‘Living on Paper: Letters From Iris Murdoch, 1934-1995’

By Glenn C. Altschuler  Published 1:56 pm, Friday, January 29, 2016

“The only conclusion I have to come to of late,” 24-year-old Iris Murdoch wrote to a friend in 1943, “is that if (I say if, and cannot give the word too horrid an emphasis), I have any métier it is to be a writer.” Seven years later, with a job as a tutor in philosophy at St. Anne’s Society, Oxford and her work at a standstill and relative success “dust and ashes as usual,” she added that nothing was worthwhile except being happily married, being a saint and writing a good novel — and concluded “my chances of (a) diminish yearly (b) is far too difficult — there remains (c) which still inspires hope.”

Murdoch, of course, would become an influential moral philosopher and one of the most prolific and influential novelists of the second half of the 20th century. Although her emphasis on moral absolutes, goodness, desire and erotically charged love were dismissed as bourgeois conceits during the heyday of structuralism and postmodernism, interest in her fiction has grown recently in the United Kingdom, the United States and around the world.

With the publication of more than 760 of her letters in “Living on Paper,” Avril Horner, professor of English literature emeritus at Kingston University, London, and Anne Rowe, a professor and director of the Irish Murdoch Archives Project at Kingston, allow Murdoch, who struggled with Alzheimer’s in the 1990s, to speak in her own voice. The volume provides fascinating insights into her philosophy and, most of all, into her immensely complicated personal life. Murdoch’s many fans are in for a treat.

Horner and Rowe are superb editors. They divide the volume into five chronological sections and introduce each with an informative summary of Murdoch’s activities, philosophical writings and novels. And they provide biographical sketches of the individuals who influenced Murdoch or were in her “circle” and definitions of key literary and philosophical terms, including deconstruction, existentialism and logical positivism.

Embedded in her novels, and presented through techniques such as “magical realism”
(as well as nonfiction essays and books), Murdoch’s philosophy is difficult to summarize. Good, she believed, “must be learned through everything, as Plato thought.” And love involved “the extremely difficult realization that something other than oneself is real.”

Struck by the power of self-absorption, hatred and obsession to “darken the world and perhaps affect the body too,” Murdoch noted the potency of prayer as a cure — and thought that concentration on things grasped as good, the positive love of other people, the existence of some works of art and a will to see the whole world as “beautiful, vital, and full of energy” constituted secular equivalents.

More important, perhaps, Murdoch’s letters document her often unsuccessful struggle to live up to the ideals of moral goodness. Involved in a substantial number of affairs with men and women, Murdoch, especially (but not only) in the years preceding her marriage to John Bayley in 1956, was self-absorbed, needy and controlling. She coined the term “nemesism” to express her recognition that her own nature was often the cause of her suffering.

“When I am in love, I am INSANE,” she wrote to Brigid Brophy, with whom she had a long-lasting and volatile relationship, “and although a great glory shines around, the main results are anxiety, misery, despair, destruction, inability to work etc.” And she was fully capable of telling Wallace Robson that the thought of waiting to marry him “is pure pain” — and then confessing a few months later to Raymond Queneau: “Listen, I love you in the most absolute sense possible. I would do anything for you, be anything you wished me to, come to you at any time or place if you wished it even for a moment.”

What comes through as well in these letters, however, is Murdoch’s capacity to forge enduring relationships, during and after the sexual liaisons ceased. Lovers became close friends. Close friends stayed close friends, despite dalliances with their spouses. Murdoch’s emotional hunger apparently did not get in the way of, and may even have fed, friendships with (among others), eminent writers (Brophy, Queneau and Elias Canetti), philosophers, (Philippa Foot and Michael Oakeshott) and mathematician Georg Kreisel. Equally compelling are the many kindnesses, emotional and financial, extended to David Morgan, a troubled student at Birmingham School of Arts, whose dissertation Murdoch supervised.

One finishes “Living on Paper” wanting more. Why, for example, are there no letters to
Bayley? And what might we learn about Murdoch from the letters that friends and lovers wrote to her? Nevertheless, this superb volume illuminates the ferocity of Murdoch’s emotional commitment to attachments, side by side with her gentleness, her generosity and her zeal, to emulate “calm objective humble people” who “often seem to come near a selfless loving.”

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**Living on Paper**

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Edited by Avril Horner and Anne Rowe

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