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A.S. Byatt's "Morpho Eugenia": Prolegomena to Any Future Theory

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In a recent essay on A.S. Byatt's resistance to theory as dramatized in *Angels & Insects*, Michael Levenson argues that theory is a belated intellectual event, "a late, parodic form of a once momentous conflict" (2001, 162), specifically "the mid-Victorian struggle of faith and doubt" (163). Central to Levenson's argument is his view of theory as "the work of those who claim spiritual authority" (162), so the theorist resembles the pre-twentieth century "man of faith [who] insists on a supervening order" (163). In contrast to the theorist/man of faith is "the naturalist, the observer, [who] can only make individual labels that fail to compose a system and that make a mockery of theory" (163-64). After working through the logic of this structural similarity between "Christian apologetics and literary theory," Levenson concludes that both are "inimical" to the "imaginative adventure" of Byatt's literary project, a project that uses language to weave "the world beyond itself, inventing connections, illuminating obscurities" (173).

While Levenson's claim that crucial nineteenth-century intellectual debates anticipate contemporary theory is compelling, his conflation of theory and religion and his analysis of Byatt's "Morpho Eugenia" are unconvincing at best and totally misguided at worst. In the following pages, I want to draw some sharp distinctions in order to clarify how Byatt's novella creatively documents the central intellectual dilemmas that have given birth to contemporary theory. According to Levenson's interpretation, the nineteenth-century crisis in knowledge led Byatt to construct a reinvigorated realism, which is based on a fluid theory of language as incarnation. By contrast, I contend that the nineteenth-century crisis led Byatt to distinguish two separate rhetorical stances, one that takes into account the role that anthropomorphism plays in the construction of knowledge about self, the world, and the other, and one that either dismisses or ignores the role of anthropomorphism in the construction of knowledge. For Byatt, since anthropomorphism is inescapable, it is impossible to overcome it. Therefore, instead of trying to overcome anthropomorphism by reinvigorating realism, humans should learn how to interact responsibly with others and the world given the inevitability of the anthropomorphic. Those who fail to understand the role of anthropomorphism adopt a destructive relation to the world and the other, while those who take into account the power of anthropomorphism can develop a healthy, productive, and life-affirming relation with the other. Such is the primary lesson to be learned from the nineteenth-century crisis in knowledge, according to Byatt.

I.

Before turning to my discussion of contemporary theory, let me detail some of the momentous intellectual crises of the nineteenth century, specifically as Byatt dramatizes them. Central to "Morpho Eugenia" is the shift from a supernatural to a natural universe, a shift from "a world in which angels and devils do not battle in the Heavens for virtue and vice," but "a world in which we are what we are because of the mutations of soft jelly and calceous bone

matter through unimaginable millennia” (1994, 69). These are the words of Harald, the patriarch of the Alabaster family, who is obsessed with proving God’s existence, but who, as a relatively well-educated Victorian gentleman, is painfully aware of the radical challenges to belief during his time. Percy Bysshe Shelley’s “The Necessity of Atheism,”¹ Ludwig Feuerbach’s philosophical analysis of anthropomorphism,² Charles Lyell’s geological discoveries that undermined traditional Christianity,³ James A. Froude’s *The Nemesis of Faith*,⁴ Charles Darwin’s work on evolution—these are all distinctively nineteenth-century developments that posed a serious challenge to faith before the central events of “Morpho Eugenia” take place. While the loss of God certainly pains a character like Harald, what upsets him most is the way that nineteenth-century intellectual developments ultimately undermined two seemingly distinctive human attributes, the capacity to act as an altruistic being (to love) and the capacity to have objective knowledge. Both capacities depend upon the existence of something “disinterested and spiritual” (67) within the human, something that stands above nature and is uninfluenced by ideological interest or worldly desire. Lacking this something “disinterested and spiritual,” the human is, according to Harald, nothing more than a “brute beast,” a creature of instinct. Indeed, if human love is biologically predetermined or governed by a primal instinct, then God, the spiritual life, and the heavens would be nothing more than the seething products of an overheated imagination. The implicit argument that Harald accepts is this: if there is something disinterested and, therefore, spiritual within the human, this would justify belief in the existence of a disinterested and spiritual realm, a realm associated with God and Reality. Therefore, Harald desperately constructs arguments throughout the text to justify the existence of disinterested and spiritual “love” (96), for he believes that, were he able to demonstrate that there is something within the human that can transcend the mechanistic laws of natural necessity, he would be able to justify the existence of a spiritual reality and/or a divine being. As he says to William: “But you do not feel your own sense of wonder corresponds to something *beyond* yourself, William?” (68)

The terror of losing love in a godless universe is certainly an important theme in “Morpho Eugenia,” but it is the loss of objective knowledge that interests Byatt most. For Byatt, what ultimately undermines the idea of objective knowledge is the concept of anthropomorphism, which dominates the novella more than any other theme. Here I do not just mean Feuerbach’s idea that humans create God in order to satisfy their needs and desires, but a more comprehensive view of the concept, one that irrevocably impacts literature, philosophy, and science. Like Harald, William is in tune with the developments of his time that have made belief in God extremely difficult, but he differs from Harald in that he does not try to save God. As a young man, William found God in all things, especially nature. During this time, he looked “for signs of Divine Love and order in the meanest flowers that blew” and he wrote “in his journal of the wonders of divine Design” (1994, 11), but after his journey to the Amazon, he changes his view considerably:

He had sat alone under a roof woven of leaves in an earth-floored hut, and scribbled descriptions of everything: the devouring hordes of army ants, the cries of frogs and alligators, the murderous designs of his crew, the monotonous sinister cries of howler monkeys, the languages of various tribes he had stayed with, the variable markings of butterflies, the plagues of biting flies, the unbalancing of his own soul in this green world of vast waste, murderous growth, and lazily aimless mere existence. (Byatt 1994, 13)

The aimless suffering in nature in this passage is significant, because it is such suffering that caused so many Victorians to lose their faith. In his article “Nonmoral Nature,” Stephen Jay Gould cogently details how the most popular design-argument from the nineteenth century was effectively refuted. In the nineteenth century, God, in His infinite wisdom and goodness, had constructed a moral universe, and if we attend to the moral order within creation, we can infer the existence of a benevolent Deity. Stated more concretely, lions do not prolong the suffering of their prey; the “death of victims... is swift and relatively painless, victims are spared the ravages of decrepitude and senility, and populations do not outrun their food supply to the greater sorrow of all” (1982, 19). The laws of nature function this way because a moral God has created it so. Basing his findings primarily on Darwin’s famous letter to Asa Gray, Gould concludes: not a lion, a tiger, or a bear, but the ichneumon posed the greatest challenge to the argument that inferred the existence of a benevolent Deity through nature. This insect first paralyzes its victim, usually a caterpillar; it then deposits eggs within the host’s body. Once these eggs hatch, the ichneumon larvae begin the work of devouring the caterpillar; however, should the insects damage any of the vital organs, the host would die and the insects would lose their food source. For this reason, the insects instinctively eat only those parts of the body that will not result in the caterpillar’s death, an act that leads to the worst of all possible worlds for the caterpillar. For those theologians and philosophers who held that God created a moral universe, and that we can discern God’s benevolent presence through the creation, this act of instinctive torture posed insurmountable problems.

If nature reflects God’s essence, as it did for the young William, then senseless suffering and random death in nature would mean either that God is evil or that no God governs the universe—a point that Robert Frost incisively dramatizes in his poem “Design.” But there is another possibility for interpreting the relationship humans have with nature. Morality is a culturally constructed system of principles, and while this system may be important for the well-functioning human society, it cannot be projected onto the natural or animal world. Such a projection Gould refers to as an “inappropriate anthropocentric language” (1982, 22). As a young man, William sees in nature a moral design that corresponds to his concept of a benevolent Deity, but after his journey to the Amazon, he claims that he has “perceived from time to time that cruelty too is instinctive in some of our species at least” (40). At this point, instead of inferring that God is an evil being on the basis of this instinctive cruelty in nature, William recognizes that certain people have used the ruthlessness of nature to project into being a merciless God, specifically one who supports the institution of slavery (40). Not surprisingly, when William rejects the religion of his father, he does not reject God as such; he just rejects a specific God: “I felt cleansed when I rejected that God” (41).

But rejecting the merciless God of his father leads William to conclude, as did Feuerbach, that the whole concept of God is just a projection of the human psyche. Indeed, later in the text, when Harald tries to prove God’s existence on the basis of an “argument from love,” William replies: “It is resonant. But I would answer as Feuerbach answers, ‘*Homo homini deus est*’, our God is ourselves, we worship ourselves” (1994, 103). Ironically, however, while William can readily understand that the God-concept is a projection of the human psyche, he is initially unable to see how this projectionist psychology applies to his treatment of human and insect communities. For instance, in a “scientific” description of an ant colony, William details the hapless plight of male worker ants who are used to impregnate Queen ants and then discarded

“after their day of glory” (119). William’s description obviously parallels his own experience with his wife in the Alabaster household, for his wife, Eugenia has intercourse with him only until she is pregnant. When reading William’s description, Matty Crompton understands how William’s narrative is an anthropomorphic projection of his own experience: “I am quite overcome with pity for these poor, useless male creatures. I must admit I had never seen them in that light before. Do you not think you may have been somewhat *anthropomorphic* in your choice of rhetoric?” (120). Notice how Byatt italicizes the word *anthropomorphic*. William may be willing to criticize Harald for anthropomorphically constructing God, but he fails to see how the anthropomorphic impulse applies to much more than theology.

To underscore William’s failure to understand and appreciate the far reaching consequences of anthropomorphism, Byatt illustrates how William remains faithful to the theological model of disinterested perception despite his rejection of God. This is made most clear when a minor character distinguishes humans from fish by suggesting that humans could never be reduced to nature’s mechanistic laws: “‘*We* are not Nature,’ said Elaine” (Byatt 1994, 37). Matty’s response to Elaine and William’s subsequent reflection on Matty’s comment sheds considerable light on the central issue of the novella: “‘What else are we?’ asked Matty Crompton. She had not thought out her theology, William said to himself, without speaking out loud” (37). Within a traditional theological framework, what makes us more than human and more than Nature is our capacity to overcome the mechanistic laws of natural necessity, something we achieve when we act as altruistic beings or have non-anthropomorphic knowledge. William, by thinking that Matty has failed to work through her theology, discloses his own religious conception of knowledge, specifically his belief that he can act as an altruistic being (more than just a brute animal, which is governed by natural instinct) and have disinterested knowledge (that is, non-anthropomorphic knowledge). By contrast, Matty, like Nietzsche, rejects the natural/supernatural distinction, because she realizes that humans are human, all-too-human and natural, all-too-natural. As Nietzsche claims: “We speak of nature and forget to include ourselves: we ourselves are nature” (1986, 390). To suggest that humans can stand outside nature or be more than nature (supernatural), and thus overcome the anthropomorphic tendency, is for Matty simply incomprehensible. In short, Matty, like Nietzsche, understands the far-reaching implications of anthropomorphism, and within the context of “Morpho Eugenia,” anthropomorphism is the imposition of human-constructed concepts on life, the human, and the world, an imposition that is heavily inflected by the language users’ needs and desires.

