

Discursive Intertextuality, Parody, and Mise en Abyme in A.S. Byatt's Short Stories

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Abstract

This essay analyses three short stories from A.S. Byatt's collection Elementals: Stories of Fire and Ice (1998) in light of several self-reflexive strategies. The short narratives Crocodile Tears and Baglady will be discussed from the perspective of "discursive intertextuality," a literary practice that foregrounds a discursive element established and detectable across genres.

Christ in the House of Martha and Mary will be examined from the standpoint of intertextuality and mise en abyme. Once again, the study of this narrative will hinge on the discursive aspects of mise en abyme as a meta-generic approach put in place not to indefinitely reiterate "the same" concept, but to show the potentially endless possibilities of interpretation a text may offer its readers.

Across these short stories, the opposition between fire and ice gets reworked in corresponding dichotomous sets: North vs. South, West vs. Orient, contemplative vs. active life. The specific goal this article sets itself to achieve is to show the contrasting trajectories at play in these short stories. Dense with contrasting and intersecting meta-generic paths, such narratives perform and make visible a double register of devotion/affection and questioning/deconstruction of genre norms in relation to established Anglophone discursive tropes.

Keywords: A.S. Byatt; *Elementals: Stories of Fire and Ice*; metageneric; discursive intertextuality; *mise en abyme*

Introduction

This essay analyses three narratives from A.S. Byatt's *Elementals: Stories of Fire and Ice*, a collection of short stories published in 1998. In *Crocodile tears*, a British woman, following a sudden trauma, escapes to the south of France seeking respite and a chance to heal in peace and isolation. *Baglady* deploys the trope of the confrontation of a Western rational subject with the 'magic' of the Orient. However, the Orient is metonymically represented by a shopping mall, a postmodern reduction of mystery to a prosaic labyrinthine space of final dissolution. Lastly, *Christ in the House of Martha and Mary* exemplifies the attempt at rehabilitating instinctual creative skills and a

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sanguine approach to life against the apollonian abilities of intellectual discernment and visual artistic creation.

Throughout several of the narratives that compose the collection, the opposition between fire and ice gets re-worked in corresponding dichotomous sets: North vs. South, West vs. Orient, contemplative vs. active life. This essay aims at discussing Byatt's distinctively own, deliberate deconstruction of such time-honoured cultural and literary tropes through specific metageneric approaches and strategies.

In an article published in the journal *Connotations* this year, Burkhard Niederhoff investigates several important structures and forms of self-reflexivity in literature. After differentiating between 'explicit' and 'implicit' metageneric approaches, Niederhoff further discriminates between *mise en abyme*, transtextuality, violation of genre norms, intertextuality, hypertextuality, and parody (2022: 1-32). This essay adapts Niederhoff's taxonomy and definitions of such categories to shed light on the short stories at hand.

More precisely, *Crocodile Tears* and *Baglady* will be discussed in terms of 'discursive intertextuality' the expression deployed in these pages to indicate a metafictional approach that violates norms that do not, however, refer to a specific text or genre, but to a 'discursive tradition' within a given literary context detectable across genres. I wish to contend that these two short stories self-reflexively meditate on the literary tropes of the 'South of Europe' and 'the Orient' as potentially healing and/or treacherous counter-domains to British civilization – unique constellations of values at the opposite spectrum of those embodied by British culture – which have been endemic to Anglophone fiction throughout the modern centuries. *Christ in the House of Martha and Mary* will be discussed in relation to intertextuality and *mise en abyme*.

From this perspective, this essay argues for the fruitfulness of a critical reading of Byatt's short narratives as staging a cognizant interplay between the northern (British) normative subject and its others, a 'literary game' based on enduring and sedimented assumptions deriving from the theoretical postulation of a correspondence between Europe's constitution as centre against an Asian, African, and/or American other on the one hand, and northern Europe's self-positioning as centre of modernity through its discursive otherization of Southern Europe (Dainotto, 2006).

