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In: Franková, Milada. *Human relationships in the novels of Iris Murdoch.* Vyd. 1. V Brně: Masarykova univerzita, 1995, pp. 22-25

ISBN 8021011912

3. IRIS MURDOCH IN CZECH

It was only with a delay of 14 years and after Murdoch had published ten novels that she was introduced to the Czech reading public with the translation of *Under the Net* in 1968. The translation by Eliška Hornátová was accompanied by Zdeněk Vančura's afterword where he commends Murdoch as a leading novelist of great promise. He is appreciative of her inventiveness, humour, technical virtuosity and courageous experimentation with motifs and genres although he favours rather strong expressions to describe some of the features of the novels up to *The Time of the Angels.*

It is therefore somewhat surprising that he passes rather harsh judgement on Murdoch in his book *Dvacet let anglického románu 1945 – 1964* (Twenty Years of the English Novel)[1], where he includes her in a chapter on young women writers with P.H. Johnson, Olivia Manning, Edith Pargeter and Doris Lessing. In it he claims that Murdoch 'cannot be widely popular owing to the intellectual side to her novels'[2], which seems to contradict the afore-mentioned Afterword, where he speaks of the readers 'eagerly awaiting' Murdoch's new novels. He mainly dwells on what he calls 'crazy playfulness, repulsive brutality and mad absurdity and the ever more complicated adultery and vice'.[2] It is hard to tell whether he classifies *The Bell* as crazily playful or madly absurd when he comments on it saying that 'English writers, who are always devising new erotic excitements, will hardly be able to think of anything more peculiar than love-making in a bell.' [2] Vančura's increasingly puritanical critical stance culminates in the last paragraph of his brief introduction to Murdoch's work: 'Since that time the author's path has led to the morass of banality. Her latest work – *The Unicorn* and *The Italian Girl* – belong to the sensational genre of the "black novel" simulating the ghostly and fatal histories of Romanticism. The various abominations and sins are set in mysterious lonely houses and gloomy countryside.'[2] This unfortunately is again in stark contrast to his conclusion of the Afterword. 'But she is never trapped in her fantastic images; compassion with the torments and worries of real people is what preoccupies her most.'

The second of the two translations of Murdoch into Czech so far, *Hrad z Písku* (The Sandcastle), was done by Helena Prokopová in 1972 and published without a note about the author other than 'a well-known English writer' – alas not in this country.

Since then and up to now only the readers of the literary journal *Světová literatura* (World Literature) have been able to keep pace with at least some of Murdoch's writing as mediated to them through Martin Hilský's reviews. It stands out unequivocally, however, that Hilský has joined the camp of Murdoch's un-

compromising critics. He insists on realism for Murdoch and censures every suggestion of a move away from it, be it Murdoch's flights into fantasy or mythology or other less credible situations, particularly her supernatural scenes, which he utterly condemns. The latter are also one reason why he summarily dismisses *Nuns and Soldiers* and *The Sea, the Sea* as works not worthy of their author. In 'Cesty a rozcestí anglického románu'(The Roads and Crossroads of the English Novel)[3] Hilský admits that the concerns of Iris Murdoch's prose make it weighty, but expresses doubts about the cognitive value of her novels. He joins in with those who see a paradox in Murdoch's philosophical and aesthetic theories and the practice of her novel writing. Nevertheless, his overall assessment of Iris Murdoch's work up to *The Book and the Brotherhood* in *Současný britský román* (The Contemporary British Novel, pp. 123 – 30) is much fairer in its judgement. In it Hilský closely examines the aesthetics of Murdoch's writing and balances criticism and praise with a more appreciative outcome than that of his reviews.

Zdeněk Stříbrný devotes two pages to Iris Murdoch in his comprehensive *Dějiny anglické literatury* (History of English Literature), where he also mentions her visit to Czechoslovakia in 1969. He finds affinities in Murdoch's work with Wilson and Huxley on the intellectual side as well as in experiment, and takes a sympathetic view of her all-embracing style and unrelenting effort of 'penetrating under the net of various theories and ideologies ...in order to confront them ...with real persons and their emotional and intellectual life.' Although not blind to some of her failures, Stříbrný mainly points out the positive values of Murdoch's novels, granting their author 'the searching for answers to serious intellectual and moral problems of modern man as well as erudite use of the cultural heritage of the whole of Europe, including ancient myths, biblical parables and the key works of classical art and writing.'[5]

Apart from the above authoritative assessments there is only a handful of undergraduate dissertations (listed in the bibliography) discussing Murdoch's work in general outlines with more or less success. The one doctoral thesis submitted by Miroslav Janoušek at Brno University in 1973 compares Golding's and Murdoch's views of evil. He concludes that by calling the reader's attention to the roots of evil Murdoch actually fights against it. She tries to find a remedy for man's evil in man himself by treating his blindness to his surroundings and breaking with the burden of his past.

