特別寄稿

How Japan and Iris Murdoch Shaped an Englishwoman's Life

Frances White

I am grateful to Paul Hullah for inviting me to talk to you at your Japan Iris Murdoch Society conference today about my connections with your beautiful country and the novelist who has shaped my life. My father, also called Paul, worked for Shell and in the role of advisor on pesticides to Japanese orange farmers was sent to live in Tokyo for two years. We flew out on my third birthday, 29 October 1963, and returned in 1965. Shell normally housed their British employees in a compound where the wives played Bridge, drank gin and complained of homesickness in a foreign land. My mother, Patricia, was having none of that. Given the chance to live in a different culture she embraced it. She refused to live in the British compound, so we stayed in the Tokyo Prince Hotel until a house was found for us in a Japanese area, the suburb of Shimomeguro.

Infant Frances with Japanese friend Bebe

My father, Paul, working on a Japanese Orange Farm

We had lovely Japanese neighbours with a daughter, Bebe, the same age as me with whom I played every day, picking up children's Japanese as easily as language is learned at that age. My parents had to take classes but they too learnt to speak and understand basic Japanese – though not to read and write it. Patricia taught English to Japanese students too and my parents made many friends with whom they kept up contact for the rest of their lives, returning for one precious visit in the 1990s. Patricia learned to cook Japanese food of which we were all very fond – I loved Oyako Domburi – and also the art of Ikebana as well as how to wear Japanese dress – we all had kimonos. We travelled extensively, visiting Japanese homes and hotels in Kyushu, Shikoku and Hokkaido, where we were the first Western people that the rice-farming family we stayed with had ever met. Japanese friends said we had seen more of Japan than they had!

Obviously, my memories from over 55 years ago are faint – I do, however, have a vivid memory of the iris garden in Tokyo which seems like a nice if coincidental link with Iris Murdoch. Although I could tell anecdotes about our time in Japan for this full hour, I must move on to her soon. But one significant thing occurred when I was an infant living in Japan – I became a Word Child. We attended St Augustine's Anglican Church in Tokyo, and at a jumble sale there I found some American Primers and brought them to my mother, saying 'I think these would be good for you to teach me to read from.' She didn't know how I recognised them as early readers, but they were, and in no time I was reading to myself silently. I don't remember this happening and can't recall ever not reading, which came to me as easily as breathing.

Paul eating Japanese food: Patricia learning Ikebana

Although it was my mother who taught me to read, it was my father who brought Iris Murdoch into my life. I must have been 13 or 14 when, knowing what an avid reader I was of everything from Agatha Christie to Alexander Solzhenitsyn, he gave me *The Unicorn* and said, 'You might enjoy this.' I read it and found not just enjoyment but entrancement. The smouldering sexuality and the golden haze of whiskey which suffuses the melodramatic story were perfect for a teenage girl, taking Daphne du Maurier's gothic tales（*Rebecca* and *My Cousin Rachel*）to a new depth. At that immature age I did not question what the difference I perceived might be. Indeed, I did not question at all. I read for pure pleasure. More than that, I read for life: books were as food to me, without them I could not survive.

Infant Frances
in the Iris Garden in Tokyo

Inevitably I read English Language and Literature when I went to Hertford College, Oxford – the one with the bridge over the road that everyone knows from the detective television series, *Morse.* I consider myself very fortunate to have been in perhaps the last generation to have had a theory-free three years of reading from *Beowulf* to Virginia Woolf. We studied Anglo-Saxon and Middle-English, the making of dictionaries, the development of spelling, Shakespeare and other dramatists, the great poets, the rise of the novel . . . but we did not study theory. I have since come to understand that you *cannot*

have an impartial standpoint towards any text you read, as both text and reader are necessarily gendered, cultured, racialised and politicised – it is a question of *awareness* of these loaded elements of all literary encounters. But, being allowed not to trouble our young heads with such knotty matters gave us freedom to encounter the texts, whether *Robinson Crusoe* or *The Wasteland* as astonishing artefacts in themselves. Every new book came as a revelation. I was punch-drunk on words the whole time, made dizzy by *Paradise Lost,* drowning in the endless length of Clarissa, stumbling over the mystical intricacies of Yeats. Not having to worry about theory or read theoretical texts gave us simply so much *time* to read the original works and I gorged on them, stuffing myself greedily with Jane Austen and W. H. Auden. Things have changed since those days and no undergraduate could now be as innocent, or perhaps faux-innocent, as we were then.

