

LIVING ON PAPER

LIVING ON PAPER
LETTERS FROM IRIS MURDOCH
1934–1995

IRIS MURDOCH

Edited by Avril Horner and Anne Rowe

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*For our grandchildren: Rhiannon, Ffion, Owain,
Iestyn, Eirian and Huw Rowe*

and

Samuel, Felix, Lulu, Elise and Dexter Horner

Yet words are so damned important now that we're living on paper again. I shall want words from you – and words and words! Write all that you think, sweetheart, including the doubts and terrors. Write all that you think and feel.

Iris Murdoch to David Hicks, 5 January 1946

I can live in letters.

Iris Murdoch to Philippa Foot, June 1968

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Cedar Lodge, Steeple Aston. *By Janet Stone with kind permission of the Reynolds and Janet Stone Estate.*

Iris Murdoch and John Bayley in the garden of Cedar Lodge, Steeple Aston. *From the Murdoch Archives at Kingston University.*

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Iris Murdoch taking tea in the garden at Litton Cheney. *By Janet Stone with kind permission of the Reynolds and Janet Stone Estate.*

Iris Murdoch accepting the Booker Prize for *The Sea, The Sea* in 1978, with A. J. Ayer and Booker director Michael Caine. *Permission to reproduce by Oxford Brookes University, holder of The Booker Prize Archive.*

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Iris Murdoch swimming. *By Janet Stone, with kind permission of the Reynolds and Janet Stone Estate.*

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John Bayley, Iris Murdoch, Peter Conradi and Cloudy (Anax in *The Green Knight*). *By kind permission of Peter Conradi.*

Iris Murdoch at her desk at Charlbury Road, Oxford.

Objects in Iris Murdoch's study in Charlbury Road, Oxford. *By Chris Thomas, from the Iris Murdoch Archives at Kingston University.*

Iris Murdoch's desk in Charlbury Road, Oxford. *By Chris Thomas, from the Iris Murdoch Archives at Kingston University.*

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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'ⁱ – 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 post-graduate 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'.ⁱⁱ 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'.ⁱⁱⁱ 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'.^{vi} 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?'.^{vii} 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.^{viii} 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.^{ix}

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'.^x 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'^{xi} – 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'.^{xii} 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.^{xiii} 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.^{xiv}

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 *oeuvre*, 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*.^{xv} 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^{xvi} at Kingston University serve only fleetingly to represent Murdoch's love for two highly significant figures in her life, Elias Canetti^{xvii} 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.^{xviii} 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.

PART ONE:

Schoolgirl and Student

August 1934 to December 1941

Iris Murdoch was born on 15 July 1919 at 59 Blessington Street, North Dublin, her mother's home town. She and her mother soon moved to 12 Caithness Road, Hammersmith in London to join her father, Hughes Murdoch, who had taken the post of second-class clerk at the Ministry of Health in 1919 after having served as second lieutenant in the 1st King Edward's Horse regiment during the First World War. In 1926 the Murdochs moved to 4 Eastbourne Road, Chiswick where the family of three, remembered with great fondness by Murdoch as 'a perfect trinity of love',ⁱ was to live for many years. Although they lived in London, they returned to Ireland most years for holidays. At the age of five, Murdoch was sent to the Froebel Demonstration School at Colet Gardens, Hammersmith where she was very happy, later recalling those years as a time of 'light, of freedom' during which she enjoyed 'the great greedy pleasures of learning, the calm kindly authority of teachers, the instant amiability of the children'.ⁱⁱ Excelling at all aspects of her learning, she was made head girl in her final year. In 1932, Murdoch won one of the two open scholarships to Badminton School, Bristol, a small, 'internationally minded', 'forward-looking', tolerant and liberal institution with only 163 girls, of whom ninety-six were boarders.ⁱⁱⁱ After an unhappy and homesick start, she soon settled in and began to thrive on its atmosphere of rigorous learning and left-wing politics. In 1938 she was awarded an Open Exhibition to read English at Somerville College, Oxford. She quickly changed direction, however, moving to Classics in order to study 'Mods' (Greek and Latin language and literature) and 'Greats' (philosophy and ancient history). Here she met Mary Scrutton (later to become Mary Midgley), Philippa Bosanquet (later to become Philippa Foot), David Hicks, Frank Thompson, M. R. D. Foot, Hal Lidderdale and Leo Pliatzky, who would all feature significantly in her life.

The short run of eleven early letters that comprise this section spans the years from 1934, when Murdoch was a fifteen-year-old at Badminton School, to the end of 1941, when she was in her final year at Oxford. A number are to her school friend, Ann Leech, the youngest daughter of a Manchester doctor, whom she met on her first day at Badminton and who was to become a lifelong friend. Murdoch's future talents and interests are already evident: the teenager's excited recording of a dramatic incident on a family holiday in Ireland presages more mature impulses to transform life into narrative. An early love of the visual arts, as well as a determination to paint, foreshadows her courting the company of painters and the inclusion of favourite paintings in her novels. Her enthusiastic reading of Gorki and Mallarmé anticipates her subsequent intoxication with European philosophy and literature.

The zeitgeist of the late 1930s generated a fierce left-wing political idealism, and Murdoch became heavily involved in Labour Club activities and joined the Communist Party soon after arriving at Oxford. On the one hand she loathed politics, much preferring the study of Classics; on the other she believed that in such times no one had any choice but to be politically engaged. Her radical leanings are expressed in her letters to Ann Leech and include an animated account of 'The Festival of Music for the People' at the Royal Albert Hall in 1939. Her Communist sympathies had stripped her of the Protestantism of her youth and she defined her religion at this point in her life as a passionate belief in the beautiful and a faith in the ultimate triumph of the people. In 1939 she shared the common anxiety that Britain might be overrun by Nazis in the near future; indeed, in March of that year some of her Oxford contemporaries, including Frank Thompson and Leo Pliatzky, acted in and produced their own play, *It Can Happen Here*, which imagined Britain as a fascist state.^{iv} Later that year Murdoch performed with an acting troupe, the Magpie Players, a travelling theatre comprising young men and women from Oxford who toured the West Country from 28 August to 16 September 1939, performing in small theatres, village halls, schools and in the open air. All proceeds were donated to various humanitarian organisations. Murdoch became fully aware of the privileged life she led during the war years that followed, when so many were suffering and dying, and in 1940 confessed to Eduard Fraenkel, her tutor, that she felt guilty about her inability to participate in the war effort. One of the central tenets of her philosophy, that morally improving the self is a fundamental prerequisite for a healthy society, is seen to emerge during these years, as does persistent insecurity about her intellectual abilities. In a more intimate vein, Murdoch confides to Ann Leech that she already has the capacity to be in love with six men at once. Such 'complications and distresses' will continue well into her adult life and will also feature in the fictional lives of her characters.

To Ann Leech, written from Ireland where Murdoch was on holiday with her parents.



15 Mellifont Av
Kingstown
Co. Dublin
29 August 1934

Dear Ann,

Hello! A grey and relentless sky has been pouring rain on us for the last week, and the sun has forgotten how to shine.

I will come to Manchester on September 4th, Tuesday, by the train arriving at London Road station at 2.10 p.m., 10.30 from Euston. Will that be all right? Please write to 4 Eastbourne Rd and say if it is.

Great excitement here! Last Sunday week night (that sounds queer) a terrible storm got up, and on Monday morning about 8 a.m. the first maroon¹ went for the lifeboat. I was in the bathroom at the time. I never got washed so quick as I did then. I was dressed and doing my hair when the second maroon went. Then I flew out of the house. Doors were banging all the way down the street, and the entire population of Dun Laoghaire² seemed to be running to the harbour. Doodle (Daddy) and my cousin had already left with the first maroon.

The lifeboat was in the harbour mouth when I arrived. I asked a man what was up. A yacht had evidently broke its moorings and drifted out of the harbour or something, anyway we could just see it on the horizon. A high sea was running and I was glad to have my mackintosh with me. I dashed down the pier – which by the way is a mile long – and was drenched by the spray and the waves breaking over the pier. The sand whipped up by the wind, drove in clouds and I got some in my eye, which hurt like anything.

The lifeboat had an awful job, it was pitching and tossing, and once we thought it was going down, but it got to the yacht, which turned out to be empty, and towed it back amid the enthusiastic cheers of the populace. Three

¹ A firework intended to imitate the noise of a cannon, used especially as a warning.

² Town on the east coast of Ireland, about seven miles (11 km) south of Dublin.

other yachts broke their moorings in the harbour, of these, two went down, and the other was saved and towed to calmer waters just as it was dashing itself to pieces against the pier. That was a great thrill. The next excitement was a huge German liner – three times as big as the mail boat – that anchored in the bay. It was too big to get into the harbour. Launches took the passengers ashore and the officers conversed in German, much to everyone's delight. The ship was touring Ireland and the tourists were taken in buses round the Wicklow Mountains. Today they are raising one of the yachts that sunk.

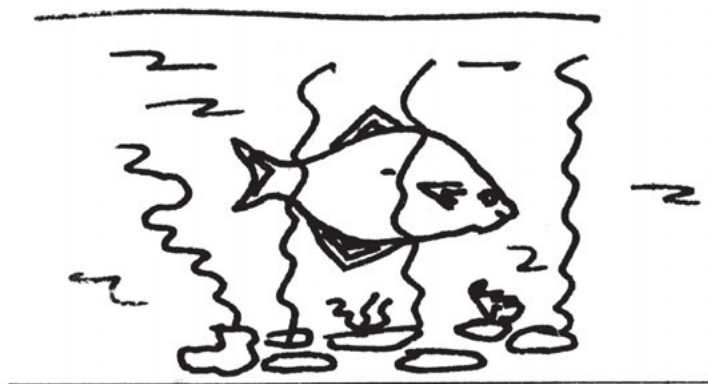
We go back to England tomorrow, and I hope we have a better crossing this time. Goodbye Ann.

See you on Tuesday.

Lots of love

From

Iris



To Ann Leech.

Badminton School

Bristol

17 July 1938

Dear Ann,

You angel! Thanks ever so much. Your present was *Lust for Life* by Irving Stone – a novel about Van Gogh. I read it most of Friday, finished it about 6.30 – 500 large pages, not bad going – and shall probably change it tomorrow! I may add 2s 6d and get Herbert Read's *Art Now*.¹ I haven't quite decided. *Lust*

¹ Published in 1933. Read was a champion of modern British artists such as Paul Nash, Ben Nicholson, Henry Moore and Barbara Hepworth. Between 1933 and 1938 he was editor of the trendsetting *Burlington Magazine*.

for Life was terrific. It just knocked me off my feet – I had no idea Van Gogh was such a wonderful, passionate, dramatic sort of person. He began as a clerk in an art dealer's, where he was not successful, as he refused to humour customers who had bad taste. Then he tried teaching, tried to go to a university, went as an Evangelist to the worst Belgian mining districts. Here he lost his job because the heads of his missionary society, coming round unexpectedly, found him conducting a service in a filthy hut, all covered with coal dust and dressed in sacking, as he had given all his clothes away. This, they thought, was a most shameful degradation of the dignity of the church!

He was heartbroken – and one day, sitting outside the mine, he began to sketch the miners as they came out – and that was the beginning. During his whole life he only sold *one* picture – and had to be supported by his brother Theo, a Paris art dealer and one of the salt of the earth. He went to Arles eventually and lived with Gauguin [*sic*], painting passionately, wildly all day in the terrific heat, quarrelling about art with Gauguin all night, and living on absinthe. This couldn't last long – he began to have epileptic fits, and finally shot himself lest he should become permanently mad and be a burden on Theo. Theo was heartbroken and died a few months later.

I am now, consequently, consumed with the desire to paint all day and all night – and am making a start this morning with an oil painting of Maria. If only I were about six times as good as I am, I'd chuck up Oxford and go to an art school. I'd sell every faculty I have to paint one good picture.

Sorry – I hope all this hasn't bored you.

Yesterday Architecture Club and me went to Montacute House, near Yeovil – my God it was glorious. It's a *huge* Elizabethan house, in perfect preservation inside and out, full of the most exquisite carving, and surrounded by the most perfect Elizabethan gardens. It's just the place Bacon¹ would have loved – square velvety lawns, lily ponds, yew trees centuries old, and two 'gazebos'. (Bet you don't know what they are!) There were white fantail doves flying about it all the while, and there *were* peacocks to walk on the terraces, but apparently the ungrateful birds spend all their time roosting in the depths of the wood! I wonder what they think they're kept for?

Good luck for Sweden – I expect you are feeling thrilled. [. . .] Some people have all the luck! We shall probably go to Ireland and join in the family quarrel – ugh.

I hope you have a marvellous time – and thanks awfully for the present.

Lots of love

Iris

Finished the painting – it's frightful!

¹ Francis Bacon (1561–1626), English philosopher, statesman, scientist, essayist and author.

To Ann Leech.

4 Eastbourne Rd
Chiswick
London
W4
27 September 1938

Dear Ann,

Thank the gods for one piece of good news – I am most terribly glad – only sad that I shan't be with you. I was going to write you today anyhow, as I heard your news from Orpen¹ – or was it Ysobel? Dulci² has just been staying with me, and I haven't been to bed before 1 for about a week. She is very gloomy, that is she believes the worst will happen, but is taking it calmly. I too believe that the worst will happen – but I don't feel at all afraid yet – only sad and strangely amused. I don't want to leave London – I love the city, and if it's going to be smashed up, I want to be there.

I can see nothing beyond Saturday³ – so I am treasuring these last few days of peace, and perhaps of life – reading poetry, and enjoying pictures and music. Of course this is just melodramatic rot – the chances are that you and I will be alive and healthy this time next year, and the world certainly won't end on Saturday – but I feel the sword of Damocles over me all the same.

