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## ***HOW TO TRANSLATE DURABLE SCIENCE INTO TRANSIENT FICTION: THE CASE OF A. S. BYATT'S MORPHO EUGENIA***

**Keywords:** *Byatt, durable scientific ideas, creative translation, transient postmodern text*

**Abstract:** *Charles Darwin's 1859 book, On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or The Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life, represents, for us, the crux in understanding life mechanisms and the evolution of man. Supporting his theory on scientific facts, Darwin replaces the old creationist view with an idea that has proven its durability: natural selection. Man is no longer the creation of God, but the result of natural evolution. Antonia Susan Byatt, who has earned the reputation of a 'postmodern Victorian', has shown a vivid interest in science in general, and biology, mathematics and genetics in particular. In fact, in her 1992 novella Morpho Eugenia, Byatt goes back in time and, starting from Darwin's idea of natural selection and the survival of the fittest, performs a difficult operation: that of revaluating Victorianism from the (rather curious) point of view of British postmodernism. .*

*My paper tries to discuss Byatt's novella Morpho Eugenia from a double perspective. On the one hand, it analyzes the Darwinian ideas of the origins and evolution of species, as they appear to the Victorian characters in the novella. The focus of the fabulas in the novella is on mating rituals in bees and ants, as compared to those in humans. On the other hand, the paper gives a demonstration of how durable scientific ideas can be creatively translated into a fictional text, without spoiling any of its fun. In Morpho Eugenia, the sound scientific ideas lend the transient postmodern text a sense of durability and a new lease of life.*

From the very beginning, this paper aims to clarify a few points that may arise during the reading of this text. The first point to be dealt with is the one raised in the title, i.e. the translation of a scientific text into a fictional one. In this respect, my analysis starts from the idea of cultural translation as both a means of carrying ideas across languages, and of crossing genre borders (this latter aspect being the one that interests me most). The text that suffers the transformation from the durable, scientific form into a rather delicate (frail) fictional one is Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*. Although it may seem unfair of me to describe the fictional text as frail and transitory, I have used the concepts of durability and transience as terms that may help the reader understand one important point: scientific ideas last longer in the mind than the means of transportation that convey them (the fictional text). It has become common knowledge that, usually, despite translators' best efforts, poetry gets lost in translation. Conversely, with Byatt's *Morpho Eugenia*, cultural translation transforms dry (if durable), scientific theories into poetry.

Secondly, my paper intends to offer an analysis of the first of Antonia Susan Byatt's novellas united under the title of *Angels and Insects*, i.e. *Morpho Eugenia*. Byatt, who has earned the reputation of a 'postmodern Victorian', has shown a vivid interest in science in general, and biology, mathematics and genetics in particular. In fact, in her 1992 novella *Morpho Eugenia*, Byatt goes back in time and, starting from Darwin's idea of natural selection and the survival of the fittest, performs a difficult operation: that of revaluating Victorianism from the (rather curious) point of view of British postmodernism. The study of the text will reveal those aspects that advocate both for the reading of the novella as an independent, original piece of writing, and for considering the same novella as a literary translation of scientific

theories into fictional text. Moreover, the novella suggests an interesting parallel between two modes of life: that of the Victorian aristocracy and that of the insects the Victorians study. Endowing her characters with abilities that make them resemble certain insects, Byatt rewrites Darwin's theory in an original way. She chooses the transience of the postmodern text in order to illustrate durable facts of life, and remind us of natural rules that both animals and humans obey. Somehow, the British contemporary author creatively translates durable Darwinian theories into a postmodern, transient text.

Thirdly, my paper will resort to Byatt's comments on her own work and, consequently, will re-direct the attention of the reader from the words of the book to those of its author. In this way, reading *Morpho Eugenia* will become a gesture of filtering the text through a double sieve, with two possible results: we, readers, either see things the way the author does, or we reject her explanations and fabricate our own. Either way, we will be given the opportunity to pick Byatt's brains; given the laconic nature of postmodern writers, that is a good thing to start from.

### **Darwin, natural selection and eugenics**

After his voyage on *The Beagle* and the exploration of life on the Galápagos Islands, Charles Darwin became more and more interested in natural selection, the way in which some species survive and prosper to the detriment of others. His research focused on animal husbandry, but it also included experiments on various types of plants. The goal Darwin had in mind at that time was to find evidence that species are not fixed once and for all, but rather in perpetual transformation.

