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# The Misfortunes of a Word-watcher : a Reading of Iris Murdoch, A Word Child.

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► **To cite this version:**

Raïd Layla. The Misfortunes of a Word-watcher : a Reading of Iris Murdoch, A Word Child.. Iris Murdoch and the Ethical Imagination, Oct 2019, Amiens, France. halshs-02326913

**HAL Id: halshs-02326913**

**<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-02326913v1>**

Submitted on 22 Oct 2019

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# THE MISFORTUNES OF A WORD-WATCHER: A READING OF IRIS MURDOCH, *A WORD CHILD*

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ABSTRACT. I propose a reading of Iris Murdoch's *A Word Child* and show how her novel resonates with important themes in Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, as read by Stanley Cavell, such as the idealization of language. I highlight the ethical significance of such an idealization.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

I would like to propose here a few thoughts about the novel *A Word Child*, published by Iris Murdoch in 1975.

*A Word Child* is a first-person narrative about Hilary Burde, a poor orphaned child, who grew up lonely and unloved. He was subjected to violence, and was becoming violent himself, when a schoolteacher spotted him as a gifted child, and made him discover languages. Hilary learned how to write his own language, English, then proceeded to Latin, French and Italian. Discovering the order of grammar gave him his first vision of order and beauty: this vision allowed him to rise above the violence and disorder around him. Eventually his love for grammar led him up to a famous university, where he became a Fellow. «I discovered words», writes Hilary, «and words were my salvation».

But *A Word Child* is not a fairy tale, and after a catastrophic love affair which ended in a scandal, Hilary resigned from his University position and took a job indifferent to his talents: at the beginning of the novel, the reader finds Hilary stuck in this job, and presenting himself as a failure. It seems that words did not save him after all, or that he could have been saved but for something that was still lacking. Why salvation did

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*Date:* October 11th 2019.

Conference given at The Iris Murdoch Conference, Amiens, 2019.

not happen and what was lacking in Hilary's first love for words and their order, is a problem the reader has to solve while reading the novel.

A few years before the publication of *A Word Child*, a very similar problem was given a philosophical expression by Iris Murdoch, in a conference she delivered in New York, on this very subject of salvation by words. This latter expression is the title of the conference, then reprinted in *Existentialists and Mystics*. The conference has a political tone: it underlines how tyranny degrades language, and it states that, with no doubt, the art which is «the most practically important for our survival and our salvation» is literature. Murdoch writes that «(...) words are the ultimate texture and stuff of our moral being, since they are the most refined and delicate and detailed (...) of the symbolisms whereby we express ourselves into existence» [7, p. 241].

The novel, *A Word Child*, could be seen as a literary exploration of this idea of salvation by words. This novel is one way to explore what it could mean. Let us note that Murdoch uses two different expressions in the words I just quoted from her article: «survival» and «salvation». One belongs to the empiricist way in philosophy about which Murdoch declares that it is not sufficient for ethics, but she still considers it contains something valuable enough to be conserved; the other word belongs to the christian and theological vocabulary, but it is stripped of the social background that gave it its sense<sup>1</sup>. So, in the profane context of modern life, the use of the word «salvation» has to be explored and rebuilt: the novel can be read as such an exploration, where the fictitious character of Hilary Burde provides a secularized setting for the word. And, interestingly, a setting where he deems himself not saved. At least at the beginning of the novel.

Since a kind of salvation is seen as essential to the work of literature by Murdoch, it would be interesting to find other works in modern literature that could be described in the terms of a salvation by words. Each of these works would depict different kinds of relations to words. It would be interesting too to see which philosophical works would answer to this description. I would like to show here how *A Word Child* resonates with ordinary language philosophy works, especially with Wittgenstein's philosophical works. We could see Wittgenstein as another word child, a word child of a certain kind, who may have been an inspiration for the character of Hilary Burde. But I will not make any historical guess; I will propose rather to bring together the novel and Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, with the idea that each work sheds light on the other.

