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Doctoral Dissertation

**The German Exile Literature and the Early Novels of Iris
Murdoch**

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Summary of Theses

The goals of my dissertation

In my dissertation, I provide a comparative analysis of the interrelationship between the German exile literature and Iris Murdoch's early novels. In this work, I explain how the issues of trauma, memory, displacement and power in Murdoch's fiction were informed by her intellectual encounters with three German-speaking exiled authors, Elias Canetti, Franz Baermann Steiner and H.G. Adler. Concentrating on five novels from Murdoch's early period, *Under the Net* (1954), *The Flight from the Enchanter* (1956), *A Severed Head* (1961), *The Italian Girl* (1964), *The Nice and the Good* (1968), I explore how the post-war trauma and the questions of displacement, power and making sense of the past had become central to her. What makes these works curious to discuss is that, in them, she sets up the diagnosis of post-war societies, which are suffering between two totalitarian powers, where exile is a symbol of the modern state of being that is characterized by rootlessness and alienation. Considering the theoretical aspects where the memories of the war, the trauma of the Holocaust and the problem of exile are represented by her refugee characters, many of whom were inspired by Canetti, Steiner and Adler, I will explain how the sense of rootlessness and identity search depicted in these novels can be compared with the theories and the lived experiences of the three authors discussed.

It is widely accepted by the studies on Murdoch's works that many of her demonic Jewish refugee figures traumatized by the Holocaust were drawn from the real-life character of Elias Canetti and Franz Baermann Steiner. The present work aims to explore the comparative perspectives that come about through these characters along with the parallels and paradoxes that these perspectives stand for in view of Steiner's, Adler's and Canetti's ideas. A peculiar feature of Murdoch's early works lies in her representation of the moral crisis of a post-war era where the social collapse triggered by the Nazi genocide and the traumatic lived experiences of the Holocaust led to the total rootlessness of the individual.

My research is based on such theoretical texts in the Murdochian scholarship that identify her novels as post-Holocaust fiction (White 2011, 99), link the concept of loss, the expressions of mourning and the state of survival to the theories of poststructuralism, Freud's psychoanalysis and Elias Canetti's notion of the survivor (Osborn 2013), and with those text that examine the question in Murdoch's novels that whether it is possible to make sense of the past in "the changed post-war climate" (Nicol 2004, 4).

A major claim in my dissertation is that Murdoch's vision as a novelist was highly influenced by her experiences as an assistant at the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (U.N.R.R.A.) in various European refugee camps during the Second World War, along with her intellectual encounters with Steiner, Canetti and Adler. The refugee character in her novels, such as Peter Saward in *The Flight from the Enchanter*, Elsa Levkin in *The Italian Girl*, or Willy Kost in *The Nice and the Good*, are without exception victims of the political systems that have definitively stamped the trauma of the Holocaust on them. In contrast to these characters stand Murdoch's "magician" figures, such masters of power whose guarantee of survival lies in their ability to keep everyone and everything under control. A peculiar and altogether special feature of these novels is that both the oppressor and the oppressed come from the same refugee circles and share the lived experience of disempowerment and violence. Power figures are, for Murdoch, victims to their urge to triumph, to get rid of the *sting*, i. e. the hurt they received from others by deracinating yet other people. The concept of the sting, which Murdoch borrows from Canetti, refers to the Ancient Greek word *ατη*, which simultaneously means blindness, a crime committed in blindness, and misfortune, blasphemy (Györkössy-Kapitánffy-Tegyey, 161). In the following chapters, I will examine in what ways did exile and displacement trigger the power struggles, suffering and violence in individual lives during and after the war, and what inspiration Murdoch found from her encounters with refugees and exiles, most notably with Steiner, Canetti and Adler.

Methodological approach

In my dissertation, I aim at identifying key concepts, such as displacement, trauma, modernity and memory culture, in order to locate them and explain their significance in Murdoch's novels. In order to examine these terms in Murdoch's fiction, I will explain how they should be understood in Steiner, Adler and Canetti. The reason for my choice is that the texts of these three authors are in a constant dialogue with each other on topics such as power and suffering, offering many intertextual references to one another. Yet, although the joint mention of these authors here may give the impression their ideas and lived experiences are inseparably linked with one another, their biographies and work, their diaries, notes and letters suggest notable differences, which this dissertation will highlight.

