

A Daughter Abandons Her Literary Mother: A. S. Byatt's *The Children's Book* and Iris Murdoch's *The Good Apprentice*. A Response to June Sturrock*

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Although there is a growing body of work on contemporary fiction, it can still take a considerable time for scholarly essays on new novels to appear. For this amongst other reasons, June Sturrock's "Artists as Parents in A. S. Byatt's *The Children's Book* and Iris Murdoch's *The Good Apprentice* is very welcome: at the moment there is only one other article on Byatt's novel. The author sets out to prove that the old-established idea of Murdoch as a "literary mother" to Byatt can still generate fresh evidence. Daughters may be influenced by their mothers, but also challenge them: here, Byatt is shown to do both.

According to Sturrock, *The Children's Book* is "in part a response to Murdoch's writing and more specifically to her late novel, *The Good Apprentice*" (108). Like Murdoch, the author suggests, Byatt foregrounds a fictional artistic family, modelled on that of Eric Gill, to allow her to debate and depict the damaging potential artists have as fathers: "*The Children's Book* has its own version of the establishment at Seegard" (110), and Byatt "takes the figure of the artist as father in *The Good Apprentice* and intensifies it" (117). In addition to this Byatt shares, Sturrock claims, Murdoch's interest in multiple centres in a narrative, and builds on the latter's mix of fairy tale and realism: Sturrock reminds us that "Byatt like Murdoch associates art with the fairy tale" (118). *The Children's Book* thus engages with and builds on both the form and the moral argument of *The Good Apprentice*.

*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 (2010/11): 108-30. For the original article as well as all contributions to this debate, please check the *Connotations* website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debsturrock0201.htm>>.

The essay is well argued throughout, persuasive and scholarly. Noting how Olive in *The Children's Book* is implicitly criticised by the implied author for "lack of attention" (114), however, I was surprised that a link to Murdoch was not made, for it has been a backbone of Murdoch criticism that the author inherited Simone Weil's passion for attention, preaching that the best art can lead to a loss of self and a loving recognition of the contingent world and its persons.¹ The artist characters of Byatt's novel do not learn this. Sturrock also describes Purchase House in Byatt's novel as "place of contingency" (121); this again is a word that is a frequent part of Murdoch's vocabulary,² and an opportunity for making a link between Murdoch and Byatt is missed. Similarly, Sturrock quotes a character in the novel describing a situation as a "muddle" (116), but does not suggest that this is perhaps a negative version of the "muddles" and "jumbles" which form a joyous part of Murdoch's *oeuvre*.³

There are further points to be made in response to Sturrock's ideas, and the first relates to Byatt herself as an author. Sturrock writes: "More recently she has expressed doubts, not about Murdoch's quality but about her continuing reputation, saying that readers now wonder 'whether they overvalued her [...]'" (126n1). Byatt has retracted these comments, stating that they were never meant to be taken seriously.⁴ Byatt's commitment to Murdoch's work has been evidenced recently by, for example, a Murdoch event at the Royal Society of Literature where she was a key speaker.⁵

I thought it would be worthwhile to contact Byatt and ask for her response to the claims made in the article. Her reaction was one of surprise: she stated that she could not see any links, although she implied that it was some time since she had read *The Good Apprentice* and that she may have covered over something in her mind.⁶ Which ever way, the "retelling" Sturrock claims is certainly not a conscious one on the part of Byatt.

The second point is one that pertains to current literary criticism more widely, of which this piece is a representative example. Sturrock's readings are careful and informed, and always engaging, but

missing is a sense of evaluation. This is increasingly seen as the job of journalists (Sturrock cites a favourable review by Leith (117)); but there is surely an argument for analysing how well Byatt carries out her apparent attempt to rethink Murdoch. Does she improve upon her “mother”?

Both novels, as well as having a shared moral centre, multiple narratives and a combination of realism and fairytale, are rich and highly intelligent. They are also both too long. Murdoch, famously, refused to allow Chatto and Windus to edit her work, with the result that her later works could easily be described as baggy monsters. *The Good Apprentice* was written in these years; alongside the shimmering magic of Seegard, and a compelling narrative demonstrating that the world can continually surprise, sit many disquisitions on goodness and responsibility that slow the pace. It is an at times brilliant, at times frustrating piece of fiction. In the same way, *The Children's Book* is for its most part an exemplary fictional display of imagination and writing, but can suffer from being a masterpiece of learning; if Murdoch is keen to show off her philosophy, Byatt is keen to exhibit her knowledge of the art and cultural history of the Edwardian years. This knowledge is fascinating and stimulating; it does hold up the narrative, however.

As a final point, I would suggest that the parallels drawn by Sturrock might be rather too narrow. There is no doubt that Byatt's novel alludes to Eric Gill, Edith Nesbit and Edwardian Fabianism; it is certainly possible that Byatt might have unconsciously reworked the Seegard narrative from *The Good Apprentice*. But there are many other novels that either depict artists as damaging parents, or show eccentric artistic communities: Elizabeth Taylor's *The Wedding Group* and Penelope Lively's *The Family Album* are two potentially profitable avenues for exploration.

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NOTES

¹This idea was introduced by Byatt in *Degrees of Freedom*.

²In *Under the Net* (1954), Jake Donaghue states "I hate contingency" (26). The book is in part an illustration of how he must learn to embrace it, and the theme of accepting contingency, or "mess," continues throughout Murdoch's fiction.

³Murdochean muddle is shown in, among other places, the deliberate formlessness of the 1971 novel *An Accidental Man*, and Jake's recognition, at the end of *Under the Net*, that the apparently random patterning of a litter of kittens is "just one of the wonders of the world" (286).

⁴Private communication: email, October 28, 2010.

⁵"Iris Murdoch Revisited," Royal Society of Literature, March 7, 2011.

⁶Private communication: email, March 17, 2012.

WORKS CITED

- Byatt, A. S. *Degrees of Freedom*. London: Chatto and Windus, 1965.
Murdoch, Iris. *Under the Net*. 1954. London: Vintage, 2002.