Discursive intertextuality: *Crocodile Tears*

Crocodile Tears, the short story opening the collection, has been described by Alfer and Edwards De Campos as "embrac[ing] the mythology of the Mediterranean," (2010: 154) a reference to the literary trope of the

Mediterranean as the imagined dimension of existential upheaval, healing, and transformation.

The Mediterranean south has been traditionally depicted, in Anglophone contemporary narratives, as a positive realm of otherness, a space for the appreciation of art and its deeper meanings, the ideal location for a self-indulgent holiday and the enjoyment of sensual pleasures, as well as an appropriate location for the elaboration of loss, for sexual initiation, for self-imposed exile. Sometimes, it is portrayed as a suspended dimension, a time capsule, a universe of continuous traditions and unbroken origins in partial discontinuity with the contemporary world.

Crocodile Tears aims at destabilizing this literary trope which has historically partaken in the cultural and literary construction of the (Anglophone) Western subject, its self-appointed place in the world, its privileged taxonomic structures as well as cultural references [1].

As the story opens, we meet a mature couple, Tony and Patricia, visiting an art gallery, engaging in a series of activities that indicate practical familiarity with one another as well as a shared sense of cultural discernment. Not only the context in which Patricia and Tony perform these actions – Bloomsbury, the gardens, the pub lunches – is distinctly English, the subject of their first (and only) conversation is about ‘English-ness.’ Tony sees a painting he likes, recognizing a ‘feeling’ in it, as well as a description of a typically English landscape. Patricia, on the contrary, only sees it as banal. She is disturbed by her husband’s fascination with what she perceives as a predictable work of art unimaginatively reiterating the ‘dullness’ and ‘greyness’ of the English landscape.

For a short while, after entertaining a mild row, Tony and Patricia visit the gallery separately. When Patricia sees Tony again, he is lying dead at the bottom of the gallery’s staircase. She overhears from the paramedics that he has had a heart attack. In shock, Patricia leaves the gallery, goes home, packs a bag, goes to the station, and gets on a train. She gets off in Nîmes, in the south of France, where she stays at a hotel spending a few days alone, visiting the city, occasionally shopping, sleeping, eating alone at the restaurant, performing the same actions routinely. This thoughtless repetition of everyday actions seems to be Patricia’s way of coping with the trauma of loss.

Throughout her stay in the southern city, Patricia is caught between a Northern and Southern dimension, cold and heat, shadow and light, the unverbalized prospect of opposing resistance to her sadness, and letting go [2]. She also discovers she is not the only visitor trying to reconcile these opposite realms. At the hotel, Patricia meets Nils, a Norwegian ethnologist

who studies “the relations between certain Norse beliefs and customs, and those in the South” (30).

Nils and Patricia share a dislike for ‘southern things’ such as bullfighting, blood, and the ritual celebration of death. But whereas Nils wishes to understand more about the southern world he has fantasized about for a long time (until he clashes with it after he sees a bullfight performance), Patricia does not, she is skeptical and selective in her approach to the local culture.

When Patricia confesses to Nils that she has not visited the Arena of Nîmes, as she really dislikes the bullfighting shows that it hosts, Nils tells her: “I don’t like it either. But I go there, often. I sit there, in the sun, and think. It is a good place to think, for a man from the north who is starved of the sun. The sun pours into it, like a bowl” (31). The sun seems to pour into the entire city, taking away from the protagonists any possibility of hiding. That southern town made up of still visible historical strata sheds light on the personal ‘layers’ of both characters, slowly bringing to the surface the need to confess to each other the true events that motivated their escape from home.

