Université de Montréal

The Spaces Between: A. S. Byatt and Postmodern Realism

par

Andrea Louise Rohland-Lê

Département d'études anglaises
Faculté des arts et des sciences

Thèse prèsentée à la Faculté des études supérieures
en vue de l'obtention du grade de
Philosophiae Doctor (Ph.D.)
en Études anglaises

décembre 1999

Page d'identification du jury

Université de Montréal
Faculté des études supérieures

Cette thèse intitulée :
The Spaces Between : A.S. Byatt and Postmodern Realism

présentée par :
Andrea Louise Rohland-Lê

a été évaluée par un jury composé des personnes suivantes :

William Kinsley (président-rapporteur)
Deborah Bowen (directeur de recherche)
John P. O'Neill (co-directeur)
Lianne Moyes (membre du jury)
Jane Campbell (examinateur externe)

Thèse acceptée le 19 juin 2000

Résumé de Synthèse

Antonia Susan Byatt a écrit qu'il est « possible qu'un texte soit totalement mimétique… et qu'il réfléchisse en même temps à propos de la forme, de sa propre forme, de sa propre genèse, à propos de la perception et de l'invention de la réalité » (*Sugar/Le sucre*, 22-3). Cette préoccupation de la forme consciente caractérise la majorité des romans et des nouvelles de Byatt. Le style de Byatt, qu'elle qualifie elle-même de « réalisme conscient » lui permet d'assumer et d'apprécier l'héritage du réalisme du dix-neuvième siècle, tout en réfléchissant à l'impossibilité et même à l'inutilité d'utiliser cette forme littéraire aveuglément. Par une utilisation fréquente de l'ironie, de l'intertextualité, de la parodie et du pastiche, Byatt redéfinit les paramètres du réalisme contemporain dans le contexte de la théorie littéraire postmoderne.

Kathleen Coyne Kelly a fait remarquer que les romans de Byatt sont souvent des « sources de controverse » qui reflètent un mélange de discours à la fois littéraires et critiques *(A. S. Byatt, xiii)*. En effet, l'écriture de Byatt peut être perçue comme une méta-fiction, c'est-à-dire une fiction qui « attire consciemment et systématiquement l'attention sur l'écriture elle-même, conçue comme un artefact servant à questionner les liens entre la fiction et la réalité » (Waugh, *Metafiction* 2). Par cette forme de littérature, Byatt réussit à brouiller « les frontières entre la fiction et la critique » (Currie 3), tout en manifestant son intérêt à l'égard des enjeux associés habituellement au postmodernisme. En écrivant de la fiction si étroitement liée aux concepts théoriques contemporains et qui suscite la participation de ses lecteurs pour déceler la présence de ces concepts et les amener à réfléchir là-dessus, Byatt valorise continuellement la communication entre le lecteur et l'écrivain qui est au centre de son œuvre.

L'intérêt de Byatt à explorer les liens existant entre la fiction et la réalité débouche sur sa volonté de révéler « une conscience théorique de l'histoire et de la fiction en tant que constructions humaines », en vue de démontrer les liens narratifs entre l'historiographie et la fiction, et ce que Linda Hutcheon appelle une « reconnaissance de [leur] textualité inévitable » (Hutcheon, *Poetics* 5, 129). Cette categorie de fiction que Hutcheon appelle«méta-fiction historiographique » se préoccupe de démontrer la nature discursive de la fiction et de l'histoire en assumant que « la signification et la forme ne résident pas dans les événements mais dans *les systèmes* (de pensée) qui transforment des événements passés en faits historiques actuels » (*Poetics*, 89). Dans des romans tels que *Possession: A Romance* ou *Angels and Insects,* Byatt évoque les théories actuelles sur la reconstitution des faits historiques et applique ces théories à des fictions qui non seulement remettent en question nos tentatives de connaître le passé, mais qui décrivent la perspective adoptée à l'égard du passé et tentent de la justifier. Par cette méthode d'écriture, Byatt réussit à s'approprier, dans sa fiction, les caractéristiques du réalisme des romans du dix-neuvième siècle qui lui ont procuré tant de plaisir en tant que lectrice, tout en essayant de démontrer comment on peut adapter les principes du réalisme pour tenir compte des pratiques théoriques et littéraires de la fin du vingtième siècle.

Abstract

Antonia Susan Byatt has written that she believes it is "possible for a text to be supremely mimetic...and at the same time to think about form, its own form, its own formation, about perceiving and inventing the world" ("Sugar/ Le Sucre" 22-3). This self-conscious attention to form is characteristic of the majority of Byatt's novels and much of her short fiction as well. Byatt's style, which is best described as "postmodern realism," enables her to acknowledge her debt to and her appreciation of nineteenth-century realism, while reflecting on the impossibility--and indeed, the undesirability--of employing this mode uncritically. Through her frequent use of irony, intertextuality, parody, and pastiche, Byatt redefines the perameters of contemporary realism within the context of postmodern literary theory.

Kathleen Coyne Kelly has observed that Byatt's novels are often "sites of controversy," which reflect a blend of discourses from the literary to the critical (*A.S. Byatt* xiii). Indeed, Byatt's writing can be interpreted as metafiction: fiction that "self-consciously and systematically draws attention to itself as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality" (Waugh, *Metafiction* 2). Through this type of literature, Byatt succeeds in troubling the "boundaries between fiction and criticism" (Currie 3), while reflecting her interest in some of the issues commonly associated with postmodernism. By writing fiction that is so closely connected to contemporary theoretical ideas, and which insists on her audience's participation in recognizing and thinking about those ideas, Byatt continually dramatizes the communication between reader and writer that is at the center of her work.

Byatt's interest in exploring connections between fiction and reality leads to her

determination to reveal "a theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs," for the purpose of showing both the narrative links between historiography and fiction and what Linda Hutcheon refers to as an "acknowledgement of [their] inescapable textuality" (*Poetics* 5, 129). This type of fiction, which Hutcheon calls "historiographic metafiction," is concerned with demonstrating the discursive nature of fiction and history through the understanding that "the meaning and shape are not *in the events*, but *in the systems* which make those past 'events' into present historical facts" *(Poetics* 89). Through novels such as *Possession: A Romance* or *Angels and Insects*, Byatt examines current theories about historical recovery and applies them to fiction which is designed to question not only how we attempt to know the past, but also whose perspective of the past gets told, and why. In so doing, Byatt in her fiction is able to recapture the qualities of the nineteenth-century novel that have given her, as a reader, so much pleasure, while endeavoring to show how realism can be adapted to reflect the theoretical and literary practices of the late twentieth century.

Table of Contents

To Dr. Deborah Bowen

In gratitude for the help and encouragement
that made this thesis possible.

CHAPTER 1: A. S. Byatt and Postmodern Realism

> What you have in Byatt is an odd-sounding but perfectly intelligible creature, the postmodern Victorian. She knows where we live and when; she knows her Joyce and Woolf and Beckett; but she is undeterred in the belief that the road into the twenty-first century winds exactly through the middle of the nineteenth. (Levenson, "The Religion of Fiction" 337)

Michael Levenson's description of Byatt's project humorously captures the air of perversity that surrounds her fiction. Here is a writer who, on the eve of the new millennium, continues to write long, challenging, multi-charactered, intellectual novels, two of which take place in Victorian England. Yet instead of languishing in academic obscurity, or being banished to the remainder table of one's local bookstore-cafe, Byatt's fiction has gained wide recognition: in 1990 *Possession: A Romance* won the Booker Prize, and more recently, *Morpho Eugenia* (*Angels and Insects*) was made into a moderately successful film.

Although she has written more about the twentieth century than the nineteenth, Byatt has gained the appellation "postmodern Victorian," a label she clearly enjoys, having included Levenson's review in the 1994 edition of her book-length study of Iris Murdoch, *Degrees of Freedom*. In her Foreword she reflects that, when the book was originally published in 1965, she shared "Murdoch's preoccupation...with nineteenth century realism, and the nature of realism in general," but both her ideas and Murdoch's have "changed over time, and differently" (viii). Levenson's essay was included, Byatt writes, because he manages to take "some of the ideas in this book [*Degrees of Freedom*] further than I might have done myself and in a direction which surprised and excited me" (viii). Levenson's phrase accurately reflects Byatt's strong

ties to realism and the nineteenth-century novelistic tradition, as well as her interest in adapting the realist novel to reflect issues and concerns--literary, historical, sociological and political--raised in postmodernism. Indeed, Byatt's fiction shows clear signs of a hybrid sensibility in regard to her frequent use of some of the conventions of literary realism and twentieth-century modernism, coupled with an awareness of postmodern/ metafictional strategies, structures, and ideas. It is a form which is most accurately described as postmodern realism. Although Byatt's attempt to accommodate postmodern fiction with literary realism may appear to be a shifting, conflicting endeavor, in fact, it is her exploration of the spaces between past and present, truth and lies, art and life, fiction and criticism, certainty and uncertainty, and her awareness of these dichotomies, which is the source of much of the narrative tension in her fiction.

Historiographic Metafiction

The first question one asks when reading *Possession* and *Angels and Insects* is why Byatt has chosen to re-imagine the Victorian novel. Some reasons for Byatt's interest and that of other writers who have written this type of retrospective fiction are suggested in Malcolm Bradbury's *The Modern British Novel* (1993). He notes the relative popularity of retrospective novels in the 1980s, speculating that

> [p]erhaps it was less that novelists were returning to the fictional verities of the past than making the relations of past and present narratives a matter for self-conscious literary examination. Among novelists, as among historians themselves, the question of the nature of history and history-writing was at issue. (406)

The nineteenth century is the era to which contemporary writers are most often drawn,

though not in the vituperative spirit of some of the early modernists. For contemporary writers, the nineteenth century represents a past which is distant but not remote. As Amanda Cooper notes, "To the modern eye the Victorian period holds a critical moment in history as our codes of language, notions of nationality, and theories of self derive from this point" ("Narratives of the Victorian Past" 1). Byatt's preoccupation with the nineteenth century can be explained in similar terms, whereby the process of historical recovery carries with it something akin to a self-discovery, as past and present are realized to be inextricably bound.

Linda Hutcheon, observing this growing interest in historical recovery among contemporary novelists, has offered a name for the type of fiction she saw emerging: historiographic metafiction, which she describes as "those well-known and popular novels which are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages" (*Poetics* 5). She notes that historiographic metafiction is concerned with the relationship between the discourses of history and literature, incorporating a "theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs" (5). This view develops from, among others, Hutcheon's reading of Dominick LaCapra and Hayden White, who acknowledge the narrative links between historiography and fiction. According to White:

> narrative historians need feel no embarrassment about resemblances between the stories they tell and those told by writers of fiction. Historical stories and fictional stories resemble one another because whatever the differences between their immediate contents (real events and imaginary events, respectively), their ultimate content is the same: the structures of human time. (*Content of the Form* 179-180)

Historiographic metafiction, however, troubles White's distinctions regarding what is

"real" and "imaginary," as historical personages utter fictional dialogue and mingle with other fictional characters. Nevertheless, both history and literature are, in their own way, engaged in an effort to reflect and to understand human experience (White 181). "Historiographic metafiction," Hutcheon writes, "represents a challenging of the (related) conventional forms of fiction and history writing through its acknowledgement of their inescapable textuality" (*Poetics*, 129). Thus, the "textualized remainders" of the past with which historiographic metafiction is concerned insure that such novels, usually grounded in realism, focus on history as document or text, and for that reason are attentive to the process of reading and writing. Byatt's *Possession* deals extensively with fictionally recovered letters that comprise a large section of the novel, encouraging reader speculation on the accuracy of literary and historical interpretation. Another English novel which deals with similar issues is Adam Thorpe's *Ulverton* (1992). His novel, similar in structure to Julian Barnes's better-known *A History of the World in Ten and a Half Chapters* (1989), introduces a collection of interlocking stories grouped around a central theme. Several of the stories in *Ulverton* are told in epistolary fashion--one by a nearly illiterate 18th-century woman--without authorial mediation of any kind. Like *A History of The World in Ten and a Half Chapters*, where the first story in Barnes's collection is narrated by a stowaway woodworm on Noah's Ark, *Ulverton* forces the reader to confront the marginalized and often unrecorded voices of English history. Such novels demonstrate that, although historiographic metafiction is not necessarily interested in trying to recover an accurate portrayal of the past, it is very much concerned with questioning "whose truth gets told" (*Poetics* 123).

Where, traditionally, historiography has been preoccupied with public or collective history, postmodern fiction is often attentive to the lives of individuals within a

particular historical moment. Penelope Lively's *Moon Tiger* (1987) focuses in part on the impressions of a female war correspondent in North Africa during the Second World War. The correspondent, who is also an historian writing a selective history of the world, argues that all history is subjective, and that the "collective past....is public property, but it is also deeply private. My Victorians are not your Victorians. My seventeenth century is not yours....Self-centered? Probably. Aren't we all?" (*MT* 2).

The challenge implied by the correspondent-narrator's comment in *Moon Tiger* urges a consideration of our own personal relationship to the historical past, just as Byatt does in *Possession*. In *Moon Tiger*, we are offered powerful descriptions of the war told from the perspective of participants like Tom, the narrator's soldier-lover, who records his experiences in the desert on paper just before he is killed by an enemy air attack. Significantly, all that remains of Tom is a text: his journal. Any accounts of his particular historical moment must be left for others to attempt to narrate and explain. In history as in fiction, many voices comprise the collective past, and "when some event occurs we shall have a multiplicity of subjective truths" (*A History of the World* 243). By focusing on unofficial or personal narratives, *Ulverton, Moon Tiger* and *A History of the World* cast doubts on totalizing versions of history that offer false assurances of their objectivity and disinterestedness.

Byatt's novels share with those of her contemporaries the understanding that "our historical narratives...are human constructions" (Holmes 58), and as such, must be regarded cautiously, even skeptically at times. Recognizing this fact, Byatt demonstrates in her fiction what Barnes also demonstrates in his: a "will to truth" (Gasiorek 164). Unlike Barnes or Lively, however, Byatt is not writing to undermine grand meta-narratives. Instead, her gaze is focused intently on interior lives and literary history. Through a series of oppositions, Byatt's novels situated in the

nineteenth century challenge accepted "truths" about who the Victorians were and who we believe ourselves to be, contrasting assumptions about their innocence and naivete with our sophistication and worldliness, their repression with our freedom. What the characters finally discover is that knowiedge is not always synonomous with understanding, and that sexual freedom does not necessarily guarantee passion.

Another novel that undermines the myth of the unsexed Victorian is John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969), a book which Byatt claims "partly provoked" her into writing her Booker Prize winner (Kelly 11). There are several points which *Possession* and *The French Lieutenant's Woman* have in common, among them the use of "historical intertexts, a parodic reworking of the Victorian novel that involves a metafictional self-consciousness, and an effort to connect the reader with the contemporary world outside the text" (Salami 107). However, the differences between the two writers are many. Despite the occasional authorial interventions in Byatt's fiction, her narrative voice lacks the stridency of Fowles's in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. In addition, whereas Byatt is concerned with showing the connection between past and present, Fowles has indicated that it is an existential conflict that interests him in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, not its historical framework. In his words, the "historical novel [is] a genre [in which] I have very little interest (Fowles, "Notes" 147). As Gasiorek points out:

> In Fowles's work the separation between history and fiction is clear-cut. The history serves as a backdrop to more contemporary concerns; indeed, it might be argued that he has set some novels in the past precisely because the psychological distance between the present and the past helps to focus the issues that preoccupy him, putting them in sharper relief. His work erects a *cordon sanitaire* between history and literature. History, he contends in *A Maggot*, "is essentially a science, and immensely different in its aims and methods from those of fiction." (Gasiorek 111)

Byatt's project differs from Fowles's largely in that she prefers to focus on the commonalities between history-writing and fiction-making rather than on their differences. Byatt and Fowles also differ in the targets of their ironic gaze, with Fowles regarding his characters with ironic, sometimes mocking detachment. Though irony is abundantly evident in *Possession*, more often than not, it is directed at the contemporary characters, not the Victorians.

But Byatt, as I have mentioned, has also written much that is not associated with the nineteenth century. Her short stories, for example, are a blend of traditional realism, fairy tale, and magic realism, while her first two novels, *The Shadow of the Sun* (1964) and *The Game* (1967), are realist novels dealing with family conflicts and her protagonists' efforts to emerge from the shadow of a more successful parent or sibling. Although these texts are by no means unworthy of consideration, they vary from the novels I have undertaken to discuss in that Byatt's later work represents a depth and expansion of themes and theoretical concerns which are only touched on in her shorter fiction and early novels.

In addition to a considerable body of fiction, Byatt has also written a number of essays and reviews, some of which have been collected in *Passions of the Mind* (1991). She has claimed in an interview that she does not try to keep abreast of critical theory, yet she has expressed a "need to write a theoretical book at the same time as [she] write[s] a novel" (Todd, *Women Writers Talking* 193), and has published essays which parallel and discuss her long fiction. Oftentimes, her critical essays expand ideas expressed in her novels, as in "Still Life/ Nature Morte" (1986) or "Van Gogh, Death and Summer" (1990), both of which were published after *Still Life* (1985) and *The Virgin in the Garden* (1978), and relate specifically to them. Although it

would be unwise to ignore the discrepancy that may occur between what an author intends and what s/he has actually achieved on the page, I have looked to Byatt's essays as a guide to what she is trying to say in her fiction, and as a way to show how her writing is not concerned only with creating believable worlds--worlds that may, however, also include djinns in the bedroom and lamias in the pool. For first and foremost, her writing is about ideas. Consequently, comparing Byatt's fiction with her non-fiction heightens the reader's awareness of the interdiscursivity of her work, highlighting her interests in art, natural science, history, critical theory, and literature. Comparisons between her fiction and essays also make it apparent that, even when an article like "Still Life/ Nature Morte" appears after the publication of a novel, her critical writing and the fiction it illuminates are tributaries of the same creative body of ideas; her essays enable her to describe her intentions overtly, whereas fiction permits her to express those same ideas more poetically or symbolically.

One issue that Byatt's non-fiction raises frequently is her interest in postmodern literary trends, and in "People in Paper Houses" (1979) she examines some of the problems she sees facing contemporary writers. These are:

> an awareness of the difficulty of 'realism' combined with a strong moral attachment to its values, a formal need to comment on their fictiveness combined with a strong sense of the value of a habitable imagined world, a sense that models, literature and 'the tradition' are ambiguous and problematic goods combined with a profound nostalgia for, rather than rejection of, the great works of the past. (*PM* 181)

Essentially, these are also the problems Byatt confronts in her own fiction. She reacts against claims that realism is a depleted form, concentrating instead on the ways that contemporary writers have tried to reconcile the contradictions she mentions, and in so

doing have self-consciously attempted to reconsider their relationship to nineteenth-century realism. However, in order to appreciate fully Byatt's contribution to contemporary literature, it is useful to begin by briefly examining some of the influences, indirect and direct, on Byatt's writing and some of her reasons for choosing the literary forms that she has.

A.S. Byatt and Literary Realism

In the words of Lilian R. Furst, "realism can be seen both as a specific historical moment and as a far broader technique that plays a role, in different ways, in most narratives" (*Realism* 22). As an artistic movement, literary realism refers to a body of texts in the latter half of the nineteenth century which expresses the dominant mimetic fashion of the time and is understood as a reaction against what Wallace Martin refers to as "the chance, fate, and providence of romantic[ism]" (60), as well as being resposive to social and political changes and the scientific and industrial advances of the time. In earlier and subsequent texts, realism takes different forms and has been given a wide variety of interpretations, dependent upon various understandings of the real.

Realism has had an important influence on Byatt's writing, but what ultimately defines her as a postmodern realist is the way that she uses realism critically and selectively, regarding it from a contemporary perspective. Even when Byatt's fiction is at its most metafictional, her novels demonstrate a strong adherence to time and place that is bolstered by her close attention to the physical details and the social attitudes of the historical period she is describing. In fact, Byatt's intense focus on the minutiae of Victorian life may sometimes foster the impression that the ordinary details of middle-class life in the nineteenth century are more visible, more accessible, than they might

be in a novel written by someone who actually lived in that period. What the Victorian may have omitted, taking it for granted that his or her audience would know what a character would have been wearing, eating, or sitting on, Byatt, like other writers of historiographic metafiction, includes such details as a means of creating what Leo Bersani refers to as the "illusion of historical authenticity" (241). Paradoxically, the feeling of hyper-reality that surrounds some of Byatt's most descriptive passages, as if a microscope had been switched on to full power, serves to signal the attentive audience to the fact that the text is neither an historical artifact nor a "genuine" Victorian novel.

Additional links to Byatt's singular use of conventional realism can be found in her use of coherent, individualistic characters with psychologically credible motives of behavior. In his study "Realism and the Fear of Desire," Bersani indicates the connection between fully rounded fictional characters and the ordered realist form with its strong "temporal frame in which individuals don't merely exist, but move purposefully from one stage of being to another" (242). In Byatt's Potter trilogy, characters like Frederica grow and change as a result of their interactions with other individuals and society at large, resisting fragmentation of the self and romantic, idealistic solutions to their problems. *Possession* differs somewhat from the trilogy because of Maud and Roland's inability to believe in a coherent self, in contrast to the Victorian poets in the novel who display a form of "creative self-fashioning" that, nevertheless, does not rob them of a sense of their identity (Holmes 70). *Morpho Eugenia* differs considerably from the trilogy for the reason that the characters in that text are primarily stock figures, with little or no individuality (92), who function as parodies of earlier literary types, though they are types which have been revised to the extent that they are permitted to enact behavior that would have only been alluded to

or performed "off-stage" in the original or parodied text. Overall, Byatt's use of certain key realist conventions contribute to the narrativity of her fiction, but with the underlying goal that her novels are intended not only to stimulate the emotions of her readers but their intellects as well. In other words, although the narrative is an important aspect of Byatt's novels, her goal is not only to tell a story but to force her readers to think about how it is told and why.

Clearly, the influence of traditional realism on Byatt's fiction has been significant. Equally important to consider is the manner in which she has shaped literary realism to reflect her own concerns and the extent to which her work reflects the transition in contemporary British literary history from the practice of realism in the 1950s to the enactment of realisms employed by writers of the 1980s and '90s.

Realism and Experimentalism

The years following World War II saw the beginning of a debate among writers who were dissatisfied with the fiction being produced in England and feared for its future viability. The argument developed into one between experimental writers and realist writers, each group essentially declaring that the novel was "unlikely to survive if their opponents' views prevailed" (Gasiorek 1). Initially, some, such as Alex Comfort, saw modernism as being incapable of adequately addressing social issues, and called for writers, in Andrezej Gasiorek's words, "to resist escape into pure form" and deal directly with social experience (2). Others, like Kingsley Amis, C.P. Snow, and William Cooper, regarded modernist experimentation, or what Mahaffey defines as "the avant-garde style of writing prevalent between World War I and World War II," as the source of the novel's perceived decline (Mahaffey 512). Not without some hostility and mistrust did they blame what they saw as high modernism's excessive subjectivity

and "attention to form and style" (Gasiorek 3). The interiority and stream of consciousness associated with James Joyce's and Virginia Woolf's fiction, as well as the influence of Freudian psychology on their work, were qualities many of the realists deplored. In 1958, Kingsley Amis memorably equated "experimentation" in the English novel with "obtruded oddity" (Rabinovitch 40), while C.P. Snow dismissed the experimental novel on the grounds that it had "little meaning and no future" (99).

In the opposite camp, writers like B.S. Johnson were vocal in their support of experimental writing, seeing modernism not as a falling-off for English literature but as a turning point. Supporters of experimentation believed that "[t]he contemporary novel should investigate language, reveal its own provisional and fictional status, and refuse what had been perceived as realism's univocal perspective" (Gasiorek 3). But as Gasiorek points out, what appeared on the surface to be a literary debate was "frequently underpinned by covert political assumptions":

> [for] to defend realism in the 1950s was to be aligned not only with 'good old English tradition' (empiricism, common sense, social comedy along the lines of Fielding and Dickens) but also with a broad commitment to liberal humanism. Experimentalism was thus attacked on putatively artistic grounds, but because political criteria were slipped in it could at the same time be dismissed as decadent ([William] Cooper, politically reactionary (Snow), and elitist (Amis). (Gasiorek 4)

On the other hand, the view that experimental writing should necessarily be equated with "progressive" thinking was a generalization of another kind. Yet something important has emerged from these debates, which is, as Gasiorek reminds us, that realisms [are]... multiple" and can "no more be equated with a particular political stance than with a given set of narrative strategies." The fact is that realism is "conceived in markedly different ways," by each writer who employs this mode, and

with widely different results (Gasiorek 4, 5).

One of the problems associated with providing a generally accepted definition of realism is that ideas of what constitutes "the real" vary widely from person to person. As we are frequently reminded today, one individual's version of reality is often very unlike another's, and it may at times be presumptuous, even dangerous, to assume otherwise. Furthermore, our recognition that "the discourses people necessarily use constitute their experience of reality" insures that one of the preoccupations of contemporary writers, including Byatt, is the perceived tension between language and reality (Gasiorek 183).

In the nineteenth century, realism was often described in relation to its opposite: romance or fantasy. Nathaniel Hawthorne did just this in his Preface to *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851), where he explains that,

> [w]hen a writer calls his work a Romance, it need hardly be observed that he wishes to claim a certain latitude, both as to its fashion and material, which he would not have felt himself entitled to assume, had he professed to be writing a Novel. The later form of composition is presumed to aim at a very minute fidelity, not merely to the possible, but to the probable and ordinary course of man's experience.

In Hawthorne's view, romance offered a writer greater latitude than a realist novel, as romance has "a right to present that truth [of the human heart]...under circumstances, to a great extent, of the writer's own choosing or creation" (iii). That the "Novel" was under stricter laws of veracity and verisimilitude is implied in Henry James's 1883 injunction to the novelist that he must "regard himself as an historian and his narrative as history....[and] he must relate events that are assumed to be real," implying, as does Hawthorne's Preface, that it is entirely possible to represent life and the social world with credible and impartial accuracy (Martin 58-59). Gasiorek demonstrates in his

definition the extent to which literary and social perceptions of realism have changed in the past century. In his words, "[r]ealist fiction...does not 'correspond' to reality, does not portray pre-existent events, but offers representations that are plausible by virtue of their rootedness in social reality" (183).

If interpretations and practices of realism have changed dramatically in the past twenty years or so, ideas of what constitutes experimentalism have changed also. Kenneth J. Knoespel (1991) sees the tendency toward experimentation in fiction as part of the general trend occurring in other disciplines, from art to philosophy to mathematics. Where once we held "an unquestioned faith in the consistency of metaphysical systems and mathematical logic," that faith has given way to a "hypercritical expectation that perturbations may be detected in all systems of thought. Where critical inquiry previously assumed stabilty, it now explores instability and confronts complexity previously ignored or simply unseen." (100). Postmodern fiction attempts to provide a way of registering and exploring this sense of instability, in order to express the world in terms that are meaningful to readers today--terms that involve reevaluating the past as well as reenvisioning the future.

Byatt And Postmodern Realism

Postmodern realism is one form that, at present, offers a way of joining experimentalism with mimesis. Peter Stoicheff observes in "The Chaos of Metafiction" (1991) that the covert strategies of realist texts have formerly sought to maintain the "illusion that [they] do not mediate between reader and world, but open a neutral window onto the world for the reader" (85). Yet whereas traditional realist fiction conceals the frame that enables it to simulate reality, metafiction, "a kind of writing which places itself on the border between fiction and criticism, and which takes that

border as its subject" (Currie 2), seeks to expose the frame in an effort to increase our awareness of all aspects of the novel and its construction. The impact of metafiction on contemporary fiction is aptly described by Iris Murdoch, who writes: "We can no longer take language for granted as a medium of communication. We are like people who for a long time looked out of a window without noticing the glass--and then one day began to notice this too." This increasing self-consciousness has made it difficult, if not impossible, Murdoch explains, to continue in the pattern of traditional realism (*Sartre* 75). Yet she, like Byatt, believes that the models provided by nineteenth-century realism are not to be discarded wholesale; rather, says Byatt, "[w]e must *learn from* tradition" and adapt that knowledge to purposes more suited to the philosophical climate (*PM* 166).

Patricia Waugh (1984) describes metafiction as maintaining a "finely balanced tension between awareness of its literary-fictional condition and its desire to create imaginative worlds, in which the reader can still become absorbed" (130). Tension is also the word Jerry A. Varsava (1990) associates with postmodern fiction as he refers to Lukacs's idea that all traditional fiction is fundamentally concerned with the pull that exists between "the present and the past, the individual and the collectivity," but the major difference between traditional fiction and postmodern fiction is that the latter often avoids resolving those tensions (*Contingent Meanings* 71). Not surprisingly, most metafiction aims to unsettle--sometimes even to frustrate--its readers, resisting our customary desire for closure or resolution, while denying us the luxury of a passive read. While metafiction generally maintains a foothold in the familiar world of conventional realism, "work[ing] within conventions in order to subvert them" (Hutcheon, *Poetics* 5), it varies in the degree to which it adheres to those conventions. For the most part, metafiction, through its modified use of realism, acknowledges the

benefits of mimetic representation for the purpose of encouraging the reader's recognition of and identification with his/ her world and the world of the text (Varsava 55). Varsava emphasizes that, despite the presence of realism in metafictional texts, this type of novel discourages the passive consumption of the narrative by its reader, and is, instead, an "interpretive project, a *pas de deux* involving text and reader, not an authorial *pas seul*" (54).

Critics such as Waugh and Varsava and others with an interest in postmodernism generally distinguish realist fiction from postmodern texts in terms of the reader's level of participation, yet it is also true that readers of realist fiction do play an important role as they attempt to decipher the author's symbols, allusions, plot twists and character changes. The main difference between the reader's role in realist fiction and that in postmodern fiction is the extent to which the reader's responses are shaped or controlled by the author. According to Furst in *All is True: The Claims and Strategies of Realist Fiction*:

> [t]he role-playing pretense demanded of readers in the construction of a [realist] text is based on an implied communicative situation in which readers respond to signals emitted by the narrator's text[, t]he response is guided and controlled by the the kind and amount of information offered (or withheld, in the case of gaps and contradictions) in the text. (66)

Byatt, too, employs such strategies of control, often creating an authoritative, extra-fictional "voice" closely aligned with the traditional realist author and very different from the "author-function" associated with postmodern writing. However, the authorial control so prominant in Byatt's work is mediated in some sense by her use of "framing" devices and narratorial interruptions. These interventions or "breaks" function very differently from the authorial intervention present in many Victorian novels, where a

narrator may suddenly interrupt the story to address the reader directly. Who can forget, for example, Charlotte Bronte's exultant "Reader, I married him," and other similar addresses in *Jane Eyre*; or Chapter Seventeen of George Eliot's *Adam Bede*, "In Which the Story Pauses a Little," and the author discusses her intentions with "my fair critic," the reader. Furst notes that, regarding nineteenth-century writing, "[i]nstead of representing an obstacle to reading through intrusive breaks in the fictional illuson, the narratorial voice is interpreted as a mediating link between text and audience, facilitating the pretense and encouraging slippages" (67). As a result, readers may be more likely to identify with the situations being described in the fictional world, drawing parallels between their own lives and the lives of the characters (Furst 63).

In contrast to the authorial intervention of nineteenth-century realist fiction, postmodern writers such as A. S. Byatt prefer to foreground the "frames" within and around their fiction. Rather than functioning as a "mediating link" between reader and text, postmodern breaks are generally disjunctive, serving as interrupters of the narrative flow. In Byatt's *Still Life* and *Possession*, for example, the narratorial frame breaks frequently call attention to "the writing of the text as the most fundamentally problematic aspect of that text" (Waugh, *Metafiction* 22). In *Babel Tower,* the realist narrative of Frederica Potter is placed within an overtly metafictional structure that emphasizes the interruptions in the principal narrative and actively resists the unity and coherence of traditional realism.

There are other times when the author-voice in Byatt's fiction is more ambiguous. On the one hand, Byatt's novels create the impression of being overseen by an omniscient figure engaged in constructing highly intricate relationships between all aspects of the text, from metaphors to themes to patterns of discourse. But instead of bolstering faith in this divine overseer, the sheer artificiality of the narrative structure

calls attention to itself as a deliberate effort on the author's part to achieve mastery over an unweildy tangle of discourse, as if, in fact, Byatt were deliberately mocking herself as author-creator.

The belief that by fostering realism we were getting closer to essential truth about human experience has, in this century, been undermined by postmodern theorists, writers and philosphers such as Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida, who have challenged both traditional ontology and conventional literary forms. They and others have taught us that there is no inherent truth in realist fiction, for the simple reason, as Saussure has argued, that "[l]anguage is a form and not a substance," and is therefore incapable of representing anything but itself ("Course in General Linguistics" 654). Consequently, as writers became aware of the implications of Saussure's linguistic theories and his belief in the need to study "the unconscious infrastructure of linguistic phenomena rather than the conscious structure" (Adams 808), they began experimenting with texts whose object was no longer the "transmission" of the exterior world but the interrogation of their own "complex medium of transmission" (Stoicheff 86). What emerges from postmodernism's reaction against the conventions of literary realism is fiction that calls attention to itself as fiction, fiction that delights in revealing its own constructedness and the artificiality of the form. That is not to say that what postmodern writers are experimenting with today has never been tried before: Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, Miguel de Cervantes' *Don Quixote* , and even Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* with their "elaborate framings" (Currie 5) contain metafictional characteristics, and they are not alone in demonstrating that self-consciousness is not a recent invention. However, aside from supporting Barthes's notion that there is no such thing as an original novel, postmodern fiction

demonstrates a fundamental ontological difference from modernist fiction of the twentieth century. Instead of positing the text as a source of truth with a stable subject, or as a code to crack or a meaning to decipher, postmodernism argues against a single subject or a single meaning, believing, instead, that a text must provoke new discussions, opening itself to a multiplicity of readings and interpretations. Where historians once posited a dominant narrative, silencing the "alternative" views of women and minorites, critics such as Michel Foucault have "articulated the histories of the forgotten areas of human thought, of the people excluded by traditional histories" (Currie 12), rejecting meta-narratives and revelling in diversity, and seeking to expose underlying ideologies and systems of authority.

An inherent feature of postmodern fiction is the realization by contemporary writers that the power structures of our society have become "more diverse and more effectively concealed or mystified" than they were in the previous century, thereby "creating greater problems for the post-modern novelist in identifying and then representing the object of 'opposition'" (Waugh 10-11). Since language is responsible for reinforcing the structures we create in society, it is not surprising that metafiction's attempts to expose and undermine the kinds of conventions--social, political, or linguistic--that induce unconscious or unthinking responses have been preoccupied with the language of conventional realism (Waugh 11). Nevertheless, it would appear that postmodernists have their own blindspots, if we consider that the desire to eliminate any particular ideological stance itself represents an ideology. In *Literature Against Itself* (1995), Gerald Graff refers to the desire of some within the humanities "to disassociate themselves from anything that might be associated with bourgeois culture" (Graff 25), in an effort, it would seem, to "escape complicity [with] the nightmare of modern history...[the] war, totalitarianism, and exploitation" (Graff 101). Such an

evasion, however, is fundamentally impossible, given the inescapability of culture and its effect on human lives.

The inescapablity of the past, both personal and collective, and the pervasiveness of its influence on the present forms the subject of many of Byatt's novels. At the same time, her fiction is also a direct response to postmodernism and its literary practices. In a 1996 interview with *Salon* , Byatt speaks about her role in the debate between realists and experimentalists, explaining that the writing of *The Virgin in the Garden,* begun in 1972, and *Still Life,* written in the early 1980s, was her way of "defending realism against the rather trivial kind of experimental [anti-narrative] novels that were then going on in England" (Miller, online 1996). Byatt's irritation with experimentalism also seems to have been directed at certain aspects of contemporary literary theory, such as Barthes's positing of "the death of the author," which Byatt challenges when she writes of her short stories in *Sugar,* that the book "does, indeed, also claim authorship for its author" (*PM* 25), though, as we have seen, such statements on Byatt's part can never be viewed uncomplicatedly, given the complexity of her attitudes toward the conventions she so consciously employs.

