

Editorial: Elegy for Iris

For many philosophers, Iris Murdoch is a guiding light. In 1961, her essay 'Against Dryness' (*Encounter*, January 1961) sounded a clarion call against the conventional wisdom of the age. According to that wisdom, in her words, 'We no longer see man against a background of values, of realities which transcend him. We picture man as a brave naked will surrounded by an easily comprehended empirical world. For the hard idea of truth we have substituted a facile idea of sincerity.'

Those who followed Iris Murdoch through her subsequent philosophical writings, in which she developed another wisdom, will have felt themselves to be on a voyage of discovery. The final destination of the voyage, if final destination there was, would remain as elusive as the need to undertake it was compelling.

As many will know, Dame Iris is now suffering from Alzheimer's disease. In his 'Elegy for Iris: Scenes from an Indomitable Marriage' (*New Yorker*, 25 July 1998), John Bayley writes that his wife 'is not sailing into the dark. The voyage is over and, under the dark escort of Alzheimer's, she has arrived somewhere.' Alzheimer's disease is a cruel and frightening condition, the apparent disintegration of all we are and hope. Bayley describes all of that, with unbearable poignancy, interspersing the collapse of the present with memories of their younger days together. But he also tells us how, in Iris Murdoch's case, Alzheimer's, 'which can accentuate personality traits to the point of demonic parody, seems only to accentuate the natural goodness in her ... she seems to become the presence found in an icon.' In her philosophy and her novels Iris Murdoch taught us to go beyond the clichés of academic thought. In her declining days she may yet lead us to reconsider other clichés.