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TESIS DOCTORAL

A CRITICAL STUDY OF THE FICTION OF A. S. BYATT

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INTRODUCTION

The aim of this dissertation is to carry out an exhaustive examination of the works of fiction of the contemporary British writer A. S. Byatt, with special reference to her use of metaphor. The main objective is to determine exactly what material she finds most fruitful in terms of content, and what factors are important to her on the formal plane in the writing of fiction. Byatt creates her fictional worlds out of words and different discourses and makes the reader aware of the fact that these are verbal constructs. Another objective is to look into the ways in which she achieves this effect. As she draws upon the literary traditions she inherits within British literature, she places herself agonistically in a long line of novelists who are conscious of the fact that this rich source can offer opportunities but also impose constraints upon the neophyte writer. Her choices from amongst a myriad of possible models should tell us much about what she likes and believes in. All her major fictional works have been considered, in the absence, as yet, of a full-length study of her fiction.

In this study we move from the general to the particular, starting with the tradition and the external circumstances affecting the writer and moving to the individual novel and short story and its place on the scene. Within each fictional work, we start with the dominant themes and examine how they are structured. Then we move down to minute analysis of small sections of text to see how the devices designed to endow the texts with cohesion and coherence function. To do this, we apply different models to whole texts and extracts in order to evaluate Byatt's methods and results according to the different yardsticks available to us from contemporary critical theory and recent developments in text linguistics and semantics.

In view of the fact that the objectives and effects of short fiction are distinct from those of novels, we have decided to divide the study into two sections: the first on the six major novels she has produced up to the present, and the second on the four volumes of short stories and novellas. For reasons of space, we have had to exclude from our analysis Byatt's non-fictional writings. However, reference will be made to them as the ideas expressed and developed in them inform all her fictional writing. Indeed, she herself declares she is no schizophrenic, but moves freely from fiction to non-fiction and back again, and in fact, has been criticized for combining the two and thus for "preaching" in her fiction.

Within each section we combine a diachronic and a synchronic approach. The former is necessary, especially in Part I, as it

enables us to see how a given novel continues to display the usual Byatt concerns, and also to see how the novels have developed in assuredness of subject and technique over the thirty years in which she has been publishing fiction. The shorter fiction lends itself to more detailed and exhaustive study of the text. In Part II, we consider each of the novellas or stories, sometimes each volume, as self-contained examples of contemporary literary discourse.

As Byatt declares she is "a non-belonger of schools", it would not be appropriate to submit her works to a critique from only one particular stance, be it post-modern, feminist, Marxist, psycholinguistic, or that of any other school. As is typical of metafictional writing, she offers a multiplicity of viewpoints within her fiction, and inspired by this, we propose to analyse, using a variety of tools, those aspects of her writing, those ideosyncratic interests and techniques, that she does admit to.

In general terms, we examine first the way in which she responds to and inscribes herself in a cultural and literary tradition. She inherits a rich tradition which includes the Western myths of Creation, and a revered canon of English literature (in these days of the questioning of canons) channelled to her through F. R. Leavis. She admits to a fascination with language, its referential and ontological nature and attendant problems. Some of her most ambitious pieces of writing are attempts to tackle the relationship between language and the real world, and confront the aesthetic and

epistemolcgical difficulties of language and "truth", language and perception, language and representation, that writing entails. A moral and philosophical concern, part of her inheritance from George Eliot, F. R. Leavis and Iris Murdoch, among others, informs all her writing, both fiction and non-fiction.

In a lecture at the University of Granada in 1988, she said that her three constants were the old, the new and the metaphor. If all the factors mentioned above can be deemed "old", stemming from the cultural and literary past which she makes her own, she is not less concerned with new material. As teacher and critic, she follows the latest currents of thought in Britain, and also many emanating from the Continent and the United States. Morover, she delights in offering the readers of her fiction detailed, almost technical information on "new" topics, subjects she imagines her readers know very little about, and which they would not expect to find in a novel. Her curiosity about all aspects of life is boundless, and as she believes a novel is "a loose baggy monster", she makes them accommodate her interests. In so doing, she gives us a view of a multifaceted life, and shows how old things can always be seen in a new light.

The old, the new, and the metaphor: indeed, these together seem to be the hallmark of Byatt's work. Creation of metaphor is acknowledged by her to be a major tool in the structuring of her fiction and in the making of the fabric of the discourse. The role of metaphor in endowing her works with cohesion and

coherence and creating a sharing attitude with her readers will therefore be examined. In the hermeneutical aspects of the study of her fiction, we take an interpretative approach which is cooperative, taking into account the importance of the tripartite pragmatic axis of author, text and reader. The general framework in which this dissertation is cast is designed to enhance a cooperation with the text through our personal reading and at the same time through an exploration of its lexicon and its meanings which is linguistic and intersubjective.

Chapter 1 is an initial over-view of the state of the art in studies on the British novel in the immediate post-war years, the period in which Byatt started writing. It covers the movement from nostalgia for classic realism to innovation by some writers and the opting of a large number of them for metafiction. Chapter 2 looks at Byatt's response to the immediate tradition, and considers her mentors and her models. Stimulated by these, she formulated her above-mentioned combination of the old, the new and the metaphor, and the overall effect of this interrelation of the ideological and the aesthetic is examined here. Chapter 3 takes a horizontal approach across the novels, bringing together different interests, tendencies and points of view. Through this, we go in search of points in common and intersections, relating themes to the principal objectives of her fiction, showing how they fit in with the new interests of the metafictional writer in general. In Chapter 4, the nucleus of our study of Byatt's metaphors, the approach is vertical in that the analysis is made of individual novels using certain descriptions

of metaphor and myth, notably those of George Lakoff and John Vickery respectively. Applying the techniques contained in these descriptions, we dig deep into the material in order to analyse a section and draw conclusions. Although study on the two axes may suggest divergence, in fact, the different results, when juxtaposed, are beneficial in their complementariness, thus we justify this dialectic between the interdisciplinary integrating approach and the monographic analytical approach. Chapter 5 examines an aspect of metafictional analysis: personal and social ritual as metaphor. Byatt has shown herself to be, along with other contemporary writers following a tradition of using fiction to portray the "Condition of England", a chronicler of British post-war social history. Her fiction has a specific historicity which grounds it and which opens up a dialectic to discuss recent political and historical events and tendencies, inviting reciprocal speculation on them from her readers.

In order to ascertain how the individual fictions function and how they appeal to different readers, we subject them to analysis for their intertextuality, their exploitation of semantic fields for coherent structuring through repetition, connection, and cohesive devices, and finally, their dependence on schemata recognised by the reader.

A particular type of analysis which originated in the discipline known as DTS (Descriptive Translation Studies), as developed in the Dutch School, and which has a Spanish equivalent in the lexicological model of Martín Mingorance (1990), presented

itself as particularly recommendable on account of its interdisciplinary and multifunctional potential within applied lexicology. The structured lexicon as part of text linguistics understood on a semantic and cognitive plane, is the base of the concept, and since it generates the key activity in reader interpretation, we propose intersubjective study of its semantics. The recent proliferation of projects focusing on the linguistic study of literature is ample testimony to its fruitfulness. We base our conception on the fundamental importance of the lexical component for the narrative. Its capacity to combine in the formation of structures and the configuration of functions susceptible to interpretation in the service of a literary meaning of a higher order is a vital component in the novelist's art. We therefore emphasise the importance of lexicology, text linguistics, narratology and cognitive pragmatics, in our approach to the key concept, intersubjective, pertinent interpretation. Close attention is paid in the analyses to questions like lexico-conceptual fields in the system, their conceptualisation in the discourse, and the formation of thematic networks as poetic axes.

Part II is similar to Part I in its approach, particularly Chapter 1 which serves as a general introduction to short fiction in contemporary literature. But then, each chapter centres upon one collection of short stories or novellas, working in chronological order. What Part II does have in common with Part I is that each chapter, at the same time, focuses upon a different component or technique in Byatt's art. Thus Chapter 2

examines the use of recognisable schemata; Chapter 3, multiple narrative layers, foregrounding of a particular lexical field, and intertextuality; Chapter 4, the visual-verbal interface instrumented by intertextuality, and Chapter 5, fairy tale as female metaphor.

The design of this methodology is based on the hypothesis that the object of study --the lexically self-conscious fictional worlds and the concept of literary creativity-- is itself a linguistically self-conscious literary form, and only a combined and cooperative methodological practice can give satisfactory results. This is true particularly in the objective of understanding the thematic relationships that make up the macrostructures of the whole body of fictional works. The implicit underlying themes intuited by the reader are thus confirmed through the lexico-semantic dimension.

Our conclusions show that such highly complex fictions are successful partly because they are rooted in recognisable schemata, which are minutely interlinked in different ways and foregrounded through repetition. On a higher level, they appeal to a reader more versed in literature, by their creation of added meaning through a web of references to admired authors and texts from the history of English literature. These are controlled by Byatt and made to function at a structural level as well as at that of the surface text. Through her intuitions of reader response, she calls upon her more sophisticated readers to create meaning with her for the pure enjoyment of fictional worlds of

the imagination. Ventures into the philosophy of language and its ontological relations in this post-Saussurian world have been moderated in the later fiction, but her control over the possible evocations through precise metonymy and metaphor enables her to achieve considerable verbal precision and tightness in the later short fiction, without sacrificing evocative power. The immense complexity of her long fiction has been sustained in her latest major novel, and continues to be a hallmark of her style. It may appear a paradox, but her fiction now has "best-seller" status in addition to intellectual exigence, and our analyses show that there has been no betrayal, for the two are compatible, when found in a writer of Byatt's calibre.

PART I. LONG FICTION

A.S. BYATT'S FULL LENGTH NOVELS, CHRONOLOGY AND EDITIONS USED

THE SHADOW OF THE SUN	1964	CHATTO & WINDUS
(EDITION USED	1991	VINTAGE)
THE GAME	1967	CHATTO & WINDUS
	(1987	PENGUIN 3RD REPRINT)
THE VIRGIN IN THE GARDEN	1978	CHATTO & WINDUS
	(1987	PENGUIN 4TH REPRINT)
STILL LIFE	1985	CHATTO & WINDUS
	(1985,	SEPTEMBER, CHATTO 2ND IMPRESSION)
POSSESSION: A ROMANCE	1990	CHATTO & WINDUS
	(1990	CHATTO 2ND IMPRESSION)
BABEL TOWER	1996	CHATTO & WINDUS
	(1996	CHATTO 1ST IMPRESSION)

CHAPTER 1. The State of the Art in Post-war British Fiction.

1.1 Introduction: the novel and criticism in post-war Britain

In order to place A. S. Byatt in the panorama of post-war British fiction and to evaluate her contribution to it, it is not necessary to make a survey of developments in the novel and short story since 1945, or to attempt a comprehensive overview of literary criticism to see how these have been accepted, but it is important to examine what "novel" means in this context and to trace what the critical viewpoints have been. Byatt has made a place for herself in a site where the tradition which dominates is not seen with the same eyes by everyone. Perhaps more than at any other time in the history of the novel, the neophyte has had difficult choices to make, choices hindered by a general insecurity concerning what the novel is and might be in the second half of the twentieth century.

The post-war period has been characterised in critical theory by an interplay between various stances, some of them at times enjoying a mutual accord, and others sustaining a permanent incompatibility, even conflict. As Douglas Tallack puts it:

> One way to generalise about Critical Theory is to see it as a set of theoretical discourses variously predicated upon the following highly unstable tendencies and pre-occupations: first, ground-breaking methodological advances, as in

> structuralism, which deliberately bracket hermeneutic questions because they are thought to rely too simplistically on traditional bases for knowledge, only for content-questions to return to haunt the whole project; second, deconstructive self-reflexivity; third, an increasingly immanent form of critique as the best option for inhabiting yet distancing oneself from a capitalism which is no longer thought to be definitively located; and, fourth, the substitution of power for truth as the primary focus for analysis. (Tallack 1995, p. 3)

Byatt has lived through all of these and felt their impact upon, firstly, the medium she uses, language, and the various analytical approaches that have been made towards it, and secondly, on the modes of fiction and criticism in which she expresses herself. If there is a basic common logic in most contemporary theory, it is anti-foundationalist and anti-essentialist. However, it is useful to retain the familiar differentiating organising concepts of structuralism, post-structuralism, psychoanalytic theory, feminism and Marxism. Since Byatt is ultimately more of a maker of fictions than a theorist of fictions, she has adhered to none of these schools. In later years, she has joined her voice to those of the discourses of psychoanalysis and feminism, but identifies with none in particular.

While entering into the heat of the dialectic fomented by the Continental theorists such as Barthes, Derrida, Kristeva and Foucault and their apologists, and the opponents of these, she has been convinced by none of them. She has participated more in the discussions of theory specific to the novel that have been prompted by postmodern thinking. In the conflict between realism

and experimentalism manifested in the work of a wide range of twentieth-century writers, she has taken no rigid stance. She has been called a realist, and defends certain aspects of "traditional realism", but much of her work reveals postmodern concerns and approaches.

By so saying, we do not wish to suggest that realism is now obsolete as a serious mode of writing, superceded by various postmodernisms. Indeed, "traditional realism" has been questioned in numerous contexts and has risen to the challenge to represent a changing social world with the greatest possible credibility and fidelity. Byatt is at the fore of the impulse to reconceptualise realism in the wake of modernist and postmodernist critique.

Recent research (cf. Cunningham 1994 and Lodge 1992, to single out rather arbitrarily but two critics) shows the so-called realism/experimentalism dichotomy to be largely fallacious. It is held to be formalist, construing realism as a set of narrative techniques which experimentalism subverts. Yet analysis of texts from writers seen as classic realists such as George Eliot and Dickens reveals formal techniques which belie their linguistic naiveté and are not so dissimilar to those used by the experimenters. Most of these are anti-mimetic and testify to the texts' self-consciousness as text.

Realism has always been a heterogeneous phenomenon, and post-war writing practices engage with it in great diversity and

complexity. The multifarious reworkings of earlier realist modes to extend realism, using it as an ideological tool for different purposes should be examined strictly within their particular contexts. Contemporaries of Byatt such as Angela Carter, John Berger or George Lamming, have their special uses for realism, namely, feminism, socialism and anti-colonialism. Byatt sees herself as a descendant of the classic realists, especially George Eliot, and does not adhere to a marked ideology or fixed formal technique, but can be seen as viewing realism as a family of writings that share a certain cognitive attitude to the world, which has manifested itself in a variety of forms in different historical periods. As we shall see later, her hallmarks are the multiple viewpoint and the art of pastiche. Hence, within the so-called "crisis of representation", her work reflects no rigid political position apart from the general leftism associated with the Arts since the War. It applies a variety of narrative strategies to achieve at once the goal of accurate representation, and that of displaying different forms of representation and questioning representation itself.

The particular ways in which she engages with the epistemological and aesthetic difficulties entailed by representation will be examined in subsequent chapters.

1.2 Realism in the post-war period

In the decade after the end of the Second World War, serious writers involved in the numerous discussions of the novel's

future shared concerns in two main areas. Byatt, growing up among them at the time, was later to find that they thought the novel was under pressure from the very fact of the War itself and its manifold repercussions and effects on pre-war expectations in general. Other menaces came from mass culture, in the form of radio, cinema, and later television. While this did not dismay her personally, being an inveterate reader, it was seen as a potential threat to readership and taste in the novel. The growing power of mass culture from these media is attested to in most of her works. This concern is of an external nature, involving social change and cultural transformation.

The second area of concern focuses on developments internal to the novel, in the areas of technique, form and style. Modernism itself continued to be a threat, in spite of the fact that its subjectivism militated against the novel's power to confront social issues directly. Modes of writing which did deal with social problems were tending towards the journalistic, notably in authors like George Orwell. The story-telling function of the novel was under threat of being usurped by the cinema. The writing of Graham Greene springs to mind here; if he did not write straight-out film scripts like *The Third Man*, his novels were conceived with an eye to filmic representation. In a recent study, Andrzej Gąsiorek voices this fear in the following terms:

> The novel, exhausted as a form, unable to meet the demands placed on it by a changing world, and challenged by the mass media, was thus thought to be in terminal decline. (Gąsiorek 1995, p. 1)

The fear of massification was felt by what was then a predominantly conservative literary intelligentsia. Elizabeth Bowen articulated an anxiety --an anxiety Byatt was later to share-- about the threat to the imagination from the uniformity of urban surroundings and the democratization of society brought about by Education Acts. These important factors in changes in socialisation are recorded in Byatt's work. Ironically, they stimulated the book industry to rise to the challenge of greater literacy and sophistication of reading taste to open a mass market potential from which Byatt has greatly benefited in the last six or seven years.

In the immediate post-war period, calls were made (1) for the novel to display a coherent attitude in the face of the fragmentation of society. In later years, as she portrayed a focal event of the time, the 1952 Coronation (in *The Virgin in the Garden,* 1978), Byatt precisely underlined this fragmentation, thus problematising the premise of a coherent attitude. The period from the 1940s to the 1960s, when Byatt began to write, was overtly seen as a straight conflict between experimental writers like B. S. Johnson and Christine Brooke-Rose, on the one hand, and realists like C. P. Snow (helped by the neo-realist Angry Young Men) on the other. Kingsley Amis spoke in favour of empiricism and Anglo-Saxon common sense when he equated the experimental novel with deceitfulness and triviality as well as narcissism. This realist defence was contested by arguing that modernism was necessarily the point of departure for post-war fiction. Brooke-Rose, influenced primarily by Pound and Beckett,

spoke of drawing attention to "the fictionality of fiction". She felt the contemporary novel should investigate language, reveal its own provisional and fictional status, and refuse what was perceived as realism's univocal perspective (2). Byatt, with her multivocal perspectivism and her self-reflexivity, has answered this call, without abandoning the heritage of classic realism.

In the 1950s, to defend realism was to be aligned with the English tradition of empiricism, common sense, social comedy along the lines of Dickens, but also with a broad commitment to liberal humanism. When this came to be seen as politically reactionary, some writers, such as Angus Wilson, distanced themselves from it. Yet realisms are multiple, and they can no more be equated with a particular political stance than with a given set of narrative strategies. The liberal humanism of such as Angus Wilson and John Fowles survives in spite of its political impotence; it is partly a Leavisite relic, and as such was inherited by Byatt.

Commentators linked the crisis of the novel with a crisis of society. A widespread malaise, a sluggish economy, a backward education system and a prevalent cultural philistinism were held to be the culprits of England's decline, and the symptoms were seen as persisting well beyond the immediate post-war fragmentation. Byatt is still analysing this phenomenon, as her latest work, *Babel Tower* (1996), demonstrates. The analysis of the decade of the 1960s is made both in terms of society and of fiction, especially the novel, and continues her analysis of the

1950s made in the first two volumes, *The Virgin in the Garden* and *Still Life*, of what is promised as a tetralogy.

It was at this time, the 1950s, that negative reverberations were emanating from the heart of English novel criticism. The contributors to John Lehmann's *The Craft of Letters in England* (Lehmann 1956) concluded that no contemporary British novelist was of major international stature, none had adequately responded to post-war social change and none was especially innovative. The piece of critical writing that had most impact upon A. S. Byatt, and which was penned at this time, was Iris Murdoch's famous article "Against Dryness", an analysis of the contemporary scene. She identified two dominant strands of writing, the "crystalline" (symbolist) and the "journalistic" (realist) (Murdoch 1961, pp. 16-20). She argued that neither mode could offer a complex account of human personality, of moral dilemmas, or of a social reality that expresses the individual and the transcendant.

1.3 Realism and the thesis of the "death of the novel"

The period we have been speaking of, from the end of the War up to the end of the 1960s --covered by the first three books that have appeared of Byatt's tetralogy, *The Virgin in the Garden, Still Life* and *Babel Tower*-- saw the growth of adverse criticism of the genre to the point of its developing into a thesis about the possible "death of the novel". Ian Watt's seminal work *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* (1957) was largely instrumental in the dissemination

of the idea of the organic nature of the genre. He equated the genre of the novel with capitalism and a bourgeois ideology, which was now moribund. In studying the origins of the novel from Defoe, he saw it as the representative form of an emergent mercantile class that developed concurrently with the social and economic changes instigated by capitalism. Since critics, Watt among them, felt liberalism had been undermined by recent historical events and tendencies, and liberalism was the keynote of realism and the whole genre of the novel, the threat to these two concepts presented a powerful challenge to the novel genre. Other post-war critics, notably Bernard Bergonzi (Bergonzi 1970) and George Steiner (Steiner 1967), endorsed this view of a possible generic crisis.

The sense of liberalism is that of a general humanist sensibility, characterised by open-mindedness, tolerance and breadth of vision. Byatt inherited these qualities through her education and background, and all her work demonstrates respect for diversity and tolerance of different viewpoints. In searching for similarity in different contexts, she must have accepted, along with Watt, that the novel had its origin in a particular historical moment which gave it its *raison d'être*, but the closure of that period did not mean, for a creative writer working subsequently, a total closure of the genre which was its expression. Literary forms can sometimes display a capacity for adaptation which transcends the physical events of political and economic history.

Bergonzi, and later Lodge, while rejecting the "death of the novel" thesis, were worried about the direction the novel was taking. Bergonzi feared it would break up into sub-genres and pastiche, and by denying distinctive individuality and originality would turn against the ideology that had inspired it in its beginnings and sustained it throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. David Lodge, in his 1984 *The Novelist at the Crossroads*, gave us a powerful metaphor to illustrate the possible deviation, bifurcation, fragmentation or disappearance of the genre. Side-roads for him were the non-fiction novel or fabulation. These other narrative modes are seen as related, but less significant fictional forms. For Lodge, the novel's central highway is realism, but not everyone would agree with that thesis.

Robert Alter, in his 1975 *Partial Magic: the Novel as Self-Conscious Genre* had already shown that from its very beginnings, in the ground-breaking work of Continental writers such as Cervantes, the novel has been multifarious, and that mimesis has not been more dominant than other attitudes such as deviation, parody, pastiche, playfulness and fantasy. As he says in his preface:

> [...] ontological critique in the novel, moreover, is carried on typically not as discursive exposition but as a critical exploration through the technical manipulation of the very form that purports to be reality. (Alter 1975, p. x)

Early novelists like Cervantes and Sterne explored what could and could not be put into this new container and what the

materials for its construction could be. *Don Quixote* and *Tristram Shandy* are self-conscious in their presentation of themselves more as verbal artefacts than products of a mere mimetic impulse:

> A self-conscious novel, briefly, is a novel that systematically flaunts its own condition of artifice and that by so doing probes into the problematic relationship between real-seeming artifice and reality. (Alter 1975, pp. x-xi)

As we have suggested elsewhere (Wallhead 1993), Byatt remains within Lodge's mainstream of realism, while exploring the alternatives at the crossroads at the same time, an act of multi-faceted virtuosity which Alter feels the early novelists performed anyway. Alter shows how Cervantes played on the reader's imagination with his simultaneous representations of reality and subversions of them:

> The moment when the impulse of consciousness darts from pole to pole is an illuminating one, for Cervantes understands that there is an ultimately serious tension between the recognition of fictions as fictions and the acceptance of them as reality, however easy it may seem to maintain these two awarenesses simultaneously. Knowing that a fiction is, after all, only a fiction, is potentially subversive of any meaningful reality that might be attributed to the fiction, while assenting imaginatively to the reality of a represented action is a step in a process that could undermine or bewilder what one ordinarily thinks of as his sense of reality. Cervantes' novel could be described as a comic acting-out of the ultimate implications, both moral and ontological, of this tension of attitudes. (Alter 1975, p. 14)

In her creation of characters who write fictions and deliberately attempt to approximate, sometimes more, sometimes less, to a representation of reality, Byatt seems to be

continuing the Cervantine practice, in a genre which rather than being moribund, was beginning to renew itself by going back to its roots.

