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## **The Iris Murdoch Review**

The Iris Murdoch Review ISSN 1756-7572 (Kingston University Press) 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 contexts of inquiry. Articles discussing relations between Murdoch and other novelists and philosophers are also welcome.

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

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

All submissions should be formatted according to MHRA, and the style-guide can be found on the MHRA website: <http://www.mhra.org.uk/Publications/Books/StyleGuide/download.shtml>

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## Contents

5	Anne Rowe	Editorial Preface
7	Iris Murdoch	An Unpublished 1983 Interview with Peter J. Conradi
18	BBC Radio 4	Broadcast as part of the 'Head to Head' Series: 'Ideas of Freedom'
23	Ian d'Alton	Iris Murdoch's Irish Identity: The Case of <i>Something Special</i>
31	Gary Browning	Iris Murdoch and the Political: From Bohemia to the Nice and the Good
38	Peter J. Conradi	Talking with the Dead
41	Anne Chisholm	Review of <i>A Very English Hero: The Making of Frank Thompson</i> by Peter J. Conradi
43	Stephen Mulhall	Review of <i>Iris Murdoch, Philosopher</i> , edited by Justin Broackes
46	Jessy Jordan	Review of <i>A Philosophy to Live By: Engaging Iris Murdoch</i> by Maria Antonaccio
49	David Robjant	Review of <i>Iris Murdoch's Contemporary Retrieval of Plato: The Influence of an Ancient Philosopher on a Modern Novelist</i> by Sonja Zuba
51	Scott Moore	Review of <i>Iris Murdoch: Texts and Contexts</i> , edited by Anne Rowe and Avril Horner
55	Avril Horner	Review of <i>Iris Murdoch: Gender and Philosophy</i> , Sabina Lovibond
60	Emma Miller	Review of <i>Iris Murdoch: Philosopher Meets Novelist</i> , edited by Sofia de Melo Araújo and Fátima Vieira
62	Katie Giles	Report on the Iris Murdoch Collections in Kingston University Archives and Special Collections 2012 - 2013
64	Anne Rowe	Recent Acquisitions: Letters to Rachel Fenner; Poems and Letters to Wallace Robson
65	Pamela Osborn	Report on 'Portraits of Writers: Bidisha on Iris Murdoch' at the National Portrait Gallery, 2012
66	Frances White	Report on 'An Arc of Friendship: Iris Murdoch and Philippa Foot': A Community Project run by the Centre for Iris Murdoch Studies and supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund
67	Daniel Read	Report on the Sixth International Conference on Iris Murdoch at Kingston University, 2012
68		Recent and Forthcoming Events and Books
69		Notes on Contributors

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

### **Letters from Iris Murdoch to Brigid Brophy**

Over 2,000 letters from Iris Murdoch are currently available to scholars in Kingston University's Archives and Special Collections.

Recently, approximately 1,000 letters and cards from Iris Murdoch to the novelist, campaigner and activist, Brigid Brophy, have been put up for sale. The letters date from the mid 1950s to the early 1990s, and document the intense and often combative relationship between the two women, which was particularly close during the late 1950s and 1960s. The women were radically different both in personality and as writers, and Murdoch's letters reflect the tensions between them as well as the deep affection they felt for each other. Murdoch's side of the correspondence contains lively comments on Brophy's writing and a strident defence of her own, as well as observations on literature, literary criticism, religion and art.

The highly respected antiquarian booksellers, Bernard Quaritch, have valued the letters at £75,000. The Centre for Iris Murdoch Studies is bidding to various funding bodies in an attempt to secure these letters for the Murdoch Archives at Kingston University.

The generosity of the public and Iris Murdoch Society Members has contributed significantly to our success to date with acquiring valuable archive material. If you would like to help secure these letters for the Murdoch Archives please email Anne Rowe at [a.rowe@kingston.ac.uk](mailto:a.rowe@kingston.ac.uk) detailing the amount you are able to pledge to the appeal. We will not require you to send the money committed until we know if we are able to make a realistic bid for the letters.

The Murdoch Archives at Kingston University are now a world-class resource on the life and work of Iris Murdoch and her contemporaries. Thank you for your help achieving this remarkable success and for your continuing support.

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### **Iris Murdoch on Twitter**

Iris Murdoch (@IrisMurdoch) now has 2240 followers on Twitter. The 3rd annual #IrisMurdochDay took place on 15th July 2013 and was more popular than ever. It saw fans from all over the world sharing ideas, quotations and blogs celebrating Iris Murdoch. The Twitter account has now been in existence for four years and has proved an excellent way of measuring worldwide interest in Iris Murdoch. It has also been useful in raising awareness of the latest developments in Murdoch studies, the existence of the Centre for Iris Murdoch Studies, the Iris Murdoch Society and the latest acquisitions to the Murdoch Archives.

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## Editorial Preface

This eclectic edition of the *Iris Murdoch Review* has much to offer scholars of both Murdoch's novels and her philosophy. Comprising a hitherto unpublished interview; scholarly essays on Murdoch's Irishness and on her politics; reviews on seven recent publications in addition to reports on newly acquired archival materials, conferences, public debates, lectures and a major local Community Project, this issue not only illustrates the energy and seriousness within Murdoch scholarship but also the enduring appeal of her work to the wider public.

The editors are indebted once more to the continuing support of Professor Peter Conradi, who contributes to this edition his previously unpublished interview with Iris Murdoch from 1983. In his introduction to the interview he remarks on Murdoch's tendency to sidestep questions that seek too rigorously to pin her down, and on how her contrariness proves informative in itself. In the interview this dynamic leads Murdoch to make unusually emphatic counterclaims: for a preference of the late work over the earlier, for example, labelling *Under the Net*, a novel for which she is enduringly lauded, as a 'childish work'. She attributes her improvement in part to the fact that post 1983 she learned to 'sit and wait' and not impose too much meaning on her work. This comparison between early and late novels draws attention to what is transformed rather than to what is perpetuated in her novels; how the creative act for Murdoch is one of destruction as well as invention, and she reminds Conradi that one can change one's mind 'utterly'. The interview becomes a bold act of iconoclasm, but her playful illustration of how detail, often taken so seriously by Murdoch scholarship, can be unintentional, forgotten or disowned, is also deeply significant. There is colour of many hues here for scholars, not least in Murdoch's discussion of Apollo and Dionysus and the importance of happiness; of Freud and Jung; of her preference for Schopenhauer over Nietzsche; of good and evil and of the ambivalences and paradoxes in her philosophical positions.

The BBC 'Head to Head' broadcast that took only fifteen minutes air-time, has been transcribed here for closer consideration. With Edward Stourton as host, the differing views of David Pears and Iris Murdoch on whether we are free to be good are debated by Galen Strawson (for David Pears) and Justin Broackes (for Iris Murdoch), who begin by explaining why neither philosopher was sufficiently recognized for their philosophical abilities. But it is interesting to note that after the discussion has ranged over both philosophers' views on Freud, determinism vs free will and an interesting explication of 'compatibilism', it ends with Galen Strawson expressing his wish that the *Murdochian* outlook – the necessity for realism, attention and imagination – will gain in influence. Broackes agrees, emphasizing the point for listeners that Murdoch's reputation as philosopher is only just beginning to reach what he calls 'its natural level'.

Peter Conradi's short essay, 'Talking with the Dead', a longer version of a feature article in the *Financial Times*, gives the intellectual background to the writing of his most recent biography, *A Very English Hero: The Making of Frank Thompson*. It ranges over the history of biography and various approaches to writing it, as well as giving a candid assessment of the ambivalences that emerge and the various ways biographers have dealt with them. He pays tribute to those biographies that inspired his own and pays a poignant tribute to his subject, Frank Thompson. Anne Chisholm's review of *A Very English Hero* follows. The life of Frank Thompson is relevant to Murdoch studies because he was

a contemporary of Murdoch's at Oxford where they became very close. She admired him deeply and was later to say she would have married him. In 1939, however, he left Oxford to volunteer for the Army and on becoming a member of 'Phantom' and SOE (Special Operations Executive), he served in North Africa, Syria, Iraq, Sicily, Serbia and Bulgaria, from where he corresponded with Murdoch. In charge of an SOE mission in 1944, he was executed in Bulgaria with some partisans and villagers who had helped them. Thompson was to remain close to Murdoch's heart as a man, and to her imagination as a symbol of the tragedy of lost potential, throughout her life.

The two scholarly essays in this edition each deal with a marginalized aspect of Murdoch scholarship: Ian d'Alton makes 'a case for *Something Special*', Iris Murdoch's only published short story, providing the most detailed analysis to date of a critically neglected text within Murdoch's *oeuvre*. He newly contextualizes Murdoch's 'Irishness' and looks at the way *Something Special* contributes to a clearer picture of her Irish cultural and literary identity, arguing convincingly for a Beckettian as much as Joycean influence in the story. His attention to the Jewish connotations within the story is enlightening in relation to Murdoch's pro-Semitism and will productively inform readings of other novels. Gary Browning's political reading of *Under the Net* and *The Nice and The Good* illustrates how the novels reflect an analysis of contemporary society not only in terms of moral but also political possibilities. He identifies both novels as political insofar as attitudes to politics inform aspects of their social and intellectual contexts and invites us to perceive afresh how her characters are situated in political worlds in which western post-war consumerist liberal capitalism casts doubt over the prospective achievement of socialism. Both of these important essays invite analysis of other novels from their particular perspectives.

Seven reviews of significant publications on Murdoch not only report on content but also perpetuate debate. Stephen Mulhall's review of Justin Broackes's edited collection of essays, *Iris Murdoch, Philosopher*, acts as a useful explanatory introduction for non-philosophers to one of the most important publications on Murdoch's philosophy to date. Mulhall notes the many, often contradictory, possibilities explored within the book and mentions specifically David Robjant's role in such debates. In this vein, both Robjant's subsequent review of Sonia Zuba's *Contemporary Retrieval of Plato* and Jessy Jordan's review of Maria Antonaccio's *A Philosophy to Live By*, make their own contribution to the lively on-going and rigorous philosophical debates that currently characterize scholarship on Murdoch's philosophy. Avril Horner's review of Sabina Lovibond's *Iris Murdoch: Gender and Philosophy* performs the same task for Feminist readings of Murdoch's novels. The *Iris Murdoch Review* supports upcoming Murdoch scholars and we are pleased to include Emma Miller's thoughtful report on *Iris Murdoch: Philosopher Meets Novelist* edited by Sofia de Melo Araújo and Fátima Vieira.

The cover of this fourth edition of the *Iris Murdoch Review* displays a drawing by Iris Murdoch, sent on a postcard to Philippa Foot. It conveys her joy at the resumption of their friendship after some emotional distance had come between them. The 'dog of happiness' not only illustrates Murdoch's skill as a cartoonist but also brings into relief the witty, funny and irreverent aspect of her character, so often obscured by the seriousness of her work. Both Murdoch's playfulness and her seriousness have been refreshingly highlighted in this edition of the *Iris Murdoch Review*, which once again pays testament to the breadth and quality of Murdoch scholarship.

Anne Rowe, August 2013

## An Unpublished 1983 Interview

*The following interview, for which Professor Conradi has kindly provided an introduction, took place in the autumn of 1983. The interview was transcribed for the Iris Murdoch Review by Daniel Read.*

This interview took place 30 years ago at Iris Murdoch's flat in Cornwall Gardens, the first time I ever went there, in November 1983. The striking chaos of the kitchen put me in mind of Tallis's in *A Fairly Honourable Defeat*. The month before I had presented my PhD on six of Murdoch's novels, 'Iris Murdoch and the Purification of Eros' (later re-worked and published as *The Saint and the Artist*), to University College London. I doubtless saw the interview as a chance to try out some of my thinking 'at the source'. This task was challenging since I was still intimidated by Murdoch and I am surprised that I appear to hold my own. She once remarked, 'Of course the critic is the enemy', implying that if it is the task of the critic to 'pluck out the heart of [the writer's] mystery' it is, by contrast, the writer's prerogative to dodge such attacks. In this connexion her propensity for side-stepping questions is not without interest.

A comparison between the live interview Murdoch did with Brian Magee (now available on YouTube) and the finished version included in *Existentialists and Mystics*, makes clear that she substantially re-wrote, clarified and improved many utterances. She evidently appreciated the chance to edit in this way.<sup>1</sup> But she hung on to the draft of this interview for a long time before writing apologetically to declare herself – in effect – defeated, and to ask that we agree to abandon or – in journalistic parlance – 'spike' it.

When I recently and unexpectedly came across the transcript I thought I could see why she might have found certain passages – on Kant, or expiation and Christianity – incoherent or unsatisfactory. But to the specialist audience of the *Iris Murdoch Review*, there may none the less be some interest in, as it were, over-hearing Murdoch 'thinking aloud', precisely to the extent that she leaves issues open and unresolved. And there may also be some pre-occupations to note and/or exchanges for scholars to draw upon.

We had started to get to know one another a little the previous year in Edinburgh, during her Gifford lectures, and she had once (I think) been to supper with my partner and me in Clapham. I had recently begun and been much helped by Hatha Yoga classes; these, together with on-going discussions with Dame Iris, led me towards Buddhist meditation. When we mulled over these matters I recall her saying that 'any discipline is spiritual'. (I think we also discussed one of John Blofield's books – probably his autobiography *Wheel of Life*, which she had told me of in a letter.<sup>2</sup> There was a picturesque footnote therein about levitation; an esoteric practice about which we are to suspend disbelief when told that James in *The Sea*, *The Sea* may be an adept.) We then had a simple and not very appetising supper – I recall Samosas, and bread toasted on a fork on her gas fire. 'Let's eat slowly', she said, 'that would be a Buddhist thing to do'. The interview that follows happened after supper.

*Peter J. Conradi, February 2013*

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<sup>1</sup> Iris Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature*, ed. by Peter Conradi (London: Chatto & Windus, 1997).

<sup>2</sup> John Blofield, *The Wheel of Life: The Autobiography of a Western Buddhist*, first published in 1959.

## INTERVIEW

PETER CONRADI: Do critics and interviewers tend to exaggerate the rationality of art, do you think? Doesn't art have its reasons, which the artist knows not of?

IRIS MURDOCH: Oh yes; well, I mean art is such a *complex* business; what lies behind things in art is so complicated that if someone asks 'Does *this* mean *that*?', you can only say 'Well... sort of...' or something; but it's in a context which has got to be seen, and felt, and the background of the thing.

PC: Does your work surprise you sometimes?

IM: Well, when it's going well, one's work in a sense surprises one because one suddenly invents things which one wouldn't have thought one could, or would, and which belong to the whole scenery of the work. On the other hand, the deliberate and careful working is [also] very important.

PC: Has the method altered? Is there more invention half way through now?

IM: No, I don't think that the method has altered; the whole material has altered. I mean – I don't know – I can't *remember* of course exactly how I created the earlier works. My impression is that I'm much more patient now and that I sit and wait more. But I think I always sat and waited. I think that if you're engaged in this game over long periods the... what is interesting is that your view of the world, your kind of insight, and your sense of people changes and you've just got to sit and let that affect you, and affect what you're doing.

PC: It seems to me that the late work is much better than the early work, and that, while the later novels have been honoured, they've also been partly obscured by the earlier books and theory.

IM: Certainly the late work is better than the early work, yes!

PC: *Under the Net* in particular, which I love –

IM: It's a childish work –

PC: It's a marvellous work. But it seems to have become a critical liability, rather like Dickens's *The Pickwick Papers*, which is also joyous and picaresque like *Under the Net*, but which Dickens came to wish he'd never written, because critics kept asking him why they couldn't have more of the same... 'Give us more Pickwick!'

IM: Well I haven't any particular view about this except that of course it's an early, childish work, and I'd be sorry if people thought that this was a kind of image of what one was doing. But this is true of every novelist who goes on writing for a long time. They change very much and you've got to sort of watch the changes.

PC: I was reminded of *Under the Net* when reading *Nuns and Soldiers*. There's a passage in the later novel in which Mrs Mount is talking about the Count, and says of him, 'He loved Gertrude: he classified Anne' – making clear that love and classification, however mutually necessary, are also somehow permanently opposed as activities – and isn't this the opposition that *Under the Net* is struggling to express?

IM: How do you mean? I'm not sure –

PC: Well, that Jake classifies, and Hugo teaches him to do something more particular than that. Hugo loves particular things...

IM: Well, yes, I think you're reading too much into this. I think that the Jake-Hugo thing is slightly different. It doesn't really engage with the women in any detail. Of course there is something that Hugo is teaching Jake but I don't think it really engages with the characters. He's teaching something that Jake will never really learn. I don't think the relationship between them is at all complicated, I mean, they're such different beings; I don't think they really, in a sense *communicate* with each other, except in the mind of the author and reader as it were. I mean, Jake's been shaken up by Hugo and probably will be a better writer... later on; but I don't think that the thing Hugo is doing is really *real* to Jake; or indeed to Hugo! I mean Hugo really is a sort of... unconscious spiritual being.

PC: I was sad that Hugo had been sent off in *The Philosopher's Pupil*.

IM: Well, he's got to die sometime!

PC: But Hugo [who exited the earlier novel apprenticed to a Nottingham watchmaker] left Jake his clocks, in *The Philosopher's Pupil*.

IM: (Laughing) Yes, he left his clocks to Jake. I'm glad you noticed that!

PC: If the later novels haven't always been properly understood, might another reason be because too much attention had been paid to some of the early theory? In 'The Sublime and Beautiful Revisited' you speak of the difference between Tolstoi, Jane Austen, George Eliot, and Scott on one hand, and Dostoyevsky, Melville, Emily Bronte and Hawthorne on the other. And you argue that the writers in the second list are great writers, but that their greatness is a lesser, second-order greatness, compared to [the] 'true novelists' in the first list. Surely you would no longer regard Dostoyevsky as a lesser novelist than George Eliot?

IM: When did I say this?

PC: In 'The Sublime and Beautiful Revisited', in *The Yale Review* in 1959.

IM: Oh that was a long time ago! Oh I don't think that now! No! [laughs] If one was going to do anything so dotty as putting these things in order of merit, yes, I now think that Dostoyevsky is much better than George Eliot. But I can't remember just what this list was?

PC: It was written à propos the question of attacking Romanticism in culture and literature. It seems to me that you're now on better terms with the romance tradition and that you're putting it to use...

IM: Oh well, the whole of that particular dichotomy has completely vanished from my mind, I certainly wouldn't... fiddle with it now. I think my view of George Eliot has probably gone down, and that Tolstoi and Dostoyevsky are far... greater... though George Eliot is a great writer, it's just that I don't feel any bond with her. I feel a great bond with Dickens, and with Dostoyevsky, and with Tolstoi and with Emily Bronte; and with Jane Austen, which remains in the midst of these... tumultuous scenes.

But I can't see why any one should *bother* with it, that particular statement of mine, it belongs to something I did a very long time ago.

PC: Well, my argument is that they shouldn't bother with it, I'd like to encourage them not to. But a common procedure among certain critics is to say your kinship is with a tradition that you have argued against, to use your early theory to disconfirm your practice, instead of really looking to see what it is that you're up to. In particular the problem comes up with two novels, *The Unicorn* and *The Time of the Angels*, which I feel have been under-estimated here in Britain, while *The Unicorn* got detached from the others by Robert Scholes, in the States.

IM: It's interesting that when the dear old French decided to set one of my novels for the *Aggregation*<sup>3</sup> they set *The Unicorn*. I was gratified that they should set any of my novels, I was very pleased because I'm

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<sup>3</sup> A competitive civil service examination in France for some positions in the public education system.

very *Francophile*; but I was surprised that they should set that one. On the other hand it's one that gives rise to a lot of sort of mythical meanings and so forth, it's got a lot of intellectual speculation in it which can be offered...

PC: It's not a novel that you in any sense disown.

IM: Oh no, I would disown no novel.

PC: Exactly.

IM: *My God* no! Though obviously I think some novels are better than others, and on the whole that the later novels are much better than the early ones.

PC: Isn't what happens in a number of the later works that you manage to combine the virtues of both the 'open' novels and the 'closed' novels, as you used to term them, within a single book?

A novel like *A Fairly Honourable Defeat* (1970), for example, has both the tight mythic form of *The Unicorn*, and the expansion against it of *The Bell*?

IM: I hope so... if you care to put it in this rather abstract way I would certainly hope that this was happening, yes. But it's very hard to theorise about one's own work because the whole scene, if you look back on it is, I'm sure, a very different scene from what the critic would see just because it's... I mean I can't think of any term here, but it all seems to be... laid waste... when you look back the world is laid waste. And what you're doing now is struggling through a kind of Waste Land of the things that you were interested in before. But when the particular work comes to be, when you're actually creating something, then you have got to make sense of it all, you've got to invent something, and this of course is very distressing very often, because you know that in inventing a particular thing you're destroying, you're throwing away an awful lot of the things that you know, because you only half know them or don't really know them, things which you think 'later on I shall understand', things which are waiting. There are an awful lot of things which are waiting.

PC: You mean because one is disciplining, discarding, excluding?

IM: Yes, any work of art is a work of exclusion. And there's an awful lot of things which I know now, which I can't put into what I'm writing. I think, you know, 'later on I might be able to'. But one sees, looking back, an awful lot of interesting things, which one was after, which one didn't quite do properly, or didn't quite pursue, or which one now sees in a completely different way. One has changed one's mind *utterly*, on the subject.

PC: Can you give me an example?

IM: (After a pause) No I can't give an interesting example. I probably could if I reflected a bit more. Oh, I don't know, just part of my general entry into a more religious – in some sense – point of view. That there are things which I felt I had to make my mind up about very clearly which I now feel, I don't have to. And other things which I now feel are absolutely important.

It's something to do with how to connect a sort of Kantian, puritan thing which is very deep in my heart and soul, with some sort of depersonalising, more relaxed, more in some sense benevolent or loving attitude to the world which is, superficially at any rate, in conflict with this kind of Kantian thing. I'm sure you understand this.

There's a problem, for example, about what do you do about guilt feelings about particular things. Here there seem to be, in my picture of the world, two opposing forces. Only they're not really opposed because they *cannot* be opposing. Now, how do I know they're really not opposing? I just know. You see, there's an area in which mistakes are made in life as we see it, and if one doesn't hold a metaphysical

view about reincarnation and so on, then life as we [know] it, is *life*. And these things are I think often opposing.

I think this arises in a very crude – from the outside – way, in relation to, if you think of what people do who have committed terrible crimes. (Leaving aside the sort of metaphysical sense in which we've all committed terrible crimes, but in the ordinary sense)... Actually that's not very helpful, we can't think about this really. But perhaps that's just a kind of parable... of the problems that face all of us with what do you do with feeling that you've behaved imperfectly, and, are you going to think about it a great deal and be obsessed with it? I mean there are obvious situations where you can remedy something, I mean even if it's a level of writing somebody a letter, or something like that. But then there are more difficult cases. And then, should you go on worrying about this case or should you regard the worrying as a form of egoism? And say, I let it go. You see, certain kinds of belief in God would take this over very easily. You'd say, 'I give it over to God. I surrender this person to God. I pray for this person, I ask for forgiveness for what I've done' and there we are. And this is the great function of God. And perhaps the name of something else, which has a great function.

PC: You'd make them presents of those things you can't solve yourself?

IM: Yes. Not frivolously of course! (laughs). After careful reflection! Have something to eat – have some of this curious cake, which is called Battenberg Roll. It's quite a worthy cake.

PC: You wrote of Sartre in your first book that 'Everything he wrote was designed to change the life of the reader'.

IM: That was a rather picturesque statement wasn't it?

PC: I wondered if you felt that the same had been true of your work?

IM: No, no. I mean, I would like to think that one might... change the life of the reader, but, no, no, I think one should forget about the life of the reader. I think that when I said that about Sartre I was probably saying it in a slightly critical sense, that one shouldn't worry about fiddling with the life of the reader. I mean, if you write a good book, of course you're going to change the life of the reader, but what you should aim at is writing the good book.

PC: I wanted to ask a question about what one might call your private mythology; you wrote [to] me that you don't take a Nietzschean view of the conflict of Apollo and Dionysus, that you view Dionysus as a later, weaker avatar of Apollo. I don't understand this. This seemed relevant to *The Black Prince* in which Apollo descends and figures, in the form of Loxias, a criminal and friend and muse. *The Black Prince* seems to be about 'love and art'.

IM: Oh well, there's nothing very obscure here. These are Greek mythological figures who, after all, as far as we know, don't exist literally as forces in the world, so we're going to do what we like with them. This is a very deep thing and perhaps rather hard to explain... I mean, there's a superficial view that people take of Apollo and Dionysus, that Apollo is the god of reason, Dionysus the god of emotion, a sort of Freudian distinction between the unconscious and conscious minds. I don't take this view, partly because of my knowledge of the role of these deities in Greek literature and mythology, and how Dionysus was a later figure on the scene and taken up by the dramatists in quite a different way. I mean Apollo is a much older god and a much more powerful god. But also because the way these things affect one's own soul, as it were. I identify, I think, in a way more, as an artist, with Apollo, thinking of him as a god of light, but also as a very ambivalent god who is a destroyer, and a very dangerous god. He's also a god of justice. He's regarded as a reconciling and a just god, as well as being, as we know – as my Loxias is in *The Black Prince* – a rapist and a murderer. And I think Dionysus comes in much later in[to] the whole scene. He's connected with drunkenness and riotous destruction and irrationality and so on and he seems to me, for these purposes,

nothing more than a kind of minor aspect of Apollo. And not a god that one would want to be devoted to, as a kind of opponent of Apollo. I mean I think Nietzsche's idea of opposing them is very... wrong.

PC: Yet as a description of the *structure* of literary works the opposition still has force doesn't it? For example in Bradley one seems to have a fastidious person, in some ways a puritan, who *undergoes* the Dionysiac, as it were. I was thinking about excessively moralised readings of the book which appear to forget that, in Nietzschean terms Bradley is an Apollonian character – like von Aschenbach in *Death in Venice*.

IM: I don't think that old Bradley gets up to this level at all, I don't think he understands what's happening. I think both Bradley and Arnold are very minor figures in relation to the great operation which we've been talking about. I think Mr Loxias is coming down, as it were, like Christ into limbo, to look at these persons. But I think he has a great affection for Bradley because Bradley really *believed* in the whole business [i.e. of art]. Whereas perhaps Arnold didn't. But Bradley really cared and was a kind of victim and martyr, as an artist. I mean I have known such persons. Some people really give up their lives, sacrifice themselves trying to do something which they can't do. And that these persons are worthy of respect and the god will come and comfort them. Although he can't actually carry them up to the high peaks.

PC: Doesn't Loxias say that 'the creator of form must suffer formlessness'? And doesn't Dionysus – or Apollo in his Dionysiac guise – preside over the formless, the dismembered world?

IM: I don't regard Dionysus as part of my mythological scene. In so far as I have a kind of myth of this sort, I regard Apollo as the deity, and Dionysus would be a sort of part of this.

PC: So he'd be a part of the black Eros, to which the title refers?

IM: I wouldn't even want him to touch the black Eros – I mean I think the black Eros is Plato, really, rather than these mythological things.

