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Brookner's A Closed Eye as a re-working of Byatt's The July Ghost

Critics have often attempted to relate Brookner to other writers. As John Skinner says:

The wide range of comparisons and analogies on offer may be conveniently reduced to four broad groupings: the French literary classics—particularly the eighteenth-century moral tale, certain major English classics from both sides of the Atlantic, a number of contemporary women's writers, and the literary underworld of the popular romance. (Skinner 3-4)

Direct literary models include the novels of Cervantes, Voltaire, Balzac, Constant, Stendhal, Proust, Gide, and those of Austen, Dickens, James, and Wharton. Comparisons have been made between Brookner's novels and the popular romance as a genre. Analogies have been drawn between Brookner and, for example, Margaret Drabble, Jean Rhys and Barbara Pym. But if Brookner's re-writing of classical texts is generally admitted, no critic has yet mentioned an actual re-working of a contemporary text by Brookner; neither have any parallels been drawn between Brookner and Antonia Byatt. Yet, various forms of intertextuality direct the reader's attention to a possible relationship between Brookner's *A Closed Eye*, written in 1991, and Byatt's *The July Ghost*, written in 1987.¹

I shall argue that Brookner's novel is a "modern parody" of Byatt's story—in the sense that Linda Hutcheon gives the term in her *Theory of Parody* (1985), that is to say, a "form of inter-art discourse" (Hutcheon 2), an "integrated structural modeling process of revising, replaying, inverting . . . a previous work of art" (Hutcheon 11). What is called "parody" here therefore is devoid of any intention of ridiculing the background text and is—contrary to Gérard Genette's definition—"not . . . at the expense of the parodied text" (Hutcheon 6). The "target" of the parody is not the parodied

¹ The page numbers in the text refer to the 1991 Jonathan Cape edition of *A Closed Eye* (abbreviated as CE) and to the 1992 Vintage edition of *The July Ghost* (JG).

text at all (see Hutcheon 50)—rather, the differences between the two texts help the reader decode the more recent text in the light of the sub-text. The parody thus invites an additional reading of the text and “involves the entire *énonciation* of discourse” (Hutcheon 23). We are concerned here with what Hutcheon defines as the “decoding of parody” (Hutcheon 23), the revelation of the “structural imposition of texts that incorporates the old into the new” (Hutcheon 33) in order to reveal the “narratorial comment”: in the background of Brookner's text stands Byatt's story “against which the more recent creation is to be implicitly both measured and understood” (Hutcheon 31). This paper purports to trace the similarities and differences between the two texts, in order to try and determine Brookner's aim in her re-working of *The July Ghost*.

Brookner seems to have taken the characters, story, narrative structure and themes of her novel from Byatt's text, published four years previously. Indeed, even the title of Brookner's novel, *A Closed Eye*, seems to echo that of Byatt's story, *The July Ghost*. Both titles contain a parallel oxymoron and can be seen as forming a chiasmus: the first word of Byatt's title, “July,” is associated with summer, sun, light, that is with life, whereas the second word, “Ghost,” is linked to shadow and non-life; whereas the first word of Brookner's title, “Closed,” conveys darkness, the second, “Eye,” is connected to light. This may suggest that, for Brookner's heroine, the inner world, associated with light, is truer than the outer world, truer than life, on which the eye chooses to remain closed. It is worth mentioning here that the epigraph to *A Closed Eye* is taken from Henry James' *Madame de Mauves*—Euphemia persists in idealizing her failed marriage and will only consent to a platonic relationship with Longmore, who says of her: “She strikes me as a person who is begging off from full knowledge,—who has struck a truce with painful truth, and is trying awhile the experiment of living with closed eyes”. This intertextuality with James' story also seems to imply that Brookner's heroine, Harriet, refuses to admit some external “reality” to herself.

Both books have a character called Imogen, like *Cymbeline's* Imogen, who is a symbol of virtuous womanhood endangered by the false perception Posthumus has of her. Both tales are built around the loss of a child, accidentally killed, setting up a mother/child/death trio.

