

Wallhead, Celia 2007: *A.S. Byatt: Essays on the Short Fiction*. Bern: Peter Lang. 234 pp. ISBN 978-3-03911-158-9

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“[T]he real world sprouted stories wherever she looked at it”, states the narrator of A.S. Byatt’s latest work, *The Children’s Book* (2009), when referring to one of its central characters, Olive Wellwood. Olive is a woman who, like many other characters in Byatt’s fiction – such as Julia Corbett in *The Game*, Christabel LaMotte in *Possession*, Agatha Mond in *A Whistling Woman*, or Cicely Fox in ‘Raw Material’, to cite just a few – is depicted in terms of her professional or aesthetic engagement with the arts of writing and storytelling. Olive’s ability to transform the ‘real world’ into ‘stories’ ‘wherever she looked at it’ can be seen as a defining trait of Byatt herself, who in the course of her fifty-year long writing career has displayed an absolute mastery of the narrative genre. Indeed, apart from being praised as a lucid and influential literary critic, and together with the acknowledgement of her poetic talent as shown in the pieces embedded in *Possession* (1990), Byatt has skilfully combined novel- and short-story- writing as part of her creative project. Dealing with such diverse and complex themes as authorship, the verbal and the visual, myth, ageing, geology and memory, among many others, and resorting to intertextuality, biblical and pictorial motifs, or fairy tale conventions, Byatt’s stories and novellas testify to her ability to explore the aesthetic potential of short fiction.

The richness and variety of this creative exploration is the focus of analysis of Celia Wallhead’s *A.S. Byatt: Essays on the Short Fiction* (henceforth *Byatt: Essays*), a detailed and enlightening study of Byatt’s engagement with the short story genre. Author of a great number of articles, book chapters and conference papers on Byatt’s fiction, Wallhead is an internationally renowned Byatt-scholar who already in 1999 published *The Old, the New and the Metaphor. A Critical Study of the Novels of A.S. Byatt*, one of the earliest monographs fully devoted to Byatt’s novels, from *The Shadow of the Sun* (1964) to *Babel Tower* (1996). In *Byatt: Essays*, Wallhead offers a careful examination of representative texts from each volume of Byatt’s short narratives, including her five collections of stories (1987-2003) and the novellas in *Angels & Insects* (1992).

The arrangement of the study, beginning with the analysis of ‘Sugar’ – from *Sugar & Other Stories* (1987) – and closing with the joint exploration of ‘Baglady’ and ‘Raw Material’ – from, respectively, *Elementals. Stories of Fire and Ice* (1998) and *Little Black Book of Stories* (2003) – has the same chronological structure as previous monographs on Byatt, such as Kathleen Coyne Kelly’s *A.S. Byatt* (1996) and Jane Campbell’s *A.S. Byatt and the Heliotropic Imagination* (2004), although these two studies do not focus exclusively on Byatt’s short fiction. This structure offers the advantage of giving a clear picture of both the recurrence of Byatt’s concerns and her exploration of new lines, to the point of anticipating some of the possible topics in her next short story collection (21).

Despite some imbalance in the length of chapters, with short chapters like the second and third ones contrasting sharply with the length of chapters four and five,

*Byatt: Essays* displays two main assets. First, although it focuses primarily on Byatt's short fiction, the study discovers revealing links with other writings by Byatt, both critical – such as her essay 'Memory and the Making of Fiction', or *Imagining Characters. Six Conversations about Women Writers* – and fictional, including her early novels *The Shadow of the Sun* and *The Game* (1967), together with different volumes of the *Quartet* (1978-2002).

