

Round Table: A.S. Byatt and the Polemics of Art

Chair: Celia M. Wallhead Salway (Universidad de Granada, wallhead@ugr.es), Alexa Alfer (University of Westminster, London, A.Alfer01@westminster.ac.uk), Carmen Lara Rallo (Universidad de Málaga, clarar@uma.es)

As English author A.S. Byatt celebrates her seventy-fifth birthday and enjoys the success of her latest novel, *The Children's Book* (2009), the number of critical works dedicated to analysing her approach to writing, embodied in both her fiction and her non-fiction, continues to rise. The participants in this round table consider that the end of the first decade of the new century is a good opportunity to take stock of Byatt's success in her chosen path, a path that is not without its pitfalls. This discussion aimed to set out the what, the how and the why of Byatt's artistic creed, looking into which aspects of content, form and use have gone with the mainstream or rebelled against it, and what the critical outcomes have been.

The Chair, Celia M. Wallhead, introduced this discussion on the 'what', the 'how' and the 'why' of art in A.S. Byatt's creed. These aspects of what makes good art, its possible content and form, and how it can or should be used, are discussed both explicitly and implicitly in Byatt's fiction and non-fiction alike. Speaking first, Wallhead's contribution concentrated on the polemical subject of Byatt's refusal to abandon ethics in her writing, her insistence that art cannot be great unless it has moral implications. She pointed to certain attributes of authors Byatt admires, for example, George Eliot and Iris Murdoch, and their insistence on the centrality of ethics in art. The last two decades of the 20th century have witnessed a significant turn, or return, to ethics, after Postmodernism's disapproval of its presence in literature (Arizti and Martínez-Falquina 2007). But ethical concerns in writing today are not treated the same as they were in the 19th century novel. Thus Byatt, particularly in her capacity as a neo-Victorian writer (as the author of *Possession*, *Angels and Insects*, *The Biographer's Tale* and *The Children's Book* and other stories), is a key figure in a discussion of how the position and treatment of ethics in literature has changed over the 20th century. Drawing examples from *The Children's Book*, Wallhead showed how Byatt continues to discuss such matters as the vexed issue of the writer's rights when they impinge upon the rights of others, like their family, and the right to review the suffering of others, as in the First World War. Rudyard Kipling and Kenneth Grahame are intertexts here. Kipling's *Puck of Pook's Hill* informs *The Children's Book* in many ways, thus his 19th century attitude to the role of ethics in literature can be compared to Byatt's 21st century treatment. Questions should be asked, such as: Is the ethical dimension a regeneration of liberal humanism? Is it a return to Victorian cultural values? Is it a return to literary aesthetics and an acknowledgment of the unsurpassed quality of the nineteenth-century writers? Or is it a version of Levinas's ethical philosophy of responsibility toward the Other? Throughout the novel, Byatt plays with the concept of freedom versus control, the problems of discipline and good intentions. Byatt does not preach a moral, but there is an anti-war, pro-creativity message combined with a plea to refuse to see issues in black and white, but in all their ambivalent complexity. Thus Byatt, from the very beginnings of her fictional and critical writing, has insisted on

content that throws up the big issues for discussion and has never evaded responsibility or been partisan.

The second speaker, Alexa Alfer, also took up the theme of ethics and considered A.S. Byatt's often negative portrayal of both writers and literary critics through the prism of what Byatt, writing about Iris Murdoch, once described as central to the novelistic endeavour: "the tension between the attempt to tell, or see, the truth" and "[t]he inevitability of fantasy, the need for concepts and form and the recognition that all speech is in a sense distortion, that novelists are fantasy-mongers" (Byatt 1976: 35-6). Referencing Byatt's critical writings alongside several of her novels, including *The Shadow of the Sun* (1964), *The Game* (1967), *The Biographer's Tale* (2000), and *The Children's Book* (2009), Alfer argued that, in spite of Byatt's often ostensibly hostile attitude towards both writers and those who professionally engage with their work, her fictions ultimately reveal a far more nuanced picture. Byatt's writerly output has, throughout her career, been characterised by intricate negotiations of both literary and critical traditions –what Alfer terms Byatt's distinctive practice of "critical storytelling"– and her acute awareness of the often problematic, always richly complex intersections between fiction and critical thought ties in with her assertion that, for her, "reading and writing are points on a circle". Indeed, Byatt habitually reclaims the territory of criticism, the habit of thinking about rather than merely consuming what we read, so that fiction and criticism are not separate but essentially conjoined activities. Both involve an active engagement with the text, and the homely hermeneutic model supplied by Frederica in her lecture to a group of art students in *Babel Tower* serves as an apt image of the fact that, ultimately, criticism, too, is a form of storytelling as it inevitably involves responding to one narrative with another narrative, unravelling a text and reweaving it with a subtly new texture. As Frederica explains to her students, "a novel ... is made of a long thread of language, like knitting, thicker and thinner in patches. It is made in the head and has to be remade in the head by whoever reads it, who will always remake it differently" (Byatt 1996: 213).

The third speaker, Carmen Lara Rallo¹, addressed Byatt's lifelong engagement with the art of collecting and exhibiting by focusing on the centrality of museums and collections in *The Children's Book*. In the context of the growing interest in the interaction between museology studies and literary creativity, whereby museums and galleries are placed at the core of contemporary culture and literature (Patey and Scuriatti 2009: 5), Byatt's fiction occupies an outstanding position because it recurrently portrays collections, exhibitions, and museums. From early novels like *The Virgin in the Garden* to recent short stories such as "Body Art", Byatt's works explore the question of what art is for, as they reflect on the implications of the practices of accumulating, classifying, cataloguing, ordering, and displaying artistic and everyday objects.

All these aspects of the intersection between Byatt's fiction and museology converge in *The Children's Book*, which opens in the South Kensington Museum, with "a series of imposing glass cases, displaying gold and silver treasures" (Byatt 2009: 3). The choice of this institution, origin of the Victoria & Albert Museum, is particularly significant because it provides a clear contrast with other exhibitions and collections in the novel, portrayed in terms of binary oppositions such as public institutions vs. private collections, the real vs. the imaginary, permanent vs. temporary, order vs. chaos. These dichotomies were examined in this contribution, which raised questions about the 'why' of art in *The Children's Book*, analysing the function of museums and collections in this narrative in the light of the contrast between the public space of the museum institution as opposed to the private space of the personal collection. Paying special attention to the

depiction of collectors in the novel, this contribution explored the role of collections as mirrors of their owner's personality (as with Prosper Cain and Benedict Fludd), the confluence of artistry and collection, and the mnemonic function of images of ordered and disordered exhibitions and collections in Byatt's latest incursion into museology.

The concluding discussion brought together different lines examined in the round table. In this sense, apart from highlighting the importance of the blurring of boundaries between Byatt's fiction and criticism, it focused on the ethical dimension of collecting in her works, in terms of the dichotomy opposing obsessive, predatory collectors, and creative, aesthetically-inspired keepers. The consensus was that Byatt's peculiar blend of invention, "truth" and criticism has always been for her a demanding – both for writer and reader– but successful artistic approach.

Notes

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