The narrative structures of the two books are similar, in that the main story is embedded, framed by a primary-level narrative. In *The July*

Ghost, the narrator tells his story to an American woman met at a party. In *A Closed Eye*, the heroine, Harriet, aged fifty-four, tells the story of her life to Monsieur Papineau, her neighbour.

Moreover, the stories follow similar lines. After his girlfriend left him, the narrator of *The July Ghost* rented a room in a large empty house in central London, belonging to a woman called Imogen, whom he met at another party. His landlady avoids him on the whole and it appears she refuses all contact, even that of her husband, who has had to leave the house. He eventually discovers that a young boy, who keeps appearing in the garden and house, is the ghost of his landlady's child, killed two years before in July, as he was running out onto the road after a ball. Since then, his mother's whole life has consisted in waiting to see her boy again, but in vain. The narrator tries to make love to his landlady, but she is "contorted and locked tight"— "*Rigor mortis* his mind said to him" (*JG* 53)—and the attempt is a failure.

Like the narrator of Byatt's story, Harriet is exiled, away from home in London. She too is alone, her husband having just died. Her life is the sad story of a loveless marriage to an older man, contracted to satisfy selfish parents, and of her refusal to commit adultery with the man she loves, and discover her own sexuality—she prefers to "remain in lifelong ignorance" rather than discover the passion that she believes would bring "grand disorder" into their lives (*CE* 45). But it is especially the story of Harriet's fascination with her daughter, the beautiful, spoilt and selfish Imogen, who is her mother's opposite, and whose love and understanding she has always eluded. Harriet refuses to "contemplate her daughter's sexuality, aware that the whole subject was taboo, as it had always been in her own case" (*CE* 186). Imogen is killed in a car crash, at the age of twenty. Like Byatt's landlady, Harriet is haunted by her daughter, whose face stays just out of the reach of her imagination.

The most striking resemblance between the two texts is their common pre-occupation with death and ghostly presences. Ghosts are at the centre of the two stories. Like Byatt's landlady, Brookner's heroine is haunted by her dead child. In *A Closed Eye*, Harriet's "she haunts me so, what I can see of her" (*CE* 252) echoes the landlady's cry in *The July Ghost*: "The only thing I want, the only thing I want in all this world, is to see that boy" (*JG* 46). Both protagonists have retired from the world.

Harriet's life is repeatedly described as "an empty room," she says that she "now functioned in ghostly form" (CE 16), that "she had hardly seen anyone for nearly a year" (CE 245), and that "her state of mind reflected a perpetual absence, as if all her emotions had been laid aside, deferred . . ." (CE 238). Byatt's landlady also has stopped living, as her husband shouts to her, "you can't throw a life away . . . can you?" (JG 42) and as her lodger notices: "He wondered what she did with her time: apart from little shopping expeditions she seemed to be always in the house" (JG 43). Harriet spends her time waiting, and so does the landlady. Once again, the actual words used by Brookner seem to echo Byatt's. Harriet's "waiting for a presence" (CE 13) seems a rephrasal of the landlady's words, "I can't stop my body and mind waiting, every day, every day, I can't let go" (JG 47). However hard they try, neither woman can get in touch with life or with herself, because they cannot get through to their dead child. Harriet cannot recapture the image of her child's face: "Imogen did not come back. Instead images of closure came and went" (CE 248). In *The July Ghost*, although the lodger repeatedly sees the boy's ghost, who adventures closer and closer to him, his mother is not able to see the apparition.

But Brookner's text is a "repetition with critical difference" (Hutcherson 7) of Byatt's. The reasons for the protagonists' failures to get through to the deceased are different, as are the final outcomes. Byatt's landlady cannot regain her child because of lack of communication, as the lodger says to the ghost: "Please. Let me go. What are we in this house? A man and a woman and a child, and none of us can get through" (JG 55). The expression "to get through" is repeated several times: the characters cannot "get through" to the ghost, nor can they "get through" to one another. The lodger thinks he has finally understood what the boy wanted: "it had 'come to' the man that what he required was to be re-engendered, for him, the man, to give to his mother another child, into which he could peacefully vanish" (JG 52). The story thus poses the question of life after death: both the landlady and the lodger say they are too rational to believe in ghosts, yet the possibility of an after-life is fictionally thrust upon them by the presence of the boy, urging them to communicate and love if they want to "get through" to him and make him live again. But the landlady begins to scream as soon as her lodger tries to penetrate her (JG 53), because, for her, "Sex and death don't go" (JG 54)—life and death are incompatible. But the boy's ghost knows his mother is wrong in cutting

