

## Iris Murdoch Blue Plaque Address 26 May 2023

We are here to celebrate Dame Iris Murdoch's many achievements. When asked about literary reputations, Dame Iris remembered that in the 1930s Charles Morgan was thought a literary giant, and Evelyn Waugh a lightweight outsider. Time reversed both judgements: Morgan has vanished without trace, while Waugh's reputation grows phenomenally. Reputation, she implied, was indeed unpredictable.

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

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

Of course, she related art and morality. “Art and morality are, with certain provisos ..., one. Their essence is the same. The essence of both of them is love. Love is the perception of individuals. Love is the extremely difficult realization that something other than oneself is real. Love, and so art and morals, is the discovery of reality” [*Existentialists and Mystics* p. 215]. This is brave, unorthodox adventurous thinking.

The philosopher Justin Broackes, writing a magnum opus about *The Sovereignty of Good* for OUP, points out “quite how life-changing the ideas of *The Sovereignty of Good* have been for many of us ... I remember, as a twenty-three-year-old or so, when a friend asked if there was anything in Philosophy that had really changed my

life, replying: oh, there was one thing that changed my life – to see the possibility of a kind of moral realism: in precisely the way that it was her achievement, I think, to map out. That changed the world.”

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

At her centenary in 2019 the *New Statesman*, perhaps surprisingly, dedicated a very long (3000-word) celebration detailing her achievement. Many – perhaps four or five different, unrelated, compelling reasons – were advanced for finding Murdoch’s work of continuing relevance and importance.

The arguments went that she was a prophetess of Gender fluidity in her life and in her fiction. That her novels draw on philosophy, religion, and literature from numerous traditions. That they are romances that defy the boundaries of class, ethnicity, age, nationality, and legality. (*The Bell* predated the 1967 Sexual Offences Act.) That starting with *Under the Net*, she created six or so innovative and influential male monologues. That she communicates the toxicity of patriarchy, and especially the male inclination to master inner chaos with a desire for power and a resort to violence. In 1944–6 she worked with refugees at UNRRA; she was able to convey the suffering of refugees and immigrants; and finally that in novels such as *A Word Child* she portrayed the long-term damage caused by childhood abuse and neglect.’ She is also unusual among novelists – Woolf is another case – in celebrating London.

To give her the last word, concerning tragi-comedy. In *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* she wrote “Much of the greatest literary art is a tragi-comic, or perhaps we should say sad-comic, condensation, a kind of pathos which is aware of terrible things, and which eschews definition and declared formal purpose. Such pathos is everywhere in Shakespeare.<sup>i</sup> We also see it in the great novels. The novel is the literary form best suited to this sort of free reflection, sad-comic and discursive truth-telling....What it loses in hard-edged formal impact, it gains in its grasp of detail, its freedom from tempo, its ability to be irrelevant, to reflect without haste upon persons and situations and in general pursue what is contingent and incomplete.”<sup>ii</sup> This is also true of her own work.

Prof Peter J. Conradi, FRSL

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<sup>i</sup> See e.g. *Much Ado* Act II sc. ii where Don Pedro addresses Beatrice: “out of question, you were born in a merry hour” and she replies “No sure my Lord, my mother cried; but then there was a star danced, and under that was I born”...Or *King Lear* Act I sc. iv. ”Dost call me fool, boy?” “All thy other titles thou hast given away; that thou wast born with”; or Sir Andrew Aguecheek in *Twelfth Night* Act 2 sc iii “I was adored once, too”.

<sup>ii</sup> p. 93. Cp also *Existentialists and Mystics* p. 456 where, a propos of a sublime absurd, comic or tragic, Murdoch commends *Lear* V iii, and *Henry IV* pt 2, III ii.