

The Good Apprentice. Iris Murdoch. *London: Chatto & Windus 1985. Pp.522.*

“Each man kills the thing he loves,” at least, in the world of Iris Murdoch — and “man” is, for once, the appropriate word. She writes continually about the way love and goodness are thwarted not so much by actual evil but by a kind of blindness to the reality of other people, and so in her novels death often comes at least partly through the preoccupation, carelessness, vanity or inadequacy of a close friend, a lover or a brother (only once, I believe, in the early *Flight from the Enchanter* (1956) is a woman the “killer”). The most obvious cases perhaps, are Hilary Burde of *A Word Child*, who scores two fatal accidents and two suicides, and Cato, the apostate priest, who coshes and kills the beautiful delinquent boy he loves. *Henry and Cato* (1977) ends with Cato lost in guilt and despair, which is where this latest novel begins. Edward Baltram, a London student, is sick with reactive depression over the death of his beloved friend, Mark, who fell from a window having been left alone to suffer the aftermath of a dose of LSD, surreptitiously administered by Edward. So the novel moves immediately into a new entanglement of love and guilt and death.

The Good Apprentice portrays with painful accuracy the dark and stifling mental world of depression. Iris Murdoch understands the complicated traps and mechanisms of the human mind, and Edward here is shown as mechanically and lifelessly stuck in a futile yearning to undo the past, refusing to accept the finality of death, living entirely in his mental conversations with Mark, endlessly explaining to Mark, endlessly asking Mark’s forgiveness. “I’m a machine,” he says to his stepbrother, “I say the same things to myself a thousand times a day, I see the same things, I enact the same things. Nothing can help me now, nothing.” Like other depressives, he conspires with his own misery; he clings to it and protects it. Acceptance of Mark’s death would involve him in another painful

death, the death of his own self-conceit, his illusions. Thomas McCaskerville, the psychiatrist who tells Edward this (and who is married to Edward’s young Aunt Midge) thinks of such deaths — “death in life, life in death, life after death” — as his “special subject”. It is also the special subject of this novel, and indeed of much of Iris Murdoch’s more recent work. The last part of *The Good Apprentice* is entitled “Life after Death”, — life, that is, after the death of Edward’s illusions, and also after the death of Edward’s father.

For Edward does learn to stop maddening himself by running away from the truth, and he learns it partly by running away from London, to meet his extraordinary unknown father, Jesse, “a painter, an architect, a sculptor, a socialist, and a Don Juan,” as one of Edward’s women friends says with awe. At this point the novel moves away from the realism of the London sequences into a different mode, a sort of semi-mythic narrative similar to that of *The Unicorn* or *The Sea, The Sea*. Jesse Baltram turns out to be half sick and half crazed, living in the tower of Seegard, the fantastic house he built in the fens, imprisoned by — or perhaps imprisoning — three strange and beautiful women, his wife and two daughters. Edward’s release from the worst of his despair comes partly from his father and his ability to accept — or invent — their mutual love. It also comes from a meeting with Mark’s sister, Brownie, the first person to ask Edward the two simple questions — Why did he give Mark the drug? Why did he leave Mark alone in his drugged sleep? — which enable Edward to face the simple truth of his guilt and its consequences. He becomes the good apprentice; he has learnt from death (“The Great Teacher” of *Henry & Cato*) something about life.

But Edward is not the only, or even the most obvious, good apprentice. His stepbrother, Stuart, falls in love with the idea of goodness, gives up his promising academic career to teach small children and decides to remain celibate.

Much of the humour in this novel arises from the total lack of comprehension of their friends and family about Edward's misery or Stuart's motives. They offer Edward chocolate and good advice and project on to Stuart all their own unease about their own compromises. Like Edward, Stuart is a good apprentice, not only in that he is apprenticed to the good but also in his effectiveness, which goes unnoticed even by himself. Stuart, who is seen as looking like a white grub, whose father, Harry, prefers his stepson Edward, who is constantly reviled as an arrogant bungler, in fact does work towards good. He leads Edward to visit and help Midge McCaskerville, torn between Harry, her lover, and Thomas, her husband; he also helps to persuade Mark's distraught mother to forgive Edward. But this is shown so subtly that even the *Times Literary Supplement's* reviewer sees Stuart as a ridiculous failure. Stuart at the end of the novel is reading *Mansfield Park*, and indeed he is a bit like Fanny Price, the timid heroine of that novel, both in his rectitude and in his repellent qualities.

The third apprentice is Thomas, the psychiatrist, a more complicated case. Having tried to help Edward and Stuart through the agonies of a kind of rebirth, he finds himself suffering a similar torture, when he learns about his beloved wife's long-lived affair with Harry. He finds himself trapped like Edward in a dreary mechanical round of repeated thoughts and futile yearnings. The novel refers twice to the story of Marsyas (the faun flayed by Apollo for daring to set himself up as a rival to the god of music) as if Marsyas' art was completed by his suffering. Apollo is the god not only of music but also of healing arts, and Thomas the psychiatrist seems to come through his misery to a new kind of understanding, and even a new joy.

