# CLIMBING/SOARING, LIFTING – FROM MATTY TO MATILDA IN A.S. BYATT'S *MORPHO EUGENIA*

NÓRA SÉLLEI
Department of British Studies, DTE

## A STORY OF OUR OWN

I have been wondering for a long while what to present as a gift at this most precious celebration of ours. I have wanted to do something that is personal, and includes both Sári and to a certain extent myself, and, at the same time, I have wanted to be academic-a gap that is not always easy to bridge. I have been wondering: should this paper be on a *Romantic female poet,* or on a *Victorian,* perhaps on a *modernist woman writer or a female contemporary?* And what genre? I will always remember the enthusiasm with which Sári recommended to me, more than ten years ago, Christina Rossetti's poem "Goblin Market," and added how strange it was that the text for a long time had been read as an innocent *fairy tale* for children, whereas, if we interpret the *fantastic* element of the text as a code, as a kind of a cover, it is just as innocent as children are in Freudian theories of sexuality. Or should I, rather, choose a *Gothic* text, something by Mary Shelley that keeps haunting myself as well, surfacing every now and then as the uncanny? And what about yet another favorite genre of Sári's, the *female Künstlerroman?* Or, could this paper possibly be on several of these? But is there a text that encompasses if not all, at least most of these areas?

I knew I would stumble upon a text that I needed-and I did. The moment I checked its publication date I knew this was what I needed: the year is 1992. A very special year for me. This is when I first met Sári in Hull, a place that for several years connected our institutes via a TEMPUS program. I am wondering how many of you can claim that you have spent weeks with Sári living in adjacent rooms, and using the same kitchen. I can, and I am both very proud of, and grateful for that. At that time I was less than an emerging feminist scholar-rather an absolute beginner in the discipline. Since then, I have frequently wondered how much I owe to those chats in the kitchen. Certainly a lot-and as we all know this is one Sári's

gifts: her support of all kinds that cannot be quantitatively defined, we cannot even put our fingers on it-yet it is there, she is always there, *lifting* us.

Let us come back, though, to the text. Touching the book I realised one more thing: it was a gift to me by two male exchange students of ours, a linguist and a historian. They subscribed to a book club while in Hull in the same year, and on receiving this book they considered it useless for themselves, and passed it on to me. This apparently superfluous book, I suppose, reached its destination and its aim: it was destined to be related to Hull, it was destined to be related to the year 1992, thus it was destined to be related to Sári and me. This book is A.S. Byatt's *Angels and Insects,* a book that Marilyn Butler declared Byatt's "best work to date" in the *Times Literary Supplement* (22), a volume of two novellas *(Morpho Eugenia* and *The Conjugial Angel),* out of which I think particularly the first one has more links to what Sári has been doing than one would think at first reading.

## THE STORY AND ITS READINGS

You may ask why, what it is about, what it is like. As not a widely known text (not even those can claim to know it who have seen the 1995 film version directed by Philip Haas as there are so many differences between the text and the film) a brief summary of the plot would be needed to see my points. In 1861, William Adamson, a Yorkshire butcher's educated son, a Darwinist natural historian, after spending years in South America among the natives, and after a shipwreck in which he loses practically all he has (i.e. all the rare specimens, except for one, he had hoped to make money from by selling them), returns to England and is generously invited to Harald Alabaster's aristocratic mansion, Bredely Hall, Surrey, where, as a return for his keep, he is asked to make order in Sir Harald's infinite piles of natural collection. He irresistibly falls in love with Eugenia, the eldest daughter, who has just lost her fiancé, under circumstances no one talks about. Aware of the social differences, all William attempts is to give Eugenia a transient present: a cloud of butterflies. Yet, while sitting in the hothouse, Eugenia proposes that William should talk to her father, and thus there is a double wedding: that of Rowena, the second daughter, and that of Eugenia. As the day of the wedding approaches, Edgar, the eldest son, who is Eugenia's stepbrother, makes it clear to William that they will never be on equal footing. The Adamsons' conjugal life is rather erratic, its rhythm dictated by Eugenia's recurrent pregnancies (she gives birth to twins, then a son, then twins again), during which William is always excluded from the marital bed.