The self-consciousness of Byatt's own writing, and particularly of the novels to be discussed in this dissertation, corresponds to Mark Currie's broad definition of metafiction as fiction that "dramatises the boundary between fiction and criticism" (*Metafiction* 3), and which varies in the degree to which it adheres to or departs from realism. For the most part, Byatt's fiction makes use of more conventional narrative strategies, because she believes that a novel's innovativeness should not be judged on the basis of clever or unusual forms but on the style and quality of the writing. However, that is not to deny the variations of familiar forms that she manages to introduce in her fiction:

> The nice thing about a novel is that everything *can* go into it, because if you've got the skill between sentence and sentence, you can change genre, you can change focus, you can change the way a reader reads. And yet you can keep up this sort of quiet momentum of narration....You can do anything. (*Salon* online)

Byatt's realism is by no means a limited or limiting mode, as her novels abundantly reveal.

The problem of of how to consider Byatt's work--as leaning more toward realism or toward postmodern metafiction--is one which various critics have tried to resolve in an effort to arrive at a clear-cut classification of her writing. Unfortunately, such strict categorization of Byatt can be reductive when it involves overlooking aspects of her fiction which do not easily fit the paradigm one is attempting to use. This is a difficulty, however, which is also felt in approaches to other contemporary writers whose work has been influenced by postmodernism. John Barth, for example, has been identified as a metafictionalist by Waugh but admits that he has withdrawn from debates about who should or should not be considered a postmodernist, having learned instead to view the naming process with a certain philosophical detachment: "Postmodern, I tell myself serenely, is what I am; ergo, Postmodernism is whatever I do." He has vowed to continue doing what he does "until the critics rename the boat again" ("Postmodernism Revisited" 121).

Barth's comment is useful in that it reaffirms what fiction writers already know--that few set out with the specific intention of deliberately producing a postmodern novel. One possible solution to the critic's problem of how to place certain texts is, according to Amy Elias in her essay "Meta-mimesis? The Problem of British Postmodern Realism" (1993), to continue to refine our use of terms such as metafiction

to include writers who share a "postmodern sensibility" (13) but who are also drawn to traditional realism. Whereas at one time writers who fell within this general category were included under the broad headings of either postmodernism or realism, Elias suggests that they might be read more profitably if they were referred to separately as *postmodern realists*, a classification that, as I have already asserted, should be extended to A. S. Byatt as well. Elias further distinguishes between postmodern realists and traditional realists partly on the basis of what she perceives as the former's tendency "to work within the Realist paradigm while accommodating the postmodern argument [as originally observed by Linda Hucheon] that 'there is nothing natural about the 'real' and there never was'" (14). Many, however, would argue that traditional realism has been accomplishing the same task for years. In some sense, what ultimately distinguishes postmodern realism from traditional realism is the writer's willingness to share the knowledge that fiction is as much a critical endeavor as it is a creative one. That knowledge, instead of lessening the pleasure of the text, adds an unexpected dimension to it.

Byatt's own fiction reveals her continued interest in fashioning stories that appeal to what she calls the "primitive reader" in all of us (*Times Sat. Review* 1992). Regardless of how sophisticated the story may be, she believes that good fiction should evoke, for both reader and writer alike, the kind of passionate "greed" with which we approached narratives as children. To a large extent Byatt shares Iris Murdoch's view of narrative, the latter's comments on the subject in 1961 seeming like an echo of statements Byatt herself has made:

> [h]owever much novelists may try, for reasons of fashion or art, to stop telling stories, the story is always likely to break out again in a new form. Everything else may be done by pictures or computers, but stories about human beings are best told in words, and that 'best' is a matter of a response to a deep and ordinary human need. (*Iris Murdoch*

15)

One of the underlying themes in Byatt's major novel, *Possession*-- the text which is the central focus of my project--concerns the question of what makes narrative such a compelling form. Much of the novel's humor derives from Byatt's--and her characters'--awareness that narrative curiosity had become unfashionable in the scholarly world of the 1980s, and only the most unsophisticated readers would be likely to admit to reading with such a banal motivation. Ironically, all of the scholars in *Possession* find themselves so consumed by the desire to find out what happened that each ends up employing extreme measures--among them, grave-robbing, petty theft, and the telling of lies to friends and colleagues--for just that purpose. And we understand, when Maud Bailey tries to justify the secrecy with which she and Roland have gone about their quest of the poets' letters, that "It isn't professional greed. It's something more primitive" (*Possession* 238). As readers, we are both participants and beneficiaries of the scholars' unscrupulous narrative curiosity, which raises a curious ethical dilemma as to whether we can deplore the means of recovery even as we enjoy the discovery.

In *Possession*, Maud's threatened self finds affirmation in the traditional narrative of the epistolary romance of Ash and LaMotte, and her "primitive" need to find out the end of the story results in an unwitting confirmation of her own identity as she discovers that she is actually descended from Ash's and LaMotte's illegitimate daughter. There is a wonderfully metafictional moment when Maud makes the discovery that she, the reader of the Ash/ LaMotte correspondence, has suddenly become a participant in the story she had been following. Maud complains to Roland: "I don't quite like it. There's something unnaturally *determined* about it all. Daemonic. I feel they have taken me over" (*Possession* 505). We sense that,

despite Maud's initial shock, the knowledge she has gained about her ancestry is positive knowledge; and it is she who is to confirm the link Byatt has been establishing between past and present.

Thus *Possession* is a novel which is designed, like other historiographic fiction, "to disturb...[the] reader's historical confidence" and to remind us that we cannot take our understanding of the past for granted (Connor 145). Paradoxically, however, "the very fact of seeming to make this historical language and consciousness so abundantly available to the reader risks confirming rather than disturbing that reader's historical confidence" (Connor 145). The apparent accessibility of the past to the reader prompts him or her to ask: What is the source of our attraction to or nostalgia for the past?

Individual Literary Influences

For A. S. Byatt, that attraction developed in early childhood with Tennyson. Of his poetry she writes that "[his] rhythms haunt everything I write," and "the enclosed weaving lady [of "The Lady of Shalott"] became my private symbol for my reading and brooding self long before I saw what she meant for him, and for nineteenth-century poetry in general" (*Times Sat. Review*). Tennyson's influence is already evident in *The Game*, which Byatt describes as "a novel about a battle between a realist novelist and an academic with a romantic imagination, in both the medieval and the Coleridgean sense" (*Times Sat. Review*). Echoes of Tennyson appear again in *Possession*, and even later in *The Conjugial Angel*, which imagines the lives of the Tennysons in the years after Arthur Hallam's death.

Another significant influence upon her adult writing is Byatt's love of fairy tales and legends that "made it clear there was another world, beside the world of having to

be a child in a house, an inner world and a vast outer world with large implications" (*Times Sat. Review). Possession*, of course, includes several fairy tales, as do *Morpho Eugenia* (1992), *The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye: Five Fairy Stories* (1994), *Babel Tower* (1996), and *Elementals: Stories of Fire and Ice* (1998). Byatt explains that "there was always a mythic and poetic undertow in my fiction, even at its most realist" (*Times Sat. Review*). Like Murdoch, whose writing also reflects an interest in the magical, Byatt's inclusion of fairy tales in her fiction provides another dimension to the events taking place in the novel or short story, offering a form of commentary on the principal text. Often, as in *Possession*, she rewrites the fairy tales or legends to reflect a contemporary focus. For example, in "The Glass Coffin," the bewitched maiden is freed from her glass tomb by a simple tailor who has no wish to claim her as his bride if she is unwilling, and he tells her, as he certainly does not in the original tale, that "'when, and if, you are restored to your rightful place, and your home and your lands and people are again your own, I trust you will feel free to reconsider the matter [of the marriage], and remain, if you will, alone and unwed'" (*Possession* 66). Both Byatt's and Grimm's version of "The Glass Coffin" conclude with the maiden's wedding to the tailor and recovery of her lost castle and wealth, but in Byatt's retelling, the bride regularly roams the forest and hunts with her brother, just as she did when she was free and unmarried, while her husband, the former tailor, stays home by the hearth like a dutiful housewife, sewing contentedly and "[making] for pleasure what he had once needed to make for harsh necessity" (*Possession* 67). The postmodern reversal of expectations in Byatt's tale offers an ironic perspective on the familiar fairy-tale depiction of gender roles, thereby expanding its interest and relevance for contemporary readers (Hutcheon, *Poetics* 134).

In *The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye,* which incorporates several tales spun by

a loquacious modern day *djinn* and by narratologists at a Turkish conference, the stories form nearly the entire narrative. Significantly, the female protagonist, Gillian Perholt, a narratologist whose "business is storytelling" (*Djinn* 95), resembles a writer collecting material and trying to put the pieces together in a connected fashion. Gilllian's occupation is symbolic of the human need to arrange experience and to tell stories, while the international conference is compared to an oriental "bazaar, where stories and ideas were exchanged and changed" (*Djinn* 106). But despite the multiplicity of tales available to Gillian, the sense of fatedness they convey is inescapable. Gillian, like most characters in traditional stories, is unable to elude her destiny: the thorn will prick the finger, the shoe will (or will not) fit. Here, Gillian suffers an acute awareness of her slackening skin and diminishing desirability, but in contrast to the raging middle-aged woman in "Medusa's Ankles" who receives a dowdy hairdo that precipitates her emotional undoing (*Matisse Stories* , 1993), Gillian accepts her biological fate (with a little help from her djinn) and is prepared to find pleasure in who she has become. She--and we--are asked to recognize certain truths about the human condition: about sex, about aging, and about death. "For these tales," traditional tales, says one of the narratologists in the story, "are not psychological novels, are not concerned with states of mind or development of character, but bluntly with Fate, with Destiny, and with what is prepared for human beings" (*Djinn* 125).

The intertexts of fable and myth employed in Byatt's fiction create the framework for her pursuit of "truth and truthfulness" (*PM* 24). Like Robert Browning, whose poetry has been an inspiration to her, Byatt "insist[s] on the need to...determine truth as far as possible, even with all our shortcomings and fallibility amply acknowledged and demonstrated (*PM* 44). Clearly, Byatt shares with Browning and his contemporary, George Eliot, a sense of moral obligation that both Victorians attached to writing. In

"Sugar/ Le Sucre," Byatt discusses the exact nature of that morality as stemming from Browning's belief that 'truth' could (and must) be "sorted out from all the intricate meshes of thought and opinion and partiality that make up our account of things" (*PM* 23). Rather than regarding poetry or fiction as an obstacle to truth-telling, art becomes Browning's most effective means of doing so, for as Byatt explains, "fiction that makes fact alive is a kind of truth, to set beside human untruth, and the undifferentiated Divine Word-Truth" ("Incarnation" 51). In this sense, historical fiction is shown to be as valuable in its own way as historiography. Byatt cites Browning's words from "The Ring and the Book": "it is the glory and good of Art,/ That Art remains the one way possible/ Of speaking truth, to mouths like mine, at least" (*PM* 51). Browning's attempt to 'galvanise' historical figures into life and to make the past speak to the present is a project Byatt has herself undertaken with considerable success--somewhat ironically, by using Browning himself both as a character in her short story "Precipice-Encurled," and as the apparent basis for Henry Randolph Ash of *Possession*.

In addition to Browning, another nineteenth-century writer who has had a significant impact on Byatt's fiction, strongly influencing the form of her fiction, is George Eliot. Olga Kenyon goes as far as to say in her book *Women Novelists Today: A Survey of English Writing in the Seventies and Eighties* (1988), that "Byatt is the only novelist in this study who admires George Eliot enough to imitate her" (54). If 'imitation' is something of an exaggeration, the impact on Byatt of her adult rediscovery of Eliot is considerable. Byatt writes in "George Eliot: A Celebration" (1980) that "Reading *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda* I learned several primitive yet crucial lessons about writing novels--and these lessons were also moral lessons about life" (*PM* 73). Indeed the most important lesson emerged from Eliot's use of realism, which

Byatt describes as partly "a moral realism, rejecting 'compensation' and other consoling doctrines, and partly a related technical realism, a desire for accuracy" (*PM* 84-5). The kind of truthfulness Eliot offers is by no means of a comfortable sort. Her characters commit errors and suffer deeply for them, reminding us of our own failings and limitations in a manner both sensitive and ironic, yet reminiscent of modern skepticism about humankind's ability to overcome adversity. Byatt's comment that "[Eliot] offered us scope not certainties. That is what I would wish to celebrate" (*PM* 76) is related to Byatt's own project and her interest in exploration rather than pronouncement, for although she believes that humans crave order, not only in their daily lives but also in literature, language and science, the difficulty of achieving it and the unwillingness to relinquish the effort to do so form the basic problem of existence.

The novels Byatt is most drawn to writing are large, multi-charactered, intricately symbolic portraits of people's lives in relation to their historical period. Not surprisingly, she admires Eliot for her extraordinary erudition and a writing style characterized by "a clear mind and a lot of information"--a description that could undoubtedly be used of Byatt's novels as well, which reveal a wide range of interests, "from snails to obsolete legal forms to ethnomethodology" (*Babel Tower*, 621). She also claims to have learned from Eliot "that it is possible to invent a world peopled by a *large number* of interrelated people" (*PM* 73), a technique adapted in her novels with increasing skill. And, like all Eliot's characters, Byatt's are depicted as "people who think...[and who are], within their limits, responsive to politics and art and philosophy and history" (*PM* 73). These are the qualities that give Byatt's characters' lives both substance and meaning, and if action is of minor importance in her novels, it is because, for many of her characters, the life of the mind is often more real and more immediate than the world of the everyday.

Byatt and Murdoch

While examining the writers who have had the most impact on Antonia Byatt's fiction, one must consider Byatt's long-standing interest in the work of Iris Murdoch, whose writing demonstrates strong ties to nineteenth-century realism. Both Byatt and Murdoch adhere to the idea that fiction is capable of conveying important truths about humankind, and despite their postmodern awareness that many versions of the truth may exist simultaneously, neither writer is willing to abandon the certainty that some truths are indeed truer than others. One of the most important differences is Byatt's strategy of using realism metafictionally in order to recognize the mutual influences of the discourses of history and literature. Her aim is to demonstrate that realism is capable of revealing the artifice and constructedness that makes fiction what it is, while continuing to provide the pleasure of what Byatt often refers to as "a good and greedy reading."

One of the commonalities between Byatt and Murdoch is the fact that both have defied easy categorization by critics who have depicted them as alternately old-fashioned and forward-looking in their attitudes toward realism. Robert Scholes has defined Murdoch's project as "'fabulation,' constantly dispensing with realistic elements, drawing on fantasy and symbolism, on ornate decor and dramatic pastiche, in the interests of constructing an original myth" (Bradbury, *The Modern British Novel* 331). Scholes regards fabulation as an important aspect of metafiction, for in his view, such myth-making

> means not a turning away from reality, but an attempt to find more subtle correspondences between the reality which is fiction and the fiction which is reality. Modern fabulation accepts, even emphasizes, its fallibilism, its inability to reach all the way to the real, but it continues to look toward reality. It aims at telling such truths as fiction may legitimately tell in ways which are appropriately fictional. (*Fabulation and Metafiction* 8)

The major difference between Byatt's use of lamia, ghosts, and genii and Murdoch's use of magic or fantasy in her novels is the allegorical quality of the latter's non-realistic elements. Murdoch's technique sometimes seems to undermine the reader's confidence in her characters' realistic nature, perhaps because of the lack of playfulness with which these elements are introduced, but Byatt's occasional inclusion of magical elements in no way undermines the realistic nature of the stories. Instead, these elements affirm or contribute to the interwoven circle of patterns, metaphors and symbols of which her novels are composed, encouraging the reader's sense of complicity in the author's game. Like Murdoch herself, Byatt is always keenly aware of what she refers to as the "tension" between realism and artificiality in Murdoch's fiction (Byatt, *Iris Murdoch* 30). It is a tension which, I have noted, is also visible in the majority of her own novels, though she is perhaps more successful than Murdoch in her integration of various fictional forms. However, aside from their very different techniques, Murdoch and Byatt both appear to agree that "[i]magination is an attempt to apprehend truth" (Byatt, *Degrees of Freedom* 5), and in Byatt's fiction there is a decidedly modernist belief in art as the one means available of locating order in existence. "Art is a vain and hollow show, a toy of gross illusion, unless it points beyond itself and moves whither it points," writes Murdoch in *The Black Prince* (1973). As her protagonist explains in the same novel, in words which echo Browning's: "Art tells the only truth that ultimately matters. It is the light by which human things can be mended. And after art there is, let me assure you all, nothing" (Murdoch 416). The words speak of her, and of Byatt's, confidence in literature and belief in its enduring value and meaning.

In addition to the shared impulse to truth-telling and a resistance to "consoling

fantasies" in Byatt's and Murdoch's fiction, Levenson has noted that a fundamental similarity between these writers is that "[t]he two of them alone are enough to count as a distinct contemporary lineage, nourished on the conviction that, our modernist complacencies aside, our Victorian origins are unresolved, unsurpassed" (338). Although I would question Levenson's choice of the word "unsurpassed," because it implies a nostalgia for the nineteenth century that I do not feel Byatt wholly shares, her novels do suggest that we have failed to resolve our attitudes toward the Victorians or their fictional practices. This is one of the issues Byatt's fiction explores, and she does so through a very determined inquiry into the nature and function of realism in postmodernity. What she shows is that realism need not be limited to representing empirical reality. In her defense of contemporary realism as a fundamentally critical activity, Byatt demonstrates its capability of responding to changes in the literary and cultural climate of our day.

Byatt and Drabble

Another novelist whose name is sometimes linked with Byatt's, and who may provide a kind of test case in the comparison between other contemporary novelists, is her younger sister, Margaret Drabble. In many ways, their fiction is very different. What they have in common, however, is their attachment to nineteenth-century realism. Although their novels are rarely discussed in conjunction with one another, interviewers have from time to time expressed an interest in their personal relationship, alluding to a coolness between the sisters, and have talked of Byatt's second novel, *The Game*, as biographical evidence of sibling rivalry. *The Game* is about the strained relationship between two sisters, one a successful writer of popular women's fiction and the other an Oxford don. In the end the younger of the two sisters,

the novelist, is partly responsible for her older sister's suicide, after she publishes a book that is intentionally based on the don's unhappy life. But in her interview with Dusinberre, Byatt discourages biographical speculation about her own life, particularly about her relationship with Drabble. Responding to Dusinberre's query about the presence of two pairs of sisters in *The Game* and *The Virgin in the Garden*, Byatt explains:

> [a]lthough one is interested in sisters because of having them, Stephanie and Frederica [of the trilogy] are both in many ways different sides of me....Frederica is like me in her intellectual equipment, her obsession with words and patterns, and also in her sexual greed and curiosity. There is perhaps more sympathy towards both sisters in that novel because I put more of myself into each of them. I had a lot of trouble with both Julia and Cassandra, the novelist and the don in *The Game*, and felt very alienated from each of them in turn. (Todd 190)

Byatt does concede, however, that there are disadvantages to growing up in a literary family, as she has done:

> It was difficult for me to find enough space to be myself. Sometimes one felt like not beginning to write for lack of mental and emotional space. It is also hard to have shared memories with another writer. So much of art is a transmutation of memory, and this needs to be private, not communal, or it is in danger of being destroyed. (Todd 190)

Byatt's feeling of being constrained by "shared memories" is one of the problems experienced by the sisters in *The Game*, the older of whom must struggle with the fear that her younger sister is making use of their past for her own professional gain. Ironically, Byatt's admission, rather than dispelling rumors about her and Drabble, seems rather to encourage them.

One can easily understand how notions of a rivalry between the sisters may have developed, given the differences in Byatt and Drabble's subject matter and writing styles. Drabble's early novels are of a type Kenyon describes as "biology oriented feminism" (Kenyon 89), about young women in domestic situations, "who are having to make their lives cohere around a jumble of partly lapsed, partly operating rules, as they struggle to maintain their own direction in life, often in the midst of marriage and childbearing" (Todd, *Women Writers Talking* 162). Drabble's later novels, however, focus more on middle-aged characters and contemporary English society, moving outward from the domestic and attempting, Kenyon writes, to capture "the fleeting social present" (89). Drabble commented once that the writers she most admires "are the people who strive to retain their links with the community and not indulge in their own consciousness to such a degree that they become very rarefied, like Henry James" or like the "neurasthenic" Proust, whose work, incidentally, Byatt greatly admires (Cooper-Clark 25). Although Byatt has also written novels which include sympathetic portrayals of young mothers and bad marriages, her emphasis has never been entirely on the domestic. She is, instead, "more interested in the origins of knowledge, the functioning of our brains, mental imagery and perception" (Kenyon 53).

Kenyon characterizes Drabble as being "conservative in technique, preferring a 'good traditional tale'" (Kenyon 100). Drabble herself has commented that she is "a traditional novelist" who writes "solid pieces of direct, realist fiction" (Harper 55). More recently, however, critics such as Michael F. Harper have questioned Drabble's claims that she is merely perpetuating the tradition of nineteenth-century realism, arguing convincingly that

> [t]he form of Margaret Drabble's novels is not the result of unthinking

> acceptance of Victorian conventions, or of nostalgia for 'the riches of the past.' It is rather a working back to a reconstituted realism, in which Drabble begins with modernism and subjects it to a critique that is profound and contemporary. (69)

It is true that both Byatt and Drabble appreciate certain elements of the nineteenth-century novel; its numerous psychologically complex characters, its attention to a "realistic social world," and its focus on narrative are elements which bear an obvious connection, for instance, to the work of George Eliot (Harper 69). On the other hand, both Byatt and Drabble recognize that realism has changed significantly in this century in part because our social and cultural reality has changed, and their novels reflect that reality in different ways. And yet, what finally separates Byatt's use of realism from Drabble's is the former's intensely self-conscious focus on the writing process and the theoretical concerns that accompany it. In fact, all of Byatt's novels are in some sense fictions about the writing of fiction. Other concerns, whether social or political, are felt as secondary to her primary interest in communicating the complexity of the writer's task. We see this afresh in Byatt's most recent short fiction. In "The Lamia of the Cevennes," a painter wants nothing more than to be alone to study the problems of color and form that the objects around him represent. When a "nondescript" orange butterfly settles on his breakfast table, he becomes wholly absorbed in gazing at the creature:

> Exact study would not clip this creature's wings, it would dazzle his eyes with its brightness. Don't go, he begged it, watching and learning, don't go. Purple and orange is a terrible and violent state. There is months of work in it. Bernard attacked it. He was happy, in one of the ways in which human beings are happy. (*Elementals* 111)

Whereas Drabble's "gaze," then, is directed outward at the social world and the

community, Byatt's concern, as the artist's scrutiny of the insect shows, is often with individual acts of perceiving and of struggling to express that perception.

The Function of Art in Byatt's Fiction

In the words of a minor character in *Still Life* (1985), "[a]rt can't be thought of as inventing people and giving them names and social backgrounds and amassing descriptions of clothes and houses" (*SL* 215). The same could be said of writing realist fiction. There is in Byatt's writing, as there is in George Eliot's and Robert Browning's, a painterly approach to writing, not simply of description, but in the sense of wanting to "capture 'the thing itself' like a painter" (Kenyon 77). *Still Life* is a novel about metaphor and art, and what Kenyon refers to as "the complexities of naming and of accuracy" (Kenyon 77), with Van Gogh and his painting forming a central theme. This is the 'real' for Byatt: the act of writing in an attempt to capture the essence of experience and the material world, whether in words or in paint. In her autobiographical short story, "Sugar," centered on memories of her dying father, one notices Byatt's Proustian use of memory and her interest in "the problem of the relations between truth, lies and fiction" (*PM* 21). "What is the truth?" she asks at one point in the story (241), troubled by the difficulty of separating family fictionalizing from the 'facts' of an event. But in spite of the author's personal need to clarify her family history, both reader and writer alike begin to realize that our memories might not be an accurate account of particular events, even though, taken together, they form the essence of our knowledge of people and of our past, a knowledge which is sometimes truer than a mere apprehension of known facts. What finally remains after her father's cremation and after Byatt has sifted through her own memories about him is not an arrival at the truth she so greatly respects, but an acceptance, however unwilling, of

the idea that "[t]he real thing, the true moment, is...inaccessible" ("Sugar" 248).

There are other aspects of truth-telling that Byatt explores in her fiction. At one point in *Still Life*, Frederica, the central character in the trilogy, contemplates the colors of various objects in nature and concludes with disappointment that the words one uses to describe the objects on paper "seemed, and were, stale, deja-vu, derivative." Michael Westlake's essay "The Hard Idea of Truth" (1989) observes that "such a stance is certainly a needed corrective to some readings of Saussure, in which language becomes an irresistible force regimenting perception....Perception then, Byatt is right to argue, constantly *exercises* the language through which it is coded" (Westlake 34). However, in *Babel Tower,* Byatt has Frederica discover not only the inadequacy of language to express accurately perceived images, but also its ability to distort one's own memories of an experience. Even as Byatt is observant of the inconsistencies of language, she tries to demonstrate throughout her body of work that

> [a]n abandonment of correspondence between language and reality doesn't rule out the possibility of truth, nor does it invalidate the diverse procedures for ascertaining what is true or false or undecidable; but it does banish the autocratic implication of the correspondence theory that 'my' truth must thereby be everybody's. (Westlake 35)

Byatt's fiction shows a constant effort to deal with the problem of how best to present experience and to be true to it without falsification, while avoiding the pitfall she attributes to contemporary literary theorists who, in ascribing too much power to language, have thereby reduced its range (*PM* 5).

Of the chapters that follow in this dissertation, the second deals with Byatt's trilogy of *The Virgin in the Garden*, *Still Life*, and *Babel Tower,* and examines her ideas on the imperfect connection between language and the image or experience the

trilogy attempts to describe; the chapter also explores her experimentation with three different narrative styles. The third and central chapter discusses *Possession* and Byatt's use of parody and pastiche in this historiographic metafictional novel. The fourth chapter focuses on Byatt's most recent long work, *Angels and Insects*, which is composed of two novellas: *Morpho Eugenia* and *The Conjugial Angel.* Both texts explore in very different fashion humankind's struggle to achieve transcendence over the material world of the nineteenth century and her characters' imperfect achievement of that goal. The dissertation concludes with a summary of the ideas at the heart of her novels and a brief analysis of her fiction as a negotiation of theoretical and critical spaces. In all, I hope to show that Byatt is a writer who has gained a place in contemporary fiction through an extraordinary talent for finding new ways of demonstrating the beauty and excitement and sheer vitality of the written word.

Chapter 2: Perception and Representation in A. S. Byatt's Trilogy

The Virgin in the Garden

Byatt's novel-length attempt at putting her ideas about postmodern realism into practice is most evident in the first book of her trilogy, *The Virgin in the Garden* (1978), which is followed by *Still Life* (1985) and *Babel Tower* (1996). The result in *The Virgin in the Garden* is a work that is rich with metaphor and dense with the intertexts of Shakespeare, Proust, and Elizabethan drama, all woven into a pattern as complex as a Tudor maze. *The Virgin,* in fact, also introduces what becomes an important element in Byatt's fiction: intertextuality as an integral part of structure and theme. All three novels explore the lives of the Potter sisters, Stephanie and Frederica, who endeavor to escape their overbearing school-master father and the dreary Yorkshire village where they were raised. In contrast to Byatt's first two novels, *The Shadow of the Sun* (1964) and *The Game* (1967), which are traditionally realist stories about families and writers, the trilogy foregrounds Byatt's self-reflexive attempt to explore the spaces between art and life and the relationship between language and its ability to order and convey image and experience.

The novel's structure, composed of four historical presents--1973, the year in which Frederica, the youngest daughter, looks back on the Coronation; 1968, the year of the novel's prologue; 1953, the year of the coronation of Elizabeth II; and the sixteenth century, the period of the first Queen Elizabeth's reign as represented by *Astraea,* the play at the center of *The Virgin in the Garden*--underlines the impossibility of recapturing either the personal or the collective past with any real certainty. When Frederica reminisces from the vantage point of fifteen years later about the summer she had played the young Queen Elizabeth in Alexander

Wedderburn's verse drama, "she was able to fill her memory theatre with a brightly solid scene which she polished and gilded as it receded" (*VG* 317); here we are given a very clear example of the bane and the beauty of memory. In fact, the predominant tone of *The Virgin in the Garden* is one of nostalgia, though less for vanished youth or the postwar years of the 1950's, than "nostalgia for a *paradis perdu*" in which, Byatt explains, "thought and language and things were naturally and indissolubly linked or, to use a [T. S.] Eliot metaphor, fused" (*PM* 9). At the same time, Byatt is keenly aware that "'[t]rue Paradise,'" according to Proust, "'is always Paradise Lost'" (*VG* 242).

In *The Virgin and the Garden* and the two novels that follow, Byatt traces the changing literary scene through the 1950s and '60s and the attitudes toward realism and experimentalism that emerged from the period. These attitudes are best summarized by Frederica's reflection on Alexander's literary career: "in 1953 Alexander tried to write, to discourse, in verse, about history and truth. In 1973 he criticises, in prose [and on television], modes of communication" (*VG* 241). The passage is clearly meant to indicate the squandering of Alexander's talents as he turns from experimenting with verse forms to merely commenting on other commentators. The danger of such intense cultural scrutiny, the novel implies, is the tendency to be seduced into a pattern of thinking that is non-regenerative and self-perpetuating, as illustrated in the image of Edmund Wilkie's psychological studies of the human brain studying the human brain: "a closed circle" (132). That is not to say that *The Virgin in the Garden* aims to depict postwar Britain as the vanished Golden Age. Far from it. Frederica recalls that after the war, people exhibited a kind of innocent rejoicing and "thwarted nostalgia....they had been naturally lyrical," and though "their lyricism had turned out to be wandering and threadbare...nothing had replaced or succeeded it" (241). What follows this brief period of hopefulness is one

characterized by "threadbare 'satire,' a sluggish and ponderous anti-rhetoric, a laboured passion for deflating almost anything" (*VG* 241) which is later associated in *Still Life* with Kingsley Amis's *Lucky Jim*, a novel Frederica condemns for its lack of moral seriousness and "childish irresponsibility" (*SL* 123).

This feeling of mild disillusionment with the present permeates the sections of *The Virgin* concerned with Matthew Crowe's "white-washing" and sanitizing preparations in the community intended to accompany the Elizabethan pageant he is overseeing to mark the gift of his estate to a new university. The sense of disillusionment assocated with the pageant also extends to the Coronation scene in the novel. At one point, all of the characters gather with mixed feelings to watch the Coronation on television, a medium that is depicted as democratic yet diminishing. Despite the ecstatic and inflated rhetoric of the BBC reporters, the viewers, Frederica among them, cannot help but be influenced by the fact that, from what they can see of the event on their television screen, the monarch of the second Elizabethan Age resembles little more than a "twinkling tiny doll, half an inch, an inch, two inches, a face maybe eight inches across, grave or graciously beaming" (*VG* 239). Literarily and socially, the prospective "new era" ushered in amidst anachronistic trappings of ritual and display is seen to represent a mockery of history and tradition through its artificiality and a misguided faith in affluence. Observes the narrator: "Money was real to the contemporary mockers" (242). Somewhat ironically, Crowe, a wealthy philanthropist, determines to transform the North Yorkshire countryside in hopes of recapturing the spirit of 'Olde England' as a suitable background for his retirement and Alexander's play, and money is what enables him to do just that. What he does achieve is a sentimental reconstruction of the past, involving the fabrication of "mock Tudor houses...decked with mock Tudor scented hedges and bunting with mock Tudor

roses and odds and sods on." "'The land's sick for it,'" he exclaims to Alexander (66) in defense of his project, but the irony of the minutely-constructed pastiche is not lost on Crowe, who is well aware that his Renaissance pageant is no lasting bulwark against the future.

For Crowe as for Alexander, the need to recreate the past is nostalgic, but it is nostalgia motivated by an awareness of the postwar generation's lack of appreciation for a cultural heritage that they were never taught to understand. As Frederica explains when she views the artwork in Crowe's old and stately home: "'It's all too much for me. I don't see it. I'm the austerity generation....All these carvings and hangings just make me uneasy'" (*VG* 137). Through Frederica's sister, Stephanie, who possesses a kind of double vision that enables her to see "what things meant to be, and miss[es] no detail of how they, in fact, presented themselves" (*VG* 110)--a gaze which later proves essential to the writerly figures in *Angels & Insects* --it is evident that the Renaissance represents for many of the characters "the vigour, the sense of form, the coherence lost, lost, with the English Golden Age" (*VG* 111). On the other hand, one cannot deny that for all the beauty of Alexander's verse drama, the play is about the difficulty of writing "[r]eal modern verse, *not* parody, *not* doctrinaire modern realism" (359). When Wilkie confidently states to Frederica that "verse and psychological realism--the worst possible combination--both are *out*," those who enjoy *The Virgin* precisely for its multi-layered psychological realism are probably inclined to share her dismayed protest that "A form is as good as the writer who chooses it" (359) At the same time, we are also likely, in 1999, to accept Wilkie's assertion that to write about historical events as Alexander does, without parody and without self-consciousness, "means he's been left with involuntary echoes--soft slurry--of things old and not so old...no blood, no bones, no guts" (359). This is a

predicament Byatt seems determined to avoid.

One of the ways I have mentioned that Byatt manages to avoid unquestioning recreations of the past is through the use of "frames" around the central action of the 1950s. *The Virgin in the Garden* begins with a Prologue that is set in the National Portrait Gallery where Alexander studies a painting of Queen Elizabeth I, a figure who, he acknowledges, "signally changed the whole shape of his own life" (12). The Queen and the Elizabethan Age become for Alexander and the reader historical and literary links between past and present. And "[as an] androgynous or hermaphrodite virgin, both virgin and not-virgin...Elizabeth contains within her the contradictions inherent in language itself" (Kelly 75). In fact, it is through the complicated and allusive language of his play that Alexander tries to resolve the dilemma involved in writing good dramatic verse about the Renaissance without being unduly overshadowed by Shakespeare. In a sense, Alexander's play is about the artist's need to acknowledge the influence of the past without sacrificing one's own identity.

In her discussion of Byatt's fiction in *Women Novelists Today* (1988), Olga Kenyon refers to Byatt's writing as being densely "inter[woven] from other texts, other discourses, other cultural associations" (61). The figure of Elizabeth is a fine example of a single character who becomes the site of the intersection of seemingly unlimited intertexts in *The Virgin*. In addition to being a character in Alexander's play, Elizabeth is also Marina Yeo, the actress who plays Elizabeth; she is Frederica; she is the Darnley portrait Alexander contemplates in the National Portrait Gallery; she is a goddess, an icon, and the entire Elizabethan period in one. The figure of Elizabeth also enables Byatt "to exploit the dominant tropes of both periods: metaphor in the Renaissance and realism in the 20th century" (Kelly 75). As Byatt explains, "In *The Virgin in the Garden* I wanted to substitute a female mythology for a male one. The

male mythology is the Dying God and Resurrection. The female one is birth and Renaissance, and that is what the Elizabethans recognized, and what Alexander wanted to show in his play" (Todd, *Women Writers Talking* 193).

