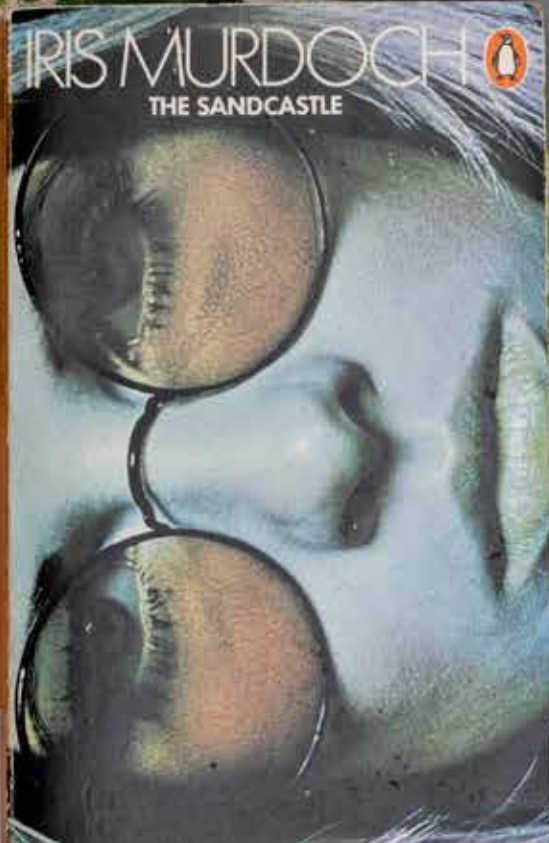


# THE IRIS MURDOCH REVIEW

No. 14 2023





# The Iris Murdoch Review

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## The Iris Murdoch Society

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# The Iris Murdoch Review

The *Iris Murdoch Review* publishes articles on the life and work 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 lines of inquiry.

The views and opinions expressed in the *Iris Murdoch Review* are those of the individual authors and do not necessarily reflect the position of the editors or the production team.

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David Williams, photograph of the work in progress, materials, tools and Iris Murdoch novels shown in a display case at the exhibition 'Other Journeys – Paintings and Drawings by Kevin Petrie', The Gallery, Gateshead Central Library, 2023.

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# Editorial Preface

*Frances White*

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THE INFLUENCE AND IMPACT OF IRIS MURDOCH'S WORK IS INCREASING exponentially each year and the *Iris Murdoch Review* likewise seems to grow with each issue. This edition contains a wide-ranging collection of essays, reviews and reports variously connected by specific features. This preface correspondingly takes a thematic approach to introducing the multifarious material rather than being merely an expanded version of the contents page. We begin with celebrations of Murdoch at home and abroad, then move on to America, art, philosophy and literature – specifically by women writers: a set of topics that encapsulates Murdoch's life of working, writing and travelling.

Nowhere closer to home could Iris Murdoch be celebrated than at the Oxford house she shared with John Bayley. Thanks to Audi Bayley's kind permission and the work of Anne Rowe, Norah Perkins (Murdoch's literary agent at Curtis Brown) and the generosity of the Iris Murdoch Society, a Blue Plaque in Oxford has been added to those in Blessington Street, Dublin and Badminton School, Bristol. We are delighted to publish the text of the address given on the occasion by Murdoch's friend and biographer, Peter J. Conradi, with an image of the new plaque. Further afield, Montse Figuerola's account of a performance of a Catalan translation of the first play in *Acastos* publicises the work of the Iris Murdoch Seminar group at the University of Barcelona, and a report on the 2022 online conference by Fiona Tomkinson and Chicho Omichi demonstrates that the Iris Murdoch Society of Japan continues to flourish under Paul Hullah's leadership.

This issue opens in customary fashion with a previously unpublished piece of original Murdoch material, a transcription of two talks given by her and John Bayley at Tulane University in 1987. It offers a rare view of how well Iris and John worked together as an academic double act, as well as being richly informative about their literary and philosophical views. Gratitude is due to Daniel Read for his painstaking labour of transcription. The theme of America continues with an extended interview with Cheryl Bove of Ball University, an early Murdoch scholar whose major contribution is deservedly recorded and celebrated here in the course of exploring Murdoch's relationship with the USA in her life and in her fiction. Meredith Trexler Drees, co-convenor with Miles Leeson, reports on the success of the online 'Iris Murdoch: Transatlantic Ties' conference, the first major USA-based Murdoch-focused event since 2001.

Art, and the making of it, features significantly in this issue. The cover image is from an exhibition by Kevin Petrie who has written a reflection, 'Other Journeys', on the influence of Murdoch on his creative work: four paintings inspired by her novels accompany his account. In the final section of this issue, 'Friendships and Connections', Rebecca Moden discusses the lives and work of two painter friends of Murdoch: the Canadian artist Alex Colville and Murdoch's portraitist Tom Phillips, who died in November 2022. We are glad to offer this homage to Phillips and it is good to see that the newly refurbished National Portrait Gallery has hung his iconic painting of Murdoch again – a sign of her continuing cultural importance. Moden's scholarship in this field is surveyed in Avril Horner's review of her monograph, *Iris Murdoch and Harry Weinberger: Imaginations and Images*, recently published in Palgrave Macmillan's 'Iris Murdoch Today' series. Dayna Miller's report on the past year's activities and acquisitions in the Iris Murdoch Collections includes news of a recent exhibition, 'Making Good' by Matthew Richardson, based on the tantalising notes for *The Bell* that Murdoch scribbled in the end pages of her copy of Colin Wilson's *The Outsider*.

Scott Moore's groundbreaking essay 'Was Iris Murdoch a Phenomenologist?' forms the core of the philosophical theme in this issue. This offering is timely as Murdoch's *Heidegger* monograph is soon to be published by Oxford University Press and will doubtless engender lively philosophical debate. Murdoch as philosopher was to the fore during the recent Wartime Quartet conference at Durham University on which Daniel Read reports, and Murdoch's influence is made plain in Rachel Handley's review of Sabina Lovibond's *Essays on Ethics and Culture*. Panning out from Murdoch, or indeed the Quartet, to fill out the background to the work of these extraordinary women is *A Terribly Serious Adventure: Philosophy at Oxford 1900–60* by Nikhil Krishnan, serendipitously reviewed for us by Lovibond.

Last, but of course far from least, we turn to the theme of literature, and to women writers across the centuries. In response to Rachel Cusk's article, 'On Iris Murdoch as a Woman Writer', in the previous issue of the *Iris Murdoch Review*, Lucy Bolton offers a spirited rejoinder, 'Iris Murdoch May Not Be a "Women's Writer", but She Certainly Writes for Me', opening up a debate that will continue as Murdoch's work is assessed from highly diverse feminist perspectives. Her fiction is juxtaposed with that of other female novelists, first in Frances White's essay on Murdoch's relationship with the work of Jane Austen – reflected in the Tulane talks given by the Bayleys – and second in Janfarie Skinner's account of the undervalued novels of Murdoch's colleague and friend, Rachel Trickett, whose centenary falls in December of this year. This is a fitting tribute to another remarkable Oxford woman. Rob Hardy's 2022 Iris Murdoch Society Christmas lecture proposed an innovative feminism-influenced reading of *The Unicorn*, focused through the lens of Marian Taylor, as Maria Peacock reports, and Anne Rowe's public lecture, reported by Frances White, brought out the importance of an early woman writer, Dame Julian of Norwich, to Murdoch's neo-theology and novels. In her review of *The Subversive Simone Weil: A Life in Five Ideas*

by Robert Zaretsky, Silvia Caprioglio Panizza picks up the contentious point well made in Bolton's riposte to Cusk, highlighting the dangerous tendency, when writing about the life of a woman intellectual, of focusing on her personal life rather than on her output. Despite containing some inflammatory material this risk was avoided in *Iris Murdoch and the Literary Imagination*, edited by Miles Leeson and Frances White for the 'Iris Murdoch Today' series, which is given an appreciative review by David Fine, pertinently identifying future areas of research for Murdoch scholars.

The final element in Murdoch studies which we want to feature in this preface is the increasing outreach towards the rapidly expanding number of Murdoch readers and students across the world. Mention has been made of work in Barcelona and Tokyo; added to this Richard Moon reports on Sarah Chihaya's 2022 online classes from the 92nd Street Y in New York, which analysed four novels from Murdoch's middle period. Moon (and other members of the IMS) also attended the Literature Cambridge lecture-seminars given by Miles Leeson, whose trumpet I wish to blow as he is too modest to draw attention to his own achievements and hard work in the Murdoch community. Leeson has created three themed series each based on four Murdoch novels: on London in 2022, on the Gothic in 2023, and on Love, forthcoming in 2024. The Iris Murdoch podcasts which he hosts and edits – of which there are now well over forty – are being listened to on all continents except Antarctica and have attracted more than 20,000 listeners over the past year. As director of the Iris Murdoch Research Centre and leader of the Iris Murdoch Society, Leeson's work too should be acknowledged and celebrated, and I am grateful for the privilege of writing this preface on behalf of the editorial team, both to take one task off his desk and to express our appreciation to him.

Looking to the future, the podcasts continue apace; many more works are in the pipeline for the ongoing 'Iris Murdoch Today' series; the first conference on Iris Murdoch and the East is imminent, as is the 25th Annual Conference of the Iris Murdoch Society of Japan this November; the Iris Murdoch Society Christmas lecture has become an annual feature; and, as well as the biennial Iris Murdoch Conference at the University of Chichester in September 2024, the first ever Iris Murdoch conference at Paris's Panthéon-Sorbonne University will take place in April 2024. We should all recognise and rejoice in the flourishing of Murdoch studies as we approach the end of the first quarter of the twenty-first century.

Finally, we are grateful to Kevin Petrie for use of his art work; to Leo Phillips for permission to reproduce his photograph of his father Tom painting Murdoch's portrait; to the Iris Murdoch Seminar group at the University of Barcelona for permission to reproduce the poster for their performance; to Heather Robbins for producing the *Review*; to our hard-working editorial team, our authors, reviewers and reporters; and ultimately to our readers who make all the work worthwhile.

University of Chichester, August 2023

# Iris Murdoch and John Bayley in Conversation at Tulane University

## *Iris Murdoch and John Bayley*

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The *Iris Murdoch Review* was preceded by the *Iris Murdoch News Letter*. John Burke opened the first issue of the *News Letter* in July 1987 with a report on Iris Murdoch and John Bayley's visit to Tulane University, Louisiana, New Orleans, during which they not only gave talks and responded to audience questions but also took part in a class on *A Fairly Honourable Defeat* and *The Black Prince*.

We are pleased to be able to reproduce transcriptions of the two talks given by Murdoch and Bayley, the first of which took place on 24 March 1987 in the McAlister Auditorium and the second in the smaller Kendall Cram Lecture Hall, perhaps a week later. Each talk began with an introduction to the guest speakers and concluded with questions from the audience, although these elements are excluded from this transcription. Murdoch and Bayley can be seen sitting on low chairs either side of a table. Murdoch occasionally shuffles her notes, once dropping them. The couple sit attentively, patiently listening to the introducer, to each other, and to the audience. Although the variable quality of the VHS recording means that there are times when their voices are barely audible, these convivial and conversational talks are here reproduced as accurately as possible, transcribed by Daniel Read.

### **The text of the first day's conversation**

**I**RIS MURDOCH: WELL, I'D LIKE TO SAY, FIRST OF ALL, HOW PLEASED JOHN and I are to be here as guests of this university and we feel already that we've been here for several weeks. Although we arrived two days ago, we feel

entirely at home and we are enjoying our talks and discussions with students and others very much indeed.

Tonight we're going to have a fairly rambling sort of discussion to which we gave the title 'The Novel, Morality and Religion' and we want to place the novel in the context of a kind of modern crisis. People are always wanting to explain why novels in the second half of this century, or since 1920 say, are less good than the great novels of the nineteenth century. I think that we must – I would – certainly take for granted that the great giants of the novelist's world, the people who made the exemplars of the novel, were the figures of the nineteenth century, such as the great Russians, Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky, and the English novelists – the English tradition of the novel, to which I in a humble way belong – and the French novelists, and great figures such as Henry James; and that these god-like figures do belong to the past and the novel now is less great. Perhaps in the future it will be as great again. On the other hand, many critics have taken pleasure in saying, perhaps as a result of this comparison, that the era of the novel is over, the novel is now done for, it's run its course and certain critics, indeed, seem to want to hasten the death [*slight laughter*] of this art form and transform it from a telling of stories into the promulgation of something which is called 'text' [*further laughter*].

Well, I don't think that this is really likely to be a permanent feature of the scene or that the novel is at all done for. I think that if we look at England and America today, for instance, and France, we see a tremendous proliferation of different kinds of novelists, many young novelists coming forward and a great variety of ways of writing novels. And this, I think, is a very important thing about this form, that it is highly individualistic; that, when it's written well, novels are written by individuals; and the novels are themselves individuals and it's a form into which all sorts of different thoughts and emotions can be put and it is – if one thinks of art as a great hall of reflection – a great place of free thought and new thought. I think that the novel represents a very large area of this reflection and thought and that, sadly, as we see in some countries – though perhaps now, in Eastern Europe, we see glimmers of hope in this respect – where the novelist is constrained, and the storyteller is told that he must serve his society in a certain definite way, the art form suffers. I think it's the novelist's duty to produce works of art; that he is an artist and must produce the best art that he can and, if he does this, he will actually serve his society and tell it truths about itself and promote new thought; that novels stir us up and bring us to new kinds of thought.

Now, the progress of the novel takes place in the context of, I think, great changes in our world which have been happening over the last fifty years, and which will go on happening for better or worse. And some aspects of these changes are threatening to art and to the kind of reflection which novelists, and also incidentally philosophers go in for, and this in the West, in our free

societies, I think, is taking place not as a result of wicked conspiracies or groups who have a positive intention to destroy our way of life or anything like that, but for all kinds of semi-accidental reasons to do with technology – the kinds of technical changes which are coming about in our society which seem sometimes to threaten the existence of books, of literature, in the sense that we've thought of them in the past. Television threatens the novel, one might say. And also that a certain feeling which we might connect with the particular kinds of advances which have taken place in science lately may also be thought of here as being in the background. We begin to feel that behind the ordinary reality of our world which stories deal with, there lie the formidable structures which scientists have lately been discovering, either outside us in the distant parts of the universe, or inside us in our makeup, in our genes, in DNA, in molecular biology or in atomic physics. We are very impressed by these discoveries, and they lead us to feel that the world that we take for granted is superficial perhaps, in relation to things which underlie it. And this brings, I think, into the background of our thought, a sense of determinism. Now I think determinism is a great enemy of human life, the sense that there is some kind of universal causality. Of course, we know about causality, we live in the midst of it, we live in the midst of accident. This is something which I think literature has always understood and investigated: the combination in human life of a purpose – a creative purpose and intellectual motive – and sheer accident; that we are accidental creatures, that we live in a contingent world. The feeling that we are now moving into a new era where we must understand ourselves differently is in the air, and I think is dangerously so. We see this not only in our sense of the progress of science, and our idolisation of science. We rightly idolise science, because most extraordinary discoveries have been made and amazing powers have developed which we would never have dreamt of even twenty years ago. But our feeling that science is so important, and that it represents a great neutral mode of discovery, may lead us to have very gradually a different view of the place of human nature in the world.

And, if we look at the political scene – I'll move off these generalities in a moment and try and say something of a different kind perhaps – we also see, I think, the influence of Marxism in many aspects of our lives strikes the same note. I have myself been a Marxist and I sympathise in many ways with the motives of Marxists, for instance in South America, where people are drawn into Marxism, young people are drawn into Marxism, for reasons which might be described as utilitarian. This is what originally drew me to Marxism: the feeling that the world is terrible, is full of injustice, and people are hungry and people are oppressed and frightened and they suffer oppression and some world philosophy should arise which is going to cure these ills. Well, these are worthy motives but the doctrine of Marxism has often – well, speaking of orthodox Marxism, not of revisionist Marxism, which is represented by members of the Frankfurt School, for instance

– there is a deep feeling of historical determinism involved. A Marxist is looking forward towards a utopian society which is to be striven for but also is, in a sense, inevitable. Now this is, again, something which feeds a wish which many of us, I think, unconsciously harbour, or semiconsciously harbour, the wish that we could feel that things must go in a certain direction, that there's really nothing that we can do about it, and if this direction is a utopian direction then so much the better. But whatever it is, we may feel that are we are powerless to alter things and this is an aspect of our sense of a great change which is taking place.

Now this also has an aspect in our sense of religion and psychology. I want to quote now a remark which I heard made quite lately at a conference which ran as follows: 'We have reached saturation point and must now progress in another dimension. Mankind is now the godhead to be worshipped'. Now the notion that mankind is the godhead to be worshipped is, of course, not at all new. We can trace this back again into the beginnings of Marxism, into the work of Feuerbach and the revolutions which brought about a shaking of the religious faith, which we see reflected in the novels of the nineteenth century. Now, another way of looking at this crisis – and of course every civilisation at different times has felt, and has rather enjoyed feeling, that it is in a state of crisis, that something extraordinary is going to happen and that this is a very exciting feeling that the future is going to be quite different in some way. And one finds this reflected, in some way, in the work of say, of Heidegger, who pictures in some of his work – a curious strange philosopher with many different moods and phases – the notion that the gods have left us but the gods are going to come again, that some kind of revelation awaits us, is going to happen, and of thinking perhaps in terms of some great change which is going to come about. One may see this also in the work of Derrida, who thinks that our whole mode of thought is going to change, that we are going to begin to realise that the literature of the past was something primitive, that we are going to have a new mode of consciousness and a new sense of art. Well, now, if we look back to the novels of the nineteenth century we may be struck by one thing: that these great writers – and I'm thinking of the great Russians and the English novelist tradition and the American tradition particularly – the authors took it for granted that religion was something fundamental and that it would be with us always. Their characters, whatever exactly the authors may have thought, the characters resorted to prayer; they believed in God and they prayed and they felt that there was a spiritual dimension to their lives into which they could as it were retire. Now this is something which is very much, I think, in question now.

And one may to come back to what I said earlier about the novels of today being somewhat different; that a loss of the religious dimension is a part of this and that the disappearance of prayer from the lives of people – I'm well aware that I'm speaking to audience where, probably, there are a great many people who are religious believers, and that, for a similar audience in a university in England, this

would not be true. A great majority of younger people in England have departed; they have no religious belief and the concept of prayer is not with them. My own position, I should say, in this is I don't hold any dogmatic Christian beliefs but I believe in spiritual change and in a religious dimension in what one might call a Buddhist sense, which I think some new kind of Christian doctrine could perhaps embrace, but this is a very difficult problem which we can't perhaps go into now. But I think that the novelist now works in a much more confused world, and in a world where the orientation between good and evil, which was taken for granted in the nineteenth-century novel has partly disappeared, and where the characters don't have this feeling that they can, as it were, retire from their immediate troubles and seek help in another dimension. And this has produced, in many writers, a sense that they have to invent their own metaphysic; that they can't be comfortable telling a plain story; that they have to make some kind of metaphysical statement. It's as if, having been finding that the safe guidelines of religion have been withdrawn from their world, they have to have some kind of reflective adventure of an original sort, wherein the background of life which was taken for granted in the nineteenth century is absent.

Now, I think I'll let John into this now and ask him to proceed from this point, or to give rather more substance, because I'm afraid I've been talking in rather abstract terms and I think it would be rather useful to talk more perhaps, as I hope we will shortly, about individual novels – but perhaps you'd like to carry on from there.

**JOHN BAYLEY:** Well, taking up the point that Iris has been making, of the conflict I think really between the idea of fiction (the novel) and the idea of religion, I would want to say that the novel thrives on the fact that it's conscious of the old religious background, but at the same time it wants to get rid of it, or at least be independent of it. I've recently been reading a rather good American novel by Alison Lurie called *The War Between the Tates* (1974) – I expect some of you, I think probably most of you, have come across this novel. I rather tend to discover works of this kind long after everybody else has read them but this is a novel which I enjoyed very much because it seemed to me to bear out something of what Iris was saying in her discourse; that there is a sort of sense in which the contemporary novel today tends to disregard entirely the old-fashioned distinction between the soul and the body, the idea that we are simultaneously two different kinds of person. I think that this was very important in all forms of imaginative literature before the novel became the most important of all. I mean, for example, Dante or Shakespeare would have taken it for granted that the soul and the body were two different things and that they were in a sense always in conflict with each other. Now I think that the novelist today takes it for granted that we have only one kind of consciousness, a consciousness which completely

dominates our approach to life and our whole daily being. And to go back to this example that I mentioned, Alison Lurie's book *The War Between the Tates*, it seemed to me this was a very striking example of the way in which a good intelligent writer today takes it for granted that there's really one kind of life and that's the one that involves our existence with other human beings, with our wives, husbands, children and so forth. It seems to me to be a very depressing kind of work, this work, just because there wasn't any sense at all of people as living in two worlds, as simultaneously as I say being souls and bodies. So that if you lose out in this kind of the world of modern or contemporary consciousness you feel, I think, that you've lost everything, that the whole of experience has gone wrong in some sort of way. Just to give a counter-example to this, I'm very surprised to find that that an English writer called Barbara Pym has become very popular in America today as a writer of fiction. And I think the reason why her novels have become popular is because, quite accidentally in a way, she has got a very strong involuntary unconscious sense almost of this differentiation, of this idea that we still are souls and bodies, and a great many of her characters are still churchgoers. And her books are founded on the idea that human existence is unsatisfactory at the best of it, that we've got somehow to cheer ourselves up, to comfort ourselves as best we can in a world which is fundamentally evil, depressing, unsatisfactory. I think that this probably fascinates an American audience today because it's so unlike the kind of world which perhaps we were accustomed to thinking was going to develop fifty years ago, a hundred years ago, perhaps. If you read today works of Sinclair Lewis, for example, the novels of Sinclair Lewis, you have this very strong sense of a world which is *ipso facto* improving all the time, that the writer is describing something which is getting automatically better, and it's getting better for purely mechanical reasons, that we are all getting more of this, more of that, so to speak.

Well, I think that the novel today is in an interesting position of dividing itself between this sort of materialistic world and of a world which is of a very different kind, a world which still assumes that we do exist on two different planes. And the one is not really compatible with the other. Hence the sort of humour which the novel can generate, which it generates for example, in these works of Barbara Pym which I described. The idea that because we are simultaneously absurd creatures, comical creatures, and also creatures who have a sort of sublimity, a kind of possibility of grandeur, that this division is the world – or rather the combination of worlds – in which the novelist instinctively inhabits. That's why I think, when Iris was speaking of the kind of situation the novelist is in today, that we are becoming perhaps increasingly conscious of the complexity, and above all of the division that confronts the writer today. I think if we think of our early readings of a writer like Ernest Hemingway, for example, we are fascinated, reading Hemingway, by a sense of 'good heavens this is all there is to life'; this

extraordinary sense that a writer possesses when he is as good as that, of a total grasp of the human situation, that his words describe everything there is. That I think today is an impression we no longer get from good writing. There was a time when we got it: there was a time when you opened a book like *For Whom the Bell Tolls* or *A Farewell to Arms*, and you felt 'yes, this is wonderful, this is just what sort of life is about, this is exactly how things are'. I think that works of fiction today have rather given up that sense of explaining everything and the reader is no longer enchanted in that way by the writer, that we have a different kind of relation with the novelist and this may be an advantage. I'll go back now to Iris and see what she feels about this problem.

**MURDOCH:** Yes, I mean I think its extraordinarily hard to define what this is. Well, I'm sure we are in the middle of an extraordinary period of change and it's very hard to define this. Yes, I see entirely what you mean when you say that there is a kind of completeness about the world that we were introduced to, say, by Hemingway and another kind of completeness of course in the great novels that we really felt that we allowed ourselves to be enchanted by them and to do what a lot of modern critics today say we are not supposed to do – to look through the page into another world and to feel that we really are being taken into another kind of reality and that this filled our attention in some way; whereas now of course many writers attempt to alienate the reader, I mean just as Brecht and others alienate the audience in the theatre and destroy the illusion while working with it, that many writers I think feel bound to do this, not necessarily in a terrifically deliberate way as some followers of structuralism do, but instinctively that they haven't got the confidence to present a whole imagined world any more because of the distraction of our modern soul and there are many reasons for this distraction. I mean ones that I've been suggesting are to do with technology and our sense of science and also I think something to do with Hitler and Stalin and the feeling which I think is absent. John was saying about Sinclair Lewis, that in a strong sense, even stronger sense in the nineteenth-century novelists, the notion that human beings were going to be better, society was bound to get better, that reason and education, and all the things the Enlightenment believed in were bound to bring about a better society with better people, that suddenly we realise that this is not a process which is necessarily going to go on and that on the one hand terrible evil is possible in our world, deliberate technologically organised evil, and in a way the Marxist utopia represents a reaction against this: the feeling that 'all right we are in a machine but it's a good machine but it's a machine which is going to bring a useful new form of society'. But, as again I mentioned, the members of the Frankfurt School, particularly I think Adorno and Benjamin and Marcuse of course, that the Frankfurt School revisionists have suggested that Marxism

really needs a moral philosophy and that the old dogmatic Marxist idea of the future is something which Marxists themselves are beginning to feel very doubtful about. So that there is this sense of uncertainty that makes, I think, many writers feel almost that it's their duty, or else instinctively that they have to, as it were, destroy their work while they're creating it or half-destroy it or crack it and, oddly enough, one sees this in the visual arts too and I think the visual arts are very often it's like, you know it's like dogs knowing there's going to be an earthquake or something [*slight laughter*], that visual artists see into the future –

**BAYLEY:** [*aside*] Dogs, yes –

**MURDOCH:** – and begin to sort of smash things up before they happen in real life but that it's very difficult now, for a painter now, to paint a traditional picture. And very often I noticed this when I taught for a short time in the RCA in London where I taught some philosophy to the art students, and I noticed particularly with the sculptors that it was quite impossible for them to make anything resembling a human form or indeed anything which was complete, or made out of a single material; that what they instinctively wanted to do was to make things of many different kind of materials rather jaggedly put together, or as one of my pupils said, 'Well I know I've made this thing' and she said, 'Well now it's cracked' and I said, 'Oh I'm so sorry' and she said, 'Oh no, that's splendid now it's cracked, it's much better'.

**BAYLEY:** [*aside*] That's right –

**MURDOCH:** And this is an aspect of a loss of confidence. Well now, what shocked me somehow when I was thinking about these things in relation to the novel – because we thought we'd be talking about the novel here – was that in a way the traditional novel, which still persists among us, and the telling of stories is something very therapeutic, and when we think of the novel we must remember that we're all storytellers; that nothing is more natural in human life than the telling of a story; that when we communicate with each other we constantly tell stories, we come home in the evening and we tell a story to our family and we embroider it a bit too and we're all in this sense artists, we tell jokes which are stories, and that this is a kind of a natural human thing, it's a part of human nature which we must hang on to, and the idea of the complete story, the continuation of the tradition I think is important and that we mustn't feel, and writers shouldn't feel I think, and artists shouldn't feel, painters shouldn't feel either, that we've somehow come over a divide which separates us entirely from the notion of the complete art object or the completeness of human nature and

its being a spiritual – as John was saying – that there is a spiritual dimension, which is also absolutely natural to us in our sense of ourselves as human beings and a human society and a sense of human nature, and this is where moral philosophy, I think, should also come into the picture; that we need some kind of new confidence which I think will partly come from the continuation of art in our society, its liveliness, its ability to change without losing a sense of tradition, without becoming fragmented, and we need, I think, philosophy to be – well this again is a rather large topic which we can't perhaps go into now and I must stop talking in a minute anyway – that we need just as the people in the Frankfurt School, I was very moved as it were when I was reflecting about the way in which these revisionists have been crying out for a moral philosophy, they say Marxism is dead unless it is a moral philosophy and that it can't be as it once was and I think new forms of moral philosophy should emerge which have a sense of the situation of religion on our planet that is that dogmatic religion – this is – I'm speaking for myself – dogmatic religion is something which is likely to diminish, that people, I mean somebody remarked, yes, Eliot remarked that Christianity had constantly changed itself into something that people could believe and I think that religion probably may in the future change itself into something which people can believe, but it will need help here from theology obviously and from a renewed kind of moral philosophy. But here coming back to the novel I think the novel is a great sort of centre point in our consciousness and that the continuation of reading and writing novels is very important.

**BAYLEY:** Well, in that sort of way there's a very clear and interesting connection, isn't there, between the whole idea of Christianity and the idea of a novel form. I mean the sense in which a story which is subject to all kinds of interpretation, subject to every kind of ambiguity, and a combination of belief and disbelief, is the thing that art flourishes on, particularly where the form of fiction is concerned. I mean you could almost say that any novel ever written partakes to some degree of the story of the gospels and this seems to me to indicate something very important indeed about the way in which stories function in our society. I mean, for instance, in a Moslem society, you have stories like Sinbad the Sailor, for example, but those stories exist purely as episodes and events. The interesting critic Todorov remarks that the point about Sinbad the Sailor is that one thing happens after another with him, the whole idea of the story in relation to Sinbad is 'and then, and then', something happens, something else happens. Well, now that is a different conception of the story to what I think the religious and moral story as the Western novel presents it is doing for us, the idea of the novel as we understand it, as Iris has been talking about it too, is something essentially connected with mystery with the idea of the mysterious, that we can't be quite sure what is going on and our interest in it is not simply

concerned with what's consecutive, sequential, but with what's concerned with the spiritual and the strange and the mystery of it and I think that's a very important sort of – simple but important – narrative distinction.

**MURDOCH:** Yes, well, I agree. I think we've talked probably for long enough now, we might try to engage in a discussion with the audience now and ask for questions and perhaps people would like to utter their own opinions.

**The text of the second day's conversation.**

**IRIS MURDOCH:** Well, we've been having a wonderful time here and greatly enjoying all our discussions with a great variety of people and we've learnt a great deal from talking with people here and we've also enjoyed visiting the city, a place we always wanted to get to and now suddenly some magic carpet brought us here to our great pleasure. The title this evening is a rather large one. I chose the two titles, some time ago, far off, in England, when visiting New Orleans seemed like a strange dream, and I couldn't think of any very precise title to offer. I thought I'd put down two rather large abstract titles, then when we were here and when we'd sniffed the air, we'd see what to do about it [*soft laughter*]. So as we haven't planned this particular discussion, I hope that things that we have to say will interlock and that they will be of interest to you. I have been having discussions with the philosophers here since I've arrived and I'm interested in – I've been for a long time interested in developments in philosophy which have had an influence on literary criticism, and which have been perhaps connected with new developments in writing, and I was wanting in this context to think of the novel as a kind of force in society, something which might counteract what I regard as rather alarming and prophetic and in some ways I think gloomy tendencies – do you think that door could be closed, would it be possible? is it? Thanks very much, I think that I've got a phobia about open doors [*slight pause*] – and what I felt after reflecting on these matters was that if one was being overwhelmed by some of the prophetic and gloomy fashionable metaphysics, the great cure would be to read a traditional novel in which the common-sense world and the world that we're familiar with was studied in detail and reflected upon because the novel I think is a great hall of reflection, it's a place where society is criticised and where characters' motives are examined and in fact there's an incident in *Northanger Abbey* – isn't it in *Northanger Abbey*? – where someone says to a young woman, 'What are you reading?' and she says, 'Oh, only a novel!' and then Jane Austen says, 'Only a work of greatest wit, insight, intelligence, in which etcetera etcetera'.

**JOHN BAYLEY:** – Do you want me to read it? I think I can find it –

**MURDOCH:** It's ... well, perhaps I will say a word first of all, while John is finding that quotation, about the kind of philosophical tendencies which I have in mind and the two philosophers I have in mind here are Heidegger and Derrida, if one can count Derrida as a philosopher which is very dubious [*slight laughter*]. I think that both these philosophers – I think Heidegger is a rich philosopher, I think Derrida is a very clever brilliant rhetorician – that the tendency in both, and this is where this connects with the title of this operation – have you found it? –

**BAYLEY:** Yes –

**MURDOCH:** Go on –

**BAYLEY:** No I don't want to interrupt you –

**MURDOCH:** No, no –

**BAYLEY:** It's quite short actually, "Oh! it is only a novel!" replies the young lady; while she lays down her book with affected indifference, or momentary shame. "It is only Cecilia, or Camilla or Belinda" – those are works by, I forget her name, Fanny Burney? – 'or, in short, only some work in which the greatest powers of the mind are displayed, in which the most thorough knowledge of human nature, the happiest delineation of its varieties, the liveliest effusions of wit and humour are conveyed to the world in the best chosen language' [*laughter*].

**MURDOCH:** Good. Well, I think that in both Heidegger and in Derrida – and I'm not going to spend long talking about them because one could spend a long time tracing their ideas – the notion of truth as we normally think of it is under attack and this is a symptom, I think, of a kind of demoralisation which attacks writers and thinkers in our society, and is influential. It seems to me that this line of thought leads even in the two writers I've mentioned, even in Derrida and Heidegger, to a kind of despair. They're both writers, and philosophers very often develop by writing when they're fairly young a large influential work and then spending later years picking it to pieces. And this was certainly the case of Wittgenstein who wrote the famous *Tractatus* when he was young and then in later life spent his time refuting his more youthful views. And I think this has to some extent happened with both Heidegger and Derrida. Though, as usually, or as very often, it is the earlier work which remains in the picture. And in the case of Heidegger, the idea of ordinary truth, and we'll talk about what ordinary truth is in a minute, is attacked by a curious etymological fantasy which he weaves about the Greek word *aletheia* and he develops a view of truth as un-concealment or revelation which is dramatic and, I think this is an important point, as far as

I can see detached from the ordinary use of truth and truthfulness to represent something morally desirable. I think that the basis of the picture of human life which is offered there is one in which our ordinary sense of the position of morality in society, and which represents one of the great interests of the traditional novel, is in some way dissolved and this is also true of Derrida's work in which the idea of old-fashioned truth is much more directly attacked by a notion that language does not refer to the world but is self-referential and thus meaning is deferred or dissolved into the total surroundings of the language. Now, both these views could be described as idealist, in the sense in which one uses this word of Hegel, and one might say that it represents a view that we can't know the truth unless we know all truth, that all the truth which then is not in the ordinary sense truth is something which is scattered through the language or through the development of history. And this is also true *mutatis mutandis* of Marxism. And they put the idea of truth against a large speculative and in many ways mystifying metaphysical background and this view, I may say, is not shared of course by the empiricist tradition of philosophy which has continued to think of truth in an ordinary sense, in the traditional sense, where the idea that truth is correspondence to reality, and the idea that it is coherent with a conceptual framework, are perfectly familiar and they are pieces of machinery as it were which we all use every day without the slightest difficulty.

Now, if we come to the novel, against this background of what I've called a kind of demoralisation, the traditional novel is a place where we can examine the idea of truth and truthfulness, asking ourselves in what sense it is a criterion of merit in a novel that we can say of it that it's truthful or indeed more generally when we say that good art is truthful, what do we mean? Is this an odd use of the word or is it something which is very easily connected with our ordinary sense of true or false? A statement may be true or false and a person may be truthful or deceitful, and in both cases there's some positive value attached to getting something right, to something being correct and to being in this sense reliable and one of the things which the novel does, I think, in giving a truthful account of human life is that it does justice to the contingent aspects of life, to the things in life which are absurd. And this is where one can introduce perhaps the idea of the novel as comic, the funniness of novels, and the detail of life, the way in which life is a muddle, it's not something which is easily sorted out into a metaphysical system, there is something muddled here and deeply contingent and accidental and this sorts [sic] very ill with the notions of philosophers, such as the ones I've mentioned and also with the traditional dogmatic Marxist ideas of how society can be cured. And against this, against the part of the background that has been offered to us by Marxists too and by structuralist thinkers and by Heidegger, is the notion that we are going to undergo some extraordinary crisis and certain prophetic thinkers announce nightfall and predict dawn or perhaps just announce nightfall, suggesting that our

civilisation is shortly going to come to an end and this idea is of course extremely popular in many quarters where people feel that they want to protest as violently as possible against the evils of Western civilisation which we are here considering.

Now I think I'll hand this over to John in a moment. I wanted to say that one can think of these matters of truth and truthfulness and the contingent aspect of life which so often occurs in the comic aspect of the novel which I think is omnipresent, by asking what's the enemy of the novel? What kind of faults does a novelist tend to fall into and what is he as it were to beware of, and here I'd make a distinction between imagination and fantasy which is not the same as the distinction made by Coleridge between imagination and fantasy. What Coleridge was distinguishing was a mode of thought which fused things together into a whole, as contrasted with a mode of thought which would only pick up little pieces and fit the pieces together. My distinction which is not totally dissimilar would be between a work of imagination as a creation of something which has something truthful to tell, which has an imaginative and beautiful aesthetic structure, and something which is really the product of personal fantasy. And fantasy is something which we all know about, how one tends to picture the world in terms of one's own desires and wishes and in one's fantasy deforms what the world is like and what it's like to have something and so on, so that I think this kind of degeneration of imagination into fantasy is something which haunts all kinds of art and makes it untrue, mediocre, lacking in a sense of justice, one could put it in terms of justice, that the good artist is just, he is just to his characters, he's just to the situation which he is describing. Now these are very nebulous terms but one could proceed perhaps to give some examples and aspects of the degeneration of art into fantasy or into untruth, which might be thought of in terms of other concepts such as sentimentality, certain kinds of irony, kitsch, vulgarity, very familiar things which haunt, dangers which haunt, the work of art. Now I have got onto some other matter here, which involves introducing a particular example, but I think I'll leave it at this point and let John carry on.

**BAYLEY:** Thank you, I think I'll take up that point, but do you want to go back to your other thing?

**MURDOCH:** I may not go back to it but go on –

**BAYLEY:** OK. I never know what Iris is going to say, but I think what I will agree with in terms of fiction where the novel is concerned is this general idea of there being a contrast between two forces at work with the writer; she described it as imagination and fantasy. I think they would correspond to something I feel too, that the writer has on one hand a strong sense of order and the need to make

sense of life and on the other hand an equally strong sense of the fact that that life is totally chaotic, absurd, anarchical, and that you can't really make anything very much of it. I think she also implies this by her use of the term contingent. The point was in a way suggested by D.H. Lawrence when he said the wonderful thing about the novel form is that it's incapable of the absolute. Well, I think all forms of art tend to aspire towards the absolute, I mean in the sense that architecture or sculpture try to reproduce something which is as near perfection in the form as is possible. I don't think that the novel can produce anything aesthetically perfect or even as it were aspiring to perfection in this kind of sense. What it does do is to mix things up and present us with something which is, as Iris said, true precisely because it is all mixed up [*laughter*].

Now I think where we would agree probably is that humour where the novel is concerned is a very ambiguous thing indeed. I mean there is a tendency nowadays, I think, both in America and also in England, in Europe, to think of all humour in terms of black humour so that provided your humour is sufficiently outrageous, sufficiently awful, that you are amusing your audience, that you are being entertaining. I think in a way that this conception of humour is very misleading in that humour is based precisely on the contrast between the idea of order and the idea of disorder and that human beings respond passionately to both these things, but where the novel is concerned the presence of these things is absolutely essential if we are to get a proper idea of truth as the novelist can present it. Now, it can be of course that humour, just to take that example, and I think Iris was verging towards it, is something that tends to destroy the idea of the moving, the touching, the passionate and that sort of thing, but I don't think this is necessarily true. I think where the finest fiction is concerned that we do feel – sorry this is a very obvious point but I think it is important – we do feel that we simultaneously want to burst into roars of laughter, quite sort of irreverent laughter, and at the same time, metaphorically speaking, we are shedding a tear or two, or at least we're feeling impressed, touched and moved. Now the presence of these two things together, though it helps in other kinds of art, is particularly characteristic of the novel form and it occurs in all sorts of different ways. I mean, to take a very well-known example the notion in Cervantes's famous novel *Don Quixote* of the very classic distinction between this ridiculous but delightful figure of the knight Don Quixote and this earthly realistic sort of figure of Sancho Panza his attendant. I think actually *Don Quixote* is one of the most boring books that I've ever tried to read and when I try to – I hope in a fairly humble sort of way – to explain to myself why I couldn't get on with it, I thought the reason must be that the point comes too early. They spill the beans, the author spills the beans too early, and that we are constantly aware, almost at page one, that a distinction is being drawn between the knight and his servant in terms of two different aspects of the human scene and human truth. The trouble

about that is that once one has seen it of course one is bored very quickly indeed. Tolstoy said of writers in his time who tried to excite the reader by dramatic, and rather dramatic sort of methods like pornography for instance, that the trouble is that you see the point too early, you see the point and you get bored by it, and I think indeed this is almost an aesthetic sin of the novel form if it's revealed too early. Consequently, real humour in the novel is always connected with a sense of withholding something, a sense of some sort of strangeness, a sense of the mysterious, which is in some way unconnected with other kinds of art, reveals itself in the novel form in humorous terms.

You wouldn't think Jane Austen is a particularly mysterious writer but in fact I just happened to get out this copy from the excellent library here in the university of her first and her last novels, *Northanger Abbey* which we've already quoted from, and *Persuasion* and I think that, very briefly I hope, I can just give you an idea of what I mean by a simultaneous sense, where the novelist is concerned, of surprising us, of rather mystifying us, but also at the same time giving us the feeling that 'life depends on strong emotion' combined with a sense of 'really strong emotion doesn't mean a great deal after all'. Well now, how does the novelist combine these two if he so to speak debunks one of them? Well then, we can all see the point and it's depressing and boring at once, he's got to somehow mix the two together in a strange – or she I hasten to say, because most of the best novelists of the last hundred years have been female – so somehow the two things have got to be combined together. Well this is a very small example, the hero of the delightful novel *Northanger Abbey*, herself a most agreeable girl, has been to the Assembly Rooms in Bath. There she's seen somebody and has fallen almost instantly in love with him. He however has taken almost no notice of her at all, or very little, and she goes to her home that evening and now this is the beginning of the next chapter: 'The progress of Catherine's unhappiness from the events of the evening, was as follows. It appeared first in a general dissatisfaction with everybody about her, while she remained in the Assembly Rooms, which speedily brought on considerable weariness and a violent desire to go home. This, on arriving in Pulteney-street' – where she's living in Bath – 'it took the direction of extraordinary hunger, and when that was appeased, changed into an earnest longing to be in bed; such was the extreme point of her distress; for when there she immediately fell into a sound sleep which lasted nine hours, and from which she awoke perfectly revived, in excellent spirits with fresh hopes and fresh schemes'. Well, this is a very slight example, but I think when one reads that one is conscious of a mysterious pleasure which is somehow connected with a sense of deep truth. I mean here is this altogether ordinary person, I mean the reader is perfectly ordinary anyway, who becomes sympathetic because she has had these two kinds of experience, she has had a strong emotional experience which was

followed by these very simple ordinary ones. Well now, humour is only as it were immanent there. I mean there is no suggestion that it is funny at all but I think it gives one the deepest sensation of it.

