Iris Murdoch on love and uglier feelings

In the summer of 1962, Brigid Brophy sent Iris Murdoch a copy of her latest novel, *Flesh*, wrapped up in silver paper. The dedication – "Flash, a navel by Brigid Bardot" (*sic*) – is teasing, and perhaps just a little imperative. Brophy was frustrated by their on-off love affair, and Murdoch increasingly kept her own flesh under wraps. The letters from Murdoch to Brophy included here show a volatile friendship, with discussions ranging from "classical" sadomasochism to classical music. "Modesty Blaise", the eponymous heroine of a cartoon strip in the *Evening Standard*, was a particular favourite, and they would catch up with the latest instalment when Iris was in London. Freedom-fighting Blaise, with her catsuit and kongo-stick, is an unlikely poster girl for the mac-clad novelist-philosopher – but the two have something in common. Even the name, poised between shame and heat, catches something central to the Murdochian ethos. In worlds both cartoonish and real, Murdoch and her characters struggle to define themselves as sexual and moral beings, and fight, in their own way, for the good.

The nature of that "good" changes over the years. Building an air-raid shelter in her back garden, a seventeen-year-old Iris adopts a Platonic-cum-apocalyptic tone – "This isn't real you know – the real things will go on, whether we are blown to pieces or not". Letters from Oxford in the late 1930s look to the "good" of Soviet Russia (as well as to the "nice Oxford reds" she encounters in promoting it). "My job", she writes, "is not to go and dig at Knossos, it is to see that the next generation even hears of Knossos." There is an impatience in these early letters. While one lover was fighting in the Middle East, and another (she imagines) is "decorating the skyline on a camel", she feels "bloody, sitting here writing self-conscious letters". Post-Oxford, Murdoch is conscripted by the Treasury, later a source for scenes of red tape and grey suits in her novels. "Self-conscious" turns to jokingly "self-important". "I can't believe that it's me, writing peremptory letters and telling people over the phone where they get off." Two years in Europe see Murdoch working with "displaced persons" for the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA), meeting Jean-Paul Sartre, visiting Hitler's deserted house at Berchtesgaden, and wondering over the "fantastic frightening irrational world one lives in".

After her return from Europe, most of Murdoch's letters, like her characters, inhabit a cosily circumscribed geography. They are sent, in the main, from Cambridge, Chiswick, and leafy North Oxford. All, as Avril Horner and Anne Rowe, the editors of *Living on Paper: Letters from Iris Murdoch 1934–1995* note, "were written by hand, many with her Montblanc fountain pen. She would spend up to four hours a day on her correspondence, often responding immediately to friends or lovers who were currently in her thoughts". There were lots of friends, and most were also lovers. The result is intense, bewildering and never dull.

School letters show Murdoch as gifted and excited, determined not to show “side”. Her painting is “frightful”. She is “so glad” for others’ success. She hopes “not to bore”, and apologizes for flaunting her Shakespeare. Up at Oxford, the difficulties of being with others gets more complex:

“I find myself quite astonishingly interested in the opposite sex, and capable of being in love with about six men all at once – which gives rise to complications and distresses. And too many people are in love with me just at present – which though pleasing to my vanity, is also liable to be annoying and difficult.”

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Murdoch pulls off some impressive emotional manoeuvres. News that one lover (hitherto “Dearest”, “Sweetheart”) is breaking off their engagement is met with a sangfroid that must have taken a few drafts to pull off: “I am perfectly all right . . . . Thank you for having the guts to write so frankly”. To another boyfriend, she recounts her own campaign trail. “I should tell you that I have parted company with my virginity. This I regard as in every way a very good thing . . . . There have been two men. I don’t think I love either of them – but I like them and I know that no damage has been done.” (Peter Conradi in his biography of Murdoch, 2001, notes that the recipient was not “unreservedly glad” to hear the news. Home on leave and “wildly melancholiac”, he dug up his mother’s flowerbed of irises to exorcise the pain.) Murdoch has her own periods of misery: “can one rely on a hundred aspirins, or is a tube train safer?”, she asks a friend. But as she establishes herself as a philosopher and novelist, the letters of the 1940s and 50s are as often comic as they are tragic, and she manages to see her life as good copy. Her delight in a “pair of Parisian boys” at an UNRRA camp chimes with the peculiarly silent Lusiewicz brothers in *The Flight from the Enchanter* (1956): “I wish I could ‘photograph’ them . . . . They give me the same sort of joy that one gets from watching squirrels or birds at play”. A year spent embroiled with an economist, a historian, and an Oxford philosopher is seen as “a quadrilateral tale that would make rather a good psychological novel”.

