

A. S. Byatt and the Life of the Mind: A Response to June Sturrock*

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June Sturrock's admirable and admiring piece on A. S. Byatt was helpful in clarifying the shifts in Byatt's style and intentions that have happened in the past decade. Byatt is one of the greatest living novelists exploring the life of the mind, but the manner of that exploration has changed. Byatt's most successful novel, *Possession: A Romance*, published in 1990, could not have been more aptly named. A knowing but benevolent exploration of romantic love, biographical hunger, and the questing instinct, it was also a book that possessed readers' minds and hearts for a time. Academics read it for the sly digs at pedantry; romantics read it for the rejuvenating force of its love story. (Sometimes both readers were one.) Byatt has produced many books, both criticism and fiction, since 1990, but none of them has *Possession's* impact and loveableness. "Possession" is something you cannot help, something marvelous or terrible that captures and rivets your emotional and intellectual attention. Her watchword now might be "obsession."

Byatt's major fiction works in the past ten years—*Babel Tower* (1996), *The Biographer's Tale* (2000), and *A Whistling Woman* (2002)—have all been unmistakably cerebral affairs, fixated on more and more obscure conundrums, and their particular brand of erudition has frightened away the large readership Byatt briefly commanded in the early 1990s. The obsessive tracing of the lives of Carl Linnaeus, Henrik Ibsen, and Francis Galton, three of the many lines of inquiry that criss-cross throughout *The Biographer's Tale*, feels nothing like the gripping poetic

*Reference: June Sturrock, "Angels, Insects, and Analogy: A. S. Byatt's 'Morpho Eugenia,'" *Connotations* 12.1 (2002/2003): 93-104.

For the original article as well as all contributions to this debate, please check the Connotations website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debsturrock01201.htm>>.

detective work that characters and readers must perform in *Possession*. Of course, Byatt's fiction has always been erudite. Therein does not lie the problem. The problem is that she is now driven by obsessions that are almost wholly intellectual, while once she was possessed by notions that were both emotionally (or spiritually) suggestive *and* mentally stimulating.

Sturrock's essay on Byatt's use of analogy in the novella "Morpho Eugenia" (which was paired with "The Conjugal Angel" in the 1992 volume *Angels and Insects*) prompted, for me, the realization that Byatt's superior writing is driven not by analogy, but by metaphor. Compared to the plenitude that a good metaphor can provide a novelist (the word "possession" in Byatt's most famous novel is a case in point), an analogy feels restricted. Metaphors provide a moving and human framework for ideas, partly because they are full of contradictions and may even be illogic. Analogies keep to the straight and narrow; a good one may have depth, but it will rarely have hidden depths.

Of course metaphor and analogy are closely related, and to some extent metaphor may be subsumed in the larger category of analogy (although Aristotle says the opposite), but, in my view, a metaphor is (largely) a poetic device, while an analogy is argumentative. A metaphor must work on our senses and emotions as well as our minds; an original metaphor vibrates with significance because it works by difference, as well as similarity. As Northrop Frye et al. say in the *Harper Handbook to Literature*, a metaphor "treats something as if it were something else." Analogy, with its etymological meaning of "equality of ratios" or "proportion" (it is originally a mathematical term), is much more insistent on equivalency, parallel reasoning, imitative thinking, and so on, as the *OED* indicates.

Analogy in Byatt has been much noted by critics of late. For example, her discussion of ants and butterflies in "Morpho Eugenia" parallels ideas about human aggression and sexuality. Sturrock's assessment of these methods is a positive one:

Through the interaction of these different kinds of knowledge Byatt frees herself to explore both the intellectual potential and the limitations of reasoning by analogy. The crossing of borders between disciplines, that is, enables her to question the intellectual processes on which human beings base their thoughts and actions. (94)

Sturrock rightly emphasises Byatt's commendable interdisciplinarity, but not what its analogical manifestation has cost the novels in terms of their ability to embody characters in all their idiosyncrasy. Jane Campbell notes in her recent excellent book on Byatt that the "principle of analogy, invoked in *Angels and Insects* to explain the human relationship to the lower animals, or, alternatively, to link the human and the supernatural, takes us only so far" (150). Yet, as Sturrock does, Campbell sees Byatt's analogies as generally enhancing. Of *The Biographer's Tale*, Campbell says: "It plays with analogies—the epigraph quotes Goethe on the pleasure of 'charming and entertaining' similitudes—and invites the reader to share the fun" (217). Of the novellas in *Angels and Insects*, Campbell has a different but still complimentary conviction: Byatt does not allow the analogies the upper hand and instead "both texts end by celebrating mystery, surprise, and contingency" (168).

