The commodification of information is no secret today. Frequent data leaks like last year’s Cambridge Analytica Scandal, the widespread use of digital profiling by the international security community, and the rise of surveillance capitalism, which is covered in Shoshana Zuboff’s latest work, all demonstrate that information, like any other commodity, has a growing market—and is subject to the pressures of demand and supply. Information as a commodity also has a long literary heritage. Nora buys Krogstad’s silence in Henrik Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House*. In Elizabeth Bowen’s *The Heat of the Day*, Harrison proposes to suppress confidential information *in exchange* for sexual favours. In Edward Albee’s *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, Martha sells the idea of her imaginary child to her dinner guests. However, with the growing prominence of information in the age of digital technology and the march of literary tradition, an important aspect of information has been frequently overlooked: the property of information to independently operate as a currency of exchange—without the need for its commodification.

[SLIDE: Iris Murdoch’s 1960s Novels]

The 1960s novels of Iris Murdoch, many which feature the lives and times of the European bourgeois, offer startling insights into the aforementioned economy of information through various channels of communication. The ones I am looking at are in bold. Information, in the context of Murdoch’s diverse body of work, necessitates the broadest possible definition.

[SLIDE: Resnikoff’s definition of information]

Howard Resnikoff’s denotation of information as ‘what remains after one abstracts from the material aspects of physical reality’ is ideal.1 Direct conversation, reported speech,

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telephone calls, letters, and ellipsis primarily make up the communicational channels of information transfer in Murdoch’s work. Communication, in this context, however, goes beyond mere information transfer.

As James W. Carey states: ‘[C]ommunication is a symbolic process whereby reality is produced, maintained, repaired, and transformed’. The production, maintenance, repair, and transformation of reality through the communication of various modes of information is an individual process and constructs an individual reality. These constructed realities, in Murdoch’s novels, vary based on informational authenticity, the communication gap that exists between sender and receiver, and the context that envelopes any communication. Existing across a spectrum of informational privilege, these realities come within touching distance of Michel Foucault’s concept of the ‘heterotopia’.

Foucault notes that heterotopias are counter-sites that exist in every culture and are formed in the origin of society. These counter-sites occupy real places and real sites within any culture can be ‘represented, contested, and inverted’ inside them. These places are locatable, although they lie outside all places. Finally, they are absolutely different from the sites they reflect and speak about.

Secrets, which are certainly not in short supply in Murdoch’s novels, compose heterotopias in her works. The preservation and revelation of communicated information certainly transpires in a real site but the plethora of meanings engendered through such

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communication reconstitutes reality with meanings that run counter to any essentialist truth. A culture of linear truth is therefore ‘represented, contested, and inverted’ by secrets in such sites that can be mapped according to physical space but remain outside all places in terms of psychological experience. Finally, secrets exist in semantic opposition to the certitude of emplacement—they effectively displace the subject within any space, simulating the condition of being lost. I will call these sites where secrets are communicated heterotopias of secrecy.

To explore the heterotopias of secrecy found in Murdoch’s writing, *A Severed Head* provides an ideal starting point.

[SLIDE: A SEVERED HEAD]

The plot of the novel introduces Martin, the protagonist, who believes he is ‘in secure possession of two women’, his wife Antonia and his mistress Georgie. When Georgie suggests the possibility of revealing their relationship, Martin dissuades her by recalling the myth of Psyche:

> Knowledge, other people’s knowledge, does inevitably modify what it touches. Remember the legend of Psyche, whose child, if she told about her pregnancy, would be mortal, whereas if she kept silent it would be a god (*SH*, pp. 14–15).

In other words, information that remains externally inaccessible is endowed a greater value through a sustained desire for knowledge. Later, when Antonia admits to having an affair with her psychoanalyst Palmer, Martin wallows in self-pity but does not reveal his own infidelity. In keeping his extramarital relationship a secret, Martin situates himself atop the moral high ground in a narrative reality he has constructed for Antonia and Palmer. Incidentally, Georgie nearly identifies what Martin is trying to achieve: ‘I suspect you of wanting to play the virtuous aggrieved husband so as to keep Palmer and Antonia in your power’ (*SH*, p. 78). However, the

