

Faithfully Yours

*O my God, give me strong faith.
 [...]
 I have committed many sins in my life,
 but now I turn away from them,
 and hate them.
 I am sorry, truly sorry for all of them,
 because I have offended You, my God,
 [...]
 I love You, O my God,
 with all my heart.
 Please forgive me for having offended You.*

*I promise, O God,
 that with Your help
 I will never offend You again.*

*My God, have mercy on me.
 --Act of Faith 6*

To be converted is undoubtedly to *come to* something, something new, something different; but in every movement toward there is always a movement away, a leaving behind of that which is now past. Conversion does not and cannot happen from a void. Nothing comes of nothing. So the question then becomes *what* exactly is left behind and is it actually ever left? Is it ever forgotten? Does a turn toward Faith signal the end of sin—of guilt—or is it merely another iteration of faithlessness? And to be properly faithful, must you also be Faithless?

In structurally similar yet inverse ways, both Graham Green's *The End of the Affair* and Iris Murdoch's *The Bell* struggle with the interactions between divine and corporeal F/faith. Although, schematically, the trajectory of the two primary relationships are directional inversions of one another, both novels ultimately establish a disjunctive relationship between Faith (in God) and faithfulness (to a partner) only to trouble the very possibility of that binarization, thereby revealing the necessity of the former for the actualization of the latter.

To choose *The End of the Affair* as the beginning is not arbitrary; the fact that the text itself is primarily given as a retrospective account that deliberately begins at the end makes it, already, a fitting point of departure. Mimetic layering aside, however, Green's text charts the dynamics of Sarah Miles' love affairs, chronicling the transition from her passion for her physical lover, Maurice Bendrix, to her passion for the disembodied Divine. For Sarah, Faith in God and faithfulness to Bendrix are situated as oppositional possibilities, competing options whose simultaneous existence is incompatible, especially given Sarah's own unorthodox (and actually *embodied*) conception and articulation of God. This process of figuring God out—of making him into a figure, a body—allows Sarah to more readily map onto *Him* the same emotions and passions that were originally directed at Maurice, thus exposing the abandonment of Maurice as necessary for the full realization of her love for a quasi-physicalized God.

For Sarah, this act of 'figuring-out' is rather direct and primarily linguistic as she slides between her designation of Maurice as 'you' and her phonetically homogenous (although visually divergent) 'You' for God. Although not immediately apparent, this slippage bespeaks both the way in which, for Sarah, a relationship with God has been made physical, almost like that with a lover, carrying comparable endearments and direct addresses. But it simultaneously and necessarily gestures towards Sarah's own unfaithfulness to her originary lover, Maurice, in her ultimate turn toward Faith. As Maurice describes at the very beginning of the novel (which gives an account of he and Sarah's first encounter after two years of separation):

“She had always called me ‘you’. [...] So that I imagined, like a fool, for a few minutes at a time, there was only one ‘you’ in the world and that was me” (TEotA 11).

Although this description happens retrospectively, Maurice's interpretation of the significance and intimacy associated with Sarah's process of naming (or perhaps, more accurately, *refusing to name*) sets up his own ironical betrayal that same evening. Presumably, as Maurice is reflecting nostalgically on

his earlier encounter with Sarah, paying particular attention to her employment of ‘you’ that evening, Sarah is simultaneously writing in her diary, addressing God directly (and for the first time), by ‘You’. This overlap speaks directly to Maurice’s fears and anxieties about the possibility of another (an Other; *the* Other), exposing Sarah’s move toward Faith in that moment as also a betraying act of faithlessness toward Maurice, for whom that particular endearment had previously been exclusively reserved.

While the tension between Sarah’s two passions, Maurice and God, is apparent, the nature of their relationship with one another is not actually as exclusive as Maurice jealously assumes. Directly addressing God in her diary, Sarah dwells on her recognition of the inclusion of her love for Maurice in her current relationship with God, querying:

“Did I ever love Maurice as much before I loved You? Or was it really You I loved all the time? Did I touch You when I touched him? Could I have touched you if I hadn’t touched him first, touched him as I never touched Henry, anybody?” (TEotA, 99).

Thus, the love Sarah formerly bestowed upon a physical lover, Maurice, is transmuted and transferred to an object of divinity—*the* divine object—revealing the already contained truth, the woven-in thread. In this case, the “revelation” is of the unexpected dependence of Sarah’s conversion (or any conversion, for that matter) on a preceding affair that engenders an almost religious passion that can (and must, for Sarah) be refocused onto religion itself. And so, contained within this distinctly “new” spiritualism is actually just a refocused iteration of the same love that Sarah initially possessed for Maurice, making her act if Faith one of exclusion and faithlessness, yes, but more radically, and act of inclusive continuation of her first faith.

