

Angels, Insects, and Analogy: A. S. Byatt's "Morpho Eugenia"

JUNE STURROCK

In *A Whistling Woman* (2002), the concluding novel of A. S. Byatt's tetralogy,¹ the central character, Frederica, rejects a career as a literary scholar because of her growing sense of the narrowness of a single discipline and her realisation that "the world [is] bigger" (411). The nearest thing to a heroic figure in this unheroic novel, Gerard Wijnobel, is devoted to the idea of "crossing the artificial invisible barriers between disciplines" (326).² *A Whistling Woman* is brimming with information, material, and analogies from a variety of disciplines, among them mathematics, psychology, biochemistry, genetics, and art history. Its narrative valorizes the breaking down of disciplinary walls, the refusal to see things in compartments. Frederica, who began the tetralogy—in *The Virgin in the Garden* (1978)—comforted by the possibility of what she calls "laminations," of keeping experiences separate, ends it with a disquieting but invigorating sense that "the laminations were slipping. She was full of life, and afraid" (*Whistling Woman* 411).³ Increasingly, Byatt's novels have become full of this sense of the variety, complexity, fascination, and inter-relatedness of human knowledge. Michael Worton has written of "the intense excitement that [Byatt] herself finds in learning" (17). She generates in the readers of her fiction a similar intense excitement in learning of many kinds.

"I read. Ants, bees, Amazon travels, Darwin, books about Victorian servant life, butterflies and moths" (*History* 117). That is A. S. Byatt's account of her preparation for writing "Morpho Eugenia," one of the two extraordinary novellas that form her 1992 volume, *Angels and Insects*, and the focus of this essay. As these words suggest, her narra-

tive draws on a remarkable variety of kinds of knowledge. As a late twentieth century re-imagining of the early 1860s, inevitably it combines history with literature. More than that, it directs the attention of its readers towards issues that were and are central to the understanding of Western culture, and especially to the relation between science and religion. Beyond that, the novella is concerned with human knowledge and understanding, past and present, of the natural world. 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.

The interdisciplinary aspects of this novel are suggested even in a brief summary of the plot. Byatt's protagonist, William Adamson, an Amazonian explorer and entomologist, shipwrecked and penniless, comes to Bredely Hall, the home of the aristocratic clergyman and amateur scientist and collector, Sir Harald Alabaster (clearly, all names in this story are carefully chosen).⁴ He marries Eugenia, the beautiful eldest daughter of the house and, as baby follows baby, seems trapped in the Alabaster household. He is eventually freed by Matty, a governess-companion, who pushes him back to entomological observation and to his writings.⁵ Finally he escapes back to the Amazon—together with Matty.

To begin with the obvious discipline—the primary discipline of the writer and the readers of this essay and of Byatt herself—this is a literary text, written by one of the most interesting living writers of English prose. It is indeed self-consciously literary, depicting and foregrounding literary expression by representing its characters as storytellers and writers. The governess, Miss Mead, recounts the Psyche myth, Matty tells an entomological fairy story, Sir Harald works on Christian apologetics, and William Adamson writes a book of popular science. "Narration is as much part of human nature as breath and the circulation of the blood," writes Byatt (*History* 166). As with much of Byatt's fiction—consider the fairy stories in *Possession*,

the Sadean fable "Babbletower" within *Babel Tower*, the Tolkien-like children's story "Flight North" within *A Whistling Woman*—both the larger narrative and the embedded narratives of this story compel us to consider the various functions of story-telling.⁶ William must become a storyteller, must publish his narratives of the ant colonies, in order to escape from the Alabasters. And certainly one of the more curious aspects of the narration is the role of Matty's scientific story-within-a-story, "Things Are Not What They Seem." This story indeed is not merely what it seems but also a coded warning—and invitation—to William Adamson: Seth, its hero, after all, bears the name of Adam's son.

Actual literary texts also play a significant part in this narrative. Tennyson's *In Memoriam* and Milton's *Paradise Lost* are especially significant, while poems by Clare, Keats, Shakespeare, Browning and Ben Jonson also figure in the characters' own frames of reference.⁷ Byatt acknowledges that her "books are thick with the presence of other books [...] out there in the world there must be people who read as passionately as I do and actually know that books constantly interweave themselves with other books and with the world" (Wachtel 77-78). Literature is part of the connective tissue of her world. As a German reviewer of her fiction points out, commenting on *The Virgin in the Garden*, Byatt is remarkable among recent novelists in her concern to make the connection between the present time and the literary classics "one of the central and recurring themes [...] of her fictions."⁸

