

## Analogy and Contiguity: A. S. Byatt's *The Biographer's Tale*\*

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In her article June Sturrock comments on the interdisciplinary aspects of Byatt's novella "Morpho Eugenia" and concentrates on the many analogies which help the main characters find out who they really are. The present article takes up Sturrock's argument and surveys analogies as well as contiguities in Byatt's work. It then focuses on *The Biographer's Tale* in order to examine how Byatt connects apparently contiguous fragmented parts by her use of metaphor.

### The pros and cons of imagery

In the essay "Still Life/Nature Morte," Byatt comments on her novel *Still Life* (1985) and her attempt "to give the 'thing itself' [...]. I wanted at least to work on the assumption that [...] accuracy of description is possible and valuable. That words denote things" (*Passions* 11). She quotes Josipovici's warning of "demonic analogy," which takes up Mallarmé's phrase "démon de l'analogie." Following Mallarmé's and Josipovici's line of reasoning, the discovery of correspondences leads to the realization that "what we had taken to be 'the world' is only the projection of our private compulsions: [...] a bounded world bearing the shape only of our imagination" (Josipovici 299). Although Byatt wanted to avoid analogies and metaphors, she did not succeed—this is illustrated in, e. g., *Still Life*: "I had the idea that I could emphasise contiguity rather than analogy. I found that this was in fact impossible

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

for someone with the cast of mind I have" (*Passions* 13). According to her understanding of language, naming is a process which creates metaphors: "Adam in the garden named the flora and fauna [...]. But even in the act of naming, we make metaphors" (*Still Life* 302). In *Possession: A Romance*, the poet Ash illustrates this conviction:

The first men named this place and named the world.  
They made the words for it: garden and tree  
Dragon or snake and woman, grass and gold  
And apples. They made names and poetry.  
The things *were* what they named and made them. Next  
They mixed the names and made a metaphor  
Or truth, or visible truth, apples of gold. (464)

In "Morpho Eugenia," Byatt explains: "Names, you know, are a way of weaving the world together, by relating the creatures to other creatures, and a kind of *metamorphosis*, you might say, out of a *metaphor*, which is a figure of speech for carrying one idea into another" (131). Imagery in *Still Life*, especially the sun flowers of Van Gogh and his "Yellow Chair," have been explained by Byatt herself. The many analogies in *Possession* have extensively been commented upon by literary critics; they do not only exist between the poets of the nineteenth and the literary critics of the twentieth century—e.g. between Maud Bailey and Roland Michell, who repeat the love affair of the Victorians Christabel LaMotte and Randolph Henry Ash; intertextual references support these parallels. The poetry of the Victorians, e.g. Ash's poems, also establishes analogies between characters of Christian and Nordic mythology; Ash speaks of "figuration" (*Possession* 163). According to Hansson, *Possession* can be read as an allegory; "Morpho Eugenia," too, stands in the tradition of "allegorical writing" (453-54). Hansson interprets allegory as a "classic example of double discourse," a model which is appropriate for postmodern literature: "like postmodern literature—[it] avoids establishing a center within the text, because in allegory the unity of the work is provided by something that is not explicitly there" (454).

In the novella “Morpho Eugenia,” parallels between animals and humans are so obvious that reviewers took this as a basis to criticise Byatt and accuse her of “applying the message with a trowel” (Lesser). Her character Matty Crompton, author of the “tale-within-the tale” entitled “Things Are Not What They Seem,” fears that her story contains “too much *message*” (“Morpho” 141). However, in order to understand Byatt’s novels and stories, it is not enough to point out such parallels. Byatt rather follows Genette and writes stories based on an “arrangement of things [which] suggests both contiguity—‘les unes à côté des autres’—and analogy—‘les unes *dans* les autres’” (*Passions* 13).<sup>1</sup>