Although Byatt's novels have sometimes been criticized for being excessively allusive, Kenyon points out that it is the intertextality of *The Virgin* that succeeds in "impos[ing] a poetic and intellectual unity on this long work" (62). Focusing on the two words "virgin" and "garden" in the title, Kenyon analyzes the numerous cultural associations attached to these words--mythical, literary, and religious--as an illustration of the panoply of meanings and discursive structures generated through Byatt's writing (61-2). Mahmoud Salami has observed that intertextuality "foregrounds the role of the reader, [and] the interrelation between the reader and the text that displaces the author's monopoly of meanings" (112), an idea that is activated in Byatt's fiction where readers are engaged not only in the process of uncovering allegory and allusion, but are made aware that what they are reading is, as Barthes describes it, the "text-between of another text," composed of "citations" which are "anonymous, untraceable, and yet *already read*" (*Image, Music, Text* 160). In *The Virgin in the Garden*, part of the "already read" emerges from Byatt's memories of other texts and how they have been reshaped by her imagination, supporting her own theory that "so much of art is transmutation of memory" (Kenyon 66).

Throughout Byatt's fiction, her characters are always literary-minded individuals who measure life and endeavor to negotiate its obstacles by means of what they have learned from books, though they do not always manage those negotiations successfully. The extent to which the characters are immersed in literature may seem unrealistic to some readers; however, there is always a certain artificiality about Byatt's characters, even when she is at her most realistic. That is because Byatt has always

maintained that her characters are intended to function both as metaphors and as recognizable human beings, as when Frederica and Alexander are alone together discussing poetry and their attraction to one another. Frederica exclaims: "If we were in a novel they'd cut this dialogue because of artifice. You can have sex, in a novel, but not Racine's metre, however impassioned you may be about it" (*VG* 349). We are reminded in this wry, metafictional interjection of the importance of recognizing what often constitutes Byatt's protagonists' most passionate and emotional concern: books. In fact, an important part of reading Byatt's writing, fictional and non-fictional alike, involves remembering books and the influence they have had upon her and her characters. In *The Virgin,* the characters are conscious that the books they have read affect their behavior in discernible and sometimes comic ways. After months of deferred intercourse, Alexander reluctantly agrees to bed the married Jenny Parry, only to discover that he is impotent. Attempting to soothe her as she sobs noisily in disappointment and embarrassment, Alexander discovers with some surprise the extent to which remembered scraps of D. H. Lawrence surface unexpectedly: "He picked her up and cradled her in his arms, murmuring, 'Don't take on, ah, don't," wondering, even then, where he had got an idiom like that, northern and not his own, and tracking it down wryly a few moments later to Lady Chatterley's lover (*VG* 346).

Alexander's self-conscious analysis of his involuntary speech patterns highlights his emotional detachment from the woman in his bed and is a reminder that he is a man who lives through words, not deeds: hence his inability to consummate his lengthy courtship of Jenny. Earlier in their relationship, Alexander realizes that his written expression of desire in the form of erotic letters to his would-be lover is not simply a temporary substitute for love-making, but has become more satisfying than any physical contact between them could possibly be: "It was almost, he thought, now,

as if the letters were the truth. So much joint imagination had been expended on the act that it was as though they did, innocently, carnally know each other" (43-44). It appears that his thoughts are also an echo of Stephanie's favorite poem, "Ode on a Grecian Urn" and the lines she savours: "Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard/ Are sweeter." The valuing of the pleasures of the mind over the pleasures of the body informs all three of *The Virgin*'s "untouchable" characters--Alexander, Stephanie and her brother Marcus--as they struggle to maintain a clear mental space for themselves within an emotionally complicated world.

Further evidence of language's power over Alexander's emotions can be detected in his dealings with the wordy and persistent Frederica. What begins as a "polite" response to her confession of love arguably becomes less a sudden realization of his love for her than an instantaneous manifestation of it:

> 'O God,' said Alexander. Some demon of politeness, or sense of occasion, or temporary truth, or female will drove him to add, 'I suppose I love you too.'
> He was a man of words. Once those were said, they took hold of him. He saw with a kind of haggard horror that those were, now, true, that *he had made them true.* That perhaps, though unfortunately not certainly, it was only leaving them unsaid that had kept him so coolly secure from them. (333) [my italics]

As a writer struggling to find his own voice (*VG* 45), Alexander, like Elizabeth Tudor, is a site for the intersection of various texts, but one also has a sense of him as a kind of Lady of Shalott, busily engaged in the creative process while watching life from the secure distance of his tower-room on the boys' school campus (a position he shares with Maud Bailey of *Possession*'s Tennyson Towers). When Alexander believes himself to be in love with Frederica it is because, Byatt explains, "she played the part of

his imagined Virgin Queen, archetypically untouchable, and he lost interest when she returned to her role of ordinary real woman" (Todd, *Women Writers Talking* 192). The problem for Alexander--and for Frederica, to some extent--is in believing that language about love can take the place of genuine passion, that language can shape and contain love. Before long it becomes apparent that, despite Frederica's energetic pursuit of Alexander, their shared love of words cannot take the place of the love they do not, in fact, feel for one another (Todd, *Women Writers Talking* 192).

A considerable portion of Frederica's feelings for Alexander stems from his remoteness and the extent to which he differs from everyone else she has ever known. In the eyes of the teenaged Frederica, Alexander is everything that is glamorous and refined, and her schoolgirl's crush is based largely on illusions about Alexander and the adult world she is anxious to be a part of. Indeed, one of the central conflicts in *The Virgin* takes place between the drab yet "real" workaday world untouched by romance or illusion (like North Yorkshire before Matthew Crowe has had it decorated and festooned), and the imaginative life of the mind sparked by literature, struggling to transcend the tedium of the daily round. Alexander's play and the flurry and excitement of its production distract him for awhile from Blesford Ride, where he is a teacher, but the play is an artificial world that cannot be sustained; eventually he must leave, just as Frederica must, if she is to realize her potential. Only Stephanie stays on and is eventually submerged beneath responsibilities to her husband and family. Stephanie's behavior is disturbing to Frederica not, as it is to her father, because of her sister's wasted abilities, but because of the Lawrentian-style plot she suspects may be unfolding in her own life (*VG* 348): " 'I was suddenly afraid I might be Gudrun. I mean, I saw the house as an awful trap, like the red-brick Brangwen house in that book [*Women in Love*]...and [I] thought Steph was Ursula, and then I got really put out

because that only left Gudrun, and I don't want to have to be her'" (*VG* 348). The feeling of falling into a literary plot not of the character's choosing is a familiar one in Byatt's fiction, surfacing later in *Babel Tower* and *Possession*. Here, the fictional world of Lawrence's novel seems to be overtaking the fictional world of Frederica Potter, but it is a problem, Alexander implies, that is easily remedied: "'You could always read someone else'" (*VG* 348).

Frederica's decision to "read someone else" does not, of course, eliminate her preoccupation with Lawrence. "'I love Lawrence and I hate him. I believe him and I reject him totally,'" Frederica explains to Alexander (*VG* 348), a statement that echoes one of Byatt's own. In her introduction to *The Shadow of the Sun*, Byatt states that she rejects Lawrence for his "repellent" depictions of the "blind wholesome passivity" represented by his sexually receptive females (*SS* xiv). Contradictorily, Frederica acknowledges the attraction of the domestic fantasy, "recognised from a reading of *Good Wives* or *The Rainbow*, to be enclosed with a transfigured man and transfigured possesssions in a private place" (*VG* 189). But if Frederica does not know quite how to make this transfiguration occur, by the time we meet her in *Still Life* she has acknowledged her unquestioning belief that "a woman was unfulfilled without marriage, [and] that marriage was the end of every good story" (*SL* 127). The fairy-tale implications of Frederica's quest for a husband or a soul-mate are cleverly undercut by a dream that she has in *Still Life* in which the the frogs never turn into princes, but remain, unequivocally, amphibian:

> She woke once from a dream in which she was a grass meadow, held to the earth by myriad grass roots through her hair, fibrils painlessly incorporating her skin in turf, a Gulliver being absorbed by Lilliput, and over the meadow leapt, slowly, exhaustedly, rhythmically, similarly, a procession of pale yellow frogs, long-legged, mostly flaccid, a spurt, a heavy-breathing rest, a floppy spurt, one after the other after the other.

(*SL* 126)

Frederica's dream indicates her dissatisfaction with the young men upon whom she has been experimenting; it is also an ironic depiction of female sexual passivity, for, unbeknownst to the men with whom she is having sex, Frederica's mind is busily engaged in deflating their performances, the only way she knows of maintaining her emotional distance. Coming of age in the early 1950s, Frederica must learn to balance her desire to be recognized and admired by men with an uncompromising attention to her goals: "Surely, surely it was possible, [Frederica] said to herself in a kind of panic, to make something of one's life *and* be a woman. Surely" (*SL* 184).

Even while Frederica believes herself to be looking for "love, trust, 'someone who would want her for what she was'" (*SL* 127), she manages to avoid intimacy, and takes considerable "pride in the fact that there was no one who could feel able to refer to her as his girl-friend" (*SL* 128). At the same time, she is naively and rebelliously judging her partners as she supposes they are in the habit of judging women, based largely on their physical attributes. Although the narrator acknowledges that her behavior is sometimes "cruel and destructive," Frederica's intention is not to wound; rather, it is the only way she knows to enjoy male companionship without the risk of having to relinquish her autonomy. Whereas her tactics may be somewhat crude, her essential goal in life is not. Perceiving that the world around her is a man's world, she chooses "to live in that world, not to be sought out as a refuge from or adjunct to it" (129). For the remainder of *The Virgin* and most of *Still Life*, Frederica's attempts to avoid being confined, a word she associates with Stephanie as a pregnant mother and an over-burdened housewife, seem likely to lead her further and further away from the claustrophobic home life that reminds her of her mother's generation and her sister's narrowing world.

Woman's everyday life portrayed in *The Virgin* often seems less real, less a reflection of a woman's true identity as she perceives herself, than the life of the intellect that she has known as a student or an academic. When Jenny Parry, also an actress in Alexander's play, complains that "life is just a regression. The nearest we ever come in this place to what I once thought was real conversation is when we play at students playing at actors playing at medieval witches and soldiers" (*VG* 43), we see her as a frustrated housewife whose intellectual energy has been depleted by meaningless domestic tasks. For most of the women in the trilogy, marriage and motherhood are associated with a stifling of the spirit and a dulling of the mind. In *Still Life* this message achieves its full impact through Stephanie's macabre death by a household appliance. This death is particularly shocking because of its unexpectedness. She is electrocuted in the week before Christmas while reaching under her refrigerator to free a trapped bird. In the moments after her death, the sparrow, like her escaping soul, soars over the heads of Marcus and the paramedics, "plung[ing] into the night" (335).

Even Stephanie's consciousness that marriage to Daniel, an unread local curate, will be the ruin of her inner life is not enough to prevent her from giving in to his insistence, and their story echoes the myth of Persephone as the dark Pluto's reluctant bride. Having convinced herself that life with Daniel is "real," she nevertheless experiences prenuptual doubts which visit her both waking and sleeping. One night she awakens from a painful dream of a lost urn, clearly a compilation of Keats' urn and Wordsworth's urn burial in the *Prelude* (251), and a metaphor for the self-contained mental life she has formerly inhabited and is now in danger of losing forever:

> What Stephanie found in *Books* was a superfluous fear, a fear of drowning, of loss, of dark powers, ambivalent about whether it was life or the imagination that was the destroyer...What she thought...was

> that she should not marry, she had lost, or buried, a world in agreeing to marry...Then she thought she herself was afraid of being in the same place as her attention, body and imagination at once, and that Daniel would require this of her, and there would be no place for urn or landscape in their own terms. But if it was death to hide them, it was, it surely was, death to immure oneself with them. (*VG* 252)

Much later, a married and pregnant Stephanie will struggle to read Wordsworth during tedious line-ups in the local obstetrics clinic, and long for the *Prelude* during her labor, but it is as the angry and disappointed Jenny had warned: "[D]on't suppose that the death of the mind can be avoided by a little rushed reading between two lots of nappies and dishes, because it can't" (*VG* 384). Paradoxically, and despite her love of her husband and children, Stephanie is never entirely content either in the academic or in the domestic world, where she proves incapable of reconciling herself completely to her diminished vocabulary and the dwindling scope of her existence.

Stephanie is aware that the part of herself that celebrated words is atrophying, but, as she puts it to herself, she is too "sunk in biology" to do anything more than complain briefly to Daniel. Kenyon has observed that "[e]ach major character [in *The Virgin*] represents a different way of coping, or failing to cope, with the world through language" (*Women Novelists Today* 66), and the type of discourse the characters employ says a great deal about their personalities and attitudes toward life. Significantly, when silence replaces the struggle to inhabit the world meaningfully through language, despair chillingly takes its place: witness Winifred Potter, her daughter Stephanie, and her seemingly autistic son Marcus. Frederica's willingness to continue trying to make sense of her life through language, even when, in *Still Life* and *Babel Tower*, she experiences tragedy and a destructive marriage, is a clear sign that she is capable of overcoming despair.

Marcus is one of the most disturbing of all Byatt's characters because he is

incapable of negotiating even the limited world he inhabits, and his grasp of reality is tenuous. The situations where he and Lucas are engaged in seemingly magical or religious rites to test Marcus's peculiar "knowledge" create a disjunction between the real and the unreal that is never fully explained by Lucas's madness or Marcus's delusion. Marcus first appears in the story lying face down in the mud beside a stagnant pond where Alexander encounters him and asks if he is well. " 'No,'" Marcus replies. "'Everything shook. The earth'" (27). Alexander assures him that it was merely a passing train, an answer Marcus is unable to accept: "'Not like that. It doesn't matter' " (27). Dusinberre writes that "*The Virgin in the Garden* challenges and undermines the realities its characters perceive, showing them to be artifices which exist only in the mind" (57). While this may be true, there is also the sense of multiple realities in *The Virgin* existing side by side, each character limited by his or her own subjectivity, never entirely able to comprehend what another person is seeing or feeling.

To explain Marcus's function in the novel, one can compare him to the later figure of the visionary that appears in *Still Life*. True artists in Byatt's fiction are often "visionaries" in the traditional sense of possessing "imaginative insight" (*OED*); such is Henry Severell, the novelist in *The Shadow of the Sun*, like Van Gogh, whose story forms the principal intertext of *Still Life*. Marcus Potter differs from these two figures in that he is not an artist, since his unique perception has no intellectual or artistic outlet, though once he had the ability to solve complex mathematical problems in his head. He is, in fact, the true virgin in the garden:

> ...I used to see--to imagine--a place. A kind of garden. And the forms, the mathematical *forms*, were about in the landscape and you would let the problem loose in the landscape and it would wander amongst the forms--leaving luminous trails. And then I saw the answer' (63).

Marcus's ability is described by the narrator as "something simply transmitted, like mediumship" *(VG* 26), an idea that evokes the creative process Byatt later portrays in *The Conjugial Angel,* where inspiration is directly equated with Mrs. Papagay's automatic writing. Nevertheless, even though Marcus is only a passive receiver of images and impressions, he is among those individuals Byatt refers to who see

> everything too bright, too fierce, too much, like Van Gogh's cornfields, or Samuel Palmer's over-loaded magic apples, or the Coleridge of the flashing eyes and floating hair, or the Blake who saw infinity in a grain of sand. Or in some less satisfactory, and more corrupt and dangerous aspects, the sunworshipping Lawrence. This vision of too much makes the visionary want to write--in my case--or paint, or compose, or dance or sing. (*Shadow of the Sun* x)

Byatt includes herself in this category of the artist who sees "too much" but is nevertheless compelled to continue seeing. She often observes life in the most minute detail, as *The Virgin in the Garden* demonstrates through an astonishing blend of visual, almost cinematic images.

There is also a comic element in parts of the novel (mostly those sections dealing with Frederica's single-minded pursuit of Alexander) that is unparalleled by anything Byatt has written before or since. On other occasions, her sharply ironic gaze is directed at domesticity and middle-class existence with unusual insight, as when Wilkie explains to Frederica the flaw in Alexander's relationship with a married woman: "'Poor dear Jenny scares him not with severity but with suburbia, the dread of our generation, the teacup, the nappy, the pelmet, the flowery stair carpet, the click of the latch of the diminutive garden-gate'" (326). In a single sentence, Byatt evokes both the short-comings of her characters and an entire way of life.

At other points in the novel, artistic vision appears as a negative vision--a way of seeing that is unacceptable but sometimes inescapable. When the visions are pressing and compelling, the visionary may wish to confront them artistically. When these same visions become overwhelming, as for Van Gogh, madness awaits. Marcus Potter is not mad, but his friend Lucas Simmonds is, and the older man represents the fine line that was tradionally assumed to separate genius from insanity (70). Yet Marcus too, as we have seen, often finds himself in a strange and frightening world beyond his comprehension. Kenyon asserts that he has

> elements of the child-seer, but is bereft of religious blessing. Through him Byatt is testing the literary and psychological legacy of Romanticism, its exalting of the child's vision. But in a world without religion Marcus can only undergo, without illumination. (70)

Incapable of communicating his visions, which involve surveying an area or landscape as if he were without an identity or fixed "vantage point," thereby enabling him to see all the objects within this expanded field simultaneously and with equal attention (*VG* 27), Marcus withdraws into himself, avoiding human contact. Akin to the "spreading" visions Wordsworth describes in *The Prelude,* Marcus's experiences differ in that they bring him no pleasure, no "[v]isitings of imaginative power" (*Prelude* xii, l. 203). Furthermore, at fourteen years old, his unique mathematical ability is irretrievably lost when his father pressures him to explain how it is done, increasing his feelings of isolation from his family and the rest of the world. Consumed with unreasonable fears of everyday objects and tormented by roaring, blinding fields of light which he lives in terror of encountering, Marcus desperately struggles to maintain his fragile existence.

Despite the seemingly negative aspects of Marcus's visions, Dusinberre associates these experiences with

> the novelist's creating consciousness. Marcus' habit of 'spreading' himself, his garden of clear polished forms where his mind wanders 'leaving luminous trails', a place where he is not actually present physically but of which his mind is a 'true survey'...are images for the process of making fictions. (Dusinberre 59)

Byatt has said that Marcus's geometry is akin to a device she used as a child to distract herself from the pain of chronic asthma, an illness Marcus also suffers from. "I used to defend myself by geometry, like him," Byatt explains. "What I was trying to do is difficult: to create someone for whom the world comes unmediated" (Dusinberre 69). Thus, when the world seems too sharply bright, Marcus refers to the necessity of regarding these visions "obliquely--out of the edge of the eye...never to look directly, to look away on purpose, and wait for it to rise to form....But it mustn't be fixed, or held down, or it...It was important to wait..." (63). Like his creator, Marcus is intensely visual. Although he rejects Lucas's suggestion that he is either artist or visionary, his mental garden with its moving and receding forms which must be allowed to develop shape and significance on their own can certainly be read as analogous to the writer's creative process where ideas develop slowly, without her conscious direction. One can well imagine why, when he is pressured and harried by Mr. Potter and other "experts," the garden visions--like creative inspiration--elude Marcus and disappear altogether.

Marcus's relationship with Lucas Simmonds seems, at first, as if it might provide the boy with a creative outlet for his emotions, or with a sense of direction, as the science teacher tries to establish a link between the transformative power of Marcus's visions and the human need to find order amidst the apparent randomness of human experience. One of the underlying themes in Byatt's novels is the search for interconnections between history, literature, life and art, and it is a task that is often

mirrored by the characters themselves, as if to prove that order does exist, "even if our capacity to understand it is limited" *(PM* 11). From Alexander's complex web of associations to the meat on display in the village butcher shop that inspires the narrator to an ironic and ghoulish rhapsody over man's curious desire to seek symmetry even in the flesh he consumes (*VG* 93), the urge to create harmony and connection is always apparent in Byatt's novels.

Without wanting to anticipate my analysis of *Still Life*, it is important to mention that, despite the differences between the first and second novels in the trilogy, *Still Life* continues to deal with ideas raised in *The Virgin*, making it difficult at times to avoid discussing the two texts simultaneously. *Still Life*, for example, takes the desire for connections evident in *The Virgin* one step further, as Marcus and Alexander both experience what may be described as a kind of "revelation" (*SL* 175) about the possibility of an "organizing intelligence" (303) behind occurrences we may be accustomed to explaining as chance. Contemplating the bee orchid, "that [floral] trap in the form of a female bee," Marcus struggles "*not* to say, 'It was designed to look like a female bee,' but it was almost impossible not to believe in a Designer" (303). Byatt's characters, influenced by the modern rejection of a God who is responsible for our world and for our destiny, appear to move cautiously, almost unwillingly, toward acknowledgement of an ordering principle rather than a deity. It is worth quoting Alexander's experience in *Still Life* just prior to his meeting with Professor Wijnnobel, a character who appears again in *Babel Tower* and who is impatient with the postmodern assertion that the universe and human experience are merely a collection of random happenings (178). The narrator intervenes to refer to seemingly chance "encounters with related people, books, ideas" (175) whose significance we try to reason away into nothing, except that each incident feels like

> a privileged insight into the order of things, in which all things are to be experienced as parts of a whole. It can feel like a magical assertion of mind over matter, a telekinetic arranging of the contents of a library or at least one's own track through it. In such moods, blandly or vacantly surveying shelves, even the catalogue, we discover an unsuspected book, or argument, or set of facts wholly relevant to our problem and yet unsought. Some such revelation came to Alexander from some chance remarks of Professor Wijnnobel, in whose honour the lunch was being held. (175)

Alexander's questioning of chance is a natural extension of the way his own mind has operated up until this point, but because of the authorial intervention, this scene is rendered more significant than if it had been filtered entirely through a character's consciousness. Yet the temptation of wanting to believe in an ordered universe is frequently tempered with skepticism. Not until late in *Still Life* does Marcus begin to question and connect; in *The Virgin in the Garden* he tries very hard to resist locating patterns in his existence. On the other hand, Lucas's mad attempt to find meaning in every dust mote and cloud formation becomes a parody of the working writer's state of mind. Margaret Drabble, Byatt's sister and another of contemporary Britain's most popular female novelists, once remarked in an interview: "when you're in the middle of writing, everywhere you look is packed with relevant symbols. The whole world seems to be full of useful materials and you see it all in terms of what you're writing about" (Todd, *Women Writers Talking* 171). What seems to separate Lucas's belief in, among other things, the idea that each book he encounters is purposefully and intentionally leading him to another (*VG* 298), from the "telekinetic arranging" of the contents of the narrator's library in *Still Life*, is the sheer wilfullness of Lucas's endeavor: "He looked for signs, straws in the wind, coincidences, and found them" (*VG* 298). He is convinced that with sufficient research and experimentation, the pattern he

seeks will finally, miraculously, be revealed. When Lucas fails to receive the "sign" he has been seeking, he reaches out to Marcus sexually in one last attempt to "be connected" (*VG* 311). When that fails, he suffers a Lear-like collapse that lands him in a mental institution.

Although *The Virgin in the Garden* seems to begin with such promise--Frederica on the verge of growing up and of discovering her potential; the preparations for the performance of Alexander's play; a new era summoned in by the Coronation of Queen Elizabeth II--the characters must eventually come to terms with the failure of their imagination. Frederica spends most of the novel longing to get close to Alexander. When the arrangements are finally made, however, and her dream seems about to be realized, she fears having to tell him she is still a virgin and flees for a weekend with Edmund Wilkie, a man with whom she is not in love. The novel has already made it very clear that Frederica and Alexander have no future together, yet losing her virginity with Wilkie is a destruction of all Frederica's illusions about romance and sex:

> Wilkie stopped talking and began to go faster. Frederica stared at his face with interest. His mouth was drooping open, his eyes closed, his breath heavy. His little fat belly was hot and sweaty on hers. After a time he went very fast indeed, suddenly gave a loud, very private groan, and dropped his head, very heavily for a moment, on her breast, looking tragic and drained (*VG* 421).

The scene is described with humorous detachment, but it is a barren introduction to adulthood. Afterward, as Wilkie drifts into sleep, "Frederica stared at the back of his hair, and reflected that she had never known him less well, or felt less close to him, than now, since they had first begun to talk" (*VG* 421). Relationships in *The Virgin* are particularly disillusioning, and Frederica is not the only character who finds them

so.

If Byatt's characters often seem insufficiently equipped to deal with relationships, it may be because of their tendency to withdraw into imaginative worlds of their own--sometimes deliberately to avoid feeling too intensely. Alexander is one example of this type of behavior; Stephanie is another. Books, as we have seen, are her refuge until marriage, and they enable her to remain separate from her emotions. Marrying Daniel is dangerous, she believes, because "she was afraid of being in the same place as her attention, body and imagination at once, and that Daniel would require this of her" (*VG* 252). She feels that "she should not marry, she had lost, or buried a world in agreeing to marry" (*VG* 252), but she has also discovered that she cannot live without love and a private life, and so she "would do what came easiest, what was already well-fixed, and marry." After Stephanie arrives at that decision, she turns to the beginning of Wordsworth's *Prelude* and begins "wildly to read it all, as though her self depended on it" (*VG* 252).

Still Life

As the characters slowly begin to cast away their illusions about life, so *The Virgin* begins to prepare the reader for *Still Life*, a very different novel from that of its predecessor. Kathleen Coyne Kelly observes that

> [i]n a way, *Still Life* is a quarrel with *The Virgin in the Garden*, a quarrel that is embedded in small in these titles. A 'virgin in the garden' [as an allegorical tableau] has endless possibilities--such an image is always and overtly pointing to meaning elsewhere. But a 'still life,' at least at first sight, attempts to assert the thing itself as its subject. (Kelly 67)

Still Life is, aesthetically, a far sparer novel than *The Virgin in the Garden*, though that does not imply that it is an inferior work of art. The mood, however, tends to be more somber and indeed more *still* than *The Virgin,* allowing one to contrast the interiority of much of its setting with the open spaces--the hedges and the lawns--of the action in *The Virgin.* In terms of the novel's thematic concerns, much of *Still Life* is given over to establishing the "relation between visual perception...and its representation in language" (Westlake 33).

Still Life continues the story of the Potter family and opens similarly to *The Virgin in the Garden*, with a prologue that is set some years in the future. It is now 1980 and a sixty-two-year-old Alexander awaits Frederica's arrival at London's Royal Academy of Arts, where he gazes intently at "a row of Van Goghs" (1). The paintings remind him of his 1957 play, *The Yellow Chair*, about the life of Vincent Van Gogh. Fragments of the artist's letters are interspersed throughout the text, signalling the trilogy's shift from Elizabeth Tudor and sixteenth-century verse forms to Vincent Van Gogh and nineteenth-century impressionism.

The principal narrative of *Still Life* begins where *The Virgin* left off, with a

pregnant Stephanie increasingly immersed in silence. At the end of the first novel, she is reduced to the position of an "unnatural and ungainly Pieta," frozen into an attitude of "what seemed to be unseeing patience," her brother Marcus leaning heavily upon her shoulder (*VG* 428). A decidedly inauspicious beginning to her marriage, this tableau, a kind of still life in itself, foreshadows the events of the sequel and the dramatic stylistic change demonstrated in the second novel of the trilogy.

Byatt writes in her essay "Still Life," about her "vague sense that my novel must move from an undissociated paradise to our modern dissociated world" (*PM* 11), the "dissociation" referring to structuralist "theories of language as a self-referring system of signs, which doesn't touch the world" (*PM* 11). What follows is Byatt's painful attempt to eschew metaphor in hopes of evoking what she describes as the "thing itself," the object at the "level of exact description" (*PM* 13). In time, she discovers that her intention is in conflict with a manner of seeing too deeply entrenched in her personality to be eliminated with any satisfaction. She is forced to admit defeat: "I was doing violence to something in my own mental constitution to try to write like Flaubert, or Proust's Flaubert, or Pound's Flaubert" (*PM* 14). During one of the novel's authorial interventions, Byatt explains not only what she had intended to write in *Still Life* but also how she has failed:

> I had the idea that this novel could be written innocently, without recourse to reference to other people's thoughts, without, as far as possible, recourse to simile or metaphor. This turned out to be impossible: one cannot think at all without a recognition and realignment of ways of thinking and seeing we have learned over time. We all remake the world as we see it, as we look at it. (*SL* 108)

In this instance, the author/ narrator metafictionally highlights the complexity of the

writer's task, effectively repeating comments that she later makes in her critical essay, "Still Life/ Nature Morte,"--an essay which she refers to as "an account of the failure of that project" (9). In both the essay and the novel, Byatt deliberately rejects the idea that it is either possible or desirable to write without metaphors, when, in her view, making metaphors is "part of the overwhelming human need to make connections and comparisons" (*SL* 302).

The novel begins, as did *The Virgin*, with a reference to a play that Alexander is writing, this time about Van Gogh's experiences in the South of France. The reader is informed of his doubts about how best to approach his subject; again, Alexander's artistic aims in this novel are analogous to Byatt's own as he strives toward "exactness and specificity" (10). But whereas *The Virgin* was a veritable celebration of metaphor, a celebration that was echoed in Alexander's *Astraea*, *Still Life* is characterized by a tone of regret and a sense of loss best expressed in the Prologue by Daniel Orton, now a widower who is said to have begun to "mistrust" all figurative language, because of the falseness and inaccuracy that some metaphors may appear to conceal. Especially repugnant to Daniel are the falsely comforting euphemisms for death he is forced to endure after Stephanie is killed. What makes this particular novel different from Byatt's earlier fiction is its deliberate exploration of the elementals of existence: birth and death, and the way her characters deal with them. What *Still Life* has in common with *The Virgin* is an interest in exploring ways of seeing; but whereas *The Virgin* demonstrates the endless proliferation of intertexts that emerge from the author's reliance on figurative language, *Still Life* minimizes the use of metaphor while scrutinizing the process by which "metaphor and naming in paint were different from these things in language" (*SL* 165).

Byatt chooses Van Gogh as the focal point of her novel because of a mimetic

quality she initially associated with his painting, explaining in the essay "Still Life" that "[w]here Van Gogh becomes useful here is that his sunflowers, as Gestalts, as icons, are mimetic in a way no verbal icon can be, in that they are made of paint, the elements of their petals and seeds are brush-strokes and pigment, not evanescent mental imagery" (*PM* 15-16). Byatt's perception of Van Gogh's work undergoes a change, however, when she reexamines his painting of a yellow chair and begins to apprehend it as a highly complex metaphor. Byatt's sense of the metaphorical implications of visual art enables her to redefine her interpretation of Van Gogh's images--and her own project in *Still Life*--as a "comment on the doubleness of a metaphor that is both mimetic, and an exploration of the relation between identity and difference" (*PM* 16). This "relation between identity and difference" is another way of expressing the "interval" or gap between the signifier and the signified, and between the known identity of the object being named, whether it be a sunflower, for example, or a chair, and the viewer's mental image or personal associations with the object (*PM* 16).

It appears that neither Byatt nor Alexander can escape from the fact that we are surrounded by objects which are "freighted down with meaning that is endlessly circulated and refashioned" (Kelly 76). Even the sunflowers described in *Still Life* are revealed as bearing associations, for "[m]etaphor lay coiled in the name sunflower, which not only turned towards but resembled the sun, the source of light" (*SL* 2). Byatt argues that from the artist's standpoint, intertextuality and metaphor are the only means available for creating some "illusion of newness" (*SL* 108), for the reason that "[a]rt is not the recovery of the innocent eye, which is inaccessible" (SL 108).

On the narrative level, both*Still Life* and *The Virgin in the Garden* recapture the experience of seeing and feeling in new ways, for the first time, through the eyes of the

greedy, inquisitive virgin, Frederica. Her new exposure to visual art as an *au pair* girl in Provence is a gradual process in *Still Life*. We are aware that she is an extremely articulate young woman, even in moments of great stress or embarrassment, and that she appears to owe her extraordinary love of language to her school-master father. Nevertheless, Bill Potter is also responsible for teaching her to devalue other forms of art, having "conveyed with every gesture, every judgment, a feeling that these [painting and sculpture] were dispensable luxuries, not moral, at best adjuncts to an essential civilization that existed elsewhere" (*VG* 104). Frederica's unthinking acceptance of her father's opinions about art is among the preconceptions she must learn to discard. Not until Alexander shows her the beauty of a Rodin sculpture in *The Virgin* does she begin to value anything beyond the written word. But whether in the form of literature, sculpture or painting, art enables Byatt's characters to think and see in ways that they had not thought possible. In *Still Life,* Frederica contemplates a seascape in the South of France and "said obviously that the sky and the sea and the boats were uncannily like Van Gogh, and Hodgkiss said that of course they would never have seen them in this way before he saw them" (*SL* 75).

Byatt's preoccupation in *Still Life* with the visual act of perceiving and the differences and similarities between what different individuals are capable of seeing provides the novel's focus. Byatt sets out the problem writers face when trying to capture their impressions of something foreign or new, because "words, acquired slowly over a lifetime...restrict what we see and how we see it" (*SL* 59) in ways that paint, she implies, does not. Using Frederica as an example, Byatt demonstrates the inadequacy of her character's Wordsworthian language, formed to describe English scenes, for expressing her experience of the Southern French landscape. Byatt's observations, however, seem disingenuous when one considers the skill with which

she conveys the heat and the brightness of Frederica's surroundings examined from the vantage point of an old bicycle:

> On this Frederica explored the unvarying hot flat country. She bumped along furrows between vines, spattered cobalt-blue with spraying. She listened to cicadas and breathed the pervasive liquorice which grew locally and was processed in a factory on the Nimes road. Whenever she fell off the *velo* she sat where she was, nodding, fumed with wine and drowsy with heat, in a classical furrow, under a pale-bright sky. (58)

Of course, Byatt's highly visual approach to thinking and writing (she claims to "*see* other people's metaphors") ensures that she is acutely sensitive to the problem of rendering images into words. In *The Virgin*, Byatt has Wilkie, the budding structuralist, wonder "whether...visual images are more primitive, more fundamental than words, or whether you can't think without some sort of precise, symbolic language" (135). Alexander's experience in *Still Life* convinces him of the former possibility: "Working with words on a painter [Van Gogh] who was also an articulate writer had taught him that: you could see things before saying them, indeed without saying them" (*SL* 163).

Alexander's realization, like Frederica's revised attitude toward visual art, marks an important turning point for the characters. In no other novel does Byatt allow the metafictional framework of the text to remain so prominently displayed; as a result, the act of reading becomes analogous to examining a complex construction site, with the novel itself seemingly under construction. In this respect, *Still Life* is also a turning point in Byatt's fiction, because the format she has chosen for the rest of her novels to date--a "framed" intertext (in this case, Van Gogh's letters and biography) evoking a particular theoretical concern--begins to be developed here.

In addition to exploring the perceptions of the writer and artist, *Still Life* is also about redefining realism through the example of Van Gogh's art. Byatt's essay "Van

Gogh, Death and Summer" analyzes the Dutch artist's technique and the Biblical and mythic elements of his painting, and she observes that although Van Gogh never worked from the imagination but always from the scene or object before him, his was not a "slavish realism, a desire to copy" (*PM* 328). Rather, as he explains to his brother Theo, "I study nature, so as not to do foolish things, to remain reasonable--however I don't mind so much whether my color corresponds exactly as long as it looks beautiful on my canvas, as beautiful as it looks in nature" (*PM* 328). It is not an exaggeration to say that Byatt identifies with Van Gogh's theory and tries to imitate in language what he managed to achieve through paint. Byatt says of Van Gogh's achievement:

> Van Gogh painted the light of the sun, and the earth under the sun. He painted what men had made of it, and he painted it naked, as far as any man can. This nakedness, and ways of representing it, are part of a modern apprehension of reality I find deeply moving because of what has been stripped from it. (*PM* 313)

This "nakedness" that Van Gogh expresses is his concern with the essentials of human existence--"birth, copulation, death"--and the "kind of bareness that succeeded natural supernaturalism" (*PM* 323). Byatt regards Van Gogh as an artist whose art managed to avid solipsism by remaining grounded in the world outside himself, and who "stands between the old myth of sacrifice, death and resurrection and the new world, in which all we can do seems to be to look clearly..." (*PM* 313). Such clarity of vision is important to Byatt, for in *Still Life,* as in all her fiction, "seeing clearly" is seeing honestly. To look, to examine without fear or pretense, is crucial to Byatt's vision of what good art should be, and the Van Gogh represented in *Still Life* conveys "the possibility and nature of, and need for, art in the world we live in" (*PM* 314). It is a message that validates everything her writing stands for: art as a fundamental

necessity of life, not a mere appendage to it.

