

THE “TOO-MUCH LOVED EARTH”:
HUMAN-NONHUMAN RELATIONS IN A.S. BYATT’S FICTION

Astrid Bracke
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In her 2001 essay “True Stories and the Facts in Fiction” the British author A.S. Byatt writes: “I believe we ought to think about the non-human, in order to be fully human” (“True Stories” 115). This quote illustrates the importance Byatt attaches to the nonhuman. However, very few ecocritics have paid attention to her work. The reason for this might be that Byatt’s novels “approach nature and environmentalism obliquely, with their main concern being to contextualize it, or explore its psychology” (Kerridge 155), to use Richard Kerridge’s words in a 1998 article. Nevertheless, I believe it to be useful to take a closer look at the relations between the human and the nonhuman in Byatt’s fiction. In this paper I intend to trace these relations in Byatt’s novels – from those of the so-called Quartet (*The Virgin in the Garden* [1978], *Still Life* [1985], *Babel Tower* [1996] and *A Whistling Woman* [2002]), to the novel that my focus will be on, *The Biographer’s Tale* (published in 2000). The theme that runs through this paper is that of the “too-much loved earth”. I will analyse the descriptions of the nonhuman in Byatt’s novels, as well as the relationship that the characters have with the nonhuman. In the latter section I will also discuss the environmental concerns expressed in the works. First, however, I will take a closer look at the phrase “too-much loved earth” and the instances in which it occurs.

The first instance is in her 1978 novel *The Virgin in the Garden*, which is set in the 1950s. One of the characters, Matthew Crowe, envisions beautifying the countryside: “He wanted everyone, this spring, to make the land remember its old sweetness and loveliness, to make the too-much loved earth more lovely with the real old flowers, the sweet-smelling ones, lavender, wallflowers, lad’s-love, clove gillyflower and matted pink” (*The Virgin in the Garden* 84). The second instance is in *The Biographer’s Tale* where towards the end of the novel, the main character, Phineas G. Nanson, says that “As long as we don’t destroy or diminish it irrevocably, the too-much loved earth will always exceed our power to describe, or imagine, or understand it” (*The Biographer’s Tale* 301). Both quotes imply not only a relationship between the human and nonhuman that is often destructive, but also suggest that it is nearly impossible for humans to describe the nonhuman. Both of these themes will be dealt with in more detail in the rest of this paper.

The suggestion that as humans we are unable to accurately represent, or as Phineas puts it in *The Biographer’s Tale*: “to describe, or imagine, or understand” (*The Biographer’s Tale* 301), the nonhuman is also frequently made by critics. Lawrence Buell for example, in his book *The Future of Environmental Criticism*, writes that “self-evidently no human can speak *as* the environment, *as* nature, *as* a nonhuman animal” (Buell 7). A similar point is made by Jonathan Bate who notes that “the ecocritic has no choice but to speak on

behalf of the Other. The ecocritical project always involves *speaking for* rather than *speaking as* its subject” (Bate 72).

In her works, Byatt deals with the challenge of describing the nonhuman, in particular insects, as well. She writes: “Insects are the object of much anthropomorphizing attention – we name their societies after our own, Queen, Soldier, Slave, Worker. I think we should be careful before we turn other creatures into images of ourselves” (“True Stories” 115). This sentiment is echoed in *Still Life* in which Marcus tells Jacqueline that he does not like ants. To this she replies: “That’s because you see them as human. If you don’t, they’re simply amazing” (*Still Life* 234). The scientist Christopher Cobb expresses a similar thought: “He warned against seeing ant-life in terms of human life”, although, as the narrator notes, “the language he spoke was coloured and informed by anthropomorphism” (*Still Life* 236). Instead of anthropomorphizing we should, perhaps, as Byatt suggests “imagine the *antness* of [...] [the] ants” (“True Stories” 115), or in Karla Armbruster’s words, “see [...] [nature] as subject rather than object” (Armbruster 432). Much more can be said about Byatt’s works in this respect, however, I will now continue by examining the relationship between the human and the nonhuman.