"Morpho Eugenia," like all of Byatt's fiction, insists on the significance not just of entire texts—but also of individual words. As Michael Worton has observed, she is "a very 'wordy' writer" (17).⁹ Her various digressions on language and metaphor in *Still Life*, for instance, demonstrate her passionate interest in words per se: "I had the idea when I began this novel that it would be a novel of naming and accuracy [...]. There would be a heavy emphasis on nouns, on naming, in such a hypothetical book" (301). For its part, *Babel Tower*, as its name suggests, is centred on language—acquiring language, legal language, and literary language.¹⁰ "Morpho Eugenia" is a narrative

that insists especially on names, on the significance of the act of naming—an act over which, as I have said, Byatt is especially careful in regard to her own characters and places.¹¹ Matty's story, "Things Are Not What They Seem," begins when she looks up the etymologies of the names of the moths and butterflies and finds as she says, "it was all running away from me. It was as though I was dragged along willy-nilly—by the *language*, you know—through Sphinx and Morpheus and Thomas Mouffet" (*Angels and Insects* 141, Byatt's italics).

Names, Byatt writes, speaking specifically of natural history, are "a way of weaving the world together, by relating the creatures to other creatures" (*Angels and Insects* 132). Writing more specifically about the naming of grasses—foxtail grass, nit-grass and so on—she speaks of these names as "obviously part of the overwhelming need to make connections and comparisons" (*Still Life* 302). Elsewhere, in writing about her work on "Morpho Eugenia," she comments with pleasure on the naming of the various Amazonian moths and butterflies by the nineteenth century European scientific explorers—"the full beauty of the Linnaean system of naming the lepidoptera" (*History* 117). She describes this kind of naming, which connects the creatures of the New World with the myths of the Old World, as "a strange and innocent form of colonialism" (*History* 118)—(well, comparatively innocent perhaps).¹²

Beyond the literary, there is an unusual insistence in this text on fact—scientific fact, historical fact. Byatt's essay on the significance of *Angels and Insects* bears the title "True Stories and the Facts of Fiction," and she describes this essay as being "about the relations of precise scholarship and fiction" (92).¹³ A recent and excellent collection of essays about Byatt acknowledges her concern with fact in its own subtitle, "Imagining the Real."¹⁴ Part of the fascination of "Morpho Eugenia" is the way we, like Matty, come to share William's obsession with insects—butterflies, moths, beetles, and especially, ants—wood ants and red ants, their reproductive lives, their social behaviour, their battles, their slave-trading expeditions. And Byatt continues to write about the not-human, in *The Biographer's Tale* with its bees and the

small insects after which the central characters are named, and in *Babel Tower* and *A Whistling Woman*, where snails and snail memory play significant roles in relation to the plot. Byatt writes that "I see insects as the not-human, in some sense as the Other, and I believe that we ought to think about the not-human in order to be fully human" (*History* 115).

The history of science, as well as science in itself, comes under scrutiny in the narrative of "Morpho Eugenia," as does the relation between science and the wider culture.¹⁵ William's researches and Sir Harald's clerical perplexities involve readers immediately with the various understandings of questions about the nature of creation in the crucial years immediately following the publication of Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*.¹⁶ We become involved with the dramatic interplay between science and religion at that period—and since—through the conversations between William and Sir Harald about post-Darwinian readings of the Bible. "It is our own free intelligence," argues Sir Harald, "that leads us to find it impossible to conceive this infinitely wonderful universe, and our own intelligence within it, looking before and after, reflecting, contriving, contemplating, reasoning—without a Divine Intelligence as source of all our lesser ones" (*Angels and Insects* 34, Byatt's italics). Sir Harald, in fact, in his attempt to convince himself of the existence of a Creator, uses the arguments of Asa Gray, the Harvard biologist (*History* 118). William, the scientist, the new man, first responds with anger: "We have made our God by a specious analogy, Sir." He goes on to express a related idea to Sir Harald's, but in far more skeptical terms: "We need loving kindness in reality and often we do not find it—so we invent a divine Parent for the infant crying in the night and convince ourselves that all is well" (*Angels and Insects* 89, Byatt's italics).¹⁷ The debate between William and Sir Harald over questions of "Design and the Designer" (*Angels and Insects* 109) again displays Byatt's preoccupation with the complex interactions involved in the ways knowledge, ideas, and culture change.¹⁸ The preoccupation with such interactions is certainly apparent elsewhere in her fiction, and especially in her tetralogy, which

examines closely the intellectual and cultural changes in the 1950s and 60s, though here the catalysts are television, contraceptive pills, and various drugs.