Given Byatt's critical stance, it is not difficult to understand why in *Still Life* a character like Raphael Faber, a Cambridge don and poet, who personifies the role of the structuralist heralding the death of realism, becomes one of the objects of her satire. Faber is a remote individual--not unlike Alexander--to whom Frederica becomes attracted. The relationship, however, is essentially one-sided. Attending one of his lectures, she listens to him speak of language "torn loose from the world" (203), no longer attached to anything tangible or concrete, while his own writing "pointed more and more precisely to an area of vagueness, absence, silence" (203). This sounds similar to Roland Barthes's writing at the zero degree, which Susan Sontag describes as "neutral, colorless writing" (Introd., *Writing Degree Zero* xvi). Barthes associates this revolutionary type of prose with "a non-style"or a "spoken level of writing" that eliminates metaphor and elements of individual style. Faber's fiction reads like a parody of radical metafiction, wherein "[i]ts protagonist and sole character was a nameless explorer who journeyed through imperfectly apprehended landscapes and violent atmospheric changes, reiterating alternately, rhythmically, that he must find the source, he must go on" (*SL* 204). The novel is empty and distasteful to Frederica, while his poetry evokes in her a sense of "impalpableness" (a word she also uses in connection with Lawrence's philosophy); its "disconnected fragments" and "incoherent scraps of meaning" require the author's elaborate verbal footnoting before she is able to understand it. Moreover, she notices a detachment about his writing which she compares to a "visual code or intelligence test she couldn't break" (*SL* 285), and the phrase carries the implication that something essential is missing from Faber's character and from the theory he is positing so stridently. One hears in this section an echo of Iris Murdoch's criticism that "[m]ost modern English novels are

not written. One feels they could slip into some other medium without much loss" ("Against Dryness" 19). Not surprisingly, Raphael Faber is antipathetic to nineteenth-century realism, and he argues angrily that "Art surely can't any longer be thought of as inventing people and giving them names and social backgrounds and amassing descriptions of clothes and houses and money and parties. All that is over" (*SL* 215). One interprets his remark as the author's sly reference to the type of fiction that she and Murdoch produce, while Frederica listens sorrowfully as "one by one the lights were put out, Tolstoy, George Eliot, Jane Austen, dead detail" (*SL* 215). Only during a later conversation with Faber is Frederica able to summon the confidence to assert her own views, criticizing the extremes people often go to "when rejecting someone or something" (*SL* 285).

When Alexander's play *The Yellow Chair* first appears in the theater, Frederica and Raphael Faber are present to see it. Raphael's biting, ill-timed criticism of Alexander's production focuses on his dislike of Van Gogh's habit of "obtrud[ing] himself all the time" (*SL* 315), but it is a criticism that Alexander is too weary either to argue or reject: he has become a depleted character in this novel, older and more disillusioned about the impact of his writing. Divided by her admiration for both men, Frederica is forced to consider her teacher's remarks, which she does with her usual astuteness. Frederica's mental tallying of Raphael's hypocrisy in condemning "'personal' painting and writing" while all the while he wrote "secretly, most personally, most privately" (*SL* 318), helps to free her from her obsessive admiration of the man, while exposing the dreariness and hypocrisy of the theories he appears to represent.

The stark, death-dealing prose that is identified with Raphael Faber is a form, the novel implies, that must be rejected if literature is to continue to be meaningful and alive. *Still Life* concludes with a death that is shocking and unexpected even though it

is foreshadowed by the Prologue and the silence that is engulfing Stephanie Potter Orton, but it is not only death that one remembers when the novel is laid aside. The haunting image of a still life that dominates the book bears closer examination. During a discussion with Wijnnobel, Alexander considers how to "dramatise stillness" (*SL* 178), and the older man calls his attention to the continued aesthetic appeal of the still life or "nature morte." Evoking Freud's belief that every organism wishes to return to the state in which it was before conception, Wijnnobel wonders if "our fascination for still life" stems from a similar desire. "Maybe," he speculates, "the kind of lifeless life of things bathed in light is another version of the golden age--an impossible stasis, a world without desire and division" (*SL* 179), like the world of Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn," a poem of ongoing significance in the novel. Given Byatt's belief that her novel has failed in some sense, she appears to foreground the relationship of *Still Life* to its predecessor. Earlier Byatt writes of "the difficulty of seeing what is formed to be 'seen' by language alone" (*VG* 78), and one concludes that the "impossible stasis" of this image of perfection represented by the urn or still life, its sheer remoteness encompassing the immediacy of life while housing and containing death, is Byatt's vision of an undissassociated past--beautiful but no longer attainable in life or in her fiction.

Babel Tower

Still Life creates, as I have said, an important turning point in Byatt's fiction. After this, once again, she returns to the writing of a large, complex, intertextual novel, but the tone and style of *Babel Tower* are unlike those of either of its predecessors. *Babel Tower* is, stylistically, neither as spare as *Still Life* nor as metaphorical and allusive as *The Virgin.* Gone is *The Virgin*'s rich, celebratory prose. There is, instead, a chastened tone about the novel, primarily due to the subject matter, which is largely concerned with social issues, and involves a Sade-like subtext, a pornography trial, a custody battle, and an analysis of Frederica's failed marriage. Moreover, *Babel Tower* is, structurally, with its stories-within-stories and self-conscious presentation of conflicting forms of discourse, more overtly metafictional than *Still Life* or *The Virgin in the Garden,* revealing Byatt's hybrid blend of realism and postmodernism at its most innovative. At the same time, *Babel Tower*'s form is uniquely constructed so as to mirror the rapid social changes of the 1960s within a generation that was already questioning the viability of written culture.

Chapter 4 of *Babel Tower* begins with a description of the grammarian, Gerard Wijnnobel, sitting in his car thinking about language. We are told that "[h]e has thought about these things all his life, always with a sensation of an impossible endeavor" (191). Reflecting on the present state of linguistic theory, he is reminded of the story of the Tower of Babel, where all the trouble first began with God's punishment of the human race "for its presumption in raising its winding structure towards Heaven" (*BT* 191). The story as told in Genesis, which offers an explanation for the diversity of languages in the world, suggests God's displeasure with the hubris of men, but also implicit is his uneasiness: "Behold, they are one people, and they have all one

language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do; and nothing that they propose to do now will be impossible" (Genesis 11). In Byatt's novel, the central image, the Tower of Babel, serves as a reminder of language as an imperfect medium of communication, and as a psychological symbol--an impediment of sorts--that must be confronted by each of the principal characters:

> [I]n the days before Babel, the occult tradition went, words had been things and things had been words, they had been *one*....Afterwards, after the fall of the tower, language and the world had not coincided, and the languages of men had become opaque, secret, enfolded in an incomprehensible and unpierceable skin of idiosyncrasies. (*BT* 191-92)

Babel Tower begins with the post-Saussurean consciousness of words as "arbitrary signs" (193) while exploring the 1960's suspicion of restriction and restraint, whether social, sexual, or linguistic. But even amidst the novel's postmodern questioning of traditional assumptions about language and literary form, one never loses sight of Byatt's underlying confidence in words. In a taped conversation with Iris Murdoch (1984), Byatt articulates precisely what she hopes to communicate through her writing:

> We live at a time where there are a great many theories about, as it were, the untrustworthiness of language, the inadequacy of language, and not many theories about the enormous power of it, the enormous accuracy of it.

Within Byatt's trilogy, language may at times seem as unreliable as a shape-changing witch, but even though her characters are always conscious of the way words may conceal or distort one's intended meaning, they are rarely content to lapse into silence. Instead, they continue to struggle to express themselves and to make sense of their world despite opposition and misunderstanding. Present in each of the three

novels and forming the strongest link between them is the notion that words are the foundation of society, and that it is their power which ultimately separates us from chaos.

Babel Tower, of course, continues the story of Frederica Potter, who is now, unexpectedly, a married woman and the mother of a precocious little boy, Leo. Estranged from her wealthy and abusive husband, Frederica finds her lifestyle and her sexuality under scrutiny as she fights him in court for custody of their child. Byatt has remarked that the "loose theme of *Babel Tower* is language about sex, which is what I think the 1960s was also about. And then it came to be about the relationship between cruelty and freedom in the 1960s, too" (Callil 66). More specifically, *Babel Tower* and its framed or enclosed subtext, *Babbletower*, raise the issue of free will and "how far human beings should be free and how far it [is] necessary for them to be restrained" (545). An analysis of *Babel Tower* necessarily involves examining the points of intersection and the spaces between the principal narrative and its subtext, which include the presence of Byatt's concern with language, the uneasy relationship between the individual and the group in contemporary society, and irony as social criticism.

The focus of *Babel Tower* is, like *The Virgin in the Garden* and *Still Life,* the problem of perception and representation: how best to express images, ideas, and states of mind in words or paint. This time, however, Byatt is interested in analyzing discourse more broadly, in both its public and private uses. Unfortunately for the principal characters, none seems certain of being able to communicate successfully with others. Jude Mason, for example, writes a moral tale for his time intended to express his dissatisfaction with certain social injustices. The story he tells is one of perversion, and we are informed that many of those who have read it are offended by

the book. Indeed, Jude himself is constructed to offend through his manner and his unforgettable disaffection for bathing, but he also endeavors to communicate a truth about human beings' capacity for cruelty and depravity as he has experienced it. For the most part, the judge and jury prove unreceptive to Jude's message, and his book is finally deemed to be nothing more than clever pornography. In despair, Jude retreats to his dirty tower apartment (the tower, as usual in Byatt's fiction, representing a writer who is unnecessarily detached from the real world) where he attempts to starve himself to death. He is finally rescued by Frederica and Daniel Orton, who is himself a prisoner of language. Incapable of expelling the horrifying vision of his dead wife and certain that no words exist to express his sense of loss, Daniel can no longer communicate with his young children and physically and emotionally withdraws from them. Like Jude, Daniel also retreats to a tower of his own--a "heavy, square mediaeval tower, now surrounded by a bristling cage of scaffolding" (8)--a former church where he, an irreligious clergyman, assists with a helpline, spending hours each day listening to anonymous callers describing their despair. For Daniel, this insular existence becomes his temporary escape from memory and emotional responsibility, though he and the reader are always aware of the children he has left behind: pressing reminders of what cannot or must not be forgotten. One has the sense that Daniel, like Marcus Potter, is only half alive until he begins to be able to communicate.

Frederica is another character who struggles to find a voice for herself which is honest and her own; in her case, a literary voice. However, there is more at stake for Frederica than maintaining artistic integrity. In the process of establishing her right to retain custody of her son, Frederica realizes for the first time that she cannot control how she is perceived--or misperceived--by others, and that the legal system she is

challenging is unimpressed by her Cambridge-educated articulateness. Moreover, she quickly discovers that her education and intelligence, instead of helping her case, have made her vulnerable to insinuations that she is unmotherly, perhaps even unworthy of caring for her son. Like Jude, she believes that her words and intentions have been grossly misread by an uncomprehending and paternalistic legal system that is out of touch with the growing sexual revolution of the early 1960s. This situation forces her to adopt a compromise between how she privately defines herself and how a court of law expects her, in her social role as mother of a young son, to look and behave:

> She feels that both she and Jude are naughty children whose naughtinesses have found them out, have been judged by the inscrutable rules of the inscrutable grown-up world to be not naughtiness but grave crimes. She feels too, as children do feel, that what she thought was the grown-up world, and believed to operate by logic, operates in fact according to the system created out of its own prejudices and emotions, which cannot be second-guessed. She and Jude have been made to recite travesties of their life stories, in language they would never have chosen for themselves. They have been judged and found wanting. (596-97)

Frederica's powerlessness within the court leaves her feeling diminished and fearful. But whereas Jude is inclined to retreat into passivity, Frederica turns to writing, at least initially, in an attempt to organize her emotions into what she hopes will be a more manageable shape. The effort turns out to be more rewarding than she had hoped. Significantly, within the world of Byatt's fiction, communication equals life, and to deny one's ties to language is to court death, be it physical or spiritual.

Frederica's marriage and her efforts to escape from it are central to her desire to write, while her relationship with her husband forms a thematic parallel to the violence

described in the *Babbletower* subtext. Frederica's earlier discovery of her mistake in having given up an intellectual life to marry informs the first section of the principal narrative and is by far the most vivid and convincing part of *Babel Tower*, creating a marked contrast to the thinly-drawn figures of the semi-allegorical *Babbletower*. At the same time, Frederica's stifling and abusive relationship with her husband forms yet another link to the events described in the subtext, reminders of the stifled spirit brought about by the selfish imposition of one's will upon another.

Babel Tower begins with an unnamed woman and child--a woman barely recognizable as the free-spirited protagonist of *The Virgin in the Garden* and *Still Life*--whom we discover later to be Frederica and her small son, walking in the woods of her husband's moated estate. There they accidentally encounter Hugh Pink, an old friend from Cambridge. The meeting with Hugh precipitates a quarrel with her jealous husband, Nigel Reiver, who does not believe the meeting was coincidental, while Frederica, unhappy in her role as idle mistress of the manor, tries, unsuccessfully, to persuade him to allow her to look for a job. The domestic tyranny Nigel exercises over his wife and her angry but cautious responses are expressed most succinctly in the image that comes to her during an argument--an image of "a woman stepping barefoot across a bed of cinders, trying to find a path between little smouldering hot places, ready to break out into flames" (38). Frederica, it appears, has already learned to be wary of angering her volatile spouse.

On the other hand, Frederica is not by nature a cautious person, and, never realizing that being married to Nigel would mean discarding the self that she believed had attracted him initially, she is unprepared to play the submissive wife to her dominating husband. Nigel is one of the few characters in *Babel Tower* who is not preoccupied with language, and although his indifference to words is initially the

source of his attraction for Frederica (she admits to herself that "she loves him because he takes her beyond words, effortlessly and with skill" (42), his tendency to disregard language that is anything other than utilitarian masks a set of expectations on his part that Frederica cannot accept. Initially, Nigel is supremely confident about himself and his place in society, and though he is neither as introspective nor as well-educated as Frederica, he does possess a subtle and almost instinctive knowledge of the language of manipulation and control. When, in the middle of an argument with his wife, Nigel unexpectedly apologizes and tells her how much he loves her, Frederica is briefly disarmed despite her intellectual assessment of the cunning evident in his well-timed confession of love. She is also surprised to realize that

> [h]e has learned what a surprising number of men never learn, the strategic importance of those words. He is not a verbal animal. Much of what he says, Frederica has noticed without yet thinking about it, is dictated by the glaze of language that slides over and obscures the surface of the world he moves in, a language that is quite sure what certain things are, a man, a woman, a girl, a mother, a duty. Language in this world is for keeping things safe in their places. (41)

Nigel's unquestioning faith in a form of discourse without ambiguities or inconsistencies is the source of much of his power. At the same time, he also derives strength from a class which has, traditionally, taken its authority for granted, making his and Frederica's quarrel clearly class-based on one level, since she is only a schoolmaster's daughter. Moreover, Nigel's unwillingness to acknowledge any woman's views that fail to correspond to his own indicates considerable narrow-mindedness, thereby preventing him from seeing Frederica as an individual separate from her role as his wife and Leo's mother. On other occasions, Nigel appears to overlook even the marginal identity that he has ascribed to Frederica, when he informs

her calmly: "'You are just a bitch, really....Just a silly bitch'" (91). The vulgar word "bitch" is probably used not because Nigel (or Byatt) is unable to think of anything more profane to call her, but because the dehumanizing phrase "just a bitch" deliberately reduces Frederica to the level of a creature, and she responds in kind after he strikes her by biting his arm and gnawing on it until blood runs between her teeth. "Bitches bite," she observes, sardonically, to herself, even while she despises her actions (92).

The familiar story of marital violence develops an uncommon twist as we trace the effects of it upon the intelligent and independent-minded Frederica, a woman who, like Lady Roseace of *Babbletower*, "prided herself on being no man's creature" (131). It is, therefore, with surprise and dismay that she regards her own behavior after a particularly violent episode with Nigel precipitated by several chatty but innocuous letters from male friends. His jealous fury at the discovery of these letters leaves her bruised and the walls bloodied and bedroom furniture smashed. Once Nigel's rage is spent, he tries to coax her back to bed. She would like to tell him that she wants to sleep alone,

> [b]ut she is tired and desperate for sleep, and afraid, more than she cares to admit to herself, so afraid that she is prepared, like many women at many times, to take comfort from the man she is afraid of. (95)

Several months later, after having separated permanently from Nigel, Frederica observes her earlier attempts at evasion and conciliation mirrored in the words of a group of women gathered in a playground, watching their children (282-83). After listening to them share complaints about the injustices of their spouses and their own rather pathetic efforts to keep peace in the home, Frederica wonders briefly at the unexpected power women gain over their husbands, at least temporarily, when

domestic strife is exposed to the critical assessment and mocking laughter of the wives in the park; but their words are merely coping strategies, not solutions to their problems, as Frederica already realizes.

What makes Frederica's story different from the typically harrowing and over-wrought accounts of domestic violence found in popular women's magazines is the dispassionate tone with which Byatt describes the beatings and intimidation. Told mainly from Frederica's perspective, the narrative nevertheless avoids melodrama by depicting her honest acknowledgement of her own failings, and her unhesitating realization that despite his axe-throwing and adultery, Nigel is not, after all, the monster her lawyer would like her to portray him as being; nor, she suspects, is she the image of the weeping victim the lawyer seems to expect and somehow would prefer her to be. "Arnold Begbie does not entirely approve of her dryness and competence," Frederica notes (326), and, like her husband, the lawyer tries to discourage her from working in order to seek maintenance for herself and her son (281), a reminder that Nigel's values are not uncommon ones for his time.

Almost more difficult for Frederica than deciding to leave Nigel is the composition of a catalogue of abuses her lawyer requires her to submit. She struggles over the wording of the text, attempting to distill her years of marriage into a few impartial phrases that, when she is finished, seem detached from their object and neither wholly accurate nor wholly untrue:

> She has always thought her life was her own, and she was in charge of it. Even when the axe hit her, she was filled with the rage of the hurt of *her*, with the fury of her own intention to get out, to regain her freedom. But this narrative is like a fishnet, a trap. It redefines her and so changes her. (283)

Where she was once Frederica Potter, an individual, she has become Mrs. Reiver, The Plaintiff, just another woman in a bad marriage. Contemplating where the relationship has gone wrong, Frederica blames her own self-deception and the romantic myth of Oneness fostered by writers such as E. M. Forster and D. H. Lawrence, that she and other women like her have grown up believing. As we have seen in *The Virgin in the Garden*, Byatt's central characters continue to struggle through their lives relying on literature to guide them, but their reliance is often misplaced when literature is used as a substitute for experience. While rereading passages from *Howards End* and *Women in Love*, Frederica makes a discovery about herself: "She may have chosen to lecture on love and marriage in Forster and Lawrence because she is snarled in the death of marriage and the end of love: but the marriage was partly a product of the power of these books." Part of Nigel's attraction was attributable to Forster's incantation "Only Connect." Frederica recalls as a child trying to will herself to believe in God, but failing, turning instead to English novelists like Forster and Lawrence, both of whom, she observes to herself, "so passionately desire *connection*. They want to experience an undifferentiated All, a Oneness, body and mind, self and world, male and female" (312). Yet after many years of struggling to integrate this philosophy into her own life, she realizes that she has been misguided. Perusing the pages of the novels before her, Frederica's attention is drawn to the "archaic" language being used to describe the desired state of male-female relations, and she notes:

> It is not so simple as supposing that sexual love replaced for the Moderns the mystical experience of the Christian religion. It is more that the narrative of the Novel, in its high days, was built on, out of, and in opposition to the narrative of the one Book, the source of all Books, the Bible....Why, thinks Frederica, does it seem so impossible, so far away, so *finished,* this Oneness, Love, the Novel? (313)

Frederica has arrived at a critical turning point in her existence: an awakening to the meaning of independence. While admiring what Stephanie and Daniel achieved together in their marriage, she understands now that it is not oneness that she requires but autonomy. Frederica's desire for independence therefore becomes a social comment on a decade that has become synonymous with free will.

Rejecting what she refers to as the "myths of desire" (315), Frederica contemplates a different type of existence that she calls "lamination," the essence of which is juxtaposition, not fusion:

> [S]he, Frederica, had a vision of being able to be all the things she was: language, sex, friendship, thought, just as long as these were kept scrupulously separate, *laminated*, like geographical strata, not seeping and flowing into each other like organic cells boiling to join and divide and join in a seething Oneness. Things were best cool, and clear, and fragmented, if fragmented was what they were. (315)

In addition, *laminations* comes to represent for Frederica more than a means of survival, but also a model for a new "art form of fragments....[n]ot linked by metaphor or sex or desire, but separate objects of knowledge, systems of work, or discovery" (360). Significantly, her ideas about lamination had already begun to germinate while, in *The Virgin in the Garden*, she was playing the part of the young Queen Elizabeth I in *Astrea*, when it had occurred to her that the power and intelligence of the Virgin Queen "were dependent upon her solitude and her separation" (360)--qualities which she knows that she too would be wise to develop.

Once Frederica considers writing a book that she proposes to call *Laminations*, she begins by trying to deconstruct the intractable letters she receives from her lawyer and Nigel's. Scissors in hand and feeling "wild and oppressed" (379), she proceeds to snip and slice, in a sense de-fanging or castrating the letter-writers, both of whom

are male and seemingly incapable of understanding her position and demands. Afterward, she rearranges the pieces to form an incoherent collage which nonetheless provides her with a "satisfactory representation of her confusion, of her distress, of her sense that the apparent irrefutable clarity of Nigel's solicitor's arguments is a nonsense in her world" (380).

The intellectual world of which Frederica is a part is one where "most intellectuals are proclaiming the death of coherence, the illusory nature of orders, which are perceived to be man-made, provisional and unstable" (380), but as Frederica's cut-ups demonstrate, the mind has difficulty deriving satisfaction from the nonsensical, and her efforts to arrange the fragments into "a kind of consequential structure" (379) confirm this. *Laminations* finally starts to take shape when she abandons the cut-ups and begins to form her own words. The only difficulty is finding a suitable discourse that does more than simply echo the words of others or render her ideas banal. The form she finally decides upon is less a form than a collection of anecdotes, fairy tales, and the directions from a package of birth control pills, all included through a kind of free association of ideas. Although Frederica has resolved to avoid developing any kind of link or connection among them, it is clear that the fragments have been selected because each is related to females bleeding. Because of the teasing similarity of the central image--women's association with blood both mythically and biologically--it becomes the reader's task to seek the connections for him- or herself.

Frederica's dissatisfaction with the traditional realist novel as a model for her own writing stems from a modernist awareness that the times required a "different fictional discourse" (Bradbury, *Modern British Novel* 159), and *Laminations* owes as much of a debt to the collage style of Joyce's *Ulysses* as it does to postmodernism's

interest in 'bricolage,' which Margaret Rose refers to as "some meaningful, if limited, assemblage of given materials" (Rose, *Parody* 225). Equally important is the Barthesian observation attributed to Frederica that "the point of words is that they have to have already been used, they have not to be new, they have to be only re-arrangements, in order to have meaning" (*BT* 385). The collage of quotations and true-life experiences in *Laminations* satisfies Frederica, both because she has managed to do without the first person perspective that had troubled her previously, and also because she discovers that she had finally "pinned something down" (390), some essential truth about her experiences, though without the conscious injection of meaning she has been trying to avoid.

"Things juxtaposed but divided, not yearning for fusion" (315) is a statement which informs both Frederica's writing and the life she hopes to be able to lead. The statement is also the guiding principle in *Babel Tower*, but the metafictional quality of the *Babbletower* and *Laminations* sections, as well as the fairy tales attributed to Agatha Mond, sends the reader a contradictory message. Try though she may, Byatt seems incapable of achieving the degree of detachment Frederica aspires to in her own writing. Throughout the trilogy, and later, in *Possession*, there is ample evidence of what is alternately Byatt's strength and her weakness: her habit of developing many strands in her novels which run parallel to the central theme. At first they may seem separate and distinct, but it soon becomes apparent that each strand is dependent on the others, forming a predetermined pattern or design. The effect in *Babel Tower* is highly artificial and sometimes forced, giving the impression at times of a text overloaded with more ideas than it can comfortably support, from topics as diverse as the snail population in the North of England, to ethnomethodology, to a discussion of elementary school education and the teaching of grammar to young children. On the

other hand, the type of connecting and cross-referencing Byatt engages in is most effective when the reader is taken unawares. One of the best examples can be found when Frederica goes through Nigel's dresser drawers looking for a letter of hers she suspects that he has confiscated. But instead of a letter, she uncovers a hidden cache of sado-masochistic erotica that sickens and repels her: "It is like finding trunks of butchered limbs, she tells herself wildly, hands and feet under the floorboards" (103). The pornographic photographs and the images they depict cleverly and unobtrusively foreshadow Lady Roseace's sexual torture and murder at the hands of Culvert, her former lover, in the *Babbletower* section. The narrator describes Frederica's findings with clinical precision, concluding with the observation:

> Padlocks, chains, thongs, spikes, cages, boots--nothing much has changed since the medieval torture-chamber was furnished, apart from the invention of rubber, which has produced some odd embellishments and habits. (103)

Frederica's intellectualization of the hidden magazines as being unlikely to do anyone reading them any harm is undermined by the unexpected disgust she experiences upon discovering them, and the question of how she is to relate this unwelcome knowledge about her husband's sexual fantasies to their own sexual relationship.

The *Babbletower* obscenity trial centers on the same issue raised in Frederica's mind on discovering Nigel's magazines: how does one define a pornographic text, and to what extent might such a text be responsible for corrupting its readers? Byatt provides an elaborate analysis of the subject through "interviews" with numerous court witnesses, drawing parallels with the trial of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. Again, the image of the tower invades the reader's consciousness, this time as an ominous phallic symbol. As one of the scholarly witnesses for the defense

explains: "'The *Babbletower* community is Fourier's Nouveau Monde Amoureux. It is also Sade's Chateau de Silling, where the libertines cut the bridge that connects them to the outer world so as to perform their terrible deeds'" (545). There is a milder echo of the tower as fortress or prison in the descriptions of Bran House, the walled and moated manor house where Frederica resides with Nigel during their marriage. In its association with lust and depravity in *Babbletower*, the tower also becomes an image of power grossly abused and freedom curtailed. In the words of one of the *Babbletower* characters reflecting on the disintegration of Culvert's utopia: "there is a lesson to be learned--about excess, about the metamorphosis of freedom into humiliation and slavery. We must go into the world and preach moderation in all things'" (410). This sober message, so baldly stated, nevertheless forms another strand in Byatt's complex tapestry. Running parallel to the novel's preoccupation with language are those sections of the text illustrating the social climate of the 1960s and some of the darker trends Byatt saw emerging from that decade. The intertexts of Frederica's *Laminations* are one means by which Byatt both revisits and authenticates the past, lending credibility of a kind to the fictional events being described in the principal narrative. The picture that emerges from the collage of images offers a diverse and sometimes frenetic view of English life in the 1960s, which is alternately frightening and quaint, ranging from the banal faces of evil in the real life Brady murder trial, concerning a young man and woman who were involved in several brutal killings that "seemed to have been committed for the pleasure of murdering" (*BT* x), to the sartorial peculiarities of Frederica Potter-Reiver. The intertextual fragments thus function metafictionally to interrupt the narrative flow, forcing the reader's attention away from Byatt's characters and outside of the text, as a reminder of the close connection between fiction and reality.

In telling the story of *Babbletower*, about a group of idealists fleeing a revolution who set up a community in a decaying fortress in an attempt to escape from the bloodshed of the revolution and in the hopes of banishing greed and class bias and sexual inhibition from their midst, Byatt creates obvious and intentional parallels between the community of the subtext and the communes that gained popularity in the 1960s. But from the very beginning of the *Babbletower* fable, the tragic future of the commune is adumbrated by the physical descriptions of La Tour Bruyarde. To the surprise of Lady Roseace, the group first enters the walls of the fortress not, as she had imagined, through a bright central courtyard, but through "a kind of tunnel...which wound its way onward into the dark bowels of the place" (28), a reminder of Hades and Persephone and also of the dark passage into the unconscious from which dreams and nightmares alike are, with Culvert's encouragement, dredged up and displayed for all to see--with terrible yet predictable results. What begins as a desire to form a society unsullied by violence and authoritarianism finally and inevitably (for we have read the signs) deteriorates; the members of the commune, with no rules to check their progress, grow steadily more cruel and depraved. Before Lady Roseace's recapture and slow sexual torture at the hands of Culvert, the leader (after she and a companion have tried to escape from La Tour), she utters a statement which resonates through *Babel Tower* and *Babbletower* alike: "you said that the true principle of our new society should be perfect liberty, to fulfil in harmony every least desire, of body or soul....[but] liberty must include the *freedom to leave the group*, harmony of desires must include the desire to abstain from desiring" (412).

In addition to the inclusion of *Babbletower*, the other major factor distinguishing *Babel Tower* from a straight-forward reminiscence or recreation of the '60s (a period Byatt does not, apparently, regard nostalgically) is the text's undercurrent of satire and

irony. The object of the narrator's satire and suspicion is groups, both secular and religious, and the sometimes dangerous, unthinking behavior that may be engendered within them--as *Babbletower* clearly illustrates. Byatt argues in a 1996 interview with Carmen Callil that "[t]he 1960s was a period obsessed with behavior in groups" (*At Random* 66). In *Babel Tower* there is ample evidence of the group's sometimes negative impact on the solitary individual, with its members' insistence on conformity and obedience. Byatt's analysis of the social and psychological dynamics of group behavior also allows her to reinforce the novel's link to *Babbletower* and the abuses of power and authority that emerge in both. In *Babel Tower*, for example, there is the falseness of the charismatic former clergyman, Gideon Farrar, with his pseudo-religiosity and propensity for the sympathetic flesh of his young female followers, the Children of Joy. During her conversation with Iris Murdoch (1984), Byatt comments on the role of Gideon Farrar in *Still Life*, where he is first introduced. She explains that he is intended to represent the movement among some of the clergy to demythologize the church, reducing theology merely to personal relationships. Despite what she describes in herself as a slight hostility to religion as an obstruction to "truth," Byatt beomes "very angry" with clergy members who appear to believe that personal relationships should be the primary concern of the church and its members.

The satirical tone in Byatt's description of the hypocritical Gideon Farrar and his dysfunctional family extends to the men's consciousness-raising group in *Babel Tower*, the Spirits' Tigers, whose meetings, in the words of one of their spokesmen, Elvet Gander, aim toward "restor[ing] to the spiritual group the energy, the *violence* even," which has "slowly over the centuries leeched away from the original Pentecostal waitings on the Inner Light" (437). Gander's rhetoric shares the earnestness and vagueness of Gideon Farrar's as he exhorts John Ottokar to "come

back to the Spirits' Tigers and bring the problem into the white light of our joint watchfulness and dreamy unknowing" (438). Frederica's response to Gander's letter to John is abrupt and straight-forward: "'His problem,' she pronounces bluntly, 'is logorrhea'" (438). Her suspicion of group experiences is similar to Byatt's own, in that both groups emphasize "fidelity to the [religious] community, perpetual watchfulness, complete trust" (461). However, as is evident among the Children of Joy, the group may also become vulnerable to the exploitation of others--in this case, its own leader, Farrar--and the narrative is critical of the unthinking (one might almost say *mindless*) trust of the groups' members and the relinquishment of their individuality for the "good" of the community. There is also evident disapproval in the text of the egocentricity of any leader who would demand such unhealthy devotion from his followers.

Several of Byatt's other characters also fear the power of the group, including Marcus and Alexander, the latter of whom, when participating in a study of British primary schools, notes with some dismay that in the new, modern-style schools later known as open-space classrooms, "[t]here are no hiding places. It is all group life" (174). In addition, there is Jude Mason, who testifies in court to the abuse he suffered in an expensive public school at the hands of classmates who tyrannized over those younger and weaker than themselves--experiences which are meant to be the inspiration for the murderous children in *Babbletower.* By locating Jude's sexual abuse in an institution where children are expected to be safe and where their innocence may once have been taken for granted, Byatt's determination to show the pervasiveness of cruelty in all levels of society and among all ages is afforded a greater impact, and she denies readers the comfort of imagining that violence and depravity are in any way remote from everyday experience.

Whereas the *Babbletower* story is told largely without irony, its horrors left to

speak for themselves, the narrative voice of *Babel Tower* is detached in its ironic presentation of the past, giving the appearance, at least, of objectivity. Linda Hutcheon's essay "The Power of Postmodern Irony" (1992) refers to William V. Spanos's comment (1987) that "postmodern ironic" may function as "a retrieval (or repetition) that interrogates the habits of mind inscribed by the past" (Hutcheon 38). The interrogatory nature of this type of irony is evident in all of Byatt's novels dealing with the historical past, but the irony is only one facet of the parody or pastiche of novels such as *Possession* and *Angels and Insects*. *Babel Tower*, on the other hand, approaches the 1960s ironically, but with the intention of using the decade as a framework or point of reference for the emotional development of its principal characters. It offers a reminder that, whether we like it or not, we are the products of our time, and only the passage of time enables us to see the extent to which history shapes and defines us.

Although the narrative voice in *Babel Tower* seems determined to maintain an objective distance, there is always evidence of a standard or norm against which the object of Byatt's irony is being measured. As Hutcheon reminds us, "irony judges" (*Parody* 53). Byatt makes her attitudes toward particular characters or types of behavior felt very strongly through her choice of words and the tone of her descriptions, as seen in her portrayal, for example, of Gideon Farrar. Another instance where Byatt's irony signals evaluation is in the description of the '60's "happening" witnessed by Frederica but not filtered through her consciousness:

> A young woman wearing a dead poppy and a few feathers dips her arms into the baby-bath, which is full of pale intestines in dark blood. Zag lifts a string of them above his head and winds them around the neck of Richmond Bly, round his own neck. The red runs down their white clothes, both their white clothes.
> 'No,' says Richmond Bly. 'I always--faint at the sight of blood.'

> 'Loss of consciousness is good for you,' says Mickey Impey. 'Dissolve the one in the many.' (616)

The suspect phrase, "Dissolve the one in the many"--suspect because the novel has already depicted the negative consequences of a loss of individual will to a group--alerts us to the narrator's disapproval of the participants in the happening for whom image and spectacle have seemingly replaced more serious considerations, and who are only too happy to relinquish their will on command. At the same time, the vacuousness of the popular culture represented by the happening is portrayed as a hodge-podge of gruesome images and childish songs which have little or no connection to one another, and seem to affect the young people engaged in the production of these images not at all. The events of the "happening" itself are described as a cross between a political protest and a circus, but the political undertones (if any of the participants are aware of them) appear too unformed to be of any use, having become lost in the spectacle which seems designed merely to shock. Frederica, who has been silent since the happening began, an observer rather than an "actor," announces that "'All the same,...[i]t's not real'" (616), thereby diminishing the event and its effect on the reader, who has also been a spectator. While the props may consist of actual blood and guts, the happening fails to touch Frederica, who maintains her ironic detachment to the end of the scene, thinking to herself that "this is not her time, she did not enjoy the Happening, though it had its interest" (617).

Another important example of the narrator's focus of disapproval occurs when a painter named Desmond Bull, whom Frederica meets at the art college where she teaches literature, says of the students that "'There's a movement among them...They really believe the past is dangerous, is a kind of death. They think it destroys their

originality...they believe in making a rupture, making a revolt, making a new world'" (227). For the students the past is perceived as an obstacle to overcome or a cage to escape from, and they would appear to have the misconception that there is a place called the Present where everything is new and untainted by influence. To the young artists of the 1960s that Desmond Bull is describing, a total break with the past is perceived as necessary to avoid producing second-rate, derivative work, although the narrative itself goes out of its way not to validate such views. Instead, the students' unwillingness to learn from the past is made to seem naive at best, and certainly ignorant. Their hostility to history evident in talk about "slashing Rembrandts and Vermeers because young painters don't get enough attention" (228) appears more foolish than threatening in Frederica's eyes: "'They will grow old themselves,' says Frederica, who throughout the increasing youthfulness of the sixties fails to understand how the professionally young fail to understand that they will grow old" (228).