In a recent analysis of another short story from the same collection, *A Lamia in the Cévennes*, Peter Mathews discusses Byatt’s strong disagreement with the romantic notion according to which “passion, with its symbolic heat, is the source from which true beauty springs” (2018: 216). Stories such as *Cold*, but also the character of Maud Bailey in *Possession: A Romance* (1990), destabilize such correspondences creatively reconciling the intellectual sphere with that of warmth and passions:

Byatt uses her story to examine the dynamic tension between a number of opposing values, from the dichotomy that Keats establishes between emotional art and ‘cold philosophy’ to the boundaries separating reality and myth, the recurrent tension between realism and abstraction in modern art, and the problematic assumptions about gender that often appear in famous works of art and literature. In this story, Byatt is particularly interested in how the success of a revolutionary discourse can lead to the uncritical acceptance of one side in these cultural dichotomies: art over science, emotion over rationality, revolution over tradition, to name but a few examples. (Mathews 2018: 213)

An analogous intent at destabilizing recognized oppositions is clearly detectable in *Crocodile Tears*. The peculiarity of Byatt’s story is in its significant and sustained neutralization of the narrative building bricks that constitute the trope of the ‘escape to the South.’ For instance, the ‘expected’ gradual recognition and consequent resolution of personal problems through a fortunate encounter with a local or fellow visitor is constantly

defused. Patricia does not experience ‘epiphanies’ and her connection to Nils appears weak throughout, fraught with uneasiness and misunderstandings.

Mathews, vis-à-vis *A Lamia in the Cévennes*, describes the protagonist’s “refusal to be seduced, along with his resolute insistence on acknowledging only a reality that he can verify with his own senses [that] makes him a forcefully anti-romantic figure, a character caught up in a bizarre fairy-tale who nonetheless uncompromisingly refuses to play by its rules or expectations” (218).

This exact description applies to Patricia, who inflexibly refuses to be seduced by the South and to play the romantic heroine on a trip to self-discovery. Reluctant to let go of her ‘Englishness’ she finds herself caught not in a fairy-tale, but within the structure of an archetypal narrative that ‘expects’ her to question previous existential convictions and experiment with passions, but that instead she ‘occupies’ with her unwillingness and reluctance, eventually proving the point that she is able to find courage and comfort in the encounter with another in spite of not having been seduced, in a conventional way, by the ‘otherness’ of the place or by someone who embodies its ‘spirit’ and values.

As she rejected, at the art gallery, a stereotypical notion of ‘Englishness’ associated with dullness, now Patricia refuses the mythical dimension of a restorative experience taking place in the south of Europe. Nonetheless, the story does ultimately outline a path towards healing and self-acceptance through mutual understanding, as both Patricia and Nils will give one another the support, strength, and motivation necessary to go back to their respective homes and take care of what they left behind on impulse, or out of a necessity for self-preservation.

The accomplishment of this healing parable seems to prove the point according to which authors might undermine a given construct or question it, but by dissecting it, they also ‘honour’ it and give it its due importance. In the article quoted at the beginning of this essay, Niederhoff observes that “texts may draw the reader’s attention to genre conventions not only by means of parody; they may also foreground these conventions by violating or deviating from them” (2022: 11). From this perspective, therefore, “a text may repudiate a genre while simultaneously practicing it” (Niederhoff 2022: 15). This short narrative seems to precisely achieve this: nurture of a given literary trope (the escape to the South) through questioning it.

Parody: *Baglady*

The literary convention that construes and represents the south of Europe as an opposite signifier to British civilization can be characterized as a

discursive formation running parallel to the European discourse on the Orient. Both traditions rest on dichotomizing discursive patterns relying on a taxonomy of places more or less modern, rational, archaic, timeless, and magical. As we will see, the ‘magic of the Orient’ is a trope that in this short story Byatt ironically manipulates, setting most of the narrative in a shopping mall, banal but sinister, that will ‘deconstruct’ a northern protagonist with ruthless intent.