In the meantime, he gets engaged in other duties and activities. He is asked by Lady Alabaster to contribute to the tuition of the smaller children by teaching them natural history, an idea proposed by Matty Crompton, a female dependant in the

house who is at help in this activity. Furthermore, she proposes that William should write a book on their observations of the ants, and she even offers her assistance in making drawings and in copying the manuscript. However, she herself is also secretly engaged in writing a book of her own: a combination of fairy tales and natural sciences, which she can sell and make money from. William manages to find a publisher for his own book as well, and by this time he learns that from their childhood on, there has been an incestuous relationship between Eugenia and Edgar (the cause of suicide in the case of Eugenia's former fiancé, Captain Hunt), and it is still going on so much so that no one is sure who the children are fathered by. Before he can figure out his future life, Matty Crompton informs William that she has ordered two berths on a ship leaving off for South America the following week, for the two of them.

*Morpho Eugenia,* written by a contemporary woman writer, thus, is a text situated in the Victorian era. Critics, however, disagree whether it can be considered a Victorian pastiche or it is a postmodern conglomerate of texts, whether it is a suffocating web of discourses (genres) rooted in the far-away Victorian past, either in a negative or in a positive sense of the word, carrying on with the Victorian tradition of writing, or it can be considered a postmodern text displaying and playing with various textual traditions, which, as a result, mutually reflect upon each other.

That Byatt's text is somehow embarrassing and puzzling for us, contemporary readers is clearly indicated by the troubled comments of a male critic who claims that "the more successfully Byatt recreates the Victorian novel of ideas, the more she persuades us of the irredeemable pastness of the past she recreates, and the more the ideas she deals with, of determinism, individual freedom [...], seem to announce that these are no longer our concerns, at least not in this way, in these contexts, in these words and forms" (Barrell). When analyzing this statement, one finds difficulties in locating the problem with the text: whether it is at the thematic or the textual level. Apparently at both since the critique is aimed at the "ideas" and "the novel of ideas" as he defines, to me rather suspiciously, the genre, and, in an implied way, as well as at the tropes and figures of speech of the text (see: words). This is a critique which, if justifiable, would proclaim Byatt's text a very bad one.

The text, however, can be approached in a more positive way as well. By another critic, Byatt is claimed to be a "'postmodern Victorian' who finds the grounds of her postmodernity in 'an earnest attempt to get back before the moderns and revive a Victorian project that has never been allowed to come to completion'" (Levenson quoted in Hansson 453), and Heidi Hansson goes on to make an apparently simple claim that "Byatt is a storyteller who continues the Victorian tradition of describing the individual in society" (453), which seems the age-old question in novels, and which, for that reason, seems an almost pre-emptied statement. We can, however, make the link between this claim and that of John Barrell's, since both can easily be

translated into more contemporary issues like the question of the subject and subjectivity, or the subject and power. On this basis, one can raise the question how the text functions in its complexity, how the "ideas" are inevitably defined by the figures, tropes, and, what my primary focus of investigation will be here, by the proliferation of genres. More precisely, I will explore how certain genres (the Gothic novel, the fairy tale, the governess novel and the *Künstlerroman*) and certain textual features (metaphors and fantastic elements) are so much intertwined with the "ideas" of the text (like determinism and freedom, the individual and the society) that they are actually brought about by these very textual features. In this analysis, I will put particular emphasis on the female *Künstlerroman,* that of Matty Crompton, which in my reading evolves in a Darwinian plot.[1]

The centrality of the metaphorical structure is underlined by Byatt, who claimed in an interview that she "began with a visual image [. . .,] compar[ing] an ant heap to a Victorian mansion. And in the middle of the ant heap there's this large fat white queen simply producing children. [. . .] It didn't have a plot for a long time-it was just this metaphor, which is a very simple one but works. And it got bigger and bigger. I had this vision of all these slightly sexless female servants, scurrying along the corridors of the gothic mansion like the worker ants" ("Interview")-among them Miss Matty Crompton, both in her semi-visibility and her sexlessness.