Murdoch’s own psychological and philosophical pursuits are handled lightly. “Heidegger and the boys” get a nod, and Conradi is warned “not to overdo the Platonism”. She impersonates Wittgenstein, and admonishes Raymond Queneau for his “disgraceful” neglect of Kierkegaard. “One could if one had time build an interesting theory of humour out of his works . . . . *Translucency*. Aristophanes, Shakespeare, Laurence Sterne – *yes* – and the Marx brothers.” Queries about the philosophical roots of her work are met with the assurance that she writes “humbly in the tradition of nineteenth-century English and Russian novels”. Her central philosophy is that of love. “Love is, perhaps”, she writes in her journal, “the only subject on which I am expert.”

But Murdoch has expertise in other areas, too. She is particularly good on what might be seen as our uglier feelings. Her novels are shot through with moments of cruelty, shame and – as when Dora Greenfield in *The Bell* (1958) encounters "a rather beautiful girl" – the odd pang of envy:

"She was very slim and had a long downcast pale face, long heavy eyelids, and a weight of dark hair which she wore in a drooping bun. Lost tendrils of hair curled in a short straggly fringe upon her high forehead. She turned a little in Dora's direction before she went through the door and smiled. Dora felt an immediate twinge of displeasure.

She realized that she had been assuming that if she had to decorate so uncongenial a scene she would at least be the only beautiful girl upon it."

It's hard to define what is quite so good about this piece of writing. It seems, in its texture, a little like the girl – effortlessly aggravating and aggravatingly effortless. Perhaps it's something about the adjectives. Her "long downcast pale face", "long heavy eyelids", "lost tendrils", "weight of dark hair" and "straggly fringe" suggest something contrary about her appearance. In personal grooming terms, she possesses a sort of Keatsian negative capability – able to be in "uncertainties, Mysteries" and "doubts" about her personal appearance. Or just not to bother. Dora, one suspects, requires a full can of Elnet and control-top pants before she feels presentable. Murdoch writes so well about what it is to experience those twinges of envy and the cognate emotions, vanity and desire, because she knows what it is to feel them. "I am crazily jealous by nature", she admits to her lover George Kreisel.

It is this "twinge of displeasure", this wanting what others have, that drives so much of the structure and form of Murdoch's novels. Elias Canetti's vicious, posthumously published attack on Murdoch as a "kind of all-in-one parasite" contained one piece of wisdom. Murdoch, he writes, "faithfully reproduces" ideas she has "collected" elsewhere. What Canetti missed is Murdoch's absolute recognition of this fact. From the picaresque take on plagiarism in *Under the Net (1954)* to the literary and sexual rivalry of *The Black Prince* (1973), envy and insecurity drive her plots as much as her personal life. We can trace it back to these letters. Time after time, it flickers up to the surface: "you have for me something which is almost a taboo quality"; "Compared to Oxford and to you I feel too weak an instrument for what I want to achieve"; "I confess I am surprised that you altogether dislike my work".

As these phrases suggest, Murdoch's emotional life is carefully calibrated. Pain becomes "displeasure", anger becomes the confession of "surprise". Such detachment is one of the central Murdochian affects, a detachment that makes many of her characters seem almost spectral. The shadowy narrator of *The Philosopher's Pupil (1983)* who hovers over the aged bodies of swimmers at

Ennistone Baths is one such example. The gravity-defying Annette in *The Flight from the Enchanter*, swinging dreamily from a chandelier, is another. The epistolary Murdoch has her own brand of airy detachment, keeping other bodies at bay. “Sex is something very very diffused for me”, she writes; “I am always partly in the past and the future and not here.” “Being incarnate”, she admits, “is a business.” Sometimes her insulation seems metaphorical – she writes of the idea of “seeing” a lover “as through double glazing”. Sometimes it’s literal. “Why not black ski pants?” she asks Brophy, in one memorable suggestion about bedroom garb. “Would provide.”

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The letters are full of such one-liners. There is not a part of this volume that drags, and it gains new energy in its final decades. As a tutor at the Royal College of Art, Murdoch had two intense relationships with her students. Here she veers between big-canvas discussions of William Blake, abortion and the Chinese economy, and unforgettable vignettes of 1960s bohemia. She reflects on a steamy tutorial with a talented young artist. A book of the paintings of Piero della Francesa lay “between us like a drawn sword”.

Just as Piero feels, here, a somewhat redundant accessory, Murdoch’s work as novelist and philosopher can feel slightly sidelined in these letters. This is partly because the pace of her love affairs generates a dominating through-line to them, and partly because Murdoch deprecates her own work. As she writes to Queneau, “I don’t care a hang this evening about anything theoretical. I care so much more about people, indeed I always do”.