Byatt immediately establishes the ‘otherness’ of the female protagonist, Daphne, vis-à-vis her social environment. In a very characteristic manner, Byatt makes the central narrative conflicts of her short stories emerge from a deeply personal uneasiness within the female protagonist vis-à-vis her surroundings. Just as in the short story *Medusa’s Ankles* from her previous collection *The Matisse Stories* (1993), and as in the short narrative that will be discussed next, a woman, sadly aware of her being at odds with social standards of beauty, youth, and grace, expresses her pain, provoking a series of conflicts that will spring from that initial sadness and dissatisfaction:

Most of the wives are elegant, with silk suits and silky legs and exquisitely cut hair. They chat mutedly, swapping recipes for chutney and horror stories about nannies, staring out of the amber glass wall of the Precious Jade Hotel at the dimpling sea. Daphne Gulver-Robinson is older than most of them, and dowdier, although her husband, Rollo, has less power than most of the other directors. She has tried to make herself attractive for this jaunt and has lost ten pounds and had her hands manicured; but now she sees the other ladies, she knows it is not enough. Her style is seated tweed, and stout shoes, and bird’s-nest hair (186).

As the narrative develops, Daphne will be rejected more and more by that world of silky smoothness the other ladies share with the exotic surroundings. When Daphne, in her heavy tweed, visits a ‘typically Oriental’ shopping mall in the company of those ladies, she struggles to keep up, slowed down and overwhelmed by the mall’s imposing size and the quantity of exotic goods on display.

That animated and colourful world, that ‘Orient’ in miniature size, will progressively deprive Daphne of the markers of her status as a wealthy foreigner – her camera disappears first, then her “smart shoes” (91), purse, and credit cards. The shopping mall gradually deprives her of her property, ‘subtracting’ from her piece by piece. She will finally lose her sense of time and identity when her watch and documents will be taken away from her.

Lastly, unable to find her way back home, Daphne gets forever caught by that labyrinthine space, by that simulacrum of Oriental opulence:

"It is in this way that she discovers that the Good Fortune Mall extends maybe as far into the earth as into the sky, excavated identical caverns of shop-fronts, jade, gold, silver, silk, lacquer, watches, suiting, bonsai trees and masks and puppets. Lifts that say they are going down go only up. Stairwells are windowless: ground level cannot be found" (192).

This passage reminds us of the mutually exclusive options of being either 'revived' by the Oriental encounter (going up) or imprisoned by it (going down): ground level is lost for good. The impact of the Orient on the rational Western subject is either revitalizing or destructive, but it invariably takes away his/her previous identity, along with his/her fundamental points of reference and certainties.

In this allegorical narrative, the Orient, represented metonymically within the space of an imposing and labyrinthic mall, is indeed 'magical' and 'timeless,' but not at all in a benevolent, 'healing' sense: it progressively entraps its visitor, becoming the stage for the undoing of the Western subject/protagonist.

In this collection of short narratives, the East, the European south, myth, warmth, and the senses are terms opposed to the West, the European North, reality, cold, and intellectual discernment. Although Byatt questions such dichotomies with acumen and subtlety, she does not comment – from a perspective located within the dynamics of her narratives or in a meta-discourse about them – on their making up a coherent cluster of preconceived associations. Hence, she reproposes them in her own language – or, as Pierre Bourdieu would perhaps say, her literary 'idiolect' – adding a distinctive, and quite intricate perspective to a collective perception of the world based on time-honoured taxonomic categories of culture and nature.

As short narratives consciously manipulating such established tropes and clichés, *Crocodile Tears* and *Baglady* are both characterized by the presence of a discursive undercurrent aimed at subverting a set of established dichotomies central to the Anglophone cultural and literary tradition. In simpler words, what these two short stories seem to say, respectively, is that a (cultural and collective) construction of self centred on rationality does not impede understanding and exchange on a deeper level, and that 'sensual disruption' has become as predictable as fake goods in a department store.