Byatt may free "herself" in this exploration of analogy, as Sturrock says, but the effect for the reader is less liberating. Although *Angels and Insects* is in many respects a fascinating book (with an excellent film adaptation by Philip Haas in 1995), contrary to Campbell's opinion, I see the atmosphere as conspicuously artificial, the author's controlling hand all too evident. In *The Biographer's Tale* the problem is so intense that the characters struggle for air and, finally, expire. Sturrock writes: "Increasingly her writing is concerned with the actual operations of the mind, the brain, whether physical or metaphysical" (101). Once, Byatt was also intensely involved with the body and the heart.

Michael Levenson is the other critic who has turned his eye toward Byatt's analogies, and his judgement is more complex. He writes with insight about her books of the 1980s, when Byatt thought, as he puts it, that "we might overcome the weak temptations of analogic think-

ing. We could love a world unredeemed by concepts" (167). At that time she defined herself as a follower of "self-conscious realism" (*Passions of the Mind* 4) and she assessed herself acutely. That tag fittingly unites human contingency, depth of thought, and commitment to verisimilitude—the hallmarks of Byatt's middle period fiction, such as *Possession* and *Still Life* (1985). But even Levenson is seduced by Byatt's authoritative, almost authoritarian, voice and the overwhelming array of ideas presented in later works like *Angels and Insects*. "The sharpest challenge to cozy analogy," he says, "is not the sharp shock of fact, but the lush production of *many* analogies" (170, emphasis in original). Byatt's abundance, he says, short-circuits the problems inherent in analogical thinking.

But such emphasis on analogies, whether they come singly or in Byattian throngs, drains the lifeblood out of a work of fiction. In *A Whistling Woman*, the romantic triangle enclosing the characters Luk, Jacqueline, and Marcus is made actual during field research into snails and reported dispassionately: "Marcus lifted his head and noticed it was briefly equilateral, before Jacqueline moved away, attenuating the connections" (67). Sturrock writes approvingly of Byatt's novels as being full of a sense of "the variety, complexity, fascination, and inter-relatedness of human knowledge" (93). I agree with all but one term here: "human." Knowledge has overwhelmed the human part of that equation.

This is unfortunate, because Byatt can write moving, sometimes heartbreaking, fiction. Even in *Babel Tower* such haunting scenes still exist. When Frederica Potter flees her abusive husband, she intends to abandon her son Leo, but the child pursues her, leaping into her arms and gripping her in a stranglehold. Leo is, we are told later,

a person who makes her life difficult at every turn, who appears sometimes to be eating her life and drinking her life-blood, a person who fits into no pattern of social behaviour or ordering of thought that she would ever have chosen for herself freely—and yet, the one creature to whose movements of body and emotions all her own nerves, all her own antennae, are fine-tuned, the person whose approach along a pavement, stamping angrily, running eagerly, lifts her heart, the person whose smile fills her with warmth like a

solid and gleaming fire, the person whose sleeping face moves her to tears, to catch the imperceptible air of whose sleeping breath she will crouch, breathless herself, for timeless moments in the half-dark. (476)

Compare this impassioned realization of the unpredictable pain and joy of human love to a more typical passage from *Babel Tower*, one coolly establishing and confirming patterns. The tortuously-named Luk Lysgaard-Peacock has been asked if the study of genetic science has changed his attitude toward human behaviour.

[W]hen you begin to understand how we are constructed by the coded sequences of the DNA—hermaphrodite slugs, sexed slugs, *Cepaea hortensis* and ourselves—when you realise all the things that go on busily in your cells all the time in which your language-consciousness appears to have nothing to do—I think it does change you, yes. (464-65)

The tumble of images and emotions in the passage about Frederica and Leo is not devoid of cliché, but it has heart.

Byatt's best book, containing both poignant moments and intellectual inquiry, is *Still Life*, the second book in her tetralogy about the intellectually formidable Potter family. In many respects, *Possession* is her most pleasing novel, but *Still Life* is her finest. In that novel a profoundly personal investigation that had been developing for years reached a kind of apotheosis. In the 1950s Byatt worked at Oxford on a doctoral dissertation (never finished) about religious metaphor in Renaissance poetry. Over the years she frequently expressed her fascination with the visual qualities of metaphors; for example in 1986 she wrote: "I see any projected piece of writing or work as a geometric structure: various colours and patterns. I *see* other people's metaphors" (*Passions* 14, emphasis in original). Yet in *Still Life*, Byatt initially intended to write without metaphors. She called the project her "bare book" (*Passions* 12). Byatt herself (not a narrator) steps into the action of *Still Life* and draws attention to this: "I had the idea that this novel could be written innocently, without recourse to other people's thoughts, without, as far as possible, recourse to simile or metaphor. This turned out to be impossible [...]" (108).