Even though Byatt makes an almost excessive use of analogies and metaphors, warnings about thinking in analogies are to be found throughout her novels. Cassandra in *The Game* criticises: “I hate these simple analogies” (140). In “Morpho Eugenia” analogy is considered a “slippery tool” (“Morpho” 100; cf. Sturrock 99). In a discussion with his father-in-law, who defends his Christian conviction, the scientist William Adamson objects: “You may argue anything at all by analogy, Sir, and so consequently nothing” (“Morpho” 89; cf. Sturrock 97). Adamson himself has to come to terms with his role in the Alabaster family, which resembles that of a drone, before he is able to reject it. To Adamson, being aware of analogies means being able to perform the metamorphosis into a new role. Adamson’s process of recognition is fostered by Matty’s story “Things Are Not What They Seem,” which Byatt herself describes as “a metaphor about metaphor making” (“True Stories” 20). But only the play with anagrams and accidental combinations of letters—contiguous material—reveals the secret of the Alabaster family and leads to the composition of the word ‘phoenix’ which outlines a concept for the transformation of both Matty and Adamson. Campbell’s comment on “Morpho Eugenia”: “In the end, analogies fail to account for lived experience” (145), accentuates the importance of contiguity (“lived experience”) versus the interaction of correspondences.

Byatt’s fictional characters try to avoid “demonic analogy”: In *Babel Tower*, Frederica with “laminations” sketches a concept “[of] Keeping

things separate. Not linked by metaphor or sex or desire, but separate objects of knowledge, systems of work or discovery" (359; cf. Sturrock 93). In *A Whistling Woman*, in a lecture entitled "Metaphors for the Matter of the Mind," Byatt has the (fictitious) cognition psychologist Hodder Pinsky elaborate:

Human beings could not think without such metaphors and analogies, the action potential for an electric jump of comparison must be born with the branchings of the grammatical forms in the embryonic brain to which he had just alluded. But what he intended to do, today, was to make opaque and visible and problematic, these facile and often beautiful metaphors with which human beings tried to think about thinking. (353)

The difference was *endlessly* more instructive than the analogy, said Hodder Pinsky. The analogy is made by the slipperiness of thought with words. [...] But thought is not words, life is not words. (355)

*The Biographer's Tale*: Analogy vs. "lived experience"

*The Biographer's Tale* (2000) opens with an epigraph from Goethe's *Elective Affinities*:

*Diese Gleichnisreden sind artig und unterhaltend, und wer spielt nicht gern mit Ähnlichkeiten?*

These similarities are charming and entertaining, and who does not enjoy playing with analogies?

Byatt thus draws the reader's attention to the fact that analogies are now more important than ever. Her protagonist and first-person narrator Phineas G. Nanson, however, votes for "lived experience" and gives up his dissertation project on "poststructuralist literary theory" in order to deal with factual reality. He opts to write the biography of a biographer and thus be directed by "*things*, [...] facts" (BT 4) in order to avoid ambiguities. He decides to investigate the life of the (fictitious) Scholes Destry-Scholes, who in 1965 presumably drowned in the maelstrom and who himself had written a monumental three-volume biography of the (equally fictitious) Victorian poly-

math Sir Elmer Bole. However, there is little material on Destry-Scholes. Phineas finds only three fragmentary manuscripts written by Destry-Scholes dedicated to three historical personalities, namely the Swedish taxonomist Carl Linnaeus, the statistician Francis Galton, a cousin of Charles Darwin, and the dramatist Henrik Ibsen.

#### Dominant metaphors: images of part and whole

Avoiding ambiguities very soon proves to be impossible. Although Phineas' narrative starts with the decision to be guided only by the world of facts, his very first pages contain metaphors which prove to be vital to the novel: The first one is found in the topic of a lecture which Phineas attends and which induces him to drop his post-structuralist dissertation project. It is called "Lacan's theory of *morcellement*, the dismemberment of the imagined body." The image is even intensified by a quote from Empedocles' *Fragments*—"Here sprung up many faces without necks [...]" (BT 1, cf. 214), and the reference to a seminar on *Frankenstein*, and thus to the creature which is composed of parts of dead bodies. To Phineas, putting together separate pieces in order to compose a whole is a process he knows from mosaic-making. "Mosaic-making" (BT 29) recurs in variations throughout the novel and is, at the same time, an image of its structure. Like old stones which can be put together to form new mosaics, quotations assume new meaning in new contexts, a process which Phineas calls "transmission of scholarship" (BT 29). This new meaning of the thus constructed text is again metaphorically described: the newly combined mosaic stones reflect light in a new way—"catching different light from a different angle" (BT 29). Byatt herself confirms that the metaphor "from mosaic-making" becomes the central image of the novel when she describes it as "A patchwork, echoing book" (BT 264). The novel's topic, which in Jensen's words is "the relation of language to things, the arrangement of those things in the world" (23), is reflected on its surface in the combination of different texts, among them Phineas' own narrative, manuscripts by Destry-Scholes, record