Well now, the last novel that Jane Austen wrote contains in a curious way something rather similar in it. It's a much more obviously touching novel, Jane Austen was very ill in fact when she wrote it and died not long after it. She describes however – and I think in a purely imaginative way – because my own suspicion is she was never really very closely involved emotionally with anyone, but she knew what it was being a great novelist, she's describing how the heroine of *Persuasion*, who has long been in love with a captain in the navy, how she feels when she meets him again. She sees him, she knows she's very much in love with him, she still is. At the same time another man has been paying her, as they used to say, close attentions: 'It was altogether very extraordinary – Flattering, but painful. There was a great deal to regret. How she might have felt' – about Mr Elliot, the other suitor – 'had there been no Captain Wentworth in the case, was not worth enquiry; for there was a Captain Wentworth: and be the conclusion of the present suspense' – essential to the novel incidentally – 'good or bad, her affection would be his for ever. Their union, she believed, could not divide her more from other men, than their final separation'. That's the end of that paragraph. We then, as it were, join the heroine, we've been in her head. We then join her in a rather different sense when she's tripping along the street in Bath: 'Prettier musings of high-wrought love and eternal constancy, could never have passed along the streets of Bath, than Anne was sporting with from Campden-place to Westgate-buildings. It was almost enough to spread purification and perfume all the way'. Well, sorry, I haven't made that very clear but I think the point is you see here again Jane Austen, though in a much more mature manner, and I think quiet really, I mean she's obviously very quiet in everything she does, is suggesting that consciousness where human beings are concerned is continually divided between our aspirations towards grand ordered splendid feelings – 'their union she believed could not divide her more from other men than their final separation' – sort of feeling that everybody wants to have, or at least I think they do, and at the same time she is suggesting that these feelings have something intrinsically comic and funny about them, and then when she suddenly takes us to the idea of this girl walking along – you know how, I suppose with both sexes, it seems to be particularly true of girls, if you see them walking along the street they often seem have curious smiles on their faces as if they were thinking of something else – and this kind of sensation is very well described I think by Jane Austen at this moment. Well, now I'm going to hand back to Iris and see whether she would roughly speaking agree that humour where fiction is concerned is much more sort of odd and quiet than is often supposed, that good fiction has a very complex version of humour to give us.

**MURDOCH:** Yes, I agree entirely and I think those are very good examples. I've been trying to think, I'm afraid what I said earlier wasn't very clear, trying to think why one feels that the novel is such a good kind of reflection on human life, it's a unique form, it's a very very versatile form, there's hundreds of ways of doing it, but it has its own kind of reflectiveness and I was thinking of the philosophical background which I was sketching earlier in perhaps a rather dramatic way. Clearly that kind of philosophy doesn't necessarily hold the whole field, there's a whole tradition of empiricist philosophy which now seems much less interesting, I think, to many people because it's less grandiosely metaphysical, it's less dramatic, it's more given to piecemeal analysis and very very careful writing rather than the sort of panache which these particularly metaphysical thinkers go in for, and that form of reflection I think is needed in philosophy. Philosophy's always, even within the mind of a particular great philosopher, in tension between making grand metaphysical patterns and returning towards the ordinary reality of the world and if it wasn't so in tension I think the whole of our philosophical tradition would tend to collapse. It's got to have this kind of awareness. Incidentally I think a philosopher who's very little thought of now but who I think is extremely good, Schopenhauer, who rambles along in a way which is disapproved of by some stricter philosophers, I think he holds this tension very well, between a sense of ordinary life and a sense of some vast background of systematic thought and I think the importance of ordinary life and ordinary truthfulness is extremely important, and ordinary morality, things like truthfulness, truth, morality – to come back to this concept – these are ideas which kinds of modern philosophy – Marxism for instance in some of its manifestations – suggests to us are illusions, and the notion that the whole of our society is a kind of illusion is an idea which hovers around in the air in some of these modes of thought and some literature, I think, has been affected by this feeling. The word alienation, for instance, is often used to give to us a feeling that our ordinary thoughts about good and evil, our sense of a tension between, an orientation between good and evil, and our notion that it's important to tell the truth and to teach our children to tell the truth and that we can make sense of the idea of truth, and that we can roughly understand the difference between appearance and reality in our lives. These ideas are sometimes seen to be as if were under attack.

Now the traditional novel, and I'm just going to talk about the novel now, the traditional novel, to write one and to read one, I think is a very important exercise in the relationship of a background of life and to the details of life and here, I think, I mean John's example is a good one where in the mildest way, and with a kind of gentle irony, I think Jane Austen is a novelist whose irony is perfectly tactful and completely ordinary in the right sense, not overdone, just connected with most intelligent reflection that she shows very easily, and a great novelist does this very easily, the way in which the human mind is poised between large

aspirations, great moral judgements, perhaps a sense of guilt or something, and the most trivial and essential preoccupation with the immediate affairs of life. And this contrast, and the details of life, the contingency, the small things, and many great novelists excel in providing us with both the great drama and, I mean Tolstoy, for instance, the great drama of human life in its most extensive and a general form, and the contingent things that you fall over all the time, the details of life which are often so preoccupying and so absolutely free, as it were, and unconnected, with this background and that one has got to hang on to the ordinary, smaller senses of order in one's life as well as aspiring towards the larger forms of order and there's something about the kind of calm comicalness of the great novel, and Shakespeare of course excels in this too if one thinks of *Henry IV* for instance where there are such wonderful touching comical scenes, this produces a kind of fresh air, a sense of relaxation, a place for thought which I think is very therapeutic, very good for one's ability to think about the human situation, it is a mode, the novel is in this sense a mode of thinking.

**BAYLEY:** Yes, I think Iris's phrase 'a calm comicalness' exactly describes it. I mean as soon as comicalness becomes deliberate and purposive it forsakes that particular kind of calm, and I think that humour in the novel very much depends on that sort of calm. I mean it may be that for instance Evelyn Waugh, say, is a very funny sort of novelist from one point of view. But at the same time I think that we can definitely see his jokes coming too much, that humour in the novel is the opposite of, as it were, comedy, slapstick comedy, in the theatre, or something of that kind, where one part of the pleasure is derived from the fact that it's all been planned beforehand. You feel in the novel that it hasn't been planned, that it's just emerging out of the general tissue of the situation, the plot, the people, and this is what really makes it humorous. I think too that the best writers very often are extremely good at putting themselves in the two sides of any human individual, as for instance Dostoyevsky did in his *Notes from Underground*. The hero of *Notes from Underground*, who's just like us so to speak, I mean he's continually preoccupied with the kind of way in which people are going to react to how he's coped with his hair that morning or something of that kind, is a character who's both comic and, seen from the outside as comic, and also who is deeply subjective and therefore as it were potentially tragic. Dostoevsky puts himself with any character in both these aspects of the human creature. This kind of division I think is essential to the novel form, Jane Austen to take, as I have taken that example, is very good at it and a work that I recommend is a very funny novel indeed, the title doesn't sound like it, called *The Death of the Heart* by Elizabeth Bowen is a particularly good case of it because the author has put herself simultaneously in the position of a sixteen-year old girl and a thirty-five-year old woman and these two people are

in a sense fused together as aspects of the comedy of life. Their relationship is very disturbing but at the same time it's enormously funny to read about – that again is an instance of how the novelist mixes things up. But I would emphasise, and I think I'd like to ask Iris this question, in some ways, whether she would agree that the really interesting thing about the novel form is how it prevents humour from congealing into a sense of the merely comical? I think again her phrase 'calmly comical' is very interesting. Jokes in novels are almost always unsuccessful unless they're practically invisible. A good joke in a novel, I think, suggests to the reader, 'You're a clever person, I love you' – that is the novelist speaking to the reader – 'and you'll understand me because of that reason, what I'm saying to you is not at all obvious'. And I think that this is exactly why we enjoy the form in this way.

**MURDOCH:** Yes, I'm sure there are as it were professionally comic novels –

**BAYLEY:** Alas, there are –

**MURDOCH** [*laughing*]: P.G. Wodehouse, for instance –

**BAYLEY:** Quite so –

**MURDOCH:** Well it's all right, [*laughter in audience*] I think he's a remarkable novelist, or writer anyway. Of course, his is a minor form and it's a very restricted form and perhaps it's a very specialised sort of pleasure I think perhaps to like his –

**BAYLEY:** I don't think he's a novelist, he's a comic writer –

**MURDOCH:** Yes, OK, righto, yes, I mean, well I was just thinking of an example here. Evelyn Waugh, I think damages his work by the kind of funniness which he indulges in. I mean I think it's dangerous if you're making a set at your reader to make him laugh. I think that the best sort of funniness arises out of quite deep reflection, and a sense of the sadness of life and its absurdity, and its accidentalness, and the sort of things people are afraid of and so on, and it's very complicated and when, I mean, again thinking of Shakespeare, of the sort of, the kind of things in Shakespeare which make one laugh are very often things which are sad absurdities, and somehow ridiculous.

**BAYLEY:** Well, Italo Svevo, who James Joyce very much admired, who wrote this very sad book about what it's like to be eighty years old, is one of the funniest and charmingest novels of its kind I think –

**MURDOCH:** Yes –

**BAYLEY:** It makes you feel that, when everything's gone, you're eighty years old, you don't enjoy anything, but life is still funny, and that's very enchanting in a way.

**MURDOCH:** Yes, I think he's a marvellous novelist if anybody's looking for a novel today.

**BAYLEY:** We would recommend that, I think.

**MURDOCH:** Yes, well, I think, absolutely, the one should be *La coscienza di Zeno* I think.

**BAYLEY:** You think that's funny?

**MURDOCH:** I like that, I think.

**BAYLEY:** Oh, I think I prefer *Memoirs of an Octogenarian*.<sup>1</sup>

**MURDOCH:** Yes, well, anyway, that's an entirely good novel.

**BAYLEY:** Well, we might ask if anyone's got a good example of one.

**MURDOCH:** Yes, well, perhaps we should move on now to letting other people join in this discussion, they probably have all kinds of examples they want to put, or counter-examples, so perhaps somebody, people in the audience, might like to say something.

1. It is unclear which of Italo Svevo's works that Bayley is here referring to, or if indeed that is still the author he has in mind.

# Murdoch in America: An Interview with Cheryl Bove

*Cheryl Bove*

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Cheryl Bove, one of the first American critics of Iris Murdoch's work, has made an immense contribution both to Murdoch scholarship and to the development of the Iris Murdoch Society and associated *News Letter (IMNL)*. She is the author of *A Character Index and Guide to the Novels of Iris Murdoch* (1986) and *Understanding Iris Murdoch* (1993) and co-author of two further works, *Iris Murdoch: A Descriptive Primary and Annotated Secondary Bibliography* with John Fletcher (1994; hereafter *Bibliography*) and *Sacred Space, Beloved City: Iris Murdoch's London* with Anne Rowe (2008). Until her retirement, she taught humanities at Ball State University.

**I**RIS MURDOCH REVIEW EDITORS: DO YOU RECALL YOUR FIRST IRIS Murdoch novel and how you came to study her?

**CHERYL BOVE:** In 1965 I enrolled in an English Literature seminar taught by a professor who had recently returned from England to Colorado (via boat and then train). She brought with her twelve Penguin paperback novels (then unavailable for sale in the USA due to copyright reasons) by rising young British writers – some of whom were Iris Murdoch, Muriel Spark, John Barth, Anthony Powell, and Kingsley Amis. There were twelve students in the class, and she challenged each of us to choose one author and to continue to read everything the author wrote and everything written about them. The Murdoch novel was *The Bell*, which I remember being well received by the class for its characterisation, setting, and the moral dilemmas faced by the characters. Dora Greenfield's crisis of identity, which led her straight to the National Gallery to contemplate the Gainsborough

paintings and think about her life and choices, was a minor revelation for several in the class who saw not only the importance of nature in the novel, but also that of the paintings. I chose Murdoch to follow because her characters seemed to be presented in a fresh way. She was also writing moral philosophy, and I had a philosophy minor. This turned out to be a fortuitous choice because no other author's novels have ever afforded me as much pleasure. I can still recall crossing the campus from the parking lot to my office, stealing the few minutes of the walk to read each new Murdoch novel as it arrived. Years later, when I was working on the *Bibliography* with John Fletcher, I already possessed a filing cabinet full of relevant Murdoch resources and articles. This undergraduate seminar was such an in-depth introduction to contemporary British novelists that several members of this seminar went on to do graduate work on their chosen authors.

**EDITORS:** Your first book, *A Character Index and Guide to the Novels of Iris Murdoch* (hereafter *Index*), must have been a labour of love as much as a work of diligent scholarship. How long did this project take? Can you describe the process of undertaking such a mammoth task?

**BOVE:** The *Index* began as a memo to myself in 1965 when I was reading (and rereading) the Murdoch novels then available. I have to confess that the idea came because, as an undergraduate, I was also studying William Faulkner's novels. Someone had published an index to Faulkner's characters which I found particularly useful. At the time I had no thought about publishing such an index myself, but I did intend to go on to graduate school eventually to study Murdoch's novels and knew that it would be invaluable. I approached the index as part of my notes on each of the novels. As it wasn't until 1986 that my *Index* was published, I had a couple of decades to get everything organised. While at times it seemed like a lot of work, continuing to read and make notes about the novels helped me familiarise myself with her characters and with a London that I only first came to visit in the 1980s. Then there was the issue of what to do about the novels that were published after the *Index* came out. I continued to keep a running memo about her characters and places and eventually published indexes for later individual novels in the *IMNL* or, more recently, with James Jeffries's online Murdoch project.<sup>1</sup> All of this took place over a number of years. Today, I think only an index for *The Green Knight* remains to be published, but the pressure of sitting down to check the indexing of that novel was relieved when Christopher Boddington's useful work, *Iris Murdoch's People A to Z* (2018), was published.

**EDITORS:** How did you first discover the Iris Murdoch Society (hereafter IMS) and what led to your involvement at the Caen symposium?

**BOVE:** I first discovered and became interested in the IMS when presenting a paper at the Modern Language Association convention in Chicago on 27–30 December 1990. Other panel members included Peter J. Conradi, John Burke and Richard Todd. Shortly after, John Burke asked if I had the time to assume the Secretary-Treasurer position of the *IMNL* from him, which I did in 1991, and in 1995 I assumed the editor position from him.<sup>2</sup> Like many of the early Murdoch scholars, his speciality was in another area; however, he continued to be interested in Murdoch and often wrote about her works for the *IMNL*.

I believe my invitation to present a paper at the Caen conference was due to John Fletcher, who knew the organiser, Richard Todd. John and I were working on the Murdoch *Bibliography* together when I received an email invitation to submit a topic for the conference. As my PhD topic had been Murdoch's aesthetics and characterisation, I suggested her aesthetics. That topic was already covered. I then suggested characterisation, but that too was already assigned. I finally said I could talk about America and Americans in her novels, and this topic was approved. At the conference it was apparent that John knew almost all of the European attendees; he introduced me to them and included me in a group that dined together each evening. It was a wonderful opportunity to make connections with other established academics who were interested in Murdoch and her writings. Just before the conference I learned that Iris and John Bayley would be responding to several of our papers; I can remember rewriting my paper's introduction in my hotel in Amsterdam the night before the conference opened because my paper seemed so negative about her view of America and Americans.

**EDITORS:** Was Murdoch then being discussed and studied in American universities?

**BOVE:** Unfortunately, Murdoch was not prominently discussed and studied in the majority of universities in the USA at this time. There were some faithful academic followers, but getting her novels into classes often depended on discussions with friends. I taught a three-semester humanities sequence in the Honors College of my university, and many of the other humanities faculty were willing to add one of her books to their syllabi. One could also offer a symposium class on a single topic, and Murdoch was well received by students in these courses. Some of my architecture students drew maps and built constructions illustrating her novels and enjoyed informing themselves about her London settings. I can remember attending an Anthony Powell Society conference at the Wallace Collection and wishing that we could have something like that for the IMS. However, at the time I knew that it would be difficult to generate enough interest here because she was not yet well known and the current interest was

in studying feminist writers. Anne Rowe spearheaded the early IMS conferences, which were then and still are fittingly held in England.

**EDITORS:** In the Centenary Edition of the *Iris Murdoch Review* you mention that, in the 1980s, 'at a time when feminist theory held sway in American academia', Murdoch was not perceived as a feminist. Do you think the change in attitude in the mid to late 1990s – when Murdoch was being included in studies focusing on women writers and when academic studies of her works were increasing – was shared by American academics?

**BOVE:** In the 1980s, Murdoch was being taught by some American academics, including the professor who had introduced our seminar to Murdoch's works in 1965. The academics who attended the first Iris Murdoch session in December 1987 at the national Modern Language Association and formed the IMS were also teaching her novels when they aligned with their courses. The problem was, most of the senior academics already had their own specialities, and the courses where her novels might fit were mostly taught by younger academics. The main early complaint from younger American academics was that she was not part of the feminist group that they wanted to teach and to quote. Her reputation changed somewhat after more information about her became known. She was an early advocate for the acceptance of homosexuality and showed homosexual people to have fulfilling lives in her novels. Peter J. Conradi's *Iris Murdoch: A Life* (2001) confirmed that she was not a stodgy traditionalist and, when more about her private life was revealed, the traditional and anti-feminist labels no longer fitted. Some of my academic friends were surprised when they found that she had been interviewed by leftist, northern European newspapers and by northern European feminists. Gradually, the old labels fell away. However, the younger American academics were deeply influenced by second-wave feminist writers and quoted almost exclusively from them in their own writings, leaving little room for Murdoch's works. Reading bibliographies from feminist books and papers at the time, one can see that expert opinions were basically from other feminist writers. Even after the anti-feminist label was shown to be unfair, her writings did not address the things the up-and-coming English department academics wanted to quote. More recently, universities have decided to concentrate on multi-cultural and postcolonial writings in English. In general, Murdoch's novels remain less popular than her philosophy in American universities.

**EDITORS:** Was *Understanding Iris Murdoch* (1993) conceived as a response to the lack of focus on Iris Murdoch in America?

**BOVE:** *Understanding Iris Murdoch* was indeed an opportunity to promote the study of Iris Murdoch's novels in America. The University of South Carolina Press

was editing a series on upcoming authors and asked me if I would be able to write a book on Murdoch's novels for this series within the next ten months to one year. As I already had most of the materials from my dissertation on hand, it was an excellent opportunity to introduce readers and students to some basic concepts that recur in Murdoch's novels. Several years later, in 2008, this book was also used to increase the consideration of Murdoch's novels in Japan when it was translated into Japanese by Choichi Yamamoto.

**EDITORS:** How did you come to be involved in *Iris Murdoch: A Descriptive Primary and Annotated Secondary Bibliography* (1994)? How did you and John Fletcher divide the work?

**BOVE:** John and I had the same publishers (Garland) who were concerned that he had such a monumental task ahead of him – describing all of the primary sources and compiling and annotating secondary sources – that he would miss his deadline with them. After consulting John, they approached me to ask if I would be willing to come in with him on his project. We emailed back and forth a few times and agreed upon a division of labour. John was responsible for the description of the primary works and my major responsibility included the secondary materials. As I had already collected a large inventory of articles and books written about Murdoch (going back to my undergraduate days and my professor's challenge to read everything written by and about Murdoch), the secondary materials worked best for me. John had a strong interest in book publications in various languages; his French was so strong that in addition to his teaching at the University of East Anglia he and his wife, Beryl, also translated French/English textbooks for Cambridge University Press. Locating Murdoch's interviews (in several languages) became very special to me because by this time Murdoch often brought out standard responses to many of the interviewers' questions, and John Bayley accompanied her when she was speaking, taking up some of the responses for her. I was hoping to discover something different from her commonly repeated remarks in her interviews. I recall some feminist authors contacting me about some of her northern European interviews with feminist papers. That she saw no difference between the abilities of men and women led to some new interest in her work from Americans. Hitherto she seemed to have been dismissed for commenting, in Sheila Hale's 1976 'Women Writers Now' interview, that she 'strongly disapprove[d]' of Women's Studies and for reiterating, in a 1981 interview with Veronica Grocock, that she believed such separatism 'fosters a dangerous double standard'.<sup>3</sup> It took time to overcome this early prejudice regarding her position. Following Conradi's biography and Anne Rowe and Avril Horner's publication of Murdoch's letters, *Living on Paper* (2015), many realised that Murdoch was not a voice from an unwanted past and that in her life and writings were many points with which they could agree.

**EDITORS:** Readers familiar with Gillian Dooley's *From A Tiny Corner in the House of Fiction: Conversations with Iris Murdoch* – which celebrates its 20th anniversary this year – may recognise you as one of the contributors to the Caen symposium which we discussed earlier. Can you summarise your paper on 'America and Americans in the Novels of Iris Murdoch' and Murdoch's reaction to it?

**BOVE:** As I read and reread each new Murdoch novel, I kept asking myself, 'Why is she continually sending these characters, that I might not enjoy having as neighbours, off to America?' Her response brought me to think about these 'new neighbours' in a different way. My paper, 'America and Americans in the Novels of Iris Murdoch', argued that her early America is 'a dark, untamed forest inhabited by disfigured demonic forces'; her American characters are undeveloped; psychiatrists and mediocre American scholarship seem parodic; and America becomes a place of refuge and exile for troubled British characters.<sup>4</sup> Murdoch's initial response was 'I want to defend myself against some of these charges!' She pointed out that she, like Henry James, was following a European myth about America, that she had a 'partly romantic view of America', that the national differences between English and American people were 'very deep' and 'particularly puzzling', and that her contact with America grew as the novels progressed. She felt that she was sending her troubled characters off to America for a new start. This last point was the clarifying remark that I missed in my initial assessment. When *The Message to the Planet* came out shortly after the Caen conference, Maisie Tether more than compensated for Murdoch's earlier under-developed American characters.

**EDITORS:** How do you square the general disapprobation that you sensed in the fictional attitude to America with Murdoch's visits there? She visited the USA about ten times, it appears. Do you think that these visits had any influence on her view of the country and its people? Were these trips varied enough for Murdoch to have been able to appreciate the differences between the states, or would they have merely reinforced her preconceptions, prejudices and stereotypical thinking?

**BOVE:** The America that Murdoch encountered on her visits to the USA would have been that of an academic elite circle in which she would have felt comfortable and appreciated regardless of where in the USA she was visiting, so a visit to Tulane would not have shown Murdoch the Alabama of thirty-five years ago. Possibly, she noticed a form of condescension within our academic world for certain American places and communities; those in which academics would not feel comfortable or would consider less elite than East or West Coast universities. To a certain extent, some such condescension still exists and one can imagine that this happens in any country. From her interactions with others, and her

willingness to write to anyone who wrote to her (even putting up with strangers who wanted to be her pen pals) one cannot imagine that Murdoch would act with condescension towards anyone, but that does not mean that she did not notice what was happening around her. She would have become aware of the different academic standards that the various colleges and universities had, as well as the educational opportunities offered in different levels of higher education, from junior colleges and community colleges, to universities and elite universities.

There is certainly less of a difference between the populations of various locations within the USA now than would have been apparent at the time of Murdoch's visits. Decades ago, one could readily experience differences in speech patterns, accents and even language used by people from different isoglosses. Some states or counties had archaic laws. Some universities were 'dry,' so if you held a conference there you could not serve liquor. Murdoch even experienced an odd situation during her time at the University of California where the Men's Faculty Club had a bar, but the Women's Faculty Club (where she and her husband were staying) did not. While the liquor laws that Murdoch found strange and inconvenient have now been regularised, there still exist many situations that would probably appear odd to her. People travel widely now, and few children grow up and remain in their home towns. Speech patterns are less diverse and less readily recognised, but some division of class and education still exists, and Murdoch was a keen observer.

**EDITORS:** Differences in speech patterns are identified by an American literary critic, Anatole Broyard, who critiques Murdoch's sentences in *Henry and Cato*, explaining that she had adopted American structures: one sentence begins with 'the hated "Hopefully"' and others 'picked up the old *Time* magazine trick of prefacing a character's name with one or two adjectives'.<sup>5</sup> What do you make of Broyard's points here?

**BOVE:** These Americanisms in *Henry and Cato* seem rather touching to me. In some of her letters to friends in *Living on Paper*, Murdoch does use words and phrases that she readily identifies as American and jokes about doing so. Although Broyard remarks that *Henry and Cato* begins badly, implying that Murdoch is in dangerous territory by setting part of a novel in an unknown America, the familiar structures are rather endearing and give an indication of her familiarity with and perhaps absorption of some of the linguistic subtleties of mid-America.

**EDITORS:** Would you similarly disagree, then, with a fairly recent review of *An Accidental Man* – by M.A. Orthofer for *the complete review* website – that suggests that Ludwig's communication with his parents about his pacifism 'stands somewhat awkwardly out'?<sup>6</sup>

**BOVE:** Yes. I do not feel that Ludwig Lefferier's letters to and from his parents seem out of place; they exhibit his contradictory feelings about returning to America to be drafted to serve in the US Army and probably – though not certainly – the Vietnam War. My generation was the Vietnam generation; many of my contemporaries felt similarly, and some avoided the draft in ways that appeared at the time to be less honourable than Ludwig's easy solution.

Murdoch carefully develops Ludwig's situation and his conflicted feelings about his position throughout the entire novel. The European background of Ludwig's parents, their gratitude for their new home and their desire for their son to fit into their new home country, as expressed in his father's letters, seem appropriate for his parents' generation. They are immigrants who have become American citizens and who are trying to fit in with their community; they express the same hopes for their son. Ludwig remarks that he and his parents see two separate Americas. Coming from different generations they probably do not have identical aspirations. As a historian, he knows something about the awful cost of past wars, but does not feel totally anti-war; he just opposes this war. One of my colleagues, a history professor who opposed the war and successfully avoided the draft, later specialised on Vietnam, and taught a course on the Vietnam war for his entire career. He pointed out to his students that the major protests to the war ended when the draft ended. Many young men's lives were dramatically changed in an 'accidental' way by the war, and not only by their birthdate numbers in the draft lottery. The qualification for draft deferral kept changing – first it was about being enrolled in college (which meant they were then overwhelmed with students and the required English, chemistry and calculus courses became the 'flunk out' courses), then it was about being married with children. The most long-lasting deferral category was teaching which left many men, who did not want to continue teaching, with decisions about retraining after the war. Ludwig's personal conflict was not only timely but also appropriate to the main theme of the novel. While Ludwig does have some concern for his safety, that is not the predominant reason for his actions. He feels guilty about choosing an easy way out and for disappointing his parents. He expresses this when he says, 'I think it's dishonourable to do what's right in an easy way'. He feels that he is acting like a coward and traitor; he does, in fact, punish himself far more for his beliefs than the government would have done, by giving up his opportunity for an academic life, his wedding to Gracie and his freedom. Ironically for Ludwig, soon after the conflict ended, amnesty was awarded to all those who had avoided the draft. Murdoch's novel expresses well the dilemma many felt at the time, and Orthofer's remark about Ludwig's acting 'sillily' diminishes the seriousness of his situation and the honour that he displays in staying firm in his own convictions about a conflict that still brings trauma to those who served as well as to those who did not.

**EDITORS:** It is interesting that there is a five-year break between Murdoch's engagement with American characters in *An Accidental Man* (1971) and in *Henry and Cato* (1976). Do you think, going back to our earlier discussion, that Murdoch's return to America in the second novel is influenced by the trip to the USA – where she visited Mexico, San Francisco, San Diego, St Louis, California and New York – that occurred four years earlier?

**BOVE:** Murdoch appears to have thoroughly enjoyed her time and her colleagues, particularly from her comments about her visit to Washington University in St Louis, Missouri, during 1972. She and the Lebowitzs – Naomi and her husband Albert – became good friends, and Murdoch continued to write to them throughout the rest of her life. She was even able to reveal to them her fears and concerns about losing her ability to write. During her time with them in St Louis she had an academic life, good friends and the Beckmann paintings to enjoy.

There must have been something about her visit that gave Murdoch the concepts for *Henry and Cato* (1976), where Henry Marshalsen finds a home in the Midwest with the American couple, Russ and Bella. Henry, who is purportedly writing a book on Max Beckmann, finds himself teaching a course for which he is unqualified in a small liberal arts college with mediocre students. This material, appearing in a book that immediately followed Murdoch's artists' exchange with Washington University, would have easily led people to get the wrong idea about the university, its faculty, and her perception of them. There must have been a time when Murdoch realised that she might have offended the Lebowitzs because she explains the portrayal of Russ and Bella, in a letter to Naomi dated 7 January 1977, saying 'You are, *of course, not* Bella, I don't portray real people [...] No, no you are utterly *different*. Russ and Bella can count as an act of homage [...] in the sense that you two have given me the only place in America where I can as it were put my root down! You are the two just guys who save the city, as far as I am concerned'. This last remark seems, perhaps, a strange comment about St Louis itself that reveals what she must think of that Midwestern city where her friends reside.

When one compares the letters about her visit to St Louis to what she has to say about the Californian universities where she stayed, her emotion varies considerably. In the 1977 letter to Naomi, Murdoch recalls her time in St Louis with fondness. In letters written only two years prior, however, California seems to be the more memorable setting. In California she had been swept along in a lively and busy scene with big trees, the ocean, and vast desert. Murdoch comments to Philippa Foot, in a letter written on 23 April 1975, that 'we are home but our hearts are still in Santa Monica', and she refers to California as 'paradise'.

Surely Murdoch did not realise that she would be insulting the Lebowitzs by her caricature of them in *Henry and Cato*; however, almost any academic in

America would feel unintentionally insulted by this portrayal. As in England, there is here an unwritten hierarchy of academic institutions. Perhaps the students Murdoch encountered were not quite the Oxbridge level to which she was accustomed, but Washington University had (and still has) an excellent academic reputation.

**EDITORS:** In a *New York Times* interview with John Russell called 'Under Iris Murdoch's Exact, Steady Gaze', Maisie Tether from *The Message to the Planet* (1989) is described by Russell as 'a brisk, tart, downright Bostonian', a rare 'fully drawn and developed American character'.<sup>7</sup> Do you agree with Russell's characterisation?

**BOVE:** *The Message to the Planet* was published soon after the Caen conference where Murdoch defended herself against the charge that her American characters are undeveloped, thus it was gratifying to have John Russell recognise in Maisie a wholly developed and sympathetic American character. Maisie appears about one-third of the way through the novel and continues to be a viable presence for another third of the novel before returning to America, from where her presence continues to be felt. A painter of watercolours, she is a forthright Bostonian who shares personal characteristics and beliefs with Murdoch herself. Maisie, too, is an only child, and her family has Quaker roots, as did Murdoch's father. Maisie's description of her father, as 'clever and good and marvellous company', has overtones of Murdoch describing her own father, who had the quiet dignity of a Murdochian good person. Maisie, like Murdoch, has had a classical education and attended a girls' school and a women's college. It is interesting that Murdoch has Maisie's origins in Boston rather than California, for an open and free Maisie from Boston would be very different from the perceived view of a free-spirited Californian and closer to, in terms of heritage and outlook, the more formal British. It is our plain-speaking, optimistic and clearly-no-fool American, Maisie, who lives on at the end of *The Message to the Planet* to affect the lives of characters on both sides of the Atlantic. When Maisie meets Franca Sheerwater, Franca's self-esteem has been damaged by her husband's insistence that she live in a *ménage à trois* with him and with his current mistress, Alison Merrick. Franca had been trained as a painter and was one until her marriage to Jack subordinated her painting to his. Maisie, who has seen Jack's painting, calls it derivative and encourages Franca to begin painting again by suggesting that they paint together. The reader learns that Maisie's presence opens 'a large warm coloured expanse' for Franca, and Maisie realises that painting 'has a special relation to happiness'. In what may be Murdoch's nod to American over-confidence, Maisie feels herself 'a natural therapist' and befriends damaged people throughout the novel. Although the novel's genius, Marcus Vallar, dies

without imparting a viable message to the world, Maisie does afford the reader a message for living in modern times – how focusing on small good things can move one towards happiness. Maisie invites Franca to join her in America, but the Franca who finally decides to stay in England with her husband (now without his mistress) is a different and confident Franca who can sustain herself by getting on with life, one who says that she will see Maisie again in the future.

**EDITORS:** Do you think that Murdoch's reading of Henry James has any impact on her picture of America, here or elsewhere? Perhaps her picture of America, like her picture of Japan in *The Three Arrows*, is more informed by her literary, rather than her physical, engagement with the country. Do you think this would constitute a limitation, or even failing, in Murdoch's vision?

**BOVE:** Murdoch often reread Henry James, as well as other novelists, for inspiration and reflection; something of James's feelings may well have seeped into her early vision of America. At the Caen symposium, Murdoch explained that James was 'the great exhibitor of the European-American myth' in that people 'very often regard Europe as a wicked, dark place whereas America is a place of innocence and clarity and moral goodness'. Murdoch also claimed that she did not see her characters going to a place of terrible exile at the end of their novels, but to a place of with 'some kind of freedom, towards a new life'. These remarks seem to refute the idea that her America had been informed mainly by literary works.

But *The Message to the Planet* does seem to be an exception. During the interview where John Russell, a fellow Oxonian, remarks that Maisie Tether is a 'fully drawn and developed' American character, he notes the overtone of Henry James in Maisie's character. Murdoch agreed that 'Maisie of course relates to *What Maisie Knew* and [...] the name Tether rhymes with Lambert Strether in James's *The Ambassadors*'. The events in James's novel take place through the eyes of Strether, and Murdoch may have been paying homage to James, but Maisie is not Strether. Maisie is clearly aware of the events and conflicts in *The Message to the Planet* but she goes about addressing them in a more contemporary and more Murdochian way than Strether does. Making Maisie's background Bostonian, rather than Midwestern or Californian, was effective in that East Coast people are known for being plain-spoken, and Strether does not appear to be the same.

During Murdoch's visits to the USA, she was part of similar academic communities wherever she visited and her contact with people outside the university environment was limited. Maisie is not an academic, but she has had a thoroughly academic upbringing. While in America, Murdoch's contacts with other classes and sectors must have been primarily from afar. The more time she spent in America the more familiar she became, but it is very difficult to

write about another country without missing out on small details about places and individuals' lives from other classes that one has not experienced. Murdoch avoids much of the danger of such errors by setting Maisie as a reflection of herself in many ways. Maisie becomes a beacon of hope for society's decline into a relativity that Murdoch feared and, as such, Americans can bond with Maisie and see a commonality between the continents.

**EDITORS:** How do you think Murdoch is viewed by Americans today? Do you think the popularity of her novels has changed? Is she still perceived as 'anti-feminist'?

**BOVE:** While Murdoch's novels are still very popular reading in the USA, most American academics focus on her philosophy rather than her novels, to some extent, because her philosophy fits well with contemporary philosophical issues. Her last great philosophical work *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, which discusses philosophy from Plato onwards, would have provided much material for critical assessment. That she was not included as much in British literature taught in America may have begun early on with the perception of her as anti-feminist, but today it would be due to the current emphasis on postcolonial novels in English. Even my own university's English department held a vote some twenty years ago suggesting that all twentieth-century British novels on syllabi should be postcolonial novels. Fortunately, that vote failed but universities around the globe are changing their focus when addressing works by novelists that used to be standard in earlier decades, even with authors such as Dickens and Austen. Sometimes, even cultural concerns having nothing to do with the author's writing can affect acceptance by others. A Japanese colleague recently mentioned that Murdoch's works were not now taught as often in Japanese universities (where they once had been regularly used as an English teaching aid). She thought the reason for this change was that the Japanese wanted to focus less on the work of foreign authors and more on Japanese authors.

The shift in what is considered important in today's society by university communities will factor into Murdoch's continued importance, and the timelessness of her messages will be key to her reputation. Murdoch does consider contemporary issues in her novels – she presents conversations and situations on the current lack of faith; she was one of the first authors to present homosexuality as wholly acceptable; androgyny and sexual fluidity appear in her novels; her representation of the Vietnam War in *An Accidental Man* captures an American experience with political realism. She supports the integration and loving acceptance of all sectors of society. She is not tied to what is considered the morality of the past, but to that of loving and caring for others. This message permeates her novels, and it is also explained in her moral philosophy. For decades,

in her interviews and in her writings, Murdoch reiterated what is necessary for achieving happiness: getting on with life; using quiet contemplation or meditation; avoiding calling attention to oneself or being self-obsessed; making a friend; helping others; keeping your moral compass. She feels it is our duty to make better and better choices, to progress toward the good, to find that natural happiness. Emerging from the pandemic and facing deep divisions in our countries, her novels can provide us with the courage to do so.

- 1 James Jeffries' online Murdoch Map project can be found here: <<https://irismurdoch.info>>
- 2 For more information, see Cheryl Bove, 'The Formation and Development of the Iris Murdoch Society', *Iris Murdoch Review* 10 (2019), 4–8.
- 3 Sheila Hale and A.S. Byatt, 'Women Writers Now: Their Approach and Apprenticeship', *Harpers and Queen*, October 1976, 178–91 (180); Veronica Groocock, 'Names and Faces', *The Listener*, 31 December 1981, 817.
- 4 See Cheryl Bove, 'America and Americans in the Novels of Iris Murdoch', in *Encounters with Iris Murdoch*, ed. by Richard Todd (Amsterdam: Free University Press, 1988), 69–83.
- 5 Anatole Broyard, 'Books of The Times', *The New York Times*, 7 January 1977, 56, <<https://www.nytimes.com/1977/01/07/archives/new-jersey-weekly-books-of-the-times.html>> [accessed 2/7/23].
- 6 M.A. Orthofer, 'Review of *An Accidental Man* by Iris Murdoch', *the complete review*, 17 September 2018, <[https://www.complete-review.com/reviews/murdochi/accidental\\_man.htm#](https://www.complete-review.com/reviews/murdochi/accidental_man.htm#)> [accessed 2/7/23].
- 7 John Russell, 'Under Iris Murdoch's Exact, Steady Gaze', *The New York Times*, 22 February 1990, <<https://web.archive.org/web/20150525202308/http://www.nytimes.com/1990/02/22/books/under-iris-murdoch-s-exact-steady-gaze.html>> [accessed 2/7/23].

# Was Iris Murdoch a Phenomenologist?

*Scott H. Moore*

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**I**N RECENT YEARS A NUMBER OF SCHOLARS HAVE DESCRIBED IRIS MURDOCH as a 'phenomenologist'. In some cases she is said to be explicitly engaged in a version of phenomenological research and practice and in other cases that her work merely shows certain similarities to the phenomenological tradition. This issue became a topic of conversation during the 2021 Iris Murdoch Virtual Conference, 'Connection and Communication'. In the question and answer session after Cora Diamond's plenary address, Diamond acknowledged that Murdoch (and others, including perhaps Bernard Williams and herself) might be considered 'closet phenomenologists'.

The answer to the question 'Was Iris Murdoch a phenomenologist?' largely turns on what we mean by the term 'phenomenology'. There is no shortage of answers among phenomenologists themselves (or among those that use the term 'phenomenology'). The difficulties here are compounded by the fact that 'phenomenological' research has migrated into a variety of fields within the natural and social sciences and the humanities. And this is to say nothing of the extraordinary diversity of philosophers themselves who employ the language, assumptions, and practices of 'phenomenology', or describe their work as 'phenomenological'.

Given this great diversity of opinion about how the term phenomenology is used and what it might mean, one might reasonably ask 'What difference would it make whether Iris Murdoch was or was not one'? To the great majority of Murdoch's readers (the general reading public who have loved her fiction for the last half-century), I am sure that it matters not a whit. But it does matter to those members of the scholarly community who want to understand Murdoch and her work as well as possible. Such scholars generally want to locate Murdoch within the dominant streams of twentieth-century intellectual and philosophic thought. Locating Murdoch is a matter of accurately understanding both the assumptions she brought to her work and the goals or objectives toward which she directed that work. As we attempt to grasp how she understood her own work, we develop

better and more realistic expectations about how to evaluate her work and what we can learn from it. If we read her as embracing phenomenology as a way of pursuing either literary art or philosophy (or both), it will tell us a great deal about what she aspired to accomplish and what the implications for this work will be. I will try to address what specific differences such an appellation might make for how we read Murdoch.

As I reflect on the larger question of whether she was or was not a phenomenologist, it seems to me that the answer is unhelpfully both ‘yes’ and ‘no’. Yes, it is entirely appropriate to read or describe Murdoch as a phenomenologist in the most common and generic senses of the term. No, it is much harder to describe her as a participant in the quite specific historical (upper case) Phenomenological tradition that originates with Edmund Husserl and works its way explicitly through the thought of Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, Emmanuel Levinas and others. Indeed, even as she engaged and appropriated insights and perspectives which we might reasonably call phenomenological, it seems clear to me that she frequently directed these insights toward non-phenomenological objectives and distanced herself from the specific Phenomenological tradition.

In order to substantiate these claims, I would like briefly to summarise the diversity of opinion on what phenomenology is and then turn to the complicated ways in which Murdoch’s work embodies and undermines phenomenological assumptions and practices. I will then turn toward a brief examination of some of the instances in her work in which it seems to me that she either misunderstands or rejects the Phenomenological tradition. I will conclude with a response to two critics who have recently argued that she should be seen as a phenomenologist. Throughout it will be necessary for me to distinguish between a generic (or common, lower case) phenomenology and a specific (or proper, upper case) Phenomenology.

### **What is Phenomenology?**

At the most basic level, ‘phenomenological enquiry’ is one which privileges description over explanation. The term is used in most natural and social sciences and increasingly in the humanities and the arts. Whether through ‘phenomenological laws’ or ‘phenomenological approaches’, these multi-disciplinary inquiries share a common commitment to give a full account of the complexity of the phenomena under examination without quickly resorting to explanatory theory. In philosophy, ‘Phenomenology’ names both an historical school of thought and a type of description.