We are storing food, my father is helping the man next door to build an air raid shelter in his garden, and tonight we get our gas-masks – 'Oh brave new world . . .'⁴

Singularly enough I feel happier now, in spite of my sadness, than I have ever felt for years. This isn't *real* you know – the real things will go on, whether we are blown to pieces or not – I am very close to reality now – something infinitely calm and still and beautiful.

Sorry to have become mystical – Dulci and I went into Westminster Abbey yesterday, and prayed with many other people beside the grave of the Unknown Warrior – the atmosphere was indescribable.

I was to go to lunch with an MP tomorrow, but Parliament is meeting, so I wrote to ask him to get me a ticket instead. It will be exciting if he managed to get me one.

1 Margaret Orpen, who was later to become Lady Margaret Lintott. The headmistress of Badminton School, Beatrice May Baker ('BMB'), had asked Margaret Orpen to keep an eye on the young Iris who felt homesick on joining the school. 'Ysobel' was presumably another school friend.

2 Dulcibel Broderick, another Badminton friend who later became Dulcibel MacKenzie, author of *Steps to the Bar*.

3 Neville Chamberlain's eagerly awaited return from Munich on Saturday 1 October 1938. Chamberlain returned triumphantly to Britain claiming to have negotiated 'peace in our time' but this act of appeasement failed: almost a year later, Hitler invaded Poland.

4 Miranda's exclamation in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*.

I am happy that you are going to Cambridge as you wished – the best of all luck to you. Do you remember in *Julius Caesar*, where Brutus and Cassius take leave of each other before Philippi? 'And if we meet again, why then we'll smile – If not, this parting is well taken . . .'¹

Forgive me – it's not often I get such a grand opportunity for melodrama.

Auf Wiedersehen

Love

Iris

To David Hicks, an Oxford contemporary three years older than Murdoch, who graduated in PPE (philosophy, politics and economics) at Worcester College in the summer of 1938 and who had recently embarked on a Diploma of Education course. Murdoch, now in her first year at Somerville College, met Hicks through the university branch of the Communist Party.^v Zuzanna Przeworska, mentioned in the letter, was a Polish undergraduate at Somerville in the year above Murdoch and an enthusiastic member of the Communist Party.^{vi}

Somerville

20 November 1938

Dear David,

Zuzzanah is in a raging fury – Gaetulian lions² are as sucking doves beside her – so I think on the whole it would be a good thing to return her type-writer *quam celerrime*.³

I have just returned from having a rather embarrassed tea with the principal⁴ – it consisted of a series of nerve-wracking pauses strung together by desperate attempts at conversation, the chief topic being Siamese cats! – What a waste, to go to tea with a really intelligent woman and talk about Siamese cats. I have now come back to the more imperial company of Aeschylus, whom you no doubt consider to be on an equal level of futility – and I admit his plays have no great bearing on surplus value⁵ and bills of exchange.

I hope you have sustained no fresh damage since last we met in fights

¹ Murdoch misquotes Brutus's words: 'If we do meet again, why, we shall smile; / If not, why then this parting was well made'.

² The Gaetulian lion was an African lion of fierce reputation, described in both Horace's *Odes* and Pliny's *Natural History*. Gaetulia, in the ancient world, was the land of the Gaetuli, a warlike Berber Libyan tribe.

³ as quickly as possible.

⁴ Helen Darbishire, principal of Somerville between 1931 and 1945.

⁵ 'Surplus value', a concept developed by Karl Marx, refers to the value produced by workers in excess of their own labour-cost. This profit is appropriated by the capitalist owner and forms the basis of capital accumulation.

with fascists or pseudo-fascists' – I feel like having a fight with somebody right now – Siamese cats! What a charming world we live in.

Well, goodbye, give my love to the deadheads,² and don't forget Zuzzanah's typewriter.

Iris

To David Hicks.

4 Eastbourne Rd
29 December 1938

Dear David,

Thank you very much indeed for your charming letter. The weather didn't hurt me in the least and as for feeling 'fooled' – well, I didn't come all that way to see any refugees, Czech or otherwise, or any number of other Davids – I came to see you and your family. May I say how very much I liked your family – and how much pleasure it gave me to see *you* in your natural habitat.

I didn't realise you wouldn't be coming back to Oxford and I certainly didn't know you were going to start teaching so soon – you should have told me. I won't pretend I'm not sorry about it. A very short while now I have 'delighted in your company',³ but long enough to know that you have something I want and that I've not hitherto found and I think I have something you want. I am, to use your words, 'a seeker after my own species'.

I shall write when there is time from Oxford and tell you of Zuzzanah's latest *affaire* and what sort of ties Peter Shinnie⁴ is wearing and why I think my philosophy of life is better than yours – and in return I should appreciate an occasional dissertation on the universe in general and young Hampstead in particular. Next vac – well, the animals at the zoo will still invite us with their interesting curves, and I should like extremely to improve my acquaintance with your family.

And now I wish you all the luck and happiness in the world. Believe in yourself. You're *not* so 'bloody mediocre'.

Love from

Iris

1 Minor altercations between Communist Party student members and other political groups occasionally took place in Oxford.

2 Boring or unenterprising people.

3 From the late sixteenth-century song 'Greensleeves'.

4 Peter Shinnie (1915–2007) was active in the Communist Party club at Oxford. He later became one of the founders of African archaeology and held professorial posts in Ghana and Canada.

PS And pray cease considering me as a child. I am in many ways considerably more mature than you are.

To Ann Leech.

4 Eastbourne Rd
[early April 1939]^{vii}

Dear Ann,

Hello, Hello, Hello! I'm terribly sorry too that I didn't write all last term, but for reasons similar to yours I have been cutting down everything, and correspondence was one of the first to go.

I'm terribly glad you are enjoying Cambridge now – I was sure you would soon. Gosh! I was glad to hear from you – going to write to you very soon. But you haven't joined CUSC¹ yet! Shades of Marx and Engels!! Of course it's sensible from an academic point of view. You will get a first and I shall get a third or a *satisfecit* (*quod avertant dei!*).² Still, there are days in which I think every intelligent man and woman has a definite duty to study politics. Next year it may all be too late.

Yes, I've been thinking things over lately, and certain facts are becoming painfully clear. If I chucked politics (which I loathe) and devoted myself to Classics (which I love) I *might* just get a first, and I *might*, not impossibly, get some sort of research or archaeological job, and spend the rest of my life in a museum (which I am beginning to believe is my natural habitat) delving into the origins of Greek religion and pursuing the labyrinthine paths of comparative mythology. That would be – paradise. And I'd write a few poems, and publish a modest little novel now and then (maybe). But you see I can't. I can't go and be happy while the world goes to hell. I saw that dimly when I joined the party, and I see it clearer now. And anyway it all concerns me personally – if England goes fascist (a not improbable contingency if we don't do something damn quick) I shan't be able to write what I please or study what I please. In fact I shall be in a concentration camp or some other even less desirable spot. So I've got to be a political worker. If I can be a great Hellenic scholar as well, so much the better, but I'm not a genius – and I'm even doubting whether I have much talent. My faith in my intellectual ability has been shaken in the last few months. I can feel, I can appreciate art and understand symbolism perhaps better than average, but I haven't a clear mind. You see, Ann, to return to the point, my job is not

¹ Cambridge University Society of Communists.

² Satisfactory degree (God forbid!).

to go and dig at Knossos, it is to see that the next generation even hears of Knossos – it is not to write fine poems, it is to work for a world in which man will read and write fine poems. O Christ! If only I'd been born into the world we're trying to build, instead of this damnable place!

Sorry. Excuse all these heroics, but I am in earnest. I thank God that I have the party to direct and discipline my previously vague and ineffective idealism. I feel now that I am doing *some* good, and that life has a purpose and that the history of civilisation is not just an interesting series of unconnected muddles, but a comprehensible development towards the highest stage of society, the Soviet world state. Ann, you *must* see, that this is the only way – it's no use dabbling about on the surface, as a Labour government would do, with always the risk that the Conservatives will come in at the next election and undo all their work. We've got to reorganise society from top to bottom – it's *rotten*, it's inefficient, it's fundamentally unjust, and it must be radically changed, even at the expense of some bloodshed. Remember, a Bolshevik revolution is not a wild emotional business of random bomb-throwing – it's a carefully planned, scientific affair, which occurs at a moment when there will be a minimum of people to be dealt with violently. And the ring of financiers who control every state in the world except one will never, *never* let go their hold unless they are forced to. And better a little violence than the physical, mental and spiritual starvation and depredation of millions of men and women.

On Saturday I went with some nice Oxford reds to the Festival of Music for the People at the Albert Hall. You would have loved it – it was a pageant tracing the relation of music to the class struggle right from feudal times to the present day. In fact a Marxist line on music, which was quite new to me. Parry Jones and Robeson sang – Robeson was, O magnificent, and the house went wild with enthusiasm.¹ Near the end they played the Spanish national anthem, and everyone stood, which pleased us.² And at the very end Tom Mann³ and Fred Coperman⁴ and the dean of Canterbury⁵ spoke. The dean was a glorious surprise to me – I knew he was that way inclined, but never dreamt he dared to come out so openly. To see him standing there in his red robes, calling us all 'comrades' and talking in a voice like thunder

1 Gwynn Parry Jones (1891–1963), famous Welsh tenor. Paul Robeson (1898–1976), American singer and actor who was a political activist for the civil rights movement.

2 The Spanish Civil War (1936–9) had stirred great passion in Oxford and elsewhere. Many idealistic British students and intellectuals of the time supported the Republican left.

3 A noted British trade unionist.

4 An English volunteer in the International Brigades during the Spanish Civil War who had commanded the British Battalion.

5 Hewlett Johnson (1874–1966) was an avowed Christian – Marxist and in 1931 became dean of Canterbury, where he acquired his nickname 'The Red Dean of Canterbury' for his support for the Soviet Union and its allies.

about the 'fullness of life in the Soviet Union' was simply wonderful. And God! the house was enthusiastic! A great sense of comradeship with all sorts of people one gets from being a communist.

About Christianity – I'm glad you are finding it good and a help to you. And I hope that it will lead you to what I consider its only logical conclusion – communism. I have finally decided that I cannot accept it as a religion, though of course I accept fully most of the teaching. My religion, if I have one, at the moment is a passionate belief in the beautiful, and a faith in the ultimate triumph of the people, the workers of the world. And in a longing for the civilisation in which every worker shall possess and love beauty lies the mainspring of all my political ideals.

I enjoyed this last term – though perhaps it wasn't such unalloyed heaven as my first term. I saw more of the seamy side of Oxford – and it's certainly a pretty vicious place in some ways. Also I had *much* too much to do and nearly had a nervous breakdown a few weeks before the end of term. However I stayed up a week and worked in the Ashmolean library – a well of silence – and recovered. My emotional life gives me trouble too – I find myself quite astonishingly interested in the opposite sex, and capable of being in love with about six men all at once – which gives rise to complications and distresses. And too many people are in love with me just at present – which though pleasing to my vanity, is also liable to be annoying and difficult.

But on the whole I find life, if not a sweet flower garden with endless vistas of roses, at any rate a very rich, lively, interesting place, and not without hope and promise, though not for me as an individual.

And now Ann dear, please pardon me for talking so loftily about myself for all these pages. I do wish you were here and we could discuss things – will you by any chance be in London this vac? Anyhow, write to me soon and say how all this strikes you.

I am going to Ireland tomorrow for four days – Oh joyous thought! After so long a time in the land of the Sassenachs without one ray of Celtic twilight to relieve the gloom! I am travelling on the Ulster Express, so if you hear the IRA have blown it up, weep a tear for me, won't you.

Now I really must put a period to my talk. The very best of luck for next term, if I don't see you before – and anyway I'll see you at the Old Badmintonian Association.

Ever so much love.

Iris

PS I must just add a note to the effect that Chamberlain must go, and that forthwith because:

- 1.) He is gradually introducing fascism into this country – he takes action without consulting the Cabinet, conveniently ‘forgets’ vitally important proposals, and deliberately misleads the country by withholding information e.g. the Cabinet knew five days before it happened that Czechoslovakia was to be invaded.
- 2.) He has consistently betrayed the working class movement and played into the hands of H and M¹ e.g. in Spain by ‘non-intervention’ and the recognition of F² and in Czechoslovakia by the Munich concessions.
- 3.) He is now betraying Poland by refusing to make a definite alliance with USSR and by making vague promises and talking about ‘negotiations’ – i.e. leaving Hitler a free hand.

This is my last piece of paper and I must stop. Good thing too. Love I.

To Ann Leech, written after Germany had invaded Poland on 1 September and Britain and France had declared war on 3 September.

4 Eastbourne Road
9 September 1939

Dear Ann – how is it with you? I hope you are not feeling too sad about the way the world’s going. It’s a beastly miserable business, yes, but maybe we can make something good out of it. After all it is a war against fascism, though undertaken for imperialist reasons, and if we play our cards properly we can make it into a war for socialism. But first, we’ve got to get rid of Chamberlain. Our government would infinitely prefer a Hitler-ruled Germany to a free and possibly socialist Germany. But Hitler threatens the British Empire, ergo, Hitler must go. But they will do their level best to prevent the German people from working out their own destiny afterwards. So we *must* get a decent government in this country that will really fight to *free* Germany and not merely to defend British interests.

I shall go back to Oxford. There will be plenty of party work and war work for me to do there. Funny, I thought once I was going to a university to study the classics. It must have been a dream. I’m sorry about my academic career – but really at the moment it seems to me that the only thing to do is to fight for a world in which it will be worthwhile having an academic career at all. O God, how I loathe politics . . . But, believing as I do, I have no choice.

1 Hitler and Mussolini.

2 General Franco, leader of the Nationalist military rebellion in the Spanish Civil War.

What will you do? I hope you will go back to Cambridge and carry on. We are so lucky not to have the whole tenor of our lives upset. Also, we've had a fine year of university life. When I think of Maria and Lalage I could weep.

