

Twentieth-
Century
Literature



The Double Voice of Metaphor: A. S. Byatt's "Morpho Eugenia"

Author(s): Heidi Hansson

Reviewed work(s):

Source: *Twentieth Century Literature*, Vol. 45, No. 4 (Winter, 1999), pp. 452-466

Published by: [Hofstra University](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/441947>

Accessed: 05/12/2012 13:03

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Hofstra University is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Twentieth Century Literature*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

The Double Voice of Metaphor: A. S. Byatt's "Morpho Eugenia"

HEIDI HANSSON

Analogy is a slippery tool.

—A. S. Byatt (100)

The double voice of postmodern fiction presents a challenge because it requires that we question the way we read and interpret not only postmodern literature but also literature as a whole.¹ This doubleness is particularly noticeable in works that openly display their affiliation with generic conventions or older works, such as J. M. Coetzee's *Foe* (1986), which rewrites *Robinson Crusoe*, Peter Ackroyd's *Hawkmoor* (1985), which is structured like a detective story, or A. S. Byatt's *Possession* (1990), Lindsay Clarke's *The Chymical Wedding* (1989), John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969), and Susan Sontag's *The Volcano Lover* (1992), which all build on romance conventions. Such doubleness resembles allegory, insofar as allegory defines the moment when one text is read through the lens of another (Owens pt. 1, 68). By thus allying themselves with previous texts in their genres and by fusing conventional and postmodern narrative strategies, these literary hybrids destabilize our interpretations of traditional works, and, at least in the case of the postmodern romances, manage both to re-read their tradition and revitalize its twentieth-century appearance.² Thus the multiple narrative voices, the open contradictions, and the consistent resistance to totalizing answers in a postmodern romance like *Possession* can be seen as continuing the allegorical mode of the "high" romances of the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance, as questioning the apparent uniformity of women's popular romances, and as restoring those complex and sophisticated qualities that formerly characterized the romance but seem to have disappeared from its twentieth-century manifestations.

Even though *Possession* in its parodies of scholars influenced by French feminism and Lacanian psychoanalysis contains a fair amount of critique of poststructuralist and postmodern attitudes, it signals its own postmodernity through devices like fluctuating narrative perspectives, paradox, ambiguity, and self-reflexivity. The short stories in Byatt's *The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye* (1994) can also be categorized as postmodern fictions, especially through the inclusion of magic and fairy-tale structures in apparently realistic tales, and the disjunctive narrative style of *Babel Tower* (1996) is another example of Byatt's interest in postmodern literary techniques. Works like these, which openly display their postmodern links, need to be approached in a way that can acknowledge the multiple meanings produced. Works that at least on the surface look like straightforward narratives might appear to be another matter. But are they? Consider the novella "Morpho Eugenia" in Byatt's *Angels and Insects*. In contrast to *Possession*, "Morpho Eugenia" is firmly set in the past, and there is no visible twentieth-century perspective in the telling. The story is mainly told by an omniscient narrator, and even though it is interspersed with fictional texts ostensibly written by the various characters in the novella, these do not represent different voices and shifting perspectives to the extent they do in *Possession*.

"Morpho Eugenia" opens like a women's historical romance and continues like a Victorian novel about love, marriage, society's expectations, nineteenth-century hypocrisy, social injustices, Darwin, and religion. Because the stories in *Angels and Insects* are set in the 1860s and 1870s and deal with Victorian concerns, reviewers have described the diptych as "resolutely mid-Victorian in tone and content" (Hughes 49), and A. S. Byatt as "a Victorianist Iris Murdoch" (Butler). The postmodern connection is consequently overlooked. One reviewer, however, sees continuities between the Victorian novel and postmodernism when he refers to Byatt as a "postmodern Victorian" who finds the grounds of her postmodernity in "an earnest attempt to get back before the moderns and revive a Victorian project that has never been allowed to come to completion" (Levenson 41). Like the great nineteenth-century novelists, Byatt is a storyteller who continues the Victorian tradition of describing the individual in society, but it does not automatically follow that she exercises her storyteller's authority to present total world visions.³ "Morpho Eugenia" appears to be double-voiced only in its extensive use of analogy in comparing the world of the Victorian household with that of insects, but even though the narrative seems stable enough, a struggle is going on within the text itself, so that at times narrative and language seem to be at cross-purposes. To read the novella as a postmodern romance—or as a postmodern Victorian novel, if such a hybrid can exist—helps to account for the ambiguities this gives rise to.