Byatt sets out to achieve this disruption partly through a contrived and gimmicky rewriting of these time-honoured tropes. If we agree with Sianne Ngai's definition of literary gimmicks as the "endpoints of poetic decline" (2020: 28) that are, however, "still 'clever': "apparently endowed with enough critical power to work against the agenda of the original

metaphor to contradict or limit the range of reference and meaning it establishes" (2020: 28), we realize that, perhaps, Byatt's literary devices do not truly 'work against the agenda' of such paradigms. Although they succeed in exploring literary archetypes and clichés with sophistication, erudition, and a 'contrary' spirit, as 'indicators of decline' they ultimately mirror a wider crisis of Western categories of thought, and a loss of confidence in their validity.

In particular, *Baglady* seems to parody the trope of a rational Western subject being undone by Oriental lavishness by, once again, 'neutralizing' its narrative components. Firstly, Byatt introduces a protagonist not at all 'centred,' self-assured, and collected, then she lets her evaporate in 'The Orient:' opulent, colourful, and a little bizarre, certainly not warm, or invitingly sensual. Therefore, the dichotomous lait-motif of fire and ice, in this story, gets not only questioned through exposing its narrative elements, by rewriting them in terms of un-centred subject/grotesque environment, but thoroughly reversed (Daphne is a nice lady and the mall is cold and unforgiving).

By questioning and reversing such sedimented categories, Byatt destabilizes the certainties of the modern British/Western subject and his/her place within a taxonomic grid of established values. In this sense, her stories indicate a crisis and, quite literally, a dis-location. The gradual loss of a self-assigned identity within a taxonomic grid of global signification: the Western rational subject and its others; the West and the rest.

Intertextuality and mise en abyme: *Christ in the House of Martha and Mary*
The last short story this essay discusses creates an imagined context for the painting *Kitchen Scene with Christ in the House of Martha and Mary* (1618, oil on canvas, 103.5 x 60.0 cm) by Diego Velázquez:

In the foreground Velázquez paints an everyday kitchen scene. A maid pounds garlic in a mortar, and other ingredients lie scattered on the table: eggs, a shrivelled red pepper, fish – a traditional symbol associated with Christ – and an earthenware jug probably containing olive oil. An older woman points towards the girl, as if giving her instructions or telling her off for working too hard, or she may be drawing our attention to the figures in the background (The National Gallery, n.d.).

Byatt imagines a busy kitchen in which Dolores, a young and talented cook, works under the supervision of Concepción, an older woman. A young

painter – a fictional Velázquez – is also at work in the same kitchen, observing (and occasionally eating) the dishes the women prepare, portraying what he sees.

Dolores is a young woman with a “stalwart build and [...] solid arms” (219) who feels that beauty, wealth, and time for leisure are a constellation of privileges that belong to a social caste she will never be part of. The narrative begins with Dolores trying to conceal the anger and pain brought about by such awareness, and by her status of servitude that does not allow her to have any time for herself: “I want time to think. Not to be pushed around. She studied her face in a shining copper pan, which exaggerated the heavy cheeks, the angry pout. It was true she was no beauty, but no woman likes being told so. God made her heavy, and she hated him for it” (220).

In a dialogue with the young painter, Dolores expresses her frustration at seeing her work unappreciated and her creations quickly and carelessly consumed. Dolores has skills and is instinctively able to recognize beauty, just not in herself: “she felt herself to be a heavy space of unregarded darkness, a weight of miserable shadow in the corner of the room he [the painter] was abstractly recording” (221).

There is an added dimension to the painting – a text within the text – an open frame on the right upper end of it that depicts the biblical episode of *Christ in the House of Martha and Mary* as described by Luke in the New Testament. Behind the biblical scene, another door opens, suggesting an infinitely recurring sequence. Formally, the technique of *mise en abyme* would consist of a repetition – within the same visual text – of the same image, but Velázquez’s take on it is particularly resonant with the article’s argument, as it hinges on ‘discourse.’ The kitchen scene and the biblical episode are not the same, but they both focus on the notion of manual vs. intellectual labour. The third door hints at, perhaps, the enduring occurrence of this issue throughout history, or the potentially infinite number of interpretations the foregrounded scene may invite.