In his essay on ‘The Phenomenological Movement’, Hans-Georg Gadamer noted that ‘the question, “What is Phenomenology?” was posed by almost every scholar whom we can assign to this movement, and the question was answered differently by each one.’<sup>1</sup> Max van Manen identifies no fewer than

twenty-nine distinct versions of philosophical ‘phenomenology’ and nine different forms of the phenomenological reduction or method.<sup>2</sup> And the problem is even more complicated than Gadamer and van Manen suggest because they limit their investigations to so-called ‘continental’ philosophy, when the terms ‘phenomenology’ and ‘phenomenological’ are used frequently (and differently) in the Anglo/analytic tradition.

In the continental tradition, Phenomenology is usually traced to the turn of the twentieth century in the work of Husserl. Dallas Willard writes, ‘Phenomenology arose as an attempt to clarify the general nature of knowledge, especially in its scientific formulations, and to dispel the prejudices of dogmatic Empiricism as to what knowledge or consciousness itself could or could not be or be of’.<sup>3</sup> In an effort to respond to what Husserl saw as the errors of psychologism, naturalism and historicism, Husserl sought to make philosophy a ‘rigorous science’ which could apprehend knowledge in its objectivity, uncorrupted by relativist and psychological assumptions. In the 1920s, Husserl’s student and colleague Heidegger expanded the scope and character of Phenomenology. Heidegger came to the conclusion that Husserl’s reflective Phenomenology did not give sufficient attention to numerous important aspects of the apprehension of phenomena, including the difference between Being (*das Sein*) and beings (*das Seiendes*, ‘that which is’) and the role time plays in this apprehension of phenomena. Husserl responded by asserting that Heidegger had abandoned the essential character of Phenomenological research. In the coming decades, the Phenomenological tradition on the continent would be expanded and transformed in numerous ways. To give only a few examples, Jean-Paul Sartre would include nonbeing among the phenomena of apprehension, Hans-Georg Gadamer would develop the hermeneutical insights of Phenomenology, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty would investigate the phenomenological implications of human embodiment.

Phenomenology is also an important concept within Anglo/analytic philosophy, but it lacks the sense of a school or tradition that is seen in the continental circles. There are similarities and differences. Both analytics and continentals use phenomenology to identify a commitment to reflection on appearance (phenomena) which is unencumbered by explanatory theory. Within analytic philosophy, phenomenology is almost always generic. The term is used to identify what appears to be the case prior to reflection and analysis. The prominent journal *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* was founded by Marvin Farber in 1940, and though the origins of Farber’s own work included a dissertation on Husserl in 1928, subsequent editors of the journal, such as Roderick Chisholm and Ernest Sosa, turned the focus toward a more analytic direction for the journal.

Within continental philosophy, Phenomenology means something far more specific. At its most basic level, Phenomenology is an approach to what ‘shows

up', to what appears – not to what *must* be the case, despite appearances. Phenomenology is an attempt at recognising the need for, first and in Husserl's words, a *rigorous* description of phenomena (what appears) and, second, a delineation of what the structures of our experience are and how they enable apprehension of that world. As such, Phenomenology traditionally begins by setting aside the distinction between appearance and reality. The job of the phenomenologist is to describe the phenomena, to describe what appears. It is not the phenomenologist's job to assume that 'reality' is different from 'appearance'. It is not to assume that something other than what appears is actually the case. Antecedent definitions of concepts and phenomena often distract the observer from seeing how the object 'presents itself'. Robert Sokolowski describes phenomenology as 'the study of human experience and of the ways things present themselves to us in and through such experience'.<sup>4</sup>

### **Murdoch as a phenomenologist**

Numerous scholars have identified Murdoch as practising one or another form of phenomenology. Gary Browning notes that 'Murdoch's novels provide a phenomenological review of imagined experience, shedding light on the contours of personal and social life'.<sup>5</sup> Jessy Jordan writes, 'When Murdoch repeatedly and characteristically refers to the experience of the "ordinary person," one, notably, "... not ... corrupted by philosophy," we should read her as a participant in the phenomenological tradition'.<sup>6</sup> Margaret Guise reads Murdoch's novels 'through the hermeneutical lens of the phenomenology of love' that is presented in the novels.<sup>7</sup>

It is certainly true that Murdoch shared many of the assumptions and commitments of the Phenomenologists, and she went about her philosophical work in ways that show numerous similarities to the tradition and practice of phenomenology. She was suspicious of both theoretical pre-conceptions and accepted definitions. She was drawn to careful and rich description, both of which are certainly characteristic of all varieties of phenomenology. She saw how corrupting and distorting antecedent views can be, as illustrated in her analysis of how the narrow logical view of the relation between 'is' and 'ought', coupled with a denial of the existence of metaphysical entities, blinded the modern moral philosopher to the limitations of the 'current view' of morality. Like some phenomenologists, she found herself at odds with many conventional analytic philosophical ways of proceeding. She gave preference to the ordinary, everyday experience of the world.

Unfortunately, much of this evidence cuts both ways. We can see a phenomenological emphasis, but it is often undermined by other commitments and interests that she expresses. For instance, she wrote novels, poetry and drama, which seem to resemble the practice of phenomenologists like Sartre and Beauvoir. Yet she

explicitly claimed that she did not want to be a novelist like either of them. In a 1977 interview with Jack Biles, in answer to the question ‘do you see yourself as a “philosophical novelist” [...]?’ she replied, ‘No, I don’t. Or, if I am, it’s in the same sense in which Dostoevsky is, not in the sense in which Simone de Beauvoir is or Sartre is’.<sup>8</sup> (I know of no one who claims Dostoevsky was a phenomenologist.)

Murdoch’s first book of philosophy was on Sartre. On the first page of the first edition (1953) of the introduction to *Sartre: Romantic Rationalist*, she is at pains to distinguish Sartre from Husserl. She writes, Sartre ‘uses the methods and the terminology of Husserl but lacks Husserl’s dogmatism and Platonic aspirations’.<sup>9</sup> Nonetheless, she not only sees Sartre as a phenomenologist, she compares continental phenomenology to travelling on a parallel path with British empiricism: ‘It might even be argued that recent continental philosophers have been discovering, with immense fuss, what the English empiricists have known since Hume, whom Husserl himself claimed as an ancestor’. She concludes the brief four-page introduction with the observation that the ‘novelist proper is, in his way, a sort of phenomenologist’, which she glosses as a ‘describer rather than an explainer’ (*SRR*-1953, ix-x). Both Browning and Guise cite precisely this passage in their defence of describing her philosophy as phenomenology.

Time and space do not permit an exploration of the numerous ways in which the claims that Murdoch makes here about Husserl (especially concerning David Hume) are misleading and problematic. Murdoch makes these same claims in ‘The Novelist as Metaphysician’, but the mature Husserl is quite critical of Hume. Husserl believes that Hume’s scepticism produces a ‘bankruptcy of objective knowledge’ and ends up in ‘solipsism’.<sup>10</sup> There is a certain irony here because I believe that if Murdoch had read Husserl more carefully and extensively, she would have found much there to affirm and develop.<sup>11</sup>

The important point here is not about Husserl or Hume. When *Sartre: Romantic Rationalist* was republished by Chatto and Windus in 1987, Murdoch re-wrote the introduction and eliminated all of the earlier comments about phenomenology she had made in 1953. The four-page introduction about Sartre and phenomenology became a twenty-nine-page introduction in which she put Sartre in dialogue with a variety of currents in contemporary philosophy, including Marxism, Genet, Adorno and, ultimately, Derrida. The new introduction is written long after the ‘charms of Sartrian philosophy’ had worn off.<sup>12</sup> Murdoch would have re-written this introduction during the period of time in which she was revising and editing her Gifford Lectures into what would become *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (1992), and whatever explicit interest she had in phenomenology in the 1950s she left it out of the new edition of the Sartre book. Neither Browning nor Guise note or offer an explanation for why she eliminated her earlier assertions.

I think the strongest arguments in favour of seeing Murdoch as a phenomenologist arise from those numerous passages in which she privileges metaphors

of vision and the importance of ‘really looking’. In the early essay on ‘Vision and Choice in Morality’, she famously privileges the ‘inexhaustible detail of the world, the endlessness of the task of understanding, [and] the importance of not assuming that one has got individuals and situations “taped”’.<sup>13</sup> And later in the same essay, she writes: ‘For purposes of analysis, moral philosophy should remain at the level of the differences, taking the moral forms of life as given, and not try to *get behind them* to a single form’ (*EM* 97). We can see a phenomenological emphasis in her repeated calls for a ‘new vocabulary of attention’ (‘Against Dryness’, *EM* 293) and in her exhortation that the ‘task of attention goes on all the time and at apparently empty and everyday moments we are “looking”, making those little peering efforts of imagination which have such important cumulative results’ (‘The Idea of Perfection’, *EM* 334).

Unfortunately, the difficulty with these passages in which she privileges vision is that for Murdoch the goal of ‘really looking’ is to get a glimpse of ‘reality’. She writes in ‘The Sovereignty of Good Over Other Concepts’ (1970): ‘Art pierces the veil and gives sense to the notion of a reality which lies beyond appearance’. And, one page later, ‘Attention is rewarded by a knowledge of reality’ (*EM* 373). Immediately after the passage in which she extols ‘really looking’, she famously remarks that ‘It is a task to come to see the world as it is’ (*EM* 375). This is two steps forward, three steps backward, on the phenomenological path. Phenomenology prizes sustained vision in order to highlight what appears (the phenomena) rather than getting behind the appearance to what is ‘really there’. It is not that phenomenology is interested in something other than ‘reality’, but the quest for ‘reality’ can blind or distract us from the careful examination of what appears, what presents itself.

In a footnote to the passage above about the ‘inexhaustible detail of the world’, Murdoch makes a point of tying a certain transformation of idealism to phenomenology. She notes, ‘It is Kierkegaard who most specifically, though in some ways tiresomely, displays the transformation of an idealist philosophy into a phenomenology of individual moral struggle’ (*EM* 87). Does she believe that it is Kierkegaard who is occasionally tiresome or that it is the production of a phenomenology itself which is so wearying? (Or both?) It seems to me that she is not using the term in any way which would be connected with the larger Phenomenological tradition. I think she simply means that the moral struggle of the individual is elevated to a heightened position against the pretensions of idealism.

One of the most promising avenues for understanding Murdoch as a phenomenologist might be the extent to which she took advantage of Husserl’s notion of the *Lebenswelt* or ‘life-world’. In his later work, Husserl uses this term to distinguish the world of personal, everyday existence and experience from the world of scientific or theoretical enquiry and endeavour. David Carr describes the life-world as the ‘world we live in most of the time, with its own structures, its own

sort of intersubjectivity, its own objectivity'.<sup>14</sup> This is the world that Murdoch is most concerned with. It is the world of her novels and of her philosophy. It is the world of M and D, of Bradley Pearson and Charles Arrowby and Anne Cavidge. In many respects what we find in Murdoch is a sustained investigation of the life-world, and yet I am unaware of anywhere that she explicates or even uses the term. This is all the more disappointing precisely because she desperately wanted 'more concepts than our philosophies have furnished us with' (*EM* 293). Here is a rich philosophical concept, articulated in the 1930s by Husserl and explicated by Alfred Schutz and numerous others beginning in the 1960s, and she seems to be unaware of or uninterested in it.

Maurice Natanson famously described Husserl as the 'philosopher of infinite tasks'.<sup>15</sup> Such a description might easily apply to Murdoch as well. In 'The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited', she remarked that to 'understand other people is a task which does not come to an end' (*EM* 283). And, in 'The Idea of Perfection', she argued that 'Good is indefinable [...] because of the infinite difficulty of the task of apprehending a magnetic but inexhaustible reality' (*EM* 333). Once again, we are struck by both the similarities of her intentions and the different goals and uses from those of the Phenomenological tradition to which she puts them.

### **Murdoch, Hegel and Husserl**

Though Murdoch referred to phenomenology and phenomenological methods and assumptions throughout her philosophical career, her commentary is quite uneven. At times, she speaks with great care and insight; at other times, her generalisations lead one to question how much she actually understood about the movement. She was clearly interested in phenomenology in general and in Husserl in particular. Clare Mac Cumhaill and Rachael Wiseman note that in her application to Cambridge in 1948 she wanted 'to bring the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl (what little she knew of it – no one in Cambridge had even heard of Husserl) into meditative harmony with the austere logicism of Wittgenstein'. The title of her proposed course of study points toward a menagerie of continental philosophy: 'Some post-Hegelian theories of consciousness: a study in phenomenological and existential philosophy (Husserl, Sartre, and others) with reference to Hegel's "Phenomenology of Mind" and to the work of Kierkegaard, also to the work of Wittgenstein'.<sup>16</sup>

From a phenomenological point of view, this proposed course of study is most confused. Those of us who would like to see her in the phenomenological camp are pleased with her interest, but it is clear that she misunderstands a great deal. And this confusion persists into the next decade. For instance, in the 1950 radio talk 'The Novelist as Metaphysician', noted above, Murdoch asks the question, 'What is Phenomenology?' (*EM* 102). Her 'bold' answer is that it 'might' be 'an *a priori* theory of meaning with a psychological flavour and a highly developed

descriptive technique' (EM 102). I cannot imagine any serious phenomenologist accepting this definition.

Husserl's phenomenology has its origins in a rejection of psychologism, and to call it an '*a priori* theory of meaning' is to disregard the foundational phenomenological practice of looking to see what shows up. But Murdoch prepared this talk for radio, and her goal in this essay is not really to understand or engage phenomenology. Her goal is to understand Hegel's influence on Sartre and other 'phenomenological novelists'. She connects these novels with Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, and in the process tells her listeners, 'Hegel is the founder of phenomenology as a self-conscious philosophical discipline', and 'Since Hegel phenomenology has been the main stream of philosophical thought on the Continent' (EM 103). And also, 'In this perilous Hegelian universe, full of substance and colour and dialectical change, the modern phenomenologist first begins to feel at home' (EM 103). In two reviews in *Mind* a month later, Murdoch again generalises about phenomenology in unhelpful ways. She notes that Sartre 'uses the Husserlian terminology, but an acquaintance with Husserl is not necessary for an understanding of what he is up to' (EM 166). In a review of Beauvoir, she equates 'Hegelian and Husserlian phenomenology' and juxtaposes it against 'Kierkegaardian preaching' (EM 123).

All of the same issues remain in play here, but a better acquaintance with Husserl would have served her well. It is difficult to know what to make of these comments. Perhaps Murdoch is being playful and provocative, not unlike her glee at showing similarities between Sartre and A.J. Ayer or describing 'the Kantian wing and the Surrealist wing of existentialism' (EM 327)? Or is she simply not carefully attending to the relevant differences that make a difference? I think it is the latter.

This seems to show how little of 'modern phenomenology' Murdoch had grasped at this time. Husserl's use of the term 'phenomenology' is quite distinct from Hegel's usage. When Hegel wrote *Die Phänomenologie des Geistes* (as legend has it, finishing it on the eve of Napoleon's attack on Jena), he was attempting to present an account of the new 'spirit' (or mind) which has appeared for this new age. He is both dependent upon Kant and critical of Kant's transcendental idealism. Hegel is giving an account of the appearance (the phenomena) of a new 'spiritual' consciousness. This is a consciousness which accepts Kant's transformation of the knower from a passive to an active position, imposing order on creation to make it intelligible, all the while rejecting Kant's formalism; this order is not fixed and unchangeable. The new *Geist* Hegel presents rejects both the Cartesian ideal of securing the foundations of knowledge and the Kantian formalism that would lay down immutable structures for both knowledge and morality. Hegel's 'dialectical idealism' is an evolving, dynamic, dialectic of consciousness, appropriate for this new age, and this is why history plays such an important role for him. Murdoch called it a 'remarkable book' (EM 103), and it is no exaggeration to see the achievement as profound.

Husserl wanted none of this, and Husserlian and Hegelian phenomenologies are dramatically different. Husserl does not want to discard Descartes; he wants to emulate him and produce what Descartes did not – a ‘rigorous science’ which abolishes the preconceptions of Naturalism and Historicism and gives a rational account of the structures of experience. It will carefully attend to the phenomena, and it will not impose assumptions which are not given in the phenomena. It will attend to givenness. It is rigorous and careful but not ‘profound’. As he says near the end of ‘Philosophy as Rigorous Science’, ‘Profundity is a mark of chaos that genuine science wants to transform into a cosmos, into a simple, completely clear, lucid order. Genuine science [...] knows no profundity’.<sup>17</sup>

In ‘The Existentialist Political Myth’, Murdoch more or less accurately understands the nature of the phenomenological reduction (it ‘puts the question of the objective reality of phenomena “in parenthesis” so that the essential structure of the phenomena may be investigated’). But her description of what follows is at best misleading and at worst confused. ‘What is supposed to emerge is the nature of human consciousness, or, if you like, the human condition’ (*EM* 133). The reduction does not give us an account of the ‘human condition’. It enables us to begin to understand the structure of consciousness which makes apprehension possible. It might be reasonably described as ‘the nature of human consciousness’. It is no way an account ‘of the human condition’.

Husserl and phenomenology appear frequently (though rarely positively) in *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*. Murdoch does finally acknowledge that Husserl ‘was not a Hegelian’, but she confirms her deep dissatisfaction with both the man and his school of thought. She says of Husserl that ‘his conceptual forms or categories are too abstract and rigid to deal with anything like an introspectable mind; and as psychological intuition his method lacks the precision of either science or philosophy. Phenomenological analysis risks an inconclusive division, falling apart into either abstract logical structuring or uninhibited descriptions which may seem to belong to empirical psychology or even to the art of the novelist’.<sup>18</sup> This type of analysis and methodology is not one which she affirms.

Murdoch remarks on Husserl in the context of her engagement (and agreement) with the Buddhist author Katsuki Sekida and his critique of Husserl. She says more than once that ‘there can be no such science’ (*MGM* 241) as she construes Husserl to be affirming. If she understands what Husserl was attempting to accomplish, she does not communicate this clearly. For instance, in the chapter on ‘Consciousness and Thought II’, she is commenting on Husserl’s notion of the phenomenological reduction. She says the following: ‘This “reduction”, providing a cognitive phenomenon which makes no statement about a transcendent world, is the crucial item in Husserl’s “eidetic science”. Hereby we are supposed to be able to inspect pure primal essences which are the basis of all knowledge’ (*MGM* 240). Earlier she had defined the reduction, arguing ‘the so-called phenomenological

reduction, whereby the essence (fundamental structure) of mental activity can be immediately and intuitively grasped as pure phenomenon' (*MGM* 231).

There are several problems here. First, for Husserl, 'transcendent' does not mean 'other worldly' or even 'contrary to imminent'. It means that which does not appear – that which transcends, or lies beyond, our apprehension. If I am examining a box and I am looking at its lid, then the bottom of box, or the contents inside, is momentarily 'transcendent' because I cannot apprehend it. More important, however, for Husserl, is his deep rejection of the notion that one is (to use Murdoch's words) 'inspect[ing] pure primal essences'. Understanding Husserl's use of the notion of 'essence' requires care. If 'essence' is understood in the traditional way as metaphysical substance distinct from its 'accidents', then no distinction could be further from what Husserl is trying to achieve. To assume that physical objects consist of essences and their accidental properties is exactly what he is trying to get away from. When Husserl said 'to the things themselves' he meant without the encumbrances of 'theory', however ironic some of us may find that charge to be. Gadamer remembers him saying, 'Not always the big bills, gentlemen. Small change! Small change!'.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, in the 'phenomenological reduction', we do not reduce consciousness to something else. We reduce our experience to the field of pure consciousness. We 'bracket' the question of existence so that we can fully describe the nature of the experience. Thus Murdoch's language of 'pure primal essences' and her description of the reduction can be misleading or distracting. If Murdoch understands this, she does not communicate it to her reader.

Ultimately, for Murdoch, 'Husserlian phenomenology [...] seem[s] to constitute a philosophical dead end, because the chosen method of description or analysis of consciousness is too abstract, too rigid, inappropriately specialised, is at the wrong level, misses the nature of what it is attempting to explain [...]. Such theorising fails because it aims at a kind of scientific status, mixes philosophy with over-simplified psychology, or attempts to offer a "neutral" analysis which ignores morality (value) or treats it as a small special subject' (*MGM* 237). One might want to argue with Murdoch about these claims. One cannot argue with the fact that she rejected what she took Husserlian Phenomenology to be. She echoes this in a letter to Philippa Foot of 9 March 1985. In reference to Richard Wollheim's *The Thread of Life* (1984), she wrote, 'it seems to me thoroughly wrong-headed. How can he, and *mutatis mutandis* J. Searle, resurrect all that Husserl-style stuff for describing the mind?'.<sup>20</sup>

### **Murdoch, Heidegger and Sartre**

While the Phenomenological tradition begins with Husserl, many scholars see its most significant development through the work of Heidegger and Sartre, and both thinkers were important for Murdoch. Heidegger was born in 1889 and

died in 1976. Sartre (1905–1980) was sixteen years Heidegger’s junior, and Sartre’s work is generally understood to be inspired (both positively and negatively) by Heidegger’s own transformation of Husserlian Phenomenology. For most of the rest of the philosophical world, Sartre comes after Heidegger. But for Murdoch, it was the other way around. It was Sartre who drew her into contemporary continental philosophy, and her interest in Heidegger came much later. Unlike Sartre, who was a regular part of her intellectual world from the 1940s on, Heidegger does not figure prominently in the arguments of her early philosophical essays.<sup>21</sup> And though an interest in Sartre stayed with her throughout her career, Sartre’s centrality for her work faded almost as quickly as it arose. The first edition of the Sartre book contains a measured criticism which grows into substantial opposition when the 1960s essays on moral philosophy appear. By the last productive decade of her life, there is very little left of the enthralled curiosity that we see at moments in the Sartre book, in the early essays, or in the enthusiasm of her meeting with Sartre himself in Brussels in 1945.

It is quite the opposite with her reflection on Heidegger. Her interest in Heidegger grew throughout her career. Early on she was keenly aware of Heidegger, even if she had read little of his work. In a 1948 letter to Philippa Foot, she announces that ‘*Sein und Zeit* will be published here in the summer and after that All will be New’.<sup>22</sup> (Is this keen excitement or mock celebration?) Heidegger had published the first two divisions of *Being and Time* in 1927. Peter J. Conradi claims that Gilbert Ryle (who had critically reviewed it in 1929) loaned Murdoch a copy of *Sein und Zeit* in 1949.<sup>23</sup> How much of it she read and understood is unknown. The first English translation by John MacQuarrie and Edward Robinson did not appear until 1962. By 1966, Murdoch is inserting a long quotation from it (from Division II, about Being-towards-the-end) within the text of her novel *The Time of the Angels* – perhaps for no greater purpose than to illustrate the obtuseness of philosophy in general and to highlight the difference between the intellectual worlds of the characters. Of course, perhaps one should not be surprised to discover that the maniacal character Carel Fisher is reading Heidegger.

In 1969, Murdoch acknowledged in ‘On “God” and “Good”’, that ‘I am never too sure of having understood [Heidegger]’ (*EM* 341). And as late as 1987, she still considers herself a novice when it comes to understanding Heidegger. She wrote in her journal on 20 April 1987: ‘I am spending a lot of time at last trying to understand Heidegger – all his ideas, and his development. Wish I had thought of this earlier!’<sup>24</sup> Consequently, Heidegger is a frequent interlocutor in *Metaphysics as Guide to Morals*, and Murdoch worked on a manuscript on Heidegger for six years.<sup>25</sup>

It is quite difficult to know what to say about Murdoch’s engagement with Heidegger and to what extent it sheds light on whether she should be understood as some sort of phenomenologist. She was, in general, quite critical of Heidegger,

but unlike her engagement with Husserl, she seems to have had a good grasp of Heidegger's overall assumptions and arguments. The most important text we have from her on this subject is the unfinished manuscript which was, no doubt, affected by her tragic illness. It would certainly be unfair to criticise a document that she was unable either to complete or to edit. It seems obvious that she believed that Heidegger's work was worthy of her time and interest. Whether she saw that work as ultimately exemplifying or critiquing phenomenology seems impossible to know with confidence. (In *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* she asks, 'Whether or not Heidegger is a phenomenologist is an interesting (even important) question' [MGM 233]. This appears to be one of the questions she set herself to in the Heidegger manuscript.) What is important and can be noted with confidence is that at the end of her life it was Heidegger that she believed she must respond to, and her last unfinished work was a serious and sustained engagement with his difficult thought.

Thus with both Sartre and Heidegger, we find the mature Murdoch at odds with both the form and the content of their philosophical work. Such a rejection obviously does not entail a rejection of phenomenology as either a method or a school of thought. But it does show a level of disagreement and discontent with the works and the ways in which these two great philosophers made their contributions. In the light of this, I find it difficult to see how her engagement with their work strengthens the case for reading Murdoch as a 'phenomenologist'.

### Reply to objections

Before concluding, however, it seems worthwhile to consider two recent publications which offer ways of understanding of Murdoch as a phenomenologist. Margaret Guise wants to see Murdoch not only specifically within the Husserlian phenomenological tradition but engaging in a form of the phenomenological reduction in her novels. Jessy Jordan sees Murdoch more as an example of the generic, analytic approach, exemplified by a phenomenology of value as presented in John McDowell's response to J.L. Mackie concerning value and the 'fabric of the world'. These essays present important potential objections to the reading of Murdoch that I have been offering.

In 'On the Failure of Philosophy to "Think Love": Iris Murdoch as Phenomenologist', Guise believes that Murdoch employs a version of Husserl's own methods. She wants to read Murdoch's novels 'through the lens' of her 'phenomenology of love'. To make this case, Guise argues that in the first-person narration of characters like Bradley Pearson of *The Black Prince* or Charles Arrowby of *The Sea, The Sea* one may 'discern moments of phenomenological reduction'.<sup>26</sup> On Guise's reading, Husserl's reflections on both the unitary constitution of the ego within the flow of time and the difficulties surrounding the ego's relation to other egos is mirrored in characters like Pearson and Arrowby. She carefully illustrates

how the egos of both men are constituted by not only their contemplative reflection on how the past has brought them to their current dilemmas but also on their failure to engage with and understand others. She acknowledges that suggesting that these characters are ‘attempting a form of phenomenological reduction at this stage is perhaps slightly overstating the case’.<sup>27</sup> Guise concludes by thoughtfully engaging Murdoch’s phenomenology of love with the important work of Jean-Luc Marion.

I find Guise’s presentation to be fascinating and provocative, and I would, frankly, love to be persuaded by it. As Guise acknowledges, her construal is most persuasive when taken as a way of reading Murdoch’s novels rather than supposing that Murdoch herself intended to exemplify a Husserlian methodology about which she was obviously quite sceptical (and probably did not understand as well as Guise does). It is perfectly legitimate for readers to impose their own hermeneutic on the text, but it seems clear (from the foregoing material) that Murdoch did not approve of the methodology or find it to be a reliable way of investigating phenomena. Thus there is no authorial intent, and in the absence of such intent, it seems misleading to conclude that Murdoch is a phenomenologist. We may read her phenomenologically; that does not make her a phenomenologist.

Jordan has recently argued that Murdoch’s philosophical method is indebted to phenomenology in ‘On the Transcendental Structure of Iris Murdoch’s Philosophical Method’. Jordan is attempting to explicate how Murdoch’s distinctive Platonism distinguished her from her more Aristotelian colleagues Philippa Foot and Elizabeth Anscombe in their joint reply to the ethical non-cognitivism of their day. Jordan argues that Murdoch employs three philosophical methodologies: genealogy, phenomenology, and a transcendental approach.

Concerning the phenomenology, Jordan’s point here is that Murdoch privileged ‘the ordinary person’s lived experience of value’. These values are not ‘projected, invented, or created by the will’, and Jordan enumerates numerous examples of Murdoch’s recognition and appreciation of ‘ordinary, non-philosophical reflection on the nature of morals’. Jordan describes these as ‘mini-phenomenologies’ that are ‘ubiquitous throughout Murdoch’s corpus’.<sup>28</sup> For Jordan, this appeal to a phenomenology of value plays an important role in his construal of how Murdoch bridges her genealogy of subverting the dominant philosophical view of dividing facts and values and her modest transcendental method for the reality (and even sovereignty) of the Good. I do not disagree with Jordan’s larger argument. My hesitancy comes through his appeal to her participation in the ‘phenomenological tradition’. If that phenomenological tradition is the more generic (analytic) one that privileges discovery and description, then I do not disagree. Jordan makes a compelling use of the similarities between John McDowell’s phenomenology of value and Murdoch’s own.

## Conclusion

While it is clear that Murdoch shares many interests and commitments held and practiced by the Phenomenological tradition, my own sense is that she is probably not best understood as a ‘phenomenologist’. This is not to exclude her from the ranks; it is to identify the most helpful ways of locating Murdoch on the philosophical spectrum. She engaged in many practices similar to Phenomenologists but she was not focused on the questions and issues which have been most typical of that tradition. She is not concerned with employing phenomenological distinctions found in the analysis of ontology or epistemology. She did not use or adapt their terminology in any expansive way. For instance, she does not appeal to the *Noema* or to an eidetic sense, she is not interested in making distinctions between *Vorhanden* or *Zuhanden* (what is present at hand rather than ready at hand). She only engages the questions surrounding *pour soi* (for itself) and *en soi* (in itself) when she is explicitly engaging Sartre’s thought, and even here she expresses a certain reluctance. Whether she employs a version of the phenomenological reduction is a contested matter. Guise obviously believes that she does, but Murdoch never claims that she is using the reduction; indeed she critiques and even, some might say, ridicules it.

Moreover, she explicitly distanced herself from certain interests of the tradition. As I have noted above, if one were to want to view her as a phenomenologist, then she should be seen as an advocate for a ‘lower case’ phenomenology in a generic, non-specific way which merely privileges description over theory, rather than in any specific identification of the school of Phenomenology which seeks to be a rigorous science that apprehends both the complexity of the phenomena and the structures of our own experience which make this apprehension possible. But if this is the case, one is still left with the question of whether describing Murdoch as a ‘phenomenologist’ really helps to illumine or explain the work that she did and the beliefs that she held.

This enquiry began with the question of how best to understand Iris Murdoch and her work. I do not believe that Murdoch is best understood through the categories or labels offered by phenomenology. If she found herself using and employing the practices of phenomenology, I think that it is more likely because of her dissatisfaction with the prevailing attitudes and methodologies which she confronted elsewhere. She did not adopt these practices because the Phenomenological tradition offered her a promising way forward. She was, as in other important areas of her life, a fellow traveller not a party member.<sup>29</sup>

1 Hans-Georg Gadamer, ‘The Phenomenological Movement’ (1963), *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. and ed. by David E. Linge (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 130–81 (143).

2 See Max van Manen, *Phenomenology of Practice: Meaning-Giving Methods in Phenomenological Research and Writing* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

3 Dallas Willard, ‘Historical and Philosophical

- Foundations of Phenomenology’, <<https://dwillard.org/articles/historical-and-philosophical-foundations-of-phenomenology>> [accessed 30/6/23].
- 4 Robert Sokolowski, *Introduction to Phenomenology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 2.
  - 5 Gary Browning, *Why Iris Murdoch Matters* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 13.
  - 6 Jessy Jordan, ‘On the Transcendental Structure of Iris Murdoch’s Philosophical Method’, *European Journal of Philosophy* 30 (2022), 394–410 (398).
  - 7 Margaret Guise, ‘On the Failure of Philosophy to “think love”: Iris Murdoch as Phenomenologist’, *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 51:2 (2018), 1–19 (1).
  - 8 Jack I. Biles, ‘An Interview with Iris Murdoch’, *A Tiny Corner in the House of Fiction*, ed. by Gillian Dooley (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003), 56–69 (58).
  - 9 Iris Murdoch, *Sartre: Romantic Rationalist* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), vii, hereafter referenced parenthetically in the text as *SRR-1953*.
  - 10 Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Philosophy: An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy*, trans. by David Carr (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970), 88.
  - 11 Husserl writes: ‘Astounding as Hume’s genius is, it is the more regrettable that a correspondingly great philosophical ethos is not joined with it. This is evident in the fact that Hume takes care, throughout his whole presentation, blandly to disguise or interpret as harmless his absurd results [...] he [Hume] has become the father of a still effective, unhealthy positivism which hedges before philosophical abysses, or covers them over on the surface, and comforts itself with the successes of the positive sciences and their psychologistic elucidation’. Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Philosophy*, 88.
  - 12 Iris Murdoch, *Sartre: Romantic Rationalist* (London: Vintage, 1999), 10, hereafter referenced parenthetically in the text as *SRR-1987*.
  - 13 Iris Murdoch, ‘Vision and Choice in Morality’, in *Existentialists and Mystics*, ed. by Peter J. Conradi (New York: Penguin, 1999), 76–98 (87), hereafter referenced parenthetically in the text as *EM*.
  - 14 David Carr, *Phenomenology and the Problem of History: A Study of Husserl’s Transcendental Philosophy* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974), 131.
  - 15 Maurice Natanson, *Edmund Husserl: Philosopher of Infinite Tasks* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973).
  - 16 Clare Mac Cumhaill and Rachael Wiseman, *Metaphysical Animals: How Four Women Brought Philosophy Back to Life* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2022), 206–7.
  - 17 Edmund Husserl, ‘Philosophy as Rigorous Science’, in *Phenomenology and the Crisis of Philosophy*, trans. by Quentin Lauer (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1965), 144.
  - 18 Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (New York: Penguin, 1992), 158, hereafter referenced parenthetically in the text as *MGM*.
  - 19 Gadamer, ‘The Phenomenological Movement’, 133.
  - 20 Iris Murdoch to Philippa Foot, 9 March 1985, *Living on Paper*, ed. by Avril Horner and Anne Rowe (London: Chatto and Windus, 2015), 522.
  - 21 The most interesting, and bizarre, comment about Heidegger from this period occurs in the 1969 essay ‘On “God” and “Good”’. She says, ‘most existentialist thinking seems to me either optimistic romancing or else something positively Luciferian. (Possibly Heidegger is Lucifer in person.)’ (*EM* 358).
  - 22 Iris Murdoch to Philippa Foot, 24 April 1948, *Living on Paper*, 109.
  - 23 Peter J. Conradi, quoted by Justin Broackes, ‘Editorial Note & Acknowledgements’, *Iris Murdoch, Philosopher: A Collection of Essays*, ed. by Justin Broackes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 111–14 (111).
  - 24 Iris Murdoch, quoted by Miles Leeson, *Iris Murdoch: Philosophical Novelist* (London: Continuum, 2011), 71.
  - 25 This manuscript, unpublished in her lifetime, was until recently only available to Murdoch scholars in the Iris Murdoch Collections at Kingston University Archives (KUAS6/5/1/4). The first 26 pages of the manuscript were published in *Iris Murdoch, Philosopher* (2011); the whole work is now forthcoming with Oxford University Press, edited by Broackes. See Justin Broackes, ‘Editorial Note & Acknowledgements’, in *Iris Murdoch, Philosopher*, 111.
  - 26 Guise, ‘On the Failure of Philosophy to “Think Love”: Iris Murdoch as Phenomenologist’, 10.
  - 27 Guise, ‘On the Failure of Philosophy to “Think Love”: Iris Murdoch as Phenomenologist’, 15.
  - 28 Jordan, ‘On the Transcendental Structure of Iris Murdoch’s Philosophical Method’, 398.
  - 29 I wish to thank Hannah Marije Altorf for her many helpful suggestions on an earlier draft of this essay.

# Iris Murdoch May Not Be a ‘Women’s Writer’, but She Certainly Writes for Me

*Lucy Bolton*

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THERE IS ONLY ONE THING MORE CERTAIN TO APPEAR WITHIN THE critique of a woman’s body of work than a focus on its quality, and that is the supposed relevance of her personal life. Whether mental illness, alcoholism, promiscuity, or privilege, biographical details invariably dominate a woman artist’s reception and reputation, especially posthumously. One of the central tenets of this approach is to ask about motherhood: about whether the woman was a mother, and how ‘good’ a mother she was. Was she enriched by becoming a mother? Was she selflessly devoted to her children? Or did she cruelly and selfishly put her work first? These judgements, inevitably based upon supposition and third, fourth or fifth-hand accounts, are seen somehow to affect the value of a woman’s work, especially for other women. Are they nurturing? Maternal? Selfless? Or something else: more self-centred, heartless, un-womanly?

Rachel Cusk’s assessment of Iris Murdoch as ‘not a women’s writer’ is founded on misconceived and outdated judgements such as these.<sup>1</sup> The very notion of there being ‘a women’s writer’ is itself a peculiar assessment. What does this mean? Does it mean, as Cusk asserts, that the writer should be concerned with an ‘inalienably personal connection to lived life’?<sup>2</sup> If ostensibly so, then there is plainly a further level of qualification in Cusk’s criteria: the ‘lived life’ needs to involve those experiences which Cusk considers to be essential to womanhood. This seems to mean that the writer should be, and create women characters who are, marginalised, excluded, and downtrodden. Taking Virginia Woolf as an example of a writer who lived and wrote as a woman, Cusk fails to take into account the full range of Woolf’s identity and characteristics. A survivor of sexual abuse and sufferer of severe mental illness, the restrictions on Woolf’s life choices cannot all be put down to her choice to spurn the sort of intellectual institutions and milieu that Murdoch embraced. There is a deep irony in Cusk’s assertion of the need for a woman writer to ground her writing in the experience

of ordinariness, and her criticism of Murdoch for allegedly failing to do so, when Murdoch herself was, in her philosophy and her novels, concerned with this precise realm of quotidian experience.

Murdoch was an intellectual. She was an only child, with Irish origins, who had a devotion to friendship and a passionate enthusiasm for romance. She was a prolific writer, and a dedicated scholar, a trained and highly qualified classicist, academic philosopher and teacher. This was her daily life, and she mined it for her characters, stories, and philosophies. She always resisted the idea that she was a philosophical novelist, claiming that she wrote about philosophy and philosophers because that was what she knew. Famously, she said to Bryan Magee in 1977 when challenged about the philosophical content of her novels, that she wrote about philosophy because she happened to know about philosophy, and that ‘if I knew about sailing ships, I would put in sailing ships’.<sup>3</sup> We may suspect that Murdoch was being a little disingenuous here, and that in fact she did indeed intentionally trial or work through many of her philosophical ideas in her novels. But this in no way detracts from the argument that she was writing about her idea of ordinariness: the ‘lived lives’ that she knew.

There is something inherently peculiar about wishing, as Cusk does, that Murdoch’s life ‘had encompassed more’.<sup>4</sup> One might say the same about Ernest Hemingway: if only he had not been all-consumingly preoccupied with bullfighting, killing animals, and his own self-improvement as a writer, perhaps he could have written more widely accessible novels about being a bank clerk or home cooking. This is the fundamental flaw in Cusk’s argument. The reader does not need to have the same life experience as the writer in order to feel spoken to or written for. Indeed, for this reader, Murdoch is one of the writers, along with Woolf, who does feel like an inspiration and an intellectual forebear. As a scholar, writer, philosopher and woman, Murdoch is someone who inspires me in my present work and life, and also offers a way in to understanding those worlds of information, history and intellect which Cusk considers to have been so exclusively male. For Cusk, ‘the woman writer loses her connection to her womanhood and hence to personal truth’ when she enters these worlds.<sup>5</sup> Even if Murdoch’s work is insufficient evidence for Cusk to see that Murdoch retains her indomitable strength of self throughout her time spent in these worlds, the recent books about philosophy’s ‘golden generation’ of women at Oxford in the 1940s are compelling evidence of how Murdoch, Mary Midgley, Philippa Foot, and Elizabeth Anscombe lived their ordinary lives in these academic enclaves.<sup>6</sup> They inhabited these worlds – which Cusk considers to have been ‘created by men’ with ‘male values’ – on their own terms and in authentic, personally resonant ways, making their marks and forging their careers.<sup>7</sup>

Toril Moi considered that the question of women and writing had become a marginal topic in feminist theory when she revisited the idea in her 2008

article “I am not a woman writer”: About women, literature and feminist theory today’.<sup>8</sup> ‘In the 1980s’, Moi writes ‘feminist theory was hugely preoccupied with questions relating to women and creativity, women and writing, women and the production of art’. Women’s writing, she argues, was ‘often defined as writing by women, about women, and for women’, and *écriture féminine*, as championed in France by Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous, focused on psychoanalytical ideas of femininity. And yet, the term was always contested, and Moi cites Doris Lessing as being quick to deny that *The Golden Notebook* (1962) was about sexual differences.<sup>9</sup> For Cusk, Murdoch compares unfavourably with Lessing, who is positioned as a writer more committed to conveying a specifically feminine constitution of identity and who reaps the benefit of cultural centrality as a result. And yet, as Moi argues, Roland Barthes, writing on the death of the author in 1977, and Judith Butler, writing on the performativity of gender in 1990, created a climate where the gendered identity of writing became less and less of a focus for theoretical work.<sup>10</sup> And yet, in the 2020s, it is apparent that Murdoch occupies a more prominent cultural position than many other writers of her time, including Lessing. Perhaps this is precisely because those voices who have always questioned what it means to write *as* or *for* women now have more of a cultural and theoretical platform and increasingly find that Murdoch speaks to them.

Cusk’s other exemplar, Virginia Woolf, is also cited by Moi as an example of a woman who believed that ‘it is fatal [...] in any way to speak consciously as a woman’. As Moi concludes, following Woolf in *A Room of One’s Own* (1929), women writers ‘must simply be themselves, and, above all, they must “think of things in themselves”, that is to say, attend to “reality”, so as to “find it and collect it and communicate it to the rest of us”’.<sup>11</sup> This language resonates strongly with Murdoch’s compulsion to pay attention to the particularity of things; to cultivate a ‘patient, loving regard’ for things as they really are, not as they are clouded by our own social personas and relational prejudices, as she argues in ‘The Idea of Perfection’ (1964).<sup>12</sup> And it is in her descriptions of the everyday lived experiences of her characters that Murdoch displays her own capacity for attention. In *Under the Net* (1954), Jake Donaghue’s tendency to resort to martial arts moves when words fail him is a prime example of Murdoch conveying her experience of studying and analysing masculinity, just as, in *The Sandcastle* (1957), Rain Carter’s exclusion from Bill Mor’s political ambitions reveals an awareness of deceptions and delusions in love.<sup>13</sup> In Murdoch’s philosophical works, women’s everyday lives are a constant reference point for her thinking about our lives as moral agents. Mothers- and daughters-in-law, selfless aunts, girls living with their cats and looking after their plants, mothers who are somewhat egotistical: all these different female archetypes appear as instructive, recognisable and – most importantly – valuable in Murdoch’s philosophy. Her work promotes and

prioritises the lives of women in ways that include, but exceed, stereotypical realms of motherhood and domesticity.