If we think about this simple allegorical, parabolic aspect of the text based on this "simple" metaphor, we may realize: what else could be a more proper metaphor for revisiting the Victorians than the Darwinian narrative? And, at the same time, what else could be a more disturbing metaphor for revisiting the Victorians than the Darwinian narrative? Byatt's Victorian pastiche is as embarrassing for its contemporary readers as the implications of the Darwinian theory were for the Victorians. Much has been written on the latter, i.e. how the Victorians resisted and felt embarrassed by the Darwinian notions of evolution and the descent of man, a story that is concisely replicated by Byatt in Harald Alabaster's figure, who is rational enough not to reject Darwin and the findings of natural history, yet cannot accept the lack of a primary creator, cannot do without the concept of God-and this irreconcilability drives him to endless self-debate and to his unfinished (because unfinishable) philosophical-theological project.

But why is Byatt's text embarrassing for its contemporary readers? Are we still Victorians in a sense? Are we still entangled in the web of questions like determinism and freedom? The answer is, perhaps, yes, but in my view the Darwinian plot of this text only partly means determinism; partly it means the potential of survival and adaptability. It perfectly fits the texture of *Morpho Eugenia*

[1] When using this phrase, I implicitly rely on Gillain Beer's monograph Darwin's Plots on evolutionary narrative in Darwin and George Eliot, which analyses rhetorical moves, the use of metaphors, etc. in 19th-century narratives.

to suppose that the Darwinian metaphor is far from stable and to be understood literally (it is a metaphor, anyway)-if that is the problem of Barrell's with contexts, words and forms that are no longer our concern; rather, in perfect harmony with the text the most central metaphor of which is perhaps transformation, transfiguration and metamorphosis (the essence of metaphor as well), the Darwinian metaphors of determinism and adaptation seem most appropriate tools to explore even our own contemporary issues of subjectivity, and the emergence of the female subject, the emergence of the female artist in particular. This mode of textuality has serious, and at the same time playful, implications in terms of gender. Although apparently relying on natural history for the representation of human genders, and as such at first sight approaching genders in an essentialist way, the text uses the very confluence of natural and human history through this complex metaphorical structure to destabilize gender as an essentialist notion (partly because what natural history implies in the text is that not even natural history is natural, nor are genders as natural as natural essentialists claim), and brings about a textual world in which central Victorian gender metaphors like the oak and the ivy, or the angel-in-the-house lose their firm grounds.

In terms of genres and genders, however, there is a clear division in the text-although both genres and genders are subversively rewritten. My claim is that the first part of the text is primarily focused on William Anderson, the natural historian returning from Brazil, and situates him into the fairy tale and the Gothic novel, and, in a special sense, the governess novel, but in a rewritten form of all these; whereas in the second part one can discover the governess novel in a different format again, and the female *Künstlerroman* in a more and more emphatic way. This proliferation of genres brings about a web that in itself raises the question of the "freedom" of storytelling, and of stories as such, which may be the reason why some readers may be embarrassed and feel the text's tightness as outdated. But why are these "contexts," "words" and "forms" no longer ours? I would, quite the contrary, claim that these are our concerns and contexts, no matter how much we want to leave them behind-which may be the reason for the very embarrassment. The Victorians used these genres partly as a kind of a code to veil whatever was not supposed to be revealed. In these subversive, rewritten forms of the genres, however, the text reveals perhaps more than is otherwise decently covered by the (Victorian) surface. But what is revealed, then?

