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

LAYLA RAÏD

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*, such as the idealization of language. I highlight the ethical significance of such an idealization.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Ludwig Wittgenstein was one of the prominent philosophical figures in Iris Murdoch's student years. Peter Conradi showed how the towering figure of the Austrian philosopher and his disciples in Cambridge in the late 1940s inspired some characters in Murdoch's novels<sup>1</sup>, as for instance in *Under the Net*.

He showed too how complex the relationship was between the two philosophers. Murdoch disagreed with what she saw as Wittgenstein's excessive suspicion on the inner life [5, p. 124]: according to her reading, Wittgenstein did not clearly show his distance from behaviourism, when rejecting the possibility of a private language and defending the idea that inner life concepts obey public criteria. Murdoch defended this reading throughout her life<sup>2</sup>. She also worried that his *Philosophical Investigations* were bound to deny the entanglement of fact and value, an essential point of her moral philosophy.

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<sup>1</sup>Cf. P. Conradi, «Holy Fool and Magus: the Uses of Discipleship in *Under the Net* and *The Flight from the Enchanter*» [5, p. 123-5]

<sup>2</sup>Cf. *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* [13], ch. 9, «Wittgenstein and the Inner Life».

Nevertheless, a series of studies by Wittgenstein scholars<sup>3</sup> have shown that there are more common themes and methods between the two philosophers than Murdoch thought. This reassessment have drawn on works where Murdoch acknowledges his proximity to her own conceptions. For instance, in «Vision and Choice in Morality», she salutes Wittgenstein's sense of the particular, and his critique of a misleading quest for generality in philosophy<sup>4</sup>, especially in moral philosophy:

Philosophers have been misled, not only by a rationalistic desire for unity, but also by certain simplified and generalised moral attitudes current in our society, into seeking a single philosophical definition of morality. (...) Wittgenstein says that «what has to be accepted, the given, is – so one could say – *forms of life*». For purposes of analysis moral philosophy should remain at the level of the differences, taking the moral forms as given, and not try to *get behind them* to a single form. [14, p. 97]

In «Murdoch the explorer», an article written in praise of Iris Murdoch's particularism, Cora Diamond, one of the leading Wittgenstein scholars today, compares Murdoch's to Wittgenstein's particularism<sup>5</sup>. Analysing the passages on freedom and the determinants of action in *The Sovereignty of Good*, Diamond adds this clear comment in parenthesis:

(The methodology here is Wittgensteinian: there is nothing the matter with the way philosophers have described a type of case; their mistake is to have taken a particular kind of case and to have supposed that, in describing it, they were describing the entire field rather than one part of it.) [8, p. 72]

Moreover, most contemporary readers interpret Wittgenstein's *Investigations* as offering arguments *against* behaviourism and the fact-value dichotomy, contrary to Murdoch's perception, so that their agreement is indeed more profound than she thought. This misunderstanding came from the fact that Wittgenstein's *Investigations* did inspire behaviourist and conventionalist positions during the 1950s – not to mention the logical-empiricist inheritance of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. But this early reception was mostly abandoned later to a different assessment of the important differences between 20th century empiricism and Wittgenstein's grammatical investigations.

I propose to explore further the consonances between Murdoch and Wittgenstein by turning to her novels, more specifically, to one of her novels that resonates with Wittgensteinian themes: *A Word Child*.

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<sup>3</sup>Cf. Cora Diamond, «Murdoch the Explorer» [8]; Alice Crary, *Beyond Moral Judgement* [6]; Piergiorgio Donatelli, *Manières d'être humain. Une autre philosophie morale* [9]; in France, Sandra Laugier (ed), *La voix et la vertu. Variétés du perfectionnisme moral* [11]; Jacques Bouveresse, *La connaissance de l'écrivain* [2].

<sup>4</sup>Cf. the «craving for generality» denounced in Wittgenstein's *Blue Book* as a major source of philosophical confusion [19, p. 17].

<sup>5</sup>Wittgenstein's particularism inspired Diamond's own ethics. Cf. her *Realistic Spirit* [7].

## 2. SALVATION BY WORDS

Let us recall the plot and characters. *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, of which he became a Fellow. «I discovered words», Hilary writes, «and words were my salvation» [15, p. 21].

But *A Word Child* is not a fairy tale. After a disastrous love affair which ended in a scandal, Hilary resigned from his position and took a job that did not allow him to exercise 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 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 similar problem was given a philosophical expression by Murdoch, in a conference she gave in New York, on this very subject of salvation by words. This latter expression is the title of the conference, which was then reprinted in *Existentialists and Mystics*. The conference has a political tone. It underlines how tyranny degrades language, stating that the art which is «the most practically important for our survival and our salvation» is literature [14, p. 241], and that our moral self is made up of words:

Words constitute the ultimate texture and stuff of our moral being, since they are the most refined and delicate and detailed, as well as the most universally used and understood, of the symbolisms whereby we express ourselves into existence. The *fundamental* distinctions can only be made in words. Words are spirit. [14, p. 241]

*A Word Child* can be seen as a literary exploration of the idea of salvation by words, as one way to explore what it could mean. Let us note that Murdoch uses two different expressions in her conference: «survival» and «salvation». The first belongs to the contemporary empiricist tradition<sup>6</sup> that Murdoch declares is not sufficient for ethics (but she still considers that it contains many important insights). The second word belongs to the Christian and theological vocabulary, but it is separated here from the religious background that gave it its meaning<sup>7</sup>. 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, the fictitious character of Hilary Burde providing a new, secular setting for it. Interestingly, it is 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 terms of salvation

<sup>6</sup>In the empiricist context, the word «survival» signals a Darwinian heritage – an altogether different approach from Murdoch's.