Peter J. Conradi, Murdoch's biographer, argues that the writings of Canetti, Steiner and Adler "bear out the truism that the 20th century, or world is the work of Hitler" (Conradi 2014, 129). By that, he echoes Murdoch's words that "[the] loss of promised redemption and wise

gentle stoical peace is something which speaks to our, Hitler and after, age when warfare and tyranny have achieved an intensity of cruelty which previous generations might have consigned to the barbaric past” (Conradi 2014, 129). The ethical atmosphere that brings Murdoch’s novels relatively close to the writings of Canetti, Steiner, and Adler is that the world these works represent captures a moment in a complex historical process of the 20th century that is highly tormented by the haunting presence of the war.

Although Murdoch does not describe the events of the Holocaust in her novels, she does talk about the moral implications of it, the rootlessness that comes as a post-war human existence, and the post-war world that has lost all its moral values, and that is dominated by demonic forces residing in everyday events. In her philosophical essay, “Against Dryness” (1961), she identifies the novel’s main task as to give a true picture of the ethical categories of “good” and “evil,” which categories, she believes, had become shallow and weak in the post-war anti-metaphysical age that is based on scientific breakthroughs and technical advances (Murdoch 1961). As Frances White notes, for Murdoch, the Holocaust was a symbol of human evil, cruelty, and suffering, a moment in history that held mirror to the social and political conflicts and various manifestations of chaos and genocide of the twentieth century and the millennial. Murdoch’s novels can also be described as “post-Holocaust” works in the sense that she portrays the Holocaust in them as not a historically stable event involving only a single ethnic group, but one of the greatest catastrophes of modern civilization in the 20th century, giving an uncomfortably honest picture of the societies in which we ourselves live. Murdoch sees modernity as a process that played a crucial role in the formation of the two greatest totalitarian regimes in the 20th century and that itself produced its own refugees through total terror and the social and moral collapse during and after the Second World War. In this sense, refugees are symbols of the modern state of human condition, who had opened a window to a world plagued by a post-war moral crisis.

Murdoch’s novels raise the questions: How can we overcome our guilt for the past? How can our suffering be healed? How can we have a true picture on evil and good? How can morality be regained after the terrible experiences of human life? These questions are fundamental for Murdoch’s views on morals and the historical and biographical background for them can be found in her encounters with the Jewish exiles coming to England before, during, and after the war. In his editorial preface to *Existentialists and Mystics* (1997), Conradi notes that, although Murdoch always denied that the characters in her fiction had anything to do with the characters in her real life, it is difficult not to find some reference, especially in the case of *The Flight from the Enchanter*, to her experiences in the refugee camps and to draw

some comparison between the scholar Peter Saward, researching ancient Jewish history, and the anthropologist Franz Steiner, or the fictional “enchanter” Mischa Fox and Elias Canetti by whom Murdoch herself felt enchanted. Accordingly, avoiding the pitfall of mere referentiality, I examine Murdoch’s novels in relation to the texts of Canetti, Steiner, and Adler, discussing in detail the theories that Murdoch takes from these authors in her narrative, and which she many times debates. These include the different ideas of survival that Steiner, Canetti and Adler had. For Steiner, survival means first and foremost survival guilt, for Canetti, survival is the triumph of the tyrant over the dead, while for Adler, survival is a task of making sense of the past (and *not* coming to terms with it, since we can only gain a picture of the past without truly overcoming the trauma of it). Murdoch’s views are at the intersection of the thought of Steiner, Canetti and Adler. The past reflections of characters who have experienced traumatic situations, as well as a surviving tyrant and a victim unable to account for guilt, are central to the ethical scene of her novels. In her reading the refugee crisis reveals a peculiar nature of modern human condition that is characterized by uprootedness, displacement and alienation, and for that the intellectual trio of Elias Canetti, Franz Baermann Steiner and H.G. Adler was a major inspiration.

Structural Organization of Chapters

In response to a 1957 criticism for her portrayals of social misfits and refugees in her novels, Iris Murdoch compared the exile to the modern man who “is not at home, in his society, in his world” (Conradi 2001, 239). Relying on the theoretical framework, I wish to discuss the ways Murdoch’s ideas on the post-war human condition were impacted by Steiner, Adler and Canetti.

