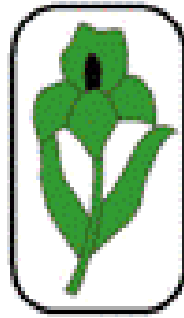


# *The Iris Murdoch Review*

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Iris  
Murdoch  
Society

**ISSN 1756-7572**

**Volume 1, Number 3 - *The Iris Murdoch Review***

Published by the Iris Murdoch Society in association with Kingston University Press Kingston University  
London, Penrhyn Road, Kingston upon Thames, KT1 2EE <<http://fass.kingston.ac.uk/kup/>>

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Printed by Lightning Source

Cover design and typesetting by Allison Hall

We wish to thank Joanna Garber for permission to use the portrait of Iris Murdoch by Harry Weinberger on  
the cover.

A record of this journal is available from the British Library

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## Editorial Preface

This third edition of the *Iris Murdoch Review* offers fresh perspectives that will energise current interpretations of Murdoch's writing and thinking. This edition opens with two newly discovered pieces that are brought into the public domain for the first time: Justin Broackes has uncovered a postscript to 'On "God" and "Good"' which, as he points out in a helpful introductory note, provides the dialogue with Marx that the opening of this essay promises, but fails to deliver. The postscript was typed up for, and distributed at, the conference for which it was written in 1966, but was not included in the published version of the essay. It has remained unremarked in the archives of the University of Iowa, but emerges now to provide a brief but incisive addition to the relatively sparse amount of primary material available on Murdoch's political thinking. In this short essay Murdoch covers much ground: she argues that the relationship between morals and aesthetics is more 'intimate' than that between morals and politics but nonetheless that 'any serious moral viewpoint is likely to imply one political axiom'. Murdoch demands a fresh evaluation of Marx, identifying him as the 'discoverer of something true' – that although morality and politics can never be amalgamated, morality must nonetheless be brought to bear on politics. She explores this paradoxical relationship between art and politics with particular reference to contemporary crises in ethics and politics, which she understands as deriving from the waning interest in religion. This is an intellectually energetic, sharp and dense piece of writing where ideas are delivered with conviction. It suggests methods for understanding the covert relationship between politics and morality within Murdoch's novels, which never form a single system but are neither entirely divorced.

Gillian Dooley's uncovering of an unpublished interview between Iris Murdoch and James Mellen seems, on first reading, to cover a good deal of old ground. Here are familiar views on the relationship between philosophy and the novel and between art, truth and fantasy alongside more thoughts on existentialism, religion and Shakespeare, for example. But any spontaneous conversation, however well rehearsed, will reveal delicately nuanced shades of meaning when repeated at different times and in different contexts. Such repetition can serve to invite comparison and comment. An interview situation also produces a unique dynamic between interviewer and interviewee that will draw out complex, often contradictory, attitudes to a writer's own work. Murdoch's responses are always coloured by her feeling for her interviewer, and the varying intensity with which her responses are probed draw out illuminating flashes of insight from one interviewer that can slip away from the intellectual grasp of another. What has become evident is that Murdoch was sensitive to those with whom she engaged in conversation, acutely responsive to some, occasionally resistant – even crusty – with others. Sometimes she will deftly employ evasive tactics and turn questions back on the questioner, thus avoiding answering them at all. This interview with James Mellen finds her candid and fulsome in her responses. Mellen wins her trust and draws out responses not solicited by other inquisitors. Here she reveals a strong allegiance to Wittgenstein that she has not voiced elsewhere; she thinks about the ways in which a writer's work can be prophetic; about her own striving for perfection; about how she constructs her characters and plots, her sibling relationships, and her dealings with eros and sex. And here, clearly speaking to someone she likes and trusts, she is brave enough to touch upon her personal life and the importance of striking the balance between society and solitude and, more poignantly, on her ambitions and regrets. This dialogue is a valuable addition to the interviews already collected by Gillian Dooley in her fine *A Tiny Corner in the House of Fiction* (published by the University of South Carolina Press in 2003).

The central new critical perspective on Murdoch in this edition comes from the novelist Jill Paton Walsh. A transcript of Paton Walsh's plenary lecture, given at the last Iris Murdoch Conference at Kingston University in September 2010, appears here by kind permission of the author and at the request of many in the audience who were stimulated, enthralled and deeply moved by her thought-provoking and informative

discussion on a topic that has vexed Murdoch criticism for decades – the relationship between Murdoch’s philosophy and art. Paton Walsh examines three ways in which philosophy may be integrated into a novel and explores how and why Murdoch participates in each of them, giving a glimpse of the many authorial modes that characterize the complex voice that constructs any novel. This essay provides a fascinating glimpse of how a writer writes and how art is made. The discussion ranges over the harnessing of inspiration, the composition of character, plot and form, and does not only confine itself to dealing with how a writer writes, but also how a reader reads. We understand ultimately that philosophy is part of what a novel does involuntarily rather than what it deliberately sets out to prove. Paton Walsh issues a stern and pertinent challenge to the brand of Murdoch scholarship that gratuitously encodes the novels by reference to the philosophy alone, for Murdoch’s is an art of feeling out of which philosophy comes only as a by-product. She argues that every first reading of Murdoch’s novels should be one born of pleasure. These insights have particular value for Murdoch scholars, for Murdoch and Paton Walsh share a similar artistic vision and she is well placed to understand Murdoch as a writer. Although Paton Walsh distrusts generic references to ‘the novel of ideas’ it would be safe to say that her own novels share the intellectual rigour, philosophical alignments, wit, humour and moral seriousness that characterise Murdoch’s work.<sup>1</sup>

Peter Conradi provides a moving and fitting obituary for Philippa Foot, Murdoch’s life-long friend who died on her 90<sup>th</sup> birthday in 2010. Dame Iris and Professor Foot were intensely close and intellectual equals. The remainder of this third edition of the *Iris Murdoch Review* is taken up with no fewer than nine reviews, a much larger number than usual. However, the range and quality of the books reviewed here pay testament to the thriving nature and high standard of current Murdoch scholarship. The ever-increasing number of important publications on Iris Murdoch’s work means that future editions of the Review will carry a smaller number of selected reviews. However, we will continue to solicit reviews on books as they are published and they will be accessible in the ‘Reviews’ Section on the website for the Centre for Iris Murdoch Studies.

Anne Rowe, July 2011

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<sup>1</sup> Jill Paton Walsh acknowledges Iris Murdoch’s influence on her in interview with Yvonne Nolan, ‘Jill Paton Walsh: Novel Ideas Along the Cam’ (27 November, 2000). <[www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/authors/interviews/article/20144-jill-paton-walsh-novel-ideas-along-the-cam.html](http://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/authors/interviews/article/20144-jill-paton-walsh-novel-ideas-along-the-cam.html)>. Also in Paton Walsh’s 1986 novel *Lapsing*, characters read and discuss Murdoch’s 1957 novel, *The Sandcastle*. Roberta White makes a study of some of the similarities between the work of Jill Paton Walsh and Iris Murdoch in *A Studio of One’s Own: Fictional Women Painters and the Art of Fiction* (New Jersey; Farleigh Dickinson University Press in Madison).

## Iris Murdoch

### A Postscript to ‘On “God” and “Good”’: Introductory Note by Justin Broackes

At the start of the essay ‘On “God” and “Good”’, Iris Murdoch tells us: ‘We need a moral philosophy which can speak significantly of Freud and Marx, and out of which aesthetic and political views can be generated.’ The paper itself talks very significantly of Freud and of the aesthetic, arguing that beauty in art and nature are a guide—indeed an ‘entry’—into morality and the good life. But on Marx and on politics, the paper may seem curiously silent. At the University of Iowa, however, there is a typescript of the essay, marked ‘For circulation among participants in the August 1966 meeting of the Study Group on Foundations of Cultural Unity’. At the end of the main paper, the typescript contains a Postscript on Politics—and, among other important things, it does something to answer to the outstanding demand that Murdoch had so strongly announced at the start of her paper: the need also to speak of Marx and of the relation of morality to politics.

Murdoch’s essay was a contribution to the 1966 meeting at Bowdoin College in Brunswick, Maine, of the ‘Study Group on the Foundations of Cultural Unity’. The group had been founded by the philosophers Michael Polanyi, Edward Pols and Marjorie Grene to bring together people from the arts and sciences who were concerned to question the dominance of scientific reductionism and of projects to incorporate all of knowledge within a single system of ‘unified science’. The group held its first meeting in August 1965 and a second meeting a year later, August 21st-27th, 1966. The twenty-six main participants, with a great range of distinctions, included the critic John Bayley, the ethologist M. R. A. Chance, the cell biologist (and environmentalist) Barry Commoner, the legal theorist Lon Fuller, the physicist Torger Holtsmark, the psychologist Sigmund Koch (at that point attached to the Ford Foundation, which provided funding for the Group), the historian John A. Lukacs, the painter Robert Mallery, and the art historian Otto von Simson. The many philosophers included—besides the distinguished organizers of the Group—Charles Taylor and Iris Murdoch. Murdoch’s essay was published, with a selection of others papers from the two meetings, in *The Anatomy of Knowledge*, edited by Marjorie Grene (University of Massachusetts Press, 1969), to which I am indebted for information on the Group. And it was included as the second essay in *The Sovereignty of Good* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970), and reprinted in *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature*, edited by Peter J. Conradi (Chatto and Windus, 1997; Penguin, 1999). In all the published versions, the Postscript was omitted and the paper—whatever more compelling reasons may have dictated the change—may have lost, I suspect, something of the unity of its original project.

The typescript for this printing is held in the Iris Murdoch Papers, at the University of Iowa Libraries, Iowa City, Iowa. Thanks are due to Sidney F. Huttner and Kathryn J. Hodson at the library for their help and permission to use their copy, and to Peter J. Conradi for the suggestion to publish the piece in the *Iris Murdoch Review*. The Postscript is published here for the first time, by kind permission of John Bayley.

## Postscript on Politics

I suggested that an adequate moral philosophy should have an intelligible relationship to empirical psychology and should also be capable of generating its own aesthetic and political theory. I think in fact that the relationship between aesthetics and morals is more intimate, for a variety of reasons, than the relationship between morals and politics. Any serious moral viewpoint is likely to imply at least one political axiom. But if the axiom implied is the axiom of individual freedom, this in itself effects a certain severance between morals and politics, which may make it improper to use the same images in both fields. (For instance, one may think it right to coerce oneself into being good, but not right to coerce another into being good). The idea of excellence has then a different operation in morals from its operation in politics, since a final acceptance of imperfection and incompleteness is built into politics in a way in which it is not built into personal morals. The command 'Be perfect,' which can never do harm to the artist or the moral agent, is a very dangerous political slogan.

There are, however, certain similarities, as well as causal connections, between the present crisis in ethics and the crisis in politics, brought on in the case of ethics by the waning influence of organised religion, and in politics by the Capitalist-Communist encounter and the development of nuclear weapons. One might say that in both cases thinking has got to become more radical or else give up. I have suggested in the case of ethics that a mystical background to morality which was concealed by the intermediate presence of religion has now got to be met with directly, both in practice and in theory. A cushioning theoretical intermediary (theology), which was both a support to moral philosophy and a breeding place of its ideas, has begun to disappear. In the case of politics the theoretical intermediary which, although it has not yet disappeared, has become outdated, is a Machiavellian view of legitimate self-interest.

Of course individual self-interest and national self-interest will and (for liberal reasons) doubtless should remain a prime consideration in politics; but as a fundamental guiding theory Machiavellianism in politics is becoming dangerously unrealistic in an advanced scientific and nuclear age. Marxists point out that for the first time in our history we are *technically able* to achieve reasonably just societies, to feed and house the people of the world, to direct our social destiny at least a little. These new technical abilities, however far they may reach, cannot be too often reflected on as we read of the arms programmes of the world's richest countries. This, together with the fact that major war (as apart from the threat of war) is no longer an actual instrument of policy, presents us with an entirely novel situation. Liberal political theory, if it is not to degenerate into a pseudo-scientific cynicism, must now attempt to recover, or uncover, an idealism which is proper to it but which, for reasons I have suggested, has never emerged as something confident and clear. Marx, like Freud, was undoubtedly the great discoverer of something true, and our sociologists and historians have by now quietly adopted many of the main theses of Marxism. And, although I think that classical Marxism is mistaken in its view of the perfectability of society and the inevitability of development, there is a world of wisdom in Marxism for the political moralist. (The Marxist critique of the Capitalist view of 'work' seems to me particularly significant). Marxism has the merit of being an explicitly moral and idealistic method of political thinking, in theory at any rate, and theory is always capable of refreshing practice. (Consider the recent developments in Yugoslavia). However, because politics is inevitably concerned with the second-best, and for related reasons connected with the axiom of individual freedom, it seems to me that idealism in politics is better conceived of as a piecemeal affair, a type of thought, rather than as an

ideology. The political thinker must constantly retire from his field to reflect upon human nature and human beings in a separated moral way, and then, with all possible realism, return again. Morality and politics can never quite form a single system. One characteristic of this type of thought which is, I think, especially important now is the finding of points of absolute non-toleration, the willingness to make absolute moral judgments on means to ends. No to torture, No to the war in Vietnam, No to the possession and testing of nuclear weapons. Moral thinking can now penetrate, and ought to penetrate, straight into politics without having to pass automatically through a testing area of Machiavellianism.

**Iris Murdoch talks to James Mellen**

Interview commissioned by Radio New Zealand, first broadcast February 1978

*This text of this interview is reproduced here by kind permission of the the Sound Archives/Ngā Taonga Kōrero (SANTK) at Radio New Zealand, and of Gillian Dooley who transcribed the interview (July, 2010).*

Murdoch: I had been trained as a philosopher at Oxford, and the years after the war were very exciting years because of the renewal of contact with France and other European countries and existentialism was very much in the air and I got rather caught into that particular climate of discussion and decided I would come back and try to become a professional philosopher, to do teaching. I spent a year in Cambridge as a graduate student then doing philosophy, and then I came back to Oxford where I taught philosophy for a great many years.

Mellen: *Did existentialism influence you as a writer?*

A. I don't think so. I'm not an existentialist. It's a philosophy which I find alien in many ways, though of course it was very exciting when it was the latest thing, but it's not my kind of philosophy. I suppose there might be some marginal influence but I think it's more an influence of the zeitgeist, of the whole way the world was going at that time and the way people were writing. I don't think there's much direct influence.

Q. *Perhaps this is the place to ask you what kind of philosopher you are, what main stream of thought you did become associated with in philosophy?*

A. Mainly, I suppose, a Wittgensteinian; I'm very much under the shadow of Wittgenstein. I knew Wittgenstein very slightly. I think I'm a Wittgensteinian empiricist in sort of one half of me and the other half is a sort of Platonist. I'm most interested in moral and political philosophy, and I find a sort of moral view which can, I think, be derived from Plato, more sympathetic than the, as it were, logical positivist style of ethics which were, and to some extent still are, more popular here. But it would be difficult to formulate this very clearly.

Q. *Well we'll not stay with you as a philosopher because the accent here is really on you as a novelist, and the very interesting thing is how, how you got away sufficiently from philosophy to become a novelist?*

A. Oh, well, I was a novelist first. I've always been a writer, ever since I was about nine. I always knew I was a writer, I mean there was no doubt about that. The only question was what else I'd do. I wrote a lot of stuff before I published anything. The war took a big chunk out of my life in terms of developing, I think, as a writer just because one didn't have time to write. I wasn't in any frenzied hurry about this. I knew I would become a writer and I went on trying and I wrote a lot of awfully bad stuff during that time.

Q. *Once the novelist began to be fully developed, how did you time yourself, how did you put your time between philosophy and writing?*

A. I had to divide it up. This was very distressing. I'd like to have lived two full lives, one completely as a philosopher, one completely as a novelist, but one had to make compromises all the time. I mainly wrote in summer vacation. I couldn't do much writing during the Oxford term and of course I had to work on



philosophy in the vacation and write lectures. And also of course I wanted to do that because I was very interested in it. I mainly wrote in the summer vac.

*Q. And when did you conceptualise, when did you think about it? Could you find enough time, say mornings, to make notes and so on?*

A. Well, I tried to keep the novel going during the time when I couldn't work on it very much. It just stayed alive somehow.

*Q. There is this struggle of course between the philosopher and the artist, [on] which you've written [and] about which a book has been published recently, and it implies a division, perhaps in terms of innermost conviction. There's Plato who says art is not pertinent to philosophy.*

A. Yes, I think Plato felt most of all that art was dangerous to morality and there is quite a lot in his view. I mean his view when fleshed out [*words unclear*] in detail in fact is plausible, that art is very much concerned with the fantasy life of the artist and with the acting out of personal fantasies which are not necessarily expressions of truth or of the highest potentiality or mind of the person concerned. It's a dangerous game. I think that the artist has got to fight all the time against personal fantasy and against using his art in a magical way to give him a sense of power or to console himself in some rather rapid manner. One has to keep purging one's art all the time of these elements.

*Q. So truth and art don't get on very well in general?*

A. Oh, generally, no.

*Q. On the other hand you were saying that it also attempts to escape morality, and yet I will come up with a sentence of [*words unclear*] saying that all art is a struggle to be in a particular way virtuous.*

A. Yes, I think that one sees from the great artists that this can be done. Of course most art is bad art. There is a small amount of really great art which shows you that art can be truthful and can be an expression of virtue and of a vision of the world which isn't a narrow personal vision. And of course if one is a practising artist one is always hoping that one's art will become like that in some way.

*Q. Has that been your attempt, to find an ideal true art?*

A. Well, not exactly, no. I mean I think what I want to do is to produce good art and I think that's the artist's job. His job is not to try and help society or anything, although I think he will incidentally help society. His job is to produce the best art that he can, and this, particularly in the case of the novel I think, is very much concerned with one's ability of course to invent and to create, but in doing so, to attain some wide and non-means-personal view of the world that one's speaking about. One can see perhaps more easily the pitfalls that one wants to avoid: the production of mere fantasy art, where the characters are all either the author in disguise or else people whom the author wants to demean in some way, and that art can very easily be self-aggrandisement and demeaning of others and other things, and this is what one doesn't want to do and I think that I'm very inspired by great examples. Of course, I mean one's work is tiny and novelists of today are nothing compared with the great novelists of the past, but one is inspired I think by reading Tolstoy and Dickens and Jane Austen and of course, most of all, Shakespeare.

*Q. How does one arrive at the opposite of what you were saying, that is to say, the fantasy and perhaps the low, how does one arrive at moral excellence and reflection of good things?*

A. Well, simply by working at the art form itself, I mean the whole secret of the thing is in the art form. I mean this is why I say philosophy and art are quite separate. The actual formulation ... Perhaps one should separate three things which are very obviously separable. One, one's actual personal conduct, how one lives one's life; secondly, a moral philosophy which one might want to formulate, one's conceptualisation of morality as far as one thinks one can conceptualise it and, thirdly, one's art. And these things are different, and people can be good at doing one and not at all good at doing another. But I'd say as an artist [*words unclear*] one's job is to purify one's art and to liberate one's imagination and to create good works of art in whatever form one's using, and I think this will be found to be connected with a certain kind of moral discipline.

*Q. And religion? Not necessarily.*

A. Well religion is another thing again. I think I am religious. I used to feel that when I abandoned orthodox Christianity, which I did quite a long time ago, I'd fallen out of religion. Now I don't think so, partly because Christian theology has been modifying itself so fast that it's rapidly approaching a position where I think it represents what I too believe, that is that Christ is not a man-God but is a great saint whose life inspires us morally and symbolises something very important about the human destiny and journey and the human soul. Partly that, that Christianity has changed, and partly that I think I've learnt through contact with Buddhism a certain amount about what religion is like when it's not necessarily dogma.

*Q. How does one incorporate this into one's novels?*

A. Oh, not at all, necessarily. I can't sufficiently emphasise how much I feel that the actual artwork is something separate. In fact, in a truistic sense of course, what one is affects one's art, what kind of person one is, is inevitably expressed in one's art, and again perhaps incidentally, since I know about philosophy and since I'm interested in religion, references to philosophy and religion do come into my books. But if there were other things that I knew about, and insofar as there are other things that I know about, I mean these things come in, and if there were further things they would come in, that is, if I was a doctor, I would bring in things about doctoring into my writing. I'm not a philosophical novelist and I am wary of any touching of the work of art at a theoretical level. I mean as soon as the feeling that some abstract idea is being expressed by the writer comes along, I think the reader is rightly offended.

*Q. Perhaps we can now leave the area of philosophy. I'll just throw another quote at you: Writers know that their books are often prophetic.*

A. I think books are prophetic sometimes in relation to the life of the writer, in the sense that I think the unconscious mind is of course the great storehouse from which all this stuff comes and if one hasn't got a good working relationship with one's unconscious mind one probably won't be able to be an artist, and there's a lot of very deep things about one's own intentions and the pattern of one's life and so on, which one may not be fully conscious of, which emerge in the novel and then seem to be confirmed in some odd way in one's life afterwards. This is a stray shadow of an idea, but writers of course are often prophetic in a more ordinary sense, like George Orwell, or Kafka. Kafka is an extraordinarily prophetic writer. But I think this is just one kind of writer, one kind of event, when writing is prophetic in that sense.

*Q. Are writers masochistic?*

A. Well, some are. I think one recognises masochism in art very readily, even if the author is trying to conceal it. No, I don't think necessarily, no. I mean I don't think that this goes with the artistic temperament necessarily, though it very often does.

