

特別寄稿

This Year's Words: Beginning (Again) with Iris (IMSJ President's Message)

'For last year's words belong to last year's language
And next year's words await another voice.
And to make an end is to make a beginning.' (T. S. Eliot 'Little Gidding')¹

Paul Hullah

Eliot's evolutionary cyclical conception of time and language can be comfort and compass to us today, as we watch 2024 recede in the rear view mirror, all splendid Murdoch conferences in Paris and Chichester, followed by our own successful annual academic meeting in Kyoto. Beginnings bloom from endings, and our completions become catalyst to further creation, this notion of renewal, continuance, 'getting on with it', so fundamental to our sane survival.

We would do well to take heed of this when appraising our own aims and history as a dedicated literary society. Eliot's lines can profitably be interpreted via Heidegger's ontology, alongside his assertion that poetry (by extension, 'good' literary writing) reveals *truth* in ways that ordinary language cannot, offering experiential possibilities otherwise often obscured by conventional, rational thought, which clearly influences Murdoch. Eliot's 'last year's words belong to last year's language' mirrors Heidegger's and Murdoch's hypothesis that traditional modes of understanding can limit engagement with being, affirming the importance of renewal in language and thought. Through *poetic* expression (profound, sympathetic, interrogation of letter and spirit, *a priori* and *posteriori*: which perhaps in our classrooms we teachers now, perversely and partially label 'critical thinking'), we can break free from the constraints of established schema and explore new existential territories.

In *The Sovereignty of Good*, Murdoch insists: 'There are properly many patterns and purposes within life, but there is no general and as it were externally guaranteed pattern or purpose of the kind for which philosophers and theologians used to search.'² Literature, not least her own fictions and poems, is where we find a more modern and meaningful Murdochian search for something good: a moral vision that admits the complexity of human existence. No need to seek a singular transcendent purpose, for this will lead to idle abstraction that neglects the real, messy *thinginess* (as Murdoch liked to term it) and moral immediacy of quotidian life.³

Murdoch's thoughts chime with contemporary challenges. Rushed technological advances, climate change, geopolitical tensions, pandemics both viral and of social inequality, boosted by un (fact) checked monopolistic social media dominance gone wrong, have all combined to create a new diversity of intolerances and a hostile landscape where traditional sources of 'truth' and meaning have lost hallowed ground. In this ambience of

anxiety, Murdoch steers us to build a bespoke attentive moral life, attuned to contingency, grounded in love and good deeds, rather than languishing in lax behaviour and dangerous dogma.

All of which should encourage those of us that teach to (re) start using Murdoch's work in our classes. For it speaks to contemporary youth of the importance of betterment, more eloquently than a TikTok video or Instagram influencer ever will. As we grapple with ideological disorder and emotional and intellectual isolation, despite being 24/7 hyperconnected and carrying every 'fact' known to humankind in our pocket (unless we've lost our smartphone again), Murdoch quietly and imaginatively maps pathways to a 'good' existential moral vision, a realistic and empathetic commitment to others beyond our 'fat relentless' ego-driven selves.⁴

For, ultimately, Murdoch's work dramatizes a shift from seeking comfort in fantastical universal patterns toward embracing the rich real diversity of human experiences and the contingent and circumstantially malleable moral imperatives they necessarily invoke. In sailing our own ships in 2025, we can find purpose *not* in set sealines, but in the authenticity of our honest close relationships and the sundry ethical challenges we all must face, in focusing on love, awareness, and the intricacies of our interconnected existence. Like 'the dialect of the tribe' was for Eliot, for Murdoch, and for us, the moral landscape is multifaceted, ever-evolving.⁵

And meanwhile at the message, some of our unfailingly uneasy members continue to lament the seeming inability of our tight-knit society to expand and attract 'new blood'. But, in context, the size of our community is not unhealthy and not of great concern. And after an overlong sojourn in the wilderness, Murdoch herself is now fully re-established (perhaps *academically* revered more than ever before?) as a venerable, potent, and presciently relevant 20th century Anglophone author/philosopher of considerable note and equal foresight. Her worldwide reputation is fêted and sustained via the marvellous ongoing *Iris Murdoch Today* Palgrave Macmillan critical book series (co-edited by Frances White and Miles Leeson, whom we welcomed as splendid IMSJ keynote speakers in 2022 and 2023 respectively). Moreover, this year will bring forth a brand new, substantial selection of Murdoch's poetry (the first since, with Iris's personal blessing and participation, our society's founder Yozo Muroya and I co-edited her limited debut selection, *Poems by Iris Murdoch*, here in Japan almost 30 years ago), as well as a variety of other critical studies looking at Murdoch's oeuvre anew, from original and diverse perspectives.⁶

Looking ahead to our 25th Conference in 2025 (a silver anniversary of gatherings!), I will thank my committee colleagues and wish them and all IMSJ members well, and end with Garth Gibson Grey's advice in *An Accidental Man*, leaving it to you, Gentle Reader, to work out why: 'Don't imagine that you are that big psychological buzz that travels around with you. Step outside it.'⁷

(President, The Iris Murdoch Society of Japan)

1. Eliot, T. S. (1943) *Four Quartets* New York: Harcourt
2. Murdoch, I. (1970) *The Sovereignty of Good* London: Routledge 77
3. Murdoch, I. (1953) *Sartre, Romantic Rationalist* London: Bowes and Bowes 92, 141
4. Murdoch, I. (1970) *The Sovereignty of Good* London: Routledge 51
5. Eliot, T. S. (1943) *Four Quartets* New York: Harcourt
6. Murdoch, I. (1997) *Poems by Iris Murdoch* P. Hullah and Y. Muroya eds. Okayama: University Education Press
7. Murdoch, I. (1971) *An Accidental Man* London: Chatto and Windus 114