

# RECEPTAREA SCRITTOAREI IRIS MURDOCH ÎN CRITICA LITERARĂ ROMÂNEASCĂ

## THE RECEPTION OF IRIS MURDOCH BY THE ROMANIAN LITERARY CRITICISM

Marinela COJOCARIU

Universitatea de Vest “Vasile Goldiș” din Arad

Arad, Bd. Revoluției, nr. 94-96

E-mail: marinelacojocariu@yahoo.com

### Abstract

The article outlines and elaborates on the reception that the novels of noted British novelist Iris Murdoch have received in the Romanian literary criticism. Generally speaking the writer enjoyed a considerable success with literary specialists who felt challenged by the abundance of characters, each minutely described. Special attention is given in this article to the ever-lasting problem of translation routinely summarized as “to translate is to betray”, as well on the impact of the translation on critical responses, especially in the case of her first novel *Under the Net*. Articolul prezintă aspecte general ale receptării romanelor cunoscutei scriitoare britanice Iris Murdoch de critica literară românească. Autoarea s-a bucurat de un succes extraordinar în rândul criticilor de specialitatea care s-au arătat interesați în special de numărul mare de personaje, fiecare descris minuțios. Articolul acordă o atenție deosebită problemei calității traducerilor, întrucât „a traduce înseamnă a trăda”, precum și impactului pe care traducerea primului roman „*Prins în Mreje*” avut-o asupra reacției criticilor români.

**Keywords:** Murdoch, translation, novels, reception, literary criticism

**Cuvinte cheie:** Murdoch, traducere, romane, receptare, critică literară

The aim of this article is to prove that Iris Murdoch's reception in Romania is a rather incoherent one. My analysis was an extremely interesting and demanding one in terms of acquiring the necessary information. I resorted to critical research in order to spot which of her works were translated and what studies did the translator entail in, what had already been written on her in the country, and then consider and appraise these writings.

The major reason I can think of is that translating Iris Murdoch is a difficult task, as one never stops to admire the richness and wit of her language. Any translator must grapple with a great deal of eloquence and an ever-increasing number of pages. My research revealed that translations cannot be said to have done justice to her subtlety and power of the word and the sheer pleasure one drives from this aspect of her writing. In my study on her literary reception by Romanian critics, I was surprised to find so many inaccuracies in the critical judgements of her work and to discover how few original articles are written on her. In order to accomplish my task I resorted to articles, reviews, books published in *The Bibliography of Romania*.

With the exception of Andrei Brezianu, most of the commentaries on her creation are common knowledge and both translators and academics who pretended to have known her

personally haven't come up yet with new interpretations of her fiction, or a new perspective on her philosophy. Nevertheless, they offer a general Romanian point of view on her novels.

My research is permeated with personal judgements which seem to contradict those of more competent critics. This creative interpretation is first and foremost based on many readings and re-readings of Iris Murdoch's literary work, and of the references to it in Romania, because "reading about" (no matter how thought provoking) will never be tantamount to reading the work itself. And doing this from the vantage point of a European approach and in full awareness that, whether we like it or not, we are heading for a globalised world – makes the real difference.

Like many exegetes before me, I uphold the opinion that the reading process is basically temporal, thus occurring in time and the consequence of this assumption is that any reading encourages a kind of interpretative activity. I tend to believe that the key concept in any discussion of a writer's value is specific readers' expectations. These are shaped, disrupted and reshaped by the author's talent in creating a captivating and thrilling text. The test of truth in critical interpretation of literature is its social viability. The major activities in the history of literary study are acts of identifying values and making judgments of value. Henry Blamires in his book, *A History of Literary Criticism* considers that:

A judgement of meaning is a special form of a value-judgment, since it depends on the selective perception of the judge, which in turn is determined by the set of values which govern his life. These values are forces whose behaviours are determined by rules of personality functioning and by the constraints of social existence.(Blamires, 68)

Concerned with the general response to literature, reception theory suggests that a literary work should be studied in terms of the impression or impact it makes on its contemporary audience and that literary value is judged according to how much the view of the text alters over time. (Newton, 101) For the author, the work of literature is a response to his life experience. For the reader, the interpretation is the response to his reading experience. The understanding of the literary transaction creates a new scale of values for the serious study of literature and literary experience. The study of literature cannot proceed independently of the study of the people involved in the artistic transaction. This artistic communication implies either the search for the relationship between perceiver and work, or between artist and work.