## A Male Cinderella

The text, at the beginning, focuses on the story of the Alabasters and particularly on Mr. Adamson, one of those archetypal-no matter how everyday-Victorian heroes

of natural sciences who go out to unexplored territories, spend years there, risk their lives, but (or rather: and) contribute to several Victorian self-myths that include the good works done "out there" in terms of geographical exploration, of spreading civilization, and of creating scientific knowledge by collecting, and, at home, categorizing new or rare species. Up until this point the plot is certainly Victorian, neatly covering what has happened to William Adamson "out there." This Victorian hero, however, wants to be an English self-made man, if not after the American fashion, but according to the rules of a rigidly hierarchical class system and society where the butcher's son tries to find his way in life, to which the only solution is offered by a fairy tale: a Cinderella story, reversed in gender terms. At Bredely Hall, "William found himself at once detached anthropologist and fairytale prince trapped by invisible gates and silken bonds in an enchanted castle" (21), where, instead of being allowed to carry out heroic deeds, all he is offered by his patron in terms of a job is sorting out and categorizing Harald Alabaster's endless collection of natural specimens. This job looks absolutely hopeless, partly because it is endless, like Cinderella's task, and it is only after he has completed this project that there beckons a more heroic, and amply masculine, future: another voyage to South America, which Harald Alabaster vaguely promises to finance ("I intend to provide for you. In due course." [90]); partly, however, this sorting out is hopeless because Adamson has no proper conception of how to make a system of those innumerable specimens, has no proper knowledge, or, put it in another way, he is incapable of naming, and making order of all those randomly purchased and very often partially destroyed or broken natural history findings. This might be a reason for the ironical name: *Adamson,* as if a new mythical history of mankind were written in his story, that of someone in control neither of his own life story, nor of controlling and arranging *life* around himself, and he is also destined to be dependent on his employer financially, even when he is married to his daughter-in no way is his "share" specified on marrying Eugenia.

The reversed-and to a great extent class-based-power structure of the Adamsons' marriage is further emphasized by the fact that it is him who is literally taken and proposed by Eugenia, and all he can offer in terms of a wedding present is the cloud of butterflies that is just as flimsy and decorative as any young woman's bridal gift to her fiancé, and what he is given in return is similarly flimsy, something typically given to a young woman: "new hairbrushes, ivory-backed" (66). The emphatically reversed gender roles and particularly the power imbalance as implied in these reversed gender roles, at first sight, seem to point in the direction that economic dependence afflicts both genders in an equal way, and brings about distortions in human relations. On second thoughts, however, although we can recognize that in spite of his name doubly indicating his masculinity, Adamson is greatly feminized; the marked exposedness and vulnerability of William Adamson due to his financial

dependence also make us aware of women's *un*marked exposedness and vulnerability, and how this state is taken for granted by readers of romance stories.

Accordingly, his extreme dependence turns the (neo)gothic mansion of Bredely Hall into a genuine space for a Gothic story. Eugenia's house is transformed into just as claustrophobic, violent and incestuous a space for him as any other Gothic mansion for any female Cinderella, where, behind the curtains, he is met with the realities of what the Gothic facade and architecture tend to veil. It is after his wedding that he explores deeper, and starts using the back stairs, where he first discovers that each and every morning a "kitchen maid, a diminutive black sprite with a mob cap" (74), anonymous at this moment (later known as Amy, who helps in the ant-watch as well) collects into two buckets "a mass of black beetles, several inches deep, stumbling and waving legs and feelers, slimed with something glutinous" (74), and the kitchen maid becomes "confused in his memory with his imprisoned Coleoptera,[2] struggling and hopeless" (75).

These insect images turn out to be symbolic in significant ways, expressing the hopelessly claustrophobic social space, eternally and inevitably recreating its own filth, its own abject. It becomes obvious in two incidents: both are related to powerful, almost omnipotent, and in one way or another violent acts of male sexuality, and both of them going on for long, with no beginning or end, behind the facades. One takes place in "the scullery, [. . .] over the sink" (106), where, symbolically, the dirt should be washed off, yet, instead, it is eternally recreated. This is where Adamson notices Edgar raping "the little beetle-sprite, Amy" (106), and Edgar's words, talking to Amy, can be considered the epitome of his omnipotence: "Run off, then, child [. . .]. I can always find you when I need you" (107). Shortly, Amy gets pregnant, has to leave the place, and live in a workhouse. This incident, at the same time, is a step in the emasculation of William Adamson as at this point Edgar clarifies his position: "The servants in this house are no concern of yours, Adamson. You do not pay their wages, and I'll thank you not to interfere with them" (107).