Another Cervantine device Byatt uses in this "reality" game, is authorial intervention. Cervantes put himself into his fiction both in a version of himself and reference to his published works, as Alter says:

> Cervantes himself [...] did not hesitate to open up a loophole in the fictional reality looking out to the frankly autobiographical reality of the writer. (Alter 1975, p.16)

Byatt, as we shall see later, appears as a significantly insignificant watching figure in some of her novels, and has characters refer to works she has had them pen. In her most ambitious work in this respect, *Still Life*, where both her anonymous narrator and creative writers attempt to overcome the problems reality itself presents for mimesis, she takes up the challenge Cervantes had struggled with:

> For Cervantes [...] as a fundamentally secular skeptic [...] art is obviously questionable because it is understood to be ultimately arbitrary, while nature is still more problematic because it is so entrammelled with art, so universally mediated by art, shaped by art's peculiar habits of vision, that it becomes difficult to know what, if anything, nature in and of itself may be. (Alter 1975, p. 28)

Or, in the words of Roland Barthes:

> To give the imaginary the formal

> guarantee of the real, while leaving this sign the ambiguity of a double object, at once verisimilar and false, is a constant operation in all Western art. (Barthes 1953, p. 5)

We have dwelt on Alter's opinions on the errors contained in a monolithic view of the nature of realism in the novel for the reason that Byatt's explorations of the novel's possibilities for her personally appear to touch on the issues he discusses. The early conflict between realism and romance --explicitly discussed by Byatt in *The Game* (1967)--, the comic-parodic strain running through Cervantes, Fielding and Sterne to the present day, and the traditions such as gothic fantasy and fairy tale. no doubt led other critics to formulate views of the novel that differ from that of the English critics Watt and Lodge.

Bakhtin, for example, rejects the equation of realism and the novel. Gąsiorek summarises neatly for us Bakhtin's stance:

> On a Bakhtinian interpretation, for example, the novel is not a modern literary form because it developed realistic techniques but because it discloses the heteroglossic complexity of early modern societies. For Bakhtin, the novel is neither associated with any particular social group nor defined by any given form. It is characterised by its fluidity, for its features belong to no 'system of fixed generic characteristics'. Moreover, because it is associated with 'low' parodic-travestying literatures that ridicule 'high' culture and undermine the language of hegemonic groups, it becomes a transgressive, anti-canonic form that discloses society's stratified and conflictual nature. The novel, Bakhtin argues, 'has no canon of its own. it is, by its very nature, not canonic.' (3)

Gąsiorek concludes, therefore, that because there is no agreement on one of the terms in the formula "death of the novel", it is misleading to speak of a general crisis within the genre. For Gasiorek, the novel is "a heterogeneous and mutable genre, which undermines its earlier forms in an ongoing search for new ways of engaging with a historically changing social reality." (Gasiorek 1995, p. 8)

But however one views this question at the end of the twentieth century, the fact remains that post-war writers saw realism in the novel as a problem of their time and for them. To examine the two viewpoints, we can compare a statement by the experimental novelist B. S. Johnson with one by Byatt's sister Margaret Drabble. In a 1967 BBC recording Johnson maintained:

> It's silly to pretend that one can solve the problems of writing in the middle of the twentieth century with the methods of Henry James, and even less with the methods of Dickens. (4)

In the same recorded discussions, entitled "Novelists of the Sixties", Margaret Drabble answered:

> I don't want to write an experimental novel to be read by people in fifty years, who will say, ah, well, yes, she foresaw what was coming. I'm just not interested. I'd rather be at the end of a dying tradition, which I admire, than at the beginning of a tradition which I deplore. (5)

Byatt, a "novelist of the sixties" like her sister, but not so famous at the time, shared that conservatism at the beginning

of her career. Bernard Bergonzi argued a few years later for continuance in the English tradition without problematising "reality":

> The tradition of nineteenth-century realism, which underlies most contemporary English fiction, depended on a degree of relative stability in three separate areas: the idea of reality; the nature of the fictional form; and the kind of relationship that might predictably exist between them. (Bergonzi 1979, p. 188)

He comments on the two sisters together, as embodying the English tradition, though we must remember that at that time Byatt had written only her first two novels, *The Shadow of the Sun* and *The Game*:

> The notion that the literary transformation of experience is a form of mystification or lying is to be found in two accomplished recent novels, by authors who certainly do not share Doris Lessing's impatience with the established conventions of fictions. Thus, Margaret Drabble in *The Millstone*, lets her heroine discover the manuscript of a novel that a supposedly loyal friend has been writing about her; she reads through it with mounting horror at the copious distorsions and misrepresentations it contains. In A.S.Byatt's *The Game* one of the two sisters who are the central characters publishes a novel in which experiences involving the other sister are improved on and written up for literary purposes, with, in the end, disastruous results. For orthodox twentieth-century criticism the source has no rights and need not be considered. What counts is the finished work, in which disparate materials are transmuted by the author's imagination into a new aesthetic unity; this, certainly, is the critical tradition in which I feel most at home and which I would struggle to defend. (Bergonzi 1979, p. 204)

1.4 The English novel in the 1960s and the rise of self-reflexive fiction

David Lodge's *The British Museum is Falling Down* (1965) is an example of what Wells called "The frame getting into the picture", where the author's act of writing is included in the field of the novel. In his criticism, Lodge had suggested that explicit problematisation of the act of writing within fiction was a device writers at the crossroads, like himself, had found useful as a way of sitting on the fence:

> [...] there are formidable discouragements to continuing serenely along the road of fictional realism. The novelist who has any kind of self-awareness must at least hesitate at the crossroads; and the solution many novelists have chosen in their dilemma is to build their hesitation into the novel itself. (6)

Through exploring the paradoxical relations between art and life, making the act of writing part of the novelist's subject, writers like Lodge, John Fowles and Angus Wilson drew on a tradition going back through Beckett and Nabokov to *Tristram Shandy* and *Don Quixote*. But as Bergonzi shows, markedness only shows up when there is a neutral constant or control, thus innovation only manifests itself against a background of normality:

> By their shuffling levels of reality, their reliance on *collage* and pastiche and parody, they point to possible redefinitions of the novel, in which, as I have suggested, the distinction between fiction and other kinds of writing could become blurred. Yet

> all these novels depend for their effect on violating assumptions which have been previously established by existing kinds of fiction. (Bergonzi 1979, p. 210)

Classic realism is the "existing kind of fiction" Bergonzi means when he suggests innovations were made against this background. A sub-genre of this is the "Condition of England Novel", which reappeared in post-war writing to be given new life in a new form. So in the two decades after the War, up until 1970, certain established writers embarked on long fictional explorations of the recent past in extended works, running into several volumes -- Evelyn Waugh, Anthony Powell, C.P. Snow, Lawrence Durrell. Perhaps as she embarked upon *The Virgin in the Garden* in 1978, Byatt intended writing herself into this particular strain of the English novel.

In his 1956 novel *Anglo-Saxon Attitudes*, Angus Wilson attempted to analyse Englishness --its moral stances, its illusions, its hypocrisies, indeed, its Anglo-Saxon attitudes. Wilson's moral sharpness and satirical bite on a panoramic scale pointed up social change and lack of it, within a basic realism. But immediately afterwards he embarked upon demonstration of an extensive repertory of styles. He had appeared to be a modern version of the traditional, Victorian novelist, as Malcolm Bradbury put it "a cross between George Eliot and Dickens." (Bradbury 1990) Then in the late sixties he upset that view with *No Laughing Matter* (1967). It is, as his younger colleague Bradbury describes it: "A mock-version of the British bourgeois epic, it uses pastiche, parody and the methods of Postmodernism

to give an upturned vision of modern British Life." (Bradbury 1990)

The work of Angus Wilson had a powerful influence on young writers, like Byatt and her sister, who wished to novelise the England of their parents as well as the England they knew at first hand. They saw how Wilson, as novelist, critic and biographer, displayed "a concern to recover the largest richnesses of Victorian fiction and the best of Modernism, and showed his heroes and heroines to be many, from Dickens, Dostoevsky and Zola to Kipling, Proust and Virginia Woolf." (Bradbury 1990). Byatt was probably encouraged by this to dare to hold up George Eliot for unstinted admiration as well as Proust.

Angus Wilson shared with Iris Murdoch, John Fowles and even Golding, the inheritance of the liberal tradition and the concern with moral questions, as Bradbury continues:

> His admirable criticism also shows his concern with social existence, with moral questions, and above all with the encounter with evil, as well as his preoccupation with literary form. (Bradbury 1990)

Like Wilson and Golding, Byatt has used the novel to explore moral concerns and the choice between good and evil, and found this discussion more securely grounded with a backing of traditions of such discussion. Bradbury believes that it was Wilson who, through half a century of writing brought back into contemporary British fiction "the social scope, moral energy,

historical curiosity, comic flamboyance and metaphysical wit that drew so abundantly from the best of the British novel tradition." (Bradbury 1990)

In Angus Wilson's own words, a creative writer is tripartite --at least--: narrator, moralist and composer, and these function within a known tradition:

> Novels are lies, novelists disreputable people in their basic nature. It is perhaps to combat this that the novelist has worked so hard at the moral, 'education for life' power that has won him Dr Leavis's approval. Gossip, confidence trickster, huckster, or novelist, all are kept in action by the power of narrating [...]
> I am certainly conscious myself of a purely narrating power that is loosed in me, once the moralist and the composer have given way to the processes of writing, to the free imagination [...] (7)

1.5 "Classic Realism" seen from the 1970s

The basic continuity between post-structuralist and liberal readings of realism came to be questioned by critics assimilating new thinking on the functioning of language emanating from the Continent. As the revelations of Derrida and Foucault permeated critical thinking, challenges were made to the key features of realism, namely, the view of language as a neutral, even transparent, tool through which to view an external world; reliance on a reflectionist aesthetic; a concept of character which supposes fixity and stability; reliance on a universalising metalanguage that establishes a "hierarchy of discourses"; Aristotelian dynamics that suppose initiation, development and

closure. Barthes was foremost in teaching us that realism is not a transparent way of describing the world, but pertains to a rule-governed signifying system that determines how perceptions of the world are structured and limited. It was Colin MacCabe who spoke of realism as a metalanguage that controls "hierarchies of discourse". For MacCabe, the controlling metalanguage presents itself as "a window on reality" and establishes its superiority by ordering the polyvocal discourses. Its presence creates a reading position by "interpellating" the reader to produce a controlled sharing and fulfilling of expectations which is the "classic realist text". (MacCabe 1979, pp. 15-6)

Byatt herself, in her writings of the 1970s, presents a nostalgic view of the empiricist-idealist assumptions about the relationship between world and language. As her work develops, her authorial voice speaks acceptance of a conventionalist analysis of realism, a post-Saussurean view that realism cannot "reflect" the world. In the words of Catherine Belsey, "language precedes the existence of independent entities, making the world intelligible by differentiating between concepts." Therefore, language can only reflect "the order inscribed in particular discourses". (Belsey 1980, pp. 38 & 46). Byatt's work begins to demonstrate that it longs for the security of the tradition and upholds a respect for Leavisite and Murdochian moralism, yet, in her Continental inclinations and fascination for language, comes to accept that "classic realism" relies on an untenable theory of language, which passes off its versions of the world as mirrors that are self-evidently veracious or natural, when in

fact they are necessarily rooted in historical fact, and therefore contingent.

This new account of realism that emerged was useful in its stress upon language as the medium that constitutes reality, but attributed a simple-mindedness to nineteenth-century writers -- notably George Eliot-- which has no basis. Byatt's own analyses of George Eliot's fiction and non-fiction (8), which have stretched over decades of critical reading, and those more recent ones of Jenny Uglow (Uglow 1987) and Penny Boumelha (Boumelha 1988) reveal that Eliot's work is more questioning and linguistically self-aware than this version of realism allows. Nor did George Eliot view herself as merely photographically reproducing her reality. She emphasised the synthetic role of the imagination in processing experience, much in the line of Balzac and James. The author does not passively record events, but actively selects, organises and interprets the material. Byatt's ambitions envy the scope of Eliot in *Middlemarch* and Balzac in *La Comédie Humaine*. She also learns from the multiplicity of vision of James, who held that people differed infinitely as to what constituted life and representation of it. As Gąsiorek shows, the "classic realist text" is "a hypostatization that makes a generic 'type' out of what is in fact an irreducibly heterogeneous corpus of texts". (Gąsiorek 1995, p. 12). He concludes that realism is internally fissured, frequently conscious of its own contradictions and constantly mutating into new forms.

1.6 The rise of metafictional fiction

At the end of the decade of the 1960s, John Fowles brought out his fourth major novel, *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, which shocked with its subversive handling of narrative and character. Its famous double ending broke the traditional framework of closure. The flaunting of pastiche in this mock-Victorian novel is as much foregrounded as its deliberate anachronisms. The anonymous narrator, a vigorous looker-on embodied in the bearded stranger on the train, throws out unanswered questions in the text and is deliberately made to enter into a metafictional disquisition on the problems of writing novels "in the age of Alain Robbe-Grillet and Roland Barthes".

We recognise here two devices for creating a metafictional discourse which appealed to Byatt and were incorporated into *The Virgin in the Garden* (1978): the intrusion of the author's persona and inclusion of real figures in amongst the fictional ones. In *Virgin*, the "dumpy woman in a raincoat, and wearing a St Laurent skirt", is Byatt seeing herself ten years earlier as she hobnobbed in the 1968 Prologue with Sybil Thorndike, Lady Antonia Fraser, Helen Gardner and Lady Longford (*Virgin*, p. 12).

Fowles showed the way to create novels that suggest that authentic character is fluid rather than static and must be presented in a way that obviates fixity. The traditional archetypal pattern of beginning, middle and end is questioned, and narrative power lures the reader on only to have his or her

expectations undermined. The onus is upon the reader to understand that here, pastiche classic realism is being used to portray nineteenth-century life in order to examine not only Victorian society as mediated by its literature (Sarah was in love with Mr Knightly and Mr Rochester), but also the nature of fictional representation as it appears from a post-war perspective. In *Possession*, twenty years later, Byatt took this process further, in offering the reader authentic-seeming, but pastiche, nineteenth-century poetry, and compared the social moment of Sarah Woodruff and Charles Smithson with the 1980s.

Like all metafictional texts, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* offers a double focus: it refers both to a reality outside the text (though Derrida might argue that Darwin, Queen Victoria and President Kennedy are only verbal functions of the text), and to the process by which that reality is fictionally constructed. The process of depiction from Fowles onwards is seen to be as important as the social domain itself, as it was for Sterne.

The self-reflexivity introduced by this shift in emphasis, which is taken to be one of postmodernism's key characteristics, can be discerned in a wide range of otherwise diverse works. Realism continues to be a presence in the last quarter of the century, but not as a set of fixed formal techniques. For writers who adhere to referentiality, fully aware of its challenges from Modernism and postmodernism, it functions rather as "a constellation of discursive practices, making it more pertinent to talk of an impulse to represent the social world than of a

particular narrative mode". (Gąsiorek 1995, p.13)

As Patricia Waugh says in her 1984 *Metafiction*:

> Metafiction is not so much a sub-genre of the novel as a tendency *within* the novel which operates through exaggeration of the tensions and oppositions inherent in all novels: of frame and frame-break, of technique and counter-technique, of construction and deconstruction of illusion. (Waugh 1984, p. 14)

The point about metafiction, says Waugh, is that as the novels tend to embody dimensions of self-reflexivity and formal uncertainty, they explore a theory of fiction through the practice of writing fiction. Waugh's definition of "metafiction" (9) brings out this aspect, also the aspect of the questioning of reality itself:

> *Metafiction* is a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality. In providing a critique of their own methods of construction, such writings not only examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction, they also explore the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text. (Waugh 1984, p. 2)

As Malcolm Bradbury --like Lodge and Byatt, a novelist and critic-- says of his work:

> Most of my (fairly plentiful) critical writing has been concerned with the novel form or the Modern movement, in the shade of which we live and experience our late

> twentieth century sense of life. [...] Writers are always asked about the writer's task. I have my own strong view of it. It is to explore and unlock the nature and value of fictions -- to test the fictions of the age, the fictions of politics, the fictions of faith, the fictions of which the world is constructed, and not always for the best. (10)

As Bradbury speaks of multiple fictions in specific contexts, all of which are potential material for the novel, one must argue for a historical rather than a formal manner of viewing realism's different manifestations. As Wittgenstein put it:

> We are inclined to think that there must be something common to all examples of realism, and that this common property is the justification for applying the general term 'realism' to the various writings, whereas 'realistic writings' form a *family* the members of which have family likenesses. (11)

This postmodern emphasis on language decisively alters how realism is conceived, as it cannot go back upon the post-structuralist tenet that cognition, and any literary artefact that is its product, is linguistically mediated. Language-consciousness, or the terms of production, is an element that has to be included in a contemporary redefinition of realism. Language's constitutive and transformative role in the creation of meaning comes to the fore. Byatt was much impressed by Paul Ricoeur's work on metaphor and on his hermeneutic reading of Artistotle's account of mimesis. This account, with its emphasis on "making", privileges the writer's constructive activity. For Ricoeur, mimesis "does not equate itself with something already

given" but "produces what it imitates". (Ricoeur 1991, pp. 137-8) He suggests that the classical designative account of language is unsustainable, reference becomes a *productive* form of reference, in terms of creating new meaning, not mirroring.

Byatt's work, like that of those who beat the path for her, is marked by the tension between a wish to represent various aspects of post-war reality and a recognition of the artistic difficulties thereby entailed. While some writers, contemporaries and friends of Byatt herself, have departed for their different reasons from the orbit of a fairly traditional realism (Barnes, Berger, Carter, Green and Rushdie, for example), others, like Fowles, Lamming, Lessing (in spite of her impatience), Naipaul and Wilson, have remained more or less within it. If we judge by her early writing, Byatt could be said to belong to the latter group, but as her experiments in pastiche and juxtapositions of different fictional discourses, including feminist fairy tale progress, one wonders if she is straining at the self-imposed bit of her youth to join the former group.

Before we leave this discussion of realism in the post-war period and Byatt's place --or places-- in the picture, we should mention the aspect of historicity. Some postmodernists, within the death of the novel, author and subject thesis, reported the death of history. If we take into account all these new "realisms" in the plural --socialist, post-colonial, feminist-- and take stock of the enormously differentiated responses to realism and Modernism, to politics and history evidenced by post-

war British fiction, we must refute the waning of historicity. The recent historical and literary past has been inscribed in the contemporary novel by such as Wilson and Byatt, Berger and Fowles. New avenues have been shown us on a global scale by such as Barnes and Rushdie. History and real events, also interested versions of real events, are the material for a new form of realism. This is based on cross-breeding of narrative modes, with a persistent focus on the difficulties of mimesis, a questioning of point of view, and hence the terms of representation.

As Patricia Waugh puts it:

> Contemporary metafictional writing is both a response and a contribution to an even more thoroughgoing sense that reality or history are provisional; no longer a world of eternal verities but a series of constructions, artifices, impermanent structures. The materialist, positivist and empiricist world-view on which realistic fiction is premised no longer exists. (Waugh 1984, p. 7)

We end this discussion with Malcolm Bradbury describing the art of the novelist-critic in his 1972 *Possibilities*. With two novels under her belt, this moment was for Byatt a taking-off point for her tetralogy and for her transition into a mature writer.

> When the novelist serves as his own critic, as novelists increasingly are apt to do in these last years, then that helps criticism. But he also helps himself, helps himself to clarify means which, in a particular age of style, seem to become present and available simply as means in the novel, and then require

a convincing articulation. The postwar era has been an era of changed means, or so I would suppose. And that has generated a period of new realisms, new passions for the grotesque, new commitments to the subjective, new disquiets about the writer's omniscience or his wisdom. These are comments on the times, not through an historical imperative, but as an aspect of the task of achieving a felt and significant fiction in particular circumstances. The enterprise of articulating means, of clarifying and ordering, of testing implications, is of a piece with the other, more diachronic activity which we think of as realistic. (Bradbury 1973, p. 180)

NOTES TO CHAPTER 1

1. For example, by Alex Comfort, *The Novel and Our Time*, (London: Phoenix House, 1948).

2. Collected in such writings as Christine Brooke-Rose, "Interview", *Contemporary Literature*, 17, 1 (Winter 1976) pp. 1-24 and "Self-Confrontation and the Writer", *New Literary History*, 9, 1 (Autumn 1977) pp. 129-36.

3. Gąsiorek 1995, p. 8. His note here refers to Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, (ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson & Michael Holquist), (Austin: Texas University Press, 1981), p. 11 & p. 39.

4. B. S. Johnson in a BBC recording of 1967 "Novelists of the Sixties".

5. Margaret Drabble, as above, "Novelists of the Sixtes".

6. David Lodge, "The Novelist at the Crossroads", (1977) reprinted in Malcolm Bradbury (ed.), *The Novel Today*, (London: Fontana, 1990) pp. 87-114.

7. Angus Wilson, extract from his novel *The Wild Garden*, (London: Secker & Warburg, 1963), quoted in Bradbury 1990.

8. A. S. Byatt, (ed.), *George Eliot: Selected Essays, Poems and Other Writings*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990)

9. The term appears to have originated in an essay by the American critic and self-conscious novelist, William H. Gass, "Fiction and the Figures of Life", quoted in Waugh 1984, p. 2.

10. David Lodge, *Malcolm Bradbury*, (pamphlet in the Contemporary Writers Series), (London: the British Council and Book Trust, 1988).

11. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *The Blue and the Brown Books*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964), quoted in Gasiorek 1995, p. 14).

CHAPTER 2. Making a Space and finding a Voice: constraints within the tradition.