Apart from his revolutionary ideas that have helped the transition from creationism to evolutionism, Darwin also contributed to an interesting theory propounded by his half-cousin, Francis Galton: eugenics. In 1865, Galton introduced the idea that human traits (be they moral or mental) could be inherited, and, therefore, principles of animal breeding could be applied to humans. It is, probably, this idea that has inspired A. S. Byatt to think of characters that are obsessed with the idea of breeding, beauty and the survival of the fittest, and to prove them wrong in *Morpho Eugenia*. Indeed, the British author takes upon herself to make Darwin's arguments heard. Thus, when, in his letters to Darwin, Galton suggested that publishing research could encourage intermarriage within a 'caste' of 'those who are naturally gifted' (Desmond and Moore 556-7), Darwin foresaw practical difficulties. In *The Descent of Man*, the latter wrote about the dangers of helping the weak (but noble or rich) to survive and have families; he then noted that, by doing so, the very principle of natural selection of the fittest would be denied, and the world would be populated by less strong individuals.

### **A. S. Byatt, the postmodern Victorian**

In order to better explain why Byatt has embarked on the journey of crossing genre borders and translating science into fiction, I have to make a tentative approach to the term 'postmodern Victorian' and, therefore, with some critics' evaluations of Byatt's work after *Possession*. When, in 1990, this literary masterpiece becomes a tremendous hit with both readers and critics, Byatt's career is relaunched and all her texts get to be reread from a different perspective. The readers' interest in postmodern techniques and in stories about stories that tell other stories in their turn is more than rewarded with *Possession*, and we all have the privilege of reading (and reciting) poems written by Byatt in the most Victorian fashion possible. Moreover, the finesse with which she treats the minutest details of the Victorian story leaves no room for criticism in that respect. In an attempt to make her characters as realistic and believable as possible, Byatt describes them as people interested in biology and fossils, the study of plants and snails, marine animals and insects.

The comeback to the Victorian age and its pastimes and obsessions happens in 1992, when Byatt publishes *Angels and Insects*, a book consisting of two novellas or short stories, *Morpho Eugenia* and *The Conjugal Angel*. In her 1997 book on writing and the arts, the critic Sally Shuttleworth defines Fowles's and Byatt's novels as belonging to 'the retro-Victorian novel' (Shuttleworth qtd in Byatt *On Histories and Stories* 78). Comparing these two eras, the Victorian and the postmodern, the critic comes to the conclusion that the crisis of faith experienced by the Victorians is, in fact, what the postmoderns long for, since they are no longer able to feel or believe in anything. This latter era is labelled by Shuttleworth as 'an age of 'ontological doubt' without any fixed point of faith against which to define itself.' (Shuttleworth qtd in Byatt *On Histories and Stories* 78). Moreover, it is the recuperation of the faith in some sort of purpose in life what postmodern writers try to accomplish in their works, and the critic elaborates on that line:

Many of the retro-Victorian texts are informed by a sense of loss, but it is a *second order* loss. It is not loss of a specific belief system, but rather the loss of that sense of immediacy and urgency which comes with true existential crisis. (Shuttleworth qtd in Byatt *On Histories and Stories* 78)

Another critic, Michael Levenson, provides the Byattian reader with the most eloquent and well-studied explanation of the paradoxical 'Victorian postmodern' nature of the author I am studying here. Thus, his 1993 analysis of *Angels and Insects*, "The Religion of Fiction", dares to make the assumption that, in fact, Byatt is such a good postmodern writer *because*<sup>1</sup> she has the courage to go back to the Victorian roots she believes she has, and extract the best from them. In the critic's view, being a postmodern writer does not seem to satisfy Byatt completely; her intelligence and her speculative nature lead her on the way of becoming both a ventriloquist (especially in *Possession*) and a re-writer of Victorian literature and scientific ideas. Levenson remarks that

[...]you miss a good deal of what is most interesting in Byatt, and what is most significant in the movement of which she is a part, if you ignore the way her postmodernity finds its ground to something else, something older, namely an earnest attempt to get back before the moderns and revive a Victorian project that has never been allowed to come to completion. What you have in Byatt is an odd-sounding but perfectly intelligible creature, the postmodern Victorian. She knows where we live and when: she knows her Joyce anti Woolf and Beckett; but she is undeterred in the belief that the road into the twenty-first century rinds exactly through the middle of the nineteenth. (Levenson 42)

