IMPLIED AUTHORS IN THE NARRATIVES OF A. S. BYATT

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Abstract: My paper makes an attempt at identifying and describing the implied authors in the novels of British contemporary author A. S. Byatt. The analysis will focus more on practical parts, and will only resort to theory when necessary.

Key-words: implied author, Byatt, narratology

Antonia Susan Byatt wrote the first draft of her first fictional narrative, *The Shadow of the Sun*, when she was an undergraduate at Cambridge, between 1954 and 1957. She confesses, in the *Introduction* to the same book, that 'It is the novel of a very young woman, a novel written by someone who *had* [1] to write but was very unsure whether she should admit to wanting to write, unsure even whether she ought, being a woman, to want to write.' (Byatt *Shadow* vii). Here, as elsewhere, we come across a very frequent gesture with Byatt: that of trying to explain her own writing and literary choices. Consequently, it becomes easier for us to both identify the implied author of a narrative and make the distinction between the real and the implied author. Even though, as Chatman and Rimmon-Kenan stipulate, the implied author is a set of principles, we find it rewarding when a writer hints at the correct decoding of her narratives.

After reading *The Shadow of the Sun* (1964), one can draw interesting conclusions about its implied author. Without knowing what the initial A. S. stand for (and, consequently, unaware of the writer's gender), an initiated reader can easily guess that the implied author of the narrative embraces the views and shares the feelings of a young woman writer, whose intellectual frustrations cannot be concealed. The real author tells us, with hindsight, about the author that, in 1964, thought out the novel *The Shadow of the Sun*. Although Byatt refers to that author as 'I', we know that what she really talks about is her implied author and its choices. Therefore, in spite of the third-person voice of the narrator, and the rigorous, chronological design [2] of the novel, as well as the episodic use of focalizers, the reader can effortlessly realize that the original idea that stood at the root of the novel is that of a 'me-novel'. Byatt confesses that the novel (designed by the implied author) wavers between the well-formed idea of the subject and the instinctive way in which the whole narrative is shaped:

> I didn't want to write a 'me-novel' as we scornfully labelled them then, literary sophisticates, inexperienced human beings. But I had the eternal first novelist's problem. I didn't *know* [3] anything – about life, at least. I remember thinking out the primitive first idea of it, which was that of someone who had the weight of a future life, amorphously dragging in front of her, someone whose major decisions were all to come, and who found that they had got made whilst she wasn't looking, by casual acts she thought didn't impair her freedom. That the battle fought itself out between sexuality, literary criticism, and writing, was inevitable. The way in which it shaped itself was more instinctive. (Byatt *Shadow* vii)

Interestingly, Byatt's implied author is confronted with the eternal postmodern problem of form. Striving to be original is not easy, and Byatt remembers the dilemma she was in at the beginning of her career: 'I had awful problems with the form of the novel. I had no model I found at all satisfactory.' (Byatt *Shadow* x). After extensive reading of Elizabeth Bowen, Rosamund Lehmann, Forster, Woolf [4], Amis, Wain, Proust and Iris Murdoch, Byatt confesses to have found no satisfactory

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solution to her problem. Consequently, she admits defeat and has her implied reader take an inferior model and emulate it. Unable to escape well-known patterns, Byatt concedes to the inevitable, and the result is that 'the underlying shape of *The Shadow of the Sun* is dictated by Elizabeth Bowen and Rosamond Lehmann, and a vague dissatisfaction with this state of affairs.' (Byatt *Shadow* xi)

Along the same line, with respect to characters, Byatt's implied author unwillingly has to content itself with writing a Lawrence novel – unwillingly, because, as the writer states, that was not her intention. Her feelings for Lawrence were mixed at the time, and she refers to him as someone she 'cannot escape and cannot love' (Byatt *Shadow* xi). It is one more element that points out that the implied author is, in fact, the manifestation of a technical, not a humane side to the author in question.