herself off from the world. He knows that he can find peace and disappear from this world only if he is re-born in a new child. The story ends with the lodger's question to the ghost: "Do you want me to stay?" To which the boy "turned on him again the brilliant, open, confiding, beautiful desired smile" (JG 56).

Harriet's problem is of a different nature: she cannot communicate with her dead daughter, because she is "living with closed eyes". She keeps encountering "the closed door of Immy's bedroom" (CE 252), she "is aware of something that remained to be done" (CE 252), in short "something was missing, some knowledge" (CE 248). In order to "catch sight of . . . Immy's . . . laughing face" (CE 254), Harriet has to accept what she already knew instinctively, but had so far refused to see. She has to have "her eyes opened" by Lizzie, Imogen's friend. She has to be admitted behind the closed door of her daughter's room, into Imogen's secret, namely that the latter, contrary to her mother, had a full sexual life and had to have an abortion. As Harriet attains knowledge, as her eyes are opened and as she opens the formerly closed door of the dead Imogen's room, she simultaneously closes the door on life. As she attains knowledge, she retires from the present into memory. Only in this sort of living death is her daughter returned to her: "Vividly she caught sight of Immy's face" (CE 254). She turns the clock back to live in the past: "All will be as before . . . when my little girl was young" (CE 255).

Thus, in both cases, one life is exchanged for another, but with a difference. In Byatt's story, only life, in the form of love between man and woman, can bring the dead child back to the world of the living. Whereas in Brookner's novel the dead daughter can only be recaptured by her mother's imagination if the latter retires from life to join her daughter in death, to live as a ghostlike character. In *The July Ghost*, the mother has to live in order to bring her child back to life. However, in *A Closed Eye*, the mother has to exchange her life for her daughter's. The condition for Byatt's ghost to disappear is the triumph of life, but the condition for Brookner's ghost to appear is the triumph of death in life. If the landlady's ghost tries to show her that the past must give way to the future, Harriet's ghost reminds her that her past is inescapable and her future encumbered.

This preoccupation with death seems to indicate that both stories respect certain very general conventions of magic realism.² Both have in common the "death-charged atmosphere" (Faris 163) typical of so-called "magical realist" texts. Also, it seems generally admitted that: "Ghosts in their many disguises . . . are crucial to any definition of magical realism as a literary mode" (Parkinson Zamora 497-98) and that "to qualify as a ghost, a literary apparition . . . need only exist as a spiritual force that enters the material world of the fiction and expresses itself as such" (Parkinson Zamora 498).

Only Byatt's text can be called a magical realist text in the strict sense of the word: "In the terms of the text, magical things 'really' do happen" (Faris 167). "The magic seems to grow almost imperceptibly out of the real, giving us, as Rushdie puts it, a dense 'conmingling [sic] of the improbable and the mundane'" (Faris 174) with a very strong "effet de réel." "The copresence of oddities, the interaction of the bizarre with the entirely ordinary . . . the irreducibly hybrid nature of experience strikes the mind's eye". Impossible things, as Salman Rushdie, once more, writes, "happen constantly, and quite plausibly, out in the open, under the midday sun" (Wilson 210). In *The July Ghost*, the dead little boy is really seen by the lodger "sitting in the tree" (JG 44) or "on the lawn, nearer than ever" (JG 48) or "running along the landing" (JG 50) or again "sitting on his suitcase" (JG 55). He can describe him, using minute, realistic details which correspond to the real boy before his death:

Blond, about ten at a guess . . . very blue eyes, slightly built, with a rainbow-striped tee-shirt and blue jeans, mostly, though not always—oh, and those football practice shoes, black and green. And the other tee shirt, with the ships and wavy lines. And an extraordinarily nice smile. A really warm smile. A nice-looking boy. (JG 46)