In the first part of my talk, I will present some elements of Hilary Burde's story: how words were special for him, how he admired the order of language, and what could have been missing here.

In the second part, I will come to Wittgenstein and to the path he followed from the *Tractatus* to the *Philosophical Investigations*. In the *Philosophical Investigations*,

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<sup>1</sup>Cf. Camille Fort, «Le Dieu caché d'Iris Murdoch» [4]: the article analyses the tensions produced in Murdoch's work by her desire to retain christian and theological vocabulary in her novels and philosophical texts (in particular to retain the word «God» itself), in spite of her agnosticism.

Wittgenstein says of the *Tractatus* that it is a work which sublimes language: it explains its apparent disorder by a logical order which is supposed to be underneath the apparent form of proposition. Logical analysis was supposed to unveil this hidden order. But the distinction between the apparent form and the real form of language is abandoned in the *Philosophical Investigations* as mythological: Wittgenstein asks the philosopher to come back to the rough ground of language, to real words, as they are used in their actual contexts, in an innumerable variety of ways. In the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein tells his own story of how he came back from the temptation to see language as something pure and orderly to a sober examination of the innumerable, unclassifiable, different language-games in which we talk.

This would show us a way to answer my question about what was missing in Hilary's first love for words, and why he looked for salvation in a place where he could not find it: our words are not logical; our language-games are innumerable; our language is first of all ordinary, evolving in a relative disorder and a relative mess. Language is like an old medieval town, it is nothing similar to neatly designed suburbs. These do exist, but they are not to be confused with the whole town. Hilary's first love consisted in this confusion, as the *Tractatus* vision of language was. Hilary's first love was more precisely an illusion, necessary for his survival, but to survive is not to live, and to live he had to give up his old vision.

The salvation by words Iris Murdoch refers to in her article is one which accepts the words in their relative disorder, and in their endless differences.

## 2. WHO IS HILARY BURDE ?

Let us come back to Hilary Burde and to his attempt to save himself through the study of words and their grammar.

Hilary Burde is an anti-hero, an underground man, as he describes himself. After his mother's death, he lived in an orphanage, separated from his beloved sister Crystal. He did not know who his father was:

I was informed, before I knew what the word meant, that my mother was a 'tart'.  
[8, p. 17]

This is the harsh way to understand that our moral being is made of words. The sentence sums up in a few words the small child's status in language: before mastering their own language, they are the impotent objects of gossip. Children are talked about in every way before being able to say anything for themselves: they are the object of description, and become authors of descriptions concerning themselves much later, if at all. Salvation was needed here, and it seems that it was not only salvation *by* words that was needed, but salvation *from* words. And the first because of the second: violent words must be fought with other words. Hilary found these other words at school, under the protection of Mr Osmand.

Mr Osmand, a schoolteacher, was the first adult to remark Hilary's talents, and the first adult to care about him:

The realization that people had simply given up trying to teach me anything enlightened me at last, more than the lectures from magistrates, about how utterly shipwrecked I was; and increased my anger and my sense of injustice. For with the dawning despair came also the tormenting idea that in spite of everything I was clever, I had a mind though I had never wanted to use it. I *could* learn things, only now it was too late and nobody would let me. Mr Osmand looked at me quietly. He had grey eyes. He gave me his full *attention*. [8, p. 21]

Hilary describes their relation as nourishing and creative. The child was saved by his master's attention and their common and shared attention for words: he was Mr Osmand's spiritual son. This is expressed in his being a « word child ».

I learnt French. I learnt Latin. Mr Osmand promised me Greek. An ability to write fluent correct Latin prose began to offer me an escape from (perhaps literally) the prison house, began to show me vistas headier and more glorious than any I had ever before known how to dream of. In the beginning was the word. *Amo, amas, amat* was my open sesame, 'Learn these verbs by Friday' the essence of my education; perhaps it was *mutatis mutandis* the essence of any education. (...) I discovered words and words were my salvation. I was not, except in some very broken-down sense of that ambiguous term, a love child. I was a word child. [8, p. 21]

Words gave him a vision of something higher. More precisely, Hilary's admiration went to grammar: words appeared to him as a certain order, as belonging to grammatical systems. So one aspect only of words were given to him: order ! And this order appeared to him as worthy of his respect.