The prominence of comparisons, analogies, and metaphors places the novella in the tradition of allegorical writing, a quintessentially medieval or Renaissance genre. But allegory is also characteristic of postmodernism (Owens pt. 2, 64). In Deborah Madsen's words, "[a]llegory flourishes at times of intense cultural disruption, when the most authoritative texts of the culture are subject to reevaluation and reassessment" (135). Such reassessment takes place when a photographer like Sherrie Levine takes pictures of famous photographs or when Coetzee's *Foe*, Marina Warner's *Indigo* (1992), and Peter Carey's *Jack Maggs* (1998) reappraise *Robinson Crusoe*, *The Tempest*, and *Great Expectations*. Works like these stand in an allegorical relationship to the subjects they appropriate, but it is not altogether clear which of the works involved represents the literal and which the figurative meaning of an allegory. The hierarchical relation between the texts is unstable, since it is equally possible to read the modern works through the filters of their predecessors as the reverse.

A characteristic of the late twentieth century, as well as of postmodern literature, is that certainties are continuously called into question, and thus allegory becomes a suitable form for expression. The model is certainly not alien to postmodernism: on the contrary, allegory is a classic example of double discourse, as well as a textual mode that—like postmodern literature—avoids establishing a center within the text, because in allegory the unity of the work is provided by something that is not explicitly there. This last point is where postmodern allegories differ from traditional ones, however, because most allegories depend on the existence of a recognized and more or less universally accepted frame of reference outside the text. But where, for example, a Protestant allegorist like John Bunyan could presuppose his reader's knowledge of the Bible, the postmodern allegorist can take no referent for granted. As a consequence, postmodern allegory is notoriously unstable, and a conventional allegorical interpretation of a work like "Morpho Eugenia" becomes impossible, because no single key can explain the meaning of the analogies.

The question is: who is in charge of decoding the allegory? In contrast to symbols, which are generally taken to transcend the sign and express universal truths, allegories and metaphors divide the sign, exposing its arbitrariness (Smith 106). Thus the allegorical impulse in contemporary literature can be seen as a reflection of the postmodern emphasis on the reader as coproducer, since it invites the reader's active participation in meaning making. But allegories can also be manifestations of authorial power: relentlessly didactic works that resolutely direct the reader's interpretations. Viewed in this way, allegory is reactionary (Smith 120). If allegory requires the presence of a fixed, culture-specific, author-controlled referent, the no-

tion of a postmodern allegorical form is contradictory indeed. If, on the other hand, allegories serve to destabilize the relation between word and meaning, between form and essence, such texts become very suitable expressions of the postmodern distrust of accurate representation. In "Morpho Eugenia" the reader can discover several meanings in dialogue with each other, and the hierarchical relation between a monologic "message" and the allegorical form that obscures it collapses. This is precisely the mark of postmodern allegory.