The only addition to Murdoch in Czech is the recent translation by Karel Klusák of her frequently cited essay 'Against Dryness'[6], which appeared in *Světová literatura* 1992/1 under the title 'Proti vybroušenosti'.In a brief note about the author Klusák quotes from A.S. Byatt's comment on the essay including Byatt's reasons why she considers Murdoch to be 'the most important and at the same time the most interesting author' of her time, which view Klusák seems to share, concluding that Murdoch 'is undoubtedly one of the most influential and important figures in contemporary world literature.'[7]

It is to be hoped that Klusák's work will usher in a new era of more, long overdue translations to follow, since reasons for the neglect of Murdoch's writing in this country seem to be at hand. It is most probable that her novels simply did not find favour with the censorship and publishers of the pre-1989 Communist regime in two important aspects: her frequent use of refugee characters from the Eastern bloc countries and her religious concerns. The omission of Murdoch's second novel, *The Flight from the Enchanter*, when the first and the third novels were translated is a conspicuous example. There are the Lusiewicz brothers, who are Polish refugees, and Nina, the dressmaker, also a refugee, not only reflecting Murdoch's first-hand experience of refugee camps when she worked for the UNRRA at the end of the war but bringing in the political implications that made the book uncomfortable and consequently unpublishable here. The same situation occurs with a number of other novels: *The Italian Girl, The Time of the Angels, The Nice and the Good* and particularly *Nuns and Soldiers*, where the Count, with his history of a child of Polish refugee parents, is actually a Polish patriot and even visits Communist Poland. It is the time of the election of the Polish Pope and politics are discussed, not merely alluded to. Murdoch is not as apolitical in her novels as she might at first sight appear to be. Political allusions like the one in *An Accidental Man*, where Matthew describes a scene in Red Square of two men joining a lonely group of protesters only to be arrested with them, may primarily have moral poignancy, but are political nevertheless and enough to have put the book on the black list. *The Book and the Brotherhood* is full of political discourse and Crimond, a fiercely radical Marxist, is hardly a likeable character – one more reason for the book to be unacceptable in the censor's eyes.

In matters religious the position displays a very similar pattern. Although Murdoch cannot be regarded as a religious writer, indeed having said on more than one occasion that she was not a believer, her interest in religion and particularly the problematic role of religion in our times, sufficed to make her novels unwanted in Communist Czechoslovakia. The fiercely atheistic policy of the regime preferred to pretend that religion did not exist. As most novels since *The Bell* do involve religious concerns, the choice for translation was limited.

Translating Murdoch is no mean task as one never stops admiring the richness and wit of her language. Nevertheless, there was a period when this aspect of Murdoch's writing was also found fault with as A.S. Byatt explains already in *Degrees of Freedom*. 'It was fashionable in the early days to say that Miss Murdoch wrote beautifully; it is now fashionable to say that she is an interesting novelist but writes badly, is both too sloppy and too rhetorical now and perhaps not careful enough ... she is someone who is passionate or eloquent in bursts, and both when she is describing certain kinds of powerful feeling and when she is writing deliberately "eloquent" descriptive prose, one senses a deliberate, almost devil-may care bursting out of a natural restraint, a natural reluctance to write so,

combined with a strong feeling that something is lost if this *kind* of thing cannot politely be done in prose. Here we should sympathize...'[8]

No matter what the current fashion regarding Murdoch's use of language may be, the translator must grapple with a great deal of eloquence on an ever increasing number of pages. Although the latter was not yet the case with the two novels Czech translators have dealt with so far, I am afraid the translations cannot be said to have done justice to Murdoch's subtlety and power of the word and the sheer pleasure one derives from this aspect of her writing.

Hornátová's *Pod síti* (Under the Net) is the better of the two in spite of the fact that Jake when 'walking down the street' actually always walks downhill and that he often eats rather strange things. The translator's insistence on rendering the characteristic English 'well' at the beginning of some utterances into Czech results in archaisms (e.g. 'inu').[9] In Prokopová's *Hrad z Písku* (The Sandcastle) it really jars when the dignified Nan suddenly uses colourful substandard Czech expressions ('i prachsakra' or 'krindypindy') and strange comparisons which are clearly the outcome of literal translation of sayings or idioms. A similar fate of a shift in character and class befalls Rev. Everard and others.

Whether the quality of the translations is partly to be blamed or not the books seem to have made little impact and left the Czech reader cold. So much so that now with the books long out of print Iris Murdoch is as good as forgotten.