Moreover this order could be consistently obeyed: it was reliable. And this reliability offered him something he never had before. Something which allowed him to counteract the effect of violence, to resist violence.

Violence is a kind of magic, the sense that the world will always yield. When I understood grammatical structure I understood something which I respected and which did not yield. The exhilaration of this discovery, though it did not 'cure' me, informed my studies and cast on them a light which was not purely academic. [8, p. 22]

Murdoch uses here the vocabulary she uses to describe moral vision in the *Sovereignty of Good*. An idea of the Good was given to Hilary through the study of grammar. Reality was given to him through the experience of obedience to the master and, at the same time, through the experience of obedience to their common object of attention: words.

But Hilary the narrator is conscious that something was missing in this relation of admiration and respect, precisely because what he admired and respected was the order that was missing from his own life. He did not use the languages that he learnt. After playing on words with the expression « a word child », the narrator crafts another expression, which signifies this partial, disengaged relation to words: a word-watcher. He admires words, but at a distance.

I loved words, but I was not a word-user, rather a word-watcher, in the way that some people are bird-watchers. I loved languages but I knew by now that I would never speak the languages that I read. I was one for whom the spoken and the written words are themselves different languages. [8, p. 28]

In his study of languages, Hilary was not interested in people, and their linguistic interactions. He was not interested in the fact that their lives were made of words, but he was interested in words abstracted from these lives, and built into systems.

### 3. WITTGENSTEIN AS A WORD-WATCHER

I propose to see Wittgenstein as another word child, one who similarly came back from a failed salvation by words in the *Tractatus* to the recognition of what salvation could really be in the *Philosophical Investigations*: one can see Wittgenstein's philosophy as going from word-watching to realism.

In the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein reassesses his first work by showing how it was under the illusion that language was a perfect order, behind the appearances. He recalls how language appeared to him as something pure and superior, as having the purity of crystal — Hilary's terms are of the same kind. We find in the salvation sought by Hilary the same temptation of subliming language that Wittgenstein sees at work in his former treatise on logic:

94. «A proposition is a queer thing!» Here we have in germ the subliming of our whole account of logic. The tendency to assume a pure intermediary between the propositional *signs* and the facts. Or even to purify, to sublime, the signs themselves. — For our forms of expression prevent us in all sorts of ways from seeing that nothing out of the ordinary is involved, by sending us in pursuit of chimeras. [9, §94]

Ordinariness was precisely not what Hilary needed to escape the ugliness and violence of the orphanage; he would return to ordinariness, but at the end of a long journey, which the novel recounts. In his school years, and his studies afterwards, his salvation depended on the greatness of the order he was discovering. The price to pay was that this sublimity left real words, in their real use, outside his attention. The use of words was not a subject of reflection. Words were treated as magical creatures. As such, they were bound to lose the reality that first allowed Hilary to escape from violence and disorder: because it was sublimed, their order was bound to lose its reality, and its appeal.

In the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein compares words with crystals, when he describes his first relation to words in the *Tractatus*:

97. Thought is surrounded by a halo. — Its essence, logic, presents an order, in fact the a priori order of the world: that is, the order of *possibilities*, which must be common to both world and thought. But this order, it seems, must be *utterly simple*. It is *prior* to all experience, must run through all experience; no empirical cloudiness or uncertainty can be allowed to affect it — It must rather be of the purest crystal. (...) This order is a *super-order* between — so to speak — *super-concepts*.