In the same way as Velázquez opens a window to the biblical story after which the painting is named, so that “in splitting levels of reality across the canvas, the artist (therefore the viewer) is able to transcend time and space and



PICTORIAL ELEMENTS ARE DEPLOYED BY BYATT TO COMPOSE A DETAILED NARRATIVE PLOT. FOR INSTANCE, WHEN DOLORES SEES THE PAINTED IMAGE OF HER SENIOR CO-WORKER CONCEPCIÓN, SHE NOTICES HER “GOOD BONES, A FINE MOUTH, A WONDERFUL PATTERN OF LINES ON HER BROW...” (220)

move from the material to the spiritual in one image" (Boyd 2006: 72), Byatt's Velázquez digresses from the linearity of his conversation with Dolores to open up a corresponding 'space' for the biblical episode within the main narrative [3]. The *mise en abyme* is therefore repeated at the narrative level.

June Sturrock explains that the episode from the Bible has traditionally been read "as representing the active and the contemplative lives respectively, and the narrative seen as establishing the opposition between them and the superiority of the contemplative life" (2016: 474). However, Sturrock points out that Byatt's interpretation rejects this hierarchy by elaborating the dichotomy into complementary terms: two different kinds of active life (the contemplative and the physical), opposed to a passive life. This is how the young Velázquez, in the story, articulates Byatt's interpretation of the episode in the Bible:

The divide is not between the servants and the served, between the leisured and the workers, but between those who are interested in the world and its multiplicity of forms and forces, and those who merely subsist, worrying or yawning [...] the world is full of light and life, and the true crime is not to be interested in it [...] The Church teaches that Mary is the contemplative life, which is higher than Martha's way, which is the active way. But any painter must question, which is which? And a cook also contemplates mysteries (226-227).

Through the words of the painter, therefore, Byatt argues for the spiritual importance of creative work, which begins with the capacity to observe (contemplate) and continues with an imaginative and personal elaboration of reality. In creative work - painting as well as cooking - contemplation and action are reconciled and made complementary to one another. If one wished to re-articulate this very notion in terms of, once again, 'fire and ice,' one could state that, according to Byatt's interpretation of this biblical story, there are two passionate ways to live, the contemplative and the active, both opposed to a cold, sterile lack of interest.

I wish to focus, once again, on the discursive aspect of Byatt's interpretation, which I find problematic for two reasons: Velázquez tells Dolores "... the world is full of light and life, and the true crime is not to be interested in it. You have a way in. Take it. It may incidentally be a way out, too, as all skills are" (226). The point is not to have skills, it is the social recognition that goes with them that creates a chance for emancipation. Dolores might possess extraordinary talents, but being a busy servant, she executes without being able to 'reflect' upon them. The possibilities that come with her talents are explained to her by someone who, by virtue of his

profession and the social status that this implies, has had the time to reflect, someone who has been enabled to use his mental faculties: intellectual, imaginative, creative...

In other words, the painter enjoys a social status that usually comes hand in hand with a scholastic disposition – defined by Bourdieu as “time liberated from practical occupations and preoccupations,” (2000: 13) – without which one, quite simply, does not have the possibility to elaborate upon reality, creating a meaningful relationship with oneself and the rest of the world [4].

The second problematic aspect is that the conceptual dichotomy between the intellect and the senses, and the ultimate primacy of the first term over the second, is fully restored in Byatt’s narration. The young painter has the power not only to create (also given to Dolores, who creates with foods), but the authority to name, to speak, to offer a comprehensive vision of the world in which Dolores figures as an object [5]. Velázquez opens doors on the abyss, but he also controls it, capturing it within the frame.

