INTRODUCTION

Iris Murdoch had two studies in her final home, a house in Charlbury Road, Oxford; one was tucked quietly away upstairs at the back, the other was downstairs at the front and was lighter and more accessible. In the small, cluttered upstairs study, Murdoch worked from early in the morning on her philosophical writings and her novels, surrounded by more than a thousand books of philosophy, theology, fiction, poetry and travel. Later, in the afternoons, she retired to the lighter downstairs study where, sitting near the window at a roll-top desk that once belonged to J. R. R. Tolkien, she settled to write her letters. During the course of her life she wrote thousands of letters and was to be remembered fondly by her many friends, her students, would-be writers, interviewers, fans and the most casual of acquaintances, for being so generous with her time. She answered every letter she received, responding even to complete strangers with the utmost courtesy and grace.

All Murdoch’s letters were written by hand, many with her Montblanc fountain pen. She would spend up to four hours a day on her correspondence, often responding immediately to friends or lovers who were currently in her thoughts. Her official biographer, Peter J. Conradi, has suggested 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 both the role-playing involved in writing letters, and the information elicited through them, fed into Murdoch’s fiction. Unlike biographies, which usually offer coherent portraits of their subjects, letters provide a kaleidoscopic picture, their authors sometimes responding in remarkably different ways to different correspondents, even on the same day. Murdoch’s life (1919–99) spanned most of the twentieth century, and her letters give us not only the story of a life lived to capacity by an extraordinary woman, but also a sense of the zeitgeist of both England and Europe during the mid to late twentieth century.

Living on Paper: Letters from Iris Murdoch opens with correspondence from 1934–41, formative years full of raw intellectual excitement and political intensity. These letters written in her youth already demonstrate serious thinking about morality and the human condition. However, pitted against
the privileged future almost guaranteed by her Oxford education, loomed the shadow of the Second World War and by 1941 her life was taking turns she had never envisaged. Letters between 1942 and 1944 catalogue both the tedium of her conscripted work at the Treasury and her frustration at being excluded from the war effort. By contrast, letters written when she had been transferred by the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) to work in Europe convey both her satisfaction at being able to help displaced persons in Austria and her intoxicated delight with European philosophy and culture. She became enthralled by the intellectualism of café life in Paris and Brussels where, in October 1945, she met Jean-Paul Sartre. By this time she was committed to philosophy and determined to become a writer. The increasing complexity of the love relationships that characterise the letters of these years formed a pattern that would mark her life and her fiction for years to come.

Having resigned from UNRRA in 1946, in 1947 Murdoch became a postgraduate student for a year at Cambridge University, where she found the philosophical climate both stimulating and frustrating. In 1948 she took up a post as fellow and tutor in philosophy at St Anne’s in Oxford and letters written between this date and 1954 suggest her pleasure in teaching and learning and her enjoyment of college social life. More poignantly, they catalogue both her unrequited longing for the French writer Raymond Queneau – whom she had met in Innsbruck in 1946 and regarded as her intellectual soulmate – and her final dignified settling for his friendship. The years between 1955 and 1962 saw her fame as a writer rise dramatically and she became an important figure in British culture. Her letters to friends are nevertheless full of humility and empathy, although her compassion occasionally shades into a voyeuristic interest in their private lives. Her marriage in 1956 to John Bayley, that was to prove strong and enduring, ensured a reputable public image. However, her personal life was complicated, each of her many correspondents unaware of either the many others to whom Murdoch also wrote, or how often her life came perilously close to scandal. Even more complex and unwise emotional imbroglios, most notably with two of her students, dominate the letters from the Royal College of Art years (1963–7). Letters written during the extraordinarily productive years between 1968 and 1978, when she wrote a book almost every year, predominantly record intense relationships with two female friends, Philippa Foot and Brigid Brophy. The decade between 1979 and 1989 brought emotional calm, marital security and new enduring friendships that allowed a freer engagement with the politics and the cultural concerns of her time, most evident perhaps in her letters to the American lawyer Albert Lebowitz and his wife, Naomi Lebowitz, a professor of English and comparative literature at Washington University in St Louis. Living on Paper ends in 1995, a year in
which her letters begin to evidence the onset of the memory loss that was to worsen before her death from Alzheimer’s disease in 1999.