<sup>7</sup>Cf. Camille Fort, «Le Dieu caché d'Iris Murdoch» [10]: she analyses the tensions produced in Murdoch's work by her desire to retain Christian and theological vocabulary in her novels and philosophical texts in spite of her agnosticism.

by words. Each of these works would depict different kinds of relations to words. It would also be interesting to see which contemporary philosophical works would fit this description. My aim is to show that Wittgenstein's *Investigations* are written in this spirit, and that the *Word Child* resonates with many aspects of Ordinary Language Philosophy. I propose to see Wittgenstein as another word child, a word child of a certain kind. But I will not make any historical guess nor advance the idea that Wittgenstein may have been an inspiration for the character of Hilary Burde. I propose rather to bring together the novel and Wittgenstein's *Investigations*, to show how each work sheds light on each other.

To make this comparison, I will describe Hilary Burde's relations to words: how words were special for him, how he admired the order of language, and what could have been missing here. Then I will recall the path that Wittgenstein followed from the *Tractatus* to the *Investigations*. In the *Investigations*, Wittgenstein says of the *Tractatus* that it is a work which «sublimes» language [18, §94]: it explains its apparent disorder by a logical order which is supposed to lie underneath the «apparent» form of proposition. Logical analysis was supposed to unveil this hidden order. But this distinction between the «apparent» and the «real» form of proposition [17, §4.0031] is abandoned in the *Investigations* as a fantasy: Wittgenstein asks the philosopher to come back to the «rough ground» [18, §107] of language, to real words, as they are used in their actual contexts, in an innumerable variety of ways [18, §23]. The *Investigations* tell the story of how Wittgenstein 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 do not obey any hidden logic; our language-games are innumerable; our language is above all ordinary, evolving in a relative disorder and a relative mess. The *Investigations* compare language to an old medieval town [18, §18]. Neatly designed suburbs do exist, but they are not to be confused with the whole town. Hilary's first love was based on this confusion, as was the Tractarian vision of language. Hilary's first love was 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 kind of salvation by words Murdoch refers to in her article is one which accepts the words in their relative disorder, and in their endless differences.

### 3. AN EXHILARATING DISCOVERY

Let us examine how Hilary Burde attempted to save himself through the study of words and 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'. [15, 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<sup>8</sup>. Salvation was needed here, and it seems that it was not only salvation *by* words that was needed, but salvation *from* words. And the former because of the latter: 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 notice 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*. [15, 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: Hilary 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. [15, p. 21]

Words gave him a vision of something higher. More precisely, Hilary's admiration went to grammar: words appeared to him as following the superior order of grammatical rules and systems, an order worthy of his respect, love and admiration, as against the squalid world of the orphanage.

As grammatical order could be consistently obeyed, words appeared to him as reliable. This reliability offered him something he never had before, a socle to resist the effect of 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. [15, p. 22]

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<sup>8</sup>Cf. Béatrice Godard-Wendling and Layla Raïd, « Quand l'enfant n'a pas voix au chapitre. Étude sur le statut linguistique des enfants » [16].

In the *Sovereignty of Good*, Murdoch uses the same vocabulary to describe moral vision, as here to describe Hilary's «vision» of linguistic order. 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 in their grammatical order.

But Hilary the narrator is conscious that something was missing in this relation of respect, admiration and love, precisely because what he craved for 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 his 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. [15, 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 built into systems and abstracted from human lives, as dangerous and unpredictable as they could appear to him in his forlorn childhood.

#### 4. 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 *Investigations*: one can see Wittgenstein's philosophy as going from word-watching to realism<sup>9</sup>.

In the *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 Hilary's quest for salvation the same temptation for 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. [18, §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

<sup>9</sup>Cf. Diamond, *The Realistic Spirit* [7].

to escape from violence and disorder: because it was sublimed, their order was bound to lose its reality, and its appeal.

In the *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 as that of the words «table», «lamp», «door». [18, § 97]

As Wittgenstein describes the inner 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! [18, §107]

For Hilary, it was vital and life-saving that grammar should be a reliable order. But what saved him from prison (or worse, as he writes it) 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 ? [15, p. 14]

In the *Investigations* §111, Wittgenstein underlines the depth of the word-watcher's illusion. He suggests this depth to his reader, but moves on 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.) [18, §110-111]

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

## 5. THE ORDINARY LANGUAGE MAN

Let us examine now 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» [14, p. 267]: existentialism and linguistic empiricism. She describes the latter as associated with «the tradition of Moore and Wittgenstein» [14, 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, according to her, 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» [14, p. 268]. With this picture we turn «away from the chaos of empirical inwardness» to «the clarity of overt action» [14, p. 268]. For the Ordinary Language Man, «[even] the presence of others is felt, if at all, simply as the presence of rational critics» [14, p. 268]. As a consequence, Murdoch concludes, 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» [14, 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 centre 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. [14, p. 268]

How does this link to the word child? Hilary 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» [4, p. 155]: the perlocutory is notoriously disorderly and messy !)

Now, this Ordinary Language Man is not Wittgenstein's language-user. As Cavell shows in the *Claim of Reason* [3], 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 *Investigations*, one that Cavell opposes too, stating that it is a misunderstanding of Wittgenstein's vision of language. Interestingly, Murdoch's criticism of conventionalism is consonant with the interpretation of Wittgenstein defended by Cavell. Murdoch's critique of 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. And *A Word Child* is a novel where Murdoch comes closer to Wittgensteinian themes.

## 6. 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, another novel is woven into the narrative of the *Word Child: 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 [12], 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 the whole 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 *Investigations*, two works that seem to belong to very different worlds, do illuminate each other.

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