That it did not work, oddly enough, is one of the reasons why *Still Life* is such a rewarding book. The narrator's struggle with metaphors reveals how vital and necessary they are. They provide solace: the troubled, perhaps partly autistic Marcus Potter derives comfort from meditating on the manifold meanings of trees, "mapping" an elm, seeing its inner and outer geometry, contemplating its ability to fertilise itself, and seeing it as "a kind of single eternity" (242). Metaphors give pleasure: there is a lovely section where Stephanie Potter Orton's newborn son sees light, and the narrator delights in imagining the similes of flames, flower petals, quills, and fish scales that the baby might use to describe the light, if "he had been capable of simile, which he was not" (107). Imagery is inescapable, lying in wait in physical objects, as the character Alexander Wedderburn notes: "Metaphor lay coiled in the name sunflower" (2). But in this striving to write a "bare book," and especially to record sense impressions (particularly sight) as directly as possible, Byatt creates the most vibrant novel of her career. In the effort to articulate their knowledge plainly, the characters become painfully and beautifully real. True Byatt progeny, they are thinking, thinking, thinking all the time. But they are also full of yearning, frustrating emotions that are more moving than anything else she has written.

The titles of many of Byatt's works are metaphorical, flickering with suggestive and multiple meanings. *Still Life*, for example, is profoundly involved with Van Gogh's paintings, asking whether it is possible to transfer the power of his vision into words. But one of the characters points out that in French "still life" translates as "nature morte," and indeed the book is steeped in mortality. When a major character dies in an accident, the survivors must decide if they want to go on with "life still," if you will. In the short story "The Chinese Lobster" (from *The Matisse Stories*, 1993) two academics discuss troubled students, sexual harassment, visual art, and despair, and, at the end, contemplate a lobster slowly dying in a tank in a Chinese restaurant. Byatt does not drive the point too forcefully, but allows the reader to contemplate not only the relation of the trapped lobster to

the academics, but also their explicit feelings of indifference to, and separation from, the creature. The metaphor is both enigmatic and illuminating.

“I find that *absolutely appalling*, you know,” says Perry Diss. “And at the same time, exactly at the same time, I don’t give a damn? D’you know?”

“I know,” says Gerda Himmelblau. She does know. Cruelly, imperfectly, voluptuously, clearly. (134)

Byatt’s characters, in the fiction since the mid-1990s, lack three dimensions. They exist as conduits for concepts. *Angels and Insects* sits on the border between Byatt’s middle period and her recent analogical style. William and Matty in “Morpho Eugenia” and Sophy and Lilius in “The Conjugal Angel” are still memorable, although less so than Ash and LaMotte in *Possession* or (even more markedly) Stephanie, who dies so tragically at the conclusion of *Still Life*. The last hurrah of the middle period is *The Matisse Stories*, with its close attention to visual detail and use of narrative surprise. The characters in *Angels and Insects* remain intriguing partly because they are engaged so explicitly with the attractions and repulsions of analogy. For example, the protagonist William Adamson states that “analogy is a slippery tool” (100) but, nevertheless, finds analogical examples from natural science eminently useful to explain his anthill-like home, Bredely Hall, and his marriage, which appears to involve his sexual servitude as a drone for Eugenia Alabaster. These names—Adamson, Eugenia, Bredely—strike one immediately and obviously, but do not reverberate any great distance. They explain, readily and neatly. Luk and Jacqueline in *A Whistling Woman* or Phineas in *The Biographer’s Tale* are even more remote. They never come to life, smothered in their author’s ideas about them.

Whereas Byatt’s metaphors flow from many sources, particularly religion and visual art, the analogies often involve science and mathematics. This laboratory atmosphere can be sterile, even suffocating. Possibly the most frequently used analogy in her recent books is the snail: her characters are always studying snails, whose spirals are perfect living illustrations of Fibonacci numbers. The snails have

genetic and environmental stories clearly embedded in their shells: “They carry their history on their outsides,” says Luk in *Babel Tower* (358). It follows that Byatt’s characters wonder whether they too are predetermined—to want children, for example. This is intriguing, but limited compared to the involved play of metaphor in *Still Life* when Alexander searches for comparisons for the colour of a plum and notices, ominously, that the purple he is reaching for comes closest to a bruise.