Iris Murdoch was a remarkably prolific author. She produced twenty-six novels, a body of philosophical writing which included a study of Sartre, two Platonic dialogues, over thirty essays and two seminal philosophical tracts, *The Sovereignty of Good* (1970) and *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (1992). She also wrote six plays, three of which were adaptations of her novels, a radio play and some poetry, of which only a small proportion has been published. Murdoch’s fame, though, came largely from her fiction. Although her novels have been accused of being patrician and socially narrow, they appeal to a wide range of readers. They manage to combine challenging highbrow intellectualism with gripping realism while the powerful passions and paralysing obsessions of her characters drive plots that are both fantastic and compelling. Her characters experience common moral and emotional dilemmas but many also undergo greater extremes of suffering, such as the anguish of male homosexual desire (at a time when it was illegal to act on it), or the transgressive pleasures and horrors of sadomasochism and incest. Above all, she was superb at portraying the madness of love and the way it can transform ordinary people into crazed and possessive beings. The reading public eagerly awaited the latest best-seller while scholars welcomed her fresh engagement with the works of philosophers such as Plato, Sartre and Simone Weil.

Despite her own reputation as a significant philosopher, Murdoch never wavered from her belief in the paramount importance of literature: ‘For both the collective and the individual salvation of the human race, art is doubtlessly more important than philosophy, and literature most important of all’. If the point of philosophy is to ‘clarify’, then the point of literature is to ‘mystify’ – or make her readers think. She believed that literature could touch people’s lives profoundly; philosophy less so because of its esoteric nature. Indeed, her artistic ambition was to construct a ‘moral psychology’ within her fiction that would enchant and challenge her readers intellectually and morally. While this intellectual rigour gave her novels originality and English fiction a distinctive new voice, Murdoch’s spellbinding narratives – which combine psychological complexity with humour, tolerance and a deep understanding of human frailty – ensured her continuing popularity with the general reader.

Murdoch’s versatility makes her fiction hard to categorise neatly, even in retrospect. She has been described variously as a surrealist, a magical realist and a fabulist. The theologian Don Cupitt remembers how, to those who read her novels as they appeared from the 1950s onwards, the most obvious comparison was not with the realists but ‘with the great Swedish film director Ingmar Bergman’. Her extensive and complex dialogues with other art
forms, in particular painting, challenge the definition of Murdoch as a realist writer in the conventional sense. Despite her claim to be working in the nineteenth-century tradition and her admiration for novelists such as Tolstoy, Dostoevsky and Henry James, she strongly asserted that she was driving the novel forward, not backward. ‘One can’t go back’, she said. ‘One’s consciousness is different; I mean our whole narrative technique is something completely different’.iv Her early novel, *The Sandcastle* (1957), alludes to Henry James’s short story ‘The Figure in the Carpet’ and thus implicitly chides critics who fail to see that aesthetics and form are as important to a story’s meaning as its plot and characters. The point of this reference was to alert readers to the experimentalism in her own writing: ‘there is a great deal of experimentation in the work, but I don’t want it to be too evident’, she once said.v The wording of a novel’s title often hints at the complex use of a symbol – a net, a bell, the sea, a dream, a severed head, a rose, a unicorn – that the reader will find within it. Titles also sometimes refer to groups whose meaning outstrips their superficial significance: angels, enchanters, philosophers, nuns, soldiers. Even simple words can carry huge symbolic weight in Murdoch’s work, marking her out as both a modern and a highly poetic novelist.

Many prizes for fiction came her way, including the James Tait Black Memorial Prize for *The Black Prince* (1973) and the Booker Prize for *The Sea, The Sea* (1978). Nonetheless, she fell out of fashion, both as a novelist and a philosopher, during the 1980s and 1990s. This partial eclipse occurred perhaps because her reputation became dogged by some reviewers’ dismissive claims that her novels deal only with the bourgeois sorrows of highly educated characters obsessed by their overcomplicated love lives. In academia, fired by structuralism and postmodernism, university departments were adopting a rigorously theoretical approach to the analysis of literary works, looking for evidence of Derridean wordplay and a desire to deconstruct absolutes while dismissing the idea that a literary text can have intrinsic and stable meaning. Murdoch’s novels – which uphold absolutes such as love and the Good and which promote the moral worth of art as a path to truth – were seen to fail such tests and were sidelined. It is true that she was suspicious of fashionable literary theories, in particular structuralism and deconstruction, which seem to privilege the linguistic system over the will and freedom of the individual, but in fact she engaged closely with contemporary philosophy, including Jacques Derrida’s work.