The comparisons between, for instance, people and insects in Byatt's novella are quite explicit, so much so that one reviewer accuses Byatt of "applying the message with a trowel" (Lesser), and another sighs that "she follows the reader around with a cowhorn, instructing him in thought and reaction, rather than rendering an action and letting the reader enjoy the illusion of freedom in his engagement with the text" (Tate 60). The description of the clash between an aristocratic society and a new, work-oriented one seems to invite a political reading, and the feminization of the insect metaphors suggests a reading in terms of gender struggle. But the apparent transparency of the comparisons is illusory, and the meanings of the analogies remain unsteady. Byatt uses common, even trite, metaphors, but she uses the same metaphor in several different ways, which draws attention to language itself and means that readers will have to reevaluate their interpretation of the text over and over again. Both the figurative—or the hackneyed—meanings and the literal meanings are present at the same time, and so metaphors and analogies become more than embellishments: they become tools for emphasizing the double voice that is an integral part of language.

Metaphors are indeed highly appropriate postmodern devices, because they are obvious vehicles for ambiguity. A living metaphor always carries dual meanings, the literal or sentence meaning and the conveyed or utterance meaning. In "Morpho Eugenia" the strain between the figurative and the literal meaning is constantly underscored, since ants and butterflies appear both as insects and as metaphors for human behavior. As Brian McHale puts it, the hesitation between literal and conveyed meaning typifies postmodern metaphorical writing:

Postmodernist writing seeks to foreground the ontological *duality* of metaphor, its participation in two frames of reference with different ontological statuses. This it accomplishes by aggravating metaphor's inherent ontological tensions, thereby slowing still further the already slow flicker between presence and absence. All metaphor *hesitates* between a literal function (in a secondary frame of reference)

and a metaphorical function (in a “real” frame of reference); post-modernist texts often *prolong* this hesitation as a means of foregrounding ontological structure. (McHale 134)

Using analogy displays the metaphor’s reference to the “real” world, and as a consequence, Byatt’s technique of offering metaphorical descriptions in the form of analogies ensures that the postmodern vacillation between literal and figurative meanings is constantly present in “Morpho Eugenia.” But metaphors are unstable not only because they hover between two frames of reference: their figurative meanings are also shaky. A metaphor induces comparison, but since the grounds of similarity are not forever given, metaphors serve to emphasize the freedom of the reader as opposed to the authority of the writer. This becomes particularly clear in “Morpho Eugenia.” Because ants and butterflies are present both literally and metaphorically, the reader is forced to take a closer look at what is embedded in the familiar comparisons of women with butterflies or human societies with ant communities. Metaphors invite thought because they enforce the understanding that there are at least two sides to everything. “Morpho Eugenia” may at times seem overloaded with metaphors, but since the interplay between metaphorical and literal meaning destabilizes both the novella and the metaphors themselves, this is one of the clearest signs of its postmodernity.

“Things Are Not What They Seem”

—A. S. Byatt (119)

“**M**orpho Eugenia” takes its title from a butterfly, and the controlling metaphors belong to the worlds of ants, bees, and butterflies. William Adamson, a naturalist recently back from the Amazon, is welcomed into the Alabaster household at Bredely Hall. At the beginning of his visit, the young ladies present at a ball appear to him as butterflies, shimmering in “shell-pink and sky-blue, silver and citron” (3). Very soon his interest focuses on one of them, Eugenia, who, like all the other members of the Alabaster family, is a “pale-gold and ivory” creature, almost always dressed in white (4). By contrast, William himself is “sultry-skinned, with jaundice-gold mixed into sun-toasting” (3), and Eugenia’s whiteness, so easily interpreted as betokening innocence, tempts him by its difference from the “olive-skinned and velvet-brown ladies of doubtful virtue and no virtue” he knew in Pará and Manáos (5). After a period of silent longing, William proposes to Eugenia among a cloud of butterflies he has raised for her in the conservatory, and they marry and settle at Bredely Hall.