Additional evidence that behind the ironized subject is a preferred dominant can be found in the descriptions of those characters who continually try to destabilize authority. There is, first of all, the irresponsible and aptly named poet Mickey Impey who exhorts the children in the schools he is visiting to defy their parents and their teachers, chanting poems that urge them to rebel against bedtimes and baths, because in Impey's mind all rules and direction are stifling (180). His behavior is deliberately made to seem irritating and immature, appearing in sharp contrast to the more moderate voices in the text, including Alexander's, which are permitted to argue at length that "Rules facilitate. Rules create order, and without order [there] is no creativity" (186). Most importantly, one is always conscious of the warning conveyed through the *Babbletower* subtext that "[n]o community can operate without...rules" (186), for without rules there inevitably follows misrule, and disaster. Then there is

Roger Magog, another member of the education committee and a former teacher and writer, who rails against the coldly professional relationship between teachers and students, arguing instead for a relationship of equals grounded in love for one another, much like the type of connection Gideon Farrar tries to develop between himself and his "followers." Whereas the narrator acknowledges the dangers of absolute authority, whether in the classroom or in society at large, the alternative that Magog proposes has its own perils. Finally, we have the sinister, book-burning rock musician, Paul Ottokar, who raids Frederica's library and sets it ablaze in a Guy Fawkes bonfire. His actions appear to represent a symbolic destruction of culture and history as well as the physical destruction of Frederica's precious books, and his radicalism renders him akin to the art students desiring to slash Rembrandts and Vermeers. The ludicrousness of Ottokar's behavior is emphasized forcefully during the bonfire as he prances back and forth, naked beneath a transparent plastic raincoat and high on hallucinogens, naively supposing that history can be altered or erased by simply destroying its artifacts.

One of the reasons why Byatt's use of irony maintains its authorial direction is because of the moral and social messages that she is trying to convey. Basically, her aim is not only to critique but to also provide some genuine understanding of the issues that emerged out of the 1960s, from the direction being taken in fiction-writing and critical theory to the problems experienced as a result of changing social values. On this count, her novel is a success. The novel is weakest, however, in its *Babbletower* sections, which, although cleverly mirroring the events in the main sections of the novel, emerge as predictable and overly didactic. Whether that is a flaw in Byatt's writing or a deliberate attempt to distinguish Jude's text from her own is difficult to determine, but no less disturbing at times. But despite its flaws, *Babel*

Tower, like *Possession*, whose structure it echoes, is a remarkable achievement in its skilful synthesis of realism and postmodernism, and is, in the words of one reviewer, a true "orchestrat[ion]...of voices" (McDonnell 1996).

CHAPTER 3: *Recovering the Past, Foreseeing the Future: Postmodernism in A.S. Byatt's Possession*

Byatt's fourth novel, *Possession: A Romance*, received significant critical acclaim when it won the Booker Prize in 1990 and continues to be the book for which she is best known today. Part of its popularity may be due to the fact that, as Byatt has noted, *Possession* is "like the books people used to enjoy reading when they enjoyed reading" (Kelly 78). More than any other novel that she has written, Byatt's *Possession* reveals her desire to keep the past alive through its fiction (Kelly 13). One of the important questions that the novel raises, however, is to what extent Byatt wishes to deconstruct traditional narrative and to what extent she wishes to maintain it (Christina Koning, *The Observer*).

Byatt's reason for choosing to recapture the historical past becomes more apparent when one examines the need this type of retrospective fiction seems to fulfil. As Steven Connor explains in *The English Novel in History*: "every representation of the past is a historicising of the present, making it possible to inhabit or belong to one's present differently. In supplying the needs or confirming the values of the present, novels that deal with history make those needs visible and thus perhaps available for consideration and evaluation" (140). Indeed, *Possession* is all about trying to better understand the present by means of the past, thereby making it Byatt's most successful novel to date in its ability to articulate with beauty and skill the ideas that have preoccupied her writing for the last twenty years or more. Through *Possession*, Byatt demonstrates the hold that the nineteenth century continues to have on our collective imagination and what emerges from the narrative is our obligation to find a creative voice that is of our time, yet which reflects our inescapable bond to the past.

Possession is about a young scholar, Roland, who uncovers drafts of an intriguing letter from a Victorian poet, R. H. Ash, whom he has been studying, to a relatively unknown female writer, Christabel LaMotte. After Roland manages to interest Maud, a LaMotte scholar, in discovering the nature of the relationship between the Victorian poets, the two academics set off on a quest that leads to the discovery of more letters--letters which are "reproduced" in the novel. *Possession* begins with a reference to Giambattista Vico's *New Science* (1725-30), and, by implication, his theory of the cyclical nature of history. Vico's belief in "myth as a primordial form of thought" which literature seeks to recover (Verene 724) becomes the central focus of the text, so that *Possession* can be read as exploring the difficulties of recuperating the historical past. Through her references to the Victorian characters' poetic myth-making, Byatt introduces her own adaptations of traditional legends and fairy tales. And like the "Victorian 'Renaissance' paintings and poems...[that] tell us more about the Victorians than they do about Renaissance Italy" (Fraser, *Victorians* 211), Byatt's recreation and reinterpretation of nineteenth-century culture and society forces us to reassess ourselves and our attitudes toward the Victorians.

Parody and Pastiche

To follow the trails of Byatt's complex literary endeavor, one must first acknowledge how she uses parody and pastiche in order to explore the subjectivity of historiography and the influence of nineteenth-century literature and culture upon our own. For Linda Hutcheon, parody is an integral part of all historiographic metafiction and she expends considerable effort trying to redefine parody and its function in late twentieth-century literature and art. In *A Poetics of Postmodernism* Hutcheon explains:

> What I mean by 'parody' here--as elsewhere in this study--is *not* the

> ridiculing imitation of the standard theories and definitions that are rooted in eighteenth-century theories of wit. The collective weight of parodic *practice* suggests a redefinition of parody as repetition with critical distance that allows ironic signalling of difference at the very heart of similarity. In historiographic metafiction, in film, in painting, in music, and in architecture, this parody paradoxically enacts both change and cultural continuity. (26)

Despite Margaret Rose's objection to what she perceives as Hutcheon's sweeping use of "'historiographic' to cover all the different uses of historical discourse and architectural style" (*Parody* 211), I believe that Hutcheon's definition is useful for analyzing Byatt's project because it recognizes the adaptation of traditional forms, including parody, which writers like Byatt have been engaging in to analyze, critique, and often appreciate our connection to our historical past. Nevertheless, Hutcheon's tendency to minimize the humorous or comic aspect of parody in order to call attention to the more serious function--its abilty to "enact change" through what Rose refers to as a "reconstruction" of the parodied text (95)--inaccurately suggests that humor is incapable of communicating a 'serious' message (Rose 95).

Hutcheon argues that parody has evolved from a narrow association with ridicule or burlesque and that contemporary writers no longer need to be limited by these outdated notions. Part of the problem as she sees it is that parody has sometimes been confused with satire because both use irony as a rhetorical strategy (*Theory of Parody* 54), but whereas "satire displays a negative evaluation and a corrective intent, modern parody, on the other hand, rarely has such an evaluative or intentional limitation" (54). Hutcheon emphasizes repeatedly that parody, although often ironic, is not necessarily disrespectful toward its subject. Instead, says Hutcheon, the irony present in parody can be "playful as well as belittling [and]...critically constructive as well as destructive. The pleasure of parody's irony comes not from

humor in particular but from the degree of engagement of the reader in the intertextual 'bouncing'...between complicity and distance" (32).

Indeed, *Possession* provides ample opportunity for the reader to be made aware of his or her precarious position between "complicity and distance," and it is a position one suspects is also shared by the author. Frederick M. Holmes notes the similarity between *The French Lieutenant's Woman* and *Possession* in that "both exploit the nostalgia pervasive in British high-brow culture for the Victorian past, with its unambiguous social hierarchy, its reassuringly solid and densely cluttered interiors, its seeming confidence, stability, and unclouded sense of purpose" (*The Historical Imagination* 49). One can probably assume that the reader who perseveres through more than five hundred pages of a novel such as *Possession*, at the center of which is an epistolary romance between two nineteenth-century poets, is already kindly disposed toward the Victorian novel, and may even harbor a certain nostalgia--if not for the historical period itself, then for its literary traditions. One of the ironies of the novel is the lack of emotional detachment demonstrated by the twentieth-century characters for their Victorian subjects, and the negative effect this has upon their work and their personal lives.

According to Hutcheon, parody does "not destroy the past; in fact, to parody is both to enshrine the past and to question it" (*Poetics* 126). Hutcheon's definition accurately describes the role of parody evident in *Possession,* in which the nineteenth century functions for the characters as an inspiration and a link to their intellectual and biological forebears, while it is our present-day misperceptions of the past which become the object of the author's critique. Thus the entire structure of the novel with its passage back and forth from the present of the 1980s to the previous century is parodic, in that it forces a constant comparison between Byatt's reproduction of the

Victorian novel and our recollections of the "genuine" article. By the same token, *Possession* (and later, *Angels and Insects*) becomes a seemingly endless generator of intertexts, depending on the reader's familiarity with nineteenth-century fiction.

Pastiche is also an important element in *Possession,* and is used to provide the novel's cultural background and impart the necessary Victorian "flavor" through Byatt's careful compilation of details and sources drawn from literature and life. Pastiche, however, has long been associated with forgery or plagiarism, a situation Hutcheon attributes to the fact that it often imitates the original as closely as possible (*Parody* 38). The main difference between pastiche and plagiarism is that pastiche makes no effort to conceal its sources, while plagiarism does (*Parody* 39). One example of pastiche in *Possession* is the love letters between Ash and LaMotte, the Victorian writers in the novel, and the poetry that they are supposed to have written. Furthermore, Hutcheon ascribes to the notion that whereas parody is "transformational in its relationship to other texts," seeking "differentiation in its relationship to its model," pastiche operates "more by similarity and correspondence" (38) in an effort to capture something of the style of the original while working within the same genre. However, both Rose and Hutcheon agree that pastiche is not merely parody's lying cousin, and may also be regarded as functioning ironically in certain contexts (232-33). Indeed, Rose turns to *Possession* as an instance where "pastiche and parody are understood in [Byatt's] novel as being hyper-reflective and as partners to a kaleidoscopic irony" (231), an observation I would have to agree with, given that the pastiched elements are an intricate and important part of the overall parody.

The ambiguity of pastiche is actually incorporated into the narrative, for instance where Maud and Roland, after having sought out the home of the Victorian poet whose life story they are pursuing, are struck by the restoration of the property, a restoration

which is itself a form of pastiche. The house is significantly named Bethany to signal an association with Lazarus, whom Jesus raised from the dead, and with the scholars' project, which, in recovering the story of two dead writers, enacts a kind of resurrection. Looking up at the "bland or blind face of Bethany," its surface sandblasted clean, Roland observes: "'It would have been sootier. It would have looked older. When it was younger.'" To which Maud responds: "'A postmodern quotation'" (211). Neither character is comfortable with the restored dwelling, viewing the house as little more than a clever fake, "[l]ike a fibre-glass copy of the sphinx" (210). Architecturally and symbolically, the house is an uncomfortable reminder of the inevitable inexactitude with which the historical past will always be represented.

Byatt's attempts in *Possession* to simulate or reproduce nineteenth-century writing styles and patterns of speech further contribute to the novel's element of pastiche and are particularly evident in Randolph and Christabel's correspondence. The text's idiomatic shift from the nineteenth century to the present demands a corresponding shift in the reader's expectations from the theoretical, academic plot of the contemporary characters to the symbolical, myth-identified lives of the Victorians. As Connor explains, novelists who use this particular narrative strategy may well be concerned with historical accuracy, but the effect is often to "bring into ironic visibility the distance between past and present" (140). By examining the Victorians through contemporary eyes, Byatt seems to be trying to explode some of the myths and generalizations which have come to be associated with them, particularly their prudery and inhibitions and the passivity of women. Monica Flegel refers to the fact that, by means of the folklore base of LaMotte's writing, she is able to "interrogate the beliefs of her Victorian society, particularly those regarding--and restricting--women. In "The Fairy Melusina," for example, LaMotte challenges traditional views of the supposedly

monstrous women of mythology" (415). In contrast to John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) which Byatt criticizes, saying that "Fowles's understanding of Victorian life and literature is crude and derived from the Bloomsbury rejection of it" (*PM* 174), *Possession* seems intent on developing an ironic comparison between Victorianism and postmodernism which forces the twentieth-century characters into a better understanding of themselves that is directly attributed to a deeper understanding of the historical past. This is not to say that the past is inherently superior to the present, but that the most important lessons about our own time are often understood best when viewed from a distance of time. For Byatt, the Victorians provide that necessary vantage point.

Mythology and Folkore

The Victorians, like Byatt, displayed a penchant for recreating the past in literature and poetry, drawing frequently on Ancient Greece and the Middle Ages for inspiration, but with aims markedly different from hers. To some extent, Matthew Arnold's Hellenic "dreams of a primitive mythological world of simple joy and harmony" (Bush 247) are representative of those of other Victorians, like Tennyson, for example, who grew tired of the "sick hurry of modern life" and turned to the ancient world--and in Tennyson's case, to the legends of King Arthur's Court--for relief (Bush 247). But, as Douglas Bush points out in his study, *Mythology and the Romantic Tradition in English Poetry*, despite the problems Arnold saw besetting the modern world, he never intended to proffer his image of the past "as a preferable or possible alternative or as a complete ideal...[,] but as a partial corrective of ill-balanced modernity and as a cool refuge for his perplexed and lonely soul" (Bush 246-47). This desire on Arnold's part and that of other Victorian writers and artists to find in the past a model and a

"corrective" to the present (Chapman 126), or sometimes even a nostalgic retreat, marks the essential difference between Byatt's ironic, questioning exploration of the nineteenth century and the Victorians' more appreciative, even celebratory, attitude toward past civilizations.

However, in *Possession*, Byatt, like a number of her Victorian forebears, signals the historical and symbolic juxtaposition between past and present (I am thinking particularly, but not exclusively, of Tennyson and the Pre-Raphaelites) through an inclusion of myth or fairy tale elements. One of Byatt's most prominent strategies for demonstrating this link is through a legendary creature called Melusina who connects the principal female characters and the two plot structures. Like the recurring image of the tower in *Babel Tower* which dominates that novel's landscape, the legend of the serpent-woman Melusina of Brittany weaves a sinuous and suggestive path through *Possession*. Through legend, fairy tale and myth, Byatt rewrites traditional stories and reinvests the tales with contemporary significance. Her insistence on the importance of myth-making is supported by Michael Roemer, whose study *Telling Stories: Postmodernism and the Invalidation of Traditional Narrative* (1995) discusses what he sees as the continued relevance of the traditional story even in a postmodern age. He writes: "[w]hereas the folktale was told and retold for generations, we, who are subject to constant change, require ever new versions of our basic myths to accommodate changes in the external world and in our continually shifting image of ourselves" (Roemer 58). Byatt's retellings of legends and fairy tales within the framework of her novels serve as an unspoken reaction to attitudes that "storytelling has become 'impossible' because we have ceased to believe in an ordered universe and in our ability to make sense of the human situation" (Roemer 182). Regardless of whether Byatt's tales actually do manage to make sense of our world (which is a tall order, after

all), Byatt forces us to rethink the role myth plays in our culture and what it tells us about ourselves.

Byatt's Melusina, a serpent who disguises herself as a beautiful woman, serves as the mythological model for *Possession*'s two principal female characters, Christabel LaMotte and Maud Bailey. As Susan Crane recounts the story in her study of medieval romance, one day Melusina meets a "desperate Raymondin [the Count of Lusignan] in the woods and aids him in return for marriage" (Crane 85). Byatt claims that she married him to gain a soul. In any case, the lovely Melusina's transformation is never complete, and she is forced to extract a promise from her husband "not to seek her out" on Saturdays when she reverts to her monstrous form. Raymondin apparently suspects nothing of her secret until, after a number of years together and several bizarrely deformed sons, he spies on her through a keyhole while she bathes, where he observes her great green tail splashing in the water. Raymondin, who believed that Melusina's absences were indications that she was either a fairy or an adulteress, was encouraged by his brother to break his promise (Crane 85).

The legend of Melusina and her beloved's broken promise echoes other similar myths and fairy tales in which physical transformation plays a part. The story of the curious Psyche is Melusina's obvious counterpart. Byatt's attraction to this type of tale is evident in "The Great Green Worm," the fairy tale she translates from the French for Marina Warner's collection of stories, *Wonder Tales* (1994). In "The Great Green Worm," the seventeenth-century story by Marie-Catherine D'Aulnoy, the heroine is married to an invisible king who she suspects might be the god of love. Encouraged by her mother and sister to discover her devoted husband's true identity, she creeps into his bedroom one night with a raised lamp, Psyche-fashion, but "instead of the young Love, golden, white, young and altogether lovely, she saw the horrid Green

Worm, with his long fronded mane standing on end" (210). Shocked by this unexpected revelation, the woman screams, the worm awakens and promptly disappears.

Whereas the Psyche myth and "The Great Green Worm" carry a familiar warning against the fatal curiosity of women and an implication of feminine weakness (let us not forget Pandora), Byatt's treatment of Melusina suggests an altogether different moral, playing upon the idea of the shape-shifting Melusina as a symbol of the woman artist's struggle for self-definition. Although in traditional romance the female shape-changer's monstrous self is usually regarded as the mask or disguise concealing the beautiful feminine form within (Crane 85), in *Possession*, the serpent-monster is associated with creativity and intellectual power, while feminine beauty or compliance becomes the mask. Although the primary shape-changers in the novel are Christabel LaMotte and Maud Bailey, nearly all of the female characters in *Possession* are in disguise of some sort to conceal their true natures--their doubleness and duplicity--from the men with whom they are emotionally connected. At the same time, the masks are also an embodiment of the duplicitious nature of these women. For Christabel, her personal and poetic identification with Melusina is shown to be a direct consequence of society's discouraging attitudes toward women writers, and she warns her niece Sabine that such women are "largely thought to be...something like changelings or monsters" (*Poss.* 350).

Throughout the novel, Byatt permits the reader and the principal male characters, Roland and Ash, to catch brief glimpses of the "monster" beneath the feminine mask. First, there is Christabel LaMotte, whose symbolic connection to the fairy Melusine is suggested in her eyes of a "strange green colour" (274): "glass-green, malachite green, the cloudy green of seawater perturbed and carrying a weight

of sand" (277); and in her light blond hair, with its "hint of greenness [like]...the pale sap-green of vegetable life" (277). Peeping out from beneath her long skirt are her feet in boots of startling "emerald green leather" (274). Ash, who is an astute observer of marine life, is not unaware of the serpentine side that Christabel conceals behind her demure smile, her "mechanical simper," as he describes it to himself. This little smile, Ash knows, "was an untruth,...a convention, it was her brief constricted acknowledgement of the world's expectations" (278). When he is alone with Christabel, he calls her "My selkie, my white lady" (283), for her resemblance to the legendary seal-wives of the Northumberland coast, "[w]omen from the sea, who come for a time and then must leave" (280). But Ash has been well-schooled by the tales he has studied, and when, after his first night with Christabel he finds "traces of blood on his thighs," he realizes that she was a virgin, and wonders at the startling possibility that she may have had a female lover before him:

> He stood, sponge in hand, and puzzled over her. Such delicate skills, such informed desire, and yet a virgin. There were posibilities, of which the most obvious was to him slightly repugnant, and then, when he thought about it with determination, interesting too. He could never ask. To show speculation, or even curiosity, would be to lose her. Then and there. He knew that without thinking. It was like Melusina's prohibition, and no narrative bound him, unlike the unfortunate Raimondin, to exhibit indiscreet curiosity. He liked to know everything he could--even this--but he knew better than to be curious, he told himself, about things he could not hope to know. (285)

Oddly, this is one topic that neither Byatt nor Ash ever explores--almost as if, now that Christabel has demonstrated that she is capable of a heterosexual relationship, what came before is irrelevant. In addition, Ash's assumption that "no narrative bound him," that he is a man of free will who has chosen to remain silent, is clearly false. Ash is,

after all, a fictional construct at the mercy of his creator's whim, and he is no freer than any other character, though he does show considerable sensitivity and tact. Lest the reader fall into the trap of believing in Ash's self-determination, Byatt includes this small reminder presumably to break the illusion of our own self-determination, an idea which the elaborate patterns of fiction demonstrate that she does not accept.

Another significant aspect of the Melusina myth is its association with the appearance of mermaids, lamias, and serpent-women in Victorian fiction and poetry. From William Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* to Bram Stoker's *The Lair of the White Worm,* male fears of the dark side of the feminine emerge repeatedly through the image of the subversive female serpent. Nina Auerbach's *Woman and the Demon* and Gilbert and Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* amply discuss the iconography of the female serpent in Victorian fiction. One hears in Auerbach's introduction a similarity to Byatt's aim:

> I want to resurrect the central female paradigms that presided over the Victorian imagination and structured its apprehensions, abandoning domestic confinement to unfurl their awesome capacity for self-creation. Seen together, these interdependent and mutually sustaining character types infuse restrictive social categories with the energy of the uncanny. Once we restore the integrity of these types, we see that they intensify power rather than limiting it. (Auerbach 9)

By bringing together the serpent-woman Melusina, the Victorian woman poet, and the contemporary literary critic, Byatt forms a triptych which joins these three females in their association with buried forms of "disruptive power" (Auerbach 8). Auerbach's fascination with mermaids and serpent-women is clearly shared by Byatt within whose novels of Victorian life there are no Patmorian angels.

Maud Bailey, too, with her white-blond braids wrapped severely in a green silk turban held in place, significantly, by a carved mermaid brooch, unconsciously

conceals her relationship to the serpent myth. Her bathroom, seen through Roland's eyes, and evoking LaMotte's poem about the cold Drowned City of Is, is a "chill green glassy place" with a "floor tiled in glass tiles into whose brief and illusory depths one might peer" (56). In a humorous parody of Raymondin's discovery of Melusina's bathing ritual, Roland is brought to the brink of a similar revelation about Maud when she catches him on his knees, trying to peer through the bathroom keyhole. She emerges, startled, and with the touch of her hand upon his shoulder, gives Roland an involuntary shock "like that emitted by the Moray eel from under its boulders to unsuspecting marine explorers" (147). Moments later he watches her figure, clad in a patterned silk robe, disappear down the dim corridor: "the long Chinese dragon [on the back of her robe] wavered palely away, on its aquamarine ground, along the shifting carpets, and the pale hair gleamed coldly above it" (148).

Shape-shifters and Desire

Although Maud and Christabel are the only characters who bear the traits of the serpent woman, nearly all of the female characters in *Possession* are shape-shifters to some degree. Roland's girlfriend Val is one example. After a severe academic failure, Val is forced to leave school to find temporary secretarial work while Roland finishes his Ph.D.: "There were now two Vals. One sat silently at home in old jeans and unevenly hanging long crepey shirts, splashed with murky black and purple flowers." The "other mournfully bright menial Val wore high heels and a beret" (14). Neither of Val's two selves is happy until she meets a handsome, wealthy young lawyer under whose attention she is "transformed" into a lovely young woman, a development which uncomfortably reaffirms the "conventional gender roles" Byatt seems intent on undermining through the character of LaMotte (Flegel 429).

If Val's shape-changing echoes the familiar fairytale transformation from pauper to princess, the long-suffering Doctor Beatrice Nest suffers under a different guise. Beatrice has spent twenty-five years editing the diaries of Ellen Ash, delayed in her task by the manner in which her subject appears to change shape. Arrested in her progress by the distinct impression that Mrs. Ash had foreseen the biographers and was resisting the tidy summation of her life that Beatrice Nest would like to give her, Beatrice makes a confession to Maud: " 'When I started on it, I thought, what a nice dull woman. And then I got the sense of things flittering and flickering behind all that solid--oh, I think of it as panelling. And then I got to think--I was being led on--to imagine the flittering flickering things--and that really it was all just as stolid and dull as anything' " (220). The reader learns the reason for Ellen Ash's mysteriousness only through a third-person omniscient narrator. Incapable of ever consummating her marriage to Ash, she tries to compensate for her deficiency by becoming her husband's "slave" (459), a fact which will certainly never be uncovered since neither Ellen nor her husband ever sought to record this painful detail of their married life, thereby leaving Beatrice to labor indefinitely over what turns out to be a useless, life-consuming project.

Beatrice Nest is presented as a grey, muffled character in keeping with her surname, and representing the negative side of self-enclosure. She is ironically unlike her Italian namesake, Dante's beloved, having loved no man and been loved by no one in return, so complete is her impenetrability. Out of date in her method of scholarship and out of touch with other members of her university, Beatrice watches the process by which perceptions of her alter with each passing decade. In a rare burst of anger, Beatrice speaks out against the stereotyping and rejection she has encountered from university students and faculty alike: "'There is an age at which, I

profoundly believe, one becomes a witch, in such situations, Dr Bailey--through simple ageing--as always happened in history--and there are witch-hunts--' " (221).

In Crane's analysis of shape-changing females in medieval romance, she argues that shape-shifting women tended to "reinforce an image of feminine alienness and contradiction" among male readers (84), and Beatrice Nest is no different in that respect, although her transformation from benign mother figure to witch emerges from a different myth, the myth of woman's "ancient susceptibility [as]...the weaker vessel--to 'the devil's illusions'" (Fraser, *Weaker Vessel* 102). At the same time, however, Crane notes that "by countering their repulsive manifestations with hyperbolically appealing ones, shapeshifters raise the possibility that beauty is not native to woman but is an artificially produced masquerade" (85). Moreover, Melusina's capacity to function successfully as a wife and mother for many years while maintaining her secret Saturday transformations supports Crane's claim that such characters were also reminders that "feminine identity is not inherent in bodily appearance" (85).

There is also, it appears, no evidence in either Christabel or Melusina of the strain of trying to pass as ordinary women, though one imagines that the latter's efforts to maintain a private life apart from her husband could not have been easy, in the same way that Christabel and Maud's fierce protection of their privacy is always fraught with difficulties. To maintain this privacy, the women develop strategies of concealment which are never entirely effective. Maud's affair with Fergus Wolff, a self-serving, cut-throat academic and the Big Bad Wolf in human disguise (Flegel 417), is threatening and distasteful to her precisely because of his inability to respect her need for solitude. First, he insists that she, who wears her blond hair nearly shaved because of a justifiable fear that she will not be taken seriously, and that her position as a feminist will be undermined by her good looks, should display what is a natural

part of her (57). But even while Fergus dares her to "flaunt the doll-mask" of her beauty, he is also intent on imposing his will upon her, diminishing the space she requires to think and work. Maud's unwillingness to continue the relationship renders her unnatural in his eyes, a cold and unfeeling creature, and he informs Roland, not without malice, that she is a woman who "thicks men's blood with cold" (34).

Despite Fergus's warning, Roland finds himself alternately attracted to Maud and repelled by her cold superciliousness. He does not understand as yet the detachment with which she views her good looks, assuming only that she disdains him as an Ash scholar and the product of a lower social class. Instead, Maud demonstrates her feminist affinity to the shape-shifting females of Crane's study in her unwillingness to be reduced by those who would regard her primarily as a beautiful woman. Examining herself in the mirror one day, Maud recalls Simone Weil's words that a "beautiful woman...seeing herself in the mirror, knows 'This is I.' An ugly woman knows, with equal certainty, 'This is not I.' Maud knew this neat division represented an over-simplification. The doll-mask she saw had nothing to do with her, nothing" (57).

By the time Maud and Fergus part, her hair has grown long, and she takes to wearing it "inside some sort of covering, hidden away" (58), like her sexuality. Now and then she is visited by an "image of a huge, unmade, stained and rumpled bed, its sheets pulled into standing peaks here and there, like the surface of whipped egg white" (56), an unpleasant reminder of the mental disorder created by her affair with Fergus. Maud's desire for uncomplicated solitude is reflected in her work on boundaries and liminality in the poetry of Christabel LaMotte, and in her office in "Tennyson Tower," with its obvious reminder of the Lady of Shalott. Only when Roland, feeling like an "intruder" in the "female fastnesses" of Maud and Christabel

(58), spends the night on Maud's sofa does she fret at her unsociableness, wondering to herself why she could "do nothing with ease and grace except work alone, inside these walls and curtains, her bright safe box?" (137). Maud shares with Christabel a self-protective need for enclosure such as LaMotte teasingly refers to in a letter to Randolph Ash, when she describes herself as an "Egg, a perfect O, a living Stone, doorless and windowless, whose life may slumber on till she be waked" (137). And like Maud, she feels threatened by the prospect of male intruders:

> Oh, Sir, you must not kindly seek to ameliorate or steal away my solitude. It is a thing we women are taught to dread--oh the terrrible tower, oh the thickets round it--no companionable Nest--but a donjon.
> But they have lied to us you know, in this, as in much else. The Donjon may frown and threaten--but it keeps us very safe--within its confines we are free in a way you, who have freedom to range the world, do not need to imagine. (137)

Christabel argues for the female artist's need to renounce the world--and the "usual female Hopes" of love and marriage--with nun-like devotion, if she is to be free to create.

The dangers to the reputation of a Victorian woman living alone, without the protection of a chaperone or male relative, have been amply documented by novelists and historians alike. Christabel confesses that it is this fear of society's disapproval that is partly responsible for her unwillingness, at least at first, to continue her correspondence with Ash. But the primary reason for her seclusion is the romantic complications she is convinced must inevitably develop between a man and a woman. Heterosexual love is equated in Christabel's mind with a drain upon a woman's mental and physical resources, and the warning she gives Ash, which he, of course, ignores, is the unspoken warning of Melusina to Raymondin to respect her privacy.

She writes: "Shattering an Egg is no Pass time for men. Think what you would have in your hand if you put forth your Giant strength and crushed the solid stone. Something slippery and cold and unthinkably disagreeable" (137).

Christabel's implicitly lesbian relationship with Blanche Glover, her friend and housemate, appears to allow her the intellectual space she requires to write. Both women believe that it is possible to live "useful and fully human lives, in each other's company, and without recourse to help from the outside world, or men" (307), and until Christabel begins her correspondence with Ash, it would appear that theirs has been a successful union. Louise Yelin's "Cultural Cartography: A.S. Byatt's *Possession* and the Politics of Victorian Studies" (1992) criticizes the novel for its privileging of heterosexuality, arguing that *Possession* contains "homophobic implications" evident in Byatt's efforts to "suppress homoeroticism" by "redirect[ing]...women's desire from women to men" (39). While there is something predictably predetermined in the fact that both implied lesbian or bisexual characters turn or return to heterosexuality, the pairing-off that occurs at the end seems less ideologically than generically motivated: *Possession* is a Romance in both definitions of the word, after all. Consequently, Byatt's parody of the bisexual American feminist scholar-critic, Leonora Stern, is a parody without a painful barb; she is a stereotype as much as Professor Blackadder, Roland's former thesis advisor, a grey-spirited bachelor who has given his life to researching Ash, and who is described as one who was "discouraged and liked to discourage others" (9-10). In fact, *Possession* is less concerned with sexual orientation than with the twentieth-century characters' post-Freudian obsession with sexuality--regardless of the form it takes. Christabel LaMotte's implied bisexuality is, I believe, of minor importance to the narrative and only gains significance through the scholars' preoccupation with defining her by her sexuality, an approach which the love

letters prove to be reductive and misleading. Intent on proving that LaMotte's poetic reworking of Melusina supports Stern's belief in the poet's lesbianism, Professor Stern employs a Lacanian reading of LaMotte's poem that sexualizes the poetic landscape in a manner which Roland and Maud find equally distasteful. The feminists' error is in wanting Christabel to serve as a model for feminist sisterhood. By appropriating her for their own purposes they succeed only in narrowing and diminishing her, when Christabel's association with shape-changers and the transparent women of the watery world of Is suggests the undesirablity of fixedness, of their trying to shape her to suit their own purposes.

There is no doubt that Byatt is conservative where gender issues are concerned and sometimes unsympathetic toward the endeavors of feminist writers and theorists. For example, Byatt criticizes Wittig's book *The Lesbian Body,* in a 1974 review, for its efforts to feminize and eroticize language. Byatt explains her position: "I would rather take Mrs Thatcher's way than [Wittig's] to deal with a male-dominated culture. I like change, not revolution. I like subtle distinctions with a continuing language, not doctrinaire violations" (*PM* 276). While Byatt admits to being a "back-to-the-wall feminist" when it comes to questions of abortion and equal rights (Dusinberre 189), she dislikes the idea of a "sisterhood" of women writers (187), preferring to regard literature as "[her] way out, [her] escape from the limits of being female" (186). Part of Byatt's dislike of a "sisterhood" stems from her strong individualism and her unwillingness to be associated with groups, but it also comes from concerns about being marginalized as a woman writer, of being, as she puts it, relegated to the "sidelines." That is not to say that Byatt is unaware of writing gender into her own narratives, because, of course, she continues to compose fiction about women artists, and much of *Possession* deals with the recovery of a variety of unheard female

voices (Todd 99), using the Melusina myth with its concealed implications of female grandeur and ingenuity as a guide to this process. Richard Todd has commented on Byatt's feminism in his article on A.S. Byatt and Marina Warner, and one passage is worth reproducing in full:

> [Byatt] frequently feminizes icons of patriarchal tradition in a particularly characteristic way, by providing what has constituted the unheard half of a discourse that [both Byatt and Warner] conceive of as complete only when bipartite, the two halves related in specifically analogous senses. It is important to make this point from the outset. Like other aspects of their radicalism, the feminism of each writer operates as *an augmentation of a total discourse*, rather than as a simplistic replacement of what has been traditionally privileged by what has been traditionally marginalized. Lest it be feared that this is token political correctness--a "soft" feminism--the claim needs pressing that such feminism is nevertheless prepared to be confrontational, that is to recognize and value the voices of confrontation, and allow them, where necessary, to be heard. Such voices are not by any means to be excluded from the total discourse. (99)

By arguing that Byatt and Warner's feminism is no less confrontational than that of other feminists whose politics are more overtly displayed in their writing, be it critical or creative, Todd touches on the ongoing debate in feminist criticism over how to define feminist writing, particularly when definitions continue to change, or, regrettably, when definitions are used to exclude.

Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik express the difficulties of the reader/ critic who tries to address this problem and the search for a solution in *Landscapes of Desire: Metaphors in Modern Women's Fiction*:

> ...[W]e are aware that it is all too easy to be tempted into glossing over any aspect of a woman writer's life and work which would seem to contradict a reading of them as politically correct. Our view is that, rather than desperately trying to redeem all women's writing as radical, feminist

> critics must develop reading strategies that come to terms with the contradictions and ambivalences of women writers. (1)

In view of Horner and Zlosnik's comment, Todd's insistence on the radicalism of Byatt's feminism seems somewhat overstated, if well-intentioned. Nevertheless, in wanting to escape the limitations society has imposed on women over the centuries, Byatt, not unlike Virginia Woolf, is trying to go beyond gender as the point of identification in order to create female characters (consider Frederica Potter, for example) who embody a kind of intellectual curiosity which, she suggests, cannot be defined as exclusively masculine or feminine.