PC: The Plato of the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*?

IM: Yes, of the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*. I think Plato was very suspicious of art in so far as it was Dionysiac... But these are my personal emotions on this matter really...

PC: But in Plato 'love' seems to be the force which releases the prisoners from the cave. Yet, a lower sort of love (whether Dionysiac or not) is also what binds them there. Isn't the structure of many of your novels to do with this? And isn't Bradley redeemed, in so far as he is redeemed, by a love which is partly selfish, partly not?

IM: [TEXT MISSING]

PC: How much or little Platonism do you want to be seen in your novels?

IM: Oh, in the novels? Not at all, no. I mean there is something which, if one's talking about the *background* to the novels, one might mention, but... I don't think that this is in the novels; except in the sense that a general attitude is in the novels.

PC: There's another phrase in that early essay, 'The Sublime and The Beautiful Revisited', which has haunted me, where you speak of the 'phenomenal *luck* of the English-speaking peoples', and the ways in which this may have obscured certain deep truths. I think you were arguing that English and American liberalism have been in some sense sheltered and privileged by history, not tested fully by events, in the ways that those parts of the world which have endured Holocaust, for example, had been so tested.

I wondered if this was connected to the presence in your books, all the way through, of both a rather rooted English milieu and at the same time of refugees, of the wholly uprooted.

IM: I don't know. I mean I'm interested in refugees because I've known a certain amount about refugees, and because it's a subject of our age. I mean if you look at the whole planet people are constantly, I mean at this very moment – look at the Lebanon – where people are being constantly uprooted and just sent off in camps. I saw *camps* after the war, people living in *camps*. They were jolly lucky if they were in a camp, because, if they weren't they'd have been starving, or would have been being murdered and so on. So this is just a general sense of the world, I don't think there's any theoretical background to it...

PC: You worked for UNRRA<sup>4</sup> during 1944-6. What was that like?

IM: This experience I've been speaking of, of seeing people utterly uprooted, seeing the total breakdown of society. And of course what I saw wasn't half as awful as what was happening most of the time all over the place, where you had fighting going on at the same time. When I arrived on the scene at least things had been sorted out as far as people being herded together into groups was concerned. People weren't actually fighting. So I'm just speaking as someone who wasn't a combatant. I mean John<sup>5</sup> and many other people I know were. To see real warfare – which is actually going on at this very moment in the Lebanon – is something so awful – to think of the degree of chaos which can descend on ordinary human life. The operation of chance and the continual presence of death: I was in the continual presence of death when I was working in Central London in the later part of the war, when bombs, VIs and V2s were constantly falling round about one, but I was in the happy situation of not being able to do *anything* about it. I lived and worked in Westminster, within the sound of Big Ben, and all I had to do was sleep: I slept in the bath, because that was a safe place to sleep. Then one got up, one went to one's work, and it was remarkable, how used one got to this. But one of the aspects of [it] was: *I didn't have to make any decisions myself*. I didn't have to make awful decisions about 'Am I going to shoot those people? Am I going to go over the top? Am I going to be brave enough to rush forward into those machine guns?' and that sort of thing. All I had to do was just go to my office and get on with my work and come back home again. But thinking of these people in refugee camps and so on. They came out of these terrible situations where not only were people fighting round about them and they were fighting but they had to decide things like 'Am I going to go back to my homeland or not? What am I going to do with myself?'

The human race is in such a state of torment. When the war ended one thought that, 'Oh well, things are going to get better, this torment will end'. But if you think of the torment of these people now in the Lebanon, of the *awful* situation of these people who are being bombed, and shot at the whole time, and a lot of them are just ordinary blokes, who aren't involved at all. It's so awful. Whereas when *we* were being bombed and shot at in the centre of London *we were* involved, we were fighting against another lot of people, and we were right, and they were wrong! And this was part of the thing, which made it comprehensible, and endurable. Whereas if you're just the kind of helpless victim in the middle of some *crazy* business which shouldn't be happening at all... like victims of terrorism in various parts of the world...

PC: The English have been indemnified, haven't they, until now, against having to experience the most terrible things?

IM: Well, Civil War must have been pretty awful. We were lucky there that we got over that. And haven't had it lately.

PC: In *A Severed Head* you made Antonia a cousin of Virginia Woolf –

IM: Is she? Who said so?

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<sup>4</sup> The United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration.

<sup>5</sup> Murdoch is referring to her husband John Bayley who saw service in the Army, first with the Grenadier Guards and later with Special Intelligence.

PC: You made her so – ‘a distant relative’.

IM: Did I? Good Heavens! I’m staggered to hear that! Did I actually mention Virginia Woolf? How extraordinary! (Laughs)

PC: Whole theses have been written on this topic! Isn’t the book in part a satire on what Martin calls Antonia’s ‘metaphysic of the drawing-room’, on her Bloomsbury values in the field of personal relations?

IM: Of course any mention of Virginia Woolf is fatal because it sets off a lot of thought-processes as it were. Entirely my fault. No I don’t think its anything to [do] with [that] at all, no. No, it wasn’t – or was it? Let me think now... I don’t think so, except in the sense that there was a difference of class and milieu and so on between Antonia and Georgie. *A Severed Head* is to do with a conflict. Georgie and Antonia and Honor represent different points of some sort of circle; and Honor’s brother Palmer represents another point. These are very different points of view. And Antonia represents a more conventional sense, I wouldn’t particularly connect her with Bloomsbury, now. Perhaps I did then but that doesn’t seem to me a terribly significant move. Antonia belongs in some quasi-civilised, or self-appointed ‘civilised’ milieu – after all she’s not terribly intellectual. And Georgie’s a kind of young intellectual, of some sort. And Honor is a sort of demon. And Palmer is – you see if I were writing that book again it would be far better, because these points of view are very good – Palmer is a kind of *conscious* demon – he should be really the most interesting character in the book, and of course he isn’t. And of course the hero – it’s written from the point of view of this dear old hero (laughs) – Martin – and he’s blundering along – and that sort of makes the atmosphere, destabilises the atmosphere in terms of these different points. So that really the only points are between the hero and Honor. Honor is the most important figure, who absorbs the others... I see her as an almost purely demonic figure, somebody without any moral force, except in the sense that demonic figures have moral force –

PC: Demonic or daemonic?

IM: Daemonic if you like – though I think that distinction is very unclear – I think she’s a bad spiritual being, or at any rate a non-moral spiritual being, don’t let’s call her necessarily bad.

PC: Are you a Manichean moralist?

IM: No I’m not Manichean. No I’m absolutely anti-Manichean, I’m a Platonist. If you’re Manichean, as I understand it... Sorry, this could be an ambiguous matter. There are two senses of Manichean, one in which you say you recognise... alright, let’s put it this way... that there are wicked forces in the world which are independent of good forces.

This is a very delicate matter. In fact it is probably the most delicate of *all* matters, if I may put it so. The philosophy book that I’m writing at the moment is concerned with this. If one says that – then does one say – ultimately that good must or does triumph over evil? And if so, by what method? I mean good could triumph over evil by making a pact with it? This is what I would object to, I mean I don’t think that there can be any pact between good and evil.

That is, I hold two views. I don’t hold a Christian view – the Christian view is pretty mixed-up – but holds that God completely absorbs evil or triumphs over evil or really in the end destroys evil. I don’t think this. I think that evil exists independently of good, and there it is.

Then the question would be, ‘does Good triumph over Evil at all?’ All right, that’s one point, and of course, Good must triumph over Evil. Which is a large assumption. At any rate it certainly ought to. And does it do this by any kind of *pact*, or by destroying evil? I think there’s no pact. It can only triumph over evil by destroying evil. That is *destroying*, underlined. That this is the only way in which morality ultimately operates, through the destruction of evil. Not by saying ‘Oh Well!...’

But you see there are hundreds of ways in which you accommodate this idea: of course you have to

make a pact with the evil tendencies within yourself. You can't destroy them, you've got to live with them. Yet the *background* of this, I'd say, would be that you must destroy them.

PC: Good and Evil are also very mixed-up in art, aren't they? This was your theme in your book on Plato *The Fire and The Sun*? And also, to some extent in the novel *The Philosopher's Pupil*?

IM: Well of course. Yes.

PC: A phrase from John Bayley's *Tolstoi and the Novel* has stayed with me. He argues that 'for Tolstoi self-satisfaction (*samodovolnost*) could be part of [the] quest', meaning moral, spiritual quest. Isn't the same true of you, and your novels?

IM: I think happiness is frightfully important, yes. I think that... I'm partly very puritan, but I'm partly very – sort of, you know, wanting people to want happiness in a good way. Terrible things happen to people because they won't desire happiness in a good way. This is a moralistic thing in a way – that higher happiness is better than lower happiness and so on – but it's very important to organise your life so that you can be happy.

This isn't *exactly* an adjustment of a selfish sort – to say, 'Oh well, I'll opt for something low, I'll have the satisfaction of a *Dolce Vita* rather than something better than I might have done', but something that could be quite connected to your spiritual life. You have to work it out. How you're going to manage so that you don't destroy yourself. I'm very much against people destroying themselves.

PC: Over-reaching, morally?

IM: Yes. Not only that, but I've seen this happen, people tear themselves to bits. These mysterious mental illnesses which people have like depression, which I think are chemical and what is chemical doesn't enter into the problem but... what can one say? You must sort of struggle...

PC: This runs through the books doesn't it? That the characters who are innocent [and possess] self-satisfaction often do less damage than those who are, as it were, spiritually on the make?! Dora and Toby, the innocents of *The Bell*, cause less harm than Michael, who is trying to better himself morally? And in *The Nice and The Good* Kate and Octavian Gray whose self-satisfaction is repeatedly emphasised – though having this [self-satisfaction] is – actually get[ting] on with things, and so [doing] some good in the process too...

IM: This is perfectly true. I don't know whether one wants to make any judgement of them, but some people who just carry on, do very much less damage than people who are struggling. But the background of struggling – this is a kind of metaphysical or religious assumption – remains there. There's some kind of proper urge to struggle. *The Bell* is a very early work on this subject.

PC: You've said you'd be happy to be considered a Christian-Buddhist. Is there any conflict there? Christianity is preoccupied with the survival of the personality and Buddhism with its annihilation...

IM: I certainly don't believe in the survival of the personality at all. In either sense. The Buddhist idea of reincarnation is a non-sense; it doesn't conceive of you surviving as a person in all your individuality, it's an image. It's just a way of imagining the sense in which you must be all the time in this life trying to transform yourself. The only reality in *this* sense is your own life, though in another sense it's not real. This is the paradox of Buddhism, that you have to try, now, to transform yourself. And the picture of *Nirvana* is the picture of perfect transformation. There all the values of this life are reversed, that all is vanity and you see that all the things that you're pursuing are non-things.

But somebody who sees this is not automatically annihilated. If he – if they're fortunate enough to be such a person – goes on, being a saint, he goes on helping other people. And being a sort of radiant centre of truth. *This* is religion.

PC: You've argued that form in art consoles. But need it? Couldn't the very stylisation of the work – as in Byzantine art where naturalism was prohibited – be the feature which points the onlooker beyond it? Couldn't the very stylisation break the illusion in such a way as to point the reader beyond the novel? Perhaps this happens in *The Black Prince*?

IM: I would have thought that this is a very deep part of any art-form. That you're concerned with how far you create something apparently artificial, which then, by some sort of shock, sends the person beyond. This seems to me what all art is, really. You're brought up against a barrier over which you jump – in good art – into something else. Then the form in which the barrier is put would depend absolutely on your immediate relation to art in your particular moment of history.

PC: Do you feel any kinship with Nietzsche? Does your desire to find an unconsolated philosophical position involve your understanding Nietzsche's demythologizations *pre-emptively* as it were?

IM: I don't feel any particular connection with Nietzsche. I've read a lot of him at different times. People say what a wonderful prophet he is about the modern age. I don't feel this. I think he missed the boat. I think Schopenhauer is much more of a prophet of the modern age than Nietzsche is. People say that Schopenhauer is a bit of nineteenth-century architecture as it were. I don't think this. I think Schopenhauer has got a much deeper understanding of what's going on. Schopenhauer has taken Kant and the past on, into the future. He's a terribly under-estimated philosopher at the moment and Nietzsche's terribly over-estimated. Nietzsche seems to me a very interesting and delightful cul-de-sac.

PC: Nietzsche called Christianity 'Platonism for the people'.

IM: Yes but you see he despised the people. Whereas I think Schopenhauer understood both Platonism and Eastern philosophy in a way that's terribly relevant to what's happening now. If anything is happening except for the destruction of civilisation. Which may well be the case.

PC: Do you feel civilisation is in such great danger?

IM: Not only because it could be accidentally destroyed with bombs and so on. But because books, and speech, and things to do with the past will disappear, and we shall live in a world of computer-language on the one hand and boss-types on the other, who'll have us totally under their control. Poor ordinary chaps will have this simplified language and live by television, and who are very easily corrupted and kept under by technological means of which we probably even now do not dream.

PC: In *The Philosopher's Pupil* you give Rozanov one of your essays, 'Nostalgia for the Particular', and also give his philosophical career a general shape which mimics your own. How much do you want the reader to read into that?

IM: Oh no, that's just a joke! I dare say, Rozanov, when young, might well have written this, O.K., yes, I don't mind.

PC: You've spoken of Jung as an enemy, in one interview. Why?

IM: Well I'm not an expert on Jung. I've read a lot of Jung. He seems to me to be on one hand a marvellously inventive and creative thinker on the relation of mythology to human life and so on, and on the origins of different sorts of mythology and their relations to – alchemy and so on. There are points in Jung's thought where he touched on metaphysical matters – in *The Answer to Job* – and elsewhere, where he talks about how mythology, now that we're aware of it, is religion. Which I feel is a reductionist attitude to the whole matter, and a way of making over religious history and indeed history into a mythological drama. *The Answer to Job* seems to me terribly picturesque and delightful but mustn't in any sense be taken literally. The notion that the myth of our society and our world is that God was so impressed by Job's complaints that he was suffering frightfully, that God thought he'd better go and do a bit of suffering;

and become Christ, and thereby redeem the world. This is just another version of the Christian myth and it isn't something that we should take in as a kind of historical pointer or as something that could not make Christianity more believable or anything like that. And certainly not – which is also suggested elsewhere – that we should do so by taking into the Trinity either the Virgin Mary or the Devil. Which of course are *charmingly*, delightfully interesting ideas – that Satan should be also invited in. Of course, that we invite Satan in, that we accommodate Satan, might be thought an old, a Taoist or pre-Socratic or Manichean idea – that we accommodate ourselves with evil and thereby tame it. Whereas it seems to me that the proper view of the matter is that you don't have any such accommodation.

PC: On the surface Freud, in works like *The Future of an Illusion* and *Civilisation and its Discontents*, would seem far more hostile to religion. Yet I sense that you're more sympathetic to him than Jung?

IM: I think Freud is a purer thinker, as it were, he doesn't mess things up as Jung might be thought to do, but I entirely disagree with Freud's view of religion. His view of religion, like his view of women and other matters that he mucks around with, seems to me to be wrong. He's just *wrong*! Religion can't be treated this way, as an illusion, in the way that he thinks of it as.

PC: You've pointed out that Freud's Eros derives from Plato's. But psychoanalysis has nowhere come up with any satisfactory theory of sublimation, of how it is that 'the lower' gets transmuted into 'the higher', which is surely the heart of the matter?

IM: Well I've read a lot of Freud but I don't have any definite view of what he thought about this. I would think that Freud himself would say, 'I'm not concerned with the religious aspect, I'm concerned with curing somebody'. But then you can't quite say this. If you've got such a tremendous metaphysics as he had, it does imply things about – I'm now raising terribly difficult problems about how you read Freud – whether one thinks of this as something which is purely concerned with therapy and making people go back into the world and become efficient... I don't know... civil servants or plumbers or whatever they're going to be when they go back again, or whether it's to do with something spiritual...

I don't think that psychoanalysis can really avoid the notion that it's really something spiritual. I notice that Bettelheim recently pointed out that what's consistently translated 'mind' in English is really 'soul' in Freud's German.<sup>6</sup> I think that this is a very important aspect of Freud, that he wasn't just concerned with making people efficient members of society, he was concerned with something more profoundly moral than this but then of course he was a *scientist*.

This is an endless difficulty about many people who muck around in this well 'muck around' – they're doing very important jobs – but in this intermediate area. The idea that you're a scientist sort of suddenly *stops* you. Or if you're not stopped then you're suddenly discredited. It's a very difficult thing.

PC: Surely most people can't get very far, in terms of being 'made good'? Mustn't so much depend on things like whether you had a happy childhood?

IM: Immensely. I'm sure you're right. It's just the *idea* of being made good should be kept there. Old-fashioned religion did keep it there. Just to keep it there. The image of Christ, that these images should be kept in front of human beings. And not be lost.

PC: Aren't a lot of people turning back to religion?

IM: I think a few people in our civilisation, yes, but we're such a small part of the world. I don't know. But all one can do is try to keep a bit of light burning – and help people in other civilisations – places like Russia and so on – and help them to keep a little light burning.

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<sup>6</sup> Bruno Bettelheim, 1903-1990, *Freud and Man's Soul* (1982).

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## BBC Radio Broadcast as part of the 'Head to Head' Series: 'Ideas of Freedom'

*The following conversation between Edward Stourton, Justin Broackes and Galen Strawson was broadcast on BBC Radio 4 on 27 August 2012. Stourton begins by introducing the speakers and playing clips from a discussion between Iris Murdoch and David Pears, recorded forty years earlier. The programme was transcribed for the Iris Murdoch Review by Daniel Read.*

EDWARD STOURTON: Going head to head this time [are] two big names in twentieth-century philosophy: Iris Murdoch, famous, of course, as a novelist and David Pears, interpreter of Wittgenstein, that puzzling giant of modern thought:

IM: 'I believe here you are making a frightening assumption which I reject'

DP: 'I think that's not true'

DP: 'The main point on which we disagree is that I don't regard the current system as quite so unscientific as you do'

The question before them: are we free to be good?

Hello, this conversation was broadcast 40 years ago on public television in the United States as part of a series called *Logic Lane*, reference to a small cobbled street in Oxford where a school of logicians is said to have lurked in the seventeenth century. In the filmed version, you can see Iris Murdoch and David Pears sitting cosily across a kitchen table loaded with lunch as they spar. The two knew one another very well. Iris Murdoch had already published fourteen novels by the time the programme was made in 1972, and she'd also been a philosophy don at Oxford for nearly fifteen years. David Pears was an Oxford philosopher of the same generation — indeed, he provided the raw material for a character in one of her novels. The title of this episode in the series was *Ideas of Freedom*. David Pears ...

DP: Well let's not discuss determinism, any way yet, or the possibility of reconciling freedom of will with determinism; let's go further back and ask about moral freedom and in what it manifests itself. I mean, whether it's in actions or in something more than actions, and generally what the scope of moral freedom is.

IM: Yes I think there is a problem about the nature of the will, of which I feel certainly unclear about, which I'd like to talk about a little later, but I think it might be good idea to start in a simpler way talking about what sort of thing freedom appears to be, what sort of moments we might experience exercising our will or exercising our freedom or enjoying our freedom. I mean we are talking about what goes on in the mind when we make choices and when we are working as moral agents.

STOURTON: Well joining us we have Galen Strawson, Professor of Philosophy at Reading University, and Justin Broackes, who is Associate Professor of Philosophy at Brown University in the United States

and has edited a collection of essays on Iris Murdoch as a Philosopher.<sup>1</sup> Justin Broackes, people do think of her very much as a novelist mostly, but she had really quite a distinguished philosophical career too.

BROACKES: In the 1950s she wasn't at that time a novelist who had philosophy as something in her past or a second string or something. She was a philosopher of quite a high degree of distinction. She had been acquainted with Wittgenstein, and she was in the circle of people who were very close to Wittgenstein - Elizabeth Anscombe, and Philippa Foot was another very good friend of hers. And I actually think that her standing as a philosopher is only just beginning really to be recognised. But I think paradoxically the greater success she had in the realm of writing novels from the late fifties, early sixties, eclipsed that and made people find it actually quite hard to image that she was really a fine philosopher as well.

STOURTON: Galen Strawson, people don't know quite so much about David Pears but I think you did know him personally?

STRAWSON: Yes, he was my supervisor.

STOURTON: Ah, well what sort of man was he?

STRAWSON: Well he was [...] of course awesomely intelligent and incredibly sophisticated, but also an excellent cook — one of the first people perhaps to be growing basil in their kitchens [laughter]; very mild mannered, and very sociable, but also very shy. He had an extremely individual way of expressing his philosophical ideas, so that what happened, I think [is that] he's not sufficiently recognised today and one of the reasons for this is that it was so idiosyncratic that when you read it you thought this is very good, but the way he put things was idiosyncratic to the point that you couldn't really export them and easily use them in your own work.

STOURTON: Leaving that sort of avenue aside for a moment, just finally before we move on. What about the other people around at the time, because there is a character who features largely in this debate called Stuart Hampshire. Tell us a little about him, Justin.

BROACKES: Stuart Hampshire's book, *Thought and Action* showed the promise of really re-launching philosophy and this seemed to be a new way of reconnecting philosophy with, as you might say, the deeper concerns of ordinary lives, of ordinary people in the world. The big question in the background, I think here, is what the nature of morality is, and what the nature of academic study of morality should be, and during the 1950s, the dominant school in Britain had been: we must do the logic of the language of morals; we must not make any attempt to preach to people and actually concern ourselves with what might be right or wrong or good or bad. Murdoch wanted to say, no, we must actually consider for ourselves what constitutes a good life, what constitutes dreadful things, and what it might be in philosophy that might be able, in some way, to show us ways in which our lives might be better. So she actually wanted to reconnect philosophy with practical concerns.

STOURTON: Well, that's a good point to move on to this second clip because here they are discussing the question of self-knowledge and its relationship with free will, and David Pears kicks off again:

DP: I know we do disagree on Freud, I mean what you're really talking about is not the kind of self-knowledge which you get from psychoanalysis but the kind of self-knowledge which you get in a rather perhaps simpler way by reflecting on your own character - what you normally do, what you're likely to do, and so on - and that's what Hampshire is talking about, I think that's what you had in mind. Hampshire's point is that that kind of self-knowledge always enlarges freedom because it gives you, his idea is, it widens

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<sup>1</sup> Justin Broackes, ed., *Iris Murdoch, Philosopher: A Collection of Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012)

your scope for effective choice, as it were, you're less often, less likely to be taken by surprise by yourself.

IM: Yes, alright, I meant at some point one draws the line, but let's say a line can be drawn between ordinary kinds of self knowledge – things you could discover without the assistance of an expert, as it were – and what's happening in the world.

DP: Well, self-knowledge acquired, if it is acquired through analysis, is of course connected, I mean it's essentially connected with the history of the development of your emotions. Whereas the other kind I mean is just contemporary, I mean you could imagine a person who had complete knowledge of what he was likely to do in any situation.

STOURTON: Justin Broackes, what was Iris Murdoch's view of the Freudian approach?

BROACKES: She thought that Freud was definitely a discoverer of many important things about the structure of the human mind and in particular the ways in which we can find ourselves motivated by factors that are far outside our access. And a certain kind of self-understanding can be improved by psychoanalysis certainly. That she was also suspicious about the power of analysts is another very important thing. She was never analysed herself, and I think she had some worry that to give the power that an analysand does to an analyst is something that is a tremendous undertaking that she wasn't sure that she wanted to make.

STOURTON: That sounds more like a phobia than a philosophical position.

BROACKES: That's probably true, I mean it wasn't a philosophical disagreement that she had with Freud, it was more a worry about power.

STOURTON: And what does all this, or how does all this, bear on the question of the subject of this, the underlying subject of this discussion, which is free will and determinism?

BROACKES: Hampshire at this point had put forward an argument that getting additional knowledge about your tendencies to behave one way or another always gives you a kind of freedom. So he was effectively trying to tell people there is no fight between determinism and freedom. In fact the more you're predictable the more you are in fact free, because if you have a bit of information about the predictions that are being made, then you can either accept them, in which case you are taking the decision to act in the way in question, or else you can decide not to accept that, in which case you make efforts to change and make sure that you do something different.

STOURTON: What was David Pears' view on this question, Galen?

STRAWSON: Well, I think one of the important things is that they both belonged to a generation that was deeply compatibilist in its thinking about freedom –

STOURTON: Better unpack that one –

STRAWSON: [. . .] Well, compatibilism is the view that free will is compatible with determinism, and both of them...

STOURTON: So even though it's inevitable you're going to act in a particular way [you] can still be free while you're doing it?

STRAWSON: Yes.

STOURTON: OK.

STRAWSON: Which sounds very puzzling.

STOURTON: It does!

STRAWSON: I mean both of them say that it's not very clear what determinism is. I don't think - I think that's nonsense, it's extremely clear what determinism *is*. It's the view that everything that happens is necessitated by what's gone before in such a way that nothing can happen other than it does, so that every single one of your actions was determined to happen as it does before you were born, and indeed back at the big bang. So, that does seem to be *prima facie*, a huge problem for the idea [that] we have free will.

STOURTON: Well, let's move on to this final clip which is Iris Murdoch speaking about exactly this question:

IM: I don't, I mean I don't feel in any way anxious about determinism. If one thinks here of the spectre of determinism rising up, as it must do, in the background, if one wishes to take a semi-scientific view of the mind, if one wants to regard the mind as a machine out of which we either can or can't step. And Hampshire, of course, who is not a determinist, thinks it's a great advantage. If you realise how machine-like your mind is, you then take the [indecipherable words] and you're even more free than you would have been otherwise. But somebody might say, well, if - if there's so much machinery, aren't you afraid the machinery will take you in as well. I don't myself feel anxious about this. I mean I'm not a determinist and I don't really think that determinism can be framed as a philosophical theory - I mean I think it's a sort of spectre.

STOURTON: Galen Strawson, you, I would take, are not convinced by that?

STRAWSON: Well, actually, I largely agree with everything that Justin said when he said he agreed with Murdoch because, as I say, the notion of freedom is complex. Actually, I was interested to hear that clip because Iris Murdoch says that Hampshire was not a determinist and actually I think he was a determinist in the sense in which I defined it, that is 'nothing can happen otherwise than it does'. I realise now that what determinist meant in those days was someone who thinks that determinism is a problem for freedom. So he didn't think determinism was a problem for freedom, and in that sense he wasn't a determinist.

STOURTON: Justin Broackes, you were nodding there.

BROACKES: What she's thinking there is that Hampshire thinks even when your actions are predictable, it's of really not much importance because that adds to your freedom. I think Murdoch thought: no, we can't say all your predictions, I mean all the third party's predictions about me, add to my freedom. No, that's not always the case, but there is a phenomenon which is our ability to reflect upon things, to ask whether such and such is just or unjust, whether it's, you know, a kind thing to do and so on, and she thought that *that* kind of reflection was in a way immune to what the scientists might come up with.

STOURTON: That was genuine freedom; you still retained that ability.