Eugenia is compared to the butterfly that shares her name, the shimmering satiny-white *Morpho Eugenia*. The butterfly image is quite automatically understood as a rather common metaphor for feminine beauty and flightiness, but as William points out, it is the male butterflies who exhibit bright colors and whirl about in the sunlight, whereas the females are drab-colored and timid. Obviously the butterfly metaphor in "Morpho Eugenia" cannot be read traditionally, and the title of the novella gives a clue: *morpho* is the Greek word for "form," which suggests that the title could be read as "the form of Eugenia." What is most significant about the form of a butterfly is that it changes, that it undergoes *metamorphosis*, and this is indeed what Eugenia—and William's conception of her—does. As the story progresses, William realizes that Eugenia's whiteness is not a reflection of her purity and innocence but instead signals degeneration and the impurity of incest. "Morpho Eugenia" becomes a story about a fall from innocence to experience and knowledge, where William has to realize that "things are not what they seem." Beneath the orderly surface of life at Bredely Hall are a dysfunctional family and a section of society—the country aristocracy—that has lost its sense of direction and purpose. William becomes like Psyche in the inset Psyche and Cupid story, where Psyche can keep her husband only if she promises "*never to try to see him*" (42). If William is allowed to see Eugenia and her world for what they are, his marriage, like Psyche's, will disintegrate.⁴

This seems to identify Eugenia as the villain of the story, but the unstable nature of the butterfly metaphor counteracts a single interpretation. At Bredely Hall, butterfly specimens are beautifully laid out in display cases, which emphasizes their status as objects, and in many ways Eugenia and her sisters are objects too, with no other aspiration in life than to make themselves beautiful for a prospective husband. In the world of insects, the use of beauty as a way of attracting the other sex is reserved for the male, but as the Alabaster relative Matty Crompton observes, "this appears to be the *opposite* to human societies, when it is the woman whose success in that kind of performance determines their lives" (40). Eugenia is a victim of a society that has no use for her except as the breeder of the next generation, and to secure her place in this society she has to make herself the object of men's admiration.

Bredely Hall represents a fraction of a society that, according to the history books, was male dominated. In "Morpho Eugenia" Byatt suggests, however, that at least that society's domestic life was controlled by women:

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. (76)

That women have been relegated to the domestic sphere and as a result have been able to exert their power over household matters is no revolutionary insight. What gives the observation new life are the analogies with bee and ant societies. One reviewer expresses his disaffection with the device thus: one “must endure the elaborate comparison of insect and human societies, an idea that I might not be alone in finding hackneyed” (Tate 60–61). This comment fails to acknowledge that in the novella, as in nature, ant and bee communities are predominantly female.⁵ Everything is run by and determined by females, down to the sex of the embryos. The male ants and the drones are sex objects, just like the male butterflies that flaunt their brilliant colors to attract the females, and fertilization of the females is the sole justification for their existence. When Byatt describes such a male-dominated society as the nineteenth-century English aristocracy through resolutely gendered metaphors of bees, ants, and butterflies, one of the results is to challenge the conventional picture of this society.

In most Victorian fiction, marriage “means the end of sexual adventures but the beginning of social responsibility” (Belsey 120), and this principle appears to be pared down to its essence at Bredely Hall.⁶ But marriage seems to mean nothing more than a socially acceptable way to secure the propagation of the species, and once conception has occurred, the pretense of love is not required. 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” (103), and the women become “egg-laying machines, gross and glistening, endlessly licked, caressed, soothed and smoothed—veritable Prisoners of Love” (102). Their ability to produce young gives them their value, and 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” (116).

Pregnancy and motherhood metamorphose women’s lives, but sometimes this metamorphosis is of a Kafkaesque kind. Eugenia experiences pregnancy as a period of cocooning, but she emerges from her cocoon not reborn as a butterfly but as something resembling an ant queen. With each pregnancy she becomes more and more like the Queen of the Wood Ants:

She was swollen and glossy, unlike the matt workers, and appeared to be striped red and white. The striping was in fact the result of the

bloating of her body by the eggs inside it, which pushed apart her red-brown armour-plating, showing more fragile, more elastic, whitish skin in the interstices. (39)

Like the ant communities it is compared with, the aristocratic society to which the Alabasters belong has no other purpose than to guarantee its own perpetuation. That this involves inbreeding is also highlighted by the comparison. As soon as Eugenia is pregnant, William is shut out of her bedroom to be let in again only when it is time to produce another baby. Quite soon it is clear to the reader that Eugenia has an incestuous relationship with her half-brother, and that William's children, who are so "true to type—veritable Alabasters," may not be William's at all (106).⁷ In an ant or bee society, incest is the rule, of course, because there are no other insects in the nests than those produced by the queen.