2.1 Introduction: the social context of the English novel and the legacy of F.R.Leavis

We left off with Malcolm Bradbury's view of the realisms, the discourses, available to writers in Britain in the 1970s. From another work of his, also of the 1970s, *The Social Context of Modern English Literature* (Bradbury 1971), we see how socially involved English writers have traditionally been, and how that involvement has tended to be central, and therefore neutral, but primordially exemplary. Bradbury speaks of English literature inheriting two traditions, and this is the first:

> The first of these derives from those writers and critics who, assuming that the literary imagination has a singular power to intervene in society, to call it to its best ends, to express its finest values and concerns, to offer a 'criticism of life', have stressed the power of great art to know and interpret the world and also to act as an humane influence in it. This view runs deep in the tradition of the English 'cultural debate' [...] a tradition in England that derives largely from the romantic poets, and notably Coleridge, and runs through Matthew Arnold and William Morriss to modern-day critics like T. S. Eliot, F. R. Leavis and more latterly Richard Hoggart and Raymond Williams himself. [...] [I]t clearly has something to do with the striking fact that the English writer in the nineteenth century was uniquely able to function somewhere near the centre of society and felt capable of intervening in the direction it took. Broadly this tradition of

> cultural thought asserts, if in various ways, that culture is a creative achievement, and that literature consciously and continuously keeps alive the best values, preserves essential standards of clarity and worth. (Bradbury 1971, pp. xiv-xv)

Here, Bradbury defines that legacy of Leavisite thinking which his generation inherited, and which some of his colleagues, like Byatt herself, had the opportunity of experiencing at first hand. Byatt's fiction is peopled, naturally, by fictional characters, but the occasional real person enters or is referred to like Fowles's Robbe-Grillet. Leavis lives on, and in Byatt's latest novel, her 1996 *Babel Tower*, she has one of the protagonist's friends talk of having published a "Leavisite analysis of the Lyrics of the Who" (*Babel Tower*, p. 82). But it is in her non-fiction that she makes explicit statements about the importance of Leavis to her. Her literary credo is to be found in her 1991 collection of essays *Passions of the Mind*. Near the beginning of her Introduction, she has this to say:

> I grew up in Dr Leavis's Cambridge, in an atmosphere of moral seriousness which placed English Literature at the centre of university studies and also of social morality. I felt then that these claims were extravagant and absurdly exclusive --all sorts of other things are good and beautiful, paint, philosophy, mathematics, biology-- there are many ways of coming at inevitably partial visions of truth. I was and am excited by T. S. Eliot's observation that our literature is a substitute for religion, and so is our religion. Just because I cared so much and so precisely for the written word I was worried by the believers and, indeed, my early novels are in one aspect a sort of questioning quarrel with Leavis's vision and values, which nevertheless I inherit and share. (*Passions*, p. 2)

Here, then, she asserts her right to question the master, at the same time as acknowledging an indelible mark. We might ask ourselves in what ways her thinking and her formal approach have been directed by Leavis. Following on from the above statement, she identifies two related strategies she has learnt from Leavis which she continues to apply in her approach to literature: these are close reading and the long quotation:

> What we did learn was Leavis's word-by-word, questioning method of close reading, and what I cannot forgo is the habit of extended quotation involved in a criticism which has this at its centre. In the 1960s I attended Frank Kermode's graduate seminars at UCL where the French structuralists and other theoretical approaches were arriving, and listened to much argument about interpretation being a matter of selecting and privileging certain parts and patterns in a work. I thought that Leavis's long quotations were a protection against such distorting interpretative fervour, and as an editor of George Elict's essays I did not do as many modern editors have done, and cut the long exemplary passages that were part of her text and her argument. Writing is reading and reading is writing, and I hope the readers of these essays will both bear with, and read, the quotations. (*Passions*, p. 2)

A third aspect of her debt to Leavis is his interpretation, for her generation, of the poetry of T. S. Eliot, and through this, the pointing to the metaphysical poets as models for "good poetry":

> More seductive than Leavis, in the world I grew up in, was T. S. Eliot, and most seductive in Eliot, to me, was his admiration for the metaphysical poets, for their mixture of intellect and passion, sense and sensuousness. (*Passions*, p. 2)

A final point is the one Bradbury stressed, the influence Leavis exerted in the sphere of moral seriousness in art and art as a criticism of life. These beliefs, if not already held by the young Byatt going up to Cambridge, were encouraged in her by her reading of Browning, her later study of Iris Murdoch, and the lectures of Leavis:

> I was trained to think about fiction in the arduously moral climate of the Cambridge of F. R. Leavis, who saw literature and art in Arnold's terms as a 'criticism of life', who privileged these ways of looking over the more apparently exact ones of biography and history. [...] As a student --and still-- I was moved by the huge poetic enterprise of Robert Browning's *The Ring and the Book*. [...] Browning himself believed it was possible, indeed imperative, to tell the truth, that there was such a thing as 'truth' that could be sorted out from all the intricate meshes of thought and opinion and partiality that make up our account of things. (*Passions*, p. 23)

In his Cambridge days, Leavis was a controversial figure in more than one respect, and still today, he has his fans and his detractors. In order to evaluate the perhaps more subtle marks left on Byatt's art, we will make a brief review of the Leavis myth in two contrasting versions. Firstly, in 1967, the year in which Byatt brought out her second novel, *The Game*, with its Cambridge don protagonist (albeit female, Cassandra), George Steiner gave a critical but favourable view of Leavis in his *Language and Silence*. "The Muses have conferred only two doctorates, his and Dr Johnson's." (1) he says of Leavis, to whom he dedicates a whole chapter. In her latest novel, *Babel Tower*, which is a study of the 1960s, Byatt adds George Steiner

to her list of thinkers and writers who influenced her then: "Writers whose ideas changed me in the sixties and are still important to me are Iris Murdoch, Doris Lessing and George Steiner." (2).

Steiner admires Leavis as a member of a very tiny élite of critics who were solely critics and did not divide their energies between criticism and creative work:

> Very few critics survive in their own right. Those that do --and how many can one add to Dr Johnson, Lessing, Sainte-Beuve and Belinsky? -- make of criticism an act of pivotal social intelligence. They work outward from the particular literary instance to the far reaches of moral and political argument.
>
> This has been radically the case with Leavis. Writing of *Ulysses*, Ezra Pound declared: 'We are governed by words, the laws are graven in words, and literature is the sole means of keeping these words living and accurate.' Leavis would add that only criticism can see to it that literature does the job. Behind this vision of criticism as 'the central humanity', as the exhibitor and guardian of values which are no less moral and social than they are technical, lies a complex, articulate theory of the critical process.
>
> To Leavis, the critic is the complete reader: 'the ideal critic is the ideal reader'. He realizes to the full the experience given in the words of the poet or the novelist. He aims at complete responsiveness, at a kind of poised vulnerability of consciousness in the encounter with the text. He proceeds with an attention which is close and stringent, yet also provisional, and at all times susceptible to revaluation. Judgement arises from response; it does not initiate it.
> (Steiner 1967, pp. 249-50)

Ideally, Steiner asserts, Leavis did not read works of

literature in search of examples to back up a theory he had elaborated. He read them for themselves and always in dialogue with himself, questioning and trying to answer his own questions, as if the works needed an ideal reader in order for them to be fully realised. As a voracious reader, and under Leavis's guidance, Byatt's sense of a good novel is that of a work that makes great demands upon the reader. No doubt, Leavis's practice of dialectic also came through his professional approach to the works, for as Steiner says: "All his criticism has sprung from the context of teaching." (Steiner 1967, p. 251) Byatt too, acknowledges the debt in her later works (especially *Babel Tower*) that she owes to her teaching as an informative source. To Leavis, the university was of paramount importance, and his hope was that it should not be an ivory tower, but that man, through literature, would become a better member of society:

> The commanding axiom in Leavis's life-work is the conviction that there is a close relation between a man's capacity to respond to art and his general fitness for humane existence. That capacity can be woken and richened by the critic. Literacy of feeling is a pre-condition to sane judgement in human affairs: 'thinking about political and social matters ought to be done by minds of some real literary education, and done in an intellectual climate informed by a vital literary culture'. Where a society does not have within it a significant contemporary literature and the parallel exercise of critical challenge, 'the "mind" (and mind includes memory) is not fully alive'. In short, Leavis's conception of literary criticism is, above all else, a plea for a live, humane social order.
> (Steiner 1967, p. 251)

Most of Steiner's book is dedicated, of course, to showing how misguided this idea of Leavis's was. But as an ideal, it

remains part of the legacy. Leavis also left a linguistic legacy, and Steiner offers a list of lexical terms which characterise Leavis's critical discourse and are the hallmarks of the Leavis style:

> 'discrimination ... centrality ... poise ... responsibility ... tactics ... enforcement ... realisation ... presentment ... vitalising ... performance ... assent ... robustness ...' 'Close, delicate wholeness'; 'pressure of intelligence'; 'concrete realisation'; 'achieved actuality' --are phrases which carry Leavis's signature as indelibly as 'high seriousness' bears that of Matthew Arnold. (Steiner 1967, p. 252)

Steiner attributes Leavis's refusal of elegant rhetoric to an underlying Puritanism. If this is true, it is another point on which to explore the pupil-master relationship of Byatt and Leavis, since Byatt started life as a Quaker and went to a Quaker boarding school. As Steiner puts it, Leavis distrusts "fine" writing which may obscure thinness of meaning or unsoundness of logic. Indeed, there is much rich writing in Byatt, if we think of her fiction, but it is as full of meaning as it is of flourish and embroidery. Where there is persuasion in discourse of shaky logic, it is of deliberate use and for pejorative purposes.

The second reason Steiner adduces to explain the sources of "that bleak, hectoring yet ultimately hypnotizing tone" (Steiner 1967, p. 253) of Leavis's is one of extreme interest to students of Byatt. As we mentioned before, Steiner assigns considerable importance to the fact that Leavis was not a creative writer. His refusal to entertain creative as well as critical aspirations

Steiner puts down to a sort of loyalty:

> For it can also entail a subtle disloyalty to the critical purpose. Where it becomes a substitute for 'creative writing', where it shows the scars of lost dreams, criticism tends towards rhetoric, self-revelation, shapely aphorism. It loses its grip on the objects before it and turns to an unsteady mirror held up by the critic to his own ambitions or humility.
>
> Leavis conveys persistently the absolute conviction that criticism is a central, life-giving pursuit. It need offer no apology for not being something else. (Steiner 1967, p. 253)

In this, Byatt and her master differ. She is successful in both and maintains her right to practise both. Admittedly, there are now more precedents for creative-writer-cum-critics than, significantly, George Eliot or Coleridge, even if in England it is a male coterie, the so-called Campus Writers, Lodge and Bradbury. Fortunately, Steiner saves face by adding a footnote to the effect that the divide between "fact" and "fiction" is no longer clear-cut, and refers us to Roland Barthes (it seems the Continental coterie of Barthes, Butor, etc., is also male dominated):

> [T]he whole distinction between creation and criticism, between analytic statement and poetic invention needs rethinking. Both may be, as Roland Barthes says, part of a linguistic totality more significant, more comprehensive than either. (Steiner 1967, p. 253)

Byatt writes her fiction very much within this new vein of blurred distinctions between genres. *Possession* is a prime example, and the device which makes this possible is the creation of characters who are creative writers and others who are

critics: in this case, the poet and poetess Ash and Christabel, and the university lecturer and research student Maude and Roland respectively. Ash was a critic as well as a poet, and at the end of the novel, Roland is writing poetry. *Babel Tower*, Byatt's latest full-length novel, has Frederica as teacher, critic and would-be novelist. But if we look back to the first novel she published, *The Shadow of the Sun*, we see that from the very beginning she has been fascinated by the figure of the writer in every aspect of his life, and even in relation to the parasitical critic. In this novel, the writer Henry Severell enjoys fame while his daughter is trying to write "in his shadow", and the critic Oliver Canning is presented as what Leavis abhorred, the failed creative writer turned critic.

To move on to the ideas on poetry and the novel which Leavis transmitted to his students, it is important to remember that his general thinking was moulded by his studies of both creative writers and philosophers, namely of T. S. Eliot, D. H. Lawrence, William Empson and I. A. Richards. Byatt acknowledges that she is in the grip of Eliot and Lawrence, albeit reluctantly. And if it were not for Empson, we might wonder about the professional name she took, A. S. Byatt. Commenting on Leavis's best-known work, *The Great Tradition*, Steiner says "Anyone dealing seriously with the development of English fiction must start, even if in disagreement, from Leavis's proposals." (Steiner 1967, p. 257). This is exactly what Byatt has found inevitable.

One final point Steiner makes and which is of interest with

regard to Byatt, is their Englishness. "'Englishness' is in Leavis's interior vocabulary a notion of tremendous positive force; it connotes a specific tone and natural excellence." (Steiner 1967, p. 265) This has negative effects as well as positive. Although Byatt has shown great interest as a critic and a creative writer in modern American fiction and French fiction and theory, she has been accused, like Leavis, of being insular (3).

It is believed that his concentration on mainstream English novelists, blinded him to the virtues of such important writers as Joyce and Hardy. As creative writers, biographers and critics, Byatt and her sister Margaret Drabble continue into the twentieth century that interest for the great Victorian writers and their depiction in the novel of the state of the nation, joining their voices to that post-war revival of the *roman fleuve* by such as Waugh and Durrell. Taken all together, the novels of the two sisters record post-war Britain in a rather introspective way.

Steiner, of course, concludes his work with the usual reservations about the ultimate validity of Leavis's work. We are not concerned with this as such, only in so far as it affects the thought and writing of Antonia Byatt. Leavis's main failing was his refusal to consider the new, in the words of Steiner: "He has abdicated from one of the commanding functions of criticism, which is to apprehend and welcome the new." (Steiner 1967, p. 266) Byatt has learned a lesson from this, she has learned not to be either insular or backward-looking.

What has helped her in this is the fact that she was a language student, she studied French language and literature as well as English. Indeed, she has the practice of spending her summers in France to distance herself from committments and concentrate on her writing. It also reminds us of Joyce and Lawrence, who could write about Ireland and England better from a distance. In her most recent novel, *Babel Tower*, Byatt reminds us of England's peculiar position, its physical insularity being both advantage and disadvantage. She says that "English literature is a structure half-connected to and half cut off from a European literature which was transfigured by Nietzche and Freud;" (*Babel Tower*, p. 379).

We started this chapter with a quotation from Malcolm Bradbury about the power of the influence of Leavis and the contribution he made to the belief in the edifying nature of English literature. He spoke of two traditions, and this is one of them. The other tradition he discerns is one based on currents of thought emanating more from Europe and America:

> The second of my two traditions derives from a rather more objective view of literature, and is less associated with practising writers than intellectuals and scholars. It is concerned less with the causative and active force literature has in society, and more with its nature as a social manifestation, an expression of the society. Hence literature tends to be seen as a conditioned thing shaped from particular resources, ideas and materials in a specified society at a specified time, the powers of great writing lying in their response to the essential forces at work in the age and the social structure. (Bradbury 1971, p. xv)

This tradition is obviously more historicist and more determinist than the first. Byatt has the advantage over Leavis to have lived at a time when the thinking of the Marxists, of cultural anthropologists such as Lévi-Strauss and Barthes has been assimilated. She incorporated into *Babel Tower* an American ethnomethodologist, as an external student of English traditions in the culture of the 1960s. Also, since Leavis's days, our views about possible attitudes to science and its importance in the world, have come into better perspective. Patricia Waugh has shown that in the famous controversy of 1959 between C. P. Snow and F. R. Leavis, neither of them was taking into account the New Science, which includes relativity, chaos and catastrophe theory, thus "both sides offer a distorted perception of the relations between literature and science". (Waugh 1996, p. 86) Byatt's views of science do, by contrast, attempt to embrace the latest thinking.

To give us an idea of the ways in which Leavis attracted adverse criticism and stimulated thinking on the novel which was increasingly contrary to his very limited and English point of view, we shall, as we said before, examine an opposing stance. The version of Leavisism we have chosen is one which incorporates the more recent European and American thinking on language and literature: Howard Felperin's 1985 *Beyond Deconstruction*. Steiner began his chapter on Leavis with a reminder of what Leavisism is in its peculiar terminological aspects. Felperin starts his with a send-up of Leavisite critical practice, approach and jargon:

> What I discovered was that an author's prose can be 'crisp', or if he is not careful, 'brittle'; his moral outlook 'buoyant' and 'life-affirming' (unless of course it is 'life-denying'); his work 'central' or 'essential' or 'marginal'. (To what and for whom was not made explicit, unless it was 'life' or the 'great tradition'.) The only authors who seemed to be consistently regarded as 'central' and 'essential', for whatever it is worth, were Shakespeare and Jane Austen. The critic, in turn, supposed himself to write out of his 'inward possession' of the work, to seek a 'realised experience' in it, to strive for 'completeness of response' to it, but most often seemed to entertain 'worries' about its artistic, and especially, its moral status until he could finally dismiss it as 'easy' or 'unearned' or 'self-indulgent'. He thereby proved himself a reader or critic --never an interpreter or scholar or even student-- of 'sensibility' and 'judgement', superior by implication to the author he had just put in his place. (Felperin 1985, p. 8)

Under the self-proclaimed democracy, says Felperin, there is undeclared authoritarianism: "a tone as dreadfully earnest and a protocol as predictable and formulaic as a religious ritual." (Felperin 1985, p. 9). Felperin begins his book with Leavisism, for, as he asserts, "our present and larger critical situation cannot be understood except as the outcome of contradictions within its underlying philosophical --or aggressively *anti*-philosophical-- position" (Felperin 1985, p. 10).

The idealism of practical criticism, with its "canon" or the "great tradition", started out from a biassed position on the following questions:

> Is the language of literature a privileged language, a language of moral instruction, of organic unity, of fullness and precision,

> a language redeemed from the divisions and duplicities that bedevil 'ordinary' language? Is there even such a thing as poetic or literary language in the first place, a language authentically different from 'ordinary' language? Then too, what is the proper language of literary criticism? What relation does criticism bear to its object of study, namely, literature or language, or the language of literature? (Felperin 1985, p. 10)

Since the 1960s, the different movements of structuralism, Marxism, feminism, post-structuralism have challenged Leavisite idealism and attacked the myth of literary privilege, attempting to demystify it. On her own bat, Byatt has attempted the same enterprise, without aligning herself to any specific ideology, not even feminism. In all her novels she has created characters who are writers and produce "literary", if not "poetic" language, and in her self-conscious realist approach, either through her narrators, or other writer characters, questions the whole concept of literary creativity.

Ironically, it was Raymond Williams who observed how the internal contradictions, self-blindness and unself-scrutiny of his master's practical criticism led to its own defeat. Williams's own practice of "left Leavisism" was criticised in turn by his pupil Terry Eagleton (4). The more recent movements have developed their own special theories and discourses, but they have at least one motive and justification in common:

> [T]o open up the closed and self-supporting economy of evaluative textual criticism, what marxism would term the commodity-fetishism of the text-as-object, and promote that commerce between the literary text

> and its social context which new and practical criticism had all but embargoed under the twin fallacies of intentionalism and affectivism in its definition of and dealings with 'literature'. (Felperin 1985, pp. 15-6)

Byatt, through her own brand of self-reflexive realism, is able to make the reader of one of her novels aware, through the act of reading, that there is a wider social context to a text, whatever its nature or purpose. The "wider social context" would be another fictional text built around the core "fictional text(s)", the "novel" or "poem" of the writer character, and beyond that, the even more problematic area of the outside reality and their referential relations to aspects of it.

However, she no doubt sins on the count of revering a text as a commodity or fetish, since she is addicted to reading and writing, and lives from producing such commodities, which her fans sometimes fetishize. In a way, therefore, she has corrected in herself one of the shortcomings of Leavisism, and perpetuated another.

What Felperin has to say in favour of practical criticism over and above the later "isms" is that in spite of its basic fallacy of accepting "literary" language as a different entity from "ordinary" language, it did, precisely because of this acceptance, attempt to engage the difficult questions of what might constitute "literary" language. Later contextual criticism has not addressed the problem of this phenomenon of literariness openly and explicity. One may say that Byatt is an unswerving Leavisite in this, for all her writing is dedicated to the

or outdated. Her pragmatism has paid off, and she would no doubt agree with Felperin that this lack of a dominating discourse may have proved beneficial for criticism, and who knows, even for fiction :

> The search for a theoretical metadiscourse has so far yielded only a proliferation of sub-discourses that shows no sign of consolidating into a common language and methodology comparable to that which lends a semblance of coherence to the practices of science and some credence to the notion of a scientific community [...] Quite the contrary, as the discourses of theory continue to proliferate and recombine into new discourses, profound incompatibilities and mutual contradictions emerge in assumptions, aims and methods, making it increasingly unlikely that any single meta- or master-discourse will achieve the desired condition of institutional domination. This, the present study argues, is not only the unavoidable destiny of textual study within a pluralist culture, but may not be an altogether unhappy fate. The unavailability of a common theoretical language may well save literary criticism from itself. (Felperin 1985, p. 2)

We have chosen a number of sub-discourses with which to examine the texts of Byatt's fiction which we believe are not incompatible. Text linguistics can help bridge gaps in ideological overviews, and approximate as far as it is possible to this scientific ideal Felperin speaks of. Curiously, they share with Leavisism a very close analysis of the text, but without privileging any attitude within the text that might be coloured by subjective thinking. But before we attempt this, we must finish the exploration of those sources of influence that contributed to the formation of Byatt's distinctive qualities as a creative writer.

exploration of what good art is and how it is made. Creative activity is her main subject.

If literary and artistic creativity are her main subject, her main approach is that of multi-perspectivism. She works into her novels all the possible viewpoints she can reasonably, even if only partially, identify with, and sometimes which she can only imagine. This gives a wholeness to her creative act that counterbalances the unilaterality of the narrator's voice that she tends to allow to dominate, rather like the subjective voice of the critic in Leavis's practical criticism. Byatt makes it plain in her novels and short stories that her more intelligent characters, the struggling writers rather than the established ones, those who are still trying to find their voice, are aware that there is no single "truth" in any aspect of life, in ideology or religion, in politics or in criticism, least of all in their medium, language. In her analytical approach therefore, she blends detailed attention to the text or idea with an attempt to air every conceivable view on it. Then she remains loyal to Leavis: in the utmost importance she gives to "good writing" -- she has her own canon-- and then in making her own judgement, easily discernible in the text, ultimately authoritative.

Felperin's conclusions are now ten years old, but they have not been proved wrong, the scene in the field of literary criticism, or "critical theory" which is replacing it, is a very varied one. Byatt, in paying allegiance to no one critical discourse, has probably prevented herself from appearing biassed

or outdated. Her pragmatism has paid off, and she would no doubt agree with Felperin that this lack of a dominating discourse may have proved beneficial for criticism, and who knows, even for fiction :

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2.2 Early influences: Murdoch, Bowen, Lehmann and Sagan

We have seen that in her Acknowledgements to *Babel Tower*, Byatt affirms how influenced she was by the fiction and the thinking of Iris Murdoch both in the 1960s and later. She had dedicated her efforts to writing a full-length book on Murdoch in 1965, *Degrees of Freedom: The Novels of Iris Murdoch* (5), and wrote several shorter works: "Iris Murdoch" in the "Writers and their Work" series in 1976 (6), and the pamphlet on Murdoch in the "Contemporary Writers" series of 1988 for the British Council and Book Trust. In 1971 she had recorded for the BBC an interview with Murdoch (7) and wrote countless shorter pieces, like "Iris Murdoch: The Black Prince" in the British Council's "Notes on Literature" series (8).