Byatt sees Dolores’ position within Velázquez’s vision as ‘privileged,’ as one of the best features of the painting: “The light hit four things – the silvery fish, so recently dead that they were still bright-eyed, the solid white gleam of the eggs, emitting light, the heads of garlic, half-peeled and life-like, and the sulky, fleshy, furiously frowning face of the girl, above her fat red arms in their brown stuff sleeves” (229).

Another interpretation would read Velázquez’s arrangement as making of Dolores one of his ‘humble objects.’ Dolores appears stuck (literally ‘framed,’ ‘enclosed’) between the eternity of biblical disapproval, the contingency of her situation of subdued worker (the older woman possibly scolding her or reminding her of the episode in the Bible), and the gaze of the painter that Dolores returns with mute resentment. Caught between guilt, necessity, and patronizing sympathy, Dolores can only accept her status as graciously as she can.

On a level of symbolic language and representation, just as Velázquez cannot escape ultimately appropriating Dolores for his artistic vision – Dolores does not have time to reflect upon herself but is reflected in the painter’s vision – Byatt, in literally creating the vision of the (fictional) Velázquez, maintains – albeit all along rehabilitating its second term – a dichotomy of ‘culture’ versus ‘nature’ without acknowledging its function within a process whereby a national, supra-national, or hegemonic entity (a person with a superior position or social status, with scholastic disposition, a colonizing country...) constructs and projects its double image.

Of course, Byatt does not necessarily have to demystify such dichotomies, she can, as I believe she does, competently manipulate them to uncover their contradictions little by little, but she also, at least in part, reiterates them by failing to see, for instance, that in the painting, the only 'human object' is Dolores, who can only look back, for a moment, and catch a glimpse, through the eyes of the painter, of her (reflected and eternalized through the *mise en abyme*) status of deceived subject with 'no time to think.'

Conclusions: Byatt's distinguished subversion

The young Velázquez asks: "the Church teaches that Mary is the contemplative life, which is higher than Martha's way, which is the active way. But any painter must question, which is which? And a cook also contemplates mysteries" (227). In this case, Byatt's main strategy seems to be rehabilitation ("and a cook also contemplates mysteries"). Here is what Bourdieu has to say about the gesture of rehabilitation:

Just as some celebrations of femininity simply reinforce male domination, so this ultimately very comfortable way of respecting the 'people', which under the guise of exalting the working class, helps to enclose it in what it is by converting privation into a choice or an elective accomplishment, provides all the profits of a show of subversive, paradoxical generosity, while leaving things as they are, with one side in possession of its truly cultivated culture (or language), which is capable of absorbing its own *distinguished subversion*, and the other with its culture or language devoid of any social value and subject to abrupt devaluations (2000: 76, *emphasis added*).

Bourdieu not only argues that language, and literary language, have the power to produce reality "by producing the collectively recognized... representation of existence" (1991: 42), he maintains that literary tropes and their collective recognition have the power to organize our perception and categorization of the world creating a "system of self-evident truths which are untiringly reassured and collectively guaranteed, and which assigns an essential identity, and therefore a place and rank, to each class of agents" (1991: 100). The expression 'distinguished subversion' is appropriate, I find, to Byatt's questioning of dichotomies in *Elementals* as it does not focus on how such dichotomies, with their dominant and subordinate terms, have been shaping our perception of the world as a hierarchically ordered space.

Aiming at rejecting an acritical acceptance of such constructs, Byatt reshuffles and/or reconciles the terms within them, achieving a critical understanding that entirely avoids exploring the roles such constructs have

played in sustaining a hegemonic – and still current – view of the world, by creating, as Bourdieu specifies, ‘places’ and ‘ranks’.¹

Mathews maintains that, in her writing, Byatt makes “critically subversive choices” (2018: 220), as she neutralizes and repositions, for instance, the traditional images and meanings established by a long literary tradition of ‘journeys to the south.’ Whereas I appreciate Byatt’s criticism of a thoughtless acceptance of received dichotomies, I am not sure about the ‘subversive’ aspect of such criticism. Patricia might remain indifferent to the ‘rawness’ and ‘sensuality’ of the European south, but these traits are still maintained by the narrative as defining features conflicting with Northern self-control and rationality.

