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"A Mysterious and Wonderful Thing":

Transformative Encounters in Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden*

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Abstract: *The Secret Garden* by Frances Hodgson Burnett is a story about a young girl’s encounters with nature, animals, people, and ultimately God, in a rural Yorkshire setting – it is a story about coming alive with the world on a spiritual journey in the midst of springtime. This essay will explore the encounters in *The Secret Garden* and their transformative impact on the characters and events in the novel, through the dialogic philosophy of Martin Buber, which is centred around the twofold nature of the I-You- and the I-It-encounter presented in his work *I and Thou*. The purpose of this study is threefold: firstly, to offer a new way of reading and understanding *The Secret Garden* by looking at encounter as the source of the transformation that takes place in the novel; secondly, to show that *The Secret Garden* is not only a literary but a philosophical achievement; and thirdly, to demonstrate the mutual benefit of an interdisciplinary approach to both philosophy and literature.

Keywords: *The Secret Garden*, Frances Hodgson Burnett, *I and Thou*, Martin Buber, dialogic philosophy, transformative encounters

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Introduction

There but for the grace of you go I
Paul Simon

There are moments in life when the border that separates us from the world dissolves and we are able to see it, as if for the first time. The world comes to meet us, in various shapes, and then draws back again, but we are no longer the same. These moments run through literature, as they run through our human experience – they are a part of the mystery of life. There are stories where these moments are particularly present and play a great part. Woven into the very fabric of the story they have the power to alter characters and events. One such tale is *The Secret Garden* by Frances Hodgson Burnett. *The Secret Garden* is a story about a young girl's encounters with nature, animals, people, and ultimately God, in a rural Yorkshire setting – it is a story about coming alive with the world on a spiritual journey in the midst of springtime.

It has been said that *The Secret Garden* is "more a mystical experience than a book" (Paterson cited in Bixler, 1996: 12). If so, then how do we make sense of this mystical experience? In this study I argue that by exploring the encounters that take place in *The Secret Garden*, and their transformative impact on the characters and events of the novel, one can find an answer to this question. I argue that these transformations occur because the protagonist, Mary, changes her way of relating to the world, something she is able to do because of the innate power that lies in encounters. In this essay the study of encounters will be undertaken from the perspective of the dialogic philosophy of Martin Buber, which is centred around the twofold nature of the I-You- and the I-It-encounter, presented in his work *I and Thou*.

Thus, the purpose of this study is threefold: firstly, to offer a new way of reading and understanding *The Secret Garden* by looking at encounter as the source of the transformation that takes place in the novel; secondly, to show that *The Secret Garden* is not only a literary but a philosophical achievement; and thirdly, to demonstrate the mutual benefit of an interdisciplinary approach to both philosophy and literature.

According to Buber (1923), encounters can take place within three spheres, referred to as "life with nature", "life with men" and "life with spiritual beings" (56-57). However, we adjust our manner of addressing according to sphere, which gives the communication in each sphere a

unique expression (56-57). Hence, whereas the first chapter will include an overview of the central ideas of dialogic philosophy, which make up the theoretical foundation of this study, the second, third and fourth chapter will examine the encounters Mary is part of within the three aforementioned spheres and how they impact on her, as well as on the novel as a whole.

The Secret Garden, written by the Anglo-American author Frances Hodgson Burnett (1849-1924), was first published in 1911 and remains the most remarkable of all her works. In 1886 Burnett moved with her family from the English industrial town of Manchester to rural Tennessee, a journey which is similar to the journey that marks the beginning of *The Secret Garden*. In the novel, we follow Mary who has grown up in a well situated but unloving family in Colonial India, until the day her parents die in a cholera epidemic and she is sent to her uncle in England. In the beginning of the novel Mary is an unloved and disagreeable little girl. Yet, through the encounters that take place in this unfamiliar setting, Mary experiences an inward and outward transformation. Moreover, in order to get new and deeper insights into both *The Secret Garden* and the significance of encounters in Burnett's stories, this study will also include extracts from two of her other works. One of those is *The One I Knew Best of All: A Memory of the Mind of a Child* (1893). In this memoir, Burnett describes a mysterious encounter with a locked-up garden in Manchester and, later on, how she was transformed by the Tennessee wilderness, in what she refers to as the "Dryad days" of her youth (252). The other is *My Robin* (1912), where Burnett describes another curious encounter, this time between herself and a wild bird.

The Secret Garden is a multifaceted work which, since its publication in 1911, has provoked a myriad of responses from readers and critics. The most noteworthy study of the novel is perhaps *The Secret Garden: Nature's Magic* by Phyllis Bixler from 1996. In her book, Bixler offers a comprehensive literary and historical study of *The Secret Garden*, as well as an analysis of its central themes and motifs. Moreover, there are also a large number of articles that explore these themes and motifs in greater depth. What follows here is an overview of the books and articles that deal with the literary, religious and philosophical aspects of novel that are relevant to this study.

There are several studies of *The Secret Garden* in relation to literary history and tradition (Heywood, White, Bixler, Roxburgh, Evans). Such studies are performed either by placing the

novel within the appropriate literary genre or by comparing the novel to other classical works of fiction. In her article from 1978, Bixler writes:

> In *Little Lord Fauntleroy* and *A Little Princess* Burnett combined two genres she knew as a child: the fairy tale and the exemplum. In *The Secret Garden* she continued to use themes and motifs from these genres, but she gave symbolic enrichment and mythic enlargement to her poetic vision by adding tropes from pastoral tradition at least as old as Virgil's *Georgics*. (191)

Closely related to this field of study are works that look at the philosophical and religious foundation of *The Secret Garden*. According to Bixler, Burnett was influenced by various traditions from the Romantic Movement and Greek mythology to Christianity and the New Thought movement. There are also works that deal with more abstracts ideas, such as the nature of hope and sacred time in the novel. In her article from 1988, Smedman argues that what Mary experiences in the garden is a natural and religious sense of hope, which springs from the transformation she is part of. Furthermore, such transformation can only take place in what Eliade refers to as primordial mythic time, which is experienced as an eternal presence (93).