*

As may be apparent at this point, in all the fields of knowledge that Byatt touches on in "Morpho Eugenia," she is concerned with the human impulse towards perceiving analogy and creating new concepts on the basis of analogy. All the narratives created by her characters depend in one way or another upon analogy. The references to *Paradise Lost* draw on its epic similes, the references to *In Memoriam* on Tennyson's parallels between family relations and the relations between God and his creation. The acts of naming with which Matty becomes preoccupied are based on analogies between lepidoptera and human narratives. The clash between science and religion arises from the apparent post-Darwinian collapse of an old system of analogies—especially the "specious analogy" of creator as father of which William complains (*Angels and Insects* 89). Certainly analogy, as Michael Levenson points out, is "an activity that disturbs and fascinates Byatt" (163). Her essay on the writing of *Angels and Insects* is prefaced by three epigraphs (from Melville, from Emerson, and from an anonymous poet-friend), all concerned with analogy. The narrative of "Morpho Eugenia" repeatedly directs our attention both to the multiple analogies between human and insect behaviour and to the inevitability and the dangers of all reasoning through analogy. As the infatuated William proposes to Eugenia, the male Emperor moths, driven by the same sexual imperative, inexorably advance towards the caged female:

Large insects were advancing along the black floor [...]. More could be seen forcing themselves through a small hole in the pane of the conservatory door. More still sailed down from the roof [...]. They advanced, a disorderly, driven army [...] thirty, forty, fifty, a cloud, the male Emperors propelling themselves out of the night towards the torpid female. More came. And more. (*Angels and Insects* 54)

The analogy between human and moth is apparent from the very title, "Morpho Eugenia." Yet the primary analogy naturally is between the ant communities and "the enclosed and complicated society of the country house" (*Angels and Insects* 74). Bredely Hall, like the anthills, is centred on the reproductive females, Lady Alabaster and Eugenia. Swollen through idleness or pregnancy, cosseted and waited on by their servants as the ant-queens are by the workers, they become much like the ant-queens,

egg-laying machines, gross and glistening, endlessly licked, caressed, soothed and smoothed—veritable Prisoners of Love. This is the true nature of the Venus under the mountain, in this miniature world a creature immobilised by her function of breeding, by the blind violence of her passions. (*Angels and Insects* 102, Byatt's emphasis)

This is William's description. And William increasingly comes to see his own role at Bredely Hall in much the same terms in which he describes the male ants: "their whole existence is directed *only* to the nuptial dance and the fertilisation of the Queens" (*Angels and Insects* 103, Byatt's emphasis). His apparent purpose at Bredely is merely to beget the five children with whom Eugenia rapidly presents him. Gender roles, class roles, and class structure, as well as sexual and parental passions, all turn Bredely into a fair simulacrum of the society of an ant colony. And other analogies follow. The description of the slave-making raids of the red ants leads automatically, in a narrative set in the early 1860s, in the years of the American Civil War, to the topic of human slavery. "Nature does indeed teach us," says Miss Mead, the governess, "A terrible war is being waged at present across the Atlantic, to secure not only the liberation of the unfortunate slaves, but the moral salvation of those whose leisure and enrichment are sustained by their cruel labours." At which point Matty, ever astute, draws attention to the "machine-slaves" in British factories (*Angels and Insects* 100), on whom the Alabasters' wealth depends (*Angels and Insects* 80).

William's response to such comments is dismissive, both justly and unjustly so. He says truly that "analogy is a slippery tool [...] men are

not ants" (*Angels and Insects* 100). His author would agree with him. Commenting that "we name [insect] societies after our own, Queen, Soldier, Slave, Worker," she adds "I think we should be careful before we turn other creatures into images of our own" (*History* 115). Indeed she writes that part of her intention in writing "Morpho Eugenia" was to "undo anthropomorphic imaginings and closures" (*History* 118). All the same, as Hodder Pinsky, the cognitive psychologist, points out in *A Whistling Woman*, "human beings could not think without [...] metaphors and analogies"—though he then goes on to make these metaphors "opaque and visible and problematic" (353). While William is intellectually cautious about analogy, he finds it difficult to avoid seeing "his own life in terms of a diminishing analogy with the tiny creatures"—the male ants (*Angels and Insects* 100). This view of himself becomes a trap—or perhaps it is the first step out of the trap, in that it implies a recognition of his situation.¹⁹ The terms of the anagram game that William and Matty play with the uncomprehending children—insect, incest, sphinx, phoenix—chart William's liberation from that trap. First he must understand the relation between incest and insect—that is, he must see that Bredely Hall is, like the ant-hills, essentially an incestuous society, must become conscious of what Sally Shuttleworth calls "the incestuous dynamics that lay at the heart of the Victorian family" ("Writing Natural History" 153). Only then is he enabled to see Matty as the sphinx who set him this liberating riddle—"the asker of riddles and the answer too" (*Angels and Insects* 134). (This word "sphinx" is left for the reader to solve from the letters William has dealt to him.) After this, he can liberate himself and become like the phoenix, reborn out of his own ashes.