Sometimes, Byatt is successful at subverting these tropes, as when she captures ‘the mystery of the Orient’ within the space of a merciless mall. At times, however, she reiterates a depiction – however camouflaged by a self-reflexive approach – of, for instance, (southern) otherness as an ‘original’ and ‘primal’ space, appropriate for the elaboration of loss. In other words, one is not always sure if Byatt is discrediting such clichés, or just reinventing them, shaping them according to her characteristically cultured and inquisitive literary style.

Niederhoff argues that authors do not usually recur to metageneric techniques to merely endorse or oppose genre conventions: “the most rewarding cases of metagenerue create a complex and dynamic debate, a concert of critical and affirmative voices through which a text ultimately achieves a sense of itself” (2022: 15). Byatt’s short stories, dense with such contrasting voices, perform and make visible this double register of devotion and questioning of genre norms in relation to established Anglophone discursive tropes.

Notes

- [1] My previous research focused on an exploration of representations of southern Europe in Anglophone textual materializations from the last and current century, in literary as well as popular fiction. The starting point of my investigation has been E.M. Forster’s literary construction of ‘Italy’ in his novels and short narratives. This exploration continued with novellas by Daphne du Maurier and Ian McEwan, and with a novel by contemporary author Sarah Hall. See the articles “Such is the Working of the Southern Mind: A Postcolonial Reading of E.M. Forster’s Italian Narratives” (2021), “Venice and the Novella: The Construction of Otherness in Daphne du Maurier’s *Don’t Look Now* and Ian McEwan’s *The Comfort of Strangers*” (2021), “La Fiaba Oscura: Narrating Italy in Sarah Hall’s *How to Paint a Dead Man*” (2021).

[2] The opposition between 'resisting' and 'letting go' is symbolized by two painted images Patricia sees at the art gallery: a windbreak and an avalanche.

[3] The biblical story is told in Luke 10: 38-42: "Now it came to pass, as they went, that [Jesus] entered a certain village: and a certain woman named Martha received him into her house. And she had a sister called Mary, which also sat at Jesus' feet and heard his word. But Martha was cumbered about much serving, and came to him and said, Lord, dost thou not care that my sister hath left me to serve alone? Bid her therefore that she help me. And Jesus answered and said unto her, Martha, Martha, thou art careful and troubled about many things: But one thing is needful and Mary hath chosen that good part, which shall not be taken away from her" (reported in J. Sturrock 2016: 474). For Byatt's use of 'embedded tales,' see Jessica Tiffin's essay "Ice, Glass, Snow: Fairy Tale as Art and Metafiction in the Writing of A.S. Byatt" (2006).

[4] Bourdieu points out that the scholastic disposition, "arising from a long historical process of collective liberation, is the basis for humanity's rarest conquests" (2000: 49). Therefore, the point is not that of morally condemning intellectuals, but of "trying to determine whether and how...scholastic disposition and the vision of the world that is enabled by it... affects the thought that it makes possible, and, consequently, the very form and content of what we think" (2000: 49). Therefore, it is not a matter or condemning the painter of the story (or Byatt) for what Bourdieu calls "the laudable concern to rehabilitate" (2000: 75), but to see how the dichotomies that are being mobilized (unquestioningly, or ironically and self-reflexively) have affected our thought and our subjectivities.

[5] Pictorial perspective "in its historical definition, is no doubt the most accomplished realization of the scholastic vision. It presupposes a single, fixed point of view – and therefore the adoption of the posture of a motionless spectator installed at a point (of view) – and also the use of a frame that cuts out, encloses and abstracts the spectacle with a rigorous, immobile boundary" (Bourdieu 2000: 21-22).

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