cards with his entries, drawings, and extensive quotations from Linnaeus,' Galton's and Ibsen's writings as well as from Pearson's biography on Galton, Foucault's *Les mots et les choses*, and a number of further literary sources.

To join random bits together to form a whole, or "[to] piece things together" (BT 33), as Byatt calls it, is Phineas' task. He learns from the manuscript fragments that the three personages in their individual contexts have tried to find an overall structure into which the parts fit, thus "bringing order to the rampant world of creatures and things" (BT 53). Linnaeus' system of naming plants records the distinctive features in a system which relates each plant to other plants. Phineas' research leads to Linnaeus' illustration of *Andromeda polifolia* which the taxonomist describes as:

ficta et vera  
mystica et genuina  
figurata et depicta (BT 112)

The drawing of *Andromeda polifolia* and the inscription exemplify that, by naming plants, Linnaeus refers to the two levels of metaphoric language, the figurative and the literal. In his research of evolution, Galton uses "composite pictures" by assembling parts of different photographs to form a new portrait. According to Galton, the combination of cells in a body resembles that of individuals in a nation:

Our part in the universe may possibly in some distant way be analogous to that of the cells in an organised body, and our personalities may be the transient but essential elements of an immortal and cosmic mind. (BT 225)

Galton applies his studies of a flock of cattle to the study of human communities. Individual members are similarly "'knit to one another by innumerable ties'—one metaphor drawn from a web" (BT 67). Ibsen describes the process of creating characters as a composition of many details: "He observed those he met on trains like a naturalist [...]" (BT 85). Georg Brandes, whom Byatt mentions in her novel, already commented on Ibsen's ability of constructing "aus kleinen

zerstreuten Wirklichkeitszügen ein ideales und unsterbliches Ganzes“ (Brandes 36). The topic of the quest for the true self—that of the author as well as of his characters—is reflected in Phineas’ own research. Among Destry-Scholes’ record cards, Phineas finds an excerpt from *Peer Gynt*, Peer’s dialogue with the allegorical figure of the “Button Moulder” (BT 233), who melts old buttons and forms new ones out of them. Phineas adds the monologue in which Peer describes the process of peeling an onion layer by layer without finding a core in order to illustrate the process of dismembering a character in search of a centre.

Again and again, Phineas broods over the question why Destry-Scholes wrote about these three precisely, the taxonomist, the statistician, and the dramatist: “Why *these three?*” (BT 236). He asks himself whether Destry-Scholes, like Galton, attempted to create a “composite picture” of the three personages. To Phineas they seem like images in an advertisement, “an image, made up of a series of vertical stripes, for a calculated number of minutes, and then flick, or revolve, the stripes, to constitute (to reveal) a quite other image” (BT 98), which finally make up the picture of Destry-Scholes. Even in his dreams Phineas melts “many images into one image,” which to him appears “as a kind of indisputable vision of the truth” (BT 190).

Phineas discovers more material that lacks order and, thus, meaning. His research leads him to Vera Alphage, Destry-Scholes’ niece, and to a suitcase containing her uncle’s belongings. Together with some disparate objects, such as a cork screw, old socks and a cheese grater, he finds a box with record cards, another one with photographs, and a bag with 366 glass marbles. Phineas’ hope that his findings are “*facts, [...] things, [...] nuggets of pure quiddity*” (BT 165) that reveal Destry-Scholes’ character does not come true. Vera’s taxonomic approach, which is to arrange the marbles according to the enclosed list of names in clusters, succeeds as little as Phineas’ attempt to establish a systematic order to subsume all the record cards.

