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Time has not stood still

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2. TIME HAS NOT STOOD STILL

In the four decades of her writing Iris Murdoch has commanded a large and enthusiastic reading public and her novels have been followed by a host of critical works, some applauding, others hostile. Since the overhasty classification among the Angry Young Men in the 1950s when her first four novels were published, she has eluded an easy label. The early novels were not 'angry' in the sense of social criticism or background although some features connected them with the 'Angry Movement'. They already bore the unmistakable Murdochian hallmark of the quest for the Good, the questioning of evil and power, the intricate web of human relationships in their contingency and the exciting plots with vague symbolism. The 50s also produced the first crop of Murdoch's theoretical articles which continued to appear in various magazines and journals even across the Atlantic in the decades to follow. They show her serious concern with the arts, in particular with the novel, its aims and possibilities, the form and its limitations. For Iris Murdoch good art is pure pleasure, a mode of reflection and a source of learning about the world.[1] However, the process of achieving this is far more complicated than the simple credo sounds.

Iris Murdoch's first novel, *Under the Net*, was preceded by her quarrel with Sartre's existentialism in *Sartre: Romantic Rationalist*. Although profoundly admiring and appreciative of Sartre's work, she does not share his existentialist view of freedom and preoccupation with the self, his rejection of religion and bourgeois morality. In a time of enthusiastic acceptance of the existentialist hero as the centre and his consciousness as the absolute, Murdoch questioned those concepts. She endorses Sartre's recipe for good writing to be a moral concern, but fails to find it in the way he portrays human relationships. At best they are shown as imperfect sympathies and Sartre clearly does not attach much value to them. His despairing romantic rationalism, offering no way out to his solipsistic hero, is for Murdoch a stance to be argued but at the same time a well of dilemmas to be explored in her novels. What Sartre lacks is 'an apprehension of the absurd irreducible uniqueness of people and of their relations with each other'[2] and that is exactly what Iris Murdoch has set out to do.

Sartre understands the contingent nature of the world as essentially adverse to man, the world hostile and dangerous. Murdoch is also a strong believer in contingency, but she refuses to be resigned to the increasing absurdity of the world. Another point of disagreement is Sartre's transparency and lack of mystery. As early as 1950, in an article entitled 'The Existentialist Hero', Murdoch criticised Sartre that '... the worlds in which they [Sartre's characters] live are without magic and without terror ...This fact alone, that there is no mystery, would falsify

their [Sartre's novels] claim to be true pictures of the situation of man.'[3] In claiming this Murdoch paved the road for her own novels where opacity and mystery were to play an increasingly important role. Unlike Sartre's social and political concerns, which are central to his novels, Murdoch's novels are, perhaps surprisingly so, given her early left leanings, little politically committed. In spite of that they fit comfortably in the wave of post-war social realism and her theoretical writing of the period emphasises her allegiance to the tradition of the great realistic novel of the 19th century.

A similar discoursing influence to that of Sartre comes from Freud's work. Iris Murdoch has her reservations about Freud's thought but as a serious student of the human psyche and human relationships she cannot escape the powerful influence of his theories, among others that of the transference of meaning between analyst and analysand as analogous to dialogue in human relationships. Murdoch's novels reflect the obsession of our culture with words and meanings and how they can be communicated. From her first novel to the latest one she has tried to discover how meaning is constructed between the speaker and the listener, both hampered by their presuppositions and wishes. The complex human relationships in her novels depend to a great extent on communication or a lack of it and the seemingly Freudian overtones go beyond Freud's concepts of unconscious sexuality. Psychoanalysis, like existentialism, has made the self its centre and offers self-knowledge as a possibility. Murdoch contrasts these concepts with Good and truth and the opacity of persons.

Iris Murdoch's early and continuing interest as a philosopher in Simone Weil has left its imprint on her fiction as well. She is attracted by some of Weil's thoughts, such as her emphasis on waiting and attention and her view that spiritual progress is won through meditation, which Murdoch finds lacking in contemporary English ethics echoing popular existentialism in its emphasis on act and choice. Whatever her criticism of Simone Weil may be, she admires her passionate search for truth, a goal not alien to Murdoch's own questing mind.

