

She Sets Her Characters Free

“Iris Murdoch and the Net of Theory” by George Watson, in *The Hudson Review* (Autumn 1998), 684 Park Ave., New York, N.Y. 10021.

Iris Murdoch is the rarest of novelists, an academic philosopher at Oxford University whose fiction is full of philosophy but devoid of “seminar-style debates” and ideas masquerading as characters. That sort of “philosophical” fiction, in her view, is not philosophical enough, observes Watson, a Fellow at Cambridge University.

Born in Dublin in 1919 of Irish Protestant stock and brought up in London, Murdoch is “a clever woman” whose writings “seldom descend into mere cleverness,” writes Watson. Not for her the fashionable notion that almost nothing can be truly known, and that moral knowledge, in particular, is merely personal opinion. Yet she has enjoyed “enormous success” as a novelist, from *Under the Net* (1954) to *Jackson’s Dilemma* (1996).

Murdoch “has always believed in something, has always believed that it mattered, and has always given an impression of wanting to believe more,” Watson writes. Murdoch “drifted out of communism” after World War II “into ever more skeptical versions of democratic socialism, along with encounters with Existentialism and Buddhism,” eventually arriving at a “highly personal version of conservatism, unattached to any party and increasingly drawn to religion.” But none of her writing is Christian, “not even *The Bell* (1958), her fourth novel, which first signaled her profound fascination with faith.” But it is a faith “in the good rather than in God,” he

notes. In her 1992 nonfiction work, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, she called for “a theology which can continue without God.”

“Iris Murdoch was the first, I believe,” Watson writes, “to suggest that the tradition of realism that has dominated English fiction for nearly three centuries, since Defoe, Richardson and Fielding, might in the end be more philosophical than a good deal of what passes for philosophy.” In a 1960 essay, she proposed Shakespeare as the father of fictional realism, writes Watson, “not for the commonplace reason that he drew from low life . . . but because . . . Shakespeare was the pioneer of what she called free character—of characters which, like Falstaff and Hamlet, grow into humanity beyond any pattern imposed by principle or plot.”

Murdoch is critical of the modernists on that score: the severely conservative T. S. Eliot and his school, for instance, had none of Shakespeare’s toleration and delight in the inconsistent variety of humankind.

After abandoning Marxism, observes Watson, Murdoch “was a refugee from ideas, or at least from glib theorizing. . . . Grand theory, or ideology, is the enemy of thought, and she is profoundly suspicious of anything that offers itself as a total solution.” As a character of hers remarks in *An Accidental Man* (1971), if a truth is complicated, “you have to be an artist not to utter it as a lie.”

OTHER NATIONS

The Iranian Surprise

A Survey of Recent Articles

Mohammed Khatami, the Shiite cleric who is president of Iran, is a man full of astonishments. First, he won the presidency in 1997 in an upset victory, receiving nearly 70 percent of the popular vote. Since then, as president, he has continued to amaze observers by (1) seeking to improve Iran’s relations with the outside world, including even the erstwhile “Great Satan” (a.k.a. the United States), and (2)

calling at home for respect for the rule of law, tolerance for diversity of opinions, and an Islamic civil society.

Though Khatami may not prevail, his advent, along with “widespread intellectual and cultural ferment” in the country, is “incontrovertible evidence that something dramatic” and important is occurring in Iran, maintains Fred Halliday, a professor of international relations at