Finally, I would like to emphasize that the connection between *The Secret Garden* and *I and Thou* has been made previously by theologian Mary Grey, in her article "Transfigured Existence and Recovery of the Dream" from 2000. Here, Grey argues that transfigured existence – similar to the I-You-encounter – has the power to recover "God's dream for creation" (20). In order to familiarise the reader with the meaning of transfigured existence Grey uses both *I and Thou* and *The Secret Garden* as examples. "The experience of existence as transfigured", Grey begins, "is described by philosophers and poets who speak of an encounter which not only qualitatively changed their lives (as in conversion experiences), but one that could always be recalled, its impact always remaining influential" (22). "It is reminiscent of Buber's I-Thou experience", she continues, "He speaks of it as having a transformative effect on the way of relating to others. But it is also reminiscent of the children's story, *The Secret Garden*" (22). "The core of transfigured existence", Grey concludes, "seems to bring a mutuality in relating to the whole of creation. It brings newness, delight and an enhanced sense of well-being, sensitivity and perception. But it also brings a sense that 'This will last. This is for ever'" (22).

In her article, Grey connects *The Secret Garden* to *I and Thou*. Needless to say, however, this is a theological exploration that does not aim to make sense of *The Secret Garden* as a

literary work. Grey merely uses the novel to illustrate her reasoning. Yet, one could argue that this connection calls for a study that explores the correlation between these two great works in greater depth. What follows here is such a study.

Key concepts

Religious philosopher Martin Buber (1878-1965) is one of the most influential thinkers of the 20th century. In his work, Buber is ultimately concerned with encounter as the deepest and truest aspect of human life. Buber was influenced by various traditions from Hasidic mysticism to Western philosophy. According to Buber-scholar Maurice S. Freidman, his work can be understood as “a gradual movement from an early period of mysticism through a middle period of existentialism to a final period of developing dialogical philosophy” (27). His most renowned work is *I and Thou*, which was first published in 1923. In this work, Buber presents his dialogic philosophy, which is centred around the idea of a twofold relationship between man and the world. What follows is an overview of the central ideas of dialogic philosophy, which make up the theoretical foundation of this study.

According to Buber (1923), “All actual life is encounter” (62). When a human being encounters something in the world, a relationship is formed. Encounters can take place within three spheres, referred to in *I and Thou* as “life with nature”, “life with men” and “life with spiritual beings” (56-57). Thus, encounters can take place between a person and a rock, a tree, an animal, another person and even God, but we adjust our manner of addressing according to sphere (57). Moreover, each relationship establishes “a mode of existence” or a world (53). Yet, according to Buber, there is not a single type of relationship but two:

> The world is twofold for man in accordance with his twofold attitude. The attitude of man is twofold in accordance with the two basic words he can speak. The basic words are not single words but word pairs. One basic word is the word pair I-You. The other basic word is the word pair I-It. … Thus the I of man is also twofold. For the I of the basic word I-You is different from that in the basic word I-It. (53)

The I-It-encounter is often referred to as “experience” and the I-You-encounter is often referred to as “relation”. These two primary encounters differ in several ways.

Firstly, the I-It-encounter takes place inside us, whereas the I-You-encounter takes place between us and the world. Thus, relation, unlike experience, is an activity in which we participate, where the You is not our object (Buber 1923: 56). Secondly, It has borders and borders on other Its (Buber 1923:55). This means that we experience the other as fragmented. You, on the other hand, has no borders, and, although it is still separate from us, it fills our world

as if everything else lives in its light (Buber 1923: 59). To illustrate my reasoning I will use a passage from *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (1974) by the American nature writer Annie Dillard, also cited in Grey (22). In this passage, Dillard gives a vivid description of an encounter between herself and a tree, which shares a great resemblance with the I-You-encounter. “One day I was walking along Tinker Creek thinking of nothing at all and I saw the tree with lights in it. I saw the backyard cedar where the mourning doves roost charged and transfigured, each cell buzzing with flame. I stood on the grass with the lights in it, grass that was wholly fire, utterly focused and utterly dreamed” (33). Thirdly, when we experience we withhold part of ourselves. In relation, however, we truly encounter the other – we enter into the encounter with the whole of our being and the encounter is characterised by reciprocity. Dillard writes: “It was less seeing than being for the first time seen, knocked breathless by a powerful glance” (33). Fourthly, experience exists in space and time. Relation, however, exists only in the present and through it we become intimate with eternity. Yet, Buber writes, “One cannot live in pure present: it would consume us” (85). Therefore, every You is destined to become an It again. Dillard writes: “Gradually the lights went out in the cedar, the colors died, the cells unflamed and disappeared” (33-34).

What, then, is the significance of this twofold attitude of man? As mentioned previously, all actual life is encounter. Our attitude as we encounter leaves a mark both in ourselves and in the world. We depend on experience for our survival, but it is relation that makes us truly human (Buber, 1923: 85). Although the moments of You are fleeting, they live in our heart. Dillard writes: “The flood of fire abated but I’m still spending its power” (33). Moreover, relation alters us, or, perhaps, it brings out something in us that was there all along. Dillard writes: “I was still ringing. I had been my whole life a bell, and never knew it until at that moment I was lifted and struck” (34). According to Buber, relation is the essence of life. Dillard writes: “I have very rarely seen the tree with the lights in it. The vision comes and goes, mostly goes, but I live for it, for the moments when the mountains open and a new light roars in spate through the crack, and the mountains slam” (34).

Additionally, in *I and Thou* Buber identifies two archetypes, based on the I-It-encounter and the I-You-encounter that he refers to as egos and persons. “Egos”, Buber argues “appear by setting themselves apart from other egos” and persons “appear by entering into relation to other persons” (112). Yet, Buber continues, “No human being is pure person, and none is pure ego”.

“Each lives in a twofold I. But some men are so person-oriented that one may call them persons, while other are so ego-oriented that one may call them egos” (115).

Finally, Buber (1923) states that only God can exist in pure relation. God, Buber writes, is the eternal You. In every You we get a glimpse of the eternal You (123). You, Buber writes, encounters us by grace and cannot be found by seeking (62). Here, grace refers to the notion that God is always You and always ready to encounter the ‘deserving’, as well as the ‘undeserving’. “Our concern”, therefore, Buber continues, “must be not for the other side but for our own, not for grace but for will”, that is, the human readiness to participate in encounters. “Grace concerns us insofar as we proceed toward it and await its presence; it is not our object” (124).