Also, I had a grand finale in the Magpie Tour, when we acted plays all over the Cotswolds for the Oxford Refugee Fund.^{viii} Hitler curtailed it by two days, which proved rather disastrous financially, but we had such tremendous fun for our money, and had not a moment to brood over the international situation. Questions of lighting, and props, and interpretation and how many two shilling seats were sold, were of much greater importance.

On the whole, I feel optimistic now – perhaps unduly so. At any rate, full of fire and fighting spirit, thank God. Really, I think any sort of hell, with a fighting chance of heaven beyond, is preferable to the limbo we've been drifting through for the last five years. (Easy words, of course, from a non-combatant.) And if a socialist Germany comes out of this, any sort of sacrifice will have been worth it. But the bitterest fight will be at home . . .

Do write and tell me how you are feeling and what you are doing. And will you ever be in London? I shall be here until I go up (I refer to my return to Oxford, not to a possible air raid) and I'm just longing to see you and talk and talk and talk.

Goodbye my dear, I wish you all possible peace of mind. Love Iris.

To Margaret Orpen, Murdoch's school friend at Badminton, who was unhappy in love and also missing her brother, a British Army cadet being trained at Dartford.

4 Eastbourne Road.
20 September 1939

My dear – I'm terribly sorry – I do hope you are feeling happier now than you were when you wrote that letter. After all we are young – and we aren't really going to be cheated. We shall have our chances surely, if not to be happy, at any rate to live, to experience, to do – and life even at its most hellish can still be interesting. Yet I do cherish a possibly irrational belief that there is a good time coming.

But forgive me for this vague optimism – I know you have such great reason to be unhappy, and my God I wish I could do something for you – I must see you when you come to London – I shall be here probably till mid October.

I don't know whether you have these two books or whether they interest

you or whether they will cheer you up at all – I hope they may. My apologies that they aren't new.¹

I'll see you soon.

Meanwhile, look up, dear lass.

Love

Iris

To David Hicks, who had abandoned his Diploma of Education course in order to work for the British Council in Egypt.

Somerville College

29 April 1940

Dear David,

My greetings. How is it with you? I think of you decorating the skyline on a camel and taking your well-earned siesta in the shade of a pyramid. Or is Egypt not romantic? Yes, I know. I had an aunt once who used to teach the young Egyptians to love God. What do you teach them? I hope it's something with an equally good moral. And altogether, how wags the world in your region of it?

You and your pyramids seem almost as fabulous and mythical to me as Oxford and I must seem to you now. I expect an act of faith is necessary to persuade yourself you ever were here. (But you were, I remember you quite distinctly.)

Everything here seems curiously the same – and yet I don't know why it should, for every month batches of men fade away into khaki, and Balliol is full of glossy civil servants from Whitehall. Worcester is still largely academic – I go there twice a week to hear Pickard-Cambridge² talking about moral philosophy. Lectures and all the clubs proceed as before, and the only difference it all makes to me is that I have ten times as much organisational work to do as I would normally, owing to the increasing man-shortage.

I have just done Mods, and got the distinguished second which you once so kindly predicted for me. (Damn you. I held that against you for a long time. I suppose it would be unreasonable to bear the grudge any longer) and now I am doing Greats. The philosophy is not as philosophical as one would wish, but the ancient history is very ancient (especially in the matter of the dons appertaining thereto) and I find them both pretty good mental exercise.

¹ A note about these books at the end of this letter, possibly written later by Margaret Lintott (née Orpen) reads, 'Donne's love poems; *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám* translated by Fitzgerald'.

² Arthur Wallace Pickard-Cambridge (1873–1952), an authority on the theatre of ancient Greece.

The *personelle* of the university has changed tremendously. Freeling and Lucy¹ are vanished as though they had never been. Carol² I hear of spasmodically achieving great things in the Ministry of Economic Warfare. A few old-timers like Jack Dawes and Denis Healey³ are still here and active. Peter Shinnie is in the air force and getting incredibly tough – others of them are in the artillery and fleet air arm. None of the women whom you knew, I'm glad to say, has joined the ATS.⁴

Myself, I am incredibly busy this term with committees [. . .] and with acting. You see I have achieved one of my ambitions, to play the chorus leader in *Murder in the Cathedral*.⁵ Christ Church dramatic society is doing it and our stage is the cloister quad at Christ Church with the cathedral as a backcloth. Also I am bringing out a revised version – an *editio maior*⁶ rather – of your song sheet. (Remember?)

The world – yes. It's a pretty interesting and fast-moving little world these days. There's a lot to be depressed about certainly, but I can't say I feel very fundamentally downhearted. In fact I've never felt so full of hope and new life as I do now. We're not doing so badly.

Meanwhile this place is raving wild with spring. I met a calf this morning that looked like Michelangelo's Moses⁷ – and the calf's mother was like Epstein's Madonna.⁸ I won't tell you about the cherry trees or how green the Cherwell banks are, or you'll be homesick. How homesick are you? Don't be too. Though indeed there's nothing much wrong with the flora and fauna. As I think Browning observed.⁹

I hope very much life isn't boring or unhappy or lonely or any of the things it shouldn't be but so often is. How many English people are there with you? Are they interesting? How hard do you work? What is the work like? Do you still paint? Have you written anything? I tell you one thing you

1 Lucy Klatschko, a half-Latvian and Jewish senior scholar, had read modern languages at Somerville between 1936 and 1939. She was later to become Sister Marian.

2 Carol Stewart, an Oxford contemporary two years older than Murdoch, who later translated Canetti's *Masse und Macht* into English with the title *Crowds and Power*. On marrying, she became Carol Graham-Harrison.

3 Denis Healey (1917–), who was reading Greats at Balliol, met Murdoch through the Communist Party but left it in the summer of 1940 when France fell to the Germans. Murdoch read his copy of Samuel Beckett's *Murphy*, a book that influenced her considerably.

4 The Auxiliary Territorial Service, formed in September 1938, was the women's branch of the British Army.

5 This production of T. S. Eliot's play at Oxford in 1940 allowed male and female students to act together for the first time; previously dons' wives had acted the female roles.

6 A jocular reference – 'major edition'.

7 A sculpture that depicts Moses with horns on his head.

8 Jacob Epstein's *Madonna and Child* (1927).

9 Oblique reference to Robert Browning's poem 'Home Thoughts, from Abroad' which opens 'Oh, to be in England / Now that April's there'.

might write, and that's a letter to me, if you feel like it, and if you have anything of note to say about a) Egypt, b) David.

The best of luck to you.

Love

Iris

PS John Willett,¹ from whom I got your address, sends his love and says he misses you a lot – but as he said all this some time ago I expect he has conveyed it himself by now.

I

To Eduard Fraenkel, professor of Latin at Corpus Christi College, Oxford, whose famous seminars on Aeschylus's Agamemnon Murdoch had been attending and from whom she was – unusually for an undergraduate – also receiving private tuition. The Ministry of Health (Murdoch's father's employer at this time) relocated to Blackpool in 1939, necessitating her parents' move. They lived in Cavendish Road, Blackpool in 1940 and then in Waller Avenue, Blackpool from 1941, returning to London after the war.^{ix}

196 Cavendish Road
Bispham
Blackpool
[October 1940]

Dear Professor Fraenkel,

Greetings. How is it with you? I hope you're having a very peaceful and unanxious vacation. As for me, my exile will produce no *tristitia*² after all – I left London for here about a month ago, and haven't regretted it yet for a moment. Never before have I been able to come out of my front door and see *mountains* – I can't see them every day, but when it's clear there are the sharp Lake District peaks in the North. And I love the wideness and freedom of the land here so different from the closeness of London – I'm so used to having my horizon 300 yards off.

There *are* crowds of people, yes, and they all talk like Gracie Fields³ and rush madly from one variety show to another – but they have a ballet-like quality of gaiety and colour and one can't help liking them. Anyway they

1 John Willett (1917–2002) read PPE at Christ Church 1936–9, and went on to translate and publish on the work of Bertold Brecht. He managed the stage lighting for *It Can Happen Here*.

2 Sadness, melancholy.

3 The actress, singer and comedienne Gracie Fields (1898–1979) was born over a fish and chip shop in Rochdale, Lancashire.

stay in the centre of the town, and we live a little way out. No one bathes – they all seem quite oblivious of the sea, though they often sit on the sands just to keep up appearances – so from here I can bathe or walk for miles along the shore and hardly meet anyone. And on a windy sunny blue and white day full of seagulls and wave crests that is well worth doing. I've also made several cycling expeditions to the Pennines, some fifteen or twenty miles off, and had days full of heather and butterflies and no people.

One of the best things about being here is that I am quite cut off from the endless acquaintances who used to be always passing through London and calling on me. I have time to read, thank God. I've almost finished *The Republic*. I find Plato at times a vile casuist, and almost always a reactionary. But he does write exquisite Greek. (Don't take this for my verdict on *The Republic*! But he does make me very angry now and then.) I've read Farrington's *Science and Politics* which you were so harsh on last term. I see the reasons for your hard opinions and I agree he does in many cases rush at his conclusions without a satisfying array of evidence. But in general I think (in all humility) that his view of the situation deserves to be considered. His remarks on Lucretius particularly seem to me to be pretty sane. And frankly, after being brought up in an atmosphere of mystical and irrational adoration of Plato, I found him refreshing. I do want to think honestly and clearly about this period and come to some coherent conclusions and I'm not at all sure I'm prepared to accept a lot of the things that are taken for granted by the historians. But I realise that with the small quantity of knowledge I possess at present I ought to be keeping my mouth shut, and that I have an obligation to reserve judgement till after the fullest consideration of the evidence – which will take a long time. So, enough!

My form of National Service at present (though I doubt if Churchill would appreciate it) is running a Left Book Club¹ group (on strictly Marxist lines) and selling the *Daily Worker*² in the street. But don't worry, as I don't 'waste' a great deal of time on these activities. I've met a lot of fine people, for which I am chiefly thankful. Altogether my days are full to the brim and I have little time to reflect on what a miserable world it is. I have various friends in internment camps for whom I feel a dull misery whenever I think of them – and others, far worse . . . Happiness can only be reckoned in individuals now. Living this easy pleasant life I have a perpetual sense of guilt and desire to hurt myself or something. I feel myself a rather opinionated

1 Presumably in imitation of the Left Book Club, a venture founded in the UK in May 1936, set up by Stafford Cripps, Victor Gollancz and John Strachey in order to revitalise and educate the British left.

The club's aim was to encourage the struggle for peace and the fight against fascism; it closed in 1948.

2 The *Daily Worker* newspaper, the voice of the Communist Party of Great Britain, was founded in 1930. It was renamed the *Morning Star* in 1966.

fool with very little knowledge of suffering and life – (I stick to the opinions nevertheless!) and I wish for a time of trial and a chance to strip my spirit to its essentials. One wish at any rate which is sure to come true in an age like this.

Forgive this soliloquising letter so full of me. I hope you and all your family are well and happy – as happy as may be.

Best wishes to you for the rest of the vacation. I hope there will be a next term.

Yours affectionately

Iris

To Frank Thompson, a fellow student at Oxford. He first saw Murdoch in November 1938 at a political meeting and was attracted to her, but did not manage to speak to her until the following term. A gifted poet and an intense idealist, he left New College in 1939, where he had been reading Mods and Greats, to volunteer for the army. On becoming a member of both 'Phantom', a small communications intelligence unit, and later the Special Operations Executive (SOE), he served in North Africa, Syria, Iraq, Sicily, Serbia and Bulgaria. He was posted to the Middle East in March 1941 and there contracted septicaemia, spending two months in hospital in Damascus; by November 1941 he was back in Cairo. Murdoch's pacifism had strengthened after she joined the Communist Party in 1938; however, by the time she wrote this letter she could see the necessity for military action in Europe.^x

9 Waller Avenue
Bispham
Blackpool
24 December 1941

Frank Me darlin'

It is Christmas eve and I in Blackpool. There is the hell of a wind blowing over the house and I feel a bit withered away already. I have just received a box of expensive Turkish cigarettes from Michael.¹ Dear old Michael. A lost soul too. (The trouble is, I have been reading Virginia Woolf, the darling dangerous woman, and am in a state of extremely nervous self-consciousness. The most selfish of all states to be in.)

The most important thing of course is that the Russians are winning at last thank God.² May they go on winning. I feel ashamed of my defeatist

¹ M. R. D. Foot (1919–2012), a school friend of Frank's from Winchester College who was reading PPE at New College, Oxford.

² Nazi Germany had invaded the Soviet Union on 22 June 1941.

mood of a month ago – then it seemed that nothing could halt the Germans this side of Moscow – now I feel that nothing can halt the Russians this side of Berlin. An equally false optimism of course. The war begins to affect me emotionally far more than it did – possibly because my watertight rationalism has broken down. It's all damn complex and confusing. I don't have a clear line on it any more. I feel myself approaching the state of ἀπορία¹ which I imagined only Liberals and the *New Statesman* suffered from – it couldn't happen to me, this pathetic confusion and suspension of judgement. But it has. Actually in a way I'm quite pleased, because such a condition contrasts favourably with the suspension of thought which preceded it. And of course the foundations are as sound as ever. It's only a lot of the fancy superstructure that's been blown away.

Last term was good. I got face to face with my work for the first time since Mods – and the results weren't too depressing. I was beginning to be afraid that my brain had decomposed in the interim. It's too late I'm afraid as far as Schools² is concerned – but I've got a lot of satisfaction out of doing philosophy and getting my mind clear on one or two questions. This man MacKinnon³ is a jewel, it's bucked me up a lot meeting him. He's a moral being as well as a good philosopher. I had almost given up thinking of people and actions in terms of value – meeting him has made it a significant way of thinking again. (Obscure. Sorry.)

Soon my charming American lassy and her kid (now two years old) are coming to stay. That will be good. I'm feeling a bit vampirish and want to have my friends around. Her husband is in the ME⁴ (in artillery – one William Holland, in case you ever meet him). She's upset about her country too. I'm afraid I can't muster much emotion about the Philippines⁵ – except that it's bloody that all these people are killing each other – but that's probably because I'm no strategist.