An interesting issue is that of choosing the title. In her book *The Narrative Act: Point of View in Prose Fiction* (1981), Susan Lanser addresses the problem of the titles, prefaces, epigraphs, dedications included in a book. According to the critic, they provide information about the real author's views in 'an open forum' with the real reader (Lanser *The Narrative Act* 125). Conversely, in his *Coming to Terms* (1990), Chatman is of a different opinion: 'for some fictions, titles could be attributed to the implied authors, since their narrators could not articulate them', whilst 'for others, titles may be simply one more message from the narrator to the narratee' (Chatman *Coming to Terms* 219). With Byatt's *The Shadow of the Sun*, the matter is to be resolved more decidedly. Thus, in her *Introduction*, Byatt gives her readers the key to the mystery: the implied author was denied the right to a title at the first publication of the novel. For Byatt, it was the meeting with her editor, Cecil Day Lewis, in the Atheneum, that decided the matter. Her choice of title was *The Shadow of the Sun*, while the publisher's was *The Shadow of a Sun* – which was approved of by the writer then, in 1964. Nevertheless, since the implied author preferred the title with the definite article and the real author had to be content with the title containing an indefinite article, there is a problem. Chatman rightly states that, 'upon publication, the implied author supersedes the real author.' (Chatman *Coming to Terms* 81), which implies that, once the title is published and read with the indefinite article, nothing the real author says in defence of the original title is of any avail. Unless she changes it back to the original – another instance in which the real author takes control of the narrative. Byatt explains her gesture plainly:

> I would have agreed to anything, then. Now, I should like to restore my original title. It is more what I meant, and I prefer its grittiness to the mellifluousness of Day Lewis's version. The sun has no shadow, that is the point. You have to be the sun or nothing. (Byatt *Shadow* xii-xiii)

Byatt's second novel, *The Game* (1967), wages the same war against one's impossibility to attain one's dream. Although it is also written in the third person, one can imagine that the subject of the book is the writer's imagination, which is split in two: commercial and mystic. In this case, the implied author has one thing on the agenda, and that is to demonstrate that a woman writer is not only a writer (with technique and style), but also a woman whose feelings cannot be overlooked. Apparently, the novel is designed in such a way as to make the reader think that it is a simple retelling of the story of the Drabble sisters' literary rivalry (from Antonia's point of view). In fact, *The Game* is a novel 'about the fear of the "woman's novel" as an immoral devouring force' (Byatt *Shadow* xi). The technique is not very different from that of the previous novel, with the exception of casual insertions of one or two letters in the text, reported predominantly in the third person.

The next two novels published by A. S. Byatt, *The Virgin in the Garden* (1978) and *Still Life* (1985), introduce us to an implied author who has the habit of holding nothing back. These first two parts of the *Frederica Quartet* have the implied author employ the same (traditional) third-person narrator as in the first two novels. In both novels, Byatt's implied author seems to have signed a double pact. The first one is with the narrator and characters, who know exactly what is going on in the story

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and, if they don't, then there is no story to tell. The other pact is signed with the reader, who is given its proper share of knowledge, but nothing more. That is how things seem to stand at first sight, only, because, if we investigate the matter further, we discover that the implied author makes use of artifices in order to keep the reader's interest alive.

First of all, the implied reader decides to make Frederica Potter, one of the characters in the quartet, the representative of a generation, i.e. Byatt's own generation of women, seen as second-hand students at Cambridge. Byatt declares that she 'was obsessed with Proust and the idea of a novel which ran alongside a life, making sense of the life, giving meaning to it' (Byatt internet source), and the result is that she chooses Frederica's life as demonstration. Since it was no use watching Frederica or any other important characters grow up, the implied author begins the story of the chosen life at puberty. Thus, *The Virgin in the Garden* is concerned both with adolescent dreams and ambitions, and with 'the nostalgia for the richness and immediacy of Elizabethan English in the post-war world of the coronation of the second Elizabeth.' (Byatt Internet source). Another important focus in the novel is on the complex relationship between language and reality, language and social life, language and ideas. All characters cast by the implied author are mainly intellectuals, artists or scholars, and the elitist streak is more than visible in the novel.

Written in the same artistic vein, and continuing along the line of *The Virgin in the Garden*, *Still Life* attempts at bolder gestures – with respect to both characters and technique. Byatt's implied author favours a multitude of characters, who people its fictional world. Even if the quartet is supposedly Frederica's, it is her sister, Stephanie, who steals the limelight in this second novel. It would seem that the author is not determined to cast Frederica in the leading role – and still, what happens to Stephanie (especially her death) – has a crucial impact on Frederica's life, too. Moreover, the implied author has become more versatile in its technique, and the odd choices it makes at certain points trigger various changes in the events recounted.

