

BYATT, Antonia. *Angels and Insects*. London: Chatto and Windus. 1992. Pp. 290. *Ángeles e Insectos*. Trans. Javier Lacruz. Barcelona: Anagrama. 1995. Pp. 348. *The Matisse Stories*. London: Chatto and Windus. 1993. Pp. 135.

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1. *Angels and Insects / Ángeles e Insectos: Presentation*

The Spanish translation of Antonia Byatt's 1992 *Angels and Insects* has been launched in the wake of her success in Spain with the translation of *Possession* which won the Booker Prize, and cashing in on the current fad, especially in the United States, for anything to do with angels. Readers who like to buy something the same but different will not be disappointed. The two novellas which make up *Angels and Insects*, "Morpho Eugenia" and "The Conjugal Angel", are brought together through the topic of the existence of God and life after death, in a Victorian setting and sensibility.

Spanish critics of *Possession* used adjectives like *inquietante*, *apasionante*, *fascinante*, and these are all reproduced inside the dust jacket of the translation *Ángeles e Insectos*. The front cover, done by Martín Gehring, unlike the original English version with its specially painted illustration by Norman Adams of an abstract but chaste figure metamorphosing into a butterfly, depicts what appears to be an enlarged photo of a yellow dahlia or aster with a superimposed tiny figure of a nude woman covered with a hint of a diaphanous drapery and sporting a pair of wings. The token chastity is in the crossed arms covering the breasts. But the eye-catching red strip attached around the book, with its affirmation "El libro más voluptuosamente inteligente de este año" (penned by a British, not a Spanish critic) aims to sell Byatt as an erotic writer as well as an "intellectual" one. This is an attempt to soften her image as a "difficult" even high-brow author and widen her readership. The metatextual factor of the physical presentation of the fiction, especially the front cover, is of great importance to Byatt, a novelist whose verbal art is always intimately connected to the visual. It is a pity that the Spanish paperback translation could not contain the reproductions inside the original hard-cover English version, which are of a Dante Gabriel Rossetti drawing, two drawings by Edward Burne-Jones and two engravings by John Martin from Milton's *Paradise Lost*, plus specially-commissioned line drawings of moths, ravens and dogs, pertinent to the stories. The way the visuals and the other explicit textual references —the most important being the poetry of the poet laureate Alfred Lord Tennyson—

are worked into the text as a whole is part of the overall intertextual packaging, an interplay of the verbal and visual.

Byatt is one of the leading exponents of intertextual writing in the English-speaking world today. In a recent collection of studies into intertextual fiction, she was singled out amongst contemporary writers to follow in an illustrious line:

While authors rewrite the work of predecessors, many post-Renaissance writers *consciously* imitate, quote and/or plagiarise extensively (as somewhat arbitrary examples we would propose Hazlitt, Lautréamont, Joyce, the French Surrealists, T. S. Eliot, Borges, D. M. Thomas, Michel Tournier, A. S. Byatt). In various ways these writers are thereby inscribing themselves in *Tradition* and making public a loving gratitude to ancestors—but their works are equally witnesses to an agonistic impulse to demarcate and proclaim their own creative space. (Worton and Still 1990, 12-13)

We are interested by the way in which Byatt, as latecome writer, takes up the challenge of a prestigious poet of a century earlier, and goes about the task of making her own statement. She incorporates into her new text, or hypertext as Genette would call it, a reading of a hipotext, Tennyson's "In Memoriam" in the case of "The Conjugal Angel", which is a curious hybrid form of Blooms's misprision, in the sense that it speaks to the late twentieth-century reader—it could not do otherwise, since Byatt is writing now—yet it pretends to speak to the contemporary of Tennyson. To convince us, it must also appear to be able to convince the late Victorian reader. Not an easy task, but then Byatt has always avoided the facile. The intertext or hypertext is being used, in a sense, metaphorically, as it functions as a vehicle through which a statement is made upon the tenor. The reader's role is to create through the reading a Gestalt in which all parts are seen simultaneously. The vehicles of Byatt's fiction vary, but the tenor is always the same: life and artistic creativity.

