autobiography the best method? Well, being no philosopher I can only reflect about the world through reflecting about my own adventures in it. And I feel that it is time to *think* about myself at last. It may seem odd that one who has been described in the popular press as a 'tyrant', a 'tartar', and (if I recall) a 'power-crazed monster' should feel that he has not hitherto done so! But this is the case. I have in fact very little sense of identity.

It is indeed only lately that I have felt this need to write something that is both personal and reflective. In the days when I wrote in water I imagined that the only book I would ever publish would be a cookery book!

I might now introduce myself – to myself, first and foremost, it occurs to me. What an odd discipline autobiography turns out to be. To others, if these words are printed in the not too distant future, there will be in a superficial sense 'no need of an introduction', as they say at meetings. How long does mortal fame endure? My kind of fame not very long, but

long enough. Yes, yes, I am Charles Arrowby and, as I write this, I am, shall we say, over sixty years of age. I am wifeless, childless, brotherless, sisterless, I am my well-known self, made glittering and brittle by fame. I determined long ago that I would retire from the theatre when I had passed sixty. ('You will *never* retire,' Wilfred told me. 'You will be *unable* to.' He was wrong.) In fact I am tired of the theatre, I have had enough. This is what no one who knew me well, not Sidney nor Peregrine nor Fritzie, not Wilfred nor Clement when they were alive, could either foresee or imagine. And it is not just a matter of sagely departing 'on the crest of the wave'. (How many actors and directors pathetically overstay their welcome.) I am tired of it all. There has been a moral change.

'All right, go,' they said, 'but don't imagine that you can come back.' I don't want to come back, thank you! 'If you stop working and live alone you will go quietly mad.' (This was Sidney's contribution.) On the contrary, I feel completely sane and free and happy for the first time in my life!

It is not that I ever came to 'disapprove' of the theatre, as my mother, for instance, never ceased to do. I just knew that if I stayed in it any longer I would begin to wilt spiritually, would lose something which had travelled with me patiently so far, but might go away if I did not attend to it at last: something not belonging to the preoccupations of my work, but precious separate from it. I remember James saying something about people who end their lives in caves. Well, this, here, is my cave. And I have reached it bearing the precious thing that has come with me, as if it were a talisman which I can now unwrap. How grand and pompous this sounds! And yet I confess I scarcely know what I mean. Let us break off these rather ponderous reflections for a while.

The above observations have been written on a sequence of different days, wonderful empty solitary days, such as I remember yearning for, and never quite believing that I wanted so much that I would finally obtain them.

I went swimming again but still cannot discover quite the right place. This morning I simply dived into deep water off the rocks nearest to the house, where they descend almost sheer, yet with folds and ledges enough to make a precarious stairway. My 'cliff' I call it, though it is barely twenty feet high at low tide. Of course the water is very cold, but after a few seconds it seems to coat the body in a kind of warm silvery skin, as if one had acquired the scales of a merman. The challenged blood rejoices with a new strength. Yes, this is my natural element. How strange to think that I never saw the sea until I was fourteen.

I am a skilful fearless swimmer and I am not afraid of rough water. Today the sea was gentle compared with antipodean oceans where I have sported like a dolphin. My problem was almost a technical one. Even though the swell was fairly mild I had a ridiculous amount of difficulty getting back onto the rocks again. The 'cliff' was a little too steep, the ledges a little too narrow. The gentle waves teased me, lifting me up towards the rock face, then plucking me away. My fingers, questing for a crevice, were again and again pulled off. Becoming tired, I swam around trying other places where the sea was running restlessly in and out, but the difficulty was greater since there was deep water below me and even if the rocks were less sheer they were smoother or slippery with weed and I could not hold on. At last I managed to climb up my cliff, clinging with fingers and toes, then kneeling sideways upon a ledge. When I reached the top and lay panting in the sun I found that my hands and knees were bleeding.