BROACKES: Exactly, that is a form of freedom, it's a form of freedom and it's what Kant thought was freedom, and you know there's a good tradition which says *the* most important thing is that.

STOURTON: What is that idea, Galen Strawson?

STRAWSON: This is like Spinoza, I think. I don't know whether he actually produced the words 'freedom is knowledge of necessity', but this was the idea: the more you know about what you are determined to do, somehow you're freer. In a sense these clips pass by something that's most striking about Iris Murdoch: she had this group of collected ideas, of realism, attention and imagination, and

really they all came to the same thing: what the moral task was: just to see the world as it is. And that was, she thought, extraordinarily difficult because there was what she called the fat relentless ego, that was always getting in the way.

STOURTON: The fat relentless ego?

STRAWSON: The fat relentless ego.

STOURTON: You can see the novelist speaking there can't you?

STRAWSON: Yes, what Kant called the 'dear self' – he said the 'dear self is always turning up'.

STOURTON: And, just listening to these two, are these questions still as live today as they were in the 1970s?

STRAWSON: I would think, and I would hope, with Justin, that broadly speaking the Murdochian outlook will gain in influence. What we need is realism, attention and imagination.

BROACKES: Yes, I think her reputation is only just beginning to reach its natural level.

STOURTON: Galen Strawson and Justin Broackes, thank you both very much indeed.

## Iris Murdoch's Irish Identity: The Case of *Something Special*

Iris Murdoch's cultural identification with, and sense of belonging to, Ireland exhibits a very particular character.<sup>1</sup> Murdoch had, in her biographer Peter J. Conradi's words, 'a lifetime's investment in Irishness'.<sup>2</sup> She could be, though, an insider and an outsider at one and the same time, reflecting a southern Protestant ability 'to slip in and out of Irishness'.<sup>3</sup> 'One's heart is broken over Ireland' was her reaction to the violent 1970s and 1980s.<sup>4</sup> And yet she could claim, 'Of course I'm Irish. I'm profoundly Irish'.<sup>5</sup> Objectively, she satisfies the recent and authoritative criterion of the Royal Irish Academy's *Dictionary of Irish Biography* – 'Born in Ireland with careers outside Ireland'.<sup>6</sup> Subjectively, too, the verdict seems clear enough: an early dust jacket states that 'although most of her life has been spent in England, she still calls herself an Irish writer'.<sup>7</sup> A frequently-quoted self-description – 'Born in Dublin of Anglo-Irish parentage' may thus bear a quizzical treatment.<sup>8</sup> It raises the question: if Iris Murdoch did have a professed sense of connection with the 'island of spells',<sup>9</sup> what was its essence, and where might evidence be found? A neglected source is Murdoch's only published short story, *Something Special*. In contrast to its characterisation as slight, inconsequential, an outlier, this essay contends that *Something Special* is a valuable staging post, a report card, on Murdoch's sense of cultural and literary identity, particularly in view of its being written in the early 1950s, just at the start of her literary career.

*Something Special* is wholly Irish, and local Irish at that, both in tone and reference. It fits uneasily into the broad, generalised bourgeois settings so typical of the later Murdoch. The story has not attracted a great deal of scholarly attention. Exceptions are an essay by Alexander Gonzalez published in the *Journal of the Short Story in English* in 1993, concentrating on aspects of gender perspectives in *Something Special*, and an illuminating and witty unpublished paper by Vivian Valvano Lynch read to the American Conference of Irish Studies in 2002, which interprets the story largely in terms of its perceived Joycean

<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of Murdoch's Irishness see Peter J. Conradi, *Iris Murdoch: A Life* (London: HarperCollins, 2001), pp 3-32, 437-66. Hereafter *IMAL*. Also Frances White, "'I'm a kind of exile": The Position of Iris Murdoch in the Irish Diaspora', unpublished paper presented at *Neither Here Nor There: Writing the Irish Diaspora* Postgraduate Conference, University of Limerick, 2008, and 'A terrible beauty or just a terrible novel? Variant perspectives on Iris Murdoch's *The Red and the Green*', unpublished paper presented at *New Voices: Inherited Lines, New Voices in Irish Criticism* Postgraduate Conference, University of Limerick, 2010. I am indebted to Dr White for furnishing me with copies of these papers.

<sup>2</sup> *IMAL*, p.29.

<sup>3</sup> Heather Crawford, *Outside the Glow: Protestants and Irishness in Independent Ireland* (Dublin: UCD Press, 2010), p.180.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in 'Iris Murdoch: A Life by Peter J. Conradi', *Guardian*, 8 September 2001.

<sup>5</sup> *IMAL*, p.27. See also Priscilla Martin and Anne Rowe, *Iris Murdoch: A Literary Life* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p.179, note 30, where Murdoch, as late as 1986, described herself as one hundred per cent Irish.

<sup>6</sup> James McGuire and James Quinn (eds.), *Dictionary of Irish Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 1, xix. The entry for Iris Murdoch is in volume 6, pp.783-86 (by Ian d'Alton). See also H.C.G. Matthew and B. Harrison (eds.) *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), vol. 39, pp.807-11 (entry by Peter J. Conradi).

<sup>7</sup> After her father's death in 1958, this changed permanently to 'she comes of Anglo-Irish parentage'.

<sup>8</sup> This appears on dust-jackets from 1961, *IMAL*, pp.24, 447, and Murdoch refers to Dublin as 'my native city', *IMAL*, pp.462-7.

<sup>9</sup> *IMAL*, pp.437-66.

structure and references.<sup>10</sup> Reviewers of the story are less than impressed. They miss its significance as a marker of Murdoch's sense of identity. Stephen Amidon reviewed the American edition of the story for the *New York Times* in November 2000 and suggested that it was 'hard to see what makes this brief tale special enough to merit a volume of its own.' The damns are not even faint; he remarks that it 'reads like an outtake from Joyce's *Dubliners*' and finds the principal character, Yvonne Geary, 'too familiar a type to evoke much sympathy'.<sup>11</sup> The respected *Kirkus Review* in the same year was even more blunt: 'This thoroughly unremarkable short story [...] won't add anything to the deservedly high reputation of the [...] late author'. It dismisses *Something Special* as containing little but 'a few faint echoes of Joyce's "The Dead"; but, interestingly, it picks up on 'Murdoch's gift for locating worlds of implication in commonplace quotidian dialogue, and for an occasional flash of the kind of understated animism that graced her later fiction'.<sup>12</sup> Elizabeth Jane Howard in 2001 tactfully suggested that its appeal would be to hard-core Murdochistas rather than to the general public.<sup>13</sup> Priscilla Martin's and Anne Rowe's brief discussion of the story in *Iris Murdoch; A Literary Life* (2010) comes closest to appreciating it as a window to Murdoch's identity. They focus on its particular setting, and characterise 'this drab small-scale abnegation of hope' as 'a rather depressing picture of Ireland and the Irish'.<sup>14</sup>

The story seems to have been written in or around 1954 or 1955. Conradi speculates that it was produced by Murdoch after a trip to Glengarriff in west Cork, Ireland. She wrote two drafts, interleaving them with what appear to be early notes and fragments of *The Sandcastle*.<sup>15</sup> *Something Special* was not published until 1957 in an anthology, *Winter's Tales No.3*.<sup>16</sup> It subsequently appeared in Japan in 1959.<sup>17</sup> Eurographica published a short signed limited edition of the story alongside four poems in 1990 and Chatto & Windus published it as a small book in 1999,<sup>18</sup> with woodcut illustrations by Reynolds Stone from Murdoch's book of poems *A Year of Birds*.<sup>19</sup> It appeared in the USA in November 2000, published by Norton, with illustrations by Michael McCurdy.<sup>20</sup>

Reading Murdoch's identity through the prism of *Something Special* is a delicate and partial exercise. To understand its nuances and subtleties requires knowledge of her life-story to 1954; yet the short story, once read and understood, adds to and amplifies that knowledge. Murdoch's tangled and mongrel family background – comprised of a mélange of Presbyterians, Brethren, Baptists, Quakers, Elamites and Anglicans<sup>21</sup> – was of the northern Irish variety of Protestantism, characterised by a self and group confidence born of a strong sense of local majority and a Calvinist religiosity, and tempered by faint remnants of a radical political tradition. Yet Murdoch's Irishness seems predominantly of the southern style, where Protestants accounted for much less than 10% of the population, and who, like American

<sup>10</sup> Alexander Gonzalez, 'The problem of gender in Iris Murdoch's "Something Special"', *Journal of the Short Story in English*, no. 21 (Autumn 1993), pp.19-27; Vivian Valvano Lynch, '"Something Special": Iris Murdoch's Joycean Odyssey' (unpublished paper, 2002) read to the American Conference of Irish Studies, Marquette University, Milwaukee, 6 June, 2002. Hereafter Lynch. I am greatly indebted to Professor Lynch for furnishing me with a copy of her paper.

<sup>11</sup> The *New York Times*, 12 November 2000.

<sup>12</sup> *Kirkus Review* (1 October 2000),

<<https://www.kirkusreviews.com/book-reviews/iris-murdoch/something-special/#review>> (accessed 16 July 2012).

*Kirkus Reviews* (or *Kirkus Media*) is an American book review magazine, giving industry professionals a preview of books prior to their publication.

<sup>13</sup> Noted in Martin and Rowe, p.178, note 10.

<sup>14</sup> Martin and Rowe, p.61.

<sup>15</sup> *IMAL*, p.646, note 25; also Murdoch Papers, University of Iowa Special Collections, MsC 212, Box 33, holograph drafts 1 & 2. Hereafter *Murdoch Papers*.

<sup>16</sup> *Winter's Tales No.3* (London: Macmillan; New York: St Martin's Press, 1957), pp.175-204.

<sup>17</sup> Iris Murdoch, *Something Special* (Japan: Eichosha, 1959).

<sup>18</sup> Iris Murdoch, *Something Special- Four Poems and a Story*, a signed limited edition of 350 copies, published by Eurographica (1990). Iris Murdoch, *Something Special* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1999).

<sup>19</sup> Iris Murdoch, *A Year of Birds* (Wiltshire: Compton Press, 1978).

<sup>20</sup> Iris Murdoch, *Something Special* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2000).

<sup>21</sup> *IMAL*, pp.4-11.

loyalists after the 1780s, had been politically beached by the British departure in 1922. In her early communism, and her work between 1944 and 1946 with the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration, what emerges is a characteristically southern Protestant recognition of otherness, an awareness of minority, amplified by a strong individualistic ethic – and, in contrast to her disapproving northern Irish cousins, a fondness for strong and anaesthetising drink.

Murdoch's birthplace, 59 Blessington Street, in unfashionable inner-city north-side Dublin, had a heterogeneous population of all occupations and religions. Blessington Street Protestants were nearly genteel but not quite, so well brought to life in *The Red and the Green*.<sup>22</sup> Murdoch, who could not possibly have remembered it as a child, nevertheless felt able to describe it later as 'a wide, sad, dirty street, with its own quiet air of dereliction, a street leading nowhere, always full of idling dogs and open doorways'.<sup>23</sup> This was the territory of the 'precariat', the exotic, the slightly dangerous. Murdoch's mother, Irene Richardson, a singer, fell pregnant before she and Hughes Murdoch were married. Politically, the Richardsons were always suspect as prone to being a Nationalist green; and, socially, Murdoch's mother often wore lipstick that was just a slightly too Bohemian red.

At the time of Murdoch's birth in 1919, southern Protestants already felt their position in Ireland precarious, as their British sponsors began to lose control. And the parallel point about Murdoch is that her hold on Ireland is precarious, too. Though born there, she never lived there: she was taken to London before she was a year old. Yes, Ireland played a significant part in her childhood and later,<sup>24</sup> but it was never really 'home'; and while Murdoch is capable of creating a very Irish Protestant sense of 'place', metaphorical in *The Unicorn*, realist in *Something Special* and *The Red and the Green*,<sup>25</sup> she cannot attain the experience of the direct, cannot speak to that wonder of the formative, expressed so vividly by Elizabeth Bowen in her contemporaneous memoir of Dublin childhood, *Seven Winters*, for instance.<sup>26</sup>

It is perhaps easier to say what Murdoch felt she did *not* belong to: Conradi refers to her sense of absence from something – her Otherness, and how her mother, father and herself, described by her as a 'perfect trinity of love',<sup>27</sup> remained unassimilated into life in England after they had fled there in 1919. To what extent did her claim to being Irish simply reflect her sense that she was not English? The amorphous religious and emotional concept of the Irish nation was not easy for the minority to get to grips with. The unpleasant bog in *The Unicorn* can be interpreted, if one is fanciful, as a metaphor for an Ireland that Murdoch wished to understand and belong to, but could not.<sup>28</sup> It is encapsulated in the poetic symmetry between the 'appalling landscape'<sup>29</sup> of which the bog was a part, and the dreary architecture of the Englishman Effingham's soul (with Murdoch's grandfather's name, incidentally) who is sucked into it. He was 'in this place, an intruder',<sup>30</sup> but is perhaps closer to it than he can admit. He stands for those who, in the words of a 1916 Irish Protestant novelist, were seen as 'illegitimate children of an irregular union between Hibernia and John Bull',<sup>31</sup> born into an Ireland that rejected them.

A minor mystery in Murdoch's literary life is her non-engagement with the short story. For a writer who experiments with and succeeds in many literary genres – the novel, literary criticism, translation, poetry, plays – this seems a curious lacuna. Maybe the restricted canvas of the short story is not capable of containing the broad vistas and detailed micro-visions that are the hallmarks of her fictional writing. Novelists such as Murdoch like plenty of space, which may gesture towards an

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<sup>22</sup> Iris Murdoch, *The Red and the Green* (London: Vintage, 1995). Hereafter TRATG.

<sup>23</sup> *IMAL*, p.19.

<sup>24</sup> *IMAL*, pp.53-4, and photographs between pp.98 and 99.

<sup>25</sup> TRATG, pp.9-10, 201-2.

<sup>26</sup> See R.F. Foster, 'Prints on the Scene: Elizabeth Bowen and the Landscape of Childhood', in *The Irish Story. Telling Tales and Making it up in Ireland* (London: Penguin, 2001), pp.158-163.

<sup>27</sup> *IMAL*, pp.22-29.

<sup>28</sup> Iris Murdoch, *The Unicorn* (London: Vintage, 2000), pp.164-7. Hereafter TU.

<sup>29</sup> TU, pp.7, 270.

<sup>30</sup> TU, p.164.

<sup>31</sup> Susanne R. Day, *The Amazing Philanthropists* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1916), p.16.

explanation of why she did not persist in the short story – at least formally. (It might be argued that some of her more complex novels, especially the ‘baggy monsters’ of the 80s,<sup>32</sup> could be disassembled into ‘short stories’ if one were so inclined to read them.) What we have, therefore, in Murdoch’s only published short story – *Something Special* – is a tantalising glimpse of what she might have achieved had she persisted in this form of fiction.

In length, it fits the classical parameter of the short story, being about five and a half thousand words. This is a précis (in one hundred and sixty): It is early 1950s Ireland. Yvonne Geary, 24 years old, is still living with her poorish Protestant mother and uncle in a small dark shop in Dún Laoghaire, formerly Kingstown, a prosperous seaside town about seven miles south of Dublin. Yvonne, tall, not unattractive, has a lacklustre relationship with the rebarbative Sam Goldman, a Jewish apprentice tailor. She sees him as nothing special. They go out for a night in Dublin city centre. Sam is trying to muster the courage to propose, but Yvonne provokes a diversion into a rather brutal working-class world of beer and fallen women. Fallen trees seem more to Sam’s taste. He drags Yvonne to a closed city centre park, St Stephen’s Green, to show her one. He believes it beautiful, special; she is unimpressed. Yvonne flees home, but after reflection says that she is going to marry Sam. In the bed which she shares with her mother, she starts to cry, silently. ‘The long night was ahead’ (p.41).

*Something Special* is an unequivocally realist Irish text, but without the gothic Ascendancy reference or overt political overtones of her avowedly ‘Irish’ novels *The Unicorn* (1963) and *The Red and the Green* (1965). It performs two antithetical services to Murdoch’s *oeuvre*. Far more than the novels, it captures Murdoch’s specific Irishness, one coloured by her own family’s sense of otherness in Ireland, of being part of a Protestant minority in a very Catholic land. But it also filters out the *specifics* of that Irishness to leave exposed, albeit in miniature, or model, form, the great questions that inform her later writings – the primacy of good, the nature of morality, the temporary providence of myth, the plight of outsiders, the purgatory of isolation, the inability to escape life as a rickety tram-track. To claim that *Something Special* is close to prototypical – containing within it the strands of construction, contingency, characterisation, disruptive fictions, unlikeable females, placement and dialogical techniques that are found in Murdoch’s later writing – might be imposing upon it an unwarranted significance. Yet, in many respects, something of a template in miniature for much of what was to follow can be seen in it. For example, it contains power figures such as Yvonne’s mother and her boyfriend Sam; and a predisposition to sudden violence. An over-forensic dissection of Murdoch carries some dangers, as A. N. Wilson makes clear: ‘Very few of her novels are wholly coherent. She wrote at great length and she refused to be edited. Many of the incoherencies and inconsistencies noted by critics in *Jackson’s Dilemma* could be found in her earlier books too. She was extremely careless and none of her books really contains a simple or perfectly organised plot’.<sup>33</sup> Therefore, while reading Murdoch may be great intellectual sport, reading too much into Murdoch may not be warranted. Notwithstanding, this essay contends that, belying Murdoch’s oft-repeated claims that she did not write from the personal,<sup>34</sup> some neglected aspects of this short story merit examination.

The historicist approach to *Something Special* is encapsulated in Conradi’s interpretation. He sets its genesis firmly within Murdoch’s life and family, and implies that *Something Special* is almost some sort of homage to, or acknowledgement of, her presumed cousin, Eva Robinson (Lee), with whom she spent time in Dublin.<sup>35</sup> In this reading, the story filters the world of Eva Robinson – albeit with some time-shift and embellishment – through that of the anti-heroine Yvonne Geary.<sup>36</sup> If it is homage, it moves in a slightly mysterious way; that is to say, whilst it carries a grainy verisimilitude by virtue of

<sup>32</sup> The phrase ‘loose baggy monsters’ is Henry James’s description of Russian nineteenth-century novels.

<sup>33</sup> A. N. Wilson, ‘A beautiful creature that jumps’, *Brain* (2005) 128 (2), 237; also his *Iris Murdoch: As I Knew Her* (London: Arrow Books, 2004), pp.168-9.

<sup>34</sup> See *IMAL*, pp.437-42, for a discussion on this topic; also Wilson, pp.67, 75, 85, 88, 91, 97.

<sup>35</sup> *IMAL*, p.462.

<sup>36</sup> *IMAL*, pp.49n, 446-7.

Baedecker-like geographic and contemporaneous reference, the text hides conceits and deceptions. It may indeed be an illusion imagined for the sake of consolation. And while the story is often interpreted as après-Joyce whimsy (or even a 'send-up' of the great man) I will argue here that, in fact, this may be a partial reading: the influence of another Irish writer in exile, Samuel Beckett, is as evident as Joyce's in the balance and construction of the story.<sup>37</sup> From Joyce's *Ulysses* we have Sam Goldman's Dublin Jewishness;<sup>38</sup> from Beckett's *Murphy* a heightened sense of the outsider and the excluded. All of this underlines Yvonne's minority status – Protestants operating behind the lines in a Catholic country so to speak, a mirror to Murdoch's wartime friend, the poet-turned-soldier Frank Thompson, who did just that in occupied Bulgaria.

James Joyce, in *Dubliners* and *Ulysses* in particular, is almost forensically accurate about the Dublin he portrays. His was not just Bowen's 'fiction with the texture of history'<sup>39</sup>; it was closer to *Lonely Planet* (c. 1904). Joyce's cartographic precision was taken up by Beckett in his most Joycean novel-play, *Murphy*. And, to Murdoch, Beckett's novel *Murphy* 'became a sort of sacred text'.<sup>40</sup> This is a credible literary genealogical line, the frame of reference within which her short story is constructed. In *Something Special*, Murdoch – who had been introduced to Beckett's work by Denis Healey in 1938<sup>41</sup> – revels in '[a]ll these demented particulars' that Mr Kelly despairs over in *Murphy*.<sup>42</sup> *Something Special* has its own set of 'demented particulars'; as Lynch puts it, Murdoch is 'every bit as precise as Joyce'.<sup>43</sup> There are numerous references to the real and the topical – 'the rocks beyond the Baths' (public baths at Dún Laoghaire, on the sea-front); 'Isn't it the like of the bloody English to win the Sweep again this year?' (a reference to the Irish Hospitals Sweepstakes, a lottery); 'a large pale moon rising over Howth Head' (the prominent headland visible from the sea-front at Dún Laoghaire); the Geary shop located at a real-life address, Upper George's Street, and so on (pp.6, 16-17). These realistic and precise settings prefigure the 'vivid and exact descriptions'<sup>44</sup> in Murdoch's 1965 novel about revolutionary 1916 Ireland, *The Red and The Green*.

Care must be taken, though, not to rely on *Something Special* as one would on *The Annual Register*. Murdoch explicitly places the story in a Dublin celebrating what was known in Irish as *An Tóstal*, or 'Ireland at Home', a sort of festival for tourists and returning emigrants (although, intriguingly in the context of the story, the word in Irish also has a secondary meaning of pride or arrogance).<sup>45</sup> This dates it as having been written no earlier than 1953, a quite precise Joycean-type time-fixing. We would expect, and indeed we get, the same precision in many of the other real-life allusions in the story. Except, that is, for one important proto-Joycean reference – the trams.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Despite this, though, we may note that neither writer figured on a 1976 list by Murdoch of works that influenced her: *IMAL*, p.524n.

<sup>38</sup> See Morton P. Levitt "'The Greatest Jew of All": James Joyce, Leopold Bloom and the Modernist Archetype', *Papers on Joyce* 10/11 (2004-2005), p.145, Spanish James Joyce Society, <<http://huespedes.cica.es/aliens/iberjoyce/levitt.pdf>> [accessed 12 September 2012].

<sup>39</sup> Bowen's later preface (1952) to her novel *The Last September* (1929) in *The Mulberry Tree – Writings of Elizabeth Bowen*, ed. by Hermione Lee (London: Virago Press, 1986), p.125.

<sup>40</sup> Wilson, p.90.

<sup>41</sup> Peter J. Conradi, 'Holy Fool and Magus: the uses of discipleship in *Under the Net* and *The Flight from the Enchanter*', in *Iris Murdoch, Philosopher: A Collection of Essays*, ed. by Justin Brookes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p.121n; Wilson, p.90.

<sup>42</sup> See 'Mapping Samuel Beckett's *Murphy*', an on-line article by COMMA, the Centre for Modernist and Postmodern Anglophone Literature at the University of California, Santa Barbara <<http://comma.english.ucsb.edu/node/22>> [accessed 17 July 2012].

<sup>43</sup> Lynch, p.5 quoted in *IMAL*, p.446.

<sup>44</sup> W. L. Webb, *Guardian* (Review), 16 October 1965.

<sup>45</sup> Email from Professor Pádraig Ó Riain to Ian d'Alton, 4 July 2012 (Professor Ó Riain, Emeritus Professor of Irish, University College, Cork, Ireland, is an authority on the Irish language).

<sup>46</sup> See D. Foley, *The Bloomsday Trams: Dublin's Tramway Fleet of James Joyce's Ulysses* (Dublin: BookSurge Publishing, 2009), passim. There are over twenty individual references to trams in *Dubliners*, for instance.

The imagery of the tram is as central to *Something Special* as it is to *Ulysses*. These rattling cans both carry and represent Yvonne's and Sam's lives, as they travel together from the suburbs to the city centre's bright lights and as Yvonne travels alone, back again to the terminus of a life going nowhere. Life on a fixed track, no deviation or exploration possible – this is Yvonne's reality, her story. Without the trams, that story does not possess grip or emphasis. The problem for Murdoch, though, is a contradiction of the 'demented particulars' in one significant respect – the tram from the city centre to Dún Laoghaire was no longer running in 1953, having been replaced by a much more un-Joycean, prosaic, and above all, unfixed, bus service in 1949. This, of course, could be mere sloppiness – *vide* A.N. Wilson's comments quoted earlier. But, caught between the imagery and the reality, Murdoch opts for the imagery.

The plethora of Joycean reference, structure and typology elsewhere in the story – the bed-scene at the story's end, redolent of *Ulysses*; a line from a song 'The moon hath raised her lamp above' (p.17),<sup>47</sup> from an opera *The Lily of Killarney* which gets three mentions in *Ulysses*, a reference Murdoch added into the final draft<sup>48</sup> – is designed to bolster the power of the tram-and-track imagery. In particular, as Lynch points out, Murdoch develops threads through the short narrative, 'in much the same way as motifs such as dust in "Eveline" or the pubs in "Counterparts" are a feature of Joyce's literary construction'.<sup>49</sup> In Murdoch's story the recurring motifs are continual references to 'special' and to flowers, whether they be roses on a Christmas card that Yvonne is trying to get her mother to buy from a salesman, or geraniums plucked from the public hanging baskets by a drunken poet serenading the young woman as Sam and Yvonne flee the pub in sleazy Dublin. Above all, the perambulation of the couple in Dublin city centre mirrors the famous wanderings of Leopold Bloom and Stephen Dedalus on 16 June 1904.

However, the exterior levels – outsidership, isolation, internality – reflect Beckett's roots in the urban commercial world of a sensitive Protestant minority. Here is where Murdoch's own background (and *sense* of her own background) emerges into the story. Murdoch could have created a simple 'otherness' in Yvonne by the well-understood Irish bipolarity of Protestant and Catholic – a bipolarity, incidentally, that was at its zenith at the time this story was written.<sup>50</sup> But Yvonne is much more complex. Resonances of *Murphy* are evident in the character of Yvonne, as she seems to retreat from a repugnant outer reality more and more into her own inner world where, perhaps she can find a kind of self-acceptance. Murdoch thus confuses, and catches the observer off-guard, as Beckett so often does.

There is a similar wrong footing the observer in Yvonne's outer world, the Geary household. It is not immediately obvious *who* they are – that is (in the traditional Irish sense) Protestant or Catholic. Familiar banter with a Christmas card salesman betokens a bond along class lines that transcends denominational difference. Yvonne's former school-friends have decidedly Catholic names, Burke and Nolan, although her mother speaks of them being in the same 'form' as Yvonne, giving a clue as to school: the Catholic word here would be 'class'. Her uncle, presumably her mother's brother, is an O'Brien (not exclusively a 'Catholic' name, but an indicator, perhaps, of a mixed marriage in the relatively recent past). Yet, later on, the wholly 'Protestant' names Stacey and Batey crop up (pp.7-8). Yvonne herself talks of 'Kingstown' – a typically southern Protestant kick against its post-British name, Dún Laoghaire, emphasised all the more by Murdoch's use of the latter everywhere else in the story. 'Kingstown' represents the parallel southern Irish Protestant reality, still in existence in the early 1950s, which allowed them to live in a legitimate, but different, Ireland to that which Catholics inhabited – succinctly summed up by the Protestant Elizabeth Bowen's comments about Catholics in her Edwardian Dublin childhood – 'They

<sup>47</sup> The song is from a popular opera by Julius Benedict, *The Lily of Killarney* (1862), based on Dion Boucicault's play, *The Colleen Bawn*. Benedict, incidentally, was of German-Jewish origin.