2. *Angels and Insects*

2.1. "Morpho Eugenia"

In *Angels and Insects*, Byatt has drawn upon the material she collected on Victorian literature, culture and mores for the writing of her previous works of non-fiction and fiction: *Unruly Times: Wordsworth and Coleridge in their Time*, and *Possession*, respectively. In the first novella, "Morpho Eugenia", insects, ants and butterflies are the focus of the narrative and are used as a

pretext for a discussion of the Darwinian debate. The plot is based on a series of opposites: man/woman, wealth/penury, Europe/the Amazon, civilization/primitivism, Christianity or religion/Darwinism. These opposites are intertwined and juxtaposed as the following outline will show.

The protagonist, William Adasson (the name is not arbitrary), is a young naturalist who has just returned from a field trip to the Amazon with empty hands, since the collection of rare butterflies he was bringing back in order to become established as an expert has been lost in a shipwreck. He is at the mercy of his patron, a rural vicar of some social standing, and in the interstice of this comfortable, secure life, juxtaposed to the rawness of the jungle, he finds himself emotionally entangled with his patron's eldest daughter, Eugenia. Social and financial differences give him little hope of pretending to marry her, especially since she is in mourning for a fiancé who died in rather strange circumstances on the eve of the wedding. (This motif of the dead fiancé is taken up again in greater detail in the second novella, and is another device for uniting the two). He devotes himself to classifying and cataloguing his patron's chaotic accumulations of specimens and natural curiosities. It is inevitable to see here the parallel with the work of the writer. Adamson's spare time is occupied by listening to his host go on endlessly and in a circular fashion on the question whether Darwinian theory negates God's act of creativity. Theory becomes practice when he is accepted as a mate for Eugenia, and after some years of seemingly marital bliss and a bevy of babies (in descriptions which remind one of Roald Dahl's story about a doting father who consumed so much royal jelly that he turned into a bee), the plot reaches a climax with a totally unexpected behavioural and hereditary twist. All the time, Adamson has been collaborating with another pariah like himself, this time a spinster, on a study of the habits of ants and on attempts at story-telling. Both these things—a "scientific" study of something new and strange for the reader and a concern with how to write—are Byatt constants.

2.2. "The Conjugal Angel"

The connection between the two stories at the narrative level is tenuous: the ship on which William sails back to the Amazon at the end of the story has as its master Captain Arturo Papagay, the husband of the protagonist of "The Conjugal Angel". We have mentioned motifs in common, such as the dead fiancé, but above all, the stories are united by their subject: how did thinking people of one hundred years ago deal with the problem of whether there is a Creator or not, and whether there is life after death, and in what way might (and may) these questions affect the creative writer.

The dead fiancé in “The Conjugal Angel” is much more famous than the one in “Morpho Eugenia”, he is none other than Arthur Hallam, engaged to be married to Tennyson’s sister Emily, and the subject, seventeen years after his death, of Tennyson’s much-acclaimed “In Memoriam”. In the story, Emily Tennyson is now in her sixties and has long been married to a sea-captain, Captain Jesse. It is 1875, the Jesses are living in Margate, and they are regularly visited by Captain Papagay’s “widow”, attracted to the seances Emily organises in order to try to contact her and her friends’ dead loved ones. Mrs Papagay and her protégé are both mediums, and they are all devoted to Swedenborgianism. They quote from the romantic poets, know most of Tennyson off by heart, and practice automatic writing. The reader has come to expect Byatt to reveal some great philosophical or metaphysical truth that she has discovered about writing, or inspiration in poetry, for example, and automatic writing is an enticing device. There is no such revelation, of course, there is no unmediated vision, everything must be mediated in discourse, while it lives on particulars from everyday life and, in this case, imagined particulars from the after life. But automatic writing is revealed to be a sham as embarrassingly rude words come out to restore the reader’s faith in Byatt’s wicked sense of humour. Discourse is not automatic, but hard work, each word the product of choices, some of which are easy, and others excruciatingly difficult.