What is important is whether you are in on this Libyan business.⁶ It's very hard, sitting here and looking out at the cabbages and the semi-detached villas, to imagine you in a war – killing people maybe – you and Leo and

1 Aporia: doubt, perplexity.

2 Final examinations.

3 Donald MacKinnon (1913–1994), Murdoch's philosophy tutor at Oxford; like Eduard Fraenkel, he was a charismatic, intellectually demanding individual and greatly influenced Murdoch. Many years later, criticising Sartre's introduction to a work by Jean Genet, Murdoch described it as 'the sort of thing I would throw back at a clever and favourite pupil with a few sharp words. "Attractive slapdash stuff"' as MacKinnon said to me, tossing my essay on the table and searing my soul, sometime back in 1941'. (Letter to Brigid Brophy postmarked 21 March 1965.)

4 Military Engineers.

5 The Philippines were invaded by Japan between December 1941 and May 1942.

6 The Allies' Western Desert Campaign in what is now south-east Libya.

Hal¹ – I can't imagine it at all. Whereas I *can* imagine you at the Coptic monastery, swimming in the cistern. God. I do feel bloody, sitting here writing self-conscious letters.

I wish June were over and I were (even) in the ATS. I don't care how tough the job is so long as I can use what mind I have. The primrose path is getting me down a bit. It's unsettling looking forward into a blank, though. A sort of queer interregnum has set in. I feel I've outgrown my old personality and not yet acquired a new one. I guess I shan't get a new one till after June. Then I shall learn some things.

I've read Gorki's *Mother* – yes a darling book. My Czech lassy is more like Sonya than anything I've ever met. As for being simple and warm-hearted – fine, grand – but unfortunately we aren't peasants with a straightforward line on life, we're just bemused intellectual misfits – or at least I am. I think. I'll know for certain after June and I'll tell you.

I'm reading Mallarmé who suits my mood again – exotic, restless, obscure. He passes me, *laissant toujours de ses mains mal fermées / Neiger de blancs bouquets d'étoiles parfumées*.² But Gorki is better. Of course – if only one could and were. I must go to America after the war.

I'm writing a little poetry again. It has its moments. I hope you are safe, dear Frank. Good luck.

Love I

1 Leo Pliatzky was awarded a first in Classical Mods at Corpus Christi, Oxford in 1939. He then served with the Royal Army Ordnance Corps and the Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers for the next five years. His friend, Hal Lidderdale, read Greats at Magdalen College, Oxford before joining the Royal Scots Fusiliers.

2 From an early poem entitled 'Apparitions' (1862), in which the poet's feelings for his beloved evoke memories of his mother who 'would hover above me sprinkling from her gentle hands / Snow-white clusters of perfumed stars'.

PART TWO:

Work and War

July 1942 to October 1947

Murdoch graduated with a first in Greats in 1942 and was conscripted to work in London as an assistant principal in the Treasury in June of that year. She stayed until 1944, becoming an expert in the tedious task of assessing notional pay raises and promotions for civil servants who had joined the armed forces, so that their careers would not be disadvantaged by wartime service. In September 1942 she took a lease on 5 Seaforth Place, Buckingham Gate, a studio flat half a mile from the Treasury Office. In October 1943 her friend from Somerville College, Philippa Bosanquet, who had recently been appointed as an economics research assistant at Chatham House in St James's Square, moved in and stayed with Murdoch until the spring of 1945. Under her married name of Philippa Foot, Philippa Bosanquet was later to become an outstanding philosopher in the field of virtue ethics and an important figure in Murdoch's life. Murdoch relished London's bohemian culture, giving parties and drinking in Soho pubs such as the Wheatsheaf and the Pillars of Hercules in Greek Street where she mingled with writers and artists. The two women often had to cope with blackout and wartime bombing, frequently waking up to find that nearby buildings had been demolished in the night. Although Murdoch probably resigned her formal membership of the Communist Party on joining the Treasury in 1942, she spied during the war for the party, copying Treasury papers then leaving them in a tree that was a dead-letter drop¹ in Kensington Gardens.ⁱ Later she was to become disillusioned with the Communist Party and gradually detached herself from its politics although she retained a deep interest in Communist ideology for many years.

¹ An espionage arrangement whereby items pass between two individuals using a secret location so that they never have to meet face to face.

In June 1944 Murdoch applied successfully to join the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA), a large international agency founded in 1943 and representing forty-four nations. Its European HQ, where Murdoch worked, was in Portland Place, London. UNRRA's purpose was to help and provide sustenance for victims of war in any area under the control of the United Nations. It had a major role in helping displaced persons (DPs) return to their home countries in Europe in 1945–6 and Murdoch played her part in this venture for two years. She was posted to Brussels and subsequently transferred to Innsbruck in late 1945; from there she was sent in March 1946 to Graz in south-east Austria. Here she worked in the Hochsteingasse Displaced Persons camp, set up by the British Allied Military Government for students who had been accepted at the University of Graz.ⁱⁱ She also spent brief periods in Vienna and in Holland. She resigned from UNRRA in July 1946, remaining unemployed until she was offered a place in 1947 at Newnham College, Cambridge as a postgraduate researcher.

Already thrilled by modern French literature, Murdoch's travels in Europe introduced her to the excitement of existentialism. In a letter from Brussels to David Hicks, dated November 1945, she vividly expresses her delight at hearing Jean-Paul Sartre lecture: 'his writing and talking on morals – will, liberty, choice – is hard and lucid and invigorating. It's the *real thing* [. . .] after [. . .] the shallow stupid milk and water "ethics" of English "moralists" like Ross and Prichard'.ⁱ In 1945 she discovered the work of Simone de Beauvoir, whose novels greatly impressed her. She was also intoxicated by the intellectual fervour of European café culture. She wrote to her Oxford friend Marjorie Boulton in November 1945: 'The mixture is perfect – philosophy ("existentialism", the new philosophy of France, which is catching the Belgian intellectuals as well) novels (Sartre, Queneau, Simone de Beauvoir) poetry (André Breton, Verhaeren, Valéry²), chaps and girls (writers, philosophers, miscellaneous intellectuals), cafés (for talking in for hours and hours on end, open indefinitely) [. . .] I get a *frisson* of joy to think that I am of *this* age, *this* Europe – saved or damned with it'. Given the dominance in English philosophy at this time of logical positivism – which held that truth and knowledge derive solely from verifiable scientific observation – Murdoch's immersion in European fiction and philosophy was unusual.

In her spare time during these hectic years Murdoch was learning German, Russian, Italian and Turkish. She was also reading voraciously in literature and philosophy, preparing for a possible career as an author and philosopher.

1 W. D. Ross (1877–1971), Scottish philosopher who worked in the field of ethics; H. A. Prichard (1871–1947), English philosopher best known for his work on ethical intuition.

2 André Breton (1896–1966), poet and novelist, founder and leader of the French surrealist movement; Emile Verhaeren (1855–1916), Belgian poet who wrote in French and one of the chief founders of the school of symbolism; Paul Valéry (1871–1945), French poet, essayist and philosopher.

While many young British would-be philosophers were following the path of logical positivism, Murdoch was avidly devouring the work of Hegel, Kierkegaard, Gabriel Marcel, Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Kant and Sartre. The work of the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1813–55) in particular influenced her and she was to draw on it later when formulating her ideas about individual choice. She committed her energies to the Labour Party in 1944 but expressed disappointment with its leaders, complaining to David Hicks in May of ‘the usual lack of unity and intelligent leadership on the left’. To her surprise and delight, however, the Labour Party swept to victory in July 1945.

No longer a Communist, she was also able to engage more freely with the matters of faith that were beginning to preoccupy her. In 1946 she wrote to the French author, Raymond Queneau, whom she had met in February of that year in Innsbruck when she heard him speak on ‘The Crisis in French Literature’, ‘I started life as a political animal thinking my soul didn’t matter – now I am almost a religious animal, thinking it matters vitally. In the swing between those two attitudes lie all the philosophical problems that interest me’.ⁱⁱⁱ While expressing scepticism about the Christian faith, she confided to Queneau three weeks later that she wished she ‘could be Christian. There is such worth there – and values which are *real* to one – but the rest remains a fairy tale to me [. . .] Van Eyckish light on white wimples and jewelled crosses, the beautiful unwearied plainsong, speaking through a grille [. . .] Life is very strange isn’t it?’^{iv}

Murdoch now began writing fiction seriously, producing three novels that were either unfinished or discarded.^v She submitted her second completed novel in the autumn of 1944 to Faber & Faber where it was rejected by T. S. Eliot. Looking for inspiration for a new way of writing, she turned to French experimentalism: her letters to Queneau express deep admiration for his work and her desire for a mentor. He, in turn, saw her as ‘*une fille épatante*’ (‘a striking young woman’), confiding to his journal after their first meeting that ‘*Je suis tout de suite séduit. Longue conversation. Nous nous entendons parfaitement*’ (‘I am immediately captivated. Long conversation. We understand each other perfectly’).^{vi} Queneau was to be a strong influence on Murdoch’s development as an author and, enchanted by his writing, she spent much time during 1946 translating his novel, *Pierrot mon ami*, into English. In April of that year she wrote to him, ‘I can’t tell you how good it makes me feel to read anything written by you. You’re like a principle of hardness and dryness in the marshland where I’m lost! And I believe you are the only writer who has this effect on me’.^{vii} As a token of her esteem, Murdoch later dedicated her first published novel, *Under the Net* (1954), to Queneau.

Several crises in Murdoch’s personal life occurred during these years and her letters portray a dizzying range of emotions from elation to despair.

There were a number of lovers and a few casual sexual liaisons: Murdoch's tendency to fall quickly in and out of love is illustrated by her letters to David Hicks and Raymond Queneau, to whom she wrote obsessively in turn. While thriving on a complicated love life, she occasionally felt uneasy about the emotional entanglements into which she was so easily drawn. Confiding in Marjorie Boulton in 1943 she wrote, 'I have all my life made terrible mistakes with people. I say this with real agony and remorse [. . .] I have shirked the exacting effort of being consistently and completely sincere'.^{viii} She was also beginning to recognise her own neediness and insecurity; in the same letter she acknowledges that 'I am, like you, an extremely emotional and sentimental person, with most extravagant cravings for affection'. Such insights did not, however, prevent future complications with friends and lovers. The painful rift with Philippa Bosanquet that resulted from Murdoch's appropriation of one of Philippa's lovers, the Balliol economics tutor Thomas Balogh, in 1944 – and her simultaneously cruel treatment of M. R. D. Foot (whom Murdoch had left for Balogh, and whom Philippa married in 1945) – had only partially healed by 1946. In Murdoch's confessional letter to David Hicks, dated 6 November 1945, she describes the imbroglio as 'a quadrilateral tale that would make rather a good psychological novel'. The rift with her Oxford tutor, Donald MacKinnon – caused possibly by his intense feelings for her (to which his wife took exception) – brought more misery. In relation to this upset she wrote to Philippa Foot in August 1947, 'I'm sick at heart and can't work. Life's been disintegrated in a nightmarish way for so long now, one almost forgets what it would be like to feel normal and secure and loved'. In early 1947 she had written to Queneau: 'As for "happiness", *mon dieu*, I have dropped that word from my vocabulary. A sort of force and *integritas* is what I yearn towards, and the *felicitas*, a sort of by-product, scarcely enters my head now!'^{ix} While such inner turbulence was obviously painful, it provided rich experience for the emotional complications of her fictional worlds.

To Philippa Bosanquet, congratulating her on her first-class degree. Having returned to London from Blackpool, Murdoch wrote this letter from a house a street away from her parents' home in Eastbourne Road, which had suffered bomb damage a year or so before.^x

55 Barrowgate Rd
Chiswick
W4
[early July 1942]

Pip, that was splendid – I’m terribly glad – my joy is now complete. It was a certainty of course – and I’m so pleased you were spared the miseries of a viva. You and Mary¹ have provided such wonderful instances of Mind triumphing over Matter – I feel myself to be quite fugitive and cloistered by contrast – not of such fine metal! Now there is *nothing* for you to worry about, and you can lie in a dreamy coma and rest that back. And *don’t* read Virginia Woolf. [. . .]

I have been a servant of His Majesty now for two weeks. Life is all rather dreamlike – I live in a fantastic world, ringing with telephone voices, and peopled by strange fictional personalities such as the Lords Commissioners of His Majesty’s Treasury . . . (Oxford has nothing on the Treasury as far as tradition goes.) I can’t believe that it’s *me* writing these peremptory letters and telling people over the phone where they get off. I don’t think I shall feel real again till I acquire a flat and start on some serious occupation, such as making a verse translation of Sophocles – all I do at present feels like play acting.

The flat is still a problem – most likely seems a single room in Gerrard Place – with a wonderful view of the Blitz and practically no plumbing. I hope you won’t mind that when you come and stay.

I feel a bit Tchekov at the moment. Questions such as ‘What is the Significance of Life?’ which I know to be strictly meaningless assume a sort of ‘expressive meaning’. I have a great many friends in London – I have lunch or dinner with a different person every day – but I get no satisfaction or consolation from them, and our relations seem superficial and even chilly. I feel like going out and picking up the first man I meet that’s willing, simply for the sake of a more intense relationship of any description with another human being.

All of which is nonsense of course and just means that it’s raining and I have indigestion. [. . .]

Very few of the people I knew at Oxford seem real to me now, even after this short interval – and I don’t want to lose touch with the ones that still retain their flesh and blood!

I’m really delighted about your first Pip – take care of that back.

I hope I shall see you before too long.