The prospectus today tells me, 'In your first year you will be introduced to the conceptual and technical tools used in the study of language and literature, and to a wide range of different critical approaches.' And now 'you can study works written in English from other parts of the world, and some originally written in other languages, allowing you to think about literature in English in multilingual and global contexts across time.' Back in the day, the authors we studied were all white, British, mostly male . . . and dead. You were not allowed to study a novelist or poet who was still writing. This was in 1978-81.

Hertford College Bridge, University of Oxford
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When I went up to Oxford Murdoch had just won the Booker prize for *The Sea*, *The Sea* and while I was there she was writing *Nuns and Soldiers*, with another six novels still to come. I was a very naïve student, looking back. I had no idea that Murdoch lived in Oxford or that she was married to John Bayley. I remember going to lectures by the brilliant and terrifying John Carey, but never saw John Bayley in action although he was at that time Warton Professor of English. For me as a gauche teenager, such figures were as Norse Gods living in a realm and breathing an atmosphere that was not of this world. I did not apprehend authors or teachers as persons like myself, with hopes and fears, sins and frailties. And, thankfully, the restrictive nature of the syllabus in those days meant that I only read Murdoch for my own pleasure. I never analysed her work and she didn't get contaminated by exam pressure – after Finals I didn't read a book for over two months, partly from eye strain but also from a surfeit of reading and revision which had become very stressful.

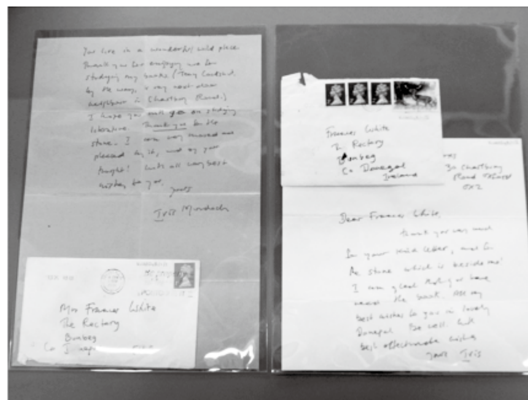
When I began to enjoy reading again – teacher-training offered me the chance to study the great Russian writers as well as the somewhat Murdochian French writer, Colette – Murdoch's novels came back to the fore. I caught up with all the ones I had missed while concentrating on the prescribed degree texts. And I grew increasingly intrigued by her. Re-reading each book, I glimpsed depths and connections which I'd missed on a first rapturous gallop through the adventure story she offers as an initial gift to her readers. Murdoch has said that *Treasure Island* is her favourite book and that she would like to have written it, and she shares with Stevenson the gift for compelling storytelling. Her complex plotting and constant humour, ranging from slapstick to subtle irony, keep her readers turning the pages whether or not they go more deeply into the moral nature of what Murdoch's novels are revealing and discussing. I certainly never did so on first reading, and doubt if many other readers do either. But going back over the stories, contemplating them, noting the rich imagery and symbolism which pattern them, the moral quandaries and ethical questions that they throw up, I began to treat Murdoch's novels as a kind of archaeological project. I dug beneath the text. And this digging took many forms. I listed all the images and symbols I noticed in the novels, finding their recurrence intriguing and wondering if this offered clues to her meaning.

I walked about in London, seeking out the sites she describes, the place where Jake swam in the Thames in *Under the Net*, the Peter Pan statue in Kensington Gardens. I visited the art galleries she mentions, looking at the paintings that feature in her novels and also finding many other paintings which I love myself. But I also read further, not just other literary authors and texts which are mentioned in her novels, but also philosophers. Who is this Sartre she speaks of? Who are Plato, Kant, Wittgenstein, Simone Weil? Why are they important to her? She became my teacher in a very do-it-yourself philosophy course. I became, in a totally amateur way, fascinated by philosophy – or rather by the philosophers themselves as people, as actually *doing* philosophy would make my head explode in the kind of way Murdoch often describes when she reveals how painful *thinking* is. I ventured out into Murdoch's own philosophical work with some trepidation, finding it, to my surprise, more readable and more comprehensible than the writing of most other philosophers. She stays so close to what we actually *experience* in our wonderful terrible troubled lives. She makes human sense. At least to me.