“The Conjugal Angel” is a meditation on “In Memoriam” and Tennyson’s work, which in itself is intertextual, as it draws upon earlier examples of the genre. But in its reworking it offers the modern reader new imaginative possibilities. The middle-aged Mrs Jesse, who had once been the sensitive and talented Emily Tennyson, has never come to terms with the fact that she opted for life and Captain Jesse rather than to be mummified along with Hallam, renouncing life in order to be a living memorial to the Romantic Ideal. She is humiliated by the fact that she has been outdone in her mourning by her brother; hers was short and sharp, Alfred’s long and agonising, also suspect. Alfred comes over tantalisingly as the true widow. The reader tries to evade the lure of possibly intimate revelations, and Byatt leads us back to the serious path of creativity. Emily is cut by the fact that what matters in the end is not depth of feeling, but what that can produce, and her brother’s feeling has been enormously productive, while her own has been barren.

The tone of the novella, however, is not tragic, the whole thing is suffused with the love of the romantic poets, which Emily shares and whose poetry lives on in Byatt’s work. It deals with the despair that few can avoid feeling in the face of death, hence the need to believe that decay (and there is plenty of that about the spirit of Hallam when he makes his appearances) is not the end of matter, a solution treated without severity. It questions the romantic ideal, and juxtaposes differing types of love, platonic and sexual. It discusses

betrayal in different forms and, in the end, opts for the triumph of life over death. All we can be sure about is the here and now, and the staid Mrs Jesse, with her farting pug dog and revolting raven on her shoulder, a send-up of Poe, and her brother who can't button up his nightshirt, become figures of gentle fun after all the seriousness.

3. *Ángeles e Insectos*

In his translation of Byatt's work, Javier Lacruz has come up against what Eugenio Coseriu (1995) has defined as "the real limits of translation". These limits are, first, where there is a conflict between the designation and the meaning in the target language, and the translation has to opt for equivalence of use. Secondly, if we only translate the semiotic relation between what is said and the accepted way of saying it in the target language, sacrifices may have to be made. What Coseriu is referring to is cases where a word may evoke other resonances in the source language, but the equivalent word in the target language may not. If sacrifices are made, the translation is a less rich version of the original. If the lacuna is so great, a note has to be made, and that is what Lacruz has sometimes had recourse to. Another "real" limit is where the language itself limits the translation. You cannot translate an *imitation* of the target language, as it simply would not be noticed. By losing its nature of difference, the example would blend in with the surroundings of the text. The same occurs where there is a foreign word or phrase in the text. An example of this in Lacruz's translation is where the name Emily in "The Conjugal Angel", which Lacruz maintains in the English throughout, is at one point said in the text in Italian, "Emilia", and a note has to be made to distinguish it.

In his fine translation, it is obvious that Lacruz has come up against Coseriu's real limits in three major areas. All three are cases of the language attracting attention to its own properties, so are examples similar in function to Coseriu's problem areas. The first area is that of archaisms. This I would equate to Coseriu's focussing on foreign words in the text, since they attract attention to their difference. Ever since Byatt wrote *Possession*, she has been classified with John Fowles (*The French Lieutenant's Woman*) and Peter Ackroyd (*Hawksmoor* and *Chatterton*) as an exponent of what Malcolm Bradbury has called "crossover fiction" (Bradbury and Cooke 1992). By "crossover fiction" Bradbury means novels or short stories and even poetry, where the discourse "crosses over" from the normal late twentieth-century language in which they are cast, to a different discourse, in these cases, an older one, an archaic one. Unlike *Possession*, which has a pair of twentieth-century protagonists and a pair of Victorian protagonists, *Angels and Insects* is not strictly crossover fiction, as it is pseudo-Victorian fiction; it starts and ends in the same discourse, with no twentieth-century intrusions. However, this pseudo-Victorian language is really only our own late twentieth-century language

with any lexical item relating to post-Victorian phenomena carefully avoided, and with a sprinkling of archaisms. These archaisms take the form, first, of referents which either have changed their designations, or which have dropped out of use, and secondly, of inversion or unusual word order. These two factors, the archaic lexical items and the disrupted word order, are textual signals which alert the reader to the fact that within the text they are different, and the reader should look for the purpose of this difference. If the translator fails to translate these words with the equivalent archaic lexical items or syntax, then the text will not signal the difference. Quite often, no archaic equivalent may be available, and the translator has come up against a real limit. As the word or phrase fades into the modern background, the effect of the difference will be lost in the translation

