

couldn't grasp it—the thing slipped away from him like a fish you're trying to get off the hook and it keeps flopping slimy slippery around."

Woven into the total picture are threads from the animal world which exists alongside the human one, and contains a similarly complex intertwining of predictable and unpredictable events. Into their routine patterns of breeding, hunting, eating, and dying intrudes an episode of unforeseeable violence when an old tomcat decapitates a litter of kittens (which he probably fathered) and when Herb's chickens, on whom he had been counting for a little extra money, betray him by coming down with some kind of inexplicable ailment.

Yet despite these negative events, this book is less a lament than a celebration, the richness of its descriptions and language an attempt to capture the totality of existence: trees, river, summer and thunderstorm, as well as men, women, work, and endurance. The age, pain, and wisdom of Hazel, Myrt, and Sam are balanced by the youth, joy, and innocence of the children at the swimming hole, of whom we catch brief glimpses between the scenes enacted by the major characters. Like the quilt, which "wasn't finished and wouldn't be finished now till tomorrow or the next day" or some time in the future, life goes on, "dull, simple, amazing, unfathomable", in the words of Alice Munro's *Del Jordan*. The result is a most satisfying book.

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Iris Murdoch: *Work For the Spirit*. Elizabeth Dipple. *Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982. Pp. 356.*

Elizabeth Dipple's analysis of Iris Murdoch's twenty novels, which went to press before the publication of her latest, *The Philosopher's*

Pupil, belongs to the tradition of practical criticism and has all the strengths and weaknesses of that approach. Dipple gives lengthy but sometimes out of sequence plot summaries, carefully explains what she thinks each novel is about, traces the development of Murdoch's ideas and her use of the novel form. In addition, Dipple helpfully suggests areas for further study and frequently makes shrewd comments about why many readers have difficulty with Murdoch or are repelled by her. Because of Dipple's thoroughness and literary sensitivity, *Iris Murdoch: Work For the Spirit* deserves to be called the best book to date on Murdoch's fiction.

However, the study, as a work of practical criticism, has two major weaknesses which I believe are linked in interesting ways. Dipple displays a philosophical naiveté towards Murdoch's work and her intentions and she is totally silent on the feminist implications of these novels and of Murdoch's status as a writer.

Dipple openly admits that she is an "evangelist" for Murdoch, who she feels is the best English novelist now writing and one of the best of the twentieth century. Although Dipple is more impressed with the latter half of Murdoch's oeuvre (I am too) and presents good reasons for thinking so, she dutifully traces out Murdoch's progress from beginning to end. Dipple criticizes earlier studies of Murdoch, even the brilliant work of A.S. Byatt, on the grounds that all suffer from excessive allusion-hunting, and falsely claim the writer as a philosophical novelist. Doing so, Dipple feels, limits Murdoch, whereas calling her a religious writer, as Dipple does, does not.

This is a strange distinction. Apparently Murdoch is thoroughly "ideological"—a key word which is never defined in this long book—rather than philosophical. Murdoch's chief subjects are the nature and utter unattainability of the Good, the shoddy unreality in which almost all her bourgeois characters choose to live, and the fail-

ure of Christianity, psychoanalysis, existentialism or contemporary British philosophy to offer a coherent or compelling picture of how we ought to live. (Marxism isn't even an also-ran.) One need not point to Murdoch's training and long career as an Oxford teacher of philosophy; to the lengthy passages in the novels on technical subjects such as the ontological proof for the existence of God and on Plato's metaphysics and dialectics. These force themselves on the reader. Finally, the fact that Elizabeth Dipple has spent so many pages explaining Murdoch's "ideology" itself makes that point. These novels are profoundly philosophical. Why then, does Dipple deny it? She says that:

To the degree that there is a philosophical issue in her work, it is Platonic and moral, and functions at the same absolutely background level as her serious use of Shakespearean references or paintings. Although critics have talked a great deal about Sartre and Kant, the ultimate working-out of her fictions is much more concentrated on causality and the peculiar structures of human personality. (p. 313)

Well, Plato is a philosopher, ethics is a branch of philosophy and it is disingenuous to call the only way of decoding these novels a "background level" of reference.

Dipple is wise in not building her critique on Murdoch's remarks about the history of the novel, as so many other commentators have done, but she fails to define the realistic tradition in which Murdoch writes. Dipple fails to see that realism is a philosophical as well as a literary category and that it is essential to ask why Murdoch feels she must salvage this tradition and avoid most twentieth century experimental developments. While Dipple is persuasive in arguing for Murdoch's mastery of a longer novel form, she fails to say enough about the literary and social context which Murdoch is deliberately ignoring.

