Connotations
Vol. 22.1 (2012/2013)

Artists as Mothers: A Response to June Sturrock*

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Published in 2009, A. S. Byatt's *The Children's Book* traces the relationships between the children and parents of various interconnected artistic families at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries. In their study *A. S. Byatt: Critical Storytelling* (2010), Alexa Alfer and Amy J. Edwards de Campos note that *The Children's Book* "is centrally concerned with the potential as well as the actual abuses visited upon the young by their elders' overactive and often predatory imaginations" (128). This assessment makes much of the historical location of the novel, understanding the breakdown of the relationships between parents and children as a metaphor for the wider cultural failure of the older generation to protect the younger generation from the horrors of the First World War. Indeed, Alfer and de Campos suggest that the "Great War" dominates the novel as "the inevitable conclusion [...], which none of the characters can predict but which every reader will be aware of" (120).[1] Similarly, Sam Leith writes that "[t]he first world war comes down on the end of *The Children's Book* like a guillotine" (13). Byatt herself, however, resists this prioritization of the war in the novel; in an interview with Leith, she says "I keep trying to get people to take the word 'looming' out of the publicity material" (13). In her article, "Artists as Parents in A. S. Byatt's *The Children's Book* and Iris Murdoch's *The Good Apprentice*," June Sturrock illuminates Byatt's novel in a way that enables it to come out from under the shadow of the Great War. While she recog-

*Reference: June Sturrock, "Artists as Parents in A. S. Byatt's *The Children's Book* and Iris Murdoch's *The Good Apprentice*," *Connotations* 20.1 (2010/2011): 108-30. For the original article as well as all contributions to this debate, please check the *Connotations* website at <http://www.connotations.de/debsturrock02012.htm>.

nises that the generational and collective experience is clearly an important part of *The Children's Book*, Sturrock focuses on the complex family relationships presented in the narrative and, in particular, the impact of the position of the parent as artist on the parent-child relationship.

Sturrock's article opens with a consideration of the connections between Byatt's novel and that of her mentor, arguing that *The Children's Book* is "in part a response to Murdoch's writing and more specifically to her late novel, *The Good Apprentice*" (108). She identifies three areas for her comparison: the representation of the artist as parent, the combination of realist and non-realist narrative modes, and the adoption of multiple narratives in an attempt to create a centreless novel. These three threads become interconnected as Sturrock claims that both novels open out from a consideration of the "intense connection between art and parental failure" (113) to explore issues about the moral responsibility of the artist. The attempts to create a "multiple-centred novel" reflect the difficulties and limitations of storytelling in its focus on the individual. Despite the interrelation of these threads, Sturrock's analysis centres on the representation of the artist as parent or, more specifically, the failure of the artist as parent. In contrasting the artist figures of Benedict Fludd and Olive Wellwood, Sturrock draws out the differences in the nature of their failure as parents, which she sees as ultimately tied to the nature of the art they produce. In this response, I would like to expand Sturrock's analysis to consider another factor which impacts on their respective failures as parents: gender.

Sturrock's analysis identifies the intertextual connections between Byatt's potter Benedict Fludd and Murdoch's painter Jesse Baltram, and between both of these fictional characters and the historical figure of Eric Gill. She claims that all three figures reveal the negative impact artist-parents have on their families, yet she suggests that Byatt's novel "is concerned both to intensify and to darken" Murdoch's narrative (108). Whereas Murdoch's novel focuses on the artist-parent of Jesse Baltram, Byatt's more expansive novel incorporates a vast array

of artist-parents, including the children's novelist Olive Wellwood. As with Benedict Fludd, Sturrock identifies interesting parallels between Byatt's fictional artist-parent and a historical figure, the children's novelist Edith Nesbit.[2] In tracing the connections between Byatt's and Murdoch's artist figures, and these fictional figures and their historical models, Sturrock opens out into an interesting consideration of what distinguishes Byatt's version from its intertextual sources. Sturrock suggests that "Murdoch represents Jesse as an artist of questionable achievement and a selfish father: [whereas] Byatt's Fludd is a great artist and a near-ruinous parent" (113). This intensification of passion—both in terms of passion for the creative process and the sexual passion he feels for his daughters—is part of what makes Byatt's artist-parent darker than either Murdoch's Baltram or the historical Gill. Another element that, for Sturrock, renders Byatt's version of this narrative more "disturbing" (111) than Murdoch's is that Byatt "imagines more fully the implications of such a household [...] not just for the male members of the household but also for its abused women" (112). Sturrock suggests that the connections between Murdoch and Byatt's novel are deliberate, arguing that if Byatt "takes the figure of the artist as father in *The Good Apprentice* and intensifies it, she does so because of her concern with the dual responsibilities of the artist, to art and to 'life'—that is to human contacts and more especially to the child" (117).