During this time I was exploring alone and thought I was odd in finding Murdoch so endlessly rich. Then I discovered the Iris Murdoch Society and realised that there were others like me in the world. I had a warm welcome from Cheryl Bove but by now I was living in rural Ireland far from any academic community. I had made an effort to put my passion for Murdoch into a project, beginning a PhD thesis on imagery and symbolism in her novels at Queens University, Belfast in the late 80s. This came to naught after my sons were born and my life revolved around them, animals, and gardening for many years. But that apparently unsuccessful period of study was worthwhile for two reasons. My husband, Stephen, was also doing a PhD at Queens at that time and his subject was the maverick Anglican theologian, Don Cupitt. As we worked alongside each other, he would read out to me comments on Murdoch that he discovered in Cupitt's books and

I would read out to him her comments on Cupitt in *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*. We were amazed at these unexpected connections – later to be developed when Cupitt lectured at an Iris Murdoch conference and wrote on his relationship with Murdoch in *Iris Murdoch: Texts and Contexts* (2012). The other reason was that Queens challenged my ignorance of literary theory, so belatedly and with initial reluctance, I filled in that major gap in my knowledge, coming to find it fascinating, rewarding and illuminating, though I continue to believe that the text must come before the theory, not the other way about.

In 1995 I read *Jackson's Dilemma* and was dismayed and perturbed by this strange uneven novel so unlike those which preceded it. Then came John Bayley's revelation that his wife had Alzheimer's which made sense of the change. I was saddened by the realisation that I would never have the conversation with Murdoch that I had imagined, following two letters she wrote in response to me which are now in the Iris Murdoch archive. Impulsively I bought an armful of irises in the Covered Market in Oxford and took them to her home in Charlbury Road. I expected to give them to John but to my amazement, Iris opened the front door herself, accepted my tribute and held my hand, smiling warmly at me as I stammered my words of appreciation and love. It was a magical moment even though the irises were probably dropped in the dust behind the door and she would have forgotten my visit even before I closed the garden gate.


Iris Murdoch

Mrs Frances White
The Rectory
Bunbeg

Frances White
The Rectory
Bunbeg
Co Donegal
Ireland

Dear Frances White,

Iris

Letters from Iris Murdoch to Frances White,
from the Iris Murdoch Collections
at Kingston University Archives [KUAS248].
© Kingston University

In 2002 Anne Rowe convened the first Iris Murdoch conference at St Anne's College, Oxford, and I attended as a member of the Iris Murdoch Society. By 2004 when the second conference was held at Kingston, the archive had been set up and Anne had discovered that I was an isolated Murdochian. She invited me to become the first PhD student at the newly opened Iris Murdoch Centre. I demurred, saying that I was too old and too busy with my sons and garden. But hearing the papers given at that conference my mind began buzzing with ideas of things I wanted to explore and work on so in

2005 I embarked on a second effort to write a thesis on her work. By now I had shifted tack from imagery and symbolism (which I still think merits further study) and was captivated by the notion of remorse, having been struck by its force in *Jackson's Dilemma.*

While I was researching my thesis I asked Chiho Omichi about remorse in Japanese and she helpfully told me that there are two words for remorse; *kashaku from ka* – scold and *shaku* – torture/torment, and *jiseki* from *ji* – self/yourself and *seki* – torture/torment. Remorse had begun to be highlighted by Murdoch scholars. Elizabeth Dipple wrote in her review of the novel for the *Iris Murdoch Newsletter*, 'Remorse, remorse, the pages of the novel whisper' (1995, no.9, p.7) and Bran Nicol emailed me that 'Murdoch dealt obsessively with guilt, loss, and yes remorse, and this is the kind of area that needs more work in "Murdoch studies"' (29-10-06). Murdoch herself wrote in *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, that 'One of the most terrible of human woes, and also the most common, is remorse' (1992, p.500).

I re-read all the novels, yet again, this time in reverse order, which gives a different perspective on her thinking than reading them chronologically as I had previously done. And I found remorse lurking everywhere in her characters' lives. Indeed, I came to feel that it is one of Murdoch's chief topics, the obverse side of the coin to *love* which she flags up as her central concern. The importance she places on love as attention to the reality of the other is significant here. When one falls in love with a person one really sees them, and even if briefly their reality is as clear as one's own. It seems also to be the case that when one feels remorse towards a person one also perceives their separate reality. This makes it a moral issue for Murdoch, one she explored over and over again throughout her work. I cannot present my entire thesis in a short talk like this so I will just pick out the two novels which most clearly show her exploring the question of how a person can go on living his life when he has done something irreparable which he finds unforgivable.