<sup>48</sup> *Murdoch papers*, holograph drafts 1 & 2.

<sup>49</sup> Lynch, p. 4.

<sup>50</sup> Ian d'Alton, 'The Church of Ireland and the promulgation of the dogma of the Assumption', *Search – A Church of Ireland Quarterly*, 32, 1 (Spring 2009), 39-42; and, *idem*, 'A Vestigial Population? Perspectives on Southern Irish Protestants in the Twentieth Century', *Eire-Ireland*, 44 (Winter 2009-10), 30-3.

were simply 'the others', whose world lay alongside ours but never touched.'<sup>51</sup> From all this, we can, just, infer that the Gearys are members of the Anglican Church of Ireland, sort of – but there still hangs about them a Beckettian ambiguity, an aura of the unsettled, the half-Jew of Leopold Bloom in *Ulysses*.<sup>52</sup>

Murdoch progressively strips away that ambiguity; there are more Protestant signposts as the story develops. Yvonne and Sam go walking through Dún Laoghaire on a very Protestant peregrination set by reference to the real-life Anglican Mariners' Church and Protestant-owned Ross's Hotel. When Yvonne rashly heads off to a sleazy public bar in Dublin, it is obvious that, despite being not a lot better off than the clientele, she is unfamiliar, and unable to deal, with the milieu. Irish Protestants, even if as poor as church mice, were genteel, and not normally frequenters of low-life public houses (although they would happily frequent more respectable ones).

But Murdoch goes one step further to catch the reader off guard. We learn that not only was Yvonne's former boyfriend English, but that her current one is a Jew. Following through the centrality of Jewishness in *Ulysses*,<sup>53</sup> she uses this in *Something Special* to almost over-emphasise a Beckettian sense of minority, of the outsider and the excluded, one inside the other, like Russian dolls. This would have heavily resonated with a southern Irish Protestant readership. For instance, between drafts, she changed Sam's surname to the more Jewish-sounding 'Goldman' from 'Freeman', while at the same time removing some of the cruder descriptions of him as 'foreign-looking' and displaying 'oriental gestures'.<sup>54</sup>

In the Irish context of the early 1950s, Sam Goldman's Jewishness is decidedly exotic. He is a rare bird: there were no more than 1500 Jewish males in Dublin in 1954, of whom very few would have been single and of marriageable age.<sup>55</sup> The comparable number for Dún Laoghaire was 35; if he lived there, he would have been almost unique.<sup>56</sup> (Because of restrictions relating to travel on the Sabbath, Jews tended to congregate close to synagogues, but there was none in Dún Laoghaire, which goes towards explaining the small number of Jews in the borough.) Logically, following the trope of 'accuracy' in Joyce, Murdoch should have had Yvonne meeting a suitable boy from the within the 1900 or so Church of Ireland males in the town. And yet, Murdoch here represents the Jew – as seen from the majority Catholic perspective – as a sort of 'honorary Protestant' as just another member of the marginalised non-Catholic five per cent. She duly has Yvonne's uncle happy that Sam would 'bring the children up Church of Ireland'. "At that", said her uncle, "it's better than the other lot with the little priest after them the whole time" (pp.3,4,10).<sup>57</sup> Murdoch appreciates the sense of camaraderie-in-adversity that this could lead to, each side able to poke gentle irony at the religious differences between them – "I always observe Christmas just as you do, Mrs Geary" says Sam. "I take it as a sort of emblem" (p.15).<sup>58</sup> Murdoch's use of Jewishness in a southern Irish context is that it doubly-underscores a sense of extreme minority,

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<sup>51</sup> Elizabeth Bowen, *Bowen's Court & Seven Winters* (London: Virago Press, 1984), p.48. See also D. Akenson, *Small differences. Irish Catholics and Irish Protestants, 1825-1922* (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1988), pp.17-149; Ian d'Alton, 'A perspective upon historical process: the case of southern Irish Protestantism', *Ireland, England and Australia - Essays in Honour of Oliver MacDonagh*, ed. By F.B. Smith, (Canberra: Australian National University, 1990), p.87.

<sup>52</sup> See Levitt "The Greatest Jew of All", p.146.

<sup>53</sup> Levitt, "The Greatest Jew of All", p.145: 'Perhaps *Ulysses*'s greatest surprise - as it was to me in that early seminar essay - is that Jewish images are not tangential in the novel but central, providing its most prevalent and, arguably, its most important pattern: it is not the myth and metaphor of Homer that provide the key to *Ulysses*, but those of Jewishness, as Joyce understood their relevance in the modern world. There are more than two hundred Jewish references in *Ulysses* (approximately double the number of Catholic images).'

<sup>54</sup> *Murdoch papers*, holograph drafts 1 & 2.

<sup>55</sup> Jews increased about tenfold between 1881 and 1946, from 390 to 3900 (Ireland, Central Statistics Office, *Census of Population of Ireland 1971*, 1, Table 1A), but declined precipitously thereafter.

<sup>56</sup> Figures extrapolated from the 1946 and 1971 censuses.

<sup>57</sup> In a comment on the story, Conradi conflates two separate quotations by Yvonne's mother and uncle into one by the mother (IMAL, p.446).

<sup>58</sup> For a then-contemporary view of Jewishness by an Anglo-Irishman, see Arland Ussher, *The Magic People: an Irishman appraises the Jews* (New York: The Devin-Adair Company, 1951).

thus exaggerating and emphasising Yvonne's and Sam's otherness and alienation from the world around them. "We're not the public, you and me", declaims Sam to Yvonne (p.34).

Finally, the fallen tree, which Sam finds 'so beautiful' (p.36), carries a symbolism that can only be properly understood in the context of Sam's Jewishness. Murdoch had many Jewish friends and was empathetic to Jewishness: in March 1945 she wrote to David Hicks, 'I find my pro-Semitism becoming more & more fanatical with the years'.<sup>59</sup> In rabbinic thought, trees serve as a symbol and metaphor for the spiritual choices of individuals. Trees are among the most dependable and useful vessels to guide people to be steadfast in the face of challenges both hidden and revealed, particularly in moments of transition. When they behave properly, people are compared to the lasting physical and spiritual stature of trees. When they do not, God fells them with a thundering crash for behaving badly. Mankind fails a sort of moral litmus test at the Tree of Life in the Garden of Eden, and thus sets a course into the world beyond paradise. In the rabbinic canon, the texts see the Torah as a tree of infinite knowledge. The Tree of Life of Torah (the central teaching and doctrinal concept in Judaism) emerges as the source of sustenance, protection, and a proper way of living, enabling the human to reconnect continually with its highest self.<sup>60</sup> So: is the fallen tree in St Stephen's Green thus a judgment on Yvonne, or on Sam; or on both? If it holds as a metaphor for their future, then truly it is a bleak, Beckettian conclusion. Yvonne's final words in the story – 'oh, it's a sad thing' – run in to the terminus. The tram has no further to go.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> *IMAL*, pp.99-100, 332, 338. For other references to Iris's engagement with Jews and Judaism, see p.310 (Fred Broadie); p.325 (Fraenkel and Steiner). This lasted a long time – 'I am practically a Jew myself', she wrote to Leo Pliatsky in 1977 (*IMAL*, p.437). See also Margaret Moan Rowe, 'Dame Iris Murdoch', in Brian Shaffer (ed.), *A companion to the British and Irish novel 1945-2000* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2008), p.322.

<sup>60</sup> This is based upon an exposition on the place of trees in Jewish thought by Dr Stephen Arnoff, 'Trees and their New Year in Rabbinic Judaism', at <[http://www.myjewishlearning.com/holidays/Jewish\\_Holidays/Tu\\_Bishvat/Ideas\\_and\\_Beliefs/Rabbinic.shtml](http://www.myjewishlearning.com/holidays/Jewish_Holidays/Tu_Bishvat/Ideas_and_Beliefs/Rabbinic.shtml)> [accessed 18 April 2013].

<sup>61</sup> This is a revised version of a paper read to the Sixth International Iris Murdoch Conference, Kingston University, 15 September 2012. My thanks go to Ann Allison, Vivian Valvano Lynch, Felix Larkin and, very specially, Dr Frances White, for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

## Iris Murdoch and the Political: From Bohemia to the Nice and the Good

If political fiction entails either the elaboration of an ideology or the evocation of a particular political milieu, then Iris Murdoch's novels tend to be apolitical. In her reflections on the contemporary novel Murdoch is critical of crystalline and journalistic forms of fiction, which, in contrasting ways, lend themselves to the political but shy away from the realities to which novels should be aligned. She observes, "The twentieth century novel is either crystalline or journalistic; that is, it is either a small quasi-allegorical object portraying the human condition and not containing "characters" in the nineteenth century sense, or else it is a largely shapeless quasi-documentary..."<sup>1</sup> The crystalline novel accommodates ideological or mythological accounts of politics, such as Orwell's *1984* and Camus' *The Plague*, which portray the positive and negative possibilities of politics in allegorical codes.<sup>2</sup> A crystalline identification of political truth may focus minds on, or galvanise resistance to, totalitarianism, yet is liable to skew the artistic imagination by subordinating incidents and characters to a formula. Similarly, a journalistic descent into the milieu of politics may convey the particular atmosphere of politics but at the expense of establishing a more inclusive evocation of character and situation.

Murdoch set her artistry against elaborating novels of political ideas or current events if they were to supplant an evocation of the diverse forms of human thought and conduct. These reservations, however, do not disqualify Murdoch from being, in some sense, a political novelist. She brought politics to bear upon the interplay of individual lives. Characteristically, intersecting aspects of situations and forms of thinking and acting shape her novels. The peculiarities of politics, ideas and society in the post-war modern world inform her novels, where individuals tend to struggle to see themselves and others clearly. They suffer emotional and erotic shocks, and occasionally develop fulfilling moral lives in a late modern context of accelerating individualism, declining religious belief and waning political commitment. In her philosophical essays she analyses the current status of moral beliefs and political ideologies in the light of changing attitudes. She became increasingly pessimistic over the prospects of political renewal recognising the problems rather than the possibilities of socialism. In 'Morals and Politics' in *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* she expressed her forebodings over the suffering that might be unleashed in the name of radical political ideology, which convinced her of the value of public order and the rule of law in a liberal polity in allowing for personal moral development, even if she continued to acknowledge the tendency of liberal capitalism to promote a selfish individualism.<sup>3</sup> Her novels reflect her analysis of contemporary society and its moral and political possibilities.

This political dimension of Murdoch's fiction is demonstrated in her novels, *Under the Net* (1954) and *The Nice and the Good* (1968).<sup>4</sup> They reveal how Murdoch's reading of politics contributes to her fiction. *Under the Net* reflects how her political subscription to socialist renewal was troubled by post-war developments. It testifies to her wavering sense of socialism and her recognition that conventions,

<sup>1</sup> Iris Murdoch, 'Against Dryness', in *Existentialists and Mystics* (London: Penguin: 1997), p.291.

<sup>2</sup> George Orwell, *1984* (1948); (London, Penguin, 1998) and Albert Camus, *The Plague* (1947) trans. by Robin Buss (London: Penguin, 2002).

<sup>3</sup> See Iris Murdoch, 'Morals and Politics' in *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (London: Penguin, 1992).

<sup>4</sup> Iris Murdoch, *The Nice and the Good* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1968) and Iris Murdoch, *Under the Net* (1954); (London: Vintage Books, 2002). Henceforth referenced in parenthesis.

institutions and ideological commitments are receding before assertive forms of individualism. Jake Donaghue, its central character, embodies an individualist existential ethic, reacting against moral objectivism, and his maintenance of only a vague faith in socialist redemption is of a piece with the decline in socialist ideology. *The Nice and the Good* reflects Murdoch's rejection of socialism and her recognition of the value of political institutions providing public order and protection of individual liberties. None of its characters profess socialism, and political order is endorsed. John Ducane, its principal character, wrestles with a moral dilemma arising out of reconciling moral duties with political obligations. His resolution of the dilemma offers a guide to what is owed to the political world even when moral duty points away from political conventions.

### ***Under the Net and the Politics of Bohemia***

Murdoch's fiction reflects her philosophical reading of politics. Her sensitivity to literary responsibilities militated against writing ideological novels in the service of political causes such as socialism, to which she was committed during and in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War. Nonetheless, Murdoch's novels are set in a period which assumes a distinctive social and political context. This post-war world constitutes a heightened form of modernity, in which substantive religious beliefs are fading, and morals and politics serve as means for advancing individual goals rather than representing objective guides to conduct. Her reading of this condition frames the political aspect of her novels.

*Under the Net* is a case in point. It reflects, without directly canvassing, a reading of the contemporary political situation, which is articulated in her essay, 'A House of Theory' (1958). In this essay Murdoch examines post-war politics, maintaining an attenuated commitment to socialism but recognizing how a full-blooded ideological commitment is waning. She observes, 'There is a certain moral void in the life of the country'.<sup>5</sup> She explains the dissipation of energy within the socialist movement due to the coalescence of post-war prosperity, the entrenchment of the welfare state and a prevalent bureaucratic mode of leftist politics. This decline in political vitality harmonizes with an enduring empirical cast of mind on the part of English people. Ideological disenchantment is also linked to the elimination of metaphysics in philosophy, and to a loss of religious faith. The upshot is a contemporary void of faith and declining political and moral conviction. She observes, 'This void is uneasily felt by society at large and is the more distressing since we are now for the first time in our history feeling the loss of religion as a consolation and guide; until recently various substitutes (socialism itself, later Communism, pacifism, internationalism) were available; now there seems to be a shortage even of substitutes' ('A House of Theory', p. 180).

Murdoch's moral philosophy, which is outlined in *The Sovereignty of Good* (1970), like her perspective on politics, depends upon her reading of the post-war context. She urges an objectivism in ethics, whereby individuals attend to and respect other individuals. This openness to others and to objective demands contrasts with a prevailing subjectivism in contemporary ethics, which encompasses Kantian, existentialist and ordinary language variants. This subjectivism reflects the currency of cultural individualism, in which individuals no longer look to institutions and traditions to provide objective guidance. It assumes that the work of ethics is done when a framework is established by which individuals can make choices. These choices are neither considered as a response to the conditions of others, nor directed outwards to other lives but instead resemble an inventory of a shopping expedition, in which individuals invest in so many commodities to satisfy their subjective and transitory desires. Contemporary moral agents appear as consumers, adept at identifying desires and obtaining value for money, because the post-war world is a consumer society, in which individuals tend to act as rootless atoms, conducting life in

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<sup>5</sup> Iris Murdoch, 'A House of Theory' in Iris Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics* (London: Penguin, 1997), p. 172. Henceforth referenced in parenthesis.

discrete liberal ways. Contemporary morality, for Murdoch, provides a smokescreen for varieties of egoism that ignore the moral tasks of attending to others and of achieving the good.<sup>6</sup>

Murdoch's recognition of a changing social and moral landscape underlies *Under the Net*. Jake Donaghue, its protagonist, is elusive, representing the more general elusivity of the present. The values and conventions, which he casually rejects, appear insubstantial, reflecting a contemporary loss of frameworks for belief. The Bohemian Jake lacks a steady job, clear ambition and a fixed moral compass. He is drawn to the philosophical scepticism of Hugo Belfounder, and is not so much an angry young man as a man without direction. He is Bohemian, but not on the margins of society, for the times are changing and what was marginal hitherto is now symptomatic of the erosion of conventional values. Belfounder refuses intellectual alibis that purport to mediate or interpret the world. The wandering cast of characters does not intimate political and moral renewal. Jake is left-wing and sympathises with socialism, but cannot adhere to Lefty Todd's revolutionary socialism because the post-war world lacks revolutionary credentials and possibilities. The Welfare State and a prevalent consumerism eviscerate the prospects for revolutionary socialism. Yet Jake's socialism is more than lip-service to a faded ideal, for it harmonises with his distaste for commercialism and material advantage. The baleful effects of commodification are evident in the novel, notably in its representation of the movie industry, where the collapse of the Roman Republic is turned into celluloid images for voyeuristic commercial purposes. The literal collapse of the set expresses the insubstantiality of contemporary commodified entertainments.

Jake may appear a marginal figure on the London scene but his restlessness reflects the fluidity of contemporary life, the decay of traditional institutions and contemporary individualism. Jake's brand of individualism is heroically existentialist, but it is as egoistic as the banal forms from which he distances himself. He romanticises his own self in avoiding stereotypical acquisitive behaviour that is endorsed by post-war liberals. His individualism is uneasy, resisting conventions to insist upon authentic existential choices. His characterisation springs from Murdoch's engagement with contemporary existentialism, but just as Murdoch is critical of Sartre, so Jake's existentialism is not presented uncritically.<sup>7</sup> By the close of the novel Jake is shown to have misread his own situation and those of other characters, whom he admires or loves. He is misled by an egoism which puts his own self beyond the demands of recognising others. An existentialist ethic, which is bereft of inter-personal awareness, is deficient. Jake's moral shortcomings reflect Murdoch's critical review of contemporary subjectivist morality in *The Sovereignty of Good*.<sup>8</sup>

In *Under the Net* Jake's withdrawal from traditions and conventions is insufficient to ensure positive moral development. The politics of the novel is revealed neither in its articulation of a creed, nor in its prefiguring of political renewal. Its characters do not fit into a crystalline scheme, for they are participants in a complex imaginative world. What the novel conveys is a world in which moral, philosophical and political beliefs and institutions lack objective backing. It is a world in which a loss of moral and political foundations demands a transformation that supersedes Jake's romantic abstract individualism. Murdoch's commitment to political renewal receded in succeeding years. In her late collection of essays, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, she is disenchanted with socialism and is more pessimistic about politics. In 'Morals and Politics' she re-examines politics in the light of the failures of bureaucratic socialism in the UK and the tyrannies of Eastern European socialism. She urges the primacy of political order, which allows individuals to develop their personal morality. She continues to identify consumerist individualism with subjectivism and selfishness, but is sensitive to the dangers of political power, as exhibited by contemporary socialist tyrannies.<sup>9</sup> She takes the priority for politics to

<sup>6</sup> Iris Murdoch, 'The Sovereignty of Good Over Other Concepts' in *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge, 1970), p.100.

<sup>7</sup> See Iris Murdoch, *Sartre: Romantic Rationalist* (Cambridge: Bowes & Bowes, 1953). For discussions of *Under the Net* and existentialism, see also A. S. Byatt, *Degrees of Freedom* (London: Vintage, 1994) and Ryan Kiernan's 'Introduction' to *Under the Net* (London: Vintage Books, 2002).

<sup>8</sup> Iris Murdoch, 'The Idea of Perfection' in *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge, 1970), pp. 17-24.

<sup>9</sup> Iris Murdoch, 'The Sovereignty of Good Over Other Concepts' in *The Sovereignty of Good*, pp. 100-102.

be the maintenance of basic rights for individuals. These rights are neither natural nor quasi-religious, for in late modernity metaphysical or religious truths cannot be simply asserted. Rights are historical and context-dependent, but they are significant axioms, expressing claims of civility and freedom. They allow for the possibility of moral progress, rather than the mere exercise of individual preferences. Personal moral development is essential to human fulfilment, and the freedom to engage with moral concerns depends upon the maintenance of basic rights by governments. Moral progress, however, is uncertain given the social pressures on modern individuals to assimilate morality to subjective choices, rather than to respond attentively and lovingly to human particularities.

### **The Nice, the Good and the Political**

Murdoch's later political pessimism, her subsequent endorsement of liberal regimes and her continued critique of moral subjectivism inform her expressly political novel, *The Nice and the Good*. Its plot is set in Whitehall, where its protagonist, John Ducane, a legal advisor to a government department, is charged with the task of investigating the unsavoury circumstances surrounding the suicide of a civil servant. The investigation is significant politically because his head of department and the Prime Minister recognise its role in maintaining confidence in a public institution. Ducane's political duty is to undertake the investigation professionally, but during the investigation he puts the moral demands of supporting a friend above his duty to produce a comprehensive report, and in recognition of his failure to fulfil his political obligation, resigns his post. The novel reflects Murdoch's continued unease at modern conditions that promote an easy subjectivism over moral objectivism. It rehearses recognition of the duty to support political order while assigning priority to the moral good.

In the novel, the nice and the good appear as countervailing qualities and are explored via their contrast with one another. Being nice relaxes the ego, allowing it to blend its own desires with manifest pleasures of the world, whereas being good sets the ego's vision away from itself, allowing it to perceive reality, particular things and people, which check its tendency to lapse into fantasy. The central character, John Ducane, undertakes a pilgrimage to the good, disengaging from Kate Gray, an exemplary figure of the nice, who is well-to-do and subscribes to a relaxed bourgeois round of hedonism and cultivated generosity. At the outset, Ducane is asked by his head of department, Octavian Gray and the Prime Minister to head up the inquiry into the death of a civil servant, Radeechy. Ducane is concurrently embarking upon a Platonic relationship with Kate, Octavian's wife, who enjoys presiding over the Grays' Trescombe estate in Dorset. He is attracted to the expansiveness of Kate, which counterpoints his uneasiness towards Jessica Bird, his girlfriend, whose needy attachment deters him from acting on his resolution to end their affair. Kate has opened her household to friends, Mary Clothier and Paula Biranne and their children, and she enjoys Ducane's company while basking in the serenity of Trescombe. Her generosity is neither constrained by a close observation of others, nor by an appreciation of demanding emotions. Her attraction to Ducane is exemplary of her attitude. 'How lovely it is, thought Kate, to be able to fall in love with one's old friends. It's one of the pleasures of being middle-aged. Not that I'm really in love, but it's just like being in love with all the pain taken away' (*The Nice and the Good*, p.112).

Kate's self-absorption contrasts with Ducane's fastidious attention to things and people. While he is attracted to Kate and the enveloping warmth of her household, he attends to others, listens to the concerns of Paula and gives and receives love. His investigation into Radeechy's death brings him into contact with dark forces contaminating the political world and with sirens of personal temptation, but his own moral sensitivity is heightened in risking his life to save Pierce, Mary's son. Eventually, he realises that he is in love with Mary, connecting his love for Mary with the magnetic power of goodness. His reflections on love and goodness counterpoint the ersatz love that is imagined by Kate: '[Mary's] mode of being gave him a moral, even a metaphysical, confidence in the world, in the reality of goodness. No love is entirely without worth, even when the frivolous calls to the frivolous and the base to

the base. But it is in the nature of love to discern good, and the best love is in some part at any rate, a love of what is good' (*The Nice and the Good*, p. 332). Ducane's insight into goodness encourages him to facilitate the reunion of Paula and her husband, Richard Biranne, who is implicated in Radeechy's death. Hence, Ducane's official report does not include any damaging reference to Biranne.

Ducane's selfless assistance to Paula is a dereliction of his political duty to his department and the Prime Minister to produce an inclusive report, which might re-establish confidence in the political establishment. His neglect of political duty is justified by its moral virtue, but appreciation of the tension between his moral and political duties is reflected in his resignation from his post. His anxiety over his failure to report the full facts contrasts with the relaxed attitude of his Head of Department, Octavian Gray, who observes the thinness of Ducane's report on the Radeechy affair with equanimity given the affair's receding significance. Octavian, like Kate, is nice and not overly concerned by morality. He can be economical with the political truth and conceal his affair with a secretary, just as Kate can renew her social life in the absence of Ducane and the disappearance of her friends. Ducane's uneasiness points to Murdoch's recognition of the delicate balance between political and moral obligations. Politics, in Murdoch's later post-socialist thinking, performs a limited role in maintaining the rules that provide order in the public world so that individuals are protected in pursuing the good. The value of these political rules, however, cannot transcend particular moral obligations to goodness. Morality may depend upon political rules to provide a framework for individual development, but the moral demands of being good supersedes politics, which merely provides a public framework of order that enables the possibilities of choice and moral development.

In *The Nice and the Good* individual lives intersect with one another and with inter-related aspects of their social worlds. Ducane is involved in the political world and is aware of its susceptibility to corruption. He is also at ease in a bourgeois social world where individuals can relax in maintaining comfortable relations with one another rather than having to confront disconcerting truths. However, Ducane develops morally by opening to others, notably to Mary, and he accepts responsibilities. His moral growth exemplifies the path towards goodness that is identified in *The Sovereignty of Good* and it is a movement away from the subjectivism that Murdoch observes to be prevalent in modern society. In *The Sovereignty of Good* Murdoch imagines moral development as part of a process whereby individuals strive to see the world differently and accept the responsibilities of their transformed perceptions.<sup>10</sup> The point is to change from satisfying the ego to looking outwards towards others and hence to turn the soul towards the good. This process is captured in a novel, which is not reducible to a set of moral and political prescriptions. Murdoch takes care to portray a credible realistic narrative that is framed via intersecting characters and themes rather than following the crystalline logic of a single set of ideas.

### **Morality and Politics in *The Nice and the Good* and *Under the Net***

*The Nice and the Good* and *Under the Net* differ from one another in offering distinctive narratives of morality and politics, but they both evoke politics and morality in imagining the lives of interconnected characters. *Under the Net* highlights the social and moral atmosphere of the post-war world. Its characters do not respect conventions and institutions and its main character's individualism is rootless. Jake neither cares for nor respects supervening institutions and beliefs to guide his conduct. He drifts, respecting only his own existential autonomy. He imagines the possibility of political renewal through socialism but it is a distant prospect and he offers no formula for its achievement. Ducane cuts a different figure. He is cultured and at ease in the bourgeois world of the great and apparently good, and he comes to recognise moral obligations as arising out of others' needs rather than simply representing his own authentic projections. Ducane's contrast to Jake is also evident in his respect for

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<sup>10</sup> Iris Murdoch, 'The Idea of Perfection', in *The Sovereignty of Good*, pp. 18-19.

political conventions in that he recognises a duty to deliver a report that will re-establish confidence in the prevailing public sphere.

Developments in Murdoch's moral and political thinking can be traced in the differences between the characterisation of Jake and Ducane and in the wider differences between the two novels. *Under the Net* reflects her continued subscription to socialism and her engagement with the vogue for existentialism. However, she does not advocate existentialism. The atmosphere of the novel and Jake's persona are at one with existentialism's disparagement of conventional social roles, but the novel intimates the hollowness of Jake's way of living. He does not see the truth, because he cultivates his own persona to the neglect of others. The novel is critical of an existential attitude, which ignores the work involved in considering others' circumstances. Its negativity contrasts with the elaboration of moral progress that is observed in *The Nice and the Good*. Both novels recognise how modernity promotes forms of moral subjectivism. In *Under the Net* characters either ignore or downplay traditions in favour of existential convictions, and in *The Nice and the Good* a disposition to favour convenient and nice choices over more arduous ones is observed. In *The Nice and the Good*, though, Ducane embraces a less egoistic standpoint even if pre-modern foundations for morality, such as religion and metaphysics are not invoked.