This Nietzschean view of knowledge, which dominates “Morpho Eugenia,” holds that all knowledge is a psychological projection that assumes a provisional form in and through a semiotic sign.⁵ Central to Nietzsche’s view is the idea that there exists no mind-independent language or concept that is best suited to signify the world aright. As he claims in *The Gay Science*: “We have arranged for ourselves a world in which we can live—by positing bodies, lines, planes, causes and effects, motion and rest, form and content; without these articles of faith nobody now could endure life. But that does not prove them. Life is no argument” (1990, 177). The theological view holds that there are pre-given arguments about life, the world, and the human that have been authored by God. These arguments can be discovered, unraveled, and decoded, but to access them, humans must possess a “disinterested and spiritual” faculty of perception, a faculty that allows and enables humans to access non-subjective and non-ideological knowledge. Since believers lay claim to a disinterested and spiritual faculty of

perception, they believe that they are best epistemologically positioned to decode the mind-independent arguments about life. But for atheists, since there is no God, there can be no mind-independent discourse that is best suited to signify the world aright.⁶ Rather, they hold that all concepts about life, the world and the human are anthropomorphic constructions. This does not mean that they reject discourse or consider it useless; Nietzsche explicitly claims that we could not endure life without human constructs like language, concepts or truth. It just means that they consider all discourses, no matter how useful, no matter how compelling, limited and biased, forever subject to the prejudices and limitations of their human creators.

The text does not take a neutral stance on this topic of anthropomorphism. For Byatt, knowledge is inescapably and inevitably anthropomorphic, so it would be naïve to think that a person could produce non-anthropomorphic knowledge. The problem for Byatt is not that knowledge is anthropomorphic; the problem is the failure to acknowledge that knowledge is anthropomorphic. For those who do not understand how the anthropomorphic inflects knowledge of the world and others, they inevitably fail to see others with any clarity or to interact with others in a healthy or positive manner. For instance, because William anthropomorphically projects a discourse of untarnished beauty and virtue on Eugenia, he fails to see how sexually experienced his seemingly innocent and virginal wife is on their wedding night. Indeed, William is so steeped in his own anthropomorphic projection of her that he fails to see any signs of Edgar's and Eugenia's incestuous relationship. This stands in stark contrast to Captain Hunt, Eugenia's once betrothed who committed suicide on discovering the nature of Eugenia's relationship to her half-brother, Edgar. Captain Hunt did not see as much as William, but he saw enough to infer what was happening between the siblings (1994, 172). For William, discovering the two in the act is the only thing that enables him to get beyond his anthropomorphic projection of Eugenia as virtue incarnate.

Throughout the novella, William, having internalized the theological belief that he can have non-anthropomorphic knowledge, has been incapable of understanding the degree to which his anthropomorphic tendency has blinded him to others, but in the final pages, Matty addresses this problem directly. Matty tells William: "You have *never seen me*" (Byatt 1994, 179). This is the case because William has never really examined the degree to which he anthropomorphically projects people into conceptual being, something Matty discloses to William when she suggests going to the Amazon with William. William responds: "It is *no place* for a woman." Here William dictates what a woman is and, based on this anthropomorphic projection of femaleness, he determines what is suitable and best for her. But after Matty notes that "there are women there," William claims: "Yes, but not of your kind" (178). Again, William assumes that he knows the kind of woman that Matty is and what is appropriate for her. But at this point, Matty claims that William does not know what kind of a woman she is because he has never actually seen her. To illustrate her point, she tells him: "You think I may be of an age between thirty and fifty." William does not confess that Matty is right, but the narrator does: "What she said was nevertheless true. He had no idea, and that was what he had thought" (179). Until this point, because William is so epistemologically governed by the anthropomorphic impulse that he almost always sees only what he wants to see, but more disastrously, he is ignorant of and insensitive to the needs and desires of those around him.

