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## **Reconstructing Subjectivity. British, American and German Studies**

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## FOREWORD

The Department of Anglo-American and German Studies of the Faculty of Letters, University of Craiova, is a group of twenty-eight members, having research activity as an important compartment of professional concern.

Along the years, research has been carried out through the teaching staff's self-development, completed in the achievement of the PhD title currently held by all the members of the department and the national and international publication of a number of volumes and articles on the study of the English language, of British, American and comparative literature, as well as on the methods of language and literature teaching.

As for the research carried out by the members of the Department of Anglo-American and German Studies we can mention *European Cultural Identities: Anglo-American and German Studies (Identități culturale europene: Studii anglo-americe și germane)* under the guidance of Emil Sîrbulescu, PhD and *Cultural Anglo-American and German Studies: Reconstructing Subjectivity (Studii culturale anglo-americe și germane: Reconstrucția subiectivității)* under the guidance of Felicia Burdescu, PhD. The contributions of the annual research of the members of the Department are published in the volume *Reconstructing Subjectivity. British, American and German Studies*, edited at the Universitaria Publishing House, Craiova.

The present volume contains the results of the academic research of the department for the year 2014-2015, consisting of the contributions brought to the research field, namely

reconstructing subjectivity, by the colleagues involved in the study of English language, British, American and comparative literature and German studies. We can as well emphasize a particularity of the papers, namely the practicability in the field, meant to complete the purpose of research for learning and/or teaching of theoretical frames on which the project is applied.

Felicia Burdescu, PhD

# **Charles Arrowby in Iris Murdoch's *The Sea, the Sea* – A Postmodern Prospero**

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**Abstract:** Although she never liked to be categorized as a philosophical writer Iris Murdoch's novels of the future, her Shakespearean-Marquezian, or Bakhtinian imaginative aesthetics of the possible which have paradoxically sprung from her morally motivated *forma mentis* betray a sophisticated intellectual historian of the crisis in language revolution who not only defined her language philosophy for the readers but also enriched both her fiction and her philosophy.

Taking into consideration the writer's general view of the world, the present study focuses on Charles Arrowby, the protagonist from *The Sea, the Sea* in a demonstration of the concept of the hero being seen as a postmodern Prospero.

**Keywords:** *subjectivity, writer, contingency, cave, sea.*

In Western Europe in mid 1970s there is a change of forms in life from the paradigm of dominant patriarchal reductive consumerist model to engagement with principles such as mercy, compassion and right action. Looking back, there started a decade of hope as the world entered the *Reagan – Thatcher* years, but hope was soon lost because there was not so much ground for it. The 1980s come with much more numerous problems to face: continuing pollution of the land, of the oceans or near space, cynical wars and presentation of triumph instead of values in political life, problems which urge

the world into a need for change of the old order, to impose a new one. In point of spiritual life, there is a shift towards a twofold orientation: on the one hand a modification of religious ideas as the spiritual component was reduced to a series of products (self-help books, celebrity videos and publications for *New Age* beliefs) and on the other hand, a denial of the soul sickness that was real and used to lie at the heart of the competitive, poisoned and overcrowded society.

John Burnside finds the only sphere of authenticity in the 1980s in the *personal* sphere because: “the public realm, the political and social, appears to have become corrupted beyond redemption” (Burnside, 1999: 9). In such circumstances the form of treatable neuroses appears with individuals that wish to withdraw, to be quiet, and to have some controllable space at stake and in general too long for authenticity. For most of the members of society the trouble is manifested in the work-related phenomenon under the form of stress or depression, against which doctors rushed to recommend drugs, exercise, diets that make the individual get out more of his efforts. What people do for themselves is to offer a surrogate rather than a path, entertainment rather than thought and tidiness rather than order.

Individuals under strain work out a way towards *detachment* in their real despair, which says from any spiritual aesthetic practice have recommended for centuries: the Platonists’ pursuit of the *Good*, the Buddhists’ disciplined search for *right action*, the early Christians’ *caritas*, all become detachment as a recurrent theme. Burnside believes detachment for the Eastern thought is represented by a sort of quietism, an attitude practiced by those who feel somehow superior to the ordinary run of human affairs (Burnside, 1999: 9). Still *in*

*being* detached, one can be passionately involved and at the same time practice detachment, aloofness. Detachment becomes central to the work of the artist when there appears a split in his being, so that the Self and the desire for various rewards are set aside, which happen temporarily, in pursuit of an elusive excellence. Writers of the time reconsider the ideas of *good* and *bad* from a new perspective, in a world torn apart, ever more skeptical, in the absence of God. They would say: "If I do good, I am blessed, whether any bless me or not and, if I do ill I am cursed." For many of the writers such ideas come to the Western thought through the Indian sources (The Bhagavad Gita):

when work is done as sacred work, unselfishly, with a peaceful mind, without lust or hate, with no desire for reward, then the work is pure. *But when work is done with selfish desire*, or feeling it is an effort, or thinking it is sacrifice, then the work is impure. And that work which is done with a confused mind, without considering what may follow, or one's own powers, or the harm done to others, or one's own loss, is work of darkness.