There is continuity and difference in how *Under the Net* and *The Nice and the Good* construe morality, and there are affinities and disparities between their representations of politics. They are both political, insofar as attitudes to politics form aspects of their social and intellectual contexts. The characters are situated in political worlds in which Western post-war consumerist liberal capitalism casts doubt over the prospective achievement of socialism. Ideology, like religion and metaphysics has declined. Jake, the protagonist of *Under the Net*, expresses a vague if doubtful commitment to socialism. In *The Nice and the Good* commitment to socialism has disappeared, even though the egoism and niceties of liberal society continue to be disparaged. Ducane maintains a qualified commitment to the liberal state, just as Murdoch in her later philosophical writings, notably in *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, recognises the value of the liberal state's protection of basic rights.

In 'Morals and Politics' Murdoch is mindful of the tendency to imperfection in the public realm and the dangers of misguided Utopianism. The evident harm manifested by current repressive socialist regimes underpins her respect for the liberal protection of the individual.<sup>11</sup> This suspicion of totalitarian political regimes is reflected in *The Nice and the Good*, where Willy, a holocaust survivor, serves as a moving reminder of their dangers. Murdoch follows British empiricists such as Hume, Hobbes and Locke, in focusing upon the state's achievement of security.<sup>12</sup> Her recognition of the merits of the liberal state, though, does not entail her reduction of morality to individual subjective preferences. Being nice is not the same as being good. For Murdoch, being good requires perception and development and its expression may conflict with the public good. These complex relations between politics and morality are shown in the narrative of *The Nice and the Good*.

## Conclusion

Iris Murdoch is not a political novelist if that means maintaining elaborate political plots. *The Nice and the Good* is relatively unique in featuring a political setting of sorts. Ducane's investigation of a death in Whitehall at the behest of the Prime Minister and his head of department is a significant thread of its plot. His discovery of the immorality at play in the offices of state is of a piece with

<sup>11</sup> Iris Murdoch, 'Morals and Politics', in *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, pp. 354-357.

<sup>12</sup> Given the change in her perspective on politics in later years, it makes sense for Murdoch to draw upon British theorists, who are sceptical of the possibilities of theory and who are aware of the negative possibilities of the social and political world. See David Hume, *Essays, Moral, Political and Literary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962); Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (ed. R. Tuck), (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990) and John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government* (ed. Peter Laslett), (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960).



Portrait of Iris Murdoch by Roslyn Jackson (2012)





Supported by  
**The National Lottery**<sup>®</sup>  
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Photography: Rich Bunce

‘Iris Murdoch and Philippa Foot: an Arc of Friendship’, an exhibition in the Kingston Museum Art Gallery, May 2013



Portrait of Philippa Foot by Roslyn Jackson (2013)

the corruption revealed by the Profumo affair in the early 1960s. What renders it an intriguing political novel, however, is not so much its political atmosphere but its intensive exploration of the inter-relations between morals and politics, just as Murdoch's first novel, *Under the Net* explored the impact of post-war circumstances and the recessiveness of socialist ideals for moral engagement.

In *Under the Net* traditional moral, political and religious beliefs and values are shown to be vulnerable in modernity. Individualism, consumerism and scepticism undermine the force of traditional institutions and ideological convictions to leave a residue of egoistic moral subjectivism. In *The Nice and the Good* personal morality and civic virtue intersect as characters recognise the corruption of political institutions. Some are attracted to an easy egoistic morality, while others show the stirrings of a demanding personal morality and Ducane confronts the tension between politics and morality. In both novels, Murdoch's individuals are affected by their social and political milieus, and their moral standpoints reflect political circumstances. To say that these novels explore inter-relations between morality and politics, however, is not to say that they are devoted to a single issue. A defining feature of Murdoch's aesthetics is precisely to avoid advancing theses or dramatizing preconceived ideas. The folly of imposing authorial ideas on characters is at the heart of her complaint in 'Against Dryness' against the desiccation of contemporary novels.

## Talking with the Dead

*A shorter version of this essay, entitled 'Dead Reckoning', was published in the Financial Times on 11 August 2012, in the 'Life & Arts' Section (p.7). This enlarged version is reprinted here with the kind permission of the Financial Times.*

There are – conventionally speaking – three Ages of modern biography: Romantic, Boring, and Today's. According to this crude tri-partite map, biography as we know it first got kick-started by Samuel Johnson's *Life of Richard Savage* in 1744 and then ripened swiftly in 1791 in Boswell's monumental *Life of Johnson* himself. Such Romantic biography started in a spirit of potent free enquiry, with the subjectivity of the biographer somehow acknowledged within the narrative. This first phase culminated in William Godwin's *Life of Mary Wollstonecraft*, (1798) and William Hazlitt's *Liber Amoris* (1823), neither easily classifiable, and both still much read and referred to today.

Biography lost vigour under Queen Victoria. The epoch of dull and solemn Life-and-Letters, of dignifying and white-washing British Worthies for a growing national Pantheon supervened. Or so we would be led to believe from *Eminent Victorians* (1918) by the debunking Lytton Strachey, who saw himself as chief re-invigorator of the genre.

Strachey flattered himself as an iconoclast. It is true that Elizabeth Gaskell's life of Charlotte Bronte in 1857 – for example – while concentrating on the private details of Charlotte's life, also started a process of sanctification. But not all Victorian biography creates a stained-glass figure. You would never realise from Strachey's account how big an outcry Lockhart caused with his life of Walter Scott around 1839 nor how brave and controversial James Anthony Froude's life of the philosopher Carlyle was in 1882. Each of these courageous books was published within a few years of their subject's death and met with a turbulent reception.

It is true that biography after Strachey has been practised with more licence and invention than before, and that British biography in particular is now exceptionally thriving, varied and interesting. It is hard to imagine Christopher Hitchens's short and acrid meditation on the life of Mother Teresa – *The Missionary Position* – that portrays her as an evil-minded, rapacious Albanian dwarf – being published before Strachey lit his flare-path. He established for ever that biography can legitimately mock, diminish, black-wash and demote.

Not that these developments are – at least to my mind – altogether or simply to be welcomed. On the one hand biography today effects a necessary recuperation of the lives of writers from the follies of Eng-Lit academics: it came of age at a time when literary criticism had driven itself into a blind alley. The so-called New Criticism of the 1940s separated the writing from the writer, rendering discussions of the Author, and (sometimes of Character too), 'taboo'. More recently New Historicism and Cultural Studies continue to diminish the importance of individual agency. Yet while the campus proclaimed the Death of the Author; the reading public happily paid scant attention, continued to buy biographies and went to evening classes to learn what soon started to be called Life-Writing.

Biography demonstrates the truth of two of W.H. Auden's maxims: firstly that a poem (or novel) is a 'machine with a man inside it'. The so-called common reader is not a fool and can see that when John Milton wrote, 'When I consider how my light is spent' it is absurd to pretend that the writer's blindness is irrelevant to its power to move us.

Auden also wrote that there are many writers 'whose work is in better taste than their lives'. The biography of a writer – it seems to me – may show us the frailty and even tastelessness of the author's life and still return us to the power and originality of his or her original writings. To celebrate without suppressing the uncomfortable is not an easy task. Andrew Motion pulled it off in his life of Philip Larkin, and Byron Rogers in *The Man who Came into the West*, presents R. S. Thomas as a *Monstre Sacré* with a wonderfully dry humour and poise that finally opens out into a moving sympathy; and, Roy Foster's *Yeats* is a man believably on the make artistically speaking, constructing his own myth about himself as much as some of the greatest verse of our time.

The biographer has the task – it seems to me – of guiding and educating the reader. When I wrote the authorized biography of Dame Iris Murdoch (2001) I had to find the 'right way' to include the sometimes comical complexities of her love-life with neither concealment nor prurience; I had also to connect her inward struggle to her interesting and evolving moral philosophy. This was not a simple task, given the double standard that decades of feminism have done little to amend. Kingsley Amis's romantic entanglements are forgiven and forgotten as mere laddishness. But any woman who claims for herself the self-same rights as a man to lead a bohemian private life is still belittled as Kali, goddess of destruction.

The biographical task came under fierce scrutiny in Janet Malcolm's *The Silent Woman*, which examines the reputation of Sylvia Plath while interrogating the form of biography itself. It is a tough-talking book that divides its readers. The biographer, like the journalist, is in her view a kind of confidence man, preying on people's vanity, ignorance, or loneliness, gaining their trust and betraying them without remorse. Biographers are voyeurs, and so are their readers. Every journalist and biographer, she has written, who is not too stupid or full of himself to notice what is going on knows that what he does is morally indefensible. Her tone is cool and smart, street-wise and winsome: the pleasures of hearing ill of the dead, she quips, pale before the joys of vilifying the living. Such prose is for ever saying 'Look at me'; she never explains how the biography she herself writes operates under indemnity from her own strictures.

According to this approach, biography rightly adds a new terror to the act of dying, its practitioners comparable to Burke and Hare who, to guarantee corpses for an Edinburgh anatomist to dissect, were willing to go to any lengths of wickedness. Something is missing from Janet Malcolm's fashionable and depressing knowingness.

Perhaps a more fruitful analogy than Malcolm's might be between biography and public séance. Biographers would then recall mediums or spiritualists, communing or conjuring with the spirits of the dead in all their rich complexity, a psychologically risky enterprise for the writer. The good biography is one in which those 'on the other side' are successfully induced, after arduous research, and by dint of sheer writerly enchantment, to appear to walk and talk again so that we can enjoy their company and perhaps even learn from their mistakes.

Richard Holmes has argued that, though the biographer must meet his 'victim' on terms of respect and equality, the Life itself comes to life at the necessary point that the biographer's love and admiration for his subject is tested. This is wise and well-said. When I started to see that the power-mad enchanter Elias Canetti was someone Dame Iris feared precisely because she felt a dangerous affinity with him, she became alive and three-dimensional to me.

One simple form of magic available to biographers is to tackle a whole inter-locking group of people: two biographies I admire do this. Alethea Hayter's *A Sultry Month* gave us in the shortest possible span an in-depth picture of London, with its complex interlocking worlds of fashion, art and politics during a single summer of 1846. More recently Michael Holroyd's *A Strange Eventful History* offered us a theatrical and social cavalcade – from the mid-nineteenth century well into the twentieth – full of humane comedic delight in absurdity and folly and conveying well the strangeness of the past while bringing it simultaneously close at hand.

These books achieve the rare and interesting feat of evoking the living quality or present-ness of the past without condescension or glibness. They resemble Time-Machines. Through their authors' intense and truthful communion with their subjects, cumulative use of telling detail and compression, such

biographies succeed in invoking the dead in order to educate the living. Depicting a group of people – rather than one heroic Solitary – is hard work, but can help guarantee truthfulness.

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These works helped inspire my recent biography of Frank Thompson in which his own remarkable family and friends acted as tragic Chorus to the drama of his life and death. Frank fell in love with Iris Murdoch at Oxford in March 1939 when she talked him into joining the Communist Party. This political allegiance probably influenced his being recruited in 1944 within SOE<sup>1</sup> to drop into Bulgaria to liaise with the Partisans struggling to topple that country's Fascist regime. It was virtually a suicide mission, and he was captured, tortured and shot in June 1944.

In Bulgaria, Frank – having been portrayed as Fellow-Traveller, then an Imperialist spy, then a Soviet agent – is now once again a People's Hero, their Lord Byron or T. E. Lawrence.

Frank's father, an Indian missionary and later an Oxford lecturer in Bengali, was the 'discoverer' and translator of Rabindranath Tagore; Gandhi and Nehru visited the family home on Boars Hill. Frank's patrician American mother came from a long line of Presbyterian missionaries who founded the American University of Beirut. His younger brother E.P. Thompson became a famous radical historian, author of *The Making of the English Working-Class*, and leader of the Peace Movement. The family were tormented for months after Frank's death by bogus telegrams purporting to come from him.

On August 15th 1945, *The Times* published Frank's 'An Epitaph for my Friends'. It is his best poem, much anthologized: the land-mark poem of World War Two. Here Frank, predicting his own end, communicates with us from beyond the grave:

As one who, gazing at a vista  
Of beauty, sees the clouds close in,  
And turns his back in sorrow, hearing  
The Thunder-claps begin

So we, whose life was all before us  
Our hearts with sunlight filled  
Left in the hills our books and flowers,  
Descended and were killed...

Write on the stone no words of sadness  
- Only the gladness due,  
That we, who asked the most of living,  
Knew how to give it too.

This prophetic poem gives a taste of what English poetry lost when he died. It was read by Edward Fox, on the fiftieth anniversary of VE day in 1995, before an audience including the monarch and Prime Minister. It is the poet's imagined adjustment to his own possible end that touches us: his light-hearted willingness to embrace his fate, speak for his generation, and indebt us to his sacrifice.

That fine, dark writer W.G. Sebald once quipped that a photograph is a device through which the dead contrive to address the living. Frank's poem has this uncanny power, artfully extending its cold finger to chide and beckon us, like Lord Kitchener in that famous World War One poster.

Frank's was a brilliantly attractive and courageous personality, the product of a remarkable time and an extraordinary family – a very English hero from a very different era. His murder at twenty-three makes him an example, still to be mourned today, of all young life fruitlessly sacrificed in time of war. This, for me, is the lesson of his story.

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<sup>1</sup> Special Operations Executive.

Review of *A Very English hero: The Making of Frank Thompson*  
by Peter J. Conradi (London: Bloomsbury, 2012)

Biography, as traditionally defined – the life of someone written by someone else – inevitably concentrates on one character at the expense of others. The main subject is the powerful sun around which smaller, weaker planets revolve. Subsidiary characters are considered in part, not as a whole, and in relation to the subject's life and nature rather than in their own right.

Frank Thompson, the subject of Peter Conradi's latest book, was one such minor character when Conradi encountered him while writing the biography of Iris Murdoch. But the bit player – a young poet and a brave soldier – made a strong impression; and some time later Conradi decided to bring him centre stage and to tell the full story of his life and death. This fine biography, scrupulously researched, always sympathetic but never sentimental, tells a moving and important story of a promising young life cut short and idealism betrayed.

The context both personal and political, within which Frank lived and died, is exceptionally well and intelligently described. This is in part a story of the aftermath of empire, of the slow fading of a world where, in the wake of conquest and exploitation, British and Americans went overseas to educate and enlighten other nations, confident in their good intentions and eager to bring about change. Both Frank's parents came from missionary backgrounds. His father, a Methodist minister and himself a prolific writer, was passionately caught up with Indian culture and aspirations, worked in Bengal, knew Tagore and Gandhi; his American mother's family were deeply involved in the Middle East, where she grew up in Beirut. High-minded leftwing internationalist intellectuals, they brought up their two clever sons (Frank's younger brother survived the War to become the influential Marxist historian E.P. Thompson) in the same tradition. Frank was a tall, clumsy, endearing boy who sailed from Winchester into Oxford in 1939 to read Classics and discover the pleasures of drinking, arguing politics and falling in love.

It was there that he coincided with Iris Murdoch, whose intelligence and eagerness for experience matched his and whose sexual magnetism soon had him, and many others, in thrall. The relationship was, and remained, almost innocent; both were virgins until the war separated them. They read the classics, wrote poetry and agreed that Communism was the way forward; it was Iris, whom he liked to call 'Irushka', who drew Frank into the Party. Their politics, like their love, remained unrealistically romantic.

Although Conradi is too subtle a biographer to define his subject as a symbol, he does encourage us to see Frank as an embodiment of the values and illusions of a particular moment in history. For the young and idealistic, the need to fight Fascism in Europe in the 1930s and 40s and build a better world provided a crusade, a shining cause so clear that reservations about communism became irrelevant. Conradi shows how none of the painful muddles of Frank's war, as he moved from North Africa to Cairo and eventually, on a mission for SOE, to Bulgaria in 1944, ever destroyed his faith in what he was doing, any more than Iris's accounts, in their substantial correspondence, of her love affairs among his friends destroyed his feelings for her. There was, however, damage; non-judgmental though he strives to be, Conradi's account does not show Iris Murdoch in a flattering light, as she airily informs Frank when she is no longer a virgin and then tells him of an affair with his close friend M.R.D. Foot. Equally, and more clearly, he cannot conceal his dislike of the way Frank's parents, caught up in their own family mythology of sacrifice in war (an earlier Frank had been killed at the front in 1917) urge

him on to behave like a hero. Both pressures, he suggests, may have contributed to Frank's 'reckless decision' to put himself in danger.

From the beginning, Conradi makes it clear that he intends to question the legend that grew up after the War of how the soldier poet died a noble death, executed after a dramatic trial, proclaiming to the end his belief in the revolution and freedom. His researches in Britain and Bulgaria prove otherwise: after being captured by Bulgarian Fascists Frank was beaten, pushed into a ditch and shot. Conradi also shows just how confused and ill-conceived the venture was from the start; and yet it is impossible not to be moved by the story, and Frank's ugly death in May 1944 at the age of 23 does not detract from what was, by all accounts, his remarkable composure and courage. He had a volume of Catullus in his pocket when he died; his mother gave it to Iris.

Iris never forgot him; indeed as the years passed her conviction that he was her great love and that they would have married had he survived grew stronger. His traces surface again and again in her novels and diaries, and part of their correspondence, edited by Conradi, was published in 2010.<sup>1</sup> Still remembered as a hero in Bulgaria, his reputation elsewhere rests mainly on one poem; as Conradi says, he was not a very good poet when he died, though he might have become one, but this poem has always struck a deep chord. The *Times* published 'An Epitaph for my Friends' on the day the War ended in August 1945. It is still hard to read the second verse without tears:

So we, whose life was all before us  
Our hearts with sunlight filled  
Left in the hills our books and flowers  
Descended and were killed.

Conradi, who believes in biography as a way of encountering and conversing with the dead, shows us the truth behind the poetry.

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<sup>1</sup> See *Iris Murdoch: A Writer at War, Letters & Diaries 1938 -1946*, edited and introduced by Peter J. Conradi (London: Short Books, 2010).

Review of *Iris Murdoch, Philosopher*, edited by Justin Broackes  
(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011)

Although this collection of essays was first conceived as presenting and preserving the contributions to a conference on Murdoch's work held at Brown University in 2001, its final form is rather more complex than anyone familiar with that academic genre might expect. To be sure, the main body of the volume consists of descendants of papers given at that conference; but that material begins only on page 119 (at the earliest – it isn't clear whether Peter Conradi's paper, which works up ideas presented in his biography of Murdoch, was delivered at the Brown conference), and is preceded by three very different generic exercises: a brief but vivid account by John Bayley of Murdoch's mode of delivering philosophical talks, which follows a substantial edited extract from Murdoch's late and abandoned critical commentary on Heidegger (hitherto available only to visitors to the Murdoch archives at Kingston University), which is itself preceded by a very substantial introduction to the volume as a whole by its editor. And the two major prefatory elements have very much more than supplementary value.

For anyone with an interest in Murdoch's critically open-minded relation to those texts and authors usually labelled as belonging to 'Continental Philosophy', and indeed for anyone with an interest in Heidegger, this (sadly truncated) record of her reflections on *Being and Time* (with very glancing excursions on themes in his later philosophical writings) is extremely thought-provoking. I first read the typescript from which this extract is taken some fifteen years ago, and I continue to think that – for all its provisionality and unevenness – it would be well worth publishing as a whole; but having some of it in the public realm is far better than having none, and its presence here is worth the (very reasonable) price of the volume on its own. It reads as if it were a newly-discovered draft of one of Murdoch's Gifford lectures, eventually published under the title *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* – a possible companion piece to her discussions there of Derrida, Hegel and Husserl. Whilst those immersed in Heidegger's work may rightly balk at some of her exegetical and critical claims, they should find ample compensation in the way in which her idiosyncratic perspective allows her to register often overlooked aspects of his investigations of the human way of being.

Justin Broackes's ninety-page introduction to the volume amounts to a condensed intellectual biography of Murdoch. Its narrative arc culminates with the publication of *The Sovereignty of Good*, of which Broackes provides a detailed interpretative summary (although concentrating on the first of its three constituent essays); and its background hermeneutic goal is twofold – to identify and contest the reasons for the apparent marginalisation of Murdoch's philosophical work in analytical moral philosophy, and to demonstrate the extent to which her writings have nevertheless implicitly shaped some of the most interesting and influential recent work in that tradition. The pressing importance of addressing the first issue is emphasized by the ease with which Broackes can show just how quickly and decisively Murdoch's talents as a philosopher flowered and were acknowledged by her peers and seniors in the immediate post-war period; given such initial acclaim, why such a dearth of sustained explicit influence? The answer is provided by Broackes's way of treating the second issue: for he argues that, pre-eminently in the work of John McDowell – and so in the work of those responsive to him (whether positively and negatively) – Murdoch's major themes and insights have in fact made a long-lasting mark on the philosophical tradition she so quickly abandoned for the different satisfactions of literature.

In the pursuit of even preliminary answers to these two intertwined questions, Broackes manages

to provide a fascinating portrait of the post-war philosophical culture that Murdoch entered and left, a sketch of the basic orientation of Murdoch's philosophical work as it culminates in *The Sovereignty of Good*, and an account of the ways in which contemporary analytical moral philosophy has either accepted or resisted the various elements of Murdoch's approach. To cover so much historical and conceptual ground even in the unusually extended compass of this introductory essay is no mean achievement – especially by someone for whom (as he cheerfully confesses) Murdoch's work was a largely closed book before he was asked to organize the 2001 conference; and Broackes repeatedly manages to cast new light on many aspects of his complex array of topics. But there is no denying that his introduction makes substantial and unremitting demands on its readers, and particularly on those to whom the philosophical landscape under examination might be unfamiliar. This is very much an introduction to a philosopher for philosophers; and even for them, the going is not always easy. For the multiplicity of fronts on which Broackes chooses to fight within the demanding constraints of his genre sometimes forces him to rest content with brief assertion rather than extended argument, and to deploy so many substantial (rather than purely referential) footnotes that it becomes hard on occasion to maintain one's connection with the basic thrust of the main text. In one of those footnotes, Broackes says that he is drawing extensively on a commentary on *The Sovereignty of Good* that he is currently preparing; and it seems to me that it will only be in that form that every element of his demanding project will have the space it needs to breathe, and to establish its full intellectual grounding. On the basis of this initial foray, that commentary is very much to be anticipated.

The volume as a whole deliberately matches its editor's introduction in presenting Murdoch as a philosopher, and primarily for the consideration of philosophers. As the book's title indicates, and despite its main contributions beginning with essays (by Conradi and Nussbaum) that address some manifestations of philosophy in Murdoch's novels, the central purpose of the enterprise is to demonstrate that Murdoch should not be categorized as a novelist with an occasional side line in philosophy, or even as a philosophical novelist, but rather as a philosopher whose writings in this field over a long lifetime add up to a sustained, original and penetrating contribution to the fields of ethics, epistemology and metaphysics. Of course, different contributors take rather different tacks in pursuing this common goal: some (for example Moran) critically evaluate Murdoch's readings of other philosophers and traditions; others (for example Antonaccio, Bagnoli, Driver) attempt either to locate Murdoch in, or to evaluate her criticisms of other inhabitants of, familiar meta-ethical taxonomies; others again (for example Crisp, Denham) focus on specific phenomena of the moral life in order to determine how well Murdoch's work equips us to acknowledge them in comparison with other philosophical approaches. Some contributors (for example Blum) are largely critical of Murdoch's views, others (for example Clarke and Holland) are primarily concerned to elaborate Murdochian insights in order to defend them against such criticisms.

Naturally, even those adopting the same broad approach to Murdoch's work do not necessarily agree with their fellow-contributors' readings – whether critical or supportive; so arguments from one paper might well be used to undermine conclusions reached in others, as well as to place question marks against alternative methodological strategies. For example, those who make proper understanding of the concrete details of moral experience the Murdochian priority might plausibly query the point of treating Murdoch's work as one more candidate theory, however idiosyncratic, for meta-ethical pigeon-holing. This sort of internal conflict is of course all to the good, both for the initiated and the uninitiated reader: it dispels any appearance of mere worshipfulness or the following of a party line, and it means that Murdoch herself is given exactly the kind of treatment one would expect of any genuinely significant contributor to the discipline of philosophy.

If there is a dominant issue that preoccupies many contributors, however, it is the vexed question of how to reconcile Murdoch's Platonic realism with her frequent acknowledgement of the fundamental role of the imagination in our moral and metaphysical thinking. This is by no means an easy matter to resolve, but it seems to me that some contributors do better than others in avoiding solutions to the problem that amount to denying one or other of Murdoch's two apparently conflicting commitments;

explicitly in Moran's and Bagnoli's otherwise valuable papers (and implicitly in Antonaccio's assumption that Murdoch is a reflexive realist), the idea of moral reality as independent of our pictures of it is in different ways so significantly qualified that Murdoch's persistent devotion to Platonic pictures of goodness becomes hard to understand as anything other than misleading. But there are other interpretative possibilities in this area that would merit further exploration (and receive it in the work of Murdoch scholars such as David Robjant): and one such possibility whose omission in the main body of the book is particularly surprising given its prominence in the introduction is that embodied in the work of John McDowell, who famously attempts to defend a view of moral reality as objective whilst simultaneously acknowledging a constitutive role for the human subject in our metaphysics of morals.

For those already well-versed in Murdoch's philosophical writings, there is another shared presupposition that might seem surprising: with the exception of Antonaccio, no other contributor substantially dissents in her critical practice from the exegetical assumption of the editor's introduction – that the centrepiece of Murdoch's philosophizing is the three essays collected in *The Sovereignty of Good* rather than the later, much larger, far more complex and wide-ranging *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*. Perhaps this simply reflects the fact that the latter text is relatively recent, and very much more resistant to a perspicuous survey, let alone a penetrating critical engagement; but until it is taken at least as seriously as the earlier volume, I feel that the full weight and complexity of Murdoch's claims to philosophical significance will remain inadequately measured.

That said, however, the contributors (and their editor) manage to sustain an impressively high level of philosophical sophistication and imaginative engagement in their struggles to make better sense of core elements of Murdoch's challenging philosophical stance; and they thereby make it clear that her work really does merit that kind of critical philosophical investigation. After the publication of this volume, there can be no excuse for failing to acknowledge that there is such a thing as Iris Murdoch's philosophy, and that it holds the promise of much moral and philosophical insight.

Review of *A Philosophy to Live By: Engaging Iris Murdoch* by  
Maria Antonaccio (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012)

With the publication of *A Philosophy to Live By: Engaging Iris Murdoch*, Maria Antonaccio has once again left Murdoch scholars in her debt. This collection of eight previously published articles (Chapters 1-6, 8, and 9), revised and expanded to varying degrees, and two new chapters (the Introduction and Chapter 7) is divided into three parts whose unifying thesis, insofar as there is one, is that Murdoch's philosophy is productively understood as offering an 'ascetic model of philosophy' (p.13). This volume pulls together some of the most important work from one of the clearest and insightful expositors of Murdoch's philosophy, providing readers with a picture of the overall development and trajectory of her thought.