Love

Iris

1 Mary Scrutton (1919–), who had studied Mods and Greats at Somerville College alongside Iris Murdoch.

To Marjorie Boulton, who was at this time reading English at Somerville College. She was later to become an author, poet, college principal and an expert on Esperanto, a constructed and politically neutral language designed to foster international understanding and peace which – not surprisingly – enjoyed a revival during and after the war years.

55 Barrowgate Road
Chiswick
London W4
16 August 1942

Dear Marjorie,

For a long time I have been intending to reply to your charming letter – but life has been full of a Number of Things, and no letter-writing got done. This seems to be the first breathing space I've had since the beginning of July, what with the new work, flat-hunting, and wild dashes into the country every weekend.

I was very interested in what you said about your poetry – and I liked the remarks of 'Treece' which you quoted. He is right, you know, about the big things being composed of small units. Of course one *must* be conscious of the rhythm of the whole – the 'movement of history' – whatever one understands by these vague and rather dangerous phrases. But such things make themselves intelligible in a concrete day-to-day manner. It has been one of the mistakes of modern left-wing poets to try, at times, to get too much onto their canvas – to evoke an indeterminate cloudy notion of Something or Other – and in the end get nothing across. Inevitable perhaps when our poets live an insulated life, away from the blood tears toil and sweat of real political activity. So beware. Avoid the sugar. But avoid the Political Apocalypse stuff too. James Joyce used always to ask of some new writer 'Is he trying to express something he has understood?'

Forgive the didactic tone. I have made all these mistakes myself and still make them. And above all, *do* go on writing. For you have a real feeling for words and something to say – *and* sufficient power to drive the whole machine (which people frequently lack, even when they have all the rest).

I haven't written anything at all since Schools – or even read very much, except a little Proust and some poetry (my latest pastime is reading Homer aloud in the Underground. There is such a racket that no one can hear you – and the hexameter goes very well with the rhythm of the train). Life has been rather strange and feverish. I like my work on the whole, though I'm not at all good at it to date. It's not the sort of work I ever imagined myself

1 Henry Treece (1911–66), poet, editor and writer of historical novels.

enjoying – pure administration – dealing with laws and regulations, applying them, amending them where necessary, coping with the unusual cases, and in general oiling the amazing machine of which I find myself part. I feel a certain humility towards this set-up – for in spite of all the Red Tape Legends, it's a remarkably efficient and businesslike organisation, and I am beginning to value such efficiency very highly. I want to become a full working partner as soon as possible.

I have felt very restless though, chiefly for want of a place to lay my head. I've felt no inclination, in these rather unsatisfactory digs, to settle down and work or read in the evenings – and I've been tempted to stay up in town till late and rush around breathlessly with various friends. Now however I see a level lagoon beyond the breakers, as I have at last acquired a flat. This is a flat of quite indescribable charm – it's what is called, in house agent language, a 'studio flat', and is situated over an empty garage and amid various disused warehouses. Its disadvantages are many, the chief being a three-year lease, the District Railway as a next door neighbour, and some six square miles of window to guard in Blitz and blackout. Its advantages are its position (fifty yards from Victoria Street and 300 yards from Whitehall), its rent (£60 p.a. unfurnished) and its utterly irresistible personality. The address is 5 Seaforth Place, Buckingham Gate, SW1, and I move in in September.¹

All this has filled my mind for the moment – which is well in a way. The news is so incredibly bloody.²

I must go now. (I am going to the zoo this afternoon, chiefly to see the zebras – I have an intense occult passion for zebras.) Write when you feel inclined and let me know how life treats you. When you are in London you must come and stay at my studio – this is a permanent invitation.

I'll probably see you next term in Oxford. Good luck.

Love

Iris

1 In her 2005 memoir *The Owl of Minerva*, Mary Midgley comments '[Iris] had got this flat [. . .] cheap because it had been bombed, and at first it looked much like a stage set for a school performance of something by Dostoevsky. It was an attic with cracks in the roof revealing the sky and cracks in the floor revealing no ceiling below, so that nothing blocked the alarming rumble of the underground trains passing beneath us. What furniture she had then was mainly orange-boxes.'

2 In July 1942 Soviet troops had been encircled in Millerovo by German forces and taken into captivity.

To Frank Thompson, stationed in Iraq.

5 Seaforth Place
Buckingham Gate
London SW1
24 November [1942]

Frank, my brave and beloved, your letter dated Oct. 7th has only just arrived – in which you record your linguistic failure with a Ukrainian truck driver. Yes, a fascinating language – not, so far, as difficult as I had expected – but I daresay fearful pitfalls and craggy *arrêts*¹ await me. Nor can I yet quite realise what poetry in such a language must be like. Our ambitious teacher^{xi} has already made us learn a little poem by Pushkin (called ‘Utro’) – but I can’t pretend I feel breathless on a peak in Darien as a result.² That will come, that will come.

As I write this the world has woken up with a vengeance and all sorts of encouraging and interesting things are happening in Russia and in North Africa – may it still be so when you receive this.³ This ingrained inferiority complex must be shaken off – one had got too much into the habit of thinking that the only people who can beat the Germans are the Russians – and they can’t do it all the year round. But now, thank God . . . In a way of course it seems terrible to rejoice at anything which must total up to such a sum of human anguish when considered in detail – especially when one is snug in Whitehall oneself – lord, lord. I get so damnably restless from time to time. I would volunteer for *anything* that would be certain to take me abroad. Unfortunately, there is no guarantee given one when one joins the women’s forces! – and anyway the Treasury would never let me go; for, inefficient as I am, I am filling a very necessary post in a semi-skilled sort of way. Sometimes I think it’s quite bloody being a woman. So much of one’s life has to consist of having an attitude. (I hope you follow this, which is a little condensed.)

I trust *you* are as far from the firing line as ever? I was amazed to observe that your latest letter contained no references to tamarisk or swiftly flowing brooks – however, ‘PAI Force’⁴ seems to indicate that you have not yet left

1 Halts or stops.

2 The title of Pushkin’s poem, published in 1829, means ‘Winter Morning’. The phrase ‘breathless on a peak in Darien’ echoes the words ‘Silent, upon a peak in Darien’, the last line of Keats’s sonnet ‘On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer’.

3 In late 1942 the Russians began to recapture various cities taken by the Germans; on 19 November the Red Army cut off and surrounded the German 6th Army in Stalingrad. On 8 November an Anglo-American force, led by Eisenhower, had invaded French North Africa. An armistice was arranged on 11 November and the Anglo-American forces assumed control of French North Africa and West Africa.

4 Persia and Iraq Force; members of the forces were not allowed to reveal their whereabouts when writing home.

the company of such delicious flora. Long may you stay. I should, of course, like you to be a hero – but I doubt if I could accept the risk – and I am quite certain you have all the qualities of a stout fella, without the necessity of a vulgar display.

News of our friends at this end I have little. What of Leo and Hal and any others that I know out your way? I miss you all, you know – I miss that unanxious society in which we trusted each other and were gentle as well as gay. I miss your burly self especially. Like all sensible people, I am searching out substitutes. The Treasury yields a number of pleasant men and women who, besides being very intelligent (and some of them very beautiful) are good company over a glass of beer or whisky. But they lack withal a certain redness of the blood – a certain human gentleness and sensitiveness. On the other hand, my Soho Bloomsbury and Chelsea acquaintanceship is widening also. The Swiss in Old Compton Street, the Wellington in Wardour Street, and the Lord Nelson in King's Road are the clubs which I frequent in search of the Ultimate Human Beings – and knowledge and experience and freedom. A strange society – composed of restless incomplete ambitious people who live in a chaotic and random way, never caring about the next five minutes, drunk every night without exception from six o'clock onwards, homeless and unfamilied, living in pubs and copulating upon the floors of other people's flats. Poetry is perhaps the only thing taken seriously by them all – and the only name they all respect is that of T. S. Eliot. Politics they do not understand or care about. Their thought and their poetry is concerned with subtleties of personal relations – with the creation of the unexpected in words – 'dredging the horrible from unseen places behind cloaks and mirrors'.¹

Perhaps it is a betrayal to make friends with these people while our armies are fighting in North Africa. But I cannot help finding these offscourings of *Horizon*² a goodly company in some ways – they seem, indefinitely, to be better human beings than these smiling Treasury people who drink, but never too much, and who never in any sense give themselves away. They are queer and unreliable, many of them – but they meet you in a level human sort of way, without the miles and miles of frigid protective atmosphere in between. They have a sort of freedom too, which I envy. I think it arises from a complete lack of any sense of responsibility – (so of course my envy is not wholehearted. I may be flying blind at present, but I would not cast *all* the instruments overboard. Why, I don't know. A person with a moral sense but no moral axioms is a ship crowded with canvas which has lost its rudder. Failing another rudder, one should strike sail, I suppose).

¹ From Terence Tiller's 'The Singers' in his *Poems* (1941).

² *Horizon: A Review of Literature and Art*, an influential literary magazine published in London between 1940 and 1949 and edited by Cyril Connolly.

In the intervals of my Soho adventures and my grapplings with Russian verbs and rules for the use of the genitive, I do a large number of things. Seaforth still needs much attention in the way of scrubbing floors and spreading coats of spotless paint over variegated surfaces. I write a bit. I read a lot – am having an orgy of Edmund Wilson¹ at the moment – (good on literature, superficial on history) and lately I reread *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*.² I feel a sort of reverence for that book – for that man – which it is hard to describe.^{xiii} To live such a swift life of action, and yet *not* simplify everything to the point of inhumanity – to let the agonising complexities of situations twist your heart instead of tying your hands – that is real human greatness – it is that sort of person I would leave anything to follow. Also I've read much poetry – various moderns, Wilfred Owen (a magnificent poet) – and Pindar (who always brings you to my mind!).

It is good to write to you, my brother, and try to disentangle for your benefit the strands of my far from satisfactory life. I feel in a peculiar sort of way that I mustn't let you down – yet don't quite know how to set about it. I don't think I believe any more in clean hands and a pure heart. Ignorance I know – 'innocence' I imagine is just a word. What one *must* have is a simple plan of action.

So what so what so what.

I am on First Aid Duty tonight at the Treasury – an oasis of peace in a far too full life. I must go down to bed pretty soon. (We had one casualty tonight. Great excitement. A man with a cut finger. Christ.)

I think of you often. May the gods guard you.

Goodnight, my gentle Frank –

Much love to you.

Iris

To Frank Thompson.

5 Seaforth Place

22 January [1943]

Darling the mice have been eating your letters (not indeed that that is my excuse for not writing for so long, my excuse for that is everything or nothing, whichever way you like to look at it). I am very angry about this, chiefly because your letters are rather precious documents, but also because I am not on very good terms with the mice, and the fact that I have been careless enough to leave valuables around where they could get at them can be

¹ American writer, editor and literary critic (1895–1972).

² By T. E. Lawrence.

chalked up as a point to them. One day I shall declare serious war on the mice in a combined trap-poison operation. At present I am just sentimental with a fringe of annoyance. I meet them every now and then, on the stairs, or underneath the gas stove, and they have such nice long tails.

Look here, though. I don't seem to have heard from you for some time. How are things? Are you still in a land of incredible shrubs and amazing mountains having unsuccessful conversations with Ukrainian truck drivers? Your silence I think portends action. I hope it has been, is being, effective – and not I do hope too dangerous – at any rate in its outcome. I don't mind how many dangers you face, so long as I don't know at the time, and you emerge in good condition – and don't suffer miseries en route of course. All the better – you will have more tales to tell when you come home – you will have the tales anyway, I guess. You are obviously designed by the universe to be a teller of tales! We must write a novel in collaboration when you return. You can write the action part and I'll do the psychological interludes.

Oh I chafe at this inaction. I'd take on any job now – *any* job – if it would get me out of England and into some part of the world where things are moving. You will say 'Baloney – things are moving in very few places (and there they're going *too* damn fast) and everywhere else you'd be just as browned off as you are in England'. Maybe – but then at least I'd know two ways of getting browned off, instead of one.

Not that I'm unhappy. All things considered, life is OK. I like my job on the whole. It's not strenuous. I have a pleasant flat near St James's Park (the park is thinking about spring already – soon *you* will be thinking about fritillaries, no doubt), which (the flat, not the park) is rapidly becoming so full of volumes of poetry of all eras and languages that I shall have to go and camp on the railway line (or feed 'em all to the mice, after they've finished their present strict diet of Airgraphs¹). I read a good deal – but not as much as I'd like. I write a little – but Oh Christ not one bit as much as I'd like. That's part of the trouble at present. I have just so many very tiring and quite *unavoidable* activities that I have just no time to live my own life – at a time when my own life feels of intense value and interest to me. Jesus God how I want to write. I want to write a long long and exceedingly obscure novel objectifying the queer conflicts I find within myself and observe in the characters of others. Like Proust I want to escape from the eternal push and rattle of time into the coolness and poise of a work of art. (Agreeing with Huxley for once, I think it is not what one has experienced, but what one *does* with what one has experienced that matters. The only possible

1 In 1941 the General Post Office introduced the Airgraph Service for correspondence between service people and civilians. Letters were photographed onto microfilm and sent to their destinations where they were developed into full-size prints and posted to the recipients.

doctrine of course for one who has experienced remarkably little of the big world!) But all this requires peace and calm and time time time which I haven't got oh blazing hell I haven't got it. [. . .]

Frank, I wish you would come home (a simple wish, often reiterated). You and the others. You offered me – and still may it please the Gods offer me – a friendship I'm finding it harder and harder to attain these days. I'm hellishly lonely in my great and beautiful and exciting London, and in my cushy job – Oh I know tens and hundreds of people some wild some tame and all interesting, and most kindly but so few my friends. I feel more independent actually than ever before – no longer at all anxious to seek the mob's approbation, to be admired or impress my intellect upon the chance gathering. But oh so much in need of intellectual intimacy. The patient mind which is prepared to comprehend my own and toss me back the ball of my thought. (This sounds a bit intellectual snob. Maybe. I'd believe almost anything of myself these days. I'm becoming the Compleat Cynick¹ where I. Murdoch is concerned.)