The following are just a few examples of this, taken from "The Conjugal Angel":

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| 1. "Lilias Papagay was of imagination all compact." (opening line, p. 163) | "Lilias Papagay tenía una imaginación desbordante." (199) |
| 2. "Conjugal" (181, 277) | "Conyugal" (220, 331) |
| 3. "nursery" (163) | "cuarto de los niños" (199) |
| 4. "shiftz" (243) | "camisón" (291) |
| 5. "sextons" (270) | "sepultureros" (323) |
| 6. "Thou", "thee", "thy" (221) | "tú", "tus" (265) |

The second problem area is that of rhetorical devices such as alliteration, homonyms and special or invented words. Just a few examples of renderings where the effect is lost are the following:

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| 1. "an appley man" (166) | "como una manzana" (202) |
| 2. "Coleridge's epithet of high praise for Shakespeare, myriad-minded" (255) | "de mente infinita" (270) |
| 3. "Jane Austen's 'loving longest'" (239) | "el de amar el mayor tiempo posible" (287) |
| 4. "long unlovely" (239) | "larga y desagradable" (287) |
| 5. "a good word, 'dottle'" (254) | "bonita palabra, 'escoria'" (203) |
| 6. "ghost, the good old English word" (264) | "espíritu, aquella palabra antigua y precisa" (315). Since the latinate form is chosen by the translator, he has to miss out the word "English". |

The third area is that of ambiguous and obscure discourse. There are sections of "The Conjugal Angel", for example, which are deliberately rather difficult to understand. These cover two types of writing, one being certain lines of the Tennyson poems, and the other is the pseudo-automatic writing in which the protagonist, Mrs Papagay, indulges. There are occasions where the translator appears baffled by the sense and prefers to give the lines a literal translation as Coseriu recommended we should do with the Holy Scriptures. Sometimes he gets away with it, but on other occasions the word-for-word translation reveals a possible lack of understanding:

1. "waking trance" (240) "despertar" (317)
2. "images of his own poetic cries of
grief" (265) "a partir de..." (317), mistranslated,
as this famous line refers to the poem
"In Memoriam" itself.
3. "after life" (269) "Su otra vida" (321)
Since this refers to the perpetuation
of the language of Dante, Thescritus
and Milton as echoes or pre-texts in
late-come texts of Keats, something
like "nueva vida" would be better.
4. "The terror of the tearing-out of life
from flesh and of the energy of love
for whatever remained when that
was gone." (274) "El terror de que a la carne le arrancaran
la vida y la energía del amor, en benefi-
cio de lo que fuera que quedara allí una
vez eso hubiera desaparecido." (327)
5. "And is my Love become the beast." "Y mi Amor es convertirme en la
bestia." (340)
The text means "Y mi Amor se ha
convertido en bestia."
6. "A life in death." (290) "La vida en brazos de la muerte."(345)
The "life" in death refers to that of
Captain Arturo Papagay, who was
given up for dead, but reappears, alive,
unlike Arthur Hallam, at the end of
the story. So perhaps the translation
should retain the indefinite article
rather than make a generalisation
through the definite article.

Whether Byatt is writing in normal twentieth-century discourse or her now familiar pseudo-Victorian, her discourse is always self-reflexive. Constant reference to quality and sound of words, to the properties of the words she has chosen through her narrators, makes life difficult for her translators.