William finds out about Edgar's and Eugenia's relationship by a message nobody admits to having sent:

"And *someone* sent for me to come back to the house, today, when I was not wanted. When I was anything but wanted."

"I didn't send for you," she said. "If that is what you are thinking. There are people in a house, you know, who know everything that goes on—the invisible people, and now and then *the house* simply decides that something must happen—I think your message came to you after a series of misunderstandings that at some level were quite deliberate." (154–55)

Matty Crompton implies that the house itself wants to put a stop to the incestuous relationship, that the invisible people at Bredely Hall work in conjunction toward what they believe is right. Certainly the household, as well as the rest of nineteenth-century society, would agree on Edgar's and Eugenia's guilt, but Byatt offers Eugenia's side of things as well:

"I *know* it was bad," said Eugenia. "I know it was bad, but you must understand it didn't *feel* bad—it grew little by little, out of perfectly innocent, natural, *playful* things—which no one thought wrong—I have never been able to speak to any other living soul of it, you must forgive me for speaking to you—I can see I have made you angry, though I tried to make you love me—if I could have spoken to anyone, I might have been brought to see how wrong it was. But—*he* thought it wasn't—he said—people like making rules and others like breaking them—he made me believe it was all perfectly *natural* and so it was, it was natural, nothing in us rose up and said—it was—*unnatural*." (158–59)

Eugenia may appear primarily as a self-indulgent breeding machine, but she is also the victim of a hypocritical society where sex is not talked about, and where women are not encouraged to acknowledge their sexual feelings. To a certain extent, Eugenia's incestuous relationship with her brother is an act of rebellion, a way of eluding the constrictions of her society. There are two sides to everything, and what makes it impossible to come to a final conclusion about how to interpret incest in the novella is that the union between Edgar and Eugenia produces children, whereas their sister, who marries "outside the nest," remains childless.

To fill his days, William Adamson agrees to help Matty Crompton and the girls in her charge to make a study of the "social insects." Together they set up a glass bee hive and a glass tank for ants in the schoolroom. The formicary becomes a miniature reflection of life at Bredely Hall. The Victorian household is filled with servants who occupy the place of the worker ants:

The servants were always busy, and mostly silent. They whisked away behind their own doors into mysterious areas into which he had never penetrated, though he met them at every turning in those places in which his own life was led. . . . They were as full of urgent purpose as the children of the house were empty of it. (74)

Harald Alabaster believes that the social insects exercise both altruism and self-sacrifice; by implication these virtues govern the lives of his servants as well. William slowly arrives at another conclusion, both about the ants and the household: "most social systems work by mutual aggression, exploitation, the sacrifice of the many not for the whole, but for the few" (Butler). He is gradually brought to realize that his situation at Bredely Hall in many ways equals that of the Wood Ants who are enslaved by the Blood-red Ants. The slaves lose all sense of their origin and identify completely with the inhabitants of their new nest, to the point where they take part in slave raids against members of their own species. "Men are not ants," however, and William does not have to be trapped in the analogy (106). Disenchanted with Eugenia, and supplied with the proceeds from the book about ants he has written together with Matty Crompton, he finally breaks out and leaves for the Amazon with Matty as his companion. Ultimately the development and choices of the individual matter, and as a consequence a reading that tries to explain the analogies in universal terms collapses.

Names, you know, are a way of weaving the world together, by relating the creatures to other creatures and a kind of *metamorphosis*, you might say, out of a *metaphor* which is a figure of speech for carrying one idea into another.

