

Tempting Targets

by

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MOTHER'S MILK
by Edward St. Aubyn

Edward St. Aubyn's novels are so intoxicatingly witty that their high seriousness may not be immediately apparent. This seriousness is not tacked on as a solemn "message"; it is intrinsic to his ferociously comic vision. Yet they cannot be described as social satires: there is no facile exaggeration, no smug misanthropy or studied indignation involved in the uncomfortable truths he tells. His first three books (*Never Mind*, *Bad News*, and *Some Hope*) were published separately between 1992 and 1994 and later together as a trilogy; his most recent work, *Mother's Milk*, can be fully understood and enjoyed on its own but is in fact a sequel featuring the same protagonist, Patrick Melrose.

St. Aubyn's prose style corresponds to the classical ideal of elegant precision and so does his sense of form: the first and third sections of the trilogy each take place within the space of a day and the central section unfolds over two, while the action of *Mother's Milk* is concentrated on four successive Augusts. Patrick's father belongs to the decadent British aristocracy and his mother to the American super-rich, so we are in the defiantly hedonistic world that attracted both Evelyn Waugh and Scott Fitzgerald but which is here seen in all its brutal vulgarity from the viewpoint of a disaffected insider. A visual equivalent to the trilogy might be some beautiful, brightly enameled triptych, each panel of which illustrates a different circle of Hell.

Never Mind is set in Provence in the mid-1950s, when Patrick is five. Its theme is cruelty, centered on the boy's sadistic persecution, culminating in rape, by his "brilliant," exquisitely civilized, but monstrously embittered father, David Melrose. Child abuse is so shocking a subject that one might prefer, in literature as in life, to dismiss its occurrence as imagined or exaggerated, but St. Aubyn's scrupulously un sentimental account of the bewildered child's distress and his vivid characterization of the abuser compel reluctant belief. David Melrose is a dedicated snob whose opinion of his own superiority is so precious that he disdains competition (the people he admires are always those who

"could have" been prime minister, or whatever, if they had bothered to try). Angry and secretly disappointed, he married for money; his wife has become a drunk to shield herself from his wounding contempt but this has also blinded her to what he is doing to their son.

In *Bad News* Patrick is twenty-two and, not surprisingly, a heroin addict. He travels to New York to collect his unmourned father's ashes; once there his search for drugs propels him in a nightmarish spiral to the brink of delirium, reaching a climax when, alone at the Pierre Hotel, he experiences a terrifying fragmentation, almost a total dissolution, of his personal identity. Here St. Aubyn shows an astonishing ability to explore complex states of consciousness without compromising the clarity and harmony of his prose. The nightmare in *Some Hope* is that of upper-class inanity, enjoyably anatomized within the setting of a large party at a grand Gloucestershire house at which Princess Margaret is a particularly nasty guest:

Bridget swiveled around and saw her daughter looking pleadingly into the room.

"Who is it?" the princess asked Sonny.

"I'm afraid it's my daughter, ma'am," replied Sonny, glaring at Bridget.

"Still up? She should be in bed. Go on, tuck her up immediately!" she snapped.

Here Patrick, now thirty, unexpectedly takes a tentative step toward understanding his self-destructive urge.

The trilogy was followed in 1998 by *On the Edge*, a scintillating comedy of New Age manners as funny as *The Alchemist* that follows a large and variegated cast of Jonsonian characters in their sometimes ludicrous pursuit of spiritual enlightenment from a range of fashionable gurus. A superficial reading might define it as a well-researched send-up of a comparatively easy target, but this would miss the sympathy felt and subtly conveyed for these seekers after knowledge: for it is knowledge they seek, not magic. One episode (describing a psychedelic trip in the Utah wilderness undertaken by a very intellectual Frenchman called Jean-Paul to please his girlfriend Crystal) has an unsettling brilliance similar to Patrick's hallucinatory adventure at the Pierre Hotel in *Bad News*.

