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Beyond Biography: Knowing the Self through Scientific Knowledge and Fictional Storytelling in A. S. Byatt's *The Biographer's Tale*

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Abstract

*The study aims to explore the skillful blending of science, fiction, reality and past in A. S. Byatt's novel *The Biographer's Tale*. The novel traces the research journey of Phineas Nanson, who, frustrated with the dull and boring abstract postmodern theories, longs for a life grounded in physical reality. His biographical research for his subject leads him to grapple with various scientific endeavours and a long chain of interconnected texts, eventually making him aware of his own identity in the process. The study examines how Phineas's longing for obtaining the objective knowledge of the natural world, which is outside the world of abstract theories, brings the reader closer to the interdependence among language, culture and natural phenomena where the animals, plants, places and all other natural elements acquire their meaning and symbolic significance in language and culture. It highlights Byatt's belief in linguistic adequacies to denote things and the blurring boundaries between the scientific methodology and fictional creativity.*

Keywords: Fiction, reality, nature, science, biography, postmodernism

A. S. Byatt (1936-2023) is one of Britain's leading intellectual writers who deal with various literary trends and genres, styles and settings, and themes in their fictional and critical works. Her novels are multi-layered hybrid texts which highlight the unending process of narrative construction. The all-inclusive structure of her novels displays Byatt's extensive knowledge of various disciplines and areas, the academic background and intellectual level. Her novel *The Biographer's Tale* offers a critique of postmodernism by reproducing its own strategies through its protagonist who is a poststructuralist scholar and a first-person narrator. Disillusioned with postmodern theories, he seeks the help of his supervisor Ormerod Goode, who is a postmodern theoretician and "an Anglo-Saxon and Ancient Norse expert, specialising in place names" (BT 2). Phineas explains to Goode that he "felt an urgent need for a life full of things.... Full of facts" (4). Goode encourages him for a new life and suggests:

The art of biography is a despised art because it is an art of things, of facts, of arranged facts. By far the greatest work of scholarship in my time, to my knowledge, is Scholes Destry-Scholes's biographical study of Sir Elmer Bole. But nobody knows it. It is not considered. And yet the ingenuity, the passion. (BT 5)

He regards Destry-Sholes as a first-rate biographer for his extraordinary achievement in the form of biography, which beautifully exhibits objectivity, meticulousness and disinterestedness. What Phineas likes the most about Destry-Scholes is the way he has completely made himself absent from the book and turns out to be a mysterious authorial figure. Impressed and intrigued by this absence of authorial voice in Destry-Scholes's work, the narrator decides to find out the facts about his life and write a biography on him in the same manner. Initially, he shows reluctance to undertake the biographical project, viewing biography as "a bastard form, a dilettante pursuit. Tales told by those incapables of true invention, simple stories for those incapables of true critical insight" (BT 5). Phineas finds the biography uninteresting, but gradually becomes fascinated by the character portrayed in the text, who "crammed more action in one life than would be available to three or four puny moderns" (8). Destry-Scholes's object of biographical research, Elmer Bole, a Victorian Polymath, an acclaimed translator and adventurous traveller and explorer was known for living the most unusual life in his times. Phineas's uninspired academic life finds its counterpart in the rich life experiences of Elmer Bole. As he proceeds with his reading of the biography, he becomes surprised by the true essence and beauty of the form, and feels gravitated more toward the author rather than the subject. He suddenly feels the urge to write a biography of Scholes Destry-Scholes, the only "appropriate form for the great biographer" (26). Giving up the world of abstract notions, Phineas embarks on a journey into the world of tangible reality, which appears promising to him.

