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Other Journeys: Reflections on reading Iris Murdoch and making art

Kevin Petrie

I am an artist and have recently shown new works in my exhibition, 'Other Journeys – Paintings and Drawings by Kevin Petrie', curated by Karolynne Hart at The Gallery, Gateshead Central Library. I've also enjoyed Iris Murdoch novels at different points in my life and these have influenced some of my new work. The 2001 film *Iris* was probably my first introduction to Murdoch. I saw the film and then read a couple of John Bayley's biographies. I also read some of the novels, including *The Bell*, *An Unofficial Rose*, *The Italian Girl*, *The Time of the Angels*, *A Fairly Honourable Defeat*, *An Accidental Man*, and *The Sea*, *The Sea*. My memory of some of these is a little hazy now – but I know I read them as I still have some of the copies from this time on my bookshelves, including one or two with stylish Harri Peccinotti photographic covers that have a 1970s glamour. Being of 1970 vintage myself, I found those covers appealing. I've recently started to collect this set and some of my collection can be seen on the cover of this journal. This cover-image shows a display in a case at my exhibition, presenting works in progress and some of the tools and materials used in my artworks.

My memories of reading Murdoch the first time around are of enjoying the stories, the arresting sex scenes, people drinking whisky in nice houses, and even the recipes in *The Sea*, *The Sea*. I also remember what were, for me, the puzzling passages when people seemed to be talking about some kind of argument or theme that I couldn't quite understand. I now know these are the more philosophical bits.

Twenty-odd years later, during the COVID-19 lockdowns, I discovered podcasts and came across the series created by the Iris Murdoch Society. I dipped into different episodes, and this rekindled my interest in the novels. I was particularly taken with the episode 'Iris Murdoch and the Common Reader' in which Liz Dexter talks about how she re-reads all the novels in chronological order every ten years.¹ I was inspired to do the same and I'm now on book twelve, *Bruno's Dream*. I've even dipped into some of the philosophy and joined a Cambridge Literature course led by Miles Leeson on 'Iris Murdoch and the Gothic'. I have also been really interested to come across other artists who have been inspired by Murdoch. For example, Carol Sommer has developed a range of projects that explore Murdoch in relation to femininity and Matthew Richardson has developed book projects and exhibitions relating to manuscripts and archives. Both are fascinating artists.²

Recently, Murdoch has directly inspired some of my own imagery. Alongside this, I have also started to see some of my work through a 'Murdochian lens' after I have made it. This has been enriched by the work of the Iris Murdoch Society, and wider community at large. The podcasts are especially stimulating and I often re-listen to episodes and find myself making parallel connections between the ideas discussed and my work. This process often illuminates aspects of my work for myself.

I certainly don't claim to fully understand all of the ideas and concepts in philosophical terms but in the present piece of writing I try to trace how some of Murdoch's themes might, at least for me, connect to my thinking as an artist. The themes that currently resonate most for me are: imagery from the novels, attention, unselfing, and the power of

artworks to tell some kind of truth. Below I discuss some of the pieces from my 'Other Journeys' exhibition in relation to these aspects.

As I already mentioned, some of my pieces have been inspired directly by reading Iris Murdoch's novels. In these cases, a striking image comes to my mind when reading and I have attempted to depict it. Images encountered in the books, combined with other themes or ideas, have helped unlock my imagination and enabled me to make far more unexpected art. In some cases, I have combined ideas in Murdoch with other visual ideas. My painting *The Enchanter* is an example of this. It is in part inspired by Jake's trip to Paris in search of his old flame Anna in *Under the Net*. He sees her across a crowded city on Bastille Day, in a kind of enchanting vision. When I read this passage it reminded me of a trip to Paris where I stood outside Notre-Dame Cathedral with my husband Allen wondering whether to go in or not. We didn't and the next day it burnt down – perhaps another kind of 'enchanting' vision? So the burning cathedral is combined with the Murdoch-inspired image. I recently re-listened to the 'Iris Murdoch for Beginners' podcast in which Cheryl Bove mentions how Jake describes Paris as a 'beautiful, cruel, tender, disquieting and an enchanting city'.³ Maybe my painting reflects something of that?

