

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

the London School of Economics, writing in the *New Republic* (Oct. 5, 1998).

Khatami's thinking is on display in two books he has written: *Fear of the Storm* (1993), a collection of five essays, and *From the City-World to the World-City* (1994), a study of Western political thought from Plato to contemporary liberalism. "The latter book," notes Halliday, "is an argument for democracy and freedom, and for open dialogue between civilizations."

Two themes run through the volumes, observes Shaul Bakhash, a historian at George Mason University, in the *New York Review of Books* (Nov. 5, 1998). "First, Khatami sees Islam as a religion and civilization in crisis or, at least . . . no longer responsive to the needs of the times, whether in science, the economy, or political organization. . . . Second, Khatami believes that today 'the world is the West, or lives in the shadow of Western thought and civilization.'" Muslims must acknowledge this reality, he believes, and intellectually engage Western thought.

Khatami—whom many have likened to Mikhail Gorbachev, the reformist Communist who dug the grave of the Soviet Union—has been part of Iran's ruling clerical establishment since the 1979 revolution. Until 1992, when he was ousted as minister of culture for being too permissive, he held important positions in the Islamic Republic.

Since Khatami became president, his "attempt to expand press and political freedoms has run up against strong opposition from the conservative faction among the

ruling clerics," Bakhash observes. Though he has a popular mandate and controls most of the executive branch, conservative clerics outnumber his supporters in parliament. More important, Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei—the successor to Ayatollah Ruholla Khomeini—possesses greater powers. Khamenei controls the military and the national police, as well as the security agencies, Bakhash points out. He also names the chiefs of the judiciary, national broadcasting, and the foundation that controls the hundreds of expropriated industries and enterprises. And he names the principal members of the watchdog Council of Guardians, which "can strike down legislation it deems in violation of Islam."

Islam is not the problem, writes Shireen T. Hunter, director of Islamic studies at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, in the *Washington Quarterly* (Autumn 1998). "Islam is no more incompatible with democracy than any other religion that puts divinely inspired laws above those made by humans," she says. The problem, rather, is that the Islamist ruling class in Iran is unwilling to give up power and "bow to the will of the people."

Khatami and the reformers may be able, if they overcome conservative opposition, to "soften the harsher aspects" of Iran's political system, Hunter concludes. But they cannot achieve the president's proclaimed aims of establishing the rule of law and creating an Islamic civil society without fundamentally changing that system.

A Pilgrim in Kerala

"Poor but Prosperous" by Akash Kapur, in *The Atlantic Monthly* (Sept. 1998), 77 N. Washington St., Boston, Mass. 02114.

It is a land where portraits of Marx, Lenin, and Che Guevara are still plastered on building walls, where small paper flags bearing the hammer and sickle flutter by the roadside. You can get your car fixed (if you are lucky enough to own one) at Lenin's Auto Parts. Is this Cuba? North Korea? No, it is Kerala, a verdant Indian state with 33 million inhabitants on the subcontinent's southwest coast. It offers a model for the Indian future, insists Kapur, an Indian resident now traveling on a fellowship from Harvard University.

In 1957, Kerala installed the world's first democratically elected Marxist government, and Communists have ruled intermittently ever since. Lush plantations of cardamom, pepper, rubber, and tea fill the valleys, criss-crossed by rivers and canals. Land reform in the 1960s gave 1.5 million tenant farmers pieces of this fecund land, and a "generous" minimum wage assures a decent standard of living, at least for those who can find work. Unemployment is high at 25 percent, a result of the fact that industry has largely stayed away from the Marxist Eden.