2. Life with Nature

The first sphere in which the world of relation arises is life with nature (Buber, 1923: 56). "Here", Buber writes, "the relation vibrates in the dark and remains below language" (56-57). Life with nature is a major theme in *The Secret Garden* and in the novel it takes the shape of a curious bird and a secret garden that comes alive in the midst of springtime. Here, it is interesting to note that Burnett has chosen a wild bird instead of a captive animal and a wild garden rather than a kitchen garden, as these better reflect the wild and untamed nature of the You. The purpose of this chapter, then, is threefold: firstly, it will give a brief background to Mary as a character before she arrives at Misselthwaite Manor; secondly, it will look at how the encounter with the robin opens the door to the garden and to the world of relation; and thirdly, it will examine the encounter with the garden, as the most significant encounter in the novel.

The first part of *The Secret Garden* is devoted to establishing an understanding of Mary as a character before she arrives at Misselthwaite Manor. Here, the reader learns that Mary has grown up in a well situated but unloving family in Colonial India, until the day her parents die in a cholera epidemic and she is sent to her uncle in England. The reader also learns that, unlike many of Burnett's characters, such as Cedric in *Little Lord Fauntleroy* or Sara in *A Little Princess*, Mary is not a likeable child. The difference between these fictional children is perhaps that when tragedy strikes, Mary is left alone without so much as a loving memory of the past.

Indeed, Mary has lived disconnected from everything around her. The relationship between Mary and her Indian nurse, for example, is the typical I-It-relationship. To Mary, the Ayah is defined by her race and her class and she is only aware of the woman as a part of her self. Hence, when the Ayah dies Mary is only concerned with how the event will impact on her. Yet, although this relationship is experiential and mainly defined by emotions such as amusement or anger, it is a relationship. To her parents, on the other hand, Mary has no relationship. Mary only watches her parents from a distance and she does not grieve when they pass away. The lack of relation also becomes apparent in the way Mary plays: "She pretended that she was making a flower-bed, and she stuck big scarlet hibiscus blossoms into little heaps of earth, all the time growing more and more angry" (4). In this instance, the lack of relation is characterised not only by the fact that it is not a real garden, but that Mary does not seem to connect with it. However, the pretence

might also express a buried power and a longing to relate. Similarly, in *The One I Knew Best of All*, Burnett writes: “In the Square she had imagined – in the forests she began to feel” (265).

When Mary arrives at Misselthwaite Manor she is selfish, uncaring, disinterested and angry. At first, she finds the Yorkshire landscape strange and unfamiliar: “the wide, bleak moor was a wide expanse of black ocean through which she was passing on a strip of land” (21). However, left to herself, Mary grows restless and decides to go outside: “There would be birds outside” and “they would be different from the birds in India and it might amuse her to look at them” (30). So far, it is obvious that Mary still relates to her surroundings as It: the moor frightens her and the birds appeal to her because they are exotic. Still, by venturing into the unknown, Mary shows the will that grace desires (Buber, 1923: 124). “The basic movement of the life of dialogue”, Buber writes, “is the turning towards the other” (Buber, 1947: 25). This simply means that if Mary is to encounter nature, she must venture out to meet it.

In the novel grace takes the shape of a small red breasted bird – a robin. The robin is one of the central characters in *The Secret Garden* and occurs frequently throughout the novel. Burnett herself had a very special bond with these birds and, in the short story *My Robin* (1912), she writes about her relationship to the original robin.

> There came to me among the letters I received last spring one which touched me very closely. It was a letter full of delightful things but the delightful thing which so reached my soul was a question. The writer had been reading ‘The Secret Garden’ and her question was this: ‘Did you own the original of the robin? He could not have been a mere creature of fantasy. I feel sure you owned him.’ I was thrilled to the centre of my being. … I wrote and explained as far as one could in a letter what I am now going to relate in detail. (1-2)

In this short text, Burnett describes an encounter that is characterized by mutuality, mystery and magnitude, in a way that greatly resembles the I-You-encounter. Burnett writes that the robin came into her garden one morning unasked, and stayed, making “mysterious almost occult advance towards intimacy” (8). It was because of what happened that morning, Burnett continues, that she knew what Mary felt the first time she saw the robin (10). “An intimacy with a robin”, she states, “is a liberal education” (3).

In *The Secret Garden* the robin is also known as “The Robin Who Showed the Way” (59), as he is the one that helps Mary get into the secret garden, which has been locked up for ten years. This adds an element of magic realism to the story. In a very real sense, however, it could

be argued that the robin also opens the door to the world of relation. Mary first sees the robin in one of the gardens at Misselthwaite Manor: “She could see the tops of trees above the wall, and when she stood still she saw a bird with a bright red breast sitting on the topmost branch of one of them, and suddenly he burst into his winter song – almost as if he had caught sight of her and was calling to her” (33). In this glance Mary is drawn into relation with the robin as You. “The eyes of an animal”, Buber (1923) states, “have the capacity of a great language” (144). Moreover, when addressed by You, I cannot help but to respond (Buber, 1947: 26). This is true, Buber says, even for the most desolate person, or as Burnett points out “even a disagreeable little girl”: “She stopped and listened to him and somehow his cheerful, friendly little whistle gave her a pleased feeling” and “brought a look into her sour little face which was almost a smile” (33). Thus, the robin is the first being Mary encounters as You and, one could argue, that it is this encounter that sets the great transformation in motion. This can be perceived in several ways.

Through the encounter Mary becomes aware of the robin as something that is not a part of her and something that is meaningful in itself. Buber (1947) refers to this phenomenon as “the immense otherness of the Other” (26). Burnett writes: “It actually gave Mary a queer feeling in her heart, because he was so pretty and cheerful and seemed so like a person” (35). “You are prettier than everything else in the world!” she exclaims. Yet, Mary does not only become aware of the robin, but of herself: “‘I’m lonely,’ she said. She had not known it before that this was one of the things which made her feel sour and cross. She seemed to find it out when the robin looked at her and she looked at the robin” (36).