The blurring between Sarah’s love for Maurice and her later realization of her love for God mirrors, inversely, a similar confusion that Iris Murdoch’s Michael Mead experiences as he struggles vainly to detach his more worthy transcendent faith from his “baser” worldly and sexual desires (TB

88). For Michael, the originary passion that will be transposed is not, as Sarah's was, an intensely desirous physical passion whose religious intensity will later be mapped onto religion itself; rather Michael begins with a strong but guilt ridden Faith in God which evolves and, by Michael's own radical acknowledgement, finds its fullest expression in a religicized devotion to Nick Fawley. But this mode of secularized (and anthropomorphized) religious devotion is fraught with internal anxiety for Michael, who is overcome by feelings of "perversion", desecration, and Faithlessness because of the transgress nature of his homosexual desire. While *The End of the Affair* gives an account of only one movement of "conversion", *The Bell*, logically enough, spans a series of oscillations, recounting Michael's passages from orthodox Faith to sanctified desire and back again. In both cases then, the structural schema of the primary relationships within the two novels is such that it makes necessary the initial (but abandoned) passion for the actualization of the later, persisting one.

In the case of *The Bell*, the trend toward divine embodiment is, I would argue, made even more physical (although perhaps less explicit) in Michael's complicated attraction to Nick Fawley and later Toby Gashe. Struggling to understand the nature of his own religious inclinations (and their self-realized overlaps with his sexual passions), Michael moves through two rather intense sexual attractions that confuse the boundary lines of his own experience of F/faith. In his first and arguably most powerful relationship, Michael experiences a love for Nick that is "so pure", and "so radiant, [and] came from so deep [that] it seemed of the very nature of goodness itself" (TB 92, 94). The divinity in Michael's impression of this relationship works, by Michael's reasoning, to supplant the traditional religious emotions and habits through which he had previously expressed his faith. "He ceased going to communion [...] [and] felt, strangely, no guilt, only a hard determination to hold onto the beloved object, and to hold to it before God", as though realizing his own more complete Faith in God through exclusive faithfulness to Nick (94). And in fact, Michael recounts that during his unorthodox communion with Nick he felt "that his faith was increased", implying a transference

of Michael's Faith in God (proper and capitalized) to a new "sacred" and divine body (94, 95). Like Sarah, Michael also recognizes the complexity of this transference, feeling that his faith is both an act of transgressive and disobedient Faithlessness and also the most full realization of that initial Faith. Just as Sarah recognized that in leaving Maurice for God she was paradoxically being the most faithful to Maurice's love, so too (inversely) does Michael interpret his passion for Nick as the fullest expression of divine Faith.

After Michael is betrayed by Nick however, he, like Sarah, "commend[s] continually to the Love which comprehends and transforms, the old passion whose intensity had made him think it so pure" (TB 97). Turning to Faith again, Michael's re-immersion in Religion is not, based even upon his own statement, a re-turn to a stark and purified orthodoxy completely purged of sexual sacrilege; rather, in a re-appropriation that now parallels Sarah's, Michael "commends" his love for Nick to God to be transmuted into a more "worthy" *form*. Plagued by the pain of Nick's betrayal, Michael desires, but is not able, to impose a separation between his passionate love of Nick and his religious passion; for him, "the emotion which fed both [his religion and his sexual habits] arose deeply from the same source" and so, in a vain attempt to create a Faithful space free of pain, he offers his unclean love to God to be corrected and *trans-formed* (TB 88). This remolding of the same substance—Michael's love for Nick—cannot, therefore, exclude Nick (as Michael futilely seeks) for he is already contained within the very nature of the love being re-shaped.

Although Michael manages to forcibly impose this compartmentalization of his two F/faiths, stubbornly reading them, as Maurice did of Sarah¹, as incompatible options where the adoption of

¹ Interestingly, although Michael's re-turn to Faith from a passionate affair mirrors, structurally, the trajectory of Sarah's love, his *desired* understanding of the movement is decidedly akin to Maurice. His jealousy and possessiveness position his interpretation of Sarah's actions in a way that distorts them as calculating acts of exclusion and faithlessness; for Maurice, there can be no inclusion or compatibility between the two loves. Hurt and embittered by Nick's actions, Michael adopts this dehydrated "fact" about Faith, thereby reading his former foray as fickle Faithlessness rather than divine unity ruined. It is important to note, though, the obvious self-deception in Michael's own grudging reading: "more superficially, [Michael] developed, as the

one necessitates the exclusion of the other, Michael is, years after his affair with Nick, yet again presented with what is initially assumed to be another “carnal” temptation in Toby. Inexplicably drawn to the boy’s innocence, youth, and naturalism, Michael struggles to resist him and instead clings to the Faith that he preserved and “purified” of all physical desire after Nick’s betrayal. Toby’s presence again forces Michael to challenge the authenticity of his artifice of Faith, moving him back toward a confused integration of the transcendent divine and the bodily that is this time riddled with the crushing guilt of his own act of betrayal.

