Wounded White: “Morpho Eugenia” and the Victorian Body in Crisis

In “Morpho Eugenia”, one of the two novellas that comprise *Angels and Insects* (1992), A.S. Byatt reconstructs the Victorian world of the early 1860’s. The novella begins when William Adamson, an entomologist of humble origins and no fortune, visits Bredely Hall after ten years in the Amazon. His host is Sir Harald Alabaster, a collector of natural history specimens and a clergyman who struggles to reconcile his religious faith with the Darwinian worldview. William falls in love with and marries Harald’s daughter, Eugenia. Byatt presents a loosely structured narrative of William’s courtship, marriage, and life at Bredely Hall, interweaved with fragments from Harald’s tract on natural theology, William’s record of insect life in the English countryside, and an allegorical story-within-a-story.

Following closely on the heels of her most popularly acclaimed novel, *Possession: A Romance* (1990), “Morpho Eugenia”, with its companion “The Conjugal Angel”, is a continuation of Byatt’s literary exploration of Victorian society, culture, and concerns. In the author’s own account, “The two stories in *Angels and Insects* make up one exploration of Victorian anxieties about what it was to be human. *Morpho Eugenia* is a Gothic tale about Victorian religion, sexuality and Darwin’s ideas” (Byatt, “Angels and Insects”). Her meticulous fabrication of the mid-nineteenth century, however, is not concerned only with the past, but bears on the present as well. As Byatt points out, “the ideas about men and animals, soul and body, male and female that the Victorians began to think about in these ways” remain subjects of intense debate today (“Angels and Insects”). Case in point is Darwinian theory, the repercussions of which are still being worked out in the continuing controversy between creationism and evolutionism, not to mention the debates surrounding newer evolutionist theories like sociobiology or evolutionary psychology.¹

¹ Dirk Vanderbeke puts forward the interesting view that Byatt actively incorporates topical evolutionist concerns about sociobiology through somewhat anachronistic word choices (such as ‘altruism’) and allusions to current debates in the field. I think his argument bears merit, given William Adamson’s increasingly consuming preoccupation with biological determination in the novella.
Darwinian theory is also the point of departure for my exploration, in this paper, of how various understandings of trauma and its literary representations may be applied in a reading of “Morpho Eugenia”. In Unclaimed Experiences: Trauma, Narrative, and History, Cathy Caruth describes psychic trauma as a “wound of the mind – the breach in the mind’s experience of time, self, and the world” (4). And as Gillian Beer points out, “It is hard to overestimate the imaginative turmoil brought by evolutionary theory” (11-12). In the “common historical experience [that] was the weight of Darwin’s blow” (Beer 11), and in the breach that its reduction of the human to the biological caused in the Victorian sense of self and the world, lies the trauma I seek in Byatt’s representation of a post-Darwinian Victorian world in “Morpho Eugenia”. In the first part of this paper, I examine how the novella portrays the impact of Darwinian theory in the figure of Harald Alabaster as a traumatized subject. In the second part, I focus on the novella’s portrayal of Eugenia as a survivor of the trauma of incest, and its problematic suppression of her witnessing voice.

I cannot measure my loss, it is the pit of despair itself.

—A.S. Byatt, “Morpho Eugenia” (69)

Caruth begins Unclaimed Experiences with a discussion of Freud’s choice, in Beyond the Pleasure Principle (1920), of Tasso’s epic poem to illustrate trauma’s tendency toward repetition. In Gerusalemme Liberata, Tancred mistakes his love, Clorinda, for an enemy knight in armor and kills her; when he later cuts a tree with his sword, the tree cries out in Clorinda’s voice. Caruth’s point is that this scene of unwitting wounding also depicts trauma as “a wound that cries out” in the voice of a witnessing other “that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available” (4).

Building on Caruth, Laura Di Prete highlights “the insistent reappearance of Clorinda’s transformed, transfigured, and thus unrecognizable body,” and reads a further layer at work in Tancred’s double wounding of Clorinda: “Behind both instances [of wounding] lies a failed recognition—or misrecognition—that allows for the unbearable traumatic truth to surface”

2 The image of ‘Darwin’s blow’, as with the images of trauma to follow, comes from Freud, via Beer:

In ‘A Difficulty in the Path of Psycho-Analysis’ (1917) Freud comments that ‘the universal narcissism of men, their self-love, has up to the present suffered three severe blows from the researches of science.’ These three blows he names the cosmological, associated with Copernican theory, the biological, associated with Darwinian theory, and the psychological, associated with psychoanalytic theory. (Beer 8-9)
(10). Di Prete goes on to relate this misrecognized body to Freud’s figurization of repressed but unprocessed memory as a “foreign body”:

Freud’s image of the “foreign body” captures the profound ambiguity of fragments of traumatic memory, which [...] remain unbound and isolated from other mental processes. The paradox is that traumatic memory retains its status as something “foreign” even though [...] it operates from within the mind rather than from without. (Di Prete 11)

Thus Di Prete gives body to Caruth’s witnessing voice, a body that insistently returns and re-presents, in altered shapes, an unassimilated traumatic experience that demands its impossible integration into representation.