The way in which Cusk assesses Murdoch's intention to live 'unfettered and equal precisely where women have traditionally been constrained and inferior' conveys a measure of disapproval, as does Cusk's description of the way Murdoch 'created brilliant, limited people as her mouthpieces, not ordinary ones'. Cusk's overall assessment of Murdoch's contribution to literature as a 'lost and gifted mother' is an extraordinary indication of an essentialist notion of femininity, tied to reproductivity, and reveals an inability to conceive of the rich life of the mind and body that Murdoch enjoyed, endured, and learned from.<sup>14</sup> Bemoaning a lack of maternal attitudes, or content, in Murdoch's work is not only a misunderstanding of the idea of female genealogy in culture, where Murdoch can indeed be seen as a forebear and an inspirational trailblazer, but also a denigration of Murdoch's life as a woman. Cusk seems to argue that Murdoch is the *wrong type* of woman writer. This is a restrictive vision of the writer that, thankfully, no longer has critical currency. Moi is clearly right to argue that 'every writer will have to find her own voice, and her own vision'. And using Cusk's own phrase, the 'lived life', we can see how Moi's conclusion concurs with the position which Cusk fails to understand: 'Inevitably, a woman writer writes as a woman, not as a generic woman, but as the (highly specific and idiosyncratic) woman she is'.<sup>15</sup>

It is Murdoch's specificity and idiosyncrasy that make her the resurgent writer for our times, as new and established readers of her novels and her philosophy discover, and discover anew, the accessibility and relevance of her queer, intersectional, non-traditional, and strongly individual writing.

- 1 Rachel Cusk, 'On Iris Murdoch as a Woman Writer', *Iris Murdoch Review* 13 (2022), 29–32 (29).
- 2 Cusk, 'On Iris Murdoch as a Woman Writer', 29.
- 3 Bryan Magee, 'Literature and Philosophy: A Conversation with Bryan Magee', in *Existentialists and Mystics*, ed. by Peter J. Conradi (New York, Penguin, 1999), 3–30 (20).
- 4 Cusk, 'On Iris Murdoch as a Woman Writer', 31.
- 5 Cusk, 'On Iris Murdoch as a Woman Writer', 30.
- 6 See Benjamin J.B. Lipscomb, *The Women Are Up to Something: How Elizabeth Anscombe, Philippa Foot, Mary Midgley, and Iris Murdoch Revolutionized Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021) and Clare Mac Cumhaill and Rachael Wiseman, *Metaphysical Animals: How Four Women Brought Philosophy Back to Life* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2022).
- 7 Cusk, 'On Iris Murdoch as a Woman Writer', 30.
- 8 Toril Moi, "'I am not a woman writer": About women, literature and feminist theory today', *Feminist Theory*, vol. 9:3 (2008), 259–271.
- 9 Moi, "'I am not a woman writer": About women, literature and feminist theory today', 260–261.
- 10 See Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', in *Image Music Text*, ed. by Stephen Heath (London: Fontana, 1977) and Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).
- 11 Moi, "'I am not a woman writer": About women, literature and feminist theory today', 267.
- 12 Iris Murdoch, 'The Idea of Perfection', in *Existentialists and Mystics*, ed. by Peter J. Conradi (New York: Penguin, 1999), 299–336 (331).
- 13 Iris Murdoch, *Under the Net* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1954); *The Sandcastle* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1957).
- 14 Cusk, 'On Iris Murdoch as a Woman Writer', 32.
- 15 Moi, "'I am not a woman writer": About women, literature and feminist theory today', 268.

# Response and Responsibility: Jane Austen and Iris Murdoch

*Frances White*

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THE TITLE OF THIS ESSAY IDENTIFIES TWO AREAS IN WHICH INTIMATE connections can be traced between the work of these great English novelists, separated not merely by the full century between Jane Austen's death in 1817 and Iris Murdoch's birth in 1919, but by the immense philosophical, theological, scientific, technological and cultural changes in human knowledge and perception which separate the turn of the eighteenth century from the mid-to-late twentieth century when each of them was writing.

Jane Austen (1775–1817), an English clergy daughter, lived her whole life at home with her immediate family, had little formal education, never married, was chaste, virginal, and staunchly Christian.<sup>1</sup> She is known for just a handful of novels: though as Somerset Maugham says, 'On these few books her fame rests, and her fame is secure'.<sup>2</sup> The core six novels were all published within six years (1811–17); she made very little money from her writing and remained an anonymous private figure until after her death.

Iris Murdoch (1919–99), an Irish woman although she lived in England, had a first class education at Badminton, Oxford and Cambridge and became a professional teacher and writer of philosophy before she was a novelist. Before her long and happy marriage to John Bayley, she had a colourful, somewhat promiscuous early life which makes the doings of such as Lydia Bennet seem mild in comparison. She was a post-Christian atheist albeit with an abiding concern for religion and the spiritual life. She published twenty-six novels over forty years, indeed her novel-writing life was as long as Austen's entire life, and plays, poetry and works of philosophy. She achieved world renown within her own lifetime, was made a Dame of the British Empire, and earned a great deal of money from her writing.

So the differences between the lives and times of these two women are enormous. Yet Murdoch said: 'I would like to think that something of the spirit of Jane Austen, whose work I love dearly, had entered into my work'.<sup>3</sup> This essay engages with the question of how this could be possible and, furthermore, with the question of whether there is anything in the spirit of Murdoch's work to which

Jane Austen, whom she would surely shock even as Austen herself shocks Auden, could respond. What, in other words, would happen, if Jane ... met Iris? This is an attempt imaginatively and critically to explore such a meeting of their minds.

Early Murdoch critics A.S. Byatt and Peter J. Conradi touched briefly on echoes of Austen in her work; more recently, Nick Turner and Gillian Dooley have written perceptive essays on specific links between Austen's and Murdoch's novels.<sup>4</sup> The plethora of discernable connections would justify a monograph but this preliminary study is confined to three main points. First, how Murdoch pays *homage* to Austen in her work; second, how *response* to the novel is of paramount importance to each of them, and third, how *responsibility* lies, in each case, at the heart of the ethics that their work differently but consonantly propounds.

Murdoch admires Austen as a creator of great fictional characters, acknowledging her as a writer whose influence she desires and with whom she identifies.<sup>5</sup> She repeatedly declares Mr Knightley to be one of her 'two favourite characters in literature' (*TCHF* 150, 224), and refers to Austen's work in five of her novels. In *An Unofficial Rose* (1962) Miranda Peronett hurts her ankle and is carried to the house by Felix Meecham like Marianne by Willoughby in *Sense and Sensibility*. To amuse her convalescence, her grandfather, Hugh Peronett, sends Miranda 'a complete set of the novels of Jane Austen in a modern leather-bound edition'. But Miranda, 'after remarking on the extreme pliancy of their covers, took no further interest in Hugh's Jane Austens' and is 'unmoved by *Pride and Prejudice*'.<sup>6</sup> In *Bruno's Dream* (1969) Danby Odell visits Diana Greensleave and finds her to be, 'A girl who did nothing. Who sat in plump chintzy chairs and read. He saw a book on one of the chairs. Jane Austen' and he interprets this fact as implying 'A woman who was perhaps a little bored. Who waited'.<sup>7</sup> In *Nuns and Soldiers* (1980) two friends, Gertrude Openshaw and Anne Cavidge, read novels together, like Catherine Morland and Isabella Thorpe in *Northanger Abbey*, and the novels Gertrude reads are Jane Austen's.<sup>8</sup> *The Good Apprentice* (1985) concludes with Stuart Cuno, whose priggish virtue recalls that of Fanny Price, reading 'a novel by Jane Austen called *Mansfield Park*', of which he naively remarks, 'I can't put it down. It's awfully good',<sup>9</sup> which makes his father and brother laugh at him.<sup>10</sup> And finally, in *The Book and the Brotherhood* (1987) the last book Matthew Hernshaw reads before he dies is *Sense and Sensibility*. Ironically, like Mr Dashwood in Austen's novel, Mr Hernshaw too fails to make clearly specified provision for his dependents which causes the next generation financial and emotional difficulties, though in a very different manner. Each of these Murdoch novels is thus nuanced by intertextual reference to Austen in subtle ways which could be further detailed and discussed.

What, then, do Austen and Murdoch share in common? The first and most striking parallel is that both are novelists of comic genius. In *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (1992) Murdoch remarks that 'A morally high sense of the comic

is ubiquitous in literature', and that 'Novels are, however sad or catastrophic, essentially comic. When one rereads a great novel one is often surprised to find how funny it is'.<sup>11</sup> Literary scholarship can lose sight of this central fact, which is what keeps the common reader reading both Austen's and Murdoch's novels, and also keeps the literary critic re-reading them. As an Oxford professor, Richard Jenkyns, has charmingly put it, Jane Austen 'has possibly given pleasure to more men in bed than any other woman in history, except perhaps Agatha Christie', and James Collins begins his study of Austen as a Moral Guide with the statement, 'Jane Austen is very funny. In fact, she is very, very funny' ('Fanny was Right: Jane Austen as Moral Guide', Carson 147).<sup>12</sup> So too is Murdoch. Furthermore, irony is central to the comic effect of both writers, to each of whom Marvin Mudrick's words about Austen could apply: 'her frame was comedy, her defining artistic impulse was irony'.<sup>13</sup>

The second thing they share in common is that Austen and Murdoch are both ardent champions of the novel. *Northanger Abbey* is, as Peter Knox-Shaw remarks, 'evidently intended over a long period to be her first book' and it 'preserves the character of a manifesto' in which Austen satirically defies the strictures of her era on the worthlessness of the novel genre.<sup>14</sup> The narrator who, as Jay McInerney nicely observes, 'keeps popping up to wink at us' ('Beautiful Minds', Carson 270), as Murdoch's narrators also do,<sup>15</sup> says:

Oh, it is only a novel! [...] in short, only some work in which the greatest powers of the mind are displayed, in which the most thorough knowledge of human nature, the happiest delineation of its varieties, the liveliest effusions of wit and humour, are conveyed to the world in the best-chosen language.<sup>16</sup>

Parallel to that famous passage can be set Murdoch's comment in *Nuns and Soldiers*:

Anne read with continued amazement. What an extraordinary art form it was, it told you about everything! How informative, how exciting, how funny, how sentimental, how full of moral judgements! (NS 106)

It is of central importance that for both Austen and Murdoch, the novel is clearly concerned with morality as well as with comedy, with ethics as well as enchantment. Turner's study of these two writers observes that 'the novel for both Jane Austen and Iris Murdoch is a place for humour, for entertainment, but also for enlightenment as to human nature [...] and despite the fact that Austen never theorized about fiction or wrote about ethics, the morality expressed in

her novels unites them'.<sup>17</sup> It is indeed because the deep morality in their work is inextricably united with, even revealed *through*, high comedy, that Austen has lasted, and that Murdoch too will last, for as Dooley astutely comments in her comparison of Austen's *Mansfield Park* and Murdoch's *A Fairly Honourable Defeat*, 'Simple tracts with no moral ambiguity do not continue to nourish generations of readers' (Dooley 12).

Thus, both Austen and Murdoch view the world thorough 'a moral lens' as Alain de Botton expresses it ('The Modest Art of Altering Life', Carson 141). Murdoch spells this out in her philosophy, as Jane Austen does not, but as Dooley rightly says, 'Although we have little external evidence about Austen's moral philosophy, *Mansfield Park* seems to imply that she valued self-discipline and attention to the needs of others' (Dooley 1),<sup>18</sup> and even if she would never have put it in such a solemn and didactic tone, Austen would agree with Murdoch that, 'Good novels concern the fight between good and evil and the pilgrimage from appearance to reality. They expose vanity and inculcate humility. They are amazingly moral' (MGM 97). Many critics concur that there is an ethical centre at the heart of Austen's comedies of manners.<sup>19</sup> Not only do both Turner and Dooley find the abiding connection between these novelists in their shared moral response to life, but Austen critics too focus on the essentially moral thrust of her comic presentation of human nature.

Murdoch believes that the responsibility of the writer is to 'overcome egoism and fantasy' in her work and sees Austen as more successful in so doing than herself (*TCHF* 226). Both Murdoch and Austen present the responsibility of overcoming egoism and fantasy as a driving ethical force in their novels. As Karen Valihora notes in a splendid study of *Austen's Oughts*, 'To be selfish is the worst thing one can be in an Austen novel', and she analyses the way in which Austen's moral values are 'revealed as much in her characters' failures to attain it as in their success', which is a notable feature of Murdoch's fiction too.<sup>20</sup> There is a direct line between Austen's demonstrations of how it is possible to become less selfish and Murdoch's demand that we learn what she calls 'unselfing'. In both cases, Murdoch's belief that love is attention to the reality of the other, is offered as a lesson which has to be painfully learned, for we are naturally selfish creatures driven by our own egos as Austen's and Murdoch's novels equally comically, and perspicaciously, show.

Thus Marilyn Butler, James Collins, Donald Greene, D.W. Harding and C.S. Lewis, to select just a sample of Austen scholars, all seek to explicate what Collins terms 'a hard moral core' in her fiction. He says that 'the real story in each of the novels is the story of how the characters deviate from or act in accordance with Austen's morality [and] the central event [...] is each heroine's discovery of her own moral weakness' (Carson 147). Greene stresses the dark underside of Austen's moral psychology which corresponds with the studies of remorse found

in Murdoch's fiction.<sup>21</sup> He says 'guilt is the main staple of the novels. The plot of every one of them turns, as much as any Greek tragedy, on the recognition by one or more of the central characters of guilt and the subsequent self-reproach, self-insight and reparation' ('The Myth of Limitation', Carson 218). I think he is right to see 'Jane Austen [as] one of the great portrayers of guilt, to be ranked along with Sophocles and Dostoevsky – guilt and its consequences in the way of misery; guilt and its redemption by remorse, self-examination, the acquisition of new insight, expiation' (Carson 221).

The single sentence which perhaps encapsulates the central dynamic of Austen's ethical stance comes in *Pride and Prejudice* when, after reading Mr Darcy's letter, Elizabeth Bennet declares, 'Till this moment, I never knew myself'.<sup>22</sup> Her exclamation epitomises what Catherine Morland, Marianne Dashwood and Emma Woodhouse also come to realise in different ways and for diverse reasons. It is in attending to the reality of the other, in this case Mr Darcy, and in perceiving the truth of the external facts instead of allowing them to be clouded by fantasy and illusion, that Elizabeth experiences this epiphanic moment of self-knowledge which is a crucial moral insight. And, as Ann Gaylin's intriguing study of *Eavesdropping in the Novel* rightly notes, in Austen, 'self-knowledge is spurred as much by interaction with another as it is by introspection [because] learning about the other provokes an understanding of the self'.<sup>23</sup>

I want to contend that Austen shares Murdoch's central credo: 'Love is the perception of individuals. Love is the extremely difficult realisation that something other than oneself is real. Love, and so art and morals, is the discovery of reality'.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, both writers depict this realisation as a slow process of moral growth. Moments of epiphany are rare, and the work of the human spirit is the slow process of orientating away from the self toward the external world and the other. Butler cites the Victorian Austen critic, Richard Simpson, as a lucid exponent of 'how for her characters the moral life is a continuous process:

She contemplates virtues, not as fixed quantities, or as definable qualities, but as continual struggles and conquests, as progressive states of mind, advancing by repulsing their contraries, or losing ground by being overcome. (Butler 259)

This could well be a description of Murdoch's work which likewise vividly portrays this continual struggle.

Butler's own landmark study in Austen scholarship, *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas*, demonstrates that Austen 'wants to show that the realization of the self, an apparently idealistic goal, is in fact necessarily destructive and delusory' (Butler 170), and she pinpoints 'the typical moment of *éclaircissement* towards which all the Austen actions tend, the moment when a key character abandons her error

and humbly submits to objective reality' (Butler 176). These key moments, also analysed by Lewis using the terms 'undeception' or 'awakening', are the means of 'tardy and surprising self-knowledge', and form 'the very pivot or watershed of the story' ('A Note on Jane Austen', Carson 106–7). Such moments are, however, part of what Harding describes as 'gradual, humbling self-enlightenment',<sup>25</sup> or what Butler defines as 'a struggle waged daily with our natural predisposition to err' (Butler 192). The first-person plural pronoun Butler employs here indicates that the reader as well as the fictional character is implicated, because Austen 'directs the reader's attention away from the existential to the ethical' (Butler 184). Collins too involves the reader when he says that 'her novels illustrate and advocate a way of being in the world that is ethical, sensitive and practical' (Carson 155).

It is this aspect of Austen's and Murdoch's work that offers the definitive answer to the accusations of limitation, famously levelled against each of them. Ian Watt cuts to the heart of the matter when he remarks: 'nearly all the great issues of human life make their appearance on Jane Austen's narrow stage. True, it is only the stage of petty domestic circumstance; but that, after all, is the only stage where most of us are likely to meet them' ('On Sense and Sensibility', Carson 46). It is also their ethical awareness which causes both Austen and Murdoch to attend to the responsibility of language as the conveyer of moral value, another point they share in common. As Collins observes, 'Value-laden words and phrases appear again and again in [Austen's] work, often in clusters' (Carson 149–50), and the same is true of both Murdoch's fiction and philosophy. Separated by time, they are united in their common apprehension of what matters in human life, and what therefore matters in the art of the novel which has a moral responsibility to the reader, whose response to that art in turn connects with moral responsibility in the real world.

Critical comment on either of these writers often illuminates both. Thus, Harding on Austen: 'It is characteristic of her work that its extraordinarily amusing, entertaining quality is fused intimately with moral seriousness (which rarely lapses into moralizing), and that she has the manner of assuming the same seriousness in her readers'.<sup>26</sup> For Austen's and Murdoch's work alike requires a response from the reader that goes beyond the aesthetic to the ethical. We go on reading them, not merely because they amuse and interest us, but because they both, in similar ways, satisfy our psychological needs. In their work we ruefully recognise our own selfishness and egoism reflected, and further, we gratefully receive profoundly wise insight into the means by which we may enable ourselves to overcome our moral weakness – or at least to make the attempt.

Many further parallels could be followed up. Miller comments that 'the realism of her works allows no one like Jane Austen to appear in them. Amid the happy wives and pathetic old maids, there is no successfully unmarried woman and [...] not one shows an artistic achievement or even an artistic ambition that

surpasses mediocrity'.<sup>27</sup> Likewise in Murdoch's oeuvre, no woman like Murdoch herself appears. And there are also ironies apparent in comparing Murdoch with Austen. It is striking that Austen's work lacks any sense of a mystical transcendent and I agree with Dooley when she considers it 'ironic that Murdoch, who clearly repudiates a belief "in a personal God, and [...] the divinity of Christ," shows herself [...] more committed to a Christian ethic than Austen, the clergyman's daughter' (Dooley 5).

Juxtaposing Jane Austen with Iris Murdoch has a double impact. First, it highlights the prescient nature of Austen's work. When you reflect that she is writing pre-Darwin, pre-Marx and pre-Freud, it is nothing short of astonishing that her novels retain such contemporaneity for readers today.<sup>28</sup> This is in part because, as Lionel Trilling observes, 'Jane Austen, conservative and even conventional as she was, perceived the nature of the deep psychological change which accompanied the establishment of democratic society – she was aware of the increase of the psychological burden of the individual, she understood the new necessity of conscious self-definition and self-criticism, the need to make private judgements of reality' ('Emma and the Legend of Jane Austen', Carson 199).<sup>29</sup> Second, it realises Murdoch's expressed wish that something of Austen's spirit has indeed entered into her work. For Susannah Carson's remark of Austen, that her 'novels provide not only the aesthetic pleasure of a good read, but also the intellectual engagement of a good think' (Carson xiii), applies equally to Murdoch's oeuvre, and Virginia Woolf's judgement on Austen is pertinent to either writer: 'Never did any novelist make more use of an impeccable sense of human values. It is against the disc of an unerring heart, an unflinching good taste, an almost stern morality, that she shows up those deviations from kindness, truth, and sincerity which are among the most delightful things in English literature' ('Jane Austen at Sixty', Carson 265).

Murdoch's work is a response to Austen's and they share an understanding of the nature of the responsibility of the creative life of the novelist and of the moral life of the reader. Olga Kenyon's view that as a 'moralist for our time' Murdoch 'can be considered in the tradition of female creators of the novel in the eighteenth century, such as Fanny Burney and Jane Austen' needs to be supplemented by the recognition that Murdoch also succeeds Austen, but not Burney, in terms of comic genius and enduring readability.<sup>30</sup> Iris Murdoch is a fine descendent of Jane Austen and her novels merit the place she is currently acquiring in the grand tradition of the English novel, the tradition which was originally established by those few books on which Austen's fame so securely rests.

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- 1 Miller amends over-innocent apprehension of Austen's subtle presentation of sexuality, perceptively remarking that 'her works regulated erotic desire so well that the world had judged them sexless, and made their author's very name a byword for chastity'. D.A. Miller, *Jane Austen or The Secret of Style* (Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2003), 4.
- 2 W. Somerset Maugham, 'Jane Austen and *Pride and Prejudice*', *A Truth Universally Acknowledged: 33 Reasons Why We Can't Stop Reading Jane Austen*, ed. by Susannah Carson (London: Particular Books, 2009), 70-82 (77), hereafter referenced parenthetically in the text as Carson. Each subsequent essay in this book is parenthetically introduced in the text by title.
- 3 Unknown author, 'Speaking of Writing XII, 1964', in *From a Tiny Corner in the House of Fiction*, ed. by Gillian Dooley (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina, 2003), 14-15 (15), hereafter referenced parenthetically in the text as TCHF.
- 4 A.S. Byatt, 'An Unofficial Rose and *The Nice and the Good* [...] are "English" like Jane Austen crossed with Margery Allingham', Introduction to *The Bell* (1958) (London: Vintage Classics, 1999), xiv; Peter J. Conradi, 'Jane Austen as well as Henry James is a 'presence in *An Unofficial Rose*', and 'like Jane Austen, she wrests from a strictly limited subject-matter the maximum of drama, interest and play', *Iris Murdoch: The Saint and the Artist*, 3rd edn (London: HarperCollins, 2001), 74, 375.
- 5 'The great writers have an evasive tone, they are open to the world. There is a largeness of vision which is lacking in most contemporary fiction, a freedom which allows characters to grow and develop independently of point of view and structure. Without this freedom there can be no great fictional characters. Jane Austen had it even though her world was so restricted. I haven't got it, too obsessive about plot' (TCHF 31); 'The people I want to be influenced by! As far as novelists go, I suppose Jane Austen, Dickens, Dostoevsky, Tolstoi, James', and 'I identify with the English novel tradition [...]. I'm using the word "English" really to mean Jane Austen, Dickens, Emily Bronte, George Eliot, Henry James' (TCHF 64, 94).
- 6 Iris Murdoch, *An Unofficial Rose* (1962) (London: Vintage, 2000), 216-7.
- 7 Iris Murdoch, *Bruno's Dream* (1969) (London: Vintage, 2001), 82.
- 8 'Gertrude was trying, following Anne's new enthusiasm, to read a novel, but the words of *Mansfield Park* kept jumbling themselves to nonsense before her eyes', and on their holiday together there is 'lamplit reading': 'Anne was reading *The Heart of Midlothian*. She read slowly, thoughtfully. Gertrude was reading *Sense and Sensibility*', Iris Murdoch, *Nuns and Soldiers* (1980) (London: Vintage, 2001), 95, 106, hereafter referenced parenthetically in the text as NS.
- 9 Iris Murdoch, *The Good Apprentice* (1985) (London: Vintage, 2000), 560.
- 10 Stuart seems to me to be an even stronger exemplar of the connection Dooley makes: 'The more difficult path is to place in the foreground a 'good' character who must deal with vicissitudes which form the interest of the novel. This, for example, seems to have been the task Jane Austen set herself when she wrote *Mansfield Park* [...]. The problem Austen faced in presenting such an unglamorous, passive and, to many, unpalatably virtuous heroine is similar to that faced by Iris Murdoch when she dramatises a figure of good such as Tallis Browne in *A Fairly Honourable Defeat* (1970), although their methods are somewhat different'. Gillian Dooley, 'Good versus Evil in Austen's *Mansfield Park* and Iris Murdoch's *A Fairly Honourable Defeat*', *Transnational Literature*, 1:2 (May 2009), hereafter referenced parenthetically in the text as Dooley.
- 11 Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1992), 92, 96.
- 12 Richard Jenkyns, *A Fine Brush on Ivory: An Appreciation of Jane Austen* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), vii.
- 13 Marvin Mudrick, *Jane Austen: Irony as Defense and Discovery* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1952), 3.
- 14 Peter Knox-Shaw, 'Philosophy', in *Jane Austen in Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005) ed. by Janet Todd, 346-56 (349).
- 15 N., the narrator of *The Philosopher's Pupil* (1983), is a case in point.
- 16 Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey* (Boston: Little, Bown, and Company, 1903), 36.
- 17 Nick Turner, 'It was badly done, indeed, Bradley': Iris Murdoch, Jane Austen and the Novelist as Moraliser', *Iris Murdoch Review*, 2 (2010), 33-38 (35).

- 18 'Austen's own morality is difficult to extrapolate from her novels, and there are no explicit and reliable external sources to rely upon' (Dooley 12).
- 19 Murdoch, it should be noted, denies she is 'a writer of comedies of manners' and further says that it is a 'mistake to use "comedy of manners" to describe Jane Austen's work' (TCHF 197).
- 20 Karen Valihora, *Austen's Oughts: Judgement after Locke and Shaftesbury* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2010), 197, 263; see also *Emma* is 'a novel which focuses critically on selfishness', Marilyn Butler, *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975/1987), 271, hereafter referenced parenthetically in the text as Butler.
- 21 See Frances White, *Iris Murdoch and Remorse: Past Forgiving?* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, forthcoming 2023).
- 22 Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (London: George Allen, 1894), 259.
- 23 Ann Gaylin, *Eavesdropping in the Novel from Austen to Proust* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 38.
- 24 Iris Murdoch, 'The Sublime and the Good', in *Existentialists and Mystics*, ed. by Peter J. Conradi (London: Chatto & Windus, 1997), 205–20 (215).
- 25 D.W. Harding, *Regulated Hatred and Other Essays on Jane Austen*, ed. by Monica Lawlor (London: The Athlone Press, 1998), 21.
- 26 Harding, *Regulated Hatred and Other Essays on Jane Austen*, 70.
- 27 Miller, *Jane Austen or The Secret of Style*, 28.
- 28 Her contemporaries, such as Fanny Burney and Maria Edgeworth, are, by contrast, read only by literary scholars.
- 29 See also, Collins: 'What Austen is saying, as a modern psychologist might urge, is that one should try to prevent the disintegration of one's personality' (Carson 150).
- 30 Olga Kenyon, *Women Novelists Today* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1988), 16–17.

# Oxford Lives in Fact and Fiction: Rachel Trickett and Iris Murdoch

*Janfarie Skinner*

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**R**ACHEL TRICKETT AND IRIS MURDOCH KNEW EACH OTHER WELL. BOTH were University of Oxford teachers, though in different disciplines. Both were published novelists. Trickett and John Bayley were prominent members of the Oxford English faculty, and both were ex-pupils and close friends of Lord David Cecil. In his obituary of Trickett Michael Gearin-Tosh wrote: 'She loved Oxford, to which she had given her life, she loved literature and true learning, she loved teaching [...] she had a wicked eye for the conceits of academics, their insularity and devious manipulations'.<sup>1</sup>

Trickett was born in Lancashire in 1923. Her father was a postman and an Independent Methodist minister. They had a close relationship and he introduced her to a love of reading at an early age. Although brought up as a Methodist she became an Anglican and a campaigning defender of the 1662 Book of Common Prayer. She studied at Lady Margaret Hall in Oxford, worked briefly in Manchester City Art Galleries and at the University of Hull before obtaining a teaching post at St Hugh's College, Oxford. She served as Principal of the College from 1973 until 1991. A building in the college is named in her honour and the wrought iron swan gates, designed at her request by her friend Laurence Whistler, stand in Canterbury Road as her lasting legacy to a university where she is remembered primarily as a redoubtable and highly successful college principal, an English scholar who contributed particularly to the understanding of eighteenth-century texts, and a lively presence in university politics and in the Church of England.

Between 1952 and 1970 Trickett published six novels in addition to teaching full-time and writing her major critical work on Augustan poetry.<sup>2</sup> Her first novel, *The Return Home* (1952), won the John Llewellyn Rhys Memorial Prize. During the same period Murdoch published the first 13 of her 26 novels and by 1970 was widely critically acclaimed. A.N. Wilson and Mary Warnock have written of Trickett's sense of envy at Murdoch's literary triumphs. Today, when Murdoch is still acclaimed, Rachel Trickett's fiction is virtually unknown and all her novels are out of print. Wilson described them as 'beautifully written but slightly

dull': certainly they lack the narrative energy, the wit and the sophistication of Murdoch's work, but they have a meditative quality and a respect for the emotional life which is timeless.<sup>3</sup> Trickett, like Murdoch, is concerned with religious values; her characters have complex relationships and face difficult moral and emotional decisions. Both novelists use great works of art and literature as metaphors and intertexts. In many ways they cover the same territory. In this essay I want to look at these aspects of Trickett's novels and ask how reading them, a worthwhile exercise, may illuminate our reading of her more successful friend. When attempting to picture the essence of their difference, I see Trickett as driving sedately through the world in a classic 1960s blue Morris Minor, being passed by Murdoch at great speed in a bright red Ferrari. As passengers we still go from A to B but the experience is not the same. The two novelists deal with similar subject matter, yet Trickett's works have a particular flavour which I will attempt to convey.

Trickett's first novel *The Return Home* concerns a young woman, Christiana Hallam, who believes she has a vocation to become a minister in the chapel to which her family belongs. Her brother returns to visit and introduces a charismatic friend who disturbs Chrissie's sheltered life. It is a gentle but powerful exploration of the impact of experience on innocence. Chrissie falls in love, her love is unrequited, she abandons her commitment to the ministry. Reviewers praised its quiet sensitivity and its originality. David Cecil said it conveyed 'a fresh and profoundly felt vision of reality'.<sup>4</sup>

The novel includes a detailed scene of a religious procession. The chapel is celebrating its anniversary. The description is cinematic in its clarity: the reader can easily visualise the 'two rows of little girls in white, sheltered by a great silk banner embroidered with the cross and lilies, above them the gold-lettered legend "I Know That My Redeemer Liveth" and below, the words "Emmanuel, God With Us"'. The children are followed by a confusion of adults old and young, apathetic and passionate: 'people ran alongside and dogs broke through the lines, barking angrily'. And as they sing the 'children shrilled out and the people in a great wave of emotion proclaimed "I'm not ashamed to own my Lord"'.<sup>5</sup> At this point Nicholas Carey, the worldly outsider who will enchant Chrissie, enters the scene. He follows the procession into the church and he hears her preach. Trickett captures the quality of non-conformist religious practice. The tone is pitch perfect.

The procession invites comparison with the procession in *The Bell* that accompanies Imber Abbey's new bell. It is one of the great set pieces of Murdoch's fiction and shares some features with Trickett's. Murdoch sets the tone of humour and the possibility of farce early on. Behind the regally vested bishop are 'a number of little girls, clutching recorders [...] trying to get out of the way of a number of little boys wearing surplices'.<sup>6</sup> There are girl guides, boy scouts, Morris dancers and

minor dignitaries. There is a choir which eventually begins to sing 'Lift it gently to the steeple', and there is a lot more going on beneath the surface, working to bring together various elements of the plot. The events are seen from Dora Greenfield's point of view and the reader is aware of the tensions which have been building. Catherine Fawley, like Chrissie in *The Return Home*, is expected to take up a religious vocation; also like Chrissie she is unhappily in love. After the collapse of the causeway and the fall of the bell into the lake Catherine attempts to drown herself and as she is rescued she declares her passion to a horrified Michael Meade. Both writers choose to incorporate a procession into their narratives and both create a vibrant and absorbing scene but the procession which Trickett shows the reader is documentary, whereas Murdoch's is a vitally inhabited complex drama.

In Trickett's second novel *The Course of Love* (1954) problems of human communication and identity are explored through the relationship of art historian Laura Dennis and academic historian Stephen Henderson. Stephen rejects his worthy but rather dull lover Laura for the more exciting Delia Gorringer, but Delia's emotional needs prove to make too great a demand on him. Stephen aims to escape to an Oxford fellowship and when he is invited for interview is elated with 'a natural self-assertion, stronger even than he had felt in his desire for Delia, because it was uninvolved with anything but his own capacities and determination'.<sup>7</sup> Trickett devotes a whole chapter to the interview process; Stephen battles to impress with his knowledge of Papal Conservatism and takes a risk with his opinion on the historian Macaulay. The reader anticipates his success; he will accept the post, sublimate his feelings for his lost love and return to the docile Laura, both knowing they are settling for something morally worthy but emotionally second best.

This theme in *The Course of Love* bears interesting comparison with Murdoch's *An Accidental Man* (1971) in which Ludwig Leferrier, also a historian, is also in love and torn between his heart and his head. He too longs to succeed in his application for an Oxford fellowship; the experience of interview is not seen directly but Ludwig's feelings are described in hyperbolic terms: 'Oxford had in these months grown huge and wide and magnetic in his consciousness. This too was a kind of being in love. He pictured himself there like a man picturing paradise. He feared disappointment like a man fearing hell'.<sup>8</sup> The good news of his election is leaked in a light-hearted letter from a future colleague, referring back to the days of interview: 'I did enjoy getting drunk with you on that second evening' says the writer.<sup>9</sup> He then adds how glad they all are that Ludwig is a single man, which is a nice irony, since both Ludwig and the reader know that he is engaged to marry Gracie Tisbourne. Ludwig's dilemma over accepting the fellowship is one strand in his overall quandary about his responsibilities to his parents, his country (he has torn up his draft card) and to his fiancée. We finally see him heading back to America to face the consequences of refusing to fight in Vietnam, mourning his

losses in England: 'At the thought of the Aristophanes class he closed his eyes. He had wanted that Aristophanes class more than he had ever wanted anything in his life, more than he had wanted Gracie'.<sup>10</sup> The novelists share an insight into the conflict between emotional involvements and intellectual excitement but their style of expressing it is very different. Trickett identifies the feelings; Murdoch gives them life.

Perhaps Trickett's most accomplished novel is *The Elders* (1966). Here she is confident in her focus on the world of academia.<sup>11</sup> The main characters are a group of Oxford friends, two of whom are poets. The novel is layered. On one level it is a modern reworking of the famous quarrel between the poets Wordsworth and Coleridge. Desmond Collier (the Coleridge figure), after a long estrangement from the group, returns to Oxford and proceeds to disrupt people's lives. He and his former friend Martin Kendrick (the Wordsworth figure) are both nominated for the Poetry Chair. Academic rivalry and the reopening of old wounds structure a well-plotted narrative which opens with the description of a tutorial taking place just after the end of Trinity term. Kitty Cameron, once Kendrick's lover, is teaching Clemence Harding, the girlfriend of Kendrick's son. A potentially Murdochian mix. In describing the tutorial Trickett's interest is clearly on the content as well as the process. Clemence reads aloud her essay on Byron. Poems are quoted in the ensuing discussion, Chaucer and Ruskin are invoked. The reader is an eavesdropper sitting in on and sharing the experience. We believe in it, in the tutor and student in their quotidian reality. The atmosphere is described, the room itself, the inward thoughts and distractions, Clemence's anxiety to leave on time. The mood of the encounter is pleasantly desultory and provides a neat transition from one world into the next, from term to vacation, from calm to storm. Mary Warnock praised this aspect of the novel's 'accuracy of the depiction of both environment and atmosphere'.<sup>12</sup>

Trickett's novel here contrasts with Murdoch's *The Book and the Brotherhood* (1987) which is also about a group of adult friends who were once Oxford students together. One of their number has long since been estranged from the group but is about to reappear. Like *The Elders* this novel opens at the end of Trinity term but in a considerably less sedate mode. The friends have regrouped to attend a Commem ball being held at a barely disguised Magdalen College. In the course of the evening Gerard Hernshaw, a key figure among the friends, takes himself up to visit their old tutor, the classical scholar Levquist (a Fraenkel-like figure): 'Gerard sat down in the seat opposite to him and stretched out his long legs cautiously under the desk. His heart beat violently. He was still afraid of Levquist'.<sup>13</sup> After some polite exchanges of catching up on news Levquist instructs Gerard to read to him in Greek. Gerard reads a famous scene from the *Iliad* which haunted Murdoch: 'how the divine horses of Achilles wept when they heard of the death of Patroclus'.<sup>14</sup>

Murdoch chose to read this scene of a 'tutorial' in *The Book and the Brotherhood* to the assembled alumnae of Somerville College at a celebration luncheon. The event was filmed and appears at the beginning of the BBC *Bookmark* documentary of 1989. It is one of the few times Murdoch portrays the tutor-pupil relationship in action and even here she is transforming it into something rich and strange. Other variations might be Bradley Pearson tutoring Julian Baffin on *Hamlet* in *The Black Prince* (1973) or George McCaffrey desperately trying to re-engage with John Robert Rozanov as tutor in *The Philosopher's Pupil* (1983). For the most part Murdoch's many academics are seen not at work but at play. When she does make use of her professional academic experience she does so to serve a deeper purpose. The ball which includes the tutorial in *The Book and the Brotherhood* is a kaleidoscopic, colourful, twentieth-century *Midsummer Night's Dream*. Both writers, therefore, are drawing on lived experience though Trickett's teaching career was much longer and more distinguished than Murdoch's. They write of a relatively small and enclosed world, but whereas Trickett keeps us in that world and explores the dramas within it, Murdoch uses it to transport us to a broader more complex world and one that is distinctively hers.

As well as sharing the profession of university teaching both writers had professional experience of working in, and great knowledge of, the world of fine art. Trickett's early memories included visits to the Walker Gallery in Liverpool and her first employment was as assistant to the Curator at Manchester City Art Galleries. Murdoch considered becoming an art historian and taught philosophy for several years on the General Studies course at the Royal College of Art. Like many writers they frequently use existing and fictional paintings in their work to highlight and enrich aspects of a novel's theme.

Anne Rowe has written persuasively on the role that Titian's *Sacred and Profane Love* plays in Murdoch's *The Sacred and Profane Love Machine* (1974).<sup>15</sup> The painting makes a significant appearance in Trickett's *Point of Honour* (1958), a novel which Murdoch is likely to have read. This enigmatic painting, which may have been commissioned as a marriage portrait, shows two female figures, one elaborately dressed in wedding garments, one a nude; they sit at either end of a Roman sarcophagus with a small cupid figure in between. The meaning of the rich and detailed iconography is much disputed and the subject of many scholarly articles. Debate has focused in particular upon which figure represents sacred and which profane love, on whether they may represent two aspects of the role of a perfect wife. Murdoch uses the painting to explore one man's relationship with two women; Trickett uses it to explore one woman's experience of loving two different men.

In *Point of Honour* the unhappily married Charlotte Elphinstone visits the gallery of the Villa Borghese in Rome and seeks this painting out. She is 'unable to resist the draw of the picture', finding it 'beautiful by any standard'. It is described

as ‘the canvas where Sacred and Profane Love share between them the wide marble pool and the dusky landscape’. The scene reveals a sadness and conflict within Charlotte. Her ‘involuntary sigh’ as she contemplates the painting hints at her inner turmoil and her desire for a revival of her relationship with a former fiancé.<sup>16</sup> The art object is a concrete presence very early in the text and highlights that, seeing herself in both figures, Charlotte is aware of the duality in her own nature and its expression in her two romantic relationships. She seems to be identifying herself in her role as married woman with the clothed figure, and in her role as lover with the nude figure, but the outcome of her moral choices will be punitive for her. After the accidental death of her lover she is forced to return to economic dependence on her husband. Trickett’s heroines end up paying for their sins.

For Murdoch, the painting is not directly referred to in the text of the novel but the title and illustration on the first edition dust jacket alert the reader to its role as an intertext. Rowe suggests that the ‘novel’s relationship to the painting reinforces the denial of any simple discrimination between sacred and profane love’.<sup>17</sup> The complexity of deciding how to identify what is to be understood as sacred and what profane is explored through Blaise Gavender’s relationships with his loyal wife Harriet and his sexually exciting mistress Emily McHugh. For Murdoch the bridal clothed figure may represent the profane world of materialist value set against, and inferior to, the sacred world of the spiritualised erotic in the nude figure. We sense that the painting provided her with food for conceptual thought worked out in the novel through characteristic moral challenges and domestic upheavals. Ultimately upright Harriet is accidentally killed and the unprincipled mistress becomes the wife.

In addition to drawing on artistic masterpieces, images of which any reader can consult to enhance their reading, Trickett and Murdoch both also employ notional ekphrasis, choosing famous artists to whom they attribute imagined works of art which play a significant role in their narratives. *The Course of Love*, which I earlier contrasted with *An Accidental Man*, was written while Trickett was an English lecturer at the University of Hull and is set in and around an East Coast university town. In this rather melancholic novel Laura, the young art historian, is curating a small private art collection in order to be near Stephen, the academic, whose enthusiasm for their relationship has cooled. While cataloguing the collection Laura identifies a small and valuable work by the important seventeenth-century artist Salomon von Ruysdael.<sup>18</sup> It is described at length – its trees, branches, light and shadows: ‘The whole work, though small, gave an impression of massive beauty, the still image of the landscape covering a complicated power of detail’.<sup>19</sup> Laura is entranced by it and in some ways it reflects her own gentle, quiet, reflective personality. Her love and enjoyment of the painting are referred to at intervals throughout the novel and compared favourably with the response of its

owner, Richard Gorringe, whose dominant emotion is of gratified possession. He startles himself when he briefly considers giving it to Laura as a parting gift. For him, as for Hugh Peronett with his Tintoretto in Murdoch's *An Unofficial Rose* (1962), the idea of relinquishing ownership is painful. Laura's subtle and sensitive taste is contrasted with that of Delia, her rival for Stephen's affections. After the final exhibition which Laura has curated Delia expresses a strong preference for a painting clearly intended to epitomise her character, an image of 'a little group of merry-makers under a tree in a courtyard by moonlight'.<sup>20</sup> Stephen has been enchanted by the sociable and vivacious Delia but her allure will not survive his prioritisation of the academic life; Laura will suit him well.