In a poem Byatt wrote for her character Randolph Henry Ash in *Possession*, he/she asks, "Are we automata or Angelkin?" (*Possession* 273). This question, which in itself crosses the traditional boundaries of the disciplines, recurs in various forms in all Byatt's later fiction: in *A Whistling Woman*, the computer scientist John Ottokar comes to feel, through his calculations for a geneticist, that his "work is [...] soul-destroying" because he works "to prove the individual is nothing"

(340). In choosing Matty and freedom, William decides to be angel rather than automaton—or ant. He uses and discards the insect analogy. Byatt comments that "the problem for the writer, for me, is to do with Wallace Stevens's great line in *Notes towards a Supreme Fiction*, 'To find, not to impose / It is possible, possible, possible. It must be / Possible.'"²⁰ She says finally of *Angels and Insects*, "I think the stories are studies of the danger of thinking with images that think with images themselves [...] and I do think that in some curious way they find, not impose" (*History* 122). Perhaps that "curious way" comes from the intensity with which she imagines different fields of knowledge, so that it becomes apparent that they exist in themselves rather than operating merely as metaphors.

Like all of Byatt's fiction, "Morpho Eugenia" explores the complex intellectual lives of human beings, as well as their practical and emotional lives. Byatt refuses to accept the division between feeling and intellect as she refuses to accept the division between the "two cultures" of science and the arts, a division taken for granted at the time and place at which she was educated. She 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. Increasingly her writing is concerned with the actual operations of the mind, the brain, whether physical or metaphysical. Inevitably such concerns finally refuse the boundaries of academic discipline.

Simon Fraser University
Burnaby, British Columbia

NOTES

¹The other three are *The Virgin in the Garden*, *Still Life*, and *Babel Tower*.

²Wijn Nobel, who also appears in *Still Life* and *Babel Tower*, is the Vice-Chancellor of the (fictitious) University of North Yorkshire.

³Frederica publishes a book entitled "Laminations" in *The Whistling Woman*. *Babel Tower* speaks of her "vision of being able to be all the things she was: language, sex, friendship, thought, just as long as these were kept scrupulously separate, laminated, like geological strata" (*Whistling Woman* 314-15, Byatt's emphasis).

⁴The implications of Eugenia's name and that of Bredely Hall are obvious, as is William's family name, Adamson. Byatt says that William and Harald refer to William the Conqueror and Duke Harold, the new man and the old. At Bredely, Matty/Matilda gets called Matty but she insists that in her room she is Matilda. "Matty" suggests Miss Matty, the quintessential "old maid" in Gaskell's *Cranford*, while Matilda was the Queen of William the Conqueror.

⁵Matty's/Matilda's status in the Alabaster household is deliberately indeterminate. She is one of "the people in houses, between the visible inhabitants and the invisible, largely invisible to both," of whom she speaks (*Angels and Insects* 155, Byatt's emphasis).

⁶The functions of story-telling are also of importance in her earliest novels, *The Shadow of a Sun* and (especially) *The Game*. The fairy stories in *Possession* reappear in *The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye: Five Fairy Stories*, transformed by their new context. "Flight North" begins to appear in *Babel Tower* and is completed and published in *The Whistling Woman*.

⁷Naturally *In Memoriam* is even more important in "The Conjugal Angel," the second novella of *Angels and Insects*, which focuses on Emily Tennyson Jesse and in which Tennyson himself briefly appears. Judith Fletcher sees the Odyssey as a "narrative template" for *Angels and Insects* (Fletcher 217).

⁸Dieter E. Zimmer, quoted by Alfer and Noble (2). *The Virgin in the Garden* is also a profoundly literary work. For instance, the chapter called "Ode on a Grecian Urn" is indeed deeply involved with Keats's poem, both directly and indirectly.

⁹See also Glitzen 92.

¹⁰Not only does it include Jude Mason's Sadean fable, "Babbletower," parts of Agatha Mond's "Flight North," and Frederica's "Laminations," it also concludes fictional transcripts of parts of Frederica's divorce and custody cases and the obscenity trial of "Babbletower." It also includes a Royal Commission on the teaching of English in schools. For Richard Todd's comments on language in *Babel Tower* see Todd 64-65.