We see the most politically significant example of the blinding potential of the anthropomorphic impulse in and through the character of Harald, who, like William, uses an anthropomorphic rhetoric to interpret social insects. Driven by a need to believe in a loving God, Harald constructs an interpretation that reconciles nature's random ruthlessness and God's benevolent design. If Darwin, painfully aware of nature's savagery, could no longer affirm the existence of a loving God, this was because he did not interpret nature aright. Such is Harald's logic, which assumes that the merciless "slaughter of the innocents" within a beehive serves a higher purpose: "It could conversely be supposed that a special providence lay in the survival of the Queen best fitted to provide the hive with new generations, or the swarm with a new commander" (Byatt 1994, 99). As for the numerous servant drones, whose whole existence centers on serving the needs and desires of those in power, this, too, is a part of God's perfect plan to inculcate noble virtues: "I do not think it is folly to argue that the society of the bees has developed in the patient nuns who do the work a primitive form of altruism, self-sacrifice, or loving-kindness" (100). Such arguments are not just the product of Harald's desire to justify belief in a benevolent Deity, they are also the logical product of his desire to justify his aristocratic position of socio-cultural power. But such an obsession with justifying God's existence as well as his own lifestyle blinds Harald to so much around him. Instead of attending to the miserable conditions of his servants, like Amy, who are being raped and impregnated by his son; rather than noting the muted rage of his between-world dependents, like Matty, who feel as if they have not yet begun to live (179); Harald throws an anthropomorphic net over the world of the social insects in order to justify his own world, "to look into its working and churning for a mirror of his own mind, to demand of it kindness, or justice" (85). Put differently, because the world of the social insects is governed by a "special providence," so too is the world of humans. Therefore, Harald need not worry that the slaughter of an innocent, like Amy, would undermine his belief in an ultimate divine justice, for such slaughter might be necessary with the rise of a competent albeit ruthless "commander." As for his servants and underlings, he need not concern himself about their sense of profound misery or discontent, for their menial service is actually a "form of altruism, self-sacrifice, or loving-kindness," virtues that are the basis and foundation of a "special providence." In short, Harald's anthropomorphic construction of a providentially-ordered community has blinded him to the harsh socio-political realities of people like Amy and Matty.

But more than just blinding people to others' needs and desires, the anthropomorphic impulse is profoundly dangerous because, when not kept in check, it has the power to divest people of personal agency. Matty examines this idea brilliantly in her short story "Things Are Not What They Seem." In this story, Seth, the main character, goes into the world to seek his fortune. After travelling extensively, Seth and his mates are shipwrecked on an island. Coming to an empty banquet hall, the mariners feast on the food left at a great ebony table. While they are eating, Mistress Cottitoe Pan Demos, ruler of the island, arrives and transforms the men into swine—Seth is only partially transformed, so Mistress Pan Demos makes him her swineherd. At this point, Pan Demos tells Seth: "You *must* do as I say—that is the rule here—and unfortunately any infringement meets—every time I'm afraid—with the most terrible consequences" (Byatt 1994, 142). Pan Demos has the power and authority to control her world through language ("you *must* do as I say"), which means that the mariners, while in her world, cannot use language to define themselves or to control their own subjectivity. Seth notes this situation when he tries to comfort his mates: "He wiped their tears, and tended their sores, and changed their water, and

listened to their sobs and moans, which he felt painfully, perhaps the more because he could not translate them into the words they wished to be” (143). What this story suggests is that discourse has the power to bring into existence the reality that it names, to paraphrase Judith Butler.⁷ Indeed, so powerful is language in determining the subjectivity and “nature” of a person that once it takes possession of a person from within, it is virtually impossible for people to translate themselves into the words they wished to be. Put more concretely, given the widespread cultural legitimation of a discourse in Nazi Germany about Jews as Christ-killing sub-humans, it would have been virtually impossible for Jews to translate themselves into the words they wished to be; given the widespread cultural legitimation of a discourse in the Belgian Congo about Africans as uncivilized savages, it would have been virtually impossible for Africans to translate themselves into the words they wished to be; and given the widespread cultural legitimation of a discourse in Victorian England about servants and women as innately inferior or defective in reason, it would have been virtually impossible for underclasses and women to translate themselves into the words they wished to be. While the culturally legitimated discourse allowed those in power to use the anthropomorphizing principle to construct certain people as “inferior,” those “inferiors” could not use the same anthropomorphizing principle to translate themselves into the subjects they wanted to be.

Matty’s story brilliantly illuminates how someone like Edgar has the power to control others by anthropomorphically projecting into being a nature within them. For instance, Edgar has forced Eugenia, his half-sister and William’s wife, into a sexual relationship with him for years, but since this relationship has gone on for so long, Eugenia considers it natural. In fact, after William discovers Edgar and Eugenia in the act, Eugenia explains to William: “‘It was just something—secret—that *was* you know—like other things you must not do, and do. Like touching yourself, in the dark’” (Byatt 1994, 172). Incest is, according to Eugenia, no more unnatural than masturbation. Indeed, just before William leaves Eugenia, she tells her husband: “‘But—*he* [Edgar] 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 *natural*, nothing in us rose up and said—it was—*unnatural*’” (Byatt’s emphasis 181). Given the language here, it might seem that Eugenia was not forced into having a sexual relationship with Edgar, that she willingly engaged in this relationship, but Byatt cleverly calls into question such a view by using an earlier rape scene to shed light on Eugenia’s experience with Edgar. Earlier in the novella, William enters a stable yard, when he notices Edgar raping Amy, a young servant girl. When William calls out to Edgar, Amy replies: “No, Sir. No, Sir. No harm. I am quite well, Mr. Adamson. *Please*” (124). As a servant, a financial dependent, Amy cannot challenge or question Edgar’s authority without at the same time putting her job in jeopardy. So she willingly accepts her plight as a natural state of affairs. This scene clearly parallels William’s discovery of Eugenia and Edgar. In both scenes, Edgar is having sex with a woman, William catches the pair having sex, and the women defend Edgar. Granted, Amy’s response is clearly that of a terrified young girl who has been abused, whereas Eugenia’s response is that of a much older and more experienced woman, but the parallel between the two scenes sheds considerable light on Edgar’s character and what probably initially transpired when Edgar first started having sex with Eugenia. As Eugenia claims, Edgar is “*strong*” and she suspects that he never intended to stop having sex with her (172).