Moreover, these realisations alter the way in which Mary behaves towards others: “nothing in the world would make her put out her hand toward him or startle him in the least tiniest way” (58). This also shows how encounter is a part of a process of becoming. Buber writes: “I require a You to become; becoming I, I say You” (62). Thus, as Mary enters into relation with the robin, she truly becomes Mary. In the following passage we get a sense of how the interaction with the robin makes Mary more natural and childlike:

> Mary began to laugh, and as he hopped and took little flights along the wall she ran after him. Poor little thin, sallow, ugly Mary – she actually looked almost pretty for a moment. ‘I like you! I like you!’ she cried out, pattering down the walk; and she chirped and tried to whistle, which last she did not know how to do in the least. But the robin seemed to be quite satisfied and chirped and whistled back at her. (41)

Hence, Mary is no longer the disagreeable little girl who abuses her Ayah and angrily pulls up flowers for an imaginary garden. "I don't feel as sour as I used to before I knew the robin", Mary concludes (162).

Finally, although the robin flies away Mary is able to recall the encounter and she is able to see both herself and others in new light: "She thought of the robin and the way he seemed to sing his song to her" (34). Moreover, "She had felt as if she had understood a robin and that he had understood her" (44). The experience of such a tender union, then, gives Mary the courage and the compassion to meet others. Later she tells Colin that she should not have liked him before she saw the robin (162).

The robin shows Mary the way to the garden. The encounter with the garden greatly resembles that with the robin, yet, being more integral to the plot, this encounter demands a closer examination. Before this, however, it is important to understand the role of the garden from the point of view of dialogic philosophy. In her book, Bixler identifies the secret garden as the symbolic centre of the novel (70). This study, however, identifies the garden as the relational centre of the novel, as this study is less concerned with symbolism than with actual life. To the dialogic philosopher, the garden is not seen as, for example, a representation of the Edenic myth – it is simply a garden. This distinction is important to make, as it emphasises the difference between the world of ideas and the world of dialogue. One cannot encounter an idea only actuality (Buber, 1923: 65). Hence, in this study, the garden is regarded as the participant in an encounter. Moreover, at the centre of the I-You-encounter is reciprocity (Buber 58). Therefore, it is important to note that it is not the garden alone, nor Mary alone that brings about the transformation. "We do not find meaning lying in things", Buber (1947) writes, "nor do we put it into things, but between us and things it can happen" (42). What follows here, then, is an examination of the ways in which the encounter between Mary and the garden resembles the I-You-encounter.

Firstly, the encounter with the garden is characterized by autonomy, lack of utility and disorder. Initially, the reader perceives this in the way Mary reacts to the seemingly dead garden: "'Is it all a quite dead garden? I wish it wasn't'" (68). Here, we sense that Mary is not primarily concerned for herself but for another life. As with the robin she comes to realise the true value of the other as a participant, rather than an object for experience and use. In relation to You, Buber (1923) argues, I has nothing for his object (55). Moreover, the encounter with You is disorderly

and unruly. “This is part of the basic truth of the human world”, Buber states, “only It can be put in order” (81). Hence, whereas the pretended garden was one “*With silver bells, and cockle shells, / And marigold all in a row*”, the secret garden cannot be controlled: “‘I wouldn’t want to make it look like a gardener’s garden, all clipped an’ spick an’ span, would you?’ [Dickon] said. ‘It’s nicer like this with things runnin’ wild, an’ swingin’ an’ catchin’ hold of each other.’ ‘Don’t let us make it tidy,’ said Mary anxiously. ‘It wouldn’t be a secret garden if it was tidy’” (10, 93). Hence, the garden as You cannot be put in order.

Secondly, the encounter with the garden is characterised by activity, participation and responsibility. “The strongest and deepest actuality”, Buber (1923) writes, “is to be found where everything enters into activity – the whole human being” and “the boundless You” (137). Or as Colin puts it: “‘The Magic works best when you work yourself’” (232). This notion is central in the novel as Mary goes from contemplating the garden to working in it. “It is not only the attitude of my soul”, Buber writes, “but how I let the attitude of my soul towards the world come to life, life that affects the world, actual life” (142). This awareness is present in Mary’s desire to get a spade and some seeds: “‘If I have a spade,’ she whispered, ‘I can make the earth nice and soft and dig up weeds. If I have seeds and can make flowers grow the garden won’t be dead at all – it will come alive’” (73). Moreover, this passage shows that the I-You-encounter does not only inspire contemplation or activity, but also a loving sense of responsibility. “Love”, Buber argues, “is responsibility of an I for a You” (66).

Thirdly, the encounter with the garden is characterised by an experience of unity and ecstasy. In his earlier mystic-days Buber describes the experience of unity between the I and the You:

> There often comes to us the desire to put our arms around a young tree and feel the same surge of life as in ourselves or to read our own most special mystery in the eyes of a dumb animal. We experience the ripening and fading of far-distant stars as something which happens to us, and there are moments in which our organism is a wholly other piece of nature. (Buber, cited in Friedman 28)

This experience is present in *The Secret Garden*, but it is particularly articulated in *The One I Knew Best of All*. In the memoir, Burnett writes about her relationship to the Tennessee wilderness: “the most perfect rapturous of her moments always brought to her a feeling that somehow – in some subtle way – she was part of it – part of the trees, the warm winds and scents

and sounds and grasses" (264). Yet, being thus entwined is not without risk. Buber writes: the moments of You are "strange lyric and dramatic episodes, seductive and magical, but tearing us away to dangerous extremes, loosening the well-tried context, leaving more questions than satisfaction behind them, shattering security" (Buber cited in Friedman 60). Burnett, herself, is no stranger to this sensation, which she describes as "a madness which was divine" (275). In *The One I Knew Best of All* Burnett writes: "If in the young all things not quite of earth are justly to be considered morbid, then this ecstasy, too subtle to be called a mood, was a thing to be discouraged; but it was an emotion all of rapture, and was a thing so delicate and strange that she kept it silently to herself" (273). Another lovely passage from *The Secret Garden* is when Dickon proves to Mary that the wintery garden is still alive, by cutting into the green centre of a tree branch: "In the course of half an hour Mary thought she could tell too, and when he cut through a lifeless-looking branch she would cry out joyfully under her breath when she caught sight of the least shade if moist green" (91).

