

**Extract from: John Bayley, *Iris* , Chapter/Entry: 4 June 1997 (Murdoch died 8 Feb 1999)**

To me the smell of Iris's mother's flat, though quite faint, was appalling. I had to nerve myself to enter; but Jack, who for quite a while looked after the old lady, never seemed to notice it, and nor did Iris herself. The ghost of that smell certainly comes now from Iris from time to time: a family odour and a haunting of mortality. But it wasn't that which caused the row I made [...]

5 The trouble was, or seemed to be, my rage over the indoor plants. There are several of these along the drawing-room window-sill - cyclamen, spider-plant, tigerplant as we called a spotty one - to which I had become rather attached. I cared for them and watered them at the right intervals. Unfortunately they had also entered the orbit of Iris's obsession with her small objects, things she has picked up in the street and brought into the house. She began to water them compulsively. I was continually finding her with a jug in her hand, and the window-sill and  
10 the floor below it slopping over with stagnant water. I urged her repeatedly not to do it, pointing out - which was certainly true - that the plants, the cyclamen in particular, were beginning to wilt and die under this treatment. She seemed to grasp the point, but I soon found her again with a jug or glass in her hand, pouring her water. Like those sad daughters in Greek mythology, condemned for ever to pour their pitchers into vessels full of holes.

I was not put out at the time: I was fascinated. I took to coming very quietly through the door to try to surprise Iris  
15 in the act, and I frequently did. Once when her great friend and fellow-philosopher Philippa Foot came to see her, I found them both leaning thoughtfully over the plants, Iris performing her hopeless destructive ritual, Philippa looking on with her quizzically precise polite attention, as if assessing what moral or ethical problem might be supposed by this task. [...]

Whether or not the fate of the plants, or the ghost of an odour, had anything to do with it, that day I went suddenly  
20 berserk. Astonishing how rage produces another person, who repels one, from whom one turns away in incredulous disgust, at the very moment one has become him and is speaking with his voice. The rage was instant and total, seeming to come out of nowhere. 'I told you not to! *I told you not to!*' In those moments of savagery neither of us has the slightest idea to what I am referring. But the person who is speaking soon becomes more coherent. Cold too, and deadly. 'You're mad. You're dotty. You don't know anything, remember anything, care  
25 about anything.' This accompanied by furious aggressive gestures. Iris trembling violently. 'Well-' she says, that banal prelude to an apparently reasoned comment. Often heard in that tone on BBC discussions, usually followed by some disingenuous patter that does not answer the question. Iris's 'Well' relapses into something about 'when he comes' and 'Must for other person do it now.' 'Dropping good to borrow when ...' I find myself looking in a mirror at the man who has been speaking. A horrid face, plum colour.

Annotatations: 5 cyclamen: Alpenveilchen; spider-plant: Grönlilie; tigerplant: Tigerlilie

Assignments:

<b>1) Where do symptoms of Alzheimer's become apparent in the extract?</b>	
[l 2/3 old lady ... haunting of mortality]	[Iris Murdoch's mother also suffered from Alzheimer's; one might speculate about Iris having inherited the disease from her mother – see <a href="#">Alzheimer's Society</a> ]
l 8 Iris' obsession	irrational and uncontrolled behaviour due to Alzheimer's
l 8 picking up things	reflects Iris' urge to do something useful, which – from the bystander's point of view – does not make any sense; collecting is a very basic instinct
l 9 compulsiveness	inability to control one's activities
ll 9/10 water slopping over the rim of the window-sill	Iris is no longer able to co-ordinate perception (overflow) and manual activities
l 12 seemed to grasp	she understands the mishap but soon forgets about it and repeats her "destructive ritual" [l 16]
l 16 thoughtfully	there is no thought to go along with the act of tending to the plants
l 23 slightest idea to what ...	both spouse's behaviour is irrational: John's because of his outburst and Iris' because of her shrouded mind
l 25 well ....	those who used to know Iris when she was healthy would expect a well-founded argumentation, which is not what follows in this context
ll 27/28 "when he comes ...	Point out the lack of reason and syntactical incompleteness of Iris' attempts at explaining her "wrongdoing"

<b>2) How does Bayley show in the language he uses that communication is hampered between the spouses?</b>	
l 5 rage	Iris' <b>mishaps</b> cause strong emotions in her <b>caregiver</b>
l 9 I was continually finding her ...	an uninvolved bystander would say: More and more often John found / would find [pflegte zu finden] Iris with a watering jug; the <b>progressive form</b> [was finding] is used to indicate <b>annoyance</b> [cp: Special use of the Progressive We often use the progressive form to <b>express annoyance</b> at a repeated action. In this case, a time expression such as always, forever, continually, etc. must be inserted between the auxiliary and the verb+ing. examples Tom is always complaining about his job! Mary was forever leaving work early. Source: <a href="http://ESL.About.com">ESL.About.com</a> ]
l 10 urged her	refers to repeated and intensifying <b>admonitions</b> to keep her from continually watering the flowers / repeated warnings not to touch the flowers
l 12 seemed to grasp	the communication is not truly successful as Iris later <b>lapses back into</b> her irrational behaviour
l 14 not put out at the time	in earlier comparable situations John did not react so emotionally, he rather decides to watch Iris more closely
l 17 looking on with her quizzically precise polite attention	John even seems to get some pleasure out of studying Iris' behaviour <b>likening it</b> to situations when she was <b>in the prime of</b> her mental capabilities
l 20 rage produces another person	<b>in retrospect</b> Bayley assesses the effect his outburst must have produced in any bystander and especially in his wife; he is quite self-critical in doing so
l 22 'I told you not to!' savagery	The <b>italic print</b> here underlines the growing aggressiveness of John's repeated accusation; the same <b>applies to</b> "savagery" [ <b>choice of words</b> ], a word that <b>denotes</b> a lack of culture and inhuman behaviour
l 23 neither of us has the slightest idea	the misunderstanding is mutual, though for different reasons: both spouses are not the same person!
ll 23/24 becomes more coherent	Bayley becomes more rational (although he still gesticulates furiously) when he cools down after his outburst; the chances of communicating more successfully rise
l 25 trembling violently	intuitively Iris has understood her husbands anger although she is unable to fully understand her faults
ll 25-27 well	see assignment 1

**3) For further observation: Consider the various aspects of communication with Alzheimer's patients.**  
**See:** *The Importance of Good Communication Skills* (hyperlinked as "Communication Skills")