Put simply, the lordly rulers of language (Mistress Pan Demos and Edgar) take possession of others through discourse and thereby construct a nature within those who are in their power, an idea that is central to Nietzsche's view of language. For Nietzsche, because life is no argument, truth is an epistemic construction of the will imposed upon the world rather than an objective discovery of the intellect that neutrally represents the world. For people who wield what Nietzsche refers to as a "closed system of will" (1989, 146), there is only one Truth, and given their epistemological access to that Truth, they are best positioned to name and define life, the world, and the human. But since there is actually no mind-independent truth for the wielders of a closed will-to-power to discover, what they really do is to use a colonizing discourse to reduce the world to their closed system of will. Indeed, Nietzsche claims that language is, for the wielders of a closed system of will, a violent act of taking possession of that which is named: "The lordly right of giving names extends so far that one should allow oneself to conceive the origin of language itself as an expression of power on the part of the rulers: they say 'this *is* this and this,' they seal everything and event with a sound and, as it were, take possession of it" (26). While Walter Kaufmann's translation here is adequate, a close look at the original German makes the claim somewhat stronger. The last part of the passage reads: "sie siegeln jegliches Ding und Geschehen mit einem Laute ab und nehmen es dadurch gleichsam in Besitz" (1988, 260). Kaufmann was right to translate the verb *siegeln* into the verb seal, but in English, the separable prefix, *ab*, gets lost in translation. When naming an object, lordly rulers seal that which they name, but in German, the claim is stronger because the act of giving a seal implies a sealing off such that the named object disallows naming from other quarters, and it is the non-standard separable prefix that functions to highlight this sealing-off activity. Granted, the act of affixing a seal to an object can imply exclusive rights to the sealed object, but the German, *siegeln . . . ab*, highlights this point more forcefully. So when those governed by a closed system of will name an object, they take exclusive possession of it, because they prevent others from naming the object as well. The consequence of this closed system of will is to reduce life, the world and the human to one interpretation, one truth:

it permits no other interpretation, no other goal; it rejects, denies, affirms, and sanctions solely from the point of view of its interpretation ...; it submits to no power, it believes in its own predominance over every other power, in its absolute superiority of rank over every other power—it believes that no power exists on earth that does not first have to receive a meaning, a right to exist, a value, as a tool of the ascetic ideal, as a way and means to its goal, to one goal. (Nietzsche 1989, 146)

The closed system of will treats life, the world and the human as a single argument and will tolerate no alternatives.

Within the context of "Morpho Eugenia," the characters who control the culture's discourse can determine (ontologize) the subjectivities of those within their power. So Mistress Pan Demos uses language to create the mariners as non-human beings, beings that Seth "could not translate ... into the words they wished to be." Similarly, Edgar takes conceptual possession of Eugenia by creating the "natural" within her, by constructing her as a natural *subject*: "he made me believe it was all perfectly *natural* and so it was *natural*." And once Edgar creates the natural within Eugenia, it becomes nearly impossible for her to translate herself into the words she wished to be. Byatt dramatizes Edgar's ability and power to anthropomorphically construct the world according to his one interpretation, an interpretation that blocks out all others, through a confrontation between Edgar and William. William asks Edgar what he intends to do about

Amy, the girl whom Edgar raped and who has become pregnant. Given his superior position within the Alabaster household, something he flaunts throughout the novella, Edgar dares William to defy him. As a lordly ruler of language, Edgar is free to colonize and net his world as he so desires. Therefore, he tells William: “The girl has not complained, and you cannot do anything to disprove what I *state*” (Byatt 1994, 167). Notice how Byatt italicizes the word *state*. Like Mistress Pan Demos, Edgar has the power and authority to anthropomorphically state into being the one true argument of life, and should William defy him, there can be, as Mistress Pan Demos puts it, “the most terrible consequences.”

For Byatt, this anthropomorphic impulse is inescapable, so the idea that humans could eliminate or overcome it is as naïve as it is unrealistic. But just because all knowledge is anthropomorphic projection, it does not follow that humans are or must be trapped within the confines of their own solipsistic psyches, something that Levenson implies in his analyses of Byatt’s work. At this point, let me detail the two central weaknesses in Levenson’s interpretation. First, in his attempt to underscore and celebrate the power of language to incarnate that which it names, he fails to note that Byatt examines two types of naming in “Morpho Eugenia,” one that is life-producing and one that is life-destructive. Second, given his failure to note Byatt’s distinction between two types of naming, he does not understand how Byatt would have us interact with others and the external world, given the inevitability of the anthropomorphic impulse.

But what Levenson fails to understand Matty understands all too well. Matty first indicates how people should interact with one another, given the inevitability of the anthropomorphic impulse, just after she calls William’s attention to his anthropomorphic “choice of rhetoric.” To further expose the dangers of anthropomorphism, Matty recites a poem from John Clare, the nineteenth-century poet who believed that “Rulers and labourers alike were men” (Byatt 1994, 120). Unlike Harald and William, who unwittingly use an anthropomorphic discourse to define the lives of social insects, Clare acknowledges the limits of his power to describe and define. As he says of the black ant’s city: “In ignorance we muse:/ Pausing, annoyed, we know not what we see” (121). Despite his ignorance, Clare does offer a description of the black ants, but his description bespeaks a kind of epistemological humility that is conspicuously absent from the writings of Harald and William: “Surely they speak a language whisperingly,/ Too fine for us to hear” (121). Clare humbly acknowledges that there seems to be an intelligence and language in the black ant’s city, but given the limits of his ability to hear, he refrains from commenting further.