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4 Iris Murdoch, *A Severed Head* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1961), p. 41. All references are to this edition of the text and will be indicated by page numbers.
ready conversion of information (via the will to knowledge) into power is not suggested by Martin’s decision to withhold his secret. As Martin is offered complimentary therapy by Palmer and is platonically looked after by Antonia, there is no evidence of immediate power acquisition. In fact, Martin admits to himself ‘[I]f I had power, I was already surrendering it’ (SH, p. 37) in Palmer’s presence and confesses that ‘[Antonia] was consciously, almost shamelessly, exerting her power’ on him. His concealment, in fact, formulates a heterotopia of secrecy around Palmer and Antonia. They exist in a reality shaped by information debt, while he remains, in contrast, informationally privileged, which he admits, saying: ‘I am in a position to know the truth about both of them’ (p. 75). Here, information is not a chrysalis that will gradually develop into power—but it is a means of exchange that can be traded in for power or withheld for privilege—as a veritable currency of human relations. To drive this point home, when Honor, Palmer’s half-sister, exposes the secret of Martin’s affair, a reparatory settlement in the form of information is expected. Palmer says: ‘A lot of lying must be compensated for by a lot of truth-telling’ (SH, p. 95).

Chapter 17 of A Severed Head is unlike any other chapter I have encountered in any novel. Its contents primarily include five letters to three recipients. Three of these are apology letters addressed to Honor, who Martin has physically assaulted in the previous chapter for having exposed the secret of his affair. While the letters vary in size and tone, a brief analysis of Martin’s declared sentiments for Honor in each letter casts a light on how the individual psyche processes information with a steady focus on its changing exchange value:

[SLIDE: Letter 1]

In Letter 1, Martin writes:

Although naturally I entertain no personal feelings toward you whatsoever, not even, as I have explained those of slightest resentment, your connection with Palmer made you serviceable as a symbol [...] (SH, p. 138).

[SLIDE: Letter 2]
In Letter 2, he states:

*I fear I have consistently behaved badly to you, but you are to me an object of profound respect, not only because you are Palmer’s sister but because you are you* (SH, p. 139).

[SLIDE: Letter 3]

In Letter 3, Martin confesses:

*I want to write to you something brief and something honest to be, as it were, in lieu of posturings of regret which might not be entirely sincere. I have in the past felt resentment against you, even dislike of you, and not entirely without cause* (SH, p. 139).

The first letter is decidedly neutral, the second letter is deferential, and the third letter, which he later admits is ‘the most sincere’ (SH, p. 146), is mildly accusatory. Of the three, Martin sends the second, which Honor perceives as ‘a lying letter’, giving it a value very different to the sender’s own valuation. In this way, information, much like any other currency, exists on a shifting index of value, and acquires a universal value once it is established as universal knowledge.

[SLIDE: AN UNOFFICIAL ROSE]

In *An Unofficial Rose*, which was published after *A Severed Head*, what I have identified as the heterotopia of secrecy has undergone further development. The plot revolves around the lives and times of the Peronett household in a quaint Kentish village as it copes with the actions of its unfaithful men. Randall Peronett plans to leave his family for his mistress in London, Lindsay. Lindsay is the companion and caretaker of Emma, who was Randall’s father’s mistress. Randall admits that ‘from the exact nature of the relation between Lindsay and Emma [his] imagination shied away’. In their company, Randall is ‘petted, permitted, indulged and ultimately bullied’ (*UR*, p. 59) as ‘they le[a]d him on […] [and] [provoke] him, in a way which satisfie[s] their curiosity while leaving them guiltless’ (*UR*, p. 59). Lindsay is granted access to the domain of Randall’s private and family life even as she remains, around

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Emma’s chaperoning presence, ‘as inaccessible as a Vestal Virgin’ (UR, p. 61). The information that Lindsay acquires from these meetings empowers her to set down a list of conditions for Randall and the trajectory of their affair. She says: ‘The programme is, first you think, then you get the money, then we go to bed’ (UR, p. 104). In order to finance his liaison, Randall plans to sell his father’s famous Tintoretto painting ‘Susannah Bathing’. Tallying the information capital that he has already surrendered and the prospect of the financial commitment he is about to make, Randall realizes his substantial overinvestment in the affair. He settles on establishing an exclusive heterotopia of secrecy with Lindsay. The heterotopia of secrecy is constructed within Emma’s flat, when she is away, through the spread of misinformation: Randall instructs Lindsay that ‘Emma should be told that [he] was out of London visiting a dangerously ill friend’ (UR, p. 120). Although Lindsay complies, Randall remains sceptical, supposing that Emma ‘might have laid a trap’, harbouring ‘the terrible and humiliating suspicion that they were both in league against him’ (UR, p. 120). Lindsay offers to make a telephone call to secure the knowledge of Emma’s whereabouts while simultaneously proving her shifting allegiance to Randall by acquiring this information while keeping his presence a secret.