If Iris Murdoch's first four novels of the 50s seem to constitute a phase, as critics usually allege, it is in the sense of setting the scene for her writing rather than bringing one stage to a close. She has not yet earned the name of a 'fabulator', because the stories still stay within the bounds of realism, her symbolism is intelligible and the fantastic and mythological credible. Greatly simplified, *Under the Net* sieves arguments of and with existentialism and ponders the artist's predicament and the impossibility of knowing another human being. *The Flight from the Enchanter* is a study of power, both from the viewpoint of wielding it and being willingly subjected to it, and of the obsessive fantasy life of an individual. It also introduces the displaced foreigner as one of Murdoch's quaint characters. *The Sandcastle*, often criticised for being an ordinary love story, has moral and psychological overtones. *The Bell* deals with entangled human relationships including homosexuality and revenge. These themes keep recurring in Murdoch's

following novels and their underlying ideas and formal implications elucidated in her theoretical articles and philosophical works are becoming part of her canon. From this point of view it would be wrong to regard her early work as a closed chapter.

By the 1960s Iris Murdoch's reputation as a novelist of consequence had been established and in 1961 her ever-since- quoted essay 'Against Dryness' clarified her views on what direction novel writing should take. She sketches the current philosophical and literary scene as devoid of moral vocabulary, a complete picture of man in transcendent reality, complex sense of the human soul and the idea of truth, and she does not accept the reduced image of 'man as a brave naked will surrounded by an easily comprehended empirical world.'[4] She distinguishes two kinds of 20th-century novel, both equally failing to grapple with reality. What she terms the crystalline novel portrays the solitary self-contained individual, while the journalistic novel tells a consoling story amounting to fantasy. She calls for a broader approach encompassing the complexities of the real world, the moral life and the opacity of the individual through new eloquence and discourse.

The eight novels of the 60s, from *A Severed Head* to *Bruno's Dream* came as a surprising departure from the realism of her early work. At one level there was a shift in the social backdrop. The financial frustrations of Jake in *Under the Net* or Nan Muir in *The Sandcastle* reflecting the post-war austerity years gave way to the more affluent world of the swinging 60s. This was also when Murdoch enclosed her middle-class characters into a world of their own although she regards this as a handicap rather than a virtue. She thinks it difficult to give a true sense of society in a novel, because today's society is far too complex and thus the illusion of people living in a complete society that she tries to create is deliberate ('Talking to Iris Murdoch by Ronald Bryden').[5]

At another level the increasing use of myth and symbol seems to be defeating her realism. In the same 1968 interview she explains: 'The supernatural – this is partly an obsession of my own ...in an age such as ours, where the world of religion and God and gods has become completely problematic, there are more psychological forces working loose, as it were, as if they were demons or spirits.'[5] However, she does not view the supernatural in her fiction as experiment, in fact she does not see experiment in the novel as something to be necessarily aimed at and renews her vow to realism whenever challenged on the subject.

Realism can hardly be denied at the roots of her emphasis on sex although this earned her a great deal of detraction. The permissive society of the 60s freed and glorified sex and its side-effects, abortion, adultery and broken marriages, became the problem topics of the day and food for psychoanalysis. Murdoch's novels of the 60s seem to suffer from an overdose of these preoccupations, the characters changing partners with a convenient symmetry (*A Severed Head*) to be almost exaggerated to parody. The inevitable Freudian overtones, incest and myth create the rich motives of this first novel of the decade. The symbolic elements are darker

and more impressive than in the early novels, but they remain just as mysterious and their meaning elusive, the opaque fog of the backdrop suggestive of the Gothic setting to come with *The Unicorn*, *The Italian Girl* and *The Time of the Angels*.