Since my arrival I have had the pleasure of swimming naked. This rocky coast attracts, thank God, no trippers with their 'kiddies'. There is not a vestige of beastly sand

anywhere. I have heard it called an ugly coast. Long may it be deemed so. The rocks, which stretch away in both directions, are not in fact picturesque. They are sandy yellow in colour, covered with crystalline flecks, and are folded into large ungainly incoherent heaps. Below the tide line they are festooned with growths of glistening blistery dark brown seaweed which has a rather unpleasant smell. Up above however, and at close quarters, they afford the clamberer a surprising number of secret joys. There are many V-shaped ravines containing small pools or screes of extremely varied and pretty stones. There are also flowers which contrive somehow to root themselves in crannies: pink thrift and mauve mallow, a sort of white spreading sea campion, a blue-green plant with cabbage-like leaves, and a tiny saxifrage thing with leaves and flowers so small as almost to defeat the naked eye. I must find my magnifying glass and inspect it properly.

A feature of the coastline is that here and there the water has worn the rocks into holes, which I would not dignify with the name of caves, but which, from the swimmer's-eye-view, present a striking and slightly sinister appearance. At one point, near to my house, the sea has actually composed an arched bridge of rock under which it roars into a deep open steep-sided enclosure beyond. It affords me a curious pleasure to stand upon this bridge and watch the violent forces which the churning waves, advancing or retreating, generate within the confined space of the rocky hole.

Another day has passed since I wrote the above. The weather continues almost perfect. I have received no letters since my arrival, and this does seem rather odd. My ex-secretary, Miss Kaufman, kindly detains the diminishing flow of business mail in London. Well, whom do I want to hear from after all, except Lizzie, and she is probably away on tour?

I have continued to explore the rocks in the direction of my tower. Yes, I am now the owner not only of a house and a lot of rocks, but of a ruined 'martello' tower! It is alas only a shell. I would like to restore it and build a spiral staircase and a lofty study room, only contrary to what is commonly believed about me I am not rich. My sea-house took most of my savings. However I have a good pension, thanks to darling Clement's business sense long ago. I must save up. Near to the tower I found a pleasing piece of archaeology, which is also evidence that I am not the only person to have discovered it difficult to get out of this sea. In a little secret inlet below the tower, and invisible except from directly above, some steps have been cut in the side of the rock, descending into the water, and surmounted with an iron banister. Unfortunately the lower part of the banister is broken away, and the rock face being smooth, the slippery steps are useless, except at high tide, if there is any strong swell. The waves simply pluck one off. It is remarkable how quietly firmly powerful my sportive sea can be! But the idea is clearly excellent. I must have the banister extended; and it occurs to me that a few iron stanchions, let into the face of my 'cliff', would provide quite enough hand and foot holds for the climb, in any state of the tide. I must enquire in the village about workmen.

I swam from the 'tower steps' at high tide and then lay naked on the grass beside the tower, feeling exceedingly relaxed and happy. The tower, I regret to say, does attract the occasional tourist; but I am loath to put up a notice saying *Private*. This little lawn is the only piece of grass which I own, except for a small patch directly behind the house. This grass, tormented no doubt by the sea wind, is extremely short, its blades spread out in little circular mats of an almost cactus-like toughness. Pink and white valerian grows round the base of the tower, and a kind of purple flowering thyme mingles with the grass and perches here and there among the rocks on the landward side. I

examined this, and also the tiny saxifrage, through my magnifying glass. I wanted to be a botanist when I was ten. My father loved plants, though ignorantly, and we looked at many things together. I wonder what I would have done with my life if I had not been theatre-mad?

Walking back I looked into my various pools. What a remarkable amount of beautiful and curious life they contain. I must buy some books about these matters if I am to become, even to my own modest satisfaction, the Gilbert White of this area. I also picked up a number of pretty stones and carried them to my other lawn. They are smooth, elliptical, lovely to handle. One, a mottled pink, elaborately crossed with white lines, lies before me as I write. My father would have loved this place – I still think of him and miss him.