To translate Iris Murdoch into Romanian, to fill in a cultural blank and to bridge a gap between the Murdochian canon in English and the one in Romanian is a complex task. Moreover, since the act of reception itself depends to a large extent on the accuracy of translations, the translator's talent and capacity to render the original text's intention into the target language plays an extremely important role in the shaping of the ulterior reader response. The translator must assume the pioneering role of the translated text's first interpreter in the target language as he construes translation as an interpretative act. He must be the first to evaluate the results of his toil. I am painfully aware that any translation implies both gains and loses.

I consider that her masterpieces were all translated into Romanian. They are chronologically as follows: *Under the Net* (*Prins în Mreje*) translated by Ioana Maria Nicolau, in 1971 with a foreword written by Mircea Ivănescu, *The Sandcastle* (*Castelul de Nisip*) translated in 1977 by Mihaela Bucur, *Bruno's Dream* (*Visul lui Bruno*) translated by Dana Crivăț in 1978,

Literatura feminină a constituit, întotdeauna, în Anglia, o categorie aparte - și foarte înaltă – în contextul ficțiunii sau eseisticii. Nu e vorba, desigur, de Emily Bronte, pe care nu numai Chesterton a

The feminist literature of Great Britain has always represented a special category – and a very influential one – in the context of fiction and criticism. We refer, of course, to Emily Bronte, considered a genius, and not only by Chesterton,

*A Word Child* (*Vlăstarul Cuvintelor*) translated by Antoaneta Ralian in 1981, *The Sea*, *The Sea* translated by the same Antoaneta Ralian in 1983, *The Philosopher's Pupil* (*Discipolul*) again by Antoaneta Ralian in 1983. The rest of the novels that appeared in the Romanian version were published after the events of December 1989 and they are only three: *The Sacred and Profane Love Machine* (*Mașina de Iubit Sacră și Profană*) translated by Virgil Stanciu in 1991, *Jackson's Dilemma* (*Dilema lui Jackson*) translated by in Angela Hondu in 1998 which benefits from an afterword written by Monica Bottez, and *The Bell* (*Clopotul*) translated by Anca Gabriela Sîrbu in 2002, to which Ștefan Stoinescu wrote an interesting and well-documented, even if controversial, afterword. Two other translations should be mentioned since they appeared in 2003 at a different Publishing House than in their first edition. I am referring here to *A Word Child*, which became in the second edition *Fiul Cuvintelor*, and *The Sea*, *The Sea*, (*Marea, Marea*) both translated by Antoaneta Ralian.

Since only three of the translations had the advantage of critical commentaries, I'll pursue my analysis of Iris Murdoch's reception in Romania by highlighting the main ideas expressed in one of them. The reason for this approach is that, in my opinion, readers are more tempted to get acquainted with an author through the foreword or afterword written to a novel than by trying to find articles or reviews in different newspapers or magazines. That is why I cannot help being surprised that the Romanian version of *The Sea*, *The Sea*, winner of the Booker Prize, wasn't considered worthy of a critical commentary (not even in the second edition).

considerat-o un geniu cu totul singular ci, poate, de surorile ei, care au inaugurat în literatura britanică un anumit gen (în înțelesul superior) al sentimentalismului și personalismului în ficțiunea romanesca, și mai tîrziu de George Eliot, Jane Austen (o cităm fără a respecta o cronologie strictă, ci, mai mult, pe cea a recunoașterii genului) și de întreaga literatură feminină engleză a primei jumătăți a secolului nostru.(Ivănescu, 7)



Iris Murdoch in 1954

Even so, the preface written by Mircea Ivănescu to *Prins in Mreje* is short and not quite impressive. He starts the analysis of Iris Murdoch's work with a brief presentation of the British feminist literature, thus associating her work with the major representatives of the female writers.

It is a rather surprising point of view considering how little her novels have in common with the feminist literature and how opposed she was to this movement. Moreover, as his ideas are expressed almost twenty years after the first English edition of the novel, by which time Iris Murdoch had already published fourteen novels, I can overlook his commentaries only by taking into consideration the lack of proper information due to the difficulty of communication with the Western world. Another idea that caught my attention and which, in my opinion undermines the one presented above, is the importance he lays on the particularity of the feminist writing less preoccupied with issues regarding narrative devices.