"Reading signs"—the meaning of things

A second dominant metaphor is the image of the dirty window in the lecture hall which Phineas himself interprets: "a dirty window is an ancient, well-worn trope for intellectual dissatisfaction and scholarly blindness" (BT 2), but at the same time the dirty window is really there, "A *thing*" (BT 2), and not just a trope. Phineas repeatedly experiences his own "blindness." Although as a post-structuralist he has learnt to read signs he does not understand the language of objects: "I was a failure as a semiotician" (BT 143); "I am not very good at codes in real life, or any even glaring semiotic system" (BT 188). On the other hand, he is not able to avoid post-structuralist thinking though he regards it as false: "You decided what you were looking for, and then duly found it—male hegemony, liberal-humanist *idées reçues*, etc." (BT 144). And though Phineas wants to take the Wallace Stevens-quotation—"To find, not to impose" (BT 144; cf. Sturrock 101) as a guide-line, it seems easier "to translate everything [...] into our own Procrustean grid of priorities" (BT 167).

Autobiography instead of biography—analogy of biographer and biographee

Finally, Phineas has to realize that all three documents contain both fact and fiction: Destry-Scholes' description of Linnaeus' impression at the maelstrom is fiction, because he never got there. Galton's expedition never reached Lake Ngami—despite Destry-Scholes' reports (cf. BT 164). The dramatic scene between Ibsen and his illegitimate son and double (cf. BT 88f.) has never taken place, a meeting of father and son cannot be verified. Phineas has to learn that instead of "mapping the mind of Destry-Scholes" (BT 175), he is working on his own life story. He phrases an insight that can already be found in *Possession*, when Maud Bailey describes Cropper's biography on Ash as being "as much about its author as about its subject" (*Possession* 246) and asks: "Whose subjectivity was studied? Who was the subject of the sen-



tences of the text [...]” (*Possession* 250). Even in writing his own story, Phineas cannot escape analogies, because his story is similar to all others: “and all our lives are partly the same story, beginning, middle, end” (*BT* 251).

The maelstrom in which Destry-Scholes presumably drowned, which Linnaeus never reached and which as an origami-imitation decorates the window of the travel agency *Puck’s Girdle*, where Phineas temporarily jobbed, is the destination of Phineas’ own journey, and it is an image for the novel at hand: “this story has funnelled itself into a not unusual shape, run into a channel cut in the earth for it by previous stories” (*BT* 251). For his narrative, Phineas finds ever new images: it is for instance “that segment of the tapeworm” (*BT* 249) or “a snuff movie”; his working process means “*organising* the quarry of secondary materials” (*BT* 227), “stirring and cooking together of disparate things” (*BT* 190), simply overcoming contiguity. Since he is a literary critic, he repeatedly analyses his own language and that of the documents. He particularly classifies metaphors—“mixed metaphors” (*BT* 171), “clichéd metaphors” (*BT* 23), “silly metaphors” (*BT* 26), “dangerous metaphors” (*BT* 238) and “false analogy” (*BT* 156). Phineas deciphers Elmer Bole’s “coded metaphor” of the “red apple” (*BT* 16), which is Bole’s term for his Turkish wife, and the “green apple,” for his English wife, both of whom do not know about each other. He also discovers parallels to his own life story. Phineas leads “two splendidly dovetailed lives” (*BT* 257): with Vera, the radiographer whose photos show a “picture of the inner life” (*BT* 186) of her patients, and with Fulla Biefeld, the entomologist who is devoted to the taxonomy of bees and who includes Phineas in her projects. He eventually gives up the project of writing his own autobiography which he regards as “slippery, unreliable, and worse, imprecise” (*BT* 250) and makes up his mind to work with Fulla in her research programmes. He learns to observe stag beetles and—like Linnaeus—gives them mythological names, “literary names of horned gods—Hern and Moses, Horus and Actaeon” (*BT* 252). He becomes a “second Adam” (*BT* 55), a *Historiens naturalis*, whose task Linnaeus describes: “[he]

distinguishes the parts of natural bodies with his eyes, describes them appropriately [...] and he names them" (quoted in Foucault 161). In her essay "True Stories and the Facts in Fiction," Byatt comments that it is exactly the study of the "Natural world" which makes the observer conscious of analogies:

One of the most peculiar aspects of analogy in the study of the Natural world is mimicry—not the mimicry of the poisonous pharmacophages by the edible, but the walking metaphor visible possibly only to humans. [...] We see eyes in the wing-spots of butterflies, we see the death-head on the hawk-moth, and we recognise the mask of the bluff attitude of the Elephant Hawk-Moth and the Puss Moth. (119)

Phineas continues to take pleasure in writing—setting down the English language" (*BT* 250; cf. Wallhead 294). He uses "synaesthetic metaphors" (*BT* 219), instead of factual language, to describe as accurately as possible the difference of Vera and Fulla:

Vera's scent, which I thought of as silvery, [...] Fulla's [...] which I thought of as golden. [...] Vera [...] is a darting silver fish, a sailing moon in an indigo sky, quicksilver melting into a thousand droplets and recombining. Fulla is gold calyx strenuously spread in gold sunlight, Fulla is golden pollen clinging to bee-fur, Fulla is sailing fleets of dandelion clocks. (*BT* 219)

Fulla wandered the plains of my flesh, causing every hair to rise to her, and inside my nerve-strings sang Vera. (*BT* 216)

While observing beetles in Richmond Park, he experiences what he later calls an epiphany, the appearance of a flock of parrots which he understands as "a sign" (*BT* 254). To him it either means that he has to stay in England with Vera or that he has to travel with Fulla. Phineas realises both options, thus not accepting an "either/or" but only a "both." In *Babel Tower*, Byatt already criticised: "Either/or. Whereas you and I know, it's both-and" (341).

## Metaphor as structural principle

Reviewers have severely criticised *The Biographer's Tale* for being “a novel that reads like a research notebook” (Scuor in Campbell 217). Updike complains of “the load of near-random texts” (222), Eder disapproves of its “lovely untidyness.” More kindly disposed reviewers realise that the novel is several things at once, a truly hybrid text—“satire,” “fairy-tale,” and “erudite” (Clark 10). However, the fragmentation of Byatt’s text, offending to some critics, is counterbalanced by the author’s use of metaphors which are a device for making connections, thus establishing patterns of connectedness. Again and again they illustrate the relation of part and whole, thus forging the disparate parts—the different texts by different authors, photographs and drawings—together, to form a hybrid whole. Jensen’s opinion: “the interconnectedness of things [is] made possible by the power of analogy,” confirms this reading. Only by imposing an order, by naming and applying metaphors, is Phineas—and through him Byatt—able to make sense of the random, contiguous world of “lived experience,” thus suggesting both “‘les unes à côté des autres’ (contiguïté) et ‘[...] les unes dans les autres’ (analogie)” (Genette 61; cf. *Passions* 13). By repetition and variation of the part/whole metaphors, Byatt simultaneously illustrates the function of metaphors which is “to connect, to blend, to fuse” (Hawkes 41).

Phineas ends his narrative with a well-known quotation from Sir Philip Sidney: “Nature never set forth the earth in so rich tapestry as divers poets have done [...] Her world is brazen, the poets only deliver a golden” (BT 259). But he does not agree with his sixteenth-century predecessor: “The too-much-loved earth will always exceed our power to describe, or imagine, or understand it” (BT 259). This “excess” of the natural contiguous world is also discussed by Foucault, again in metaphoric language:

Things and words are very strictly interwoven: nature is posited only through the grid of denominations, and—though without such names it would remain mute and invisible—it glimmers far off beyond them, con-

tinuously present on the far side of this grid which nevertheless presents it to our knowledge and renders it visible only when spanned with language. (160)

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#### NOTE

<sup>1</sup>Byatt quotes from Genette, "Metonymie chez Proust" in *Figures III*, who quotes Proust: "toutes les choses, perdant leur aspect premier des choses, sont venues se ranger les unes à côté des autres dans une espèce d'ordre, pénétrées de la même lumière, vues les unes dans les autres" (60).

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