

IRIS MURDOCH AND MORALITY

Anne Rowe and Avril Horner, eds.

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Although this new collection of essays develops a synthesis between Murdoch's literature and philosophy as a stand-alone work it needs to be seen in the continuing tradition of publications by The Iris Murdoch Society that are a spin-off from the biannual conferences held at Kingston University, UK. The previous collection, *Iris Murdoch: A Reassessment* (2006)—also edited by Rowe—is a development from a successful conference in much the same way as the collection under consideration is; however, the diverse structure of the earlier volume has been refined (although this is not to say that *Reassessment* does not work well on its own terms) to provide a greater synergy between ideas presented within individual essays.

Iris Murdoch and Morality considers, over its thirteen chapters, three distinct areas of Murdoch's work: morality and the novel, philosophy and literature and her secular theology. Rowe and Horner negotiate the rather difficult task of placing essays to best delineate Murdoch's wide range of thought, and, although by no means exhaustive (how could it be when Murdoch's interests range over several decades and take in a spectrum from Plato to Heidegger, Homer to Dickens) there is ample room for the readers to move on from the essays provided to discover their own interests in Murdoch's work. As the editors state in their introductory essay "her novels do not function as mere illustrations of her moral philosophy but as meditations on, and counterpoints to, the positions she puts forward there [...] her novels therefore offer themselves as a secular alternative 'place' for such moral

reflection” (p. 1) which brings the collection —as they themselves freely admit— into line with the developing trend for ethical discussions of texts and intertextual (and interdisciplinary) evaluations. This is, in my view, no bad thing, as it aligns with the nature of Murdoch’s own work though it does leave the collection open to criticism that it is perpetuating a certain line of ethical analysis that parallels her own work. Other critical approaches are noticeably absent but perhaps this is the nature of Murdochian scholarship at present.

For the uninitiated, this collection may not be the best starting point (there are several introductory works available, not least Rowe’s forthcoming volume for “Writers and their Work”), as it takes for granted a wide, prior engagement with Murdoch’s oeuvre, as well as the vast corpus of secondary criticism available. However there is a close engagement with the ideas presented —and these almost always harmonise between chapters— and this is richly rewarding: what emerges clearly is that it is within Murdoch’s novels that the most nuanced and diverse discussions of her ideas are to be found, where they become fully humanised.

The range of essays presented here makes good the expectations aroused by the general title and demonstrates the lines of enquiry now in full development since the reinvigoration of Murdoch’s work some ten years ago. The book includes both established scholars of international renown (including her biographer and friend Peter Conradi) and new and exciting talent, and this collection very much benefits from the ideas developed from previous works published by Nicol, Grimshaw, Schweiker and others. There is a hermeneutic of continuity that will encourage those unfamiliar with what are considered central secondary texts in Murdoch studies to discover the roots of these honed ideas. Perhaps the most useful strand of discussion that runs through the book concerns the aesthetic consideration of morality and how Murdoch’s characters struggle with moral, indeed ethical, foundations as their ‘everyday’ actions compete with moments of reflection. It is this fictional reworking of Socrates’ statement regarding the unexamined life that is at the heart of both Murdoch’s fiction and the essays developed in this collection.

Naturally, the approaches are diverse but complementary. The first essay by Nicol has Murdoch’s work at its centre but moves outward to encompass her contemporary B.S. Johnson and postmodern fiction writers. He claims —a development from his previous work, or at least a more explicit and concise statement of it— that Murdoch is further away than she thinks from those she admires of generations previous to hers. In re-reading *The Philosopher’s Pupil* (1983) and *Bruno’s Dream* (1969), amongst others, Nicol claims we may see a gradual encroachment of the ‘postmodern’ onto her work and a greater flexibility with regard to writing and metafiction. Conradi urges us to review Murdoch’s humour (an area little-studied or drawn on) and he presents both her tragedy and comedy, seen over a wide

variety of novels, as focusing us back toward the messiness (or ‘thingyness’ as she would have it). Morality then can and should be developed through humour and we are warned of the dangers of false seriousness.