### **The story of *Morpho Eugenia***

Set in the 1860s and 1870s (after the studies on natural selection and eugenics), both *Morpho Eugenia* and *The Conjugal Angel* deal with Victorian concerns, which have led some reviewers to describe the diptych as 'resolutely mid-Victorian in tone and content' (Hughes 49). Nevertheless, we are now aware of the fact that this is only the disguise of the postmodern writer who tries to recuperate the Victorian project (Levenson), and, therefore, what we are mainly interested in is the way the stories – especially *Morpho Eugenia* – reflect ideas, obsessions or feelings characteristic of that time.

From the temporal point of view, *Morpho Eugenia* presents no surprises: the story is firmly set in the past, sometime in the 1860s, and the visible twentieth-century perspective in the telling that we have in *Possession* is nowhere to be found here. The story is mainly told by an omniscient narrator, but we also witness insertions of stories within stories, containing, in their turn, analogies with the main story or

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<sup>1</sup> My emphasis.

characters. Although, at times, these other stories appear to break through the veil of the main story line, they resemble variations on the same theme; due to their mirroring nature, these minor stories help punctuate and emphasize the meaning of the events depicted in the main picture.

In a poetic (and scientific) vein, *Morpho Eugenia* takes its title from a butterfly, and the controlling metaphors of the novella belong to the worlds of ants, bees, and butterflies. Here, the Darwinian ideas are masterly set on stage. Thus, the story tells us how William Adamson, a naturalist recently back from the Amazon, is welcomed into the Alabaster household at Bredely Hall<sup>2</sup>. The very first scene of the book is that of a ball at which the young ladies present appear to him as butterflies (or similarly attractive insects), tempting him to get into the mating game and fall into their traps. Actually, this is the main metaphor and analogy of the novella: humans as insects, but under a larger magnifying glass. In *On Histories and Stories*, her 2001 book of criticism, Byatt states that ‘The tradition of comparing insect and human societies also precedes the work of Darwin and the socio-biologists.’ (Byatt *On Histories and Stories* 80). She also expresses some concerns, ‘I worry about anthropomorphism as a form of self-deception. (The Christian religion is an anthropomorphic account of the universe.)’ (Byatt *On Histories and Stories* 80). Translated literally, since ‘morpho’ is the Greek word for ‘form’, then the title could be read as ‘the form of Eugenia’, or ‘the shapeliness of Eugenia’. Nevertheless, this ‘morpho eugenia’ being also the name of the butterfly that the hero, William Adamson, brings from the Amazonian jungle back to England, it is best to leave the title as it is, namely in its scientific form. The idea of eugenics, of beauty and what it can create and/or destroy is one that concerns Byatt immensely; in this respect, she states,

One of the things that delighted me about writing *Angels and Insects* was playing with the comparison of human ideals of beauty (in the Victorian age) and beauty in the creatures. [...] I wanted in *Morpho Eugenia* to depict my hero’s passionate attraction to the beautiful and well-bred Eugenia Alabaster as a question of pheromones and Victorian romantic love combined – disastrously. I was also playing with ideas going back to Walter Scott of Englishness and Normanness, as they appear in *Ivanhoe*. The Alabasters are the Anglo-Saxons. William, son of a Yorkshire butcher, is called Adamson – because, like Linnaeus, he named the unknown insects in the tropics. But he is also, being the ‘new man’, the scientist, William the Conqueror, and sets off for the rainforest with Matty – Matilda – the predatory worker-turned-queen in the metaphorical anthill. It’s a quiet image of shifting class and sexual hierarchies, too [...] (Byatt *On Histories and Stories* 81)

The story of *Morpho Eugenia* unfolds traditionally and somewhat unsurprisingly up to a point; it tells the readers how William Adamson, a naturalist who is saved from a shipwreck, finds shelter in the house of his ‘benefactor’, Harald Alabaster, helps the latter with the sorting out of various exhibits, and ends up by getting married to his eldest daughter, Eugenia, with whom he has five children in three years. If we read no more than that, we may very easily draw the conclusion that the storyteller simply continues the Victorian tradition of describing the individual in society – end of story. However, if we are still supporters of the ‘happily ever after’ tradition, it is at this point that the story takes a different turn for the worst. First of all, Byatt does not exercise her storyteller’s authority to present a total world vision of Bredely Hall, the Alabasters’ household. What she does is make analogies between that and a beehive or an anthill, illustrate principles of natural selection and of eugenics, and then leave the readers draw their own conclusions.