Fellow Travellers is an ink drawing featuring three characters from *The Sandcastle*: a spectral dog Liffey, a fourteen-year-old girl Felicity (who believes she can see Liffey - the dead family pet) and a man playing cards, who may be either Angus (the imaginary person Felicity sees in different guises) or the traveller that other figures in the novel come across at various points. In my picture the model for the latter was a religious statue of a seated Christ that I had seen in a church in Portugal and that I 'clothed' to make the contemplative

figure in the drawing. My drawing is not so much an illustration of a particular scene in the book but an exploration of juxtaposing different elements in an image. It's also worth mentioning that Murdoch's confidence in depicting characters of the opposite sex has inspired me. Prior to my recent interest in Murdoch, my pictures often featured a tall man in a landscape who is rather like me. I'm now trying to look outside of myself more and explore different people and their 'other journeys'.

An example of this is my drawing *The Unicorn*. To date I've made a number of images of sleeping figures combined with other scenes. There is a sleeping woman at the bottom of the artwork, with a scene above inspired by the passage in *The Unicorn* where Hannah Crean-Smith walks out of her bedroom and past young Jamesie (the house keeper's son) in the direction of the cliffs where she commits suicide. The combination creates a Gothic dreamlike scene. When making work like this I rarely know what the final artwork will look like or mean. Part of the fun here is being faced with a new image to consider and decipher.

Some works that have been inspired by the novels are further illuminated for me later by discussions in the Iris Murdoch community, particularly the podcasts. My drawing *In the Nightjar Alley* references the scene in *The Bell* where Michael and Toby take a night-time walk to see nightjars in the woods. A few days before this, middle-aged Michael spontaneously kissed 18-year-old Toby. This plunged Toby (and Michael) into a period of confusion. Michael initiates the evening excursion in the hope of discussing and resolving the situation. My drawing depicts the moment of 'resolution' in full moonlight surrounded by nightjars. This scene struck me as important, it stimulated my visual imagination, and I made the picture quite intuitively without too much thought about its meaning.

After making the drawing I've re-listened to a couple of the podcasts and some aspects stood out to me and made me think again about the picture. In the episode on 'Childhood and Adolescents' Anne Rowe discusses Toby and Michael as a depiction of what she calls a 'perfect example of Murdochian unselfing'.⁴ Toby's thought processes move from confusion, and thinking about the effect of the kiss on him, to acceptance, and thinking more about Michael. He does this to the point that he becomes 'curiously protective of Michael'. In another episode on *The Bell* Frances White makes the point that the character of Michael can be seen in different lights.⁵ One reading is that he is a potential threat to young boys and men and is likely to continue a pattern of inappropriate behaviour beyond the end of the novel. Reconsidering my drawing, I think the resolution in the moonlight can be seen in the two figures, but the surrounding darker flurry of agitated birds might be portentous of a less resolved future.

The idea of paying attention is starting to seep into a number of my pieces. For example, the drawings *Smell the trees* and *The Listener* focus on using particular senses to experience our environment. *Orchard Avenue 1980* depicts a childhood memory of my delight at seeing my first bullfinch when I was about ten. This may even be seen as a kind of Murdochian idea visualised in a picture of a child's realisation that something exists outside himself, and his instinctive love for it. Forty years later, seeing a bullfinch is still an undiminished pleasure for me. *The five o'clock boat* shows my husband, Allen, making his Lego Titanic ship. This is, perhaps, a kind of mindful attention too. He is being watched over by birds that feature in a stained-glass window in the room. In the distance is a ferry which passes by on the nearby North Sea at 8am and 5pm each day – a kind of marking of time.

Swimming and water have also been themes in some of my work over the last few years. I started open-water swimming in lakes and sea about six years ago. Of course, as has been pointed out on the Iris Murdoch Podcast, Iris would have called this just – ‘swimming’.⁶ I find swimming outdoors very visually stimulating. For example, I swam in London at the Royal Victoria Docks which is quite exciting and eye-opening. I swim front crawl and so, when one breathes on both sides, you get a constantly changing set of glimpsed images of the city, such as buildings, bridges, and planes flying over, and I made a number of paintings that depict this. More recently, I have made several paintings inspired by the Fermanagh Lakes in Northern Ireland. For the last few summers I have stayed at Lough Erne. This is a large lake which I’ve enjoyed swimming and kayaking in. The water is very black and so the enjoyment is tempered by respect and a slight fear. Nearby, on Boa Island, is Caldragh Graveyard, which dates from the Irish early Christian period (400–800 AD). This small isolated graveyard is known for two carved stone statues called the Boa Island figure and the Lustymore Island figure. When I visited, offerings of coins and oranges had been made to the figures. Gravediggers were also laying flowers on a freshly filled-in grave. Soon after this visit I heard a story of a fisherman who had drowned at night in the lake. This lake was also close to a World War Two base for sea planes, and remnants of one of these ‘flying boats’ was found at the bottom of the lake in recent years. The combination of my experience of swimming in the lake as well as associated stories and places of interest around it has stimulated my visual imagination and resulted in number of paintings. For example, *Black Lake* emerged from the story about the fisherman but could be seen as a figure enclosed in a protective and unselfing element. *Hibernator* developed from several ideas. It is another example of the sleeping figure idea and suggests a figure taking