In spite of the abounding fantasy and sudden, unexpected turns in the packed plots of the novels there is clear seriousness of intent on the part of the author. The inner lives of the characters are given prominence, the lives with their dilemmas, obsessions, passions and inexplicable impulses, a far cry from the rational hero transparent to psychoanalysis. The psychological credibility of the characters is another trait of realism that the novels have kept. The family theme of *The Italian Girl* and *The Time of the Angels* emerges from the Oedipal claustrophobic atmosphere into the large web of familial intricate relationships in *The Red and the Green*, Iris Murdoch's one historical novel, which also draws fratricidal parallels with the historical and political background. God and faith and religion are an important part of the context here, while the world without God and faith turns into evil in *The Time of the Angels*. As Murdoch explains elsewhere, she does not consider herself a believer, but the questions of God and Good are central to her moral philosophy and they recur in her fiction, too.

The last two novels of the decade, *The Nice and the Good* and *Bruno's Dream*, escape somewhat from the dark passions of the fog-bound world of the Gothic novels and despite Radeechy's black magic return to a more real world. *Bruno's Dream* opens up a new theme thus far and one to be explored in greater or smaller detail in later novels as well – that of dying. Murdoch mainly looks at dying from the point of view of human relationships and what better communication could do or could have done for the people involved to prevent feelings of guilt and remorse.

Murdoch's talents are versatile and the macabre and the serious does not preclude comedy, which is not limited to the comic subplots that sometimes vaguely echo the main action and are thus reminiscent of Shakespeare's form. Murdoch admitted her interest in Shakespeare early on and in her 1968 interview with Ronald Bryden confessed that she would like to be influenced by Shakespeare, particularly by the way he managed to give his plays a marvellous pattern and keep his characters within it as free and independent persons.

Murdoch's attempts at defining and creating free characters have become an issue never as yet resolved by either the author or her critics. In *No, Not Bloomsbury* Malcolm Bradbury called the chapter on Iris Murdoch's novels 'A House Fit for Free Characters', which are probably the most frequently quoted words from her theoretical article 'The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited' published in the *Yale Review* as early as 1959. Ever since, almost all those critiquing her work would assert that she did not practise what she preached, because her characters were more and more imprisoned in the neat patterns of her novels. It is but a few who give her the benefit of quoting a little further, adding that 'literature must

always represent a battle between real people and images', and admit the implausibility of any writer ever being able to create really free characters. Eventually they have to remain the author's brain-children.

In the 60s Murdoch's novels appeared in quick succession, at an almost regular interval of one book per year, which made critics suspicious: she was too prolific. Suspicious but undaunted, the critics contrived to be just as prolific and the new novels were analysed and reanalysed from various points of view, the effort also resulting in new attempts at classification. In 1965 A.S. Byatt's *Degrees of Freedom,* a comprehensive and weighty analysis of Murdoch's first seven novels, pointed out the seriousness of Murdoch's writing and its moral charge. She describes *Under the Net* as a philosophical novel despite the fact that Murdoch disclaims being a philosophical novelist. Byatt also believes that 'some *idea*, which could be well called philosophical, provides much of the unifying framework for each of Miss Murdoch's novels – from the conceptual net (Wittgenstein) in *Under the Net*, to the Simone Weil suffering in *The Unicorn*, via the conceptual idea of power in *The Flight from the Enchanter* and the religious approach to the philosophical Hegelian totality in *The Bell.*'[6]

In contrast to that some critics, disregarding those aspects and rather concentrating on Murdoch's ever more intricate plots, gave her the label of a writer of romance or the novel of sentiments. Human relationships and feeling indeed were and are what Murdoch writes about, but the sheer scope of the relationships in interplay with a similarly large gamut of other elements of human experience hardly justify this simplistic classification. It seems to disregard the key issues of the novels: the loss of moral referents in modern man and the need for more concepts of love, freedom, evil and good. In the special Iris Murdoch number of *Modern Fiction Studies* in 1969, Linda Kuehl unflatteringly grants Murdoch the creation of 'her own genre, the metaphysical fantasy' and goes on to ask 'whether hers is a talent for serious fiction or merely for sensational effects.'[7] The latter refers to eroticism, supernaturalism and Gothic setting with which Iris Murdoch allegedly seduces the reader.