How, if any, do these defining elements of traumatic representation – the wound that cries out in witness and the misrecognized, foreign body – appear in Byatt’s novella? One illustrative passage in the text is that in which Harald Alabaster gives voice to his devastating loss of faith:

I cannot measure my loss, it is the pit of despair itself. I began my life as a small boy whose every action was burned into the gold record of his good and evil deeds, where it would be weighed and looked over by One with merciful eyes, to whom I was walking, step by unsteady step. I end it like a skeleton leaf, to be made humus, like a mouse crunched by an owl, like a beef-calf going to the slaughter, through a gate which opens only one way, to blood and dust and destruction. And then, I think, no brute beast could have such thoughts. [...] Where does it all come from? (Byatt 69, emphasis in the original)

Here, too, we find a returning body, one that shifts shape from “a skeleton leaf” to “a mouse” to “a beef-calf,” each destined for decay and predation. The truth that speaks through these apparitions, then, is the truth of human ‘being’ seen in a Darwinian light – that man stands neither at the center nor the apex of a divinely ordered and nurtured chain of being, and that he is, like any ‘brute beast’, no more than a bare organic body destined for consumption: “we eat and are eaten and absorbed into other flesh and blood” (69).
The trauma of ‘Darwin’s blow’ here is not so much incomprehensible, as all too well comprehended. As Gregg M. Horowitz puts it, “When all futures are annihilating, it is certainty that terrifies,” and “in the aftermath of the traumatic blow, the sufferer has seen it all before, undergoes the necessity of his suffering, and rests confident that he will see it all again” (35). Thus the passage also illustrates Horowitz’s understanding of trauma, not as incomprehensible loss, but as the suffering of “something immediately familiar” (35) – in Harald’s case, the unmediated reality of death – and, perhaps even more aptly, demonstrates that trauma is “the appearance of something real in the place where phantasy ought to be” (36).

But how to reconcile Di Prete’s misrecognized “foregin body” with Horowitz’s “something immediately familiar”? I suggest that it is not the images themselves, but their provenance that appears foreign. Hence the perplexed query, “Where does it all come from?”

Harald’s desperate hope is that the seemingly external origin of these thoughts points toward a higher intelligence, the ‘Divine Mind’. This is, in the eyes of an evolutionist like William, a mistaken and fanciful attribution: “We have made our God by a specious analogy, Sir—[...] we make perfect images of ourselves, of our lives and fates [...]. And we worship these, as primitive peoples worship masks of terror” (Byatt 104). One may say that it is as one of the symptoms of trauma that Harald displays such a will to misrecognize, to seek and discover (unsuccessfully, whence his tormented doubt) the traces of a loving God made in human image – an attempt, in a way, to re-place phantasy in the place of where something real, unbearable, and terrible appears.

Something terrible had been done to him. And to her, he thought.

—A.S. Byatt, “Morpho Eugenia” (176)

In leveling humanity with animals onto a shared plane of biological living, Darwinism

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3 In the interest of brevity, I have omitted from the quoted passage a line immediately preceding this question: “No frog, no hound even, could have a vision of the Angel of Annunciation.” This would seem to indicate that the “it” whose provenance is being questioned refer, not to the images of brute living, but of divine providence. However, the reference is more ambivalent than appears, as right before the quoted passage, Harald describes how he can no longer see the vision of the Annunciation without the intrusion of a grotesque, simian parody of the mother and child. Thus the “vision of the Angel of Annunciation” is, in fact, yet another example of the traumatic apparition that haunts Harald.
posed the threat of contamination, no less than the threat of annihilation. According to Beer, the idea of kinship central to Darwin’s theory held uncanny resonance for his nineteenth-century readers: “Many Victorian rejections of evolutionary ideas register a physical shudder. In its early readers one of the lurking fears it conjured was miscegeny – the frog in the bed – or what Ruskin called ‘the filthy heraldries which record the relation of humanity to the ascidian and the crocodile’” (Beer 7). Or to “some monstrous toad or savage-seeming beetle,” which Harald hopes may “immortalize” him by bearing his name (Byatt 20). As Michelle Weinroth notes, “Harald, perhaps unbeknownst to himself, is ascribing exalted significance to his humanity through an idea that repelled many Victorians: miscegeny” (189, n.4). It is indeed ironic that the head of the uniformly blond and white Alabasters, “who had always been very pure-blooded” (Byatt 25), should turn to images of miscegeny for recourse from the threat of death. Of course, the text as a whole easily lends itself to a reading as an ironic allegory of racial purity turned upside-down; it is not the “sultry-skinned” William, but Edgar Alabaster of “gold and white colouring” with whom Eugenia engages in monstrous reproduction (Byatt 4). And it is the exposure of their incestuous relationship that finally enables William to break free from Eugenia’s enchanting hold and set out for the Amazon with his new companion, Matilda Crompton, his “brown hand grip[ping] her brown wrist” (Byatt 182).