Part I, 'Metaphysics and the Idea of the Individual', explores Murdoch's unique conception of metaphysics, drawing not only from the more well-known early philosophical essays of the 50s and 60s, but also integrating insights from Murdoch's later work, most notably *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (1992). Central to understanding Murdoch's conception of metaphysics, Antonaccio argues, is regarding it as one side of a two-way movement in philosophy, from ordinary observations (empiricism) to the construction of large conceptual structures (metaphysics) and back again. Both are necessary to the philosophical enterprise; metaphysics works towards systematic understanding, whereas empiricism returns us to and reminds us of the contingent. Scholars interested in the development of Murdoch's philosophical thought will find much of interest in this section, and indeed in the volume as a whole, as Antonaccio argues that a proper appreciation of Murdoch's mature work will disabuse us of certain misconceptions regarding her intellectual legacy: the notion that Murdoch is concerned with a 'morality of perfection over a morality of duty or obligation' (p.65); or that her philosophy favours a renunciatory ethics of unselfing, which aims at the extinction of the ego over a more 'aesthetic and affirmative' stance toward the ego (p.176) – a claim about which I remain somewhat sceptical (see below); or that she is 'concerned exclusively with private morality and the inner life of consciousness' (p.211) and thus neglects the political dimension of moral thought. Part II, 'Religion and the Demand of the Good', contains what is truly 'new' in this volume (p.x) and the chapters that 'bear most directly on [its] claim' as a whole (p.13), namely that 'Murdoch's philosophy can be seen as a constructive enactment of an ascetic model of philosophizing' (p.126). Finally, Part III, 'Liberalism and the Pursuit of Ideals', convincingly demonstrates the initially counterintuitive claim that Murdoch's Platonism fits seamlessly with her Political Liberalism. Antonaccio defends this claim by showing that the moral purification emphasized in Murdoch's ethics of unselfing just is the 'condition for liberal tolerance' and respect for individuals (p.215).

As mentioned above, this volume possesses a unifying thesis, but only in the loosest of senses. Indeed one would expect this from a book that, as Antonaccio confesses, brings 'together materials produced over more than a decade and at various stages in my own thinking' (p.15). Thus, if one is looking for a tightly interconnected set of chapters, ordered into a coherent whole by a central claim, then disappointment will surely follow. However, if one is willing 'to stop being neat' in order to 'see the whole picture', as Antonaccio quoting Murdoch suggests we should be, then one surely stands to gain valuable insight upon insight into Murdoch's philosophical project. One should therefore read this volume just as Murdoch wants us to read *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, heeding her warning that 'we

shall have to travel over a wide field criss-cross in every direction' (p.277). This review, then, in keeping with the nature of the subject matter, must 'stop being neat', give up pretensions to completeness, and necessarily be selective. It will thus focus on what Antonaccio identifies as 'new' in this volume and especially its account of the dual nature of Murdoch's ascetic philosophy.

When Antonaccio labels Murdoch's an 'ascetic model of philosophy,' she means that Murdoch develops a philosophical framework in which there are a set of practices or disciplines aimed at the cultivation of the self in light of some moral ideal regarding what sort of person it would be best to be. Viewing Murdoch's thought through this lens not only remains faithful to her philosophical project, but also promises to serve as one of the most helpful heuristics through which to come to terms with her intellectual legacy. Not to be missed in this volume is Antonaccio's 'typology of approaches to *askesis*' in which she helpfully contextualizes and contrasts Murdoch's ascetic model with those of Michel Foucault, Pierre Hadot, and Martha Nussbaum (p.133ff.).

The heart of what is new here, however, is not simply the claim that Murdoch's model of philosophy is ascetic, but that it contains an underappreciated dual nature, including the more widely recognized renunciatory element of unselfing, as well as the less acknowledged, but equally prevalent, affirmative or aesthetic element. Indeed, the identification of these two competing impulses in Murdoch's philosophy represents what Antonaccio calls an 'evolution of my own thinking on the subject' (p.13), as formerly she had overlooked the antipuritanical dimension of Murdoch's moral thought (p.9), most notably in *Picturing the Human*. If Antonaccio is correct about the duelling puritanical *and* antipuritanical impulses in Murdoch's moral *philosophy* – and on this point she is entirely convincing – then this forces us to revise, as she rightly indicates, the notion that Murdoch's novels embody an internal complexity that her puritanical, more 'simplistic' philosophy lacks. But Antonaccio, in what is probably the most ambitious aspect of this volume, is not content simply to leave this tension between the puritanical and the antipuritanical unresolved; rather, in Chapter 7, which she describes as the 'fulcrum of the book's central theme' (p.14), Antonaccio 'attempts to show how the two meanings of *askesis* (ascetic and aesthetic) are integrated or harmonized' (p.14) by utilizing Murdoch's important, but largely neglected, interpretation of the Demiurge in Plato's *Timaeus*. Throughout this and other chapters, Antonaccio defends her claim regarding the presence of the antipuritanical in Murdoch's philosophy by drawing our attention to Murdoch's positive evaluation and utilization of art and the imagination. For Antonaccio, Murdoch's endorsement of the 'wilful and creative' work of the imagination – think, for example, of the creative work of the moral imagination that M engages in with respect to D – 'affirms the idea of the individual in Murdoch's thought' (p.116).

Antonaccio's argument is entirely persuasive insofar as it challenges readings of Murdoch's ascetic philosophy that neglect its dual aspect, focusing on the renunciatory but overlooking the antipuritanical. Let us call this claim the 'internal complexity thesis.' However, Antonaccio is much less convincing when she argues that this internal complexity is never 'decided entirely in favour of one side of the tension or the other' (p.169), and when she argues that the two meanings of *askesis* can be 'integrated or harmonized'. Let us call these claims respectively the 'perpetual tension thesis' and the 'harmony thesis.' There is a highly plausible alternative reading of Murdoch's ascetic philosophy – one that maintains the 'internal complexity thesis' but rejects the 'perpetual tension thesis' and the 'harmony thesis' – which Antonaccio would have to grapple with and discredit before one could judge her interpretation truly compelling. This alternative reading, which we could call the 'complex renunciatory thesis', asks why we should not think that the renunciatory element of Murdoch's philosophy wins out in the end, despite the existence of genuine complexity within her ascetic philosophy. Anyone wishing to defend something like the 'complex renunciatory thesis' would need to make sense of the presence and role of the antipuritanical element in Murdoch's ascetic philosophy; however, a fairly natural explanation offers itself to readers of Murdoch here: namely, that the antipuritanical element plays a role in achieving moral perfection, but only at lower levels of spiritual or moral purification, and that the affirmation of the personal ego must ultimately be abandoned at the highest levels. Indeed, the notion that Murdoch

would employ the personal ego for its own defeat at lower levels and then abandon that strategy at higher levels, is a highly plausible way to read Murdoch, for she often speaks in terms of spiritual levels and moral ascents. So when Antonaccio contends that ‘the cure for egoism [...] must *enlist* rather than simply *negate* the contents and reflexive dynamics of consciousness in their own self-correction and purification’ (p.168), she is surely correct in her interpretation of Murdoch, but that does not necessarily imply the ‘perpetual tension thesis,’ for it does not rule out the possibility that the antipuritanical is just a stage on the way toward the eventual extinction of the personal ego. The appropriate means of purification at one stage may turn into the chief moral and spiritual obstacle at a higher one. Likewise, the appropriate means of purification at higher levels may be disastrous if attempted at lower levels.

In this review I cannot adequately address the full complexity of Antonaccio’s careful, subtle, and eminently interesting arguments in favour of the ‘perpetual tension’ and ‘harmony’ theses, since, to her credit, her position stands or falls as a part of an interconnected way of reading Murdoch, and especially on her interpretation of Murdoch as a ‘reflexive’ realist and on her specific conception of the reflexive structure of consciousness. Thus far I have merely hinted at a plausible alternative interpretation to hers, one to which she would need to respond to in order to be fully convincing. But let me, in however provisional a manner, try to gesture toward a possible problem for the ‘perpetual tension’ and ‘harmony’ theses. To save the personal ego in Murdoch, Antonaccio needs to demonstrate at least two things: 1) that the personal ego makes a positive contribution ‘toward the achievement of truthful perception’ (p.158) and 2) that the subjective standpoint from which reality is truthfully perceived is in some meaningful way unique or personal. Antonaccio attempts to do both: the former by appealing to the positive role for the imagination, as seen especially in the M and D example; the latter by invoking her own account of the reflexive structure of consciousness in Murdoch. However, these attempts do not show that Murdoch affirms a distinctly *personal* ego or ‘unique personality’ (p.162) at the highest levels, as Antonaccio seems to think they do. We can see this by making a distinction between a *personal* and *impersonal* ego and also by making a distinction between *personal subjectivity* and *impersonal subjectivity*.

These distinctions are especially important because Antonaccio has a tendency mistakenly to equate the subjective with the personal or unique. One may agree, for example, with Antonaccio’s following claim about M and D: ‘The idea that imagination plays an active role in moral perception suggests that the vision of reality that results from the practice of unselfing is not a vision that has been stripped of subjectivity, but a vision that has been actively constructed by a perceiving subject’ (p.162), without thinking that anything unique about M’s subjectivity contributed to her truthful perception. This could be the vision of a subject who has stripped herself of all the unique features of her personality in order to see reality from an impersonal subjective standpoint. An impersonal subjective standpoint would be one that could recognize ‘the inescapable role that subjectivity plays in moral perception’ without, *pace* Antonaccio, ‘undercut[ting] the ideal of a total unselfing’ (p.167), if total unselfing is understood as the extinction of the unique or distinctly personal features of the ego. The ideal standpoint from which to view reality, according to this view, would not be a mind-independent one – like that of the so-called ‘scientific gaze’ – but neither would it be the standpoint of a personal or unique consciousness; it would be a standpoint emptied of all the unique features of the ego. Just because one maintains that the grasp of reality is always mediated through consciousness does not mean that one endorses the distinctly unique or personal within consciousness. At this point, as interpreters of Murdoch, what we need is an account of the nature of the ideal standpoint in Murdoch, and, as far as I can tell, nothing which is unique, personal, or individual contributes positively to the truthful perception of reality.

Despite these worries regarding certain aspects of Antonaccio’s interpretation of Murdoch’s ascetic philosophy, her account is subtle, powerful, and deserving of careful attention by anyone trying to come to terms with Murdoch’s intellectual legacy. Indeed, Antonaccio has once again produced a volume that should serve as a point of departure for interpreters of Murdoch’s work for years to come.

Review of *Iris Murdoch's Contemporary Retrieval of Plato: The Influence of an Ancient Philosopher on a Modern Novelist* by Sonja Zuba  
(Lampeter: Mellen Press, 2009)

Taking issue with Maria Antonaccio, Sonja Zuba remarks that 'Murdoch's account of moral life cannot be appropriated uncritically by Christian theologians' (p.219). Murdoch's moral philosophy nevertheless contains enough of value to Christian theologians that it might be worth trying to appropriate Murdoch *critically*, which is what Zuba understands herself as doing. This aim is carried forward over three of four chapters. Chapter 2, 'Philosophy and ethics', culminates in the section 'confronting the fact/value divide'. Chapter 3, 'Philosophy and metaphysics', sets out points of sympathy and disagreement with Murdoch's treatment of Good and God in the Ontological Proof. Chapter 4, 'Philosophy and religion', rounds up what limited elements Zuba hopes to take from Murdoch into Christian theology.

In the main argument, developed by Chapters 2-4, Zuba disagrees with Murdoch about the proper uses of the Ontological proof, and offers that 'God must be seen as the source of all value, hence it does not make sense to discuss or speak of the Good, or any form of morality, without reference to God' (p.9). Zuba returns to this theme in the section 'On the loss of theism', and her discussion here is the most passionate and inhabited part of the book. One occupant is Franklin Gamwell:<sup>1</sup>

Gamwell believes and I agree with him [...] [that the] [...] central affirmation [of theistic religion] is that we ought to love God because all our lives, in all their detail, make an abiding difference to the divine reality [God loves us]. In contrast, the Good, as an Idea rather than an individual, is always to be loved but never loving. (pp. 222-3)

Partly, Zuba is saying that she cannot accept the task of unrequited love that may seem to be at the centre of Murdoch's moral programme. But Zuba offers further that in this programme for unrequited love, 'the loss of theism is the loss of a deep aspect of human life' (p.223). The suggestion here is that in describing love for the Good without the expectation of any return, Murdoch is proposing something essentially *inhuman*. This is the sense in which for Zuba 'Murdoch's religion without God is inconsistent with her emphatic moral realism' (p.223), since realism here, on Zuba's account, would accommodate the supposed fact of our general inability to love unrequitedly. This is an interesting and moving train of thought. I doubt the premise.

The centre of Zuba's book is the attempt to show that Murdoch is in error in her atheism, but yet offers resources for a moral philosophy that could support theism. In what is perhaps the pivotal passage, Zuba has it that for Murdoch, 'all divisions between fact and value ultimately reduce the sphere of human knowing and diminish our ability to perceive accurately' (pp.135-6). But Murdoch nowhere argues that all divisions between fact and value are unhelpful, and patently it is often helpful to draw such distinctions (e.g. there is a *fact* about what Murdoch actually wrote, however we might fail to *value* it). It may be necessary to briefly revisit Murdoch's remarks. Murdoch objects to the way in which Wittgenstein 'separates the area of valueless contingency, where everything is as it is and happens as it does happen, from the *thereby* purified ineffable activity of value'.<sup>2</sup> The complaint is that

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<sup>1</sup> See Franklin. I. Gamwell, 'On the loss of theism', in *Iris Murdoch and the Search for Human Goodness*, Maria Antonaccio and William Schweiker (eds.), (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1996), pp.171-89.

<sup>2</sup> Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1992), p.34.

picturing value as occupying *a separate realm* from the facts, such as the *Tractatus* and much later moral theorising involves, in no way captures the various intimacies of 'is' and 'ought'. One such intimacy is that 'the instructed and morally purified mind sees reality clearly'.<sup>3</sup> That remark is somewhere near the centre of Murdoch's moral epistemology. Egoism is such a ubiquitous impediment to truthful vision that access to the *facts* goes through the *virtues*. A separate and additional point would be that, in the special case of the form of the Good, what is and the valuable are perfectly united. But that fact and value are united at that point of perfection issues no licence for the thought that they are everywhere indivisible.

Rather independent of Zuba's interesting train of theological thought is Chapter 1, 'Art and philosophy: literary theory', which meditates on the relation between Murdoch's philosophical and literary output. It is there that Zuba most directly discusses Murdoch's 'retrieval' of Plato. Zuba asserts that for Murdoch, Plato's worries about the moral status of art are 'concerned with public order and public morality, not with art as a creative medium itself nor with the personal moral quest' (p.46). This odd claim contradicts so much in Murdoch, including: 'Artists have great quasi-spiritual satisfactions, false "highests", which may arrest progress (Plato's fear)'.<sup>4</sup> Zuba then adds: 'Murdoch's use of Plato is selective; she is interested in his moral philosophy alone' (p.90). This about-face would appear to be an unattributed quotation of Heather Widdows,<sup>5</sup> and the borrowed remark again contradicts Murdoch: 'if we want to understand our ethics we must look at our epistemology'.<sup>6</sup> Murdoch's subtle mix of fear and hope for art is reduced by Zuba to the 'almost tautological' formula 'Good Art is Good' (p.47). Zuba complains that 'Murdoch's [dialogue] *Acastos* contains several philosophical elemnts [sic] despite her strong denial of this, with regard to her literary writings' (p.68). What Murdoch did not want categorised as philosophy-by-other-means were her *novels*.

I cannot recall a book so traumatised by copyediting. Several pages (e.g. pp.38-9) offer reproduction of Murdoch's *The Fire and the Sun*, dropping conventions of indentation or quotation marks. On page 43 a passage is credited 'F&S, 463' but contains no device for distinguishing Zuba from Murdoch and begins 'According to Murdoch...'. Here the author, or copyeditor, has inserted their own punctuation into Murdoch's text, and failed to mark an ellipsis.

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<sup>3</sup> Iris Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics*, ed. by Peter J. Conradi (London: Chatto & Windus, 1997), p.426.

<sup>4</sup> Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, p.429.

<sup>5</sup> Heather Widdows, *The Moral Vision of Iris Murdoch* (Hampshire: Ashgate, 2005), p.9.

<sup>6</sup> Iris Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics*, p.68.

Review of *Iris Murdoch: Texts and Contexts*, edited by Anne Rowe and  
Avril Horner (London: Palgrave, 2012)

Anne Rowe and Avril Horner have edited another rich volume of essays, many of which were originally presented at the 2008 International Conference on Iris Murdoch at Kingston University. The essays are grouped into six sections – political, psychological, philosophical, theological, literary, and biographical – but as one might expect in a volume on “texts and contexts,” these themes show up throughout the volume and repeatedly re-contextualize Murdoch’s life and work. For instance, two of the essays address political questions explicitly, but reflections on Murdoch’s complicated political commitments appear throughout the volume. If this is true for politics, it is even more the case when it comes to theological and psychological themes. *Iris Murdoch: Texts and Contexts* will make a substantive contribution to scholarship in many fields. As increasing numbers of scholars from a diversity of disciplines continue to rediscover in Murdoch resources for their own work, *Texts and Contexts* will serve as a significant point of departure. There is not space, unfortunately, to comment on all of the essays, but I have chosen to examine how the themes of politics and biography intertwine in several representative essays.

Anne Rowe and Sara Upstone note that scholars have been slow to explore the complicated political implications of Murdoch’s thought. Several essays in this volume take up this task. Rowe and Upstone offer a brief summary of Murdoch’s engagement with political questions in her novels and then turn to compare Murdoch’s work with Ian McEwan who has explicitly assumed the mantle of public (i.e., political) intellectual in the decade since the September 11, 2001, attacks. Rowe and Upstone persuasively show how Murdoch managed to focus on the spiritual and moral health of the individual and community without turning the novel into a polemicist or didactic tract.

Frances White also takes up the question of Murdoch’s approach to the political dilemmas confronting the one and the many in her comparison of Murdoch’s radio play *The One Alone* and T.S. Eliot’s *Murder in the Cathedral*. White summarizes the little-known radio play and demonstrates its debts to and departures from Eliot. According to White, in *The One Alone* Murdoch ‘reconceptualizes the idea of martyrdom, and [...] calls into question the continued effectiveness of Eliot’s play in secularized late twentieth-century political contexts’. Murdoch is famous for her affirmation that one must be good ‘for nothing’ – without hope of reward or punishment. White explicates how Murdoch could continue to find joy linked to goodness ‘for nothing’. *The One Alone* attempts to illustrate an abiding validity for self-sacrifice, even in the absence of a grand Christian narrative.

Reading White’s fine essay alongside Rowe’s and Upstone’s, one has to ask whether Murdoch was in fact more tempted by a didactic element within her art than she cared to admit. This radio play, broadcast in 1987, seems to attempt to illustrate explicitly the moral philosophy we find running throughout her career. (While Murdoch’s politics may have migrated across the spectrum, her moral philosophy remained remarkably consistent.) If Murdoch had not succumbed to Alzheimer’s disease in the 1990s, would she have taken on a more explicit role as a public and political intellectual? How would her faithful readership have responded had the one-time Communist taken to defending John Major in the *Times*? (Mary Midgley claimed that Murdoch’s support for Thatcher was a terrible strain on their friendship.)

Political questions also come to the fore in one of the most thought-provoking sections of the collection, the three essays that confront Murdoch’s engagement with Jacques Derrida. During the last

productive decade of her scholarship, Murdoch found herself increasingly engaged with the work of Derrida, and her response was – on the surface – quite negative. Pamela Osborn, Tony Milligan, and Paul Fiddes each believe that there is much more to the Murdoch-Derrida encounter than what sits on the surface. In Milligan's words, they may even be 'holding hands under the table'. Both Fiddes and Milligan make persuasive cases for showing the flawed nature of Murdoch's criticism of Derrida, especially as she treats him in *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*. Both point toward unspoken commonalities and real disagreements. The difficulty resides in adjudicating between the two when Murdoch seems to have wilfully misunderstood Derrida. What is the significance in this encounter and how does it relate to politics and biography?

Fiddes notes, 'for those who know the work of Derrida,' Murdoch's presentation of him 'hardly seems like Derrida at all; in fact, he has become a target for all that she dislikes about recent philosophy'. Fiddes does not argue that Bradley Pearson is a Derridean figure; rather does Fiddes believe that 'Bradley exhibits traits of thought that worry her and which she later extensively attributes – not altogether accurately – to Derrida himself.' In both her work on Derrida and in *The Black Prince*, Fiddes sees Murdoch struggling with the tension between the search for philosophical coherence and the test of contingency. Fiddes's principal interest is in the relation between writing and speech and whether one can be prior to the other. Fiddes demonstrates that *The Black Prince* 'shows the danger of giving either writing or speech priority over the other. Whether or not the novel directly has Derrida in mind, it tends to support the Derridean conviction that the world is inseparable from signs, and so undermines Murdoch's own later critique of Derrida'. Pearson's tragi-comic tutorial on Hamlet to Julian illustrates this view perfectly.

Tony Milligan does an excellent job of showing Murdoch's failure to distinguish the ethical and political work of the later Derrida from certain aspects of a Derrida of two decades earlier and of the larger postmodern current of the day (e.g., Michel Foucault's denial of any normative standpoint). Milligan writes, 'Derrida was traveling down a road that was familiar to Murdoch, a road that she had travelled down with a sizeable cluster of Wittgenstein-influenced scholars in the 1940s and 1950s'. Though Milligan does not cite the texts, his case would be even more persuasive were Murdoch to have shown evidence of reading Derrida's *Force de loi* (1989) and *Spectres de Marx* (1993). Of course, time was also Murdoch's enemy by this point. Milligan believes that Murdoch failed to remember the way in which she had recognized that she and Derrida were both 'critics of a linguistic puritanism that demands precision where a tolerance for the indeterminate and the ambiguous may be less prone to mislead'. Osborn relies on Milligan's essay and turns toward Derrida's work on mourning, finding many similarities to Murdoch's own depictions of mourning in her novels, especially the late novels. Osborn believes that Milligan is correct that Murdoch's harsh treatment of Derrida was directed toward the Derrida of the late 1960s and not the 'ethically minded' Derrida of the late 1980s and 1990s. There is a tension in the way that Osborn frames her essay. In the introduction she claims that Murdoch may have used 'deconstructionist techniques unknowingly to represent the truth of the experience of mourning'. In the conclusion, she suggests that she is reading Murdoch from a 'Derridean point of view'. The former is a claim about authorship; the latter is about readership and seems more plausibly persuasive. Derrida's late work on mourning is intimately connected with the work on hospitality, friendship, forgiveness, and a concept of justice which cannot be deconstructed. It seems highly unlikely that Murdoch was sufficiently unaware of Derrida's ethical turn to miss it in the revisions of *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (Milligan) while being sufficiently affected by Derridean mourning to incorporate unknowingly these themes into the same late novels which were being written during the revisions of the Gifford Lectures (Osborn).

In the decade and a half since Murdoch died, there have been several biographies and many more thoughtful vignettes published from her circle of friends, colleagues, lovers, and acquaintances. John Bayley, Peter Conradi, A.N. Wilson, David Morgan, and Priscilla Martin and Anne Rowe have completed biographies of Murdoch, and she figures prominently in autobiographical works by such luminaries as

Elias Canetti, Mary Midgley, Martin Amis, Roger Scruton, and others. Peter Conradi has also published an early (1938-1946) collection of Murdoch's letters and diaries. Unfortunately, there is still little secondary scholarship on Murdoch's biographies, but several essays in this collection seek to rectify this omission and turn our attention to significant questions concerning biographical aspects of Murdoch's life. Elaine Morley recognizes the need for a reassessment of the troublesome relationship between Murdoch and Elias Canetti. Based upon an analysis of their correspondence, Murdoch's annotations to, and review of, *Crowds and Power*, and a comparison of *Die Blendung* and *The Time of the Angels*, Morley argues that as writers (rather than merely as lovers), they were preoccupied with similar philosophical and political problems, and their work shows a mutual dependence upon the other. According to Morley, the traditional reading of Canetti as monster needs to be supplemented with an understanding of how the two were intellectual partners.

Alex Ramon also takes the reader back to Murdoch's biography, this time reassessing her life in light of Richard Eyre's 2001 film *Iris*. Ramon acknowledges both Murdoch's skepticism about film in general and the negative response *Iris* received from Murdoch scholars. Ramon, however, believes that film, as a medium, has greater potential 'to strengthen human perception of reality' than either *Iris* (the woman) or *Iris* (the film) realized. To the extent that the film masked the reality that really was the woman, Ramon believes that *Iris* may be viewed as 'a way of keeping the most private, enigmatic and mysterious aspects of her personality intact' – a very odd compliment.

Don Cupitt, the former Dean of Emmanuel College, Cambridge, and theologian famous for 'taking leave of God', also offers insight into Murdoch's biography. Cupitt describes their relationship as a 'star friendship' – a term employed by Nietzsche in the *Gay Science* to describe estranged friends who share a celestial orbit. Nietzsche wrote, 'Let us then believe in our star friendship even if we should be compelled to be earth enemies'. Cupitt imagines that they would have been quite close in 1980 (though they never met), when Murdoch published *Nuns and Soldiers* and he produced *Taking Leave of God*. Their only meeting occurred a decade later and was 'disappointing' to Cupitt because he believed that she 'was becoming even more of a dogmatic platonist'. In *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (published in 1992 but based on her 1982 Gifford Lectures), Murdoch had described Cupitt as a 'brave and valuable pioneer' whose writings 'contained many sayings which I like and respect'. Unfortunately, Murdoch also thought that Cupitt was driven to 'unnecessarily extreme' positions. She confessed, 'I am not so happy with Cupitt's attitude to Plato and to philosophy generally'. Taken together, both of these episodes help us understand Murdoch's response to the prevailing (a)theological context of the day.

Janfarie Skinner's essay on how the fiction Murdoch read in her own childhood continued to influence her work is delightful. This essay helps us better understand both biographical and literary contexts for Murdoch. Skinner addresses the influence that Lewis Carroll (both *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass*), Rudyard Kipling (*Kim*), and Robert Louis Stevenson (*Kidnapped* and *Treasure Island*) continued to have on Murdoch's work. There are important observations here, and they ring true for many Murdoch readers. Skinner's essay would have been strengthened had she, in addition to focusing on narrative techniques or models for character or plot, included instances in which specific engagements with childhood novels substantively influence Murdoch's own narratives. For instance, several of the characters in *A Word Child* return again and again to reflect on and perform J.M. Barrie's *Peter Pan*. What does it mean when, in a book about language and words, we are confronted with the possibility that the dog Nana might be the hero of the story? It falls to the virtuous but dim-witted Arthur to tell the brilliant, but tragic, word child Hilary, 'There's nothing bogus about Nana. Nana doesn't *talk*'. Children's literature provided Murdoch with a far more fertile field of exploration than merely technique or allusion.