Kuehl's comprehensively condemning critique of Murdoch's work is more than counterbalanced by Walter Allan in *Tradition and Dream*, where he recognises Murdoch as 'the leading symbolist novelist of the period'.[8] He was not the only one to place the symbolic features of Murdoch's writing in the limelight of critical interest. It was the way Murdoch sets symbolic elements against a realistic background or, conversely, realistic detail against a symbolic background that earned her being grouped with symbolists. However, this turned out to be yet another cul-de-sac because Murdoch's symbolism proves to be difficult to explain and resists conclusive analysis. Moreover, Murdoch herself argues against Modernist symbolism, against what she calls the dry symbol of the crystalline novel, the self-contained, clear kind of symbol that does not depend on outside reference.[9] Her own symbolism is neither a major tool nor an end in itself, but rather

just one of the vehicles to help her show the vast and opaque world which remains so difficult to comprehend. The symbols are vague and elusive, even in the cases where the whole novel is centred on one, the characters relate to them differently, the symbols reaching out for a multiplicity of references outside their scope and outside the scope of the particular novel.

Throughout the 1970s Murdoch remained very much in the limelight of attention offering the reader and the critic another seven novels and food for thought and contention with them. She entered the decade with the *Sovereignty of Good*, a slim volume of philosophy, which also elaborates some of her ideas on novel writing. She clearly states her moral concerns and contests the then current philosophical view that 'there is only outward activity, ergo only outward moral activity, and what we call inward activity is merely the shadow of this cast back into the mind.'[10] Against the concepts of will and self-assertion she pits a moral philosophy in which the concepts of love and the Good can again be made central. She concludes that the Good always lies beyond as something unrepresentable and mysterious and in relation to it she parallels human conduct with the work of the artists striving for perfection. However, she remains sceptical about finding the Good or even defining it properly or making it real. In art she remains committed to realism, though realism of participation: 'The consumer of art has an analogous task to its producer: to be disciplined enough to see as much reality in the work as the artist has succeeded in putting into it, and not to 'use it as magic'.[11] She also addresses the problem of words – words as imperfect tools of communication, rendering human beings opaque to each other.

All of these concepts and preoccupations may be traced in her fiction of the decade, starting with *A Fairly Honourable Defeat* as the first of a quasi series of outsider heroes, misfits by accident, contingency or will, when alienation was the topic of the day. In the vast cast of *An Accidental Man*, Austin – the eponimous accidental man – is not the only misfit. Mitzi, too, has become an outsider to her former world through an accident. Dorina, an outsider by nature, is carried by a series of accidents to her death. Ludwig and Matthew have moral dilemmas to solve, eventually helped to reach final decisions by accidental events. The isolation and alienation of each of the characters, including the seemingly well-adjusted ones, is shown to be the product of the inadequacy of words and consequently fear of misinterpretation. This in turn results in non-interfering, a failure to respond to others in need of attention, each individual wrapped in the impenetrable cocoon of his own self. In *The Black Prince* Bradley is an outsider through his own will, as his moral choice. The striving for perfection which he cannot grasp does not make him immune to the accidental, which brings about his ruin. In the clash of opinions and approaches to writing between him and his friend and fellow writer Arnold Baffin Iris Murdoch mocks the critical views of her own writing and fights some of her own battles.

The moral issues of *The Sacred and Profane Love Machine* which are central to the main story overshadow the minor outsider characters. The true misfit comes back with a vengeance in *A Word Child*, where the moral dilemmas of love and hate, humility and power, self-obsession and attention converge in Hilary at a pitch dangerously close to the breaking point. Accidents and words, unspoken or misinterpreted, govern the relationships and fates of everybody involved. Unlike the accidental man Austin, however, Hilary comes nearer seeing the light when he realises the frailty of the subjective and seems to be in better control of his inner battle between personal responsibility and the accidental. Both points illustrate two moral concepts that Murdoch explains in *The Sovereignty of Good* : that the self cannot be the all-important object that existentialist and behaviourist philosophers make it to appear and, secondly, that the inner battle, too, is a legitimate moral activity productive of progress towards perfection.