The disputed relationship between philosophy and literature is never far below the surface in discussion regarding Murdoch’s work and the editors acknowledge this devoting the second section of the collection to the ‘moral union’ of philosophy and literature. Simon Haines places Murdoch as one of the primary motivating factors in—and a key influence on—the ‘ethical turn’ that has become so prominent in the last twenty years or so. He clearly points out that this is, necessarily, a two-way dialogue and is paralleled by a ‘literary turn’ in moral philosophy. He sees Murdoch as leading a path away from linguistics, really away from Kantianism and all that followed him to Ayer and Ryle, toward an understanding that is richer in concepts: he wishes to call her a kind of phenomenological writer, an idea which merits greater investigation. Scott H. Moore develops this general overview and investigates Murdoch’s fictional philosophers regarding the say/show distinction. His claim is that if we disregard Murdoch’s pronouncements regarding the separateness of her dual endeavours and trust the text then “in several instances, specific ideas and even idioms from her philosophical works appear in novels that were being written at the same time. If most of them *say* things similar to Murdoch’s philosophy, they *show* something entirely different, however” (p. 101). These moral pronouncements and, even more so, moral actions, delineate her underlying thought. Frances White and Mark Luprecht go deeper by focusing on how moral dilemmas are discussed and developed within specific novels—Luprecht with a solid and illuminating discussion of *Bruno’s Dream* and *The Sovereignty of Good* (1970) and White’s novel approach discussing *Jackson’s Dilemma* (1999) in conjunction with the as-yet-unpublished “Heidegger: The Pursuit of Being”, kept in the Kingston archives.

The final section is rather more diverse in its approach with a discussion from various angles of Murdoch’s secular theology. A rather long and protracted discussion that can be made regarding the nature of Murdoch’s approach to religion and theology: was she really a firm believer in Platonic forms in a literal sense? Was she a closet existentialist? Does she really exhibit the traits one would associate with Wittgensteinian neo-Platonist (as she liked to describe herself in her later years)? Thankfully these issues are kept at arm’s length whilst we are led, by both Rowe and Pamela Osborn, through a series of meditations (perhaps too loose a word) on the Christ-figure in her work. Rowe sees Christ as both haunting Murdoch and as prefiguring the interior lives of not just her characters, but also, by her seeing Christ in others, of herself. Osborn makes clever use of the work of the Australian novelist Patrick White to discuss the demythologization of Christ in *Nuns and Soldiers* (1980) and *The Time of the Angels* (1966)—two of her most overtly

‘Christianized’ works. Osborn’s clever comparative study is both novel and pleasing; a new Murdochian to watch with interest. The two final essays by Grimshaw and Schweiker (two established academics) are, again, rather different. Grimshaw discusses Murdoch’s dismissal of Christianity, her affinity with Buddhism, and her description of herself as a ‘Christian Buddhist’: the ‘hauntology’ of Christ returns (of course). She uses Murdoch’s later work to unravel this and her reading of both *The Green Knight* (1993) and *Nuns and Soldiers* makes the reader wish to re-read both—what more could a critic ask for? Schweiker is the final contributor and ties up many ends, although not all, by discussing the connection between Murdoch’s thoughts regarding morality and art and how this shapes her understanding of a lived humanity. By discussing the bi-location of Murdoch work—between the necessity of virtue and the necessity of death—he neatly engages the reader with Murdoch’s humanism and argues that it is revealing in relation to contemporary humanistic approaches to ethics and the end of our existence on Earth. Reading this in tandem with his previous work on Murdoch contained in his own co-edited volume from 1996 I was stuck by the depth of understanding Murdoch had regarding the current and perhaps overriding neohumanism in politics and beyond. That we are brought into the immediate ‘now’ is both a testament to Murdoch’s own work and to the excellent work in this volume.

A paperback version of this excellent selection of essays would no doubt broaden the readership and would be most welcome in the current economic climate. However, perhaps the foresight of University libraries will enable a continued development of secondary resources on Murdoch as this collection is both a welcome addition and a necessary marker in contemporary studies of her work.

Works cited

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