Scholarly Vampirism

Another related issue that emerges from *Possession* is the risk of appropriation, or, as William H. Epstein expresses it in *Recognizing Biography* (1987), the researcher's possible "abduction" of his or her biographical or literary subject. Helen M. Buss, who grounds her theory in an insightful study of Carol Shields's novel *Swann*, explains this process as occurring when "biographers, while seeking to represent their subjects, must, by necessity, exclude and/ or revise portions of the subject so that she can be 'recognized' by current commodification standards" (Buss 428), a situation which can be related to Christabel LaMotte. Although Epstein and Buss argue in defense of the feminine subject at risk of being appropriated by male academics seeking to forward their own agenda, Byatt demonstrates that any literary subject, regardless of gender, is open to appropriation. While this may be true, as any feminist reader would likely point out, those of the male gender have not, historically, been in danger of being denied a voice. Buss also raises the question whether "struggles over possession of papers and manuscripts as well as representation and

reputation constitute part of the 'life story' stretching well beyond the writer's death" (Buss 433), an issue which forms the center of *Possession*'s plot that begins with Roland's theft of Ash's unfinished letter from the London Library and ends with Professor Cropper's plundering of Ash's grave.

Because of the unique position in which the reader of Byatt's novel is placed as beneficiary of the scholars' "theft" and subsequent discovery, any implications of wrong-doing must be shared by the reader, thereby complicating one's ability to pass judgment upon the characters. That the scholars themselves are, perhaps with the exception of Cropper, fully aware of the ways in which their actions have transgressed the boundaries of ethical behavior, further problematizes our response to them. Even while we are asked to empathize with Ellen Ash's desire to burn her husband's private correspondence in order that "no one else make idle curios or lies of [their lives]" (442), it is with a frustrated sense of loss that we view her actions until the specimen box of letters is uncovered. When the box is found and its opening justified by Leonora's question as to why Ellen Ash chose to preserve letters she genuinely wished never to be unearthed, we, as much as the characters, are in the grip of our desire to uncover the rest of the story, and Roland's statement that "'I felt possessed. I had to know'" (486) is, if not a justification of his and the others' curiosity, one with which the reader is likely to identify.

Although curiosity is one of the primary, even primal, emotions leading the characters to the narrative's resolution, there is another reason behind their intense interest in Ash and LaMotte: namely, the very desire for resolution. Holmes argues that, in *Possession*, "the endeavor to resurrect and give voice to the dead may result merely in a trafficking with the dead that is itself a kind of death" (81), and he indicates how Byatt's symbolism points to that conclusion. After perusing the first batch of the

love letters with Roland, Maud drives home through a wood that Christabel had probably known, and she is struck by the uncomfortable suspicion that "her prying curiosity about whatever had been Christabel's life, seemed suddenly to be the ghostly things, feeding on, living through, the young vitality of the past" (136).

The primary character associated with death through his obsessive pillaging of Ash's past is Mortimer Cropper. With his first name an apparent play on the French *mort*, and his last name a foreshadowing of failure with its echo of the English expression *come a cropper* (to fall heavily, and publicly), he has none of the redeeming qualities of Professor Blackadder, whose exhaustive study of the poet's work displays a sincerity entirely absent in Cropper's character, though he bears the snaky name "adder" as evidence of the secretiveness and *possessiveness* with which he jealously guards his research about Ash. Blackadder is also, it appears, in competition with Roland, another Ash scholar, about whom he writes dull and cautious references, as if to keep him in his subordinate position as long as possible. Cropper, on the other hand, has devoted himself body and soul to procuring every last material object that Ash ever owned. Of Ash's pocket watch which he wears "near his heart," he likes to think that "he has and held something of R. H. Ash" (387), and his chief pleasure is believing that possessing the artifacts of Ash's life can bring him closer to the past and in some way compensate him for having been unable to live Ash's life himself. One suspects that Cropper is precisely the kind of "vulture" Ellen Ash has in mind when she considers burning some of her dead husband's papers; and the image of Cropper as he dines on a huge seafood platter until the "heap of debris on his plate was higher than the original creatures had been, *every sweet white morsel extracted*" (my italics), precisely describes his death-dealing brand of scholarship (428).

Roland, however, is also implicated in the novel's criticism of this scholarly

vampirism. Everything about his life with Val in their dank basement apartment and his association with Blackadder's subterranean "Ash Factory," which Roland likes to think of as the "Inferno," is an association with death (Holmes 81). Above the desk where Roland produces his articles on Randolph Henry Ash hangs a murky print of Ash's death mask, a gloomy reminder of how even the most fascinating life stories must eventually end. Even Val is conscious of the futility of Roland's unhealthy preoccupation with the past when she comments to him: "'I suppose I envy you, piecing together old Ash's world-picture. Only where does that leave you, old Mole? What's your world-picture?'" (20). It takes Roland the entire novel to begin to be able to answer that question. In the meantime, Blackadder struggles with a similar problem as he labors over his Ash research. Reflecting upon the nature of his own efforts to resurrect Ash's intellect, Blackadder wonders, "What would knowledge be, collected for its own sake, for his own sake, that was, for James Blackadder, with no reference to the pickings, digestion and leavings of Randolph Henry Ash?" (28-9). The loss of identity Blackadder shares with Roland, and his recognition "that he would end his working life, that was to say his conscious thinking life, in this task, that all his thoughts would have been another man's thoughts, all his work another man's work" (29), reveals a loss of confidence so profound that when Blackadder is briefly inspired to write a poem of his own, he remembers that Ash had written a poem on a similar subject and gives up in defeat. Flegel attributes this lack of creativity to the type of education Blackadder and Roland have received, pointing out that "Byatt ultimately criticizes critical readings," and indicates through her fiction that "unimaginative theories and education can be damaging to those who endure them" (426).

Identity: Ventriloquism, Mirrors, and Boundaries

Because many of the twentieth-century characters seem uncertain of their personal identity, they are drawn to the nineteenth century as a time when, they imagine, identity was stable and unquestioning. When Maud asks herself, "who am I?" she responds with another question: "A matrix for a susurration of texts and codes? it was both a pleasant and an unpleasant idea, this requirement that she think of herself as intermittent and partial" (251). Roland is of a similar mind, having

> learned to see himself, theoretically, as a crossing place for a number of systems, all loosely connected. He had been trained to see his idea of his 'self' as an illusion, to be replaced by a discontinuous machinery and electrical message-network of various desires, ideological beliefs and responses, language-forms and hormones and pheronomes. Mostly he liked this. (424)

Roland, a "crossing place for a number of systems, all loosely connected," is not unlike *Possession* itself, with its mesh of intertexts. In fact, Roland's name forms a clever juncture between past and present by evoking both the trusting and devoted knight of medieval romance and the disillusioned Childe Roland, inured to failure, of Robert Browning's poem, whom Byatt transforms into the plodding, poorly-paid scholar of postmodern times engaged in another uncertain quest. But as Holmes points out, instead of "enhancing their inadequate identities," the scholars' obsession with their subject ironically tends to "diminish" what sense of self remains (Holmes 71). Unlike the scholars who attempt, each in his own limited fashion, to become a part of Ash and give definition to their own murky selves through him, Ash's "ventriloquism," his ability to "inhabit another man's mind, or body, or senses, or history" ("Precipice" 191), is a product of an imagination which gains depth from each poetic figure he creates.

Ash's claim that he is "at ease with other imagined minds--bringing to life, restoring in some sense to vitality, the whole vanished men of other times" (158), is an echo of Byatt's short story about Robert Browning, "Precipice-Encurled" (1987), where Browning, too, is depicted as a ventriloquist and one who, like the Biblical figure of Eli'sha, is capable of raising the dead (Kings 2.4). Of these dead Browning says:

> I catch them,...I hold them together, I give them coherence and vitality, I. And what am I? Just another concatenation, a language and its rhythms, a limited stock of learning, derived from my father's consumed books and a few experiments in life, my desires, my venture in dragon-slaying, my love, my loathings also, the peculiar colours of the world through my two eyes, the blind tenacity of the small, the single driving centre, soul or self. ("Precipice" 191-92)

That "single driving centre" of which Browning and Ash are both aware provides a definition to their characters that the scholars lack. Though they recognize that they, like Roland and Maud, are also the sites of an intersection of remembered sources and texts, Ash and Browning are always conscious of being an "I" in a way that the twentieth-century scholars are not.

Whereas Robert Browning in "Precipice-Encurled" is confident in his assumption of a god-like "maker" at work behind him, Maud and Roland are intimidated by the possibility of a higher power or "ferocious ordering principle" (421), plainly fearing a loss of control over their own destinies. There is a moment of recognition in which Roland ponders the notion, "partly with precise postmodernist pleasure, and partly with a real element of superstitious dread, that he and Maud were being driven by a plot or fate that seemed, at least possibly, to be not their plot or fate but that of those others" (421). "Those others" are, of course, Ash and LaMotte. Even worse, Roland speculates, "[f]inding themselves in a plot, they might suppose it

appropriate to behave as though it was that sort of plot. And that would be to compromise some kind of integrity they had set out with" (422). Without a clearly defined sense of self, and apparently riddled by postmodern angst, Roland and Maud feel unable to control the direction their lives are taking (Holmes 70). But postmodern angst is only one of the reasons for Roland to feel what he is feeling. The fact is that he and Maud *are* merely characters driven by a plot. In the words of a Gillian, the narratologist in Byatt's later short story, "The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye":

> 'Characters in fairy tales are subject to Fate and enact their fates. Characteristically they attempt to change this fate by magical intervention in its workings, and characteristically, too, such magical intervention only reinforces the control of the Fate which waited for them, which is perhaps simply the fact that they are mortal and return to dust.... The emotion we feel in fairy tales when the characters are granted their wishes is a strange one. We feel the possible leap of freedom--I can have what I want--and the perverse certainty that this will change nothing; that Fate is fixed.' (*Djinn* 258-59)

Even as Byatt explores the randomness of historical events in *Possession*, the novel's symbolic structure and fairy tale elements belie the likelihood of chance occurrences, particularly in the conclusion where Maud discovers that she is descended from both Ash and LaMotte. After leaving readers and characters alike with regret at the unfinished nature of the story (Ash, we initially presume, never knew that his child with Christabel had survived), Byatt adds a postscript in which Ash accidentally meets Maia, his young daughter. In the words of the omniscient narrator:

> There are things which happen and leave no discernible trace, are not spoken or written of, though it would be very wrong to say that subsequent events go on indifferently, all the same, as though such things had never been. (508)

While *Possession* foregrounds the impossibility of representing or documenting history with any assurance of total accuracy, particularly when unrecorded circumstances may have as profound an effect on the future as those which have been noted down with care, the Postscript is also a reminder of Byatt's world view of the cyclical nature of history. This idea is foreshadowed in Roland's discovery of Ash's letters to Christabel inside a copy of Vico's *New Science*. Kathleen Coyne Kelly notes that "Byatt's...notion of history as circular ensures that we never arrive at an end point or denouement" (97), although, as many readers have observed, the Postscript does manage to achieve a sense of closure, even if it is not strictly the "happy ending" some reviewers have seen it as being. While managing to resolve the last concerns raised in the novel, the coda provides a poignant look at relationships that might have been. Ash asks his young daughter to "'Tell your aunt...that you met a poet, who was looking for the Belle Dame Sans Merci, and who met you instead, and who sends her his compliments, and will not disturb her, and is on his way to fresh woods and pastures new'" (510). Unfortunately, the little girl forgets to convey the message, leaving Christabel, at least, with a lifetime of regrets--regrets which she finally acknowledges in an undelivered letter to the dying Ash.

The story of Roland and Maud and their eventual coming together is a mirror in many ways of Ash and LaMotte's beginnings. As we have seen, Maud's studies of boundaries and fortresses and her fear of relationships echo LaMotte's preoccupation with the preservation of her own "doorless and windowless" solitude (137). By becoming sexually involved with Roland, Maud proves what it had also taken Christabel many years to learn--though boundaries protect, they also limit and restrict. In *Women's Lives: The View from the Threshold* (1999), Carolyn G. Heilbrun defines liminality as a state in which one is "poised upon uncertain ground,...leaving one

condition or country or self and entering upon another. But the most salient sign of liminality is its unsteadiness, its lack of clarity about exactly where one belongs and what one should be doing, or wants to be doing" (3). For Heilbrun, "[f]eminism, in literature as in life, has either moved women, or tried to move them from the margins closer to the center of human experience and possibility" (3). In these terms, such movement is positive and enlightening, and not unlike being in "foreign territory," where everything is new and surprising and sometimes difficult to understand (Heilbrun 9). Significantly, Maud writes a paper called "Marginal Beings and Liminal Poetry," about the "paradoxical desire to be let out into unconfined space...and at the same time to be closed into tighter and tighter impenetrable small spaces" (54). Maud is clearly struggling to recognize herself as a scholar, a feminist, and a woman. In Gasiorek's analysis of Angela Carter's fiction, he observes that "liminality...serves a structural function in [her novels], for each is organized around protagonists who undergo rites of passage which are inseparable from the experience of marginality" (126). I would argue that *Possession*, as well as the later *Angels and Insects*, incorporates liminality for similar purposes. This is not to say that liminality is itself a desirable state in Byatt's fiction when it brings with it only a preoccupation with one's marginality; liminality becomes positive when it engenders or precedes an individual's desire for growth and change.

From the Language of Criticism to the Language of Poetry

The novel concludes with the possibility of a long-distance relationship between Maud and Roland (the postmodern solution?) that evades the complications of domestic cohabitation and parodies the marriages that have traditionally ended English fiction (Heilbrun 90). At the same time, *Possession* presents, through Maud

as well as through Christabel, the familiar dilemma in Byatt's fiction: the woman's desire to be loved coupled with fears of losing her independence and creativity in the process. Roland's response--"I'll take care of you, Maud" (507)--overcomes her resistance, at least for the moment, but his words are probably no real assurance to most feminist readers.

Roland, whose doubts about his autonomy have less to do with his personal life than with his profession, nevertheless maintains boundaries of his own, though without realizing he is doing so. His quest to uncover the artistic workings of Randolph Henry Ash misleads him into believing that he too could live vicariously through his subject, and as a result, he fails to exist as a whole person, living instead among the shadows of the Ash Factory and in the company of a girl whom he no longer loves. Returning to the apartment where he once lived with Val, Roland examines the pictures of Ash he kept on the wall and experiences a revelation:

> Roland had once seen them [the photographs of Ash] as parts of himself. How much they had been that, to him, he only now understood, when he saw them as wholly distant and separate, not an angle, not a bone, not a white speck of illumination comprehensible by him or to do with him. (467)

With this awakening of sorts, Roland's quest takes a new direction. "[Roland] had been taught that language was essentially inadequate, that it could never speak what was there, that it only spoke itself," but all at once, rereading one of Ash's poems, he realizes that the "ways in which [something] could be said had become more interesting than the idea that it could not" (473). In what would seem to be a rejection of a belief in the inedequacy of language, Roland begins to see that his study of Ash's poetry is really just a beginning, and not an end in itself. In his head, "[h]e hears Vico

saying that the first men were poets and the first words were names that were also things" (472), an observation that returns us to *Still Life* and Byatt's goal to write a novel in which "there was no gap between words and things" (*PM* 16). All his adult life, Roland had been taught that "language was essentially inadequate," and he had believed it until now (473). In the end, however, it is Roland's movement from critic to poet, from a position as a mere observer of life and art to a participant--a *creator* of sorts--that marks a turning point in the narrative.

Roland's decision to write poetry emerges from the energy and immediacy with which language suddenly appears to have become infused for him. As Byatt explains, "natures such as Roland's are at their most alert and heady when reading is violently yet steadily alive" (470). By calling attention to Roland's love of the written word, Byatt brings her novel full circle, from its beginning in the London Library with the discovery about Ash, to the novel's conclusion with another life-altering rereading of the poet. On a fundamental level, *Possession*--as all of Byatt's novels, to one degree or another--is about what it means to be a reader, or as Kelly puts it: "Rather than a description of reading, *Possession*...is an enactment of reading" (Kelly 95). Flegel, on the other hand, sees the novel as an "enchantment" of reading (424), its fairy tale motifs representative of a particular type of reading Byatt wishes to encourage, one with a "strong emotional response" (413) and a visible "juxtaposition between the past and the present" (424). Critical reading, the novel suggests, is only one type of reading. *Possession* reminds us that there are other readings which may be more vital, more perceptive, and more productive.

Awakening the morning after Maud and Roland become lovers, they are aware of a strange vegetal smell in the air, tart and green, like the smell of "bitten apples," a reminder that this is "Eden after the fall...after the discoveries of Freud, but it is

nevertheless a rejuvenated paradise" (Flegel 425). Having finally satisfied their curiosity about the lives of Ash and LaMotte and experienced sexual desire for themselves, rather than simply reading about it in the lives of others as they had been doing, Roland and Maud are in a position to "move beyond their critical anxieties" (Flegel 425), and to undertake new ways of reading and writing, such as Roland begins to demonstrate: "an hour ago there had been no poems, and now they came like rain" (475).

Throughout this discussion of *Possession*, I have felt it necesary to call attention to "the reader" on numerous occasions, because of the text's determination to remind us that we are very much participants in Byatt's writing. There is little opportunity to forget that the reader's responses and his/ her willingness to "play along" are important factors in whether or not a particular reader will find Byatt's fiction a tiresome exercise or a stimulating and exciting game.

CHAPTER 4: *Angels and Insects*: Metamorphosis and Marginal Beings

Recovering the past is always a complex endeavor in Byatt's novels, as is the case in *Angels and Insects* (1992), a book composed of two novellas which, like *Possession*, are set in Victorian England. The first, *Morpho Eugenia*, is an exploration of sex, class, and Victorian domesticity, and it takes as its theme the disparity between what is seen and understood on the surface and what actually transpires beneath. The second, *The Conjugial Angel*, is concerned with spiritual crisis and the spiritualism craze of the mid nineteenth century. Although both novellas are capable of being read as separate and complete works of fiction, they gain in depth and in interest by being read together, as they were evidently intended. The first indication of a connection between the two novellas is the book's literal frame: the cover. Both front and back of the hardcover edition show a faceless, stylized angel figure, in glowing jewel-like colors reminiscent of stained glass, with a golden halo or sun behind its head. In the lower left corner of the illustration is a butterfly. The angel itself, with its large spread wings and narrow body, resembles nothing so much as a large insect. Together and individually the two texts examine humankind's struggle to reconcile the material world, as represented by the insects in *Morpho Eugenia*, with our longing for spiritual transcendence, as explored particularly in *The Conjugial Angel*. What begins as an introduction to the terrestrial world of the ant colony eventually metamorphoses into the butterfly of the second novella and its traditional association with transition, hope, and resurrection. Moreover, both novellas continue to reflect Byatt's interest in "the spaces between"--specifically, between life and death, and the seen and the unseen--and the principal characters in *Angels and Insects* reflect this interest, being uniquely possessed of the ability to move between social and spiritual worlds in unexpected

ways.

Unfortunately, *Angels and Insects* has failed to achieve the popular recognition of *Possession,* and this for several reasons. "Pedantic, preachy, repetitive" is how Ann Diamond describes it in her January 23, 1993 review of the novel in *The Montreal Gazette.* Although I disagree with Diamond's comment that Byatt writes as though "the 20th century never happened," there is some truth in her observation that there is "a strange, hermetic feel to her world, as if nothing existed outside the text." Diamond probably derives her impression from the fact that whereas *Possession* continually shifts focus from the twentieth century to the nineteenth and back again, *Morpho Eugenia* and *The Conjugial Angel* are centered entirely upon the Victorians. However, the mere fact of setting these two novellas in the nineteenth century does not prevent Byatt from drawing a number of parallels between the present and the past.

Angels and Insects, like *Possession*, falls under the category of historiographic metafiction, with its reliance on parody, pastiche, intertextuality, and a confrontation of the "paradoxes of fictive/ historical representation" (Hutcheon, *Poetics* 106). Unlike *The Conjugial Angel*, whose characters are given strong psychological motives for their behavior, *Morpho Eugenia* proves less interested in character development. As Byatt acknowledged during an interview, characterization became secondary to the many ideas she was trying to communicate in this particular novella: "[O]nce you got all that in place, the characters didn't have an awful lot of character. [*Morpho Eugenia*] is driven by the story and the metaphor" (*Salon* 1996). Byatt also departs from traditional realist conventions in the structure of *Morpho Eugenia,* which consists of the principal narrative interspersed with fairy tales and detailed segments describing insect behavior. Each of these secondary narratives functions similarly to the fairy tale sections in *Possession* and *Babel Tower* as both an indirect comment on the

principal narrative and an interruption of it. The result is a text which self-consciously exhibits its constructedness at every turn. While *Morpho Eugenia* may be read as a parody of the Victorian novel, as well as a criticism of mid-nineteenth-century English society and an exploration of the politics of race and domination, the metafictionality of *Morpho Eugenia* asserts that it is a text which is not designed to speak only about itself, or to expose the flaws and foibles of the Victorians simply to enable the reader to feel comfortably superior to them. Neither *Morpho Eugenia*, *The Conjugial Angel*, or *Possession* aim to foster the idea that history is a process of "becoming" whereby the past has been outgrown and conveniently left behind (Benedict 120). Instead, Byatt's Victorian novels appear to diminish the distance between past and present, hinting at the possibility that the ancestral Other is actually a facet of our contemporary selves.

Morpho Eugenia

"We are like the voyagers of a ship, casting off for new seas, distant shores." --Walt Whitman

The story begins with a description of a formal ball from the third-person perspective of William Adamson, who has recently returned from a ten-year exploration of the Amazon jungle in search of rare and unusual insects. Upon his return, he is hired by the wealthy Harald Alabaster, who invites him to live in Alabaster's mansion, Bredely Hall, for the time it will take to catalogue the specimens Adamson and other travelers have sent the elderly collector. The year is 1859 or 1860.

From Adamson's position as outsider and observer, he is able to draw some interesting conclusions about class relations within the microcosm of the manor house. What begins as a desirable arrangement for the unemployed naturalist and butcher's son soon becomes a trial, as Adamson is constantly made aware of his inferior status within the Alabaster household--a sense of inferiority which persists even after he weds Eugenia, the eldest daughter. We are told that "[i]f 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" (75). Feeling lonely and displaced, Adamson finds himself spending more and more time in the company of Matty Crompton, a sort of governess and companion for the Alabaster children, "whose status in the household, he sometimes ruefully thought, had the same uncertainty as his own," for he and Mattie "were both poor, both semi-employed, both, now, relations of the masters but not masters" (75-6).

The domestic sphere as reflecting and reinforcing a larger social hierarchy in Victorian England is the subject of Anne McClintock's social history *Imperial Leather* (1995), which examines the roots of British imperialism and its impact not only upon

the colonies, but upon all aspects of English society, including domestic space. Early in her study, McClintock cites the etymology of "the verb domesticate [as being] akin to dominate....Until 1964, however, the verb to domesticate also carried as one of its meanings the action 'to civilize'" (35). As in *Possession,* where the many shades of the verb "to possess" form a constant play on the novel's themes, so here the notions of "domination" and "domestication," though not actually spoken of by any of the characters, resonate through this text at every turn. For example, as a member of the lower classes, Adamson is expected to conform to the Alabaster way of life. Indeed, Eugenia in particular expects him to erase his past and all his familial ties, due to an arrogant assumption that her interests and her family's position automatically supersede anything he had ever known before. Unfortunately for Adamson, he is denied the pleasure of "watching class lines dissolve within marriage" (Armstrong 52), and is relegated to a kind of purgatory of dependence wherein he finds himself imprisoned. In addition, because of his class and the years he spent among the natives, Adamson must be, as it were, "re-civilized," thereby placing him in the unusual position of representing for the postmodern reader both the colonized and, through his role as white explorer and appropriator, the British colonizer. The irony of *Morpho Eugenia* is that the apparently random world of the ant colonies Adamson studies appear, in many ways, more unified and industrious than that of their human counterparts.

It is commonplace to speak of Victorian society as essentially patriarchal and the home as the feminine domain, and Byatt reproduces this familial structure in *Morpho Eugenia*, but with an unexpected variation. Dominating the Alabaster household while her husband, at a physical and emotional remove from the rest of the family, writes his book, is the Lady Alabaster, a corpulent, sedentary woman frequently

compared to the large and glossy queen ants Adamson researches in his spare time. She is a far cry from the demure and selfless Angel in the House of popular Victorian mythology, yet the implications of the gendered space she inhabits are not lost on the reader: while her husband pursues his lofty studies of science and religion, Lady Alabaster and her daughters are forced to confine their interests, as did many Victorian women, to what Fowles refers to as the circumscribed world of "dress and home and children" (*The French Lieutenant's Woman* 107). Neveretheless, despite her "immobile [and] vacantly amiable presence [Lady Alabaster] was a source of power in the household" (27), Adamson notes, and it is she upon whom the smooth operation of the large establishment appears to depend. What Adamson does not seem to observe is the dual nature of Lady Adamson's position because of the regal bondage in which she cannot be said to live, but merely to exist.

Eugenia, who might be called the primary breeder in the family, also possesses a form of class power which Adamson is incapable of matching. When he protests against Eugenia's intention to name their son after her brother Edgar, whom he detests (wishing, instead, "to give his child a name from his own family, however undistinguished"), his wife is quick to remind him of his dependence and social inferiority: "'I do not see why,' said Eugenia..."'*We* are your family, and I think you must own we have been good to you'" (72)--as if he were a pampered servant and not her husband. In due course, the child is baptised with the hated name, in spite of Adamson's objections. As for Edgar Alabaster, he is a predictable composite of every wicked rich man's son ever described in 18th- and 19th-century fiction. Hunting, riding, drinking, fathering illegitimate children, and carelessly assaulting the female domestics in his father's house with no other thought in his head besides a selfish desire for pleasure, Edgar is a one-dimensional brute who offers no surprises. Shortly

before Adamson's marriage to Eugenia, a drunken Edgar attempts to provoke him to "fight like a man" by calling him "vulgar" and "underbred" and "no good match" for his sister" (62). The incident demonstrates a clash of values between Adamson, whose intellect and scientific experience align him with the rationality of men like Charles Darwin, and Edgar, an anachronism even in mid-nineteenth-century England, who is the representative of a shallow, heartless type not unlike Arthur Huntingdon in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall,* or Mr. B in *Pamela.* Despite Edgar's many loathsome habits, he is no more than a stereotype, a mere scarecrow to whom the reader is free to transfer all his or her class loathing. Consequently, Edgar's marked and unoriginal resemblance to many familiar literary rogues necessarily diminishes his interest and effectiveness in this novel.

"'One of the dangers of exploring the past," McClintock cautions, is in "accepting fictional portraits quite literally as documentary portrayals" (161). To support her point, McClintock draws upon research by Patricia Branca that suggests that middle-class Victorian women were not the ladies of leisure they have generally been assumed to be, but were actually engaged in a "laborious and time-consuming *character role,*" to conceal work in order to appear "respectable" (161). The notion of role-playing and subterfuge in the home has its echoes in *Morpho Eugenia.* However, when reading Byatt's novella, it is wise to keep McClintock's warning in mind, particularly in view of Byatt's description of Eugenia, which is made to correspond to the familiar image of the Victorian woman as delicate, idle, and "fretfully preoccupied by trifles," her home an "airless hothouse of Victorian domesticity" (McClintock 160). While it is true that Eugenia, as a member of the "tiny, truly leisured elite" (McClintock 161), would possess the means (or her father would) to employ the number of servants necessary to live in complete idleness, *Morpho Eugenia* perpetuates the tired image of the

Victorian woman as little more than an ornament. Moreover, Byatt's equation of Eugenia with the corpulent and cosseted queen ant whose only function is to reproduce is disturbing from a feminist perspective, because, as she does with Edgar, Byatt is drawing upon literary types that have lost their power and originality. It would appear, indeed, that Byatt is using the stereotypes in order to subvert them later by involving the characters in a sexual situation that would not have been approached by any mainstream or "respectable" Victorian writer. In so doing, Byatt creates a parody of Victorian literary conventions while acknowledging the dichotomy between the public and the private self. Unfortunately, Byatt's failure to create interesting or engaging characters means that though her message is communicated, it is without a corresponding emotional appeal.

When depicting the daily lives of the servant class, Byatt attempts to expose the physical reality of domestic service in a rich man's house. Like the drones whom they resemble, the servants "come like a cloud of young wasps from under the roof of the house, pale-faced and blear-eyed" (49):

> [t]he servants were always busy, and mostly silent. They whisked away behind their own doors into mysterious areas into which he had never penetrated, though he met them at every turning in those places in which his own life was led. They poured his bath, they opened his bed, they served his meals and removed his dishes. They took away his dirty clothes and brought back clean ones. They were as full of urgent purpose as the children of the house were empty of it. (74)

The culmination of Adamson's observations comes with his meeting of Amy, the young housemaid who destroys the insects that overrun the scullery each night. She too has been taught the necessity of concealed labor, as she rises early to perform her

disagreeable task "before the gentry gets out of bed" (75). Undernourished and overworked, Amy gains Adamson's sympathy, and he sets her to the task of watching the ant colonies for him on her days off, enabling her to earn a few pennies in the process. Unfortunately, as her health improves, Amy becomes the target of Edgar's sexual advances, and although she is "no more than a child" (74), he has no qualms about exerting his power over her. When Adamson catches Edgar forcing himself on Amy in the scullery and attempts to stop him, Edgar coolly accuses him of being a hanger-on, arguing that since Adamson does not pay the servants' wages, he has no right to interfere. Technically, of course, Edgar does not pay the servants' wages either, but the type of behavior he exibits was not uncommon among employers of domestic servants, regardless of whether those employers were members of the upper or middle classes. Francoise Barret-Ducrocq's study of sexuality among the working classes, *Love in the Time of Victoria* (1992), discusses the not-infrequent tendency among some employers to make use of their female domestics for sexual purposes. Barret-Ducrocq observes that, "[a]lmost invariably, when [the masters] are forced to acknowledge what had happened [as when the servant becomes pregnant], they offered compensation in money, showing at the very least that domestic service and sexual services had become confused in the master's mind" (49). The same proves true of Edgar, demonstrating that certain stereotypes of "the rogue" are not without a basis in reality. When Adamson discovers that a pregnant Amy has been dismissed without a reference and is living in the workhouse, he angrily confronts Edgar with the news. Not surprisingly, Edgar responds casually to his accusations with the remark that, more than likely, his mother will send Amy "some sort of present" (146), leaving Adamson to deal with an "inhibiting shame at his own powerlessness and impotence" (147). With little money of his own and fears that any effort to help Amy might be

misconstrued by Eugenia and her parents, Adamson "wavered and did nothing" (147).

Part of the reason for Adamson's hesitation to try to assist Amy is a guilty awareness of his own questionable behavior with the native women he encountered in the Amazon. He asks himself: "Here and there in Brazil, it might well be, were pale-eyed, dark-skinned infants with his blood in their veins, to whose support he did not contribute, who knew nothing of him. Who was he to judge so righteously?" (147). Adamson's weakness, or tolerance, however one might choose to see it, is the result of a "double consciousness" that haunts him since his return to England wherein "[e]verything he experienced brought up a contrary image from *out there* " (24), and he finds himself ever the watcher, never the participant, in all that he is involved with. In the words of Herman Melville's narrator in *Typee* (1846), "I saw everything, but could comprehend nothing" (244). Neither England nor the Amazon feels entirely real to Adamson: both are, in many ways, equally foreign. In such a role, Adamson finds himself disinclined to exercise moral judgment upon his own actions. Although Amy is dismissed from the novel at this point, she is by no means discharged from the reader's imagination. In making Amy's life visible to the contemporary audience, when the author could have continued to conceal her, like the Victorians, among the dirty pots and pans of the scullery, Byatt gives her a voice and an identity that is not soon forgotten.

It may seem at first that Adamson's sexual encounters with native women, whose racial diversity is eroticized in his recollection of "various golden, amber and coffee-skinned creatures he had loved on hot nights" (106), are no better and no worse than Edgar's "sowing of wild oats" with the housemaids. In the novel, Adamson's dalliance in the Amazon jungle with "velvet-brown ladies of doubtful virtue and no virtue" (5) is made to seem far less reprehensible than Edgar's casual assault

of frightened maidservants, presumably because Adamson's mistresses were at least *willing*. The narrator also dwells, often ironically, upon Eugenia's pure white flesh which Adamson mistakenly associates with physical and mental purity, while the juxtaposition of the Amazon dances with the English ballroom undercuts the latter, diminishing the distance between civilization and the primitive:

> [Adamson] shifted himself inside Lionel's dress suit and reflected--he was, after all, a scientist and an observer--that these dances were designed to arouse his desire in exactly this way, however demure the gloves, however sweetly innocent the daily life of the young woman in his arms. He remembered the palm-wine dance...[and h]e remembered being grabbed and nuzzled and rubbed and cuddled with great vigour by women with brown breasts glistening with sweat and oil, and with shameless fingers....Nothing he did now seemed to happen without this double vision, of things seen and done otherwise, in another world. (6-7)

The English ball represents here what Richard Lehan refers to in his discussion of Conrad's *The Heart of Darkness* as "the primitive forces that civilization still employs but tries to conceal" (*City in Literature* 101), and Adamson's memories allude to the familiar Victorian association of people of color with a proclivity for sexual immorality (McClintock 48). As Adamson observes to himself, the hidden agenda of the ball is to arouse male desire, albeit for the purpose of encouraging the young men to marry. What is not dealt with directly in the story, however, are the "velvet-brown ladies" and "coffee-skinned creatures" who cast their own indistinct shadows in the text. Individualized in Adamson's memory not by personality but by skin tone, they form a disturbing half-presence in the text. The highly-charged binaries of whiteness and darkness, purity and impurity, master and servant that are continually foregrounded are inescapably present for the reader, who is made aware of the ways in which

domination of different kinds is concealed in the society that the narrative seeks to represent.

In *Morpho Eugenia* Byatt confronts Adamson's gradual, if imperfect, understanding of the small cruelties and larger injustices of English society and domestic life. However, his inability to individualize his relations with the women of the Amazon represents, for many postmodern readers, a significant omission on Adamson's part. The difficulty embedded in *Morpho Eugenia* lies in the extent to which the text fails to signal a distinction between Adamson's blindspots and, possibly, Byatt's own. While such a distinction may, for some, be neither necessary nor desirable, it becomes a matter of interest, given the nature of Byatt's exploration in *Angels and Insects* of the spaces between the seen and the unseen, the known and the unknown, for anyone acquainted with the body of her fiction to analyze the implications of all that may be interpreted as having been left unspoken or concealed.

One might reasonably argue that the demands of the narrative (the story takes place in England, not the Amazon jungle) preclude the necessity of imagining the participants in Adamson's foreign sexual adventures beyond what has already been expressed. And this is undoubtedly true. Yet there is perhaps another reason for the scarcity of people of color in Byatt's fiction, which is that she is a writer who is primarily concerned with the Self, not with the Other. Over the years, Byatt has demonstrated that the world she knows best and which clearly interests her most is the relatively insular world of the English university or college, and her protagonists are usually writers, scholars, and students of English literature. That is not to say that Byatt is, by any means, unaware of another world outside the ivory tower. In *Babel Tower* , for example, Frederica explores London's shabbier districts as a single mother with little money. At one point, Leo is befriended by a slightly older black boy who lives in the

neighborhood and commits small acts of vandalism. Interestingly, Frederica's reaction to this friendship involves a complex set of emotions:

> Frederica feels an emotion about Clement that she dare not describe to anyone. She is pleased that he and Leo *really like each other*, two boys playing and talking together. She is pleased that she herself likes Clement so much, laughs at his jokes, listens to his stories. She is pleased that her son has a black friend. She is also pleased because before Clement was Leo's friend, Leo had been knocked over by-accident-on purpose once or twice, playing in the square. (391-92)

Frederica is clearly somewhat surprised that she is comfortable with Clement, and she accepts Clement's self-assigned role of bodyguard to his smaller, more delicate friend, Leo, but Byatt's emphasis on Frederica's self-conscious approval of Clement because he is black suggests her hope that he may impart to her child Leo the value of racial integration. This well-intentioned desire points toward the obvious--that Frederica herself has not managed to befriend any of her black neighbors. While Byatt could not entirely avoid including some characters of color in *Babel Tower*, given the London setting of a large portion of the novel, the absence of other races in the art school where Frederica teaches literature or in any other academic setting in Byatt's novels hints at curious omissions in Byatt's artistic awareness.