In *Babel Tower* (1996), set in the 1960s, Byatt deals extensively with the – often destructive – relationship between the human and nonhuman. Jacqueline’s interest in biology and zoology has become a “passion for what was beginning to be generally known as ecological studies” (*Babel Tower* 54). Christopher Cobb has become interested in

“crop-spraying and seed-dressings” which, according to Jacqueline, he should be as “nobody understands what is being done to the earth” (*Babel Tower* 55). In the spirit of the age, Jacqueline gives Marcus a copy of Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*. Echoing Carson’s book, the narrator relates how Marcus’ and Jacqueline’s “waking dreams were haunted by the idea of swamps, and desert wastes, and rotted tree-trunks, and lifeless lakes where no birds sing” (*Babel Tower* 56). The environmental concerns expressed in *Babel Tower* recur in *The Biographer’s Tale*, the novel I’ll be focusing on in this paper.

The Biographer’s Tale is the story of Phineas G. Nanson, a PhD student who decides to give up literary theory to write a biography of the biographer Scholes Destry-Scholes. During his research he comes across three texts written by Destry-Scholes on Linnaeus, Galton and Ibsen. He also comes into contact with Fulla Biefeld, a Swedish pollination ecologist and starts to work at a bookstore annex travel agency for out-of-the-ordinary holidays, called Puck’s Girdle.

The concerns that Jacqueline, Marcus and others expressed about seed-dressings and crop-spraying in *Babel Tower* are echoed in *The Biographer’s Tale*. Fulla Biefeld – like Jacqueline – refers to *Silent Spring* when she asks Phineas if he has read the book. Other echoes occur as well. In *Babel Tower* Jacqueline says: “We shall kill the planet. We are a species that *has gone wrong* somewhere. We shall kill everything”, while Fulla tells Phineas that “both *here* and *there* and *now* this species is destroying, every day 6,000 species perhaps, many unknown, some perhaps essential – certainly essential – to the

survival of a whole chain of others” (*The Biographer’s Tale* 141).

Implicitly both of these quotes resemble the dedication to *Silent Spring* which cites Albert Schweitzer: “Man has lost the capacity to foresee and to forestall. He will end by destroying the earth” (Carson).

Despite Fulla’s concern with the environment, Phineas initially isn’t so easily convinced of the importance of her cause. He calls Fulla “an eco-warrior” and describes her as the type who is “[e]arrest, covered with natural body-hair, intent on organic living, opposed to modern machines and comforts” (*The Biographer’s Tale* 141). He, on the other hand, is an “urban animal” (*The Biographer’s Tale* 141). Yet in the course of the novel, he becomes persuaded by Fulla’s words about the urgent state of the environment. An important factor in this change is the strength of Fulla’s words. Her passionate, powerful speeches even result in Puck’s Girdle promoting “pollination tourism” (*The Biographer’s Tale* 291). Of course Phineas’ change of mind is also brought on by his relationship with Fulla.

Fulla is not only significant because her connection with Phineas but also because she is one of the many naturalists in Byatt’s work. Naturalists, in Byatt’s novels, are often used to demonstrate the difficulty of naming the nonhuman as they are continuously naming and categorizing. This connects to the points I made earlier on describing the nonhuman. Naming and categorizing also inspired Byatt while writing *Still Life*. In a metafictional passage in this novel, Byatt addresses the reader and writes: “I had the idea, when I began this novel, that it would be a novel of naming and accuracy” (*Still Life*

364). Naming recurs in *The Biographer's Tale* – to be precise in the passage about Linnaeus: “Adam the gardener wandered this mountain, noting and naming all things, plants, beasts, insects, birds, and the fish in the descending funnels and troughs of the surrounding sea.’ Even as a young man, [...] [Linnaeus] thought of himself [...] as the second Adam, the separator, the taxonomist, the Namer of species” (*The Biographer's Tale* 65).