[Y]ou cannot exclude from the busy automatically-connecting mind possible metaphors, human flesh for fruit flesh, flower-bloom, skin bloom, bloom of ripe youth for this powdery haze, human clefts, declivities, cleavages for that plain noun. (164)

Alexander’s metaphoric discourse on the colour of plums, which goes on for several pages, is, for me, more memorable than the recurring references to Fibonacci sequences. What is the reaction of most readers when, in *A Whistling Woman*, Luk notices that his lover’s genitalia remind him of the shell of a snail he is studying, *Helix pomatia*, to be exact (178)?

It can be difficult to decide which of these demonstrations of Byatt’s need to create order are metaphors, and which analogies. Some sit in the middle. But, in the main, the analogies can be recognised by their limitations. They name, but do not sing. Frederica, for example, throughout the Potter tetralogy is working out a theory that her life is best described not in terms of unity or wholeness, but as a “lamination” or a series of separate but overlapping units. At one point, it was possible that these laminations might rewardingly suggest musical counterpoint, a weaving or mosaic, but in the final analysis one is reminded instead of the scales of a snake. The effect is off-putting, and Byatt does not appear to realise that “lamination” has more commonplace connotations, at least to North American readers: a plastic coating, on a menu for example, or an inexpensive wooden floor.

In *Still Life*, there is a vibrant moment when Stephanie names her newborn son as simply as she can, and Byatt’s embattled project of writing a plain book without imagery briefly seems possible:

But now in the sun she recognised him, and recognised that she did not know, and had never seen him, and loved him, in the bright new air with a simplicity she had never expected to know. "You," she said to him, skin for the first time on skin in the outside air, which was warm and shining, "you."
(94)

This simplicity, this ability to capture quotidian reality, is difficult to sustain, but is perhaps Byatt's greatest gift. Byatt once subscribed to Iris Murdoch's principle, as stated in the 1961 essay "Against Dryness," that novelists require "a renewed sense of the difficulty and complexity of the moral life and the opacity of persons" (20). In her middle period Byatt expended tremendous effort to write plainly but fully about particular and unpredictable individuals, without systematising them. Eventually the imagery returned. Both metaphors and analogies of course tend to organise and systematise, but at least metaphors allow for more mystery and opacity. A metaphor in a novel often demonstrates a provocative tension between character and idea. More often than not, an analogy dissipates that tension, in its insistence on resemblance. *Babel Tower*, *A Whistling Woman*, and *The Biographer's Tale* have the preserving dryness of the museum. Her characters, even the once-lively Frederica, wriggle only a little as the author pins them, for comparative purposes, beside her snails and butterflies.

In a telling comment from the essay "True Stories and the Facts in Fiction," first given as a lecture in the early 1990s, Byatt says of *Angels and Insects*: "I see insects as the not-human, in some sense the Other, and I believe that we *ought to* think about the not-human, in order to be fully human" (*On Histories and Stories* 115, emphasis mine). June Sturrock quotes this sentence in her essay, but it does not seem to give her the chill it provides me. There is no doubt that Byatt is among the most intellectually engaged and fiercely curious living novelists. Michael Levenson in his inquiry into Byatt is twice driven, rather delightfully, to use the word "brazen" to describe her independence of mind (161, 169). But it is disturbing that she feels the need to command that we "ought to" think about the non-human in order to be

fully human. Once a penetrating writer about the life of the mind, she now writes more restrictively about the life of *her* mind.

On the last page of her essay, Sturrock mentions the writer who serves as a model for the way forward: Byatt “is acutely aware of the interplay between intellectual and emotional life—perhaps it is for this reason that she so often expresses admiration for the writing of George Eliot” (101). *Middlemarch* springs to mind as a useful point of comparison when considering Byatt’s use of natural science, and the way her characters and narrators obsessively ask how to find the right conceptual language for their thoughts. But while Casaubon, for example, is representative of certain notions under severe scrutiny (spiritual sterility, the futility of an over-reaching taxonomy), he is also memorably human, sad and rather touching in his pathetic jealousy. A. S. Byatt could have been our century’s George Eliot. *Still Life*, *Possession*, *The Matisse Stories* and, to a lesser extent, *Angels and Insects* hint at that same richly human but restlessly questioning intelligence. Sturrock notes that Byatt these days is busy “question[ing] ... intellectual processes” (94), and that is true. But Byatt also has a tendency to impose intellectual processes that are less compelling than she thinks they are. George Eliot, at her best, liberated readers into living more fully their own life of the mind.

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