¹¹*The Biographer's Tale* is a case in point. The parasitic nature of biography is indicated by the parasite names of some of the main characters.

¹²Richard Todd notes her concern in *Angels and Insects* with "what it is to give a name to a living creature" (Todd 32).

¹³The narrator of *The Biographer's Tale* abandons the study of literary theory because he needs "a life full of things [...] full of facts" (*Biographer's Tale* 4).

¹⁴See Alfer and Noble.

¹⁵Shuttleworth gives an excellent account of its story in relation to the late twentieth century historical novel in *The Third Culture*. Del Ivan Janik's article looks only at *Possession* in this regard.

¹⁶Byatt says that "Morpho Eugenia is related to the reading of Darwin in connection with George Eliot's novels and essays and also to modern Darwinian ideas and fictions" (*History* 92).

¹⁷William is of course referring to Tennyson, *In Memoriam* 55: "an infant crying in the night / And with no language but a cry."

¹⁸Issues of class and gender in Victorian society and the relation between class and gender are central to a narrative that opposes the reproductive woman (Eugenia) to the intellectual woman (Matty/Matilda), and that explores the stratified complexities of country house society. The narrative of *Possession* springs from some of the same concerns: for Christabel Lamotte conflicting reproductive and intellectual imperatives tear her life apart, while her great-great-great-granddaughter, Maude Bailey, can (though not without difficulty) learn how to combine them. Such concerns recur through the tetralogy, set in the 1950s and 60s. *The Virgin in the Garden* begins with two brilliant sisters, Stephanie and Frederica. Stephanie will be literally killed by domesticity; in *Babel Tower* Frederica's marriage nearly extinguishes her, so that her escape appears like the re-emergence of Persephone. In all these texts gender expectations are clearly related to historical period.

¹⁹I am grateful to the reviewer for *Connotations* who made this suggestion.

²⁰In fact, Byatt has condensed Stevens's lines. He writes in "It Must Give Pleasure," from *Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction*: "But to impose is not / To discover. To discover an order as of / A season, to discover summer and know it / / To discover winter and know it well, to find / Not to impose, not to have reasoned at all, / Out of nothing to have come upon major weather, / / It is possible, possible, possible. It must / Be possible" (133-40).

WORKS CITED

- Alfer, Alexa, and Michael J. Noble. "Introduction." *Essays on the Fiction of A. S. Byatt: Imagining the Real*. Ed. Alexa Alfer and Michael J. Noble. Westport, CT: Greenwood P, 2001. 1-15.
- Byatt, A. S. *Angels and Insects*. London: Vintage, 1993.
- . *A Whistling Woman*. London: Chatto and Windus, 2002.
- . *Babel Tower*. London: Chatto and Windus, 1996.
- . *On History and Other Stories*. London: Chatto and Windus, 1999.
- . *Possession*. London: Chatto and Windus, 1990.
- . *Still Life*. London: Chatto and Windus, 1985.

- . *The Biographer's Tale*. London: Chatto and Windus, 2000.
- . *The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye: Five Fairy Stories*. London: Vintage, 1998.
- . *The Virgin in the Garden*. London: Chatto and Windus, 1978.
- Fletcher, Judith. "The Odyssey Rewoven: A. S. Byatt's *Angels and Insects*." *Classical and Modern Literature: A Quarterly* 19 (1999): 217-31.
- Glitzen, Julian. "A. S. Byatt's Self-mirroring Art." *Critique* 36 (1995): 83-96.
- Janik, Del Ivan. "No End of History: Evidence from the Contemporary English Novel." *Twentieth Century Literature* 41 (1995): 160-88.
- Levenson, Michael. "*Angels and Insects*: Theory, Analogy, Metamorphosis." *Alfer and Noble* 161-74.
- Noble, Michael J. "A Tower of Tongues: *Babel Tower* and the Art of Memory." *Alfer and Noble* 61-74.
- Shuttleworth, Sally. "Writing Natural History: 'Morpho Eugenia.'" *Alfer and Noble* 147-60.
- . "Natural History: The Retro Victorian Novel." *The Third Culture: Literature and Science*. Ed. Elinor S. Shaffer. Berlin: de Gruyter, 1998. 253-68.
- Stevens, Wallace. *Selected Poems*. London: Faber, 1954.
- Todd, Richard. *A. S. Byatt*. Plymouth: Northcote House, 1997.
- Wachtel, Eleanor. *Writers & Company*. Toronto: Knopf, 1993.
- Worton, Michael. "Of Prisms and Prose: Reading Paintings in A. S. Byatt's Works." *Alfer and Noble* 15-30.