



Age will win

Iris Murdoch's fall could not have been more marked: perhaps the greatest novelist of her generation, she was reduced to a state of perpetual puzzlement by Alzheimer's. Martin Amis gets the first look at Richard Eyre's tender, raw portrait of her decline

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'Like being chained to a corpse, isn't it?' This remark was offered to John Bayley by a fellow-sufferer in an Alzheimer marriage. He found himself "repelled" by the simile, and didn't care to give it the demolition it deserved. A corpse, we may reflect, has several modest virtues: it is silent, stationary, and, above all, utterly predictable. A corpse, so to speak, has done its worst. In addition, a corpse is not loved, and a corpse will not die.

Moreover, the corpse John Bayley was allegedly chained to was Iris Murdoch: the pre-eminent female English novelist of her generation, and some would say (Updike is one of them) the pre-eminent English novelist of her generation period. There can be no argument about the depth, the complexity, and indeed the beauty of Murdoch's mind: the novels attest to this. And so the terror and pity evoked by Alzheimer's are in her case much sharpened. Bayley gave us that tragedy in three leisurely acts, namely *Iris*, *Iris and the Friends*, and the more tangential and novelistic *Widower's House*. The recent movie, *Iris*, unfolds the story before our eyes in 100 minutes.

Very broadly, literature concerns itself with the internal, cinema with the external. In Bayley's meditative trilogy, the agony is partly eased by the consolations of philosophy, by the elegant and entirely natural detours into Proust, Hardy, Tolstoy, James. Richard Eyre's movie, on the other hand, for all its subtlety and tenderness, is excruciatingly raw. As you collect yourself while the credits roll, you find you have developed a lively admiration for cancer.

The Bayleys were eccentric - "out of centre" - in their complementary brilliance (he is a novelist, a quondam poet, a literary critic of effortless fluidity). But they were also famously eccentric in their temperament and habits; and if you're an American, you don't know the type. They're the kind of people who like being ill and like getting old, who prefer winter to summer and autumn to spring (yearning for "grey days without sun"). They want rain, gloom, isolation, silence. "We had no TV of course," writes Bayley, commalessly; and the reluctant acquisition of a radio feels like a surrender to the brashest promiscuity. The Bayleys were further cocooned and united, it has to be said, by their commitment to extreme squalor.

At their place, even the soap is filthy. "Single shoes [and single socks] lie about the house as if deposited by a flash flood...Dried-out capless plastic pens crunch underfoot." An infestation of rats is found to be "congenial, even stimulating". Every where they go, they have to hurdle great heaps of books, unwashed clothes, old newspapers, dusty wine bottles. The plates are stained, the glasses "smeary". The bath, so seldom used, is now unusable; the mattress is "soggy"; the sheets are never changed. And we shall draw a veil over their underwear. On one occasion a large, recently purchased meat pie "disappeared" in their kitchen. It was never found. The kitchen ate it.

One of the unforeseen benefits of having children is that it delivers you from your own childishness: there's no going back. John and Iris, naturally, did not toy long with the idea of becoming parents; it was themselves they wished to nurture ("two quaint children" and "co-child" are typical Bayleyisms). This is intimately connected to their embrace of dirt and clutter, a clear example of *nostalgie de la boue* - literally, homesickness for the mud, for the stickiness and ooze of childhood, babyhood, wombhood. The plan seems to work. Professor Bayley and Dame Iris are crustily cruising into a triumphant old age. And then a three-year-old comes to stay, to live, to die.

It is Iris Murdoch.

Richard Eyre's movie is devotedly faithful to the main lines of Bayley's narrative. Yet there is also an undertow of creative defiance. He has taken a highly unusual story about two very singular people - a story saturated with oddity, quiddity, exceptionality - and he has imbued it with the universal. How?

In the Iris books, Bayley glides around in time and space, indulging his "intellectual being", in Milton's phrase, "the thoughts that wander through eternity". Eyre, characteristically, is direct and rigorous, almost geometrical in his approach. He constructs a double time-scheme of present and past, and lays down a reciprocal rhythm of back and forth, ebb and flow. Throughout, the film tremulously oscillates between the 1950s, when the two principals are just entering each other's force fields, and the 1990s, and the protracted visit from "the dark doctor": Doctor A.