A year later, *Henry and Cato*, usually interpreted as a return to Murdoch's artist and saint contrast, juxtaposed two misfits trying to find themselves in the dark flux of their obsessions: Henry – the profane figure – consumed with jealousy and willing to succumb to it; Cato – the saint figure – unable to come to terms with having lost his God and having killed. The minds and motives of the characters are only partly revealed by the narrator, thus preserving the opacity of persons as a characteristic feature of Murdoch's realism.

The quest of Iris Murdoch's characters for the Good and her own call for a new moral philosophy as well as her preoccupations with reality and magic, the truth and illusion and perfection can be directly traced back to Plato. In *The Fire and the Sun. Why Plato Banished the Artist* her allegiance to some of Plato's concepts becomes obvious. She agrees with Plato's view that 'the bad (or mediocre) man is in a state of illusion, ...[which] veils reality. The defeat of illusion requires moral effort.'[12] And that 'we must seek such perfection as may be available to us.'[13] Plato's theory of the Forms 'expresses a certainty that goodness is something indubitably real, unitary, and (somehow) simple, not fully expressed in the sensible world, therefore living elsewhere.'[14] He remains vague on the subject and so do Iris Murdoch's questing heroes.

Where Murdoch is at variance with Plato is the role of art and the artist. In principle Plato is strongly against art and artists, seeing the former as vague, image-ridden illusion and the latter as the worst of all liars. He would like to have the artist 'politely escorted to the border' or, at best, have him produce purely didactic writing. Murdoch argues against Plato's assertions, nevertheless, she concedes that some of his charges are worthy of consideration. She goes on to quote W.H. Auden saying that 'no artist ...can prevent his work being used as magic, for that is what all of us, highbrow and lowbrow alike, secretly want art to be.'[15] Iris Murdoch does not and this is where she is ready to accept Plato's charges against the pseudo-enlightment of art. She makes a parallel between what Plato termed a crisis of 'demythologization' in the traditional city state religion of his

time and the crisis of present-day Christianity, the resulting hiatus in need of being filled. She calls Plato's Demiurge, the rational and good divine being who creates the changing cosmos and the World Soul according to the perfect model of the changeless and eternal Forms, Plato's portrait of the artist. 'The mythical Demiurge creates because active mind must move ... and he is moved by love for the Forms to attempt to imitate them in another medium. Like the mortal artist he fails, both because the other medium cannot (as he is well aware) reproduce the original, and because the material resists his conceptions and his powers. The result is a quite different entity, which is the best possible.'[16] Plato himself, however, condemns the art and the artist for blurring the distinction between the presence and absence of reality.

The notion of blurred distinction between the presence and absence of reality and a gradual retreat into fantasy is explored in the novel to follow, the Booker Prize-winning *The Sea, the Sea.* Charles Arrowby is an outsider by nature, later his fame and the position of a theatre director set him further apart. On his retirement he becomes a recluse by choice and is trapped in a fantasy-myth of his own making. In the 70s critics seem to agree that Murdoch writes the novel of character and, whether as a basis of this classification or as a result of it, the characters of her novels receive most of the critical attention. It is probably justified in view of the fact that the outsider heroes of the 70s novels, particularly if compared with the increasingly wider casts of the novels of the 80s, stand out more conspicuously, virtually calling for attention.

The bone of contention appears to be whether Murdoch is or is not didactic. Her own vocal commitment to moral issues makes her liable to attacks for didacticism, particularly when her own opinion voiced in the conclusion of *The Fire and the Sun* is that 'the artist is a great informant ...and though he may artfully confuse us, on the whole he instructs us.'[17] Comparing Murdoch with Muriel Spark, whom she finds lighter and more frivolous, Patricia Stubbs[18] fully absolves Murdoch from any such charge. She also speaks amiringly of her writing as a 'conscious process, the deliberate discarding of one fictional form after another in a search for the ideal novel, for which she has issued prescriptive formulae.'[19] Lorna Sage is of a similar opinion when she says that Murdoch's 'aesthetic of imperfection is powerfully attractive because it mocks the critical demand for totalities and makes fiction seem a living process.'[20] These views may well serve to counter another accusation directed at Murdoch in the 70s, namely of creating patterns of characters and plots, which falsifies reality by generalisation instead of attending to the particular.