The novel depicts the academic life of a self-conscious narrator, who discovers his true self during his research project. Even the meaning of his name suggests his longing for identity:

When I discovered – in a Latin class when I was thirteen – that *nanus* was the Latin for dwarf, cognate with the French *nain*, I felt a *frisson* of excited recognition. I was a little person, the child of a little person, I had a name in a system, Nanson. (BT 3)

The highly multi-layered structure of the novel becomes confusing and creates significant ontological uncertainty for the reader. It presents fact, fiction and subjective perspectives as inseparable, which adds to the uncertainty, unreliability and chaos of fragmented textual evidence. Real historical figures are mixed with fictional characters: the lives of Francis Galton, Carl Linnaeus, and Henrik Ibsen are searched by Phineas as they are the biographical subjects of the fictitious biographer Destry-Sholes. However, incoherent nature of life-events leaves Phineas as well as the reader of the novel disillusioned with the project of biography-writing.

In her works, Byatt, through her characters, remains preoccupied not only with verbal modes but also with the visual modes of representation. She regards visuality as an important medium to depict the interconnections between the human and the non-human world. In this novel, Phineas discovers a collection of photographs, which according to him, were "clearly also snipped from books" (BT 121). It refers to Destry-Scholes's and Byatt's style of picking images and sentences from other works and using them into their own. The collection contains composite pictures of Galton which he created by fusing photographs of several individuals into one. He formed new composite photographs by layering pictures of different family members over one another in order to feature the resemblances between them. The novel incorporates the composite images of Galton, in which he fused various photographs of convicted criminals in order to point out common facial characteristics that

represent criminality. He also formed a “composite family image” of “Linnaeus’s wife, Sara Lisa, and his daughters” (212). Galton’s technique of creating composites of people aims at highlighting their common features rather than differences. Destry-Scholes’s card no. 101 cites Galton’s views:

We as yet understand nothing of the way in which our conscious selves are related to the separate lives of the billions of cells of which the body of each of us is composed.... Our part in the universe may possibly in some distant way be analogues to that of the cells in an organised body, and our personalities may be the transient but essential elements of an immortal and cosmic mind. (BT 225)

Phineas unable to make sense of the photographs, admits his dislike of this modern form of representation in texts. He feels confused and does not understand properly why the biographer wrote about the three historical personages. Destry-Scholes researched the individual lives of his subjects, yet “appeared...to have been more interested in what they had in common than what made them unique” (BT 239). Phineas speculates that like Galton, Destry-Scholes might have tried to make a composite picture of the three personages—a complex narrative of their adventures, theories, facts and lies which reflects the face of both biographers working on them. He wonders, “Was the composite portrait the face of Destry-Scholes? Was it, seen in some mad mirror, my own?” (328) but the question of Destry-Scholes’s identity remains the same. At the same time, it can be noticed that the transformation of Phineas’s character has started and he has reached the stage of his research journey where he begins to change “from an innocent into a writer” (Wallhead 293). In the novel, the narrator puts metafictional comments on the characteristics of his narrative:

I hate photographs. Destry-Scholes had collected them, possibly at least he too hated them. I found his gruesome. All the eyes were dead, like fish on slabs. But it is possible that I exaggerate, for my own reasons, which I have therefore tried to adumbrate. Adumbrate is a good word, in this context; it sprang to the pen. I notice that my writing is becoming perhaps too impassioned. But then, what sort of a piece of writing is it? I may be passionate or dispassionate as I choose, since this document has no importance anyway. (BT 164-65)

Vera Alpage’s occupation is also significant in terms of expressing the reality of the human body from within, not through words but as concrete images. She takes x-rays and examines the unseen bone structures of people, something which is hidden from the naked eye. Phineas gets surprised when he sees the extraordinary beauty of the images revealing internal structure of the body: “Vertebrae, jaws, pelvis and femur, collarbone and shoulder blade, fingers and toes” (BT 186) are looking very beautiful with the help of light, shadow, colour and arrangement. These images are real which reflect unexpected internal beauty of the human-body. Metaphorically, they also signify wholeness, a system and order where all the organs are fit together to make a whole-body structure, thus helping to connect with concrete physical reality. The incorporation of photographs and images in the novel demonstrates Byatt’s passionate engagement with verbal as well as visual modes of representation which makes the novel transcend the boundaries between text and image, and real and artificial.