Whereas, of course, if the words «language», «experience», «world», have a use, it must be as humble a one as that of the words «table», «lamp», «door». [9, § 97]

As Wittgenstein describes the conflict created by this first relation, a conflict between the requirement of crystalline purity and actual language, he calls the philosopher back to the ordinary uses of words:

107. The more narrowly we examine actual language, the sharper becomes the conflict between it and our requirement. (For the crystalline purity of logic was, of course, not a *result of investigation*: it was a requirement.) The conflict becomes intolerable; the requirement is now in danger of becoming empty. — We have got on to slippery ice where there is no friction and so in a certain sense the conditions are ideal, but also, just because of that, we are unable to walk. We want to walk: so we need *friction*. Back to the rough ground! [9, §107]

For Hilary, it was vital and life-saving that grammar should be a reliable order. But what saved him from prison (or worse) was at the end an illusion. The novel depicts the difficulty of the way back to reality.

Now Crystal is Hilary's sister's name. She completely exists for him, and him for her. Her name shines for him. But she is not an illusion, she is plainly real. And Murdoch depicts her as the apparent contrary of a crystal; she gives her a heavy plain body. Crystal embodies the ordinariness Hilary has to come back to, another image of love:

Let me try to describe Crystal. She cannot be said to be beautiful. She was short and dumpy, she had no perceptible waist. She had pretty small well-worn capable hands (...) She had a large mouth with a prominent moist lower lip, very mobile. Rather bad teeth. (...) Her eyes were hazel, of the kind which are pure golden without a hint of green, but they were usually hidden behind thick round spectacles which made them look like gleaming stones. None of this really describes Crystal however. How is it possible to describe someone to whom you are oned in love ? [8, p. 14]

In §111 Wittgenstein underlines the depth of the word-watcher's illusion. He suggests this depth to his reader, but passes then to another question. This is the kind of place where a novelist could begin a story, and the kind of place where Murdoch would have considered perhaps that philosophical writing is not powerful or expressive enough, and that it should give way to literature:

110. «Language (or thought) is something unique» – this proves to be a superstition (*not a mistake!*), itself produced by grammatical illusions.

And now the impressiveness retreats to these illusions, to the problems.

111. The problems arising through a misinterpretation of our forms of language have the character of *depth*. They are deep disquietudes; their roots are as deep in us as the forms of our language and their significance is as great as the importance of our language. — Let us ask ourselves: why do we feel a grammatical joke to be *deep* ? (And that is what the depth of philosophy is.) [9, §110-111]

The ideas of a word child and of a word-watcher are such grammatical jokes, which have philosophical depth.

## 4. THE ORDINARY LANGUAGE MAN

I come now to some elements in Murdoch's philosophy that may seem to go contrary to this reading of Wittgenstein as a former word child, trying to find his salvation in words, the real words of ordinary language, where crystals should be searched for and found.

In her 1959 article, «The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited», Iris Murdoch describes two strands of contemporary philosophy she connects with «symptoms of decline in contemporary literature» [7, p. 267]: existentialism and linguistic empiricism. She describes the latter as associated with «the tradition of Moore and Wittgenstein» [7, p. 267]. One of Murdoch's objection to this inheritance of Wittgenstein's philosophy is that its picture of the moral agent, being conventional and behaviouristic in spirit, is incapable of approaching the complexity of moral life.

The «Ordinary Language Man», as she calls this construal of the moral agent, is «a being subject to rules», surrounded by «the network of ordinary language», understood as «the network of moral conceptual activity at its more common and universally accepted level» [7, p. 268]. With this picture we turn «away from the chaos of empirical inwardness» to «the clarity of overt action» [7, p. 268]. For the Ordinary Language Man, «[even] the presence of others is felt, if at all, simply as the presence of rational critics» [7, p. 268]. As a consequence, concludes Murdoch, this version of the moral agent is incapable of understanding virtue, which is essentially a concern not with actions or rules or reason, but with «really apprehending that other people exist» [7, p. 284].