If there is an inadequacy to this volume, it might be found in what is missing, rather than in what is included. Of course the editors are constrained by the essays given to them by their contributors, but there are several 'texts and contexts' that were enormously important for Murdoch but go largely unexplored in this volume. For instance, Murdoch often acknowledged the importance of Henry James

and Fyodor Dostoevsky on her work, and though Rowe and Horner point out just this fact in their excellent introduction, there is little engagement with either writer. The same could be said for the relative absence of Dante and Shakespeare. Perhaps it is an inevitability of scholarly literature that significant lesser influences, such as Banville or Reik, come to be explored at the expense of the more obvious influences.

One would also like greater attention to those philosophical texts and contexts which were formative for her work, especially for her literary work. Given as much ink as has been split on Murdoch's debt to Plato, perhaps it is not surprising there is not another essay chiefly devoted to him, but the scholarly community desperately needs work on Murdoch's debt to Aristotle, which was certainly more profound than she cared to admit. She was not hesitant to acknowledge the significance of Immanuel Kant and David Hume for her thought, but serious work is needed to explicate the complicated influence that both of these luminaries had on her work. Here are texts and contexts that were absolutely formative for both her philosophy and her novels. But, as noted above, the editors can hardly be faulted for what was not given to them, and perhaps omissions like these merely make one look forward to another fine conference at Kingston and the next helpful book by Rowe and Horner.

Review of *Iris Murdoch: Gender and Philosophy*, Sabina Lovibond  
(London: Routledge, 2011)

In this intriguing book, Sabina Lovibond rigorously addresses issues that frustrate many twenty-first century women readers of Murdoch's fiction. These include: Why do her novels include no attractive and intellectually powerful women? Why is goodness in her fictional world so often associated with self-deprecation, patience and stillness, particularly in women, where it is frequently linked with an attractive non-threatening femininity? Why does the idea of the 'master' haunt her work in the form of male scholarly figures who strive towards truth and goodness in an abstract realm apparently closed to women?

Lovibond takes remarks made by Murdoch during a colloquium held at Caen, France in 1978 as a touchstone when attempting to answer these and other questions. Explaining her tendency to write through a 'male' narrative voice, Murdoch commented at that time:

I suppose it's a kind of comment on the unliberated position of women [...] I think I want to write about things on the whole where it doesn't matter whether you're male or female, in which case you'd better be male, because a male represents ordinary human beings, unfortunately, as things stand at the moment, whereas a woman is always a woman!

As Lovibond points out in the last section of her study, the crux of the matter is whether we understand this remark as 'sympathetic' (i.e. Murdoch is conscious that the second-class status of women is a social and cultural phenomenon, which can be put right through education, cultural intervention and political change) or whether we see it as 'symptomatic' (i.e. Murdoch is unconsciously complicit with intellectual strategies working within the social imaginary, or symbolic order, that conspire to keep women in their 'unliberated' place). With regard to gender, there are many tensions and contradictions in Murdoch's thought – between, for example, the implied notion that the question of gender is irrelevant when philosophically considering the individual's struggle towards goodness and truth, and her fictional portrayal of virtue as imbued with certain gendered characteristics. Again, on the one hand, Murdoch seems to challenge traditional philosophical criteria for virtue in so far as they marginalise the ethical goodness we often see in women's behaviour (such as in caring selflessly for others); on the other, she frequently displays, as Lovibond notes, 'some deep-seated resistance to the prospect of full moral and intellectual autonomy for women' (p.7). Lovibond sets herself the task of walking through this rhetorical minefield in order to probe Murdoch's ideas on gender and philosophy and, ultimately, to raise questions about the gendered nature of philosophy itself. In so doing, she draws on the work of Simone de Beauvoir, Simone Weil, Michèle le Doeuff and Luce Irigaray (with a peek at that of Jean-François Lyotard) exemplifying thereby her own determination to be enthralled neither to 'dieu ni maître' and to avoid the 'vertical' ladder of epistemology whereby one looks up to a (male) sage or seer – a model that Murdoch seems to have found seductive for much of her own life, both in her infatuated adoration of lovers such as Elias Canetti, and in her fierce intellectual adherence to certain thinkers, referring in interview as late as 1983 to 'Kant and Plato, my personal gods'. (It is perhaps no accident that the philosophers to whom Lovibond pays most attention are not just women but *French* women;

it would seem that the gallic social imaginary accommodates female intellectuals rather more readily than its anglo-saxon counterpart – something that Lovibond does not explore here.) The result is a book full of valuable insights, not only into Murdoch's work but into patriarchy itself and its enduring legacy in the form of a social imaginary which still impedes women's progress in the world, whether they are philosophers, surgeons or bankers. It is perhaps salutary to note that Mary Midgley, in her autobiography *The Owl of Minerva* (2005), suggested that it was partly the absence of men at Oxford during 1938-45 that allowed her, Elizabeth Anscombe, Mary Warnock, Iris Murdoch and Philippa Foot to have 'a greater voice in discussion at the time' and eventually to become important philosophers: 'I do think that in normal times a lot of good female thinking is wasted because it simply doesn't get heard' (p.123).

In the first section of Lovibond's book, entitled 'A Woman Philosopher: why not?', she wittily sketches out how and why philosophy 'even today' (p.2) appears to be a 'male domain' and suggests that Murdoch's response to that was ambivalent. On the one hand she proffered female models of virtue (such as the mother-in-law in the 'M and D' story) imagined within an 'intimate' and 'domestic' (p.24) scenario quite foreign to the tradition of male dominated philosophy and which, by implication, offered a critique of existentialist-behaviourist ethics rooted in a certain sort of masculinity. On the other hand, what Lovibond describes as Murdoch's 'investment in the male subject-position' (p.4) is clearly evident in her fictional narrative strategies and in the creation of male ascetic thinkers, to whom female characters often abase themselves. However, the number of male charlatans and the amount of 'feminine roadkill' (p.5) in her novels can be read as an expression of anger about waste of female potential – an anger that perhaps Murdoch could not easily articulate as an honorary male within the academy. In this respect, Murdoch's relation to what Le Doeuff calls the 'philosophical imaginary', is complicated further by her attitude to religion and to the nature of desire. Lovibond draws on de Beauvoir's *Le Deuxième Sexe* – which Murdoch read enthusiastically in French when it was first published in 1949 – as well as texts by Virginia Woolf, Dale Spender, Sandra Lee Bartky, Deborah Cameron and Gabriele Griffin to illuminate such apparent contradictions. For a woman born in 1919, homage to the male was just part of the ideological climate in which she lived and breathed; for a woman such as Murdoch, who believed intensely in the intellectual freedom of the individual *qua* individual, such a climate clearly produced 'internal discord in her attitude to sexual politics' (p.21) and Lovibond sets out to explore this tension in Murdoch's life and thought.

In the book's second section, Lovibond examines Murdoch's engagement with the philosophy of Simone Weil from the 1950s onwards, drawing out their similarities and differences. This is a useful exercise, given the profound effect that Weil's reflections on the concepts of obedience and attention had on Murdoch's thought. They shared an early dedication to the ideals of Marxism but both later rejected it; as moral philosophers they went their different ways, Weil choosing the path of Christian mystic asceticism while Murdoch opted for a liberal humanism that embraced the supernatural at one remove: 'Good represents the reality of which God is the dream' (*Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, p.496). Yet the influence of Weil's thoughts on attention and 'decreation' resound throughout Murdoch's writing career, not least in the concept of 'unselfing', illustrated in her writing, for example, by the 'kestrel' epiphany in *Henry and Cato* and by the revelation experienced by Stuart Cuno in *The Good Apprentice* when he sees the mouse in the underground station, both of which effect a spiritual change in the observer. Furthermore, in the spirit of Weil's admiration for the worker, Murdoch's 'good' characters are often (relatively) uneducated and unassuming beings. Lovibond rightly points to Weil's emphasis on humiliation, self-annihilation and individual suffering as the path to truth, and to her distrust of collective thought and public action, as powerful influences on Murdoch's ideas concerning virtue. She suggests, moreover, that these aspects of Weil's philosophy perhaps account for Murdoch's deep suspicion of any form of militancy, including the women's liberation movement of the 1960s. While advocating equality for women in the public sphere under the umbrella of justice (she notes, for example, in *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* that 'in advanced free societies women have certain rights, including

that of being priests' p.367), Murdoch seems continually to associate feminists with strangeness or stropiness. This tendency is illustrated by Daisy Barrett in *Nuns and Soldiers* and Lily Boyne in *The Book and the Brotherhood* – and indeed, by the rather odd May Baltram in *The Good Apprentice* who, having grieved over Jesse Baltram's death, is written out/written off by her creator as settling down to 'write her own memoirs and a big book on feminism', just as Jean Cambus is damned (at least in her husband's eyes) by having 'written a book on feminism' in *The Book and the Brotherhood*. While wary of the cliché that the phrase 'consciousness-raising' has become, Lovibond rightly notes that collectively women are sometimes able to identify a 'hermeneutical lacuna' (Susan Brownmiller's term) by probing shared social experience in order to identify an instance of epistemic injustice (Mirander Fricker's term) – as, for example, in the coinage of the term 'sexual harassment', now enshrined in legal vocabulary. The Christian subject-position of patience and quiet suffering, embraced by Weil and admired by Murdoch, does not necessarily work to right social wrongs and is, Lovibond claims, 'incompatible with thinking of oneself as a potential agent of change' (p.41). Indeed, it can lead to both a sentimental portrayal of the uneducated virtuous person, a figure both Weil and Murdoch found seductive, and in an over-investment in the notion of an idealised teacher figure, whether priest or prophet.

There are, however, some less convincing aspects of Lovibond's appraisal of Murdoch in relation to philosophy and gender. She does, for example, seem to assume that the novels should demonstrate the tenets of Murdoch's philosophy. It is one thing to quote Murdoch's words in conversation with Brian Magee that 'the writer's *morality*, displayed in the novel, is a major item' (p.47); quite another to claim that 'the moral orientation of the novels is supposed to be the same as that of Murdoch's moral philosophy' (p.96). Murdoch herself, of course, went to great pains to distinguish between fiction and philosophy and she was right to do so. Novels offer visions or fantasies of the world, notwithstanding the acute observations of social mores and values they may contain; their relationship to the 'real' world is complex and not simply one of mimesis, even in what we call the 'realist' novel. The world of the novel is a different realm from the discourse of philosophy, whatever the interesting conjunctions between them. Nor do the behaviour or values of certain characters bear an easy relation to the author's own world view. However, given Murdoch's brilliance, the fact that her novels offer no intellectually strong women is, on one level, puzzling, and Lovibond sets out to address this in Chapter 3, 'Men, Women and Learning: Case Studies in the fiction of Iris Murdoch'. But a 'case study', a phrase drawn from the disciplines of sociology and psychology, is not the appropriate term here and Lovibond's tendency to slip between the language of disparate disciplines does not help her case. As she points out, sometimes Murdoch as novelist seems to be 'shoulder to shoulder' with de Beauvoir, well aware that one is made, not born, a 'woman' and that society has much to answer for on that front; sometimes, however, her novels seem to invite us 'to share the pleasures of participation in a sexist world-view' and to succumb to 'the lure of misogynist normality, in which women too are implicated' (p.48). We are back with the choice of Murdoch as sympathetic to or symptomatic of/complicit with female subordination. The analyses of eight Murdoch novels that follow (although no rationale is offered as to why these have been chosen and not others) exposes 'their joyless – or at best tepid – response to those long-term social processes through which women's position as the "second sex" is ceasing to be self-evident' (p.48). Not surprisingly, Lovibond finds instance after instance in which Murdoch inhabits the point of view of her male narrator, seeming to collude in her male characters' condescension towards and deprecation of female characters. Men, she notes, often relate to each other in a homoerotic way in Murdoch's novels while women are infantilized (addressed constantly as 'child' or 'kid'). Moreover, while men are affirmed as 'exemplars of the human condition in general' and hence capable of 'the highest degree of moral reflectiveness', little is made of the professional status and intellectual insights of the few academic women in her novels. Focusing on *The Philosopher's Pupil*, Lovibond concludes rather gloomily that

The fundamental gender difference seems to be that male education gives rise to issues of promise, fulfilment, vocation and destiny, whereas female education does not, but is enveloped in an atmosphere of vagueness and neglect. (p.72)

Despite the awfulness of some of Murdoch's male characters, who can be seen as an implied critique of the social imaginary, Lovibond is made deeply uneasy by Murdoch's 'occupancy of the viewpoint of the male disciple' which 'serves to lend respectability to the erotically charged perception of the "master", which if attributed to a female observer would be reduced to the status of *mere* sexual admiration' (p.83). Murdoch, though, wrote what she wrote; to express disappointment in her failure to offer positive role models for women takes us back to the prescriptiveness which dominated 1970s feminist literary criticism. The puzzle as to why she did not give us women characters based on her own success – or that of Philippa Foot or Elizabeth Anscombe or Mary Midgley – is the same puzzle that faces us when we read George Eliot's novels. Eliot embraced an entirely unconventional life for a mid-Victorian woman, living with George Henry Lewes while he was still married; earning her own living as an intellectual and a writer; and, after Lewes' death, marrying a man of forty when she was in her sixties. Her novels, however, are full of clever women who are either unable to use their brains and their talents (Dorothea Brooke, for example, in *Middlemarch*) or who embrace renunciation rather than upset the gender apple cart (Maggie Tulliver in *The Mill on the Floss*). To ask why neither George Eliot nor Iris Murdoch offers us more positive portrayals of contemporary women is to ask the wrong question. They chose to document in their fiction the experience of most women rather than that of the extraordinary woman – and they were both extraordinary. That was their choice. In the end there are two important questions to consider. What do those novels tell us about (a) the society and the individuals they portray and (b) the author's value system and how that relates to a particular historical moment. As George Eliot famously put it, 'there is no creature whose inward being is so strong that it is not greatly determined by what lies outside it'. Such an approach encourages us to deconstruct a novel's world without judging the novelist as somehow lacking in political foresight or levelling accusations of inconsistency across the fiction and the non-fiction, something Lovibond is inclined to do.

In the final chapter, engagingly entitled 'What is she afraid of?', Lovibond probes how far Murdoch's thought may have been 'greatly determined' by certain ideological phenomena and draws several interesting conclusions. First, she agrees with Gabriele Griffin that, in following Weil's train of reasoning, Murdoch elevated selflessness into 'a universal principle of moral conduct' which, for women, 'implies remaining in and perfecting the state of complete other-orientedness they are socialized into anyway' (p.85). This is not a recipe for active feminism; on the contrary, it is one which results in many fictional female characters being associated not only with serenity and repose but with a certain 'beneficent lumpishness' (p.86). (Readers will be quick to point out exceptions to this of course: Dora in *The Bell*, for example, is a likeable character whose growth into confidence and self-knowledge results in her finally leaving her abusive husband and taking up the threads of a career abandoned on marriage.) Secondly, Lovibond sees Murdoch's terse dismissal of 'rubbish like "women's studies"' (p.87) as symptomatic of 'a kind of dismay at the perceived intention of feminism to devalue – and de-eroticize – masculinity, with dire imaginary consequences for the figure of the "thinker", "sage" or "great teacher pure of heart"' (p.88). There is much food for thought here, not least in Lovibond's astute observation that masochism is culturally associated with the female subject position. Thus self-abasement before the (male) 'sage' by the self-deprecating student (whether male or female) includes an element of erotic desire associated with the feminine or the homoerotic. This erotic element might well be exciting for the pupil (certainly the 'specialist ascetics' in Murdoch's fiction are invariably male) and it is one that endlessly complicates the learning scenario. In matters of love, it can be a disaster; Lovibond points out how frequently 'thoughts about "slavery" force themselves upon Murdoch's fictional characters when they fall, or remain unhappily in love' (p.91). One only has to turn to Murdoch's letters to see such a dynamic in action: writing to David Hicks in January 1946 she confides that although she

'can't yet make out how much you are likely to want to dominate me' she would be 'sorry if you didn't want to!'; the following month she writes to Raymond Queneau about 'the question of searching for a 'master' – a dangerous and important problem!'; in letters to Elias Canetti written in the 1960s she addresses him as 'great lion', 'beloved Titan' and signs off 'with homage, love, ever your devoted Iris'. As Lovibond argues, the 'mystique of the "master-thinker"' is likely to be seriously punctured by the intellectual independence and social equality demanded by feminists. This is the reason, perhaps, why second-wave feminists in Murdoch's novels are presented either comically or as destructive influences: they are part of the 1960s erosion of authority which challenged the status of both God and man and which threatened the dissolution of powerful cultural images. Murdoch, in the face of such threat, chose to return nostalgically to the figure of 'genius, saint or 'avatar'' (p.103) and thus shore up the 'vertical' mode of access to philosophical understanding. Logically, then, argues Lovibond, she continued to embrace the idea that the brilliant woman intellectual is exceptional and that the greatest accolade (for either man or woman) is that of being 'chosen' by the master. This continues the cultural obliteration of what Irigaray has termed 'the maternal genealogy' whereby women's contribution to intellectual, social and political history is never adequately recorded and perpetuates 'an unjust epistemic regime' (p.106) – although, again, the resisting reader might point out that Murdoch's admiration of, and engagement with, Weil's work hardly fits this pattern. Lovibond concludes that as 'a chronicler of the spellbound "upward" gaze, whether male or female, Murdoch is unsurpassed' (p.106) and that we can use her work to understand not only 'a "*social* imaginary" in which many of us share to some degree' (p.9) but also the gendered nature of philosophy itself.

There is much to enjoy and plenty to quarrel with in this lively and contentious study of Murdoch's work. The main aim of Lovibond's book is to reveal Murdoch's mental landscape as indicative of a particular cultural and historical moment and to show how understanding that might help us to understand better both the 'gendered' character of philosophy itself and the way we think about men, women and understanding. In this she succeeds admirably.

Review of *Iris Murdoch: Philosopher Meets Novelist*, edited by Sofia de Melo Araújo and Fátima Vieira (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011)

This is an interesting and timely collection of essays that responds to the large number of works on Iris Murdoch that have sought to explain her literature by exploring her philosophy or to explain her philosophy by exploring her literature. The volume is organised into two sections: the first deals with 'Reading Philosophies in Literature' and the second with 'Reading Literature through Philosophy'. The essays cover a selection of Murdoch's fiction and related philosophical issues. However, by comparison with the number of essays included in the volume (ten in the first part and seven in the second) the introduction is brief, where an extended discussion here would have enhanced the volume. Nevertheless, the introduction provides a helpful overview of previous critical publications by those who have similarly explored the relationship between Murdoch's novels and her philosophy, and these writers include A.S. Byatt, Barbara Stevens Heusel, Heather Widdows and Miles Leeson, to name a few. In assessing the arguments of these critics, Sofia de Melo Araújo explains the impetus behind this volume's contribution to the debate. One of the central questions it poses regards the role of ethical philosophy in Murdoch's fiction, which is, ultimately, whether Murdoch's philosophy is translated into literature as a form of moral guidance. The reader is reminded that Murdoch refused to acknowledge that she consciously merged the two disciplines, by quoting Murdoch's claim to 'find really no difficulty in separating these activities' (p.3). The study itself though, seeks to assert a natural interdisciplinarity between literature and other subjects, whilst suggesting Murdoch's two areas of expertise are not as clearly divided as she desired. Yet, surely it is possible that while there is a real philosophical influence apparent in the fiction and, similarly, that the fiction is also pertinent to her philosophical work, it does not necessarily follow that the two strains converge. Murdoch herself, in the quotation cited above, also accepts that she 'mention[s] philosophy sometimes in the novels because I know about it' (p.3). For the two disciplines not to be 'separate' though, there would have to be not only more than a metaphysical exploration of the philosophy in the fiction, but also a blending of academic styles and approaches in a decisive and vigorous fashion. However, the exploration in this introduction of just how far the dialogue between philosophy and literature extends is a valuable one and relevant to the future direction of Murdoch studies, which frequently focuses on links between Murdoch as both novelist and philosopher, rather than simply as a writer of fiction.

As the title and the introduction of this book imply equal weight to both philosophy and literature, confronting the question of how far Murdoch's fiction can be read exclusively as philosophical tract, and conversely if any of the fiction can be read as uninfluenced by the philosophy, would have been welcome. It would have also been useful to have included a more thorough consideration of at what point a novel alters from being a work of literary artistry and becomes, rather, a philosophical novel, although there is a helpful discussion of the 'Ethical Turn' (so named by Martha Nussbaum) in literature and some of the issues surrounding this movement within literature (p.1).

The first part of the volume, which puts the emphasis on philosophy, includes essays on many of the philosophers one would expect to see paired with Murdoch, such as Simone de Beauvoir, Simone Weil and Jean Paul Sartre, and provides not only a useful introduction to Murdochian themes for new scholars but also an interesting new perspective on traditional avenues of critical exploration which are posited alongside rather more surprising pairings. Frances White's consideration of literature and the Holocaust is not thematically unusual for anyone familiar with Murdoch's philosophy but her approach is simultaneously brave, thorough and necessary, because it can be difficult (as White acknowledges in light

of Adorno's oft quoted – and often not fully understood – assertion that 'to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric' [quoted on p.101, translation mine]), for the critic to engage with this topic. Murdoch clearly thought deeply about the effects of the Second World War and Hitler's regime, and how to express the inevitable trauma of the Holocaust. She had first-hand experience of witnessing some of these effects as a relief worker in Austria and Belgium for UNRRA and knew many Jewish *émigrés*. Although Murdoch often references the Holocaust and its impact, she does not use it as an overt focus for her fiction, yet White seeks 'to make a claim for Murdoch's novels, and in particular, *The Message to the Planet*, as Post-Holocaust texts' (p.99). Such a claim is welcome amongst Murdoch scholars who, like myself, are keen to see the wide-ranging historically detailed seriousness of Murdoch's literary vision recognised more widely.

Anne Rowe and Pamela Osborn's continuation of previous assessments of the relationship between Murdoch's work and that of Simone Weil, which draws upon '[f]resh primary sources acquired by the Centre for Iris Murdoch Studies since 2004' (p.103), provides an insight into the usefulness of the copies of Weil's books that Murdoch owned and had annotated by hand in margins and on end pages. Not only does this chapter serve to reconsider the way that Murdoch interpreted Weil's writings and how they informed her own thinking, but also demonstrates to research students how newly discovered primary sources can reshape Murdochian debate, as well as the continual development of the field of study on which the book focuses. Sofia de Melo Araújo's chapter, 'Iris Murdoch: An Existentialist In Spite of Herself?' explores one of the central concerns of the collection and provides some of the necessary detail that the introduction lacks. As this question is one of the focal points of the collection as I read it, and certainly one of the questions Murdoch critics frequently grapple with, I would have liked to see this chapter placed either first or last in the initial section to help qualify and expand upon some of the points in the introduction.

Some of the more unusual comparisons in the first section will no doubt be of particular worth though to those interested in this area of study and George Eliot is here classed by Marialuisa Bignami as a 'thinker' rather than as a novelist, which is not only a fresh approach but also serves to place Murdoch in the Victorian tradition she valued so highly – Murdoch stated in an interview with Sheila Hale (1976), that Eliot did not 'touch her heart terribly although one must admire her. She was *driven* to develop an intellectual vision' (Interview in Dooley, 2003: p. 31). A Sufi reading of *The Good Apprentice* by Zeynep Yilmaz Kurt provides another intriguing angle on an author who was by her own admission fascinated by a wide variety of world religions, languages and cultures.

The second part of this volume is disappointingly short, but only because 'Reading Literature through Philosophy' promises to be just as interesting as the first part. The selection of novels in this section is also regrettably narrow, and of the seven chapters, three are concerned with *The Bell* and four with *The Black Prince*. Analyses of a wider variety of Murdoch's fiction that represented her lengthy and varied career would have been preferable here and such variety would have better met the questions the volume poses in its introduction in respect of Murdoch's entire literary output, rather than in relation to just two novels. However, the individual essays do make a number of valid points, but the thematic concerns are much broader, and therefore in some cases more generalised, unlike the first group of essays where each one identifies a specific angle to explore. However, Ignasi Lloberra and Margarita Mauri's chapters each contain discussions of the sermons in *The Bell* which are particularly intriguing and worthy of note.

This collection makes some valuable contributions to the field of Murdoch criticism. As a literary critic rather than a philosopher I can best assess the benefit to literary academics and students, and there is much in this volume to commend it to both, although there are some areas that that could be productively enlarged should the volume be reprinted. Along with a more detailed introduction and some structural amendments, which I have already noted, as there are such a large number of essays an Afterword would enhance the collection, providing an assessment of the ideas, why the essays have been positioned as they have, and how, in retrospect, they are evaluated by the editors. This addition to an already useful and interesting collection would be of particular help to undergraduates, and those new to the work of Iris Murdoch as both novelist and philosopher.

## Report on the Iris Murdoch Collections in Kingston University Archives and Special Collections 2012 - 2013

Since the last archive report in 2011, the Murdoch Archives have been increasingly busy. A great deal of work has gone into the Community Project on the letters from Iris Murdoch to Philippa Foot, which was supported by the National Lottery through the Heritage Lottery Fund. This collection of around 250 letters from Murdoch to her lifelong friend and fellow philosopher have been fully catalogued and transcribed by a team of dedicated transcribers, many of whom have continued to transcribe other letters from Murdoch that we hold here in the Murdoch Archives. The letters have also been seen by local community groups during visits to the Archive, as well visitors to Kingston Museum during the recent exhibition there. For more on the letters and the project please see Frances White's article in this issue. Since their acquisition, the Philippa Foot letters have been viewed by 16 groups and 107 individual researchers.

Other acquisitions comprise:

- DVD and playscript of *A Severed Head*, donated by Anne Rowe
- Past copies of the 'Iris Murdoch Newsletter of Japan' – future editions of this publication will be added to the Collections by the Iris Murdoch Society of Japan
- Letters from Iris Murdoch to Mary McIntosh, who was a student of Iris Murdoch's at St Anne's. Their correspondence comprises of 15 letters from 1955-1958. Kindly donated by Mary McIntosh
- A copy of *Leninism* by Josef Stalin inscribed by Iris Murdoch, purchased by the Centre for Iris Murdoch Studies.
- Three framed drawings of Crete by Harry Weinberger. One was previously owned by Iris Murdoch, who mentions it in a letter to Harry Weinberger held in Kingston's Collection. Purchased by the Centre for Iris Murdoch Studies.
- Copy of *The One Alone* and CD audio book of *The Message to the Planet*, kindly donated by Michelle Austin.
- Poster for *The Black Prince* at the Aldwych Theatre 1989, kindly donated by Pamela Osborn.
- Handwritten draft of the poem 'The Unpruned Pear Tree' by Iris Murdoch, with an accompanying letter from Iris Murdoch to Tina May, purchased by the Centre for Iris Murdoch Studies.
- Letter from John Bayley to Dr Babb regarding his and Murdoch's views on John Cowper Powys kindly donated by Josie Mitchell.
- Cassette recording of Iris Murdoch and John Bayley speaking at the Powys Society Conference 1992, kindly donated by Professor Charles Lock.
- Cards and letters from Iris Murdoch to publisher Carmen Callil, dating from the 1980s onwards. Purchased by the Centre for Iris Murdoch Studies.
- Peter J. Conradi's research on Frank Thompson, acquired for his recent biography of *A Very English Hero: The Life of Frank Thompson*. Includes documents and books. Kindly donated by Peter J. Conradi.
- Two novels by John Bayley: *The Queer Captain* and *George's Lair*, kindly donated by Michelle Austin.
- Theatre programmes for the plays *A Severed Head* and *The Italian Girl*, kindly donated by Pamela Osborn.