One of the most interesting aspects of Sturrock's analysis is the connection that she identifies between the type of art created and the nature of the damage inflicted by the artist-parent; she argues that "the nature of the abuse relates to the nature of the art" (114). She states that "the potter's art is tactile, and for both [Benedict Fludd and Eric Gill] this tactile quality is directly and obsessively sexual"; this tactility determines their relationships with their children as both men have a "sexually possessive attitude towards [their] own daughters" (111). Sturrock claims that "Byatt shows Fludd's family [...] as unquestionably harmed by his obsession with his art and by his terrifying anger and his sexual aggressions, though she never directly shows the

process of wounding" (112). Whereas the novel never shows the "process of wounding" Benedict Fludd inflicts on his daughters, it explicitly depicts this process in the case of Olive Wellwood and her children, most notably Tom. Sturrock argues that "Olive's preoccupation with storytelling means that her greatest fault as a parent is 'abstraction—a want of attention' [...], and this lack of attention is also a lack of imagination" (114). She goes on to claim that "[a]s with Fludd and his daughters, [Olive] has damaged her children by turning them into art, by putting them to the service of herself and her art" (115). Sturrock notes that "the potter, who works with his hands, abuses largely through touch," while "[t]he storytellers abuse by spinning stories out of other people to the neglect of their individual reality" (114). In drawing out the correlations between the type of art these parents produce and the ways in which they abuse their children, Sturrock provides a provocative way of thinking about the role of artist-parents and their conflicting responsibilities as artists and as parents.

In focusing on the damaging effects of storytelling, Sturrock highlights something that Byatt has herself identified as a recurring concern in her writing. In her interview with Sam Leith, Byatt says "in my work, writing is always so dangerous. It's very destructive. People who write books are destroyers" (13; cf. Sturrock 113). Indeed, Sturrock hints at connections between *The Children's Book* and some of Byatt's earlier fictions, notably *Possession: A Romance* (1990), the Potter Tetralogy, and "Body Art," in their concern with "parental failure [and] parental passion" (116).[3] However, these texts focus not so much on the artist as parent, but more specifically on the artist as mother. Although Byatt's fictions do not focus exclusively on the female artist, and male artists often appear in her work, her novels do seem to be particularly concerned with the specific difficulties facing the woman artist. Despite resisting being labelled as a feminist writer, Byatt has acknowledged that "all my books are about the woman artist—in that sense they are terribly feminist books" (Tredell 66). Thus, Byatt's concern with what Sturrock terms the "dual responsibilities of the

artist" (117) is most frequently mediated through the figure of the female artist, for whom the opposition between the role of artist and mother exemplifies the conflicting responsibilities to art and life.

Byatt's recurring concern with the position of the female artist in her work highlights a key distinction between the artist figures in *The Children's Book*: gender. Refocusing on the issue of gender and its relationship to art allows for an extension of Sturrock's analysis of the position of artist-parents in this novel. As I have noted, Sturrock understands Olive's failure as a parent as deriving primarily from her position as a storyteller which, paradoxically, involves "a lack of imagination." If the primary cause of Olive's failure as a parent is her position as a storyteller, then it might be expected that the other writer figure in the novel, Herbert Methley, would be guilty of the same abuses. Despite fathering two children in the course of the novel, Herbert Methley remains aloof from them and thus never fully moves into the position of artist-parent. He is, however, still responsible for perpetrating "abuses" against the younger generation, specifically Elsie Warren and Florence Cain. Despite being a storyteller, his "abuse" does not result from the "lack of imagination" that Sturrock ascribes to storytellers; rather it possesses the same "tactile" and sexual quality as Benedict Fludd's abuse. Sturrock notes that "Byatt speaks of Methley as 'horrible' [...] and most readers would agree" (127). However, unlike Benedict Fludd's sexual desires, Methley's are not directed at his own children and therefore are presented as less damaging in the novel. The differences between Herbert Methley and Olive Wellwood reveal that her failings as a parent, although linked to her position as a storyteller, are also inflected by her gender position. Thus, I would like to suggest that the "lack of imagination" with which Sturrock charges Olive is a direct result of her position as a *female* writer.