The first chapter therefore discusses the sociocultural constructions of exile, with an emphasis on the role of identity and the existential crisis that comes with them through the works and biography of H.G. Adler, Elias Canetti and Franz Baermann Steiner. The chapter reviews the conceptualizations of Jewish identity and exile experience as well as the trauma of the Holocaust in the light of Elias Canetti’s, Franz Steiner’s and H.G. Adler’s years of exile in England. The closing part of the chapter discusses how the theories outlined in these works can be put into a comparative analysis with the ethical problems that emerge in the early novels of Iris Murdoch, according to which the social collapse caused by the war and the traumatic lived experiences of the Holocaust result in the total rootlessness of the individual.

The second chapter gives a further analysis on the problem of rootlessness and identity crisis discussed in the first chapter along with the problem of coming to terms with the past through Iris Murdoch's *Under the Net* and *A Severed Head*. The scene of both novels is London revived from the ruin of the war. Their first-person male narrators are suffering from rootlessness and identity crisis, aiming to find a post-war state of being and to restore their damaged male identity through a set of picturesque journeys and love affairs. Both heroes are carrying the aftereffects of the war and both novels might be seen as some form of parody of the traditional masculine ideals lost in the war and the Nazi genocide. The central issues of these novels: What new alternatives might literature point to after the tragedies of the Second World War and the Holocaust? How can the masculinity required by the war, be reinstated in a changing post-war social and political world? The chapter discusses the cultural transfer between the English society and its German-Jewish exiles, explaining how the mutual contribution on each side helped to find new paths after the war. Examining *Under the Net*, I explain two essential elements that characterized Murdoch as a novelist at the start of her career: the desire to find new grounds for fiction and the commemoration of Steiner. Then, I analyse how the traditional male sexuality gets reassessed in *A Severed Head* in a series of events, whereby Martin Lynch-Gibbon, the novel's hero is forced to realise that he is no longer the master of his world, and that reality is independent from the control of his will. In both novels, I argue that cultural transfer was a basis for Murdoch to give an accurate portrayal of a post-war Western world characterised by the permutations and variations of power.

The third chapter discusses the problems of social and political displacement in Murdoch's second novel *The Flight from the Enchanter*. Her critics approach this novel as the one most concerned with the refugee crisis from Murdoch's oeuvre. Dedicated to Elias Canetti, this novel is among the first to identify the problems of marginality, power and suffering as fundamental elements of the modern world. Departing from the ideas of power and suffering, the chapter examines the collective phenomenon of Hitlerian power and the social trauma caused by the Holocaust that is characterized by Canetti in *Crowds and Power* with the metaphor of the sting and the transference of the sting, i.e. the liberation from suffering that is only possible by passing it on. This theory is constantly present in Murdoch's fiction. The chapter discusses how Canetti's conceptualization of the transference of suffering and power takes shape in Murdoch's novel. This chapter identifies the two types of exile characters presented in the book: the overpowering survivors who can only get rid of the sting of their trauma by passing it onto others, and the suffering ones, similarly disregarded by their fellow exiles and the English society as they were during Hitler. In so doing, this chapter compares Murdoch's critical

approach to exile and modernity, the lack of freedom and the moral blindness of the modern world with that of Canetti, Steiner and Adler, explaining how this problem culminated in the social and political tragedies of the 20th and the 21st centuries, including the Holocaust and the refugee crisis of the 2010s.

The fourth chapter provides a critical analysis of the problem of trauma, memory as well as the post-war Jewish guilt and mourning for the dead in *The Italian Girl*. Although *The Italian Girl* has often been considered to be a lesser work compared to Murdoch's other novels, this chapter approaches it as a forerunner to her later novels, in which the problems of Jewish exile identity and lived experience as well as the recovery of identity and the elimination of trauma through coming to terms with the past appear more clearly here. In view of this, the chapter discusses Murdoch's use of the Gothic style combined with the Freudian ideas on homecoming and the uncanny femininity, searching for answers to the question of how the symbolic contrast between the return and the past becomes apparent in the hero's imminent urge to return to the dominant mother and his childhood scene, and how the state of rootlessness and the desire for the home appear through the novel's Russian refugee twins. Then, this chapter explores Elias Canetti's and Franz Steiner's ideas on survival, explaining how Murdoch's ideas approach or move away from those of Steiner and Canetti. Accordingly, survival in the novel conveys the obsessive strengthening of power that requires the refusal of the traumatic past and the infinite transmission of guilt to generations based on the definition of the sting discussed in the previous chapter.