Secondly, Wallhead's monograph adopts a different approach for each of the texts examined, applying critical concepts and tools such as intertextuality, schemata, lexical analysis or generic considerations. In this sense, after an introductory section which provides the theoretical background of Byatt's formation as a short story writer and critic, the volume opens with a chapter that explores the title narrative of *Sugar...* in the light of its dominant schemata, following the model offered by Guy Cook in *Discourse and Literature: The Interplay of Form and Mind* (1994). Through the discovery of the main schemata in the story, which fall into the two major categories of 'family' and 'creativity', Wallhead convincingly argues that the key themes of 'Sugar' are the true / false paradigm in narration and the metaphorical evocation of artistic creativity. Therefore, this chapter goes beyond the usual analysis of the story in terms of its first-person narrator and autobiographical elements, or of the allusions to Van Gogh – whose vital and creative experiences figure prominently in Byatt's novel *Still Life* and in her essay 'Van Gogh, Death and Summer' – and focuses instead on the complex interaction of truth and fact, fiction and lies, as well as on the metaphorical relationship of sweet-making to writing and creativity.

Significantly, metaphor and creativity occupy a central position in the second chapter of Wallhead's study, devoted to the novella 'Morpho Eugenia', from *Angels & Insects*. Set in the Victorian period, 'Morpho Eugenia' and its companion piece 'The Conjugal Angel' discuss divine Creation and human creativity, but from different points of view. If 'The Conjugal Angel' foregrounds intertextuality, 'Morpho Eugenia' gives prevalence to formal aspects like binary oppositions and semantic relations, which are explored by means of a lexical analysis of the novella. Already in *The Old, the New, and the Metaphor*, Wallhead had demonstrated the aptness of a lexically-based study to examine the relevance of metaphor in Byatt's fiction, and the second chapter of *Byatt: Essays* further proves this point by revealing two major lexically-based strategies to underline creativity in 'Morpho Eugenia'. Those strategies are the profusion of lexical items denoting creation and causation, and the use of taxonomies and listing, which, in their seemingly inclusive but actually selective nature, point to how "writing fiction is a question of selection, that is, decisions to include or exclude, some conscious and some unconscious" (54).

The nature of those decisions is interrogated in the third chapter of *Byatt: Essays*, which apart from addressing poetic creation and writer-reader relations in 'The Conjugal Angel', scrutinises above all the intertextual embedding of Tennyson's *In Memoriam* in the novella. "My books are thick with the presence of other books", acknowledges Byatt (Wachtel 1993: 77), as she weaves an intricate web of intertextual connections in all her novels and short stories. Commonly associated with the complexity of *Possession*, intertextuality is indeed one of the defining traits of Byatt's production as a whole, which enters into a fruitful dialogue not only with literary works of all times, but also with other arts and fields of knowledge, including painting, entomology, genetics and neuroscience.

The centrality of the intertextual practice in Byatt's fiction is highlighted in Wallhead's study, which devotes several chapters to intertextuality in the short stories from different perspectives: chapter three explores the uses and effects of the intertextual presence of Tennyson's masterpiece in the second narrative of *Angels & Insects*, comparing the factual and fictional sides of the characters in the story and in the poet's real life, a strategy already employed by Campbell (2004: 96-103) in her analysis of 'Precipice-Encurled', from *Sugar...*; chapter seven investigates the recurrence of the biblical figure of Jael in several nineteenth and twentieth century literary texts, including Byatt's 'Jael', from *Elementals*. Likewise, chapters four and six foreground the richness of interdisciplinary connections in Byatt's fiction, as they analyse, respectively, the relationship between the verbal and the visual in *The Matisse Stories* (1993) and the imaginative rendering of Velázquez's painting *Cristo en casa de Marta y María* in Byatt's story of the same title (1998).

As "a past mistress in the art of intertextuality and polyphony" (61), Byatt has shown throughout her career a skilful mastery of multiple strategies of textual and discursive cross-fertilisation. In this sense, apart from resorting to practices that correspond to the five categories of Gérard Genette's transtextuality, the writer has examined the potential of other intertextual devices, including both the recurrence of literary titles – with, for instance, chapters in her 1978 novel *The Virgin in the Garden* being entitled 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' or 'Women in Love' – and the transposition of literary figures, or interfigurality. Coined by Wolfgang G. Müller (1991: 101), the concept of *interfigurality* refers to the development of links with already existing characters, as when Byatt gives the name of Artagall to one of the protagonists in the narration inserted in the quartet, or when a marginal character of 'Morpho Eugenia' appears again in 'The Conjugal Angel'.