Thus, in the opening scenes, we watch the young Iris riding her bicycle (comfortably outspeeding the more timorous John), her head thrown back in exhilaration, appetite, dynamism; she is rushing forward to meet the fabulous profusion of her talent. Then we fade to the elderly Iris, in the chaos of her study, working on what will be her final fiction. In the margin she writes out, again and again, the word "puzzled". "Puzzled" puzzles her; she is puzzled by "puzzled". "All words do that when you take them by surprise," says her husband, comfortingly. Iris puzzles on; and in her eyes we see an infinity of fear. "It will win" is the pathologist's prognosis. It will win: age will win. Eyre's emphasis is very marked. Iris becomes a tale of everyman and everywoman; it is about the tragedy of time.

What scenarists would call the "back story" is a comedy of courtship. A vital symmetry establishes itself here, because young John is younger than young Iris (31 to her 37) and most decidedly the junior partner. He is a lovestruck provincial virgin with a bad stammer. She is a robust bohemian and free spirit; and he soon learns "how fearfully, how almost diabolically attractive" she is to all men (and most women). Her numerous lovers are artists and scholars, big brains, dominators. And her greatest resource is the private universe of her imagination. This, though, turns out to be John's entrée. In at least two senses, Iris settles for him, however lovingly. She intuits that domesticity - and the scruffier the better - will liberate her art.

The "front story", the age story, begins with the onset of the disease, and spans the five years between diagnosis and death. Soon, "the most intelligent woman in England" (Bayley's plausible evaluation) is watching the Teletubbies with a look of awed concentration on her face. This is now Iris at her best. A clinging, smothering dependence is punctuated by spells of terrifying agitation; she rattles the latch; she bolts, she flees. Alzheimer's is symmetrical, too, in its way: each new impoverishment reduces the awareness of loss. It is John's sufferings that multiply; and we are not spared his surges of rage, bitterness, and contempt. He had always wanted to possess her mind and its secrets. Now, as total master, he does possess it. And there's nothing there. Murdoch-readers won't mind (because they already know), but the movie never quite gives a sense of the intellectual height from which she fell.

Certain cerebrovascular disasters are called "insults to the brain". As already noted, the more prodigious the brain, the more studious (and in this case protracted) the insult. Iris's brain was indeed prodigious. Returning to her novels, with hindsight, we get a disquieting sense of their wild generosity, their extreme innocence and skittishness, their worrying unpredictability. Her world is ignited by belief. She believes in everything: true love, veridical visions, magic, monsters, pagan spirits. She doesn't tell you how the household cat is looking, or even feeling: she tells you what it is thinking. Her novels constitute an extraordinarily vigorous imperium. But beneath their painterly opulence runs the light fever of fragility, like an omen.

Eyre's film is built on the cornerstones of four performances. As the young Iris, Kate Winslet is slightly hampered by the conventionality of her good looks; but the seriousness and steadiness of her gaze effectively suggest the dawning amplitude of the Murdoch imagination. Hugh Bonneville and Jim Broadbent play Bayley quite seamlessly (their stutters must have been calibrated by stopwatch); much more is asked of Broadbent, of course, and it is duly given. As for Judi Dench, as the mature Iris: she is transcendent. I knew Iris; I have respectfully kissed that cunning, bashful, secretive smile. It is as if Dame Judi and Dame Iris were always on a metaphysical collision course. Her performance has the rarest quality known to any art - that of apparent inevitability.

Maritimers talk of a turn in the tide as the moment when the waves "reconsider". Over and above its piercing juxtapositions of youth and age, Iris has an oceanic feel, and this provides a further symmetry. Although she

never cared for George Eliot (or, relevantly, for bath water), as Bayley notes, Iris's "wholly different plots and beings remind me of Maggie Tulliver in *The Mill on the Floss* saying, 'I am in love with moistness.'" And *Against Dryness* was one of the more famous of her philosophical essays. The imagery of *Eyre's* film is against dryness: the lakes and rivers in which John and Iris habitually immersed themselves; the sea, of course (Iris's key novel was *The Sea, the Sea*); and the rain, the rain, that seemed to hide them from the world. Hold yourself in readiness, too, for the floods of your tears.

Footnote. In the row behind me at the screening of *Iris* sat John: Professor Bayley. When I staggered up to him, afterwards, it seemed to me that, of the dozen of us in the theatre, John was easily the most composed. He wasn't undone by *Iris*, as we were. He had already lived it. He alone was perfectly prepared.

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