The editors read “in excess of 5,000 letters” in making this selection of 750-odd. A number have been seen before, particularly in Conradi’s *A Writer at War: Letters and diaries 1938–46* (2010) – but this is the first publication for many of the letters here. The result is impressive. The editors’ chapter introductions soundly introduce the literary context – and the letters themselves have been selected with conviction and care. The book draws to a close in 1993, with some moving letters which “in retrospect, suggest the progression of Alzheimer’s disease”. Despite unavoidable cuts, one is rarely left gazing into an intriguing ellipsis and wondering what might have filled the gap. That said, a few absences in this volume are odd, and a few elements seem wanting. It includes no letters from Murdoch to John Bayley. While an editorial note explains that some letters to “significant figures” in her life such as A. S. Byatt and Richard Wollheim have not been included because they have been “destroyed or because they were unavailable at the time of writing”, Bayley is not mentioned in the list. It is not clear whether his letters were “unavailable” or were “destroyed”, but it is clear that Murdoch’s husband of forty-three years is significant enough to have merited a name-check here.

There are occasional slips. Some obvious points are stated or misstated, while more potentially interesting details and allusions are left hanging. But the overwhelming sense of this volume is one of richness. As Rowe and Horner note, this is not intended to be an "exhaustive" edition of the letters – and one result of reading it is that it makes one want more, for which one either turns to Conradi's magisterial biography, or re-reads the novels. But this is a fascinating work on its own terms. Letters matter to Murdoch, and reading her in this way reveals something particular. "I can live in letters", Murdoch reassured her friend and lover, the philosopher Philippa Foot, known affectionately as her "sphinx". This is partly because the epistolary form enables her to transform others into what Simone Weil would call the "creatures" of her imagination. I see "the other person as quite separate from his letters", she notes. *Living on Paper* (a brilliant title) captures the oddity of a writer for whom paper was a way of controlling, creating and surviving – but who remained hungry for something more substantial.

For Galen Strawson, Murdoch was always disabled by her self-insulating and self-denying power. "Lost in the vast selfishness of her odd lack of ego", as he puts it in a *Guardian review of A. N. Wilson's Iris Murdoch: As I knew her* (September 6, 2003), she was destined to squash more sensitive creatures, partly because she failed to recognize her own weight. (A cheery letter to a friend about a seaside swim seems oddly resonant here: "I stepped on a sea urchin – (no lasting damage, even I think to the sea urchin)".) Strawson's observation is wonderfully put – and these letters allow us to reflect more on why she might have got so lost in the first place. Her weightlessness, her abstraction, even her stylized emotional life – all these oddities seem to stem from a desire for elsewhere, a desire for figures who are enchantingly beyond her reach. This is not news. But it is newly moving to read, in series, the letters in this volume that touch on that "elsewhere". Murdoch's letters to Queneau and Canetti, and her letters about her former philosophy tutor, Donald MacKinnon, span almost all the years covered by the volume. All were men whom, it seems, Murdoch passionately loved. All, in different ways, refused really to "see" her. A bewildered note tells of her fruitless pursuit of MacKinnon down the side roads of Cambridge. "He looked at me as if I were a ghost", she reflects. Repeated letters are sent to Canetti – stamped addressed envelopes are included, so that he can refuse her without exertion. The desperate prostration of George McCaffrey in *The Philosopher's Pupil*, "sick with apprehension and horrible frightened joy" as he approaches his former tutor, seems painfully close here. Murdoch seemingly accepts her arm's-length affair with Queneau. "This somehow isn't abstract", she reassures herself, and hopes for a brief reply. Such replies, one guesses, were pretty disappointing. Her postscript to one of her particularly passionate runs of letters – "P. S. My surname ends with an H not a K" – tells us something about the level of his engagement.

Murdoch's letters to Queneau are often completed with small drawings, "consoling forms" that ape Queneau's illustrative style. One, from 1949, shows Murdoch in various attention-seeking postures – swinging a football rattle, riding a large

Cupid’s arrow, clutching a volume of Hegel. A cartoon Queneau sits with his back turned. A sign reads “Do Not Disturb”. “I am hoping that you are not cross with me. Have you had enough of me?”, she plaintively asks. “Art is born of humiliation”, W. H. Auden wrote, and these letters show that labour in the making. Like the flayed Marsyas in the Titian painting she most loved, Murdoch the stick-figure hangs in mid-air – diminished, stripped, utterly exposed.

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