Fourthly and finally, the encounter with the garden is characterised by mutual transformation. Throughout the encounter, Mary and the garden mutually aid each other in becoming, that is, to actualise their inborn potential and come alive. Buber (1923) writes: "Relation is reciprocity. My You acts on me as I act on it. Our students teach us, our work forms us. The 'wicked' become revelation when they are touched by the sacred basic word. How we are educated by children, by animals! Inscrutably involved, we live in the currents of the universal reciprocity" (67). In one passage, Mary discover sprouting bulbs, and intuitively she starts tending to them by clearing spaces around them which allows them to breathe: "Such nice clear places were made around them that they had all the breathing space they wanted, and really, if Mistress Mary had known it, they began to cheer up under the dark earth and work tremendously. The sun could get at them and warm them, and when the rain came down it could reach them at once, so they began to feel very much alive" (77). The transformation can be perceived both in the garden and in Mary: "She could not believe that she had been working two or three hours. She had actually been happy all the time; and dozens and dozens of the tiny, pale green points were able to be seen in cleared places, looking twice as cheerful as they had looked before when the grass and weeds had been smothering them" (70). Here, it is important to note, that what the literary theorist thinks of as personification and the psychoanalytical theorist thinks of as projection, the dialogic philosopher regards as reciprocity. A similar argument is made by Bixler

(1978), who writes that *The Secret Garden* is an example of "the georgic reciprocity between man and nature which Wordsworth described as being both 'willing to work and be worked upon,' of being 'creator and receiver both'" (201).

Thus, life with nature introduces Mary to the world of relation through a curious grace. It should be noted that the wordless interaction with nature enables Mary to open up to relation, in a way that the interaction with men or God is not yet able to. Mary goes out into the grounds of Misselthwaite Manor expecting to experience nature but instead she encounters the You of nature. In the meeting with the robin and the garden Mary is transformed, inside and out, which shows the immense power of the I-You-encounter. In the next chapter we shall be able see how this newfound power to relate gives Mary the courage and the compassion to meet others.

3. Life with Men

The second sphere in which the world of relation arises is life with men (Buber, 1923: 57). “Here”, Buber states, “the relation is manifest and enters language” (56-57). Life with men is the most distinguished sphere and “the main portal into whose inclusive opening the two side portals lead” (151). Buber writes: “The moments of relation are joined here, and only here, through the element of language in which they are immersed. Here that which confronts us has developed the full actuality of the You. Here alone beholding and being beheld, recognizing and being recognized, loving and being loved exist as an actuality that cannot be lost” (151). Perhaps it is for this very reason that human relationships are more complex and, to someone with little or no experience of them, even frightening. This is what Mary is thinking when she arrives at Misselthwaite Manor: “‘People never like me and I never like people’” (33). This chapter, then, will look at how Mary proceeds towards human encounters.

In *The Secret Garden* life with nature introduces Mary to life with men. As the writer Ralph Waldo Emerson puts it: “A friend may well be reckoned the masterpiece of nature” (179). As mentioned previously, relation, in any form, “teaches you to meet others and to hold your ground when you meet them” (Buber, cited in Friedman 60). Hence, the encounter with the robin and the garden encourages Mary to attempt to relate to other humans. Yet, in order to do so Mary must, at the same time, learn to relate to herself. Buber (1947) writes:

> Certainly in order to be able to go out to the other you must have a starting place, you must have been, you must be, with yourself. Dialogue between mere individuals is only a sketch, only in dialogue between persons is the sketch filled in. But by what could a man from being an individual so really become a person as by the strict and sweet experiences of dialogue which teaches him the boundless content of the boundary. (24)

Thus, life with nature allows Mary to be with herself and to experience dialogue. Moreover, it is interesting to note how the encounters in the previous chapter are mirrored in this chapter: the Indian Ayah is contrasted by the Martha; the robin introduces Mary to Ben; Mary gets to know Dickon through the garden; and Colin goes through a similar transformation as Mary.

The first actual encounter Mary has with another person is with Martha, who is a servant at Misselthwaite Manor and the sister of Dickon. Mary initially tries to relate to Martha in the way she used to relate to her Ayah: “‘Are you going to be my servant?’ Mary asked, still in her

imperious little Indian way" (25). However, unlike the Ayah, Martha asserts herself and does not conform to this treatment, because Martha does not see herself as an It. This unsettles Mary:

> Mary listened to her with a grave, puzzled expression. The native servants she had been used to in India were not in the least like this. They were obsequious and servile and did not presume to talk to their masters as if they were their equals. They made salaams and called them 'protectors of the poor' and names of that sort. Indian servants were commanded to do things, not asked. It was not the custom to say 'please' or 'thank you' and Mary had always slapped her Ayah in the face when she was angry. (24)

What Mary experiences in relation to Martha is something similar to reciprocity. When Mary considers slapping Martha, she is a little concerned that Martha will slap her back. After the initial shock, however, Mary begins to like Martha and to listen to her stories about her family and about the secret garden.

Moreover, Martha encourages Mary to go outside, which leads to the encounter with the robin. The robin, in turn, introduces Mary to the old and rather cross gardener Ben. One could even argue that the encounter with the robin foreshadows the encounter with the gardener. Like the bird, Ben is a wild and lonely creature that is not easily tamed. Yet, through their mutual delight in the robin and their equally unattractive tempers and appearances, Mary and the old gardener develop a sort of friendship.

