Ana Gabriela Macedo

**A. S. Byatt’s Storytelling Ancestors and Narrations of Science**

Headed towards death, language turns back upon itself; it encounters something like a mirror; and to stop this death which would stop it, it possesses but a single power: that of giving birth to its own image in a play of mirrors that has no limits. [...] A work of language is the body of language crossed by death in order to open this infinite space where doubles reverberate.

Michel Foucault, ‘Language to Infinity’ (1977)

Stories are like genes, they keep part of us alive after the end of our story [...].


Ventriloquism, liminality, laminations, collage, and connections are expressions frequently used by Antonia Susan Byatt in her fiction, essays, and interviews about the role of language in naming the world. Behind the writer, she argues, the avid reader is always omnipresent, driven by intense curiosity: ‘It goes to something very primitive about being a reader, because my early reading was the thing that most excited me, more than my life, my friends and my family’.¹

Far from being a ‘passive pleasure’, reading triggers an interior recollection, an intense concentration ‘quietly and not aggressively’ achieved, close to Keats’ formulation of ‘negative capability’ and Eliot’s description of the writer’s creative process. In ‘Individual Talent’ Eliot claims that the poet’s mind is ‘a receptacle for seizing and storing up numberless feelings, phrases, images, which remain there until all the particles which can unite to form a new compound are present together’.² The ‘business of the poet’, therefore, requires a particular kind of concentration which is not necessarily identified with tranquility (since it does not happen ‘consciously or of deliberation’) but achieves something new

---

resulting from the concentration in which ‘impressions and experiences combine in peculiar and unexpected ways’.³

Farce, parody, and pastiche are fundamental features of Byatt’s poetics, deeply imbued with the notion that reading is a most reverential act. The perfect reading was accomplished by Borges in the short story ‘Pierre Menard, autor del Quijote’ (1939), in which the protagonist rewrites Don Quixote word by word in the twentieth century (a method Borges claims to adopt with all his favourite writers).

By arguing that the novel is a comic genre, Byatt means that it thrives on a perception of reality constructed in opposition to tragedy. As for her own capacity to create humorous situations, self-ironically she declares: ‘I always think of myself as a person not with great quick verbal wit, but as a rather stolid Quakerly person’.⁴

The writer is always a fabulator, fabricating stories even when the novel is biographical or autobiographical, such as Virginia Woolf’s Orlando: A Biography (1928), the allegory of the ‘new biography’ originating from what Woolf defined as a ‘perpetual marriage of granite and rainbow’, or metafictional, as John Fowles’s The French Lieutenant’s Woman (1969). Byatt also cites the short story ‘Sugar’, her only autobiographical fiction, in which it is almost impossible to draw a straightforward distinction between fiction and reality:

It was as true as it could be. It left out quite a lot of things that could have been put in that would have made it more true. It says that, ‘I select and confect’ (I got this perfect word ‘confection’ from my mother’s stories and my grandfather’s profession which was making sugared sweets) but it didn’t consciously say anything I thought was untrue.⁵

Possession, the novel for which she was awarded the Booker Prize in 1990, thrives on a finely woven web of scholarly quotations and parodies of Victorian poems and letters. The writing of Possession is thus not necessarily what Fredric Jameson would call a nostalgic act, but rather a loving one, involving a deferred passion for the numerous texts and authors named in her essays ‘Fathers’, ‘Forefathers’ and ‘Ancestors’.⁶ For Byatt being a writer entails a narcissistic and self-referential attitude and a desire to experiment with genres, rhetorical strategies, and narrative processes. The very word possession thus acquires a literal and a metaphoric sense, which the author, eager to achieve a multifaceted view, incessantly dissects and analyses as if it were a true, scientific experiment. The metafictional process defined by Linda Hutcheon as a ‘representation of

---

³ Ibid., pp. 42–43.
⁴ Franken, ‘An Interview with A. S. Byatt’.
writing as representation\(^7\) is the core of Byatt’s labyrinthine novel. Her vertiginous mode of writing is described by Frederica Potter, the protagonist of *Babel Tower* (1996)\(^8\) and a surrogate author:

Laminations. Cut-ups are part of it. It is a form that is made partly by cutting up, breaking up, rearranging things that already exist. […] The point of words is that they have to have already been used, they have not to be new, they have to be only re-arrangements, in order to have meaning.\(^9\)

Byatt enunciates a narrative strategy which, although grounded on memory and experience, is not to be confused with a nostalgic mode or a mere craving for the past. It is the avowal of a contemporary poetics, acutely in tune with the disruption of the present mode of existence and, at the same time, well aware of the limitations and the fractured perception of reality that any writer can give. Much of contemporary literature dwells on this paradox. Byatt’s statement represents a metaphorical coming to terms with both the aesthetics of realism and postmodernism, creating a self-reflexive ambivalence that is constantly restaged in her writing.\(^10\)

While discussing in detail the genesis and creative process of her novel *Possession*, she offers illuminating clues about the effects of reverberation achieved through her rewriting of fairy tales and mythic narratives. ‘Laminations’ are here clearly defined as a palimpsest drawing on pastiche, *mise en abyme*, and self-referentiality:

My fairy stories are postmodern, in that they reflect on the nature of narrative, and of their own narrative in particular. Narration is seen as the goal as well as the medium – the heroines tend to be narrators, not only the Old Lady and the Eldest Princess, who cure the creatures with a fairytale version of Freud’s ‘Talking Cure’, but the youngest princess, too, who is given a Thread by the Old Woman, to follow out of the orchard. *I associate weaving and embroidery and tapestry with the art of narrative*, too – the Tailor sews, and Eva in ‘Dragons’ Breath’ makes carpets. My narrators, Gode, Christabel, Matty, Matty’s creation, Miss Mouchet, *narrators within narrations*, resemble each other as self-conscious narrators. But whereas much post-modern, self-reflexive narrative seems somehow designed to show that all narrations are two-dimensional and papery,

---

that all motifs are interchangeable coinage, what I believe, and hope to have shown, is that the tale is always stronger than the teller."\(^{11}\)

Byatt openly exhibits her creative technique in a relentless self-examination, a sort of ‘psycho-drama’, as if to leave no doubts concerning the awareness of the symbiotic nature of her own creative process.

Two apparently contradictory, but actually complementary issues epitomise the essays and lectures in On Histories and Stories. Selected Essays (2000). In ‘Old Tales, New Forms’ she claims:

I said earlier that storytelling was to do with death and biological time, with our own beginnings, middle and ends. I said also that stories, and story-webs, often carry within themselves images of infinity which contradict the linear narrative. There is a particular group of images of infinity, besides tentacles and spider-webs, that suggest a bad infinity, a trap. These are mirrors, which go with one aspect of death.\(^{12}\)

In ‘Ancestors’ she associates the narrative technique adopted by George Eliot (one of Byatt’s crucial ‘ancestors’) with that of ‘natural histories’, a term she gets from Eliot herself. Byatt focuses on the design, the composition, and the ‘artistic coherence’ of the novels The Mill on the Floss (1860) and Middlemarch: A Study of Provincial Life (1871–1872), to conclude that Eliot observes the human community ‘with a Darwinian naturalist’s eye’.\(^{13}\) Eliot’s ‘natural histories’ emphasize the ‘gradual operation of natural laws which is her image of time and the comparison, and relation, of human beings to the creatures […]’. Byatt proposes that Eliot sensed avant la lettre what DNA shows – ‘that all living forms are quite closely related’.\(^{14}\)

Stories, like mirrors, suggest, or rather, fabricate infinity (while they posit death as a paradoxical limit); observation of human nature in our post-Darwinian world requires a ‘naturalist’s eye’, which produces major effects on the form and content of much current fiction, such as the development of a new kind of ‘historical novel’, despite a slow process of ‘resistance’ and ‘adaptation’. John Fowles’s The French Lieutenant’s Woman, Graham Swift’s Waterland (1983) and Ever After (1992), Julian Barnes’s A History of the World in 10/12 Chapters (1989) and Ian McEwan’s Enduring Love (1997) provide outstanding examples of the genre.