*Q. Your characters, when they are writers especially, they are desperate to escape from people. It seems to be an attempt to escape the imperfections of life, to get into a sort of perfection in writing. Is that reflective of you?*

A. No, not specially. I think the characters you're thinking ([...] are very particular ones) [...] part of the point of the story that they want get away from people and then the story made it clear that they couldn't. I think any writer wants a certain amount of time and reflection and solitude. I certainly very much require solitude which, for a very large part of my life, I haven't been able to have, but I think a writer must lead an ordinary life and preferably of course have an ordinary job, at least for part of his writing life. And I certainly myself don't shun society.

*Q. But this occasional character who constantly is struggling to free himself of people, and who practically slaps them down, and says, get out, get out, what is that based on? What sort of person is he?*

A. I think that's just one sort of writer. It isn't anything that I'd want to draw general conclusions from. It just happens that I've once or twice portrayed characters of that sort, but I think that there are just as many writers who are tremendously social people, who are always wanting to be talking with their friends and so on. I mean I think just by definition a writer's got to be alone some of the time otherwise you couldn't write, and he's likely to be a reflective person so he's likely to want a bit of solitude, but I think writers come in all kinds of personalities.

*Q. You haven't quite been able to strike the right balance in your life between society and solitude?*

A. No, I think I probably have struck the right balance, but I mean everything that's worth doing involves sacrificing something else. I very much regret, I regret having had to give up teaching. I enjoyed teaching, and I miss it. But it was impossible to run two lives quite so intensely without being regretful that one was losing part of one. I didn't have enough time to write, I really could only write in the summer and I wanted to write more and I felt I had to sacrifice the teaching. I'm also sorry, to go farther back, that I didn't become a scholar in the serious sense. I mean I am a scholar in a sense of course but I didn't become a polymath. I'd like to have been an art historian or scholar of Greek and Latin.

*Q. At the expense of being the artist, then?*

A. Yes, and no, I mean in many ways I'd rather have done that than become a philosopher. But there it is. I mean, one's life is full of ... I'd also like to have been a linguist. I'm very interested in language, I collect languages, I'd like to have become an orientalist and learnt Chinese and Japanese, but these are all dreams.

*Q. Dreams, yes. Dreams might be the way to put it. It's also reflective of enormous ambition. Is ambition the right word though?*

A. Well, I'm very anxious to do a lot of things. I'm ambitious as an artist, yes, I want to write well, I want to write better than I write now, in this sense I'm certainly very ambitious, I want to do better, much better. I think I'm very voracious about life, I'd like to do a lot of things, I'd like to learn a lot of languages, I'd like to be a teacher, I'd like to learn a great many things which I now probably won't ever have time to learn.

*Q. To dwell on the construction of the novel. You've confessed occasionally to a compulsiveness about plot. You dwell on the plot of your novels perhaps too much, you think.*

A. Well, I think there's always a tendency, or at least perhaps there is with me, a tendency for a conflict to arise between plot and character, that the plot may constrain the characters, or on the other hand the

characters may destroy the plot. I think plot is very important. This is entirely up to every individual writer to decide how he treats the question of plot and character and his guide is his own artistic inspiration and conscience. I have very strong plots and I sometimes feel that the plot is so strong that the characters are constrained. One wants to have the best of all worlds, as Shakespeare does, or as Dickens does, or as Henry James does, though James is already showing signs of falling over his own genius in a way. He is so good at certain things that I think he sometimes makes sacrifices of the freedom of his characters. I think this is a very very difficult question and something that is very very difficult to do, to make one's characters free, and to give them, to animate them with a life which really carries them outside the fiction, while at the same time the fiction is wonderfully constructed. I think one of Shakespeare's plays or a novel by Dickens shows that one can have the best of all worlds in this way.

*Q. Yes, and whatever the disadvantage in your case of such strong plotting, it is something very admirable and something that your readers are much drawn to. Perhaps you could give us some idea of how it works with you. How do you plot?*

A. I usually have a conception of two or three people in some kind of situation, and there's some kind of atmosphere about the situation, it's some kind of moral situation, there's a conflict, there's a choice involved or something, and the people are there and they have a certain real nature, and then gradually I unwind the thing. From this centre other characters appear, but I think the most important thing is to have live characters, and the characters to some extent will then invent the plot. I think one has to start with some kind of tangle. This is a co-operation between intellect and unconscious which one simply has to learn to control.

*Q. Does it happen on paper? Is it there anything mathematical about it? Is there any formula?*

A. Yes yes, I mean, I just write random semi-nonsensical notes down and it becomes more and more coherent. I mean this again is a matter of temperament; I find it easy to think in that kind of thinking by writing, as I say, a kind of semi-nonsense notebook, asking questions of myself and so on.

*Q. And spinning it out. How much are you the storyteller, though? How much do you belong to that breed?*

A. Oh, I think I'm a storyteller, yes, yes, I think that this is something which I find very natural. I think the novel is a wonderful form. It's a great art form, and very much alive and kicking and I think that to tell a story is a good thing to be able to do, even if one can't do anything else.

*Q. Could you perhaps in very simplified terms begin with a plot and as an example tell us how it develops?*

A. I mean one might do something about somebody, a family that's been divided and one of the children then had grown up, one of the boys had been in Canada or something for 15 years and hasn't seen his family and he comes back and he's not at all what they expect, and there are conflicts and then his brothers and sisters divide into sort of different camps, some are for him and some against him and then he forms a very close friendship with one of them and then the people to whom the brothers and sisters are married are also involved in the drama and then there's some secret which the parents have always kept from the children which then emerges. I mean one could go on [...] for a long time. I mean the thing is that you've got people in a familiar kind of situation, you see, a family situation of course is always a good starting point in a way because it's something we all know about and it has very very profound conflicts in it but I mean it could be a situation to do with work for instance.

*Q. So frequently your characters do need to relate to more than one person so there begins to be the complications of many relationships.*

A. Yes, but this is true of most of us, after all. I mean, there's nothing very unusual about that. I mean I'm interested in psychological dramas where people have to make choices and to harmonise different kinds of relationships which represent perhaps different sides of their own personality, that kind of thing.

*Q. Yes. We'll come back in a minute. I'd also like you to place in perspective Eros. Eros is a most important principle in your novels. What is it?*

A. Well, Eros, in this very general sense is a concept of, perhaps one should say a person, mentioned by both Plato and Freud, meaning a very deep creative principle which is of course connected with sex but with sex in some very general and wide sense where this is connected with artistic creation as well as what we normally think of and is connected with the drive towards pattern in one's life which comes from very deep sources. I mean I don't speak now as a philosopher, I mean one would have to look very critically at this concept if one were offering it in a general, well, if one was offering it as part of a philosophical theory, about morality for instance, but I think it certainly represents to me something which I recognise, this ambiguous creative force which can be dangerous, it can become a kind of egoistic drive, it can become personal fantasy and so on, or it can be the energy of imagination. I think that the artist must learn the discipline of imagination and how to, as it were, make space in which his creation lives. He's got to clear away the narrowing influences of his own personality in its lower energies; he has to purge the energy of his personality so that it makes these spaces in which these independent things, which are works of art, can come to be. I mean, this expresses something that I feel deeply about myself and which I think is of general application too. But I certainly wouldn't offer it as a sort of philosophical or psychological theory.

*Q. The lower energies you said that you must purge, is that then when Eros is to do with sex?*

A. Oh, no, sex is everywhere. I think this is one of the aspects of Freud which I find sympathetic. I think that a very large part of one's life is to do with sex, not in the silly sense but in some very very general sense, that one's energies are to do with sex, one's interests are to do with sex. But again, I'm not saying this as in a kind of theoretical tone of voice. No, think how sexy Shakespeare is, I mean sex can go up to the very top of human endeavour and human art. Think how sexy the great painters are. I mean it isn't that they remove sex from their work when they're at the very peak of the power and their understanding, it's rather that they transform it into some great light [that] shines on the human world. No, I meant much simpler things, I mean if one thinks of a bad novel, a bad thriller, this is the most obvious case of a bad work of art, and one can think of pictures which would be similar but perhaps the story is the easiest case of simply the use of the art form as a revenge upon life by the writer. I mean it may be literally revenge upon people who've humiliated him and he tells the story of how he triumphs over these people. It may be that he's failed to do various things and in the book he does the things and he's attractive and everybody likes him and he wins in the end and so on. Well I mean people could do this in a good story too but in a bad story this is told in a way which destroys the free openness, the truthfulness of the work of art, because one can see too clearly what is being done. I mean even a great writer can fall into this. I think Lawrence sometimes falls into it - D.H. Lawrence - that you suddenly hear the sort of a rather mean voice of Lawrence speaking, his vindictive, self-aggrandising voice speaking, and then he's back again to being the great genius which he ought to be.

*Q. Among many complicated sorts of relationships and many forms of relationship a very important one is the sibling in your characters. Now what principle is involved in the siblings relating?*

A. Oh well, I'm an only child, I mean that's a very fundamental thing in my life, that I've been looking for siblings all the time, I mean this may be why I write. I mean my characters are brothers and sisters, and it's mysterious to me because I never had a brother or a sister. There's something which I find very interesting, I mean, this particular bond which can be enmity or love and sameness and difference, and the long

relationship from childhood onwards. I mean this seems to me mysterious and interesting, but as with anything else in a work of art, this can be transformed. There are many meanings in the sibling relationship.

*Q. Is a sibling relationship significant in every relationship, that is, between all men and women?*

A. You mean it's a pattern?

*Q. Mm hm.*

A. Not necessarily. No, I think this is something personal ...

*Q. What separates it then? What distinguishes it? What is the difference between a male-female relationship or a heterosexual or homosexual one.*

A. I don't know. As I say this, as in any work of art, the artist finds that the thing he's playing with has a lot of different meanings and I think this has a lot of different meanings to me. I mean in an obvious sense the sibling relation is interesting because of the taboos on sexual relations between siblings. Certain emotional connections appear with a difference; certain tensions appear with a difference. I mean this is of interest, but I find in every book where I deal with these subjects, and this is true I suppose of a lot of my books, the thing comes out differently. It depends on the whole atmosphere of the work of art, what the other characters are doing, and what the general feeling of the drama is, what the deep form of the drama is, what these things will look like.

*Q. A homosexual character is often present in the drama that you enact. Does he play a consistent part, is he an observer of some sort rather than an active participator?*

A. No I don't think so. I have a very many ... many different kinds of homosexual characters appear. I know a good many homosexuals. I mean there's no mystery about this. People sometimes say I do portray homosexuals. I mean, they're around the place, a great many of my friends are homosexual and I know a lot about that world, and these persons, like every other kind of person, appear in many different kinds.

*Q. Who in fact furnishes the world of your fiction? Is it the world of Oxford, is it London? Or are you inspired by Shakespeare? What is your storehouse of characters?*

A. Well, I wish Shakespeare would do even more work for me. But in general not Oxford particularly. I don't want to write about Oxford; I never have done, though I've mentioned it once or twice in a very peripheral way. No, nothing in particular, just human beings, I know a great many human beings of many different sorts. I don't draw from life, some people can do this well, I can't and wouldn't want to. I invent my people. They are not people that I know, they are invented people, though obviously the sort of people one has known will limit the kind of people one will invent well, to some extent. But I wouldn't say there was any particular source; it's just the human world as I've seen it over a great many years.

*Q. And what part of society in the main?*

A. Well, the parts that I know about. I know more about, I suppose, the middle-class world than I do about the working-class world, but again I think that there's a bit too much emphasis sometimes on the writer's world in this limiting sense. I think after all one knows a lot of human beings of many different kinds. One has a great many contacts with the world and one then invents. I don't feel that one's, as it were, shut up in any particular kind of world necessarily.

Q. *And Shakespeare, how important has he been?*

A. Oh well, I wish he could be more important. I don't know, I mean I have increasingly felt that somehow or other that this is a great source for me. I mean certain plays I meditate upon as if they were sort of religious texts and endless things come out of these deep wells of poetry and human conflict and unconscious symbols. I mean it's a great sea of wonderful stuff which I think can help one if one goes on meditating on it.

Q. *One or two in particular?*

A. Well, I don't know, *The Tempest*, and *Hamlet*, *Measure for Measure*, all the tragedies, *Lear*. I mean, I could go on for some time.

Q. *How would you describe the future of the novel as you see it? Are you optimistic about it or pessimistic?*

A. Oh, I'm optimistic. I think it's marvellous, and I think it's very very various. I feel a little alarmed when I hear formalist critics trying to define the novel in a narrow way, trying to say that it must stop being realistic, that it must carry out certain formalist requirements if it's to be real novel art and so forth. I wouldn't agree with this. I think that anything goes in the novel, and there are these mysterious tides in human thought which make changes in art, and of course the novel is subject to this and in a very obvious way. I mean we write in a different way to nineteenth-century writers, but apart from things like this, which happen almost automatically, I don't think there's any rule or general form which the novel must observe. I think that it's a very very free form; it's one of the freest of art forms; you can do anything with the novel and I think that people will just go on enjoying this freedom and I see no reason why this should stop.

Q. *You don't perceive any decline in the general popularity of the novel?*

A. Well there's a decline in quality. This has been sad. And I mean we are much less good than our predecessors, I think. The giants in the novel form are in the past.

Q. *And equivalently perhaps a declining interest on the part of the general public?*

A. Well, the public read less, this is unfortunately true. I don't know, I mean what can one say about the future? One thing that one can be certain of is that it will be very surprising. One might say, well, we're entering a period where people won't read, where reading will decline. I don't think so, and I think the novel will survive.

## Philosophy and Fiction

*This text of the Plenary Lecture given at the 5th International Iris Murdoch Conference at Kingston University, Saturday 11<sup>th</sup> September 2010 by is reproduced here by kind permission of the author.*

Friends, I am not so much on the margins of Murdoch studies, as right off the page. I met Iris Murdoch twice, nearly forty years apart, and on both occasions tangentially, so that although of course I remember meeting her, I am sure that she never knew my name, or realised that she had met me. The first time was in 1956. I was a second year undergraduate at St. Anne's College, Oxford, of which college she was a senior member. The college at that time had no dining hall; undergraduates ate in the various scattered hostels to which they had been assigned. The dons came round in turn to encourage solidarity by eating dinner with us.

Miss Murdoch was famous among us – a published don was commonplace, but a published novelist who was a don was a rarity. As a punishment for reading the wrong sort of English I was heavily persuaded to swap places with a first-year undergraduate who was desperate to meet Miss Murdoch, and was reading the modern course. From my place at a table down the room I watched the top table and their guest. Miss Murdoch appeared ill at ease and shy. A curtain of thick blond hair overhung her face when she looked down, and she looked down often. Possibly she didn't appreciate the predominantly Catholic company she was in – Cherwell Edge was a Catholic hostel. She gave short answers to eager questions and redeemed the impression she was making with an occasional sweet smile.

'A lion thrown among Christians' – a phrase I heard much later seems, in recollection, appropriate. This slight encounter was enough to make me begin to read Murdoch. And once one begins to read her she is, as we all know, addictive. What I would like to reflect on with you this morning is the interface between philosophy and fiction, an interface which is always present and which is unavoidable in any discussion of Murdoch's novels. How does philosophy get into fiction?

There are, I think, three main ways in which philosophy can get into fiction. Here I am making an aside to define my terms. Novels are the predominant form of fiction in modern times, but drama, poetry (including epic poetry) and film are also forms of fiction and, for the purposes of this talk, have more in common than they have difference. Aristotle's distinction between Poetry and History matches ours between fiction and fact; so when I talk about 'the novel' I am hoping to be understood as referring to any narrative fiction in any genre.

Those three ways: the first is via the coherence that makes us experience a narrative as a story. Can we start by thinking about coherence in any fiction whatever, even the rankest tosh written by the least philosophically aware writer imaginable? What makes something 'make sense' as a story? The most preposterous rambling tale is experienced as 'story' because a view of the world, and of cause and effect in the world, emerges from it. A simple folk tale, or *Tom Jones*, will put before you a world in which luck, Fortune, Fate is hugely important.<sup>1</sup> A Mills and Boon romance in which the poor cotton worker marries the mill owner's son or a highly regarded novel in which a dowerless girl marries the owner of Pemberley alike propose the importance of luck.<sup>2</sup> Often there is a talisman of some kind – being virtuous, being beautiful (as long as you are unaware of it), being kind to old women and lost animals, or simply being clever and amusing will help your luck along. Such a picture of the world is very popular and very long-lasting and widespread,

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<sup>1</sup> Henry Fielding, *Tom Jones* (1749).

<sup>2</sup> Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (1813).



and we can see its appeal – it is rather like the appeal of the National Lottery - if luck matters, then there is hope for the most unfortunate and oppressed. If luck matters more than virtue, then even the venal amongst us may hope for happiness. I imagine that that is what Murdoch was thinking of as a consoling fiction, when she hoped not to console anyone.

Can we now consider the role of fate in a very non-consoling, pre-modern fiction, the story of Oedipus. The coherence in this story offers an outrage to any Christian thinker and nearly every post-Christian thinker too come to that. Oedipus is horribly punished for horrible crimes (murdering his father and marrying his mother) which he did not know he had committed. He committed them partly because he was in flight from the man and woman he believed to be his mother and his father; that is, his attempts to escape doing wrong caused him to do it. Morally, Oedipus is guilty at worst of a bit of arrogance in assuming himself innocent; any Christian pastor would forgive him at once. The ancient Greeks believed in absolute responsibility. We believe in the immense importance of your intentions in the moral nature of your deeds. It is hard for us to make sense of *Oedipus Rex*. To get any moral sense out of it we have to read it as saying, ‘the world is like this because of the immoral cruelty of the Gods.’ But are the Gods immoral? Or are they just the Gods?

I would wish to say that the severe moral shock administered to our feelings by *Oedipus Rex* is part of the point of reading fiction. We encounter a world view very unlike our own, and that experience, even when distressing and rejected, is enlarging; it opens mental windows on the possibility of alternative constructions of the world. I am not going to linger with the ancient Greek playwrights because all that we need from them this morning is the demonstration that a view of the world, a philosophy deep or shallow, simple or profound, underlies story and can be deduced from the progress of a narrative and above all from its conclusion. The best exposition of this point is in Frank Kermode’s *The Sense of an Ending* published in 1968 but still available.<sup>3</sup> I recommend it to you. Here is another aside. The interpretations of the world that I am discussing now have nothing to do with literary merit. The same tropes about luck, fate, misfortune, the reward of merit, and so on, emerge from shoddy literature as clearly as they do from great literature. The discussion, to take one example, of how women should best prosper in a world dominated by men is discernable in Catherine Cookson as it is in Jane Austen.

This first sense in which philosophy is found in fiction is very elementary. It is often completely unnoticed by either writer or reader, consisting simply of common unexamined assumptions in both parties. Perhaps because it is operating unconsciously it is usually rather clichéd. Nobody reads a novel to explore a rusty truism, such as ‘what you sow shall you reap’; their pleasure in what they read is derived from other aspects of the story. And many stories are written as pure entertainment, simply to divert the reader from troublesome concerns. Even stories such as these have a plot, sometimes a dashing and elaborate one, and a plot consists of a chain of cause and effect which reveals what the writer assumes the effect of certain thoughts and actions will be; or if we are dealing with a cunning and unscrupulous entertainer, what the writer thinks the reader would like to be told the consequences of the characters’ thoughts and actions will be.

I used to say that Kermode’s book was one of only two works of criticism which were useful to a writer. Kermode died last month, and I am glad to take an opportunity to salute him. The other useful book was Aristotle’s *Poetics*. Famously, Murdoch regarded herself as a Platonist, but it is very hard for any novelist not to be an Aristotelian in the practice of the craft. There is not however a deep contradiction here, because Murdoch’s Platonism was a world view, a picture of The Good and its complex relationship with religion, whereas Aristotle concerned himself not so much with content as with method. For Plato, as of course you know, our view was that of captives chained in a cave with our backs to the light, observing only

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<sup>3</sup> Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968).

shadows of reality, and a work of art, including narrative art, was merely a shadow of a shadow. The important counter claim made by Aristotle is that fiction (poetry in his terminology) is in fact truer than reality because it contains a more general truthfulness.

Here is the passage I refer to. Aristotle has just characterised history as telling us, for example ‘what Alcibiades said or did.’ But

[t]he poet’s function is to describe, not the thing that has happened, but a kind of thing that might happen [...] Hence poetry is something more philosophic and of graver import than history, since its statements are of the nature rather of universals, whereas those of history are singulars. By a universal statement I mean one as to what such and such a kind of man will probably or necessarily say or do.<sup>4</sup>

That is pure Aristotle. And here, in language less bleak and terms more familiar to us, is an expansion of that passage from Martha Nussbaum’s essay on ‘Literary Theory and Ethical Theory’, in her book entitled *Love’s Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature*:

[o]ne of the things that makes literature something deeper and more central for us than a complex game [...] is that it speaks [...] *about us*, about our lives and choices and emotions, about our social existence, and the totality of our connections. As Aristotle observed, it is deep and conducive to our enquiry about how to live, because it does not simply (as history does) record that this or that event happened; it searches for patterns of possibility – of choice and circumstance and the interaction between choice and circumstance – that turn up in human lives with such persistence that they must be regarded as *our* possibilities.<sup>5</sup>

This leads me to put before you a profound contradiction, or perhaps I mean a profound tension, between the generality described in the passages I have just read to you, and the realism, the specified particulars which distinguish nearly all novels from the older narrative forms. I am not quite sure if experts in Murdoch would see a parallel between what she called ‘crystalline’ novels, and what she called ‘journalistic’ ones. But the parallel might be there.<sup>6</sup>

More than any other narrative form, novels portray to us the situations we find ourselves in; they offer us images of human character, human actions and human consequences which are portrayed *situationally*. They show us our dilemmas and our scope for action as we find them, in snowstorms of detail, in blizzards of circumstance. The trains of cause and effect which they trace may be obscure and apprehended at first by intuition. The moral thinking in a reasonably achieved novel is the very opposite of schematic; it embraces complexity. And above all it recognises human emotion. To those two great

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<sup>4</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, translated by Ingram Bywater (Oxford: OUP, 1920), p.43.