We have already mentioned the impact Murdoch's "Against Dryness" article had upon Byatt. She wrote in the Introduction to *Passions of the Mind*:

> My interest in the novel as a form came later than my interest in poetry, and was partly a purely practical interest in narrative method. Two statements about the nature of fiction that influenced me very early were Iris Murdoch's 1961 essay 'Against Dryness' and a remark of Graham Greene's [....] 'Against Dryness' is both a text about morality in a post-Christian world, and a text about the appropriate fictive form with which to explore that world, in its complexity and depth. It rejects what Blake might have called the single vision both of the crystalline novel, or jewel-like artefact, and of the journalistic report, and defends, on moral grounds, the Tolstoyan 'old-fashioned naturalistic idea of character'. (*Passions*, p. 3)

Murdoch had remarked that Reality "is not a given whole", yet acknowledges that realist writers believe it has an existence that is independent of the perceptions of the cognizing self, and that the writer's task is to explore that enormously complex world as fully as possible. The involvement of the writer as individual within the reality itself makes the complex task even more difficult: "We are not isolated free choosers, monarchs of all we survey, but benighted creatures sunk in a reality whose nature we are constantly and overwhelmingly tempted to deform by fantasy." (9)

In *Passions of the Mind*, Byatt continues her discussion of the implications of Murdoch's assertions:

> In this 'polemical sketch' Murdoch argues that current views of the nature of the human personality are 'shallow and flimsy' and that the two main views of human nature she describes, the rational one of the logical positivists, or the existentialism of Sartre, both assume that human beings are 'solitary and totally free' and that the fundamental virtue is 'sincerity'. 'Sincerity' might, I suppose, be translated as 'self-consistency' or 'truth to oneself'. Iris Murdoch finds it inadequate. What we need, she says, in a sentence that electrified and electrifies me, is 'the hard idea of truth' as opposed to 'the facile idea of sincerity'.
>
> 'The hard idea of truth'. The phrase persuades with a metaphor --truth is like stone, sincerity is slippery like butter. [...] During my time as a writer such solipsist ideas of our experience of the world have increased largely in power. So that, whilst it was once attractive (*séduisant*?) to think that whatever we say or see is our own construction, it now becomes necessary to reconsider the idea of truth, hard truth and its possibility. We may be, as Browning said, born liars. But that

> idea itself is only wholly meaningful if we glimpse a possibility of truth and truthfulness for which we must strive, however, inevitably, partial, our success must be. I do believe language has denotative as well as connotative powers. (*Passions*, p. 24)

The importance to Byatt of these views of "appropriate fictive form" and traditional characterisation cannot be stressed too much. They informed her growing view of realism, and probably account for her early fiction being considered traditional. Murdoch's "realism" is particular, it depicts a world which is immediately recognisable as a Murdoch world, yet only a minority, the upper middle classes, would recognise it as theirs. Byatt's world of reality is much wider in scope. In her "Introduction" to *Passions of the Mind* she continues discussing what realism was coming to mean for her:

> The problems of the 'real' in fiction, and the adequacy of words to describe it, have preoccupied me for the last twenty years. If I have defended realism, or what I call 'self-conscious realism', it is not because I believe that it has any privileged relationship to truth, social or psychological, but because it leaves space for thinking minds as well as feeling bodies. (*Passions*, p. 3)

Byatt goes on to explain how important it is for her as a reader to have space to think. It is not surprising, therefore, that her principal characters are thinking people. She argues with Murdoch for traditional representations of character and teases out some misconceptions. Still explaining "self-conscious realism", she says:

> It is closely related to ideals of accuracy, as exemplified by those very self-conscious artists, Ford Madox Ford and Willa Cather. It is, however, Ford who discusses the problem of solipsism in the impressionistic modern novel. I am afraid of solipsism, and find it frustrating as a reading experience. [...] I was recently at a conference where it was argued with some force and elegance that Sterne left space for the reader to be free and creative as George Eliot, an instructive narrator, did not. And yet if we think about it, which is really the more *coercive*, the more exclusive of mental activity in the reader, Eliot's measured exposition and solidly sensible embodiment, or Sterne's legerdemain playfulness? It is Sterne who manipulates, who teases the reader and demands total admiration and assent. Eliot lays out her evidence and conclusions, speaks sometimes as 'I', sometimes to 'you' and sometimes as 'we'. But despite her passionate morality, her reasonable proceedings leave room for dissent and qualification --indeed, she demonstrates and argues the case for independent thought, in reader as in characters and writer. (*Passions*, p. 4)

In her monograph on Iris Murdoch in the "Contemporary Writers" series, Byatt begins her first three paragraphs in a parallel manner, referring to Murdoch's world. She begins: "Iris Murdoch's world is a beautiful, complicated, surprising and interrelated whole." We quote this because Byatt emulates her in her own fictional worlds, especially in the complication and interrelatedness. Her second paragraph begins: "It is a postwar world, where liberal dreams of progress and of the intrinsic goodness of personal relations are threatened [...]". Again, this becomes the world of Byatt's fiction. The third paragraph opens: "It is an immediately recognisable world, full of lovingly recorded *things*, the stuff of fiction --pictures and gardens and meals and clothes [...]". Her concerns have been taken up by

Byatt herself: "the nature of freedom, personal and political, and later with the nature of goodness, in life and in art, and with the relations of these two."

Byatt chose to give prominence to Murdoch's statement about the novel genre by reproducing it on the front of the pamphlet:

> Novels are individuals, about individuals, essentially comic, essentially sad, telling of the secret travail which ordinary life conceals, and formulating deep truths about human society and the human soul. They are also works of art; art first, edification probably. This supreme literary form is (let us hope) only now beginning its reign; long may it travel with us.

Richard Todd has pointed out that in Murdoch's reading of Plato and Freud, art "acts iconically between the artist and what Freud terms the 'client'" (Todd 1997, p. 16). Byatt seems to set up a similar set of reader-writer expectations and dynamics. Byatt confesses, not surprisingly: "She is, for me, the most important --and the most exciting-- novelist of my time." In an attempt to define her innovations, Byatt writes, (still in the pamphlet):

> What I think she was doing was to invent a form, at once free and highly ordered, which derived from the elegant coincidences of Shakespearean comedy, or the wild inventiveness of Dickens and Dostoevsky, which told real truths, amongst the comic pleasures of elaborate narrative forms. [...] She has diagnosed, and given fictional form to, the moral problem that underlies all moral thought from Nietzsche to Dostoevsky and beyond. If there is no God, and if the

> authority of the Churches is therefore without foundation, what is the reason, where is the source, what are the sanctions of our moral beliefs? [...] She has a sense of human order and limitation, and of what lies outside it.

Before we leave this discussion of what Murdoch has meant to Byatt, we must point out that just as we discern a development in Byatt's sense of realism, she discerned differences within Murdoch's writing, and this may have affected her own growth. In her exposition of *The Black Prince*, a novel where the protagonists are concerned with the differences between good and bad art, an interest dear to Byatt's heart, she has this to say about Murdoch and realism:

> Iris Murdoch has always described herself as a 'realist' when talking about her own fiction. 'Realism' is for her a technique for discovering more about reality, for describing the world as it is, when not distorted by private fantasy or desire. *Under the Net* and *The Black Prince* are, however, not 'realistic' either in the way in which a novel by George Eliot, or Tolstoy is realistic, or even in the way in which some of Iris Murdoch's own novels --*The Bell*, *A Fairly Honourable Defeat* --are realistic. They have large elements of fantasy, improbable plotting, farcical invention and literary joke which, I would suggest, are partly connected to the fact that their subject-matter is so largely concerned with the nature of art. They could possibly be best described as fables *about* the moral value of realism, rather than as realist novels in themselves. (10)

Byatt's conclusions about modern fiction, that much of it is fiction about fiction, art about art, deliberately exploiting or displaying its own artificiality, can also be applied to her own art.

By comparison with Murdoch, the influences of other women writers Byatt studied have been much less strong, and we shall therefore dedicate less time to them. An interesting starting-point is Lorna Sage's study: *Women in the House of Fiction* (Sage 1992). She divides the twenty-odd women writers she has chosen --not all British-- into five convenient groups, as follows:

1. **After the war**

   Simone de Beauvoir, Doris Lessing, Nathalie Sarraute

2. **Displaced persons**

   Christina Stead, Jean Rhys, Elizabeth Smart, Tillie Olsen, Françoise Sagan

3. **The Middle Ground**

   Iris Murdoch, Edna O'Brien, Margaret Drabble, Mary McCarthy

4. **The Movement**

   Joyce Johnson, Kate Millett, Erica Jong, Diane Johnson, Marilyn French

5. **Divided amongst Ourselves**

   Fay Weldon, Margaret Atwood, Angela Carter, Toni Morrison, Joyce Carol Oates

According to Sage, these writers, since the war, forced a revaluation of representation. As her categories show, she

believes feminism contributed strongly to the amplification of the subject-matter of the novel, as she puts it in her preface:

> The women's movement, and feminist politics, have found fictional shape in narratives that explore self-division, the multiplicity of ways to be. (Sage 1992, p. x)

Byatt is absent, having become famous later than these writers. If she had been included, we suppose she would have been in "The Middle Ground" along with Iris Murdoch and her sister Margaret Drabble. The "middle ground" is what Sage calls the "ordinary human jumble", the realist territory of the nineteenth-century novel tradition. Byatt herself, looking back thirty years to her first novel, comments on what inspired and informed it. As she became more famous after the success of *Possession*, *The Shadow of the Sun* was re-edited and in the "Introduction" she has this to say:

> It is the novel of a very young woman, a novel written by someone who *had* to write but was very unsure whether she should admit to wanting to write, unsure even whether she ought, being a woman, to want to write. [...]
> My problems were both human and literary. The human problems were to do with being an ambitious woman, in the English version of the world of Betty Friedan's feminine mystique. (*Shadow*, p. viii)

Elaine Showalter, in her 1977 study, *A Literature of Their Own. British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing*, pointed out that English women writers after the War were not very involved with the Women's Liberation Movement, and therefore lacked the zeal, openness and intellectual vigour of the American writers

like Susan Sontag and Erica Jong. A general caution and anti-experimentalism held back the English woman's novel (Showalter 1977, p. 316). Indeed, Byatt herself, in her review of Monique Wittig's *The Lesbian Body*, which tries to invent a new language free of gender distinctions, explains her allegiance to a more moderate tradition: "I like change, not revolution. I like subtle distinctions within a continuing language, not doctrinaire violation." (11) British women novelists tended not to accept the aesthetic policies of radical feminism, but, in Showalter's words:

> they can hardly avoid being sensitized and challenged by the new climate of feminist solidarity and by the discussions in art, as well as in literary criticism, of female iconography and female vision. (Showalter 1977, p. 316)

Showalter includes a much wider range of writers, providing biographical information on two hundred and thirteen of them, Byatt included. She mentions Byatt's second novel *The Game*, as being concerned with the conflicts between art and love, self-fulfillment and duty. She sees the sources of female creative power in anger and sexuality. (Showalter 1977, p. 301)

In the "Introduction" to *The Shadow of the Sun*, Byatt discusses the problems of female anger and frustration in a man's world:

> My own mother had herself studied English at cambridge, and I might, in the 1960s, have

> felt I should have written about the generations of women who faced the same problems. As it was, I avoided approaching her perpetual rage, depression, and frustration, which were, in fact, the driving force that made sure none of her daughters became housebound. We wanted 'not to be like her' and I am only now, some years after her death, beginning to dare to try to imagine what went on in her inner mind. I wrote a novel about a girl with an ideal and unapproachable father, who, being male, could have what she and I felt we perhaps ought not to want, singlemindedness, art, vision. (12)

Byatt's approach to women's problems as set out in her first attempts at fiction has been much less of a frontal attack on limitation and anger, and a much more subtle, literary-orientated discussion. She explains her teething problems in this illuminating new "Introduction" to her first novel:

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

As an undergraduate, Byatt read with interest the novels of Elizabeth Bowen, and was later (1976) to write the "Introduction" for the Penguin edition of *The House in Paris*. But at this time,

or more precisely, upon leaving school, a greater impact was made upon her by Françoise Sagan's *Bonjour Tristesse*. In 1954, Sagan suddenly became famous at the age of nineteen. Lorna Sage classifies her as a "Displaced Person", perhaps what she means is that she does not belong to the so-called mainstream of the novel tradition, the "Middle Ground". *Bonjour Tristesse*'s heroine, or anti-heroine, Cécile, is a rebel, who at an unexpected crisis-point in her young life defies her would-be step-mother Anne with tragic consequences. The guiding motive in Cécile's anti-social conduct is "to choose myself". The step-mother is the antithesis of the archetypal wicked stepmother, indeed, she represents sanity --the orderly, intelligent and moral. Byatt was obviously much attracted by several factors: the Oedipal father-daughter relationship which could be explored in terms of both sexuality and of art and rights; the archetypical motif, like the wicked step-mother of fairy tale; the unexpected crux of events that takes away meditated choice and determines one's life; the unexpected irruption of violence into the placid domestic scene (developed later in *Still Life*); and perhaps even Simone Weil's concept of right attitude to life, which can guide a correct moral choice. Finally, this novel displayed a surprising toughness which Byatt admired at the time, as she acknowledges:

> I had awful problems with the form of the novel. I had no model I found at all satisfactory. I should say now that the available models, Elizabeth Bowen, Rosamund Lehmann, Forster, Woolf, were all too suffused with 'sensibility' but that I disliked the joky social comedy of Amis and Wain considerably more than I disliked

> 'sensibility'. I know that there is a considerable stylistic influence from *Bonjour Tristesse*, which I read in French the summer before Cambridge, and which is against sensibility, and also concerns final decisions made casually and by accident. Between the first Cambridge draft and the final one, made in Durham in 1962-3, I had read Proust and discovered Iris Murdoch, both of whom combine a kind of toughness of thought with a sensuous awareness that is part of their thought. I had also written a partial draft of *The Game* which is about the fear of the 'woman's novel' as an immoral devouring force. But the underlying shape of *The Shadow of the Sun* is dictated by Elizabeth Bowen and Rosamund Lehmann, and a vague dissatisfaction with this state of affairs. (*Shadow*, pp. xi-xii)

In her *Women's Utopias in British and American Fiction*, Nan Bowman Albinksi (Bowman Albinksi 1988) traces the historical development of Utopian writing by British and American women in the period of the 1920s to the 1980s. She holds that women had three options open to them:

1. to compete with the male world on its terms
2. to withdraw and create an 'other' world of female retreat
3. to try to change the patriarchal world

Byatt is not mentioned, but Margaret Drabble wrote the section on Doris Lessing. The interesting thing about Byatt's early novels is that they display a very complex mixture of these three possibilities, not only in Byatt herself as writing woman, but also in the characters she develops, particularly the two sisters in *The Game*.

The early writing of Byatt and the already established characteristic writing of her sister was not popular in all quarters. They received very superficial treatment and negative conclusions in Rosalind Miles's *The Fiction of Sex*, (Miles 1974). Miles discusses the following aspects of women's writing:

1. Definitions of Sexuality
2. Creativity and Sex
3. The Writer as Woman in the Twentieth Century
4. Sexual Themes
5. Moral Themes and the Consolations of Romance
6. The "Liberation"
7. Sexual Stereotypes and the Image of Woman

Miles appears to have totally misunderstood at least Byatt's subtle discussions, and even more explicit ones of the interface of sexuality and art:

> Stories like A.S.Byatt's *The Game* (1967) and her sister Margaret Drabble's *The Needle's Eye* (1972), with their casts of journalists, telly 'personalities', *au pair* girls, and novel-writing ladies, evoke a world of colour-supplement superficiality and meaningless behaviour. In such a setting the women are naturally characterised by childish acquisitiveness and pride of possession, whether it be of money, things, publications, or sexual conquests. The increasing use of the world of communications --television, journalism, advertising-- as something attractive and desirable, has become a thumping cliché of the modern novel.
>
> Were it one great yawn only, that would be bad enough. But this historical process

> threatens seriously to impoverish our ideas of what is exciting, glamorous and worth sighing for: what is *romantic* in short.

Byatt does not fare much better in Miles's later book, *The Female Form: Women Writers and the Conquest of the Novel* (Miles 1987), indeed, she is not mentioned as a novel writer, but for having written about Iris Murdoch in *Degrees of Freedom*. *The Virgin in the Garden* and *Still Life*, Byatt's third and fourth novels, which had established her reputation in more literary circles, were also given very superficial treatment by Jennifer Breen in the year in which Byatt shot to fame with *Possession*. *In Her Own Write: Twentieth-Century Women's Fiction* (Breen 1990) discusses "The 'Feminine' and fiction", "Work and 'brilliant' careers", yet the complexities of Byatt's contribution to the whole discussion are passed over. Her clique of fans remained small, until *Possession* opened up her world to a wider reading public. Only two or three articles analysed her work in depth, as we shall see later, but full-length books on the subject of the post-war novel and women's participation in it do her no justice.

2.3 Byatt hallmarks: the old, the new and the metaphor

Invited to lecture at the University of Granada in 1988, Antonia Byatt talked about how she viewed the craft of the novelist and how she went about her work. She revealed that three strategies or factors were important to her: a meticulous recording of almost every experience, a curiosity about most

things and above all, metaphor. First, she showed the audience a large, hard-backed notebook, which she said she carried everywhere with her, jotting down her thoughts and observations. This became the stuff of her writing: her own life, thoughts and varied experiences. Secondly, she said she felt a writer should always include in a fictional work something that was quite new to him or her, something that had to be researched. Without exactly explaining why, she suggested that if a writer comes quite "innocently" to some new material in which he is interested, this has a refreshing quality which permeates the whole work. Here she is discussing the writer's point of view. From the reader's point of view, in this day of a highly educated reading public, the Murdochian conception of the novel being instructive about life and even edifying, is still apt. The reader is either interested or flattered or both. Thirdly, she acknowledged that she felt the indispensability of metaphor in the novel --not only embellishing metaphors in the detailed fabric of the text, but large, structuring metaphors to give both cohesion and coherence, and also vividness to the main themes. She learned much from Ricoeur's ideas on metaphor, and her interest in poetry has helped her to see the contribution the poetic qualities of metaphor can bring to the novel. Her idea is that a novel can encapsulate a metaphor which will express ideologically, and often visually, the quintessence of the work. What Maggie Gee writes about Virginia Woolf's novels is also true of A. S. Byatt's: "[...] the title usually points to the central image around which the whole book crystallizes." (13)

2.4 The old: the familiar as a basis for the embedding of innovations

Malcolm Bradbury's *The History Man* (1975) manages to suggest the fictionality of "reality" without entirely abandoning realism. Two devices he uses to do this are to invent plausible but non-existent things within an apparently normal reality, conveyed according to the familiar conventions, for example, "Watermouth University", and to introduce into the context a surrogate for himself, a minor and ineffectual character, in this case.

Byatt also uses these devices, and sets out within the familiar conventions of realism in order to break out and explore through language and imagination, a possible disrupting of these conventions. Patricia Waugh explains how metafiction requires a background of the familiar in which to embed the innovative, and reaches this dimension through the individual reworking and also undermining of familiar conventions:

> Literary texts tend to function by preserving a balance between the unfamiliar (the innovatory) and the familiar (the conventional and traditional). Both are necessary because some degree of redundancy is essential for any message to be committed to memory. Redundancy is provided for in literary texts through the presence of familiar conventions. Experimental fiction of the aleatory variety eschews such redundancy by simply ignoring the conventions of literary tradition. Such texts set out to resist the normal processes of reading, memory and understanding, but without redundancy, texts are read and forgotten. They cannot unite to form a literary

> 'movement' because they exist only at the moment of reading.
>
> The metafictional response to the problem of how to represent impermanence and a sense of chaos, in the permanent and ordered terms of literature, has had a much more significant influence on the development of the novel as genre.
> (Waugh 1984, p. 12)

The familiar background Byatt introduces into her novels is drawn from her own personal experiences in life, conveyed in the realist mode. Innovations are introduced within this frame. Her personal experiences, in terms of occupation, have been: schoolgirl, Cambridge undergraduate studying English Literature, University Lecturer, creative writer and literary critic. In terms of the family group, they have been: daughter, sister, wife, mother and grieving mother. Uniting the two is an insatiable curiosity about human life and an addiction to words that one supposes she will never be able to break. Each stage in the life of this Protean writer has its fictional recreation in her works, and is vital in the creation of the novelistic world.

The world of her schooldays figures largely in *The Virgin in the Garden*, with the schoolgirl Frederica Potter embodying and speaking many of her ideas, much more so than in the first novel, *The Shadow of the Sun*, where the female protagonist, Anna, the teenage daughter of the writer Henry Severell, is seen more out of school than in. University life, both as student and as lecturer, comes to the fore in *The Game*, where Cassandra teaches English Literature at Cambridge; in *Still Life*, Frederica Potter is following in the steps of her sister Stephanie to reach the

glorious heights of a first, and in *Possession*, the twentieth-century protagonists, Maud Bailey and Roland Michell, are respectively, university lecturer and post-doctoral research student, and both are involved in literary criticism. In *Babel Tower*, we see Frederica Potter break out of a stifling and mistaken marriage and become a lecturer in English Literature, albeit part-time.

The creative writer is a constant in her novels, from Henry Severell, that first embodiment of herself. Thirty years after publishing *The Shadow of the Sun*, Byatt explains in the "Introduction" to the new edition:

> Henry Severell is partly simply my secret self [...] Someone who saw everything too bright, too fierce, too much, like Van Gogh's cornfields, or Samuel Palmer's overloaded 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*, p. x)

In *The Game*, Julia, Cassandra's sister, opted to enter journalism straight from school and is a best-selling novelist; Alexander Wedderburn, an English teacher at Frederica Potter's school in both *The Virgin in the Garden* and *Still Life*, is a successful playwright; the nineteenth-century protagonists of *Possession*, R. H. Ash and Christabel LaMotte, are famous poets. We see the products of their efforts, for Byatt is a past-master of pastiche, and we also see them in the act of creation, with

their thoughts on this process and attempts to express them. Frederica shares with us in *Babel Tower* her attempts at literary creation. Hugh Pink, the poet of the first two volumes of the tetralogy or *roman fleuve*, discovers Frederica by chance at the beginning of the third volume, *Babel Tower*, as he is composing in his head a poem about a pomegranate and considering the myth of Persephone and the fairy tale of Sleeping Beauty. Frederica has been both of these figures during her marriage, and now wakes up and returns to the world and to literature.

Family relationships are at the heart of the early novels. In the first two of the novel series, *Virgin* and *Still Life*, the two sisters, Stephanie (in 1948) and Frederica (in 1953), trace the steps of their creator up to Newnham College, Cambridge, just as Anna Severell, with less success, followed after her illustrious father, also to Cambridge. Stephanie, while pregnant, sees her life divided into the periods through which her creator had already passed:

> She was a woman with a young body whose knowledge, biological and intellectual, was defined in clearly marked periods, menstrual, domestic, academic, rounds of flesh, blood, rites, qualifications. (*Still Life*, p. 23)

In these two novels, we suffer with Stephanie the intellectual woman's dichotomy of profession versus motherhood. Through her extended family, we view all the aspects of family life, from annual cyclical rites and rituals like Christmas and Easter to the more momentous births, marriages and deaths. Even

exceptional national ceremonies in this period, the Coronation of Queen Elizabeth II in 1953 (*Virgin*, p. 238) and a visit by the new Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh to Newnham (*Still Life*, p. 129), or historic international events like the Hungarian Revolution and Suez in 1956 (*Still Life*, p. 280) have their place here. Whereas the rituals associated with human life and death are dealt with from a sociological point of view, as we shall see in a later chapter, as well as from the essentially narrative, life, and especially death, loom large in other novels, from *The Game* to *Possession*. The life of the mature or maturing person is focused on in *Babel Tower*, which widens to take in younger children. The tetralogy starts with Frederica as a sixth-former, and now she is struggling to bring up a child of her own. The early education of children is introduced to be discussed along with the continued interest in the teaching of English Literature to other students, not sixth-formers, but adult professionals and art students.

It is also in the *roman fleuve* that Byatt gives us a view of a wider spectrum of society. Frederica, at Cambridge, innocently admits to being from a "lower-middle-class serious home" (*Still Life*, p. 111) and most of life is seen from this perspective. Through her curiosity, she comes into contact with the upper-middle classes (in Tony the Fake), the working classes (in Alan the Chameleon) and the upper classes (in Sweet Freddie, p. 116, and of course Nigel Reiver, who persuades her to marry him). Stephanie, on the other hand, shouldering seriously her duties as a curate's wife, takes in what one might call the dregs

of society (Gerry Burtt, whose wife is in prison for child murder) and a scattering of sub-normal and handicapped parishioners. The social upheaval in British society since the war has its nineteenth-century counterpart in *Possession*, where through Byatt's creation of a Browningesque Victorian thinker and poet, R. H. Ash, we see the impact of the discoveries of Darwin and other scientists and philosophers on the beliefs of the Victorian middle classes. The idea of a world with its ideology in flux is conveyed by the foregrounding of the concept of change within a background of the constant and familiar.