The fictional Tintoretto owned and loved by Hugh Peronett in *An Unofficial Rose* is described through the eyes of Mildred Finch. It is a study for the real *Susannah Bathing*, held in Vienna's Kunsthistorisches Museum. Rowe sees the function of Hugh's painting to be 'to support the plot and enlarge the psychological realism of characters'.<sup>21</sup> It is a common criticism of this novel that the art object is asked to do too much work. Rowe suggests:

A lack of confidence surfaces in Murdoch's use of the painting as an extended metaphor which seriously weakens the book. She fails to trust either herself or her readers and resorts to an obvious and naive didacticism to describe the obsession she had intended the painting to signify.<sup>22</sup>

*The Course of Love* is a less ambitious novel than *An Unofficial Rose* but here perhaps Trickett's traditional art appreciation serves her better than Murdoch. Rowe has since suggested that such criticisms of Murdoch, many of which were shared by contemporary reviewers, perhaps misunderstood her literary experiments with art.<sup>23</sup> Although Trickett's imagined Ruysdael has none of the rich symbolism or mythical referencing of Murdoch's Tintoretto, it is integrated effectively into the narrative and functions in a way which is both relevant and convincing.

Trickett's sixth and final novel *A Visit to Timon* (1970) was published in the same year as Murdoch's *A Fairly Honourable Defeat*. Trickett's previous novel *A Changing Place* (1962) is different in tone and theme from her other works. It is a social documentary, a family saga with emphasis on working class/upper class relationships. Set partly in Trickett's home county of Lancashire it explores male friendship between the classes and a failed love affair.<sup>24</sup> It evokes *Brideshead Revisited* though has elements in common with *A Word Child* (1975) and *Henry and Cato* (1976).

*A Visit to Timon* and *A Fairly Honourable Defeat* have curiously parallel themes. *A Visit to Timon* is told from the perspective of a Murdochian first-person

narrator who identifies himself as, and is identified by others as, a manipulator and puppet master. Plato's *Laws*, a background text in *A Fairly Honourable Defeat*, plays the same role here. A group of ex-university friends lament the absence of Oliver, a former tutor and friend. Giles, the narrator, who is a TV presenter, decides to seek out the reclusive Oliver to discover why he has retired to a country retreat and abandoned his career. Giles strongly resembles Julius King in *A Fairly Honourable Defeat* and is as devious as any of Murdoch's first-person narrators. Like Julius he callously toys with others' fortunes: 'Nothing I like more than mysteries – my metier's making and unmaking them' he tells us.<sup>25</sup> He is '[h]ere, there, everywhere, getting to know, bringing together, coaxing apart, it doesn't take will-power, only a little curiosity, and a love of the game'.<sup>26</sup> Oliver is the focus of attention but largely absent from the text; he is neither the Timon of Pope's poem 'Timon's Villa' (the reference in the book's title) nor the misanthrope of Shakespeare's *Timon of Athens*. The problem Giles has in reconciling himself to Oliver's acceptance of the world parallels the challenge Julius King confronts when faced with Tallis Browne's humble lack of ego. Seeking to understand why a man so full of promise has accepted the quiet life, Giles selfishly manipulates the family and friends like a theatre director. In the later part of the novel the tone has a theatricality and timelessness evocative of Virginia Woolf's late work *Between the Acts* (1941). Trickett writes in a more experimental, elliptical style than she has formerly employed, switching tenses and registers and not seeming entirely at ease with her flawed and devious narrator. If *A Visit to Timon* had not appeared in the same year as *A Fairly Honourable Defeat* the parallels are such that one would be tempted to suspect at least unconscious influences.

There are, finally, illuminating differences in the aesthetic as well as the moral attitudes of the two writers. Trickett's treatment of sexuality and sexual conduct is discreet and often coded and certainly in the earlier novels reflects the social conventions of the period in which she was published. She was not narrow-minded but she was of her time. In *The Course of Love* we understand that Stephen and Laura had become lovers during their time together in Paris but their intimacy cannot be explicitly referred to among family or friends once they are back in England; the shocked reaction of parents to sexual transgression is beautifully and comically represented when Stephen is, mistakenly, thought to have spent a weekend away alone with Delia. Trickett allows her readers to read between the lines and to accept that many of her characters are constrained by attitudes which she did not herself share. Murdoch, of course, was ahead of her time in her representation of sexual morality. Several characters have abortions: Georgie Hands in *A Severed Head* (1961), Flora Narraway in *The Italian Girl* (1964), Morgan Browne in *A Fairly Honourable Defeat*, Tamar Hernshaw in *The Book and the Brotherhood*. The first two of these were published when abortion was still illegal in England. Although the women suffer emotional turmoil the authorial voice

offers no sense of moral disapproval of their choice. When *A Fairly Honourable Defeat* was published in 1970 homosexual acts (between two men over the age of 21) had only been legalised for three years. In this novel the sensitively portrayed relationship between Simon Foster and Axel Nilsson is the only sexual partnership to survive to the end of the narrative.

Trickett particularly disliked excess. In obituaries John Bayley referred to her 'robust manner and [her] fearless independence of thought',<sup>27</sup> but her friend Michael Gearin-Tosh wrote, 'what she disdained was sensationalism'. Of her novels he said: '[they] move to a point where home truths are articulated, or nearly articulated, by characters who are not larger than life, pointedly not'.<sup>28</sup> She allows her characters to explore, make mistakes, have regrets, but ultimately to come to see where they went wrong and what they must choose. What they must choose, therefore, will be revealed by seeing things how they are, adopting that fundamental realism which directed her art. This has a lot in common with Murdoch's adoption of the concept of Attention, attending to reality to discern the Good. In Trickett's worlds, however, it feels as though a character's attending is filtered through the objective moral net of Christian values. This is not necessarily spelt out explicitly, nor does everyone conform. Indeed, there is a degree of melancholic resignation and compromise in Trickett's fiction which is entirely un sentimental and can feel hauntingly sad. She had, I think, an undeclared interest in bringing her characters to goodness, to the Good, unconsciously perhaps to God. Murdoch's route to goodness is via the just and loving gaze focused on the reality of the objective other. Trickett engages the imagination to interpret the reality of the other and that imaginative engagement frees her from a rigid adherence to any fundamentalist moral beliefs but keeps her within a belief system, a belief system which fascinated Murdoch without limiting her. These aesthetic and moral differences show themselves in the interview between the two women which was recorded to celebrate the publication of *The Good Apprentice* (1985).

In the interview Trickett tells Murdoch that she likes *The Good Apprentice* very much, and thinks it is a departure for Murdoch in the way it creates 'a quite remarkably original characterisation of virtue' and describes the pursuit of goodness through the 'entirely attractive' and 'very convincing' 'utterly uneccentric' (Trickett's words) figure of Stuart Cuno.<sup>29</sup> She is particularly interested in Murdoch's use of religious imagery and her introduction of the theme of the Prodigal Son. Trickett used the parable herself in *The Return Home* (where her prodigal is also called Edward) and, more extensively, in *Point of Honour*, where Charlotte is the prodigal and is forced to listen as her young stepson Felix, at the insistence of his grandmother, recites verses 18 to 24 of Chapter 15 from St Luke's Gospel in the King James version. The point stressed by the grandmother is the mercy of God to the sinner and how little it is deserved. The scene is a dramatic one and the inclusion of the whole gospel passage ensures that readers see

Charlotte's history within the context of the Christian tradition. The referencing to the gospel is almost as explicit in *The Good Apprentice*. Part One of this novel has the title 'The Prodigal Son' and the opening lines are also the words of St Luke's Gospel (verses 18 and 19) in the King James version, words which haunt the grieving Edward Baltram agonised by the guilt of causing his friend's death. Encouraged by a 'message' received at a séance Edward decides: 'I'll go to my father, I'll confess to him, and he will judge me'.<sup>30</sup> Trickett reminds Murdoch that in the original gospel passage the focus is on the father figure who is doing the forgiving and she points out that Murdoch has eliminated the God/father figure and substituted for him three fathers: Thomas McCaskerville the psychiatrist, Harry Cuno the novelist and Jesse Baltram the artist. As with their incorporation of paintings as intertexts we see Murdoch making the more imaginative, more complex use of the original parable. One senses Trickett might feel that Murdoch is taking more liberties with it.

Trickett is also keen to see Seegard, the home of the Baltram family, as Pre-Raphaelite and as drawing on William Morris romances. Murdoch resists this suggestion and points out that she has not actually read the Morris works. Rather, she says, she is drawing on her reading of Malory. However, a little later in the discussion Trickett makes clear that she sees the Seegard women as 'more Pre Raphaelite than like something out of Malory'. There are fascinating little tussles going on in what is, on the surface, a very good humoured and (unusually for Murdoch) relaxed discussion. However, in what must surely have felt like a 'damning with faint praise' moment Trickett tells Murdoch:

I've always found interesting – not always satisfactory – in your novels, the relationship between the episodes and the arbitrariness [...] and this rubs off in the plausibility or otherwise of the characters to me. You have said yourself that you're sympathetic to the old realistic naturalistic build-up of character [...] and yet in a sense the plotting of your novels undercuts the old stable ego of the character by involving people in these very sudden arbitrary violent incidents and it was *this* that has always worried me in your novels (but pure prejudice on my part, I may say, it's not a literary criticism of them) that I *didn't* find in *The Good Apprentice* and even the disruptions that we're used to, and can be considered indeed realistic now, like breakups of marriages and reshuffling of partnerships, are quietly reassembled in the end.<sup>31</sup>

That 'quietly reassembled' is a high accolade from Trickett – as though she thinks that, after twenty-one attempts, Murdoch is finally on the right track.

In 2023, the centenary year of Rachel Trickett's birth, we can say with confidence that Murdoch was definitely on a successful track in the world of fiction but that

Trickett's achievements were not insignificant. Valentine Cunningham, one-time doctoral student of Trickett and now Emeritus Professor at Corpus Christi College, Oxford, values the novels and believes that they 'deserve republishing'.<sup>32</sup> This is not likely to happen in the current publishing climate but all the titles are available in deposit libraries and several are easily obtainable online for modest sums. For Murdoch readers these works by her friend and contemporary are likely to be of great interest.

- 1 Michael Gearin-Tosh, 'Obituary: Rachel Trickett', *Independent*, 29 June 1999, <<https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/obituary-rachel-trickett-1103320.html>> [accessed 12 May 2023]. Michael Gearin-Tosh here offers a detailed and generous obituary. He was a friend of Trickett's and shared a home with her in the last years of her life. While there is no full biography of Rachel Trickett, a number of memoirs touch on her life. Mary Warnock devotes a chapter to her in an autobiographical memoir written shortly after Trickett's death; it is a fond and anecdotal account. (The two women were exact contemporaries at Lady Margaret Hall though only became friends when both were teaching at St Hugh's some years later.) A.N. Wilson's memoir on Iris Murdoch also includes a number of anecdotes. See Mary Warnock, *A Memoir: People and Places* (London: Duckworth, 2000) and A.N. Wilson, *Iris Murdoch as I Knew Her* (London: Hutchinson, 2003).
- 2 Rachel Trickett, *The Honest Muse: a Study in Augustan Verse* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967).
- 3 Wilson, *Iris Murdoch as I Knew Her*, 48.
- 4 David Cecil, 'Introduction', *The Return Home* (London: Constable, 1952), vii.
- 5 Rachel Trickett, *The Return Home*, 67–8.
- 6 Iris Murdoch, *The Bell* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1958), 273.
- 7 Rachel Trickett, *The Course of Love* (London: Constable, 1954), 266.
- 8 Iris Murdoch, *An Accidental Man* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1971), 5.
- 9 Murdoch, *An Accidental Man*, 63.
- 10 Murdoch, *An Accidental Man*, 367–8.
- 11 An obituary of the Oxford academic and sometime Professor of Poetry John Jones claims that Trickett drew deliberately on Jones's life in *The Elders* (1966): 'Some found Jones's arrogance insufferable, but he always had his admirers – such as Anne Barton, the Shakespearean scholar, and Iris Murdoch. Rachel Trickett, a much-underestimated novelist, brilliantly evoked his character in a prophetic novel, *The Elders*, in which she fantasised, 12 years before Jones stood for the chair of poetry, that Wordsworth and Coleridge were standing against one another for election. It was in reality a novel about Jones, and what she saw was that he was a failed genius, who could not decide whether to be Wordsworth, with a body of work and no charm, or the cherubic Coleridge, whose genius was lost in talk.' Peter J. Conradi also notes that Jones and his wife Jean 'were thought by some to be one model (and there were others) for the kindly, hospitable, ambiguous host and hostess figures who dominate Iris's novels of the 1960s and 1970s'. Unknown author, 'John Jones, Oxford Don – Obituary', *Telegraph*, 18 March 2016, <<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/obituaries/2016/03/19/john-jones-oxford-don--obituary/>> [accessed 12 May 2023]; Peter J. Conradi, *Iris Murdoch: A Life* (London: Harper Collins, 2001), 295.
- 12 Warnock, *A Memoir: People and Places*, 118.
- 13 Iris Murdoch, *The Book and the Brotherhood* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1987), 20.
- 14 Murdoch, *The Book and the Brotherhood*, 23.
- 15 For an excellent discussion of the relationship between Titian's *Sacred and Profane Love* and Murdoch's *The Sacred and Profane Love Machine* (1974), see Anne Rowe's comprehensive study, *The Visual Arts and the Novels of Iris Murdoch* (Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press, 2002), 139–44.
- 16 Rachel Trickett, *Point of Honour* (London: Constable, 1958), 36–37.
- 17 Anne Rowe, *The Visual Arts*, 141.
- 18 Salomon van Ruysdael is one of several seventeenth century Dutch landscape artists from the same family. Salomon was uncle to the more acclaimed Jacob van Ruisdael. Trickett refers

- simply to 'Ruysdael'. It is impossible to be sure which if either Ruysdael she intended to fictionalise here. The work as described perhaps has more in common with the landscapes of Jacob but the spelling is that preferred by Salomon.
- 19 Trickett, *The Course of Love*, 29.
- 20 Trickett, *The Course of Love*, 132.
- 21 Rowe, *The Visual Arts*, 75.
- 22 Rowe, *The Visual Arts*, 83.
- 23 See Anne Rowe, *Iris Murdoch, Writers and their Work* series (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2019), 85.
- 24 In 1990 Trickett made six recordings for BBC Radio 3 about her childhood and her parents. Two of these are held in the British Library Sound Archive and convey a lyrical picture of her family's life in Lancashire and the sense of the past conveyed to her through oral history. Rachel Trickett, 'A World Dense with Promise', BBC Radio 3, 4 July 1990 and 11 July 1990. (The British Library references are, respectively, ISRC: CKEY1867995 and ISRC: CKEY1868036.)
- 25 Rachel Trickett, *A Visit to Timon* (London: Constable, 1970), 11.
- 26 Trickett, *A Visit to Timon*, 68.
- 27 John Bayley, 'Obituary: Rachel Trickett', *Guardian*, Thursday 8 July 1999, <<https://www.theguardian.com/news/1999/jul08/guardianobituaries2>> [accessed 12 May 2023].
- 28 Michael Gearin-Tosh, 'Obituary: Rachel Trickett'.
- 29 Iris Murdoch, 'Iris Murdoch in Conversation with Rachel Trickett', *Eye to Eye*, BBC Radio 3, 22 September 1985. (The British Library reference is ISRC: CKEY7520264.) This half-hour interview was recorded on 5 September 1985.
- 30 Iris Murdoch, *The Good Apprentice* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1985), 95.
- 31 Rachel Trickett, 'Iris Murdoch in Conversation with Rachel Trickett', *Eye to Eye*.
- 32 Valentine Cunningham, email to Janfarie Skinner, April 2023.

# Other Journeys: Reflections on reading Iris Murdoch and making art

*Kevin Petrie*

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I AM AN ARTIST AND HAVE RECENTLY SHOWN NEW WORKS IN MY EXHIBITION, 'Other Journeys – Paintings and Drawings by Kevin Petrie', curated by Karolynne Hart at The Gallery, Gateshead Central Library. I've also enjoyed Iris Murdoch novels at different points in my life and these have influenced some of my new work. The 2001 film *Iris* was probably my first introduction to Murdoch. I saw the film and then read a couple of John Bayley's biographies. I also read some of the novels, including *The Bell*, *An Unofficial Rose*, *The Italian Girl*, *The Time of the Angels*, *A Fairly Honourable Defeat*, *An Accidental Man*, and *The Sea, The Sea*. My memory of some of these is a little hazy now – but I know I read them as I still have some of the copies from this time on my bookshelves, including one or two with stylish Harri Peccinotti photographic covers that have a 1970s glamour. Being of 1970 vintage myself, I found those covers appealing. I've recently started to collect this set and some of my collection can be seen on the cover of this *Review*. This cover-image shows a display in a case at my exhibition, presenting works in progress and some of the tools and materials used in my artworks.

My memories of reading Murdoch the first time around are of enjoying the stories, the arresting sex scenes, people drinking whisky in nice houses, and even the recipes in *The Sea, The Sea*. I also remember what were, for me, the puzzling passages when people seemed to be talking about some kind of argument or theme that I couldn't quite understand. I now know these are the more philosophical bits.

Twenty-odd years later, during the COVID-19 lockdowns, I discovered podcasts and came across the series created by the Iris Murdoch Society. I dipped into different episodes, and this rekindled my interest in the novels. I was particularly taken with the episode 'Iris Murdoch and the Common Reader' in which Liz Dexter talks about how she re-reads all the novels in chronological order every ten years.<sup>1</sup> I was inspired to do the same and I'm now on book twelve, *Bruno's*

*Dream*. I've even dipped into some of the philosophy and joined a Literature Cambridge course led by Miles Leeson on 'Iris Murdoch and the Gothic'. I have also been really interested to come across other artists who have been inspired by Murdoch. For example, Carol Sommer has developed a range of projects that explore Murdoch in relation to a feminist context and Matthew Richardson has developed book projects and exhibitions relating to manuscripts and archives. Both are fascinating artists.<sup>2</sup>

Recently, Murdoch has directly inspired some of my own imagery. Alongside this, I have also started to see some of my work through a 'Murdochian lens' after I have made it. This has been enriched by the work of the Iris Murdoch Society, and wider community at large. The podcasts are especially stimulating and I often re-listen to episodes and find myself making parallel connections between the ideas discussed and my work. This process often illuminates aspects of my work for myself.

I certainly don't claim to fully understand all of the ideas and concepts in philosophical terms but in the present piece of writing I try to trace how some of Murdoch's themes might, at least for me, connect to my thinking as an artist. The themes that currently resonate most for me are: imagery from the novels, attention, unselfing, and the power of artworks to tell some kind of truth. Below I discuss some of the pieces from my 'Other Journeys' exhibition in relation to these aspects.

As I already mentioned, some of my pieces have been inspired directly by reading Murdoch's novels. In these cases, a striking image comes to my mind when reading and I have attempted to depict it. Images encountered in the books, combined with other themes or ideas, have helped unlock my imagination and enabled me to make far more unexpected art. In some cases, I have combined ideas in Murdoch with other visual ideas. My painting *The Enchanter* is an example of this. It is in part inspired by Jake's trip to Paris in search of his old flame Anna in *Under the Net*. He sees her across a crowded city on Bastille Day, in a kind of enchanting vision. When I read this passage it reminded me of a trip to Paris where I stood outside Notre-Dame Cathedral with my husband Allen wondering whether to go in or not. We didn't and the next day it burnt down – perhaps another kind of 'enchanting' vision? So the burning cathedral is combined with the Murdoch-inspired image. I recently re-listened to the 'Iris Murdoch for Beginners' podcast in which Cheryl Bove mentions how Jake describes Paris as a 'beautiful, cruel, tender, disquieting and an enchanting city'.<sup>3</sup> Maybe my painting reflects something of that?

*Fellow Travellers* is an ink drawing featuring three characters from *The Sandcastle*: a spectral dog Liffey, a fourteen-year-old girl Felicity (who believes she can see Liffey – the dead family pet) and a man playing cards, who may be either Angus (the imaginary person Felicity sees in different guises) or the



Clockwise from top left:  
*The Enchanter*, 2023, acrylic on wooden panel, 60 × 42 cm;  
*The Unicorn*, 2023, ink on paper, 21 × 29.7 cm;  
*The Bell*, 2023, ink on paper, 21 × 29.7 cm;  
*In the Nightjar Alley*, 2023, ink on paper, 21 × 29.7 cm;  
Photographed by David Williams

traveller that other figures in the novel come across at various points. In my picture the model for the latter was a religious statue of a seated Christ that I had seen in a church in Portugal and that I ‘clothed’ to make the contemplative figure in the drawing. My drawing is not so much an illustration of a particular scene in the book but an exploration of juxtaposing different elements in an image. It’s also worth mentioning that Murdoch’s confidence in depicting characters of the opposite sex has inspired me. Prior to my recent interest in Murdoch, my pictures often featured a tall man in a landscape who is rather like me. I’m now trying to look outside of myself more and explore different people and their ‘other journeys’.

An example of this is my drawing *The Unicorn*. To date I’ve made a number of images of sleeping figures combined with other scenes. There is a sleeping woman at the bottom of the artwork, with a scene above inspired by the passage in *The Unicorn* where Hannah Crean-Smith walks out of her bedroom and past young Jamesie (the housekeeper’s son) in the direction of the cliffs where she commits suicide. The combination creates a Gothic dreamlike scene. When making work like this I rarely know what the final artwork will look like or mean. Part of the fun here is being faced with a new image to consider and decipher.

Some works that have been inspired by the novels are further illuminated for me later by discussions in the Iris Murdoch community, particularly the podcasts. My drawing *In the Nightjar Alley* references the scene in *The Bell* where Michael and Toby take a night-time walk to see nightjars in the woods. A few days before this, middle-aged Michael spontaneously kissed 18-year-old Toby. This plunged Toby (and Michael) into a period of confusion. Michael initiates the evening excursion in the hope of discussing and resolving the situation. My drawing depicts the moment of ‘resolution’ in full moonlight surrounded by nightjars. This scene struck me as important, it stimulated my visual imagination, and I made the picture quite intuitively without too much thought about its meaning.

After making the drawing I’ve re-listened to a couple of the podcasts and some aspects stood out to me and made me think again about the picture. In the episode on ‘Childhood and Adolescents’ Anne Rowe discusses Toby and Michael as a depiction of what she calls a ‘perfect example of Murdochian unselfing’.<sup>4</sup> Toby’s thought processes move from confusion, and thinking about the effect of the kiss on him, to acceptance, and thinking more about Michael. He does this to the point that he becomes ‘curiously protective of Michael’. In another episode on *The Bell* Frances White makes the point that the character of Michael can be seen in different lights.<sup>5</sup> One reading is that he is a potential threat to young boys and men and is likely to continue a pattern of inappropriate behaviour beyond the end of the novel. Reconsidering my drawing, I think the resolution in the moonlight can be seen in the two figures, but the surrounding darker flurry of agitated birds might be portentous of a less resolved future.

The idea of paying attention is starting to seep into a number of my pieces. For example, the drawings *Smell the Trees* and *The Listener* focus on using particular senses to experience our environment. *Orchard Avenue 1980* depicts a childhood memory of my delight at seeing my first bullfinch when I was about ten. This may even be seen as a kind of Murdochian idea visualised in a picture of a child's realisation that something exists outside himself, and his instinctive love for it. Forty years later, seeing a bullfinch is still an undiminished pleasure for me. *The five o'clock boat* shows my husband, Allen, making his Lego Titanic ship. This is, perhaps, a kind of mindful attention too. He is being watched over by birds that feature in a stained-glass window in the room. In the distance is a ferry which passes by on the nearby North Sea at 8am and 5pm each day – a kind of marking of time.

Swimming and water have also been themes in some of my work over the last few years. I started open-water swimming in lakes and sea about six years ago. Of course, as has been pointed out on the Iris Murdoch Podcast, Iris would have called this just – 'swimming'.<sup>6</sup> I find swimming outdoors very visually stimulating. For example, I swam in London at the Royal Victoria Docks which is quite exciting and eye-opening. I swim front crawl and so, when one breathes on both sides, you get a constantly changing set of glimpsed images of the city, such as buildings, bridges, and planes flying over, and I made a number of paintings that depict this. More recently, I have made several paintings inspired by the Fermanagh Lakes in Northern Ireland. For the last few summers I have stayed at Lough Erne. This is a large lake which I've enjoyed swimming and kayaking in. The water is very black and so the enjoyment is tempered by respect and a slight fear. Nearby, on Boa Island, is Caldragh Graveyard, which dates from the Irish early Christian period (400–800 AD). This small isolated graveyard is known for two carved stone statues called the Boa Island figure and the Lustymore Island figure. When I visited, offerings of coins and oranges had been made to the figures. Gravediggers were also laying flowers on a freshly filled-in grave. Soon after this visit I heard a story of a fisherman who had drowned at night in the lake. This lake was also close to a World War Two base for sea planes, and remnants of one of these 'flying boats' was found at the bottom of the lake in recent years. The combination of my experience of swimming in the lake as well as associated stories and places of interest around it has stimulated my visual imagination and resulted in number of paintings. For example, *Black Lake* emerged from the story about the fisherman but could be seen as a figure enclosed in a protective and unselfing element. *Hibernator* developed from several ideas. It is another example of the sleeping figure idea and suggests a figure taking sanctuary. I have also made several ponds, and I'm always pleased to see frogs, so these visual images perhaps suggested the idea of hibernation. My drawing *The Bell* was inspired by Toby and Dora celebrating their retrieval of the ancient bell from the lake, but in my version they remain protected under the water and inside the bell.

I had made all of these images before I listened to the 'Iris Murdoch and Swimming' podcast. This episode, which really resonated with me, emphasised that more than half of Murdoch's novels have passages that describe swimming. Drowning and fear of drowning is a prominent aspect in her novels. The episode also touched on the indirect links between swimming, spirituality and philosophy in Murdoch, referencing ideas around certainty and mystery, clarity and muddiness, unselfing, grace, surrender, and connections to nature. I was especially struck by Hannah Marije Altorf's comment that 'if you go swimming in really dark and muddy water you're always wondering what might be underneath and it might be a monster or it might be a clock or it might just be a lot of bikes rusting away'.<sup>7</sup> This revealed, for me, why I might have been interested in making these images of 'what lies beneath'. Thinking about it as I write, Hannah's comment might actually be a good basis for a painting!

Readers will probably know that many Murdoch novels feature art and often have a scene where an artwork tells some kind of truth to a character and potentially transforms their thinking. This is often in front of a 'great' painting in a major gallery. On a more modest and personal scale, I sometimes have similar experiences with my own work. Of course, I make my paintings and drawings but I don't always have a clear sense of what the final image will be. I often start with an idea that then evolves through a series of steps leading to the final image. After a period of time, once a picture is finished (or I've just stopped working on it), it becomes a separate object outside myself which I can look at and decipher. This can illuminate for me something about myself or the world or makes concrete an idea, thought or memory.

An example of this is my painting *A boy comes home from school*. When I was eleven my dad died from cancer. About a week before, a bed had been put in the living room for him. One day I came home from school and said to my mum, 'I'll just go and see Dad'. She didn't want me to, but I went into the room anyway. My dad had passed away and this painting depicts the scene. What has been interesting for me is that the painting has made me learn something about the event. Each character is in their own zone and perhaps experiencing the event in different ways. The boy is passing through a transition. For events like this there is a before and an after. Nothing is the same after the event, which is a kind of 'journey'. So, although in one way it's obvious that the death of a parent is a transitional, life-changing event, my picture made this much clearer and literally visible to me over forty years after it happened.

In summary, through my paintings and drawings I've attempted to capture moments in time and the symbolism of the everyday. By immersing myself in the act of painting and drawing, I would like to think that I'm engaged in a process of deep attention, allowing the artworks to evolve organically and often incorporating unexpected elements. Murdoch and, importantly, the Iris Murdoch community have offered me new ideas to explore, new ways to interpret and think about my own work, and also a lot of enjoyment!

## *Iris Murdoch Review*

- 1 'Iris Murdoch and the Common Reader', the Iris Murdoch Podcast, 2 April 2021, <<https://soundcloud.com/user-548804258/iris-murdoch-and-the-common-reader-podcast>>.
- 2 For more information about the work produced by Carol Sommer and Matthew Richardson, see <<https://www.carolsommer.net/>> and <<https://matthew-richardson.co.uk/>>.
- 3 'Iris Murdoch for Beginners', the Iris Murdoch Podcast, 21 Sept 2020, <<https://soundcloud.com/user-548804258/im-beginners-podcast>>.
- 4 'Childhood and Adolescents', the Iris Murdoch Podcast, 6 May 2023, <<https://soundcloud.com/user-548804258/childhood-and-adolescents-podcast>>.
- 5 'The Bell', the Iris Murdoch Podcast, 18 June 2020, <<https://soundcloud.com/user-548804258/the-bell-podcast>>.
- 6 'Iris Murdoch and Swimming', the Iris Murdoch Podcast, 25 August 2020, <<https://soundcloud.com/user-548804258/iris-murdoch-and-swimming-podcast>>.
- 7 'Iris Murdoch and Swimming', the Iris Murdoch Podcast.

# Review of Robert Zaretsky, *The Subversive Simone Weil: A Life in Five Ideas* (London: University of Chicago Press, 2021)

*Silvia Caprioglio Panizza*

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IT CANNOT BE EASY TO WRITE ABOUT SIMONE WEIL'S LIFE. FIRST, WRITING about the life of a woman intellectual as such can raise the doubt that one is sacrificing her output for an interest in her person, which is sadly often at the forefront when we talk about brilliant women. Richard Eyre's 2001 film about Iris Murdoch, where not enough of her novels and little of her philosophy shine through, is an example of such concerns. Luckily, Robert Zaretsky's book on Weil is explicitly aimed at narrating, yes, her life, but 'in' her ideas, as the subtitle promises (although he starts the Introduction, regrettably, with the fact of Weil's death and starvation, something that has already generated too much fascination). The ideas are meant to guide the story of her life, not vice versa, and that is why, as Zaretsky states, the chronology is not followed in strictly linear fashion, nor does the book claim to be an exhaustive presentation of either Weil's life or her ideas.

Having avoided the danger of focusing on the life and forgetting the work, another particular danger looms large, and is much more difficult to avoid. Zaretsky is writing about a person whose aim was impersonality, narrating ideas through a life of someone who wanted her ideas to come out as if from nowhere, and describing the genealogy and context of thoughts that, according to the author of these thoughts, had to be universal to be worth anything. Indeed, Weil's aspirations to universality and impersonality are foremost among the many striking features of her thought. The former manifests in her capacity to read principles such as 'force' or 'gravity' as agitating through disparate events and times, from the *Iliad* to seventeenth-century Venice to Europe during the Second World War. The latter appears in her insistence that no intellectual or spiritual achievement has anything to do with the achiever's person; rather – as she writes

‘Reflections on the Right use of School Studies’ in *Waiting on God* (1951) – any time a student gets the sums right, it is because she has let the impersonal take over.

Does this mean that Weil would have been uncomfortable with a presentation of her ideas not just as *hers* but as embedded within her life? I think it quite likely. Yet the normative claim that one should therefore not do it does not automatically follow. Kafka wanted his unpublished work to be burned when he died, and the jury is out on whether his friend and literary executor Max Brod should have done so. Weil did not leave any note forbidding future writers to combine her life and thought, or explain one through the other. Nonetheless, the tension between Weil’s aspiration to impersonality and scholars’ interweaving of her life and ideas cannot but make a reader wonder.

So, a life in five ideas. What are these five ideas? Affliction – of course. Attention – yes indeed. Resistance? One might have expected ‘force’, yet the full title of the chapter is ‘The varieties of resistance’, so at least force finds some room there. Roots – again quite rightly. The Good, the Bad and the Godly – well that is three, and uncomfortably squeezed together into one chapter, where at least the Good and the Godly could do with a chapter of their own. Overall, Zaretsky’s selection is reasonable. But the uneven space given to these ‘key’ ideas is itself a key to the book. He is, for example, much stronger when it comes to historical and political questions and less strong when it comes to the metaphysical and ethical Weil.

Zaretsky’s book is at its most valuable when it provides a historical background to Weil’s life, going beyond familiar bibliographical details to offer events, stories, and anecdotes with which Weil readers may not be acquainted. Zaretsky is clearly at home in history, and it shows. The connections with contemporary culture and politics are also worth reflecting on, such as those found in the discussion of contemporary Western ‘patriotism’ as opposed to real roots, and the opposition of populist patriotism with Weil’s idea that love of one’s country is incommensurable and does not and cannot lead to thinking it superior to others (119).

While the historical and political Weil is very important and, as Zaretsky notes, useful for us to reflect on in our time, some of the force of her political philosophy comes from her broader worldview, which is both metaphysical and moral. This is not absent in the book, but its treatment, while competent and in places quite enjoyable, may leave some readers wanting more. This takes us to another Weilian theme, that of contradiction. The book aims to present Weil to the general public, and to make Weil accessible to anyone who does not know her. To some extent, I think the book succeeds: the style is engaging, the connections are broad, and the ideas presented are not false. But simplifying Weil comes at the great cost of smoothing over not only the depth and difficulty of some of her ideas but also their contradictions, which according to Weil are necessary to any true philosophy. This meta-philosophical point is shared, in less extreme fashion, by Murdoch, for whom contingency and complexity should

not always be expected to give way to resolution, but rather point towards something true. On the one hand, the ‘messiness’ of reality; on the other, our impatience towards it, which is reflected in philosophical practice but not only there. Granted, doing justice to insoluble difficulties and contradictions requires time, pages, and patience. But it has to be done, for as Weil writes, ‘With respect to contradictions, all philosophical thought contains them. Far from being an imperfection of philosophical thought, it is an essential characteristic of it without which there would only be the false appearance of philosophy.’<sup>1</sup> Zaretsky is not oblivious to this important aspect of Weil’s thought, yet in the admirable aim of making her ideas accessible something important is lost. This may be, in itself, an insoluble problem.

The intention to offer a quick and accessible overview of Weil’s thought may be the reason, for instance, why a brief discussion of themes as huge as the ‘I’ and the Good are interrupted to jump to the question of political parties (149); or why the introduction of force in the *Iliad* gives way, too soon, to other remarks about Nietzsche and the *Odyssey* (106–7). Here we also see how Zaretsky effortlessly draws upon a vast and impressive range of connections: he links Weil with Albert Camus, Edmund Burke, Emile Zola, Martha Nussbaum, Robert Putnam, Mahatma Gandhi, among others. This breadth can be a weakness as well as a strength, particularly if one feels that Weil’s complex ideas require more than quick connections and expansions, and that some comparisons deserve more careful analysis.

The aim of presenting Weil engagingly leads to breezy formulations, which border on not doing justice to Weil’s thought. Zaretsky writes, for example, that ‘In Weil’s scheme, God is at best neurotic, at worst sociopathic; a divinity who has wrought a cosmos He wishes He never had and filled it with residents who should wish they never were’ (140–1). But if creation is an act of God’s love, as Weil maintains, then we cannot say God never wished to create the world. A similar misinterpretation appears when Zaretsky suggests that force is ‘an equal-opportunity oppressor’ (19). It is evident that the author feels uneasy with Weil’s ardent earnestness, and he knows he is not alone – Murdoch herself suggested that ‘many readers may find a repellent and self-destructive quality in her austerity.’<sup>2</sup> Earnestness is not the only aspect of Weil that makes Zaretsky view her with ambivalence. It is well known that the extremity of Weil’s thought has captivated and repulsed many readers, and it seems that the author of this book is no exception. On the final page we find his clearest admission of this ambivalence, an admission of finding Weil ‘insufferable’ and ‘irreplaceable’, yet the final verdict is that ‘it is difficult to find a more desirable, if difficult, guide for our lives’ (160).

Although Zaretsky finally embraces Weil, the sense of discomfort is hard to shake off, both in the content and in the tone of the book. Perhaps the quick

presentation of ideas and some of the more light-hearted formulations are an attempt to make the weight of Weil's ideas more bearable to a post-modern sensibility, which require more irony to swallow Weil's pills. Yet too much irony risks the possibility of only swallowing half the pill, evading Weil's ideas in their fullness. This evasion, too, is unsurprising when the reader is struggling with a thinker who has no time for compromise and whose thoughts may strike us as outrageous albeit true. Some have called Weil's moral rigour saintly. If that is true, it is not surprising that Weil makes us uncomfortable. As Anne Carson writes when comparing Weil with Sappho and Marguerite Porete, 'saintliness is an eruption of the absolute into ordinary history and we resent that. We need history to be able to call saints neurotic, anorectic, pathological, sexually repressed or fake. These judgments sanctify our own survival'.<sup>3</sup> Who can blame us for wanting to live ordinary lives – even if that means making compromises, accepting that we do wrong, even evil – when goodness seems to demand of us not exactly too much, but a jump into a realm of existence that seems so different from our own that it could make us mad? Weil's most important ideas are at once hard to explain, hard to contemplate, and hard to accept. If writing about Weil's life is hard, writing about her ideas can be simultaneously joyful, transfiguring, and also maddening: we should be mindful of this paradox when critiquing any author who attempts it.

1 Simone Weil, 'Some Reflections around the Concept of Value: On Valéry's Claim that Philosophy is Poetry', trans. by Eric Springstead, *Philosophical Investigations* 37:2 (2014), 105–112 (111).

2 Iris Murdoch, 'Knowing the Void' (1956), in

*Existentialists and Mystics*, ed. by Peter J. Conradi (New York: Penguin, 1999), 157–160 (160).

3 Anne Carson, 'Decreation: How Women Like Sappho, Marguerite Porete, and Simone Weil Tell God', *Common Knowledge*, 8:1 (2002), 188–203 (203).

# Review of Sabina Lovibond, *Essays on Ethics and Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022)

*Rachel Handley*

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SABINA LOVIBOND'S LATEST COLLECTION OF PHILOSOPHICAL ESSAYS IS striking, both for the unique insights we find within the individual essays and for the thematic threads which grow between each piece of work. The volume begins with an essay on metaethics. We might consider this an unusual start given the sheer abstraction of metaethics in comparison to the book's subject of ethics and culture. However, although metaethics is abstract, it is fundamental if we are to understand ourselves as moral beings. Its job, after all, is to help us understand what we mean when we utter moral sentences. When we say something is morally wrong, the metaethicist will ask: does that mean that it is objectively wrong? Is it wrong for everyone regardless of whether they think it so, or is its wrongness relative to whichever culture you inhabit?

The early essays in the collection focus on Wittgenstein. Firstly, the scene is set by Lovibond's exploration of Hans-Johann Glock's objections to her arguments for an anti-anti-realist (AAR) reading of Wittgenstein – AAR being a term borrowed from John McDowell and applied to both Lovibond and McDowell by Glock. Lovibond seems reluctant to accept this label, and instead asserts that, although her work falls within the scope of this term, she herself prefers the term moral realist. This is a term that, unlike AAR, suggests both a negative and a positive understanding of ethics. It is Lovibond's moral realism, in conversation with other methods for moral thinking, which the reader will come back to over the course of the collection.

For further clarification, Lovibond notes that her metaethics is not of the robust kind. It is not a view which defends objective truth in the style of David Enoch, where moral truths are non-natural entities. Rather, she takes her metaethics to be realist, yes, but firmly situated in the natural world. She is concerned with 'getting

things right'. But had we not said an essay on pure metaethics was unexpected in a collection on ethics and culture? We did. And clearly this review is – yes – shaping up to be Lovibond on metaethics. But, as it turns out, essay one is not a straightforward defence of Lovibond's metaethics. And the book is wide-ranging, touching on the philosophies of Iris Murdoch, Cora Diamond, and Wittgenstein among others, as well as writers such as Tolstoy and Patricia Highsmith.

Lovibond points out that her metaethics is not only an argument against ethical non-cognitivism; it is also an argument against a particular existential view, a view whereby human beings are reduced to 'a locus of quasi-consumerist preferences' (19). According to this view, Lovibond suggests, moral agents become nothing more than their desire to escape the world. However, we might ask why non-cognitivists should accept this reduction themselves. On the face of it, human beings primarily express attitudes or desires when they express moral judgements. But this does not mean that those attitudes or desires would not have values as their objects. Regardless of objections from the non-cognitivist, we can still find a larger lesson in Lovibond's philosophical approach. She maps views onto ways of life. And as such this volume will spark interest for anyone interested in the inner moral life.

The two subsequent essays explore different sides of Wittgenstein. Lovibond explores how Tolstoy's and Wittgenstein's thought might or might not work in tandem. Towards the end, we see the theme which reaches through several essays in the collection: philosophy as therapy. And indeed, this theme is indicative of Lovibond's approach to philosophy more generally, an approach which looks to philosophy not only as a way of 'getting things right' but also as ways of living. Due to this, throughout the collection we see philosophy as a way to improve. Essay four thus deals with an extension of the ideas expressed in Lovibond's earlier work, *Ethical Formation* (2009). Itself a work in conversation with Aristotle, the essay explores these ideas in connection with Wittgenstein and Bourdieu.

The fourth essay works to uncover both the sociological and philosophical importance of Bourdieu's concept of 'habitus'. Habitus is 'embodied history'. It is our way of reacting to the social world in an unreflective way. It is clear, then, why Lovibond should be interested in the concept: the notion of second nature is crucial, whether it exists or not, to moral development. Here the focus of the essay shifts to tackling an account of beliefs, whether they are in the body, or should be conceived as a types of mental states. By essay four the reader will also see another interlocutor: Lovibond is in conversation with John McDowell. Other than Wittgenstein and Murdoch, McDowell is the name that appears the most. His views on moral realism – his views on second nature – speak not in the same words as Lovibond's work, but certainly in the same tone.