<sup>5</sup> Martha Nussbaum, ‘Perceptive Equilibrium: Literary Theory and Ethical Theory’, *Love’s Knowledge: Essays in Literature and Philosophy* (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp.168-94 (p.171).

<sup>6</sup> Iris Murdoch, ‘The twentieth century novel is usually either crystalline or journalistic; that is, it is either a small quasi-allegorical object portraying the human condition [...] or else it is a large shapeless quasi-documentary object’, in ‘Against Dryness’ (1961) in *Existentialists and Mystics*, edited by Peter Conradi (London: Chatto & Windus, 1997), pp. 287-95 (p.291). To Kermode she commented, ‘It’s one of these epigrammatic distinctions which are probably themselves rather inexact [...] There is a tendency, I think, on the one hand, and especially now, to produce a closely coiled, carefully constructed object wherein the story rather than the people is the important thing, and wherein the story perhaps suggests a particular, fairly clear moral. On the other hand, there is and always has been in fiction a desire to describe the world around one in a fairly loose and cheerful way. And it seemed to me at present in the novel that there was a flying apart of these two different aims. Some ideal state of affairs would combine the merits of both.’ *From a Tiny Corner in the House of Fiction: Conversations with Iris Murdoch* edited by Gillian Dooley (South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 2003), pp. 9-13 (p.10).

questions in philosophy – ‘What can we know?’ and ‘How should we live?’ it adds a crucial third, ‘What should we feel?’.

The effect of the inclusion of detail in the settings and characterisation of a novel is to enhance the reader’s power to envisage the scene; visual detail assists the vividness and dimensionality of the performance unrolling in the theatre of the reader’s mind. Detailed description of characters augments the impression we will get from the dialogue and actions of those characters in much the same way as our observations of those we meet in real life helps us to get them in focus. Detail claims for ‘a kind of thing that might happen’, the concrete and indisputable nature, the solidity, of something that has happened. The use of plentiful detail is characteristic of nineteenth-century writers, think of Balzac or Dickens, and of twentieth-century writers like Proust. Murdoch, I understand, said she would like to be a realistic writer, like a nineteenth-century writer.

Let us look at some detail in two passages from *A Fairly Honourable Defeat*. First:

Hilda and Rupert Foster, celebrating their twentieth wedding anniversary with a bottle of rather dry champagne, were sitting in the evening sun in the garden of their house in Priory Grove, London, SW10. Hilda, a plumper angel now, reclined limply, exhibiting shiny burnished knees below a short shift dress of orangey yellow. Her feet were bare. Her undulating dark hair showed some needle-thin lines of grey. Her burly boyish-faced husband, whom she had at last persuaded to stop wearing shorts, sat open-shirted, cooking in the sun. He was red, hoping later to be brown. His shock of abundant fair hair had faded with the years, becoming unglistering and dry while still undeniably blond. They were a handsome pair. They were altruistic, but treated themselves judiciously to luxuries. The latest one, to which they had not yet become accustomed, was a diminutive swimming pool which made a square of shimmering blue in the middle of the court yarded garden. The garden was enclosed by an old red brick wall which was surrounded by a trellis bearing an enlacement of Albertine and Little White Pet, all now in outrageous flower.<sup>7</sup>

I would describe this passage, like the passages of detail in other novels, as not so much ‘realism’ as ‘realisation’. Such passages, as I just said, assist readers in the task of staging the story in the mind’s eye and seeing it as clearly as if it had really happened in their sight. But before that desirable result they had assisted the writer in the prior task of envisaging the imaginary subject of the book brilliantly enough to live with it, or perhaps I mean within it, for long enough to write it.

I am going to justify the distinction I have just made between realism and realisation by a passage about another garden, from the same book:

Simon was moving through a dark twilit garden underneath huge plane trees, through whose leaves a luminous but dark sky could Intermittently be seen. There was different light under the trees, strange light, dark and yet lurid. He was following his mother who was walking some ten paces ahead of him and guiding him [...]. Simon knew that she was going to show him something appalling. [...] At last his mother stopped and pointed at something on the ground. In the illuminated darkness Simon saw a long mound of ashes like the ashes of a bonfire. There were sticks and fragments of branches and withered flowers lying all about as if they had been part of the bonfire but had not been consumed. He felt an urge to touch the ashes and leaned down. Then he saw, only a few inches from his hand, a piece of brown tweed. It was a trouser leg. He saw the turn-ups of the trouser, and then a protruding leg with a dark sock and a shoe. He withdrew his hand in horror, thinking instantly, this is my father’s grave. My mother has led me to my father’s grave. (p.159)

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<sup>7</sup> Iris Murdoch, *A Fairly Honourable Defeat* (1970); (London: Vintage Classics, 2001), pp.3-4.

Both these passages demonstrate Murdoch's attentive and knowledgeable eye. But there is a crucial difference. The first is describing what counts as reality in the novel; the second describes a dream. The specification of detail does not in fact guarantee that what we are reading is a description of reality – only consider a landscape in the *Lord of the Rings*.

So if the snowstorm of detail in a novel is not an index of realism, of what is it actually an index? The clouds of detail - imaginary facts - in which a novelist surrounds her characters embody an important truth - all human actions take place in specific circumstances. The ache for simple rules of action, for clear moral injunctions which can be carried out regardless of the details, regardless of the actual situation, whatever the consequences, is a natural one. But it is a childish one. It short-circuits the complexities of the world. I am tempted to say that I have learned from writing novels, as from reading them, that we have a moral duty to attend to the circumstances in which we find ourselves, although the fulfilment of that duty will rob us of most of our certainties.

The words I have just spoken embody a philosophical position – for speaking thus I have been called a 'consequentialist' and contrasted with one who believes in moral absolutes, as in 'torture is always and in all circumstances wrong, no matter what results from it'. I do not quite see why one could not be absolutist about the wrongful nature of torture, while being consequentialist about remembering to have tea with one's aunt; but the point I am after here is that this is another example of a philosophical position getting into a novel unofficially, and sometimes unnoticed by either writer or reader. A writer who offers snowstorms of detail is surely indicating clearly a belief that the circumstances matter greatly, and that we need to have them to join in the ethical judgements the novel is making. A tale which begins, 'there was once a poor woodcutter who had a beautiful daughter ...' and which is not going to tell us why the father is poor, or in what way the daughter is beautiful, or exactly where they were living when one day the prince came riding by, is surely indicating that a narrative pattern matters without our having any need to know much about the circumstances; this is narration based on types. It is not in the least about Alcibiades; it is about what such and such a kind of girl will probably or necessarily say or do. Simply by story-telling in such a stripped down fashion it asserts that what it is about to tell us will be valid in almost any set of circumstances. And indeed such stories have very wide currency over both place and time. Novels in the literary canon vary quite a lot in the amount of reliance the narrative places on circumstance.

On this matter Murdoch herself took up a position very clearly in her first novel, *Under the Net*. In the version that Jake Donaghue has made of his colloquy with Hugo Belfounder Annandine, who is the avatar for Hugo, says the following:

If by expressing a theory you mean that someone else could make a theory about what you do, of course that is true and uninteresting. What I speak of is the real decision as we experience it; and here the movement away from theory and generality is the movement towards truth. All theorising is flight. We must be ruled by the situation itself and this is unutterably particular. Indeed it is something to which we can never get close enough, however hard we may try, as it were, to crawl under the net.<sup>8</sup>

That seems clear enough, doesn't it? Murdoch is a consequentialist. But novels shimmer with ambiguity, a point to which I will return later. On reading this passage after an interval, Jake thinks that Hugo's position is not as strong as he had at first thought; and that his own position in the discussion could be strengthened. Is Murdoch disowning Hugo? But then those words about crawling 'under the net' have given the novel its title, which one would think underwrites Hugo's point.

Before we leave these questions of pattern truth and detailed realisation I would like to point out that a modern reader is likely to enjoy the very process of discerning the underlying moral pattern in a novel

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<sup>8</sup> Iris Murdoch, *Under the Net* (1954); (London: Vintage Classics, 2002), p.91.

through the narrative cloud of detail. There is pleasure in doing that, as there is in correctly guessing the identity of the murderer in a detective story before the author reveals it.

I would like to sum up this description of the first way in which philosophy gets into novels by pointing out that in this unconsidered form, the philosophy (perhaps we should call it ethical thinking) is always unoriginal. It depends on the assumptions that are made at any time by writer and reader; only when the culture has radically changed do such assumptions break the surface and appear remarkable in any way, as the ancient Greek views of guilt now seem to us, or the attitude to women in Jane Austen.

We come now to the second way in which philosophy gets into novels – it can get there because the author puts it in. And of course, philosophical inserts into fiction do not tend to be the kind of elementary stuff that everybody knows about; there would be no need to insert open philosophical reasoning if it were pretty likely that the reader already knew such reasoning, or could assume it. It is more esoteric stuff which gets put in deliberately.

A good example would be *The Time of the Angels*, in which Marcus Fisher is writing a book about the possibility of ethics after the death of religion.<sup>9</sup> Many of Murdoch's characters are writing books on philosophical topics; such writings offer good insertion points. Deliberately placed philosophical topics strongly indicate to the reader what the author thinks the discourse in the novel is about. They are self-conscious and artful. And in this kind of philosophy Murdoch is a serial perpetrator. Murdoch's characters discuss philosophical ideas, as well as finding themselves in situations which raise philosophical questions. Allusions to the content of the books illuminate the meaning one might find in the dilemmas of the characters. I am going to call this kind of thing 'placed philosophy'. There is so much placed philosophy in Murdoch that it seems very curious that she should have declared that she was not a philosophical novelist. I agree with her that she was not, and I will explain that view later.

For the moment let us look at the status of stuff that gets into novels. I am sorry for the inelegance of the word 'stuff' but it does describe what I mean. Under the cover of that need for specific detail that gives the chimera of the tale the look of reality, all sorts of stuff gets into novels, and philosophy is by no means the most usual. Huge tracts of history get into novels, and that in two ways. The story could have been set in the past when it was written, like *Ivanhoe*, or *War and Peace*; or the survival of the novel in question has meant that it is loaded with historical material for readers now, which was contemporary social comment when it was new, like *Pride and Prejudice*, or *Nicholas Nickleby*.<sup>10</sup> Sometimes the history is the very story the writer wants to tell, as in Hilary Mantel's magisterial *Wolf Hall*;<sup>11</sup> sometimes it is there to give glamour to a love tale, or a tale of daring exploit ... or, since the possibilities for people in the past is less known to us, to cover for implausible situations. The stuff of history in a novel can be a good deal more chewy than any of the placed philosophy in Murdoch.

Apart from history, think of the amount of topology in novels, the swathes of landscape and streetscape; think what we are shown about dairy farming in passages in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, what we are shown about English stately houses when reading *The Spoils of Poynton* by Henry James (or *Brideshead Revisited*); what we are shown about square-rigged men of war when reading *Master and Commander* by Patrick O'Brian, what we are induced to think about music from reading *An Equal Music* by Vikram Seth; about mediaeval architecture in William Golding's *The Spire*; about bell-ringing in *The Nine Tailors* and about painting in almost all Murdoch's novels and dozens of novels from other hands – *Girl with a Pearl Earring* by Tracy Chevalier or *Circles of Deceit* by Nina Bawden for examples.<sup>12</sup> The amount of sociology and travelogue

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<sup>9</sup> Iris Murdoch, *The Time of the Angels* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1966).

<sup>10</sup> Walter Scott, *Ivanhoe* (1819); Leo Tolstoy, *War and Peace* (1869); Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (1813); Charles Dickens, *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838-9).

<sup>11</sup> Hilary Mantel, *Wolf Hall* (London: Fourth Estate, 2009), winner of the 2009 Man Booker Prize.

<sup>12</sup> Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891); Henry James, *The Spoils of Poynton* (1896); Evelyn Waugh, *Brideshead Revisited* (1945); Patrick O'Brian, *Master and Commander* (1970); Vikram Seth, *An Equal Music* (1999); William Golding,

in fiction is worth libraries of non-fiction, and I have not yet mentioned the biography of famous real people, *Wolf Hall* again, or Robert Bolt's *A Man for all Seasons*, and so on and so on.<sup>13</sup> Novels are simply stuffed with stuff.

There are many readers who read precisely because of stuff – they like to read historical novels, and feel that they learn from them. As many dislike historical novels, feeling that the author has authority only on matters which he or she might have experienced in person. I should have added autobiography to the list of possible stuff.

And placed philosophy is just stuff. I need to remind you that I am not using that pejorative term about philosophical patterns of thought emerging in the narrative, but only about the open mention and exposition of philosophical material. About this Murdoch herself said, in an interview with Frank Kermode, that putting actual pieces of philosophy in a novel is a dangerous thing to do.<sup>14</sup>

Time I confessed to the fact that there is placed philosophy in my own work. Particularly in *Knowledge of Angels*, in which all the available proofs of the existence of God are discussed.<sup>15</sup> They are proposed and one by one demolished by the atheist. Nevertheless, *Knowledge of Angels* is not about the possibility or impossibility of proving the existence of God; it is about the corrosive effects of certainty. I did it again in *A Desert in Bohemia*, a novel which is in essence a meditation on Moral Luck, and which contains a lecture on – guess what – Moral Luck.<sup>16</sup> In this case I was being, I think, authentically Murdochian – using placed philosophy to indicate to the reader what the embedded train of thought is about.

Can we actually learn from stuff in fiction? Authors differ in the soundness and thoroughness of their knowledge and their research; but that is true also of non-fiction authors, and we usually have no qualms about learning from them. It is in fact very unlikely that there are mistakes about square-rigged ships in anything by Patrick O'Brian. But not impossible, and we cannot be sure. And for large tracts of stuff, mistakes are impossible in an unhelpful sense. Could Hardy be mistaken about some landscape feature of Wessex? But however closely Wessex resembles Dorset, when it is Wessex he made it up. It is what he says it is and cannot be wrong.

Facts in fiction are fiction, not fact; perhaps I should say they become imaginary facts. All the stuff in a novel is fiction. Fiction is an immensely powerful solvent which dissolves into its own substance anything you put into it. It has its own quite different way of being true.

I think, therefore, that although philosophy feels more relevant than lots of other kinds of stuff, you cannot do philosophy in fiction, any more than you can do music or architecture. Murdoch herself said that between novels and philosophy the subject matter is the same, but the activity is different. All the same, placed philosophy is no less soluble in the stream of fiction than any other stuff; and Murdoch and others get away with it largely because the novel is an ample and disorderly art form which accommodates authorial peccadilloes. Placed philosophy either sticks out a lot, and risks the reader feeling got at; or it is dissolved into the substance of fiction, and gets itself thought of fictionally.

Reading fictionally we are following a train of events. What Aristotle thought was important – peripety and discovery – in our language, switches of fortune and surprises. The plot is pre-eminent in a novel, and the shape of that plot carries the major part of the meaning and has beauties and flaws of its own. It is also an organic thing, because it must respond to peripeties and discoveries that the author makes in the process of writing. I dislike the word plot because it chimes with the idea of plan and is too static. I

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*The Spire* (1964); Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Nine Tailors* (1934); Tracy Chevalier, *Girl with a Pearl Earring* (1999); Nina Bayden, *Circles of Deceit* (1987).

<sup>13</sup> Robert Bolt, *A Man for All Seasons* (1954/1960).

<sup>14</sup> BBC1 for Sixth forms, 1965. <[www.bbc.co.uk/archive/writers/12207.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/archive/writers/12207.shtml)>.

<sup>15</sup> Jill Paton Walsh, *Knowledge of Angels* (Cambridge: Colt Books, 1994).

<sup>16</sup> Jill Paton Walsh, *A Desert in Bohemia* (London & New York: Doubleday and St Martin's Press, 2000).

prefer to think of the movement of action and event in a novel as a trajectory, a flight-path across the subject.

Many years ago now, my cousin Peter told me: 'we used to read old Iris to teach us how to live.'<sup>17</sup> Can one read a novel to teach one how to live? It is a fairly startling thought, given the behaviour of many sets of characters in Murdoch's work. When I began to read Murdoch as an exceptionally green young person I was amazed at the sexual conduct of her characters. In the staid world of the fifties and early sixties I simply could not imagine this work as a portrayal of the way real people might behave; I took it for comic fantasy – a kind of mockery of the prevailing ethos. In one of life's little ironies my own life was about to be derailed; it was crashed into by a charismatic intruder, like one of Murdoch's enchanters, and since I was engaged at the time it catapulted me into a truly Murdochian triangle, and a situation nearly as preposterous as a Murdoch plot. I set up one of the worst evenings of my life by taking my husband, my ex-lover and his new fiancée to see *A Severed Head*, then newly running in London.<sup>18</sup> For once I hadn't read the novel the moment it was published. My other choice of entertainment for us was *The Marriage of Figaro*, but at least in that there is always the music.

Peter's remark suggests to me a difficulty which Murdoch was subject to. People read her differently because they knew from the flap copy that she was a professional philosopher. They were looking for philosophical tropes rather in the way that detective story readers look for clues. Talking to Murdoch, Kermode mentioned an 'inexplicit debate' in *An Unofficial Rose*;<sup>19</sup> but an alert reader will be able to excavate the inexplicit and bring it into the foreground of their minds, thus disrupting the effect that the novel might have. A novel is not encrypted philosophy.

Nor could any novel have been written to be the basis for the sort of activity going on at this conference. Non-academics like myself seem to be standing clearly on the far margins not only of Murdoch studies, but of most literary criticism. But I have never heard of any conference assembled, or any critical work published on the work of an entirely unpublished author. Publishers do not put their money into works that they feel they cannot sell. In Murdoch's heyday a novel could be published on the expectation of a sale of around 1000 copies, so those one thousand readers are the ultimate gatekeepers.

Copies of novels borrowed from library shelves or bought in general bookshops get into the hands of the common reader, an increasingly endangered species. The point I am making is that the novel is a commercial item; it always was. Rich patrons do not figure prominently in its history as they do in the art of painting or in the history of music. We are looking at a democratic form. However deliciously discussable the novels of Murdoch are, they were not written to be discussed, as no doubt her philosophical work was. And common reading, perhaps often a somewhat baffled one, precedes all critical discussion which will take place only if the common reader has given approval enough for the book to remain in print, at least for a while. That primary reading, the *sine qua non* of all the fascinating and proliferating readings offered at this conference, is likely to be artless and probably irritated by any inclusions, however high-minded, which delay the progress of the story itself. Such an innocent reading is driven by a simple desire to 'know what happens'; what is said will count as something that happened only if it does on some level drive the plot forwards. In my terminology it all depends on whether the philosophical utterance is or is not on the trajectory. What is spoken or thought by a character in a novel is a dead weight unless it drives events forward or is part of the revelation of the character to us. I think that is why Murdoch thought it dangerous to include actual philosophy in a novel, although she added, one might get away with it.

You will have noticed that I have not yet got round to the third fashion in which philosophy gets into novels. I have put it third because it is the most difficult. The most difficult to explain, that is. And being a

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<sup>17</sup> Peter Honorine Ady (1914-2004).

<sup>18</sup> The play of *A Severed Head* by Iris Murdoch and J.B. Priestley (published by Chatto & Windus in 1964), opened at the Criterion theatre in June 1963.

<sup>19</sup> Iris Murdoch, *An Unofficial Rose* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1962), <[www.bbc.co.uk/archive/writers/12207](http://www.bbc.co.uk/archive/writers/12207)>

novelist I look for what was once called ‘an objective correlative’ – a fairly concrete visual image by which to explain it to you.<sup>20</sup>

The process of writing is like a river flowing in limestone country. It starts as a brook running along in the open air, in a high landscape, glass-clear and cool. Then it disappears into a sink-hole and enters a dark subterranean cave. Somewhere, later, it emerges as a fresh spring, a powerful river which begins to carve a route for itself in the valley which grows green around it. A writer’s mindscape is like limestone country in that it can be difficult to be certain that the brook which vanished suddenly on the upland and the river roaring out of the cave are really the same water – the continuity and identity of the flow being deeply hidden below ground. And, to pursue the metaphor – the new river may have mingled in the cave the waters of the upland brook with immemorial and ancient water that fell as rain centuries ago.

Let me unpack that comparison for you. The upland brook is glass-clear and cool because novelists tend to be intellectuals, of a sort. Self-aware sort of people. But there is that underground cave in the middle of the process; an immense discontinuity.

There is a secret to authorship which many of us do not wish to reveal – but I am shameless in my old age; and that is that the process is not completely under control. Sometimes it seems almost fraudulent to claim credit for it. There is the input – a ream or so of white typewriting paper, and then there is a finished draft. Who wrote it? I feel simultaneously that it must have been me, and that it cannot have been me. I often feel that it must have been written by someone who is a better novelist than I am.

I have spent many hours of my life – I have written more than 40 works of fiction – in this semi-autonomous frame of mind. I know it well. Weird though it sounds it is a state I love to be in. I cannot decide to be in it; I can hopefully fool around with some thoughts and see if they catch fire. When a subject does catch fire it feels like being grabbed by the scruff of the mind, by the scruff of the heart, and not put down until one has written the novel.

I expect this is what the authors and commentators of the past meant when they described ‘inspiration’ or invoked the Muses. Or even rebuked the Muses for refusing to speak. It is probably what people are asking about when they ask, ‘Where do you get your ideas from?’ This mystifies everyone, writers included. And yet semi-autonomous activities are not confined to finding oneself inspired –breathed through –by the Muses. Steering a sailing boat in choppy winds and hidden currents is probably like it; or riding a spirited horse. And more to the point, because it has been experienced by everybody here, dreaming is like that, and remembering is like it. I experience the process as applied long-distance day-dreaming.