But my interest lies less in the exposure of incest, then the truncated witnessing of it. The traumatic effects wrought on all who have come in contact with the terrible fact of incest are revealed in Eugenia’s confession of its history:

‘And then—and then—when I was going to marry Captain Hunt—he saw—he saw—oh, not so much as you have seen—but enough to guess. And it preyed on his mind. It preyed on his mind. I swore then, I would stop it—I did stop it—I wanted to be married, and good, and—like other people—and I—I did persuade him—he—was mistaken in me. It was so hard, for he would not say what he feared—he could not speak it out loud—and that was when I saw—how very terrible—it was—I was.

‘Only—we could not stop. I do not think—he—‘ she choked on Edgar’s name, ‘meant even to stop—he—he is—strong—and of course Captain Hunt—someone led him to see—he saw—not much—but enough. And he wrote a terrible letter—to—to both of us—and said—oh—‘ she began to weep rapidly suddenly, ‘he could not live
with the knowledge even if we could. That is what he said. And then he shot himself.
(Byatt 172, emphasis in the original)

The breaks and repetitions in Eugenia’s narration reflect the difficulty of articulating traumatic experience. The interweaving of Captain Hunt and, more importantly, his death into the history of her relationship with Edgar produces what Caruth has characterized as “a kind of double telling, the oscillation between a crisis of death and the correlative crisis of life: between the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival” (7). If the event of incest (or the knowing thereof) proves insupportable to the point of death for Captain Hunt, what burdens Eugenia is “the unbearable nature of its survival,” the terrible truth that she could, and indeed must, live with her knowledge.

I have stated above that Eugenia’s witnessing of the trauma of incest is truncated, and so it is, in her final conversation with William. After he informs her of his decision to leave for the Amazon, never to return, Eugenia asks him, “And—shall you speak to anyone—shall you—tell?” To which, William replies, “Who can I tell, Eugenia, whom I should not destroy in the telling? You must live with yourself, that is all I can say, you must live with yourself as you can” (Byatt 181). Eugenia then begins another halting narrative of her history, only to be stopped by William’s cutting remark:

‘Breeders know,’ said William curtly, ‘that even first-cousin marriages produce inherited defects—increase the likelihood—’

Eugenia cast down her lashes. ‘That is a cruel thing to say.’ (Byatt 181-182)

William’s silencing of Eugenia does indeed seem cruel, especially in light of her appeal for her pressing need to tell: “I have never been able to speak to any other living soul of it, you must forgive for speaking to you” (Byatt 181). If the revelation of the incestuous – and hence unnatural, corrupt, and debased – origin of the Alabasters’ purity (at least, for its youngest generation) subverts notions of white supremacy, racial purity, and the injunction against miscegenation, it is accomplished only at the cost of a redoubled and cruelly enforced injunction against, not so much incest itself, but the speaking of incest: “You must live with yourself […] as you can,” is the sentence William passes on his erring wife, to continue the living of an experience that remain, and must remain, unspeakable and untold.
As stated in the beginning of this paper, “Morpho Eugenia” is a story that explores “Victorian anxieties about what it was to be human” (Byatt, “Angels and Insects”). It is not surprising, then, that applying the concept of trauma and its literary representations as an interpretive lens on this text should reveal traces of the wounds sustained by the Victorian experience of the advent of a post-Darwinian world. Accordingly, I have examined how trauma surfaces through the voices of the two Alabasters. First, in Harald Alabaster’s voicing of the terrible truth of man’s biological ‘being’ and fate of utter annihilation that haunts him as an aftermath of Darwin’s blow. Next, in Eugenia’s witnessing of her unbearable survival of incest, and the suppression of her voice in the process of the novella’s subversion of Victorian notions of race and whiteness.

Thus far, my attempt at a reading of “Morpho Eugenia” through the framework of trauma has yielded, for me, a renewed understanding of the novella that is both intriguing and unexpected. It is a result that, in a way, confirms the sentiment expressed in the novella’s conclusion, that “everything is surprising, rightly seen” (Byatt 183). How exactly does Harald’s misrecognition of the source of the images that haunt him “allow[s] for the unbearable traumatic truth to surface” (Di Prete 10)? Why does it not, rather, enable him to repress the traumatic truth by presenting in its place the soothing phantasy of a merciful and loving God? And in the scene of Eugenia’s silencing, where William, with his proposed departure and his professed inability to tell, appears to enact the ghostly return of the departed Captain Hunt, who “could not speak it out loud,” what are we to make of this body that returns transfigured, to silence the wound instead of giving voice to it? These questions, brought forth during the course of an exploration of “Morpho Eugenia” in search of the traces of Victorian trauma in Byatt’s text, invite further explorations, in which I anticipate the encounter of more surprises that bear on our understanding of Byatt’s text and perhaps also on our understanding of trauma and its appearance in literature.
Works Cited