Like many others, and not only during the 70s, A.S. Byatt raised the question of there being too much magic in Murdoch's novels, not quite fitting with her realism of the detail. In particular in *The Sea, the Sea*, as reviewed by Byatt in *Book and Bookmen*, the combination requires changes in mental attitudes. Despite the critical tenor she concedes that 'the shifts and self-consciousness can produce

pleasure in the "made-up" story as well as irritation at breaks in the smooth flow of belief.'[21]

Those critiquing Iris Murdoch generally like to stress that she may be read at several levels, implying, rather arrogantly, that the common reader finds satisfaction in her thrilling plots while the discerning critic can detect subtleties hidden to the less acute eye. This involves critical activities ridiculed in Stephen R.L. Clark's review of *The Book and the Brotherhood* in the TLS: 'Murdoch-fanciers may play the usual games. How many names are hymn- tunes? Where else have we met the Filthy Kitchen, Strangers in the House, the Demon Figure ...' [22] All this inspite of Murdoch's warning against looking for hidden meanings which she may never have intended.

Somewhat more legitimate seems to be the search for Shakespearean resonances resulting from Murdoch's admiration for the achievement of the great playwright. The search, thorough and classified in Richard Todd's study *Iris Murdoch: The Shakespearean Interest* nonetheless proves the links with Shakespeare's plays and characters to be just as elusive as Murdoch's symbolism. A broader view, rather than trying to pinpoint which of her characters echo Shakespeare's heroes, might take us closer to seeing that it is the sheer variety of characters and tolerance of Shakespeare's attitude that provide one of the obvious links. As Murdoch said when interviewed by Bryan Magee for the *Listener*: 'There is a kindly breath of tolerance which comes out of Shakespeare, because he can see so much. He can see how different people are, and what makes them different, and how many different ways there are of thinking about the world.'[23] Later, in another interview with John Haffenden [24] she strictly rejects the idea that her novels might be patterned on or make parallels to Shakespeare's plays.

In his essay 'Iris Murdoch', in fact an essay on *Bruno's Dream*, Frank Kermode concludes that Murdoch's 'taste is somehow a bit high' and that the book is 'disappointing only by the fantastically high standards it contrives to suggest.'[25] Kermode thus embodies other critical voices, namely that Murdoch's work is too cerebral and that her characters inhabit a non-existent, enclosed world of upper middle-class intellectuals.

It may have been the latter alongside Murdoch's professed admiration for the traditional novel, particularly for Tolstoy, that has made her novels progressively longer, affording larger casts and more heterogeneity. Although she does not approach anywhere near Tolstoy's huge canvasses, her novels of the 80s are much more populous with more opportunities for character interplay. There is more detail and more myth. A conscientious student of everything that matters in life and art, she includes it all: the private and the public, the inner and the outer, the form and the meaning. She celebrates love, life and the comical and subverts it by contingency. Unlike the followers of the latest -isms, she believes there is truth and good somewhere to be looked for, even if never found. The impossibility of this creates the tension and the fire of her work.

In *Nuns and Soldiers* she ventures into the world of the attic, the bed-sitter and the pub, explores the French countryside and Polish politics. The relationships span different backgrounds with added dimension and intensity. They abound in private and shared myths, the former being a barrier, the latter a bond. Anne's dream-like vision of Jesus Christ and the burn that would not heal defamiliarise the scene to an unprecedented extent, leaving puzzled the reader and the critic alike. Defamiliarisation is also the note of the setting of *The Philosopher's Pupil*, the fictitious spa town of Ennistone with its mysterious baths. The teacher-pupil relationship of the title is echoed by two more of the kind, each special in its way. The theme is old and may be traced back to Socrates and Plato, but it cannot be denied new topicality in the 1980s. A whole gammut of relationships is displayed in *The Good Apprentice* incorporating all the elements of Murdoch's concerns – myth, mystery, psychoanalysis, Oedipal relations, infidelity, guilt, religion and the quest for the Good – in a riot of feeling, comedy and serious thought. Socrates and Plato come alive in *Acastos: Two Platonic Dialogues*, where they discuss problems of the 20th century in arts and religion in a cleverly conceived ancient form. Politics play a more important role in *The Book and the Brotherhood* than in any other of Murdoch's novels. Political and moral attitudes clash and crush relationships and individuals in the process. The teacher-pupil relationship appears again in this last novel of the decade as well as in *Acastos*.