What is unreal appears as real. The fact that the boy is not seen by his mother herself, but by the lodger, is used to show that the ghost is

² The term "magic realism" was first used by the German critic, Frantz Roh, in 1925, to characterize a group of Post Expressionist painters, then was popularized by Latin American writers as a literary form (between about 1949 and 1970), before being appropriated by critics to describe an international style of writing, often associated with postmodernism and with fiction privileging ex-centric non-Western perspectives. I will here use the definitions of the term "magic realism" as given in Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy Faris' anthology, entitled *Magical Realism, Theory, History, Community*, the only—to my knowledge—existing work of consequence on the subject.

not merely a figment of his mother's imagination. Byatt's text thus is based on a juxtaposition of the real and the supernatural, by describing non-realistic phenomena as natural. The real and the unreal are identifiable, but co-exist within a model which inextricably entwines them. Space and time are hybrid. The little boy, who, because of his death two years before, belongs to another dimension, appears now as he was then, the other world "erupting" naturally into this one.

Even if *A Closed Eye* is not a magical realist text *stricto sensu*, the presence of ghosts obviously cannot be evacuated from Brookner's text. But, instead of presenting the unreal as real, Brookner does the opposite, presenting the real as unreal, projecting inner states outwards and making them appear, to the heroine, more real than reality. Space and time are given imaginable properties by the character, for whom an imaginary world is more present than the real one. Thus Harriet reinvents her life through memory, so that the recapturing of lost time and space is made possible by the choice she makes, namely to close herself to the present and live in the past. Time—perceived by Harriet as labyrinthine, circular, retroactive—and space become plastic, subject to the psychological requirements of the heroine, being essentially subjective for a character closed up within her inner world, in the "House of Psyche."

Thus, it would seem that Brookner uses certain general conventions of magic realism as exemplified by Byatt's story, but subverts them, obtaining a particular sort of magic realism generated from inside the psyche—called "psychic realism" by Jeanne Delabaere-Grant (251). In both stories, extraordinary worlds are made possible, but with a difference: in Byatt's story two possible worlds are copresent, but in Brookner's novel, an extraordinary world becomes possible only because the heroine accepts to perceive things differently, because the real world is seen through the distorting lens of her imagination. Harriet is so far removed from daily life that "the sound of her own voice startled her" and she herself remarks: "That way madness lay" (CE 247). Whereas the magical realism of Byatt's text seems to be congruent with romance, as described in Northrop Frye's theory of fictional modes: "in a romance a ghost as a rule is merely one more character . . ." (qtd. in Parkinson Zamora 519), the ghost of Brookner's fiction is not the typical ghost of magical realism, but, as Frye puts it: "In some forms of ironic fiction . . . the ghost begins to come back as a fragment of a disintegrating personality" (Parkinson Zamora 520).

In both the texts studied here we experience not only the near-merging of two realms, but a sort of struggle and permutation between the two. The fictional world becomes a transitional zone in which mutations occur, which is another recognised characteristic of magical realism:

The magical realist vision exists at the intersection of two worlds, at an imaginary point inside a double-sided mirror that reflects in both directions. Fluid boundaries between the worlds of the living and the dead are traced only to be crossed (Faris 172)

This vision is linked to a questioning of the very nature of reality: "Because ghosts make absence present, they foreground magical realism's most basic concern—the nature and limits of the knowable" (Parkinson Zamora 498). Magical realism is thus said to be truly postmodern in its rejection of the binarisms, rationalisms, and reductive materialisms of Western modernity and its counterrealistic conventions are particularly well suited to enlarging and enriching Western ontological understanding (*ibid.*).