The inspiring force exerted by interfigurality is amply illustrated in chapter seven of the volume, which traces the presence of the figure of Jael and the biblical episode of her violent murder of Sisera in different novels and short stories, from Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* to Byatt's 'Jael', including as well Herman Melville's 'The Bell-Tower', George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* and Sara Maitland's *Daughter of Jerusalem*. Wallhead discusses Byatt's treatment of Jael in the light of the critical assessment of the story by Mieke Bal – in *Murder and Difference* and *Death and Dissymmetry* (1988) – and in comparison with earlier rewritings of the episode. By doing so, she proves how the protagonist of Byatt's 'Jael' resembles her counterpart in Maitland's novel, as both demand equality with men, while being at the same time closer to Brontë's and Eliot's versions in their use of the parallel with the biblical character to reveal psychological complexities. Surprisingly, however, little attention is paid to Byatt's skilful use of the narrative voice in her story.

Above all, Wallhead clearly explains, 'Jael' is a narrative about memory and the danger of cultural loss, two crucial issues for Byatt, who in her interview with Boyd Tonkin emphasized her feeling of loneliness when noticing how the younger generations are unable to recognise biblical rhythms (Tonkin 1999: 17-18). Significantly, in this same interview, the author expresses her delight in "that element in the visual which completely defeats language" (Tonkin 1999: 17). This fascination is explored by Wallhead in the fourth and sixth chapters of her monograph, which demonstrate Byatt's extraordinary ability as "a painterly, writerly writer" (Kelly 1996: vii). Chapter four focuses not just on one individual story but on the whole collection of *The Matisse*

*Stories*, analysing the main themes of its three narratives – art and the consumer society, visual versus verbal creativity, and changing power patterns – in connection with the intertextual dialogue with Matisse’s paintings and aesthetic principles. Apart from discovering how the stories in the volume make a collective statement about art and life, Wallhead demonstrates the variety and wide-ranging quality of Byatt’s intertextual strategies, which are examined in terms of Genette’s seminal model of textual interdependence in *Palimpsestes. La littérature au second degré* (1982).

From intertextuality to architextuality, Genette’s five categories of transtextuality are successfully applied to the interplay between word and image in *The Matisse Stories*, whose paratextual richness had already attracted Michael Worton’s attention in his contribution to *Essays on the Fiction of A.S. Byatt. Imagining the Real* (2001: 24). According to Wallhead, intertextuality here fulfils a function similar to metaphor, which can be associated not only with the key role of metaphor and creativity in ‘Morpho Eugenia’, as dealt with in the second chapter of *Byatt: Essays*, but also with the use of fire as a metaphor for creativity in *Elementals*. This collection is analysed in chapter six of Wallhead’s study, which pays special attention to the closing story in the volume, ‘Christ in the House of Martha and Mary’, explored as a verbal account of the pictorial creation of Velázquez’s *Cristo en casa de Marta y María* (c. 1618). The picture, an early masterpiece usually classified as a religious still life, was chosen by Byatt for her contribution to the *National Gallery News* in November 1993, where the author offered some reflections on the structure and components of the painting that are echoed in her ekphrastic story.

The narrative, as Wallhead contends, shows points in common with the themes of *The Matisse Stories*, as well as with ‘The Conjugal Angel’, since the recuperation of a version of Tennyson in this novella is paralleled by the fictional recreation of young Velázquez in ‘Christ...’. The imagining of the situation behind the compositional process of the picture, Wallhead convincingly argues, allows Byatt to ponder over the themes of painting, wisdom, power, active and passive attitudes and, above all, the nature of artistry, identified by Worton as the main topic of the story, together with “identity, and the need to accept oneself in order to produce truly beautiful works” (Worton 2001: 27). Artistic creativity confers an iconic value on Velázquez’s “pursuit of the truthful rendering of visual appearance” (162), and so the lesson of Byatt’s story is that “great art transforms the prosaicness of the sign into the layered exclusiveness which distinguishes symbol from sign” (168).