Perhaps significantly, Arthur Marwick in *Culture in Britain since 1945* never mentions Iris Murdoch in the last part of his overview which he dates from 1977 to 1990 although she does not fail to figure among the prominent writers of the previous two chapters. This shows that by the 80s the novelty if not the popularity of Iris Murdoch had worn out and with the emergence of writers such as Martin Amis, Fay Weldon, Angela Carter and David Lodge the interest of the critic in the work of Iris Murdoch waned as the focus shifted in another direction, mainly towards new experimentalism.

In spite of the general trend several major critical works on Iris Murdoch appeared during the decade, every one of them celebratory. Elizabeth Dipple in *Iris Murdoch: Work for the Spirit* praises and defends her on all fronts. She claims that Murdoch is striving after excellence which Dipple does not otherwise find in contemporary fiction and she stresses Murdoch's detail of the human character, her enormous allusive frame, her clever satire, her attitude to art and the enormous content of her novels. She also upholds Murdoch's realism. 'Hers is a firm and distinct style in the great novelistic tradition, replete with the eccentricity and repeated mannerisms that mark any original stylist.'[26] One of the few critical notes points out that 'it is rather odd for a contemporary novelist who is not a servant to orthodoxy to have as a fundamental part of her style such a presentation of religious attention and love, especially when the main underlying ideas acknowledge contemporary society's loss of the workable religious concept that once united it.'[27]

In the same year, and completely in contrast to Elizabeth Dipple, A. Norman Jeffares in *Anglo-Irish Literature* dismisses Iris Murdoch's novels as 'clever but ultimately superficial' and 'the characters ...hardly worth the energy that must have gone into their creation.'[28] In Richard Todd's opinion (*Iris Murdoch*) 'Iris Murdoch's understanding of what it means to be a contemporary writer is an intensely personal one, and it has been achieved through a profound and articulate understanding of the relationship between art and morality in the context of the historical moment in which she lives. She has given serious and extended thought to the difficulties underlying the whole enterprise of writing fiction in an age and culture which evinces highly ambivalent attitudes towards "greatness" in art and which has become deeply suspicious of the kind of liberal creative impulse which she herself possesses.'[29]

The major critical work of the decade *Iris Murdoch: The Saint and the Artist* by Peter Conradi offers deep insights into the novelist's writing and thought and appears to be the most sympathetic and celebratory as well as the most profound of all the critical comment to date. He ranks Iris Murdoch among mystic novelists, together with Greene, White, Bellow, Spark and Golding, and voices the opinion that the mystic novel, being a more recent development than the existentialist novel, offers deeper critique, while 'the existentialist's is a "natural mode of being of the capitalist era"'.[30] He catalogues her numerous virtues, highlighting the less frequently noticed ones, namely her playfulness and ability to write about happiness. He charges Elizabeth Dipple and Lorna Sage with having only understood 'one half of Murdoch's genius ...Dipple sees only the moral passion and idealism, Sage chiefly the absence of illusion and the moral scepticism. It is the combination of the two that gives Murdoch her brilliant and essentially tolerant double focus.'[31] Conradi also discerns some postmodern elements in Murdoch's work in her playfulness, the comic side to her novels and their open-endedness and concludes that she is wholly of our time.