Importantly, a certain kind of reading is also semi-autonomous. The kind I have described as innocent. Readers totally immersed in a book have surrendered to it; are allowing their thoughts and feelings to be directed by another person’s view of things. They can recover autonomy by throwing the book in the fire, by refusing or neglecting to finish it, or by embarking on criticism of it. But while they read eagerly and willingly they have surrendered. They are for the time being, only partly themselves. They are, as we say, ‘lost in a book.’ When you are lost in a book, what precisely is it that you have lost? I’m coming to that.

Literary criticism is often conducted on the basis that the author intended every effect produced by the work, designed every aspect of it, was always in control, and can therefore offer definitive interpretations of the work. But in practice authorship is like falling into that deep subterranean cave, and being swept out of it on a river which has a natural direction of flow. The author does not necessarily know why things are in a novel.

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<sup>20</sup> The term ‘objective correlative’ was first used by Washington Allston in the ‘Introductory Discourse’ of his *Lectures on Art* (1850) but was brought into literary discourse by T. S. Eliot’s essay ‘Hamlet and His Problems’ in *The Sacred Wood* (1920).



I shall call Murdoch to witness about this. In the interview which Frank Kermode conducted, and which I keep citing to you because I like it so much, he proposed to her that the cat in *An Unofficial Rose* is intended to offer another contrast between the wild and the civilised, parallel to the contrast between the inchoate Ann Peronett, and her husband, the artist Randall. Murdoch resisted this. Kermode asks, 'Why does *An Unofficial Rose* begin with a death?' she replies that it just fell out so. He asks, 'Was the cat a deliberate second string to the wild/tame contrast represented by the roses?'. Answer: 'The cat just arrived more or less accidentally.' And about Miranda's dolls she rebukes the great critic for bringing to bear 'too much theoretical weight'.<sup>21</sup>

I think I perceive clearly in this conversation the immense discontinuity in authorial control which I mentioned to you, comparing it to the river flowing partly underground. The process entails a sort of self-abnegation, a sort of personal set-aside, to allow some subliminal other voice to be heard. I think this is what Keats meant by negative capability.<sup>22</sup> It often feels more like listening than speaking. What can it be that dictates something to the author – something not audible to consciousness when the author is not at work? Not something divine, surely; the Muses are long dead – we cannot even name them now without looking them up, and the Christian God hit writer's block after the Book of Revelation – what speaks, I think, is entirely human, what we don't yet know that we know; what we haven't yet realised that we feel. The world is so complex, so overwhelmed with detail, so much of it trivial and distracting and not yet digested and ordered and surfacing in our conscious minds, that most of it lies unknown to us. We have experienced far more than we can remember. Our conscious minds are great simplifiers, great system-builders. A conscious mind can do philosophy, think morally, read history, learn sociology. But in all the discarded details a more precise knowledge of the world is implicit and has accumulated in the deeps of memory.

What makes it available to us is asking questions – visualised questions. What would a certain imaginary character do in such a situation? What would happen to them? We ask ourselves urgently – we have a thousand words to write today – and we ask not knowing the answer, giving scope to an answer that emerges freshly from the forgotten experience we have acquired, and not *a priori* from the knowledge in our heads. We set aside the known patterns, and revisit the inchoate sources of our beliefs, and make the pattern afresh. Or, if we are really absenting ourselves from ourselves, if we have given up control, we listen to our characters and let them tell us how they feel, and what they are going to do.

Other people are never transparent to our understanding; they have always got a profound otherness. Even love deceives itself if it does not feel this strangeness. A character in fiction represents a real person; a successful representation needs to portray strangeness and starts, as the author withdraws from totalitarian power over the character, with allowing the character to have autonomy, to be partly unknown to the author, to be real in this most important human aspect even, I maintain, to have rights to be fairly treated by the creator.

An imaginary character with rights? Perhaps you will think I am being fanciful. Well, I have always hated the burning of Guy Fawkes in effigy on bonfire night, so that my family's party had a bonfire, chestnuts to roast, fireworks, gingerbread and all the neighbours round, but never had a guy. I think an image of a human being needs a certain modicum of respect; some small degree of the respect due to what is represented by it. Just so I think an author should treat a character, with some degree of the kindness, fairness, justice which one would hope to afford a real person. The author has absolute power over the characters in a work in progress; but the only morally acceptable thing to do with absolute power is to refrain from exerting it.

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<sup>21</sup> Iris Murdoch, interview with Frank Kermode, <[www.bbc.co.uk/archive/writers/12207](http://www.bbc.co.uk/archive/writers/12207)>

<sup>22</sup> John Keats's theory of 'negative capability' is found in the letter to his brother dated Sunday, 21 December 1817.

'I do love my characters' Iris said; 'but one must be able to make them free'.<sup>23</sup> And she wrote that a novel must be a house fit for free characters to live in.<sup>24</sup> To force a pattern onto a novel, onto the characters in it, is to falsify it and diminish them. Can I repeat to you the quotation from *Under the Net*?

We must be ruled by the situation itself and this is unutterably particular. Indeed it is something to which we can never get close enough, however hard we may try, as it were, to crawl under the net.

But what about the plot? The trajectory? Murdoch says, 'one finds a tension between producing a really satisfactory form and the free development of character, letting some character have his way'.<sup>25</sup>

Form in art consoles us; it comforts our fear that life may be meaningless chaos. But what if such consolation is false? What if we have made robots or puppets of our characters to impose a pattern which is not true? Ideally the form has emerged freshly conceived, flowing from a new transaction between the author's conscious and unconscious understanding of the possibilities of human life, and not in the least imposed from what the author previously believed or has been taught about morality. Ideally writing a novel is a process of finding out – of personal enlightenment. And that ideally applies to the form as well as to the characters. That is an intensely difficult thing to achieve. There is, as Murdoch observed, 'very little great art'.<sup>26</sup>

Time now to try to explain clearly that third way in which philosophy gets into novels. Not because it is implied in the general consensus of a culture, not because it is consciously placed there, but because it has arisen freshly, like a new spring out of a cave from the making of this particular story about these particular people. It is present, dissolved and invisible, like the limestone in a river. Of course a writer's past life and present interests shapes the output; if she is a philosopher, then philosophical ideas will flavour what arises as she writes. The contrast between Murdoch's interest in the freedom of her characters and, say, Thomas Hardy's picture of Tess of the d'Urbervilles does not happen because he decided to write a treatise on predestination, and she decided to write treatises on free will, but because the differences in their lived experience and temperament coloured, or flavoured, whatever metaphor you will, the flow of their thoughts and feelings as they wrote. Their take on the world was simply implicit in what they wrote – confirmed or disconfirmed by the powerful thrust of the imagined people and events. I cannot emphasise too much that a living story discovers, rather than expresses what the author has to tell.

I mentioned earlier that the author's loss of autonomy is paralleled by the reader's loss of autonomy, when they allow themselves to be swept away by the narration, and charmed into imaginary company. I also asked whether it was possible to learn from reading novels. No form of learning is more vivid, or more treasured than what we discover for ourselves; and one does not discover what one is told. The magic art of novelists is not to express their own understanding openly, but to create an experience for readers as a result of which readers will think and feel freshly for themselves. The implicit is infinitely more potent than the explicit.

In general, the practice of literary criticism, that highly autonomous and rational process is potentially destructive. Authors do it, of course – it belongs to the second third and fourth drafts of a work; it is a cold and choking influence on the first, really creative one. And readers ought to do it likewise, on second third and fourth readings. Doing it on a first reading makes you a spectator, rather than a participant. You probably cannot really criticise a work that you were not willing to read uncritically first – you haven't actually experienced it. And *a fortiori* it is possible to read a novel by Iris Murdoch very perversely, looking all the time for philosophical tropes – after all you know she was a philosopher. When you drag the implicit to

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<sup>23</sup> <[www.bbc.co.uk/archive/writers/12207.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/archive/writers/12207.shtml)>

<sup>24</sup> Iris Murdoch, 'The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited' (1959) in *Existentialists and Mystics*, pp. 261-86 (p.286).

<sup>25</sup> <[www.bbc.co.uk/archive/writers/12207.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/archive/writers/12207.shtml)>

<sup>26</sup> Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1992), p.9.

the surface you rob it of its fictional power. 'This is what she is saying,' you tell yourself. 'Only this.' This manner of reading is profoundly reductive.

Murdoch does herself no favours by using so much 'placed' philosophy in her work. It distracts attention from the dissolved and implied moral thinking she was so good at. And by telling her readers what she is about she robs them potentially of the rewarding experience of seeing it for themselves. Not that one could ever see by reading her novels, even the placed passages, what Murdoch's own philosophical position was. She says of Hugo in *Under the Net*: 'He makes a number of theoretical remarks, some of which I endorse but not all'.<sup>27</sup>

The critic Derek Brewer advised readers to attend to the whole mind of the work.<sup>28</sup> The whole heart of the work would be just as apt. You might notice, I think, reading George Eliot's *Silas Marner*, that the weaver of Raveloe was a point by point exemplar of Marxist alienation; and you might be moved to go and look up the dates to see if George Eliot could have read *Das Kapital* when she was writing *Silas Marner*.<sup>29</sup> But seeing the weaver as an exemplar of a political theory will not help you take him into your heart and care about what becomes of him. More likely it will hinder you in seeing what matters about him to the people with whom he comes to interact. I suppose reading *The Sandcastle* one might perceive that the whole mind of the work offered Mor a choice between duty and happiness, which might have come out of Immanuel Kant; but I think a reader who has never heard of Kant and notices nothing of the kind will probably have understood the novel just as well, and felt it more keenly.<sup>30</sup>

If what you are interested in is Murdoch's philosophy – well she published a good deal of it, and you can read that. If you are interested in Murdoch's vision of the world, the moral universe in which she saw people living and acting, then you would apprehend it best by reading her uncritically. She is easy to read in such a way – she sweeps her readers along masterfully. If what you are interested in doing is talking about her novels afterwards, dissecting, and anatomising them, well, there's no harm in that, and that may be rewarding, as long as it doesn't, as long as you don't allow it to, overwrite your own reactions as an innocent reader.

I admire Murdoch as a novelist very greatly. She could imagine and orchestrate the most wonderful and memorable scenes, in which startled characters are suddenly revealed to themselves, and to us. That car slowly tipping over into the river ... that suicide pact in which two cars are driven towards each other at high speed ... that commemoration ball ... and I admire the seriousness with which she wrote; she is surely the most morally thoughtful writer in the English canon since George Eliot.<sup>31</sup> I admire also her courageous lack of clarity as a novelist; her power to show us people who struggle to understand themselves and each other, or to decide what to do. The impression she often gives that some kind of pattern is obscurely at work in the lives of people who cannot fully understand it. It is not, I think, that as the author she is withholding knowledge that she herself possesses, it is rather that this is a realistic picture of the difficulty of a moral life. It is simply true that it is hard to know how to live. She respects her characters and preserves their obscurity and strangeness, to each other and to us. That her novels are often comedies in the Shakespearian sense of comedy is a crowning glory. I would imitate that if I could, but it is beyond me.

My cousin Peter was dazzlingly beautiful and brilliant, and one of Iris's lovers; but could anyone, even she, have learned how to live by reading 'old Iris'? I don't think you could really learn how you yourself in your particular circumstances should live by reading Iris, or any other novelist. But you could learn what living as a human being is like, and why it matters how you do it. A novel can show us, using Martha Nussbaum's words again: 'patterns of possibility – of choice and circumstance and the interaction between

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<sup>27</sup> <[www.bbc.co.uk/archive/writers/12207.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/archive/writers/12207.shtml)>

<sup>28</sup> Derek Stanley Brewer (1923-2008), medieval scholar.

<sup>29</sup> George Eliot, *Silas Marner* (1861); Karl Marx, *Das Kapital* (1867-94).

<sup>30</sup> Iris Murdoch, *The Sandcastle* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1957).

<sup>31</sup> From respectively, *The Sandcastle* and *The Book and the Brotherhood* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1987).

choice and circumstance – that turn up in human lives with such persistence that they must be regarded as *our possibilities*'.

I asked rhetorically, earlier in this talk, what precisely we have lost, when we are lost in a book. It is of course ourselves we have lost; our full autonomy, our self-direction is compromised by something *other*. The author has to step down and let the characters be free, and then the reader has to step down and let the author show them things that they probably would have seen differently left in full charge of themselves. The person who starts a book is displaced for the duration; the person who finishes it is not quite the same person, sees with not quite the same eyes. If the work in question is one of those very rare great works of art, the difference between the person lost and person found may be profound.

George Eliot hoped to touch every heart among her readers 'with [...] loving humour, with tenderness, with belief in goodness'.<sup>32</sup> Murdoch would probably have agreed with that. We know that she wanted to be like a nineteenth-century novelist; that she said she was not a philosophical novelist. I said that in that I agreed with her. To see what is at stake here, think what a qualifier before the word novelist does. Historical novelist; a romantic novelist; a regional novelist; a gothic novelist, a children's novelist, a Bloomsbury novelist, a novelist of ideas ... *War and Peace* was published in 1869, nearly sixty years after the events it describes. So it's a historical novel – right? *Middlemarch* announces that it is about events which took place thirty years ago, so that must be another. Have you ever heard Tolstoy described as a historical novelist? Have you heard George Eliot so described? Have you ever heard Jane Austen described as a Romantic novelist, except jocosely? Is Emily Bronte a gothic novelist, or Thomas Hardy a regional one? All these qualifiers are limiters. Imagine somebody saying to a friend, 'Oh, if you are interested in Napoleon's attack on Russia, you really should read Tolstoy...'

Such qualifiers draw attention to the *stuff* in a novel, and ignore the fiction. In the case of Tolstoy or of George Eliot a magnificent, life-enriching, enlightening fiction; something which far transcends the interest of the stuff in the work because it enlarges our capacity for fellow feeling. It makes us into participants in a human drama which shines a bright light on the possibilities open in our own lives. So of course Murdoch isn't a philosophical novelist – she is far too good for that.

The second time I encountered Iris Murdoch was nearly forty years after that first time at St. Anne's. It was in the glories of the Guildhall in London, packed with the glitterati, on the occasion of the Booker Prize dinner in 1994. My book *Knowledge of Angels* was on the short-list that year. In the hubbub that followed the announcement that James Kelman had won,<sup>33</sup> I noticed Iris, standing near the podium, alone and looking rather lost. Her illness was not yet common knowledge. I went across to her, and offered her a little verbal posy of admiration. She looked at me with a perfectly blank expression in her very blue eyes; first smiled at me and then frowned. John Bayley, who was chairman of the judges that year, turned round from the Podium and said to her – 'You remember, Iris. Jill Paton Walsh. You remember her book.' At that she shook her head. She looked obviously distressed, and I withdrew without another word.

But in one of John Bayley's books about Iris, he says that the last book he remembers her understanding and enjoying was 'a religious allegory, set in an imaginary rather than a historical past'.<sup>34</sup>

That was my book. That means a lot to me.

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<sup>32</sup> Letter from George Eliot to John Blackwood, 11 June 1857.

<sup>33</sup> James Kelman, *How Late It Was, How Late* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1994).

<sup>34</sup> John Bayley, *Widower's House* (London: Duckworth, 2001), p.127.

**Peter J. Conradi**

## **Obituary of Dame Philippa Ruth Foot (3 October 1920 - 3 October 2010)**

*This obituary was first published in the Independent, Tuesday 19 October 2010, and is reproduced here by kind permission of the newspaper.<sup>1</sup>*

The moral philosopher Philippa Foot, who has died on her 90th birthday, was among the great pioneering moral philosophers of the age. The modesty of her output – a two volumes of collected papers *Virtues and Vices* (1978), *Moral Dilemmas* (2002) and a culminating book, *Natural Goodness* (2001) – should not belie its superior, often stunning, quality: absolutely ‘about the stuff’ in Cora Diamond’s phrase about Foot’s close philosophical colleague Elizabeth Anscombe – a philosopher for whose appointment at Somerville Foot proposed vacating her own. That was a gesture characteristic of her lived integrity.

Hers is moral philosophy at its best, never abandoning real life; and she kept words on a Wittgensteinian leash, close to their ordinary homes. Her thinking is driven not by commitment to abstract doctrine but by a haunted preoccupation with cases and examples, such as the German Letter Writers’ sacrifice of their lives in protesting against the Third Reich. Foot returned again and again to such situations to explore their moral import.

She was born Philippa Bosanquet in 1920 and was educated mainly at home before going to Somerville College, Oxford in 1939 to study Politics, Philosophy, and Economics. She graduated in 1942 and worked as a government economist during the remainder of the Second World War, before returning to Somerville. In 1949, she became a Fellow of the college. In the 1960s and 1970s, she held visiting professorships at Cornell, MIT, Berkeley, and the City University of New York before settling at the University of California, Los Angeles for fifteen years in 1976. She was an Honorary Fellow of Somerville until her death.

Her mother had been born in the White House, daughter of President Grover Cleveland. Her father was an industrialist in Kirkleatham where she was brought up in typical upper-class fashion. She and her sister Marion, hunting with other local grandees, recalled huntsmen on horse-back and full rig entering Raby Castle hall. She would in adult life use hunting metaphor to illustrate discussion of philosophers: who fell at the first ditch, who were front-runners. Her gift for philosophy mystified her: believing that she lacked other kinds of intelligence or knowledge, she could not account for it. Yet she knew she was a front-runner all the same.

Around the age of eight Philippa got abdominal tuberculosis and suffered the then ‘cure’ of sleeping for a year including winter months on an out-of-doors balcony in North Yorkshire. This taught her a hard-won self-sufficiency. When their mother threatened to sack Nanny, main source of love and care, ten year-old Philippa and her eleven year-old sister Marion packed their infant bags to leave home. The death of this good woman in 1976 was a deep loss to her.

While the product of this background, she felt contempt for its political conservatism and treatment of women. From governesses she never even learnt ‘which came first, the Romans or the Greeks’. When she won a place at Somerville one of her mother’s friends said, ‘Never mind Dear: she doesn’t LOOK clever!’

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<sup>1</sup> <[www.independent.co.uk/news/obituaries](http://www.independent.co.uk/news/obituaries)>

She married shortly after the war the historian MRD Foot, from the Dorset home of the Pinney family, whose only daughter, then a child, remembered Philippa as uniquely attentive to her as a complete human being. Philippa always claimed that Donald MacKinnon at Oxford had taught her and Iris Murdoch virtue, and how properly to apprehend another person: but she had her own virtue too. Indeed Iris, Murdoch, with whom she shared a flat for two years in 1943-5, praised her brilliance and warmth, noting that she was 'morally tough and subtle, with lots of will and self-control'.

Her marriage failed in 1959. If its childlessness was a source of grief, friendships delighted and consoled her: she was generous, with an excellent memory for the detail of other lives. Philippa Foot's long friendship with Murdoch was possibly even more significant for Dame Iris than for Foot. She appears as Paula in Iris Murdoch's novel *The Nice and the Good* and her and Marion's alliance against their mother made an appearance in *A Fairly Honourable Defeat*, where Morgan's fear of her sister also echoed Dame Iris's fear of Philippa.

Foot's published work is confined to ethics, though she would occasionally give workshops on Later Wittgenstein. But within ethics she ranged widely. There are papers on special issues (such as the doctrine of double effect), abortion, and euthanasia; on freedom of the will, virtues and vices, a critique of utilitarianism, moral dilemmas. Yet her core concerns were the major themes of morality's objectivity and rationality.

Foot challenged two contemporary orthodoxies: first, that facts and values are distinct, that arguments about values, unlike those about facts, may break down without rational error (Stevenson, Ayer, Hare); second that morality necessarily gives reason to everyone. The first is attacked, devastatingly, in the wonderful papers 'Moral Arguments' and 'Moral Beliefs' (1958). On 'the private enterprise' view of evaluative predicates, individuals are in control of relevance – of what facts are, and are not, to count as evaluatively relevant: I am free to dismiss the facts that you bring to argue that X is good, and so our argument may break down. Against this Foot argued for public criteria. She took a mid range evaluative predicate 'rude' and argued that if certain facts obtained you could not deny that some piece of behavior was rude, and vice versa – and still count as having linguistic mastery of the predicate. Similarly, you cannot call anything you like 'good' (or 'bad') and be understood (e.g. stand on a chair and flap your arms – and call that action 'good').

However, this brilliant advocacy of an ordinary objectivity in value was accompanied by an assumption of a subjectivity of reason. She thought: surely you only have reason to be courageous if it links to something you happen to care about? If it does not, then still to say 'you ought to be courageous, etc' is to treat those words as imbued with magical automatic reason giving force. So, if you ought to be virtuous, it is either because this promotes something you care about, or it is itself something you care about. Now Foot thought not everyone cared about virtues as ends. Initially she accepted the second orthodoxy, and argued that everyone cared about their self-interest and that the virtues promoted this. The position is unappealing – and as she realized had serious difficulties over justice. This led to the 'scandalous' position of 'Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives' (1972) where she abandoned the second orthodoxy: some care about morality and the virtues as ends, others do not – and for the latter there is no reason to be moral.

Foot came to see the problem was her assumption of the subjectivity of reason. With this obstacle removed, the final picture is revealed: there are objective facts about what is good and bad in human action and life, and these facts ground objective reasons for what a human ought to do (whether they realize it or not); there are objective facts not just about means but about what ends we ought to have or care about.

But what are the criteria for human goods and bad, or 'the human good'? Some fuller account was needed. *Natural Goodness* gives us an objectivity of practical reason together with the kind of factual basis

of moral evaluation: the good and bad dispositions of the human will are to be assessed in a basically comparable way to assessing the goodness and badness of a tree's roots (or good and bad health). This book is an appropriate capstone to a wonderful career.