4. *The Matisse Stories*

In her latest work, *The Matisse Stories*, Antonia Byatt continues to explore the relationship between creativity and everyday life. What is good art?, she asks; how is it made? What makes it good, how does it function and how is it used? From there comes the implication of the relation between visual and verbal art, and the comparative articulacy of the different media. She follows the example of Barthes in seeing no reason to distinguish in her writing between the fictional and the critical, and in this work brings together the fictional, the critical and the metatextual, in the knowledge that she has created a cult readership that appreciates and has come to expect this combination.

We read on the dust jacket of *The Matisse Stories* that "great art illuminates the patterns and meaning of our lives", and indeed, in the three stories that make up this volume, we see how ordinary (now contemporary) people go about their daily life, with their mind-numbing routines and with their personal icons. In this age of the cheap and easy reproduction, great art, here in the form of Matisse's paintings, may crop up unexpectedly anywhere, from a hair salon to a Chinese restaurant. Art, whether pictorial or verbal, becomes, once it has been produced and sold, the property of the consumer. There are consumers who hold it sacred and others who do not begin to understand it, they may take it for granted, or even oppose it for a certain reason. The overt and also covert and subtle power patterns in our society, which involve everybody and everything in their interplay, make no exception where art, as a commodity, is concerned. If we examine the three stories, "Medusa's Ankles", about a middle-aged literary woman's problems in a hair salon; "Art Work", where the husband and wife are artist and writer respectively, and they are both surprisingly outdone by their cleaning lady, and "The Chinese Lobster", the resolving of a problem by two middle-aged art professors in a Chinese restaurant, we can see what Byatt is saying under cover of entertaining, often very comical stories, about these three issues: art and our consumer society, visual versus verbal creativity, and changing power patterns. Although they are separate stories, they make a collective statement about life and art. How has Antonia Byatt managed to transmit through the volume an overall message? One of the principal strategies has been the use of visuals, either drawings or paintings by Matisse. The paintings on the front and back covers, plus a significant drawing at the head of each story, visually reinforces the verbal use of Matisse. These are instances of Genette's paratextuality, and they offer an intertextuality which is both of the order of the message and of the code, since they

make a statement about art. It is a practice Byatt had begun from her very first novel *Shadow of a Sun*, but which she pursued more thoroughly in *Still Life*.

If we look at the statements to be found in the intertextuality relating to the message, we discern that insinuations are present concerning the art and sexuality interface, in the stereotyped relations between men and women, because we always see woman either confined to the home or in a subordinated position. Two of the paintings reproduced show woman at home as wife or mother, an idea commented on in "Art Work" through Debbie, working for the magazine *A Woman's Place*, while her husband stays at home. The third is the *Rosy Nude*, where the female figure is at the disposition of the painter. The first drawing, *La chevelure*, 1931-32, at the head of "Medusa's Ankles", no doubt inspired a story about hair. It reveals men using women for the female attributes that are sexually attractive to men, and also shows women dependent upon men. The female protagonist, Susannah, is dependent upon her hairdresser. At the head of "Art Work", we have *L'artiste et le modèle reflétés dans le miroir*, 1937, where again, Matisse uses his model professionally, placing her in a subordinate position since he is fully clothed and she is naked. Interestingly, we see at once and together, the artist, the source of inspiration and the final art work sketched on the wall behind. This visual text informs Byatt's verbal text which in its self-consciousness about its nature as a verbal artefact, is similarly transparent. Finally, at the head of "The Chinese Lobster", we have the 1931-2 drawing *Nymphe et faune*, which portrays a faun intent upon copulating while the nymph is looking boredly away. The male protagonist in the story, Professor Diss, is accused of attempting what the faun was doing and gets into trouble. This story shows, however, how woman in today's more egalitarian society has new powers to fight back, but that she is not perfect either.

Byatt's female protagonists in all three stories, Susannah, Debbie and Peggi Nollett, have made a protest against the way our life continues to be dominated by men, and through these three and Matisse, Byatt invites the reader to consider the questions of male/female art, and the models set up by and for men and women, and more or less accepted in our changing society.

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