sanctuary. I have also made several ponds, and I'm always pleased to see frogs, so these visual images perhaps suggested the idea of hibernation. My drawing *The Bell* was inspired by Toby and Dora celebrating their retrieval of the ancient bell from the lake, but in my version they remain protected under the water and inside the bell.

I had made all of these images before I listened to the 'Iris Murdoch and Swimming' podcast. This episode, which really resonated with me, emphasised that more than half of Murdoch's novels have passages that describe swimming. Drowning and fear of drowning is a prominent aspect in her novels. The episode also touched on the indirect links between swimming, spirituality and philosophy in Murdoch, referencing ideas around certainty and mystery, clarity and muddiness, unselfing, grace, surrender, and connections to nature. I was especially struck by Hannah Marije Altorf's comment that 'if you go swimming in really dark and muddy water you're always wondering what might be underneath and it might be a monster or it might be a clock or it might just be a lot of bikes rusting away'.⁷ This revealed, for me, why I might have been interested in making these images of 'what lies beneath'. Thinking about it as I write, Hannah's comment might actually be a good basis for a painting!

Readers will probably know that many Murdoch novels feature art and often have a scene where an artwork tells some kind of truth to a character and potentially transforms their thinking. This is often in front of a 'great' painting in a major gallery. On a more modest and personal scale, I sometimes have similar experiences with my own work. Of course, I make my paintings and drawings but I don't always have a clear sense of what the final image will be. I often start with an idea that then evolves through a series of steps leading to the final

image. After a period of time, once a picture is finished (or I've just stopped working on it), it becomes a separate object outside myself which I can look at and decipher. This can illuminate for me something about myself or the world or makes concrete an idea, thought or memory.

An example of this is my painting *A boy comes home from school*. When I was eleven my dad died from cancer. About a week before, a bed had been put in the living room for him. One day I came home from school and said to my mum, 'I'll just go and see Dad'. She didn't want me to, but I went into the room anyway. My dad had passed away and this painting depicts the scene. What has been interesting for me is that the painting has made me learn something about the event. Each character is in their own zone and perhaps experiencing the event in different ways. The boy is passing through a transition. For events like this there is a before and an after. Nothing is the same after the event, which is a kind of 'journey'. So, although in one way it's obvious that the death of a parent is a transitional, life-changing event, my picture made this much clearer and literally visible to me over forty years after it happened.

In summary, through my paintings and drawings I've attempted to capture moments in time and the symbolism of the everyday. By immersing myself in the act of painting and drawing, I would like to think that I'm engaged in a process of deep attention, allowing the artworks to evolve organically and often incorporating unexpected elements. Murdoch and, importantly, the Iris Murdoch community have offered me new ideas to explore, new ways to interpret and think about my own work, and also a lot of enjoyment!

¹ 'Iris Murdoch and the Common Reader', the Iris Murdoch Podcast, 2 April 2021,

<<https://soundcloud.com/user-548804258/iris-murdoch-and-the-common-reader-podcast>>.

² For more information about the work produced by Carol Sommer and Matthew Richardson, see

<<https://www.carolsommer.net/>> and <<https://matthew-richardson.co.uk/>>

³ 'Iris Murdoch for Beginners', the Iris Murdoch Podcast, 21 Sept 2020, <<https://soundcloud.com/user-548804258/im-beginners-podcast>>

⁴ 'Childhood and Adolescents', the Iris Murdoch Podcast, 6 May 2023, <<https://soundcloud.com/user-548804258/childhood-and-adolescents-podcast>>

⁵ 'The Bell', the Iris Murdoch Podcast, 18 June 2020, <<https://soundcloud.com/user-548804258/the-bell-podcast>>

⁶ 'Iris Murdoch and Swimming', the Iris Murdoch Podcast, 25 August 2020,

<<https://soundcloud.com/user-548804258/iris-murdoch-and-swimming-podcast>>

⁷ 'Iris Murdoch and Swimming', the Iris Murdoch Podcast.