

Edward St Aubyn on writing *Mother's Milk*

When I completed *Some Hope*, my trilogy about the unhappy Melroses, I thought I had finished with that fictional family for ever. Feeling relatively carefree for a while, I wrote two other novels with entirely different themes and settings. Then, at the beginning of this

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century, the dawning of the Age of Terror, I was drawn back into family themes by the birth of my son and by my mother's descent into dementia. I became overwhelmingly aware of the non-verbal realms of consciousness. My son had not yet learned to speak and my mother could no longer speak, and I (who might be accused of speaking too much) was drawn

again and again into imagining what sort of experience they were having. Ever since I 'did' T. S. Eliot for A-level, I had been impressed by his description of poetry as a 'raid on the inarticulate'. The 'inarticulate' in *Some Hope* had been the secrecy and taboo surrounding incest and addiction, but here was the thing itself: experience that could not be articulated by the people who were having it. The effort to imagine a mind without language, like that of the newborn Thomas, or clinging on to language with her faint but imperious pencil-written notes, like the almost speechless Eleanor, was the 'raid' that turned into *Mother's Milk*.

And yet I still didn't realize that I had a Melrose novel on my hands. Respecting the completeness of *Some Hope*, I dutifully invented a new set of characters, or at

least a new set of names. The protagonist was called Mark, and if the novel had remained essentially about speechlessness, he might have kept his name, but the drama of disinheritance introduced a French house into *Mother's Milk* indistinguishable from the Melrose house in *Some Hope*. Mark's mother also turned out to be a compulsive philanthropist strangely reminiscent of Eleanor Melrose. In *Some Hope* Eleanor drunkenly writes a cheque to the Save the Children Fund, in dim recognition that children need to be saved, even if the one she has in her care cannot be. In *Mother's Milk* the philanthropist has become more fundamentalist and wants to give all her money to a charity that cannot do any good to anyone, except its director, Seamus Dourke.

Evidence against the novelty of the characters and setting of *Mother's Milk* was piling up, but I only admitted that it was a Melrose novel after I had finally finished writing it. Always rather technologically incompetent, I tried to turn Mark into Patrick with the 'change all' function on my computer. Sadly I made some kind of mistake, with the result that characters were now going to the 'superpatricket' and saying things like 'Patrick my words'. Eleanor, as she now was, had 'puncture patricks' on her arms when she was visited in hospital by her son. Although I had rather more 'Patrick' than I had bargained for, I knew I had made the right decision, only marvelling at how long it had taken to make.

Inspired by my recognition that *Mother's Milk* was a Melrose novel, I decided that I should write a second, maternal trilogy to balance the paternal trilogy of *Some Hope*.

Last summer I finished what was supposed to be the second part of the second trilogy, but again I turned out to be wrong. With annoying consequences for my fine symmetrical plan, I realized that *At Last* was the end of

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the story of Patrick Melrose's upbringing and his quest to become free from its destructive consequences. There was no need for a third volume.

I am trying to acknowledge rather than exaggerate the role of inspiration, receptiveness and patience in writing a novel. Of course art thrives on control and lucidity, but the imagination often throws out these Apollonian virtues. This is true for me on the large scale of organizing a series of related novels and also on the small scale of organizing a sentence. Metaphors are the part of writing where the imagination is in its freest state. They lay claim to correspondences between things that are not linked in the ordinary world, and so no amount of ordinary research can uncover them. They cannot be willed into existence but have to arise spontaneously. A lot of the time my expectations have turned out to be wrong, and I have had to wait, close to desperation, for the next bit of a novel to reveal itself. On the other hand, I sometimes have the impression of eavesdropping on certain passages of dialogue, and feel that images have turned up of their own accord.

Still, whatever the balance between the conscious and unconscious elements in making a novel, I have now, at last, finished with the Melroses and their unexpected quintet. Or so it seems.

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