In many of Byatt's fictions, the female artist experiences a conflict between the competing roles of mother and artist which are frequently represented as an either/or opposition. This conflict can ultimately be understood as a conflict between the self and other. The

women writers in Byatt's fictions are often presented as jealously guarding their sense of self from the threat posed by the "other" in order to continue as an independent, creative individual. In *Possession*, the female poet Christabel LaMotte experiences her relationship with the male poet Randolph Henry Ash as a possible threat to her individual autonomy, and by extension her identity as an artist. Interestingly, LaMotte's desire to preserve her identity from this perceived threat is conceived of in distinctly maternal terms. In a letter to Ash, LaMotte uses the riddle of an egg as an analogy for her desire for solitude. She notes: "*There may come a day when you may lift the lid with impunity—or rather, when it may be lifted from within—for* that *way, life may come—whereas your way—you will discover—only Congealing and Mortality*" (Byatt, *Possession* 137). When her affair with Ash results in the birth of a daughter, LaMotte rejects her role as mother and gives her child to her sister to raise. While this decision can be in part explained by the social norms of the Victorian era in which this strand of the novel is set, it seems to underscore LaMotte's belief in the incompatibility of the roles of artist and mother.

Although most critical accounts of this aspect of the novel focus on LaMotte, on the impact for the female artist, Denenholz Morse hints at the impact on the child, noting that the "separation of mother and daughter leads to a kind of death of female creativity in May [Maia], who rejects the art Christabel creates in unrequited desire and sorrow" (158). This conflict between the two forms of female creation—art and motherhood—remains unreconciled until the end of the novel when there are suggestions that Maud, a direct descendant of Maia and therefore LaMotte, has found a way to "embrace both a sexual and creative identity" (Hadley, "Feminine Endings" 192). Thus, while Byatt explores the implications of the conflict between the self and other for the female artist, she is also concerned with the impact of this conflict for those closest to the female artist.

One consequence of the female artist's determination to preserve the autonomy of the self can be a failure to recognize the other as a complete, individual entity. As we have seen, Sturrock claims that the

damage done by writers is due to a "failure of imagination." However, the "lack of imagination" that Sturrock identifies in Olive's relationships with her children is more properly a lack of empathy, a failure to understand the other as a complete and individual self, having an entirely separate existence from the self. This lack of empathy, perversely, derives from the artist's position as a mother. *The Children's Book* explores the threat that the child poses to the mother's sense of self and traces the consequences of the female artist's preservation of self for the child. In this respect, *The Children's Book* seems to continue the concerns of Byatt's second novel, *The Game* (1967). Specifically focusing on the impact that Julia's novels have on her sister Cassandra, who is the direct inspiration for much of what she writes, *The Game* explores what Byatt refers to as "the fear of the 'woman's novel' as an immoral devouring force" ("Foreword" xii). For Creighton, *The Game* indicates that "a certain amount of 'monstruous' appropriation of others is essential for the artist, including the female artist who has been taught that such aggression is 'unfeminine'" (23). This appropriation of others, however, is not only unfeminine, but also distinctly unmaternal.

In *The Children's Book*, Olive Wellwood clearly represents the conflict between woman as mother and woman as artist; separating out the roles of artist and mother can be seen as an attempt to preserve her sense of self as a creative individual from the imposition of the other through her position as a mother. As Alex Clark notes in her review of the novel: "When Olive is pregnant once again, she seals herself away in her stories, partly out of financial necessity but also to shore up her individuality and to insulate herself from her unborn child." This separation of the roles of mother and artist becomes even more marked once the children are born, with the maternal role being taken on by Olive's sister, Violet.[4] Violet occupies the maternal role and provides for the needs of the children; as she comments to Philip, the young runaway Olive takes in because she is interested to know his "story": "I'm the one they turn to, when they *need* to" (Byatt, *The Children's Book* 19). Although Violet takes care of the children's physi-