> During that week of sunshine, she became more intimate with Ben Weatherstaff. She surprised him several times by seeming to start up beside him as if she sprang out of the earth. The truth was that she was afraid that he would pick up his tools and go away if he saw her coming, so she always walked towards him as silently as possible. But, in fact, he did not object to her as strongly as he had at first. Perhaps he was secretly rather flattered by the evident desire for his elderly company. Then, also, she was more civil than she had been. He did not know that when she first saw him she spoke to him as she would have spoken to a native, and had not known that a cross, sturdy old Yorkshire man was not accustomed to salaam his masters (78)

Both Martha and Ben tell Mary about a local moor boy named Dickon, and in the same way that Mary grows curious about the garden, she grows curious about Dickon: "It was really this mention of Dickon which made Mary decide to go out, though she was not aware of it" (30). Yet, it is not until Mary has learned to relate to the garden that she is ready to encounter Dickon. It should also be noted that their first meeting takes place because Martha writes to Dickon and asks

him to purchase gardening tools for Mary. Moreover, like the garden, Dickon is a mesmerising piece of fiction. Many previous studies associate Dickon with the mythological creature Pan, because of his connection to the earth (Bixler, Roxburgh, Lennox, Phillips, Evans, Boëthius, Price). Yet, this study is interested in Dickon because of his extraordinary relational power. Indeed, if the garden is the relational centre of the novel, Dickon is the ultimate Buberian person, or as Mary puts it: a "Yorkshire angel" (163). This becomes apparent in the way Burnett describes Dickon to the reader.

In the novel, Dickon appears almost as a part of the landscape. He moves "so slowly that it scarcely seemed as though he were moving at all", there is "a clean fresh scent of heather and grass and leaves about him, almost as if he were made of them" and his eyes have gotten their blue colour form "always lookin' up at th' birds an' th' clouds" (83, 84, 97). Dickon tells Mary about his relationship to the wildlife of the Yorkshire moors: "I've lived on th' moor with 'em so long. I've watched 'em break shell an' come out an' fledge an' learn to fly an' begin to sing, till I think I'm one of 'em. Sometimes I think p'raps I'm a bird, or a fox, or a rabbit, or a squirrel, or even a beetle, an' I don't know it'" (86). Moreover, the relational power Dickon possesses can also be perceived in his gaze. Mary tells Colin: "He has such round blue eyes and they are so wide open with looking about" and "He's always looking up in the sky to watch birds flying – or looking down at the earth to see something growing" (127). It is because of his gentle gaze that he is the first outsider who is allowed to look at Colin. The relational power can also be perceived in the way Dickon speaks: Mary "wished she could talk as he did. His speech was so quick and easy. It sounded as if he liked her and was not the least afraid she would not like him, though he was only a common moor boy, in patched clothes and with a funny face and a rough, rusty-red head" (84). Buber (1923) states that one can learn much about a person by listening to the way they say "I". Here, Buber writes about the I of the Romantic author Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, which is not dissimilar to the I of Dickon:

> It is the I of pure intercourse with nature. Nature yields to it and speaks ceaselessly with it; she reveals mysteries to it and yet does not betray her mystery. It believes in her (sic) says to the rose: "So it is You" – and at once shares the same actuality with the rose. Hence, when it returns to itself, the spirit of actuality stays with it; the vision of the sun clings to the blessed eye that recalls its own likeness to the sun, and the friendship of the elements accompanies man into calm dying and rebirth. (116)

In the same way, Dickon is a friend of all living things. Ben tells Mary: "Everybody knows him. Dickon's wanderin' about everywhere. Th' very blackberries an' heatherbells knows him. I warrant th' foxes shows him where their cubs lies an' th' skylarks doesn't hide their nests from him" (37-38). In their first meeting, Mary senses this intuitive familiarity: "He did not speak to her as if they had never seen each other before but as if he knew her quite well" (84). To Mary, Dickon becomes a saviour, an inspiration and a teacher. In his presence, Mary is able to forget herself, and in doing so she ventures fully into the unknown world of relation: "Then Mary did a strange thing. She leaned forward and asked him a question she had never dreamed of asking any one before. And she tried to ask it in Yorkshire because that was his language. … 'Does tha' like me?' she said. 'Eh!' he answered heartily, 'that I does. I like thee wonderful, an' so does the robin I do believe!'" (95). Here, we sense how Mary puts her whole being into the address. This, perhaps, is what relation sounds like when it enters language and the silence of experience is broken by the first shaky utterances of relational dialogue. Buber (1947) writes: "Yet it can happen that we venture to respond, stammering perhaps – the soul is but rarely able to attain to surer articulation – but it is an honest stammering, as when sense and throat are united about what is said, but when the throat is too horrified at it to utter purely the already composed sense" (19-20). Mary takes a great risk and she is rewarded for, as mentioned previously, when addressed by You, I cannot help but to respond.

Far from the garden, however, Mary encounters her cousin Colin. Some previous studies criticise Burnett for shifting the focus from Mary to Colin (Knoepflmacher, Bixler, Price). In order not to repeat this pattern this study will not overemphasise Colin. Whilst Dickon is the ultimate Buberian person, Colin, on the other hand, is the ultimate ego, or as Burnett puts it "A Young Rajah" (119). When Mary discovers Colin, he has spent his whole life hidden in a room, since it is believed that he is a cripple and that he is going to die young. His father only visits him when he is sleeping for fear of getting attached to the boy, so Colin is attended to by servants. Burnett writes: "He had lived on a sort of deserted island all his life and as he had been the king of it he had made his own manners and had had no one to compare himself with" (200). In this passage, it becomes clear how the lack of relation forces Colin to become a co-actor in this performance, playing the role of the tyrannical patient. "'Every one is obliged to do what pleases me,' he said indifferently. 'It makes me ill to be angry. No one believes I shall live to grow up.' He said it as if he was so accustomed to the idea that it had ceased to matter to him at all" (112).

The life of the ego, however, is a half-life. Buber (1923) writes: "The more a human being, the more humanity is dominated by the ego, the more does the I fall prey to inactuality. In such ages the person in the human being and in humanity comes to lead a subterranean, hidden, as it were invalid existence – until it is summoned" (115). Here, it is interesting to note that the language Buber uses to illustrate his argument very accurately reflects Colin's situation – how the predominance of It has kept him hidden in the dark, living a fictional existence as an invalid. Yet, Buber also foresees the possibility of rebirth, for Colin *is* summoned. In the encounter with Mary, Colin must face his fears and dare to live, or as Buber puts it, he must proceed towards his destiny "without knowing where it waits for him. He must go forth with his whole being" (108). This is actual life. Actual life cannot be taught, Buber argues, only lived: "We cannot go to others and with what we have received, saying: This is what needs to be done. We can only go and put to the proof in action. And even this is not what we "ought to" do: rather we can. We cannot do otherwise" (160). Thus, Mary and Dickon bring Colin out into the garden, where he experiences the grace of the I-You-encounter, which has the same transformative effect on him as it had on Mary. "I'm going to see everything grow here", Colin says, "I'm going to grow here myself" (189).