In terms of technique, we have an upturn: like *The Virgin in the Garden*, Still *Life* too begins with a *Prologue*, which is placed in the year 1980, whereas the body of the novel takes place in the fifties and sixties. What is surprising is that the implied author has in the *Prologue* the conclusion of the novel before the reader gets a chance to find its substance. The end literally comes first, and it is the implied author's way of confusing the readers and attracting them at the same time. The prologue is also easily forgotten as the action progresses, and it must be reread at the end of the book – or, maybe, at the end of the whole quartet, even. This prologue does not put a real end to anything, it is an image of the characters' future. One of the reasons why the implied author has the *Prologue* placed first would be that, by the end of the story, it becomes a faint, staggering memory. Thus, the future itself is presented as a mere recollection, a solved enigma, and the reader can concentrate on the past. What *Still Life* intended to be, and whether or not the experiment was a success, is explained by Byatt on her Internet site:

> *Still Life* was meant to be what I called my 'biological novel' – I wanted to write plainly and exactly about birth, marriage and death in language like that desired by William Carlos Williams – 'no ideas but in things.' I had the wild idea of writing a novel without metaphor, and found I couldn't do it- my imagination is inexorably metaphoric. The best I could do was a kind of regretful commentary on the impossibility of refraining from metaphor. (http://www.asbyatt.com/oh_Babel.aspx)

The end of this second novel of the *Quartet* brings to one's mind the end of *The Game*: in both cases, one of the two sisters finds her death either by a suicidal gesture (Cassandra in *The Game*) or by electrocution (Stephanie, in *Still Life*, while trying to save a bird from underneath an unearthed refrigerator). It may appear to the reader that, while improving its technique and style in the 1985 novel, the implied author is still fond of certain dramatic gestures, and, therefore, it repeats some of the

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choices made in the 1967 narrative. It is obvious that the meaning of the gesture and its consequences are very different from one novel to another. However, the very idea that there are two sisters (writers or of an artistic nature, at any rate) and one of them has to die in order for the surviving one to learn valuable lessons in life is a cliché.

What is very far from cliché is Byatt's next novel we shall discuss, *Possession* (1990). The implied author announces, in this case, the novel to be 'a romance', and uses Nathaniel Hawthorne's Preface to *The House of the Seven Gables* to support this [5] claim: a Romance differs from a novel in 'fidelity', and so a novel must conform to the 'possible', 'probable' and 'ordinary', while the Romance can be the writer's own 'creation'. In fact, *Possession* is not at all a romance. If one considers, though, only the meaning of the romance as something entirely imaginary, a feat of ingenuity, an artful creation of the writer's mind, then one may accept it as the novel's subtitle.

Possession's implied author turns literary history and criticism into a detective novel with a necessary ending, which is not actually known to the characters themselves. In this narrative, the readers are the only privileged sharers of the true plot – a sign that the implied reader sides with them. Told either by many narrators who also play parts as characters in the story, or by a third-person narrator, the story of *Possession* resembles a puzzle to be completed. What seems funny and surprising is that the characters are unaware of that fact, they are certain they have solved the mystery. Conversely, it is the reader who learns from the author the three major incidents that give the meaning to the narrative and complete it [6]. That is another sign that Byatt's implied author has learned how to play the game of composing a compelling narrative.

A most interesting choice in this case is that of the title – and here the implied author makes all the decisions. In fact, Byatt herself explains that the title was the first thing that prompted her to think of and do research for a possible novel dealing with that theme. On her website, the British author confesses that the idea came to her at the British Library, while watching that great Coleridge scholar, Kathleen Coburn, circumambulating the catalogue:

> I thought: she has given all her life to *his* [7] thoughts, and then I thought: she has mediated his thoughts to me. And then I thought 'Does he possess her, or does she possess him? There could be a novel called *Possession* about the relations between living and dead minds.' This must have been in the late sixties. It was the time of the *nouveau roman* [8], of the novel as text'.
> (http://www.asbyatt.com/oh_Possess.aspx**)**

As a result, Byatt's implied author not only comes up with the plot, characters, and a multitude of narrative voices, but it also re-invents literary history. It imagines two Victorian poets, Randolph Henry Ash and Christabel LaMotte, who write in the styles of Tennyson, Browning and Christina Rosetti. These two poets fall in love, suffer and then part, but their descendant, the feminist critic Maud Bailey, puts the pieces of the puzzle together and retraces, in part, the Victorians' steps.