cal and to some extent emotional needs, they are still damaged by Olive's art. This damage is perpetrated not just by a "want of attention" on Olive's part, but through her lack of empathy, her failure to understand the "otherness" of "her" children and her tendency to turn her children into stories. Olive writes a private story for each of the children which is begun when they are very young, and is gradually extended and modified as they grow up. In this way, the stories seem to usurp their identity; they both are and are not the stories of the children themselves.[5] Olive never thinks to ask her children's permission to write stories about them and, although she does acknowledge the sense of ownership that her children, especially Tom, have over their stories, she ultimately sees them as her stories and feels free to mine them for ideas for her published works. Thus Olive's storytelling represents what Creighton has termed a "monstrous appropriation of others," which is considered "unfeminine" and thus at odds with her position as a mother. Olive's writing damages all of the children in various ways; however, the damage is most intense with her eldest son, Tom.

After Tom leaves for boarding school, Olive continues to write his private book and send him segments. While Tom's letters home always pointedly thank Olive for the story, saying "[i]t makes all the difference" (198), the narrative reveals a more ambivalent response: "The story was an embarrassment. [...] The story was a necessity" (198). In reading the story, the lines between Tom's real and fictional identity become blurred: "Tom reading *Tom Underground* was real: Tom avoiding Hunter's eye, Tom chanting declensions, Tom cleaning washbasins and listening to smutty jokes was a simulacrum" (198). The boundary between the real and fictional Tom is further blurred as Tom descends into the basement of the school in order to find the privacy to read the story. When Tom is discovered by the older boys, he runs away from school, only returning to his family home six weeks later. Olive's response reveals the extent to which her identity as a mother has been subordinated to her identity as an artist: "She had 'been through' something bad, and she dealt with it in her usual

way, writing a children's story of an innocent boy set upon by bullies at school" (204). In understanding the situation as something that "*she* had 'been through,'" Olive betrays her inability to recognise Tom as a separate, individual being with an emotional life of his own. Indeed, she writes the story in response to feeling "shut out" by Tom's experience: "Tom was part of her, and she was part of Tom, and the evil boy, Hunter, had severed the connection" (203). She seeks to re-establish this connection by writing the story, but in doing so she fails to imagine the impact it will have on Tom. The narrative hints at the potential damage this will do to Tom through the thoughts of another child character: Julian Cain "said to himself that if he were Tom he would find the book unforgivable" (204). It is not only that in writing this novel Olive has usurped Tom's identity and experiences, but also that the writing of this interrupts Tom's own narrative: "Olive did not write any more of *Tom Underground* until after the publication of *Blacktowers*" (204). In appropriating his identity for her fictions, Olive undermines Tom's own sense of himself as a separate being with his own narrative.

Olive's transformation of Tom into fiction becomes truly "unforgivable" when she shifts from writing stories to writing a play. Pondering the difference between writing plays and writing stories, Olive notes that "[a] true playwright makes up people who can be inhabited by actors. A storyteller makes shadow people in the head, autonomous and complete" (518). Thus, in stories, the identity of the other, in this case Tom, is more fully appropriated than in a play. Yet, Olive "was not really a playwright" (518), and thus *Tom Underground* usurps Tom's identity to the extent that he commits suicide.[6] In her usual way, Olive is guilty of a "want of attention" while creating the play: "[she] had not told Tom, either that they had adapted his story, or that they had taken his name. She had not thought about Tom whilst the work was going on" (520). Tom first hears of the play when he receives an invitation to the opening night, and his initial reaction reveals the nature of Olive's failure; he simply remarks "I wasn't asked. Or told" (521). The simple act of asking would have recognised the

sense of ownership that Tom feels over the story and acknowledged his separate existence from his mother.[7] Olive recognises that "she should say—should already have said—something" (520); however, she persists in her lack of empathy and fails to address the situation even after the fact. In doing so, she fails to deal with the situation as a mother, focusing instead on her position as an artist.