Essay five turns from McDowell back to Lovibond's book *Ethical Formation*. In this essay she focuses on the ethics of practical reason and the question of

whether ‘wrong-doing is due to ignorance’ (83). What plays under the surface of this particular view of wrong-doing is a wider philosophical dilemma: whether there is a connection – and if so, how strong – between believing we should do something and actually doing it. Essay six returns us to the concept of second nature. This time the conversation is a direct exchange with McDowell’s view. Lovibond asks about the place that tradition, habit, and culture might have on our ethics, and how that internalised tradition might feel imbued with a kind of authority. This essay, then, speaks not only to the earlier essays on habit and belief formation but also to feminist ethics which decries the unreflective assumption that the epistemology of the day is always right.

Readers interested in Iris Murdoch’s philosophy will get much out of essays seven, eight, nine, ten, and eleven where Lovibond explores Murdoch’s notion of realism and moral vision both in her philosophical work and in her literary work. Essay seven details Murdoch’s view of moral vision: the idea that there are certain features of reality that can be morally salient to us, coupled with the claim that those features are noticed by us (or not) due to our ethical education and formation. In this fascinating essay, Lovibond pairs Murdoch’s work on moral vision with the worry that we can commit involuntary wrongs – these being wrongs which we had no conscious choice to commit, but nevertheless did anyway. There is also a fascinating connection between this worry and Robert Mathew Adams’s concerns in his work on philosophy of religion. Lovibond, resistant to adopt Adams’s terminology of ‘involuntary sins’, instead puts forward the secular alternative of ‘involuntary wrong-doings’ (119). Terms aside, the ideas are the same: that there might be actions which we can be blamed for even if they are involuntary. How does this work? We might worry that this pushes ethics into a strange shape. Surely we are only responsible for the actions we choose to do? But the answer to this question is complex. To borrow an example from Lawrence Blum, who also draws on Murdoch’s work, imagine two people sitting on a train who see a pregnant woman in discomfort because she cannot get a seat. One of those people, Joan, notices her discomfort and offers her seat, whereas the second person, John, fails to notice (but would help if he had noticed). There is something ethically wrong about John’s failure to notice. Yet John is not failing to notice on purpose. It is just that his Murdochian moral vision is not up to scratch.

In essay eight, Lovibond focuses on Murdoch’s view of attention once more. This time the essay pivots around the idea of the self, creativity, and attention. For example, there is an excellent discussion of how one can produce the best art. For Murdoch, the answer lies in creation away from the personal self, where one can find the truth. The best art is the art where we can find a whole world. Both Plato’s and Simone Weil’s influence can be seen here. Plato’s influence is rather a plot twist. He denigrated art precisely because, he claimed, it failed to be true. But, as Lovibond points out, Murdoch seems to turn this on its head. For

her, art can tell many truths, and if so, it is worthy of pursuing. Lovibond goes on to admit Murdoch's debt to Weil. Her admiration for another philosopher who takes the notion of 'seeing reality clearly' as seriously as she did is plain. Weil's aim to make a whole world, a true world, sits well with Murdoch's philosophical and literary ambitions. We read Murdoch remarking on moral reality in both domains. As Lovibond notes, 'the Platonist ethical backdrop to all of Murdoch's thought, and to everything she writes, must be the source of a certain solicitude or vigilance in relation to the "large social scene" of the novels' (150).

Essay nine jumps from Murdoch's novels back to her philosophy. A clear-cut distinction between them might prove anathema to how we should read Murdoch; certainly, Lovibond would stress the mingling of both for Murdoch's work. Essay nine goes on to offer the reader further insights into connections between Murdoch's philosophy and Diamond's. The essay sits well alongside the rest of the collection, both as a way of looking at Murdoch in more depth and as an opportunity to appreciate Lovibond's approach to philosophy. The essay then is not just a conversation between Murdoch and Diamond, but a conversation between Lovibond, Murdoch, and Diamond about moral life. Murdoch's view that there is no separation between morality and other parts of life chimes well with both Diamond and Lovibond: Diamond because of her virtue ethicist view that morality is a way of life, a habitual practice of values; Lovibond because of her affinity with the aforementioned view, and because of her wide-ranging view of the task of philosophy. There is something rich and very human about a philosophical collection which speaks, in all directions, to the human condition.

Essay ten jumps back in time to Murdoch's early fascination with and study of existentialism. Here, Lovibond weaves threads between Patricia Highsmith and Murdoch in a deft essay that explores their views on freedom and choice. Here, again, we see a focus on Murdoch's call, away from the ego and towards something more objective, to produce good philosophy. Essay eleven draws our attention to Murdoch's views on improvement and why she matters. The essay is a lesson in Murdochian ways of seeing, as well as an exploration of Lovibond's approach to philosophy. Here, Lovibond allows the reader to listen in on another conversation, this time between Murdoch and Marx. It may seem to be an unlikely pairing, at first, until one notes Murdoch's early undergraduate days as a ferociously dedicated Marxist. More importantly, Murdoch's view of improvement and Marx's walk a similar road. They both, Lovibond suggests, focus on improvement as an ethical act, as a development in our cognitive faculties as well as our ability to see reality as it is.

The last three essays in the volume draw on previous themes. Essay twelve is a tribute to Lovibond's friend Pamela Sue Anderson. Lovibond focuses on Anderson's notion of vulnerability. Here, she objects to the idea that 'argumentative immunity' (202) is a strength. Rather, being vulnerable becomes a philosophical

virtue. This essay speaks to themes from feminist ethics, an ethics which rejects an epistemology and approach that is far removed from human beings and their inner moral lives. It also speaks again to Lovibond's interest in moral formation. Anderson's call for vulnerability becomes a way forward for moral thinking. In essay thirteen we see the theme of feminism continued as Lovibond discusses Judith Butler's work on political agency. Again, we see themes of agency, choice, and moral formation as we reckon with the constructivist versus voluntarist ideas behind morality, which can be framed within the question of whether certain features of the world are made by us or are simply discovered by us. The way an individual can shape their own thoughts and world is central to this insightful essay.

In the final essay we see Lovibond's views on philosophy in full force. She engages with Richard Rorty on what form philosophy should take. The answer: it need not take any particular form as a matter of course. Lovibond wrestles with relativism in this essay. Any reader interested in the themes of moral development, truth, and ways of philosophising will find both this essay, and the entire collection, to be of great interest.

# Review of Rebecca Moden, *Iris Murdoch and Harry Weinberger: Imaginations and Images* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023)

*Avril Horner*

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THE SECOND BOOK IN THE 'IRIS MURDOCH TODAY' SERIES, PUBLISHED by Palgrave Macmillan, is Rebecca Moden's *Iris Murdoch and Harry Weinberger: Imaginations and Images*. At the heart of this study is Murdoch's relationship with the artist Harry Weinberger, whom she first met in Provence at the home of Stephen and Natasha Spender in 1975, and whose art she admired. Their friendship lasted for over twenty years during which time they frequently went to galleries together, on visits that inspired many discussions about the practice, teaching, and morality of art. Drawing on Murdoch's unpublished poetry and journals, only recently acquired by Kingston University for its Iris Murdoch Collections, and almost 400 letters from Murdoch to Weinberger also held there, Moden's book offers a highly perceptive overview of their relationship. Weinberger's ideas are represented by quotations from unpublished writings and comments he made in various interviews; the result is a real sense of the dialogue between the two individuals. The originality of Moden's book lies in her claim that their exchanges inspired and influenced Murdoch's developing theories of art, her philosophy and her novel writing.

In the first chapter, 'Writer Meets Painter', Moden describes how Murdoch was drawn to Weinberger not only by his ideas and creative gifts, but also by his history as a Jewish refugee from Hitler's Germany who arrived in England on a Kindertransport train. Following their meeting in France, Murdoch and Weinberger discovered that they shared many intellectual preoccupations and these came to form the basis of a friendship uncomplicated by erotic desire. Their fascination with the Provençal landscape and the challenge of representing it in art and fiction, Moden suggests, was to influence Murdoch's portrayal of the region in *Nuns and Soldiers* (1980). This novel was the first of five – all written during the

period of their friendship – in which, according to Moden, Murdoch’s ‘thoughts on art and artists are most fully explored’ (14). Importantly, Moden claims that an understanding of how Weinberger’s paintings influenced Murdoch’s writing allows fresh interpretations of her work.

Before embarking on a detailed exploration of these novels, Moden devotes Chapters 2 and 3 to Murdoch’s developing ideas about art and artists before she met Weinberger. When young, Murdoch often considered becoming a painter, but came to realise that her real talent lay in writing. Nevertheless, the problems and challenges faced by visual artists continued to chime with her own preoccupations as a novelist, extending from the quest ‘for a more fully synaesthetic form of communication which can transcend the boundaries of language’ (33) to her claim in ‘The Idea of Perfection’ that moral psychology ‘does not contrast art and morals, but shows them to be aspects of a single struggle’ (37). Her portrayals of artists – Rain Carter in *The Sandcastle*, Dora Greenfield in *The Bell*, Tim Reede in *Nuns and Soldiers* and Jack Sheerwater in *The Message to the Planet*, for example – illustrate the search for a higher truth, even when that search is bedevilled by self-deception. As Moden notes, ‘The experience of looking at a work of art – almost always a painting – appears in almost every one of Murdoch’s novels’ (41) and this inevitably moves a character (and the reader) forward in their understanding of both themselves and the world around them. Later, in 1993, Murdoch was to liken this to the experience of approaching enlightenment in Buddhism, in so far as both are informed by an attempt to comprehend the true nature of reality.

It was Murdoch’s aim as a novelist that fiction should offer similar moments of enlightenment and insight. She thought of consciousness as pictorial so her constant recourse to the visual arts in her novels is, Moden claims, an attempt ‘to tap into the vast indeterminate region of consciousness where thoughts occur in imaging form, and so to access and convey reality more directly and viscerally’ (62). Chapter 2 concludes with a close examination of the images of birds in *A Word Child* in which Moden teases out the difference between passively looking (a sign of moral failure) and the deep looking vital to moral growth. Through such images, Murdoch attempts to make the reader see in a moral as well as a physical sense even if her characters do not always rise to the challenge. The resonance here with Murdoch’s concept of attention, borrowed from Simone Weil and expounded in her philosophy, is clear, as is the way her thought chimes with Weinberger’s approach to art: ‘His outward-directed, prayerful attention to the details of external reality beyond the self is an essential aspect of her neo-theology’ (17), Moden claims.

Chapter 3 charts Murdoch’s friendship with various artists, including the wood engraver Reynolds Stone, the painter Jean Jones and the Canadian artist Alex Colville. Moden traces how Murdoch’s curiosity about their subject matter, their

techniques and their use of imagery fed, sea-changed, into her fiction. Stone, for example, inspired the character of Edmund Narraway, an introverted engraver, in *The Italian Girl* and Jones's paintings of landscapes and ancient stones inform both *The Philosopher's Pupil* and *The Good Apprentice*. But, Moden concludes, Murdoch's friendship with Weinberger was far more important than any of these other relationships. She suggests that his subject matter – the sea, boats, masks and angels – and the way he portrayed them – came to have a profound influence on her thinking and writing. He was, Moden states, 'unquestionably her favourite living painter' (121).

The rest of Moden's study is devoted to a close examination of the interchange of ideas between the writer and the painter. In Chapter 4, 'Kindred Spirits', Moden suggests that Murdoch's evolving discourse with Weinberger – conducted mainly through letters – influenced her thinking in a number of ways, not least in relation to aesthetic sensibility. Although she always claimed that she did not draw her characters from life, aspects of Weinberger's ideas and personality seem to have fed into several artist characters in Murdoch's novels. But the relationship worked both ways. Murdoch's admiration of Weinberger's paintings must have cheered him at a time when many of his colleagues at Lanchester Polytechnic (now Coventry University) judged his work as formulaic and derivatively semi-abstract. He also seems to have confided in Murdoch about the tensions in his marriage – evident, Moden claims, in his portraits of his wife. Weinberger's belief in tradition and the truth-telling properties of art reflected exactly Murdoch's claim in 'The Idea of Perfection' that 'art and morals [...] [are] two aspects of a single struggle' towards the Good (142). It seems that they were indeed kindred spirits.

In the following chapter, "'All Your Colours Are So Triumphant": The Rhetoric of Colour', Moden argues that both Weinberger, in his paintings, and Murdoch, in her novels, use colour 'to articulate sensations hovering on the edge of consciousness, in the face of deep formative experiences where language fails' (162). With this in mind, she explores how both Murdoch's and Weinberger's choices of colour are used symbolically – for example, to evoke a state of lost innocence or to recover past experience (sometimes traumatic, as in the case of Weinberger's forced departure from Berlin during the rise of Hitler's Nazi party). Moden draws on *The Sea*, *The Sea*, *The Good Apprentice* and *Nuns and Soldiers* – the last 'full of Weinberger's presence' (191) – in order to pursue her argument, particularly in relation to the descriptions of seascapes and river scenes. Moden is well read in the history of art and art theory and her comments on both paintings and novels are beautifully contextualised within this wider field of study. Her analyses are convincing and are enriched by references to writings on the psychology of colour (Froebel and Merleau-Ponty, for example); to observations on colour made by other painters and writers such as Matisse, Cézanne and Rainer Maria Rilke; and to ecocritical reflections on colour made by theorists such as James J. Gibson.

Moden concludes that for both Murdoch and Weinberger, ‘the healing, refining, and stimulating aspects of colours may facilitate a moral step forward, as they point the way beyond themselves to reality’ (207). Written with assurance and imagination, this is one of the book’s strongest chapters.

Murdoch and Weinberger were fascinated by masks which they both saw as emblematic of the essence of form and epitomising the complex relationship between internal and external realities. In Chapter 6, “Shadow-Bound Consciousness”: The Mask as Icon’, Moden explores their dialogue on this topic, arguing that ‘Striking connections between *The Green Knight* and Weinberger’s paintings of masks invite this novel’s critical reassessment’ (213). There are certainly many references to masks in the novel, including Moy’s creation of numerous grotesque masks which trouble her; and there is much emphasis on the attractions of disguise and role-play among the characters. Moden suggests that in his self-portrait, *Me Wearing the Venetian Mask*, Weinberger (who had a huge collection of masks) interrogates the role and role-play of the artist:

A mask is a copy of a face, and this mask is a copy of a copy. Weinberger’s face hovers, ghost-like, behind the Venetian mask, and his face is itself yet another mask, mediating the inner reality beneath or beyond it. The refinement of perception required to penetrate these layers is, as in *The Green Knight*, a slow, laborious process. (238)

Moden also reads the busy *passeggiata* in *The Green Knight*, which confines the strollers to a circling pattern, as a bleak metaphor for structuralism, which Murdoch saw as denying transcendence and the idea that individuals can be free agents linguistically and morally. To break free of that false form, born of a disabling cultural fantasy, is a difficult struggle that necessitates piercing the mask of illusion. This chapter concludes with a reflection on Weinberger’s Punch paintings in which he portrays himself as a rebel against the dictates of contemporary art; they also present ‘a visual statement of his consciousness of the theatricality of the role of the artist’ (243). Moden draws a parallel here with Murdoch’s self-conscious awareness of her role as a writer, including her unease about the seductions of form and her desire – against trends in contemporary writing – to incorporate myths and ancient texts into her fiction. Murdoch and Weinberger, Moden concludes, employ the mask as a device that represents both the seductions and the freedoms offered by form.

Chapter Seven, ‘More than a Likeness: The Ethics of Portraiture’, focuses on the capabilities and limitations of portraiture. Weinberger’s two portraits of Murdoch – in which she appears fragile as well as wise – are very different from Tom Phillips’s portrait of her painted a few years earlier for the National Portrait Gallery. Moden sensitively analyses Weinberger’s portraits and suggests

they illustrate his belief, shared by Murdoch, that ‘imaginative attention can create a more realistic and truthful likeness than mimesis’ (258). Stimulated by their conversations about portraiture, but aware of the seductions posed by the imagination if it is not constrained by moral rigour, Murdoch created two fictional portrait-painters whose vision is clouded by fantasy: Jesse Baltram and Max Point in *The Good Apprentice*. The result is mediocre art. Moden pursues this line of enquiry by briefly examining Murdoch’s portrayal of other fictional artists, such as Rain Carter in *The Sandcastle* and Alexander Lynch-Gibbon in *A Severed Head*. The chapter closes with a discussion of how both Weinberger and Murdoch explored the representation of ideal concepts (such as courage and goodness) in their later work. Her analysis of what St George meant to both of them (as he appeared in icons and obliquely in Rembrandt’s *The Polish Rider*) and how they represented him in their own work (Weinberger in *Icon* and Murdoch in *The Green Knight*) is particularly interesting.

Despite having rejected the concept of God, Murdoch remained attached to the figure of Christ and Christian iconography; like Weinberger, she collected replicas of medieval Christian icons. In her final chapter, Moden argues that Murdoch’s dialogue with Weinberger revived her interest in the angel as an ambiguous figure, portrayed in *An Unofficial Rose* as ‘troublingly eroticised’ (320) and in *The Unicorn* as ‘dangerously aestheticised’, as in Pre-Raphaelite art (321). Referencing Andrei Rublev’s *Trinity* icon and Piero della Francesca’s *Baptism of Christ* (which Weinberger linked in his lecture ‘Why Icons’), Moden offers a perceptive reading of *The Time of the Angels*. Comparing and contrasting their late work, Moden argues that *Jackson’s Dilemma*, like Weinberger’s painting, *Jacob’s Dream*, is ‘a meditation on the role of artist’, the two works depicting a ‘shared vision of dispensing with form in order to progress towards a state of unmediated contact with reality’ (310). By the time she wrote *Jackson’s Dilemma*, Moden claims, Murdoch’s meditations on aesthetics and religion had become inseparable and in this novel she set out to challenge ‘the capabilities of realism, particularly in her presentation of the mysterious and mystical Jackson’ (334). Indeed, Moden asserts that Weinberger’s painting *Triptych: Rider and Angels* (1989) enables a deeper understanding of Jackson’s identity in so far as it ‘directs critical attention to the darkness in Jackson, and by extension to the darkness in his creator and, perhaps [...] in all of us’ (350).

Some of Moden’s claims are perhaps rather tenuous (for example, the suggestion that Weinberger’s portraits of his wife Barbara influenced Murdoch’s creation of Charles Arrowby when she was writing *The Sea, the Sea*) and she repeats herself occasionally. Nevertheless, this book is a highly original contribution to the field of Murdoch studies and will make much unpublished correspondence available to readers. Moden writes fluently and with great clarity, her prose uncluttered by academic jargon. Throughout, this study is greatly enriched by the inclusion

of many illustrations, both of Weinberger's art and of Murdoch's drawings and paintings. A detailed and perceptive study of the relationship between a famous writer and a less famous artist, Moden's *Iris Murdoch and Harry Weinberger: Imaginations and Images* undoubtedly enriches our understanding of Murdoch's thinking on morality and aesthetics.

# Review of Nikhil Krishnan, *A Terribly Serious Adventure: Philosophy at Oxford 1900–1960* (London: Profile Books, 2023)

*Sabina Lovibond*

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**T**O BEGIN BY SPEAKING MORE CONFESSORALLY THAN CRITICALLY: I AM still processing the mixed emotions with which I read Nikhil Krishnan's fascinating book. Admiration, certainly: he has an enviable gift for the brisk, but not hopelessly reductive, presentation of complex discussions and, on this showing, must be an excellent tutor or supervisor. He makes apt use of Pierre Bourdieu's notion of *habitus* (13) to frame his account of Oxford philosophical culture around the mid-twentieth century, and of its leading personalities; accordingly, his 'basic unit of organisation is not the argument but the anecdote' (13), though the wealth of anecdote he offers is skilfully integrated with philosophical exposition to the extent allowed by his format. I learned a great deal from the book as a whole: partly through his helpful reconstruction of imperfectly remembered debates, but still more on the side of biography, memoirs and ephemeral material such as book reviews and obituaries, where Krishnan – along with his 'exemplary' research assistant (319) – has rounded up a superb array of circumstantial detail.

Krishnan's title is curious in two ways. First, that 'terribly serious adventure' sounds facetious or *faux*-juvenile – but no, it turns out to be quoted from the American philosopher Ernest Nagel, commenting on the unusual excitement generated by academic philosophy in 1930s Vienna (60). And second, the period that concerns Krishnan is really not so much '1900-1960' but rather – as he in fact says in his opening chapter (6) – the years between 1920 and 1960, with considerable attention also in later pages to the aftermath of those years (for example, he has plenty to say about Bernard Williams, whose main publications date from the 1970s onwards). By contrast, we get only the briefest sketch of the state of Oxford philosophy during the opening decades of the century; everyone

would seem to have been fretfully awaiting the advent of Gilbert Ryle (born in 1900), for whom the post-Victorian contest between ‘idealism’ and ‘realism’ is already obsolete. Of course, it is not obligatory to take an interest in that period, but the dust jacket does create something of a false scent.

Is the suggestion of facetiousness similarly misleading? This is harder to answer. Krishnan is very much alive to ‘tone of voice’ in philosophical writing, and to the way this can influence the content of thought through choice of examples and implicit appeal to a target audience. (He naturally quotes the famous passage in *Sartre: Romantic Rationalist* [1953] where Iris Murdoch contrasts the reassuring milieu of cricket and cookery with the more challenging existentialist landscape of love, sin, prayer and the Communist Party.) He also returns quite often to the topic of jokes and their place in philosophy; to philosophers’ sense of humour, or lack of it. The comic qualities of J.L. Austin, in particular – the central character in Krishnan’s story, if anyone is – are emphasised as part of his distinctive charm and cleverness.

Here, though, we come up against Krishnan’s weakness for eye-catching but gratuitous schemata. Thus, ‘[w]here Austin was arch and funny, [Elizabeth] Anscombe was plodding, careful and relentlessly serious’ (232). ‘Plodding’ – really? Krishnan can be a bit too quick to reach for this word. Just because the verve and originality of R.G. Collingwood were appreciated by his undergraduate lecture audiences in the 1930s, it does not follow that their regular tutors were ‘plodders’ (126), or even that the students necessarily thought of them as such.

What is going on here? I realise that Krishnan’s book is not primarily ‘meant for my ears’, to borrow an interesting phrase of his own (288), but he may have done himself a disservice by trying a little too hard to please the imagined sceptical outsider – a reader assumed to be ready for any available bit of fun at the expense of ‘fossils of the senior common room’ (129), ‘curdled old creatures sipping sherry’ (222) or ‘fighting the good fight on the wine committee’ (273). (Do colleges have wine *committees*? News to me, but what do I know?) This point of view is not, in the end, the one Krishnan adopts: he quotes Susan Sontag on the ‘deep sympathy modified by revulsion’ that is demanded of a historian of sensibility (9), but goes on at once to say that in his case ‘the sympathy heavily outweighs the revulsion’. And towards the end of the book he makes the thoughtful – and clearly not at all facetious – proposal that we work towards a ‘charitable picture’ (294) of the relevant intellectual formation: not ‘charitable’ as in condescending, but in the Murdochian sense of ‘loving and attentive’ (303), even if this kind of language would probably have caused severe embarrassment to many of his protagonists.

And yet there is so much cognitive dissonance to be negotiated. For instance, the tutorial system, so central to the ‘Oxford philosophy’ experience: was this form of teaching a ‘grind’ (146), a ‘convenient way of catching up on sleep’ (238) while students read out their work, having cynically guessed what the

tutor wanted to hear in order to ‘serve it up [...] in essay after formulaic weekly essay’ (209)? Or was it the authentically purposive encounter that Krishnan allows us, later on, to glimpse through the words of R.M. Hare, involving skilful and merciless criticism ‘not only in respect of [...] truth, but also in respect of relevance, accuracy, significance and clarity’ (295)? If Hare knew what he was talking about, why should we not believe his predecessors – though no doubt grossly overworked, like university teachers today – to have approached their job in a similarly idealistic and vigilant fashion? P.F. Strawson deserves credit for his willingness to take in essays and read them before the tutorial (238), since this means a significant increase in time required per student per week; but again, it does not follow that the read-aloud method sold anyone short: this too can be an exercise in ‘careful attentiveness to the sound of the human voice’ (287). (It occurred to me that Krishnan might actually have modified his views more than he realised in the course of writing.)

Another instance: there are some thought-provoking pages on the ‘chumminess of speech’ (271), the wilful *ordinariness* of ordinary-language philosophy, which offended commentators such as Herbert Marcuse and Perry Anderson (the latter born in 1938, by the way, not 1928 – and the subject he studied at Worcester College was modern languages, not history: I hope this is an isolated inaccuracy). Both deplored the absence of a broad historical and cultural frame of reference, the claustrophobic social atmosphere, the hint of anti-intellectualism – Marcuse is reported as saying in *One-Dimensional Man* (1964) that the Oxford attitude ‘militates against intelligent non-conformity’ and ‘ridicules the egghead’ (271). Krishnan gives this attack serious consideration and describes a debate on the subject between Anderson and Williams in the pages of *Isis* in 1957 (it came as a surprise that these two ever noticed each other’s existence, so this, to me anyway, would be a good example of ephemera rescued from oblivion). One might just feel that he misses a trick by failing to refer back to Murdoch’s exactly contemporary ‘Metaphysics and Ethics’ (1957) (discussed earlier, 215) for the thought he assigns to Anderson in his own summing-up – namely that there is no such thing as a value-free conception of philosophy, and hence that Oxford philosophy, despite a ‘naïve picture of itself as ideologically neutral’, is in no position to offer this (276). But he does well to accommodate a moment of such fierce negativity.

On the other hand – why, having grasped this nettle, does he persist on his own account in writing, much of the time, in a vein of unabashed ‘chumminess’? It is as though we were being invited to immerse ourselves in some mildly dated form of donnish chitchat: Strawson has a good deal to ‘bone up on’ before he starts lecturing (237); a bit later on he is ‘pipped’ to the Wykeham Chair by A.J. Ayer (247); Ernest Gellner and Bertrand Russell engage in a ‘dust-up’ in the *Times* (225). Krishnan mentions the ‘blokeish flippancy’ of John Wisdom’s writing (154). But he does not seem particularly anxious to steer clear of the blokeishly flippant

in his own. Is it possible to shed any light on the wartime career of Hare by saying that ‘a Rugby man must act on a *principle*’ (173)? Do we really know that much about the alumni of Rugby, or are we just nodding along in an attempt to fit in? Then, the question of whether I can know something without knowing that I know it: how are we meant to stay awake in tutorials if we are going to dismiss this as an ‘old chestnut’ (229)? The American metaphysician David Lewis – must we think of him as a ‘bearded savant’ (300)? Who cares about his facial hair? Likewise with the ‘bearded men walking the streets of Pittsburgh’ who declare themselves to be proud followers of Anscombe (309) – is there supposed to be something super-ironic about this situation?

Krishnan’s book is undeniably a page-turner. But I seem to have drifted back to a certain recurrent feeling of alienation with which I read it. During the earlier chapters, this could perhaps be put down to a slightly querulous sense of imaginary exclusion. Why wasn’t ‘my’ Oxford like this – *my* classical education, *my* Somerville, *my* 29 years as a tutor? It all sounds so convivial and exciting, this world in which the editor of a student magazine could ‘acquaint himself with the best undergraduate talent’ (70) or where a young man could ‘[catch] the eye’ of an influential older one (71) – not (necessarily) sexually, but with lasting professional consequences. Well, apart from subsequent social changes, we can be sure that many able people remained outside this kind of magic circle: sometimes by choice (as with Collingwood, who writes in his *Autobiography* [1939] that ‘[w]here [philosophical conversation] becomes general discussion, it is an outrage’), but often by simply not catching anyone’s eye or receiving the crucial invitation.<sup>1</sup> (Krishnan makes it clear that one did not just turn up to Austin’s Saturday-morning sessions. He also refers in a different context to ‘that Oxford underclass, the young man from the *minor* public school’ [50].)

As the narrative flowed on, however, I began to wonder if Krishnan’s eye for the telling personal detail was itself complicit in something exclusionary or even incipiently hostile. Austin, I dare say, would not have given a damn whether people *expected* intellectual novelty from a man with his ‘bank manager’s face’ and ‘crumpled blue suit’ (286); nor would Anscombe have minded whether it was her ‘shapeless trousers’, ‘baggy jumper’ and uncompromising hairstyle that made an impression, or (quoting Mary Warnock) the ‘astonishing serenity and beauty’ of her face (107). So one can sometimes feel that such scrutiny bounces off harmlessly. Still, the fact remains that well over half the human race are unlikely, for one reason or another, to be visually convincing in the role of ‘philosopher’ (the word ‘cliché’ doesn’t appear until almost the last moment (306), but visual cliché is what seems to be at issue here), and few of us can face a lecture audience with the lofty confidence of a man who ‘needed no models other than himself’ – Austin again, according to Krishnan (143). Physical presence can be a minefield, as illustrated by this report of the initial encounter between Murdoch and

Raymond Queneau in 1946, picked up by Krishnan from Peter J. Conradi: ‘She found him “a natural, absolute, philosopher”. He in his turn thought her “Big. Blonde. Common-sensical”’ (202). A whole world of perceptual habit (or *habitus*) seems to be contained in these lines – and not in a good way.

As indicated at the outset, cultural criticism is not Krishnan’s main objective: he says he will be happy if readers find some of the ideas of his selected ‘Oxford philosophers’ persuasive, but ‘happier still if they [come] away simply admiring’ the people concerned (13). I do not think, in my own case, there was much scope for developing greater admiration than I already had; but he has not left me any the cheerier about *being* a ‘philosopher’, a potential target of that cheerily objectifying gaze.

Let me end, though, on a positive note: readers of the *Iris Murdoch Review* will be pleased to find Murdoch herself emerging as a key figure. While some of Krishnan’s biographical information will be very familiar, his treatment of her intellectually formative experiences and relationships is refreshingly varied: these pages allow us to take a step back from the ‘four women philosophers’ scenario (in which, for understandable reasons, she has recently been bracketed with Anscombe, Philippa Foot and Mary Midgley), and to notice the unusual diversity of her influences. There is a commendably nuanced account of her attitude to Austin, and an illuminating cameo role for the ‘Metaphysicals’ (‘mostly High Anglican men out of sympathy with the direction of Oxford philosophy’, 219), who must have provided a congenial seedbed for Murdoch’s growing dissatisfaction with ethics in the ‘behaviourist, existentialist, and utilitarian’ style.<sup>2</sup> Krishnan’s discussion reminds us that despite the renunciation of her youthful Marxist politics, she does not mutate into a ‘relentlessly’ analytical thinker, but continues to put her cosmopolitan cultural alertness to philosophical use.

1 R.G. Collingwood, *An Autobiography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1939), 54.

2 Iris Murdoch, ‘The Idea of Perfection’ (1964), *Existentialists and Mystics*, ed. by Peter J. Conradi (New York: Penguin, 1999), 299–336 (305).

# Review of *Iris Murdoch and the Literary Imagination* edited by Miles Leeson and Frances White (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023)

David J. Fine

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**I**RIS MURDOCH AND THE LITERARY IMAGINATION – EDITED BY MILES LEESON and Frances White – takes a good, long look back before moving forward. As this valuable collection of essays makes clear, the centenary of Murdoch’s birth prompted many to reflect on the scope of her career. This prompting surely led to the mix of old and new that distinguishes the collection. Naturally, the anniversary has also encouraged a reassessment of scholarship on Murdoch, both past and present. The edited collection’s most distinctive contribution, then, is its retrospective assessment of the field. For this alone, it is recommended for scholars of Murdoch’s work, especially those in literary studies.

Frances White’s contribution represents what the collection’s retrospective tone, at its best, produces. Her excellent chapter examines Murdoch’s first and final novels, comparing two key overlaps. Significantly, White’s analysis looks back at Murdoch’s pathbreaking *Under the Net* while reinvigorating scholarly conversations surrounding the less successful *Jackson’s Dilemma*. She makes a strong case that ‘*Jackson’s Dilemma* is far from being a curiosity or afterthought’; in fact, for White, ‘it is essential to our understanding of Murdoch’s art and thought’ (32). The novel’s relevance for the medical humanities is, as White’s account suggests, reason alone to return to this text.

White’s essay is traditional literary analysis. A notable feature of the chapters in this collection, however, is its blending of memoir and scholarship. Murdoch’s 100th birthday – combined with the international conference that accompanied it – invited many of the contributors to reflect on their own experiences of Murdoch, whether or not they had ever met the author in person. For example, Gillian Dooley’s chapter focuses on Australia and how Murdoch has been, curiously, part of her life there. Dooley’s experience of Murdoch as a lifelong companion will

resonate with many readers, but the Australian focus gives the essay its edge. In addition to Murdoch's own time in Australia, Dooley investigates how shifts in scholarly trends have impacted what gets taught and where. Her engaging examination of who is – and who is not – teaching Murdoch in Australia not only reveals the happenstance of canonisation but also suggests the continued importance of legacy work.

Stephen Medcalf's posthumous contribution is notable in that it provides an account from the perspective of someone who knew Murdoch personally. His reflection on Murdoch as a supervisor provides readers with a striking picture of Murdoch as a teacher and a thinker. His examination of art in her novels from the 1950s and 1960s, coupled with his story of her own encounter with Andrei Rublev's *Trinity* at his house, makes this an ideal balance of scholarly and personal reflection. After all, the icon makes it into two novels – *The Unicorn* and *The Time of the Angels* – and themes of teaching and learning appear throughout the collection. It is fitting, then, that Medcalf's chapter opens the collection, because it complements the chapter at its end.

Valentine Cunningham's closing essay also blends personal experience of Murdoch – highlighting two moments of contact in their lives – with scholarship. Whereas Medcalf remembers Murdoch's impact on him as a student, Cunningham explores one particular teacher's impact on Murdoch's thinking: Eduard Fraenkel. This text comes from Cunningham's keynote at the 2019 conference, where, as the editors note in their introduction, it met with some controversy. He argues, with a focus on touch, for 'the truth of morality's daunting mixturing' (192). In this case, he maintains that Fraenkel's abuse of female students does not – and should not – erase his significant contributions to classical scholarship. To be clear, Cunningham identifies the 'obvious badness' (187) of Fraenkel as a sexual predator, but he believes The Fraenkel Room, where he encountered Murdoch in 1978, should have kept its name. (The name was changed to The Refugee Scholars' Room after student protests.) For Cunningham, Murdoch's work underscores the admixture of good and evil and the inability to separate them out fully.

The immediate response to Cunningham's lecture – and the mixed feelings it will surely continue to inspire – reflects the atmosphere of the times. Indeed, the collection's attunement to current debates emerges most clearly in its consideration of gender and sexuality. It becomes apparent, as one reads through the collection, that there is some rethinking happening when it comes to Murdoch's understanding of the erotic: the bad as well as the good. J. Robert Baker, for instance, argues for the centrality of other people to the individual's moral progress, claiming pleasure and sex as vehicles for this growth. Against puritanical and individualist readings of Murdoch, Baker demonstrates how romantic friendships and erotic entanglements can lead to unselfing in the novels. He supports this view with readings of two baggy monsters: *The Philosopher's*

*Pupil* and *The Green Knight*. Ultimately, his analysis celebrates the care and nuance Murdoch brings to her characters' inner lives as well as to their lived relations with others.

Baker's chapter provides a helpful reminder that eros is not always a bog of fantasy. Still, the topic itself is a muddle, and Anne Rowe's chapter strikes a different chord. Murdoch's representation of eros and sexual violence, in particular, read differently in the wake of the #MeToo Movement, which has demanded institutional change in the light of pervasive sexual abuse. Rowe's chapter combines reflections on her classroom teaching with an analysis of *Under the Net*. She shows that, while changing social mores reaffirm the novel as a product of its time and place, Murdoch's indirect approach to the male gaze still proves valuable. 'The challenge', in Rowe's words, 'is to decipher, through both the warped perception of the narrator and the ruthless comic irony of the author, where the fantasy ends and the reality begins' (59). Murdoch allows readers to see through the eyes of privileged, sexist men, and their responses to women, as Rowe establishes, leave much to be desired.

Rowe's chapter provides a salient reminder: it might be more important than ever to engage the imaginations of students in this manner. The distancing and framing, for which Murdoch is rightly famous, pose problems to Gen Z's desire for pragmatic immediacy. They want female authors to bear witness to women's authentic experience and to write from her firsthand perspective. Murdoch does quite the opposite, frustrating expectations for immediate truth and utter transparency. This challenge is a real one, and my own teaching of Murdoch confirms it. I agree with Rowe, then, that Murdoch's value for the early twenty-first century may just lie in that frustration, in the effort of imagination it requires from contemporary readers. Here, it seems to me that scholars are breaking new ground in Murdoch studies, critically interrogating how, once again in Rowe's words, Murdoch's feminism embraces 'a diverse approach to non-binary gender' (62). This path is an exciting one, and Rowe's analysis has done a lot to clear the way forward.

Miles Leeson picks up on these threads in his examination of the supernatural in Murdoch's thinking. Leeson's distinction between the gothic and the supernatural is a helpful one: he asserts that, while Murdoch's experimentation with the Gothic novel reaches its end with *The Time of the Angels*, her interest in the supernatural spans her entire career. Leeson links the supernatural to three things: a critique of toxic masculinity, the closeness of the spiritual world, and the proximity of adolescent girls to the paranormal. He then mobilises the distinction Murdoch makes between fantasy and the imagination to explain why the supernatural perseveres, despite her late-career novels' movement toward greater realism and contingency. He brings his examination of gender and power to a close with a provocative look at her most magical novel, *The Green Knight*.

Reading through the collection, I received the impression that the centenary has brought renewed scholarly attention to the edges of Murdoch's career. Scholars are thinking carefully about where Murdoch starts and where she ends, leaving the powerful novels of the 1970s, more or less, in the background. Leeson's analysis follows this tendency, as his provocative reading of the early Gothic novels leads him to the mystery and magic of *The Green Knight*. Peter D. Mathews likewise engages with this late novel, making the case for its 'scrambled' (133) meaning and intertextual methodology. With close attention to Murdoch's engagement with both the eponymous medieval poem and Nietzsche's philosophy, Mathews shows how the novel warns against overarching myths and all-encompassing frameworks of meaning. There is a danger, in other words, of tying too tight a bow around the gift that is Murdoch's penultimate novel.

Murdoch, of course, draws extensively from a variety of source material, and not just in *The Green Knight*. Indeed, Fiona Tomkinson's chapter explores the relevance of another classic text, *The Tale of Genji*, and shows how its themes colour Murdoch's oeuvre. After establishing the text's importance to Murdoch on a personal level, Tomkinson deftly traces its many appearances within the novels. Specifically, she argues that Murasaki's text influences three characters – Bradley Pearson in *The Black Prince*, Charles Arrowby in *The Sea, The Sea*, and Tim Reede in *Nuns and Soldiers* – who replay its drama. While Tomkinson's textual explorations are fascinating, what I find most promising in the chapter is the case it makes for Murdoch within a tradition of women's writing. Tomkinson is right to claim Lady Murasaki and Dame Julian of Norwich as key figures in Murdoch's own conception of female authorship.

Although she touches on themes of gender and authorship also investigated by Rowe, Tomkinson's contribution speaks most directly to Paul Hullah. In his chapter, Hullah makes the case for Zen and haiku as foundational for a full appreciation of Murdoch's understudied poetry. Using both published and unpublished poems, Hullah shows how Buddhism and key ideas such as the *koan* illuminate Murdoch's writing. With this context in mind, the poetry becomes much more than an afterthought. As he concludes, 'the technically impressive and knowingly intertextual, eclectic poetry produced by Murdoch is good poetry as well as meaningful philosophy' (82–3). In this way, both Hullah and Tomkinson remind scholars of the need to move outside the Western tradition for a richer understanding of Murdoch's oeuvre.

These intertextual readings rest on a mix of primary sources and archival materials. As this scholarship continues to grow – and as the international scope of Murdoch studies becomes more global – the journals and letters prove invaluable resources. Authors cite the journals, held at Kingston University, throughout these chapters, as they do the letters collected in *Living on Paper*. These sources give critics an unprecedented look behind the scenes, and they continue to breathe

new life into familiar topics, such as gender and sexuality. This collection brings these subjects, always central, to new audiences in fresh ways.

*Iris Murdoch and the Literary Imagination* is, for these reasons, a fitting first edited collection for the 'Iris Murdoch Today' series. It reflects on the past without losing hold of the present. That being said, there are still further topics to study. While the collection directly addresses #MeToo, there is the notable absence of Black Lives Matter. Put plainly, scholars of Murdoch's fiction and ethics need to interrogate the whiteness of her literary imagination. Gender – explored so well throughout these chapters – perhaps provides a clue in how best to proceed, but that pursuit will need to engage also with the sort of cultural sensitivity demonstrated by Hullah and Tomkinson. Race is distinct from gender, but it is hardly invisible. It is time for Murdoch scholars to enter into this urgent conversation, if for no other reason than to explain why her work needs to be taught – and I am thinking of Dooley's fine piece here – in a world grappling with a legacy of colonialism, racism and slavery.

This is also a world that has, since the July 2019 centenary, witnessed a global pandemic. Many people – and there are tweets to prove it – turned to Murdoch during COVID-19. Her relevance here remains to be theorised as well. As scholars gear up for the next conference at Chichester, it is clear that there is plenty present in this collection to provide inspiration, and the absences are there, too, to prompt aspiration.

# Report on ‘Reading Iris Murdoch with Sarah Chihaya’, The 92nd Street Y, New York, May–August 2022

*Richard Moon*

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SARAH CHIHAYA’S ONLINE ROUNDTABLE CLASSES, BASED AT 92NY, A CULTURAL and community centre located on the Upper East Side of Manhattan, were an admirable introduction to Iris Murdoch’s fiction, identifying the moral questions and philosophical quandaries most important to Murdoch by means of analysis of four novels of Murdoch’s ‘middle’ period: *A Severed Head* (1961), *The Nice and the Good* (1968), *The Black Prince* (1973) and *The Sea, The Sea* (1979). Chihaya began with an explanation of Murdoch’s essential essay ‘Against Dryness’ (1961) which inveighs against the limitations of the contemporary and argues for a new novelistic form. Murdoch’s subsequent experimentation with the novel and her intense examination of the quality of love sought to represent the un-crystalline messiness of life and of the opacity of others, demonstrating in fictional form what it is to be ‘good’. With Murdoch, the novel can say the unsayable.