Murdoch’s eclipse lasted less than twenty years: since the late 1990s her writing has been internationally celebrated and her reputation revived. Her fiction is now hailed by many as a paradigm for morally responsible art and her philosophy is seen as important matter for debate in the field of virtue ethics. Since 2000 a raft of new publications on her work has emerged from
the UK, Europe, Japan and the USA. This global response is redefining Iris Murdoch as an eminent philosopher of the twentieth century and has triggered fresh interest in her fiction.

Recent research into Murdoch’s life has, however, revealed a number of enigmas and contradictions and these have occasioned both perplexity and fierce debate among her critics. Revelations about her personal life since the publication of Peter J. Conradi’s official biography in 2001 have sometimes been used to challenge the previously held image of her as a somewhat saintly puritanical figure. Bran Nicol, a subtle reader of her fiction, has described her as ‘a complex, sexualised being, capable of cruelty and deception as much as kindness and wit’. Even Conradi, whose biography is both comprehensive and compassionate, has more recently observed that her letters to Frank Thompson, a contemporary at Oxford to whom she became close and who was killed in the Second World War, can seem ‘arch and irritating’. He notes that Thompson was deeply hurt by Murdoch’s promiscuity and by her casual frankness about it in letters to him (in particular her taking M. R. D. Foot, a fellow Oxford student, and Thomas Balogh, an Oxford tutor, as lovers during the summer of 1943). Conradi even speculates that Thompson’s fateful decision to enter Bulgaria might have been in part prompted by the ‘unwelcome news’ received when he was in Serbia in 1944 about Murdoch’s affair with Foot: ‘was [Thompson’s] reckless disregard for his survival a peevish reprisal for her troubled love life?’ Martha Nussbaum, a careful interpreter of Murdoch’s philosophy, has claimed that Murdoch was unable to live up to her own definitions of moral goodness and that she was self-absorbed, controlling and predatory. In a measured epilogue to her most recent book on Iris Murdoch, Maria Antonaccio defends the author in the face of Nussbaum’s claims and warns against reading the work alongside the life in any simple way.

Perhaps the same caveat needs to be made in relation to reading Murdoch’s life through her letters. Effusive and emotionally weighted language in Murdoch’s correspondence can be misleading. Indeed her language frequently blurs the boundaries between platonic and sexual liaisons so that deciphering accurately the extent of intimacy is challenging. Her vocabulary is often of the kind most usually reserved for sexually intimate relationships: ‘I love you deeply’ or ‘I embrace you with much love’ are refrains throughout. But such language in Murdoch’s letters does not necessarily imply sexual intimacy and/or a desire for total commitment to one person. She was progressive, both in her advocacy of complete emotional and sexual freedom in relationships and in her sense of gender as something fluid rather than fixed.

For Murdoch, however, the highest form of love is the perception of individuals. Love is the extremely difficult realisation that something other than oneself is real. Such deep attention to the Other also occasions precisely
that emotional generosity and lack of possessiveness that her letters display, making room for the possibility of complete freedom. The person one loves should not be entrapped in one’s own fantasy world, as so often happens with Murdoch’s fictional characters. (The emotionally and sexually rapacious Charles Arrowby in *The Sea, The Sea* comes to mind here.)

Murdoch’s ‘love’ in this sense is enabling and not restricting, and sexual encounters in her fiction are often part of a healing process that allows characters to move on from debilitating obsessions (as, for example, in *The Green Knight* when the young, wounded Harvey Blackett and Sefton Anderson make love briefly and therapeutically). However, her best novels also portray the tension between freedom and obsession that she experienced herself; this tension is what makes her novels compulsive reading. She was well aware that love could enslave as well as liberate, and many letters in *Living on Paper* demonstrate Murdoch’s own obsessive desire for, or obsessive interest in, certain people at various points in her life. David Hicks, an Oxford contemporary, is replaced by Raymond Queneau, the French experimental writer, who is followed by the political philosopher Michael Oakeshott, the author Elias Canetti and the writer and activist Brigid Brophy as individuals with whom she cultivated intense and passionate liaisons. This pattern in her life has influenced the structure of *Living on Paper*; letters to specific people often appear in ‘blocks’, indicating periods of emotional obsession.