That Olive prioritizes her art over her family is reinforced during opening night. Olive and Humphry sit in a separate box from the children, who are with Violet. Thus, Olive appears more concerned with the audience's reaction to her play than with Tom's reaction; she abandons Tom to make sense of the play, and its imposition on his identity, on his own. Tom has an ambivalent response to the play he sees on stage, recognising that he "knew, and didn't know the story. His skin crawled" (523); "Something had been taken from him, certainly, but in these lights, against this backcloth, it was something fabricated and trivial, which it made no sense to mourn" (524). Despite this, Tom clearly does mourn his loss of identity. His reaction is to leave the theatre and walk, initially towards home, but eventually just for the sake of walking. Through the constant movement, Tom seeks to resist the narrative that Olive first imposed on him, and then took away from him. "It did not matter where he went. All that mattered was to move, to be on the move, to use his body and not his mind" (526). As he continues to walk, however, Tom does begin to use his mind and starts to create his own narrative: "He did now have in his head an image of a story. Not more than the skeleton of a story, of a walker walking through England" (531). Tom's story ends with him walking, "without hesitating," into the sea. When his body turns up two days later, Humphry remarks that it was "[n]ot recognisable [...]. Not—as a person" (535). Of course, it was Olive's inability to recognise Tom as an individual person that led to his suicide.

In denying her role as a mother in order to focus on her position as an artist, Olive clearly wreaks irrecoverable damage on her children. Yet Tom's death also causes reciprocal damage to Olive's position as an artist. Haunted by "every Tom that had ever been," Olive initially

thinks "this is a story, there is a story in this" (536). Almost immediately afterwards, however, she recognises that "[t]here would be no more stories, she thought, dramatically, uncertain whether this too was a story, or a full stop" (536). Despite the distance she maintained between her roles as mother and artist, there is a suggestion that both are necessary for Olive's creative process. Thus, Tom's death in some ways ends Olive's identity as both a mother (despite the numerous other children and putative children she has) and an artist: she "took to her bed, most of the time, much of the time in the dark. She was not writing" (542). Although the novel focuses on the dangers of the separation of the role of artist and mother for the child, it also hints at the dangers for the artist-mother. The suggestion seems to be that the roles of mother and artist are inextricably connected, and that one should not be prioritized over another. In this respect, *The Children's Book* recalls "Body Art," which Amanda Craig sees as continuing Byatt's exploration of how the two forms of female creation, art and childbirth, are "intertwined" (67). Although this intertwining is experienced as dangerous by some women artists, there is a suggestion in "Body Art" that it can be productive. In order for it to be productive, however, the separate identities of both the mother and the child need to be respected and preserved. In *The Children's* Book, Olive's failure to recognise and respect her son's separate existence leads to her failure as both a mother and, eventually, as an artist.

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NOTES

[1]Conversely, Alex Clark claims that "[t]he war never feels like an inevitability, nor the numerous characters artificially inflated in order to provide soldiers for it; instead, it feels like the vast, traumatising shock that it was, its victims randomly alighted on, its effects making nothing, and yet everything, of what has gone before."

[2]Sturrock traces the resemblances between Nesbit and Wellwood, claiming that "For my purposes—and, I assume, for Byatt's—the most important of these relate to her children" (115). Despite the similarities, Martin Rubin suggests that it is "a monstrous injustice to read this wonderful text as a roman a clef" and to see Olive Wellwood, who he considers a "marvelously original creation, full-blooded and magnificently realized," as merely a fictional representation of Edith Nesbit.

[3]I am deliberately using the term "Potter Tetralogy" to reflect Sturrock's "discomfort with the tendency to label Byatt's tetralogy as 'The Frederica Quartet,'" which she claims "seems to misdirect readers, to provide them with a mistaken focus" (124). This "mistaken focus" suggests that the quartet follows the trajectory of a single character, whereas Sturrock sees it as part of Byatt's attempt to "worked towards Murdoch's ambition of multiple centres" (124).

[4]As Sturrock notes, in assigning the motherly role to her sister, Olive Wellwood follows her historical model Nesbit who similarly left it to "the other woman (her own sister) to play the maternal role" (116).

[5]As Adam Mars-Jones notes, "There is a suggestion that in some way Olive has decanted the essence of her children into the stories."

[6]Mars-Jones suggests that in writing the play Olive "perhaps [...] does something symbolically similar to separating [Tom] from his shadow."

[7]It is this failure to ask permission which separates Olive Wellwood from the other storyteller in the novel, Herbert Methley. When he sees Elsie Warren contemplating buying a pair of boots and a belt, he asks: "I wonder if you would mind very much if I put your feet—and your shoes—into a novel I am writing?" (288). Of course, the other key difference is that Elsie Warren is not Herbert Methley's child.

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