Mai exact ar fi poate să se spună că în literatura engleză – într-o măsură mai mare decât în clasicismul francez sau în romanticismul german – cărțile importante scrise de femei înseamnă ceva mai mult decât mărturia unui specific și a unei sensibilități feminine identificabile ca atare, ci mai degrabă, manifestările singulare ale unui geniu mai spontan și mai sigur din punct de vedere artistic – pentru că mai puțin preocupat de chestiuni de tehnică și abilitate literară decât cel al scriitorilor – ca să le spunem aşa – de genul masculin. (Ivănescu, 7)

but also to her sisters who initiated a certain type (in the higher sense of the word), of sentimentalism and character defining for the world of fiction. We refer also to George Eliot and Jane Austen (we mention her without observing the strict chronological rule but as an acknowledgement of her genius) and to the whole feminist British literature of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The year 1971 witnessed the publication of her first novel due to a moderate change in the state's policy regarding Western culture.

"To be more precise, one could say that in the British literature – more representative than in the French classicism or German romanticism – the important books written by women signify a better proof for the expression of a certain essential feature and a feminine sensibility, but are rather the singular manifestations of a spontaneous genius, more reliable from the artistic point of view – less interested in matters regarding narrative technique and literary ability than those – so to speak – of the male writers."

Mircea Ivanescu assumes that what made critics associate her with the Angry Young Movement is what he terms as the “conventional” characteristic of her first novel. It is strange that he felt bound to mention this out-dated labeling especially since the foreword to the novel was published in 1971 when no British critic would have dared consider Iris Murdoch “conventional”. Fortunately he does not forget to add that another reason for which Iris Murdoch could have been part of this Movement is the portrayal of the main characters.

*Prins în mreje* este poate cea mai convențională dintre cărțile sale. Aceasta nu înseamnă însă în nici un caz că romanul ar fi lipsit de calități stilistice și literare. Dimpotrivă. Însă acest prin roman al Irisei Murdoch este totodată cel mai puțin personal - adică cel mai conform unei anumite formule - și din cauza asta a și constituit la un moment dat argumentul pentru care scriitoarea a fost integrată acelei categorii de tineri compatrioți ai ei denumiți “Tinerii furioși”. Tonul general al povestirii, o anumită intensitate sarcastică și amără a personajelor, aspectul polemic și nu rareori grotesc-violent al incidentelor dintre eroi justifică apropierea de literatura protestatară. (Ivănescu, 7)

The critic continues the analysis of Iris Murdoch's work by describing the defining feature of her novel writing, the one that separates her from the other writers.

În realitate însă Iris Murdoch este o scriitoare mult mai serioasă, mai matură și mai ambicioasă decât confrății săi - cei mai mulți mai tineri – cărora le-a fost asociată. . (Ivănescu, 87)

Through a discourse somehow typical of that time the author embarks upon demonstrating the value of the novel which resides in his opinion in what he terms “intellectual intensity”.

*Prins în mreje* este o carte despre un intelectual, camdezorientat și incert în finalitatea acțiunilor și gîndurilor sale. Dar este și ceva mai mult decât expresia unei dezorientări și a unui protest – ceteos în vehemențele lui juvenile – împotriva unei anumite formule de viață. Ce este acest altceva e încă nelămurit în această carte de debut - de altminteri extrem de sigur construită și scrisă cu mare virtuzitate stilistică. Însă calitatea se precizează treptat în cărțile ulterioare, afirmîndu-se apoi ca notă distinctă a literaturii Irisei Murdoch și

“*Under the Net* is probably the most conventional of her books. It does not necessarily mean that it lacks any stylistic or literary value. Quite the reverse. But this first novel is also the least personal – i.e., the one that conforms to a certain formula and that is the reason why, at a certain moment, it was considered as a reason in favour of associating her with the other writers of the generation also known as Angry Young Men. The general tone of the story, a certain sarcastic and bitter attitude of the characters, the polemic and the often grotesque and violent aspect of the events and the relationships between the heroes justifies the connection made between this novel and the literature of social tendency.”

“The truth is that Iris Murdoch is a more serious, more mature and more ambitious writer than the colleagues – most of them younger – with whom she had been evaluated.”