---

The new paradigm of the intricacy of ‘form and subject’ in novel writing is discussed in detail in the already mentioned essay ‘Ancestors’:

Recent discoveries about the great extent to which DNA patterns are shared by all creatures have perhaps changed writers’ ideas of the natural world, and have certainly modified my choice of difference as the important thing to look at.\(^\text{15}\)

Byatt’s obsession for detail, multi-perspectival analysis, re-proposition of the subject and object of her writing, and almost excruciating addiction to sources and cross-references make her writing not only an easy target of ‘the post-modern critic’, but also a vivid demonstration of the case she argues for. Evidence can be found in most of her work, from Possession (1990) to Babel Tower (1996) and the Biographer’s Tale (1999). The novella ‘Morpho Eugenia’ included in Angels and Insects (1992) illustrates the (im)possibility of the dialogue between science and religion, embodied in the text through an explorer and naturalist’s view of the world and that of a clergyman and creationist’s. The themes of instinct, sexual drive, and desire that traverse this text are crucial allegories of a more subtle argumentation, concerning an entomologist’s belief that the concepts of beauty and perfection pertain to the ‘natural’ world order and not to a divine plan or jurisdiction. This topical confrontation of the world of instincts, reason, common sense, and emotions is shared by many of the writers whom Byatt chooses to name her ‘ancestors’, such as Eliot and Thomas Hardy, or contemporaries such as Fowles, McEwan, Swift or J. M. Coetzee. In ‘Ancestors’ Byatt makes a claim against a ‘nostalgia for existential crisis’ and states instead her praise for scientific curiosity, while she declares (with some theatrical pose): ‘[...] I write about scientists because they do not spend their time deconstructing the world, or quibbling theologically about abstract terms of value’.\(^\text{16}\)

In the tale ‘The Djinn in the Nightingale’s Eye’ from Five Fairy Stories (1994) Gillian Perholt, a contemporary narratologist, herself a version of Chaucer’s Patient Griselda in The Clerk’s Tale, Shakespeare’s Hermione in The Winter’s Tale, and ultimately a parodic mirror image of the author/narrator of this story, like Scheherazade weaves her own life in the thread of the story she tells.\(^\text{17}\) The labyrinthine plot – achieved again through a complex series of ‘laminations’ – is thus not just about ‘character and destiny and sex in the folktale’, as the narrator impersonally flaunts, but more poignantly about ‘the lives of women in the frame story’, as she adds in a more subdued tone.

Byatt’s defence of reading as a greedy practice and the addictive pleasures of language allow for deciphering ‘The Greatest Story Ever Told’, devoted to The

\(^{15}\) Ibid., p. 80, my emphasis.

\(^{16}\) Ibid., p. 79.

Thousand and One Nights and included as the last chapter of On Histories and Stories. Here she develops a narcissistic cross-reference to Scheherazade:

This story has everything a tale should have. Sex, death, treachery, vengeance, magic, humour, warmth, wit, surprise and a happy ending. It appears to be a story against women, but leads to the appearance of one of the strongest and cleverest heroines in world literature, who triumphs because she is endlessly inventive and keeps her head. The Thousand and One Nights are stories about storytelling – without ever ceasing to be stories about love and life and death and money and food and other human necessities. Narration is as much part of human nature as breath and the circulation of the blood.\(^1^8\)