I should tell you that I have parted company with my virginity. This I regard as in every way a very good thing. I feel calmer and freer – relieved from something which was obsessing me, and made free of a new field of experience. There have been two men. I don't think I love either of them – but I like them and I know that no damage has been done. I wonder how you react to this – if at all? Don't be angry with me – deep down in your heart. (I know you are far too Emancipated to be angry on the surface.) I am not just going wild. In spite of a certain amount of wild talk I still live my life with deliberation.

Ersatz? Well, yes, a bit – but then all life is rather ersatz now, since the genuine articles have been separated from us and he is a fool who does not go ahead on the basis of what he has.

News of our friends I have little. Noel Martin² I saw the other day when he was in town for a medical exam. (He passed A1.) He's volunteering for a special air observer job which sounds rather suicide squaddish to me. He's been driven crazy with boredom in his searchlight racket. He's in love with an ATS subaltern age thirty and may soon propose to her. The gods speed his suit. She sounds rather nice. Leonie³ I hope before long to have staying with me, complete with infant. (I haven't yet seen the latter.)

1 *The Compleat Cynic*, a play written by Alaric Jacob (1909–95) who was a war correspondent for the *Daily Express*. He was based in Teheran and Cairo during the early 1940s where he might possibly have met Frank Thompson and/or David Hicks.

2 An Oxford contemporary and friend of Leo Pliatzky. In 1940 Martin had asked Murdoch to marry him.

3 Leonie Marsh, an Oxford friend and a member of the Communist Party. During her first year at Oxford she fell in love with Frank Thompson (who loved Murdoch) and was loved by M. R. D. Foot. She married Tony Platt in 1941.

People are getting awfully damn complacent about the war. I wish they wouldn't. We're hardly beginning to see the way out of the wood yet. Beveridge¹ is a good thing though – *that's* all right, so long as people don't start relaxing with a sigh of relief. (I've just been reading Bev. – a fine piece of work – thorough and equitable – and it will be a good fight, trying to get it put into operation – doomed to failure I surmise, but instructive.)

Poetry (said she slipping around in a random manner from subject to subject, please forgive this) obsesses me more and more – it is a great sea which, whenever I can escape from my detestable duties, even for ten minutes, I slip into with a sigh of relief. Poets I have discovered lately – Louis Aragon² – *Le crève-cœur* – the first real war poems I have read that *are* poems. *Dunkirk* at last seen by an artist – a handful of real jewels – a limited edition in France, all confiscated. One or two copies escaped to England and have been reprinted here. Then – a favourite of your father's evidently – archy the cockroach!³ And (rediscovered) Wilfred Owen. And Ann Ridler.⁴ And innumerable moderns.

Do you ever read now? Or write? Oh you should have that civilisation you could take part in so richly – too. For the mountains and the truck drivers are very good also. And I *do* agree with you about the Russian language!

Write to me you frightful cad and say what you are feeling about our pretty baffling universe.

you write so many things
About me which are not true
Complained the universe.

There are so many things
About you which you seem to be
Unconscious of yourself said archy⁵

¹ The Report on Social Insurance and Allied Services, known as the Beveridge Report (1942), was produced by a committee chaired by the economist William Beveridge (1879–1963). It formed the basis for the post-war reforms in the UK and resulted in the creation of the welfare state and the National Health Service.

² French poet, novelist and essayist (1897–1982), a founder of the surrealist movement and a member of both the Communist Party and the French Resistance movement.

³ *archy and mehitabel* (1927), by Don Marquis, originated in a series of satirical newspaper columns in the 1910s and 1920s; archy is a fictional cockroach who has been a free-verse poet in a former life; mehitabel is an alley cat.

⁴ English poet (1912–2001) and an editor at Faber & Faber.

⁵ From *archy and mehitabel*.

Out in the kitchen I can hear the mice eating something or other. Better go and see what.

Look after yourself.

Much love

Iris

To Frank Thompson who, having landed in Sicily on 10 July, was now being shuttled back and forth between countries, including Malta and Libya; his squadron finally reassembled in Egypt in mid-August. Murdoch's decision to learn Turkish was perhaps a gesture of sympathy and identification with Frank, who was required to learn the language in preparation for the possible invasion of the Dodecanese Islands.^{xiii}

5 Seaforth Place

15 August [1943]

Old campaigner, you preserve a stubborn (and no doubt prudent and correct) silence about your martial activities, and it is only from Hal that I have learnt where you have been lately. Yes, I daresay it is all just so much more sweat and hotness and sordid scenery for you – but at least you are in the big river – and we at home can't help envying you. I can imagine your comments on that – but Christ, can you imagine how it feels to fulfil a serene daily routine, having to make greater and greater imaginative efforts to believe that a war is on at all, as the memory of the Blitzes fades – and yet knowing intellectually all the time that humanity's future is being fought out, and that one's own friends are out there and may get hurt in the process?

Pardon my tiresomeness – just this old restless feeling, annoyance against the easy stay-at-home life.

I'm glad you see Hal now and then. Hal is a very good guy, and as you say, has a special brand of wisdom. Re your suggestion that a photograph of me be forwarded, I have to inform you that action has been taken. Viz. I have made an appointment with Polyfoto¹ for their next free date, viz. the end of August. So you may expect the radiant thing to arrive about Christmastime.

You don't mention old Leo. Hal tells me – and indeed I had a letter recently from the old cynic himself – that he is shortly to be commissioned. Your army takes a long time to recognise a good proposition.

The leaves are falling portentously all over St James's Park. I am rereading large sections of the Bible and wondering about Man. I am getting on capitally with my Turkish teacher, except that he will call me 'Mudrock' in spite of

1 Popular brand of national photographic studios.

frequent reproaches.' ('What you must never forget, Bayan Mudrock . . . 'Murdoch, efendim!' 'Ah yes – now as I [was] saying Bayan Mudrock . . .').² But – and this, the only conclusion of importance I have come to of late is that if (I say if, and cannot give the word too horrid an emphasis) I have any métier it is to be a writer.

Writing is the only activity which makes me feel 'Only I could produce this'. Whether or not 'this' is any use is of course the crucial question to which I know not, and may not ever know, the answer. Meanwhile I am writing fairly regularly, both poetry and prose.

The autumn brings melancholy. Will this war never end – will it always be you battenning on Chianti and cakeshops, I on Burtons and the ABC³ – and never a united celebration? Soon I shall break into a lament and compare our inconvenienced youth with the fall of leaves in high summer – as they are falling now. What bosh. And the Red Army advancing too.⁴

Later I will write a more virile letter and prove to you that I am not fundamentally downcast.

Do thou, oh my brother, prosper.

Love I

To Frank Thompson, written from Blackpool where Murdoch was convalescing following a bout of jaundice. Although this appears to be Murdoch's last letter to Thompson, he continued writing to her until the spring of 1944; Murdoch's letters written in response have been lost but it is clear from Thompson's replies (held in the Bodleian) that they chronicled her 'disaster-prone love-life', including her affairs with M. R. D. Foot and Thomas Balogh.^{xiv} In Thompson's last letter to her, dated 21 April 1944, he wrote: 'I can honestly say I've never been in love. When I pined for you I was too young to know what I was doing – no offence meant. [. . .] All the same, I don't think you should fall for "emotional fascists" – Try to avoid that . . .'^{xv} Thompson probably had Thomas Balogh in mind when using the phrase 'emotional fascists'. In November 1944, Philippa Foot was to bring Murdoch the news that Thompson was 'Missing Believed Killed'.

Blackpool

12 November [1943]

¹ Murdoch had persuaded the secretary to the Turkish Embassy to teach her the language.

² 'Bayan' is Turkish, in this context, for 'Miss'; 'efendim' means 'sir'.

³ Burton's jam teacakes; ABC (Aerated Bread Company Ltd) was famous for its self-service tea shops.

⁴ The Soviet summer campaign of 1943 saw the Russians defeating the Germans in the air and recapturing Russian cities.

Dearly beloved, thank you for Прыг *and* Скок,¹ who have just arrived! Yes, it pleases me too to think that these people of blood and iron have their human moments – perhaps after all we are wrong in thinking of them as somewhat barbarous Asiatics fundamentally differing from ourselves. Viva the confraternity of Peter Rabbits.

I am delighted too to hear that a Mayakovsky² may be en route. [. . .] When I get back to London I shall send you some of the stuff that is being written now by the Younger School – our contemporaries, God help us – the New Apocalyptics, the *Poetry (London)* gang, the sensibility boys who think with their stomach.³ You probably won't approve – you may nevertheless enjoy. Just occasionally some of these folks produce an exquisite lyric – and a good lyric is a good lyric, and infinitely to be preferred to the barren political jargonising that even real poets spent so much time on in the play-time of the '30s when we were all conscience-ridden spectators. [. . .]

I am reading another Henry James called *The Ambassadors* – the man is uncanny the way he unravels a psychological situation. He writes in about five dimensions – and in that gorgeous convoluted style which, if you give it your closest attention, is nevertheless not obscure. He is the only novelist I know who really says *everything* – and gets away with it. To write like that is self-evidently one of the greatest activities of the human mind. I hope the New World Order will agree! [. . .]

I'd love to know what you're up to – (though of course I know you can't tell me). Still, if the Russians, God bless 'em, continue to hare along like this maybe you'll all be home before too long. Au revoir then.

Con amore, devotissima

I

To Leo Pliatzky.

5 Seaforth Place

17 June 1944

1 Russian children's book *Skip and Jump*, about small animals such as frogs and rabbits, that Frank had sent in order to help her improve her Russian.

2 Vladimir Mayakovsky (1893–1930), Russian poet and playwright.

3 Murdoch describes three groups here: the Apocalyptic Movement, or the New Apocalypse, was a group of Scottish, Welsh and English poets of the late 1930s and early 1940s, including G. S. Fraser, Norman MacCaig, Edwin Morgan, Vernon Watkins, Kathleen Raine, David Gascoyne, George Barker, Henry Treece and Herbert Read, who drew on myth to convey the idea that European civilisation was destined to collapse. The second group comprised those who published in the magazine *Poetry (London)*, which ran from February 1939 until January 1951. The third group was probably the New Romantics, poets who were reacting against the intellectualism and realism of 1940s poetry and whose most famous member was Dylan Thomas.

Old Leo, hello, I was so glad to get your letter and to know you were safe and secluded, though irked at being so. I have so far avoided bombs, torpedoes, pilotless planes and other such. I have changed my job, without however attaining any great spiritual satisfaction thereby. I have escaped from the Treasury into UNRRA. There I wander, amid the chaos of what may one day be an organisation, trying to persuade myself and others that I am doing a job. Actually I just read odd memoranda, learn people's names, and try to decide what the word 'rehabilitation' means.

The Second Front, as I write is proceeding nicely.¹ How good it is to hear these French names! How charming to be freeing a place called St Mère Église. (Not so charming, no doubt, if one is on the spot.) I hope this is no false dawn for all these people. Perhaps they will see to it that it is not. Morale at home (of course) is fine, to judge from conversations in trains, applause in cinemas and so on! (Tito² got such a rousing reception at a cinema the other day, I was quite surprised.) Even pilotless planes do not depress unduly. They provide such fascinating material for the uninstructed theorist. Everyone in London has his little idea.

I suppose this business will end. It looks as if it might. Any ideas yet of what you'll do thereafter? It's a queer prospect. I feel tired, myself, of the vague administrative task. If I saw a chance I'd bolt for the academic ticket – but I doubt the appearance of a chance. Otherwise, to be a hander out of cocoa and Fry's chocolate to the savage tribes of Europe might be sufficiently perplexing and preoccupying and pity and terror inspiring to divert the attention from the self.

Write again oh my dear Leo. I will do the same, I will.

As always my love to you

I

To David Hicks who had just left his post in Cairo to work in Teheran. Although Persia had become Iran in 1935, its old name seems to have stuck.

5 Seaforth Place
4 September 1944

David my dear, your letter, thanks. But oh Lord what a picture of deserts and bad Persians and awful Englishmen. It hurts that one can't *really* imagine the cockroaches or the heat or the fever. I can a little imagine the hatred. I

¹ 6 June 1944 – D-Day – had seen the beginning of the Second Front, the Allied invasion of France which lasted for eleven months and ended in Berlin.

² Josip Tito (1892–1980), Yugoslav revolutionary and statesman.

was moved – but it remains all too vague this picture of you and of Teheran. Or else a little too mythological, with Black Girls and Leopards and so on. And your voice, still sounding familiar, in the background. I hope you haven't been ill again. And have your chiefs turned decent and is life reasonably calm and sane? The main thing is obviously that you must come home pretty soon – but you've thought of that yourself. [. . .]

You ask about UNRRA. UNRRA, to be brief, is a pretty unstable show at the moment. It's rather too full of inept British civil servants (whom their departments could well spare; me for instance), uncoordinated foreigners with Special Ideas and an imperfect command of English and go-getting Americans and Canadians. The result is pretty fair chaos. There are a few able people here and there and very many noble-hearted good-intentioned people – but they drown in the general flood of mediocrity and muddle. Yet maybe I paint too black a picture. The machinery for repatriating 'displaced persons' (the one job UNRRA certainly *will* have to do) is being planned with a fair amount of sense and energy – and if we do the right thing by these 8,000,000 we shan't have lived altogether in vain. My own part in this great show is small. A sort of jungle life prevails at my level (survival of the fittest etc.) and I have to spend much of my energy preventing myself being (quite genuinely) mistaken for a clerk or girl messenger by newcomers from Washington. The nervous strain is pretty considerable; I'm certainly not enough of a go-getter for that sort of existence. Prospects of going abroad are nil at the moment. (I nearly got a job the other day on a 'flying squad' in connection with repatriation, but was rejected because I can't ride a motor bicycle! What a useless character I am.) Altogether gloom and obscurity prevails about the future. I might try to get some academic job – but that mightn't be too easy and anyway would I make the grade? Heigh ho. I suppose the trouble is I have a little too good an opinion of my intellect – thus I easily get fed up with mediocre jobs, and imagine I'm being victimised while all the time (maybe) I'm just not rising to occasions. A problem. Well, I shall learn. I still cherish the illusion that I can write, though that too is getting a little battered by the waves of time. *Eh bien*. Meanwhile, most of the people at UNRRA are perfectly charming (especially the Czechs – I like next best the French, Dutch, Belgians, Poles, British, Americans and Canadians in that order!) and so one is not perpetually in a state of (righteous/unrighteous) indignation. (It's revolting to observe the extent to which a little social success relieves and rehabilitates one's vanity.)