—A. S. Byatt (131–32)

Discussing her story "Things Are Not What They Seem" with William, Matty expresses a fear that it might contain "too much *message*" (141). In certain ways the same is true of "Morpho Eugenia": as a reader, one sometimes feels that there is just too much message, or too many messages. The novella both begs for interpretation and resists it. The frequent analogies invite an allegorical reading that is continually thwarted by the instability of the novella's abundant metaphors and symbols. At times, the political drift of the narrative appears to be antifeminist, from the role reversal that places William Adamson in the Cinderella position, through the misogynistic descriptions of pregnant women and William's final repudiation of his wife and his life at Bredely Hall. The accentuation on ant and bee communities as female societies does not counteract such a reading, because the emphasis on this could also be taken to imply that it is the women who tie themselves, each other, and men to fixed gender roles.

On the other hand, the insect analogies are used to describe a society usually thought of as completely male dominated, which is a challenge with rather feminist overtones. An important feminist project has been to reveal that language and linguistic expression are not innocent, and in "Morpho Eugenia" Byatt shows that this is true of metaphor as well. Discussing "gynocentric writing," Mary Daly demonstrates that, for instance, hyphenation may operate as a means of exposing the veiled meanings in words, to dis-cover language, as it were (24). Judicious installation of hyphens can reveal hidden meanings in words and invites the reader to look at common words in new ways, as in the examples "his-tory," "mis-take," and "re-mem-ber." Similarly, Byatt's revitalization of common metaphors points to a feminization of language, so that when the ant hill is presented as a society run and perpetuated by the female of the species, an overlooked component in the familiar metaphorical connection of human and ant societies is laid bare. As a result, an internal struggle occurs in the story between the level of narrative and the level of language. This instability creates a tension in the novella that renders any single political interpretation difficult.

Metaphors and analogies, like proverbs, are often given universal significance, and largely go unquestioned. What makes metaphorical expressions interesting, however, is that they are double signs. The discrepancy between the literal meaning of the words and the utterance meaning of the

statement, that is, what is being conveyed, gives life to the metaphor. As a consequence, metaphors die or lose their value when the utterance meaning is so automatic it no longer carries dual meaning, and this is when they need to be reetymologized.⁸

Commonly used metaphors may retain their double meaning—presumably nobody would take the “people are ants” metaphor literally—but when their figurative meanings have become hackneyed, these, too, demand re-examination. What exactly are the grounds of similarity? In which ways do people resemble ants? Female gendered, the metaphor obtains new life, but the analogy’s more conventional meanings are also present. The meanings of metaphors and analogies are always in flux, and Byatt draws attention to this in “Morpho Eugenia” when she uses identical linguistic figures in quite divergent ways.

The main metaphors in “Morpho Eugenia” are all inherently contradictory. The “people are butterflies” metaphor contains meanings like beauty, fickleness, and metamorphosis, as well as the observation that the perceived similarities between women and butterflies are actually illusory, because only male butterflies flaunt their beautiful colors. The “people are ants” metaphor is questioned in the same way: ants are insignificant, they specialize, they form rigid societies, but they are also predominantly female, unlike the human society to which they are compared. By gendering the metaphors, Byatt has enhanced their instability. Does this mean that these expressions should be taken as separate words, as homonyms, words that sound the same but mean different things? I do not think so. I would suggest that the ambiguity is there to provoke thought and to offer questions without finally providing the answers. Thus, the lavish use of metaphor draws attention to the extent to which we are unaware of the attitudes we perpetuate through language itself. The “people are ants” metaphor, for instance, functions as a provocation and questions the male-dominated society it describes. It also questions the kind of separatist feminism that advocates single-sex communities, in that it describes a feminine society that is both thoroughly hierarchical and extremely rigid. More conventionally, it functions as a means of “forcing the thought that seen from a height, watched across centuries, we humans creep and crawl, scratch and burrow like any other low creature moving close to the surface of the planet” (Levenson 42).