Patrick, Jean-Paul, and Crystal reappear in St. Aubyn's next novel, *A Clue to the Exit*—or rather in *On the Train*, the book that the beleaguered narrator, Charlie Fairburn, is somehow managing to write. The "novel within a novel" device has become very familiar and can often seem pointlessly pretentious. Here it is effectively used to discriminate between, and eventually combine, two separate approaches—the sensational and the cerebral—to the book's theme: the nature of consciousness. *A Clue to the Exit* received very little attention when it appeared in 2000 and in an overview of St. Aubyn's work might be ignored or dismissed as an eccentric curiosity, but it remains an absorbing experiment in which admirers of the more successful and accessible trilogy and *Mother's Milk* will find a heightened treatment of the same underlying concerns. Its opening paragraph exemplifies a blend of epigram and poetry peculiar to St. Aubyn:

I've started to drive more cautiously since I was told I only have six months to live. All the love I've ever felt seems to have waited for this narrowing funnel of time to be decanted more precisely into my flooding veins. Bankrupt, I cannot resist staring through jewellers' windows at those diamond chokers locked solid around black velvet necks.

Charlie (a successful scriptwriter) sells his St. Tropez house, tries to lose all his money at the Monte Carlo tables but only wins more, embarks on a dreamlike erotic adventure with a beautiful compulsive gambler, then retreats further and further into ascetic solitude and intense meditation—a lifetime's potential is speeded up to fill the inelastic space of half a year. His subjective narrative is pitched at an excitingly high register and sometimes resembles the surrealism of a Buñuel film.

In contrast, the book on which he is compulsively at work records a philosophical discussion (recalling Thomas Love Peacock and early Aldous Huxley in its sparkle and erudition) among a trainload of travelers from a consciousness conference. After rehearsing most of the theories currently competing in the "Great Consciousness Debate," this ends with relieved acceptance of the notion of "cognitive closure": "not only was the problem unsolved, it never could be solved." But Charlie's attempts to deal with the idea of his own mortality confront the problem more creatively with an increased sensitivity to experience itself. At the climax of this original and challenging book, his physical sensations merge with his emotional disturbance, leading to a mental exploration of extraordinary concentration and range. Here too there is closure of a kind: "But it's enough to know that there are states of mind and works of art which deliver this

paradox: that the thing which is closest to us is the most mysterious."

Mother's Milk starts explosively with the birth of Patrick's first child, Robert, as remembered by Robert himself a few years later—a tour de force typifying St. Aubyn's characteristic match of imaginative power with verbal ingenuity:

Why had they pretended to kill him when he was born? Keeping him awake for days, banging his head again and again against a closed cervix; twisting the cord around his throat and throttling him; chomping through his mother's abdomen with cold shears; clamping his head and wrenching his neck from side to side; dragging him out of his home and hitting him; shining lights in his eyes and doing experiments; taking him away from his mother while she lay on the table, half-dead. Maybe the idea was to destroy his nostalgia for the old world. First the confinement to make him hungry for space, then pretending to kill him so that he would be grateful for the space when he got it, even this loud desert, with only the bandages of his mother's arms to wrap around him, never the whole thing again, the whole warm thing all around him, being everything.

The time is August 2000 and the place is again St. Nazaire, the Melrose property in southern France where the traumatic events described in *Never Mind* took place. Patrick, now an underemployed barrister of over forty, is married to Mary, who has recently given birth to their second son, Thomas. The narrative remains in the third person throughout but the viewpoint alternates between Robert (who is five at the start), Patrick, Mary, and (briefly, at the end) three-year-old Thomas. Patrick has become a father but has not ceased to be a son. The villainous ghost of David Melrose, whose poisonous influence pervaded, even posthumously, the earlier trilogy, has at last been laid to rest—only to be replaced as a source of anxiety, fury, and guilt by the surviving presence of Patrick's mother, the "goody-goody" Eleanor.

A loveless childhood in meaninglessly opulent surroundings has left Eleanor with a loathing of money but in some confusion about the wisest way of getting rid of it. After passing from one impetuous, ill-considered, and soon-regretted charitable scheme to another she has become the victim of an Irish crook who wants to establish a New Age "Transpersonal Foundation" at St. Nazaire. Eleanor is in bad health and longs to die—but before doing so she seems intent on disinherit her own family.

There are two bad mothers in the story: unselfish Eleanor, a bullied victim whose pathological philanthropy can only extend to beneficiaries unconnected with herself, and Mary's mother, a straightforwardly selfish socialite. Mary herself has a strong and pure maternal instinct to which she gives free rein—but in Patrick's view her success as a mother is preventing her from being a wife:

As usual, Mary had gone to sleep with Thomas, leaving Patrick split between admiration and abandonment. Mary was such a devoted mother because she knew what it felt like not to have one. Patrick also knew what it felt like, and as a former beneficiary of Mary's maternal overdrive, he sometimes had to remind himself that he wasn't an infant anymore, to argue that there were real children in the house, not yet horror trained; he sometimes had to give himself a good talking to. Nevertheless, he waited in vain for the maturing effects of parenthood. Being surrounded by children only brought him closer to his own childishness. He felt like a man who dreaded leaving harbor, knowing that under the deck of his impressive yacht there is only a dirty little twin-stroke engine: fearing and wanting, fearing and wanting.