On other fronts change goes forward at its usually breakneck speed. Shortly after I wrote to you last I tore myself away, with agonies which I could not even have conceived of a year ago, from the utterly adorable but

wicked Hungarian with whom I'd been living.¹ Now that I'm no longer bleeding at every artery I see this was a very good move. At present I'm having a rather decorous *affaire* with a French diplomat,² which is at any rate good for my French. Nothing very world- or soul-shaking I must say, though, I am rather in love with France. *La lointaine princesse*³ maybe. (London shewed considerable restrained enthusiasm about the liberation of Paris,⁴ and one sees a suitable number of tricolours about.) My own passion grows and grows. A large percentage of sheer romanticism of course. Yet too the feeling that if France lives Europe will live – meaning that there will be something left not Russianised or Americanised. Meaning too that France is likely to be a decent progressive force and will be useful to have around. And oh, all the rest – French people, French films, French songs, Baudelaire and Mauriac and the dangerous intellects of the Church and Giraudoux⁵ and Aragon and Jeanne d'Arc and what have you. (I got very vividly your picture of the French women who wished they hadn't married Persians.) [. . .]

How nice it would be to be Catholic and to be able to light candles for people and feel it was some use. (Today Sunday and the angelus from Westminster Cathedral, which is 200 yards from here, has just ceased ringing.) Anyhow, keep well, my dear, and get that home leave. [. . .]

Much love to you, David
Iris

To David Hicks, in which Murdoch mentions briefly Frank Thompson's death. In charge of a Special Operations Executive mission, Thompson had been executed in Bulgaria in June 1944 with some partisans and villagers who had helped the SOE team. However, he was not officially to be declared dead until 1945.^{xvi}

5 Seaforth Place
12 December 1944

Dear David, a long time ago, as I may or may not have mentioned, I sent you off some Eliot and some Aragon. [. . .] Anyhow that was a long time ago. If those chaps are to be seen on every bookstall in Teheran, my apologies. I cannot stop imagining your city as consisting of three mud huts and a bazaar.

1 Thomas Balogh.

2 Olivier Wormser, an acquaintance of Thomas Balogh.

3 The 'distant princess' is a stock figure in medieval romance literature.

4 On 25 August 1944.

5 Hippolyte Giraudoux (1882–1944): French novelist, essayist, playwright and diplomat.

Since then, I have a feeling all sorts of things have happened. I heard the news of the death of my old friend Frank Thompson – you may have met him in Cairo. He used to be at New College. He was a brilliant and full-blooded creature, one of the best I ever knew. I suppose only now I'm beginning to realise the war isn't just a short interval after which one resumes – something. There's nothing to resume. Oh it was all very golden and beautiful and pure-hearted, all that time – but now one is quite different and wants different things. A very obvious conclusion, but I hadn't up till now felt it so violently, that severance from the golden lads and lasses period.¹ What the present period should be called, I really don't know. What does it consist of? Oh whirls of charming people, and much hard work directed to no very clear end (and which anyway will probably all have to be scrapped when we finally clear up our relations with the military!), and loads of Henry James and Kierkegaard and lots of French things – French books and French conversations and Frenchmen. At last there's a reasonable flow of news from Paris, and one begins to feel that that's a city, after all, in the same universe as one's own, and which one might even conceivably visit. One's friends go off there for a week and come back. A few books come across. All that's very refreshing and exciting. [. . .]

Send me a photograph of yourself. And write, old dear, about the wicked Persians and your black girl and the loathsomeness of officialdom and what you yourself are thinking and doing in the midst. I hope you are well and not miserably prostrated with real or imagined illnesses. Somehow or other, I thirst for news.

My love to you.

Iris

To Leo Pliatzky.

5 Seaforth Place

[5 April 1945]

Leo, dear, it was good to hear from you. You still sound rather sandy – I hope life isn't being too arid. I didn't know the people you mentioned – but I know of plenty like cases. *Mon dieu*. Friends? I suppose I have been lucky – I've made about four really good friends in the last year or two – and, lord, that makes all the difference between the desert and the rose gardens of Shiraz and Ispahan.² (Have been reading Rilke into the bargain.)

¹ Echoing Shakespeare's *Cymbeline*: 'Golden lads and girls all must, / As chimney-sweepers, come to dust'.

² Ancient cities in Iran.

Hal Lidderdale is due home tomorrow on seven days' leave. It will be queer to see him again after four or five years, and now that it comes to it I don't altogether want to. In a way you know, I'm savagely jealous of you people who have been out of England during the war – even granted all your cares about only seeing the world from inside the military machine. What I've been seeing is the dirty depressing muddled insides of offices – consoled of course by friends and poems and novels and soaring scintillating ideas and the rest of that paraphernalia. I suppose you will be home too before long – it's odd to think of it.

The usual caucus race goes on in my mind about what to do after the war: university, WEA,¹ British Council, BBC, journalism, League of Nations (or whatever), Allied Control Commission – anything, anywhere, heaven only knows. What about you Leo? Any plans?

Have just been reading Henry Miller's torrential book about Greece.² His lyrical enthusiasm about people and places is infectious. I suppose it's not such a bad old world – for people like us, anyway. It has possibilities – and I imagine, with the war ending, one should be thinking more and more about how good life might be. Yet of course one isn't. Yet indeed the daffodils are now 9d a dozen in London.

See you soon, old Leo. I can remember nothing except the long eyelashes. Good luck and write again and so will I.

Love

I

To David Hicks.

5 Seaforth Place

13 May 1945

Hello. It is extremely hot and I am sobering down after the uneasy excesses of VE.³ We did all the right things in London, such as dancing in Piccadilly at 2 a.m. Now I suppose one will cool down, think about poor old Europe, and wonder if our rulers have learnt a great deal from this. Yet to hell with such gloomy reasonings! Thank God part of the damned war is over. I did thank God very earnestly in the RC Cathedral on Tuesday where the emotion was as thick as incense and the cardinal (or is he a cardinal) made a dreadful speech which was happily soon

¹ The Workers' Educational Association, founded in 1903 to provide access to education and lifelong learning for adults in the UK and Northern Ireland.

² *The Colossus of Maroussi* (1941).

³ Victory in Europe Day, 8 May 1945.

drowned in the Hallelujah Chorus. After that I went and got drunk, which was good too.

I hope you reached the Caspian all right with your mule and got back again safely and met many charming Russians on the road. When are you coming home on leave? Do these extraordinary events make any immediate difference to your life?

Sometime or other you will receive *The Brothers Karamazov* which I at last managed to get sent off. When I next remember and am in Charing Cross Road I will send you some French books. I am getting some fascinating stuff over from France at the moment. As a result of late repercussions from Kierkegaard and Kafka the French novelist seems to be in a dilemma, wondering whether to write a philosophical essay or a novel. Some, like Albert Camus, write first the one and then the other. Maybe the French have been that way for some time (Gide . . . Mauriac . . .) but the malady is certainly intensified now. Poets too are getting philosophical about the nature of language. The Silence of Rimbaud is becoming a great subject for metaphysical speculation. Out of this hurly-burly a lot of exciting and maybe good literature seems to be getting written. I'm quite intoxicated by all this. The intellectual fumes are strangely mixed, very strong, overpowering.

I saw Hal Lidderdale, home on leave, a few weeks ago. I like Hal a lot. (He looks much less like Chatterton¹ than when last I saw him.) I like his warmth and humanness, his lazy pleasure in life's good things, and his lack of petty vanities and meannesses. A good chap. He's now in Germany. He's had a fairly peaceful time throughout the war, and didn't in the last phase discover any Germans who wanted to fight.

Now I am going out into St James's Park to look at the tufted ducks.

Au revoir.

Love, I

To David Hicks, now working in Prague.

5 Seaforth Place

1 June 1945

David dear,

Your fine epic *did* arrive, a few days after I sent off my last letter. Maybe it was too heavy, and that delayed it. Heavy or not, I consumed it with joy. I envy you these flirtations with a Nature wilder than anything I've ever seen.

¹ Thomas Chatterton (1752–70), early Romantic poet, who died by taking arsenic at the age of seventeen and who is famously commemorated in Henry Wallis's painting *The Death of Chatterton* (1856).

I've never met with this Monk Lewis sort of Nature.¹ Sorry about the snow – however you were both so thoroughly British and determined about it.

Czechoslovakia? Good God. What shuttling to and fro you chaps seem to do. I can't think at the moment whether I'm glad or not. Of course I'm very glad you're getting out of the backwoods – you were due for that anyway. But I wish you were coming a bit nearer home than Czecho. I feel an occasional dash to Prague will probably be beyond my income. I hope you'll be coming to England en route? Well, yes, I think I *am* glad. I like to think of you in Prague. There seems to be an obscure suitability about it. Maybe that's because of a dim pre-war memory of your telling me how you stood with some Czech on some balcony looking down on the fair city with him saying sadly '*für Hitler's Bomben*' – or did I dream that? It must have got shelled, I suppose, at the end – perhaps it's not too bad.² Baroque, baroque – what else? Not much else I can connect with the picture of Prague. Never mind. Maybe you'll be in Bratislava after all. Know any Czech?

Yes, I liked your epic: pondering now over the prelude. I was amused by your stuff about our Master Raceness. I suppose you get stuck right up against this problem. For me, I just don't see it at all. I suppose simply because of staying put here in England and not ever having to think about putting anything across. I feel *now* that I'm not of any particular country. There's Ireland, there's England – but if I have a fatherland, it would be something like the literature of England perhaps – and so, one escapes from chauvinism. Or does one? Yes, I know I will change some of this after I have lived outside England for a while. Even a few months in UNRRA have shewn me that universal brotherhood is not a condition that comes naturally to people. (Canadians. Grrr!) I wonder will you hate Prague too? I can't believe that. But oh Teheran – I shudder in sympathy. Come out of it, David, soon.

Peace, and all that. They have brought back about fifty pictures to the National Gallery. Oh heavenly bliss! Sir Kenneth Clark's favourites, I suppose.³ Well, they're all right. The Van Eyck man and pregnant wife. Bellini and Mantegna Agonies. Titian *Noli me tangere*. Rubens' *Bacchus and Ariadne*. El Greco *Agony*, Rembrandt portraits of self and of an old lady. His small *Woman Bathing* (lovely!). A delicious Claude fading into blue blue blue – blue lake, mountains, sky. Incredible distances to breathe. Two Vermeers, so blue and lemon, honey stuff, girls at the Virginals. And then oh more Bellini and Rubens, and then the Ruisdaels, the Hobbemas, and chaps like Cuyp that

1 Wild, sublime landscapes as described in the Gothic novels of Matthew ('Monk') Lewis (1775–1818).

2 In fact, Prague had been bombed on 14 February 1945, when the US Army Air Forces carried out an air raid on Dresden and (possibly accidentally) hit the Czech city as well.

3 Kenneth Clark was director of the National Gallery from 1933 until 1946. All paintings were sent to Wales during the ten days preceding the declaration of war on 3 September 1939. For further safety, in 1941 the paintings were housed in converted slate mines near Blaenau Ffestiniog.

one had forgotten about. I still feel delirious with the first shock. It felt *really* like peace. And all the people wandering round looked dazed.

The UNRRA wheels are really turning at last and I have far, far too much to do. I'm liking it though. Just now and then one can, for a moment, grasp the whole tiresome chain of causes and effects and realise that what one does in one's office has some remote connection with someone or other over there being fed, clothed, calmed, who wouldn't otherwise be. Outside office hours, this damned election is taking my time. I spent last weekend sitting on an interviewing board to look at chaps who had the effrontery to offer themselves as possible Labour candidates in Westminster. They were uniformly frightful (ignorant, opinionated, careerist, insensitive . . .) – well, I suppose we shall have to choose one of them. [. . .] Heigh ho, Russian exam on July 2nd, general election on July 5th, and UNRRA Council opens in London on July 12. In June, however, I'm going to Scotland and will stay at the gayest hotel in Edinburgh. In August maybe, Ireland . . . island of spells, provincial pigsty. ('Little brittle magic nation dim of mind'. Joyce, of course.)¹

The other day I came up the steps on one side at St James's Park station, and up the other side, meeting at the top, came Denis Healey. He was with Edna Edmonds. Remember those characters? D. is Labour candidate for Pudsey,² his home region. He looked bronze and sleek and rough and handsome and very pleased with himself. I was glad to see him.

Am just reading [Arthur] Koestler's *The Yogi and the Commissar* (shall I send you this, or can you get it out there?). Why am I convinced Koestler is Satan? He's so well aware of so much that no one else notices or can comment on. He sees what are the real moral problems of now. He's a better moralist than Sir David bloody Ross and all the Oxford and Cambridge chaps rolled together. Well, just for those reasons. He makes the left self-conscious – good – but he administers no corrective, no antidote . . . It's the same old dreary cynical undertone. There's No Solution – let's just be conscious of the problems – fine subtle intellectual chaps seeing the problems and understanding our neuroses. He quotes Pascal 'Man is neither an angel nor a brute – but in trying to be an angel he becomes a brute'.³ We'll never find Koestler trying to be an angel. Oh what tangles, what circles . . . Seductive whirlpools. The best moralists are the most satanic.