2.5 The new: innovations in form and content

Patricia Waugh reminds us that there is no one privileged "language of fiction", and that in literary fiction it is possible only to "represent" the different *discourses* of that world:

> There are the languages of memoirs, journals, diaries, histories, conversational registers, legal records, journalism, documentary. These languages compete for privilege. They question and relativize each other to such an extent that the 'language of fiction' is always, of often covertly, self-conscious.
>
> Mikhail Bakhtin has referred to this process of relativization as the 'dialogic' potential of the novel. Metafiction simply makes this potential explicit and in so doing foregrounds the essential mode of all fictional language. (Waugh 1984, p. 5)

In *Possession*, Byatt makes all knowledge and all discourses the stuff of fiction. Her way of putting it is to call a novel

a big roomy bag. Into this bag all kinds of discourses can be inserted, and if there are startling formal effects of juxtaposition, this is Byatt's efforts stretching the seams of the bag. Through the character Ash, she explores a wide array of different fields. For Ash, like another of his models, Coleridge, is curious about everything in life, not just poetry, but everything that affects man, from cosmology and philosophy on the grand scale, down to microbiology as opened up to him through the discoveries of Lyell and his microscopes. From the mid-nineteenth century onwards it was difficult for a person, however well educated and dedicated, to be knowledgeable about all things; men had to specialise. This century, one takes for granted that new and recondite information on a subject has to be presented to us through the experts who have done research in the field. The place for this information is in the books and journals in the subject area. But why should not the novel be the place for this information too? Wordsworth avowed that material emanating from the new technological discoveries could have its place in poetry. While this was controversial around 1800, and perhaps until the middle of the twentieth-century, as the famous controversy between C. P. Snow and F. R. Leavis indicates, in the late twentieth century it is hardly debated, and we know on which side A. S. Byatt's preferences lie, in spite of her support for her mentor Leavis in his ideas on the primordeal nature of the humanities and morality. When Stephanie thinks "knowledge has its own sensuous pleasure, its own fierce well-being, like good sex, like a day in bright sun on a hot empty beach" (*Still Life*, p. 153), we know it is Antonia Byatt speaking through her.

However, since Byatt is a proponent of multiplicity of vision, she shows that this matter can still be debated, but that the focus has shifted. The question now is not whether the novel and the poem are the appropriate place for, let's say, scientific information, but whether late twentieth-century readers of literature still want to find information of this type, and have not been sated by it. In *The Game*, a television discussion about Simon Moffitt, the naturalist (based on such as David Attenborough and his "Zoo Quest") is introduced by the producer Ivan, with this platitude: "Now I'd have said one thing that characterises our culture is a hunger for facts [...]" (p. 158). One of the members of the panel, Ben, the sculptor, does not agree about the continued interest in facts: "We've got far too many facts in our life." (p. 160).

Byatt introduces expert information into her novels not merely for decoration or to interest or flatter the reader, but rather in the same way as she uses metaphor. It is integrated to such an extent and in such a way that it becomes part and parcel of the structure of the novel, part of the narrative, or sheds light on one or more of the major ideas under discussion. This matter will be taken up in detail in a later chapter, suffice it here to mention the subjects that have come under Byatt's microscope in each novel. Starting with *The Shadow of the Sun*, there is a theme that pervades all Byatt's writing, and that is the connection between light, vision and creativity. The omniscient narrator says of Henry Severell that "He knew already before the war that his visionary moments were a direct source

of power." (p. 59) A description of a visionary experience in the style of Blake precedes this:

> What he called, liking the precise medical metaphor, his attacks of vision, had come upon him very gradually, only becoming really nasty when he was about Anna's age. At first it had been only an inexplicable attentiveness, a tightening of sight, a thing seen suddenly and remembered as a visual touchstone, a tree like a branched and burning candlestick, with flame upon flame of leaping green light. But once, in the main street of the small country town where he had lived as a boy, the thing had shaken and changed him, and the pattern had been set. There had been first the visual insistence --hard outlines, the lines on the pavement suddenly slicing and dangerous, the salmon pink and dull brick reds of the housefronts suddenly thickened and glaring to the point of suffocation. (p. 58)

Hence Severell, as well as writing novels, also studies the Romantics, like Byatt herself, and especially the visionaries. In the earliest novels, and right through to the latest to date, the myths of the Creation of the world are scrutinised and manipulated by Byatt, as she writes in her "Introduction" to *The Shadow of the Sun*:

> What I write is heliotropic. I don't think I knew that when I chose my title, despite being already involved with Cassandra and her inability to contain or transmit molten light. My unfinished Ph D thesis was partly about the neoplatonic creation myths, where the Sun is the male Logos, or Nous, or Mind, that penetrated inert Hyle, or matter, or female Earth, and brought it to life and form. This is both exciting, because in a way physically true --life does depend absolutely on light-- and depressing because false in its analogies --there is nothing intrinsically male about the sun, or female

about the earth. [...]
And then there is the question of the moon, the silver, cold savage moon, a purely reflected light, usually female in Western mythologies.
My subsequent novels all think about the problem of female vision, female art and thought, using these images (amongst others, and not without interest in the male too.) (p. xiv)

The dichotomies or opposites: Creator/Created, Man/Woman, Paradise/Fall, perfection/imperfection, Good/Evil, Life/Death, light/dark, are constants, and there is no novel in all her production that does not reveal a preoccupation with the light-energy-life-creation paradigm. To continue with her explanation in the "Introduction" to *Shadow*:

In *The Game* I called the character who had taken Helen Gardner's monastic advice Cassandra, and she, like Anna, saw moons through glass. In *The Virgin in the Garden*, the imagery became complicated. The helpless visionary who saw too much light was male and a mathematician. [...]
In *Still Life* the central figure turned out to be Vincent Van Gogh, rather to my surprise, a whole-hearted sun-driven light-driven maker (but who also had problems about sexuality and work.) Like Cassandra he was mad with too much light, but he got something done, he made something. In *Possession*, where there are two poets, both of whom can and do write, and can and do feel sexual passion, even if tragically, the sun becomes quietly female for both of them. This is because I had noticed --to repay debts-- that the sun is female in Tolkien, and this made me remember that in my earliest and first-loved book, *Asgard and the Gods*, the Sun Chariot is driven across the sky by a goddess. In Norse and German the sun is female. My poets both quietly accepted the personification, destroying the old Nous-Hyle creation myths without even shouting about it. (pp. xiv-xv)

Central to creation myths is the idea of the Fall and the

reason for it. In the Judeo-Christian version, the instrument for the introduction of evil to humanity is the serpent. Again, there isn't a Byatt novel without some sort of snake in it, even if it is only an effect of the light (*Shadow*, p. 61). *The Game*, whose title suggests Snakes and Ladders and hunting, and turns out to include forms of these and many other types of game, has the subject of snakes at its core. Simon Moffitt, the male protagonist of a sort of love triangle, is an expert on snakes, and through him, Byatt brings in detailed research such as species and habitat:

> *Lachesis muta*. Very venomous [...] (p. 12)
>
> This whiteness of the mouth is the reason for the name of the cotton-head snake [...] (p. 13)
>
> [...] snakes do not deliberately break bones [...] Death is due [...] to constriction of the heart. The constrictors seem to know exactly when death takes place [...] (p. 21)
>
> [The] smooth fronted caiman [...] and the dwarf caiman --the smallest alligators-- appear to violate the rule that two very similar species are not found closely associated in nature. (p. 50)

Serpents and dragons also figure in *The Virgin in the Garden*, in a less realistic, more mythical way. The concept "garden", of course, suggests Eden, and from there, the Serpent, which is the reason why the garden is always flawed, whether it be the Garden of Eden itself, the walled garden of the young Elizabeth I, Renaissance England as garden, Elizabeth II's England, or the garden of the stately home where Alexander

Wedderburn's play is performed. In addition to the narrative of the production of this play, the novel also contains the narrative thread involving the youngest of the Potter children, Marcus (the mathematician of the Byatt quotation from the "Introduction" to *Shadow*), and his relations with the science master of the school. The latter, Lucas Simmonds, who is suffering the effects of having been in the war, has drawn up a patchwork theory of the universe based on eclectic but arbitrary reading (p. 298), which he has set out in a pamphlet called, with overtones of Poe's "The Pit and the Pendulum", "The Plan and the Pattern" (p. 145). Here he develops the idea of mental evolution, and places everything on a "Scale of Matter". He persuades Marcus to accompany him on field trips ostensibly to collect data, but also in his need for human contact. On a trip to Whitby Abbey, Simmonds attempts to "make contact with the noussphere" using an ammonite, "a stony symbol of Creation and the Work" (p. 303). The ammonite brings in the snake theme, as in ancient times, people believed ammonites were petrified snakes, turned to stone by the powers of St Hilda, founder of the Abbey:

> But the truth is different --the ammonites are early records of the *true* history of creation, and the secret meaning of the petrified snake, its *real* relation to holiness, is to be found in Jung's account, in *Psychology and Alchemy*, of Mercurius --as a dragon. He read out a whole page to Marcus, with mounting excitement:
>
> 'The dragon symbolises the vision and experience of the alchemist as he works in his laboratory and 'theorises'. The dragon in itself is a *monstrum* --a symbol containing the cthonic principle of the serpent and the aerial principle of the bird [...] Time and again the alchemists reiterate that the *opus*

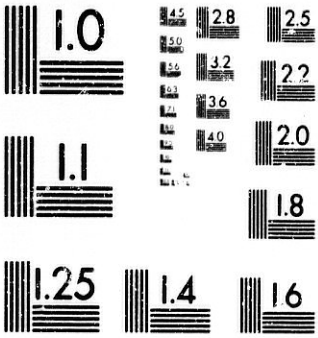
> proceeds from the one and leads back to the one, that it is a sort of circle like the dragon biting its own tail [...] --a symbol uniting all opposites. (pp. 299-300)

Later we shall look at the ways in which recondite information from Frazer and Jung, also ideas from modern cosmogony, are subverted, and Simmonds and his "photisms" (p. 125) made fun of.

Still Life, where Alexander Wedderburn writes a play about Van Gogh, draws, as one would expect, and as Byatt states in the Acknowledgement, upon expert knowledge of painting, but the snake is still there: "Metaphor lay coiled in the name sunflower [...] (p. 2). Also the idea of the garden:

> One thing always linked to another thing. As the Poets' garden, a decoration for the bedroom of the 'poet Gauguin' was more than it seemed. (p. 2)

These references bring together the topics under discussion in *Still Life*: human perception of reality, language and reality, light and colour in painting, especially with references to flowers and plants, and the concept of order versus chaos, selfishness versus altruism, perceived by Marcus in his observations of ants and grasses, and practised by his sister Stephanie. At a beach party in the Camargue, Frederica participates in a discussion with Alexander and his literary friends on the nature of colour. Wittgenstein's universal



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These references bring together the topics under discussion in *Still Life*: human perception of reality, language and reality, light and colour in painting, especially with references to flowers and plants, and the concept of order versus chaos, selfishness versus altruism, perceived by Marcus in his observations of ants and grasses, and practised by his sister Stephanie. At a beach party in the Camargue, Frederica participates in a discussion with Alexander and his literary friends on the nature of colour. Wittgenstein's universal

language of colour words and the mathematics of it are touched on, as is Proust's association of the letters of the alphabet with colours (p. 79). Van Gogh's own ideas are seen through his letters to his brother Theo and other friends, read in the new edition by Alexander and Crowe: "*There is no blue without yellow and without orange.*" (p. 109) These ideas are commented on by Byatt's authoritative narrator:

> Vincent Van Gogh was no naïf painter. What he had to understand about pigment and geometry, the relations of colours and the behaviour of light was taxing and terrible. He feared falling into a 'metaphysics of colour' when he contemplated the 'terrible battle' of the complementaries violet and gold in his paintings of sower in Arles and reaper in St Rémy. (p. 109)

One of the characters, Raphael Faber, the Cambridge don and poet, and Frederica's idol, makes reference to other aspects of the subject of Van Gogh: Heidegger and Artaud on Van Gogh's boots and madness respectively (p. 316), but the author keeps to the principal theme, that of light, colour and form and the relation of these to our perception of the world. She uses the character Professor Wijnnobel, who here is Vice-Chancellor designate of the "New University of North Yorkshire", and, as an intellectual, a sort of Dutch precursor to Ash of *Possession*, to discuss the subject through BBC talks:

> A series of precise but wide-ranging talks on the representation of light in Western painting [...] one on Leonardo, Raphael and Platonic ideas of mathematical order and truth, one on Vermeer, Van Delft, seventeenth-century optics, the camera

> obscura, the telescope and the micrscope, one on post-impressionist icons and the painting of light, which included Van Gogh. (p. 175)

Wijnnobel relates light to Freud and his equation of light and *eros* (p. 179). Light as mathematical and connected with geometry and effects of light as erotic are subthemes which tie the principal narrative plot, the France-Cambridge-London plot of the experiences of Frederica Potter upon leaving school and going to university, to the Yorkshire plot where the other members of the Potter family are leading less glamorous lives. The erotic and mythic power of both light and art had been insinuated by Byatt already in *Virgin*, where, to take but one example, in Chapter 18, entitled "Anadyomene" after the myth of Venus Anadyomene, Eros the trickster, under his guise as Venus Anadyomene, forces Stephanie and Daniel together on Filey beach, in a scene full of light, wind and literary connotations. The asthmatic Marcus, Stephanie's brother, has a strange, secret reaction to light. This turns him in the direction, not of art, but of mathematics, and he suffers doubly as his father attempts to exploit his genius. The profound, adverse psychological effects of these things only start to lose their power as in his late teens he begins to relate better to certain friends and to discover reassurance in life through discerning order and stability in unexpected places, like ant colonies:

> This is a colony of British black ants, *Lasius niger*. The glass of the observation nest is yellow-red, as the ant is blind to rays in this range of the spectrum, although it is keenly alive to the range of colours towards

> the ultra-violet [...]
> He didn't know whether he was watching seething chaos or incomprehensible order.
> (pp. 192-3)

Just as the narrator broke in to add comments to Alexander's perusal of Van Gogh's letters, here, she "interrupts" a lecture by an ant expert speaking in 1953:

> 'A whole colony of ants has sometimes been compared to the aggregation of cells which compose one human being [...]

with her own more recent readings:

> Now, in 1984, biologists have taken to referring to all organisms, men, amoebas, ants, song-birds, giant pandas, as 'survival machines'. They measure the statistical likelihood of altruistic behaviour in baboons and partridges with computer analyses of degrees of kinship and the perpetuation of particular genes. They account for self-consciousness as a product of the self-images the computing brain of the survival machine needs to make in order to be efficient.
> (p. 195)

For Marcus, the result of his interest in the ant colony and his A Level mathematical and botanical studies is that he comes to believe in a new form of God: "There was a God, he suddenly knew, a God of overflowing order and intricacy, ovals and ants." (p. 198) Some of Byatt's characters believe in a God and some do not, but they respond to the human urge to impose a form of order upon apparent chaos and find meaning for their lives.

In the sequel, *Babel Tower*, it is obvious that the 1960s mirror an un-Utopian post-Babel fallenness in many respects. Characters still react to snakes, but the new focus is not on ants, as in *Virgin* and *Still Life*, or butterflies, as in "Morpho Eugenia", in *Angels and Insects*, but snails. Marcus, now a graduate of the "New North Yorkshire University", works on genetics and memory, "the neuroscience of the brain" (p. 53), with a half-Danish geneticist Dr Luk Lysgaard-Peacock, who informs Frederica about snails. The reader comes to know that the *Helix hortensis* has pure white lips, and the *Helix nemoralis* shining black lips. The helix shape ties in with the ammonites of *Virgin*. It also ties in with another new twist to an old story, that of language. Culvert, a character in the novel within the novel, Jude Mason's *Babbletower*, talks of "new forms of language" (p. 61). This has its counterpart in the computer languages being developed in the 1960s and the increasing use of visual communication on television. Wilkie writes a letter to Frederica in which he says:

> Written culture, not Box Culture [...]
> soon to be relegated to museums and dusty
> bookshelves. I will tell you a secret --
> you can't think in language in the Box.
> *It has to be* thought with images, associations,
> quick flickerings of form. (p. 84)

The whole of the short Chapter VI (pp. 190-3) is Professor Wijnnobel's meditation on the theories of Chomsky and the innate features of deep structure, becoming fashionable in the 1960s. Byatt shows us experts working in the fields of the brain, of linguistics, of culture and the media. Indeed, she herself has

researched the period, although she lived through it, and mentions in the *Acknowledgements* works like Bernice Martin's *A Sociology of Contemporary Cultural Change*, Jeff Nuttall's *Bomb Culture* and James Britton's *Language and Learning*. In *Virgin* and *Still Life*, she asked the reader to consider England in the 1950s, and her respective 1968 and 1980 prologues underline our vantage-point. In *Babel Tower*, a deeper sociological study of the culture and concerns of the 1960s is made. We even have the new ethnomethodology applied to the ephemeral culture of Flower Power. In the new age which rejected the beliefs and methods of parents, the new generation was particularly concerned with rethinking established religion and education.

If this is true of the twentieth-century characters, it is all the more true for the nineteenth-century people in *Possession*. The Victorians' passion for knowledge and collecting stemmed from new ways of looking at Man and the universe, opened up to them by Darwin and others. Ash's interests were encyclopaedic:

> [C]ramming his elastic mind and memory with unconsidered trifles from History and Topography, from the felicitous alphabetical conjunctions of Science and Miscellaneous --Dancing, Deaf and Dumb, Death, Dentistry, Devil and Demonology, Distribution, Dogs, Domestic Servants, Dreams. (p. 3)
>
> Ash had been interested in everything. Arab astronomy and African transport systems, angels and oakapples, hydraulics and the guillotine, druids and the grande armée, catharists and printers' devils, ectoplasm and solar mythology, the last meals of frozen mastodons and the true nature of manna. (p. 28)

A list of the subjects Byatt has interested herself in and put into her novels through her characters, aside from the central subjects, reads somewhat like Ash's interests if we also put them into alphabetical order:

autistic children (*Virgin*, p. 222)
Breton box beds (*Possession*, p. 338)
crinolines and hoop-lifters for crossing puddles (p. 365)
Death of God theology (*Babel Tower*, p. 146)
divorce procedure (*Babel Tower*, p. 319)
dolls --making of (*Virgin*, p. 204)
English elms (*Still Life*, p. 242)
geometry (*Virgin*, p. 262)
incoherent self --modern theories (*Possession*, p. 473)
optics and the Old Masters (*Possession*, p. 461)
rabbit-warrening in Lincolnshire (*Possession*, p. 78)
Renaissance music (the Bottle Chorus of *Virgin*, p. 312)

Central to the narrative of *Possession* are two subjects, Breton mythology and Victorian spiritualism. In her *Acknowledgements*, Byatt testifies to her use of research material by Silvia Vegetti Finzi on the *Melusina* legend in the 1986 collection: "*Melusina, Mito e Leggende di Una Donna Serpente*". The female and reptilian qualities of Melusina and related motifs permeate the work, and function at both the nineteenth- and twentieth-century levels.

An interest in psychic phenomena is shared by Ash and the poetess Christabel LaMotte, although the latter has investigated further on Second Sight and pre-Vision (p. 166) and later takes part, as one of the "Vestal Lights", in seances with rappings and table-shifting, which Ash exposes as fraudulent, rather as in Browning's celebrated account "Mr Sludge, the Medium" in his

Dramatis Personae of 1864. As Roland goes to the top of the London Library to consult the "excellent shelf of spiritualist writings" (p. 392), one feels that he is tracing the steps of his creator. A passage from Byatt's *Unruly Times: Wordsworth and Coleridge in their Time*, a work she had completed in a first version some twenty years earlier, is illuminating:

> Animal magnetism (or Mesmerism after its founder, Mesmer) attracted a number of devotees, and interested Coleridge, as it was based on a theory of the organic unity of the universe --since all men and all matter were part of the same organic whole one man could cure the illnesses in another's body simply by concentrating on destroying them mentally. Mind and matter were one, and mind had power over matter. Coleridge was interested in the 'cures' produced by men with such theories, and in the true relationship between mind and matter. He is said to have been the first to use the term 'psychosomatic'. (14)

It was while she was researching *Unruly Times* in the British Library in 1970 that Byatt, watching the Coleridge scholar Kathleen Coburn also working there, came to the realisation that Coburn "possessed" Coleridge's thoughts, but was also in a sense "possessed" by him. She was the mediator through whom most of our knowledge of Coleridge's thinking came to us. Over the next twenty years, as *Possession* grew in Byatt's mind, Coleridge was replaced by Robert Browning, and Kathleen Coburn was transformed into a number of scholars, covering the whole spectrum of literary theory. The central incident of the novel, or "romance", the affair between the poet Ash, Robert Browning with overtones of Wordsworth, Coleridge and even Walt Whitman, and the poetess Christabel Lamotte, obviously based on Elizabeth Barrett-

Browning, takes place at the same time as the publication of Darwin's *The Origin of Species*. A purported "shift in the subject-matter of Ash's poetry, from history to natural-history" is attributed by Roland to a general tendency resulting from Darwin's discoveries:

> It was part of a general intellectual movement at the time. *The Origin of Species* was published in 1859. Ash's friend Michelet, the great historian, had at this time taken to nature study and had written four books related to the four elements [...] Ash's 'natural' poems were like these, or like Turner's late great paintings of elemental light. (p. 212)

The detective story aspect of *Possession*, when it reaches its conclusion, suggests that the shift in Ash's interests was not caused solely by the trends begun by Darwin, but by his relations with Christabel, the early feminist poetess. She, in turn, was fascinated by all knowledge, and demanded the right to study and work in a male world.

2.6 Metaphor as a structuring and as a cohesive device

The four elements form a framework for the metaphorical structure of *Possession*. Metaphor in A. S. Byatt's writings will be dealt with in greater detail in a separate chapter, but we will have a preview of it before leaving this justification of "the old, the new and the metaphor". Antonia Byatt has been quite explicit within her novels about the nature of and the human need for metaphor, from the quotations from Proust at the head of

Still Life, where words are related to images as clear-cut, familiar and typical (in the true sense of the word) as pictures on an old-fashioned schoolroom wall, to personal interventions through the narrator, where the image is much more complex:

> The germ of this novel was a fact which was also a metaphor: a young woman with a child, looking at a tray of earth in which unthinned seedlings on etiolated pale stalks died in the struggle for survival. She held in her hand the picture of a flower, the seed packet with its bright image. Nasturtium, Giant Climbing, mixed. (*Still Life*, p. 237)

For her first novel, *The Shadow of the Sun*, Byatt has found an image which conveys the difficulties that women experience when they try to create. Men overshadow them, hence it is apt that Anna should be struggling to get out of the shadow her famous father casts to get into the sun of creativity and fame herself. Neither *Virgin* nor its sequels, *Still Life* and *Babel Tower*, began as an outline for a plot either. The former originated in a desire to describe a period, England in the 1950s --a new Elizabethan age-- hence the portrait of the first Elizabeth in all her glory has an iconic function. The middle one, *Still Life*, as we have just seen, (and we must believe what the narrator is saying) began as a static image, an icon, a Madonna and Child. Stephanie, who is an altruist and not a survivor, dies like the seedlings, the nasturtiums calling to mind Proust's simple images, and also Van Gogh's sunflowers, a sort of still life, and in their artistic form, more permanent than the real thing. In this novel, Byatt is also discussing the theme of death, and explores through the figure of Stephanie the

arbitrariness of life and death, and gives us a death which is not necessary to the plot. Forster, in his *Aspects of the Novel* (1927), argued that plot was story plus causality, but Stephanie's death has no sense, and the only causality is a deliberately tenuous aesthetic one. The image and the working out of the metaphor are therefore given precedence here even over plot. *Babel Tower*, in its study of evil in society, again seems to privilege the artistic and sociological over plot, and has been criticised for this. But Byatt has found an image which, without being that of the Fall from the Garden of Eden, is similar. In the Tower of Babel, men sought to reach God, they thought that in their technological advances they had found the answer to their isolation, only to be confounded and divided. The image of Stephanie and her child, later to be superceded by Frederica and her son in *Babel Tower*, brings together concepts that run through not only the volumes of the tetralogy that we have, but most of Byatt's fiction: mother and child, the human life cycle, its connection to the vegetable world, the origins of life, Man and Woman, Adam as namer of things and the problem of language and communication, the nature of visual perception and human representation and creativity, etc.