In *A Word Child* (1975), the first-person male narrator, Hilary Burde is trapped in a cycle of darkness after having killed his lover Anne, the wife of his friend and mentor Gunnar Jopling. Hilary's present life is held in a vice-like grip by his past. He can find no way to get out of this hellish cycle, symbolised by his riding on the Underground Circle Line – which is suggested by the early book jacket, designed by Murdoch's friend Christopher Cornford – and by the rigidity of the weekly pattern of his life seeing the same people and eating the same meals on each day. By the end of the novel, Hilary has repeated his original act of destruction in causing the death of Gunnur's second wife, Lady Kitty, and it seems he may be doomed to continue forever reliving and repeating these traumas. Anne Rowe believes that to be the case. I myself feel that the novel ends on a note of hope that Hilary may be able to break out of this cycle and start afresh but this is certainly a dark book, a case-study of what the remorse theorist Steven Tudor calls 'chronic remorse', which destroys lives, being like an illness which persists for a long time or constantly recurs, as in chronic bronchitis.

Murdoch said, in an interview with Shena Mackay which was published in the

wonderful collection of *Occasional Essays*, edited in Japan by Yozo Muroya and Paul Hullah, back in 1998; 'I have known people absolutely wrecked by remorse.' Talking to John Haffenden, she enlarged on this, saying; 'It's a salient thing in human life, one of the most general features of human beings, that they may be dominated by remorse or by some plan of their lives which may have gone wrong. I think it's one of the things that prevents people from being good.' This interview is in the splendid collection edited by Gillian Dooley, called *A Tiny Corner of the House of Fiction* (2003). Hilary Burde is her strongest portrait of such a person whose life is dominated by chronic remorse.

A decade later Murdoch returned to the theme of remorse in *The Good Apprentice* (1985). She takes a parallel situation in which a young man, Edward Baltram, has caused the death of his friend, Mark Wilsden. And she asks again, how can one live with oneself and with others after doing such a thing? This novel asks if religion can still help, in a post-Christian age. It begins with the words from the Bible, 'I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father I have sinned against heaven and before thee, and am no more worthy to be called thy son', but who, now, can be the Father who can give absolution? Edward seeks the help of father-figures in his life, but they all prove inadequate to the task. The novel also asks if the disciplines of psychoanalysis or psychotherapy founded by Freud and Jung – something which Murdoch regarded with deep suspicion as well as enduring fascination – can offer any help to the sufferer from remorse. In a rarely positive portrait of a psychologist, Thomas McCaskerville, Murdoch explores the means the mind may have to accomplish its own healing and the journey that the sufferer must undergo in doing so. Both religion and psychology seem weak against remorse. But over the course of a year, Edward makes that journey. At the start of the novel he was paralysed by remorse, in a manner similar to Hilary Burde. But by the end he is in a very different place, ready to engage with others and to study again. He has achieved what Steven Tudor calls 'lucid remorse', lucid having associations with clarity and light. Nothing has changed, Edward still knows what he has done and will grieve for Mark forever, but he is able to move humbly on with his life. How has this been achieved? Murdoch suggests that a number of things can help with this process, the love and acceptance of Edward's family and friends, the forgiveness given to him by Mark's sister, Brownie, and eventually by Mark's mother, the psychotherapeutic skill of Thomas who sends Edward on his mental and spiritual journey to learn to assimilate his remorse, and – perhaps most of all – Edward's gradual ability to pay attention to the world around him, really seeing it, and to people around him too so that he ceases to be entirely self-obsessed. Murdoch's says that love is attention to reality and she shows Edward learning how to love life again. It is a powerful portrait of lucid remorse and contrasts starkly with her earlier work.

Iris Murdoch by Tom Phillips,
1984-1986.
© National Portrait Gallery, London

'Art is for life's sake . . .
or else it is worthless'
Iris Murdoch

In her early essay 'The Sublime and the Good' (1959), Murdoch says that 'Art is for life's sake . . . or else it is worthless' (*EM*, p.218): she wants her novels to have a moral as well as aesthetic impact. Latterly in my own research I have been focusing on reader-response to her work, and the techniques, whether conscious or unconscious, that Murdoch employs to persuade her readers of her moral point of view. It may be significant that my own position has always been liminal: I do my work on Murdoch in the academic contexts of the Iris Murdoch Resource Centre and the Iris Murdoch Archives but I have never held a post in higher education. Also, although I have no philosophical training, my area of expertise being entirely in literature, I have found myself unavoidably writing about Murdoch's philosophy as I believe it is impossible to ignore the interface of her work in these two disciplines, whatever she may have said about the separation she wants to maintain between them. Her novels and philosophical texts mirror each other adding light to both. This has made me able to take a hybrid approach which lacks the technical expertise of professional philosophers but perhaps opens up Murdoch's work to a wider common readership. I have been delighted and honoured to be invited to contribute to two recent landmark collections of essays on Murdoch.