After becoming familiar with life with nature, then, Mary proceeds towards life with men, where relation is experienced and expressed through language and recognition. Through these encounters, Mary learns about reciprocity, responsibility and love. In her study, Bixler (1978) argues, that "another important characteristic of the georgic pastoral tradition" is that "it emphasizes cooperation not only between nature and man but also between man and man" and "that Communities as well as individuals can experience the marvelous change of rebirth" (202). This is the powerful force of relation. Moreover, being together in the secret garden the children begin to recognize, reflect upon and verbalise the existence of a sacred bond between all living things, or as Buber puts it, to feel the breath of the eternal You (57).

4. Life with Spiritual Beings

The third sphere in which the world of relation arises is life with spiritual beings (Buber 1923: 57). “God”, Buber writes, “is not divided but everywhere whole, and where he reveals himself, there he is wholly present” (cited in Freidman 28). “Through every single You”, Buber argues, “the basic word addresses the eternal You” (123). The eternal You turns communication into communion (Buber, 1947: 6). Although *The Secret Garden* is not religious in any conventional sense, it is a deeply spiritual work, which is an aspect of the novel that is often overlooked by critics. In the novel, God becomes present to Mary through her relationship to the robin, the garden, Dickon and Colin. In this sense, God is not outside the meeting, the meeting is inside God (Buber, 1923: 59). Moreover, one could argue that the relation the children experience in the spring garden triggers a religious impulse. As Henry David Thoreau puts it: if men “should feel the influence of the spring of springs arousing them, they would feel the necessity rise to a higher and more ethereal life” (47). Colin tells Mary and Dickon:

> Sometimes since I’ve been in the garden I’ve looked up through the trees at the sky and I have had a strange feeling of being happy as if something were pushing and drawing in my chest and making me breath fast. Magic is always pushing and drawing and making things out of nothing. Everything is made out of Magic, leaves and trees, flowers and birds, badgers and foxes and squirrels and people. So it must be all around us. In this garden – in all places. (205)

This chapter will be devoted to establishing an understanding of the religious foundation of *The Secret Garden*, from the perspective of dialogic philosophy. It will examine the nature of Magic and how this concept relates to Buber’s concept relation. It will also look at how the nature of God and eternity is dealt with in the novel.

According to Smedman, “the characters name the power at the centre of the cosmos”, but they “do not call the power God; perhaps because they recognize it as ‘Mystery’ but yet inherent in nature, they call it ‘Magic’” (97). Yet, it is important to note that there is not one kind of Magic in the novel, but several.

Firstly, there are instances of magic realism. An example of this is the way in which the robin helps Mary to get into the secret garden. Burnett writes: “Mary Lennox had heard a great

deal about Magic in her Ayahs stories, and she had always said that what happened almost at that moment was Magic" (65). "'It was Magic that sent the robin'", Mary tells the reader (187).

Secondly, there is the magical transformation of nature, which Burnett (1893) refers to as a "mysterious and wonderful thing" (258). Burnett (1911) writes: "The garden had reached the time when everyday and every night it seemed as if Magicians were passing through it drawing loveliness out of the earth and the boughs with wands" (160). Here, the children are constructing their own creation myths. Yet, this transformation is also linked, both symbolically and actually, to the transformation the children experience in themselves: Mary felt that the "Magic was working all the afternoon and making Colin look like an entirely different boy" (188).

Thirdly, there is Magic which can be wielded. This is the Magic of Colin, or the Magic of the Buberian ego. Colin says: "I am sure there is Magic in everything, only we have not sense enough to get hold of it and make it do things for us – like electricity and horses and steam" (205). This instrumental notion about Magic suggests, perhaps, that Colin will remain partly person, partly ego. His Magic is the Magic of It, that is, Magic that "wants to be effective without entering into any relationship and perform its art in the void" (Buber 1923: 131). From the following passage, we get a sense that Colin's Magic is compromised by his desire to experience and use, rather than relate: "'Even if it isn't real Magic,' Colin said, 'we can pretend it is. *Something* is there – *something!*'" (202). Yet, one should not be too quick in dismissing this Magic, as it is perhaps also the Magic of willpower and positive thinking – two forces that are also integral to the novel.

Fourthly, there is relational Magic that cannot be wielded. This is also the Magic of Dickon, or the Magic of the Buberian person. Mary is a great believer in Magic and "Secretly she quite believed that Dickon worked Magic, of course good Magic, on everything near him and that was why people liked him so much and wild creatures knew he was their friend" (188). Yet, she tells Colin: "'But he doesn't call it Magic. He says it's because he lives on the moor so much that he knows their ways. He says he feels sometimes as if he was a bird or a rabbit himself, he likes them so'" (125). Colin replies: "'I believe Dickon knows some Magic, but perhaps he doesn't know he knows it'" (205). Here, we get a sense that the Magic of Dickon is fundamentally different from that of Colin. Dickon does not wield Magic, he participates in it.

