

“Any Day is a Kissing Day”: Iris Murdoch’s Letters as Expressions of Intimacy

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It has been argued that Iris Murdoch was driven by a desire for intimacy – emotional and intellectual as well as physical – with as many people as possible. She confessed to her friend Brigid Brophy in 1964 that ‘As far as I am concerned any day is a kissing day’. This desire for intimacy is linked to the fact that reading, writing and talking all represented erotic acts for her and that she felt herself on a mission in life to be a disinterested force for moral good.

Murdoch used letters as a tool to establish and maintain this ideal of intimacy not only with friends but also with people she had never met – and would never meet. It is possible, now, to take an overview of Murdoch’s habits as a letter writer because of the 2015 publication *Living on Paper*, edited by Avril Horner and Anne Rowe, that consists of over 760 letters written by Murdoch over the course of sixty-one years, few of which had been published before.

The act of writing was central to Murdoch’s life. Her desire for intimacy with as many people as possible led to a reliance on letters that enabled her to maintain close relations with old friends while also to reach out to new acquaintances. Murdoch’s deafness and possession of a character genial but, at times, remote, enhanced the congeniality of the letter for her. The complicated nature of her personal life also meant letters served the function of helping her to compartmentalize her various duties, roles and relationships.

Living on Paper represents only a small selection of Murdoch’s letters. The number she actually wrote and sent was huge: an estimated ‘mountain’ of correspondence. The 3,200 letters held in the Iris Murdoch Research Archive at Kingston University in London from which Horner and Rowe made their selection is probably matched by at least that number elsewhere.

Murdoch was in the habit of spending four hours a day writing replies, in longhand, to almost every letter she received, using her preferred Montblanc fountain pen, refusing only to respond to correspondents obviously ‘mad or bad’. She devoted her mornings to her novels and philosophical writings and her afternoons to her letter writing, sitting at a desk once owned by J.R.R. Tolkien.

Conradi suggests that ‘pen-friendship offered her cost-free intimacy, a point of entry into the imaginative worlds of others, and a stage on which to try out her own personae’ – and that the information elicited from them fed into Murdoch’s fiction.

In 1968 Murdoch boasted to Foot that she felt she had a special talent for letter writing: ‘I have in fact only once corresponded with anyone (now departed from my life) who was as good at writing letters as I am’. Writing letters was not a form of

drudgery, a duty to be grudgingly performed. Murdoch found it a joyous enterprise and once remarked, also to Foot, that 'I can live in letters'.