[SLIDE: Telephone Conversation #1]

The telephone call, however, does not go according to plan because phone calls (excluding modern day conference calls) privilege senders and recipients—harkening back to Shannon and Weaver’s transmission theory of communication.

[SLIDE: Shannon and Weaver’s theory]

It is evident from Murdoch’s writing that spaces within spaces are created within heterotopias of secrecy. Here, two sites can be gleaned from the text: the physical space that Lindsay and Randall share outside the material I have presented and the technologically facilitated site of communication between Emma and Lindsay on display. In the conspicuous
pauses that appear in the conversation, the two spaces find their limits. Encountering this boundary infuriates Randall and prompts the following questions: ‘And what was the significance of the telephone conversation? What had happened in the gaps?’ (p. 122). Thankfully, as readers outside the diegetic bell jar, we find out what happened in the gaps in the next chapter.

[SLIDE: Telephone Conversation #2]

The opening lines of Leo Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina* ends with ‘each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way’; Murdoch, it would appear, took her Tolstoy seriously. Murdoch’s *The Italian Girl* opens with Edmund Narraway returning to his family house to attend his mother’s funeral, where he finds himself entangled in the family troubles of his older brother. Here, Edmund meets his brother’s apprentice David and his niece Flora, and the latter takes Edmund into her confidence in order to request for financial support to abort an unwanted pregnancy. When Edmund fails to lend his support, being more preoccupied with the moral reprehensibility of ‘Charlie Hopgood’—a boy from Flora’s college, who she claims—is the father. Later, Edmund is informed by Flora that Charlie Hopgood ‘is a complete fiction’, and David is, in fact, the father.6 Flora justifies her deception after completing the abortion, saying: ‘Why should I? […] I told you because I had to tell somebody, and much good you were! But I wasn’t sure you wouldn’t tell father […] And I didn’t want father to break David’s neck’ (*IG*, p. 98–9). As evident in this case, misinformation incurs continuous devaluation as the actions or inactions contingent on its continuance come to pass. In the wake of Flora’s falsity, Edmund attempts to physically chastise her only to find himself seduced. David observes this incestuous moment and procures a secret to keep his own secret safe. When Edmund attempts to reprimand him, David responds, ‘[W]hy should I submit to you? […] You were so beautifully caught’ (*IG*, p. p. 101). In a final endeavour to increase the stakes, Edmund tries to peddle the

information he possesses to Isabel, Flora’s mother, who knows nothing of his encounter with her daughter.

In Foucault’s final principle of heterotopias, he discusses heterotopias of illusion and heterotopias of compensation, which are polar opposites.

[SLIDE: HETEROTOPIA OF ILLUSION]

He states that heterotopias of illusion ‘perform the task of creating a space of illusion that reveals how all of real space is more illusory, all the locations within which life is fragmented’. In the revelation of each secret in *The Italian Girl*—and the novel has many secrets—the illusion of reality wears thin, to the point where the reader suspects narrative misdirection at every corner. In the fragmentation of secrets, then, we arrive at heterotopias of illusion.

[SLIDE: HETEROTOPIA OF COMPENSATION]

On the other hand, Foucault also discusses heterotopias of compensation, which ‘have the function of forming another space, another real space, as perfect, meticulous and well-arranged as ours is disordered, ill-conceived and in a sketchy state’. Heterotopias of compensation are uncomfortably close to utopias—except they are not perfect spaces—but spaces which ‘appear perfect’ in contrast with human imperfections. If heterotopias of illusion are composed by the disintegration of secrets, it may not be a stretch to assume that heterotopias of compensation are born out of the birth of secrets. Their building blocks are the stuff of human idealism and the uncomfortable truths that we prefer not to talk about. However, if Murdoch’s writings—or the real world—is anything to go by, when information is exchanged, secrets often come out.

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7 Michel Foucault, ‘Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias’, p. 356.
8 Michel Foucault, ‘Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias’, p. 356.