In seclusion, heading a saint-like life would be too easy and wise a departure from the problems of life, for involved writers like Iris Murdoch. More often than not, the daemons of our nature come to the surface and torment us in recluse. Consequently, one cannot imagine oneself away, withdrawn from society to find peace, or wisdom, or detachment. That is a mistake for the world around as well as for the individual who becomes inappropriate, selfish, and even cowardly. The only valid going away is the temporary one, in which the human

being recollects spiritually, only to come back to the bustle of existence afterwards.

In the Buddhist countries, a person may retire in a temple for a year, or some time, which means the person, is taking a refuge to live in the outside world, when afterwards one brings a fresh strength and compassion to the relation with others. And because only very few are fit for the life of a monk or a saint, the retreat that one practices is, spiritually, morally and physically beneficial, it has been applied in society for ages. Nevertheless, the temptation to withdraw and achieve a seeming detachment, to be above the agitating world may be an attractive one, but it does not offer a spiritual path, a search for meditation, wisdom and not in the least saintliness. Generally, to practice detachment means to be passionately detached, to be in the world, in the chaos of needs, emotions, conflicts experienced by people, in the ordinary life. If that kind of life is hard and full of disappointments, then it means it is a just life.

It is true, in withdrawal one can have the illusion of self governance, order, peace, but it is a mere illusion, not worthwhile for most of us, but for egoists. In the Bodhisattvas or Sufi practices they keep asking themselves “How can I enjoy my peace, if others are confused, hurt and in need?” For the Bodhisattva practices, beings do not leave the circle until all *sentient* beings attain enlightenment; the saint who has got rid of the world illusion, returns to the same world in order to save the others. The return is not of an aloof, detached, cool *person*, but a return to the chaos and pity of the human condition; “To accept imperfection is the key. To engage, with compassion, in the serious game of being, is the only acceptable choice.” The practice of the Bodhisattva, Sufi sages



comes very near to Shakespeare's Prospero in *The Tempest*, otherwise *great Will* used to say *the world must be peopled*. (Burnside, 1999: 11)

In this respect should be considered Murdoch's intention to write *The Sea, the Sea*, and create the figure of a new Prospero, finally a failed one, for the British world of the 1980s. Charles Arrowby is the ex-director of a London theatre, a man approaching the retiring age who wishes to go away from the bustle of life in the capital and especially from friends, relatives and just be by himself at the seaside for a time. He therefore buys a damp, grim cottage at Shruff End by the seaside and first takes great pleasure in learning the labyrinth of the *house, full of rodents or the neighborhood* full of insects, rock, and ...*the sea!*

The novel is structured in three parts, *Prehistory*, *History* and a short postscript, called *Life Goes On*. Soon the reader discovers Charles is a complex, rather strange hero who is in fact running away from his *egoism*. At the seaside he has no chance of remaining by himself, for being a public figure, people look for his company and *friends or women* he used to love, are chasing him in that village. Soon we discover Charles starts writing a *diary*, an *autobiography*, a *memoir* or such a work of art, in the pages of which his entire life before, his background and accomplishments should pass the test of time. And from the very beginning the reader marks Charles' intention to change the writing about *himself* into a novel, a kind of *philosophical journal*.

Murdoch creates a comedy for Charles to be able to develop as a writer that Hague features as the *Alazon* archetype, or a pretended writer of the distinction Aristotle had

made in the beginning of theatre, opposed to the *Eiron* archetype, or the true writer (cf. Hague, 1984). We have seen Murdoch prefers to create her new contingencies *for the themes she constructs in fictional reality as comedies*, rather than tragedies, as she knows a lot about the Classical mind. Ancients used to produce tragedies with linear events and *spilt* away passion *consuming* the protagonists along the story, versus comedies that easily shift reality for illusion, allowing characters to change, develop, readjust to life tragedy and manipulate language in numberless comic effects.

Generally, *satyricals* used to follow the tragical show for the pleasure of the spectators in ancient Greece, bringing them back to reality and life with the help of ancient Hellequins/modern harlequins. Murdoch also makes use of the *carnavalesque space* that M. Bakhtin finds most complex in his classification of *chronotopes* when reinterpreting Rebelais' works and she now has the hero by the *chaotic sea-space* representing the *lower* classes, opposed to the space of the *upper* ones. We have already noticed Murdoch in the comedies of her *network-like* world that she creates before the 1980s. Now in this way, the *comic tone* of *The Sea, the Sea* is felt by the reader from the beginning of Charles Arrowby's diary when he is presented as a *false* or pretended writer, an Alazon archetype, or in the long-debated talks on *food* by which he ironically challenges his group in *Prehistory*; or in his meeting people as if on the stage: "My paternal grandfather was a market gardiner in Lincolnshire. (There, quite suddenly I have started to write my autobiography, and what a splendid opening sentence! I knew it would happen if I just waited)." (Murdoch, 1978: 22)