After exhaustive research pursuing multiple strands of investigation, Phineas admits defeat as he discovers very little material on his subject's personal life. He says, "I had no idea what to do with myself. None at all" (BT 245). His journey, begun with rejection of postmodern theory in search of facts and things, reaches full circle. His biographical project reaches a dead end with no hope for progression further. In the end, the character of Destry-Scholes remains mysterious and elusive, and Phineas finds noticeable absence of his biographer from the text, admitting that he "appeared to have failed to find Destry-Scholes himself" (248). It is the disintegration and uncertainty of the novel that foregrounds the nature and the limits of primary source materials in the construction of an ultimate whole from the fragmentary parts. As a result, Destry-Scholes's absence leads to Phineas's presence in his work. Unwillingly, his work becomes more and more concerned with his own life than that of Destry-Scholes:

I have to respect him for his scrupulous *absence* from my tale, my work. It will be clear that I too have wished to be *absent*. I have resisted and evaded the idea that because of Destry-Scholes's *absence* my narrative must become an account of my own presence, *id est*, an autobiography...it will be clear to almost any attentive reader, I think, that as I have gone along in this writing (we are now at page 161, ms) I have *become* more and more involved in the act of writing itself, more and more inclined to shift my attention from Destry-Scholes's absence to my own style, and thus, my own presence. (BT 248)

As he engages deeply with the life of his subject, he becomes increasingly conscious of shaping his own identity. In the process of narration, he occupies the roles of both researcher and storyteller, incorporating everything he discovers, gathers, and analyzes into a subjective framework of memory. While contemplating the unfinished nature of his biographical work and its unavoidable conclusion, he reflects, "I now wonder whether all writing has a tendency to flow like a river towards the writer's body and the writer's own experience?" (BT 248). Such an observation highlights that how a person interprets others' experiences through the lens of their own understanding and encounters with the world.

Campbell describes Phineas's transformation using the term "metamorphosis" (223), emphasizing his gradual reconnection with the material world through nature and his physical relationships with his lovers, Fulla and Vera. This shift marks a movement away from purely abstract thinking toward a more grounded engagement with reality. As a result, he develops the ability to write about sensory experience with greater depth. By the novel's conclusion, his writing matures to a level where it can attempt complex tasks – suggesting, as the text indicates, that even Linnaeus "made a taxonomy of smells, too" (BT 219). Phineas uses beautiful metaphors, fusing different sensory perceptions to describe the difference between them:

Vera's scent, which I thought of as silvery...Fulla's...which I thought of as golden.... Vera...is a darting silver fish, a sailing moon in an indigo sky, quicksilver melting into a thousand droplets and recombining. Fulla is gold calyx strenuously spread in gold sunlight, Fulla is golden pollen clinging to bee-fur, Fulla is sailing fleets of dandelion clocks. (BT 219)

Phineas's sexual relationships can be interpreted metaphorically as moments of revelation, drawing him away from abstract theoretical speculation and grounding him in lived reality.

They underscore the richness of human truth in Byatt's fiction by enabling the mind to move beyond textual confines and engage with the natural world. His attempts to understand others, along with his intimate relationships with two women, contribute significantly to his process of self-realization. Through these encounters, he becomes more attuned to the material world via bodily experience.

Fulla, in particular, assumes an almost transcendent role in Phineas's life, guiding his development into emotional and intellectual maturity. Her direct and unmediated connection with nature, as well as her sensitivity to the non-human world, reflects a heightened physical awareness. She is instrumental in awakening Phineas both to the vitality of the natural environment and to his own embodied existence. His growing sensitivity to nature may be seen as fulfilling his deep desire to engage with a reality grounded in concrete facts. However, his decision to turn away from postmodern theory and instead pursue biography does not ultimately offer a simple or practical resolution. In the course of his research, he encounters many of the same challenges associated with postmodernism—such as the limitations of language, the instability of meaning, the fragmentation of the self, the endless intertextual connections, and the uncertain authority of the author. His desire to attain objective and tangible knowledge of the physical world ultimately reveals the intricate interdependence between language, culture, and nature. Animals, plants, places, and other elements of the natural world derive their meanings and symbolic value through their representation within linguistic and cultural frameworks. Phineas's journey demonstrates that even the most immediate and physical experiences are inevitably mediated through interpretive structures of language and culture. There is a close connection between the human and the non-human world, even the naming system of non-human species is based on human imagination. It highlights Byatt's belief in linguistic adequacies to denote things and the blurring boundaries between the scientific methodology and fictional creativity. As we know that the main objective of Phineas is to "piece things together" (BT 52) in order to make sense of them. He discovers from the documents that the three historical personages have individually tried to find a systematic form into which the various parts fit, thus "bringing order to the rampant world of creatures and things" (53).