Much like Michael’s attraction to Nick, his entrancement by Toby is not (and cannot be seen as) stereotypically carnal; in fact, Michael’s perception of Toby as “clean”, “without sin”, and pastorally spiritual suggests a collapse of his desire for Faith and his desire for faith incarnated (TB 39, 86, 39). For the first time since his establishment of the lay-community at Imber, Michael is presented with an attraction that dissipates the boundary of his Faith and his prurience, prompting him to readdress what had always been the case: that his Faith was at its most intense when he was faithful to an incarnate.

And perhaps even more than Nick, Toby is that incarnate². He literally embodies—makes bodily—all those abstract and transcendent religious ideals that Michael placed in Nick’s stead and clung to after Nick’s betrayal. He is innocent, raw, pastoral—almost untouched by original sin, untouched by a lust for the forbidden. As such (and as much as Michael initially loathes himself for it), Toby serves as an ideal zenith of Michael’s Faithful progression; however, the very fact that

years went by, a quiet resentment against Nick”, but “at a deep level, where his thoughts were hardly explicit”, Michael “commended continually to the Love which comprehends and transforms, the old passion” for Nick, thus exposing the façade of separation and Nick’s necessary inclusion in Faith.

² In fact, others at Imber experience this sensation of incarnation when near or watching Toby. On more than one occasion, Dora Greenfield develops a “new consciousness of herself as incarnate”, as bodily and physical, when confronted with the sight of Toby’s innocent naïveté (TB 67). Although Michael’s own perception of Toby is rather more complicated than Dora’s, there is still an interesting overlap between Dora’s turn toward Faith and Michael’s as they are both partially mediated through Toby.

Michael must again witness his Faith's culmination through a forbidden body ignites in him the burning guilt of F/faithlessness to Nick.

Indeed the similarities between these two attractions is not coincidental; interpreting his love for each of them as a visceral manifestation of his holy calling, Michael relates a profound desire to protect and guide the young men, using the two relationships to engender and enhance each of their Faiths:

“Vaguely Michael had visions of himself as [Nick]’s spiritual guardian, his passion slowly transformed into a lofty and more selfless attachment. He would watch Nick grow into manhood, cherishing every step, ever present, yet with a self-effacement which would be the highest expression of love” (TB 94).

And later, concerning Toby:

“[Michael] felt within him an infinite power to protect Toby from harm. Quietly he conjured up the vision of Toby the undergraduate, Toby the young man. Somehow, it might be possible [...] to watch over him and help him. Michael felt a deep need to build, to retain his friendship with Toby; [...]his moment of joy would not be something strange and isolated, but rather something which pointed forward to a long and profound responsibility, a task” (TB 142).

In each of these passages, Michael's experience of his own passionate yearning is, even from the beginning of affairs, already religicized: in line with his Faith, he seeks to bind himself to the youths, making his faithfulness to them and his love for them his work, his task, his job. Michael is then, as the Abbess proclaimed, one of those “sick people” who, “disturbed and hunted by God, [...] cannot find a work which satisfies them in the ordinary world” and therefore must embrace “that place, that task, those people, which will make [their] spiritual life most constantly grow and flourish” (TB 71). What Nick, Toby, and to a certain extent his creation of Imber allow him to realize, then, is that his own particular brand of Faith cannot just be a devotion to God; rather, it must transmute into a duty-bound passion for *something*, *someone* for him to be F/faithful to.

But, for Michael, the form of that object must be consistent. Because incarnation—embodiment: the bodily form—is so fundamental to Michel’s experience of Faith, the ostensibly smooth re-routing of Faith to Toby actually proves far more complex, and eventually, impossible. As Sarah knew, and Michael learned through Toby, Faith must be and always is faithful. Despite the fact that Michael experienced the beginnings of an intense connection with Toby, he is rather abruptly forced to realize that the way the passion is taking *shape* is all-wrong. Having just kissed Toby in the idling car outside Imber, Michael watches as a “figure vividly revealed” walks “slowly up into the beam of the lights”, realizing it’s Nick just as he is illuminated. Only superficially concerned about the possibility of having offended Toby by the unprompted kiss, Michael anguishes over the possibility that “Nick may have seen something”, confessing that it was “this thought which tormented him the most” (TB 143-144). Because of this possibility, Michael is ridden with guilt, profoundly distressed by “the notion that Nick might think him unfaithful” even while recognizing the absurdity of “assum[ing] that time had stood still” enough for ‘faithfulness’ to even be an issue (TB 150). It is during this same moment of introspection that Michael also begins, “with more cynicism”, to doubt his previous day’s declaration that “such a spring of feeling could not be wholly evil”, subconsciously tying together his guilty feelings of faithlessness and his understanding of Divine incarnation. Given, for Michael (and Sarah), and necessary simultaneity of the sensations of Faith and faithfulness, the experience of Divine F/faith can only take one form: it will be bound to one bodily incarnation within whom the F/faiths co-depend.