Byatt's story makes "the reader . . . hesitate between two contradictory understandings of events . . . between understanding an event as a character's hallucination or as a miracle" (Faris 171). The landlord does try to deny the world interpenetration or dual "worldhood" typical of magical realism by explaining the ghost away rationally—"what he had seen was what she desired to see, a kind of mix-up of radio waves" (*JG* 48)—but he cannot, and the boy finally forces him to stay on in the house. The text thus questions "received ideas about time, space, and identity" (Faris 173), presenting the unreal as real and creating doubt in the reader's mind about the possible existence of a hybrid space where "the narrative voice bridges the gap between ordinary and bizarre . . . making everything seem normal" (Wilson 220). The text optimistically suggests that the living and the dead do not belong to two impervious worlds, but are linked by a web of connections; the boundary between them, far from being "airtight," is a transitory zone, letting one world "erupt" into the other.

But *A Closed Eye* seems to refuse this merging of two planes of being, sticking to the binary logic of European realism. The novel ends with Harriet quoting from a French author—probably Stendhal (one of Brookner's favourite authors)—and its translation: "That moment is taken up with a little pain Suddenly one feels nothing, one is dead. Therefore death is nothing. It is a door which is either open or closed, it

must be one or the other. There is no third way" (CE 254).³ She surveys "the empty room" and thinks, "My life . . . an empty room" (CE 254), before choosing death in life: "she felt no pain, felt in fact the cautious onset of some kind of release" (CE 254). Since there is no after-life, the only way she can be reunited with her daughter is through retiring into her memories.

Thus, both fictions contain this "faculty for boundary-skipping between worlds" (Wilson 210), both use magic to battle death and to oppose canonical European realism in literature. But with a difference. In *The July Ghost*, magic cannot be explained away as an individual or collective invention. Magic is normative and normalising. Byatt's text uses magical realism to subvert rationalist notions of the probable and plead for the magic inherent in human contact, for a mysterious sense of collective relatedness, corresponding to E. M. Forster's "only connect," so typical of the postmodern novel. But in *A Closed Eye*, magic is presented as quixotic madness. Brookner uses the conventions of magical realism, but subverts its fundamental questioning of Western metaphysics which separates matter and spirit. This author, whose whole work apes canonical realism and presents a predominantly binary vision of the world, does not suggest here the possibility of life after death, but rather the possibility of death before life, of life un-lived, of death in life, and of life re-lived backwards. Brookner, who uses the conventions of classical realist texts to subvert the assumptions that reality exists objectively and that history is linear and progressive, also uses those of magical realism to pursue her own interests, namely her preoccupation with the mother/daughter/death trio, linked to literary creation—which, incidentally, explains the change of sex of the dead child in Brookner's novel.

Brookner's novel can thus be seen as what Linda Hutcheon calls a "modern parody" of Byatt's *A July Ghost*. The intertextual parallels concern not only the more obvious narrative structures, characters and story-line, but also certain general conventions of magical realism, namely the presence of ghosts and the copresence and interaction of two possible worlds, as well as its basic ontological questioning. Brookner uses Byatt's story—just as she uses James' *Madame de Mauves*—to shed light on her

³ "Ce moment est occupé par une douleur quelquefois bien peu vive. . . . Tout à coup, on ne sent plus rien, on est mort. Donc la mort n'est rien. C'est une porte ouverte ou fermée, il faut qu'elle soit l'un ou l'autre, elle ne peut pas être une troisième chose" (Quoted in CE 254).

own story, to guide and control the understanding of the readers, using past texts as a memorial continuum, making readers active creators of the parodic text. The verbal echoes between the two texts suggest that Brookner's heroine, like Byatt's, is out of touch with the real world, because obsessed with her dead child. But, whereas Byatt's text is life-orientated, Brookner's is death-orientated. The presence of ghosts in broad daylight is used by Brookner, not to suggest the merging of planes of being, as Byatt's optimistically does, but to insist on her heroine's "disintegrating personality" and on the "living death" she leads, regressing into living in the past. Brookner's novel does not suggest the possibility of life after death, but hints at some sort of cyclical regression. By mentally refusing the present and going back to the time when Imogen was a little girl, *A Closed Eye* illustrates the autogenerative magic of language itself, which makes it possible for Harriet to re-tell, to re-create the "empty room" of her life and to give birth a second time, by making her daughter live again through words. The ghost of love, or absence, is clearly what engenders Brookner's literary text.

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