Such real-life experience undoubtedly flows into her portrayal of obsessive desire in her fiction, as do her own sexual relationships (which often took the form of ‘diffused eroticisms’ – erotically charged relationships that were deliberately not fully sexually consummated). And here we have another puzzle: in a letter to David Morgan written in mid-January 1972, Murdoch notes, ‘I disapprove of promiscuity’. The apparent contradiction between this statement and the fact that Murdoch had many lovers herself – and that she encouraged others to engage in such free relationships – is perhaps illuminated by the remark that follows: ‘To be oneself, free, whole, is partly a matter of escape from obsession, neurosis, fear, compulsions etc.’ Sexual freedom was for Murdoch just one aspect of a wider freedom – social and political – that is paradoxically and inevitably tied up with other people and their difference from oneself. For Murdoch, freedom is always defined within a relationship or a social context and so ‘love’ for her is ‘the imaginative recognition of, that is respect for, this otherness’. This is not to say that she was blind to the potential damage to others that such sexual freedom could bring in its wake, and this ambivalence is expressed in the novels repeatedly.

The reader is, then, faced with a choice: whether to see Murdoch’s many intimate relationships as an attempt to live out a liberal forward-thinking moral philosophy, or whether to see that philosophy as a convenient
legitimation of a personal freedom that, it could be argued, included a rather casual attitude to sexual relations and some emotional exploitation. In the end, it is for the reader to decide; *Living on Paper* adds another piece to the jigsaw of biographical information that helps us put together a picture of this complex and enigmatic personality. In trying to understand Murdoch’s chameleon nature, perhaps we would do well to remember her fondness for the myth of Proteus, who was able to change himself into any shape he wished, a myth that she used to assuage John Bayley’s occasional anxiety about their marriage:

> It was in reply to my despairing comment that I couldn’t understand her, or the different person she became for the many others with whom she seemed, in my view, helplessly entangled. ‘Remember Proteus’, she used to say. ‘Just keep tight hold of me and it will be all right.’ [. . .] When Hercules held tightly on to him throughout all these transformations he was compelled in the end to surrender, and to resume his proper shape as the man he was.

*Living on Paper* tells Murdoch’s life story in her own words and provides a rather different portrait from those currently available. Her letters vividly convey her wonderful sense of humour and her sometimes wicked irreverence – thereby providing a sharp contrast to the almost austere and serious tone of many formal interviews and some previous accounts of her life. Moreover, her relationships with Michael Oakeshott and Brigid Brophy, to name but two of her correspondents, are fully documented for the first time in this volume. Her letters also give unique glimpses into the minutiae that made up her everyday life and they record her frequent travels, mostly omitted from biographical accounts; she was deeply interested in and stimulated by other cultures and traditions and eager to communicate her experiences on paper to lovers and friends. Her love of painting and languages and her desire to understand them better are displayed in many letters, as is her constant openness to new writers and new ideas. She was not intellectually or emotionally closed in any way and this openness contributed to the development of both her fiction and her philosophy. She was not closed, either, to the difficulties facing others and her letters are full of many small and sometimes extravagant acts of kindness and offers of help. Her lifelong insecurity about her own abilities is often painfully evident, as is her modesty about her achievements (she rarely used the title of ‘Dame’). Although *Living on Paper* paints a picture of immense energy and commitment, we should remember that it represents only a fragment of the activity that produced a remarkable body of work.

Finally, the great value of Murdoch’s letters – which are often direct and very intimate – is that they give the reader a strong and lively sense of what
Iris Murdoch was like, not only as a novelist or philosopher, but also as a woman living out her daily life. If Murdoch’s philosophy gives us a picture of a gifted intellectual and her novels convey her abiding interest in moral psychology and the contingency of life, Murdoch’s letters show us a warm and complicated woman who loved life but who also frequently struggled with a sense of her own frailty and who endured dark episodes. Surprisingly, perhaps, few letters engage with philosophical ideas and theories in any depth; readers must turn back to her philosophy for that. Instead, they give us a portrait of a woman who lived unconventionally and according to her own moral code; of a complex individual whose reactions to others and world events were often intense and frequently irreverent; of a woman whose ideas and values changed profoundly over the years. However, the young Communist does not simply follow the predictable pattern of metamorphosing into the old conservative as the years pass: reactionary thoughts often jostle with radical ideas, even during the last phase of her life. Because they document so vividly the complexity of their author, Murdoch’s letters constitute a distinct aspect of her writing persona: they are not merely an addition to her *œuvre*, but an integral part of it, both illuminating and complicating our understanding of her philosophy and her fiction.

**Editorial Matters**

The 3,200 or so letters written by Iris Murdoch and held in the Iris Murdoch Archives at Kingston University, London, were the first inspiration for *Living on Paper*. Of the sixty runs held there, we selected letters from Murdoch to Marjorie Boulton, Brigid Brophy, Elias Canetti (copies), Roly Cochrane, Peter Conradi, Scott Dunbar, Rachel Fenner, Philippa Foot, Lucy Klatschko (Sister Marian), Georg Kreisel (copies), Michael Levey, Hal Lidderdale, Leo Pliatzky, Raymond Queneau, Suguna Ramanathan, Wallace Robson and Harry Weinberger. We have also accessed letters from many other archives in the UK and abroad, and read in excess of 5,000 when making our selection for this volume.

