

Theme: Communication Hampered by Alzheimer's

Text: Fictional – Extract from *Iris* by John Bayley (1998)

There are so many doubts and illusions and concealments in any close relationship. Even in our present situation they can come as an unexpected shock. Her tears sometimes seem to signify a whole inner world which Iris is determined to keep from me and shield me from. There is something ghastly in the feeling of relief that this can't be so: and yet the illusion of such an inner world still there - if it is an illusion - can't help haunting me from time to time. There are moments when I almost welcome it. Iris has always had - must have had - so vast and rich and complex an inner world, which it used to give me immense pleasure not to know anything about. Like looking at a map of South America as a child, and wondering about the sources of the Amazon, and what unknown cities might be hidden there in the jungle. Have any of those hidden places survived in her?

Showing me a tracing from the most elaborate of the brain scans Iris underwent a year or so ago, the doctor indicated the area of atrophy at the top. The doctors were pleased by the clearness of the indication. I thought then - the old foolish romantic idea of the Amazon - that her brainworld had lost its unknown mysteries, all the hidden life that had gone on in it. It had been there, physically and geographically there. And now it was proved to be empty. The grey substance that sustained its mysteries had ceased to function, whatever a 'function', in there, can possibly mean.

[...]

Were I an expert on the brain I should find it hard to believe in such flashes of lucidity revealing, as it were, a whole silent but conscious and watching world. It would be as if - to use a clumsy analogy from my hidden city in the jungle - a flash of lightning were to reveal its existence, and then the explorers found that it didn't exist after all. The words which Iris used with such naturalness and brilliance cannot be stacked there silently, sending out an occasional signal. Or can they? I notice that the eerie felicities which Iris has sometimes produced, like 'sailing into the darkness' or 'I see an angel', seem to come, so to speak, with a little help from her friends. They are like the things a young child suddenly comes out with, to the delight and amusement of parents and friends. But it was the friends or parents who unconsciously did the suggesting. Must have been.

Iris has heard nothing from a great friend, a novelist whom she had once befriended and inspired, counselled and consoled. Had this now famous friend left her, abandoned in her silence? Was it in resignation or in bitterness of spirit that she spoke those words? Sailing alone into the dark ...

In my own daily intercourse with Iris words don't seem to be necessary, hardly appear to be uttered. Because we don't talk coherently, and because we talk without seeming to ourselves to be talking, nothing meaningful gets said. The clear things Iris does sometimes come out with are intended for public consumption. They are social statements. They have the air of last remarks before all the lights go out.

Annotations:

Bayley's above observations of Iris state of mind were made on 10 May 1997.

11 atrophy – wasting or decrease in size of a body organ **16** flashes of lucidity – lucid: sane/rational **20** eerie felicities – unexpected ways of expressing oneself

Assignments:

- 1) How does Alzheimer's affect Iris Murdoch's communication with other people according to the text? (Do not forget an introductory statement.) [Contents]
- 2) What literary means do Bayley and Iris Murdoch herself use to describe the medical condition of Alzheimer's? (References to *the Amazon* and what it stands for are expected to play a major role in your interpretation.) [Analysis]
- 3) Discuss the pros and cons of making the *inner world* (1.2) of Alzheimer's patients known to a wider public. (Take the above extract as a starting point and use your knowledge of other relevant texts on our reading list in your answer.) [Evaluation]