He does have guesses of his real position in the house, though. When his wife gives birth to his son, and wants to call him Edgar, he puts down his feet, insists that the child should be given his own father's name, and self-consciously claims: "I should like something *of my own*. And my son is my own, in some sense" (72). This "in some sense" proves to be prophetic and at the same time betrays his own half-admitted fears: "the child, like all five children, was an Alabaster, a pale, clean-cut, nervous creature" (72). Fatherhood to the children never becomes certain, but after revealing Edgar and Eugenia's incestuous affair that has been going on since their childhood the remains of Adamson's masculinity are shattered by this transgressive sexual act behind the facades of the Gothic mansion. This is the

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[2] A species of butterflies.

ultimate act of violence, breaking the most basic taboo that is supposed to inform all human communities. Victorian patriarchy, nevertheless, by its omnipotence, is beyond rules, its structure allows any violation, producing its own filth (like the mass of black beetles, just eating up-destroying- anything), and deterministically locking up fragile creatures (not only butterflies but human beings as well).

## FROM SEXLESS FEMALE TO *KÜNSTLERIN*

Adamson's gradual emasculation goes parallel with his recognition of his own position as similar to that of Matty Crompton, and it seems the turning point in the narrative as well in the sense that from this moment on Matty starts emerging both in her personhood in the eyes of Adamson, and as a female artist, and parallel with that she seems to take over the narrative. Not coincidentally, I suppose, it coincides in the narrative with Edgar's "clarification" of Adamson's standing. Adamson himself thinks about it in different terms:

> If he had a place, it was in the spaces between the cushioned family softnesses and the closed-away servile hierarchies in the attics and cellars and back rooms. In the schoolroom, [...] occasionally he would find Matty Crompton, whose status in the household, he sometimes ruefully thought, had the same uncertainty as his own. They were both poor, both semi-employed, both, now, relations of the masters but not masters. (75...76)

In social terms, this position is quite close to that of the governess or tutor, and, actually that is the activity how Adamson and Matty "make [themselves] useful" (76): by teaching the young ones. This position is analyzed by Jeanne M. Peterson, and she calls it "status incongruence" as the governess, by her social origins (impoverished middle-class family) and functions (that of the middle-class mother, teaching the young ones) belongs to the "masters," to the genteel class, yet she is paid for what she does, which is a paradoxical situation (cf. 3–19). True, neither Adamson, nor Matty is literally paid for the work they do, yet for their maintenance and keep (and Adamson for the future, no matter how vague, promise of a new South American voyage) they are expected to be useful for the masters. At this point, in the narrative one can discover not only the shift of focus from Adamson to Matty, but also the merging of two plots, in the form of the same genre: the governess novel (or, as an alternative, the tutor novel-the archetype of which could be also a novel by Charlotte Brontë: *The Professor*).

There is, however, a major, and in terms of gender, a significant difference between how Adamson's "tutor novel" and Matty's governess novel are created by

and in the text. Whereas Adamson's plot can be characterized by a gradual narrowing and dead end as a result of a Darwinian determinism, so much so that he almost falls out of the system of the house as uninterpretable for himself (he cannot any longer consider himself even a drone in this human beehive), Matty's governess plot goes in another direction: she proves to be the great survivor of the text, the one who can perfectly adapt to her circumstances, and by adaptation, change it so that what evolves on the basis of determinism is freedom and independence. These subversively mirrored governess/tutor plots would be interesting enough for anyone who adopts gender as a focus of investigation. More intriguing is, however, the process of how Matty turns into Matilda, that is, her female *Künstlerroman,* and what it implies. When in her own room (which, by this time, is turned into a room of her own) she informs Adamson of her decision to go to South America and that she has actually booked two berths for themselves on board a ship, Miss Crompton, everybody's Matty, always at hand and at disposal, says the following: "'My name', she said, 'is Matilda. Up here at night there is no Matty. Only Matilda. *Look at me*'" (157). This personal declaration of independence and of gaining home grounds, which includes creating herself as a sexual being as part of her personhood, another component of which is her self-naming, is the result of a series of minor steps that are not devoid of elements of Darwin's plots.