Chihaya’s analysis of *A Severed Head* explored how Murdoch presents these issues of perception and real or delusional love. The characters of this novel’s restricted social circle render people as objects to be moved in and out of their lives when convenient. Murdoch asks what constitutes freedom, love and happiness; what are ‘real’ people; and what is human personality and how can it be communicated in art? These are the unanswerable questions to which Murdoch returns throughout her novels. Martin Lynch-Gibbon has made Honor Klein a terrible object of fascination by comparing her to the severed head of primitive tribes, which are said to utter prophecies of strange knowledge remote from ordinary life and from real love. Honor can see that Martin has mythologised her; she has become for him a totemic substitution for deeper truth. Martin loves her without tenderness and humour; it is a monstrous love. It is, however, Martin

and Honor – against the background of a revolving door of other characters' relationships – who ultimately confront issues of happiness and love (and indeed whether love has any connection to happiness). Honor's advice to Martin is to take his chances to see if the two of them can survive together: the reader is left to guess whether the two of them can survive this ordeal. Can they leave the artificial enclosure of this particular novel (or indeed the novel form in a more general sense) and treat one another as real people?

Chihaya explained Murdoch's formalistic dilemmas in *The Nice and the Good* about what the author can contain within the structure of a novel. Art requires attention to Nature but the two have to be differentiated because Art needs the tidying effects of form (not least because a novel has to end somewhere) while Nature does not. Citing A.S. Byatt, Chihaya noted Murdoch's 'metaphysical regret' that this limitation has to be so. *The Nice and the Good* adds to the questions posed by *A Severed Head*: what do we understand by good and evil and how do they play into our everyday lives? How do we understand goodness and move towards it? Murdoch's 1964 essay 'The Idea of Perfection' establishes the proposition that real love comes from truly attending to the other person, and that love is the way to good. Moral clarity needs patient, honest discernment and exploration, a just and loving gaze. In *The Nice and the Good*, evil is a fully described phenomenon, which appears as inattentiveness, ennui and indifference, whereas good is only alluded to through Murdoch's representations of the novel's marriages and loves. The possibility for goodness is revealed in the redemptive love of John Ducane (a 'Nice' character who genuinely tries to be 'Good') and Mary Clothier (a 'Good' character). Against that exemplar, we see the deformed self-complacent love of Octavian and Kate Gray – 'to be good is a matter of temperament' Kate claims, a statement with which Murdoch could not disagree more. Kate is perhaps 'Nice' but not 'Good'; Octavian is neither 'Nice' nor 'Good'. Uncle Theo, preparing to return and die in the green valley, is saintly. But is he 'Good'?

Of all her works, Murdoch's concern with the novelistic form is perhaps most fully explored in *The Black Prince*, one of Murdoch's most significant works, which Chiyaha described as a 'layered meta-fictional exercise'. *The Black Prince* is concerned with 'bookishness': it is a book with alternate narrators who draw attention to its artifice, and interrogate Murdoch's novelistic practices. It is a book questioning its nature as a book: is it Bradley Pearson's memoir, his novel, or is it Murdoch's novel? Murdoch is stripping away the art of book-making, suggested Chihaya, revealing her obsession with form and with the novel's potentiality and also its limitations. This is fiction which admits its fictionality, with para-texts (the 'Editor's' foreword, Bradley's foreword and the self-justifying postscripts) which make no pretence to be separate from the novel they frame. There is playful self-reference too (though with serious intent) about what constitutes good literature. Arnold Baffin has Murdoch's same catholic approach, her sense of fun and her

considerable rate of output; Bradley has neither catholicism nor fun nor such output. So which do we want? Bradley's review of Baffin's recent publication is a plausible critique of Murdoch herself: stockbroker becomes monk, meets intense woman, discussion of religion, a bizarre death. Bradley Pearson is the narrator of *The Black Prince*, but this is not a novel he could ever have written. So the reader is presented with a choice: do we want Bradley's own costive, careful literature or Baffin's Murdochian plot?

*The Black Prince* explores further Murdoch's premises about the worth of the novel as the conveyer of moral truth – if written properly (that is, by Iris Murdoch). This is a novel which writes 'crookedly or ambiguously' about art, claimed Chihaya. Bradley ends up a (wrongly) convicted murderer, but in gaol he discovers the moral potential of art inspired by erotic love; he reaches enlightenment by producing a piece of work which really is 'art'. Is this a redemption? Bradley is, Chihaya argues, a familiarly deluded Murdochian character, an accidental man, a failed writer and a failed lover, but one with whom we can ultimately sympathise. Murdoch has shown us, in Bradley Pearson, that art sheds light on life. Chihaya cited Byatt to the effect that art is not a consolatory form; it does not exist to make us feel better. Art can show and perhaps mend; it is our only means of seeing. The final word falls to P.A. Loxias: having presciently observed that art would be the doom of Bradley, he concludes that art is not cosy because it tells the only truth that matters. Art is the light by which humanity can be mended. After art there is nothing.

*The Sea, The Sea* is Murdoch's 'big, sloppy book'; not her best, according to Chihaya. Charles Arrowby is a man who cannot perceive reality and for whom any future enlightenment looks to be unlikely. He has renounced his role in theatre, abjuring his 'magic' and breaking his staff in order to live alone, to write his autobiography and to learn how to be good. But Arrowby's attempt at seclusion unintentionally brings all the people from his past to his 'Prospero's island' in a magical convergence. Most of these gate-crashers of solitude have at one stage been manipulated and instrumentalised by the dislikeable Charles who continues – perhaps unintentionally – to exercise his trickery at Shruff End. Charles uses other people, objects and his surroundings ('my cliff') for his own convenience. The world is a projection of his ego. Hartley, a figure from his past, is a symbol for Charles, not a woman with her own life. He breaks the Murdochian rule that one should strive to live a good life.

As well as presenting us with the shallow unreformable man, *The Sea, The Sea*, explained Chihaya, returns to Murdoch's experimentation – and possibly her struggles – with novelistic form. We see this in dramatist Charles's attempt to bend the novelistic form to his autobiographical will, an attempt which is abandoned. The novel has broken down as a form for him; the shape of his novel (and perhaps Murdoch's) is left unresolved. The reader sees too in *The Sea*,

*The Sea* how hard it is to live Murdoch's exemplary life; how hard it is for those who are morally blind to learn and to change. Murdoch nearly offers a neat and crystalline ending as the travelling planet breathes noiselessly and beneficent seals visit and bless Charles – 'there is no doubt how the story ought to end', she writes tauntingly. But 'Life goes on'. Charles appears set to re-enter London's world of egoism and re-start the demon-ridden pilgrimage of life. 'What next I wonder?' he asks. A return to his former ways, having learnt nothing, it seems.

Chihaya provided a fascinating course that included a high-quality level of analysis and explanation both of Murdoch's conceptual thinking about the novelistic form and of the complexity and development of each novel's plot. Given the strong intellectual foundations to which Chihaya returned throughout, the course was 'introductory' only in the sense that the selected novels are among Murdoch's most well-known and most highly-regarded – a couple of them would probably belong in the top five, if not the top three, of most readers of Murdoch. (I should add that, while Chihaya rightly acknowledged the undoubted structural weaknesses of – and indeed frustrations with – *The Sea*, *The Sea*, this novel remains a huge sentimental favourite of mine.) It was very good to see the 92NY devoting resources to bring together this online community of Murdoch readers for such a worthwhile discussion. It is to be hoped that more will follow.

# Report on the 22nd Conference of the Iris Murdoch Society of Japan, 26 November 2022

*Fiona Tomkinson and Chiho Omichi*

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IT WAS MARVELLOUS TO SEE THE IRIS MURDOCH SOCIETY OF JAPAN reconvening after the disruption of the pandemic, albeit online. Being reunited with old friends, and meeting new international Murdochians, brought great pleasure, and the papers and presentations gave everyone much food for thought.

After opening remarks, the meeting commenced with two well-researched and thought-provoking papers in Japanese. The first, by Yuriko Noguchi, was on D.H. Lawrence in the Age of Infectious Diseases and offered a Murdochian interpretation of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, with special attention paid to Murdoch's 1972 essay, 'Salvation by Words'. The second, by Takayo Naito, focused on the character of Daisy Barrett in *Nuns and Soldiers*: finding Christ-like elements in Daisy, Naito discussed the way in which salvation, or 'religion', can stay with human beings in our post-Christian world.

The conference then moved on to papers given in English. The first of these was by a Chinese scholar, Duan Daoyu from Nanjing Agricultural University, who gave an excellent analysis of Murdoch's complex relationship with the writings of Virginia Woolf, that 'darling dangerous woman', and the way in which this relationship developed over the course of her career. Next came a presentation by Tatevik Ayvazyan, of Rebel Republic Films, who gave a fascinating account of a work in progress: a film adaptation of *The Italian Girl*. Maria Peacock then gave a paper on the enigmatic presence of Kafka in Murdoch's novels, with particular reference to *The Flight from the Enchanter* and *The Message to the Planet*, revealing how his presence is connected to the pervasive theme of exiles and refugees in Murdoch's fiction and to Murdoch's own work with UNRRA.

Finally, the keynote was given by Frances White, who commenced by sharing some beautiful stories of her childhood in Japan. Having discovered Murdoch's novels in her teenage years, she read them avidly, initially engaged by Murdoch's

skill as a storyteller then increasingly intrigued by her imagery and symbolism, and later also by her philosophy. She spoke of a single, magical encounter with Murdoch. White discussed her research into the notion of remorse in Murdoch's oeuvre, observing that for Murdoch, remorse is 'the obverse side of the coin to love which she flags up as her central concern', and exploring the chronic remorse of Hilary Burde in *A Word Child* and the lucid remorse of Edward Baltram in *The Good Apprentice*. She also outlined her most recent research, which focuses on two main areas: first, the rhetorical techniques employed by Murdoch to persuade readers to adopt her moral stance, and second, Murdoch's life-changing influence on many readers. White concluded that Murdoch would view the latter as her greatest achievement.

A face-to-face conference of the Iris Murdoch Society of Japan is planned for next year in Tokyo, and we look forward to continuing these conversations there!

# Report on Rob Hardy's Iris Murdoch Society Christmas Lecture, '*The Unicorn*: On Summoning Marian Taylor', 15 December 2023

*Maria Peacock*

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THERE ARE MANY WAYS OF READING IRIS MURDOCH'S BEAUTIFUL AND complex 1963 novel *The Unicorn*, and for the annual online Christmas lecture Rob Hardy presented us with a provocative and stimulating approach to the work. He perceives the novel as a feminist comedy about the absurdity of men, as a psychodrama in Gothic mode, and a spiritual philosophical journey. He considered the various elements Murdoch brings to the novel, which expose the inequalities of class and gender and the force of sexual power. He showed how her storytelling and dialogue exemplify questions about fundamental ethical, metaphysical and religious matters relating to God, love, will and suffering which were ignored in debates based on logical positivism and empiricism, the prevailing philosophical trends at Oxford University.

As suggested by his choice of title, Hardy framed his talk with the evolution of the main protagonist Marian Taylor, whom he called 'the reader's representative'. Marian belongs to the twentieth-century world of realist fiction, but she would not be out of place as the heroine of a novel from an earlier century: recovering from an unsatisfactory love affair, she arrives in a remote and inhospitable part of Ireland to take up the post of governess, and finds herself among the classic scenery of a Gothic romance. Already in a state of apprehension, Marian is about to go through ordeals of suffering towards self-realisation and renewal. In a robust critique of the opening pages of the novel, Hardy took us through Marion's encounters with a succession of men described by him as a 'curious collection of trousered bipeds'. Her own situation, gender and class determine

her position in the social hierarchy and make her the object of condescension in the appropriately named Gaze Castle.

As Hardy observed, Marion's role in life is to be seen by men, but the reader's attention is directed to look at what she sees, and although the novel is concerned with serious and terrible matters and contains physical and psychological violence, there is a great deal of humour in what we are shown. Hardy appraised Murdoch's use of the weapon of satire in creating her male characters, giving particular and quite merciless attention to her portrayal of Effingham Cooper as the personification of the self-important English middle-class male civil servant. Murdoch parodies Oxford male-dominated philosophy in a discussion between Effingham and his former tutor, the unworldly recluse Max Lejour. Max, a caricature of an aged patriarch and scholar, searches (like Murdoch) for Good, although he is aware at the end of his life that he has hardly begun his spiritual pilgrimage. Effingham personifies the complacency and intransigence of a philosophy which repudiates the mystery of whatever cannot be proved. He is imprisoned by his failure to see anything, except in relation to himself, and for both Max and Effingham, women are objects to be worshipped rather than desired or loved.

Referring to Peter J. Conradi's *The Saint and the Artist*, Hardy considered the lessons which Murdoch's characters need to learn by tracing the parallel narratives of Effingham and Marian, who are each instructed by suffering. He wondered whether Effingham's loss of self, which exposes him to love and death as he is sinking down into the bog, teaches him anything lasting. He concluded that Effingham's subsequent behaviour is evidence that the instruction is short-lived: when he leaves Gaze he is still imprisoned by his self. Marian, however, as she returns to the real world, is freeing herself of the things which constrained her, and although she has suffered loss and guilt, she has learnt that she must choose love over selfish hate.

In this intriguing and original reading of *The Unicorn*, Hardy referred to the work of Sarah Perry to show how the adoption of familiar literary elements of the Gothic not only provides a thrilling sensation of apprehension, but it also creates a place where archetypes – those universal images and ideas which are held in the collective unconscious – can be found. He links this to his identification in the novel of archetypes of the major arcana of the Tarot cards. Invoking Jung's concept of individuation as the extension of consciousness to reveal the true persona free from the falsehoods generated by the ego, Hardy drew on Mark Patrick Hederman's argument that one function of the Tarot is to aid spiritual growth by providing a route to the area beyond logic, temporality, space and reason. Entries in Murdoch's journals record that she read and owned Tarot cards and occasional references to the cards can be found in her novels. Hardy demonstrated that the Tarot is a significant theme in *The Unicorn* by indicating

where characters could be matched with archetypes and by finding allusions to images from particular cards. For example, the spiritual Denis, who can be seen as the Magician archetype, sings a song about a blackbird in a fuchsia tree, which is an image found on the Star card. Hardy made it clear that the novel is not merely an allegory of the arcana. The Tarot can be a way of charting a spiritual journey, such as that undertaken by Marian, away from instinctual motivation in the unconscious towards a full consciousness of the world. Hardy's reading presents the Tarot as one way by which we can find a path through this wonderful and mysterious novel.

# Report on ‘Iris Murdoch and Dame Julian of Norwich’, public lecture by Anne Rowe, University of Chichester, 18 February 2023

*Frances White*

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**A**NNE ROWE’S INSPIRING LECTURE ON THE INFLUENCE OF DAME JULIAN OF Norwich (c. 1343–1416) on Dame Iris Murdoch was the concluding highlight of the IMRC Postgraduate Study Day, when members of the public joined academics, forming an audience of about forty. This talk was beautifully illustrated with images of Stanbrook Abbey, Norwich Cathedral, Dame Julian’s shrine and cell, the Fiddleford crucifix, and a medieval copy of *Revelations of Divine Love*, all immersing us in the religious world of the Middle Ages. Icons of Julian juxtaposed with a photograph of Murdoch created a strong visual impression of these two strong, influential women, separated by time and world-view but holding elemental things in common, as Rowe demonstrated.

This scholarly and illuminating historical account of Dame Julian’s life, and of the vicissitudes of the remarkable survival of the manuscript she left, was underpinned by Rowe’s characteristically meticulous research, undertaken for a forthcoming academic essay which will be included in *Iris Murdoch and the Western Theological Imagination* (2024) in the ‘Iris Murdoch Today’ series. But the fine scholarship was leavened by Rowe’s evident passion for Dame Julian – which she shares with Murdoch – and by her vivacious account of her personal pilgrimages to the religious sites associated with this medieval anchoress.

Drawing on material from Murdoch’s journals, letters and *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* as well as Murdoch’s annotated copy of *Revelations of Divine Love*, Rowe drew out the importance of that text to Murdoch’s theological thinking, before tracing the influence of Julian’s insights and images in four novels in which she sees Murdoch in dialogue with Julian. She picked out Catherine Fawley in *The Bell*, Julian Baffin in *The Black Prince*, Anne Cavidge in *Nuns and Soldiers* (identified as the Ur-text for Murdoch’s Julian-influenced fiction) and Franca

Sheerwater in *The Message to the Planet*. Further – perhaps contentious – links were offered with regard to Jake Donaghue in *Under the Net* and Colette Forbes in *Henry and Cato*, suggesting the disruptive and disturbing effect of reading these texts through the lens of Julian’s emphasis on universal forgiveness.

Murdoch, whose vocation as novelist involved her in full immersion in worldly human experience, was, Rowe contended, deeply touched by the alternative vocation of the religious life and the women who live it. She visited Stanbrook Abbey herself and maintained a lifelong friendship by correspondence with her Oxford contemporary, Lucy Klatschko, who became Sister Marian and spent the rest of her life there. The enduring fascination of the mystical life for Murdoch may account for Dame Julian’s strong appeal: Murdoch too can arguably be seen as a mystic and she also had veridical visions which she bequeaths to the characters Anne Cavidge and Bellamy James. Further parallels between Murdoch and Julian are that both are mavericks and renegades, brave women who dared to go against the established thinking and teaching of their times, going with their own instincts instead – though admittedly the risks incurred by heresy were far greater in medieval times than in the twentieth century.

Rowe delineated the clear gap between Murdoch, who lacked belief in God and any life hereafter, and Julian’s staunch belief in both. Yet Julian’s conviction that all shall be redeemed by our life in Christ is echoed in Murdoch’s wistful repetitions of the phrase, ‘Nothing can separate us from the love of Christ’ alongside Julian’s own renowned mantra, ‘All shall be well and all shall be well and all manner of thing shall be well’. What chiefly unites these women, in Rowe’s view, is their absolute belief in love as a regenerative force which heals. Her talk concluded with the final words of their respective texts: Dame Julian ending *Revelations of Divine Love* – which is experiencing a global revival in the twenty-first century – with ‘Love was our Lord’s meaning’, and Iris Murdoch closing *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* with words from Psalm 139. A lively question and answer session followed this well-received lecture.

# Installation Address of Iris Murdoch's Blue Plaque, 30 Charlbury Road, Oxford, 26 May 2023

*Peter J. Conradi*

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The Iris Murdoch Society was delighted to be able to support the production and installation, alongside Audi Bayley, of an Oxfordshire Blue Plaque at 30 Charlbury Road to celebrate the life and achievements of Dame Iris Murdoch. Our especial thanks to Peter J. Conradi for agreeing to give the unveiling address to a number of our members, academics from the University, and friends and neighbours of Dame Iris from the local area. His words are reproduced below.

**W**E'RE HERE TO CELEBRATE DAME IRIS MURDOCH'S MANY ACHIEVEMENTS. When asked about literary reputations, Dame Iris remembered that in the 1930s Charles Morgan was thought a literary giant, and Evelyn Waugh a light-weight outsider. Time reversed both judgements: Morgan has vanished without trace, while Waugh's reputation grows phenomenally. Reputation, she implied, was indeed unpredictable.

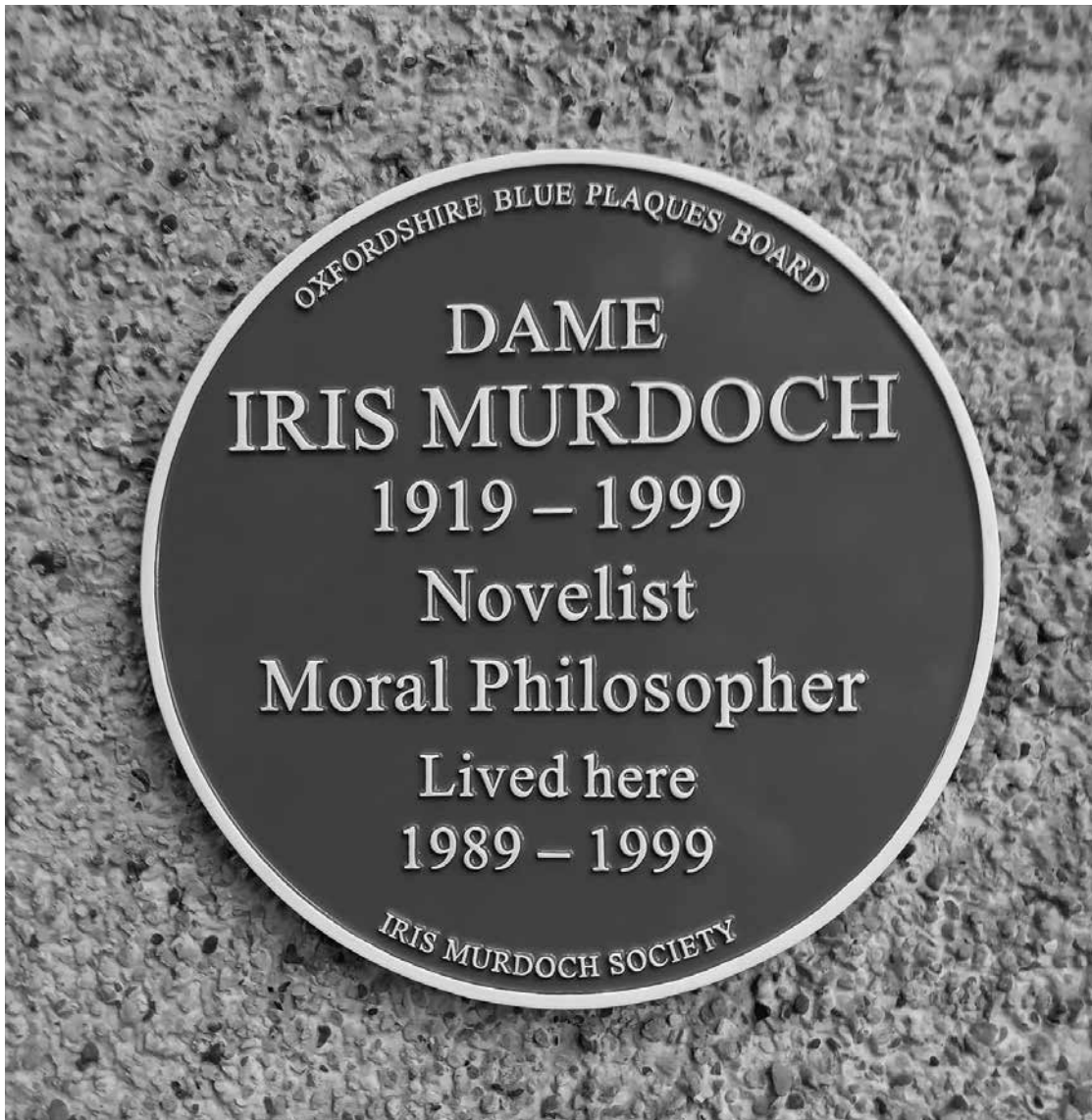
She felt as if she had no contemporaries. True, she noticed in passing that she herself, together with Golding, Spark, Saul Bellow and Patrick White all shared a certain affinity: their vision of life entailed the spiritual ... But she nonetheless felt as if she had no contemporaries. That may testify to her astonishing freshness of imagination: she had imitators – from (arguably) John Updike to Martin Amis – but no living models. Such models as she acknowledged – Shakespeare and the great Russians – were long dead. Indeed when she herself died critic Lorna Sage recorded that 'You could sense in the tributes, a rather stunned realisation of her originality and energy and daring'.

I'll return to this question of her legacy. Meanwhile some light-hearted reflections on the Bayleys' housing. After 29 years living at Steeple Aston, Cedar Lodge had become too much for the Bayleys. In December 1985 they moved to 68 Hamilton Road. 'For 30 years kings of infinite space', Murdoch noted in her journal, 'now to live in a nutshell'. John Bayley said that he bought the house 'without exploring much inside'. In fact John confessed that he bought Hamilton Road without going inside at all: he feared that during the time it took him to go indoors someone else might buy it. The house was much too small, and there were also small and noisy children in the neighbourhood. After four years, they moved here. She wrote to Audi and Boris Villers, '30 Charlbury Road is now empty and we go and look at it with silent awe and can scarcely believe it belongs to us'. She lived in Charlbury Road from April 1989 until her death on 8 Feb 1999, so about 10 years during which she completed *The Green Knight* (1993), wrote *Jackson's Dilemma* (1995), and much moral philosophy – for example *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (1992). Dame Iris had two modes of address: through her 26 novels, and through her moral philosophy.

Of course, she related art and morality. 'Art and morality are, with certain provisos [...], one. Their essence is the same. The essence of both of them is love. Love is the perception of individuals. Love is the extremely difficult realisation that something other than oneself is real. Love, and so art and morals, is the discovery of reality'. This is brave, unorthodox and adventurous thinking. The philosopher Justin Brookes, writing a magnum opus about *The Sovereignty of Good* for Oxford University Press, points out 'quite how life-changing the ideas of *The Sovereignty of Good* have been for many of us [...] I remember, as a twenty-three-year-old or so, when a friend asked if there was anything in Philosophy that had really changed my life, replying: oh, there was one thing that changed my life – to see the possibility of a kind of moral realism: in precisely the way that it was her achievement, I think, to map out. That changed the world'.

What is it like to admire a writer? John Bayley has a simple answer to this interesting question. When you admire a novelist – he suggests – this is because you feel you trust their mind: you find their manner of thinking interesting. We could add that that admiration goes together with a feeling of being at home – or safe – in their mind.

At her centenary in July 2019 the *New Statesman*, perhaps surprisingly, dedicated a very long (3000-word) celebration detailing her achievement. Many – perhaps four or five – different, unrelated, compelling reasons were advanced for finding Murdoch's work of continuing relevance and importance. The arguments went that she was a prophetess of gender fluidity in her life and in her fiction. That her novels draw on philosophy, religion, and literature from numerous traditions. That they are romances that defy the boundaries of class, ethnicity, age, nationality and legality. (*The Bell* [1958] predated the 1967 Sexual Offences



Act.) That starting with *Under the Net* (1954), she created six or so innovative and influential male monologues. It seems strange that instead of celebrating this unique – and also influential – achievement, dull critics take her to task for not choosing women. That she communicates the toxicity of patriarchy, and especially the male inclination to master inner chaos with a desire for power and a resort to violence. In 1944–6 she worked with refugees at UNRRA; she was able to convey the suffering of refugees and immigrants; and finally that in novels such as *A Word Child* (1975) she portrayed the long-term damage caused by childhood abuse and neglect. She is also unusual among novelists – Woolf is another case – in celebrating London.

To give her the last word, concerning tragi-comedy. In *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* she wrote 'Much of the greatest literary art is a tragi-comic, or perhaps

we should say sad-comic, condensation, a kind of pathos which is aware of terrible things, and which eschews definition and declared formal purpose. Such pathos is everywhere in Shakespeare. We also see it in the great novels. The novel is the literary form best suited to this sort of free reflection, sad-comic and discursive truth-telling. [...] What it loses in hard-edged formal impact, it gains in its grasp of detail, its freedom from tempo, its ability to be irrelevant, to reflect without haste upon persons and situations and in general pursue what is contingent and incomplete'. This is also true of her own work.

# Report on ‘Acastos’, a performance in Catalan, University of Barcelona, Spain, 26 May 2023

*Montse Figuerola*

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**T**HE FIRST OF IRIS MURDOCH’S PLATONIC DIALOGUES IN *ACASTOS: TWO Platonic Dialogues* (1986) was performed in Catalan in the Faculty of Philosophy at the University of Barcelona, organised by members of the Iris Murdoch Seminar. Margarita Mauri, Professor of Ethics at the University, had skilfully translated ‘Art and Eros: A Dialogue About Art’ into Catalan. This project developed further when some undergraduate students accepted the challenge of staging her translation. None of them were professional actors, but they agreed to portray the six characters who appear in the play. They had the help and guidance of another student, Guillem Galmès, the only professional thespian among them, who undertook the duties of the director.

The result was a highly enjoyable and professional performance. The overall portrayal was delightful. The setting was minimalist but provided different spaces to make each character shine. The costumes transported the public to Ancient Greece. The theatre was filled to capacity and the audience was focused and silent. A success!

The most remarkable aspect was the seriousness with which the characters were performed. We all could laugh with Callistos (Jordi Pon), full of youth and excitement. Other characters were the politician Mantias (Santi Acha), the cynic Deximenes (Víctor Escudero), the sensible Acastos (Arnau Martí), the young and sometimes grumpy Plato (Jonas Casado), and the measured Socrates (Adrià Vilaseca), probably the most difficult role. The actors knew what they were doing and the work was faithful to Murdoch’s original text.

None of this would have been possible without the invaluable contribution of Margarita Mauri to the study of Murdoch in Spain. Translating is always a delicate task. Very often there is controversy about various lines. That is



# ACASTOS

UN DIÀLEG SOBRE L'ART

D'IRIS MURDOCH

**26 DE MAIG A LES 20:00**  
**AULA MAGNA, FACULTAT DE FILOSOFIA**

INTERPRETAT PER JONAS CASADO, VÍCTOR ESCUDERO, JORDI PON, ADRIÀ VILASECA, ARNAU MARTÍ I SANTI ACHA. DIRIGIT PER GUILLEM GALMÉS. VESTUARI D'HELENA MATEOS.

UNIVERSITAT DE BARCELONA. FACULTAT DE FILOSOFIA. DEPARTAMENT DE FILOSOFIA. ANY 2023. ORGANITZEN: SEMINARI IRIS MURDOCH I AULA DE TEATRE UB.

not the case here: Mauri is an expert on Murdoch and the text in Catalan is just perfect.

The Iris Murdoch Seminar is a research group formed by students of Philosophy at the University of Barcelona, headed by Mauri, which began in 2006. The purpose of this group is to study, and spread knowledge of, Murdoch's work. The Seminar analyses a novel every year and publishes an essay in *Convivium*, a Spanish journal of philosophy. Mauri has also published several essays and articles in other journals. This group has been very active for many years, participating in both national and international conferences. It has also held different exhibitions related to Murdoch. This performance – enjoyed by all – was an excellent addition to the tasks undertaken by the group to promote Murdoch's work with the intention of making her better known in Spain.

# Report on ‘Wartime Quartet: Significance, Legacy, Spirit’, a conference held at Durham University, 7–9 June 2023

*Daniel Read*

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THE ‘WARTIME QUARTET: SIGNIFICANCE, LEGACY, SPIRIT’ CONFERENCE represented the culmination of Clare Mac Cumhaill and Rachael Wiseman’s ‘Women In Parenthesis’ project launched in 2015. The conference enabled people from across the world, both in person and online (for the keynote speakers), to celebrate the lives and work of Elizabeth Anscombe, Philippa Foot, Mary Midgley and Iris Murdoch. It also brought the Quartet into conversation with each other and with their fellow, lesser-known philosophers.

The three-day event began on Wednesday with an introduction to the Midgley Archive in pre-booked thirty-minute intervals. Although this time felt short, and many were left wanting more, the Durham University archivist Andrew Gray brilliantly guided the audience through a representative selection of material. Later in the afternoon, the organisers officially opened the conference with a welcome address that was followed by a screening of Carol Sommer’s ‘Sometimes she tried to think about painting’. This audio-visual presentation captured the attention of the audience with its striking visual imagery that juxtaposed everyday or manmade objects against the landscapes of the British Isles. The day closed with Cora Diamond’s plenary lecture, ‘Anscombe and Foot on What Has No Sense’; she gave a remote lecture to the audience that considered how, for Anscombe and Foot, consequentialist arguments can corrupt moral thinking.

Thursday morning began with Lawrence Blum’s plenary lecture, ‘Philippa Foot, Iris Murdoch, and Dorothy Emmet’, a shortened version of his originally planned paper, which was to include a discussion of Bernard Williams. For Blum, these figures represent a counter-tradition within, or against, analytic ethics. A poster session followed next – a new addition to the plenaries and panels usually found in conference programmes. Everybody enjoyed the opportunity to

experience ideas being presented in new and creative ways. Stand-out posters, for me, included Hannah Marije Altorf and Mariette Willemsen's interactive poster on their Dutch translation of Iris Murdoch's *The Fire and the Sun: Why Plato Banished the Artists*, Amia Guha's model for how to integrate the Wartime Quartet into A Level Philosophy courses, and Amy Ward's insights into creating the 'Women in Parenthesis' Podcast during 2020.

Two sets of panels straddled Thursday's lunchbreak: the first gave delegates the option to focus on 'Education and life progress', the 'Non-human world' or 'Action'; the second gave them the choice of the 'Ontology of the Good' or 'Intellectual Journeys'. As always, the decision of which panel to pick was difficult. Murdoch made appearances in papers by scholars familiar to the Murdoch research community. Megan Jane Laverty, for example, brought Murdoch and Foot into conversation with each other on the subject of childhood and growing up, and Miles Leeson offered an exploration of Donald MacKinnon's influence on Murdoch's *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*. The second day was rounded off by Sophie-Grace Chappell's plenary lecture, 'Anscombe's Three Theses After Sixty Years: modern moral philosophy, polemic, and "Modern Moral Philosophy"'. Chappell delicately teased out the arguments in this seminal work, and her erudite discussions of the problems with consequentialist philosophical argumentation resonated with Diamond's lecture from the evening before.

Justin Broackes opened the final day with his plenary lecture, 'Personhood, Recognition and our Supersensible Nature: Murdoch, Weil and Murdoch's interlocutors'. He explained Murdoch's disagreement with the metaphors of touch, as used by thinkers like Stuart Hampshire. She instead follows Plato by using visual metaphors. Broackes argued, however, that it is interesting how, despite her reading of Weil, who prioritised the sense of hearing, Murdoch did not integrate this sense, or indeed its converse, talking, into her own philosophical writings. An extended tea-and-coffee break then followed, during which Frances White shared an exhibition, jointly curated with the Kingston University archivist Dayna Miller. Titled "'The Windmills of her Mind": Iris Murdoch's Journals', this exhibition illustrated how the private thoughts in Murdoch's journals reveal her hybrid nature, part-novelist part-philosopher.

Friday's last panels focused on 'Human nature & philosophical method' and 'Attention/perception'. My own panel-choice guilt was alleviated by a wonderful collection of papers, given by Silvia Caprioglio Panizza, Peter West and Ian James Kidd. All of these embodied the ethos of the conference by drawing connections between members of the Wartime Quartet, by expanding the philosophical canon to include ostensibly peripheral writers, and by highlighting the importance of less narrow-minded, myopic ways of thinking.

Indeed, these values were borne out by the conference, where a new term was coined for people who seemed to operate on the periphery of the Wartime Quartet,

such as Donald MacKinnon, Dorothy Emmet and Mary Warnock, became 'the Quartet Plus'. In a similar vein, Jane Heal's plenary lecture, 'Unselfishness and Plural Intentionality', closed the conference with an argument in favour of moving away from the individualistic focus of much mainstream philosophy. While many construe that practical rationality is governed by a singular 'I', Heal's paper brilliantly illustrated how it can, just as easily, be governed by a communal 'we'.

Heal's plenary lecture may have closed the day's scheduled events, but the final timeslot on the conference programme was given over to an untitled plenary. In this session Clare Mac Cumhaill and Rachael Wiseman briefly concluded the conference and then – with a quick reshuffle of the lecture-room's chairs into a large rough circle for the remaining delegates – opened up the room for questions, allowing everyone to share their reflections, their highlights and their hopes for the future. It was particularly touching to hear Mary Midgley's sons share their pleasure at seeing such a vibrant research community grow around their mother and her own circle of friends. It was also exciting to hear of people's continued wishes to build and expand the 'Women In Parenthesis' resources with teaching materials, publication lists and researcher catalogues. This round-table discussion offered a refreshing, moving and convivial way to end a brilliantly organised conference.

# Report on ‘Iris Murdoch: Transatlantic Ties’, an online conference, 30 June 2023

*Meredith Trexler Drees*

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THIS CONFERENCE, ORIGINALLY SCHEDULED ON-SITE AT THE UNIVERSITY of Notre Dame, was convened by Miles Leeson of the Iris Murdoch Research Centre and Meredith Trexler Drees of Kansas Wesleyan University and took place in a virtual format. It would have marked the first major Murdoch-focused event in the USA since 2001; however, moving the conference online allowed for a well-rounded group of thirty attendees from a variety of geographical locations. Scholars working on Murdoch and her circle in all disciplines from North America and beyond were invited to participate. The conference showcased ongoing and published Murdoch scholarship, with a particular focus on connections to Murdoch’s work outside the UK.

The conference opened with Kelly Ann Cunningham’s discussion, ‘Knowing Shakespeare, Knowing the Self, Knowing Love: Murdoch on Friendship, Self-Knowledge, and Moral Development’. Robert Mueller, Lisa Lottini-Wagner and Theresa Delaplain gave an unusual offering, ‘Imaginings: Musical Inspiration from Murdoch’, which enhanced the conference with a skillfully and vibrantly performed oboe duet with text from Murdoch, composed by Robert who explained the connection he makes between music and Murdoch’s words. Katherine Pier opened up the question of ‘Where is the Justice in Iris Murdoch’s ‘Just and Loving Gaze?’ and Kristian Cantens presented the moral challenge Murdoch sets in ‘On Becoming Better’. The morning session closed with Ranadip Dutta’s paper on ‘Interrogating “masculinity/ies” between “art” and “morality” in Iris Murdoch’s *The Nice and the Good* and *The Black Prince*’.

The afternoon session comprised two papers coming at Murdoch’s work from very innovative angles: Keenan Davis, from a scientific slant in ‘An Ethical Phenomenology of Deep Brain Stimulation: Murdoch, Levinas, and Medical Ethics’, and Robert Cremins juxtaposing Murdoch’s fiction with the writing of a contemporaneous novelist, William Gaddis, in ‘*Carpenter’s Gothic*, Murdoch’s

Gothic'. At the culmination of a productive and enjoyable day, Lawrence Blum gave an illuminating and thought-provoking keynote address concerning the work of a contemporaneous but less well-known philosopher, Dorothy Emmet, in 'Foot, Murdoch, and Emmet: A Complex Counter-Tradition in and Against British Analytic Moral Philosophy'.

The conference inspired rich discussion and collaboration among Murdochians with the aim of promoting and advancing Murdoch scholarship well as furthering the transatlantic relationship between Murdoch scholars.

# Update from the Archive 2023

*Dayna Miller*

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**A**S WE BEGIN THIS YEAR'S UPDATE I'M PLEASED TO REPORT THAT OVER A six-day period in January the archive collections were successfully relocated to the Town House. Despite contending with some cold and rainy weather, around 1,200 crates of material were safely transported across the Penrhyn Road campus from our old archive. While there is still work ahead to organise the collections in the store and to settle ourselves into the office space, it is a step forward to have both our materials and researchers in the same building!

Talking of researchers, this year we have welcomed 406 visitors to the Archive, 40 percent of whom have viewed items from the Iris Murdoch Collections. We were delighted to host students on our MA Creative Writing distance-learning course during their on-campus study day and this was followed by MA English Literature students from the University of Chichester. We also enjoyed visits by sixth form pupils from Ibstock Place School and Kingston Grammar School. Following an introduction to the Archive and a talk from Anne Rowe, the pupils had the opportunity to handle a selection of Murdoch-related materials – from her letters and journals to her stones and costume jewellery. We hoped that engaging with these items would encourage the pupils to take part in the inaugural Daphne Turner Memorial Prize for Essays inspired by the Iris Murdoch Collections at Kingston University Archives. The prize was conceived by Anne Rowe and named in honour of her mentor, friend, and fellow lecturer, Daphne Turner. With six entries received, the judging panel – comprising Anne Rowe, Frances White and myself – was excited to see a range of topics, high quality writing, and imaginative approaches from the pupils. At the prize-giving event on 27 June, all six entrants received a special mention, with two being highly commended for their efforts. The prize was awarded to Odessa Lidstrom of Ibstock Place School for 'A Letter to the Board of Education', a rousing call for Murdoch's works to be studied by future generations of English Literature students and written very much in the spirit of Iris herself! The winning entry is available to read on the Iris Murdoch Society blog: <https://irismurdochsociety.org.uk/2023/06/26/letter-to-the-board/>

With the essay prize providing inspiration for pupils who are thinking about applying to university, our last exhibition, 'Making Good', celebrated

the other end of the educational journey. Matthew Richardson is a practising illustrator whose PhD, 'Para-illustration: Gaps, fragments and spaces of the literary imagination', explores a selection of writers' notes, drafts, and archives to create new ways of visualising their literature. For his final project, Matthew responded to Murdoch's planning notes for *The Bell*, written inside her copy of Colin Wilson's *The Outsider*, by producing his own illustrated book entitled *Good*. While browsing its pages during Matthew's first visit to the Archive, Frances and I were amazed to find one connection after another between the illustrations and items in the Iris Murdoch Collections. This series of connections formed the basis of our exhibition, which showcased Matthew's illustrations alongside the archival items with which they were associated. Fossils, religious icons, stamps, and fish are just some of the connections we identified, and without traditional exhibition captions, viewers were invited to make connections of their own. Following the opening of the exhibition, the Archive held a workshop for MA Illustration students during which Matthew talked about his PhD research and shared his thought processes around image-making. The students were given an in-depth introduction to the exhibition and, with the theme in mind, they were then asked to make links between items taken from various archive collections which were displayed in the Reading Room. This resulted in some interesting discussions, and it was great to see the students interacting with the materials. 'Making Good' closed on 7 September but more information can be found on the Archive blog: <https://blogs.kingston.ac.uk/asc/2023/07/04/an-accidental-exhibition/>

Getting inventive with the Iris Murdoch Collections has been a theme of this year and it continued with a display at the Wartime Quartet conference held at the University of Durham in June. We had a marvellous time creating images of items from the Murdoch Collections that illustrated the lyrics of the song 'Windmills of Your Mind' by Noel Harrison. These were to accompany "The Windmills of her Mind": Iris Murdoch's Journals', a talk by Frances White. Along with faux journals and reproductions of items from the Collections that depict the iris flower, the images were arranged to form a representation of Murdoch's desk. Postcards featuring quotations from and about Murdoch's journals were also created to complement the talk and provide conversation starters for attendees. It is hoped that following its success in Durham, we can revisit 'The Windmills of her Mind' in the Archive!

In addition to all this creativity, we have restarted our transcription programme and have been pleased to welcome three new transcribers, who come to us via Kingston Arts Society and Kingston Museum and are all transcribing the annotations within Murdoch's Oxford Library. We are also very happy to have Lucy Oulton back with us on the transcription team. There is a fair way to go yet, but progress is certainly being made with two more books completed since

March. With that I would like to extend a huge thank you to all transcribers past and present for giving the Archive your time and expertise.