How fantastic to think of you back in Europe. Give me news of that soon. If I think of it when I'm shutting the envelope I'll put some stamps in. Whistle if you want that Koestler. It will annoy you. There's a lot of

1 *Finnegans Wake* (1939).

2 Denis Healey narrowly failed to win Otley and Pudsey (a constituency near Bradford) but went on to hold several important positions in the Labour Party, including Chancellor of the Exchequer (1974–9) and deputy leader (1980–3).

3 Blaise Pascal (1623–62), *Pensées*, Section VI, No. 358.

potboiling stuff in it too – written for Yankee magazines. God! And any other books you want. I'll raid Charing Cross Road for you soon.

Au revoir chéri.

I

To David Hicks.

5 Seaforth Place

21 July 1945

My dear, as you see I am still *in situ* – and likely to remain so for quite a time, as things look at present.¹ I may even still be here on September 1st. But God knows. Hell blast this damned Administration, nothing ever remains the same for two days together. There is now a plot that I should go to Frankfurt. In any case, my departure to anywhere looks like being indefinitely delayed. The nervous strain is frightful. I always guessed that international organisations needed employees with iron nerves. At least at Geneva one could go swimming or drown oneself in the lake or go and contemplate the Dents du Midi and feel that it would all be the same in a thousand years. Not that this is an international organisation actually. Your picture of mouselets on office stools is quite wrong. You have no *idea* how we live. We are not run by quiet bowler hats from Ealing and Dagenham, who at least behave approximately like gentlemen, but by the citizens of Milwaukee and Cincinnati and New Haven, Conn., let loose in their myriads to deal a death blow to tottering Europe. They do not sit on office stools but lounge, with cellulose belts and nylon braces, behind enormous desks and chew gum and call their fellow citizens by their Christian names. Oh God. However, I must admit (and this spoils my race theory) that I have got quite fond of a number of these *Herrenvolk*² – these are mainly disgruntled intellectuals from Cornell, Ithaca, who have found in UNRRA the means of having a long holiday from the Ithacans: *Odyssey* in reverse.

Oh David I feel so tired and angry these days. I wish you were coming home earlier than September blast you. As for seeing you I feel quite confident that I shall manage that, once you're in Europe, even if it means hitchhiking 500 miles in jeeps or unofficially chartering a Lancaster. I have some leave left which I could take in England *if* by any chance I am gone before you arrive.

¹ In a letter written on 6 July, Murdoch had told David Hicks that she expected to be sent to Brussels soon.

² Master race.

We shall all freeze next winter in our respective capital cities. But I shall see you before then. I will write again soon when I am feeling a little less enraged. My rude beloved David with vine leaves in your hair, my love to you.

I

To David Hicks, following the Labour Party's definitive victory in the general election. This gave Labour its first majority government and a mandate to implement reforms, including those outlined in the Beveridge Report.

5 Seaforth Place

27 July 1945

Oh wonderful people of Britain! After all the ballyhoo and the eyewash, they've had the guts to vote against Winston! I feel really proud of them, and ashamed at not having believed in them. I thought they would be fooled. But they have sense, they can think! I feel proud to be British! This is the beginning of the new world.

My own affairs are damnably delayed and God knows when I shall get away. It looks as if I shall be going, for a while at any rate, to Frankfurt. Dismal but educative.

Oh David, what a time this is! I know they will make endless mistakes and it will be bloody hard. All the same I can't help feeling that to be young is very heaven!¹

Much love

I

To Leo Pliatzky, written when Murdoch was expecting to be posted to Brussels at any moment.

4 Eastbourne Road

11 August 1945

Leo darling, hello, thank God that other war is over too or seems to be. I know a lot of Naval and other mothers, brothers and sweethearts who are pretty damned relieved.

I am still *in situ*, as you see, but likely to be gone before the end of August.

¹ 'Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive/But to be young was very heaven!' William Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, Book XI.

When are you coming on leave? I saw a newsreel last week of you Italian chaps coming on lorries through most of Europe in order to get home, but I didn't see you. Write soon, please, whatever the news.

London and I are feeling faintly hysterical at present. The great game is to shower torn paper out of the top windows on main thoroughfares *à la* New York. I am out of my old life and not yet into my new. I can't dream of settling down to universities or anything else in England that would have me till I've had a good sniff at Europe and listened to the French tongue for a while. After that I shall probably be too restless to settle down at all!

And you? Any plans yet? When do you get out? Will you be coming to the BLA¹ before you do? If so, come via Brussels or come there on leave. And if you should get to England before the end of August, ring up or call at once. Write, anyway, immediately. Love to you.

Iris

To Leo Pliatzky.

UNNRA
c/o British Military Mission to Belgium
FPO [Field Post Office]
BAOR [British Army of the Rhine]
4 September 1945
Home address in Brussels:
c/o Agence Continentale et Anglaise, 32 Rue Picard

Dear Leo, greetings. I am most sorry I missed you. *This* is where I am now. [. . .]

Of course I think Brussels is glorious. It has a wild feminine charm. Even the 19th century here was sufficiently baroque to be delightful. I haven't had much time yet to explore the old Flemish quarters fully – but, oh, it's all delightful to me: the French voices, ridiculous little dogs, the little clanging trams, and the way everyone rides on the running boards and never pays their fare –

More of all this anon. Write me how England strikes you after these years. Where do you go next with the army? And what will you do after? Have you decided yet? Au revoir.

Love I

¹ The 21st Army Group, known also as the British Liberation Army, which operated in several European countries, including Belgium, from June 1944 until the end of the war.

To David Hicks, who was at this time on leave in the UK.

UNRRA

c/o British Military Mission to Belgium

4 October 1945

Dearest David, your letter written in the Flying Scotsman¹ is now with me. It's strange to think of you wandering round all my old haunts in London – and many other haunts, I daresay, that I never dreamed of. You are probably able to get infinitely more out of the literary pub life than I ever got. I just ran away from it in the end. One of the many disadvantages of femininity, of course, is that it's more difficult to cope with that sort of society and appear neither a whore nor a bluestocking. Also, in the end, it seemed to me that the percentage of really intelligent conversation was rather small. Soho is so damnably full of people with some talent and sensibility, but not much solid ferro-concrete intelligence – and (bluestocking after all, perhaps) I find as I grow older that I do require from people, if I'm really to enjoy their company, plenty of the good old Oxford and Cambridge clearness of thought and expression. And oh the nauseating vanity of so many of those bohemians! I liked a lot of them very well. Tambi,² for instance, is a darling and has beautiful hair. But relationships were always stormy. People turned out so often to be childish and malicious. Finally I decided I was wasting my time and ceased frequenting the pubs and started staying at home and reading or else chatting with colder more civilised sort of chaps and was much happier. But maybe I was just unlucky in the individuals I met, and as I say it's all more tricky for a woman. What a croaking raven I am, enough of this! [. . .]

I'm amused to hear that your new boss is Edwin Muir.³ I connect him, though not very clearly, with all sorts of things – literature, and some Polish friends of mine in London, and Kafka's mistress.⁴ I forget exactly what the latter story was – that the Muirs took her in after Kafka's death, or something. What would there be left to do in the world after having been Kafka's mistress?

Which reminds me that I have discovered a *wonderful* novelist – more or less everything that the modern novelist should be, and a woman, bless her!

¹ London to Edinburgh express train service.

² Meary James Thurairajah Tambimuttu ("Tambi") came to London in 1938 from Sri Lanka (then Ceylon). In 1939, with Anthony Dickins, he set up *Poetry (London)* which became the leading poetry magazine of the 1940s.

³ Scottish poet and translator who was director of the British Council in Prague and Rome between 1945 and 1949.

⁴ Probably Dora Diamant, Kafka's last love.

Simone de Beauvoir, Jean-Paul Sartre's mistress and full of his philosophy. However, I'll tell you no more about her now, as you must be fed up with these cries of enthusiasm about the French.

I can't think why the British Council should send you to Scotland. A consolation prize, after Iran, so that you could tell the Czechs about the Scots? More talk later, when I'm in a more coherent mood.

Au revoir, chéri.

I

PS I can't place the Black Horse.¹ Where is it?

To Leo Pliatzky.

c/o British Military Mission to Belgium
30 October 1945

Dear Leo,

I was delighted to get your letter. I had been wondering what had happened to you, and was cursing you for not writing! I'm so glad you've escaped from the army. A year of Oxford will be an odd fantasia, but can do no harm. How I envy you, with *time* before you to think and wonder and decide! Your remarks about people gave me very strange sensations. It is eerie, this business of meeting people again, and meeting all one's previous selves – melancholy and desolating in a vaguely pleasant sort of way! What will you *do* in PPE in your one year? If you're doing any philosophy *insist* on MacKinnon! Anyway, do go to all his lectures, and let me know what he's talking about now. [. . .] Please let me know lots more about all the chaps and girls we used to know. What is Stuart Schultz² doing now? Is Denis Healey back? How is the Lehmann–Alastine Bell³ marriage turning out? Give my greetings to dear Fraenkel! All that, and London too, seems so infinitely far away now.

Of course I absolutely love being here. I forget if you ever touched Brussels on your many voyages? If you did, you will remember the Grand Place and its perfection and its rich Flemish buildings and the gilded statuettes high on the roofs, and the tower of the Hôtel de Ville, and the churches, old

¹ The Black Horse, Rathbone Place in north Soho (now called Fitzrovia), a pub that was to feature in *The Black Prince*.

² An Oxford contemporary who spent the war serving in the Royal Army Education Corps but who never progressed beyond the rank of private because he was thought too Bolshevik to promote.

³ Alastine Bell was a former girlfriend of David Hicks. She had married Andrew George Lehmann in January 1942.

Flemish, and the churches, Romanesque – and also (not less amazing to my innocent uncontinental eye) the thousand and one caf  s and the insane tramway system. Just being here and breathing the air and walking on the cobbles and reading the advertisements and hearing the soft twitter of French and the harsher music of Flemish fills one with a crazy joy.

What you say about the curse of military life is probably truer of UNRRA, Germany, than of UNRRA Brussels. There is all the military paraphernalia – I get a certain kick out of that too. It's rather bizarre, now the war is over, to be masquerading as a British officer, drinking cheap drinks in the clubs, and being cared for by NAAFI and ENSA.¹ However, I have managed to get to know a number of Belgians as well and that is much more important – mainly literary chaps and university people. The intellectuals of Brussels are insanely *francophil* (naturally) and that suits me very well. So there are long conversations in caf  s about Jean-Paul Sartre, and Simone de Beauvoir, and Albert Camus and Raymond Queneau, and all the boys that we were just beginning to get excited about in London when the first French literature filtered across after the Liberation. My God, Leo, there is some very interesting stuff being written in France at present on the philosophical and literary front. I begin to get some glimmering too about 'existentialism' the latest philosophy of France – Sartre, out of Husserl, Heidegger and Kierkegaard. Last week I had a very great experience. Jean-Paul Sartre came to Brussels to give a lecture on existentialism, and I met him after the lecture, and on the following day during an interminable caf   s  ance. He is small, squints appallingly, is very simple and charming in manner and extremely attractive. What versatility! Philosophy, novels, plays, cinema, journalism! No wonder the stuffy professional philosophers are suspicious. I don't make much yet of his phenomenology, but his theories on morals, which derive from Kierkegaard, seem to me first rate and just what English philosophy needs to have injected into its veins, to expel the loathsome humours of Ross and Prichard.

UNRRA is as crazy as ever. A recent reorganisation has completely crippled my job, which I was very attached to, and left me with very little to do. I'm afraid the magic carpet will soon call for me and translate me to Bad Oeynhausen or Wiesbaden or Spenge or London or some other outlandish place for the winter. If I *am* translated back to England I will of course shoot straight down to Oxford to see you.

I still can't think what to do with my Life, which still remains oddly unstarted. Brussels is putting all sorts of foolish intoxicating ideas into my

¹ NAAFI: Navy, Army and Air Force Institutes, set up in 1921 to provide goods and leisure facilities for servicemen and their families. ENSA: Entertainments National Service Association, created in 1939 to provide entertainment for British armed forces personnel during the Second World War.

head. The Importance of Living in Paris is becoming more and more evident. My French improves slowly. It's odd how few even of the intelligent people here can talk English.

Dear Leo, please write again *soon* and give me more news of yourself. Hal Lidderdale, who passed through Brussels recently, asked after you.

Love

Iris

PS Tonight *Charles Trenet*¹ sings in Brussels and I shall be there. What joy! Any news of Noel Martin?

To David Hicks.

UNRRA

c/o British Mil. Mission to Belgium

6 November 1945

Your letter of November 2 has at last arrived. I was beginning to be really very angry with you, my dear, for not replying – and rather angry with myself for minding so much. You will have received by now another short lecture on Jean-Paul Sartre (what a bore I am) and a letter expressing panic which I now kick myself for having written. Reflecting on my other letter I thought afterwards I'd said one or two foolish things. Anyway, never mind. Thank you for the photo. I find I'd quite forgotten what you looked like. My 'pleasantly selective memory', to which you once referred me, retained only a general impression of black hair and mockery. Here, you look as if you were attending a lecture on the Right and the Good.² You look a nice sort of chap though and I wish I could meet you. Have you any inside information on how soon the general public might be able to visit Prague? I've always wanted to study those baroque styles.

I'm glad you saw Alastine. I'm sorry it hit you like that, but of course it would. It was far better to see her. Re her feelings, I don't see why you should imagine that you are the only one who can behave how you don't feel. I hope the pain has worn off a bit by now.

This point you asked me to elaborate – I find it rather difficult. Vague generalisations don't help much, and the various illustrative stories would take a long time to tell, and would probably sound just like penny dreadfuls³

¹ French singer and prolific songwriter.

² An allusion to *The Right and the Good* (1930) by W. D. Ross.

³ Popular lurid serial stories printed on cheap paper during the nineteenth century, each part costing one (old) penny.