A little later in the novella, Matty again tries to communicate to William the dangers of anthropomorphism. Like Levenson, William celebrates the power of language, but he fails to understand how language could also be an ominous force, something that works in tandem with an oppressive politics. For instance, when William recalls his experience in the Amazon, he thinks fondly of colonizing and netting the insect world: “The imagination of the scientist had colonised the untrodden jungle before I got there. There is something wonderful about *naming* a species. To bring a thing that is wild, and rare, and hitherto unobserved under the net of human observation and human language” (Byatt 1994, 136). Levenson sees this passage as Byatt’s celebration of the scientist’s ability to produce a “vital verbal construction” (173). Of course, in his interpretation, Levenson conveniently ignores Byatt’s reference to the scientist, who “had

colonised the untrodden jungle” (my emphasis). Naming, no doubt, is an essential activity that humans perform, something, as Nietzsche notes, without which we could not live, but the word colonizing suggests an illegitimate imposition of conceptual power on a vulnerable being, an epistemic imposition that has more to do with domination and control than anything else. While Levenson is right to note the importance of naming in “Morpho Eugenia,” what he fails to understand is that naming could also be the basis for an oppressive and destructive political agenda.

In contrast to William’s euphoric but blind desire to net and colonize the world through scientific language, Matty documents a more responsible way of using language. For instance, in her story, after Seth has gone through a couple of harrowing experiences, a Figure decides to liberate the hapless mariner on condition that he name her: “You must speak, Seth. You must name me” (Byatt 1994, 158). At this point, instead of taking delight in using language to name and thereby colonize the Figure, Seth, like Clare, replies: “How can I name you, when you are hidden behind a veil, and you spin your own hiding-place, and make your own light? What would any name I choose be, to you? I cannot name you” (158). This was the right answer, for the Figure behind the veil says: “You have solved the riddle most excellently, for I am indeed kind, and that is one of my names, one of the best of them” (158). Instead of using language to “net” and “colonize” the Figure behind the veil, Seth humbly acknowledges the limits of naming, and such a humble gesture results in a productive and respectful relationship between Seth and the Figure.

Clearly, Matty’s treatment of the anthropomorphizing impulse differs considerably from William’s. William is obsessed with reality, which is obvious from the question he intended to answer in his comments on the ant colony: “What Is an Individual?” (Byatt 1994, 126) Such a question implies that the individual is a pre-given argument that must be decoded. In Matty’s world, however, such a question would make no sense, because the individual is not an argument waiting to be decoded. On the contrary, in her world, individuals are brought into conceptual being through an anthropomorphic discourse. But there are two ways of being brought into conceptual being. For those lordly rulers of language who wield *a closed system of will*, they treat life, the world and the human as a pre-given argument which only their discourse is uniquely situated to decode, and as a consequence, those who are under their power will not have the freedom “to translate them[selves] into the words they wished to be.” William inadvertently uses discourse to colonize and net the world around him, but by the end of the novella, after Matty exposes to him his anthropomorphic tendencies and the dangers of those tendencies, he is able to overcome the closed system of will. In his interactions with the Figure behind the veil, Seth resists the impulse to use the closed system of will to anthropomorphically construct the Figure such that she cannot translate herself into the words that she wished to be. In short, Seth uses *an open system of will* that humbly acknowledges the limits of naming, and thus makes possible a more productive and life-giving relationship with the Figure behind the veil.⁸

II.

To conclude this essay, I want to return to Levenson’s astute observation that Byatt’s depiction of the nineteenth century’s momentous intellectual debates prefigures theory, which is but a “late, parodic form” of those debates. While I would agree with Levenson that theory is not

nearly as original as many of its contemporary practitioners seem to think, I totally disagree with his conflation of religion and theory. If anything, what Byatt's novella suggests is that the "disappearance of God" (J. Hillis Miller) and the "failure of religion" (Terry Eagleton) have made theory possible. But let me explain how I define theory at this point. While theorists from Plato through Christ to T.S. Eliot hold that life, the human, and the world are mind-independent arguments that they are epistemologically positioned to decode, theorists hold that life, the world and the human are adiscursive entities for which there is no mind-independent argument.⁹ For contemporary theorists, the world exists, but our concepts about the world are, as Byatt notes, human constructions. As she claims in her wonderful essay, "Van Gogh, Death and Summer," which relies heavily on the deconstructive theory of Derrida, specifically his essay "White Mythology," the world is not some pre-encoded hieroglyph waiting to be read aright; "mimesis is essentially human" (1992c, 296), which means that "[o]ur perceptions of colour, like our language, like our power to make representations, is something that is purely human" (299). According to this view, instead of using language to accurately represent the mind-independent argument of life, Byatt concludes: "We all make meanings by using the myths and fictions of our ancestors as a way of making sense, or excitement, out of our experience on the earth" (283-84). In short, for Byatt, the absence of a mind-independent theory or argument does not mean that humans should stop creating theories (arguments) that help humans systematize their world; it just means that every theory (argument) humans create will only be a human-constructed system that humans anthropomorphically project onto life, the human and the world. Therefore, instead of using language like Pan Demos and Edgar to define life, the world and the human such that people cannot translate themselves into the words they wished to be, theorists should use language like Seth and William (that is, William at the end of the novella) as a way of engaging the other so that people could work together in their communal construction of arguments. I find Derrida insightful and moving on this score. In an essay on justice and deconstruction, Derrida focuses, not on a mind-independent argument or concept about the world, but on the way people interact with each other in the formation of a concept (argument) like justice:

One must be juste with justice, and the first way to do it justice is to hear, read, interpret it, to try to understand where it comes from, what it wants of us, knowing that it does so through singular idioms . . . and also knowing that this justice always addresses itself to singularity, to the singularity of the other, despite or even because it pretends to universality. Consequently, never to yield on this point, constantly to maintain an interrogation of the origin, grounds and limits of our conceptual, theoretical or normative apparatus surrounding justice is on deconstruction's part anything but a neutralization of interest in justice, an insensitivity toward injustice. On the contrary, it hyperbolically raises the stakes of exacting justice; it is sensitivity to a sort of essential disproportion that must inscribe excess and inadequation in itself and that strives to denounce not only theoretical limits but also concrete injustices, with the most palpable effects, in the good conscience that dogmatically stops before any inherited determination of justice. (Derrida 1992, 20)

Justice is not a mind-independent argument that is what it is whether humans perceive it or not. Rather, it is an "inherited determination," a human-constructed apparatus that structures social forms and governs human action. But that inherited determination of justice may have been constructed without taking into account the interests, needs and desires of a wide range of people. Therefore, instead of thinking of justice as a settled argument, concept, system, or apparatus, Derrida *conceives* of it as the act of listening and hearing, of reading and interpreting,

of trying to understand where the other comes from. By listening and understanding, people may not overcome their anthropomorphic impulses, but they will at least have developed a rhetorical strategy that enables them to interact with others in a healthy and productive manner in spite of the anthropomorphic impulse. Once we understand the degree to which the anthropomorphic plays a role in the construction of our arguments about life, it would be possible to understand the need, in the name of justice, to communally construct new arguments in conjunction with instead of isolation from others.

At this point, let me explain precisely why Levenson's interpretation of "Morpho Eugenia" and his representation of theory are so profoundly misguided. Levenson's objective is to recover realism, but not traditional realism which naively believes in the stodgy, old correspondence theory of truth; he calls for a "reinvigorated realism," which is based on paying close attention to the significant details of the universe "*wherever one finds oneself*" (Levenson 2001, 165). Such an updated aesthetic is based on a "metamorphic naturalism" (171) "in which metaphor is metamorphosis and language incarnation" (173). In other words, literary language can signify the mind-independent argument about the ever-changing world and human, so long as it recognizes that "language can never be a stable instrument; it is an active, mobile instability, and as it evokes the world, it changes worldly experience" (173). Because theory, according to Levenson, lives in its own world in which language "bears no relation to things" (173), it is destined to fail. To illustrate this point, Levenson discusses a passage about Matty's smell. According to his interpretation, "[t]he good stain of sensual life emanates through Matty's smell, and as it draws William toward her and away from his white and sterile marriage, it reaffirms the call of the body, whose upsurge defeats theory" (167). What Levenson seeks here is triumph, the triumph of language to incarnate the thing it names, and in his reinvigorated realism, he believes that he has achieved his goal. Moreover, in pointing out that theory is defeated, he seems to think that he has exposed the limits as well as the flaws of theory.

But with regard to the production of a metaphysical or legitimate argument about life, the human, and the world, theory will always fail; it will always end in epistemological and ontological defeat. And yet, and this is something that Levenson simply cannot understand but something that Byatt understands perfectly well, theory's defeat, of which it is fully conscious, is its virtue and strength; it is the very thing that makes human connection between people and cultures possible. Since there are no mind-independent arguments waiting to be discovered or decoded, there is no possibility of developing an epistemology or theory that would rightly grasp the ontological conditions of being. In other words, in a post-God universe, there is no possibility of an epistemological and/or ontological triumph, a triumph that Levenson seeks to re-establish by reinvigorating realism and developing a new language of incarnation. Rather, we can produce theories about the world, but those theories, projected onto the world by anthropomorphically driven humans, will always reflect the limits and biases of the language users and producers. Such an awareness of theory's limitations does not mean that theory is useless or irrelevant. It just means that theory, no matter how useful, no matter how compelling, will never be up to the task of doing representational justice to that which it names. Eventually, inevitably, every theory will be supplanted, modified, deconstructed, or reconstructed, something that every good theorist knows. So instead of trying to discover the right language or the one theory that can ultimately incarnate the thing it names, Byatt encourages us to perpetually create meanings and concepts in order to make "sense, or excitement, out of our experience on the earth."