How is Miss Matty Crompton represented by the text? She is certainly one of those "slightly sexless female servants, scurrying along the corridors of the gothic mansion like the worker ants" (Byatt, "Interview"), even though she is not called like that. Yet, she is seen as sexless by Adamson (105), and she is aware of it when she challenges Adamson in her room: "You do not know that I am a woman. [...] You have *never seen me* (156); and she does function like a worker ant: intellectually feeding (teaching) the Alabaster children. As a paradigmatic female dependant, with no income of her own, and at the mercy of the family, she does not only figure as a pseudo-governess, but she is one of those superfluous or redundant women who the Victorians had great troubles to define as they were a contradiction in terms: women but not married-so what should they do with their lives, as the question went. This is the question that intrigues Adamson as well: "He did begin to wonder how she spent her days [...] and came to the conclusion that Matty Crompton was required to 'make herself useful' without any demeaning named post" (76). Mid-nineteenth-century discourse on the so-called "redundant" or "superfluous" women, including "spinsters, nuns, nurses, political and philanthropic activists" (Nestor 4), went on further to ask the question from the position of authority as well: in 1862 (the very time when the novel takes place) Frances Power Cobbe posed the question "What Shall We Do With Our Old Maids?" (Nestor 7), which is clearly related to the other question: "How far could women be trusted without male supervision?" (Nestor 4), both implying that women left on their own, out of

the bounds of (patriarchal, authoritarian) control may go awry, end up dangerously-both to themselves, and to the social structure as well.

In a manner appropriate for a pseudo-governess, or a female dependant of the house, Matty is present in the text from the very beginning in a matching semi-visibility, semi-presence and non-defined position. For long, it counts as an element of surprise for Adamson if she displays activity as a "patient huntress" (29) in the project of observing the ant community, or if she has a voice and knowledge of her own when, for example, she recites Milton's *Paradise Lost* – a butt of an ironical remark by Eugenia ("clever Matty" [31]), or implied misogyny by Adamson, who makes the comment: "'You think a great deal, Miss Crompton,'" the implication of which is made explicit by Matty: "'For a woman. You were about to add, 'for a woman', and then refrained, which was courteous. It is my great amusement, thinking'"(41). And she does think-more than Adamson does. Whereas Adamson is puzzled at how Matty spends *her* days, *she* realizes how futile *his* engagements are, and thinks of a new employment for him: he is included, as natural historian, in the children's private tuition-a project initiated by Matty. From that moment on, Matty is the initiator, the think tank, who can make most of the current circumstances-of apparent entrapment and determinism, of power discourses-, and carries on an incessant dialogue with the environment, a dialogue that can be described as adaptation, which turns out to be a more active attitude, and transfigures itself into changing the environment, and as a result, Matty gains her subjectivity by resisting the dominant power.

In this process, Matty gains control not only of her own story, but that of Adamson as well. As a next step after the idea that Adamson should be included in the children's teaching, Matty takes over Adamson's realm, the insect world, and starts her own observations of the ants, makes drawings of them, while encouraging Adamson, who keeps moaning about his lack of opportunities, to pick up natural research on home grounds instead of South America (77). As she says, when she proposes the observation of the ants, "'[m]y sphere is naturally more limited. I look naturally closer to hand'."(77) This almost self-depreciating remark, diminishing the significance of the step, can be interpreted as an evolutionary gesture: perfect, but active adaptation to the circumstances in which Adamson, the male in the same position, is totally paralysed. As a further step, it is Matty who inspires Adamson to write a book of their observation of the ants (92), she even offers herself as an assistant (93). As yet another step, she starts making drawings of the ants (in an anthropomorphic way), but she practically asks for Adamson's permission if her drawings could be included in his book (95). Characteristically, this is the moment when Adamson ponders upon the graceful movements of Matty's wrist bones, which signifies not only her becoming an artist, but also her gaining visibility, sexuality, and personhood. Not until she starts creating does anyone consider her a woman, whereas the movements of her wrist bones start off a chain of

signification that results in the creation of his desire for her: "abstractedly studying her [. . .] absorbed in her work[,] William found himself suddenly sharply inhaling what must have been her peculiar smell, a slightly acid armpit smell" (95–96)-a smell he recalls later in Eugenia's bedroom, a smell that emphatically appears in Matty's room in her final transfiguration as an indicator of her personality and sexuality.