Fulla is also a “Namer of species”. She tells Phineas that she classified insects for fun as a child: “I got interested in fitting the bugs together. Then into fitting the insect world into the rest of the world. Boxes in boxes” (*The Biographer's Tale* 246). But, as Fulla says, “[o]f course, *all* the naming’s arbitrary” (*The Biographer's Tale* 246). This last remark touches directly on the impossibility to accurately describe the nonhuman, which is prevented either by anthropomorphizing or simply by the fact that we are not nonhuman. Time prevents me from going into this in full, but Byatt’s comments on naming can spark an interesting discussion on language, especially when keeping Bate’s remark in mind that “[l]anguage is itself a symptom of humankind’s apartness from other species and our consequent power to destabilize ecosystems” (Bate 149).

At the beginning of *The Biographer's Tale*, Phineas is a PhD student writing a dissertation entitled “Personae of female desire in the novels of Ronald Firbank, E.M. Forster and Somerset Maugham” (*The Biographer's Tale* 26-7) – at the end of the novel he has become a parataxonomist. I believe that this change in Phineas’ life is not only

inspired by the force of Fulla's arguments or his relationship with her. His decision to leave postmodern literary theory is sparked by his realization that he must have "things" (*The Biographer's Tale* 4). As he tells his new supervisor, "I need a life full of *things* [...] Full of facts" (*The Biographer's Tale* 7), which he believes he will be able to find in biography and not in literary theory. Things return in the text on Linnaeus which compares magic to science: "[m]agic, like science, is concerned with *matter*, with the world of *things*, of rocks, stones, trees, creatures, also clouds, rain, wind and water vapour" (*The Biographer's Tale* 53). Significant in this passage is that the *things* are described in natural terms: "rocks, stones, trees" (*The Biographer's Tale* 53).

Throughout the novel it becomes apparent that the nonhuman will give Phineas the things he longs for. Stimulated by Fulla, he starts to pay more attention to bees and considers adding "Bee Watches and pollination holidays to the fan of possibilities displayed at Puck's Girdle" and even thinks "with evanescent pleasure of looking at wormcasts and birdnests in Richmond Park" (*The Biographer's Tale* 152). The appeal in this for Phineas lies in the fact that "[n]obody could say that these were not *things*" (*The Biographer's Tale* 152).

Quite tellingly, Phineas compares the nonhuman world and its inhabitants to the books he is surrounded by at Puck's Girdle. By doing this he is weighing his old life against his new life. Although the books that he studied as a PhD student were things as well, they were "things containing the codes to access thingier, denser *things*" (*The Biographer's Tale* 152). The novel ends with Phineas comparing

literature to the nonhuman and suggesting that the latter has replaced the former: “As a boy my hair had prickled at the beauty of a Shakespeare sonnet, or a Yeats rhythm, or Donne’s bright hairs and brittle bones. That was gone. But I was left with [...] the pink hook of strong beaks, horns and claws, stamens and pistils, the beat of demonic wing-cases, and descending circles of brilliant rose and emerald wings” (*The Biographer’s Tale* 294-5).

The “too-much loved earth” is a phrase that indicates the human relationship with the nonhuman. It suggests a destruction – but out of love. Love and destruction: the ambivalence of this combination exemplifies Byatt’s treatment of the nonhuman in her works. Her novels are peopled with naturalists who note with varying degrees of fascination, curiosity and horror the state of this too-much loved earth. There’s also ambivalence in Byatt’s call to perceive the nonhuman as it is whereas even she cannot refrain from anthropomorphizing. Byatt’s novels may not be the ecological novels that Kerridge had hoped for in 1998, as they contextualize or explore the psychology of nature and environmentalism. Nonetheless, in her works Byatt confronts her readers with and makes them aware of the too-much loved earth, and our relationship with it. That, I believe, is what makes her works so valuable for ecocriticism.

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