- Transcript of an interview with Iris Murdoch by Peter J. Conradi from the autumn of 1983, kindly donated by Peter J. Conradi.
- Copy of *Under the Net* with a handwritten dedication from Iris Murdoch kindly donated by Ludmilla Pineiro.
- Approximately 300 letters from Iris Murdoch to Rachel Fenner, dating from 1964 to 1993. Fenner was one of Murdoch's students at the Royal College of Art with whom she maintained correspondence. Purchased by the Centre for Iris Murdoch Studies with the assistance of the Friends of the National Libraries
- A copy of *Man, Morals and Society* by J.C. Flugel owned by Iris Murdoch, kindly donated by Priscilla Martin and copies of letters from Iris Murdoch to Marjorie Bolton, kindly donated by Priscilla Martin.
- A copy of Iris Murdoch's own playscript adaptation of *The Sea, The Sea* and a further adaptation by the Theatre Director Bill Alexander. Both copies kindly donated by Bill Alexander.
- Letters and poems from Iris Murdoch to William Robson. Robson and Murdoch were engaged for a short period of time. Purchased by the Centre for Iris Murdoch Studies with the assistance of the Friends of the National Libraries.
- Iris Murdoch's own copy of *The Lover's Manual of Ovid* by E. Phillips Barker, signed 'Iris Murdoch. Oxford. Jan. 1942', kindly donated by Anne Rowe.

Our thanks are extended to all donors and supporters.

The Iris Murdoch Archives are continuing to attract researchers from all around the world. Since August 2011 we have had 417 visitors and 21 group visits, during which we have issued 1320 items from the Collections. A small exhibition staged by the Archive for the Sixth International Iris Murdoch Conference in September 2012, featuring the letters from Iris Murdoch to Philippa Foot and Harry Weinberger, was viewed by around 70 people.

The address of our online archives catalogue has changed to **<http://adlib.kingston.ac.uk>**. Please remember that our book collections (including the Iris Murdoch Oxford Library and Iris Murdoch London Library) are catalogued onto the University's library catalogue at **<http://icat.kingston.ac.uk>**. To narrow your search to items in the libraries, on the main search screen type in your search term, change the drop down to library catalogue, and click search. The results screen then displays items from the entirety of the Library catalogue. On the results screen you can then look down the left hand side for the heading 'LRC Collection', and then under this for either 'Iris Murdoch Oxford Library' or 'Iris Murdoch London Library'. Clicking on either of these will then narrow your search to the books in those Collections. You can also try searching IML to bring up books in her Oxford Library or MLL\* for those in her London library.

We have now launched a blog which can be found at **<http://blogs.kingston.ac.uk/asc>**. Do please check back regularly as we continuously update the blog with information about our Collections, behind the scenes information about the Archive, as well as news about exhibitions, events and Archives closures.

The Archive is open to all researchers. Due to the increase in the number of researchers and group visits it is now more important than ever that you give us prior notice of any research visits, with a minimum of 24 hours notice. The longer in advance you make your appointment, the more likely it is you'll be able to come in on the day and time you wish. Please email **[archives@kingston.ac.uk](mailto:archives@kingston.ac.uk)** to make appointments or to ask any questions you may have about the Collections. The Collections are constantly being enlarged, and the Centre for Iris Murdoch Studies and the Archives and Special Collections welcome information regarding any items of potential interest.

## Recent Acquisitions

### Letters to Rachel Fenner; Poems and Letters to Wallace Robson

Two significant collections have been acquired for the Murdoch Archives already this year, each with the help of a donation from the Friends of the National Libraries. The Centre for Iris Murdoch Studies owes its gratitude to the FNL for contributions towards the purchase of a number of our most prized acquisitions. The Rachel Fenner collection comprises around 300 letters, together with 85 postcards and other notes from Iris Murdoch, written between 1964 and 1993. Fenner was a student at the Royal College of Art in the 1960s where she met Iris Murdoch who taught philosophy to art students there between 1964 and 1968. She is now a highly respected environmental sculptress and public artist. At the RCA she wrote her dissertation on 'The Imagination as Moral Tool' under Murdoch's supervision and the two women became close friends. Rachel Fenner took Murdoch in her car to research the cityscape setting of *Bruno's Dream* (1969), which is bounded symbolically by Brompton Road Cemetery and the Lots Road power station. Fenner admits to being 'obsessed' with Murdoch, and their friendship remained close until the 1970s, when Murdoch encouraged her to marry. When the birth of Fenner's two sons increasingly occupied her time, the two women saw less of each other, but the relationship later revived and they remained in contact by letter, with occasional meetings, until the 1990s (see Conradi, *Iris Murdoch: A Life*, p. 474, p.481& p. 522).

The letters add significant biographical and psychological detail to currently available profiles of Murdoch because they record the working of her moral philosophy in real-life situations rather than in the fictional lives of her characters: 'Of course much is flux, perhaps most is flux – but there is the other small thing and by this and in this one lives. I think almost involuntarily (it's very hard really to believe that certain aspects of love in one's life are meaningless and worthless)', she wrote to Fenner. The letters are at times deeply moving as they catalogue Murdoch's counselling of Fenner through her career, the birth of her children, the split within her marriage and the emotional and professional problems she experienced thereafter: 'We are born to sorrow', she writes, 'and you are not the only one in whom things "do not fit". I suspect this is a general human condition [...] we are hopelessly muddled imperfect animals'. The letters reveal much, not only about Murdoch's unfailing care and concern for others, but also about her own moral and intellectual struggles, her preferences and opinions on art, and her views on many of the social and cultural issues that defined the decades during which the women corresponded.

Murdoch is rarely as unguarded and candid in her letters as she is to Fenner. Her tendency to address her as 'dear child' suggests a deep maternal fondness and indicates a complex relationship that not only embodies an artistic like-mindedness but also triggers almost girlish longings and a sense of fun that distinguishes these letters sharply from others in the Murdoch Archives. In one letter she tells Fenner that she has bought a mini-skirt; in another in 1968 she admits to being in love with a pop singer with whom she was having breakfast; later she confides, 'I had my hand kissed by Ralph Richardson (also [a] flirtation with Yehudi Menuhin. My musical friends say he is no good at the fiddle, but he has such a beautiful face)'.

The nine undated letters and eleven poems that comprise the Wallace Robson collection were written between March 1952 and March 1954. They are likely to be what remains of a larger collection, as Conradi's biography suggests Murdoch and Robson met in 1950 when he was English Fellow at Lincoln College Oxford. Their relationship culminated in a semi-formal engagement, which was volatile and confusing for Murdoch. Conradi notes that 'she constantly quarrelled with Robson', and quotes a letter to another friend suggesting 'perhaps something too much of violence here on both sides' (Conradi,

p. 311). Murdoch seems to have vacillated in these years between an assurance that Robson was right for her and an equal assurance that he was not. However, these letters and poems paint a less tortured, better-humoured and witty stage in their relationship. Many of the nine poems are unaccomplished (Murdoch was well aware of her limitations as a poet) and comically play to these limitations rather than her poetic aspirations. Yet the concomitant lack of gravity does not negate seriousness of meaning: 'Nervous & beady in the back cage, / (Words are described as winged), / Their crooked feet are ringed, / Tense for flight is their plumage, / And high for the storm their courage. ...They are braver than I...'. The tortuous lines tail off into wistful self-knowledge.

The nine letters were mostly written on trains, possibly from London to St Anne's, where Murdoch was teaching during these years, and suggest a more idealistic and romantic Murdoch than any other letters held in our current collections. She also displays a more playful side to her character: 'I am going to lunch with a Luxembourggeoisie [...] who will want to talk philosophy. How awful. Oh darling, I just can't work this afternoon – isn't it awful? I just want to sit by the fire and read Woman's Own. If only I were either a lot cleverer or less clever I'd get on better'. At heart these are the letters of a young woman happy and in love: 'how very sorry I am to have missed your 'phone call and the lovely gladioli'; 'It was very nice to hear your voice this morning'; 'bloody well write to me now'; 'I'm missing you extremely, but I feel anxiously happy & serene'; 'I want to do nothing but sit about dreamily'; 'I wonder what you are thinking & feeling today?'; 'I love you terribly, I can't think why'. These funny, moving and startlingly refreshing letters include one that runs for six pages, cataloguing the random minutiae that young, idealistic lovers share only with each other. They provide an enchanting glimpse of the ideal romance for which Murdoch yearned, but knew she could not achieve with Robson. This early, serious relationship that generated complex and contradictory passions was one through which Murdoch learned, perhaps, not only of her own inability to conform to the conventional female stereotype, but also that romantic idealism and complex passionate and sexually powerful men were mutually exclusive: 'I can see no hope in your sex branded eyes' she writes to Robson in her poem 'Tu es mon mal'.

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**Pamela Osborn**

Report on 'Portraits of Writers: Bidisha on Iris Murdoch'  
at the National Portrait Gallery, 12 December 2012

Against a background of pictures of Iris Murdoch, including Tom Phillips's 1997 portrait, the author, critic and broadcaster Bidisha spoke at length about her personal relationship with Murdoch's novels. Topics ranged from Murdoch's ability to transform our understanding of ancient texts, such as *Hamlet* and 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight', to the notes of darkness, sobriety and self-questioning which she identified in Murdoch's later novels. These later novels, Bidisha argued, were misinterpreted by critics and are in fact pacy, witty and wholly absorbing. She praised the Iris Murdoch Archive at Kingston University for its range and volume of material and suggested that the dearth of novels in Murdoch's personal library, which forms part of the archive collections, reveals that she thought of herself as a novelist who was more inspired by philosophy than literature. Murdoch's own philosophy was identified as essentially an interpretation of Plato. Also discussed was Murdoch's construction of male and female characters, the latter of which Bidisha claimed are weaker and less distinctive than the former. Questions asked by the audience included queries about Bidisha's interpretation of *The Black Prince* as a non-allegorical novel and Murdoch's treatment of female characters. She concluded her talk by suggesting that Murdoch entertained and educated, thrilled and inspired with her novels, activating the minds of readers who go on to become ambassadors for her work.

Report on Heritage Lottery Funded Community Project:  
'Iris Murdoch and Philippa Foot: an Arc of Friendship'

This exciting and innovative project, supported by the National Lottery through the Heritage Lottery Fund, was run by the Centre for Iris Murdoch Studies at Kingston University between May 2012-July 2013, and its success exceeded all expectations. The team leading the project were Anne Rowe (Project Co-ordinator), Frances White (Project Officer) and Katie Giles (Archivist). The project centred around 250 letters from Iris Murdoch to her lifelong friend, the philosopher Philippa Foot, dating from the 1940s to the 1990s. The letters were acquired by the Centre for Iris Murdoch Studies with the help of the Heritage Lottery Fund in March 2012. The wealth of personal and historical importance, as well as immense intellectual interest of these letters, provided an opportunity to extend the significance of the Murdoch archives beyond academic research to the wider public.

Members of local reading groups and school students who took on the novel task of transcribing the letters commented: 'I'd never done anything like this before, and for me it was a great thrill to handle and read Iris's original letters because they are a voice from another era' (mature transcriber); 'I think it is beneficial for people my age to have this experience and get a taste for research in the future' (young transcriber). Local community groups (Mind in Kingston, Age Concern, Kingston, Kingston Carers and Adults with Learning Disabilities, Kingston) and Sixth Form students from local schools all enjoyed visiting the archive to see the original documents and participating in workshops, discussion groups and visits to London to 5, Seaforth Place, St James's Park, HM Treasury and the National Gallery. The following comments from a variety of the groups sum up the success of the project more accurately than any commentary:

'I feel I have been following in Iris Murdoch's footsteps'; 'The project has greatly enhanced my life by visiting places I had not been to or heard of before, & learning all about the history & lives of the two individuals. It was also nice [...] to feel valued as an individual, and have the chance to take part in the project & share a part of our British Heritage'; 'Merely taking part in the project was a first for me and I felt privileged to be given the opportunity. To have a glimpse into the academic world, of which I have no experience, was quite exciting'; 'Yesterday was the first time any of them went into a university. That alone is a positive experience and the way a complicated subject matter was made accessible and meaningful is a real triumph' (Adults with Learning Disabilities, Kingston). 'It was like nothing I have ever done before. The most interesting thing for me was looking at the original letters – it was amazing that they were in such good condition yet we were allowed to handle them!' (Year 12 Students from Surbiton High School and The Tiffin Girls' School).

The project culminated in an Exhibition of the letters and the project work by the community groups, 'Iris Murdoch and Philippa Foot: an Arc of Friendship', at Kingston Museum Gallery, 3rd - 25th May 2013, which included events open to the public: a Performance Story-telling session, 'Darling Pip ... Love Iris', by Belinda McKenna; 'The Guises of Love: The Friendship between Iris Murdoch and Philippa Foot', a talk by Peter J. Conradi, and 'A World of Thought and Feeling: Letters from Iris Murdoch to Philippa Foot', a talk by Anne Rowe and Avril Horner. We gave this project, which is at the vanguard of contemporary archival practice in its engagement with people beyond the university, the title 'An Arc of Friendship', as an image of the way that the friendship between Iris Murdoch and Philippa Foot arched across time (60 years) and space (the UK to the USA). But as the project has progressed it has arched across age-ranges and across social and ability groups, and more than one participant has commented that it has been an arc of friendship for us too – arching between the university and the community, between different local groups, and between individuals who have developed friendships through the project.

## Report on the Sixth International Conference on Iris Murdoch at Kingston University, 2012: ‘Baggy Monsters’: The Late Works of Iris Murdoch’

The Conference ran from 14 to 15 September 2012 and began the evening before at the nearby Kingston Library with an illustrated talk by Dr Anne Rowe, celebrating the gift to the Iris Murdoch Archives of 400 letters from Iris Murdoch to the painter Harry Weinberger. The following day, Professor Charles Lock’s opening plenary, ‘‘Baggy Monsters’: John Cowper Powys and the novels of Iris Murdoch’ considered the influence which Cowper Powys may have had on Iris Murdoch, and also provided a few short anecdotes of his meetings with her. The subsequent panel sessions considered Murdoch and ‘Contemporaneous Female Philosophers’; her ‘Neo-theology’; ‘Memory, Trauma & Loss’ and ‘Animals in Murdoch’s Late Fiction’. The second plenary, Anne Chisholm’s ‘‘Essential You’: Reflections on the friendship between Iris Murdoch and Philippa Foot’, defended Murdoch against the media, that had, two weeks previously, published salacious articles relating to the friendship between Murdoch and Philippa Foot. The following panels considered ‘Chaos and Comedy in Murdoch’s Late Fiction’; ‘The Concept of Attention in Murdoch’s Philosophy’; ‘Theatre and Myth in *The Green Knight*’ and ‘Politics, Religion and Public Morality in Murdoch’s Philosophy’. After these discussions came panels on ‘Re-Reading *The Black Prince*’; ‘Agents of Power and Morality’ and ‘Metaphysics and the Ordinary’. A ‘Seminar on *Jackson’s Dilemma*’, and a Teaching Panel completed the available choices for the afternoon and offered the opportunity for delegates to participate in a close reading of one of Murdoch’s novels or for those who teach Murdoch on their courses, to discuss various methods of teaching her work. The latter panel linked with Kingston University’s ‘Iris Murdoch Special Study’, lead by Dr Anne Rowe, and some of the creative work submitted for assessment by students who had recently completed this module in 2011-12 was on display at the conference.

The second day began with Sabina Lovibond’s plenary lecture, ‘Baggy Monsters Digest the 1980s: the Realism of the Later Iris Murdoch’, which considered the way in which Murdoch’s late fiction connects her to The Golden Age of the Novel. Lovibond’s plenary was followed by panel sessions on ‘Wittgenstein, Schopenhauer and Phenomenology’; ‘Pupils and Apprentices in Murdoch’s Mature Fiction’; ‘The Virtues: Humility, Courage and Love in Murdoch’s Philosophy’; ‘Oblique Approaches to the Work of Iris Murdoch’ and ‘Before the Baggy Monsters: Rethinking Murdoch’s Early Novels’. The conference concluded with Philip Hensher’s informative and entertaining discussion of ‘Iris Murdoch and Other 1980s Novelists’, which considered the influence of Murdoch on Hensher’s own fiction in terms of her focus on the magus figure and, Hensher argued, her connection to the stylistic experimentations in 1980s.

The flawless organisation of the conference was a credit to the organisers and Kingston University. The plenary lectures and the number and variety of panels showcased the growing academic interest in Murdoch’s moral, philosophical and literary work. This short summary does not do justice to wealth of information and the celebration of Murdoch’s work provided by the conference. The late ‘baggy monsters’, which were the larger focus of this conference, were rejuvenated and their academic relevance renewed.

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## Recent and Forthcoming Events and Books

### Recent Events

Oxford Brookes Philosophy in conjunction with the British Society for the Philosophy of Religion: Public Lecture, 'Action and Contemplation in Plato and Iris Murdoch', Professor Timothy Chappell (Open University), 28 November 2012

Forum for European Philosophy Dialogue, London School of Economics. A debate 'On Iris Murdoch', Sabina Lovibond and Timothy Chappell, 28 January 2013

North London U3A, 'Iris Murdoch and Zen Buddhism', Anne Bancroft, 11 March 2013

University of Cambridge Institute of Continuing Education, Iris Murdoch Study Weekend, 3-5 May 2013

### Forthcoming Events

The Seventh International Iris Murdoch Conference: 'Archives and Afterlife', Kingston University, 13-14 September 2014. Plenary Speakers will include Professor Timothy Chappell (Open University). The first call for papers can be found at the end of the *Review*.

The First International Conference on Iris Murdoch to be held in Rome will take place on 21-22 February 2014 at Roma Tre University. The First call for papers can be found at the end of the *Review*.

Iris Murdoch and Harry Weinberger: 'Novelist meets Painter', An Exhibition of Letters and Paintings, will take place at Kingston Museum, 5 – 25 September 2014

### Recent & Forthcoming Books

In May 2013 Professor Yozo Muroya published a comparative study of Iris Murdoch and Kenji Miyazawa, a Japanese poet. The book contains other articles that have appeared in the *News Letter* of the Iris Murdoch Society of Japan. It also contains letters from Iris Murdoch and John Bayley to Professor Muroya. A copy of the book has been kindly donated to the Murdoch Archives.

*Remembering Iris Murdoch: Letters and Interviews* by Jeffrey Meyers (Palgrave Pivot, May 2013)

*Language Lost and Found: On Iris Murdoch and the Limits of Philosophical Discourse* by Niklas Forsberg (Bloomsbury Academic, September 2013)

*Mystical Philosophy: Transcendence and Immanence in the Works of Virginia Woolf and Iris Murdoch* by Donna Lazenby (I. B. Tauris, October 2013)

*Iris Murdoch and Elias Canetti: Intellectual Allies* (Legenda Studies in Comparative Literature) by Elaine Morley (Maney Publishing, December 2013)

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## Notes on Contributors

**Anne Rowe** is Lead Editor of the *Iris Murdoch Review*, Director of the Centre for Iris Murdoch Studies and Reader in English Literature at Kingston University. She has published widely on Iris Murdoch and is currently working on a monograph on Murdoch for the Writers and their Work series, to be published by Northcote House in 2014. She is also co-editing, with Avril Horner, *Living on Paper: Letters from Iris Murdoch 1934-1995*, which will be published by Chatto & Windus in 2015.

**Frances White** is Assistant Director of the Centre for Iris Murdoch Studies, Kingston University, and Assistant Editor of *The Iris Murdoch Review*. Her book *Becoming Iris Murdoch* won the Kingston University Press Short Biography Competition and will be published in 2014. She is currently working on groundbreaking projects and exhibitions that engage people outside the academic arena to engage with the Iris Murdoch Archives.

**Anne Chisholm** is a biographer and critic. Her previous books include lives of Nancy Cunard, Rumer Godden and Frances Partridge and she is currently preparing a new edition of the letters of Dora Carrington. She is Chair of the Royal Society of Literature.

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

**Ian d'Alton**, a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society and author of *Protestant Society and Politics in Cork 1812-1844* (1980), is an historian of Protestant Ireland, concerned with its cultural and religious construction in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. He was a consulting editor of the *Dictionary of Irish Biography* (Royal Irish Academy and Cambridge University Press, 2009) and the author of the entry on Iris Murdoch. His current work is completing a commissioned book on British historiography in the twentieth century.

**Gary Browning** has been Professor of Political Thought at Oxford Brookes since 1997. His publications include *Plato and Hegel: Two Modes of Philosophising About Politics*; *Hegel and the History of Political Philosophy*; *Philosophy, Politics and the Unity of Theory and Practice*; *Lyotard and the End of Grand Narratives*; *Contemporary Social Theory*; and *Dialogues with Contemporary Political Theorists*. He was the founding and General Editor of *Contemporary Political Theory* (2000-2010) and co-editor of *Politics* (1993-1999).

**Jessy Jordon** is Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Mount Saint Mary's University in Emmitsburg, Maryland. He specializes in the thought of Iris Murdoch, value theory, and metaethics. His current research attempts to situate Iris Murdoch's moral philosophy within contemporary metaethical debates over value realism, drawing attention to the distinctive contributions Murdoch has to offer in this domain.

**Stephen Mulhall** teaches philosophy at New College, Oxford. His research interests include philosophy and literature, philosophy and film, Wittgenstein, Nietzsche, Sartre and Heidegger.

**Avril Horner** is Emeritus Professor at Kingston University. Major publications include *Daphne du Maurier: Writing, Identity and the Gothic Imagination* (1998) and *Gothic and the Comic Turn* (2005), both co-authored with Sue Zlosnik; and with Janet Beer, *Edith Wharton: Sex, Satire and the Older Woman* (2011). She co-edited *Iris Murdoch and Morality* (2010) and *Iris Murdoch: Texts and Contexts* (2012) with Anne Rowe and is working on *Living on Paper: The Letters of Iris Murdoch 1934-1995* which will be published by Chatto & Windus in 2015.

**Emma Miller** is a Research Associate at the University of Durham. She has a monograph on Iris Murdoch's rewriting of past narratives of incest and domestic abuse currently in publication with McFarland. She has published in a number of journals and edited collections on the relationship between history and contemporary literature, in terms of the presentation of women and children and the real-life impact of such textual depictions.

**David Robjant** gained his PhD from The University of Wales, Lampeter, for a thesis 'The River as a Guide to Iris Murdoch' and has published substantially on Murdoch's philosophy.

**Scott H. Moore** is Associate Professor of Philosophy and Great Texts at Baylor University, Waco, Texas, USA, and the author of *The Limits of Liberal Democracy: Religion and Politics at the End of Modernity* (2009) and the co-editor of *Finding a Common Thread: Reading the Great Texts from Homer to O'Connor* (2013).

**Pamela Osborn** is a researcher at The Centre for Iris Murdoch Studies and teaches at Kingston University. She recently gained her PhD on bereavement and mourning in Murdoch's novels and has published essays in *Iris Murdoch, Philosopher Meets Novelist* (Cambridge Scholars Press, 2011) (with Anne Rowe) and *Iris Murdoch: Texts and Contexts* (Palgrave, 2012). Her essay "'Robbed of Thy Youth by me:' the Myth of Hyacinth and Apollo in *The Bell*" is forthcoming in *Iris Murdoch Connected*, edited by Mark Luprecht (University of Tennessee Press, 2013).

**Daniel Read** is a part-time MA student at Kingston University, preparing for a dissertation that will consider the psychopath in Iris Murdoch's fiction. Once he has completed his MA, he is keen to undertake a PhD focusing on Iris Murdoch's fiction.

## **IRIS MURDOCH AND VIRTUE ETHICS: PHILOSOPHY AND THE NOVEL**

First International Conference on Iris Murdoch to be held at  
Roma Tre University, Rome (Italy)  
21-22 February 2014

### **CALL FOR ABSTRACTS/PAPERS**

Roma Tre University is pleased to announce the First International Conference on Iris Murdoch in Rome in February 2014. Panels will focus on Murdoch's works of philosophy and fiction. We would be particularly interested in papers informed by: the importance of virtue in Murdoch's thought; the relationship between philosophy and the novels; Murdoch and Realism; Murdoch and Plato; considerations of her work alongside that of other philosophers (such as Levinas, Ricoeur, etc.) or novelists. Other panels will include papers on the relationship between Murdoch's early and late works and will engage in how her work has been renewed by changes in critical approaches. Studies of her contemporary significance in the fields of Theology and English Literature will also be welcome.

Plenary speakers will include Professor Sabina Lovibond, Worcester College, Oxford; Professor Margarita Mauri Alvarez, University of Barcelona and Dr Anne Rowe, Director of the Centre for Iris Murdoch Studies at Kingston University. Roma Tre University plans to publish a volume of the papers given at the conference entitled: *Iris Murdoch and Virtue Ethics: Philosophy and the Novel*.

Abstracts of 500 words are requested by 30 September 2013; responses will be sent by the 15 October 2013. Final drafts of accepted papers for the volume and/or for the conference will be expected by the 15 November 2013. Publication date is January 2014 (copies will be available during the conference). Conference Organizer: Dr Ester Monteleone (Roma Tre University, Philosophical Department). Please send abstracts electronically to **emonteleone@uniroma3.it**

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### **"Archives and Afterlife"**

The Seventh International Conference on Iris Murdoch  
Kingston University, London, UK  
12-13 September 2014

#### **First Call for Papers**

**Celebrating ten years since the opening of the Iris Murdoch Archives and the inauguration of the Centre for Iris Murdoch Studies, the Seventh International Conference on Iris Murdoch will showcase published and on-going research that has been informed by material in our archives. Researchers past and present are invited to illustrate the ways that fresh resources within the Murdoch Archives are illuminating and transforming Murdoch scholarship. Papers on Archival Theory and on the value of small literary archives are particularly welcome. However, panels will not be confined by this focus and all researchers currently working on Murdoch's fiction, philosophy, theology and/or their political and cultural significance are invited to contribute papers to this celebration of Iris Murdoch's life and work.**

Plenary speakers will include Professor Timothy Chappell from the Open University and Anne Rowe and Avril Horner, who will discuss their forthcoming *Living on Paper: Selected Letters from Iris Murdoch 1934-1995*.

The conference will run concurrently with an Exhibition at Kingston Museum: 'Iris Murdoch and Harry Weinberger: Writer Meets Painter' which will run between 5 & 27 September. A selection of material from 'Iris Murdoch and Philippa Foot: An Arc of Friendship', an exhibition that ran at Kingston Museum in May 2013, will also be on display at the University.

The Murdoch Archives will be open for the duration of the conference. A London Walk will be organised for Sunday 14 September.

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

Abstracts of up to 300 words to be sent by 30 April 2014 to: **frances.white@kingston.ac.uk**