When it came out in 2001, her publisher joked that 'Wittgenstein once said that it was impossible to do philosophy slowly enough. But Philippa, by incubating her book for decades, had proved Wittgenstein wrong': and it went into several languages. She knew she was a world-class philosopher and was proud that she had a following in – for example – Sweden, Berlin and Bulgaria as well as the USA, to all of which she travelled in later years. Foot quotes Wittgenstein's 'Be crude and then we shall get on' and she helped us get on immeasurably, with exemplary tenacity and humanity. Her sister Marion survives her

**Review of *Iris Murdoch: A Writer at War: Letters & Diaries 1939-45* edited & introduced by Peter J. Conradi (London: Short Books, 2010)**

This attractive collection of early letters and diaries would, without hindsight, be almost purely delightful. It is organised in three parts, which end with the outbreak of war, a violent death and a broken engagement: Murdoch's 1939 journal of a summer tour with the Oxford amateur Magpie Players; her letters from 1940 to 1944 to Frank Thompson and some of his replies; her letters between 1938 and 1946 to David Hicks and one of his. Conradi provides a general introduction, an introduction to each part, cast-lists of friends and acquaintances and notes.

This autobiographical record is, as Conradi puts it, one of 'painful growing up [...] of the process of reaching adulthood during a world war'. The twenty-year old Iris's account of touring with a sweet folksy programme of ballads, songs, interludes and a medieval play in the terrible August of 1939 is lively and innocent: a chronicle of hasty rehearsals, cast squabbles, stage fright, problems with props and costumes, meals, snacks, drinks, modest takings and unexpected successes, flora and fauna, suspicion of bedbugs. Events in Europe pass her by or are shrugged off: 'I have not seen a paper for weeks, it seems, & have not the remotest idea what is happening, except that Germany and Russia have signed a non-aggression pact (over which much unnecessary fuss is being made) & that there is more trouble over Danzig [...] We try not to think of it at all – and find it amazingly easy. We have so many urgent little problems of our own, that we have not time to look up and see the gathering clouds.' But everything changes on August 31, after an excellent matinee at Yarnton Manor, 'a beautiful Elizabethan house with miraculous gardens.' It was the end of their season. One of the players predicts, 'After the war the Magpies will tour again. But our show will be frightfully pre-war, I'm afraid.' It doubtless would have been. But there was no going back. By the evening the pre-war pastoral was over. On September 3, the day war was declared, Iris decided to return to her parents' home, although her friends were against it. 'Do you realise there's a pretty good chance of London being bombed tonight? Don't be a little fool.' Already it was a wartime scene: a frustrating five-hour journey, a long wait at Oxford station, 'no lights in the trains', an unexpected change and delay at Reading, 'troop trains packed with singing cannon fodder passing every ten minutes', arrival in London after 1 a.m. and no tube from Hammersmith. But Iris reached home and, unlike Frank Thompson, survived the war.

Frank, a star student, promising poet and brilliant linguist, was, like Iris, reading Classics. Under her spell he too became an undergraduate communist. He joined up in 1941, served first in the Middle East and then with the Special Operations Executive in Serbia and in 1944 was executed by the Germans with some of the partisans he had come to support. Iris always mourned for him and came to believe that they would have married. It was obviously a very fond relationship between two very compatible people but perhaps, especially during years of separation, more friendly than amorous. Iris calls Frank 'brother' and he describes her as his 'soul-sister.' They were both wonderful letter writers and, despite the delays and difficulties of wartime correspondence, kept up an eager conversation on paper about places, people, politics, books and languages. While working in the Treasury after graduating, Iris was learning Russian, Turkish and Italian. Meanwhile, Frank learned Russian, Polish, Serbo-Croat and Bulgarian. They share more intimate experiences. Iris reports that she has lost her virginity and hopes he doesn't mind. Frank replies that he feels neither jealousy nor 'righteous indignation', so has 'no cause for anger', considers possible objections and concludes that 'on balance, it is obviously a subject for joy.' In his last letter Frank seems to detach himself from a love relationship: I can honestly say I've never been in love. When I pined for you I was too young to know what I was doing – no offence meant.' The final page of this last letter is missing. But the ending that survives is



suggestive: 'I don't think you should fall for "emotional fascists" – Try to avoid that [...]' Iris certainly had a tendency to fall for them. They included Thomas Balogh, Elias Canetti and perhaps David Hicks and they also figure darkly in her fiction: Mischa Fox, Julius King, David Crimond. Frank himself died fighting fascism, his gifts and idealism probably a loss to posterity as well as to his contemporaries.

Frank described Iris's letters to him as 'gentle'. David Hicks did not. His letter printed here ends, 'Well, be a bit more friendly, can't you?' Her letters to him are often touchy (he is 'a curious sort of bastard', a 'bloody swine', a 'self centred blighter'), perhaps because the relationship was more important to her or perhaps because it was not to last. Their engagement was brief, less than three months in 1945/6, following on a seven-year correspondence during much of which they scarcely saw each other. Like Frank, David was sent abroad, though not on active service. He worked with the British Council in Egypt and Persia and, after the war ended, Czechoslovakia. Possibly they had not known each other well enough, probably both had changed. Iris released him graciously but her letters from Brussels, Salzburg, Innsbruck and Vienna suggests that she was very in love and eager to marry him. Perhaps the ecstasy was heightened by the mountains and the ski-ing.

The letters to the two men are a personal record of wartime Oxford and London. In both Iris felt frustrated at her easy war as a student and a civil servant, at not being a combatant or posted overseas. She makes the war sound easier than it was in London. Her main complaints are of boredom and loneliness, not of bombs and danger. The worst of the Blitz was over by the time Iris arrived at the Treasury in 1942 but it is strange to read 'The people of Europe will probably forgive us for not having suffered.' Meanwhile, Iris is exercised about what she should do next: the Treasury turns her against administration; she considers an academic career but thinks she is not good enough at philosophy. She relaxes among the raffish bohemians in the pubs of Fitzrovia, as Jake will do in *Under the Net*. She dances with the crowds on VE Day, thanks God in Westminster Cathedral and is thrilled when favourite paintings, which have been stored for safety in Wales, return to the National Gallery.

The letters are also a record of her reading and writing. Murdoch is overwhelmed by Dostoevsky and enthuses about Gorki. Proust, 'teaches one to forgive' but Virginia Woolf makes her nervous and self-conscious. She loves Henry James, objects (rightly) to Frank's description of him as 'a comfortable American' and is nearly broken-hearted at *The Wings of the Dove*, which will many years later provide the central situation in *Nuns and Soldiers*. In Brussels she is excited by existentialism and goes on to read Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Queneau and Buber. She was writing poetry and at least two novels about which she sounds deprecating. However, she felt that an advance was being made. All the characters in the first were herself but not in the second. Her theme of a man who sustains during years of separation a love for a woman whom he then re-meets has an obvious parallel with her relationship with Hicks. Her remarks about the theory of the novel anticipate her contrast of the crystalline and the journalistic but express a preference for the crystalline or patterned. Here hindsight is comforting. We know the achievements which will follow this time of self-doubt and self-criticism.

Conradi's introductions are vivid and informative. His notes, however, are guilty of various inaccuracies and omissions. The Oxford College St Edmund Hall is re-named 'St Edmund's Hall College'. Conradi translates *casus belli*, which means 'chance or mischance of war', as 'justification for war.' (The Preface includes an acknowledgment of my 'help with Latin and Greek.' I was not responsible for this). Murdoch admits, 'I have a curious moralizing tendency (of the *video* and *probo* rather than the *sequor*, variety, of course)'. Conradi translates the verbs correctly, 'I see and approve rather than follow', but the allusion would make more sense with a full reference to Ovid's *Metamorphoses* 7.20-21: *video meliora proboque / deteriora sequor*: 'I see and approve the better / I follow the worse.' On 'London is a bit like Plataea after the young men had gone to help the Athenians', Conradi comments, 'The battle of Plataea happened in 479BC.' The place name is misspelt and Murdoch refers to the battle of Marathon in 490 BC.

The battle of Salamis is described in the History of Herodotus not, as Conradi claims, in that of Thucydides. He may be politically correct in translating '*lui*' as 'her' from Henri Rambaud's remarks on the novelist, but is grammatically incorrect: '*lui*' here means 'him'. As well as making mistakes himself he fussily 'corrects' with a redundant '*sic*' perfectly correct spelling and expressions e.g. 'Magdalen [*sic*]', 'Along the [*sic*]', 'discreet [*sic*]'.

Murdoch was a candid diarist and engaging correspondent. There will probably be a long wait before the surviving journals and collected letters are published. Meanwhile this selection provides an alluring prelude.

**Bran Nicol**

**Review of *Iris Murdoch: A Literary Life* by Priscilla Martin and Anne Rowe  
(London: Palgrave, 2010)**

In a period when the public profile of Iris Murdoch has been both expanded and shrunk by a fascination with what Peter Conradi has recently called the 'simplified after-life' (the great author as tragic genius, always – according to media caricature – either 'screwing or screwy' [Conradi, *Iris Murdoch - A Writer at War: The Letters and Diaries of Iris Murdoch: 1939-1945*, p.10]) it is refreshing to see the publication of this book, a thoughtful and thorough guide to the aspects of Murdoch's biography which ought to matter most: the life of the writer. *Iris Murdoch: A Literary Life* is a volume in one of Palgrave Macmillan's longest-running and most successful series, hence the title. But it has a subtle polemical edge in the case of this particular author. For those weary of *Iris Murdoch: The Sex Life*, here's the alternative.

I imagine the main challenge for Martin and Rowe in preparing this volume was how to write it without undue reliance on Conradi's exhaustive official biography, *Iris Murdoch: A Life* (2001) or Valerie Purton's useful *Iris Murdoch Chronology* (also published by Palgrave). But to their great credit, while they inevitably draw fairly substantially on both these sources, they accompany their use with illuminating original incorporation of contemporaneous newspaper material, personal letters, and material from the Iris Murdoch Archives at Kingston University. I was surprised at how often I learned something I didn't already know or came across a witty anecdote. It should be stressed that the authors' intention was not to challenge Conradi's reading and provide a new biography. Yet by focussing on the literary life they do manage to achieve something significantly original by returning Murdoch's life to her work after a decade of caricature following her death and the controversial memoirs by John Bayley, A. N. Wilson, and the 2005 film, *Iris*. The last chapter is particularly good at dealing with the 'afterlife' of Murdoch's work, not simply the public perception, but, valuably, her influence on contemporary novelists such as Zadie Smith, Ian McEwan, Monica Ali, Carol Shields, Alan Hollinghurst and John Banville.

Thus the book points suggestively towards ways in which Murdoch's reputation as a key twentieth-century novelist can be re-assessed by scholars. First and foremost, though, the great value of *Iris Murdoch: A Literary Life* is that it is a scholarly, dependable resource for students and researchers – though one which does not sacrifice 'readability' for information. For the most part, in interpreting Murdoch's work, the authors stick with established themes in Murdoch criticism, e.g. the saint and the artist dichotomy, free will, the dangers of solipsism, etc. But this is quite appropriate for a book which aims at being an authoritative, comprehensive study of an entire writing career. That said, a welcome freshness about the discussion of Murdoch's fiction is also in evidence throughout: the authors offer some interesting new emphases and ideas (e.g. on the visual arts in Murdoch, or the idea of the 'neo-theological') and develop exciting new readings of individual novels (such as the discussion of terrorism in *The Book and the Brotherhood*). The discussions of the novels are succinct and lucid, and when the authors do offer 'biographical criticism', it's always soberly and plausibly done (e.g. the fate of Harold Solomon in relation to psychoanalysis in *A Severed Head*, homosexuality in *The Bell* and other novels, etc). The authors have also sensibly chosen to concentrate on recent British readings of Murdoch's work rather than delve into the vast archives of academic criticism over the past decades, and this contributes to the sense that the book is bringing Murdoch criticism right up to date.

Martin and Rowe have done a good job of tackling what I see as the main problem with writing a 'Literary Life' of this length on Murdoch which is simply the fact that she was so prolific, producing so many novels in the 'mature phase' of her career (1968 – 1995) that to summarize and interpret all of them – which any volume of this kind is duty-bound to do – means an inevitable reduction of the contextual-biographical

angle. I felt this especially in Chapter Six, which deals with some of her most important novels (*A Fairly Honourable Defeat*, *An Accidental Man*, *The Black Prince*, *The Sacred and Profane Love Machine*, and *A Word Child*) yet had clearly to limit the space devoted to them. I would have liked to have known more about how Murdoch wrote these works and responded to their success. Yet the fact is that her extraordinary productivity was a key element of Murdoch's literary life, and the authors manage skilfully to preserve the contextual/biographical framework wherever possible by highlighting fascinating biographical moments, such as her reaction to becoming a 'media star' in the late Seventies after winning the Booker, or the 'miracle' she experienced in Delphi while writing *The Good Apprentice* (you will have to read the book to find out what it was!).

This study provides a first-class resource for students and researchers interested in Murdoch whilst it is also lucid and readable enough to appeal to general readers interested in the writer and her work. It is thoroughly researched and written in an exceptionally clear style (which remains consistent throughout the book, no mean achievement for a co-authored volume). Throughout, Martin and Rowe sustain just the right balance between documenting the genesis, production and interpretation of the novels, and telling the story of Murdoch's literary life.

**David J. Gordon**

**Review of *Iris Murdoch and Morality* edited by Anne Rowe and Avril Horner (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010)**

**The Good Apprentice**

Iris Murdoch was not only a distinguished and prolific novelist but also a trained philosopher, ready and able to take on any of her predecessors from Plato to the present, especially in the area of moral philosophy. Every contributor to this welcome new volume of essays rightly assumes that these two areas of her achievement are intertwined, not separate, each better understood in the light of the other. I believe that this very intertwining helps us locate and define Murdoch's originality. The novels just as novels are really rather strange. The characters are all types and the narratives are marked by excessive contrivance and melodramatic incident. Murdoch herself regretted both her inability to create memorable, autonomous characters (as did Austen, James and Tolstoy) and her tendency to press her plots into the forms of characteristic myths. But for her admirers, what animates her fictive persons and does in fact make them memorable is precisely their symbolic function, and what energizes her plots is the play of ideas bending them into mythic patterns, though there remains an excess of detail that the myth has failed to make use of. Similarly, her treatises and essays, just as philosophy, are rather strange. They contain passages that resemble the work of standard philosophers, but they come alive mainly as impassioned records of Murdoch's own moral striving, of her own spiritual pilgrimage. Imagine a straightforward philosopher announcing in an epigraph to a summary opus (as Murdoch does in *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*) that the difficulty of the task at hand is insurmountable.

The introductory essay to the volume under review, by editors Anne Rowe and Avril Horner, is launched from the conviction that Murdoch, both by precept and example, was a major forerunner of what has come to be called the ethical turn in contemporary literary culture, a trend that has been abundantly clarified in some notable recent publications: *Renegotiating Ethics in Literature, Philosophy and Theory*; *Iris Murdoch: A Reassessment* (in which Anne Rowe locates this trend) and *Iris Murdoch and Her Work* (in which Frances White's essay, "Art is for life's sake ... or else it is worthless": the Innovative Influence of Iris Murdoch', informatively expands on it).<sup>1</sup> Rowe and Horner are able in their present introduction to link Murdoch's books with those of various like-minded contemporaries who have found a responsive audience, aiming to justify her belief, in the face of postmodern suspicion, that the novel is a very proper forum for the discussion of ideas.

A broad subject like Murdoch and Morality is approached in these essays by a dozen different critics, but we may discern several prominent lines of inquiry. A fruitful one turns on the idea that moral positions embedded in her novels are deformed by aesthetic considerations and thus expressed indirectly and often ironically. Priscilla Martin tells us that Murdoch's good people are typically less interesting than those she wants us to fear or dislike, but since the novelist avoids 'the preacher's tone,' we have to infer her moral position by understanding her use of various aesthetic strategies. Peter J. Conradi writes smartly of her ability, rather like Dostoevsky's, to laugh at something tragic. She may make a subject like death look absurd

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<sup>1</sup> *Renegotiating Ethics in Literature, Philosophy and Theory* edited by Jane Adamson, Richard Friedman and David Parker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); *Iris Murdoch: A Reassessment* edited by Anne Rowe (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); *Iris Murdoch and Her Work: Critical Essays* edited by Mustafa Kırca and Şule Okuroğlu (Stuttgart: Ibidem Verlag, 2010).

or may seek to demonstrate that, seen from a distance, any tale of our messy human (and typically erotic) doings is comic. Avril Horner focuses on the Gothic effects in three novels (*The Bell, The Unicorn, The Time of the Angels*), showing how Murdoch exploits these effects to expose the refinements of evil. Scott H. Moore lets us see that Murdoch's fictional philosophers, even those who seem to be Platonists and who thus might be expected to win her approval, are treated ironically. And Bran Nicol comes at the question of aesthetic deformation from a broader perspective. His idea is that Murdoch's mode of realism is as distant from that of the nineteenth century masters she admired as from a deliberately experimental novelist of her time like Robbe-Grillet. Her 'mannered' realism, which may include such devices as metafiction and self-reflexivity, is, in his view, similar to what we find in the work of other post-War English writers and reflects an aesthetic rather than a theoretical need.

Another line of inquiry adopted in this volume connects moral ideas in Murdoch's work with similar ideas elsewhere that are either incorporated in hers or are parallel to it. Rob Hardy writes about healers in Murdoch's fiction, observing, justly I think, that the figure of the healer was as important for her as that of the moralist. He examines particularly the use of stories and rituals in *The Good Apprentice, The Book and the Brotherhood* and *The Green Knight*, and finds that Carl Jung particularly exerted an influence on her representations of the healing process. Anne Rowe writes a rich essay about Murdoch's haunting dream of 'holiness.' She traces the emergence in both the fiction and the philosophy of a 'secular neo-theology,' which, starting from the premise that we are simply and inexplicably here in the world, replaces denial of God with the more promising idea of desire for God. Murdoch, according to Rowe, wanted her secular neo-theology to walk hand-in-hand with her Christian heritage, her Platonism and even with Buddhism, some of whose teachings (absence of dogma, selflessness, inner stillness) attracted her. Rowe discusses also Murdoch's fear of the magical aspect of religion and her bold use of the 'Flaying of Marsyas' image, though, to my mind, the novelist's feelings about these matters are more complex than the critic here allows.<sup>2</sup> Pamela Osborn takes an intertextual approach to the question of kindred moral positions, describing in convincing detail the profound similarity of feeling, especially in regard to religion, between Murdoch and the Australian novelist Patrick White. Tammy Grimshaw devotes careful attention to the Buddhist elements in *The Green Knight*, and describes also the history of Murdoch's interest in Buddhist ideas and her references to them in earlier novels. And William Schweiker's formidably abstract and intricate account of Murdoch's neo-humanism seems to argue that, although her brand of humanism and that of Immanuel Kant reject the Christian belief in an otherworldly personal God, the development in their work of a notion of transcendence means that their theologies are not fundamentally different from that of orthodox Christianity.

A third productive approach in these essays sets out to reveal the specific interaction between one of Murdoch's novels and one of her philosophic works. Mark Luprecht relates the novel *Bruno's Dream* to the treatise *The Sovereignty of Good*, written about the same time, and seeks to show that the novel, particularly its fine pictures of Bruno facing death and of the several caretakers who help him do so, tests certain ideas in the treatise. And Frances White breaks new ground in demonstrating the considerable interaction between Murdoch's last novel, *Jackson's Dilemma*, and a manuscript she was working on at the same time and left unfinished as she was slipping into the dementia of Alzheimer's disease. It is titled *Heidegger: The Pursuit of Being*, and White consulted it in the Iris Murdoch Archives at Kingston University.<sup>3</sup> A principal character in the novel is writing just such a study and finding his feelings torn between respect for

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<sup>2</sup> For a more detailed discussion of Murdoch's use of this image see Anne Rowe, *The Visual Arts and the Novels of Iris Murdoch* (Lampeter: Mellen Press, 2002), pp.144-53.

<sup>3</sup> Iris Murdoch, *Heidegger: the Pursuit of Being* (unpublished typescript), Peter Conradi Archive ref KUAS6/5/1/4, acquired by the Centre for Iris Murdoch Studies for Kingston University Archives and Special Collections. This typescript has restricted access such that it cannot be copied by researchers, nor may any part of it barring the introduction (pp.1-26) be quoted directly in any published work. Further information can be sought from the Archivist, Katie Giles

the great metaphysician and scorn for some implications of his work as well as for the man he later became, a man complicit with the Nazi regime. Murdoch faulted Heidegger in her manuscript 'for a kind of contempt for human existence.' The Holocaust, we know, was always for her the iconic instance of evil in the world. White reminds us that Murdoch was dodging Heidegger throughout her career. White's detailed and valuable comments on the manuscript and *Jackson's Dilemma* (along with the forthcoming publication of an early part of the Heidegger manuscript) will help us round out the picture.<sup>4</sup>

I want in concluding to extend two interesting arguments put forward in these essays so as to emphasize the extraordinary reach and ambition of Murdoch's vision. Conradi comments in some detail on her ability to laugh at something tragic, but he could have developed further this feature of her work. Between *An Accidental Man* (1971) and *The Philosopher's Pupil* (1983) the novelist mounts an energetic case against tragedy. She regards tragedy as a 'comfort word' belonging to the theatre where its purpose is to help us bear sufferings rather than understand and thus relieve them. Certain emotions often cited to explain tragic outcomes – obsession, envy, guilt, remorse – should be understood as products of our egoism, our personal fantasy, not as rooted in our nature (as they are for Freud?). This may seem a belittling of human suffering, but Murdoch's purpose is earnestly idealistic: to teach that these emotions are corrigible, curable products of mistaken understanding, not fundamental elements of our very being. When we look at the human scene from above rather than below, we understand the causes of ethically questionable behavior in terms of Chance and Necessity, not in terms of their psychological equivalents, free choice and the compulsions restraining choice. From a cosmic point of view then, we are absurd, comic creatures, worthy of laughter.