Dipple's failure to treat these literary questions is related to her failure to discuss the feminist implications of Murdoch's fiction. Dipple simply applauds Murdoch's vision of an impersonal Goodness which human beings by definition cannot reach, but which ethics commands them to choose by seeking out unhappiness and death. Dipple ignores the paradox therein, and, what is more, fails to consider that Murdoch's view might be in some sense ethically trivial and degrading, particularly to women.

Ethical problems in Murdoch's later fiction are almost exclusively personal and erotic and inevitably devolve from the active expression of sexual desire. Passive, sexless contemplation of the beloved is morally and spiritually superior to sexual union. Purified love is defined by the utter renunciation of the self and its interests. Human love for Iris Murdoch is a contradiction in terms.

The impact of Murdoch's theological and philosophical views on her treatment of women is hard to state precisely. Murdoch has never used a first person female narrator. In an interview in the late 1970s, she said that she avoided using one because by doing so she would have limited her scope to female rather than human, that is, male concerns. Significantly, Dipple does not mention this interview, nor does she comment over all on Murdoch's treatment of female characters or of marriage (usually torment, at best a mediocre arrangement), or of active hetero- or homosexuality (usually dangerous, leading to maiming or suicide), or celibacy (morally preferred and relatively safe).

Over and over in these novels, characters who would be good—most of these are male—are asexual. The only female character who is articulate enough to analyse her goal says that her quest is to teach herself "how to be nobody and nothing and try after all to enjoy it." For feminists, for so many reasons, this is not an appealing message. Traditionally, writers and thinkers

who have disdained the body and rejected sexuality have also hated women. Could it be that Iris Murdoch, who has been honoured by being included in the B.B.C. "Men of Ideas" series, and Dipple, who addresses the reader throughout as "he," perhaps have not too much to say to us?

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Women of Ideas, And What Men Have Done to Them: From Aphra Behn to Adrienne Rich. Dale Spender. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982. Pp. 586.

This is a work of ample scope, bold and stimulating analysis as well as impressive research. After an introduction explaining the basic approach taken ("Why didn't I know?"), the book continues through successive discussions of individuals, from Aphra Behn (1640-80) to the 1970s. Further theoretical discussions are interspersed in the main text, which is followed by an Appendix ("Life in Prison", an excerpt from Sylvia Pankhurst's *The Suffragette Movement*), a chronological table of the women discussed or alluded to and an excellent bibliography. Most women discussed are English, American and French, with occasional references to Canadian, Australian and Russian figures; they encompass a wide variety of literary and political activities.

Dale Spender's book deserves to become a classic, one which will and should be used by everyone active in Women's Studies, irrespective of individual disciplines. The issues Spender raises may not all be new, but they deserve the most serious consideration. Her main thesis is stated in the following passage:

I am advocating the premise that knowledge is political. I am asserting that in a male-dominated society women do not control the uses that are made of knowl-

edge. I am asserting that a fundamental use of knowledge in a patriarchal society is to enhance the image of men and to negate the image of women. I am asserting that women's resources are appropriated and used to find in favour of men and against women, and that much 'valuable' use is made of any negative evidence we may construct about other women. While it is not in our power (at present) to influence the uses made of negative knowledge about women, *it is well within' our power to refuse to make it available.* (p. 501)

All of the above points are concretized through the discussions of individual women. Since Spender is concerned with the transmission of knowledge, and since Women's Studies are by definition interdisciplinary, it is therefore clear why the implications of her thesis have relevance to a wide scope of activities, creative, political and educational.

The book has much to offer to those who are already active in Women's Studies, to say nothing of the general reader. The fundamentally feminist aim of recovering our heritage and retrieving lost figures of the past is pursued—thus the reader will encounter many fascinating figures. Everyone will have her own favourites; one of mine is the following statement from Matilda Joslyn Gage's book, *Women, Church and State* (1893):

The whole theory, regarding woman, under Christianity, has been based upon the conception that she has no right to live for herself alone. Her duty to others has continuously been placed before her and her training has ever been that of self-sacrifice. Taught from the pulpit and legislative halls that her position must always be secondary even to her children, her right to life has been admitted only insofar as its reacting effect upon another could be predicated. (p. 241)