“*Under the Net* is a book about an intellectual, rather confused and uncertain regarding the outcome of his actions and thoughts. But it is more than the expression of a certain confusion and protest – rather foggy in its youthful passion against a specific type of life. What exactly is represented by this ‘more’ remains unclear in this first novel - extremely well-structured and written with great stylistic talent. The quality of the writing is brought to light more accurately in the following novels becoming a characteristic of Iris Murdoch and ensuring her a special place in the Anglo-Saxon literature. We could call it

impunîndu-i locul aparte în contextul literar contemporan anglo-saxon. Am putea-o numi o intensitate intelectuală. (Ivănescu, 7)

It would have been interesting if he had discussed at least one of her philosophical works and her bent for philosophical debates carried out by her characters. It is surprising that he does not write anything about *The Sovereignty of Good* which appeared in 1970. The presence of this foreword in the first novel by Iris Murdoch published in Romanian shows that Mircea Ivanescu's intention was to get the readers acquainted with the novel of an important British writer whose talent, as it seems, was not, at the time, neither understood nor appreciated by the Romanian critics. He ends his foreword by highlighting the same idea:

Cartea de față reprezintă o bună introducere în opera unei scriitoare care cu numeroase prilejuri și-a demonstrat calitățile de analist al unei anumite condiții intelectuale a compatrioșilor săi și care, într-o operă variată și întotdeauna interesantă (cel puțin), și-a adus o contribuție substanțială la diversificarea și umanizarea literaturii grave contemporane. (Ivănescu, 8)

"The present book represents a good introduction to the work of a writer who had evinced on many occasions her qualities of an analyst focussed on a certain intellectual condition typical of her fellow countrymen. In a fiction diversified and invariably interesting (to say the least) the author brought an important contribution to the diversity and "humanization" of the serious contemporary literature."

## Conclusions

Mircea Ivanescu's attempt to give a short evaluation of Iris Murdoch's work and his interpretation shows unfortunately a complete misunderstanding of her message and craftsmanship regarding structure inventiveness. It also proves that he didn't grasp the essence of the novel. Nevertheless, his mentioning other novels written by her could have been an incentive for those few or many charmed or challenged by her style and knowledge of human nature. I am positive that considering the new opportunities offered by the postmodernist re-evaluations of Iris Murdoch's work, the Romanian readers will benefit from many more translations of this gifted and resourceful author. Eventually, this is exactly what one would expect of a translation: readers endeavour to read foreign authors in translation because they are motivated to learn new things about foreign cultures, but also expect that the translator will act as an aid, or guide, in the process.

## Bibliography

1. Barry, P., (ed), *Issues in Contemporary Critical Theory*, Macmillan Press Ltd., 1993
2. Bayley, J., *Iris: A Memoir of Iris Murdoch*, London, Abacus, 2000
3. Bradbury, M., *The Modern British Novel*, London, Penguin Books, 1994
4. Ciocoi-Pop, D., *Notes on Modern British Literature*, vol. II, Sibiu, Editura Societății Academice Anglofone din Romania, Universitatea "Lucian Blaga", 1999
5. Conradi, P., J., *Iris Murdoch: A Life*, London, HarperCollins Publishers, 2001
6. Evans, I., *A Short History of English Literature*, London, Penguin Books, 1979
7. Ivănescu, M., 'Iris Murdoch' prefață la *Prins în mreje*, Editura Univers, București, 1971
8. Jameson, F., 'On Interpretation: Literature as a Socially Symbolic Act' *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*, London, 1981
9. Leavis, F.R., 'The Function of English Criticism', *The Common Pursuit*, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1978

10. Lodge, D., (ed) *Modern Criticism and Theory – A Reader*, London, New York, Longman, 1991
11. Lodge, D., *Limbajul romanului*, Bucureşti, Editura Univers, 1998
12. Newton, K.M., (ed) *Twentieth Century Literary Theory: A Reader*, Macmillan Press LTD, London, 1997
13. Newton, K.M., *Interpreting the Text. A Critical Introduction to the Theory and Practice of Literary Interpretation*, New York, London, Toronto, Sydney, Tokyo, Singapore, Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990
14. Murdoch, I., Prins în mreje, Bucureşti, Editura Univers, 1971
15. Richards, I.A., *Principles of Literary Criticism*, London, Routledge& Kegan Paul Ltd., 1966