Whereas the author pays lip service to the idea that naming is inadequate: "Sartre's sense that matter escapes our naming" (*Still Life*, p. 301), she has attempted to recreate in this novel primary experiences like childbirth, or a new-born child seeing, and has tried to find verbal expression for these. It is here that she is breaking ground. She has also examined the interface

between the visual and the verbal. Through the narrator, she asks the reader to "see" light and colour for the first time as Stephanie's son does. There is a Blakeian authority about the passage --conjecture though it is-- which is almost Biblical in its simplicity and repetition:

> The child opened his eyes and turned his head from side to side and saw light. He saw light as through water [...] (*Still Life*, p. 107)

Even in the second sentence here a comparison has crept in, and the narrator has to admit the limitations both on herself:

> [T]hough it was not possible for me to say whether he in any way associated synaesthetically the ideas of warmth and light [...]

and on her medium, the baby:

> If he had been capable of simile, which he was not [...] (p. 107)

Figurative speech is necessary for human expression. It is not just that most of our everyday speech is metaphorical, as George Lakoff and Mark Johnson have shown (15), but that we need to create new analogies in order to express ourselves at all successfully. Byatt, with her literary background, cannot help associating primitive seeing with Wordsworth and Van Gogh (the daffodils and irises by the cot):

> Art is not the recovery of the innocent eye, which is inaccessible. 'Make it new' cannot mean, see it free of all learned frames and names, for paradoxically it is only a precise use of learned comparison and the signs we have made to distinguish things seen or recognised that can give the illusion of newness. 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 re-alignment 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. (*Still Life*, p. 108)

This authorial voice may sound rather dogmatic taken in isolation, but in fact it enhances the reader-writer relationship, makes the reader more aware of the need to be alert to the ways of seeing being presented to him or her, and thus prepares him to search for the covert as well as the overt metaphors. It is also part of the creation of the self-consciousness of the realism, as it involves the reader in the writer's problems in composing the novel. In a later chapter, Byatt's use of metaphor to endow her fiction with structure and cohesion will be examined, also the working out in metaphor of interrelated mythical themes.

Before we leave this preview of Byatt's use of metaphor, we must not forget that whereas Byatt's narrators may point in one direction sometimes quite categorically, in global terms, many paths are explored. In *Still Life*, the narrator tells us that figures of speech had to be readopted and that all description has to be metonymic, no representation can be all-inclusive:

> I had the idea, when I began this novel, that it would be a novel of naming and accuracy. I wanted to write a novel as Williams said a poem should be: no ideas but in things. I even thought of trying to write without figures of speech, but had to give up that plan, quite early. It may be possible to name without metaphor, to describe simply and clearly, to categorise and distinguish, one specimen from another, *arrhenatherum, les jeunes gens en fleurs*. There would be a heavy emphasis on nouns, on naming, in such a hypothetical book, and also I suspect on adjectives, those unfashionable categorisers [...] it went almost without saying that to make comparative images was to have great power, to be a small god making new wholes. Frederica's friends would have pounced on Marcus's history and the cleistogamous flower and thought they had understood something because they had seen an analogy. Whereas in fact, part of such an instant vision is the closing-off of other ways of seeing. (pp. 301-2)

Byatt manages to combine the need for the representative with the need to show life in all its exhuberance. Why use two words where twelve will do it better? Or even twenty-odd nouns in one sentence, as in this extract, which is at once the presentation of a single but synaesthetic image and a sheer delight in words and in the English countryside in late spring. It is one of the loveliest passages ever composed by any writer, and leads the reader to associate Byatt with a tradition which goes back through Fowles and Hardy to Shakespeare ("late modern survivors of thickets seen by Shakespeare or painted by Morris", *Possession*, p. 268):

> There was a meadow full of young hay, and all the summer flowers in great abundance. Blue corflowers, scarlet poppies, gold buttercups, a veil of speedwells, an intricate carpet of daisies where the grass was shorter, scabious, yellow snapdragons, bacon and egg plant, pale milkmaids, purple heartsease, scarlet

pimpernel and white shepherd's purse, and round this field a high bordering hedge of Queen Anne's lace and foxgloves, and above that dogroses, palely shining in a thorny hedge, honeysuckle all creamy and sweet-smelling, rambling threads of bryony and the dark stars of deadly nightshade. It was abundant, it seemed as though it must go on shining for ever. The grasses had an enamelled gloss and were connected by diamond-threads of light. The larks sang, and the thrushes, ad the blackbirds, sweet and clear, and there were butterflies everywhere, blue, sulphur, copper, and fragile white, dipping from flower to flower, from clover to vetch to larkspur, seeing their own guiding visions of invisible violet pentagrams and spiralling coils of petal-light.

There was a child, swinging on a gate, wearing a butcher-blue dress and a white pinafore, humming to herself and making a daisy-chain. (*Possession*, p. 508)

NOTES TO CHAPTER 2

1. George Steiner, *Language and Silence: Essays 1958-66*, (London: Faber & Faber, 1967). We quote from the 1985 edition, p. 252.

2. Byatt says this in a non-fictional part of the novel, the Acknowledgements at the end: A. S. Byatt, *Babel Tower*, p. 618.

3. In, for example, Michael Westlake's article: "The Hard Idea of Truth", *PN Review*, 15 (1989), pp. 33-37.

4. In such works as Raymond Williams, *The English Novel from Dickens to Lawrence*, (London: Chatto & Windus, 1970) and Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983 & 1990).

5. A. S. Byatt, *Degrees of Freedom: The Novels of Iris Murdoch*, (London: Chatto & Windus, 1965). It was revised in 1994 by Vintage as *Degrees of Freedom: the Early Novels of Iris Murdoch.*

6. A. S. Byatt, *Iris Murdoch*, (London: Longman for the British Council, 1976). (Writers and their Work, no. 257).

7. Iris Murdoch, interview with A. S. Byatt, recorded 26 October 1971. BBC archives (40 minutes).

8. A. S. Byatt, "Iris Murdoch: *The Black Prince*", (London: The British Council, 1977). (Notes on Literature, no. 170).

9. Iris Murdoch, "Against Dryness: A Polemical Sketch", *Encounter*, 16, 1 (January 1961), pp. 16-20, p. 20.

10. Byatt, "Iris Murdoch: *The Black Prince*", p. 2.

11. Byatt, "Give Me the Moonlight, Give Me the Girl", *The New Review*, II (1975), p. 67.

12. Byatt, *The Shadow of the Sun*, p. ix. Antonia Susan Byatt was born in 1936 in Sheffield and has two younger sisters, Margaret Drabble and Helen, an art historian. According to Fiona MacCarthy ("The Drabble Sisters", *Guardian*, 13 April 1967, p. 8, "Strict professional secrecy is maintained by the three [...] they talk about children when they meet.")

13. Maggie Gee, "Fifty Years of Virginia Woolf", *Literature Matters: British Council Newsletter*, (1991) p. 5.

14. A. S. Byatt, *Unruly Times: Wordsworth and Coleridge in their Time*, (London: The Hogarth Press, 1989) p. 92. First published in 1970 as *Wordsworth and Coleridge in their*

Time, (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd.).

15. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1980).

CHAPTER 3. Recurrent Themes and Motifs

3.1 Introduction: life, metamorphosis and repetition

Patricia Waugh has shown us (Waugh 1984, p. 18), that metafiction explicitly lays bare the conventions of realism, it does not ignore or abandon them. Very often, realistic conventions supply the "control" in metafictional texts, the norm or background against which the experimental strategies can foreground themselves. One of the purposes of metafiction's re-examination of the conventions of realism is to discover, through its own self-reflection, a fictional form that is culturally relevant and comprehensible to contemporary readers. Metafiction shows us how literary fiction creates its imaginary worlds, and thus helps us to understand how the reality we live day by day is similarly constructed and becomes written.

Metafiction shares with modernism a self-consciousness that draws attention to the aesthetic construction of the text, but the former goes beyond its precursor in systematically flaunting its condition of artifice. Waugh (1984, pp. 21-2) lists the features typical of post-modernism which contribute to the appearance of self-reflection. We summarise them here:

1. The over-obtrusive, visibly inventing narrator
2. ostentatious typographic experiment
3. explicit dramatisation of the reader
4. Chinese-box structures
5. incantatory and absurd lists

6. over-systematised or overtly arbitrarily arranged structural devices
7. total breakdown of temporal and spacial organisation of narrative
8. infinite regress
9. dehumanisation of character, parodic doubles, obtrusive proper names
10. self-reflexive images such as mirrors
11. critical discussions of the story within the story
12. continuous undermining of specific fictional conventions
13. use of popular genres
14. explicit parody of previous texts, whether literary or non-literary.

In all of these, what is foregrounded is the writing of the text as the most fundamentally problematic aspect of that text. In all her novels, Byatt makes the reader aware of the construction of the text. Looking at the above fourteen points, we could say that she has used all of these techniques in her writing. Some of them she has used in an almost heavy-handed manner, especially the last, and we could also pick out numbers four, Chinese-box structures, and eleven, critical discussions of the story within the story, as being important techniques in her fiction. Others, such as numbers three, explicit dramatisation of the reader, and seven, total breakdown of temporal and spacial organisation of narrative, she has used more sparingly, if at all. Whatever the innovative technique she is applying at a given moment, it finds its place in a background

of normality, of apparent realism.

The background of normality is created by the setting up in the reader of certain expectations from early on in a novel. These are that the "life" depicted in the fiction is framed in a normal background and that the usual things are present and recur. Life, Byatt suggests, is made up of a repetition of the same old things, and just occasionally, the rhythm will be broken by something new or unusual. Before we examine these new elements, we have to ascertain how Byatt sets up, through repetition of certain themes and motifs, this background of normality and convention in life. To take an introductory example: James Blackadder, the Scottish editor of R. H. Ash's poems in *Possession*, thinks of writing a poem after seeing a naturalist on television (like the Simon of *The Game*) dissect an owl-pellet, only to find that the "great poet" has beaten him to it (*Possession*, p. 29). In creativity, no idea is new, writers are always reworking agonistically the creations of previous writers (1). Also certain ideas can be worked and reworked over and over again by a writer, for none of our thinking can escape constructing identity against differences, large or small. A reading of any two novels by A. S. Byatt makes one recognise immediately that not only are certain images used constantly within a novel, but that early images recur in later novels. In *The Virgin in the Garden*, Frederica Potter is preparing for her A Levels. She escapes one day on a bus trip to Goathland and Whitby, and her meditations on literature are comically punctuated by her initiation into sex with the help of a

travelling salesman who sells dolls. Inititation into sex is a constant in Byatt's early novels, being a personal rite of passage which can be traumatic. Literature is also a constant, and the character of Frederica Potter is used throughout the tetralogy to discuss it:

> The other thing they did, which made Shakespeare like Racine, but not like Shaw (who was indeed rather recalcitrant to the good, professional A Level candidate), was trace recurrent images. Blood and babies in *Macbeth*, blood and light and dark in *Phèdre*. (*Virgin*, p. 201)

The dogmatic voice of the narrator here barely masks that of the author. Tracing recurrent images is made to seem infantile (a practice only A Level in standard) and susceptible to error (it makes authors look the same). However, tracing images through a complete corpus helps define the outlines of the major concerns and can point towards the methods by which these are worked out formally by the writer. In an initial study, it needs to be done.

Life

The reader soon discovers that A. S. Byatt is dealing in her fiction with the great cosmic themes of Man and the Universe: how and why man has come to be on earth, and how he should comport himself. Again, she has taken Iris Murdoch as her model here. Frederica voices her author's antipathy to those writers she feels are frivolous, focusing her attention on *Lucky Jim*. She admires works that confront major human issues:

> At least Eliot and Waugh involved the whole of things, fought it out, however absurdly, on a cosmic scale. (*Still Life*, p.183)

Byatt involves the whole of things, and most of her novels cover the cyclical processes of birth, growth, decay and death. Often her short stories also focus upon a moment of crisis, like the loss of a parent, or going up to university. The individual is seen going through the rites of passage both alone and in a social group. The problems of these traumas in the contemporary period, the second half of the twentieth century, are compared with the same problems a hundred years earlier, to give a wider perspective on the changing nature of the problems and of society itself.

Byatt does acknowledge having been impressed by the writings of Gabriel Josopovici (2), who explains how difficult it is for twentieth-century thinkers and writers to escape their nineteenth-century background. The other figure in the tetralogy through whom Byatt discusses literature is Alexander Wedderburn, English master and playwright. Through him, her narrator is able to juxtapose thought and writing in the two centuries, and at the same time underline the need for examples and connections:

> He did not have, as Romantic proponents of the organic metaphor might have had, a sense that the 'culture' pun was a profound insight into the necessary growth and life of any single being, bacteria, human language, life. But analogy was a way of thought and without it thought was impossible. (*Still Life*, p. 165)

We have already seen in the image of Stephanie, her son and the seedlings, how Coleridge's organic metaphor is essential to *Still Life*. The issues are often suggested through difference: the general binary opposites of Life/Death, Man/Woman, large/

small, order/chaos. Also in a Coleridgean sense, the positive goodness of life itself is not limited to animate things, but for people who respond sensitively, certain significant things, even though inanimate, can come "alive". In *The Shadow of the Sun*, Byatt's first novel, not only are the spiders "alive" (p. 169), but also the road in the heat (p. 61). Van Gogh's particular yellow chair in the painting (we learn it was one of a set) is "alive" for Frederica and Alexander, as they plan how it should become a key metaphor of Alexander's play (*Still Life*, p. 83). Cambridge, with its dual or multiple character, is also "alive" to Frederica:

> It is a town thick with words, wrapped in shining folds of words, alive with the history of words. (*Still Life*, p. 112)

Ash's two letters to Christabel, found by Roland in the poet's copy of Vico in the British Museum Library, are "alive" (*Possession*, p. 50) and have the power to mobilise many people on a lengthy quest. Indeed, Blackadder, Roland and his girlfriend Val were all studying Ash because his poetry remained "alive" (though his name suggests death), when most other literature they had had to study had finally appeared flat and dead (*Possession*, p. 55). The "aliveness" and "deadness" of different people and things in life reminds one of D. H. Lawrence and his thinking; indeed, he is referred to as a proponent of "life" in *Still Life* (p. 182), though attitudes to him in the novels also come in binary opposites.

Metamorphosis

In addition to this rather particular view of Life and

Death, alive and lifeless, there is in all the novels, in spite of a certain stasis in *Still Life* because of its central metaphor of contemplating a still life painting, the view of life as perpetually dynamic, going through a series of stages. That an individual undergoes metamorphoses in the course of his or her life is made particularly explicit in the novella "Morpho Eugenia" in *Angels and Insects*. Of the novels, *Possession*, which like "Morpho Eugenia" deals with the Victorian period, is the one most concerned with metamorphosis. Christabel LaMotte, the fictional Victorian poetess, modelled on such as Elizabeth Barrett Browning, has a poem of that title, and another on Psyche as butterfly. But before that, even in *The Game*, we have the snake as a symbol for life:

> They are worshipped in association with running water and with lightning. As a symbol --for the life, the life that drives us. Although in our culture, traditionally, we see them as the opposite. (p. 20)

Coleridge, again, may be the source for this image, with his "slimy things did crawl with legs" in *The Ancient Mariner*, and while snakes can mean death, they bite their tails, form an unbroken circle and signify new life. As Coleridge himself said:

> The principle of the imagination resembles the emblem of the serpent, by which the ancients typified wisdom and the universe, with undulating folds, for ever varying and forever flowing into itself --circular and without beginning or end.

Hence, return to "life" for the mariner comes through sight of the water snakes. Cassandra, the medievalist in *The Game* is

the one who, through her youthful reading of Coleridge and Keats, informs Simon the snake expert about snake symbolism in mythology and literature from the serpent of Creation, through the myth of Psyche, Eros embodied as serpent, to Romantic literature, quoting these two poets:

> *Notes on the winged snakes* [...] The serpent is traditionally [...] a symbol for our horror at finding ourselves necessarily embodied. *It is the brute.* A creature reduced to a mouth and a stomach. On thy belly shalt thou go etc. [...] So, of course we give the creature wings [...] (p. 24)

The snake, like the other symbols in *The Game*: the web, glass and mirror, carries both hopeful and depressing possibilities, it changes from meaning life to signifying the opposite. In her article "The Hunger of the Imagination in A. S. Byatt's *The Game*", Jane Campbell has analysed Byatt's use of the symbol:

> The last major symbol, the snake, also proves the impossibility of final interpretations. Its obvious reference is to the Genesis story; [...] Cassandra has made a much greater effort than Julia to see as Simon does; Julia's gift to her sister of a glass snake shows, perhaps, her recognition of this difference between them. Nevertheless, Cassandra's need for metaphor draws her to mythical interpretation. The story of how Psyche's curiosity led her to discover Eros embodied as a serpent, Cassandra 'tells' Simon in her journal, is interpreted as showing the transformation of spiritual love into lust. [...] She quotes Coleridge's poem 'Psyche', which depicts the snake as deforming and killing what it feeds on, and presents this activity as the usual human lot: the reptile is a more apt image for humans than the butterfly. This allusion links the snake with the activities of predation and ingestion and thus with the novel's main subject, the devouring power of the imagination.

(Campbell 1988, pp. 158-9)

The motif of snake imagery is taken up in the poetry discussions Frederica attends in Cambridge (*Still Life* pp. 221-2), and since the theme of the dichotomy of paradise/hell is central to *Possession*, at the very beginning of this novel we meet Ash's "creeping Nidhogg" (p. 22). In mythical paradises and underworlds, whether in the Semitic, Nordic or Greek traditions, there is the Man, the Woman and the Serpent. Variants, as we shall see later, are dragons or winged snakes, and the serpent-woman. Melusina, the serpent-woman of Breton mythology, is a focal point of *Possession*, where Christabel is planning a major poem on her story.

In the dichotomy Man/Woman, man is seen as first in every way, more perfect than woman; her only power over man is man's own fear of her:

> All human beings, Wilkie said, according to Winnicott, were possessed of an unconscious fear of Woman [...] in their subconscious jungles lurked monsters and overpowering Fantasy Women. (*Virgin*, p. 246)

Needless to say, there is always another viewpoint, and Bill Potter (who was afraid of no one, least of all a woman) calls this theory "codswallop".

Melusina is assessed as a woman --good wife, mother, home-builder (castle-builder), *but* she has the nasty habit of growing a beautiful tail in the bath. Woman is seen to transform in

certain situations into something terrorific which represents her darker, sexual side. Similarly, all the females in *Possession* are assessed as women: Christabel herself, who changes from spinster into mother; her friend Blanche Glover who slips between the crack in the man/woman dichotomy and suffers for it at the hands of society; Ellen Best, Ash's wife, who in spite of her name is not as perfect as a Victorian wife should be, transforming at night into a totally frigid man-repulsing female; the twentieth-century women like the apparent man-hater Maud, whose heart melts given the right man; the man-and-woman eater Leonora; the man-evader Beatrice, and the apparently dull and self-effacing but finally normal and sexy Val.

Across the novels, the theme of how modern women match up as professionals and also home-makers is developed by Byatt (in spite of her determination not to write a "woman's novel") from *The Game* to *Babel Tower*. The Protean nature of Frederica is the working out in the characters of the literary theme of metamorphosis.

Repetition

Just as Roland and Maud are seen as a repetition of Ash and Christabel, the feeling of repetition in time or in cycles, is common to all the novels. In the very first novel, *The Shadow of the Sun*, Anna follows in her father's steps in going up to Cambridge, and in wanting, like him, and in spite of her sex, a profession based upon literature. In *The Game*, Simon, as a teenager, meddles and teases and brings unhappiness to the two sisters, Julia and Cassandra. Years later, he repeats his

meddling, which results in Cassandra's suicide. In *Still Life*, cats giving birth is a motif that recurs and is tied up both with the general theme of Life and Death and with the narrative concerning the life of Stephanie. Through a cat giving birth, Stephanie meets Daniel the curate, whom she is to marry (*Virgin* p. 30). She in turn gives birth to two children, William and Mary (repetitions or historical echoes, chosen not for the King and Queen, or even Stephanie's father, Bill Potter, but for William Wordsworth and Mary as "woman"). Stephanie is watching a Nativity play in which her daughter is doubly Mary:

> Parents are moved because childhood is so swift and vanishing. They are perhaps also more darkly moved by some threat in the law of flesh and blood itself. These small creatures are the future, they are only acting out what they will be. Not only childhood vanishes: men and women, having handed on their genes, are superfluous. To watch this acting is to be marginally caught between times, between rôles. Mary looks protectively at the doll: Mary's mother looks, moved and protective, at Mary's childish body and soft face. And time runs on. (*Still Life*, p. 41)

The first cat dies, perhaps as a premonition of Stephanie; a second cat that survives, later gives birth, and through cats chasing birds, Stephanie loses her life. She has handed on her genes, but meets an untimely death, so she is still like one of the seedlings she was contemplating. In *Babel Tower*, as the family look at the young Mary, they see the dead Stephanie in her face and movements.

Life has natural cycles, repetitions and patterns, which can be drawn upon to give formal structure to a work of literature.

These repetitions are then conscious, deliberate and controlled. In the Prologue to *Still Life*, Alexander is thinking about Frederica:

> There had been a pattern, an only too discernible repetition in the events and relationships of his life into which she had ruggedly refused to fit [...] She had suggested that they look at Van Gogh together, setting up another form of repetition, deliberate, contrived and aesthetic. (p. 1)

3.2 Multiplicity of vision

As we have indicated already, Antonia Byatt belongs to no particular school; this may be because she can see different points of view, whether it be in politics or in art, and can understand how each has some validity in its claims to a monopoly of the truth. In her works she aspires to the goal of offering a comprehensive overview, which takes in all possibilities, often making her narrator detached, wise and powerful for this purpose. An important passage from *Still Life* discusses both the theme of order and chaos and the human need to seek order within a multifarious reality. Professor Wijnnobel is speaking at the inauguration of the "new North Yorkshire University":

> We cannot perhaps picture our picture-making. Even with all our windows we shall only catch glimpses of the real world [...] We shall not answer the question, what is man, nor the harder question, what is real, what is true. But our plurality of windows should surely protect us against, rather than inducing solipsist despair. [...] What Kepler discovered about optics Vermeer applied and exemplified in the light and colour of the 'View of Delft'. And from that painting Marcel Proust picked out the patch of yellow wall

> and associated it for all time --or all imaginable time-- with an exact, irreducible vision of truth, order and likeness. Great intuition --in all fields-- perceives order and likeness in the differences and multitudinous movements of the universe. Intuitions of order fail, and are succeeded by others, but we persist in seeking [...] (p. 277)

This type of public occasion, or a television or radio discussion, is the device often used by Byatt to introduce into her novels an intellectual discussion where various points of view on serious issues are put forward. In *The Game*, it was the television programme "The Lively Arts", where several experts in different fields aired their views. Julia the novelist was the only woman invited. The intellectual or creative woman is, of course, a constant in her writing, and we see this figure either solitarily communing with her notebooks or journal, like Anna or Cassandra, or in lively debate in later novels: Frederica discussing life and painting with the artists and philosophers in the south of France (*Still Life*, p. 79) and poetry at Cambridge (p. 220), where Raphael Faber provides the opposing view on Lawrence and Tolkien (p. 215 & p. 295). In *Possession*, Christabel talks about literature on several occasions, and in the twentieth century, Maud discusses literary criticism and the new thinking in that discipline.

