

novels? Is it part of the recognition he claims all writers are in search of?

Wilson's book is an entertaining mix of anecdotes, stories, diary entries, use of tape recordings, philosophical discourse, facts and fiction, descriptions of surroundings and people he or she knew. He makes it clear that he wishes to 'restore' Iris Murdoch's true and brilliant personality as a great novelist and philosopher, which he feels has been damaged in recent years by her husbands publications, the film or Conradi's work. Consequently, Wilson's biography of Iris Murdoch can be seen in the light of Scott's (1998: 44) conclusion about the role and responsibility of the biographer:

in the depiction of the 'life' ... do not take away the responsibility of the author for producing an interpretation. It follows that this account is one of many that could have been made. Indeed, the closure occasioned by the researcher necessarily treats the evidence as fixed and reliable and glosses over ambivalence and uncertainty.

Wilson's search for and debate on the nature of 'the truth' and 'the good' throughout the book, can possibly be seen in parallel with Iris Murdoch's lifelong search for answers about religion, politics, philosophy and human relationships. The reader can certainly feel the 'goodness' of Iris Murdoch, which Wilson shows by matching her philosophical work with her novels and with much of her personality.

In conclusion, one is inclined to agree with Wilson that 'the best picture of Iris Murdoch is actually to be found in the novels of Iris Murdoch. She certainly felt this. She was otherwise a more than usually secretive person'.

Francisca Veale
University of Southampton

NEVER FELT LONESOME

The value of solitude: the ethics and spirituality of aloneness in autobiography. John D. Barbour, 2004. Virginia: University of Virginia Press; ISBN 0813922887, 240 pp., £36.49.

We often choose to be alone yet feel lonely against our will and it is this degree of volition that determines our reaction to solitude. Barbour relates solitude to autobiography as a necessary condition for the examination of conscience and consciousness. It is a spiritual rather than emotional or social distance. The book 'deals primarily with the spiritual experiences of Christians who interpret solitude using the classic symbols and beliefs of their faith tradition' (p. 4). For religious hermits, 'Asceticism replaced martyrdom

as the ultimate form of Christian commitment' (p. 14). The early hermit monks withdrew from distraction in order to get close to God. This brought about its own particular problems of boredom and despair. It seems that a basic component for sanity is the knowledge that we are alive in the consciousness of others: if not, like isolated prisoners, we begin to lose our grip.

Barbour maps the relationship between theologians and solitude and the changing attitudes about withdrawal versus monasticism: eremitic solitude was uneconomical, whereas the monks kept the monasteries productive. The hermit was seen as essentially useless and solitude as having limitations. Shorter periods rather than the continual isolation of the desert fathers contributed to theological autobiography: Augustine's withdrawal, motivated by inner conflict over emotional and sexual states, was temporary; Petrarch saw solitude as a contemplative and literary activity (although Barbour castigates this mendicant for omitting 'the dark side' of solitude).

Solitude and idleness have often been linked and seen as negative rather than recuperative. Montaigne, as well as Burton, was hostile to idleness. For Montaigne it was a vice rather than creative or relaxing. For Burton also: 'Be not solitary, be not idle' (p. 60). Architecture and the idea of the individual – the development of the study, then 'a room of one's own' – characterized modernist solitude. The study, so much more comfortable than a cave, has become a withdrawing space and a meeting place for solitude, contemplation and writing. Montaigne's tower-bound solitude to grieve over his friend's death is a moving testament to literature as a memorial and the study as a place to mourn privately (p. 59). For Montaigne, solitude is a process of evaluation that lends perspective. The social requires commitments, obligations and external stresses that can be avoided or temporarily alleviated by the solitude offered by withdrawal.

In Rousseau's *Reveries of the Solitary Walker* (1778), Barbour shows that the writer in solitude is never actually alone because he is consciously speaking to an audience (despite Rousseau's protestations that he was writing for himself): 'He needs to imagine the opposition of others to feel his selfhood to the fullest' (p. 92). Persecutors (real or imagined) or audiences all direct the voice in solitude to entertaining, lambasting or justifying (and who are we talking to when we talk to ourselves?). By bringing his paranoia with him, Rousseau was far from alone.

Thoreau's rural retreat from modernity into self-reliance still has moral implications in a simultaneously globalized and fragmented world. However, Barbour is able to see Thoreau as turning his back on the possibility of social change. Solitude is not merely physical proximity but a state of mind. Thoreau's withdrawal was a philosophical choice rather than an alienated resentment. In *Ecce Homo*, at the end of his sanity, Nietzsche romanticized his solitude as a precondition of genius rather than admitting his feelings of loneliness and despair, again aware of a possible

audience and his self-aggrandizement in front of them. The adventurer Richard Byrd's abandoned his attempted 6-month solo Antarctic vigil. Byrd was very aware of an audience as he transmitted messages back to the American press. Any endurance is better endured with the knowledge of an audience enduring it admiringly at a safe distance (and paying you for it!). In Paul Auster's *The Invention of Solitude* (1982), Barbour locates solitude as a place where meaningful work can be achieved: writing writes the self out of solitude, a possible communion.

Barbour's book underplays the relationship of boredom and solitude. He mentions boredom in passing on p. 4 but not until p. 69 does he briefly examine it. Many people fear solitude because of the fear of boredom and the inability to enjoy their own company, be self-reflexive or to do without the distractive materialist culture. Many of the desert fathers suffered from *acedia*, the desperate boredom that rises from a lack of dynamism in daily life, because of the unvarying pattern of solitude. The ascetic life of perpetual devotion requires some remission. Asceticism's denial of human and material urges that lead to boredom and *in extremis*, insanity. However, in a culture dominated by celebrity gossip, soaps, stress, work and debt, solitude, or periods of it at least, seem more essential to preserve sanity than ever. This concisely written book is recommended for anyone interested in the use or value of being alone, and especially useful for brief periods of illness or excessive travel.

Chris Ritchie
Solent University

NOTHING BUT BIOGRAPHY

Disraeli: a personal history. Christopher Hibbert, 2004. London: HarperCollins; ISBN 000714718X, 401 pp., £9.99, paper.

Benjamin Disraeli (1840–81) who famously observed, 'read no history, nothing but biography' is of particular interest to students of that discipline. How was it possible for such a born outsider – a vain, outlandish, dandified Venetian Jew – to become the leader of the Conservative Party and twice Prime Minister? Certainly, he did not suffer from that that now common contemporary malady, low self-esteem: his high opinion of himself never faltered and he did not suffer the hindrance of noble political ideals. As to his appearance, imagine a very Jewish-looking young man in tight red leggings, a blue jacket, a gold cummerbund and sporting long, black hair arranged in ringlets, his hands and neck bejewelled. While still a young man, his father Isaac D'Israeli (one of the most erudite and learned men in London) took his son to literary evenings, usually held at