As far as the technique is concerned, we have here Byatt's best implied authors. Apart from the classical third-person account of incidents and direct dialogue [9] between the characters (imagined either in our present times or in the Victorian period), the implied author employs a plethora of literary tricks, meant to dazzle (and delight) the reader. Thus, we encounter quotations from the poetry of Ash and LaMotte, which support the present and past narrative, validating both documents and the rendering of the three key incidents [10], which no other document supports. We have also quotations from Christabel's fairy tales, quotations from the letters Christabel and Ash exchanged and which were found by Roland and Maud, quotations from the diary [11] kept by Christabel's cousin, Sabine Lucrèce Charlotte de Kercoz, quotations from scholarly works of the present, belonging to the Americans Mortimer Cropper and Leonora Stern, as well as from Beatrice Nest's 'Final paper', quotations from Ellen Ash's and Blanche Glover's diaries. On top of everything, the implied author considers it

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necessary to also include fragments from a TV show with the 'Ash expert' James Blackadder and the 'LaMotte expert' Leonora Stern, quotations from other writers (such as John Donne), and even letters [12] quoted in full.

In his *Coming to Terms*, Seymour Chatman identifies irony as one of the means by which we could clearly identify an implied author; however, he does not imply that, without irony, there is no implied author:

> The need for 'implied author' is not limited to ironic texts: even where there is no discrepancy between the implied author's intent and the narrator's or other speaker's intention, the theoretical distinction is worth preserving because the two terms account for different levels and sources of information. (Chatman *Coming to Terms* 76)

It is more than obvious that the implied author of Byatt's *Possession* makes its presence felt on every page. The irony it uses ranges from the names [13] given to the characters in the novel to the very idea of love and romance, as well as to the postmodern presumption that scholarly articles and literary experts could ever tell the whole story of an artist's life. That is, in fact, what the implied author wants us to remember: that life is more important than art or theories, and that its meaning cannot be decoded easily or completely by anyone.

The two novellas published by Byatt in 1992 under the title *Angels and Insects* present us with a more traditional implied author, who does not try to experiment much with genres. In spite of the period chosen to depict, the Victorian age, the two novellas do not share many of the features portrayed in *Possession*. We have a study of the relationship between Arthur Hallam and Alfred Tennyson in *The Conjugial Angel*, and an ironical parallel between humans' and insects' societies in *Morpho Eugenia*. The writing technique reminds us of the great feat of *Possession*, but the result is far from spectacular. We have quotations and embedded texts, intertextuality and irony, but they merely fill in the gaps left by a traditional narrative, told (mainly) by a third-person extradiegetic narrator. There are interdisciplinary aspects in the two novellas – science and religion in *Morpho Eugenia*, spiritualism and biography in *The Conjugial Angel* – but they do not dazzle the reader the way the previous novel did. That is why I move on to *Babel Tower*, the third novel in the *Frederica Quartet*.

With *Babel Tower* (1996) and *A Whistling Woman* (2002), Antonia Susan Byatt completes the *Frederica Quartet*; it is only natural, then, that the subject should continue the story of the lives of the Potters and their friends, and give us the ending to the saga. Only it does not happen that way. Byatt's implied author seems to have improved its technique since *Possession*, and it no longer offers solutions, but open endings. That is why the reader may adopt Scarlett O'Hara's attitude and say, 'I'll think about that (the meaning of the way a Byatt novel ends) tomorrow.'

As far as the subject matter is concerned, Byatt's implied author cannot surprise us with this last half of the *Quartet*. What it can do, nevertheless, is people the fictional world with so many characters, that, sometimes, the reader seems to be overwhelmed, and has to go back a number of pages and search for references about a character's name and role in the narrative. And, as if the characters in the plot about our contemporary life were not enough, the implied author thinks it best to insert fragments of other books and introduce other characters in this second-level narrative, in order to emphasize the meaning of the text. Almost all characters [14] write stories, plays or poetry, and Frederica herself cuts up various texts (juridical, literary, personal letters, citations), and produces and publishes a book titled *Laminations*. Intertextuality is at its best in both novels, and there are many instances when Frederica's TV shows are quoted and described in the two books. In fact, almost everything is included here by the implied author: a divorce and an obscenity trial, students' papers, embedded books, scientific articles, interviews.

Another discovery made by the implied author is that it can play with the concepts of utopia and dystopia in the very propitious postmodern age. *Babel Tower* is 'a book about the way life is distorted

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by language' (Byatt internet source), and the point is that dystopia is everywhere: in one's family, in literature, in the juridical system. Messages are misunderstood and communication is just an illusion in the scenario imagined by the implied author for *Babel Tower*. And, although *A Whistling Woman* tends to sweeten the pill the reader swallows with every page of *Babel Tower*, the main idea remains: the postmodern world is a dangerous place to live in.