Sincere thanks also go to Mrs Audi Bayley and the Iris Murdoch Society for their continued support of the Archive and its activities, and to those who have donated material to the Iris Murdoch Collections over the last year. Highlights include:

- A draft script for 'Mirror, Mirror', an unproduced film based on *A Fairly Honourable Defeat*. Kindly donated by the Iris Murdoch Society. Though the author is unconfirmed, it is possible that the script was written by Peter Ustinov, as referred to in Peter J. Conradi, *Iris Murdoch: A Life* (533).
- A copy of the *Iris Murdoch Newsletter of Japan*, No. 22, March 2023. Kindly donated by Yasushi Nakakubo, Secretary of the Iris Murdoch Society of Japan. This edition of the newsletter features 'How Japan and Iris Murdoch shaped an Englishwoman's Life' by Frances White.
- Françoise Trichet, 'Iris Murdoch – Myth and Reality'. Kindly donated by Dr Eric Northey. This thesis was written in 1968 for Trichet's English Masters' degree at Nanterre University, Paris.

Moving through summer and into the 2023/24 academic year, we are preparing a new exhibition which is being curated by two of our volunteers and will feature material from the Iris Murdoch Collections among others. We also hope to take an active part in a new postgraduate module, 'The Archive in Contemporary Media Cultures', focusing on the role of archives in contemporary media. Work on our application to attain Archive Service Accreditation from The National Archives for a second time will be ongoing throughout the year and, as ever, we will continue to support research and projects relating to Iris Murdoch. We welcome contact from organisations, groups and individuals who would like to arrange a visit and look forward to seeing you in the Reading Room!

For general enquiries and appointment requests, please email [archives@kingston.ac.uk](mailto:archives@kingston.ac.uk)

To search for documents, artworks, and objects, please visit the archive catalogue at <https://adlib.kingston.ac.uk>

Books and audio-visual collections can be found in our main library catalogue at <https://icat.kingston.ac.uk>

To keep up with news and events, please check out our blog at <https://blogs.kingston.ac.uk/asc> and follow us on Instagram @kingston\_uni\_archives

# Loving Order: Iris Murdoch and Alex Colville

*Rebecca Moden*

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IRIS MURDOCH MET THE CANADIAN ARTIST ALEX COLVILLE (1920–2013) IN 1963, at an Anglican retreat in Ontario. Murdoch was invariably fascinated by artists, and so it was entirely characteristic of her that she sought out Colville's company and asked to see his work. They liked each other straightaway, and he readily showed her all his portfolios. They were able to meet on only one further occasion, when Colville was passing through London in 1969, but they corresponded, and the friendship developed by letter. Each acknowledged the influence and inspiration of the other.<sup>1</sup> 'I really do find your pictures an immense pleasure & a deep inspiration even though I have only the marginal knowledge of someone who has not been able to look continually – they are ideas to me – but I shall hope to be able to do a lot more looking', she wrote to him in 1969.<sup>2</sup>

During the years which followed she did indeed undertake a great deal more 'looking'. Although she unfailingly attended Colville's occasional London exhibitions, she knew his work mainly through reproductions. Colville sent Murdoch photographs, colour slides – a set of slides of pictures dating from 1966–1970 was found among her possessions on her death, suggesting that his work of this period was of particular interest to her – and a critical work on his oeuvre which she described to him as 'a marvel and a treasure'.<sup>3</sup> She would 'sit and study her volume of Colville reproductions by the hour', John Bayley observes.<sup>4</sup> That she was not in the presence of the original pictures would have presented no difficulty to Murdoch; she had, after all, meditated on Titian's *Flaying of Marsyas* for many years, finding in it vast inspiration, long before she saw the original at the Royal Academy in 1983. Colville's highly distinctive realist pictures in the Pointillist style are constructed with geometric precision. Their surface appearance is scrupulously true to life, but they offer far more than photographic realism; they are meticulously constructed fictions, their complex meanings hovering beneath the surface, often unsettling, perhaps stirring suppressed unconscious fears in the viewer. As Murdoch scrutinised Colville's pictures, seeking their elusive meanings, they fed her imagination

and her intellect; they were, she told him, ‘powerful and beautiful’, and she discerned in them a ‘particular serenity and *presence of being*’.<sup>5</sup>

Murdoch’s characters are frequently captured in the moment of contemplation of a work of visual art, in tableaux which expand characters’ psychology, enhance the novels’ moral impact, and refine readers’ capacities for objective, outward-directed attention. Murdoch reveals that although a picture may merely reinforce an inattentive viewer’s self-delusion – as when, in *A Fairly Honourable Defeat* (1970), self-absorbed Morgan Browne is easily convinced by her cynical ex-lover Julius King to consider the Tate’s late Turners ‘limited and amateurish’<sup>6</sup> – attention to a picture can, conversely, engender a fleeting lucidity of vision which is a form of unselfing. Dora Greenfield in *The Bell* (1958), for instance, wandering through the National Gallery in a distracted state, is suddenly overwhelmed by spontaneous feelings of love and reverence for Gainsborough’s *The Painter’s Daughters Chasing a Butterfly*, and is subsequently able to begin thinking with greater clarity and to make the moral decision to try to repair her troubled marriage, taking the painting as a sign that ‘somewhere, something good existed’.<sup>7</sup> Murdoch’s response to Colville’s pictures is rather more measured than Dora’s response to the Gainsborough, yet she undoubtedly gained mental and spiritual refreshment from studying them: she remarked to him on their ‘calmness and truth’; their ‘*absolute thereness*’ and, in a late letter in which she describes her current struggle with *Jackson’s Dilemma*, wrote: ‘Thank you for all your pictures which stay so calmly as icons’.<sup>8</sup> Colville’s pictures are tableaux that arrest moments of everyday experience and, with loving attention to order and detail, render them mysterious, monumental and archetypal. Murdoch, poring over Colville’s pictures in emulation of her many characters who contemplate pictures in their quest for truth, unwittingly created a *tableau vivant*: a moment steadied for objective consideration, which offers another means of understanding Murdoch, her work and thought.

There are many points of convergence between Murdoch and Colville. Her dialogue with him and her contemplation of his pictures energised her thinking, and this can be detected in the novels which she was writing in the mid-to-late 1960s, during the early stages of their friendship: the Shakespearean and supernatural blend of romance, comedy and thriller *The Nice and the Good* (1968), and the darkly comedic allegorical tale of good and evil *A Fairly Honourable Defeat*. Both of these novels reflect on the concepts of chaos and order, which are at the heart of Colville’s personal philosophy. ‘I tend to think of all experience as chaotic’, Colville remarked in a 1984 interview. Discussing the artist’s attention to the details of the natural world, Colville noted the Ancient Greeks’ sense of innate order in nature, and acknowledged, ‘That sense of order is immensely important to me’.<sup>9</sup> Colville’s geometrically precise measurement and ordering of pictorial space enabled him to impose form on contingency so harmoniously that it appears

natural. *Nude and Dummy* (1950) – which depicts a female figure standing at an attic window, half-turning to gaze behind her at, possibly, the artist, the viewer, or the dressmaker's dummy which dominates the foreground and which might be interpreted as a mutilated body – was the first of his pictures to employ a rigid perspectival system to define a constructed space into which the elements of the picture are worked. Colville called this his 'first good painting', and it marks a turning point in his development as an artist.<sup>10</sup> Murdoch noted, and remarked admiringly on, his resemblance to the Early Renaissance master Piero della Francesca – who she aligns with Shakespeare in 'On "God" and "Good"' (1969), contending that both are 'almost gods' – and the Post-Impressionist Georges Seurat, both of whom rigorously applied mathematical principles to their art. Murdoch was surprised that neither artist was mentioned in the critical work on Colville's painting which he had sent her, remarking that they 'should have been there'.<sup>11</sup> Order was essential not only to Colville's painting but also to his everyday life in rural Nova Scotia, which was organised into a finely tuned, rhythmical pattern of long periods of concentrated work interposed with episodes of recreation and family time; this pattern enabled him to maintain psychological equilibrium and work with maximum effectiveness. The philosopher (also Colville's friend) George Grant commented with regard to Colville's love of order, 'You can't do anything good in the world at all without some order over your own life'.<sup>12</sup> Yet Colville's disciplined daily routine contrasts markedly with the disordered lives of many of Murdoch's 'good' characters, perhaps most obviously Tallis Browne in *A Fairly Honourable Defeat*, who seems unable to maintain even a basic level of order in his own home, or to repair his broken marriage. Instead, Tallis spends his time haphazardly and somewhat ineffectively attempting to absorb and assuage the suffering of others, and in this sense can be understood as a Christ-like figure, his chaotic existence a reflection of and response to the chaos of the world he is trying to redeem. Ironically, order is restored in Tallis's home by his adversary, the satanic Julius; this order is, however, superficial – Julius having devastated the deeper pattern of Tallis's relationship with Morgan – and is only temporary.

Colville's enduring desire for inward order can be understood, at least in part, as a response to the evil and chaos of war. Following fine art training, he had enlisted in the Canadian Army in 1942 and was made an official war artist in 1944 aged just 24, and at that point his career as a painter really began, as he recorded images of turmoil and devastation across Europe. 'I felt my job was simply to report, to describe in drawings and watercolours and so on, what was going on', he stated.<sup>13</sup> Despite his endeavour to function as an objective recording eye, Colville was deeply and permanently affected by his war experiences. His images of the details of ordinary soldiers' everyday lives reveal his admiration for them; wanting to share more fully in their experiences he went on battle manoeuvres with them, against orders because war artists were supposed to stay

out of immediate danger. *Infantry, near Nijmegen, Holland* (1946), a portrayal of a platoon of Canadian soldiers marching down a road, conveys the heroism of ordinary soldiers; in a rare departure from objective reporting, the first soldier's face is a portrait of Colville's father. Colville was tasked with documenting the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp on its liberation in 1945, an experience which haunted him lifelong, although he has spoken of feeling a 'curious sense of detachment' on being confronted with Belsen's horrors. His images of the concentration camp – such as *Bodies in a Grave, Belsen* (1946) – have been criticised for their supposed 'emotional sterility', but they can also be understood as conveying utter bleakness and sorrow without resorting to luridness or sensationalism.<sup>14</sup> 'The Ancient Greeks thought that hell was chaos and chaos was hell, that is that for them, as for me, essentially hell is disorder. And yet one had the feeling that some kind of sense could be made even out of this chaos', he observed.<sup>15</sup> Colville's attempts to make 'sense' out of this confrontation with humankind's capacity for evil attracted him, like Murdoch, to existentialism in the post-war period. His picture *Tragic Landscape* (1945) depicts the abandoned corpse of a young German paratrooper, ignored by a passing cow; it is profoundly existentialist in its implication that, as such horrors are permitted, there can be no loving God the Father and no moral universe.

Post-war, Colville wanted to withdraw, to live with his family in relative isolation, and to work out his personal style and subject matter. He began producing numerous pictures of animals, which he revered, stating that an animal is 'like an angel, in a certain way' and 'I think of them as incapable of evil' – in obvious contrast to humans who had invented and perpetuated the horrors of war.<sup>16</sup> Murdoch owned many copies of Colville's animal pictures, including *Crow up Early* (1966), a depiction of a 'beautiful serene crow', and *Stop for Cows* (1967), her 'earliest favourite'.<sup>17</sup> Colville's belief in animals' essential nobility and goodness is likely to have filtered into Murdoch's profusion of wise and all-knowing animals; in *The Green Knight* (1993), she takes her experimentation further than Colville's by briefly inhabiting the consciousness of the dog Anax in an attempt to overcome animals' essential unknowability. From *Nude and Dummy* onwards, Colville developed his signature rigidly geometrical approach, moving away from the impressionistic style of much of his war art. Concealed faces and truncated figures repeatedly appeared in his pictures, often with unsettling impact, making the viewer confront the essential mystery of other people.<sup>18</sup> For instance, in *Snow* (1969), a copy of which was owned by Murdoch, a couple gaze out of a window at a snow-covered landscape and an empty grey sky, their backs turned to the viewer, their faces unknown. Colville said that he concealed the faces of his subjects 'to make you look harder'; like Murdoch, he strove to make people attend to the reality of others.<sup>19</sup> In her novels Murdoch uses similar imagery to reveal the moral failure inherent in inattention. For instance,

in *The Sea, The Sea* (1978), Charles Arrowby is haunted by the image of a ghostly, indistinct face which silently signals his failure to attend to the inner life of his childhood love Mary Hartley Smith, a failure which has devastating consequences, and which indirectly causes the death of Mary's adopted son Titus. Colville's blocked faces and missing heads often imply isolation and alienation, inducing a sense of anxiety or dread in the viewer that is heightened by the austerity of his compositions, revealing the enduring impact of his existentialist worldview on his subject matter and technique. In contrast Murdoch, who was tempted by but ultimately rejected existentialism, maintained her belief that people could learn to perceive each other with increased clarity through the gradual refinement of outward-directed attention.

Murdoch was acutely interested in the question of how one lives with, and processes, knowledge of the atrocities of war. She probed their effects on human consciousness by creating characters such as Willy Kost, a survivor of Dachau, haunted by guilt, who struggles to contain his suffering in *The Nice and the Good*. He occasionally finds distraction in his work and in conversation with loved ones, but they provide only temporary respite. Although Colville was an observer and not an inmate of the concentration camp (he has described his experience of it as 'voyeuristic'), he was, like Willy, burdened with the fact of his continuing existence.<sup>20</sup> His wife Rhoda, speaking of his experience of Belsen, which resurfaced frequently as 'terrible nightmares', observed: 'He felt that it should almost kill a person to see it, and yet you go on living'.<sup>21</sup> In *A Fairly Honourable Defeat*, as Julius King cleans and organises Tallis's filthy kitchen, Tallis by chance sees a tattoo mark on Julius's arm which reveals him to have been an inmate of Belsen. This crucial detail forces the reader, at a late stage in the novel, into sudden re-evaluation of Julius's hitherto seemingly motiveless machinations. It implies that Julius's experience of hell on earth may have caused him to embrace order with satanic glee, and to propagate suffering by imposing devastatingly symmetrical patterns of destruction which wreak havoc on the lives of others, in a faint echo of the Nazi vision of global order. The forced imposition of artificial order by external powers is not true order at all; thus it fails and becomes chaos, at every level, from the barely imaginable horrors of the concentration camp to the somewhat farcical setting of Tallis's kitchen which resists Julius's attempts to order it. By contrast, Colville's sense of order is self-imposed and inward, and can be understood as genuine order, enabling him to control and contain his pain instead of passing it on, and necessary for the cultivation of refined vision which enabled him to create pictures emanating 'calmness and truth'.<sup>22</sup> The geometric precision of his compositions reflects the order which he believed to be innate in the natural world; nevertheless, Colville at times deliberately breaks this order by introducing an unexpected element – such as the plaster cast on the arm of the garage attendant in *Truck Stop* (1966) – which serves to enhance his realism.

Some of his pictures may be unsettling, reflective perhaps of his existentialist sense of the world as disconnected, incoherent and ultimately unknowable, but his depictions of the details of everyday life are also joyously life-enhancing. He resolutely continued painting these details against the trend of Abstract Expressionism which directed attention away from the external world and towards the self. Like Murdoch's novels, Colville's pictures reveal the extraordinary nature of individual human experience. Near the close of *The Nice and the Good*, Willy finally attempts to describe his time in Dachau to his friend Theo, but Theo, who resists listening, reflects that nothing matters except attention to the good: 'Only this contemplation breaks the tyranny of the past, breaks the adherence of evil to the personality, breaks, in the end, the personality itself. In the light of the good, evil can be seen in its place, not owned, just existing, in its place'.<sup>23</sup> Theo's words here are distinctly Murdochian, and their sentiment is interwoven with Colville's moral choice to direct attention to the good while remaining ever-conscious of the presence of evil.

In a letter believed to date from 1970, Murdoch wrote to Colville: 'Just a note to say that someone has written to me from Montreal and *thrilled* me by saying that my novels remind her of your pictures! I am very flattered. She enclosed a magazine print of a marvellous picture of a horse meeting a train'.<sup>24</sup> This painting, *Horse and Train* (1954), captures a moment of tension and imminent disaster: a train is rounding the curve of a track, its lights about to illuminate a horse which is galloping along the track towards it. Jeffrey Meyers, a mutual friend and author of works on both artists, observed: 'Alex painted pictures that Iris would have liked to have created herself', a reminder that Murdoch had once considered painting as a career; the abandonment of this self-image caused her some pain, although she eventually diverted her fascination with the visual arts into her novels and found pleasure and inspiration in her many friendships with artists.<sup>25</sup> It was characteristic of her warmly to praise the work of her artist friends; nonetheless, her knowledge of the visual arts was wide-ranging and her observations (such as the connection she made between Colville, Piero and Seurat) were often discerning. Murdoch's friendship with Colville was not as intimate, or as wide-ranging in impact, as her friendship with the German Expressionist painter Harry Weinberger; nor was Colville's influence on her as specific as that of the engraver Reynolds Stone, whose life and work had a substantial impact on *The Italian Girl* (1964). Yet Colville's imagery, techniques and ideas played on her imagination and intellect over an extended period; she readily acknowledged their influence, and their subtle presence can be felt in her novels. Murdoch's friendship with Colville is undoubtedly a significant aspect of her complex engagement with the visual arts, deserving of increased critical attention.

## Iris Murdoch Review

- 1 Jeffrey Meyers observed: 'Iris and Alex both felt they were inspired and influenced by each other's work'. Jeffrey Meyers, 'Letters from Iris Murdoch to Alex Colville', *The London Magazine*, Feb–Mar 2013, 20–25, hereafter 'Letters to Alex Colville', 22.
- 2 Iris Murdoch to Alex Colville, undated [1969], reproduced in 'Letters to Alex Colville', 23.
- 3 Iris Murdoch to Alex Colville, 26 November [no year stated], reproduced in 'Letters to Alex Colville', 25.
- 4 John Bayley, *Iris: A Memoir of Iris Murdoch* (London: Duckworth, 1998), 123.
- 5 Iris Murdoch to Alex Colville, 29 November [no year stated], KUAS6/3/27/5, Iris Murdoch Collections at Kingston University Archives, hereafter Iris Murdoch Collections; Iris Murdoch to Alex Colville, undated, KUAS6/3/27/6, Iris Murdoch Collections.
- 6 Iris Murdoch, *A Fairly Honourable Defeat* (1970) (London: Penguin, 1972), 235.
- 7 Iris Murdoch, *The Bell* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1958), 190. For detailed analysis of Dora's experience of the Gainsborough, see Anne Rowe, *The Visual Arts and the Novels of Iris Murdoch* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 2002), 162–173, and 'A Secular Iconography: Art Galleries and Museums' in *Sacred Space, Beloved City: Iris Murdoch's London* by Cheryl Bove and Anne Rowe (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008), 39–40.
- 8 Iris Murdoch to Alex Colville, undated, KUAS6/3/27/2, Iris Murdoch Collections; Iris Murdoch to Alex Colville, 26 November [no year stated], reproduced in 'Letters to Alex Colville', 25; Iris Murdoch to Alex Colville, undated, KUAS6/3/27/6, Iris Murdoch Collections.
- 9 Alex Colville, 'The Splendour of Order' (1984), dir. by Don Hutchison, Cygnus Communications, hereafter 'Splendour of Order'.
- 10 Alex Colville, 'Splendour of Order'.
- 11 Iris Murdoch, 'On "God" and "Good"' (1969), in *Existentialists and Mystics*, ed. by Peter J. Conradi (London: Penguin, 1999), 337–262 (351); Iris Murdoch to Alex Colville, 26 November [no year stated], reproduced in 'Letters to Alex Colville', 25.
- 12 Alex Colville, 'Splendour of Order'.
- 13 Alex Colville, 'Splendour of Order'.
- 14 Hans Werner, 'From the Archives: A Visit with Alex Colville', *Canadian Art*, 1 September 1987 <<https://canadianart.ca/features/from-the-archives-a-visit-with-alex-colville>> [accessed 30 July 2023].
- 15 Alex Colville, 'Splendour of Order'.
- 16 Alex Colville, 'Splendour of Order'.
- 17 Iris Murdoch to Alex Colville, undated, KUAS6/3/27/6, Iris Murdoch Collections; Iris Murdoch to Alex Colville, 26 November [no year stated], reproduced in 'Letters to Alex Colville', 25.
- 18 For detailed analysis of Murdoch's friendship with Colville, including discussion of imagery of hidden faces and truncated figures, see Rebecca Moden, *Iris Murdoch and Harry Weinberger: Imaginations and Images* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), 106–112.
- 19 Alex Colville, quoted by Jeffrey Meyers, *The Mystery of the Real* (Eastbourne: Sussex Academic Press, 2016), 11.
- 20 Alex Colville, quoted at Canadian War Museum <[https://www.warmuseum.ca/cwm/exhibitions/artwar/artworks/19710261-2033\\_bodies-in-grave\\_e.html](https://www.warmuseum.ca/cwm/exhibitions/artwar/artworks/19710261-2033_bodies-in-grave_e.html)> [accessed 30 July 2023].
- 21 Rhoda Colville, 'Splendour of Order'.
- 22 Iris Murdoch to Alex Colville, undated, KUAS6/3/27/2, Iris Murdoch Collections.
- 23 Iris Murdoch, *The Nice and the Good* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1968), 311–312.
- 24 Iris Murdoch to Alex Colville, 5 August [no year stated], reproduced in 'Letters to Alex Colville', 24.
- 25 Iris Murdoch to Alex Colville, reproduced in 'Letters to Alex Colville', 22.

# Tom Phillips, Iris Murdoch, and the *Flaying of Marsyas*

*Rebecca Moden*

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This piece was originally published as an Iris Murdoch Society blog post on 3 March 2023. It is reproduced here in memory of Tom Phillips who died on 28 November 2022.

WHEN TOM PHILLIPS FIRST MET IRIS MURDOCH – AT A DINNER PARTY given by Michael Kustow, a producer, writer, and mutual friend – they bonded instantly over Titian’s *Flaying of Marsyas* (c. 1570–76). They had both just seen that extraordinary painting, which depicts the satyr Marsyas being flayed alive as punishment for his hubris in daring to compete with the god Apollo, at the Royal Academy’s 1983–84 exhibition of Venetian art. The *Flaying of Marsyas*, which had not been exhibited in the Western world since 1673 and was generally unknown to the public, had been the show’s star attraction, shocking and entrancing its many visitors. ‘All these months – it is not too much to say – London has been half under the spell of this masterpiece, in which the tragic sense that overtook Titian’s *poesie* in his seventies reached its cruel and solemn extreme’, the painter and art historian Lawrence Gowing commented. ‘At most hours on most days’, he continued, ‘there is a knot of visitors riveted and fairly perplexed in front of it. [...] At the Academy people still ask, and on the radio well-meaning critics debate, how it is possible that a horribly painful subject should be the occasion of beauty or greatness in art’.<sup>1</sup>

Like the vast majority of visitors to the RA exhibition, that was the first time Murdoch saw the original *Flaying of Marsyas*. She had nevertheless been meditating on it for many years, finding in it enormous inspiration. It had become, for her, a sublime image of unselfing: ‘an image of the death of the self – that the god flays you, that you lose your egoism in this sort of agony, which is also ecstasy’, she said in a 1984 interview for Channel 4.<sup>2</sup> She told her friend the painter Harry Weinberger that she was ‘obsessed’ with it, and called it ‘the



Leo Phillips, black and white photograph of Iris Murdoch sitting for Tom Phillips, c. 1984–86, Tom Phillips's studio, London. Photograph reproduced by kind permission of Leo Phillips.

greatest picture in the world'.<sup>3</sup> Murdoch identified strongly with the figure of the flayed artist Marsyas, and she confided this to Phillips.

Murdoch had been an enthusiastic, if rather amateurish, painter in her student days, but with literature and philosophy competing for her attention, her attempts at painting were perhaps fortunately sidelined. Instead, she channelled her fascination with paintings and painterly techniques into her novels. They are saturated with direct references and subtle allusions to numerous great paintings, but the *Flaying of Marsyas* is, as John Bayley says, 'the painting which had the deepest and at the same time the most visible effect on her work'.<sup>4</sup> Murdoch never describes the *Flaying of Marsyas* explicitly; she knew that the attempt to do so would risk dangerously simplifying its meaning. She weaves a web of allusions

which permit the painting to retain its complexity and ambiguity, so that it can point beyond itself towards a truth which can only be articulated indirectly. In *A Fairly Honourable Defeat* (1970), for instance, Simon Foster sees the painting as emblematic of his relationship with his caustic lover Axel Nilssen. Later on it is referenced in *The Good Apprentice* (1985), when the psychiatrist Thomas McCaskerville likens his patient Edward Baltram to Marsyas, and in *Jackson's Dilemma* (1995), when the painter Owen Silbury observes that the *Flaying of Marsyas* reveals Titian's remorse and great pain. Most significantly, the *Flaying of Marsyas* permeates *The Black Prince* (1973), whose protagonist Bradley Pearson is flayed and goes through a process of redemptive suffering.

Murdoch's great love of the *Flaying of Marsyas* ignited Phillips's aesthetic vision. 'When the National Portrait Gallery commissioned me to paint her portrait I recalled our conversation', he said, and he 'started a fairly hasty copy of the picture to act as a backdrop so that she might sit in front of the head of Marsyas'.<sup>5</sup> Phillips sketched in the Titian with broad brushstrokes; in contrast, he rendered the image of Murdoch herself with great precision and imbued it with a translucent, otherworldly light: 'She has a luminous presence and the visual metaphor [for her] that came into my mind was of an electric light bulb in that gloomy corner, glowing, casting out darkness. I suppose this is what people of a mystical bent call an "aura"' (Phillips 83). The painting took three years to complete. Four large-scale sketches of Murdoch, named by her 'Earth', 'Air', 'Fire', and 'Water', produced from memory midway through the work when the Titian seemed to be overpowering the portrait, helped Phillips to refresh and refine his recollections of her and to return to 'the original light-bulb image' (Phillips 84). Phillips incorporated a branch of ginkgo – the world's oldest tree, much loved by Murdoch – into the portrait, thereby associating her with age, tradition and wisdom. Ginkgo is now used in research into treatment of Alzheimer's disease, which makes Phillips's inclusion of it seem both poignant and prescient.

This was by no means the only portrait in which Phillips presented his subject against a backdrop of visual art. In 1993, for instance, Phillips depicted the financier and connoisseur Nicholas Goodison before two mystical landscapes which point to Goodison's role as Chairman of the Courtauld Institute and also perhaps represent his personal taste in art. In Phillips's 1986–88 portrait of restaurateur Jeremy King, the back wall is filled with a version of a landscape (based on a postcard) of Burnham-on-Sea, where King was born. His 1983–85 portrait of the art critic Edward Lucie-Smith includes an African sculpture which, Phillips said, acted as 'mute witness' to Lucie-Smith's African heritage, and also includes a section of *Terminal Grey* (1971–92), a work in progress by Phillips himself, 'to represent modern painting'.<sup>6</sup> Phillips's method echoes Murdoch's characteristic employment of a work of visual art as a means of guiding the reader's interpretation. Whereas for Phillips the work of art in the background

functions as a kind of shorthand, pointing to an aspect of the sitter's life, their tastes or interests, or a key influence on them, it often operates in Murdoch's novels in a far more complex way, the highly flexible novel form perhaps more easily permitting this expansion of meaning. A case in point is Bronzino's *Allegory with Venus and Cupid* (c. 1545) which functions in *The Nice and the Good* (1968) on a sustained and intricate symbolic level, its allegory being patterned many times in the novel, and its meaning proving inexhaustible. By including the Titian in Murdoch's portrait, Phillips explicitly connects Murdoch with great art and the figure of the tortured artist; he can only hint at the vast significance of this particular painting to her oeuvre, yet it is to be hoped that viewers are stirred into delving further, to begin to comprehend its immense meaning to her.

The *Flaying of Marsyas* appears in the background of at least two of Phillips's other portraits of the same time period. Phillips noted that his 1984–87 portrait of Michael Kustow 'ran in tandem' with his portrait of Murdoch: 'they occupied the same seat and shared the same basic background, a copy I had made specially for Iris's portrait of Titian's *Flaying of Marsyas*. Since it was Michael that had originally introduced me to Iris this seemed apposite especially as it allowed a wry variation. Whereas Iris is placed in front of the figure of Marsyas himself, in identification with the Artist, Michael is seen in the context of King Midas who judges the artistic event and is rewarded by Apollo with the ears of an ass for being right but on the wrong side'.<sup>7</sup> The association with Midas is an ironically humorous comment on Kustow's role as Channel 4 'impresario of the arts'.<sup>8</sup> In his 1984–85 portrait of the musician, composer, and producer Brian Eno, Phillips draws on the Titian yet again; he stated that Eno is 'yet another trapped in the context of Titian's *Flaying of Marsyas*. As Iris took the place of the goat-footed poet and wild piper Marsyas, and Michael the place of the king who judged right when he should have judged wrong, Midas, so with apposite logic Brian had to appear in front of the man whose music made the stones dance and who ended up as a singing head floating on the water, Orpheus'.<sup>9</sup> The *Flaying of Marsyas* became a recurrent feature in Phillips's oeuvre, much as it did in Murdoch's; inspired by his first conversation with her, the painting came to haunt him too, though to a lesser extent.

Phillips and Murdoch discussed everything from socialism to school songs during their sittings and subsequent meetings; they surely discussed *The Sandcastle* (1957), her most fully developed analysis of portrait-painting. Phillips's portrait of Murdoch bears some striking similarities to a portrait described by Murdoch in that novel: the portrait of the headmaster Demoyte, painted by the young artist Rain Carter (who is, according to A.S. Byatt, 'the nearest Murdoch ever came to a traditional youthful self-portrait').<sup>10</sup> Rain's vision of Demoyte is partly realised by means of her careful selection of props – a book, a glass paperweight, a pile of papers, a lustrous, priceless rug – which build up an image

of a thoughtful, cultured man. Demoyte's features are 'meticulously represented' – recalling the photographic realism with which Phillips renders the head of Murdoch.<sup>11</sup> Demoyte's head, positioned against the richly decorative background of the rug much as Murdoch is placed before the Titian, has 'enormous force' (*TS* 154). Rain's portrait is generally considered a 'really good likeness', but the art teacher Bledyard observes that Rain's portrait is 'too beautiful' and that the sitter 'does not look *mortal*' (*TS* 42, 155). Rain, anguished, tries repainting the head, striving to create the impression of incompleteness in order to prevent its form from crystallising. She eventually abandons the portrait, tacitly acknowledging the inadequacy of art to represent reality. Rain cannot avoid idealising Demoyte; Phillips consciously idealises Murdoch, removing from her features the signs of age which he claimed 'were not really important to her actual presence' (Phillips 84), and imbuing her with that light-bulb glow so that she appears, as Peter J. Conradi says, 'pale, still and mythical, a light shining in darkness'.<sup>12</sup> Is Phillips's portrait of Murdoch any more than a 'really good likeness' (*TS* 42)? Is it even that? What more can a portraitist hope to achieve, anyway? The subject continually outruns the attention of the artist, and the work has to be finished, or abandoned, at some stage. Phillips's portrait certainly divided critics: to Waldemar Januszczak it was 'not just a fine likeness [but] also a portrait of an inner life', whereas Brian Sewell described it as 'deplorable', called the copy of Titian 'frankly appalling', and lamented: 'poor jaundice-eyed Miss Murdoch is as flat and grainy as an overblown holiday snap' (quoted in Phillips 85). Although Murdoch herself had reservations about having her image captured and fixed in portraits, and the loss of control which this entailed, she enjoyed Phillips's version of her, and praised it for its separateness and coolness.<sup>13</sup>

It is hardly surprising that Murdoch and Phillips got on so well together. They had much in common; moreover, Murdoch habitually sought out and loved the company of visual artists. Her social circle included the engraver Reynolds Stone, painters Alex Colville, Jean Jones, Barbara Dorf and Harry Weinberger, sculptor Rachel Fenner, and Christopher Cornford and Carel Weight, her colleagues at the Royal College of Art; she also made the acquaintance of Francis Bacon and the hologram artist Margaret Benyon at the RCA. She was, consciously or unconsciously, positioning herself within a well-established tradition of fruitful relationships between writers and painters, rather in the manner of her great inspiration Henry James. 'I am probably too romantic about painters – I want to project my own dream life as a painter', she noted in her journal in 1965; her propensity to idealise painters remained with her throughout her life.<sup>14</sup> Nonetheless, she sincerely admired Phillips's oeuvre. Although she was often gloomy about the future of art, Phillips's art seemed to brighten its prospects: speaking of the contemporary art scene to Martin Gayford in 1993, she observed that, 'Of course one mustn't be too pessimistic. There is still a great variety of

artists around. [...] I love Tom Phillips, and the people who are very versatile and really know how to paint'.<sup>15</sup>

Murdoch and Phillips would undoubtedly have discussed Phillips's great work, *A Humument*, which had been in progress since 1966, and which became a fifty-year project. *A Humument*, originally an obscure Victorian text titled *A Human Document* which was repeatedly transformed by Phillips into an entirely new text by means of painting, collage and cut-up techniques, might be understood as Phillips's self-portrait. It is a *Gesamtkunstwerk* – a work of art that endeavours to encompass most or all art forms – and as such it bears some resemblance to Murdoch's attempts to merge words, visual images, sound, colour and light in her quest to create a more fully synaesthetic mode of communication which would represent reality with greater truth. The concept of the monumental *magnum opus* under perpetual production would, moreover, have struck a chord with Murdoch, being a feature of both fact and fiction for her, in the shape of her own *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, which evolved out of her 1981–82 Gifford Lectures and was eventually published in 1992, and in the philosophical works-in-progress of many of her characters, including Marcus Fisher, Rupert Foster, and David Crimond. *The Book and the Brotherhood* (1987), written concurrently with the painting of Murdoch's portrait, centres on Crimond's writing of a nebulous book which – suspect the uneasy 'brotherhood' of friends who have been funding its interminable production for the past thirty years – has moved far from its original brief. Was Crimond's book partly inspired, perhaps half-humorously, by Phillips's *Humument*? Rather ironically, whilst open-endedness is celebrated as an essential aspect of *A Humument*, the brotherhood both fear and desire the completion of Crimond's book (and it is, in fact, one of the very few books ever finished by an inhabitant of Murdochland).

Having, as he said, 'rashly criticised' the cover designs of Murdoch's novels during portrait sittings, Phillips found himself being 'gently trapped' into designing the covers of several of her novels of the later 1980s, and also the cover of *Metaphysics as Guide to Morals* (Phillips 86). His cover illustration for *The Book and the Brotherhood* depicts a layer of closely written and almost indecipherable text – seemingly taken from the novel – superimposed on a target, which is indicative, perhaps, of language's capacity to come close to but never quite to hit its mark. For the cover of *The Good Apprentice*, a novel about fathers and sons, Phillips presents the ghostly head of Jesse Baltram, an absent father at the centre of a web of illusion. The head is placed against a backdrop of brooding, cloudy sky and flat landscape inhabited by a single shadowy figure – Jesse's son Edward Baltram, entering the environment of Jesse's home, Seegard, or so it appears. On the back cover, the image of a butterfly recalls the tormented Edward's dream of a butterfly which bit him

and then fell to the floor dead, and his psychiatrist Thomas McCaskerville's response that, 'Psyche is a butterfly [...] She is loved by Eros'.<sup>16</sup> Phillips's book covers, and indeed those by other artists across the full range of Murdoch's oeuvre, are works of art in their own right which would definitely merit closer scrutiny by Murdoch enthusiasts.

The final meeting between Iris Murdoch and Tom Phillips took place at a St Catherine's Feast in the late 1990s. Although Murdoch was, by this time, increasingly affected by Alzheimer's disease and often struggled to recognise her friends, she told Phillips straightaway: 'Of course I know you, you are in a famous painting... in a portrait'. Phillips was deeply touched; he has described how her face lit up with 'all the old radiance' and he saw once again her 'luminous beauty' (Phillips 86). Her reversal of the roles of artist and sitter indicates the confusion brought about by Alzheimer's, but it also signals her enduring preference for the role of scrutiniser, rather than that of the scrutinised. Her words to Phillips provoke the rather disconcerting idea that while he had been scrutinising her image and transforming her into a work of art, she had discreetly been doing the exactly the same to him. From Phillips's portrait, she continues to gaze back at her audience, challenging our powers of perception.

- 1 Lawrence Gowing, 'Human Stuff', *London Review of Books*, 2 February 1984, 6, 2 <<https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v06/n02/lawrence-gowing/human-stuff>> [accessed 15 July 2023].
- 2 Eric Robson, 'Iris Murdoch talks with Eric Robson', *Revelations*, Border TV, Channel Four Television, 22 September 1984.
- 3 Iris Murdoch to Harry Weinberger, postmarked 20 February 1984, KUAS80/2/50, Iris Murdoch Collections, Kingston University Archives.
- 4 John Bayley, *Iris: A Memoir of Iris Murdoch* (London: Duckworth, 1998), 88.
- 5 Tom Phillips, 'Painting Iris Murdoch', in *Iris Murdoch: A Centenary Celebration*, ed. by Miles Leeson (Devizes: Sabrestorm, 2019), 83–86, 83, hereafter referenced parenthetically in the text as 'Phillips'.
- 6 Tom Phillips, 'Edward Lucie-Smith' <<https://www.tomphillips.co.uk/works/portraits/item/5447-edward-lucie-smith>> [accessed 15 July 2023].
- 7 Tom Phillips, 'Michael Kustow' <<https://www.tomphillips.co.uk/works/portraits/item/5446-michael-kustow>> [accessed 15 July 2023].
- 8 Tom Phillips, 'Michael Kustow' <<https://www.tomphillips.co.uk/works/portraits/item/5446-michael-kustow>> [accessed 15 July 2023].
- 9 Tom Phillips, 'Brian Eno' <<https://www.tomphillips.co.uk/works/portraits/item/5440-brian-eno>> [accessed 15 July 2023].
- 10 A.S. Byatt, *Portraits in Fiction* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2001), 82.
- 11 Iris Murdoch, *The Sandcastle* (1957) (London: Reprint Society, 1959), 154, hereafter referenced parenthetically in the text as *TS*.
- 12 Peter J. Conradi, *Iris Murdoch: A Life* (London: HarperCollins, 2001), 570.
- 13 Nigel Williams, 'A Certain Lady', *Bookmark*, BBC 2, 29 December 1989.
- 14 Iris Murdoch, 3 January 1965, 'Journal, February 1964–18 March 1970', 9, KUAS202/1/10, Iris Murdoch Collections, Kingston University Archives.
- 15 Martin Gayford, 'The Beautiful and the Good: Iris Murdoch on the Value of Art', *Modern Painters* (Autumn 1993), 50–54 (54).
- 16 Iris Murdoch, *The Good Apprentice* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1985), 67.

# Notes on Contributors

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# Matching Fund for the Barbara Stevens Heusel Research Fund for Early-Career Scholars



Barbara Stevens Heusel, who founded the Iris Murdoch Society in New York City in December 1986.

Photographer: Robert Howard.

**T**he Iris Murdoch Society, in partnership with Barbara Stevens Heusel and her husband Dennis Moore, are delighted to announce the continuation of the Barbara Stevens Heusel Research Fund for Early-Career Scholars. Each year, a £500 stipend will help fund a junior scholar's visit to the Iris Murdoch Research Centre at the University of Chichester or the Archive at Kingston University, or participation in one of the IMRC's conferences or research events.<sup>1</sup>

By donating £6,000, Professor Dennis Moore, lifetime member and former officer of the Iris Murdoch Society, has already double-matched the first contributions (one from the Murdoch Estate and three from private donors), and

has generously offered to match the next £5,000 in further donations. Please consider making a contribution to this matching fund that will provide Barbara Stevens Heusel Research Grants to Early-Career Scholars.

The matching fund is a simple, ongoing way for the Murdoch community to honour the life and achievements of Professor Heusel while helping to nurture ongoing research into Murdoch's life and work. To donate, to apply, or for more details contact Miles Leeson at the Research Centre by emailing [ims@chi.ac.uk](mailto:ims@chi.ac.uk)

- 1 Junior scholars are postgraduate taught students (MA and equivalent), postgraduate by research students (PhD/DPhil/MRes or equivalent), and those who have completed their PhD (or equivalent) within the last five years.

# Eleventh International Iris Murdoch Conference, University of Chichester, 6–8 September 2024: First Call for Papers

**T**HE ELEVENTH INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON IRIS MURDOCH STUDIES will take place at the University of Chichester in 2024. The conference will showcase ongoing, and published, Murdoch scholarship with a particular focus on Aspirations and Inspirations.

Panels should not be confined by this focus, however, and all researchers currently working on Murdoch's fiction, philosophy, theology, personal journals, letters and poetry – and/or the political and cultural significance of any of these – are invited to submit proposals. We also welcome papers on Murdoch's influence on other novelists or philosophers, and panel proposals of three papers linked by a common theme or text.

The Iris Murdoch Collections at Kingston University Archives will be extending its opening hours both before, during and after the conference to accommodate researchers. Bookings should be made in advance to Archivist Dayna Miller by emailing [archives@kingston.ac.uk](mailto:archives@kingston.ac.uk)

Please forward abstracts of up to 300 words by 31 March 2024, and any enquiries relating to the conference itself, to organisers Dr Miles Leeson and Dr Frances White, at [ims@chi.ac.uk](mailto:ims@chi.ac.uk)

# Join the Iris Murdoch Society and receive the *Iris Murdoch Review*

**T**HE *IRIS MURDOCH REVIEW* IS THE FOREMOST JOURNAL FOR IRIS Murdoch scholars worldwide and provides a forum for peer-reviewed essays as well as book reviews, event reports and notices.

Iris Murdoch Society members will receive the *Iris Murdoch Review* on publication, keeping up to date with scholarship, new publications, symposia and other related information, and be entitled to reduced rates for the biennial Iris Murdoch Conferences at the University of Chichester.

For current subscription rates and to become a member, please contact the society at [ims@chi.ac.uk](mailto:ims@chi.ac.uk) or join online by searching for 'Iris Murdoch Research Centre University of Chichester'.

It is a collaborative project between the University of Chichester and Kingston University, London. Kingston University is home to the Iris Murdoch Archives, an unparalleled world-class source of information for researchers on the life and work of Murdoch and her contemporaries.

Iris Murdoch

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