Alternative viewpoints are provided by other "stock characters", for example, the down-to-earth person, like Val in *Possession*, who reminds Roland that there are people having heart attacks and dying and youngsters contracting cancer all the time, while he is occupied with his poetry. The two characters

who most fulfill this role and take it further, to the extent of being religious and do-gooders, are Julia's husband Thor in *The Game*, and Stephanie's husband Daniel in the tetralogy. Other ways of being a priest are also seen in the tetralogy in Mr Ellenby, the old-fashioned vicar, and Gideon Farrar, the new variety, also, of course, Canon Holly of *Babel Tower*, who, with his Death of God theology in the 1960s is made to hobnob with the Bishop of Woolwich and his sensational *Honest to God* (p. 20). There is also the worldly wise figure, like Oliver Canning in *Shadow*, Ivan in *The Game* and Crowe in the tetralogy.

Large-scale discussion with different points of view in a public forum is offered in *Babel Tower* in the trial of *Babbletower*. Expert witnesses speak for and against the case for obscenity. Another example in this novel is the "Steerforth Committee" and its frequent meetings of heterogeneous personalities. Frederica's lectures are also public occasions, and her classes with the adult students are made to contrast markedly in the number of different viewpoints covered, with her classes for art students, who are monolithic in their thinking and will contemplate only the present moment.

The narrator in all the novels serves to anchor opinion, as the note of authority in the narrator's voice privileges this voice above all others. In some novels, the narrator is more obtrusive than in others. In *Possession*, he or she is almost imperceptible, because of its nature as a romance, but in *Still Life*, there is a strong intervention in the first person, almost

a formal interlocution with the reader (pp. 58-9), and a strong presence in the statements already seen on metaphor. In addition to and distinct from the "I" of the narrator, again, as we have already pointed out, Byatt introduces herself into the tetralogy, like John Fowles's bearded stranger in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, or like Hitchcock in his films. She is a mysterious, unnamed and undeveloped observer, the "smallish woman in a pine-green tent-like coat" of *Still Life* (p. 3); also the "girl [...] in a dark peacock brocade dress [...] who [...] has her own reasons for not considering a Cambridge Ph. D." (p. 298). At the beginning of *Virgin*, she is the woman in a raincoat with Lady Antonia Fraser. We have a visual impression of a figure at a historical point of time, also a voice. The presence of the narrator fades in the later work, but it is interesting to trace authorial use of the narrator's voice or organising work in the last two novels.

In *Babel Tower* the narrator appears to be a contemporary of the events, and to know about life in Britain in the 1960s. Only once does she intervene from a post 1964 vantage-point. She is talking through Daniel's thoughts on cruelty and the passing of the Murder Bill:

> [...] cruelty is human, cruelty is part of our nature as it is part of the nature of no other creature. (The warmongering chimpanzee is a discovery of the future). (p. 373)

Only one intervention in the whole of over six hundred pages, and parenthetical at that, yet once is enough, we know

that the narrator transcends the events of the plot, and this reminds us always to keep an open mind and even reserve judgement.

There is also an effort in the organisation of *Babel Tower* to remind the reader that, while the author or narrator may have an authoritative voice, he or she may at the same time play at having a multivocal form of communication. The author is composite and made up of all that he or she has read. Byatt gives us a timeless foreword, in place of the first two novels' Prologues, an orthodox beginning at Chapter 1 with a continuation of Frederica's story, but then the narrator says that the story could have begun with the secondary characters or the interpolated novel-within-the-novel, *Babbletower*. It is not that Byatt could not make up her mind, which she has been accused of, but that she strains at the rigidity of the linearity and momentary univocality of discourse.

We said that *Possession* had no narrative intervention since it is a romance, like a fairy tale, told or repeated by yet another anonymous story-teller. However, it has a short interlude towards the end, like an afterthought, like the warmongering chimpanzees, in fact, which directs our attention to the fact of the telling of the tale, and the fact that writer/teller - reader/listener relations do exist. The passage is two pages long, pages 470-472, and begins thus:

> It is possible for a writer to make, or remake at least, for a reader, the primary pleasures

of eating, or drinking, or looking on, or sex.

The "looking on" reminds us of the voyeurism of the watching narrator, who constructs a story as if reconstructed for the reader to also view through a combination of his eyes and the reader's own imagination.

Then the narrator becomes explicit about story-telling and the overt or covert nature of the writer-reader relationship set up:

> They do not habitually elaborate on the equally intense pleasure of reading. There are obvious reasons for this, the most obvious being the regressive nature of the pleasure, a *mise-en-abîme* even, where words draw attention to the power and delight of words, and so *ad infinitum*, thus making the imagination experience something papery and dry, narcissistic and yet disagreeably distanced, without the immediacy of sexual moisture or the scented garnet glow of good burgundy. And yet, natures such as Roland's are at their most alert and heady when reading is violently yet steadily alive. (What an amazing word 'heady' is, *en passant*, suggesting both acute sensuous alertness and its opposite, the pleasure of the brain as opposed to the viscera --though each is implicated in the other, as we know very well, with both, when they are working.)

The parenthesis here, to comment on the word "heady" defines the narrator as someone fascinated by words and who likes to use expressions taken from French or Latin. The narrator includes the reader in this final "we", and goes on to address the reader directly, in an exhortation both to understand Roland's exhilaration when reading and to share his exhilaration as readers ourselves. The writer's task, according to this narrator, with his Biblical tone, is to make the reader feel strong

emotion:

> Think of this, as Roland thought of it, rereading [...] Think of this --that the writer wrote alone, and the reader read alone, and they were alone with each other. [...]
>
> 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.

The authority of this passage, though it is only two pages out of over five hundred, must extend backwards and forwards to the whole book. It is the privileged voice, against which all others must be measured. It asks us to feel the *frisson* described as we read Byatt's prose. It attempts to define the effects of great literature, and suggests that *Possession* must be amongst the great works, as great as the fictional Ash's poetry at least!

The contemplation of fiction reminds the reader of the generic possibilities of the novel. It also forms a base into which other generic forms can be introduced. As Patricia Waugh says (Waugh 1984, pp. 82-6), in metafiction, the following are useful for exploring readerly expectations: the detective story (Borges and Nabokov), the thriller (Spark, Fowles, Burgess,

Pynchon), romance (Drabble's *The Waterfall*, 1969), science fiction (Pynchon), pornographic writing (Gore Vidal, Brigid Brophy, Robert Coover), the comic, the family saga (Nabokov). Pastiche of some of these genres is seen within Byatt's novels.

3.3 The Family and social life

The most striking pattern seen in Byatt's tetralogy is that of the family over two or three generations. Furthermore, here and in all the novels, we see how the female protagonists are all dedicated to literature and some are presented in pairs. They are all dominated or "overshadowed" by their fathers, from Anna of *Shadow*, to whom this latter epithet particularly applies, through the sisters Julia and Cassandra of *The Game*, to Stephanie and Frederica of the tetralogy. This is true to a lesser extent of *Possession*, with Christabel and Blanche, and across the centuries, Christabel and Maud. In the early fiction, the theme takes the form of sibling rivalry, starting in early childhood; it is especially significant in *The Game*. Although Antonia Byatt may have a precedent in her own family, she is the elder of two writing sisters out of the three, the idea goes back to the Cain and Abel myth.

There are also parallels across the novels, as the two elder sisters, Cassandra and Stephanie, are alike in leading the way and providing the initiative. They are looked up to by the younger sisters, Julia and Frederica respectively, the difference being that Julia's jealous energies are directed destructively

against her sister, whereas Frederica is more independent. The older ones are more solitary and more dreamy, while the younger ones are more engaged with real life, and more aggressive, more like Cain than Abel:

> Julia, on the other hand, was real and dangerous. In the beginning she had been merely inquisitive eyes, proprietary curiosity the other side of the locked door. But lately she had come to see her as an almost impersonal menace, something which would infallibly take what she, Cassandra, wanted because its only function was to want precisely that. (*The Game*, p. 94)

Pairs continue to interest Byatt in her latest fiction: in *Babel Tower*, the variation on Julia and Cassandra is the Ottokar twins, Paul always wanting what his brother John has, for example, Frederica herself. This is a new version of the dual since Frederica lost her sister Stephanie at the end of *Still Life*. Other variants are the Reiver sisters, Frederica's sisters-in-law, who don't appear to have separate identities, and Myra Hindley and Ian Brady, a dual force for evil.

The motif of the dominant father is worked out in Anna's writer father, Henry Severell, in the father of Julia and Cassandra, Jonathan Corbett, a staunch Quaker, and in the agnostic English teacher, Bill Potter, father of Stephanie, Frederica and the younger Marcus. They are set in their ideas, ideals and ways, and their selfishness or intolerance makes life at home difficult. Along with this goes the motif of the subjected, retiring mother, who like Paul Morel's mother in *Sons and Lovers*, is a reluctant domestic, being a frustrated educated

woman. Winifred, Bill Potter's wife in the tetralogy and Roland's mother in *Possession*, are English graduates. These figures trace their origin to Byatt's own mother, but as we saw in the Introduction to *Shadow*, Byatt did not want to make this problem the focus of a story, so the unfulfilled educated woman remains in the background as a measuring stick for the children.

An extension of this motif is the mother, sometimes father, who walks out on the family. In *The Game*, Julia and her husband split up, and the teenage daughter turns to her aunt Cassandra for attention. In the tetralogy, the first to leave is Elinor Poole. She walks out on her husband and leaves him to bring up the children. One of these children is probably Alexander's son, hence we have the variant of the father not recognising his family. Daniel is the other father to run out, unable to bear the situation after Stephanie's death. In *Babel Tower*, Daniel is working for the Listeners, a help-line for desperate people, and he takes the call of a mother who one day suddenly abandoned the home with no warning and has felt remorse ever since, yet is still not able to face going back. This woman in a way prepares us for Frederica's nighttime flight, which is much better explained and justified.

Through the theme of sibling rivalry, we come to the motifs of youth and innocence acquiring knowledge, wisdom and maturity, as in Jane Austen, Sir Walter Scott and particularly Charlotte Brontë --indeed the phrase "we wove a web in childhood" is the first line of the extract from her "Retrospection" quoted at the

beginning of *The Game*:

> When we were children, we were not quite separate. We shared a common vision, we created a common myth [...] This is that primitive state that has been called innocence. We wove a web in childhood, a web of sunny air [...] But there is no innocent vision, we are not indistinguishable. We create each other, separate. It is not done with love. [...] The web is sticky. I trail dirty shreds of it. (p. 230)

This is the embittered Cassandra speaking, commenting on the fallacy of the complete innocence of childhood (a subject Byatt takes up later in *Babel Tower*). What she exemplifies is the child who invents a game to escape from reality, or to play out prematurely visions of adult life. She invented, aided and abetted by Julia, the game of the title. In *Virgin*, it is the solitary and repressed Marcus who invents his game of "spreading" (p. 27) to escape from his fears. He has a considerable struggle to "grow out of" his problems. Cassandra, Marcus and Lucas Simmonds are all in some way outside family life. At one and the same time they desperately want and firmly reject "normality". Apart from these, Anna and Frederica are the principal characters whose vicissitudes the reader follows as they strive to emerge from teens into young womanhood.

It is at this point in her life, when she has just gone up to Cambridge, that Frederica loses her sister Stephanie. Untimely death and suicide is a constant in Byatt's writings. There are timely deaths, like that of the father of Julia and Cassandra in *The Game*, and untimely deaths, like Simon's photographer, in the same book, eaten by piranhas (relations of some mythical sea

dragon or malevolent fish-tailed goddess from Julia and Cassandra's game, no doubt). Daniel's father, the train driver, meets an untimely death in a work-related accident. The fortuitous death of Stephanie comes as a shock at the end of *Still Life*. It seems to be as unplanned as the crime in Camus's *L'Etranger*, or the antisocial behaviour of Cécile at the end of *Bonjour Tristesse*. Yet it has been built up to quite subtly (p. 334).

Loss of children recurs, as in the only son of the Headmaster in *Virgin*, in the two children who fell into a flooded quarry as a premonition to Stephanie's death *(Still Life* p. 231), or the boy in "The July Ghost" in *Sugar and Other Stories*. Also in *Still Life* there is the case of the Belfast peace mother Ann Maguire, introduced on account of similarities with Van Gogh and his nephew and the repetition of their names (pp. 8-9 & 253). Ann Maguire's suicide brings us to the theme of the taking of one's life by one's own hand. Byatt has several examples in her fiction, some are failed attempts and others successful, occasionally accompanied by madness. These examples are Lucas Simmonds in *Virgin*; the "abnormal" woman Thor has to deal with in *The Game*; Cassandra with her mental turmoil (*The Game* pp. 182 & 199); in *Still Life*, indirectly, the suicide is Van Gogh; *Possession* has a suicide in Blanche Glover, who from a feeling of defeat, penury and uselessness, repeats with more success (because weighted down with stones Christabel brought from Yorkshire) Mary Wollstonecraft's attempt off Putney Bridge (*Possession* p. 216). In *Babel Tower* there are three suicide

attempts, two successful and one not, and none of them in the main narrative. The first is in a novel Frederica writes a report on for a publisher: in Phyllis Pratt's *Daily Bread*, the clergyman who loses faith attempts it, in a close parallel to Daniel. In the main novel within the novel, *Babbletower*, the Lady Mavis successfully commits suicide by jumping off the tower (p. 274). Finally, Frederica writes up a report of the death of a sculpture student appropriately called Peter Stone, who threw himself under an underground train, as part of her novel *Lamination*s (p. 448).

Jude Mason, the author of the novel-within-the-novel, *Babbletower*, is constantly telephoning Daniel anonymously at the Listeners. They come to call him "Steelwire" and wonder if, in his apparent theological despair at the death of God, he might attempt suicide. Daniel, who has had much experience of the feeling, decides he is "too gabby to be suicidal" (p. 10). Daniel's grief over Stephanie is unbearable, partly because, in spite of being a priest, he does not believe in an after life:

> The words were a thin defence between him and the pit. (*Still Life* p. 341)

The impact of his wife's death demands a complete break with his past life, excepting his principles and way of putting these into practice. Estranged from his family and completely devoted to social work, years later he comes across his son working as an orderly in a hospital, and sees him as truly a repetition of himself. He knows that death can present itself in two ways: it

can be natural and normal, part of the rhythm of life, or it can be unnatural, disruptive, breaking the pattern. It can be a fitting end, or an unjust, undeserved one. That rite of passage, death, or the leaving of this world, has its social occasion in the public funeral. In a later chapter, we examine how Byatt shows the English on display during their social occasions.

Byatt develops her principal characters within their families, then she shows them in the larger social group. Social processes and rituals recur in Byatt's *oeuvre*, and they are usually portrayed in a limited number of locations which recur also. Yorkshire, Antonia Byatt's childhood home, figures in all the novels except *The Game*, where the northern family home is in Newcastle. London and Cambridge are prominent in all the novels, the latter less so in the last two, *Possession* and *Babel Tower*. The Yorkshire-London-Cambridge triangle is extended to travels in France: Aix-en-Provence, where Frederica meets Alexander again by chance in *Still Life*, and Ash and his wife Ellen spend their honeymoon in *Possession*. Also in *Possession*, Brittany is important, as it is the paternal home of Christabel LaMotte, whither she returns in her need, to be followed later by Ash, Roland and Maud, then most of the others on the quest.

We see middle-class life from the 1950s onwards in the town of Calverley. It is the local town of the Potters in the tetralogy, and is also the home town of Ellen Best, Ash's wife in *Possession*. Nearby is the site of the "new University of North Yorkshire", and in *Possession*, there is the "new University of

Lincoln", both inventions modelled on the new universities of the 1960s like Keele. As expected, Calverley is made to seem provincial compared to London and Cambridge, however, since the characters the reader is intimate with are intellectual and literary-minded, like Frederica, Stephanie, their father, Alexander and Crowe, this is not as obvious as it might otherwise have been. Sorties into other domains, like Frederica in the department store watching the brides-to-be, or in *Possession*, Mortimer Cropper, the American biographer visiting Daisy Wapshott in Preston in pursuit of an Ash letter, give a better view of provincial middle-to-working-class life.

Everyday life had improved after the war, as the narrator of *Still Life* indicates while focusing upon the young Frederica's limited social awareness:

> This was the quiet, forgotten, static time of the middle Fifties, after austerity, before affluence, [...] A time when political and sociological thinkers were saying there were no great issues left, only practical problems of economic and social planning, no ideology, only a broad consensus, no class conflict, only, within reach, equality of opportunity. A time when most British people believed modestly and without excitement in better things to come as better things had come, bananas, oranges, butter, the Health Service, the Butler Education Act, plans to expand higher education, motor cars for working men. (p. 180)

That the post-war hopes do not develop into the expected Utopia is testified to in the book of the 1980s, *Possession*, where Blackadder is having nightmares over going on television,

and fears he might be asked what the Victorian Randolph Ash would have had to say about "Social Security cuts, the Brixton riots and the destruction of the ozone" (p. 400).

In all the novels, we see people going about their individual daily lives, working, eating, making love. We see them in their social lives, attending functions, and finally, going through the necessary ceremonies which are the landmarks of the individual's life. Looking at these activities in this order, we follow first, the different professionals in the course of their work: teachers and writers of differing degrees of independence, like Henry Severell, Cassandra and Julia, Alexander, Bill Potter, Raphael Faber, Frederica Potter, Maud, Blackadder and Roland. These last three have for comparison American contemporaries, also counterparts of a century before to give added perspective. Another profession which has an important place in the tetralogy is that of the Church: the old-style priest, Vicar Ellenby, is contrasted with Daniel his curate, and the new-style religious, Gideon Farrar and Canon Holly. We have only glimpses of other professions, for example, doctors and nurses in the tetralogy, television personalities and their guests in *The Game* and *Possession*, salesmen (dolls and liqueurs) in *Virgin* and *Still Life*, and rich landowners, international businessmen and scientists in *Babel Tower*.

One of the focal points of the narrative in *Virgin*, apart from the performance of the play, is the viewing of the Coronation on television. This brings the whole community

together, in a George Eliot type of grand scale. All levels of society are represented, from the local gentry down to the rather humble, like Daniel's mother, the widow of a train driver. All generations are represented too, from older people like the Headmaster down to the baby Thomas Parry. All educational institutions are present: the schools, the Training College and the Church. All these people are experiencing a historic moment together, some seeing television for the first time and beginning to think that perhaps a new world is opening up.

In this new world, some things change and others remain the same for ever. Food and the ritual of eating changes, reflecting greater prosperity. The post-war affluence meant that a meal was no longer a necessary act to assuage hunger, but could become an act of pleasure. Byatt is explicit about the power of words to evoke pleasures which are not exclusively intellectual:

> It is possible for a writer to make, or remake at least, for a reader, the primary pleasures of eating, or drinking, or looking on, or sex. Novels have their obligatory tour-de-force, the green-flecked gold omelette *aux fines herbes* [...]
> (*Possession* p. 470)

In most Byatt fiction, food is there to be enjoyed for its own sake, but she also uses it to indicate social status, class and taste, and also historical period. Hence Daisy Wapshott's breakfast, with its egg and bacon and all the trimmings, and English tea, which the American Mortimer Cropper hates, is typical and copious but unacceptable in an age of yuppies with their problems of time and colesterol. From her first novel,

Byatt shows how food can be related to morals as well as aesthetics:

> She opened the shopping bag and found a tin of luncheon meat, a tin of baked beans, a sliced white loaf, a packet of margarine, a tin of peaches and two bottles of beer. Oliver had what amounted to a moral belief that in order to eat simply one must eat nastily, as his mother had done, as everyone had had to do in the war. Anna had tried on previous occasions to explain to him that an unsliced loaf could be fresher, that things could be done with eggs or cheese and potatoes, that were impossible with luncheon meat, that the extra few pence spent on butter made a great difference, that you could buy a whole ripe melon for the price of a tin of gluey peaches, that food could be a pleasure. [...] Anna gave up arguing when she worked out that this everyday food was a way of keeping her in her place as a Severell, and of emphasizing Oliver's own natural place. It was one of his social quirks [...] (*Shadow* p. 226).

The more select BBC luncheon Alexander attends in *Still Life* or the "earthy" food, the mackerel with fennel, a stew of small squids (p. 161) he has at the Pooles' seem more worthy of social approbation, also the colourful picnics of plain, wholesome food (with matching plain, wholesome words). These picnics come in the English variety:

> They took a simple picnic. Fresh brown bread, white Wensleydale cheese, crimson radishes, yellow butter, scarlet tomatoes, round bright green Granny Smiths and a bottle of mineral water. *(Possession* p. 268)

They also come in the French:

> Lunch was good: little cold herb omelettes, raw smoked ham, huge pumpkin-indented

> scarlet tomatoes, black olives with garlic
> and pepper, glistening, wrinkled and hot.
> There was a lot of red wine, Côtes du
> Ventoux, and a lot of good crusty bread.
> There was sharp, fresh goat cheese and
> rose-orange Cavaillon melons, green-gold
> like legendary serpents outside, into
> whose fluted pink hollows Crowe ceremoniously
> poured pink, sweet Beaumes-de-Venise wine.
> (*Still Life* p. 78)

In *Still Life*, the colourful breakfasts Alexander shares with the Pooles are "still lives", hence food in its social aspect comes to share in the general metaphor of the book concerning art and creativity. In *The Game*, the ritualistic meal in hall in Cambridge that Julia has so looked forward to as if they were to be served ambrosia, is subverted by Byatt for a specific purpose, as we shall see in a later chapter. So eating can be a necessary evil, a delight or even an initiation.

Sex is all of these things too. The rituals of love-making are found from *Shadow* to *Babel Tower*. *Virgin*, perhaps to live up to the implications of its title, beats the record with most couples copulating, whereas *Possession* is interesting in that it juxtaposes the reticences for different reasons of Victorian courtship and "sexuality in the shadow of Aids" (p. 384).