The book, thus, becomes a joint project of Adamson and Matty's: the text written Adamson, and Matty not only making anthropomorphized drawings but also "brighten[ing a] passage considerably with little forgotten details" (109). Apparently Adamson is in control of the project, yet, "[s]he was determined and inventive about the book. She was fiercely intent, not only on its production, but on its success" (105). This is the moment when Adamson admits to himself:

> It interested him, that he thought of her as sexless. That thought itself might have arisen out of some analogy with the worker ants. [. . .] He was beginning to think that there were all sorts of frustrated ambitions contained in that sharp, bony body, behind those watchful black eyes. [. . .] He did not think she was so altruistic a being. (105)

What is she then like? She is clearly a most self-conscious, self-confident, and self-made female artist, who is capable of reversing gender roles not only in the sense that whereas she pretends only to help and assist ("I can draw-and record-and copy if necessary-„ [93]), or only to slightly contribute to William Adamson's book, she is the prime mover behind his creation and movement, thus she acts as the *oak* on whom Adamson-*ivy* can always lean and rely for support. This is not so surprising a role since women have played it for centuries: they have acted in, and from, the shadow, unnamed, invisible, as in this case too: her name does not feature on the cover of Adamson's book. Yet in his narrative of "The Swarming City" "he found himself unable to characterise either himself or Matty Crompton, and used a narrative voice that was a kind of royal, or scientific 'We' to include both of them, or either of them, at given points of time" (108).

Matty or, by this point, rather Matilda, goes further, and writes a story of her own, called "Things Are Not What They Seem"-a title that can very well characterize *her* as well. How she hands it over to Adamson to read is telling of the ambivalence of the situation. On the one hand, she pretends apologetic humbleness, on the other hand admits the pleasure and joy of creation, and the unadmittable ambition behind:

> 'if you would cast your eye over this writing when you have a spare moment. I meant it for no more than an illustratory fable-you will see-I amused myself by tracing the etymology of [butterflies], and thought I would write an instructive fable around these strange beasts-and found I had got rather

carried away, and written something longer than I intended and perhaps, for a simple puzzle-tale, over-ambitious-and now I am puzzled what to do with this.' (118–119)

Her tale can be read as the *mise-en-abyme* of the text: both thematically and in terms of textuality, it functions as metafiction in which, as put in the tale, "names [. . .] are a way of weaving the world together, by relating the creatures to other creatures and a kind of *metamorphosis,* you might say, out of a *metaphor* which is a figure of speech for carrying one idea into another" (131–32), but also because by the confluence of the children's fairy tale and of natural history, there comes about a textual universe in which everything and anything is possible, where facts, reality and imagination are not separated, and in which names function as *"walking figures of speech"* (141). She writes a fable for children in which "Things Are Not What They Seem" (as she is not what she seems either).

The story is about the youngest son of a poor man, Seth, who leaves home to try his luck, and on his voyage he and his mates, like Odysseus, are turned into tiny animals by eating and drinking of what was offered. Seth is only partially transformed, this is why he can be helped to regain his figure, and he can also help the others to escape. In the escape, he is supported by creatures of the insect world that-quite like themselves-are not what they seem, or what they are called. This fairy tale, not devoid of elements of the fantastic either, utilizes the etymology of names and all the mimicry that the insects use as self-protection. In this way, there comes about a highly metaphorical text in which no meaning can be fixed, everything is shifted over to something else, everything is covered either by its name or by its looks. As such, it is a tale of appearances, but more than that: by mobilizing all her resources, Matty/Matilda creates a texture made out of all her materials "to hand" (her knowledge of natural history, mythology, etymology, and also her imagination) which turns out to be a successful attempt at making sense of the world in a holistic way-as opposed to Adamson's failed attempt at making sense of, by categorizing, Harald Alabaster's collection of specimens.