It is after lunch and I shall now describe the house. For lunch, I may say, I ate and greatly enjoyed the following: anchovy paste on hot buttered toast, then baked beans and kidney beans with chopped celery, tomatoes, lemon juice and olive oil. (Really good olive oil is essential, the kind with a taste, I have brought a supply from London.) Green peppers would have been a happy addition only the village shop (about two miles pleasant walk) could not provide them. (No one delivers to far-off Shruff End, so I fetch everything, including milk, from the village.) Then bananas and cream with white sugar. (Bananas should be cut, *never* mashed, and the cream should be thin.) Then hard water-biscuits with New Zealand butter and Wensleydale cheese. Of course I never touch foreign cheeses. Our cheeses are the best in the world. With this feast I drank most of a bottle of Muscadet out of my modest 'cellar'. I ate and drank slowly as one should (cook fast, eat slowly) and without distractions such as (thank heavens) conversation or reading. Indeed eating is so pleasant one should even try to

suppress thought. Of course reading and thinking are important but, my God, food is important too. How fortunate we are to be food-consuming animals. Every meal should be a treat and one ought to bless every day which brings with it a good digestion and the precious gift of hunger.

I wonder if I shall ever write my *Charles Arrowby Four Minute Cookbook*? The 'four minutes' of course refer to the active time of preparation, and do not include unsupervised cooking time. I have looked at several so-called 'short order' cookery books, but these works tend to deceive, their 'fifteen minutes' really in practice means thirty, and they contain instructions such as 'make a light batter'. The sturdy honest persons to whom my book would be addressed would not necessarily be able to make a light batter or even to know what it was. But they would be hedonists. In food and drink, as in many (not all) other matters, simple joys are best, as any intelligent self-lover knows. Sidney Ashe once offered to initiate me into the pleasures of vintage wine. I refused with scorn. Sidney hates ordinary wine and is unhappy unless he is drinking some expensive stuff with a date on it. Why wantonly destroy one's palate for cheap wine? (And by that I do not of course mean the brew that tastes of bananas.) One of the secrets of a happy life is continuous small treats, and if some of these can be inexpensive and quickly procured so much the better. Life in the theatre often precluded serious meals and I have not always in the past been able to eat slowly, but I have certainly learnt how to cook quickly. Of course my methods (especially a liberal use of the tin opener) may scandalize fools, and the various people (mainly the girls: Jeanne, Doris, Rosemary, Lizzie) who urged me to publish my recipes did so with an air of amused condescension. Your name will sell the book, they tactlessly insisted. 'Charles's meals are just picnics,' Rita Gibbons once remarked. Yes, good, even great, picnics. And let me say here that *of course* my guests *always* sit squarely at tables, never

balance plates on their knees, and *always* have proper table napkins, *never* paper ones.

Food is a profound subject and one, incidentally, about which no writer lies. I wonder whence I derived my felicitous gastronomic intelligence? A thrifty childhood gave me a horror of wasted food. I thoroughly enjoyed the modest fare we had at home. My mother was a 'good plain cook', but she lacked the inspired simplicity which is for me the essence of good eating. I think my illumination came, like that of Saint Augustine, from a disgust with excesses. When I was a young director I was idiotic and conventional enough to think that I had to entertain people at well-known restaurants. It gradually became clear to me that guzzling large quantities of expensive, pretentious, often mediocre food in public places was not only immoral, unhealthy and unaesthetic, but also unpleasurable. Later my guests were offered simple joys *chez moi*. What is more delicious than fresh hot buttered toast, with or without the addition of bloater paste? Or plain boiled onions with a little cold corned beef if desired? And well-made porridge with brown sugar and cream is a dish fit for a king. Even then some people, so sadly corrupt was their taste, took my intelligent hedonism for an affected eccentricity, a mere gimmick. (*Wind in the Willows* food a journalist called it.) And some were actually offended.

However, it may be that what really made me see through the false mythology of *haute cuisine* was not so much restaurants as dinner parties. I have long, and usually vainly, tried to persuade my friends not to cook grandly. The waste of time alone is an absurdity; though I suppose it is true that some unfortunate women have nothing to do but cook. There is also the illusion that very elaborate cooking is more 'creative' than simple cooking. Of course (let me make it clear) I am not a barbarian. French country food, such as one can still occasionally find in that blessed land, is very good; but its goodness belongs to a tradition and an instinct