Contemporary theory's awareness of its basis in perpetual defeat is paradoxically its strength because it refuses to be satisfied with its formulations, because it refuses to see its formulations as final or absolute. Matty's story details why this is the case. Like Judith Butler, Byatt understands that discourse, rather than accurately representing an object's mind-independent essence or nature, produces the conceptual arguments and effects that it names. And like Nietzsche, Byatt understands that there are two separate types of language users, those who use discourse to reduce that which they name to a final or absolute concept and those who claim that life is no argument and, therefore, reject the idea that any particular discourse could accurately signify the world's essence or being. For Mistress Pan Demos and Edgar, who wield the closed system of discursive will, they implicitly or explicitly reduce that which they name to the dictates of their conceptual system ("You *must* do as I say"), and since these two have the cultural and political power to enforce their conceptual system, it becomes a nature ("he made me believe it was all perfectly *natural* and so it was *natural*") within the people around them.

By treating life as a human-constructed argument that could never adequately represent the singularity of that which it names, theory avoids the ontological imperialism that is central to conceptual systems constructed by those who wield a closed system of will. Utilizing a theory of women as weak beings who cannot endure the difficulties of life in the Tropics, William tells Matty that the Amazon "is *no place* for a woman." After exposing the limits of William's patriarchal theory of women, Matty finally tells William directly that his perspective of her is faulty: "I do not think you know what kind of woman I am" (Byatt 1994, 178). William's anthropomorphic theory about women has prevented him from seeing Matty's singularity, her uniqueness that cannot be netted or colonized by William's anthropomorphic discourse. Were William like Mistress Pan Demos or Edgar, he would persist, doing everything within his power to force her to believe that what he says is perfectly natural so that it would become perfectly natural to and in her. But Matty convinces William that he does not see her, and as a consequence, William begins to understand the limits and dangers of his own anthropomorphic tendencies.

That Matty radically impacts William is evident, not because he implicitly adopts an alternative theory about women ("a reinvigorated realism" of sorts), but because he adopts a new rhetorical strategy for interacting with others, a strategy that keeps the anthropomorphic impulse in check. After Matty and William express their care for each other, William takes Matty into his arms. Instead of projecting onto her his own anthropomorphic discourse, he uses language to discern Matty's interests, needs and desires: "Shall I stay here?" he said. 'Or shall I go back, now?" Matty replies: "I should like you to stay" (180). While William differs from Pan Demos and Edgar, because he has neither the power nor the authority to project people into conceptual being such that they could not translate themselves into the words they wished to be, he was like both of them in that he refused to engage others or to understand what they desired or needed. He took a joy in netting and colonizing that which he named, rarely asking himself if his act of naming was just an anthropomorphic projection on that which is named and never questioning if that anthropomorphic projection was a destructive imposition on the named person or thing. But in his questions to Matty, it is obvious that William has finally learned that others are not necessarily what they seemed to be to him, and he has developed a rhetorical strategy to begin the process of understanding others independent of his own anthropomorphic projections. Such a

rhetorical strategy will allow him in the future to construct theories in conjunction with others, provisional theories that will be more complex and nuanced in representing the singularity of others, but also more just because they will be open to a deconstruction and a subsequent reconstruction in light of the others' input, input that would counter but never eliminate the language users' anthropomorphic tendencies. William, like all of us, will never overcome the anthropomorphic impulse, but he has at least learned how to use language so that he can respect the needs and desires of others and begin the process of creating life-producing arguments about life, the human and the world in conjunction with those around him. Such is the legacy, according to Byatt, of the nineteenth-century crisis in knowledge, which enables theorists, in their defeat, to connect with others in humility and respect.

Notes

¹ For an intelligent analysis of Shelley's essay in relation to the developments in British atheism, see Berman's *A History of Atheism* (1988, 134-91).

² For one of the most astute analyses of Feuerbach's work, see Van A. Harvey's book *Feuerbach and the Interpretation of Religion*.

³ For a useful discussion of the way Lyell's work was "inimical to the traditional Christian world-picture" (1999, 185), see A. N. Wilson's *God's Funeral* (1999).

⁴ In the "Introduction" to Froude's novel, Rosemary Ashton details some of the central atheistic developments that led to the publication of *The Nemesis of Faith* (1988).

⁵ Byatt specifically refers to Nietzsche's work in her essays ("George Eliot's Essays" and "People in Paper Houses") and her novel *Babel Tower*. In the epigraph to *Babel Tower*, she quotes Nietzsche's famous claim about God and language: "I fear we are not getting rid of God because we still believe in grammar." For an extensive analysis of this sentence, see my essay, "Killing God, Liberating the 'Subject': Nietzsche and Post-God Freedom."

⁶ For discussions of the nineteenth-century intellectual developments that led to the rejection of a mind-independent concept, see Richard Rorty's *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Jacques Derrida's *Of Grammatology* and *Writing and Difference*, Michel Foucault's *The Order of Things* and *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, and J. Hillis Miller's *The Disappearance of God*.

⁷ Butler develops this idea most clearly in *Bodies That Matter* (1993).

⁸ For a more detailed analysis of this distinction between an open and closed system of the will to power, see my essay, "D.H. Lawrence's *Women in Love*: A Tale of the Modernist Psyche, the Continental 'Concept', and the Aesthetic Experience."

⁹ Theorists I have in mind include Jacques Derrida, Drucilla Cornell, Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak, Stuart Hall, Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari, and Judith Butler, and all of them hold that knowledge systems are non-necessary conceptual formations. Indeed, for all of these writers, primary is the rhetorical relationship people establish with others and the world. In other words, the lessons they learned from nineteenth-century crisis in knowledge have something to do with the way we use rhetoric rather than the way language can incarnate the thing it names.

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