Byatt's handling of non-white characters in *Possession* is even more pointed, given that there are only two: the security guard who patrols the corridors of the Ash Factory and is described as a "jingling warder, her black face severe" (324); and a beautiful Indian woman whose job it is to interview Professor Blackadder on the cultural and literary significance of the Ash-LaMotte correspondence. Blackadder immediately feels at ease in the company of Ms. Patel, who wears a traditional sari and "smelled of something lightly exotic, sandalwood, cinnamon? She smiled on

Blackadder and made him feel, briefly, wholly welcome and desired." Moments later, she is asking him to tell her, "'Why we should still care about Randolph Henry Ash?'" "'If we care about history at all--,'" Blackadder begins. "'*English* history--'" exclaims Ms. Patel, pointedly. This conversation is followed by Blackadder's irritable, unspoken question: "Why must the English now always apologise? he asks himself" (400-01). The encounter between these two characters has several issues operating at the same time: first, there is the obvious meeting of East and West, former colonizer and colonized subject, with Ms. Patel behaving disarmingly as the desirable, exotic "Other," though, she also represents youth to Blackadder's age, and the lure of the glib and facile television sound-byte in contrast to genuine scholarship. And then, there is evidence of exasperation, whether Blackadder's or the narrator's, with the issue of ascribing historical blame and recognizing its social and political implications. Earlier in the novel, Roland complains to Maud about a similar situation: "'It's exhausting. When everything's a deliberate political stance. Even if it's interesting'" (271).

Even when Byatt is trying to avoid a "deliberate political stance" because of her conviction that fiction should be able to explore the places where political belief cannot go, and look at both sides of the issues with some degree of impartiality (Byatt, *Salon* 6), she nevertheless creates narratives which necessitate a political response, as in her description in *Angels and Insects* of Adamson's activities in the Amazon. A mild and gentle man, Adamson is nevertheless engaged in what amounts to a plundering of the "dark places of the earth" for samples of rare and unusual insect life. However, there is no hint that Adamson regards his activities as resembling anything as crude or violent as plundering. A sincere man, Adamson evidently believes himself to be engaged in valuable scientific research, although it is not only knowledge that he is in quest of, since he makes his living by interesting wealthy men like Harald Alabaster in

his finds. For Mr. Alabaster, the animal and insect specimens he acquires to supply his vast, private collection very likely represent prestige: he is making use of Adamson in order to be able to pride himself on being cognizant of the most recent scientific discoveries. Neither Adamson nor Alabaster seems aware that this quest for specimens has either ecological or political implications. In *Possession*, Byatt had explored the Victorian mania for natural history and its harmful effects on the environment through Randolph Henry Ash's scientific enthusiasm. Like many Victorian amateurs, such as George Henry Lewes, for example, with his cruel and sickening experiments on frogs (Gilmour 143), Ash, "in search as he put it of 'the origins of life and the nature of generation' was unwittingly, with his crashing boots covered with liquid india-rubber, as much as with his scalpel and killing jar, dealing death to the creatures he found so beautiful, to the seashore whose pristine beauty he helped to wreck" (248). In the same way, there is a sense of wasted effort that surrounds Adamson's endeavor, for after years of work, all but a few of his specimens are lost in a hasty exodus from the Amazon and subsequent shipwreck. When he arrives at the Alabasters,' he is met with the sight of a saddle-room (24) half-full of crates and tea chests overflowing with animal and insect specimens of all shapes and sizes, many of them moldering or turned to dust, like a cornucopia of bountiful death.

The superfluity of Adamson's existence in Bredely Hall is finally too much to be borne, so that the discovery of his wife and her brother Edgar in *flagrante delicto* provides a sudden, empowering release from his self-enforced bondage. William's first impulse is to escape, to flee to the Amazon, but instead, he dresses for dinner as usual and gathers with the rest of the family to play alphabet cards. After sending him a card reading 'incest', Mattie Crompton teases him with the casual observation that "Things are not what they seem" (153). Later, beckoning him to her bedroom after the

household is asleep, she explains the source of her knowledge about Edgar and Eugenia:

> 'There are people in houses, between the visible inhabitants and the invisible, largely invisible to *both*, who can know a very great deal, or nothing, as they choose. I choose to know about some things, and not to know about others. I have become interested in knowing things that concern you.' (155)

Mattie further astonishes Adamson by informing him that she has already arranged for two berths on Captain Papagay's ship to the Amazon. Having sold her book of fairy tales and provided herself with a small but independent income, she is prepared to face Adamson as a woman and an equal. Momentarily resentful at having the power of decision taken from his hands, Adamson attempts to dissuade her from her plan, since the jungle is "no place for a woman." He has failed to recognize the totality of her transformation from the sexless and self-effacing Matty of old to the strong and determined person standing before him demanding to be recognized, and he fumbles over her name: " 'Miss Crompton, Matty--'" he begins. "'My name,' she says firmly, 'is Matilda. Up here at night there is no Matty. Only Matilda'" (157). Whereas Adamson is always "cursed with double vision" which he never knows quite how to resolve, his own position ambiguous and uncomfortable, Mattie, one of the household's "invisible" members, has become skillful in negotiating her two worlds as well as maintaining her individuality and an identity distinct from the one that has been imposed upon her.

The novella concludes with William Adamson and Matilda Crompton, a nineteenth-century Adam and Eve, standing side-by-side on the deck of a ship, regarding the sea again with a kind of double vision, in a liminal state between England and the Amazon:

> They breathe salt air, and hope, and their blood swims with the excitement of the future, and this is a good place to leave them, on the crest of a wave, between the ordered green fields and hedgerows, and the coiling, striving mass of forest along the Amazon shore. (160)

Having left Eugenia to her own devices in England, William and Matilda set out for what is meant to represent their new world, and in doing so, they appear ready to cast off the bondage of class and convention. Just then, Captain Papagay brings Adamson a butterfly that has been found in the ship's rigging:

> Matilda observes to William and Captain Papagay that the wings are still dusty with life. 'It fills me with emotion,' she says. I do not know whether it is more fear, or more hope. It is so fragile, and so easily crushed, and nowhere in reach of where it was going. And yet it is still alive, and bright, and so surprising, rightly seen.' (160)

The figures on the ship leaving civilization behind them contain too many implications for the contemporary reader to ignore. We, of course, lack the innocence and naivete of William and Matty, knowing only too well the dangers of romanticizing the primitive. Yet there is an earnestness about this last passage that softens the criticism implied in the parody. The butterly clinging tenaciously to the rigging, its wings tattered and torn, is a symbol analogous to the orderly and hard-working ants of the novel and a metaphor for life and for the human spirit, while an image of teeming and undirected existence is provided by the wide black sky, "glittering and slippery with suns and moons and worlds, greater and smaller, like spattered seed," or the ocean below, "presenting a kind of reverse image of the lavish star-soup" (159). Dwarfed by the sea and the sky, William and Matilda seem no more powerful or in control of their fate than

any of the other life forms swimming beneath their feet, though in rejecting the more destructive aspects of their own society, they have opted to become part of the natural world and the promise of renewal it contains. As Captain Papagay observes to the young couple beside him, "'That is the main thing...[t]o be alive. As long as you are alive, everything is surprising, rightly seen.' And the three of them look out with renewed interest at the points of light in the dark around them" (160).

The Conjugial Angel

"Ah, do not ghosts prove--even rumours, whispers, stories of ghosts--that the past clings, that we are always going back....?" **(*Waterland* 89)**

When we leave William and Matilda on the Calypso with Captain Papagay, they are "rushing through the mid-Atlantic night, as far from land as she will be at any point on this voyage" (159), and all three of them demonstrate a singular hopefulness which is heightened by the discovery of the butterfly, "so fragile, and so easily crushed." Ten years later, at the beginning of *The Conjugial Angel*, Lilias Papagay is mourning her husband, the Captain, who "had been drowned ten years ago, in the Antarctic, or thereabout, or so she believed, since the Calypso had never been seen since, and nor had any of its crew" (168). Captain Papagay forms a clever link between these two novellas, though he inhabits a place neither in this world not out of it; but of William and Matilda we learn nothing more. Did the Captain deliver them safely, or are we to assume that they were drowned or cast away when the Calypso was wrecked? It appears that Byatt has deliberately withheld a conclusive ending in order to emphasize the notion that our fate is out of our hands, that total certainty will always be denied us, just as it is denied to her characters.

What is certain is that *The Conjugial Angel* expands the themes present in the first novella, skilfully joining literary biography, the supernatural, and Swedenborgian angelology with a typically Byattian self-consciousness about writing and the creative process. In *Morpho Eugenia*, Byatt subverts her readers' expectations of the nineteenth-century novel by populating her book with twentieth-century stereotypes about the Victorians which she eventually topples as she plays with the notion that nothing is quite what it seems. Complementarily, in *The Conjugial Angel*, she explores the slippage between the seen and the unseen, surface and depth, the

conscious self versus the unconscious, but she does so this time through the tropes of spiritualism, religious crisis, and the legendary relationship of the Tennysons to their beloved Arthur Hallam.

Byatt's title, *Conjugial Love*, is derived from Emmanuel Swedenborg's book of the same name, and her deliberate use of "conjugial," instead of "conjugal," is a reference to Swedenborg's coinage in relation to his belief in the marriage of good and truth between the angel-father and the angel-mother and its result--heavenly conjugial love (181). A scientist who believed that he was able to commune with the angels, Swedenborg (1688-1772) "established a theory of correspondences between earthly and spiritual life, one aspect of which was the proposition that every man and woman had a soul mate, or spiritual affinity" (Owen 35), and his controversial teachings form the background of the sections of Byatt's novella dealing with spiritualism. The desire of Byatt's characters to contact the dead is never mocked or ridiculed but is depicted instead as a very human--if sometimes misguided--reaction to prolonged or unresolved bereavement. On the other hand, the repeated references to Swedenborg's teachings and his intimate, materialist knowledge of the afterlife is always intended to be read ironically. In fact, nearly all the references to Swedenborg are introduced by the pompous and irascible Mr. Hawke, a regular sitter at Mrs Papagay's seances, who entertains lustful thoughts about Mrs Papagay while implicitly trying to legitimize his desires by quoting Swedenborg at every turn. The contrast between the spiritual and the material is displayed with comic effect during these seances, with Mr Hawke pressing hot knees against an ambivalent Mrs Papagay while Mrs Jesse's pug dog belches and breaks wind at their feet.

Like the watchful Matty Crompton who also inhabits unseen spaces, Mrs Papagay, in her role as medium at the seances held by Emily Tennyson Jesse, once

affianced to Arthur Hallam, observes the goings-on of her social superiors and arrives at her own conclusions about them. At the same time, Mrs Papagay's interest in the after-life generates a connection between this world and the next. Reflecting on her reasons for becoming a medium, Mrs Papagay makes a telling admission:

> For what had lain in wait for her, a dubious widow, in straitened circumstances, but constriction and tedium? She could not bear to sit and gossip of bonnets and embroidery and the eternal servant problem, she wanted life. And this traffic with the dead was the best way to know, to observe, to love the living, not as they were politely over teacups, but in their secret selves, their deepest desires and fears. They revealed themselves to her, to Lilias Papagay, as they never would have done in usual society. (171)

In this pre-Freudian setting, the seance acts as a therapeutic session for the participants, while the medium creates an environment wherein the bereaved may freely address the source of their grief. The revelation of the sitters' "secret selves" is of great interest to Mrs Papagay, who takes special pleasure in observing individuals without the mask of convention. Alex Owen in *The Darkened Room: Women, Power and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England* (1990) goes further in her assertion that "[w]hat the seance promised was the ritualised violation of cultural norms" (203). By adopting a psychoanalytical approach, Owen reveals the ways in which "spiritualist practice brought to light the hidden and repressed components of the psyche in a series of spirit representations" (204). While Owen focuses largely on the medium as the figure undergoing the most radical transformation during the seance, she sees the seance room itself as a "distinct realm governed by different rules of conduct" (202), where unconventional behavior which would have been abhorred in polite society is tolerated or "forgiven" within the context of the seance.

Mrs Papagay, like most mediums of her day--and like most protagonists of

historiographic metafiction--is herself an uncommon individual. Hutcheon notes that "the protagonists of historiographic metafiction are anything but proper types: they are the ex-centrics, the marginalized, the peripheral figures of fictional history" (*Poetics* 113-14). Most of Byatt's characters can be described as outsiders, "ex-centrics," and highly individualistic people with no interest in conforming to the status quo. The same is true of the characters in *Morpho Eugenia*. At a time when respectable women were expected to maintain a decorous silence in polite society, Mrs Papagay organizes seances and communes with spirits. Despite her rather conventional outward appearance, she is an unconventional woman by mid-nineteenth-century standards, and her relationship with Captain Papagay, set against Victorian norms of behavior, is transgressive in its crossing of racial and linguistic boundaries. Childless (whether by accident or design, we do not know), Mrs Papagay easily adapts to the demands of mediumship and enjoys considerable independence. While her marriage to a sea captain is not unusual in itself, her reasons for marrying him are. He is a "master mariner of mixed racial origin" acquainted with a smattering of many languages (hence the name Papagay with its connection to the Spanish *papagayo*, or "parrot"). She claims to have married him chiefly "because, like Othello and Desdemona, he entranced her with tales of his deeds and sufferings in faraway places" (168). As in *Othello*, where Desdemona's attraction is attributed to stories of the dangers through which the Moor had passed, and her daring wish "[t]hat heaven had made her such a man" (I. iii. 162-63), it is Captain Papagay's words that gain his wife Lilias's attention. It would be difficult, however, to dismiss the element of their attraction that is based on both Othello's and Captain Papagay's racial and cultural otherness. Despite their different backgrounds, Captain Papagay and his wife are both consummate story tellers who know no impediment to communication. He, with

speech that is a creative mixture of English and foreign tongues, and she, with words that challenge barriers between life and death, read like an embodiment of a postmodernist text that defies a master narrative, celebrates diversity, and is rich with intertexts.

Mrs Papagay would appear to confirm in fictional form Owen's most interesting claim that "[i]t was spiritualist practice, and in particular all that was implied by the spiritualist seance, which effected a truly radical challenge to cultural orthodoxy and the stunning subversion of the nineteenth-century feminine ideal" (202). Subverting the nineteenth-century feminine ideal is, of course, partly what Byatt is engaged in doing in both *Possession* and in the whole volume of *Angels and Insects,* where emphasis is on the transformational powers of female creativity and sexuality, but as is the case with Matty Crompton (who writes a book that sets her free) and Christabel LaMotte, Lilias Papagay's true strength lies in her understanding of the power of language.

Given Mrs. Papagay's preoccupation with words, it is appropriate that upon finding herself alone and needing to earn a living she first turns to fiction writing. The results are unsatisfactory, for she discovers that "her skills in language were unequal to [the task], or the movement of the pen in purposeful writing inhibited her--for whatever reason, what she wrote was stilted, saccharine rubbish" (168). Not being one to give up easily, she becomes interested in automatic writing which she masters quickly and incorporates into her seances, though despite her enjoyment of the activity, there is "a moment of fear when her hand began to move, without any volition on her part" (196). It is a sensation she likens to having been given a divining rod as a child and feeling the dead wood suddenly come to life with no direction or movement on her part, "[f]or pens," Mrs Papagay realizes, "could take over as hazel twigs

did....And the pen, the pen bucked and twisted between her passive fingers[,] and what letter-forming force" (197). Aside from the Freudian association of pens, penises and masculine privilege brought to our attention by Gilbert and Gubar (1979), the automatic writing Mrs Papagay engages in, with its tendency to begin as "a kind of hither and thither searching among strings of words which as it were *hooked into each other*, until out of the scribbling rose a message or a face" (197), is analogous to the creative process Byatt herself describes in her *Salon* interview with Laura Miller (1996):

> Things just sort of rise up in your consciousness and then after a bit you can go back and see where they came from....Nevertheless, you get very tight metaphors hurtling their way through whole books. I find myself noticing that something has worked after it's worked. (3-4)

Mrs Papagay, "a great weaver of narratives from tenuous threads of looks, words and feelings," fulfils the role of the self-conscious writer familiar in Byatt's fiction. However, Byatt implies that the sense of being out of control which automatic writing engenders leads to a form of transcendence in the writer where patterns and metaphors "mysteriously" appear from what was once fragmented or incomplete.

In addition to Mrs Papagay's automatic writing, she creates lively stories about her acquaintances in an attempt to satisfy her curiosity about the hidden details of ordinary lives. Formed from her imagination and by no means supernatural in origin, these narratives prompt her to ask herself "whether other people told themselves stories in this way in their heads, whether everyone made up everyone else, living and dead, at every turn, whether this she knew about Mrs Hearnshaw could be called knowledge or lies, or both" (201). Mrs Papagay's words deliberately echo the metafictionalist's interest in a world "mediated through language" (Waugh 3), where

even the spirits summoned to Mrs. Jesse's salon are masterful manipulators of human discourse. However, in spite of her doubts about the veracity of the tales Mrs Papagay tells herself, she knows human nature well enough to realize that some stories seem more natural or more "true" than others (200). It soon becomes evident to the reader that William and Matty and Sophy Sheekhy and Mrs Papagay all have in common some form of "double vision" that enables them to perceive more than the average person, most likely because they are themselves liminal people who have been forced to adapt to being marginalized in some fashion. Consequently, what they see is what human nature would endeavor to conceal from others--an ability not dissimilar to the author's role as truth teller in Byatt's fiction.

Even when Mrs Papagay is in some doubt about the wisdom of continuing her private story-telling, she cannot help but believe that there is truth in these fictions. The same feeling seems to motivate the sometimes-skeptical seance sitters who, nonetheless, return again and again to Mrs Jesse's gatherings. All of them, including Tennyson himself, whose "In Memoriam" parallels the characters' varied efforts to cope with loss, demonstrate a "pressing and threatened desire to know that the individual soul [is] immortal" (184). Preparing for another seance to begin, Mrs Papagay reflects on the fear and emptiness that have gripped many Victorians, along with her belief that

> they could not go on if their lives were not of importance, of absolute importance, in some higher Eye which watched and made real. For if there were not death and judgement, if there were not heaven and hell, men were no better than creepy-crawlies, no better than butterflies and blowflies. (189)

While spiritualism may have provided the solace that some Victorians were looking for, the irony is that in their straining after incontrovertible evidence of an afterlife, they

require more and more material evidence of its existence--a fact that Mr Hawke also acknowledges when he states: "'We live in a material time, Captain Jesse--apart from metaphysics, the time is gone by when anything is made out of nothing'" (167). In fact, many mediums felt intense pressure to provide materializations--fully-formed spirit manifestations--for their sitters (Owen 48). When Mrs Papagay suggests that Sophy might do the same, the younger woman rejects the idea outright: "[The dead] didn't exist to perform circus tricks," Sophy maintains (170). For Sophy, the spirit world is not to be taken lightly. Owen explains the basic paradox that materialization represented for spiritualists and, by extension, for the characters of *The Conjugial Angel*:

> At one level what happened in a materialisation seance was, quite literally, a fleshing out of metaphorical representations of death. And yet, paradoxically, this fleshing out could occur only via a denial of carnality and bodily integrity. Spiritualist materialisation, the evocation of the physical manifestation of the spirit, re-enacted corporeality--and with it the erotic--in the very place (spirit) where both must be denied. A spirit was a figurative realisation of, and victory over, the harsh abstraction of death. But to have or to hold a spirit in any lasting or carnal sense was an impossibility. (222-23)

Death and the erotic are firmly linked in the minds of Alfred Tennyson, Emily Jesse, and Mrs Papagay. Even Sophy Sheekhy, "a pure vessel, cool" (191) and a woman seemingly immune to sexual desire, neverthless manages to arouse it in others, though she also possesses the ability to withdraw into an almost death-like state, leaving her body ice-cold to the touch, whenever she is approached sexually. For the others, there is evidence of a steady preoccupation with the dissolution of the corpse of the beloved. Mrs Papagay, for example, imagines her husband's body tumbling amongst the waves or "engorged" by a great sea creature (191), while Emily Jesse

recalls her constant preoccupation after Arthur Hallam's sudden death with the horror to be wreaked upon the decaying corpse. As the narrator explains, "You have to be touched to the quick, to touch dead flesh with the imagination and rest there, as she had done in all those months of illness and grief" (221). Of course, Tennyson's "In Memoriam" is also replete with yearnings for the physical presence of the departed friend, and "it was clear throughout [the poem] that [Alfred's] imagination had faced and probed what remained, or ceased recognisably to remain, of that much-loved form" (221).

If Hallam's body can be read as the site of desire for several characters, it can also be seen as an historical marker: everything of significance that occurs in the lives of Alfred and Emily dates from the moment of his death. Emily's grief is as intense and overwhelming as her brother's following Hallam's death, but in time, bereavement becomes mingled with guilt when she agrees to marry Captain Jesse. Unfortunately, even thirty years of married life cannot erase her sense of having betrayed the dead man she still appears to love. That Emily and Tennyson continue to dwell upon their memories of Arthur Hallam for so many years implies that their remembrances of his living body and their imaginings of his corpse have become not only something of an obsession, but also a "safe" focus of desire around which the mind is permitted to explore aspects of the beloved that would have been forbidden in his lifetime. For Tennyson, lengthy musings on the dead force him to examine the homoeroticism implicit in his love for Hallam, a topic that troubled nineteenth-century reviewers who questioned the "amatory tenderness" of "In Memoriam," and about which the historical Tennyson was always singularly defensive and evasive (Hammond 150). The Tennyson Byatt depicts is only too aware of the way his love for Hallam has been (mis)interpreted, and "for eight years he had squirted black vague ink at his dearest

[wife] Emily, like a retreating squid" (258), presumably to prevent her from dwelling on lines like those in section 59 where Hallam is associated with "Sorrow...No casual mistress, but a wife,/ My bosom-friend and half of life" (59, ll. 13-15).

In the same sexualized language that has Tennyson identifying himself with the phallic squid, Byatt describes him as fumbling suggestively with the buttons on his nightshirt while he compares the intensity of his love for his friend with his marriage to Emily Sellwood:

> He had found the act of love--he pushed the button in and out of its slit, and found another, still not the appropriate one, making a kind of loop of fabric--anyway it was long ago, now, Emily had long been an invalid, there was no need to think. He thought he had acquitted himself well enough, he thought he had. (260)

The disconnected phrases reflect Tennyson's disingeniousness as he draws closer to a personal revelation and then veers away abruptly, unconsciously startled into a near-confession by the sly image of the masculine "button" and the feminine "slit," the two of which he has so much difficulty aligning. Finally rejecting the conventional buttonhole (heterosexual intercourse), Tennyson tries to create one of his own with a loop of fabric, but ends up rejecting that alternative (homosexual intercourse) as being "still not the appropriate one." "Anyway," he tells himself, "it was long ago," and he takes obvious satisfaction in thinking himself "doubly cloaked, now, in the distracted vagueness of genius and in the thick cloak of the respectability of his Age, of which he had somehow or other become an exemplary citizen" (258).

The irony of Byatt's Tennyson is found in the juxtaposition between the frank, poetic avowal of his passion for another man and what Paul Hammond notes in *Love Between Men in English Literature* (1996) as the "obscurities of [his] thought and

style...which help him to evade convention to say things which would be crass or shocking [to a 19th-century audience] if translated back into some literal paraphrase" (154). In a dual act of revealing and concealing, the Tennyson of Byatt's novella essentially lays bare his homoerotic attachment to Arthur Hallam while maintaining a posture of innocence and naivete that the people close to him have striven to aid and protect.

In addition to Tennyson's musings on his relationship with Hallam, he also expresses fears in *The Conjugial Angel* that he has used his poem to "subserve his own gain, his own fame, or more subtly, making something fantastically beautiful out of the horror of Arthur's dissolution" (268). While contemplating his vision of the poem as matter molded into spirit, he is uplifted by the thought that, despite its flaws, and despite being "animal and abstract at once, matter moulded and shadowy" (271), "his poem was beautiful and alive and true, like an angel" (268). Unfortunately, the spirit of Arthur Hallam that haunts Sophy Sheekhy's bedroom has not been transformed by death, nor is he the "ministering spirit or divine messenger" (OED) that Mrs Papagay's little group is seeking. On the contrary, he is heavily and foully terrestrial, a "clay-cold...stinking mass" (274), a spectre instead of an angel. In a sense, the emotional and artistic use that has been made of Hallam after his death is akin to the scholarly vampirism that occurs in *Possession* : private memory has become public knowledge and memory has, unintentionally, perhaps, been turned into personal gain.

Hallam's ghost appears to be trapped in an agonizing half-life by the mourners who persist in idealizing him and turning him into a literary legend based more on the potential he seemed to represent than upon what he actually accomplished in his lifetime. The rank and troubled ghost within the parodic framework of Byatt's novella represents the failure of Tennyson's poem to do more than revere Hallam's memory

and communicate his grief and religious uncertainties. By extension, the fictional Tennyson's desire to recuperate the past becomes suspect when he endeavors to transform Hallam through his art into a demi-god and an angel, varnishing over the frailties and prejudices that beset the living man.

The evening Sophy encounters Hallam for the first and last time occurs when she is repeating one of her favorite poems to herself, D.G. Rossetti's "The Blessed Damozel" (1847), one of three poems (the other being "The Raven" (1845) and "In Memoriam") which are of especial significance in *The Conjugial Angel.* Each of these poems deals with uncertainties about whether or not we will be reunited with our loved ones after death--the same concerns shared by nearly all the characters in the novella. Section 41 of "In Memoriam" is particularly interesting in the relationship it bears to the elderly Tennyson and his sister Emily as they reassess their lives and what it means to them to have loved and been loved by Arthur Hallam. This earlier section of Tennyson's poem has him lamenting to Hallam's spirit that "thou art turned to something strange,/ And I have lost the links that bound/ Thy changes" (41, ll. 5-7). As the beloved gradually recedes from the speaker, he reaches for comfort toward the common hope that death will reunite him with his friend. At other times, "when sundown skirts the moor/ An inner trouble I behold, A spectral doubt which makes me cold,/ That I shall be thy mate no more" (41, ll. 17-20). The speaker in Poe's "The Raven" is also in mourning and gives entrance to doubt when he admits the mysterious raven into his chamber one dark December night. Struggling with his sorrow for a deceased young lady called Lenore, he begs the bird, who he believes is invested with supernatural powers, to tell him whether, "'within the distant Aidenn,/ [this soul] shall clasp a sainted maiden whom the angels name Lenore.'/ Quoth the Raven, 'Nevermore.'" His rage and despair at the bird's response is intense, and the poem

concludes with the speaker divested of all hope: "And my soul from out that shadow that lies floating on the floor/ Shall be lifted--nevermore!"

Rossetti's "The Blessed Damozel" is inspired by "The Raven" and goes even further than Tennyson or Poe in imagining a fleshly angel who manages to communicate with and be seen by her lover on earth, and spends her time praying that the two of them will soon meet again in heaven. Michael Wheeler notes Rossetti's unconventional depiction of heaven as a kind of "erotic bliss" wherein its inhabitants are "enraptured by each other (heaven as reunion and community), not by the experience of the divine presence (heaven as worship)" (*Heaven, Hell, & the Victorians* 152). Although we know nothing of Emily Jesse's religious beliefs, the narrative implies that she too hopes for earthly contact with her former lover whom she continues to describe to herself as "a young god" (218). Moreover, we are led to assume that she longs to be reconciled with him in the afterlife, though her reflections on her relationship with Arthur Hallam are notably marked by ambivalence.

What emerges from Emily Jesse's years of interrogating the past is a muffled resentment at the way Alfred's mourning had seemed to appropriate her own, "[h]ad not only overtaken it, she told herself in moments of bleak truthfulness, [but] had undone and denied it" (229). After forty years of worshipping and remembering Arthur Hallam, Emily Jesse arrives at a gradual realization of his imperfections--even of his limitations: "A man of his time, "[h]e had treated [Emily] like a mixture of a goddess, a house angel, a small child and a pet lamb" (218). Included in Byatt's text is an actual letter Hallam wrote to Emily reproving her for reading his "Theodicaea" and urging her to avoid theology--a topic, he implies, which is better left to the superior male intellect (218). The letter has its counterpart in section 97 of "In Memoriam" that seems to echo the sentiment of Hallam's letter:

> Her faith is fixt and cannot move,
> She darkly feels him great and wise,
> She dwells on him with faithful eyes,
> 'I cannot understand: I love.' (97, ll. 33-36)

The elderly Emily Jesse of Byatt's story is forced to confront the almost legendary image of herself as the beautiful and innocent young girl in mourning that Tennyson's poem made famous, for she knows that Tennyson and the Hallams would have liked when she was younger to have fixed her in her position as perpetual mourner. Only later in life does Emily allow herself to recall her anger and hurt at being patronized and excluded from the masculine world Arthur and Alfred shared so confidently together, her intelligence completely overlooked by them both. When Emily begins receiving reproachful messages from the spirit world accusing her of "silliness" and inconstancy, she begins to reassess her life and the decision she had made so many years ago to leave off mourning Arthur and try instead to be a wife to Captain Jesse. Her marriage, while comfortable in many ways, is always overshadowed by a past that she is unwilling to discard, perhaps because it represents what she has come to believe is the best of herself as she once was: loving, faithful, and devoted--the house angel, the beautiful sufferer. In contrast to Eugenia Alabaster, who borrows the mask of the angel of the house to act out her domestic subversion, Emily is haunted by the role she has tried, simultaneously, to incorporate and discard. As she grows older, Emily's concerns about a possible reunion with Hallam in the afterlife force her to reconsider what her loyalty to him has cost her.

Hallam's ghost, as one might expect, is an ambiguous and enigmatic creature, inhabiting "an elusive reality" of his own (Owen 222), though there seems to be no

question that we are meant to believe in his existence as firmly as does Sophy Sheekhy, who explains his presence to herself as a consequence of the unabated mourning for him on earth: "It dragged him down, or back, or under" (250), indicating that she does not doubt the existence of an afterlife of which he should have been a part. Hallam's explanation is more obscure: "I walk. Between. Outside. I cannot tell you. I am part of nothing" (250). The ghost's liminality truly places him in the position of the Other, the outsider, being neither in life nor out of it; and the body he bears is a burden that he cannot discard or wholly retain (Owen 222). Like William and Mattie who are also, as it were, caught between worlds, Hallam's ghost embodies metaphorically the living death that awaits those who remain attached to a way of life of which they cannot be a part.

While Hallam lies with Sophy in her virginal white bed in a bizarre parody of a lover's embrace, there is an intertextual echo of a miracle attributed to the disciple Eli'sha. It is written that he once brought back to life a child who had died recently:

> Then he went up and lay upon the child putting his mouth upon his mouth, his eyes upon his eyes, and his hands upon his hands; and as he stretched himself upon him, the flesh of the child became warm. (Kings 2, 4)

The Eli'sha story is one that Byatt first discusses in her essay "Robert Browning: Incarnation and Art" (*PM* 47), where she notes Browning's inclusion of the miracle in *The Ring and the Book*. By referring to Browning's technique as an "act of resuscitation" that emerges from his "dramatising monologues, [and] the varied voices he brought to life" (*PM* 47,30), Byatt speculates that Browning's interest in "galvanism" and resurrection may be "connected to the fear, made beautiful and wonderful by the geologists and the prehistorians, that perhaps the body was all there was, that the one

life ended once in death" (*PM* 48). Of course, doubts about the existence of the afterlife are the motivation for the seances in *The Conjugial Angel*, and Sophy suffers for trying to grasp the unimaginable in the figure of Arthur Hallam's ghost.

As miracle worker Sophy fails when the ghost that she is attempting to warm into a simulation of a living being metamorphoses into a terrifying incubus. Hallam consciously and terrifyingly strives to retard his dissolution, and in that fearful moment when "[s]he felt him grasp at her with disintegrating fingers that tried to pry into her flesh like roots searching for a vantage" (274), Sophy realizes for the first time the danger involved in trying to animate the dead. It would seem that her mistake is in believing she can move between the worlds of the dead and the living with Swedenborgian impunity. Her encounter with Arthur Hallam's ghost clearly proves otherwise.

Emily Jesse makes a discovery similar to Sophy's in her last seance with Mrs Papagay. Just then a creature appears to Sophy, part decomposed matter and part bird of prey, "hungry for the life of the living creatures in the room." And the creature bears a message for Emily: "'I triumph in conclusive bliss. Tell her. We shall be joined and made one Angel'" (283). Instead of reacting with pleasure or relief at this communication that she presumes to be from Hallam, Mrs Jesse is visibly disturbed. Detaching her hand from the seance circle, she turns to her husband:

> 'Well, Richard,' she said. 'We may not always have got on together as well as we should, and our marriage may not have been a success, but I consider that an extremely unfair arrangement, and shall have nothing to do with it. We have been through bad times in this world, and I consider it only decent to share our good times, presuming we have them, in the next.' (283)

Mrs Papagay looks on with delight at this reunion of husband and wife, while the sinister creature departs, "baleful, yearning." " 'It is hard to love the dead,'" Mrs Jesse explains to her husband. "'It is hard to love the dead enough'" (284). In their introduction to *The Oxford Book of English Ghost Stories* (1986), Michael Cox and Robert A. Gilbert refer to the fact that "[w]hatever we do with the dead they will not go away. Whether we entomb and isolate them or scatter their ashes, they remain as ghosts in our memories and faced with their continuing presence we have no option but to live with them" (ix).

The same can be said of the historical past. Byatt's recovery of the past in *The Conjugial Angel* acknowledges that there are dangers in the endeavor: one can, all too easily, lose a sense of oneself or be overcome by nostalgia and regret. In this story we are also reminded of the limitations of our communication with the past, for no matter how many spirits we raise or history books we devour, none will ever divulge what it is that we are truly searching for: "that ultimate secret, the mystery of life and death" (Owen 237). Indeed, *Angels and Insects* and *Possession* both caution against a resurrection of the past which stems from a desire to compensate for the perceived inadequacies of the present (Holmes 80). Sadly, Emily Jesse spends the greater part of her life looking backward at the short time spent in Hallam's company, and later, longing for his and his family's forgiveness "for not having been able to be...a 'dedicated nun'" to his memory (218), while Tennyson himself labors for twenty years, delaying his marriage in an attempt to hold onto the memory of his friend, "to flesh out his imaginings, to see the unseen, but Arthur had gone on dying" (256). By the same token, the seances in the novella become a substitute for lived experience and are used to hasten knowledge, like that of Mrs Hearnshaw's pregnancy, that would in any case have been revealed.

In spite of the characters' repeated quest for angels, genuine angels--true messengers of God--are curiously absent from the text. Brian McHale makes an interesting point in *Constructing Postmodernism* (1992) when he notes that "angels have been making a strange kind of come-back in postmodern writing" (200), citing examples from novels and short stories by Milan Kundera, Salmon Rushdie, Thomas Pynchon, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, and others. Many of the angels McHale examines in postmodern fiction are parodied or "hollow" angels, while others, featured more traditionally, "symbolize the human aspiration to achieve a state beyond the human" (203). The characters' desire for transcendence in *The Conjugial Angel* is akin to the aspiration McHale refers to. He concludes that:

> [i]n postmodernist poetics, angels evidently serve, among other things, as realized metaphors of the violation of ontological boundaries. Ambassadors from what Pynchon calls 'the Other Order of Being' (Pynchon 1973:222 and *passim*), angels call attention to the plurality of worlds and world-versions in postmodernist texts, and to the ontological 'seams' or 'rifts' between adjacent or rival worlds which often fissure these texts (202).