My second amplification concerns Priscilla Martin's suggestion that, because the meaning of the central figures in *The Book and the Brotherhood* and *A Message to the Planet* is unclear, Murdoch may be trying to tell us that there *is no message*. I find it difficult to believe this, especially in view of the fact that the last two central figures in the late novels, Mir (in *The Green Knight*) and Jackson, are, compared to Crimond and Vallar, more coherently represented and more clearly benign. They are frankly mythic figures, somewhat above or apart from our world yet able to exert a salvific influence upon it. Since they are magical as well as benign beings, they may puzzle us because of Murdoch's long-standing suspicion of enchanter. However, when we look back carefully, we can see that her feeling toward enchanter was always ambivalent even when negative feelings seemed to predominate, and I suggest that this is because such figures had the power, if not the will, *to heal us*. At the end of her career Murdoch withdraws the irony, and the religious passion that was always part of her sensibility comes to the fore. She does not abandon the Plato-inspired idea of the sovereignty of Good over other concepts. Nor does she cease to value simpler forms of the Good turning on the idea of innocence. But when this good apprentice gives full-throated expression to her prime value, she imagines it as a distant impersonal magnet drawing us nearer, an unreachable goal that we must nevertheless endeavor to approach. As her spokesman Socrates says, chiding a doctrinaire Plato (in *Acastos: Two Platonic Dialogues*), 'Out at the very edge of our imagination the spirit is eternally active.'

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<sup>4</sup> See Iris Murdoch, 'Sein und Zeit: Pursuit of Being' from *Heidegger*, the first 26 pages of the typescript of Murdoch's unpublished work in *Iris Murdoch, Philosopher* edited by Justin Broackes (forthcoming, Oxford: Oxford University Press, September 2011).

**Review of *Iris Murdoch and the Moral Imagination* edited by M.F. Simone Roberts and Alison Scott-Baumann (North Carolina: McFarland, 2010)**

In the face of the ever-growing mass of Murdoch criticism, a new collection of essays is welcome indeed, for here is a chance for linked polyvocality, breadth and range. The theme and title of the book – Murdoch’s ‘moral imagination’ – is usefully wide, and while this idea is not without a few minor pitfalls, for the most part this is an engaging and exciting study.

Addressing the reader directly in the introduction – a nicely personal approach, which augurs the many individual and idiosyncratic styles in the collection – the editors explain that the novelty of their work is its demonstration of how Murdoch ‘developed a moral imagination that was indelibly imprinted with modern European thought [...] and yet communicates her vision fluently to her primary audiences in Britain and America’ (p.2). They explain that as a whole the essays want us to perceive our realities via those Murdoch creates; that her philosophy and fiction are both equally important; and that, overall, ideas of linking and harmony unite the essays and Murdoch’s work. The collection has three areas of focus, one of which each essay falls under: the aesthetic, the philosophical, and the historical. Wisely, the editors have not attempted to separate the essays: blurring and cross-referencing is implicit in both project and execution.

It is not possible within this space to devote equal time to each essay, and the great variety of ideas raised. The most important thing that must be said, though – and the really striking thing about this work – is that it proves that it is still possible to strike out new ground in Murdochland. Notable examples of this are Peter Mathews’s linking of Murdoch and Nietzsche, John Hacker-Wright’s discussion of how Murdoch’s dismissal of scientific naturalism should not be taken at face value, Frances White’s clear and convincing paralleling of the work of Murdoch and Hannah Arendt, and the unexpected but winning conjunction of Murdoch and Irigaray by M.F. Simone Roberts. Anne Rowe makes a worthy case for seeing Zadie Smith as Murdoch’s successor through ethical uses of art; and in one of the strongest essays in the collection, Amy Smith suggests that the apparent (and often worried-over) gap between Murdoch’s ideas about character and fiction, and her execution of them, can be resolved by remembering that ‘myth is an integral part of how we see ourselves and live’ (p.48). That vision might be flawed; a two-dimensional character is so because that is how we tend to view others.

For the most part, these new avenues are opened with great success. White’s essay is a deeply considered reflection on the intellectual parallels between Murdoch and Arendt, with biographical and textual references; an example from *The Nice and the Good* perfectly illustrates how both writers share a belief in the banality of evil. Rowe’s approach to Murdoch and Smith has a strong philosophical base, while also noticing that the former writer makes a guest appearance in Smith’s *On Beauty* – as a dog. Scott-Baumann argues that we should read Murdoch as not influenced by Sartre, but in dialogue with his work: this position, which is shared by many of the other essays, can be summarised as in fact a rejection of both dialectic and synthesis, to reach what Muraro calls ‘thirdness without synthesis’, where we ‘gain a sense of reality’ when freed from a ‘reactive, specular duality’ (p.246).

It is also heartening to see that, as well as discussion of major works such as *Under the Net* and *The Sea, the Sea*, there is focus on little-studied texts: Sharon R. Wilson considers *The Green Knight*, Wei H. Kao the play *The Servants and the Snow*, and Luisa Muraro makes reference to the short story ‘Something



Special'. Areas that have often been seen as outside Murdoch's interest are argued to be present for the reader who wishes to draw them out. For example, Murdoch has frequently been seen as somehow 'anti-feminist'; while Rowe acknowledges that Zadie Smith has an interest in gender that Murdoch cannot share, Kao makes a case for the implicit feminism within *The Servants and the Snow*; and Roberts's coupling of Murdoch and Irigaray must suggest an implicit, or at least potential feminism within Murdoch – if only by default.

Similarly, Murdoch's apparent humanism and straightforward realism are shown to be insufficient ways of understanding her work. Postmodern approaches are demonstrated by Judit Varga, seeing Hannah in *The Unicorn* as a Baudrillardian simulacrum, and by Wilson, reading *The Green Knight*. In the same way, the lower classes and Irish tinkers are shown to be figures of concern for Murdoch by Kao in his postcolonial reading of *The Servants and the Snow*.

That famously impenetrable novel *The Unicorn* does, after Judit Varga's piece, now make sense to me at last. In general, in fact, there is a pleasing desire in this collection to be accessible (providing brief introductions and contexts to Murdoch's work for the new reader) without being either condescending or losing intellectual force. This tone is matched by styles that are often highly attractive, and a pleasant change from the dryness of much academic writing. In Miles Leeson's stimulating essay on Murdoch and Heidegger in *The Time of the Angels*, for example, the strong first person voice carries the argument, as it does in Luisa Muraro's concluding essay. This piece has a sometimes anecdotal air, sharing with the reader how her thinking has changed: 'I am not sure why', she writes, 'but everything I have written about [Murdoch] so far takes the form of an introduction.' (p.239). This is a delight.

Perhaps the variety within this book is a slight problem. The definitions of 'moral imagination', and Murdoch's understanding of it as shown by the editors, do mean that a very large range of questions can be addressed; but the collection could do with more unity. An example of this is Wei H. Kao's very good study of *The Servants and the Snow*: as admirably as it resurrects and explains the play, I did wonder if its presence showed that the book might better be simply called something like *Iris Murdoch: New Essays*. This is not to say that it lacks a guiding principle – just that it is a wide and not strongly developed one. It also does have to be said that there is a fraction more error than there should be.

The only other qualm I have is a slight feeling of repetition within the project, and in its aim overall. While clearly breaking new ground in terms of use of Murdoch's works, and the links made between the writer and other writers, the overall ideas about Murdoch's moral vision are standard by now; there is rather a lot of claiming of the importance of the loving gaze, recognising the other, and unselfing. That said, as the editors state, this book could well serve those new to Murdoch – who would discover this as new material.

Inevitably, as a reader, I do not agree with every claim made in this collection. Thorough as Wilson's argument for *The Green Knight* being a postmodern work is (in its use of myth and fairytale), the novel still *feels* at odds with that way of reading. (I would still go with Peter Conradi's view of it as alluding to Shakespearean romance). Like many others, I suspect, I really do not think 'Something Special' is a 'real gem'. And perhaps the arguments in some of the essays suggest a gravity and dryness in the fiction whereas reading Murdoch is so often an exhilarating, comic imaginative journey. *Iris Murdoch and the Moral Imagination* is, in conclusion, a satisfying and timely work, and an important indicator of the current state and wide range of Murdoch scholarship.

**Review of *Iris Murdoch and Her Work: Critical Essays* Edited by Mustafa Kırca and Şule Okuroğlu (Stuttgart: Ibidem-Verlag, 2010)**

In 'The Sovereignty of Good over other Concepts' Iris Murdoch states that there is 'a sense in which intellectual disciplines are moral disciplines'; she also compares her concept of 'Unselfing' with the intellectual process of learning a foreign language wherein '[...] something which exists independently of me' is progressively revealed. *Iris Murdoch and Her Work: Critical Essays* may thus be viewed as a testimony of 'Unselfing' in both these ways. Murdoch scholars from Turkey, India, Italy, Britain and Australia offer fascinating glimpses of their research. The present volume excites because it evidences important scholarship in Murdoch Studies beyond the Anglophone world.

Edited by Mustafa Kırca and Şule Okuroğlu of the Middle East Technical University, Ankara, *Iris Murdoch and Her Work: Critical Essays* is a record of conference proceedings from the sixteenth METU British Novelists Conference held at the same institution in 2008. Each of the eighteen papers presented at the conference have been published in this volume. The subjects of the papers are wide-ranging, considering Murdoch's work in terms of literary and philosophical theories (intertextuality, existentialism and psychoanalysis) and assessing her literary treatment of subjects such as gender and ethics. In this review, I have grouped the articles according to shared themes to facilitate a more structured appreciation of the material.

Two essays deal with the subject of postmodernism in Murdoch's writing. Bran Nicol, who was also the keynote speaker at the conference, draws comparisons between Murdoch's literary aims and those of postmodernism. Nicol sketches the comparison using Murdoch's theoretical writings demonstrating her preoccupation with realism and connects this with the 'sense of belatedness' which 'haunts' Murdoch's writing and which also characterises postmodern fiction. Nicol singles out *The Black Prince* (1973) as Murdoch's most 'experimental' and 'postmodernist' novel, particularly in view of its 'self-reflexive realism' and its paratextuality which 'implicitly deconstructs Murdoch's favoured mode, realism'. Nicol suggests the resurrection of Robert Scholes's term 'fabulation' to describe Murdoch's fiction which is a more 'fictional kind of fiction', more concerned with ideas and ideals and thus more artistic than realism. Ayşe Yönkül's essay would have formed a nice companion piece to Nicol's (fifteen essays separate them in the volume) in that it too takes up a discussion of stylistic practices typically termed 'postmodern' in relation to *The Black Prince*.

'Intertextuality', a term typically associated with postmodernism, is also dealt with in a number of essays in this volume. Joshua Lobb identifies common ground in Murdoch's and A.S. Byatt's models for the novel. Fiona Tomkinson interrogates *The Green Knight* (1993) arguing that apart from the obvious intertext, Murdoch's novel also refers to Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (1946). While it remains to be seen whether Murdoch read Auerbach's text (her library does not contain a copy of it), Tomkinson's attentive analysis does suggest a new interpretation of Murdoch's novel. Similarly, Mukadder Erkan's essay views Jake Donaghue in *Under the Net* (1954) as a Baudelairean and Benjaminian *flâneur*, an observer of people and the city and a reader and writer of texts. It would be an interesting exercise to extend this investigation further by establishing which of these texts Murdoch had read (with the help of the Murdoch Archive at Kingston), what her reception of them was, and where the connections between the *picaro* (which is how Donaghue has traditionally been viewed) and the *flâneur* lie.

Of course, Murdoch was, in the early 1950s, immersed in French culture. One year before the appearance of *Under the Net* her study *Sartre: Romantic Rationalist* (1953) appeared. Her early theoretical jousts with existentialism are well-known. Gökşen Aras interprets *Under the Net* as Murdoch's literary re-enactment of her debate with the existential view of the lonely individual. Ekin Şiriner's discussion of an existential dilemma in *An Accidental Man* (1971) argues that Sartre's concept of 'Bad Faith' is a useful interpretative tool for approaching the novel. The article suggests that Murdoch's intellectual connection to existentialism was an ongoing one and, in this respect, is in need of further analysis.

Especially later in her career, Murdoch became interested in Eastern literature. Her novel *The Sea, The Sea* (1978), for example, takes up the subject of Buddhism through the characterisation of the adept, James Arrowby. Minnie Mattheew argues that there are parallels between the development of Charles Arrowby (and thus Murdoch's moral psychology) and the teachings of the *Bhagavad Gita*. Indeed, Murdoch explicitly makes reference to this text in *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (1992) which suggests that there is further work to be done on assessing the relationship between these texts. Indira Nityanandam also suggests further investigations into comparisons between Murdoch's central guiding insight of love and the concept of *rasa* in the *Natyashastra*.

Three of the essays in the collection deal with the subject of gender in Murdoch's fiction. Gillian Alban studies Murdoch's earlier novels, *A Severed Head* (1961) and *The Time of the Angels* (1966) to probe patterns in relations between the sexes. Alban argues that Murdoch's women are powerful in a number of different ways. She thus deconstructs the view that her female characters are passive and weaker than their male counterparts. A. Clare Brandabur considers the centrality of the *femme fatale* in *The Unicorn* (1963) and *The Red and the Green* (1965) and draws parallels with the figure of the Morrigan in Celtic mythology. Meryem Ayan and Reyhan Özer explore Murdoch's postmodern critique of settled (male) narrative trends through a concealed voicing of the female using *The Black Prince* where Murdoch, as a female author, voices a male narrator.

One of Murdoch's least discussed novels, *The Italian Girl* (1964) is the subject for both Carla Fusco's and Kübra Çakıroğlu's essays. Çakıroğlu presses the reader to reconsider *The Italian Girl* as having an important place in the development of Murdoch's moral psychology. Neslihan Ekmekcioğlu considers the nexus between Murdoch's moral psychology, the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice and psychoanalysis. Karan Singh and Jyoti Yadav study Murdoch's development of her moral psychology through her fiction and Farzaneh Naseri-Sis studies the 'unselfing' of Theodore Gray in *The Nice and the Good* (1968). Frances White's essay convincingly places Murdoch at the heart of the return to ethics, the so-called 'ethical turn' of the early 1990s. She thus establishes Murdoch as the trailblazer for later thinkers (including Cora Diamond and Martha Nussbaum) on the relationship between art and ethics.

*Iris Murdoch and Her Work: Critical Essays* is an important contribution to Murdoch scholarship. While the editing of the book could have been more polished (the articles could have been grouped together in clusters according to shared themes, for example), the two essays with which the anthology opens (by Nicol and White) are important markers in the current state of Murdoch studies. Their inclusion makes a noteworthy contribution to contemporary Murdoch scholarship and suggests this volume as essential reading for new students of Murdoch seeking to understand her place in current intellectual and literary debate. The volume adds to established areas of research and also points to relatively new terrain; Murdoch's interest in Buddhism and Indian literature, her influence on other writers and theoreticians and her literary relationships with her contemporaries represent just a few of the many rich and exciting areas awaiting scholarly attention.

**Review of *Iris Murdoch: Philosophical Novelist* by Miles Leeson  
(London: Continuum, 2010)**

It is a sign of health in a scholarly community when books arise that challenge its orthodoxies. Such challenge requires bravery of the scholar and meticulous care in arguing for new approaches. Leeson's book is brave and healthy in this way, aiming to open new lines of research and inquiry into Iris Murdoch's novels as, precisely, philosophical novels. Not novels in which philosophy is a motif (the orthodoxy), but in which philosophy is, in fact, *done*. Such a line of counter-criticism has been opened, though not settled notably by the work of Guy Backus and Bran Nicol. Leeson's book extends that line firmly to establish that Murdoch's novels do philosophy, and to open space for explorations of the depths at which her philosophy is woven into her aesthetic fabric.

The first and fourth chapters, examining *Under the Net* and *The Bell* and their surrounding criticism, are the strongest. In the first chapter, Leeson describes the difficult relation Murdoch had with Existentialism, and her attempt to rewrite it in her own terms in *Under the Net*. Leeson simultaneously contradicts Murdoch's own claim that her philosophy is separate from her novels. He incorporates the views of earlier generations of critics, but clearly and forcefully challenges the degree to which they follow Murdoch on this point. In a passage on Beckett's influence on Murdoch's early novels, Leeson points out 'the similarity between Murphy and Jake. Both are racked by the existentialist fear of human contact and both refer back to the hero of *Nausea* in their longing to find a firm foothold in reality and not succumb to the abyss.' Where Murphy does succumb, Jake's awakening to reality saves him. Reality is not the abyss, it is the cure. Leeson's account of the subtleties of Murdoch's objections to the fact-value divide is particularly lucid. Discussing *The Bell*, he not only demonstrates how Murdoch comes to find a home in her modified Platonism but also reads the novel for its development of Platonic and Augustinian ideas of attention, indicating the varying success of the characters' attempts to work with low eros to move to a higher eros. Leeson's summaries of Murdoch's philosophical thought on these subjects are pithy, clear, and compelling:

Murdoch's realization that Michael's religion and sexuality both emanate from the same source is a useful tool in understanding her version of eros [...] For Murdoch [...] it is not the sexuality that matters but his refusal to accept himself for what he is. Michael [that is we] must exhibit a Platonic unselfing in order to become fully naturalized with the world around him; he must see what is truly there by walking out of the cave [of denial of his sexuality] and defining what his own landscape is like. (p.108)

Leeson's reinforcement – through his reading of the philosophical work of *The Bell* – of the view that the path of unselfing is one of integration rather than excision of aspects of our selves, is particularly to be admired.

The chapter on Heidegger and *The Time of the Angels* is ground breaking criticism. Leeson's explication of 'Life in the House of Carel' as that of regular people trying to live in the World of Heidegger's *Dasein*, the failure of that, and their abandonment of or destruction in it is a forceful examination of Murdoch's crusade against self-centeredness, whether in life or in philosophical conceptions of the self. Leeson meticulously traces Murdoch's defense of the self and inner life from the neurotic and paranoid forces of fantasy-driving enchanters and their enchantments. Leeson is correct, I would venture, that it is time for scholars to have greater freedom to publish from *Heidegger: The Pursuit of Being*. That Murdoch found wrestling with Heidegger difficult should be no surprise: many philosophers simply never go near his work. Understanding that wrestling match is likely to shed much light on both her philosophy and fiction.

The book is not, however, without flaws, which come in momentary lapses of meticulousness that weaken an orthodoxy-busting project of this kind. The most perplexing is that in the chapter on *A Severed Head*, we are offered a discussion of Freud and Nietzsche and the work Murdoch does in the novel to respond to them, but instead we get Freud and Foucault and Lacan with a dash of Nietzsche. Not only is this distracting but there is a larger problem. Foucault and Lacan would have fallen under the heading Structuralist for Murdoch, and may well therefore have fallen beneath her attention. Moreover, most of the philosophers with whom she argues in her novels get considerable attention in her philosophical work. She engaged deeply with them while or before writing novels that worked on their ideas. Foucault and Lacan get little or no mention in her philosophical work, and Leeson offers no reference to the archive that shows her engaging with them 'off the books' as in the case of Heidegger. *A Severed Head* was published in 1961; Foucault's *History of Sexuality I* was published in French in 1976 and Lacan's *Écrits* in 1966. It is possible that Murdoch read some of these works as they were published in journals or circulated informally, but without some further tangible connection this is the kind of stretch that can undermine confidence. To his credit, Leeson acknowledges this stretch, that a parallel in thought is not evidence of influence, but he makes the stretch nonetheless. It is clear that the points about Oedipal Neurosis could have been made via Freud, and one does miss the promised discussion of the conversation with Nietzsche which is palpable in the novel and would have brought more light to that address. It is here and in *The Sea, The Sea* that Murdoch does her strongest work on and against Nietzsche's philosophies. A second edition of this book would provide Leeson with an opportunity to shift the weight of this chapter back to balance.

Two further minor quibbles. Literary critics and scholars will find that Leeson is not interested, in this project, in close readings of the novels. His project is more global in scale, tracing the presence and work of philosophy in the novels, as well as the evidence that much of Murdoch's philosophical maturation takes place through the writing of fiction. Literary critics will want to say that it is not only in the arc of plot and evolution or devolution of characters that philosophy gets done, but also in the settings, symbols, allusions, and a host of miniscule aesthetic details – the art – without which the novels would be the philosophical equivalent of Aesop's fables. As a literary scholar, I share that sentiment, yet I also sense that my dissatisfaction on this point is an invitation to follow Leeson's lead and trace these aesthetic depths for myself. Thus openings for new and exciting scholarship abound in the light of Leeson's work.

With regard to previous critics' work on these matters, Leeson's introduction is polite, even to the point of being coy up until around page 15, and then he gets to brass tacks. This direct assault continues to good effect in the first two chapters, and once the first generation of Murdoch scholars (A.S. Byatt, Elizabeth Dipple, Peter Conradi, Peter Wolfe, Rubin Rabinovitz, Guy Backus and Barbara Stevens Heusel) is both honoured and put in place, he settles down to his readings with fewer and fewer references to them. This is part of the book's bravery. Although the shift in tone is surprising, it proves a fine rhetorical and aesthetic touch. The effect is double in that the tonal shift comes with the long promised definition of the philosophical novel, delayed one would imagine in order to make room for the polite summaries of the previous critics, but a little distracting organizationally.