Linnaeus is a scientist and a linguist who considers himself "the second Adam, the separator, the taxonomist, the namer of species" (BT 55). For Byatt, the naming and classification system is of pivotal significance for a clear understanding of the human life and the world. The naming system is described in Destry-Scholes's biographical documents on Linnaeus, who was also studied by Foucault during his times. Linnaeus named plants after mythical creatures and also relates each plant to other plants. One such example is given in the novel when Phineas comes across Linnaeus's illustration of a plant: "early in his journey he had named a pretty plant, *Andromeda polifolia* (bog rosemary), for the chained princess" (65). The drawing of the plant is incorporated in the narrative of Phineas in which Linnaeus draws parallels between the plant and a mythic woman. Linnaeus describes the different parts of the plant based on the physical interpretations of the mythic woman and his use of the metaphorical language for the plant gives it an abstract entity based on an already existing human story. Phineas thinks that Linnaeus's "description of the relations between mythic woman and flower was both far-fetched and, in a way, sexy" (132). Now he understands the importance of metaphors and analogies in science and the natural world, and the role of language in perceiving the world. He has entered the world of things that were classified by

Linnaeus, then analysed by Foucault, after that arranged by Destry-Scholes for his biographical project:

The pleasure for me, I suppose, as I write, is that this time I was thinking of Foucault, and even more of Linnaeus, amongst *things*, shaved fish-skeletons, great blue butterflies, leather bindings, drawings done by the man himself even if the drawings involved (why not?) levels of meaning, analogies between plants and other creatures, real and invented, accurate and far-fetched. (BT 157)

Linnaeus's naming system in the past is carried on by Fulla Biefled in her contemporary scientific research who helps Phineas interpret Destry-Scholes's documents on Linnaeus. She tells Phineas about her naming of beetle species, especially the first insect she collected and which she named "stag beetle" (BT 212). She also comes to know that her naming of the insect was according to the Linnaeus tradition. She comments, "Your friend Linnaeus called it *Lucanus cervus*, which does mean stag beetle.... I discovered that the old Swedish word was truly *hjorthagge*. I'd imagined it rightly" (212). Fulla is devoted to the taxonomy of bees and blames biased human-nature and actions for the destruction of other species. Her environmental values are in stark contrast with theoretical background of Phineas who initially remains doubtful of Fulla's ecological approach. But later in the novel, Phineas gets frustrated with his biographical quest and regards it as "slippery, unreliable, and worse, imprecise" (250), and joins Fulla to help her in her research programmes. In Fulla's company, he starts to notice the behaviour of beetles and like Linnaeus, gives them mythological names. Byatt's focus on the naming system and individual words in the novel helps her character to reconnect with the natural and the concrete world. In fact, despite the factual emphasis of the novel, Byatt deploys fantasy and mythology in complex ways to highlight the connections between myths and scientific discourses. The names of the female characters in *The Biographer's Tale*, Vera and Fulla who are scientists by profession, symbolize myths and fairy-tale. While the name, Vera Alphage refers to the plant rosemary, Fulla Biefled alludes both to a goddess in Norse mythology and a wordplay based on "plenitude and the field of bees she studies" (Campbell 217-218). Byatt describes the role of analogies to present the relationship between humans and the natural world:

One of the most peculiar aspects of analogy in the study of the Natural world is mimicry - not the mimicry of the poisonous pharmacophages by the edible, but the walking metaphor visible only to humans.... We see eyes in the wing-spots of butterflies, we see the deaths-bed on the Hawk-moth, and we recognize the mask of the bluff attitude of the Elephant Hawk-Moth and the Puss Moth. Very late in the writing of my story I was flicking through my insect book and saw these, and thought they were, so to speak, walking analogies, walking metaphors. (PM 119)

The novel demonstrates the intertwined relationships between the elements of nature and ancient narratives. The linguistic techniques and narrative patterns highlight the complex interactions between the real and the imaginary, science and culture, and human and non-human. Byatt has a special fascination for taxonomy as it aims at presenting over-lapping similarities between biology and culture.

Byatt has a strong inclination to the scientific nomenclatures in her work. In fact, the source of the novel lies in her fascination with the Linnaean system of classification that

originates from her early reading of Michel Foucault. She says, "I suspect the germ of the novel lies long ago in my own first reading of Foucault's remarks on Linnaeus and taxonomy in *Les mots et les choses*" (BT 204). Foucault's juxtaposition of science and language exerted a deep influence on Byatt's mind. Phineas tells, "Foucault did fit Linnaeus's desire for a complete taxonomy into a view of language and language" (114). Throughout her literary career, Byatt deals with the problematic relationship between fact and fiction, and body and mind. Like Foucault, she believes in the power of taxonomy and its descriptive language to bridge the gap between words and objects. Her characters always strive to transform their physical experiences into linguistic expressions through classification and these "characters sometimes act as 'taxonomers' as they formulate schematizations that will complete disparate elements into some semblance of coherence" (Gauthier 29). Phineas has a strong sense of belonging to an ordered and systematic world in the novel. Byatt's exploration of the natural world and Linnaean taxonomies in the novel presents the text's engagement with the concrete reality and with reducing the gap between words and things. By incorporating science into fiction, Byatt makes her novel an interdisciplinary text. Though she takes recourse to multi-linguistic patterns and tools in her novel, she still believes in the concreteness of the physical world and its importance in language which can further be related to her belief in realism.

For getting a real and meaningful life, Phineas chooses to write a biography and depends on his subject Destry-Scholes who also projected himself completely on his biographical subjects. The names of the characters suggest the parasitical relationship between them which Byatt reveals in an interview with Philip Hensher:

He is called after an insect. The biographer is called Scholes Destry-Scholes and that is because he wrote a biography of the great Victorian Elmer Bole. The beetle that caused elm disease and killed the elm trees is called *scolytus destructor* and I wrote to my entomologist Chris O'Toole and I asked, what preys on the beetle that preys on the elm tree? He said, there is a beautiful wasp called *phaeogenes nanus*. So I sat, thought for about five days – my hero has obviously got to be called something that calls up *phaeogenes nanus* – and I finally called him Phineas G. Nanson. (38)

Sir Elmer Bole refers to the Dutch Elm tree and Destry-Scholes stands for its parasitic beetle to which the parasitic wasp *phaeogenes nanus*, i.e. Phineas Nanson attaches itself. It creates an image of threesome, suggesting that no writer becomes a writer independently, rather one always learns from the works of others to create his own works.

In this way, through his biographical research project Phineas creates a narrative of self-realization by connecting to the natural world outside the texts. His objective of constructing an ideal biography by discovering the textual documents from the past results into his realization of self-hood and his awareness about the role of imagination and individual experiences in the process of life-writing which can be truer than facts. The reader's expectations, through Phineas, are challenged as the novel progresses, by the fragmented narratives, intertextuality and ironic situations. Thus, the novel is a piece of metafiction about the endless textual possibilities that cause the protagonist to realize the fragmented subjectivity and its construction as well as the interconnectedness between literature and natural sciences. His desire to find the concrete reality of the world makes him aware of his real self and the importance of natural phenomena outside the world of texts.

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