Incorporating angels, or rather, the suggestion of angels in her text, is another means by which Byatt elaborates upon the notion of the "plurality of worlds and world visions" that all the principal characters in *Angels and Insects* are engaged in discovering. For plurality, as Byatt has explained in *Still Life*, is our chief protection against "solipsist despair" (276). Even more importantly, angels, however elusive, are reminders that faith has not entirely vanished for Byatt's characters, and the world still holds out the hope of fulfillment.

In the final chapter of *The Conjugial Angel*, Sophy and Mrs Papagay have more pragmatic concerns than uncovering the mysteries of life and death. They are

now unemployed. As they walk home together from Mrs. Jesse's in the dark, they realize that they are being followed. Unknown to them both, Captain Papagay has, as it were, returned from the dead: "twice wrecked...Once cast away" (289), he explains to his astonished wife. Of the passengers and crew on those lost ships we learn nothing. After observing Mrs Papagay leap into her husband's arms in a frenzy of joy, our attention is diverted by Sophy Sheekhy, whose thoughts have turned to:

> all the people in the world whose arms are aching and empty to hold the dead, and of how in stories, and very occasionally in sober fact, the cold and the sea give back what they have taken, or appear to have taken, and this dark windswept conjunction became in her mind a harmonious whole with the vision of the Jesses' fireside, and the miracle of the sea" (290).

This passage is touching in its echo of the longing and loss that permeate *The Conjugial Angel.* Its outward progression from the mourner to the sea-grave and then to the unexpected restoration of the dead to the living attests to the precariousness of human existence, despite the occasional miracle with which we may be rewarded. The passage may also be interpreted as a trope which joins the book's two sections.

Sophy's comment, "In stories, and very occasionally in sober fact, the cold and the sea give back what they have taken," reads like a disingenuous nod at realist fiction, but its placement in the novella also provides a metafictional twist. Like the conclusions of *Morpho Eugenia* and *Possession,* the ending of *The Conjugial Angel* employs a nineteenth-century novelistic convention that underscores our late twentieth-century mistrust of the happy ending as being too pat and too contrived, at the same time that it highlights the desire for narrative closure and the hope that miracles are not entirely outside the realm of possibility within our own lives. As Byatt has explained in *Possession,* "[c]oherence and closure are deep human desires that

are presently unfashionable. But they are always both frighteningly and enchantingly desirable" (422).

In spite of the irony that runs throughout the texts, a sense of hopefulness pervades the latter portions of Byatt's Victorian fiction and is evinced particularly in the appearance or suggestion of the butterfly in *Angels and Insects*. Although Byatt does not allude directly to Henry Bowler's "The Doubt: 'Can These Dry Bones Live'?" (1855), the painting reads as an integral part of the intertext of the second novella. Bowler's painting was originally intended to accompany "In Memoriam" and is featured in Wheeler's study, which Byatt consulted when writing *Angels and Insects*. (Her assistance to Wheeler is also credited in his Preface.) The painting represents a young woman gazing at an open grave wherein lie a man's skeletal remains. There are two gravestones in the foreground inscribed with the words "I am the Resurrection and the Life" and "Resurgam." Wheeler argues that "[f]or the observant visitor to the Royal Academy in 1855, this genre panting in the Pre-Raphaelite style contained more signs of hope of resurrection than signs of death and corruption" (1). In addition to the inscriptions, upon one of the stones there lies a chestnut, and upon the exposed skull perches a small butterfly--both traditional symbols of regeneration. Where contemporary viewers may be inclined to focus on the doubt implied in the title, the Victorians, Wheeler maintains, would have understood "Bowler's use of a tradition of analogy between scriptural revelation (the texts on the gravestones) and nature (the chestnut and the butterfly) that came down to the Victorians from Bishop Butler and the eighteenth century..." (2). The point of the natural analogies is that "[they] are not proofs, but aids to reflection for those who already believe" (Wheeler 64), so that the painting's main message, like that of *Angels and Insects* and "In Memoriam," is hope.

The image of the butterfly and the skull in Bowler's painting is one of life

emerging from death and of spirituality and transcendence enmeshed with matter and corruption. Indeed, Bowler's butterfly seems to have fluttered naturally and inevitably into Byatt's novellas, apparently offering the ants and the beetles of *Morpho Eugenia* the promise of transformation, as symbolized by the butterfly in the rigging of the Calypso. In *The Conjugial Angel*, the characters' anxiety regarding the afterlife is eased by their communication with the dead and the reunion of the living.

For Byatt's characters, their adoption of the pseudo-religious discourse of Emmanuel Swedenborg represents one attempt at trying to find a vehicle for expressing the nature of their spiritual exploration. We must note, however, that the solutions the novella offers to the problems being raised are of *this* world: in "choosing" her husband over her former lover, Mrs Jesse chooses life and personal autonomy. Her action implicitly criticizes Swedenborg's "conjugial marriage" and its emphasis on the certainty that husband and wife are but two halves of a whole. As the story demonstrates, the conjugial ideal fails to reflect the reality or the needs and circumstances of the living, or to allow fully for the individuality of both partners. Consequently, the characters have begun to understand that they must seek the spiritual within themselves, and without the support of the spirit world. Conjugial love in *The Conjugial Angel* also raises the spectre of "oneness" that Frederica Potter scorns and rejects in *Babel Tower* as inviting an undesirable, "undifferentiated All" (*BT* 312), where the feminine will is subsumed within the male. Emily Jesse is only too aware of how closely aligned is the domestic angel and her Swedenborgian counterpart.

Although the narrative focus of *The Conjugial Angel* is on the characters' longing for a glimpse of heaven and a sense of spiritual affirmation, this is also a story about ourselves. In some ways we, at the cusp of a new century, are still grappling

with the Victorians' "problem of finding a language which could convey an idea of the transcendent in an increasingly scientific-materialist world" (Wheeler 4). We also, like the Victorians, appear to be in pursuit of angels: popular culture has made them a focus of some North Americans' quest for spiritual enlightenment. According to McHale, angels are the postmodern surprise--traditional figures that have been reinvented by contemporary fiction--indicating for him that "the presence in fiction even of degenerate and parodic angels means that angels are still with us after all, despite (or because of?) the death of their Creator" (201). Whether Byatt believes in that death is irrelevant. What matters is that she allows her characters to exercise their faith, and does not mock them for their desire to believe. Levenson interprets this as evidence that "[Byatt's] point is not to confirm religious truth, but to enlarge the religious sense, which locates value not in the infinite but in the yearning for the infinite, not in God but in the search for God" (343). The desire for transcendence that joins both novellas and which has proven so difficult for Byatt's characters to achieve is marked less by failure than by the value inherent in striving to achieve, however distant the goal may be. Coherence and closure therefore take on a different meaning in Byatt's writing, less in terms of a happily-ever-after conclusion than in the revelation of those rare and privileged moments of insight she seems to reach toward in her fiction, including *Angels and Insects,* when "all things are to be experienced as parts of a whole" (Byatt, *Still Life* 175).

Conclusion: Negotiating the Spaces Between

In Chapter One I discussed the characteristic feature of Byatt's novels as being an exploration of the spaces between ideas and modes of fiction. In true postmodern fashion Byatt's novels eschew certainties, dwelling instead in the region of multiple possibilities. Even the form she adopts, which I have called postmodern realism, is reflective of a kind of shift or movement of ideas that is constantly taking place in her fiction. In the late story "The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye," Byatt's descriptions of glass become a metaphor for the type of fiction she is writing and the *frisson* of intellectual excitment she manages to create:

> Glass is made of dust of silica, of the sand of the desert, melted in a fiery furnace and blown into its solid form by human breath. It is fire and ice, it is liquid and solid, it is there and not there. (*Djinn* 271)

Reading Byatt, one is always aware of the creative pull of ideas and her interest in expressing what is often unheard, unspoken, and unseen. It is possible to argue that the kind of prolonged narrative tension that develops from her focus on the spaces between, upon what is simultaneously there and not there, is in fact the source of her novels' success.

Chief among the spaces negotiated in Byatt's fiction are the intervals and intersections between literary realism and postmodern forms. One of Byatt's concerns as a writer has been to try to show how far realism can be taken and to refute post-structuralist generalizations about realism as a naive and outdated form. In fact, as Byatt's fiction amply demonstrates, "realism...is not necessarily an antithesis to experiment, nor a self-evidently unspeculative mode" (Bradbury, *Possibilities* 174).

Consequently, her novels reflect her insistence that realism can be both representational and experimental, and a study of the ideas and structures of her novels reveals Byatt continually engaging with the problem of how to relate postmodern cultural sensibility to the writing of realist fiction.

For the most part, Byatt makes use of strong, engaging narratives with psychologically believable characters who exist within a recognizable social world, but her reliance on realism goes beyond the conventions of the form. Byatt's fiction frequently acknowledges the problem of achieving definitive truths about life and individuals, and she shares with other contemporary novelists of the 1980s and '90s what Gasiorek refers to as "the difficulties...[of] seek[ing] to represent social reality" while "grasp[ing] that any interpretation of it is in part constructed by the discourses at... her disposal" (82). Ultimately, however, art becomes for Byatt a means of exploring not one truth but the many truths about ourselves as human beings. Yet even if there are only partial truths to be discovered, it becomes our moral duty, she maintains, to explore them. In this respect Byatt is most decidedly a realist writer.

Where Byatt's realism is more overtly postmodern is in her attempts to combine realist narratives with an overt analysis of contemporary literary theory. In addition to the realist narrative at the center of her novels, there are discussions of the writing of fiction, the instability of language, problems of perception and representation, and the nature of historical recovery, all of which point toward a narrative voice that combines both critic and storyteller. In turn, this combination creates a dual role for readers who find themselves simultaneously in the text and outside the text, participants in the compelling fictional world Byatt has constructed and observers who are deliberately aware of the artificiality of the conventions she is employing.

Although these types of literary strategies are not exclusive to postmodern

writing, Byatt's intertextuality, her self-reflexive narrative structures and self-conscious preoccupation with language and its relationship to the world combine to create a "sustained opposition" between fiction and criticism that is generally associated with postmodern metafiction (Waugh, *Metafiction* 6). Therefore, for a reader such as Judith Thurman to complain in her 1990 review of *Possession* that Byatt "needs to abandon her unreadability--her pedantic insistence that we savor the minutiae, the ironies, and the heroics of her struggle with all that can't be said" (151)--is to overlook the fact that in many ways this is precisely what Byatt's fiction is about: exploring the unsaid and the ways in which it can be told, amidst a framework of metafictional structures and techniques.

The juxtaposition between traditional realist conventions and postmodern literary theory occurs most successfully in Byatt's *Possession*. As John Fowles once explained in a memorandum to himself on his plans for *The French Lieutenant's Woman*: "You are not trying to write something one of the Victorian novelists forgot to write; but perhaps something one of them failed to write" ("Notes on an Unfinished Novel" 15). Fowles's distinction between the forgotten incident and that which has been deliberately suppressed applies very well to Byatt's project in *Possession* and *Angels and Insects*, where she deals with subjects rarely explored in mainstream Victorian fiction. Through her female characters in particular, Byatt subverts the nineteenth-century feminine ideal, depicting Victorian women as they challenge the social and physical limitations of their world. In *Possession*, Byatt links the nineteenth- and twentieth-century female characters in their mutual struggle to achieve a balance between their sexual and intellectual identities.

By self-consciously rewriting the past in her fiction, Byatt has undertaken to question the nature of historical knowledge and "to open...the past to the present"

(Hutcheon, *Poetics* 110). She and other postmodern writers have seized the opportunity to challenge assumptions about the inherent truthfulness or accuracy of written history and to argue against attempts to regard this history as being in any way conclusive (Hutcheon, *Poetics* 110). Historiographic metafiction often seeks to undermine confidence in the historical record by exposing omissions, inaccuracies, and ideological biases implicit in any historical account, and may foreground alternate readings of an event as a means of counteracting the original. In the same manner, Byatt's Victorian-style novels function as an attempted corrective to modern stereotypes of the Victorians, though there can be no absolute certainty that her version of the past is any more reliable than others, as she is herself undoubtedly aware. There is always the danger, novels such as *Possession* imply, that one may be misinterpreted by future generations, and the topic also appears in her short story "Jael," from her recent collection, *Elementals: Stories of Fire and Ice.* At one point, the narrator of "Jael" looks back on her unthinking use of racially charged words in the 1950s. "It's so long ago, we shall be judged without being imagined," says the narrator regretfully. The phrase is one which can be applied to the Victorians in Byatt's novels as she strives to provide readers with the context and the scope to imagine and understand them before we attempt to judge them for any perceived prejudices or shortcomings on their part.

Byatt achieves this largely non-judgmental rendering of the Victorians partly through a sort of "morally sensitive omniscience" (Holmes 207), and by means of what Kelly has noted as "the figure of artist-as-medium....[or] as a liminal figure who moves easily from one kind of consciousness to another" (107). Significantly, Byatt's novels about recovering the past are replete with liminal figures whose function is, like the mediums in *The Conjugial Angel* or Maud Bailey and Christabel LaMotte in

Possession, to serve as bridges between the the conscious and the unconscious self, the dead and the living, the past and the present. As such, these characters mirror Byatt's own mediumship, which enables her to become what one critic has called "our conduit to a lost world" (Hawthorne, "Winged Victoriana" 99). In contrast to the type of scholarly vampire Byatt deplores, who feeds upon the past for self-gain, trying to force history to accord with his or her preconceived ideas about it, the liminal character is, by its very nature, one who hovers between spaces and boundaries and is well-suited to metafiction. The liminal figures in Byatt's novels are, often unintentionally, truth-seekers--again, not unlike Byatt herself. The sheer fluidity and marginality of many of Byatt's liminal characters means that they are often uniquely possessed of the ability to see what others cannot. In *Angels and Insects*, the liminal characters are also "ex-centric," or outside the ordinary range of society, such as Matty Crompton and William Adamson in *Morpho Eugenia,* or Lilias Papagay and Sophy Sheekhy in *The Conjugial Angel*, and this outsider status enables them to remain separate from the other characters and observe without being seen in return. In this manner, the liminal figure in Byatt's novels plays a central role. "'Things are not what they seem,'" says Matty Crompton, but instead of this being a fearful pronouncement, as would have been the case in a genuine Victorian novel, her words hold out a postmodern promise of instability, a state of flux that is akin to the sea journey of *Morpho Eugenia*--a journey where all might be lost or anything might be gained.

For the reader, one of the benefits of Byatt's fiction is an awareness of the generative effects of reading, and the pull between fiction and reality. Though all of Byatt's novels are, to some degree, about what it means to be a reader, *Possession* and *Babel Tower* are two novels in particular which foreground the activity of reading, incorporating letters, fairy tales, poetry, court transcripts (*BT*), and literary analysis

(*Poss.*), and both novels portray the act of reading as a vital and significant form of creativity. In *Possession* it is described this way:

> Now and then there are readings which make the hairs on the neck, the non-existent pelt, stand on end and tremble, when every word burns and shines hard and clear and infinite and exact, like stones of fire, like points of stars in the dark--readings when the knowledge that *we shall know* the writing differently or better or satisfactorily, runs ahead of any capacity to say what we know, or how. In these readings, a sense that the text has appeared to be wholly new, never before seen, is followed, almost immediately, by the sense that it was *always there*, that we the readers, knew it was always there, and have *always known* it was as it was, though we have now for the first time recognised, become fully cognisant of, our knowledge. (471-72)

The act of reading Byatt is referring to, where a reader's almost unconscious knowledge is brought to the surface, may sometimes seem like an act of discovery as the words on the page become powerful truths for having finally been named and described. Reading in such circumstances forms a bridge between art and life, stirring the imagination and making the world visible in new and interesting ways.

There are other times when Byatt associates reading with an almost supernatural sense of fatedness. When William Adamson is playing alphabet cards after the discovery of his wife's incestuous affair, he is startled by the recurrence of words in his hand which bear closely on his predicament: "The luck of the letters was uncanny. It gave him the feeling that occasionally comes to most of us, that however we protest we are moved by chance, and struck by random shocks and blows, in fact there *is* Design, there is Fate, it has us in its grip" (*ME* 153). Byatt's novels have often raised the possibility that Chance is really another word for Fate, but her narrators always stop short of declaring their complete belief in the theory. Instead, the narrative

hovers around the possibility, moving toward it and edging away.

The sense of fatedness that startles Byatt's characters is not always a welcome feeling, in that it often seems to communicate a half-concealed threat of an ineluctable future not of one's own choosing. However, there is another side to the destiny question which, on other occasions, may suggest that what is being experienced is a "privileged insight into the order of things" (*SL* 175). In fact, the "random shocks and blows" of life may appear to contain a purpose or a shape not always apparent to Byatt's characters, but the moment of insight nevertheless provides them with the satisfaction of feeling joined to something larger than themselves. To be connected in Byatt's novels takes on less positive connotations when the union involves an individual's loss of selfhood. Byatt's fiction always seeks to distinguish between the feeling of well-being derived from a belief in the possibility of an ordered universe and what she often depicts as the false notion that a man and a woman or an individual and a group are capable of fusing their lives to become one harmonious whole. That is not to say that Byatt's characters only know unhappiness in their relationships. Yet if her characters' relationships are often fragile and uncertain, it is because she has rejected romantic ideas about love as a happily-ever-after affair. Relationships in her novels are built on a respect for one another's individuality, and when one partner seems disinclined to accept the other's distinctness--as in *Babel Tower*, for example, between Nigel or Frederica, or between Fergus Wolff and Maud Bailey in *Possession*--the relationship will certainly fail.

As is apparent, even when one of Byatt's novel is subtitled "*A Romance*," her fiction always remains grounded by her efforts to maintain an imaginative truth, and the places and people she creates, regardless of their historical distance, retain undeniable links to the present. It is as though the reader is being asked not to step

through a "stone arch...between this world and another," but to pass, again and again, through a "series of moving veils or woven webs between one room and another" (*Poss.* 339). Within these "moving veils," Byatt's critical and poetic gaze negotiates boundaries and questions everything it sees. What sets Byatt apart from other contemporary writers is her extraordinary ability to join a seemingly disparate collection of details, images and ideas through a process that resembles the dovetailing of memory or the play with a juggler's set of fragile, gleaming balls, constantly in motion until brought to the hand in an elegant, calculated descent. As an expression of what is most fittingly called postmodern realism, Byatt's fiction represents the hope that the historical and literary past will continue to be made relevant and accessible to future generations. Given the depth and versatility at least of her own writing, this is a hope that seems likely to be realized.

Bibliography

Adams, Hazard, Leroy Searle, eds. *Critical Theory Since 1965.* Tallahassee: Florida State U P, 1990.

Alter, Robert. *Partial Magic: The Novel as a Self-Conscious Genre.* Berkeley: U of California P, 1975.

Altick, Richard D. *Victorian People and Ideas.* New York: Norton, 1973.

Armstrong, Nancy. *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel.* Oxford: Oxford UP, 1987.

Barret-Ducrocq, Francoise. *Love in the Time of Victoria: Sexuality and Desire Among Working-Class Men and Women in Nineteenth-Century London.* Trans. John Howe. New York: Penguin, 1992.

Barth, John. "The Literature of Replenishment." 1975. *The Friday Book: Essays and Other Nonfiction.* New York: Putnam, 1984. 193-206.

---. "Postmodernism Revisited." *The Friday Book: Essays and Other Nonfiction.* New York: Putnam, 1984. 113-126.

Barthes, Roland. *Image, Music, Text..* Trans. Stephen Heath. London: Fontana, 1977.

---. *Writing Degree Zero.* Trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith. New York: Hill & Wang, 1967.

Benedict, Francesca. "From Story to History and Back: History in North American Literature in the 1980s." Eds. Theo D'haen and Hans Bertens. *Narrative Turns and Minor Genres in Postmodernism.* Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1995. 115-132.

Bersani, Leo. "Realism and the Fear of Desire." *A Future for Astyanax.* Boston: Little Brown, 1969. 51-88. Rpt. in *Realism.* Ed. Lilian R. Furst. London and New York: Longman, 1992. 240-260.

Bottrell, William. *Traditions and Hearthside Stories of West Cornwall.* Penzanze: Cornish, 1870.

Boumelha, Penny. "Realism and Feminism." *Realism.* Ed. Lilian R. Furst. London and New York: Longman, 1992. 319-333. Rpt. of "Realism and the Ends of

Feminism." *Grafts: Feminist Cultural Criticism.* Ed. Susan Sheridan. New York: Verso, 1988. 77-91.

Bradbury, Malcolm. *Modernism: A Guide to European Literature, 1890-1930.* London: Penguin, 1991.

---. *The Modern British Novel.* London: Penguin, 1993.

---. *Possibilities: Essays on the State of the Novel.* Oxford: Oxford UP, 1973.

Branca, Patricia. *Silent Sisterhood: Middle Class Women in the Victorian Home.* Pittsburgh: Carnegie-Mellon U P, 1975.

Burnham, Sophy. *A Book of Angels.* New York: Ballantine, 1990.

Bush, Douglas. *Mythology and the Romantic Tradition in English Poetry.* Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1969.

Buss, Helen M. "Abducting Mary and Carol: Reading Carol Shields's *Swann* and the Representation of the Writer Through Theories of Biographical Recognition." *English Studies in Canada* (*ESC*). 23 (1997): 427-441.

Buxton, Jackie. "What's Love Got to Do with It?: Postmodernism and *Possession.*" *English Studies in Canada* (*ESC*) 22 (1996): 199-219.

Byatt, A[ntonia]. S[usan]. *Angels and Insects.* London: Chatto & Windus, 1992.

---. *Babel Tower.* London: Chatto & Windus, 1996.

---. *Degrees of Freedom: The Early Novels of Iris Murdoch.* London: Vintage, 1994.

---. *The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye: Five Fairy Stories.* 1994. London: Vintage-Random, 1995.

---. *Elementals: Stories of Fire and Ice.* London: Chatto & Windus, 1998.

---, Ignes Sodre. *Imagining Characters: Six Conversations About Women Writers.* London: Chatto & Windus, 1995.

---. Interview with Carmen Callil. "Language and Sex." *At Random.* 14 (1996): 64-77.

---. Interview with Juliet Dusinberre. *Women Writers Talking.* Ed. Janet Todd. New York: Holmes, 1983. 181-195.

---. "Interview with Lit Chat." *Salon* (1992): 3 pp. Online. 3 March 1999.

---. *Iris Murdoch.* London: Longman, 1976.

---. *The Matisse Stories.* 1993. London: Vintage-Random, 1994.

---. "Parmenides and the Contemporary British Novel." *Literature Matters: Newsletter of the British Council's Literature Department..* 21 Dec. 1996. 6-8.

---. *Passions of the Mind: Selected Writings.* 1991. London: Vintage-Random: 1993.

---. *Possession: A Romance.* 1990. London: Vintage-Random, 1991.

---. *The Shadow of the Sun.* 1964. London: Vintage-Random, 1991.

---. *Still Life.* 1985. London: Penguin, 1986.

---. *The Virgin in the Garden.* 1978. London: Penguin, 1981.

---. *Writers in Conversation: An Interview with Iris Murdoch and A. S. Byatt.* Videocassette. Roland Collection of Films on Art, 1984.

Campbell, Jane. "The Hunger of the Imagination in A. S. Byatt's *The Game.*" *Critique* 29 (1988): 147-162.

---. " 'The Somehow May Be Thishow': Fact, Fiction, and Intertextuality in Antonia Byatt's 'Precipice-Encurled.' " *Studies in Short Fiction.* 28 (1991): 115-23.

Champagne, Roland A. "The Writer within the Intertext." Eds. Jeanine Parisier Plottel and Hanna Charney. *Intertextuality: New Perspectives in Criticism.* New York: New York Literary Forum, 1978. 129-137.

Chapman, Raymond. *The Sense of the Past in Victorian Literature.* London & Sidney: Croom Helm, 1986.

Connor, Steven. *The English Novel in History: 1950-1995.* London: Routledge, 1996.

---. "Rewriting Wrong: On the Ethics of Literary Revision." Eds.Theo D'haen and Hans Bertens. *Liminal Postmodernisms: The Postmodern, the (Post-) Colonial, and the (Post-) Feminist.*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1994. 79-97.

Cooper, Amanda. "Narratives of the Past: An Introduction." *Post-Imperial and Post-Colonial Literature in English.* (1996). 14 March 1999 <http://www.stg.brown.edu/projects/hypertext/landow/post/uk/g.

Cooper-Clark, Diana. "Margaret Drabble: Cautious Feminist." *Atlantic Monthly* (1980): 69-75. Rpt. in *Critical Essays on Margaret Drabble.* Ed. Ellen Cronan Rose. Boston: Hall, 1985. 19-30.

Cox, Michael, R. A. Gilbert, eds. *The Oxford Book of English Ghost Stories.* Oxford: Oxford UP, 1989.

Crane, Susan. *Gender and Romance in Chaucer's* Canterbury Tales. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1994.

Currie, Mark, ed. *Metafiction.* London: Longman, 1995.

D'haen, Theo and Hans Bertens, eds. *British Postmodern Fiction.* Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1993.

Diamond, Anne. Rev. of *Angels and Insects*, by A. S. Byatt. *The Montreal Gazette* 23 Jan. 1993 : 31.

Dusinberre, Juliet. "Forms of Reality in A. S. Byatt's *The Virgin in the Garden."* *Critique* 24 (1982): 55-62.

Elias, Amy J. "Meta-mimesis?: The Problem of British Postmodern Realism." Eds. Theo D'haen and Hans Bertens. *British Postmodern Fiction.* Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1993. 9-31.

Epstein, William H. *Contesting the Subject: Essays in Postmodern Theory and Practice of Biography and Biographical Criticism.* West Lafayette, IN: Purdue UP, 1991.

Faulkner, Peter, ed. *A Modernist Reader: Modernism in England.* London: Batsford, 1986.

Flegel, Monica. "Enchanted Readings and Fairy Tale Endings in A.S. Byatt's *Possession."* *English Studies in Canada* (*ESC*). 24 (1998): 413-30.

Fowles, John. *The French Lieutenant's Woman.* 1969. New York: Signet, 1981.

---. "Notes on an Unfinished Novel." 1969. *Wormholes.* New York: Holt, 1998. 13-26.

Fraser, Hilary. *The Victorians and Renaissance Italy.* Oxford: Blackwell, 1992.

Furst, Lilian R. *All is True: The Claims and Strategies of Realist Fiction.* Durham and London: Duke UP, 1995.

---. Introduction. *Realism.* Ed. Lilian R. Furst. London and New York: Longman, 1992. 1-23.

Gamache, Lawrence B. "Toward a Definition of Modernism." *The Modernists: Studies in a Literary Phenomenon.* Eds. Lawrence B. Gamache and Ian S. MacNiven. London: Associated UP, 1987. 32-45.

Gasiorek, Andrzej. *Post-War British Fiction: Realism and After.* London: Arnold, 1995.

Gilbert, Sandra M., and Susan Gubar. *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Literary Imagination.* New Haven & London: Yale U P, 1979.

Gilmour, Robin. *The Victorian Period: The Intellectual and Cultural Context of English Literature, 1830-1890.* London: Longman, 1993.

Graff, Gerald. *Literature Against Itself.* Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1995.

Hamon, Phillipe. "The Major Features of Realist Discourse." *Realism.* Ed. Lilian R. Furst. London and New York: Longman, 1992. 166-185. Rpt. of "Un discours constraint." *Poetique* 16 (1973): 411-45.

Hammond, Paul. *Love Between Men in English Literature.* New York: St. Martin's, 1996.

Harper, Michael F. "Margaret Drabble and the Resurrection of the English Novel." *Contemporary Literature* (1982): 145-68. Rpt. in *Critical Essays on Margaret Drabble.* Ed. Ellen Cronan Rose. Hall: Boston, 1985. 52-72.

Hawthorne, Mary. "Winged Victoriana." *New Yorker* (June 1993): 98-100.

Hawthorne, Nathaniel. *The House of the Seven Gables.* 1851. Edinburgh: Paterson, 1883.

Heilbrun, Carolyn G. *Women's Lives: The View from the Threshold.* Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1999.

Higdon, David Leon. *Shadows of the Past in Contemporary British Fiction.* London: Macmillan, 1984.

Holmes, Frederick M. *The Historical Imagination: Postmodernism and the Treatment of the Past in Contemporary British Fiction.* ELS Monograph Series No. 73. Victoria: U of Victoria, 1997.

Horner, Avril, and Sue Zlosnik. *Landscapes of Desire: Metaphors in Modern Women's Fiction.* New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990.

Hutcheon, Linda. *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction.* New York: Routledge, 1988.

---. "The Power of Postmodern Irony." *Genre, Trope, Gender.* Ed. Barry Rutland. Ottawa: Carleton UP, 1992. 35-49.

---. *A Theory of Parody.* NY: Methuen, 1985.

Kelly, Kathleen Coyne. *A.S. Byatt.* London: Twayne, 1996.

Kenyon, Olga. *Women Novelists Today: A Survey of English Writing in the Seventies and Eighties.* New York: St. Martin's, 1988.

Kermode, Frank. "Novel And Narrative." *The Theory of the Novel: New Essays.* Ed. John Halperin. London: Oxford UP, 1974.

Knoespel, Kenneth J. "The Emplotment of Chaos: Instability and Narrative Order." *Chaos and Order: Complex Dynamics in Literature and Science.* Ed. Katherine N. Hayles. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1991.

Koning, Christina. "Ladies of Letters Look in the Mirror." *The Observer* 11 Mar. 1990: 68.

Lehan, Richard. *The City in Literature: An Intellectual and Cultural History.* Berkeley and L.A.: U of California P, 1998.

---. "Cities of the Living/ Cities of the Dead: Joyce, Eliot, and the Origins of Myth in Modernism." *The Modernists: Studies in a Literary Phenomenon.* Eds. Lawrence B. Gamache and Ian MacNiven. London: Associated U P, 1987. 61-74.

Levenson, Michael. "The Religion of Fiction : Two Novellas by A. S. Byatt." (1993). A. S. Byatt. *Degrees of Freedom.* London: Vintage, 1994. 337-344.

Lively, Penelope. *Moon Tiger.* London: Deutsch, 1987.

Lodge, David. "The Novelist Today: Still at the Crossroads?" Eds. Malcolm Bradbury and Judy Cooke. *New Writing .* London: Minerva, 1992. 203-215.

Mahaffey, Vicki. "Modernist Theory and Criticism." Eds. Michael Groden and Martin Kreisworth. *The Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory and Criticism.* Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins UP, 1994. 512-514.

Martin, Wallace. *Recent Theories of Narrative.* Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1986.

Michael, Magali Cornier. *Feminism and the Postmodern Impulse: Post-World War II Fiction.* New York: State U of New York P, 1996.

McClintock, Anne. *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Conquest.* New York: Routledge, 1995.

McDonnell, Kate. "Byatt Orchestrates a Babble of Voices in Latest Novel." Rev. of *Babel Tower,* by A. S. Byatt. 1996. 2 March 1999 <http://home .sol.no/~anlun/literat.htm>.

McEwan, Neil. *Perspectives in British Historical Fiction Today.* Wolfeboro, NH: Longwood, 1987.

McHale, Brian. *Constructing Postmodernism.* London and New York: Routledge, 1992.

Melville, Herman. *Typee.* 1846. London: Penguin, 1972.

Mermin, Dorothy. "The Damsel, the Knight, and the Victorian Woman Poet." *Critical Inquiry* 13 (1986): 64-80.

Miller, Laura. "A. S. Byatt on the dark side of utopia, the chains of literary feminism and the albatross of sex." *Salon Interview* (June 1996): 9 pp. Online.

Internet. 2 March 1999 <http://www.salon1999.com/weekly/interview.html>.

Murdoch, Iris. "Against Dryness: A Polemical Sketch." *Encounter* (London) 16 (1961): 16-20.

---. *The Black Prince.* 1973. London: Penguin, 1975

O'Connor, Patricia. *To Love the Good: The Moral Philosophy of Iris Murdoch.* New York: Lang, 1996.

Ohmann, Richard M., ed. *The Making of Myth.* New York: Putnam, 1962.

Onega, Susana. *Form and Meaning in the Novels of John Fowles.* Ed. Susana Onega. Ann Arbor: UMI Research, 1989.

---. "'A Knack for Yarns': The Narrativization of History and the End of History." *Telling Histories: Narrativizing History, Historicizing Literature.* Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1995.

Owen, Alex. *The Darkened Room: Women, Power and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England.* Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1990.

Rabinovitch, Rubin. *The Reaction Against Experiment in the English Novel: 1950-1960.* New York: Putnam, 1967.

Roemer, Michael. *Telling Stories: Postmodernism and the Invalidation of Traditional Narrative.* London: Rowman, 1995.

Rose, Margaret A. *Parody: Ancient, Modern, and Post-modern.* Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993.

Rose, Ellen Cronan. *Critical Essays on Margaret Drabble.* Boston: Hall, 1985.

Salami, Mahmoud. *John Fowles's Fiction and the Poetics of Postmodernism.* London and Toronto: Associated UP, 1992.

De Saussure, Ferdinand. "Nature of the Linguistic Sign." *Course in General Linguistics.* 1959. Rpt. in *Critical Theory Since 1965.* Eds. Hazard Adams and Leroy Searle. Tallahassee: Florida State UP, 1990. 646-656.

Scanlan, Margaret. *Traces of Another Time: History and Politics in Postwar British Fiction.* Princeton, N.J.: Princeton UP, 1990.

Scholes, Robert. *Fabulation and Metafiction.* Chicago: U of Illinois P, 1979.

Shields, Carol. *Swann.* Toronto: Random, 1987.

Simpson, David. *The Academic Postmodern and the Rule of Literature.* Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1995.

Steinmetz, Horst. "History in Fiction--History as Fiction: On the Relations between Literature and History in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries." Eds. Theo D'haen and Hans Bertens. *Narrative Turns and Minor Genres in Postmodernism.* Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1995. 81-103.

Stoicheff, Peter. "The Chaos of Metafiction." *Chaos and Order: Complex Dynamics in Literature and Science.* Ed. Katherine N. Hayles. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1991.

Thornton, William H., Songok Han Thornton. "Toward a Cultural Prosaics: Postmodern Realism in the New Literary Historiography." *Mosaic* 26. (1993): 119-142.

Thurman, Judith. "A Reader's Companion." *New Yorker* (November 1990): 151ff.

Todd, Janet, ed. *Women Writers Talking.* New York: Holmes, 1983.

Todd, Richard. "The Retrieval of Unheard Voices in British Postmodernist Fiction: A.S. Byatt and Marina Warner." Eds. Theo D'haen and Hans Bertens. *Liminal Postmodernisms: The Postmodern, the (Post--) Colonial, and the (Post--) Feminist.* Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1994. 99-114.

Varsava, Jerry A. *Contingent Meanings: Postmodern Fiction, Mimesis, and the Reader.* Tallahassee: Florida State UP, 1990.

Verene, Donald Phillip. "Giambattista Vico." *The Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory.* Eds. Michael Groden and Martin Kreiswirth. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins U P, 1994. 723-725.

Warner, Marina. "The Great Green Worm." Trans. A. S. Byatt. *Wonder Tales: Six Stories of Enchantment..* Ed. Marina Warner. London: Chatto, 1994. 189-229.

Watt, Ian. "Realism and the Novel Form." *The Rise of the Novel.* (1957): 9-18. Rpt. in *Realism.* Ed. Lilian R. Furst. London and New York: Longman, 1992. 87-94.

Waugh, Patricia. *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction.* London: Routledge, 1984.

---. *Practising Postmodernism, Reading Modernism.* NY: Routledge, 1992.

Westlake, Michael. "The Hard Idea of Truth." *PN Review* 15: 4 (1989): 33-37.

Wheeler, Michael. *Heaven, Hell, & the Victorians.* Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994.

Yellin, Louise. "Cultural Cartography: A. S. Byatt's *Possession* and the Politics of Victorian Studies." *The Victorian Newsletter* 81 (1992): 38-41.