Possession has established a new trend in Byatt's writing: the implied author of this famous novel can be recognized as the parent of other narratives by Byatt. This is the case of *Babel Tower*, *A Whistling Woman* and *The Biographer's Tale*, which share the same interest for elaborate, technical writing. Seymour Chatman calls the implied author that employs the same method in more of his books a 'career-author':

> We can comfortably define the career-author as the subset of features shared by all the implied authors (that is, all the individual intents) of the narrative texts bearing the name of the same real author. The real author's name, then, can be understood as the signifier of a certain constancy or common denominator of method among the implied authors of various works. Its signified is the known subset of features, carried over from other, similarly signed texts, which provides readers with significant information as they make their way through the new text. (Chatman *Coming to Terms* 88)

I think that, at least for *Possession* and the other three novels mentioned above, Byatt's implied author can be called a career-author. That is why, in spite of the changes made to the narrative, the reader can recognize, in *The Biographer's Tale*, many of the features from *Possession*. The main idea of the novel is – again – the historical or biographical possession of the truth about one's life. As in the 1990 novel, here we have the same ambiguity about who possesses whom – does the biographer possess his dead subject or vice versa? The parallel plot is another déja-vu in the history of Byatt's implied authors, and the only conclusion one may draw is that, tired of being original, the implied author of *The Biographer's Tale* attempts a re-make of *Possession*.

The technique employed by the implied author follows the celebrated recipe of the previous novels: intertextuality, embedded texts (again, taken from various scientific or humanistic fields), and, as a novelty, a masculine autodiegetic narrator. The character Phineas G. Nanson follows in the (fictional) steps of the main male character in *Possession*, Roland Michell, in the sense that they both seem inadequate and somewhat helpless. Moreover, the implied author has both of them miss the end of the life story they are trying so desperately to read and comprehend. Nevertheless, whilst Michell does his best to decode the message of the letters and reconstruct the puzzle of Henry Randolph Ash's life, Nanson is perfectly aware that his efforts are doomed to failure.

As a conclusion to the analysis of the implied authors of Byatt's novels, two things may be said to stand out. One is the existence of a career-author in some (if not all) of Byatt's books – therefore the possibility of identifying 'a Byatt'. The other is the discovery of an implied author who finds pleasure in elaborate, intricate plots and technical writing, and who has waged a war against arid theories and theoreticians/ biographers.

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[1]. Byatt's italics.
[2]. The traditional pattern, that respects chronology and causality, is normal in a début novel of the 1960s.
[3]. Byatt's italics
[4]. Whom Byatt found 'too suffused with "sensibility"' (Byatt *Shadow* x)
[5]. Unusual for a postmodern text like *Possession*

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[6]. Since I will discuss that aspect in more details in another chapter, I only mention it here as one of the postmodern techniques employed by Byatt's implied author
[7]. Byatt's italics
[8]. Idem.
[9]. Leading mainly to the deciphering of the past, and with very little impact on the present itself. Its only aim is to create and try to reveal the mystery, which is finally a secret to those who talk (characters).
[10]. The moment of making love between Ash and Christabel, the contents of her letter to him before his death, revealing the existence of their daughter, as well as his encounter with their daughter when she is a very young child – which reveals that he has known about her all along.
[11]. Written in France, in the vicinity of the legendary realm of Ys.
[12]. Letters that are from Lady Bailey to Roland, from Fergus Wolff to Maud, from Leonora to Maud, from Ash to Ellen, from Blanche to Ellen (quoted in her diary by Ellen herself), Blanche Glover's suicide note, Ariane Le Minier's letter from Nantes to Leonora (about Sabine's diary), note from Ariane to Maud, Christabel's letter to Mortimer Cropper's ancestress, Priscilla Penn Cropper, Christabel's letter to Ellen Ash (asking her to give Randolph her letter in which she tells him about their daughter), Ash's letter to Christabel (burned by Ellen, but not before we get to read it), three letters to Roland which offer him a job (among which one from Blackadder), and, last but not least, Christabel's letter buried by Ellen in the box found by the group of scholars when they dig up Ash's grave.
[13]. As many critics have noticed (Lidia Vianu and Richard Todd among them), Mortimer suggests the image of death, Leonora Stern is the most promiscuous woman in the book, Beatrice Nest cannot find her nest anywhere, Fergus Wolff has a name betraying his predatory nature, Roland Michell is quite the opposite of Browning's Childe Roland.
[14]. The reader knows from *The Virgin in the Garden* and *Still Life* that they are all artists or scientists.

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