The rather blatant clue given in the name “Alabaster” emphasizes the significance of references to color, “white” in particular, in “Morpho Eugenia.” To William, Eugenia’s whiteness symbolizes an innocence tied up with his dreams of England and precious by its contrast to the brown colors of the Amazon. The “white lilies” and the “snowy bedspread” (8) in his bed-

room suggest an English cleanness very different from "the earth-floored hut" that used to be his home in the jungle (12). On his wedding night, he is "afraid of smutching her [Eugenia], as the soil smutched the snow in the poem" (67). If the color white is seen as an image of purity, the color brown becomes an image of dirt, impurity, perhaps guilt, in consequence. If, on the other hand, "brown" represents health and vigor, the meaning of "white" has to change.

When Matty Crompton is introduced into the story, the darkness of her features is foregrounded:

She stood in the shadows in the doorway, a tall, thin dark figure, in a musty black gown with practical white cuffs and collar. Her face was thin and unsmiling, her hair dark under a plain cap, her skin dusky too. (27)

Matty has "a quick step" (36) and her movements are "quick and decisive" (96), a contrast both in coloring and manner to the languid Eugenia. Her similarity to William with his "mane of dark, shining hair" (9) is obvious, and as William's fondness for Matty grows, the whiteness of the Alabasters takes on a more sinister meaning.

One of William's tasks in the Alabaster household is to organize Harald Alabaster's collection of insects and other specimens, which he does, but with diminishing enthusiasm, because William "wanted to observe life, not dead shells, he wanted to know the processes of living things" (73). Bredely Hall is a dying society, and William realizes this as he tries to complete his apparently endless chore. William's reaction as he looks at Harald Alabaster's hands illustrates that "white" stands for death, too:

The hands were ivory-coloured, the skin finely wrinkled everywhere, like the crust on a pool of wax, and under it appeared livid bruises, arthritic nodes, irregular tea-brown stains. William watched the hands fold the wavering papers and was filled with pity for them, as for sick and dying creatures. The flesh under the horny nails was candlewax-coloured, and bloodless. (90)

"White" and "dark" are thus contrasted with each other throughout "Morpho Eugenia," but the meaning of the contrast changes.

England, finally, is white, and the Amazon brown, with everything this might suggest of racism and colonialism. At the beginning, the novella seems to take an imperialist perspective, but such an interpretation collapses as the reversal of the relation between "white" and "dark" becomes clear. "Morpho Eugenia" could very well be interpreted as a story about Eden

and the fall, particularly since William's last name is Adamson. But where is Eden? In Brazil, William thought of England as paradise, but in England, the Amazon is "the innocent, the unfallen world, the virgin forest, the wild people in the interior who are as unaware of modern ways—modern evils—as our first parents" (30). On the other hand, the Amazon is unsafe—there is unchecked growth, unbridled sex, strong feelings, snakes and dangerous insects—but it is alive. If the comparisons between Bredely Hall and the female societies of ants and bees suggest an antifeminist politics, this is countered by the contrast with the Amazon, a place-name with explicit feminist connotations.

You may argue anything by analogy, Sir, and so consequently nothing.

—A. S. Byatt (89)

Analogy is a precarious device, because it gives the appearance of universality, and if William Adamson is taken to represent "man in general" as his last name seems to suggest, it would seem as if the reader is asked to find an authoritative answer about man's place in society in the text. But political readings of "Morpho Eugenia" break down because everything seems to contradict everything else. The narrative points one way, an allegorical interpretation of the analogies another, and the fluctuating meanings of the metaphors in yet other directions. This ambivalence is a feature of postmodern literature, since postmodern art is concerned with problematizing, not offering solutions. As Linda Hutcheon points out:

Most of the issues raised by postmodernism are actually doubly encoded. Most are by definition ambivalent, though it is also true that there are few notions which cannot be formulated in opposing political terms. (205)

The metaphors and analogies in "Morpho Eugenia" embody these "opposing political terms," and thus the politics of the story remain unclear. As a postmodern allegory, "Morpho Eugenia" does not guide the reader toward the disclosure of a final answer but 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.