The investigation of the transformative power of art in this narrative is contextualised in the light of Byatt’s theoretical ideas about the short story genre, as reflected in her critical work of edition of *The Oxford Book of English Short Stories* (1998), which came out the same year as the collection of ‘Christ...’. In this way, *Byatt: Essays* approaches the author’s engagement with the short story in the critical vein, too: apart from dealing with Byatt’s narratological assumptions both in the introduction and in the opening section of chapter six, Wallhead devotes two chapters to the writer’s treatment of generic conventions in stories from *The Djinn in the Nightingale’s Eye* (1994), *Elementals*, and *Little...*

On the one hand, chapter five discusses Byatt’s relationship with the fairy tale genre in *The Djinn...*, which is analysed within the theoretical framework of Jack Zipes’s works on the short story. Like the chapter on *The Matisse Stories*, this fifth chapter does not focus solely on a single narrative, but studies instead the whole collection, providing an overview of the five tales that make up the volume and paying special attention to the

title story. Wallhead addresses thus important aspects of each tale – such as the connections between ‘The Glass Coffin’ and its framing narrative, *Possession*, or the allegorical overtones of ‘Dragon’s Breath’, among others – while concentrating particularly on the protagonist of ‘The Djinn in the Nightingale’s Eye’. As Wallhead explains, the fact that this character, Gillian Perholt, is a narratologist enables Byatt to achieve a two-fold goal: to theorise on the art of fiction and to offer a wide range of embedded stories, all of them related to the themes of narrative power and satisfying closure.

On the other hand, chapter eight of Wallhead’s monograph examines another subgenre of short fiction, the Gothic tale, in two narratives that share the depiction of helpless, threatened female characters: ‘Baglady’, from *Elementals*, and ‘Raw Material’, from *Little...*, a collection left aside in previous studies, including Campbell’s. Tracing the persistence of the Gothic in the twentieth century, as well as the pervasiveness of Gothic elements in Byatt’s production, the analysis of these stories is relegated to the last section of the chapter, which after the deep and multi-faceted study of the other stories in Wallhead’s monograph, leaves the reader somewhat unsatisfied. In any case, the author of *Byatt: Essays* discovers how the unifying theme of Byatt’s latest collection revolves around the Gothic, understood as terror aroused in the reader, and confusion of good and evil. Moreover, the story from this volume, ‘Raw Material’, epitomises the writer’s lifelong interest in the topics of creativity, writing and art, which are identified in the conclusion of Wallhead’s study as central and recurrent issues in Byatt’s fiction, from ‘Sugar’ to ‘Raw Material’.

This conclusion suggests that the key to the success and permanence of Byatt’s stories lies in her ability to fictionalise timeless questions, and eagerly anticipates “if not ... another half century, at least ... a few more decades of great writing” (224). Indeed, Byatt’s short fiction endorses the author’s own view of storytelling in her essay collection *On Histories and Stories* (2000), where she describes it as “intrinsic to biological time, which we cannot escape. ... Stories are like genes, they keep part of us alive after the ending of our story” (Byatt 2000: 166). Byatt’s skill in meeting the human need for storytelling, as she transforms the ‘real world’ into ‘stories’ ‘wherever she looks at it’, is foregrounded in Wallhead’s lucid and well-informed monograph. All in all, *Byatt: Essays* emerges as a valuable critical tool that neither Byatt-specialists nor those interested in contemporary British fiction, or in the Anglo-American short story, should miss.

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Received 4 April 2011

Revised version accepted 12 August 2011

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