The book as a whole offers, however, such a careful engagement with Murdoch's philosophy, and so clear a presentation of her continuing of that work in her fiction, that it cannot be dismissed on the basis of a few loose ends. Perhaps the most concise and astonishing chapter is the sixth, addressing Murdoch's Wittgensteinian Platonism as developed in *The Green Knight*. Of Murdoch's novels, this one pushes the hardest on the boundary between realism and fantasy in fiction. Every scene is both wholly believable, and dreamlike. Yet, here, Leeson reads the novel as a working through of Murdoch's mature thought—the hard work of her reconciliation of Plato, Wittgenstein and Weil. One must read it in order to appreciate its grace and force, as I would say, one should read the entire work. There is much inspiration to be found here, and Leeson is establishing himself as a young scholar of depth and promise.

**Review of Roula Ikonomakis, Post-War British Fiction as ‘Metaphysical Ethnography’: Gods, Godgames and Goodness in John Fowles' *The Magus* and Iris Murdoch's *The Sea, The Sea* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2008)**

*Post-War British Fiction as ‘Metaphysical Ethnography’* by Roula Ikonomakis draws together Iris Murdoch's *The Sea, The Sea* and John Fowles's *The Magus*, reading both as exemplars of metaphysical ethnography which she defines as ‘a kind of new sacred text that provokes our reflection, increases our awareness, our attentiveness, our awakening to the world’ (p.11). Taking her cue from Murdoch's essay ‘The Novelist as Metaphysician’ (1950), wherein Murdoch wishes the reader to discover the impetus behind ‘this *rapprochement* of literature and philosophy’ (*Existentialists and Mystics* p.101), Ikonomakis provokes the reader to revisit ethical narratives and view them not merely as fictional representations but as models for virtue ethics that can, and should, be applied in everyday life. Further connection between both Ikonomakis's work and Murdoch's early essay derives from a fascination with ‘lived-in ethics’ – the connection between language and action and how the self develops – and this concept is central to *Metaphysical Ethnography*. Readers should not be dissuaded by the off-putting title of this well-written and strenuously researched book which provides a fresh revision of Murdoch's most lauded work. However, the primary recommendation is the subtle and detailed reading that Ikonomakis provides of Murdoch's philosophical essays. By considering most of Murdoch's published essays up until the publication of *The Sea, The Sea* she ties the various concepts in Murdoch's work (such as platonic unselfing and the necessity of the free character), not only to Murdoch's fiction but also to theoretical approaches to both novelists.

Ikonomakis employs a direct (almost scientific) style and is unconcerned with Murdoch's personal life; what drives her is not a narrative approach to Murdoch's work but an analytical understanding of Murdoch's prize-winning novel. In pursuance of this line of inquiry Ikonomakis divides her work into five sections: ‘Antagonisms’ – a revisiting of Conradi's work on saints and artists (though Ikonomakis would have us see them as saints and magi); ‘Doubles’ – considering Murdoch's and Fowles's use of didactic language; ‘Ether’ – considering whether existentialism and mysticism are compatible; ‘Hedonautism’ – dealing with inherently hedonistic pursuits and how the self may view itself through selfish (and unselfish) action, and ‘Stratagems’ – a dismissal of theoretical approaches, notably deconstruction, toward the novels mentioned. Though not perhaps the most obvious way of reconciling Murdoch's work with that of Fowles, it is fascinating to be lead through a new reading of both authors and the originality of Ikonomakis's approach is, at times, startling. Her critique is, furthermore, replete with doubling of thematic references and digressions concerning both novels in question and many other texts: this requires the reader to make a concerted effort with a study that, at times, devotes so much space to the minutiae of the texts that the wider vision that Ikonomakis (eventually) provides may be lost amongst the plethora of secondary material. The author is fond of developing her own (almost Heideggerian) terms as a way of moving through the dense thicket of conflicting and self-sustaining ideas from both novelists, but it is a welcome change to read a book of Murdochian criticism structured in such an unusual and challenging way.

Ikonomakis covers ground that has already been visited by others. She re-states both authors' interest in ‘Magi and Saints’, power and gender relations, existentialism and mysticism, and other opposing and complementary ideas. Though drawing on the work of Conradi, Dipple, Antonaccio and others she does not feel constricted by them. What liberates her from the constraints that one sometimes perceives in Murdoch criticism created within the established community of scholars, is that Ikonomakis feels free to cast her academic net across literature, philosophy, political thought, theatrical theory, gender theory,

psychology and other areas to create a heady mix of highly diverse ideas. Ikonomakis thus takes us on a journey through the entire gamut of influences on Fowles and Murdoch and scrutinises the metaphysical implications these have on their fiction. Both authors share a common passion for the underlying moral motives of their respective characters and a moral vision intended to provoke the reader to reconsider their attitude toward others. Along with a fascination for the work of Shakespeare, *The Tempest* being the central intertext for both works considered here, both Fowles and Murdoch 'speak the universal language of humanity and [their work] stages the immensity of our power of love where we are nothing in the face of its miseries, revealing to us that we can alter society through acts of Good' (p.11).

Whether this monograph provides a vital reassessment of Murdoch's most fêted novel, or merely offers a useful indicator of current research, may be questioned. Ikonomakis demonstrates close knowledge of *The Sea, The Sea* but her study is not restricted to focusing upon a single Murdoch text; although her major dynamic remains the linking of this novel to Fowles's *The Magus* there is also insightful discussion of *The Black Prince*, *The Flight from the Enchanter*, and *Henry and Cato* in relation to 'metaphysical ethnography'.

The main drawback of *Post-War British Fiction as 'Metaphysical Ethnography'* is the difficult style of textual presentation. For a book so crammed full of references, the referencing system is not up to the standard expected of an international publishing house. Footnotes, insertions, parentheses, endnotes, indented and inserted quotations jostle for position and, although leading the reader on interesting journeys of digression, tend to distance and distract from the major theme of Murdoch's and Fowles's ethical fiction. There is also no index. Thus the major problems this book presents are those of editorship rather than authorship. Peter Lang provides both a frustrating footnote system that impinges the flow of the text and a non-existent reference system, features which do harm to an otherwise well-produced text that not only offers a new perspective on *The Sea, The Sea* but also, for the first time since Richard Kane's *Didactic demons in Modern Fiction* (1988), provides a comparative reading of the work of Fowles and Murdoch. Murdoch scholars will benefit from this approach as Ikonomakis's argument, although not strictly in favour of reading Murdoch as a philosophical novelist, highlights the need for a greater involvement in attending to Murdoch's fiction through a metaphysical lens.

Cheryl K. Bove

**Review of *Chance and the Modern British Novel: from Henry Green to Iris Murdoch* by Julia Jordan (London: Continuum, 2010)**

This well-argued critical study of the intellectual history of the mid-twentieth century British novel focuses on the influence of chance (possibility, probability, contingency) on the aesthetics of a set of authors who tried to incorporate it into their narratives without authorial determinism destroying perceived reality. Julia Jordan concludes that '[A]ny study of chance will [...] end up insinuating a defence of the superiority of reality over art' (p.151). Thus, she purports, that despite the various, sometimes extreme, means by which Henry Green, Samuel Beckett, B.S. Johnson and Iris Murdoch tried to liberate the novel from the strictures of form, reality in their aesthetics remains problematic and their narratives continue to be largely restricted by authorial determinism. Amongst these four novelists, however, Jordan commends Murdoch's vision of equating contingency with good, which brings an ethical reading into the bleak view of chance seen by earlier writers in this period. It also moves contingency beyond and away from the largely fatalistic views of her mid-century colleagues and connects reality with her art. Jordan's discussion of the ethical quality displayed by those Murdochian characters with the ability to accept contingency (to endure 'mess' in their lives without trying to restructure it), and of her relating this quality to the 'good', will interest Murdoch scholars as this study adds a further dimension to our understanding of Murdoch's mingling of contingency with philosophy and aesthetics.

Jordan depicts the historical evolution of the semantics of chance from *fortuna* (associated with messages from the gods) to an alignment with determinism in the seventeenth-nineteenth centuries. She analyzes the change to the decidedly negative attributes of the term chance which ensues from the introduction of modernist philosophic, scientific and artistic theories that affect how human beings think of themselves and their place in the world. In earlier centuries events were considered manifestations of Providence, with cause and purpose, so people understood themselves to be necessary and central. Their narratives presented that epistemological reality. Stories could be seen as having causal relationships; authorial omniscience and omnipotence were accepted as realistic. By the mid-twentieth century, however, modernist ideas and experiences forever changed both the intellectual concept of chance and human self-reflection. The Newtonian universe with its deterministic ways of thinking gave way to Chaos theory; mathematical probability theories showed the universe as no longer controlled and determined, but possibly reasonless—leading to more uncertainty; Quantum mechanics 'invalidated whole swathes of the previously predominant deterministic world view' (p.27); Dadaism concerned itself with the idea of pure chance and letting chance become part of the composition; existentialist ideas centered on the individual as alien, subject to random circumstances beyond his or her control. Other factors intensified this preoccupation with accident: the Second World War manifested the contingency of life even beyond the battlefield as the London bombings made people vulnerable and subject to random death. The wartime fragmentation of Europe increased feelings of alienation and the ascendancy of meaningless chance.

Although nineteenth-century authors working in the realistic tradition were accepted as being in charge of their narratives and characters, how were modern writers accurately to represent reality in their perceivedly contingent world? Any authorial intervention, even if it involved chance, was deterministic because it removed the actual randomness now seen as inextricably part of the modern world. Jordan's work concentrates on the experimentalism of these four twentieth-century authors' efforts to confront this problem in their aesthetics. Following the Dadaist aesthetic, many mid-century writers asserted the arbitrariness of existence and inserted chance prominently into their works; however, by its very nature (subject to narrative and events controlled by author), the novel seemed ill-equipped actually to be random.



Further, as Jordan observes, if chance is allowed to become meaningful in the novel, 'then novels depicting this contingency are curtailed from conveying their own deepest meaning: their meaninglessness' (p.33). Ultimately, she concludes, those modern writers who tried to avoid predetermining the outcome of their works through experimental methods failed to discover a satisfactory means of avoiding authorial manipulation because 'chance' happenings necessarily remain controlled by the author.

Jordan demonstrates that although Henry Green may have informed Murdoch's thinking, his treatment of the accidental as meaningless random happenings is bleaker than Murdoch's vision of life; and, furthermore, that Murdoch's aesthetics provide her characters, unlike Green's, with a means of accepting and living in their contingent world. Samuel Beckett also had a profound effect on Murdoch's aesthetics and thinking especially with regard to language, freedom, and contingency. Johnson, like Murdoch, but perhaps for different reasons, saw story telling as telling lies. For him, fictionalizing life undermined its random, contingent part; for Murdoch the same random detail may be missing from the narrative, but she makes a moral connection with its absence.

Jordan thus traces links between Murdoch's work and that of these other post-war novelists and in the concluding section of her study concerning Murdoch's conception of contingency, she elaborates on similarities Murdoch shares with them. Jordan finds, however, a distinguishing feature in Murdoch which lessens the conundrum that the earlier novelists present but fail successfully to overcome. This feature is the ethical dimension in which Murdoch places contingency – her perception that a willingness to accept contingency equates to goodness. Jordan claims that, for Murdoch, mess is almost without exception good. Using the example of Tallis Browne from *A Fairly Honourable Defeat* (1970), she contends that those characters who have the ability to 'bear' mess, who avoid resistance to muddle, exhibit a degree of braveness that she equates with a 'secular version of grace' (p.116). Jordan's reading of Murdoch's aesthetics, discussed in the light of the other authors studied, delineates many of the same issues with which all of them struggle. The connection between the ethical dimension which Murdoch ascribes to contingency and the ability to convey truth in the novel provides the strongest element in Jordan's argument; it separates Murdoch from the influence of her predecessors and establishes the way that Murdoch succeeds in capturing reality in her novels. I am however doubtful about the conclusion that those Murdoch characters 'who adopt [the] artist's desire to direct action and who hate contingency, are always men [...] from which we may extrapolate that femininity is perhaps better equipped to deal with messy reality, or even that it is inherently aligned with the same' (p.123). This surprising statement is strangely unsupported in Jordan's own text, given that her prime example of the good is Tallis Browne, and whilst there is some disagreement among Murdoch critics in identifying the few saints represented in her novels, her good characters are generally held to be men: Hugo Belfounder, Bledyard, Tallis Browne, Brendan Craddock, William Eastcote and Jenkin Riderhood. Only Murdoch's nearly good characters (those which have a slightly lower level of awareness than her perceived saints), include any women: Ann Peronett and Anne Cavidge as well as Denis Nolan.

Murdoch was subject to the same fragmentation and instability caused by the Second World War that Jordan credits (along with the influence of modernist theories in art, science, and philosophy) as forming the catalyst for the evolving, increasingly negative, concept of chance in the modern novel and the inability of post-War authors to convey life as they perceived it. She was heir to and shared many of the same concerns as these fellow authors, especially Beckett (freedom, linguistic complications precluding the ability to know others, a preoccupation with chance), yet Murdoch was able to take this 'mess' of life and move into a truthful portrayal that evaded her mid-century colleagues. Jordan's analysis of the significance of Murdoch's recognition of the contingency of life, and more particularly her investing it with ethical value, provides valuable insight into the importance of Murdoch's place in the tradition of the British novel and into her unequalled ability to portray life in all of its variety, with a truthful respect for its contingency and chance.

**Review of Nick Turner, *Post-War British Novelists and the Canon*  
(London and New York: Continuum, 2010)**

Nick Turner is a Romantic: in this thought-provoking book he sets up modern critics such as Barbara Herrnstein Smith and Steven Connor against Samuel Johnson, Matthew Arnold and F.R. Leavis and proves himself unabashedly 'on the side of the angels' - who are, of course, the latter group. In assessing criteria for the literary canon, he is in favour of 'great works', of 'universality', of the intrinsically valuable and timeless and he does at one point explicitly call for the return of liberal humanism. He recognises, however, that today the "'universal'" 'has been seen as no longer valid as a concept' (p.23). In his chapter on Iris Murdoch, 'the central figure of this book' (p.35), he rehearses the rise and fall of her reputation before declaring uncompromisingly, 'it is time now to pronounce judgement, as it were: Murdoch is a great novelist, and her work has intrinsic value' (p.56). Turner's sense of critical embattlement extends to his choice of his own canon of critically 'unfashionable' women writers: Murdoch herself, Anita Brookner, Ruth Rendell and Emma Tennant.

Turner's theoretical position is unusual: a declared sceptic about postmodernism and most other 'isms', he puts up a doughty defence of women writers, who have peculiar difficulties in gaining acceptance into the canon, in a way which surely must align him with many feminists. This places him in an awkwardly conflicted position when he is arguing for the 'universality' of the canon. He attacks Bloom's defence of a 'sublime' canon, arguing that what Bloom dubs the 'School of Resentment' 'is actually 'a commendable and necessary attempt to rewrite literary history and find a place for formerly marginalized voices in syllabuses and scholarship' (p.29). Elsewhere, however, his position on the canon seems strangely close to Bloom's in its sense of absolute value and belief in the indubitably 'great'.

One of Turner's approved definitions of 'the canon' is A.S. Byatt's, that a 'canon is [...] what other writers have wanted to keep alive, to go on reading, over time' (p.21). It is important for him, therefore, in supporting Murdoch's inclusion, to trace her influence on later writers and he convincingly demonstrates that both Zadie Smith and Ian McEwan are in her debt. He also quotes approvingly Peter Conradi's list of Murdoch's literary heirs - A.S. Byatt, A.N. Wilson, Candia McWilliam, Alan Hollinghurst and Marina Warner - but, surprisingly, though he has been in private correspondence with Byatt during the writing of this book and though she is arguably the most eminent of Murdoch's literary heirs, he does not pursue her debt to Murdoch. He also deals rather dismissively, I feel, with Byatt's great novel, *Possession*, arguing reductively that it was Byatt's 'use of postmodernism and structuralism (sic) in *Possession* [that] led that novel to win the Booker Prize in 1990' (p.112). I do feel that there is a tendency here (one Turner shares with Murdoch herself) to think in binary terms about issues in critical theory which are actually extremely complex. This makes the book an excellent and stimulating polemic but rather reduces its value as literary criticism in its own right - though I make an exception for Turner's moving vindication of Murdoch, in which he convincingly compares an extract from *An Accidental Man* with the fall of Bulstrode in Eliot's *Middlemarch*, declaring both to be high points of realism. (In this instance I do agree that Murdoch uses realism magnificently).

Iris Murdoch, according to Turner, has suffered from an immediate posthumous decline in reputation not uncommon in literary figures. It was evident at the beginning of the twentieth century in the deriding of the poetry of Alfred, Lord Tennyson and at the end of that century in the eclipsing of the novels of Angus Wilson. Tennyson's critical recrudescence has been remarkable and lasting; there is no sign yet of a rise in Wilson's fortunes. Turner summarises the literary eulogies at the time of Murdoch's death in 1999 but then points out that '[f]or all the times in which Murdoch has been seen to have the seriousness of Golding,

or the dark comedy of Dostoevsky, she has been derided for her melodrama, heavy-handed symbolism, style, poor characterisation and implausibility' (p.36). The obvious comparison (though Turner does not make it) is with the contemporary reception of Murdoch's great master, Charles Dickens, whose critical respectability was only confirmed seventy years after his death in Leavis's reluctant extension of membership of the Great Tradition. Readers since Dickens's death had, however, ignored canonical issues and had simply gone on reading Dickens; I would have liked evidence (from public libraries, perhaps?) of the continuing *popular* readership for Murdoch. Turner's criterion, instead, is the purely academic one, of the number of articles and monographs recorded in MLA. Occasionally he can sound like an over-excited literary bookmaker: 'Measured against other post-war women writers in English [...] Murdoch is beaten only by Margaret Atwood, Doris Lessing, Toni Morrison and Alice Walker' (p.37). Later he tells us that 'Murdoch, Spark, Lessing and Drabble are no longer the centre [...] the field is led by the late Angela Carter with Jeannette Winterson, Sarah Waters and Zadie Smith providing strong support' (p.37). This is, however, largely because of its liveliness and combativeness, a useful book on several fronts: it contains an exhaustive list of the literary prizes won by a large selection of post-War British Women Writers and a fine bibliography of primary and secondary sources and it is written in a style which itself collapses the distinction between academic and popular. There is an almost journalistic sense of immediacy: three of the writers under discussion are referred to as 'the late Iris Murdoch', 'the late Angela Carter' and 'the late Penelope Fitzgerald' –as if these writers inhabit a limbo state between the 'timeless' and the contemporary. Most of all it does encourage a timely reassessment of reasons for reading Iris Murdoch.

A problematic aspect of Turner's assessment of Murdoch is that whilst noting the temporary posthumous decline in Murdoch scholarship he fails to even mention the current renaissance in Murdoch studies which means that his study is dated (a problem of delay between research and publication, exacerbated further by delay between publication and review). The establishment of Murdoch's leading (albeit unwitting) role in the 'ethical turn' in literary theory during the 1990s, and the revived interest in, and multiple publications on, her work in the past decade deny Turner's evident uncertainty concerning her literary survival, an uncertainty paradoxically offset by his own championing of her claim to canonicity (he denotes her the strongest of the novelists under consideration in his study, p.56). Turner adumbrates the reasons he identifies as being behind Murdoch's success – her parallel career as a philosopher, her 'complexity and experimentation', her own theorizing about the novel, her inheritance from Shakespeare, Dickens, George Eliot and (most interestingly) her use of the male persona. His argument here follows his stout defence of women writers in his introduction: it is in essence Virginia Woolf's point, in *A Room of One's Own*, about society's tendency (still) to take maleness more seriously than femaleness.

The reasons Turner suggests for the decline in Murdoch's reputation are similarly challenging. They include her unwillingness to engage in feminism, her support of realism, her class and political background – and the uncomfortable fact that she 'has never written a novel that is a classic' (p.55). Initially shocked by this statement, I soon began reluctantly to accept that lovers of Murdoch are usually lovers of the whole oeuvre, of 'the World of Iris Murdoch' – of the ways in which the novels are in dialogue with one another, of the trajectory of their development over the decades – and would be hard put to it to select a single representative work. I would maintain, however, that the same can be said of Charles Dickens and that an extended comparison of these two novelists might have further illuminated Turner's argument in this unapologetically and refreshingly argumentative book.

## Report from the Iris Murdoch Collections in the Archives of Kingston University: August 2011

Since the last update in May 2009 many new sets of records have been added to the Iris Murdoch Collections held in the Archives of Kingston University. When the University secured Iris Murdoch's letters to Raymond Queneau for £50,000 early in 2010, the purchase was supported by the V&A Purchase Grant Fund; the National Heritage Memorial Fund; the Breslauer Foundation (USA); the Friends of the National Libraries, Kingston University and the Iris Murdoch Society. These letters date mostly from 1946-1956 and reveal the many facets of Murdoch's friendship with Queneau whom she saw as a mentor and friend, they also reveal Murdoch's early attempts at writing and philosophy. This crucially important acquisition was reported in the *Guardian*, *Daily Telegraph*, the *Sunday Times* and other national newspapers. A small selection of the letters were also featured in *Granta* magazine. The story was carried in the French and Italian Press and the Director of the Centre for Iris Murdoch Studies, Anne Rowe, was interviewed on Radio Moscow and on BBC Radio 4's *Woman's Hour*. The extent of this coverage demonstrates the level of public interest in Iris Murdoch's life and work in addition to her established intellectual significance in academia. The Murdoch-Queneau letters are being heavily used by researchers, having already been issued more than thirty times.