The tale, thus, is in several senses a fancy work (and what more feminine could one imagine), which, at the same time, can be turned into materiality: can be, and is, sold and finally Matty emerges as Matilda. In William Adamson's eyes she appears first as an alternative to the angel-in the-house image: as a fairy with a wand (156)-and what more appropriate image could be applied to a woman who unbelievably makes money and buys boat tickets to South America for two. Ultimately, however, she emerges as a flesh-and-blood, visible and seen person, with a will of her own, and with an awareness of what she can do:

'I will learn. I am strong. I have not lived softly, contrary to appearances. I am resourceful. You need not heed me, once the voyage is over. [. . .] It is what

> I will do.'
> [...]
> And she put up her hands to her head and undid the plaits of her hair over her ears, and shook it out, and came and stood before him. And her face between the dark tresses was sharp and eager and hungry, and he watched how trimly she turned and said, 'I have seen your wrists, Matilda. I dreamed about them now and then. You have-remarkable-wrists.'
> 'I only wanted you to see me,' said Matilda, less confidently, once she saw that he had indeed seen her. (157)

With this self-disclosure, Matty's transformation is over. At the beginning of the text Harald Alabaster, who is otherwise anti-Darwinian, makes the following comment: "Transfiguration is not a bad thing. Butterflies come out of the most unpromising crawling things" (49). One can add, transfiguration can take place unnoticeably, so that no one notices the steps. Yet, transfiguration is there, and in this sense, the narrative of the text, with its almost uninterruptedly dominant focus on the male protagonist, re-enacts the history of Victorian literature by revealing the almost unnoticeable emergence of a woman writer, a single woman who takes control of her life, her story, and her life story by the end of the text-even against all odds, by making most of what is at hand, of what is possible, of all the bits and pieces that are available-presenting us (to carry on with the biological metaphor) the paradigmatic phylogenesis and ontogenesis of women writers. Furthermore, she gets out of patriarchal control (fulfilling the paranoiac Victorian fear of women without male supervision), threatens and destabilizes the social structure; and whether the result of her transformation from "the most unpromising crawling thing" is considered a butterfly or a disgusting moth depends on the perspective of the interpretation, or interpreter.

The text, written by a *female contemporary,* thus, takes place in the *Victorian* period, furthermore, includes elements of the *fairy tale,* the *Gothic,* and the *fantastic,* and can be read as a *female Künstlerroman,* and a special one at that, in which the woman artist emerges from another Victorian genre: that of the governess novel (from which the elements of the *Künstlerin* are not absent either-let's think of Jane Eyre or Agnes Grey and their paintings), or, in social terms, from that nondescript class that the Victorians kindly termed as redundant or superfluous women. By the end, however, Matty, Miss Crompton, or rather Matilda does her best in terms of social Darwinism: perfectly adapts to, and utilizes, her circumstances; and whereas we-and all the characters of the text-tend to think that (and let me now refer you to the saying of black women in Susan Arpad's[3] address) she "must lift while she is

[3] Susan Arpad, Woman Studies, California State University, Fresno, helped Sari to start the Gender Studies stream in Szeged in the early 1990s. She was approached by the organizers of the conference to send her welcome address on the occasion on a DVD and, by way of cyber

climbing," by the end she can even soar as a butterfly-while lifting as well. Let's suppose and hope that these two elements indicate a basic feature of the paradigm that Matilda represents: the emerging and self-made female creator, and let's celebrate the ones who seem to be *climbing* (but, as we know from the title of Matilda's story: "Things Are Not What They Seem" [119]), so, even if unnoticeably in the eyes of many, are *lifting and soaring*.

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technology, to be part of the celebrations.