Smedman argues that by naming the magic power, the children are able to wield it. "In mythic cultures", she writes "to recognize, to know, the sacred power is primary. Knowledge of

the power is symbolized by the ability to name it. What one can name, one has power over, for naming indicates knowledge of the essence" (97). Yet, although this is a valid point, one could argue that the most magically powerful character, Dickon, does not name his power, nor does he presume to have knowledge of it or even a desire to use it. Hence, in *The Secret Garden* the divine elements are also nameless and undefined. One day, Susan Sowerby, who is the mother of Dickon and also a magic person, joins the children in the garden. When asked if she believes in Magic, Susan responds:

> 'I never knowed it by that name but what does th' name matter? I warrant they call it a different name in France an' a different one i' Germany, Th' same thing as set th' seed swellin' an' th' sun shinin' made thee a well lad an' it's th' Good Thing. It isn't like is poor fools as think it matters if us called out our names. Th' Big Good Thing doesn't worrit, bless thee. It goes on makin' worlds by th' million – world like us. Never thee stop believin' in th' Big Good Thing an' knowin' th' world's full of it – an' call it what th' likes.' (238)

Similarly, Buber (1923) argues:

> Men have addressed their eternal You by many names. When they sang of what they had thus named they still meant You: the first myths were hymns of praise. Then the names entered into the It-language; men felt impelled more and more to think of and to talk about their eternal You as an It. But all names of God remain hallowed – because they have been used not only to speak *of* God but also *to* him. (123)

This genuine address is present in *The Secret Garden*, when the children wish to rejoice in and express their gratitude to the Magic by singing the Doxology. Thus, it is not the name by which the children address God that is central but the spirit in which they do it. When we address something as You, Buber argues, God listens. Similarly, Susan tells the children: "'Th' Magic listened when tha'd sung. It was th' joy that mattered'" (238).

Moreover, when encountering You, we also encounter eternity itself. Buber (1923) writes: "Only as You becomes present does presence come into being" and in the present moment we glimpse eternity (63). "These moments", he continues, "are immortal; none are more evanescent. They leave no content that could be preserved, but their force enters into creation and into man's knowledge and the radiation of its force penetrates the ordered world and thaws it again and

again" (82). Theologian Paul Tillich, who was largely influenced by Buber, referred to this phenomenon as the "eternal now". Tillich writes:

> Whenever we say 'now' or 'today', we stop the flux of time for us. We accept the present and do not care that it is gone in the moment that we accept it. We live in it and it is renewed for us in every new 'present'. This is possible because every moment of time reaches into the eternal. … Not everybody, and nobody all the time, is aware of this 'eternal now' in the temporal 'now'. But sometimes it breaks powerfully into our consciousness and gives us the certainty of the eternal (90)

The eternal now breaks through the pages of *The Secret Garden* as Colin, for the first time, enters the secret garden and "the sun fell warm upon his face like a hand with a lovely touch" (182). Colin then cries out: "'Mary! Dickon! I shall get well! And I shall live forever and ever!'" (183). This passage is also emphasised by Smedman, who writes: "Mary and Colin can know on an experiential level the sacredness of such moments of being, but, as children, they cannot articulate what they feel". "Therefore", she continues, "the author-narrator steps in to verbalize for them and us the continuity between chronos and kairos, between profane and sacred time, between time and eternity" (97). Burnett writes:

> One of the strange things about living in the world is that it is only now and then one is quite sure one is going to live forever and ever and ever. One knows sometimes when one is gets up at the tender solemn dawn-time and goes out and stands alone and throws one's head far back and looks up and up and watches the pale sky slowly changing and flushing and marvelous unknown things happening until the East almost makes one cry out and one's heart stands still at the strange unchanging majesty of the rising sun – which has been happening every morning for thousands and thousands and thousands of years. One knows it for a moment or so. And one knows it sometimes when stands by oneself in a wood at sunset and the mysterious deep gold stillness slanting through and under the branches seems to be saying slowly again and again something one cannot quite hear, however much one tries. Then sometimes the immense quiet of the dark blue at night with millions of stars waiting and watching. Makes one sure; and sometimes a sound of far-off music makes it true; and sometimes a look in some one's eyes. (185)

In *The Secret Garden*, then, the children refer to that which is unexplainable as Magic, which leaves room for various interpretations. This shows that Burnett, like Buber, is eager to keep the mystery alive by focusing on the encounter with God as it is experienced in the moment, rather than a clearly defined or pre-existing concept of God. Yet, it can be concluded that through the encounter with the You of nature, men and herself, Mary is able to encounter the eternal You of

God. Despite this, however, we sense that the encounter with God is not the end but only another beginning. God is not a station but a way of travelling. Buber writes: “Whoever goes forth to his You with his whole being and carries to it all the being of the world, finds him whom one cannot seek” (127).

Conclusion

Stand and face me, my love,
and scatter the grace in your eyes

Sappho

By marrying Burnett's novel with Buber's dialogic philosophy, this study aimed to get to the heart of the mystery that is *The Secret Garden* without betraying it. This has resulted in a demonstration of how encounters in *The Secret Garden* can be identified as a source of the inward and outward transformation that Mary experiences in the novel. Though the transformation is not restricted to Mary, I chose to focus on her as she is perhaps the most complex and intriguing character in that she represents a mixture of the person and the ego. Indeed, though we from time to time come across real-life Dickons and Colins, most of us are Marys, as we struggle to find a way of being, going forth between the world of It and the world of You.

Throughout the study we have seen how the series of encounters the protagonist participates in differ depending on the sphere in which they take place; how the wordless interaction in life with nature enables Mary to open up to relation, how she then proceeds to life with men, where relation is experienced and expressed through language and recognition and, finally, how she becomes aware of the presence of the eternal You of God. Yet, it is important to note that although in each sphere the encounters take on a different shape and expression, they all signify a shift from a predominance of the I-It-encounter to a powerful dawning of the I-You-encounter. This shift, then, from experience to encounter, from silence to dialogue, from It to You, is what brings about the transformation of Mary from a disagreeable, unhappy and sickly ego to a gentle, joyful and healthy person.

Furthermore, by placing the novel under a philosophical lens, it has become clear that *The Secret Garden* is not only a literary but a philosophical achievement. In her work, Burnett penetrates issues that are at the core of human existence, such as how to be good, how to be free, how to be alive and how be in the world and with God. Moreover, this study has also demonstrated the mutual benefit of an interdisciplinary approach to both philosophy and literature. It demonstrates how dialogic philosophy can offer a new way of reading and

understanding *The Secret Garden* and how the literary work, in turn, gives life and body to these ideas.

This study, then, has given an insight into the nature of encounters and the central and life-affirming role they play in *The Secret Garden*. As Buber puts it: “As we have nothing but a You on our lips when we enter the encounter, it is with this on our lips that we are released from it into the world” (159).

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