Other acquisitions to the Archive comprise the following (all letter runs have been fully catalogued and are available to researchers):

- Letters from Iris Murdoch to Harry Weinberger- over 300 letters from Iris Murdoch to her artist friend. These letters have kindly been donated to the Archives by Harry Weinberger's daughter, Joanna Garber.
- Letters from Iris Murdoch to Hal Lidderdale. Over 60 letters dating from 1946 to the 1990s, placed on permanent loan in the Archives by an anonymous donor to whom we are extremely grateful.
- Letters from Iris Murdoch to John Gheerhaert. A run of 61 letters in all, dating from the late 1980s and 1990s, in which Murdoch discusses some of her novels and philosophy. A number of the letters indicate her steady mental decline. These letters were purchased by Kingston University on behalf of the Centre for Iris Murdoch Studies.
- Letters between John Willett and David Hicks, to whom Iris Murdoch was briefly engaged, approximately 66 letters in all. These letters were donated by John Willett's son, Tom Willett, and we wish also to acknowledge the help of Peter Conradi in securing this donation.
- Letters from John Bayley to Michael Howard, author of *Otherwise Employed: Letters home from the Ruins of Nazi Germany*. There are 25 letters written from John Bayley to Michael Howard dating from the Second World War onwards, as well as copies of some letters from Michael Howard to John Bayley, and other accompanying documents. The letters were kindly donated and transcribed by Michael Howard.
- Three files of photographs of Iris Murdoch, John Bayley and others including Elias Canetti and Frank Thompson, found in the loft of Iris Murdoch's former home. Purchased by the Centre for Iris Murdoch Studies and the Iris Murdoch Society.

- One photograph of the Murdoch family c. 1890s, donated by a member of the Murdoch family in Australia.
- Copy of *A Time of Angels*, donated by Don Cupitt because of its interesting introduction.
- Photograph of Iris Murdoch and John Bayley at an unknown event, c. 1970s, donated by Pamela Osborn.
- Videos of *An Unofficial Rose* (Television Production), DVDs of *The Bell* (BBC TV Series) and the film of *A Severed Head* (1970, starring Lee Remick, Richard Attenborough, Ian Holm and Claire Bloom), donated by Anne Rowe.
- Signed copy of Murdoch's play, *Joanna, Joanna*, donated by Anne Rowe
- Copy of Iris Murdoch and James Saunder's play *The Italian Girl*, donated by Pamela Osborn.
- Copy of 'Poet Venturers'- booklet from 1938 by Bristol School Children in aid of China purchased by the Centre for Iris Murdoch Studies. The booklet was edited by Iris Murdoch and features four poems by her. Acquired for the Archives by the Iris Murdoch Society.
- Various interviews and essays on Iris Murdoch, donated by Janine Canan.

Our thanks are hereby given to all donors and supporters.

The Iris Murdoch collections are increasingly attracting researchers from around the world; since May 2009, 141 researchers (as well as a number of group visits) have visited, and 677 items from the collections have been used. A small exhibition staged by the Archives for the 5<sup>th</sup> International Iris Murdoch Conference, 'Murdoch on the Margins', in September 2010, was visited by around 50 people over the course of the two days.

Some of the collections are featured in a film by Open Road Media which can be viewed on their website <[www.openroadmedia.com/authors/iris-murdoch.aspx](http://www.openroadmedia.com/authors/iris-murdoch.aspx)>

In 2009 the Archives Catalogue was launched online. The website is based on a keyword search and the web address is <[www.kuadlib.kingston.ac.uk](http://www.kuadlib.kingston.ac.uk)>

In 2010 the Archives moved to a new location, still based in the Penrhyn Road LRC but now with the benefits of significantly improved storage a much larger room for researchers the capability to play Audio Visual material the capacity to host group visits in the new seminar room

The Iris Murdoch libraries and records are open to all researchers. Visits to the Archives can be arranged by email to [archives@kingston.ac.uk](mailto:archives@kingston.ac.uk); at least 24 hours notice of visits is requested, please, to facilitate efficient provision of material for researchers. The collection is constantly expanding and the Centre for Iris Murdoch Studies and the Archives and Special Collections welcome information concerning items of potential interest.

## Report on 'Iris Murdoch Revisited', Special Event at the Royal Society of Literature

On Monday 7<sup>th</sup> March 2011, The Royal Society of Literature hosted an event at the Courtauld Institute in London, entitled, 'Iris Murdoch Revisited'. The event was sold out and a recording of it is available at <[www.rslit.org/content/pastevents/1117](http://www.rslit.org/content/pastevents/1117)>.

A panel discussion of Iris Murdoch's work between A.S. Byatt, Philip Hensher, and Bidisha was introduced and chaired by Anne Chisholm, chair of the RSL. Her introductory remarks began with the familiar lament that Dame Iris's fame has grown since her death for the wrong reasons since people have lost sight of her brilliant literature in light of her cruel final illness and revelations of her promiscuity. This event aimed to redress the balance and to celebrate Murdoch's writing. Welcome was extended to Dame Antonia Byatt whose pioneering critical work *Degrees of Freedom* (1965/1976) examines power structures and influences in eighteen Iris Murdoch novels, to the novelist and academic Philip Hensher who has also written on the subject of Murdoch, and to novelist, journalist and cultural commentator Bidisha, who has written on Murdoch's fiction and philosophy in the *Guardian* and spoken about her work on Radio 4.

Philip Hensher observed that this is the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary year of the publication of 'Against Dryness' in *Encounter*. He delineated some of Murdoch's formal experimentation, drawing parallels between her prolific output and that of Arnold Biffin in *The Black Prince*; examining the epistolary and unattributed dialogue elements of *An Accidental Man* and the role of objects such as *The Bell*. Bidisha spoke of her personal Murdoch revelation (upon reading *The Bell*) which, despite its unique feeling, echoed the experience of many Murdoch admirers. She focussed on the intelligence of Murdoch's writing with its philosophical influences and attention to detail, illuminating topics that were unfashionable or ahead of her time; homosexuality, religious vocations, obsession of many kinds and the humour of human foibles. Byatt's introduction contained personal anecdotes. Her first brush with Murdoch came via the gift of *Under the Net* from an ex-boyfriend and *Degrees of Freedom* sprang from her burning quest to understand this novel. She elaborated on 'Against Dryness' and the light it shed on her moral thinking, drawing particular attention to the quotation, 'for the hard idea of truth we have substituted the facile idea of sincerity.' She observed that chaos in a Murdoch novel is often the result of characters' spontaneous lies, distraction or failure to think things through. Murdoch once told Byatt that she would really like to write a novel and then rewrite it from the perspective of all the ancillary characters.

In light of these three introductory assessments Anne Chisholm inaugurated a lively discussion about Murdoch's reluctance to see herself as a 'novelist of ideas'. The RSL audience was punctuated with literary and academic celebrities: Richard Harries, former Bishop of Oxford, for example, asked about *The Sovereignty of Good* which led to a discussion of Murdoch's Platonism and followed by a discussion instigated by a student on Peter Pan and her infatuation with innocence. The enthusiastic audience response provides positive evidence that the enjoyment of Murdoch's novels in the public domain remains as strong as during her lifetime.

## Janfarie Skinner

### Report of 'Dishevelled virtue: the good, the bad, and the chaotic in the novels of Iris Murdoch', Woodstock Literature Society

On Wednesday, 16 March 2011, in the Woodstock Library, Oxfordshire, the Woodstock Literature Society hosted a lecture on Iris Murdoch's work by Dr Helen Stanton, entitled 'Dishevelled virtue: the good, the bad, and the chaotic in the novels of Iris Murdoch'. Stanton is a writer, theologian and teacher of Christian spirituality: her approach to Murdoch's fiction is linked significantly to her professional interests and her personal faith. She described how she initially encountered the novels as absorbing, page-turning stories then discovered that attending to their moral concerns proved relevant to her own work. Stanton is interested in Murdoch's exploration of 'the examined life' and the life of the spirit, in how the idea of 'the good life' is configured and how metaphysics is related to morals. She uses some of Murdoch's novels, and the dialogue *Acastos* in her teaching and remains 'constantly grateful' to *The Bell* which has taught her to be alert to the challenges and pitfalls inherent in small religious communities.

In developing the subject of her title, 'Dishevelled virtue', Stanton argued that the characters of the Good in Murdoch's fiction are those who are dishevelled, down at heel, practising a virtue that is necessarily messy. Murdoch's philosophy, she said, has been attacked for not being sufficiently systematic, but this criticism might be modified in the light of Rowan Williams's argument that authentic theology must be messy. She gently raised the question of how far Murdoch's own life was a striving for virtue via dishevelment, how far her life reflected an ideal of messiness.

Pursuing Murdoch's picture of virtue Stanton suggested a link to an essay by the writer and poet Anne Carson who, meditating on Sappho's poem *phainetai moi* (Fragment 31), has written on 'the self that learns to leave itself behind to enter into poverty'. (Carson's essay, *Decreation: How women like Sappho, Marguerite Porete, and Simone Weil tell God*, may throw light on the influence of Simone Weil on Iris Murdoch).<sup>1</sup> Stanton also cited the work of Elizabeth Dipple as helpful to her own thinking.

Stanton's examples of dishevelled virtue in Murdoch encompassed *The Nice and the Good*, *A Fairly Honourable Defeat*, *Henry and Cato*, and *The Sea, The Sea*. Murdoch's figures of good, for Stanton, are those capable of leaving themselves behind and entering into poverty. Stanton's enjoyable and illuminating talk could perhaps be accused of recruiting Murdoch for a theological project which she herself would at least have wanted to interrogate rigorously (and *not* messily), and it gave no hint of Murdoch's comic genius. Nonetheless, audience response in the brief question time indicated that Murdoch's novels continue to engage general readers as well as academic scholars, and also that new readership of her work is indeed growing.

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<sup>1</sup> *Common Knowledge*, 8:1, Winter 2002, 188-203. Reprinted in Anne Carson, *Decreation: poetry, essays, opera*, (London: Jonathan Cape, 2006). <[www.muse.jhu.edu/journals/common\\_knowledge/v008/8.1carson.html](http://www.muse.jhu.edu/journals/common_knowledge/v008/8.1carson.html)>

## Notes on Contributors

**Anne Rowe** is Reader in English Literature and Director of the Centre of Iris Murdoch Studies at Kingston University. She is Lead Editor of the *Iris Murdoch Review* and has published widely on Iris Murdoch's work. She is currently writing a volume on Iris Murdoch for *Writers and their Work* which will be published by Northcote House publishers in 2012. She is also editing *Living on Paper: Letters from Iris Murdoch 1945-1995* with Avril Horner, to be published by Chatto & Windus in 2014.

**Frances White** is Assistant Editor of the *Iris Murdoch Review* and Assistant to the Director of the Centre for Iris Murdoch Studies at Kingston University. She has published widely on Iris Murdoch's work. Her monograph *Iris Murdoch and Remorse* is currently under consideration for publication and she is conducting research on food in Iris Murdoch's work and on Iris Murdoch's early intellectual life.

**Cheryl K. Bove** recently retired from Ball State University. She is co-author (with Anne Rowe) of *Sacred Space, Beloved City: Iris Murdoch's London* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008). Her *Understanding Iris Murdoch* (University of South Carolina Press) will be released in paperback, spring 2011.

**Justin Broackes** teaches in the Philosophy Department at Brown University. Besides Iris Murdoch, his interests include colour, substance, and Plato. He is the editor of the collection of essays *Iris Murdoch, Philosopher* (Oxford University Press, 2011).

**Peter J. Conradi** is Emeritus Professor of English at Kingston University and Honorary Research Fellow at University College, London. He is author of *The Saint and the Artist: A Study of the Fiction of Iris Murdoch* (1986/2001) and *Iris Murdoch: A Life* (2001), and editor of *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature* (1997) and *A Writer at War: Iris Murdoch 1939-45* (2010). His *Life of Frank Thompson (1920-44)* is due out with Bloomsbury in 2012.

**Gillian Dooley** is Special Collections Librarian at Flinders University, South Australia and an Honorary Research Fellow in the Department of English. She is editor of *From a Tiny Corner in the House of Fiction: Conversations with Iris Murdoch* (2003) and her latest book is *JM Coetzee and the Power of Narrative* (Cambria Press, 2010).

**David J. Gordon** is Emeritus Professor of English at the City University of New York. He is the author of *Iris Murdoch's Fables of Unselfing* (University of Missouri Press, 1995), and his last book was *Imagining the End of Life in Post-Enlightenment Poetry* (University Press of Florida, 2005).

**Rivka Issacson** is an MRC New Investigator at Imperial College London running a small research group that studies proteins, the machinery of life, on a molecular level. Although her recent publications are mostly scientific, she combines science with a lively interest in literature and has previously published on Iris Murdoch and Wendy Cope.

**Miles Leeson** lectures at the University of Chichester and has previously worked at the Universities of Portsmouth and Sussex. His most recent publication is *Iris Murdoch: Philosophical Novelist* (Continuum, 2010) and his monograph *Beings in Time: The Philosophical Novelist in the Twentieth Century* will be published by Continuum in 2013. He is also working on a co-edited volume with Emma Miller provisionally titled *Incest in Post-War Literature*.



**Priscilla Martin** is Academic Visitor in Classics, University of Oxford. She co-authored *Literary Lives: Iris Murdoch* with Anne Rowe (Palgrave, 2010).

**Elaine Morley** is Associate Lecturer in German and Comparative Literature at the University of Kent, Canterbury. She is currently preparing her doctoral thesis (on Iris Murdoch and Elias Canetti) for publication and is conducting post-doctoral research on Germanophone émigré writers in London.

**Bran Nicol** is Reader in Modern & Contemporary Literature, and Director of the Centre for Studies in Literature at the University of Portsmouth. He is the author of *Iris Murdoch: The Retrospective Fiction*, (2<sup>nd</sup> edn, Palgrave, Macmillan, 2004), and his latest work is *The Cambridge Introduction to Postmodern Fiction* (2009).

**Jill Paton Walsh** received the CBE for services to literature in 1996, and is a fellow of the Royal Society of Literature. Her awards include the Book World Festival Award, 1970, for *Fireweed*; the Whitbread Prize, 1974 (for a Children's novel) for *The Emperor's Winding Sheet*; The Boston Globe-Horn Book Award, 1976 for *Unleaving*; The Universe Prize, 1984 for *A Parcel of Patterns*; and the Smarties Grand Prix, 1984, for *Gaffer Samson's Luck*. In 1994 her novel *Knowledge of Angels* was short-listed for the Booker Prize. She runs a small specialist imprint 'Green Bay Publications' in partnership with John Rowe Townsend.

**Valerie Purton** is Reader in English Literature at Anglia Ruskin University and the author of the *Iris Murdoch Chronology* (Palgrave, 2008). Her latest publication is the *Palgrave Literary Dictionary of Tennyson* (2010), co-authored with Professor Norman Page.

**M. F. Simone Roberts** is an independent scholar of nineteenth and twentieth Century Poetics and Feminist Philosophy. Her recent publications include *A Poetics of Being-Two: Irigaray's Ethics and Post-Symbolist Poetics* (Lexington, 2010) and *Iris Murdoch and the Moral Imagination: Essays* (McFarland, 2010) co-edited with Alison Scott-Baumann.

**Janfarie Skinner** is a retired freelance tutor in English literature who has worked for the University of Oxford Department for Continuing Education, the Stanford in Oxford Program and the WEA. She has a special interest in the fiction of George Eliot, Virginia Woolf and Iris Murdoch. Her most recent work includes a study of the influence of childhood reading on Murdoch's fiction and a study of *The Sandcastle* in relation to the school story genre.

**Nick Turner** is an Honorary Research Fellow at the University of Manchester, and his most recent publication is *Post-War British Women Novelists and the Canon* (Continuum, 2010).

## Iris Murdoch on Twitter

Iris Murdoch (@IrisMurdoch) now has 830 followers on Twitter, many of whom joined on 15<sup>th</sup> July 2011, during the 'Iris Murdoch Day' celebrations (the account was the 473<sup>rd</sup> most followed in the UK that day). People had been asked to prepared blogs, questions, favourite quotes, tributes, etc for the day. A poll was taken to discover 'Twitter's favourite Murdoch novel', which attracted much interest and was won at the last minute by *The Sea, The Sea*. The twitter account is an excellent way of measuring worldwide interest in Iris Murdoch and is also useful in raising awareness of the latest developments in Murdoch studies, the existence of the Centre for Iris Murdoch Studies, the Iris Murdoch Society and latest acquisitions to the Murdoch Archives. It is more immediate than Facebook since all news is delivered directly into the follower's 'feed' and does not need to be searched for.

## The Iris Murdoch Society Join the international Iris Murdoch Society

*The Iris Murdoch Review* is the key journal for Iris Murdoch scholars worldwide. The annual publication of the Iris Murdoch Society, this informative journal provides a forum for peer-reviewed articles, reviews and notices.

By joining the Iris Murdoch Society members will:

- Receive *The Iris Murdoch Review* as soon as it is published. Keep up-to-date with scholarship, new publications, symposia and other news about the life and work of Iris Murdoch.
- Be entitled to reduced rates to Iris Murdoch conferences. The Iris Murdoch Review and the Society will keep you informed about forthcoming events.

To become a member and for subscription rates, contact Penny Tribe:

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*The Iris Murdoch Review* is published on behalf of the Iris Murdoch Society by Kingston University Press. Kingston University is the long-established centre of excellence in the field of Iris Murdoch Studies and is home to the ground-breaking Centre for Iris Murdoch Studies, an unparalleled, world-class source of information for researchers on the life and work of Iris Murdoch.

[http://fass.kingston.ac.uk/research/Iris\\_Murdoch/index.shtml](http://fass.kingston.ac.uk/research/Iris_Murdoch/index.shtml)

## **Appeal on behalf of the Centre for Iris Murdoch Studies by The Iris Murdoch Society**

The Iris Murdoch Society actively supports the Centre for Iris Murdoch Studies in acquiring new resources for the archives and Special Collections at Kingston University. Society members have contributed financially towards the purchase of many items in the current collections. More detailed information on the collections can be found on the website for the Centre:

<<http://fass.kingston.ac.uk/research/Iris-Murdoch/index.shtml>>

The Centre is regularly offered documents, individual letters and letter-runs that are carefully evaluated and considered for funding. We would welcome any financial support that would enable the Iris Murdoch Society to contribute to the purchase of important items that may come up for sale in the future. We would also welcome reminiscences of Iris Murdoch, letters from her, or the donation of any other material that would enrich the archives. The Centre for Iris Murdoch Studies is establishing itself as an internationally significant source of information for researchers on Iris Murdoch's life and work. The Iris Murdoch Society would greatly appreciate your help to continue this level of support for the Centre.

## **The Iris Murdoch Society and *The Iris Murdoch Review***

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***The Iris Murdoch Review*** ISSN 1756-7572 (Kingston University Press) publishes articles on the work and life of Iris Murdoch and her milieu. The *Review* aims to represent the breadth and eclecticism of contemporary critical approaches to Murdoch, and particularly welcomes new perspectives and contexts of inquiry. Articles discussing relations between Murdoch and other novelists and philosophers are also welcome.

Articles are sent for review anonymously to a member of the editorial board and at least one other reader. Manuscripts should not be under consideration elsewhere or have been previously published. It is strongly advised that those submitting work to the publication be familiar with the *Review's* content.

Articles are normally c 3000 words long, and book reviews c 1000 – 1500 words long. Among criteria on which evaluation of submissions depends are whether an article/book review demonstrates familiarity with scholarship already published in the field, whether the article/book review is written clearly and effectively, and whether it makes a genuine contribution to Murdoch studies. The editorial board reserves the right to refuse submissions that fail to meet these criteria, including articles and book reviews which have been requested.

All submissions should be formatted according to MHRA, and the IMR style-guide can be found on the IMS website: <[http://fass.kingston.ac.uk/research/Iris\\_Murdoch/index.shtml](http://fass.kingston.ac.uk/research/Iris_Murdoch/index.shtml)>

Submissions can be sent to the Assistant Editor, Dr Frances White: [frances.white@kingston.ac.uk](mailto:frances.white@kingston.ac.uk) or the Editor, Dr Anne Rowe: [a.rowe@kingston.ac.uk](mailto:a.rowe@kingston.ac.uk)

**'Baggy Monsters' – the Late Works of Iris Murdoch**  
**International Conference**  
**Kingston University, London UK,**  
**14-15 September 2012**  
**First Call for Papers**

Kingston University is pleased to announce its sixth International Conference on Iris Murdoch in 2012. While papers on all aspects of Murdoch's work will be considered, panels will focus primarily on Iris Murdoch's later works of fiction and philosophy (post 1980) which have received less critical attention than earlier works. They will also include papers on the relationship between Murdoch's early and late works and will also engage with interest in how her work has been renewed by changes in critical approaches. Considerations of her work alongside that of other novelists and philosophers and/or studies of her contemporary significance in the fields of English Literature, Theology and Philosophy are also welcome. We would be particularly interested in papers informed by research in the Murdoch Archives in the Special Collections at Kingston University.

Plenary speakers will include Anne Chisholm, Chair of the Royal Society of Literature; others to be announced.

The conference will include an exhibition of new acquisitions to the Murdoch archives, most significantly letters from Iris Murdoch to the artist Harry Weinberger and a selection of his paintings.

The Murdoch Archives will be open for the duration of the conference. A London Walk will be organised for Sunday 16<sup>th</sup> September.

Organisers: Dr Anne Rowe, Kingston University. Tel: +44 (0)208 417 9000, Email: [a.rowe@kingston.ac.uk](mailto:a.rowe@kingston.ac.uk) and Dr Frances White, Email: [frances.white@kingston.ac.uk](mailto:frances.white@kingston.ac.uk)

Abstracts of up to 300 words to be sent by 30<sup>th</sup> April 2012 to: Dr Frances White at the following address: [frances.white@kingston.ac.uk](mailto:frances.white@kingston.ac.uk)