The fifth chapter examines the ideas of reconciliation and forgiveness in Murdoch's *The Nice and the Good*. The themes of this novel are love, forgiveness, and peace, and its characters without exception suffer from the *karma* of the traumatic past, while being determined to give meaning to it through memory. The chapter examines Murdoch's ideas on forgetting and forgiveness within the framework of memory culture, as well as her problematic engagement with Judaism and, by that, Adler's view on how the past should be made sense of, Steiner's thought on the direction of attention and the concept of suffering. Locating Murdoch's novel in the philosophical and political debates after the Eichmann trial, I ask whether and how Murdoch's approach fits into the contemporary ideas and arguments about coming to terms with the past, and in what ways does her philosophy represent the *Zeitgeist*, out of which her own conceptualization was borne. In this chapter, I argue that Murdoch's novels, however groundbreaking they are, represent the characteristics of their age, in that they can only envision progress and forgiveness on the axis of forgetting.

My aim was to draw an arch on how the questions of the post-war human condition, the idea of reconstruction, the reflection on the past and the meditations on power, displacement and suffering become the core of Murdoch's early prose. As she was a thinker and a novelist in the making at the time when she met Steiner, Canetti and Adler, I believe that a comparative analysis should be necessary to reveal the overlap as well as the differences between their theories. Through these authors, I argue that Murdoch's fiction could be linked to the German *Exilliteratur* these three authors were a part of, a literary form emerging from the ruins of the war in the British and American banishment that approaches the concept of displacement, rootlessness, modernity, suffering and power in the context of the Central European lived experience during and after the war.

Conclusion of research

An essential result of my research is the recognition that not only Canetti, Steiner and Adler, but through them the entire Central European Jewish spirit world had a significant impact on the philosopher and novelist Iris Murdoch. They represented the European culture that had brought up Franz Kafka and Max Brod, who laid in their works the foundations of what today is called "minority literature" or "the literature of the displaced". These figures were also the expelled ones of a mad and inhuman world, who recorded their own lived experience and that of the Jewish people in their scholarly and literary works, extending them to the moral and political crisis of the European civilisation. Moreover, their efforts brought to light the crisis in the post-war cultural, political and social life, which altogether called for a reassessment of the relationship between the individual and society, the moral life and moral and social responsibility of the individual. For both literature and visual culture, philosophy, and social anthropology and social theory, experimenting with new forms and breaking new paths involved the foundation of a new wave of representing reality. These processes took place in different steps and at different stages, as well as in different social and political dimensions in Europe and the United Kingdom. The works of Steiner, Canetti and Adler, along with Murdoch's novels and philosophy, are embedded in these waves and currents, therefore it was necessary to examine their legacies in the 20th social and cultural context that laid the foundations of the contemporary European memory culture.

As I explain, this collective remembrance could not have been established, or perhaps only with in a different form and manner, without the cultural transfer that involved a kind of

intellectual reciprocity between the English intellectual élite and the Central European Jewish refugees carrying their entire cultural *Geist* with them during and after the war. In my dissertation, I emphasize that Central European intellectuals fleeing to England brought a new colour to the cultural and literary life of English society by pointing out the socially critical nature and cohesive power of art.

Social responsibility, the question of morals and the various social and individual mechanisms that result in the total oppression of complete populations are central to Steiner, Canetti and Adler, and these issues constitute many of the ethical bases for Murdoch's fiction. In the chapters of this dissertation, I wished to explore the problems of minority self-awareness resulting from social exile, the trauma of the Holocaust and the social and ethical issues of making sense of the past in the works under discussion. In doing so, I aimed at putting these works into dialogue with each other and with other theories about the Holocaust and memory culture.

What I find in my dissertation essential to suggest was that Murdoch's ideas, however old fashioned they might be by today's standards, paved the way for English fiction to focus more elaborately on the human condition that was highly impacted by the memories of the war and the Holocaust. Such a recognition might be more efficient, if we take into consideration the work and the lived experiences of those who suffered and survived during that period, in this case Steiner, Canetti and Adler, examining how they transformed the way we think about the past, and providing possible answers for the questions of how they might contribute to the achievement of a European society that is based on tolerance, respect and solidarity.

Works Pertaining to the Topic of Dissertation

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Conference Presentations

2019

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2018

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2015

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Other Research Activities

2019

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