Murdoch sees this appeal to convention as a surrender when faced with the difficulty of understanding how each of us makes place for the other in our life. The orderliness and rationality of convention plays the role of an intellectual shield against the disruptive character and turmoil of human encounters. This disruption and turmoil are at the center of both Murdoch's philosophical works and novels.

In *The Sublime and the Beautiful revisited*, she describes convention as the enemy of love and understanding:

One might say that whereas the Ordinary Language Man represents the surrender to convention, the Totalitarian Man of Sartre represents the surrender to neurosis: convention and neurosis, the two enemies of understanding, one might say the enemies of love; and how difficult it is in the modern world to escape from one without invoking the help of the other. [7, p. 268]

How does this link to the word child? Hilary Burde shares one thing with this creature of convention: an idealization of language, an unrealistic recoil from its actual variety and messiness. There are different ways to fantasize the order of ordinary language: the Ordinary Language Man is one of them. It is the fantasy that human beings could have convened to build something common to resolve the most important disagreements in advance — as if we could have come to some general agreement beforehand to answer Socrates' question to Eutyphro: «But what kind of disagreement,



my friend, causes hatred and anger ?». (Stanley Cavell puts this question as an epigraph to his essay on the perlocutory aspect of language, «Passionate and Performative Utterances» [3, p. 155]: the perlocutory is notoriously disorderly and messy !)

Now, this Ordinary Language Man is not Wittgenstein's language-user. As Cavell showed in the *Claim of Reason* [2], the image of human beings as creatures of convention that Murdoch finds in some works inspired by Wittgenstein is precisely what Wittgenstein (and Austin) tried in fact to avoid, while feeling at the same time the temptation to picture human beings in such a way.

The linguistic empiricism Murdoch opposes is linked with an early reception of the *Philosophical Investigations*, one that Cavell opposes too, stating that it is a misunderstanding of Wittgenstein's vision of language [2]. Interestingly, Murdoch's criticism of conventionalism is consonant with the interpretation of Wittgenstein defended by Cavell. The critique Murdoch opposes to the first Ordinary Language Man leads her to the moral themes of this second reception, that developed well after linguistic empiricism (roughly, from the 1970s on).

Thus, in criticising the «Ordinary Language Man», Murdoch comes closer in fact to Wittgensteinian conceptions<sup>2</sup>. And *A Word Child* is a novel where Murdoch comes closer to Wittgensteinian themes.

## 5. CONCLUSION

As a conclusion, I would like to point to another theme in the novel which can be linked fruitfully to Wittgenstein's philosophical method.

All along the *Word Child*, another novel is woven into its narrative: *Peter Pan*. In his introduction to the Vintage edition of *A Word Child*, Ray Monk, who is the author of an important biography of Wittgenstein [5], proposes an interpretation of the role of Peter Pan in the novel. Peter Pan is the master of make-believe, and his main tool is language. Let me quote, for example, the passage where Peter Pan and the Lost Boys are playing doctor. «Please, sir», said Peter, going to Slightly, one of the Lost Boys, «Are you a doctor?»:

The difference between [Peter Pan] and the other boys at such a time was that they knew it was make-believe, while to him make-believe and true were exactly the same thing. This sometimes troubled them, as when they had to make-believe they had had their dinners. [1, p. 79]

Monk shows how the risk of a salvation by words is that the word-watcher is entangled in his or her own linguistic imagination. Words can be veils that create illusions, as well as tools to pursue the truth. What was missing in Latin was the language-games in which Latin words were used: but that was all the point for young Hilary.

Monk does not refer to Wittgenstein in his introduction. But it is an interesting result of Murdoch's novel that *Peter Pan* and Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*,

<sup>2</sup>See Murdoch's «Wittgenstein and Inner Life» in *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* [6]: the last pages of this article acknowledge the presence of a voice in Wittgenstein which is at variance with the voice of convention. Murdoch sees it particularly present in the second part of *Philosophical Investigations*.

two works that seem to belong to very different worlds, do illuminate each other in the end.

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