Iris Murdoch is the artist as cornucopia. The abundance of her work, the sheer number of her novels, many of them rich and strange, is delightful — for those whom she doesn't infuri-

ate. This novel is good — funny, intelligent, perceptive, subtle, absorbing. All the same a vital element is missing: *The Good Apprentice* lacks a perspective, an anchor in reality, so to speak. All the characters in this novel are wealthy and privileged, all part of one prosperous and intelligent circle: Mark's mother knows Edward's tutor's wife and Edward's tutor's son is in love with both Stuart and Mark's sister, and so on. It is a small world which seems to lack all consciousness of its smallness or of the larger world, a privileged world which is blind to the underprivileged. Even Stuart, who wants to help other people, seems to be more aware of his own need of a sense of goodness than of other people's more immediately urgent needs. There is no room for the homeless, the hungry, the deprived in this world.

There is also not much room for women. Of course there are women characters, some of them intelligent professional women. But the only woman character whose thoughts and experiences we share is Midge, a former model who spends her time hand sewing, buying flowers, and conducting her love affair with Harry. All her thoughts concern her relations with men: the impact of a second meeting with Jesse tosses her from Harry to Stuart temporarily, and then back to Thomas and her son Meredith. She delights in Harry assuming authority over her and tries to move Stuart into a similar position. There is no sense of Midge as an individual; she sometimes seems like a mere mechanism of the plot, put there to afflict Thomas, to place Harry, and to fail to understand Edward and Stuart. The problem is that she is never placed as a woman in a male-dominated society. Perhaps Iris Murdoch felt that Midge's actions and reactions place her adequately, but this is not so. And indeed, although there are powerful women (like Honor Klein and Emma Sands) and women artist (like Rain Carter) elsewhere in Murdoch's work, a similar problem is felt in other novels: in *Nuns and Soldiers* certainly the ex-nun, Anne Cavidge, is shown as a thinking, feeling being,

but the widowed Gertrude seems to be there only for other people to love: she is an object, not a subject. Iris Murdoch is quite capable of stabbing at sexism with brilliant sharpness. In *Henry and Cato*, while John Forbes thinks complacently about his abhorrence of the domination of men over women, he is at the same time remembering how he had pushed and manipulated his daughter into an unwanted and unsuitable education. "He had always fought for women's liberation," he thinks "...but there was a kind of invincible stupidity in the other sex which simply asked for bullying." Such stupid self-satisfaction on the part of apparently intelligent males is shown to be almost invincible because it is so profoundly unconscious.

Such placing is lacking in *The Good Apprentice*. The women in the novel are only half-realised and for the most part assume too easily a mythical significance (as in the scene where Mark's mother and her two friends seem to merge into the three Furies bent on punishing a new Orestes). This deficiency, the lack of any sense of what it means to lack power and privilege, robs the novel of some of its potency, which is unfortunate as it succeeds so brilliantly in portraying on a personal level. The lack of this dimension has the effect of making the love of goodness seem sometimes merely a game, an expensive toy, an indulgence of the privileged.

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Working Women in South-East Asia: Development, Subordination and Emancipation. Noeleen Heyzer. *Milton Keynes and Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1986. Pp. 145*

Working Women in South East Asia examines the relationship between economic development, subordination and possibilities for women's emancipation in six countries. Before entering into her account of working women's

lives, Heyzer provides a brief theoretical overview of women and development, and establishes her rationale for limiting her study to women working within poverty. Then Heyzer examines the forms and bases of women's subordination. Changes in agricultural production are shown to weaken women's authority, increase their work burden, and exclude them from newly organized bureaucracies and institutions. Plantation agriculture, based on a need for male migrant labour, forces women into sole responsibility for reproduction, social isolation, and limited wage labour opportunities. Adverse social conditions, predominantly alcohol abuse, further women's oppression.

Simultaneously, migration to urban centres results in the concentration of women in subsistence production based on a traditional domestic division of labour which holds them in the "informal economy" — the poorest economic sector. Urbanization in conjunction with tourism leads to massive increases in the trade in female sexuality where women remain trapped by coercion, violence, and a lack of viable alternatives. Migrating women also are drawn into the lowest ranks of the industrialized work force and there they stay. The overall consequences of urban living, Heyzer argues, are the marginalization of women in all economic sectors, serf-like working and living conditions, deteriorated health, and an inability to break through the structural barriers which deny women participation in decision making.

Traditional and externally imposed cultural forces undermine opportunities for emancipation and advancement. Sexual ideals and behaviours are rife with contradictions. While some women migrate from rural areas to escape traditional patriarchy, in the cities they are caught in the net of foreign demands for sexual licence. At the same time, religious groups and state institutions seek to limit women's social participation, arguing that rapid social change and disorientation requires adherence to traditional roles and