The first of these was *Reading Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* edited by Nora Hämäläinen and Gillian Dooley which was published in the centenary year 2019 and launched (among others) at the centenary conference in Oxford. In my contribution to this anthology, I first trace the way Murdoch developed the drafts of the Gifford Lectures which she gave with much angst in 1982 into the published text of *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* a decade later, and reveal the mental strain she experienced from doing this work. This was archival work as all the drafts in her handwriting are held at Kingston and I was able to compare them. The second aspect of this essay is rooted

in close-reading of the final published book. I analyse the language Murdoch uses to persuade us to share her perspective and adopt her moral stance and consider to what extent she was doing this intentionally and what may have been subconscious, as I believe it also works at a subconscious level on the reader's mind. That is, until one becomes aware of this rhetorical technique!

The editors and some of the contributors at the launch of
Reading Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals
edited by Nora Hämäläinen and Gillian Dooley,
at Somerville College Oxford, 13 July 2019

The editors and some of the contributors at the launch of
The Murdochian Mind
edited by Silvia Caprioglio Panizza and Mark Hopwood,
at the University of Chichester, 25 June 2022

The second collection, *The Murdochian Mind* edited by Silvia Caprioglio Panizza and Mark Hopwood, came out this year and was launched at the tenth International Iris Murdoch Conference in June 2022 at the University of Chichester. This is the largest collection of work on philosophical aspects of Murdoch yet, containing 37 essays from 39 contributors, ranging from Plato and Kant to contemporary feminist and ecological concerns. I was pleased when the editor Mark told me that when his non-philosophically

trained parents said they would like to read some of the book, he advised them to begin with my contribution on 'How Iris Murdoch Can Change Your life' as it is approachable. This essay has roots reaching far back to my own acknowledgment that reading Iris Murdoch has been a major influence on my own life, a fact which I explored in my short biography *Becoming Iris Murdoch*, back in 2014: 'Iris Murdoch has made me who I am. . . . Writers wreak havoc. They help us form our sense of self-identity. They create us. We do not read and remain unchanged. Books are an insidious, often unnoticed, part of becoming who we are' (p.22).

Two contemporary writers whose works I greatly admire and enjoy are the Swiss-born essayist Alain de Botton who wrote a book called *How Proust Can Change Your Life* (1997) and the Scottish novelist Alexander McCall Smith who wrote a book about *his* life-changing influence, *What W. H. Auden Can Do for You* (2013). My essay on Murdoch pays homage to them and works in this area of reader-response. I asked other Murdoch readers what effect she had had on their lives as well as analysing the impact she made on others as revealed in biographical writing and letters. This survey of the legacy left by Murdoch's life and work brought me to a conclusion agreeing with Priscilla Martin and Anne Rowe, who said in their *Literary Life* (2010): 'it would be the extent of her influence, not merely on contemporary literature, but on the day-to-day lives of her readers and students that Murdoch herself would perceive as her greatest achievement' (p.171).

I think Iris Murdoch would be both amazed and happy to know of this conference today, and that her work is still being read, discussed, and loved around the world. I want to conclude with the precious element of the *international* aspect of Iris Murdoch studies. It impresses me that the editors of the two recent collections I talked about are, respectively, Nora, a Finnish woman working in the Czech Republic in partnership with Gillian, an Australian woman (whose primary career was in librarianship), and Silvia, an Italian woman working in Ireland alongside Mark, an Englishman working in America. Murdoch loved having friends from many different countries, including Japan – where she had memorable visits with Paul Hullah and Yozo Muroya, the scholar who championed her work in his country. Japan has been an important and beloved element in Murdoch's life, as in mine. Becoming part of the Murdoch family over the past two decades has immeasurably enriched my life, giving me friends from all around the globe, and offering me the opportunity to travel to new places. I have been to Murdoch conferences in France, Italy, Portugal, Turkey and the Czech Republic, and I am virtually in Japan today! I am sorry not to be with you in person but today has made me remember early conferences at Kingston where I met Chiho Omichi and had many subsequent discussions with her. And not only did I meet her, but so also did my parents – with whom I began this talk – who never failed to be delighted to meet new friends from their beloved Japan. Reading Iris Murdoch has changed my life in so very many ways since I was a small girl living in Tokyo, and I hope you will all find equal delight and enlightenment as you read, study and discuss her work together.

(Deputy Director, Iris Murdoch Research Centre, University of Chichester)