NOTES

¹ I use the term *postmodern* rather than *postmodernist*, avoiding the association between a postmodern aesthetic and the philosophies and literatures of "high" modernism, whether this relation is viewed as a continuation or a replacement of modernist ideas. Even though I believe that "postmodernism" is best seen as a phenomenon of the late twentieth century, the existence of a postmodern allegorical form suggests a connection between postmodern attitudes and literature from the Renaissance and before.

² See Hansson for a more thorough discussion of postmodern romances and their relationship to the chivalric, historical, and women's popular subcategories of the genre, as well as to some influential individual romances.

³ This is not to say that Victorian novels are necessarily authoritarian, or that the worldviews they present are absolute. One effect of Byatt's reworking of the genre is to indicate that there is considerable ambiguity in the Victorian models.

⁴ The reference to Psyche is yet another way in which the butterfly metaphor is expanded, since Psyche, as a personification of the human soul, is often represented as a butterfly.

⁵ The observation that the societies of bees and ants are female societies is overlooked in all the reviews quoted in this article, despite the emphasis on it in the novella.

⁶ The similarity between the sounds of the words "breeding" and "Bredely Hall" is certainly not coincidental.

⁷ "Morpho Eugenia" is the "insect" novella in the diptych *Angels and Insects*, and to a certain extent the story can be read as an elaborate pun on "insect" and "incest."

⁸ For a discussion of dying metaphors, see, for instance, Traugott.

WORKS CITED

- Belsey, Catherine. *Desire: Love Stories in Western Culture*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1994.
- Butler, Marilyn. "The Moth and the Medium." Rev. of *Angels and Insects* by A. S. Byatt. *Times Literary Supplement* (16 Oct. 1992): 22.
- Byatt, A. S. *Angels and Insects*. 1992. London: Vintage, 1993.
- Daly, Mary. *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism*. Boston: Beacon, 1978.
- Hansson, Heidi. *Romance Revived: Postmodern Romances and the Tradition*. Uppsala: Swedish Science P, 1998.
- Hughes, Kathryn. "Repossession." Rev. of *Angels and Insects* by A. S. Byatt. *New Statesman and Society* (6 Nov. 1992): 49–50.
- Hutcheon, Linda. *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*. 1988. New York: Routledge, 1992.
- Lesser, Wendy. "Séance and Sensibility." Rev. of *Angels and Insects* by A. S. Byatt. *New York Times Book Review* (27 June 1993): 14.
- Levenson, Michael. "The Religion of Fiction." Rev. of *Angels and Insects* by A. S. Byatt. *New Republic* (2 Aug. 1993): 41–44.

TWENTIETH CENTURY LITERATURE

- Madsen, Deborah L. *Rereading Allegory: A Narrative Approach to Genre*. New York: St. Martin's, 1994.
- McHale, Brian. *Postmodernist Fiction*. 1987. London: Routledge, 1994.
- Owens, Craig. "The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism." Part 1. *October* 12 (1979): 67–86.
- . "The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism." Part 2. *October* 13 (1980): 59–80.
- Smith, Paul. "The Will to Allegory in Postmodernism." *Dalhousie Review* 62.1 (1982): 105–22.
- Tate, J. O. "Dress for Success." Rev. of *Angels and Insects* by A. S. Byatt. *National Review* (23 Aug. 1993): 60–61.
- Traugott, Elisabeth Closs. "'Conventional' and 'Dead' Metaphors Revisited." *The Ubiquity of Metaphor: Metaphor in Language and Thought*. Ed. Wolf Paprotté and René Dirven. Amsterdam: Benjamins, 1985. 17–56.