Five letters to Frank Thompson and eighteen to David Hicks that are held in the Bodleian Library, Oxford, have previously been published in Peter J. Conradi’s *A Writer at War: Letters and Diaries 1938–46*. They are included here because they document how important both these relationships were to Murdoch’s emotional development, and because they are historically and biographically relevant.

We have also chosen to include information about Murdoch’s relationships with certain individuals who are not represented by any letters in this volume but who were important to her. They include her two Oxford colleagues, Peter Ady and Margaret Hubbard, and her lover Franz Steiner, letters to whom have either been destroyed or were not accessible when we compiled
Living on Paper. Also, two disproportionately short letter runs from the Conradi Archive at Kingston University serve only fleetingly to represent Murdoch’s love for two highly significant figures in her life, Elias Canetti and Sister Marian of Stanbrook Abbey. These relationships were profoundly important to Murdoch and to omit them from the overview of her life would be to diminish it; they therefore feature in our narrative despite the paucity or absence of letters. Sadly, we could not locate any letters to John Bayley.

Living on Paper is not an exhaustive account of Murdoch’s epistolary history. Letters to some significant figures in her life (such as Vladimir Bukovsky, A. S. Byatt, Honor Tracy and Richard Wollheim) are not included, either because they have been destroyed or because they were unavailable at the time of writing. Nor have we included letters from two other recently published collections of letters: Geoffrey Meyers’s Remembering Iris Murdoch and Gillian Dooley and Graham Nerlich’s edited correspondence between Iris Murdoch and the Australian philosopher Brian Medlin. While both collections are noteworthy in relation to Murdoch’s friendships, readers can easily access these volumes independently.

Limitations of space have meant that some fascinating letter runs that are held in the Iris Murdoch Archives at Kingston University, or that have been loaned to us, have been omitted, for example letters to the architect Stephen Gardiner, to Murdoch’s former student Julian Chrysostomides, to her philosopher friend Denis Paul and to the painter Barbara Dorf. Other important runs held at Kingston that are only minimally represented here include letters to Roly Cochrane, an American fan of her work, and her painter friend, Harry Weinberger. Reading these letter runs, however, helped us to understand more fully Murdoch’s personality and the way her mind worked – and therefore aided us in the selection and editing of the letters that are included.

To cut down on distracting apparatus in the letters, readers will find biographical profiles of all correspondents, close friends and other significant figures in the Directory of Names and Terms at the end of Living on Paper. Other names, of less significance and perhaps mentioned only once or twice in the letters, are explained in footnotes. The Directory also includes brief explanations of important philosophical movements, and profiles of certain philosophers and writers whose work influenced Murdoch.

For the ease of the reader – and to save space – we have occasionally removed from letters: detailed information concerning arrangements for future meetings; repetition of information from one letter to another; some cryptic comments that are so esoteric as to be impenetrable or meaningless; references to people or events that are either insignificant or that we cannot account for or explain adequately. Such omissions are indicated in the usual way with ellipses. There are a handful of individuals whose identities we
have been unable to explain, despite our best efforts; as these are minor characters in the tapestry of Murdoch’s life we hope readers will not be too distracted by them. In order to protect the privacy of certain individuals we have anonymised them by using names that are not their own.

Dating Murdoch’s letters has been largely a process of sleuthing. While her early letters do usually include day and month (e.g. 4 October), she often omits the year. Later letters are sometimes not dated at all. Fortunately many of the letters were kept in their original envelopes by her correspondents and have been dated from postmarks where these are legible. Other letters have been dated from content or by liaising with still living correspondents. Any date, or part of date, that appears in square brackets signifies either date of posting (rather than date of writing) or is a date that has been deduced by us. Where we have had to guess a date, or part of it, we have included a question mark. All letters selected for inclusion were checked by more than one transcriber and sustained attempts were made to decipher any remaining illegible words; there are therefore very few gaps within letters due to illegibility.

Despite our best efforts, Living on Paper might still contain errors; these are our responsibility alone and we would be pleased to hear from readers with any relevant information and corrections. We would also be pleased to hear from anyone possessing, or knowing of, any letters written by Iris Murdoch that are not already in the public domain.