Mother's Milk resembles a piece of music in its deployment, within a firm structure, of variations on separate themes that contrast, conflict, and combine to form ever more fascinating patterns. The dominant motif is Patrick's double dilemma: hatred of and pity for his dying mother (to whom he weakly surrenders his share of what remains of their former wealth to squander on a ludicrously bogus venture) coupled with unreasonable but devastating distress at no longer being the single focus of his wife's love. He understands Eleanor's embarrassment and self-disgust about being rich but can't help fearing poverty; he shares Mary's love for their children but can't help being jealous of it. Since she is too busy attending to little Thomas to sleep with Patrick he stumbles into an adulterous affair that only depresses him further. Patrick recognizes something of himself in his elder son, having "been so concerned with shaping Robert's mind, with giving him a transfusion of skepticism, that he had sometimes forgotten to let him play, enjoy himself and be a child." In compensation Robert, a reserved and observant boy, has developed a precociously inventive gift of mimicry.

There's no lack of tempting targets for him to imitate. Margaret, the loquacious, self-absorbed maternity nurse, is a comic creation on the grand scale—an example of the paradox that bores in life can be wonderful company on the page. A visit to the family of

a schoolmate of Robert's in a St. Tropez villa provides a hilarious celebration of philistine vulgarity. Nearer home, Mary's mother (known simply by her nickname, Kettle) and Patrick's American Aunt Nancy embody extremes of worldliness to more subtly humorous effect. But the most uproariously funny character of all is not consigned to the periphery of the action but takes center stage as a sinister villain: the smarmy shaman Seamus Dourke.

With his phony charm, candid blue eyes, and firm handshake, his glib babble about Holotropic Breathwork, Soul Retrieval, power points, and shamanic rituals, Seamus inspires murderous loathing in Patrick and Robert while Mary hopes he may not really be a bad man, just a complete idiot. But soon she wonders:

Was he, after all, really a bad man doing a brilliant impersonation of an idiot? It was hard to tell. The connections between stupidity and malice were so tangled and so dense.

Eventually, after he has persuaded Eleanor (who believes she is helping humanity) to give him the house and subsidize his absurd foundation there, he abandons her, never visiting the nursing home in which she is bedridden.

This betrayal removes what little was left of Eleanor's will to live. Her harrowing physical decline is inexorable but not yet terminal and she turns for help to Patrick, who is forced to look into the legalities of assisted suicide:

Once again, as with his own disinheritance, he became the legal servant of his mother's repulsive demands.... He decided to have nothing to do with organizing her death. Asking him to help her die was the last and nastiest trick of a woman who had always insisted, from the moment he was born, that she was the one who needed cheering up. And then he would visit Eleanor again and see that the cruelest thing he could do was to leave her exactly where she was. He tried to remain angry so he could forbid himself to help, but compassion tortured him as well. The compassion was far harder to bear and he came to think of his vengefulness as a relatively frivolous state of mind.

"Go on, do yourself a favour, get homicidal," he muttered to himself as he dialed the number of the Voluntary Euthanasia Society.

But Eleanor is still alive at the end of the book. None of Patrick's problems, in fact, is allowed to reach a conclusion, satisfactory or otherwise, and it is likely that, as with many problems in life, they are incapable of resolution. The poised elegance of the narrative has nothing to do with artifice but seeks, and finds, artistic truth.

I think *Mother's Milk* is St. Aubyn's finest achievement to date. As before, the wit of his sophisticated characters and the unconscious humor of some of the others combine to create a shimmer of potential amusement over everything he tells us, even though the content may be almost unbearably painful. Again, his prose, in itself so pellucid and controlled, somehow manages to convey the chaos of emotion, the confusion of heightened sensation, and the daunting contradictions of intellectual endeavor with a force and subtlety that have an exhilarating, almost therapeutic effect on his readers. An undercurrent of human sympathy, present but not obvious in the earlier work, seems now nearer the surface. While the trilogy had at its center such lurid and particular themes as child rape and drug addiction, *Mother's Milk* addresses with equal penetration a more general range of concerns: being a spouse, being a parent, being a child, being born, and wanting to die.