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<sup>2</sup> The name Bredely Hall also reminds the reader of ‘breed’, or ‘well-bred’, and could be read as the Hall where breeding takes place.

In good Victorian tradition, Bredely Hall represents a fraction of a society that, according to history books, was male dominated. Because of the insect/human analogy, however, in *Morpho Eugenia* Byatt suggests that at least that society's domestic life was controlled by women. The house is, in fact, described as the image of a nest, an ant-hill or a bee-hive:

Houses such as this were run for and by women. Harald Alabaster was master, but he was, as far as the whirring of domestic clocks and wheels went, a deus absconditus, who set it all in motion, and might at a pinch stop it, but had little to do with its use of energy. (Byatt *Angels and Insects* 76)

Obviously, under such circumstances as presented by Byatt, the men at Bredely Hall lead the lives of male ants or drones whose existence is directed solely to 'the nuptial dance and the fertilization of the Queens' (Byatt *Angels and Insects* 103). Consequently, following the insect rules, the women become 'egg-laying machines, gross and glistening, endlessly licked, caressed, soothed and smoothed – veritable Prisoners of Love' (Byatt *Angels and Insects* 102). For her part, Eugenia does not even wish to escape that fate; more than that, she embraces it. Her ability to produce young gives her a value, which her sister, Rowena, who marries 'outside the nest', is denied. Consequently, in such a society, love becomes 'an instinctual response leading to the formation of societies which [gives] even more restricted and functional identities to their members' (Byatt *Angels and Insects* 116). It is generally known that pregnancy and motherhood metamorphose women's lives, but, in Eugenia's case, this metamorphosis is of a Kafkaesque kind. Although Eugenia experiences pregnancy as a period of cocooning, she emerges from her cocoon not reborn as a butterfly, but as something resembling a greedy, self-absorbed ant queen. Eugenicis is a dangerous thing, Byatt seems to imply.

The story does have a sort of happy-ending, though not of the type we have been accustomed to by the fairy-tales with princes and princesses. On gradually discovering that his wife needs him for mating purposes only, and on finding out that Eugenia's children may very likely have been the produce of her incestuous affair<sup>3</sup> with her brother, Edgar, William leaves her and England and sets off for the Amazonian jungle. Nevertheless, this time, he has a companion: Matilda Crompton, who turns from a working ant in the Alabasters' household into a queen ant herself. The rather undecided ending of *Morpho Eugenia*, with William and Matilda<sup>4</sup> leaving for the jungle, baffles the lover of traditional Victorian tales, who is keen on being guided toward the disclosure of a final answer to the story. Nevertheless, the challenging postmodern reader is rewarded, as, to quote Heidi Hansson,

*Morpho Eugenia* operates on several levels at the same time, introducing meanings that conflict with one another, replacing the monologic message of conventional allegory with dialogue. Postmodern allegorical writing speaks in at least two voices, both of which need to be heard. (<http://search.ebscohost.com>.)

In a very ingenious manner, Antonia Susan Byatt manages to translate the durability of Darwinian theories on the natural selection of the species into the transient postmodern text of *Morpho Eugenia*, without spoiling the reader's fun. The way in which people are made to resemble insects, to behave like them, and still sound perfectly (and, in some cases, monstrously) human shows us how fragile and transient individuals may be. The lesson to be learned from the analogy drawn by Byatt could be that

<sup>3</sup> In an ant or bee society, incest is the rule, because there are no other insects in the nests than those produced by the queen.

<sup>4</sup> Names with historical connotations, if we think of William the Conqueror and his consort, Matilda (whom Byatt mentions in an interview given to Margaret Reynolds and Jonathan Noakes, in 2004).

insects are truer to the natural laws than humans; the latter try too hard to achieve perfection, in a world where beauty is only a transient thing.

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