Malcolm Bradbury in *No, Not Bloomsbury*, in the aforementioned chapter on Iris Murdoch, credits her with being both a very modern and very British novelist and one of the great novelists of our time. Despite what he calls the 'unmistakable Murdochland' or 'Murdochian world' of her numerous novels he admits that 'she exists in a curious, half-magical state of elusiveness.'[32] He agrees with Robert Scholes in that her work is experimental and crosses the boundaries of realism. This seems to be in tune with terms like 'operatic realism' and 'fantasy realism' applied to Murdoch's novels by Conradi and Todd respectively. Bradbury also draws attention to human relationships as an important feature of Murdoch's novels since the 60s, a fact largely overlooked by her other critics.

Regarding current criticism Iris Murdoch finds herself in an anomalous position: she writes from the man's point of view, all her narrators being invariably male, of which some, particularly male critics are suspicious; and she is not fighting the feminist war, which excludes her from among 'women writing'.

Deborah Johnson devoted her book *Iris Murdoch* to as yet unexplored questions of Murdoch's position concerning feminism as reflected in her novels. The study also touches upon her relationship to modernist writing, to 'female Gothic', Freud and her handling of love and sexuality. From her feminist positon Johnson is clearly worried by Murdoch's male narrators, but conveniently manages to trace Murdoch's femaleness in the space between the author and the narrator. She grants Murdoch some preoccupation with the unequal power relationships between men and women and with the miseries of her female characters, their confinement, whether literal or in their minds. However, elsewhere she criticises Murdoch for judging women harshly and qualifies this as Murdoch's split attitude to the treatment of female experience. She concludes that 'Iris Murdoch reveals an in-touchness with some vital feminist issues, and can speak to the feminist need for re-readings of the world, even though she cannot ultimately be claimed as a feminist writer.'[33]

Murdoch states her attitude to today's feminism quite unambiguously in an interview with Jack I. Biles. 'I'm not very much interested in the female predicament. I'm passionately in favour of women's lib, in the general, ordinary, proper sense of women's having equal rights. And, most of all, equal education ...I'm not interested in the "woman's world" or the assertion of a "female viewpoint". This is often rather an artificial idea and can in fact injure the promotion of equal rights. We want to join the human race, not invent a new separation.'[34]

In his book *Iris Murdoch, Muriel Spark and John Fowles, Didactic demons in modern fiction* Richard C. Kane revives the debate on Iris Murdoch's didacticism. He claims that she 'employs techniques that become unabashedly didactic'[35] and demonstrates his view on her treatment of demonic power in some of her characters and the resulting relationship of domination and submission.

Kane's claim seems to be contradicted by Brian Appleyard in 'Tiny Spark', a chapter on Iris Murdoch in *The Pleaures of Peace*, where he points out her 'inclusive vision of character and the role of the author as impersonal and without the moral right to exercise power over or to reduce the stature of her characters.'[36] Contrary to didactic reduction is also the overall inclusiveness that Appleyard values in Murdoch's work which 'permits several layers of reality to exist side by side ...the effect is that we are never quite in the "real" world, though, equally, we never quite cut ourselves off from its existence.' [36] He recognises this treatment of reality, the attention to detail and the inclusion of philosophy, psychology, theology and symbolism as stemming from the author's 'imaginative need to reject the shrunken image of modern man.' [36] In this sense he also justifies the increasing length of Murdoch's later novels. Appleyard regards Murdoch's quarrel with existentialism and her understanding of the role of language and literature as a dissident posture in the context of post-war culture.

Murdoch's latest novel to date, *The Message to the Planet*, is a monumental work which fully justifies Appleyard's praise of Murdoch's 'inclusiveness'. She

carries on her discourse at a high pitch of poignancy and whereas Jack's absurd marriage experiment returns to normal, Marcus' formula to save the Planet fails to materialise. It eludes his grasp and although it must be somewhere at the end of all the striving, the path is endless just like in Murdoch's view moral tasks are endless. Marcus dies, his magic formula undefined, like Murdoch's philosophical concept of the Good as indefinable. The final picture is something like the Jewish Midrash; the telling and retelling of human stories in their endless similarities and variations and the need to listen to them with attention.