Byatt dedicates the next few pages of this essay to prove her argument. She claims that storytelling, often thought of as a ‘vulgar’ or primitive form of narrative, is a major literary form, since it is ‘intrinsic to biological time, which we cannot escape’;\(^1^9\) and therefore crucial to life. ‘Storytelling in general, and the Thousand and One Nights in particular, consoles us for endings with endless new beginnings.’\(^2^0\) Like Scheherazade, we live coping with the imminence of death penalty, and the function of narrative is to create the illusion of life, ‘a false eternity, a circular time-loop’,\(^2^1\) and adjourn death, because ‘stories are like genes, they keep part of us alive after the end of our story’.\(^2^2\) There have been many storytellers of perfect or almost perfect stories, who have reshaped Scheherazade’s stories, nurturing humankind with that lure of life. ‘Scheherazade’s tales have proliferated, like germ-cells, in many literatures’,\(^2^3\) in Ovid’s Metamorphoses (8 AD), Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales (end of the 14th century), Boccaccio’s Decameron (1350–1351/1353), Cervantes’ Don Quixote (volume I published in 1805, volume II in 1815), Jean Potocki’s Saragossa Manuscript (1805–1813), in the fiction of Salman Rushdie and Naguib Mahfouz, both under penalty of death for the very power engendered by their stories; in the novels by Marcel Proust, constantly postponing his death for the sake of writing an endless book. ‘Narrate or die is the imperative’\(^2^4\) for Proust’s narrator as well as for Scheherazade. In America, first Edgar Allan Poe, later John Barth ‘have been tempted to write the Thousand-and-second Tale’;\(^2^5\) Italo Calvino and Jorge Luis Borges (the closest of all to Byatt) conjure up ‘an illusion of inexhaustibility’.\(^2^6\)

\(^1^9\) Ibid., p. 166.
\(^2^0\) Ibid., ivi.
\(^2^1\) Ibid., p. 168.
\(^2^2\) Ibid., p. 166.
\(^2^3\) Ibid., p. 167.
\(^2^4\) Ibid., p. 170.
\(^2^5\) Ibid., p. 168.
\(^2^6\) Ibid., ivi.
Byatt ends her essay by recollecting a night different from all others, called ‘Scheherazade 2001’:

During the bombardment of Sarajevo in 1994 a group of theatre workers in Amsterdam commissioned tales, from different European writers, to be read aloud, simultaneously, in theatres in Sarajevo itself and all over Europe, every Friday until the fighting ended. This project pitted storytelling against destruction, imaginative life against real death. It may not have saved lives but it was a form of living energy. 27

Storytelling is thus a form of ‘living energy’ against stale life, death, war, and destruction, just like the blood circulating in human veins is a pledge of life. Byatt often uses the antinomy ‘living energy’ and ‘stopped energy’ to signify the human struggle for survival in adversity, where ice, cold, and numbness are both metaphors and physical symptoms of ‘ill health’ opposed to vivaciousness, luminosity, and prodigality. ‘The Djinn in the Nightingale’s Eye’ is a perfect illustration of that belief, which finds numerous reverberations in various other tales and fairy stories of hers, such as Elementals: Stories of Fire and Ice (1999). Scheherazade’s Thousand and One Nights is in this sense truly paradigmatic, since through the power of her storytelling she both creates life and defers death, which again explains why her infectious stories ‘have proliferated, like germ-cells, in many literatures’, as Byatt maintains.

‘Scheherazade 2001’, the episode narrated by Byatt in the essay tellingly named ‘The Greatest Story Ever Told’, stands as a new testimony to the endless vitality of Scheherazade’s tales, their never-ending power of cross-fertilization and ‘contamination’. A true reinvention of the power of narration, ephemeral and utopian, as Borges suggests, but not, for that reason, less effective:

I know of an uncouth region whose librarians repudiate the vain and superstitious custom of finding a meaning in books and equate it with that of finding a meaning in dreams or in the chaotic lines of one’s palm. […] They admit that the inventors of this writing imitated the twenty five natural symbols, but maintain that this application is accidental and that the books signify nothing in themselves. This dictum, we shall see, is not entirely fallacious. 28

Circularity and permanent movement evoke ‘images of infinity which contradict the linear narrative’ 29 and potentially open up a ‘babelean’ space of transgression and freedom, a notion constantly explored by Byatt. In that labyrinthine space the rules of language defy death, silence, and timelessness, as noted by Michel Foucault in the essay ‘Language to Infinity’:

27 Ibid., p. 171.
Writing so as not to die, as Blanchot said, or perhaps even speaking so as not to die is a task undoubtedly as old as the word. The most fateful decisions are inevitably suspended during the course of a story. We know that discourse has the power to arrest the flight of an arrow in a recess of time, in the space proper to it.30

Bibliography

