Attending to the other

reviewed by Ralph C. Wood in the May 19, 1999 issue

Elegy for Iris.
By John Bayley. St. Martin's, 275 pp.

The literary critic John Bayley has written a deeply affecting lament for his late wife, the philosopher and novelist Iris Murdoch, as she disappeared into the insidious fog of Alzheimer's. She died at roughly the same time the book was published, in January of this year. Yet Bayley's book is not only a threnody; it is also an epithalamium, a nuptial hymn offered in praise of their 40-some years of marriage. In celebrating their special sort of love, a love that the horrors of mental illness could not destroy, Bayley also discloses the appeal as well as the limits of his wife's work.

Murdoch was the author of 26 novels as well as important essays on metaphysics and morals. In both her philosophy and her fiction she was concerned to combat what she called "the fat relentless ego." Murdoch was vigorously opposed to the modern notion of the subjective self as one's own personal project, an endless exercise in the making of autonomous choices. This omnivorous self is obsessed with its own needs, Murdoch believed. It reduces everything to its own dimensions and devours everyone who gets in its way.

Murdoch's work was dedicated to the counternotion that we are formed by radical acts of attention to people and things other than ourselves. We escape our egomania and discover the world in all of its excellent otherness, she argued, by assuming roles and mastering skills that take us out of our minuscule selves. Art, she maintained, is the disciplined act of seeing which seeks to honor the reality of the other. Hence the inseparable link between art and ethics. They both depend upon the imagination of otherness, and they both constitute forms of love as Murdoch defined it: "the extremely difficult realization that something other than oneself is real."

For more than half a century, Bayley and Murdoch were the married practitioners of such love. He quotes novelist Anthony Powell's observation that marriage does not resemble any other human experience in the smallest degree. It is this strange and

wondrous quality of wedded life that Bayley celebrates. He commends the Australian poet A. D. Hope for offering a precise if paradoxical description of true conjugal union. A deeply married couple, said Hope, "moves closer and closer apart." Bayley and Murdoch found that their apartness was essential to their closeness. "One of the truest pleasures of marriage," he writes, "is solitude." This man and wife never expected to "grow" in their marriage, as so many couples do. Marriage was simply the social fact of their lives, the ground bass of the complex harmony which they sought to make.

Far from walling themselves off from the world, marriage provided Bayley and Murdoch the distance necessary to pursue individual interests without fear of rivalry or abandonment. When their concerns coincided—as in their devotion to good food and wine, to great books and art, to swimming naked in almost any river or stream—their love was rendered all the more rapturous. Yet they were also free to care about things that they did not have in common, and to be absent from each other without feeling lonely or bereft. So instinctive was their sympathy and understanding that they didn't need always to make them articulate. "Apartness in marriage," Bayley writes, "is a state of love, not a function of distance, or preference, or practicality."

Some readers will be appalled at the apartness which Bayley and Murdoch in fact practiced. She carried on a series of extramarital affairs which, we learn, caused him no great grief. Bayley contends that Murdoch fell in love with other men not for the sake of sexual conquest, but in admiration of their godlike learning and authority. These were adventures of the mind and soul more than the body. Her novel *The Nice and the Good* centers on fictional versions of such dalliances. So little did they spring from Murdoch's egotism that she could return from her lover's bed to her husband's without any sense of marital betrayal. Neither of them looked upon sex in the modern fashion as a performance sport which requires us to strive after ever new records by ever more extravagant efforts. They made fun of our culture's joyless carnality by way of witty palindromes: "Sex at noon taxes."

Bayley speaks repeatedly of Murdoch's natural goodness, her completely uncensorious character. Indeed, he calls her an *anima naturaliter Christiana*. She was a naturally Christian soul, he contends, because she lived without guile or scorn and yet also without formal religion. Her happily godless childhood left her immune to it. William James would have called her one of the world's once-born, those souls who require no radical rebirth. Murdoch was imbued with a modesty so genuine,

Bayley argues, that she was utterly unaware of it. Having no urge to get on in society, Murdoch cared hardly at all for honors and possessions. They mattered as little to her as her own existence. Nor was she troubled when her husband interrupted the daily routine of her writing, whereas he would snarl whenever she broke his own work's continuity. That their house was a veritable pigsty of dirt and disorder bothered her not a whit.

Bayley is right to link Murdoch's unselfish personality to the richness and variety of her fictional plots and characters. Murdoch possessed something of the Protean selflessness that animates the work of Keats and Shakespeare. Like them, she was so identity-free that she could imagine her way into completely alien lives and deeds. "Iris once told me," Bayley notes, "that the question of identity had always puzzled her. She thought she herself hardly possessed such a thing, whatever it was. I said that she must know what it was like to be oneself, even to revel in the consciousness of oneself, as a secret and separate person—a person unknown to any other. She smiled, was amused, looked uncomprehending. It was not something she was bothered about."

Bayley is admirably candid about the limits of his wife's literary work. He admits that her fiction displays almost no historical sense. And despite the exuberant ingenuity of her plots, she was rarely able to inhabit the inward life of her characters. There is something slightly incredible about them. "Her awareness of others is transcendental rather than physical," Bayley confesses. "She communes with their higher being, as an angel might, and is unconcerned with their physical existence, their sweaty selves." One suspects that her sexual infidelities had the same angelic quality.

Bayley connects Murdoch's gnostic bent of mind to her peaceful descent into the awful anonymity of Alzheimer's. Having no strong sense of identity, she did not struggle against the obliteration of her own particularity. She went gently into the dark night of personal oblivion. Bayley reports that her face gradually assumed the leonine passivity of a typical Alzheimer's patient, "the broad expressionless mask" that has little but a blank behind it. The daily airing of Teletubbies became this once-rigorous philosopher's chief delight in life.

Those who care about Murdoch's work will welcome Bayley's plangent account of the ways, both funny and sad, that Alzheimer's ravaged her life. It will also attract readers concerned about the slippery question of faith and art. Although Bayley has

personal reasons for describing his wife as a natural Christian, it's clear from her writings that she is to be numbered among pagans like Virgil and Plato. As a thoroughgoing Platonist, Murdoch professed an abiding belief in the sovereign Good, not in the sovereign God of Christian tradition. Her literary ingenuity was surely a product of the benevolent paganism associated with such philosophical faith. Since her own identity was so wondrously selfless, she became wondrously inventive. Would Murdoch have become a lesser writer if she had become a Christian?

It is altogether fitting that Murdoch should have likened her condition to that of Proteus. This figure from Greek mythology could assume a myriad of animal shapes, both benign and monstrous, until Hercules clutched and forced him to resume his proper human form. "Remember Proteus," Murdoch would say to Bayley in the early years of their marriage. "Just keep tight hold of me and it will be all right."

Elegy for Iris is a remarkable testament to the way that, even to the desolate end, Bayley the faithful husband held hard to his shape-shifting wife as she lost the lineaments of her being. This reader also wonders whether Bayley's saving grasp may have signaled the embrace not only of the sovereign good but also of the sovereign God—the grip not of a human Hercules, but the clasp of Murdoch's ultimate Other, the One to whom she offered unwitting homage in seeking always to imagine otherness.