Just as Julia's Cambridge meal with Cassandra is subverted, so is her love-making with Ivan: terms from self-defence or the martial arts are used in the description, which, together with Julia's self-consciousness, make for a lack of cooperation between her and her lover which prevent the experience from being a mutually ecstatic one:

'Defend yourself, my darling.'
Julia was no good at self-defence when it came to a direct attack, and opened her legs pliably enough when they were pushed. She was not easy to stir, and had been, ever since Simon's first attempt to kiss her, neurotically afraid of being watched; she was unable, although she knew it to be impolite, to resist twisting her head from side to side to see whether the room had suddenly become inhabited. Afterwards, she felt hot and sticky, and, as Ivan handed back to her those of her clothes he had removed, a sense of temporary respite.
(*The Game* p. 134)

Sex as an initiation for the woman is seen through Anna, Frederica and Christabel. Whereas with the last of these the relation is motivated by great mutual attraction and the anonymous observing narrator is suitably delicate, the younger pair both demonstrate curiosity and a feeling of needing to get it over with:

[...] and thought well, that's that.
(Shadow pp. 139 & 164)

In the abstract, virginity was a very simple nuisance. (*Virgin* p. 328)

With Frederica, the process is subverted by a detailed description of the man's "performance of a routine technique" with obnoxious aspects like "his tongue, which seemed monstrously huge, round and swollen, breathing nicotine, beer and tea" and Frederica's thoughts on literature, Racine, D. H. Lawrence, then her fears through ignorance:

It occurred to her to wonder what if she were to want to pee [...] (p. 206)

A similar session between Frederica and Crowe is also made to appear grotesque by Frederica's apparently neutral observations:

> One thin knee cracked up against his double chin [...] She [...] stared with cold judgement at his white Silenus-paunch and rosy appendages. (p. 329)

Nearby, Wilkie and Marina Yeo the actress "in a straining parody of Rodin's Baiser" are also made fun of by the sublime and the ridiculous: Wilkie offers old-fashioned flowers --chamomile, rosemary, eye-bright, etc.-- and these are juxtaposed with the possible consequences of rue: "prickly heat and unsightly blotches" (p. 329). Other pairs having sex in the course of the novel *Virgin* and whose methods and techniques are inevitably compared are Alexander and Jenny (in *Still Life*, Alexander and Elinor Poole), Thomas Poole and the schoolgirl Anthea Warburton, Lucas Simmonds begging Marcus to touch him, the narrator using a plant image which is both comic and pathetic:

> [...] and the hard root flowered extravagantly and wetly and wilted slowly. (p. 311)

Stephanie and Daniel are the central characters of the first two novels of the tetralogy in terms of sex, courtship and marriage. But even here, there is a deliberate let-down. Stephanie is really entrapped by Daniel's moral blackmail, there is no passion on her part. After the wedding, when the marriage is consummated, it is to the tune of children, outside in the poor housing estate they are to live on, singing a song about

donkeys and fleas. Stephanie closes herself off from Daniel and all he can think is that safe inside her skull, her "bone box", she is separate from him (*Virgin* p. 279). Ash, having made love to Christabel, also contemplates her "living skull" with its "inaccessible thoughts" (*Possession* p. 284).

If Stephanie requires convincing, Maud in *Possession* is even more difficult to conquer. After experiences with Fergus Wolff that subsequently disgust her, leaving her with images of beds like mounds of dirty whipped egg white, Roland has to be slow, scrupulously clean and very gentle, but the final coming together at the end of the romance is the fitting repetition of the Victorian courtship and sex process in the Ash-Christabel love.

Love-making may or may not have its consequences. It does for Anna and Oliver, Stephanie and Daniel, of course, also for Alexander and Elinor Poole and Ash and Christabel. Anthea Warburton is soon deprived of her offspring by way of an abortion, but the other women come to bear their babies in situations and circumstances varying from the deliberately mysterious (Christabel), to the dubious (Elinor Poole), to the highly detailed, moment-by-monent, blow-by-blow description of Stephanie's experiences in two childbirths, beginning with her ante-natal visits. As life and death rituals are juxtaposed in Byatt's writing, on one such visit, an ominous incident occurs: a woman refused special attention partly through English discipline, haemorrages and loses her baby. Stephanie tells Daniel about this after he has described, in his own, blunt,

picturesque, Sheffield way, how he has spent the afternoon officiating at a funeral:

> Not nice, really. Old ladies from t'Home. One daughter wi' three or four kids in tow. Crematorium. Usual anti-climax --old birds standing round a bit o' grass at t' back they'd got lease of for a few hours, wi' a garden label saying Mrs. Edna Morrison and a few bunches of chrysanths put in rows. Looked ready to be blown away, the old biddies. But pleased wi' themselves because they were still on their pins and not slid away into Eternity.
> (*Still Life* p. 17)

Colloquial expressions like "old birds" and "biddies", "chrysanths" and "pins" create the humour and pathos here. In the funeral in *The Game*, that of Jonathan Corbett, father of the two sisters, the sombreness of the occasion is lit up to those who can appreciate it, such as Julia herself, by the incongruity of her Father Christmas-like appearance:

> [...] they found themselves following the coffin through elbow-high tunnels of scooped-out snow. No one particularly wore black. Cassandra was naturally sombre. Julia wore her scarlet and white, and looked, she thought, incongruously like Father Christmas where the snow had brushed against her. (p. 54)

The funeral makes Julia remember her wedding in the same Meeting-house. The usual "long, white, sophisticated dress, with yards of floating veil and an armful of flowers" (p. 54) as worn by Stephanie, is denied her as she is a Quaker, so she has to make do with "short white muslin with a sash, a round collar and a row of pearl buttons, a white hat like a Quaker bonnet and a

posy of rosebuds and forget-me-nots. She looked more like a first communicant than a bride" (pp. 54-5). But the image of her elder sister Cassandra as a "reluctant bridesmaid stumping along behind in grey poplin and a kind of glorified boater" can only flatter her.

Similarly, in *Still Life*, a funeral recalls a wedding: "Most of the people who came to the funeral remembered Daniel at his wedding" (pp. 340-1). The narrator intervenes towards the end of *Still Life* to indicate how death is more of a conclusion to a novel than a happily-ever-after marriage. Indeed, all her major works except the first, taking the tetralogy together, end in the death of one of the protagonists:

> There is a temptation to hurry over the next part of their lives, particularly Daniel's. It feels a little like discretion: it is both English and composed to turn away for a time, and take up the narrative again when there is something to narrate. Once novels ended with marriages: now we know better, we lumber on inconclusively into the sands and swamps of married life, ending in a query, an uncertainty, a bifurcation of possibilities that allows the reader to continue the story with his own preferred, desired projection. Death is more of an end than marriage. Tragedies end with death. (*Still Life* pp. 343-4)

Byatt thus inserts into her realist background a reminder to the reader that it is all a fictional, verbal world. In the sequel, *Babel Tower*, Frederica realises that both she and her sister married for sex. Stephanie married the Church, although she did not believe, and Frederica married the Shires, although she was an outsider. They allowed the body to dominate and to

take away their considered, rational and independent decisions. Frederica says that Nigel taught her desire and "That destroyed something in me: a separateness that was a strength." (p. 311) After leaving her husband, Frederica has a relationship with one of her mature students, John Ottokar, and as always, we are seeing into her separate, thinking mind as she makes love: "They are separate, and yet intent on connection" (p. 346). Sex without love is carried on by Nigel in brothels, and through him, Frederica catches a venereal disease. Sex without love is seen in *Babbletower*, where sadism, sexual cruelty, is explored. This culminates in the sexual torture Culvert practises on the Lady Roseace, the description of which the reader only gets in a preview --Culvert tells her what he is going to do to her, the scene of him doing it is not included, but the reader assumes it happens as we later learn of the Lady Roseace's death. This issue is explored, as it was by Charles Fourier and de Sade himself, as part of the individual versus society problem. Byatt explores it as such, but with the moral sense she inherited from Iris Murdoch, she equates irresponsible sex without love with sickness and death. Also, pornographic writing is used, as Waugh suggests, "to explore fundamental problems about human identity", precisely in novels of the late 1960s (Waugh 1984, p. 86).

3.4 Language and the significance of names

Patricia Waugh (Waugh 1984, p. 53) tells us that there are two poles of metafiction: one that finally accepts a substantial real world whose significance is not entirely composed of

relationships within language; and one that suggests there can never be an escape from the prisonhouse of language, and either delights or despairs in this. The first sort employs structural undermining of convention, or parody, using a specific previous text or system for its base (novelists like Fowles, Spark, Vonnegut, Lessing) because language is so pre-eminently the instrument which maintains the everyday. The second is represented by those writers who conduct their fictional experiments even at the level of the sign (like Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*), and therefore fundamentally disturb the everyday. Waugh quotes Berger and Luckmann (Berger and Luckmann 1971) in their arguments concerning language as the main instrument for maintaining this everyday reality. Texts which move towards a breakdown of the language system, presenting reality as a set of equally non-privileged competing discourses, can be seen as resisting assimilation into the terms of the everyday. Waugh gives as an example of this, Lessing's protagonist Anna in *The Golden Notebook* (1962), in spite of the fact that in general terms, Lessing belongs to the first, more conservative group. The Frederica of Byatt's latest work, *Babel Tower*, has in common with Anna the sense of fragmentation of the self, of different selves in different contexts and discourses. As Richard Todd says in relation to this novel: "Language guards against the violent frustration that must explode when articulacy either comes under threat, or simply cannot be achieved (as in the world of Nigel Reiver)" (Todd 1997, p. 64). It seems that there is a progression in Byatt's work within the exploration of the limits of language in fiction. Overall, Byatt would be placed

in the first group, like Lessing, and it may be that they have the 1960s in common in this idea of the disruption of the conventional and everyday, Lessing writing her novel in the 1960s and Byatt reproducing pastiche and parody 1960s writing. Both writers have moments of greater stretching of the limits of language in their attempts to convey the everyday, the stuff of fiction.

Like Doris Lessing, Antonia Byatt has always been interested in language itself as the instrument for working in the interface of the everyday and the fictional text. She has used her characters as surrogates for herself within her texts to discuss the issues involved. From Byatt's earliest writer character, Henry Severell of *The Shadow of the Sun*, all her writer protagonists have struggled with language, the medium they use to express themselves in both their everyday life and their literary lives. Cassandra of *The Game* felt language had a mystical power when used in certain ways, and it could even be life-threatening. In the tetralogy, Marcus finds he can control his personal fears by imposing strict limits on language, putting it into lists or taxonomies. This use of taxonomies here and in other Byatt works of fiction will be taken up in more detail in a later chapter, and will be shown to serve a purpose which is rather different from the one suggested by Waugh (Waugh 1984, pp. 21-22).

The narrator of the tetralogy introduces the subject of the

ontological properties of language in *Still Life*, as we have already seen. The discussion is taken further in the sequel, *Babel Tower*, using the figure of the European intellectual Professor Wijnnobel. The whole of the short, three-page chapter, Chapter VI, is devoted to his meditations on language:

> Gerard Wijnnobel sits in his official car and thinks about language. He thinks about order and disorder, about form and chaos. He has thought about these things all his life, always with a sensation of an impossible endeavour. (p. 190)

Wijnnobel comes from a family of mixed blood and ideology, Calvinists and Jews, and in each generation, they have had a nostalgia for a perfect language. The grandfather had become obsessed with the idea of an original pristine language, as suggested in the Bible:

> He had set out on a doomed attempt, part-mystical, part-historical, part-exegetical, to find the traces of the Ur-language, the original speech of God spoken by Adam in Eden, and indeed by God, the Word Himself, when he called the universe into being out of chaos, simply by naming it. [...] in the days before Babel, the occult tradition went, words had been things and things had been words, they had been *one*, as a man and his shadow perhaps are one, or a man's mind and his brain. 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. (p. 190)

The second generation, Wijnnobel's father, is of course pre-Saussurean, and therefore equally mistaken. The father believed

that words are not purely conventional, but that they are somehow connected to the things they denote:

> He thought it was something more natural, more intrinsically part of the nature of things, a tongue in which there were words for lion, lamb, apple, snake, tree, good, evil, which wholly contained and corresponded to *all* their power and meaning. Elephant spoke elephant, earwig spoke earwig. (p. 191)

It is from this naïve position regarding language and the world that the narrator of *Still Life* says she would like to attempt to write a novel about naming things and pinning them down:

> I had the idea, when I began this novel, that it would be a novel of naming and accuracy. [...] Adam in the Garden named the flora and the fauna [...] (p. 301)

She has to admit failure and have recourse to metaphor:

> But even in the act of naming, we make metaphors. [...] As Vincent Van Gogh said, in our world, olive trees may stand for themselves, and so with cypresses, sunflowers, corn, human flesh. (Though he could not divest any of these of the cultural metaphors that come close and intrinsic as their shadows, replacing, as he almost said, the old halo.) (p. 302)

In the sequel, *Babel Tower*, Wijnnobel is a post-Saussurean, indeed a follower of Roman Jakobson and the Chomsky of the mid-1960s. His vision of a perfect language looks not to the past, but to the future, through technology and study of the brain:

> He believes too, that in some distant future the neuroscientists, the geneticists, the students of the matter of the mind, may find out the forms of language in the forest of the dendrites, in the links of the synapses. The genes are aperiodic crystals, dictating to the matter they control, the structures, the forms, the substances that matter shall become. Somewhere in the future the understanding of their invariable form may lead to the understanding of the web of grammar and its invariable deep structure. (p. 193)

The desire to control language, to have it correspond exactly to the thing or things it denotes, cannot be fulfilled. Quite the reverse, language often seems to control us. In *Babel Tower*, Byatt considers language as a mask, and also as a net: "The net is made by words." (p. 324). But as we saw, Byatt has her characters do things with language in order to achieve a measure of control. Writing lists is one form of control, and this is practised by not only Marcus, (Chapter 27 of *Still Life* is "Names of Grasses") but also Frederica in trying to write, and by Roland in *Possession*.

Lists involve names, and the use of names, especially proper names, in different ways, is of vital importance to metafictional writers. As Patricia Waugh puts it:

> The use of names in traditional fiction is usually part of an aim to disguise the fact that there is no difference between the name and the thing named: to disguise this purely verbal existence. Metafiction, on the other hand, aims to focus attention precisely on the problem of reference. Here, proper names are often flaunted in their seeming arbitrariness or absurdity, omitted altogether (as in Nathalie Sarraute's work), or placed in an overtly metaphorical or adjectival relationship with the thing they name. (Waugh 1984, p. 93)

Significant names can thus undermine the tendency of realistic fiction to create a sense of ordinariness through assigning apparently arbitrary, non-descriptive names to characters. Byatt uses names in the metafictional way, and also favours significant names simply in her delight in language. Also, contrary to Waugh's metafictional idea, naming people can be a form of the attempt to create stability in language. People change, and are different personae in different situations at the same time, as Frederica discovers in *Babel Tower*. But a name can give fixity to an identity. In Byatt's work, names are used for another purpose, unlike words themselves, they are rarely arbitrary. Names conventionally denote characteristics, and the person then becomes endowed with these characteristics.

In his book *Acts of Naming: the Family Plot in Fiction*, Michael Ragussin (Ragussin 1986), attempts to remystify the naming of persons. He considers the naming of Clarissa, Tess, Albertine and Lolita, and finds that in these books, acts of naming lie at the heart of the plots. Both eroticism, in the case of Proust, and magic, are involved. Ragussin finds this reappraisal necessary after Wittgenstein had exposed the magic in traditional practices of naming:

> This is concerned with the conception of naming as, so to speak, an occult process. Naming appears as a *queer* connexion of a word and an object. --And you really get such a queer connexion when the philosopher tries to bring out *the* relation between name and thing by staring at an object in front of

> him and repeating a name or even the word 'this' innumerable times. For philosophical problems arise when language *goes on holiday*. And *here* we may indeed fancy naming to be some remarkable act of mind, as it were a baptism of an object. (3)

Wittgenstein had thus attacked the name/thing association that dominates philosophy, a view of language as a system within which names play a more limited role. Wittgenstein, and also Byatt, feel this neglects the complex human circumstances under which the naming of persons becomes charged with meaning and power.

As we saw in the Van Gogh reference, a name brings a cultural aura with it. Hence the need, on the few occasions one has in life to name things or people, to choose something appropriate. Chapter 22 of *Still Life*, "Names", concerns the naming of Stephanie and Daniel's second child. Daniel fixes upon "Mary" because he thinks the child looks like a Mary and because Mary is womanly (p. 252). If we look up the etymology of the name, we find that it means "the healer of bitterness", besides the obvious Biblical reference to the Virgin Mary, the Mother of God and the new Eve. In spite of the fact that their first child William was named after Wordsworth, not after the grandfather (though as "helmet of resolution" this would be apt), he and Mary will always recall the facetious side of the British monarchy reflected in *1066 And All That* (p. 252).

In *Virgin*, Daniel read *King Lear* because Bill Potter had taunted him with being illiterate in the world of English

Literature. In Chapter 2, he is "In the Lion's Den", the lion being Bill Potter, and he is also imprisoned in his fat. The typological image of Daniel as the Biblical Daniel is continued in the chapter with more prison imagery concerning himself and also Stephanie and her father's ambition for her, also fire imagery (Bill is fire, p. 269). In the sequel, *Still Life*, Stephanie, not surprisingly, is equated with Cordelia. If we look up the name Stephanie, we find it means "a wreath", basically laurels, but also funereal, like the martyred St Stephen. The Potters are divided into "pale Potters" and "fiery Potters", those that, like their father, are red-headed and energetic, for example, Frederica. Stephanie is a "pale Potter", possibly a loser, so perhaps always doomed to die young. The bird she tried to retrieve from behind the refridgerator survived, as did the cats she nursed, and these are like the dog, horse and rat of *Lear*:

> Shakespeare manages, it occurs to me as I write, to include the different pain of grief in the resolution of tragedy. The worst suffering in *Lear* is at the end, the accident after the resolution, the unacceptable. Why should a dog, a horse, a rat have life And thou no life at all? Cordelia's death, if we imagine Cordelia and not only Lear, makes that play too uncomfortable for the Aristotelian relief. We can let Lear go, gladly and gracefully, but not, if we have imagined her, Cordelia. (p. 344)

The name Cordelia means warm-hearted, and like Stephanie, she was the one who was most loved, the one who gave most, and died. Stephanie is also thought of in relation to Charlotte

Brontë: the trip to Filey with Daniel which puts the seal on their relationship. The early death on account of children and the theme of English Literature bring them together. As Mary, Stephanie's second child, is born, Elinor Poole also gives birth, to a child that is probably Alexander's. This gives rise to an overt discussion of the meanings of Alexander's names. Alexander means "helper of men", Miles means "soldier" and Michael "like unto God", hence the narrator says "he always added that they were very military, down to the military archangel" (*Still Life* p. 244). In the case of Alexander, who is not in the least military, the name seems arbitrary, except in the God-like qualities, as he is admired by everyone. Only the narrator and a haughty observer like Raphael Faber know that his work is not as wonderful as his admirers make out; it is as mediocre as Alexander himself suspects.

His surname, Wedderburn, Byatt may have taken from a writer who worked on Ruskin at the turn of the century. Elinor Poole's husband, Thomas, in addition to also having a poet's name, has a name that biblically means "twin", and in a way he is the other half of Alexander, the married half. The Pooles choose the names Simon Vincent for their son, this second name because of the play Alexander (who lodges with them in London) wrote on Van Gogh. This makes Alexander contemplate the fact that Vincent Van Gogh had experienced anxiety over the naming of his nephew, Theo's son, also Vincent Van Gogh, for Vincent himself had received his name after an older brother, the first to be called Vincent, had died. Alexander decides the name cannot be unlucky given that his

paintings are so highly prized today.

Some other names in the tetralogy are significant. The self-effacing mother Winifred, "friend of peace", is always backing down from her irrascible husband. Frederica, meaning "peaceful ruler" seems ironic, not at all apt, unless Byatt has an about-face in store for her in the final part of the tetralogy. A very aptly named couple, however, are the new vicar and his wife, Gideon and Clemency Farrar. Gideon was one of the judges of the Old Testament, and in one version, he makes an idolatrous image and leads the Israelites into immorality. Given what he was up to with his young parishioners, and that his wife was always having to forgive him, their names fit them very nicely.

Like Alexander, Frederica thinks about names, especially those of her boyfriends. The poet Hugh Pink feels his surname is an impossible name for a poet, particularly as he has rather round pink cheeks. Frederica tries to console him, saying that if he writes good poetry, people will not think about cheeks, but "Yeats and Eliot and Pink" (*Still Life* p. 200). From the sublime to the ridiculous, and further, with it rhyming with drink and think, what is not said but hinted at is that it also rhymes with stink. Frederica's man of her dreams, the Cambridge poet and don, the Jewish Raphael Faber, has a suitably angelic and literary name, also Raphael means "healed of God", which fits in with his quiet sadness over losing his family in the war. Frederica makes more amatory progress with the less literary-minded Nigel Reiver, later to become her husband. She didn't like the name Nigel, she

felt it belonged to "respectable little boys from nice homes" (*Still Life* p. 296), but forgives him because Wordsworth was going to call *The Borderers*, *The Reivers*. The reader may also recall his surname as Lawrentian: Paul Morel's first girlfriend, Miriam Reiver in *Sons and Lovers*. However, Richard Todd has pointed out the sinister feline nature of the names of the associates of Nigel Reiver, not only the son Leo, but the solicitor Guy Tiger and his colleague Laurence Ounce, seen as predators (Todd 1997, p. 72).

Of the new characters in *Babel Tower*, Jude Mason is obviously the most important in terms of names. In court, we learn that this is not his real name, and he admits he took Jude from Hardy's novel, as he wanted to be "obscure", and Jude was a stone-mason by trade: "I believe art is craft first", says Jude (p. 572). Another worker in stone is the sculpture student who committed suicide, Peter Stone. Finally, Frederica's son is called Leo, and he is the stone lion of her dreams, he is red-haired and stubborn like the fiery Potters. The evil genius of the novel-within-the-novel, Culvert, has a French name suitable to his Sadian activities.

Anna of *The Shadow of the Sun* may also have a Lawrentian name, from *The Rainbow*, or her name may have come from a character in a different role in *Bonjour Tristesse*. Her father Henry, whose name means "master of the house" is well named, as is his namesake Randolph Henry Ash of *Possession*. In *The Game*, Cassandra, the sister who is truly dedicated to literature,

suitably has the name of Jane Austen's sister and mother. But as she meditates on this (like Frederica and Alexander) she prefers another Cassandra:

> Cassandra who was Apollo's priestess [...] incapable of communication. Unrelated to the world of objects around her [...] like myself, a specialist in useless knowledge. (p. 141)

In *Possession*, the four major characters, Ash and Christabel, Maud and Roland, have significant names, perhaps necessarily so here, since the novel is a fairytale romance, where names symbolise states of being. Even the minor characters have meaningful names. There is Fergus Wolff, who is the wolf out to catch Maud; Blanche Glover, the pale lesbian with the suitably female, concave, glove poem written by Ash; Beatrice Nest, who is homely and always knitting and working with bits and pieces of material to complete her great work; Mortimer Cropper, the "baddie" of the story, who comes a cropper at the end --his name suggests death, "dead sea" or stagnant water, as if he were trying to poison or suck the life out of the two pairs of protagonists while he crops or harvests what others have sown; finally, Maia Thomasina Bailey, Ash and Christabel's daughter, whose name Ash explains:

> He told her that Maia was the mother of Hermes, thief, artist and psychopomp; and that he knew a waterfall called Thomasine. (p. 509)

He meets her on a May day, makes her a crown as for a May

Queen, and recites a poem about Proserpina to her. Her name is related to the may blossom, or hawthorn, which her mother Christabel had in her garden, and with which Vivien is associated in the Sir Edward Burne-Jones painting "The Beguiling of Merlin" on the jacket of the novel. Her naming, with the recurring significantly female waterfall, reminds one of the naming of horses, also mentioned by Byatt through Val getting herself into horsey circles with Euan (p. 414).

Ash's name, as we already noted, is related to death: one thinks of the "Dust to dust, ashes to ashes" of the funeral service. But he and his poetry are very much alive, and the other meaning of ash contributes to this idea. In the romance, we have a repetition of the Creation myth --the first man and woman, Adam and Eve, recreated in Ash and Christabel, in Roland and Maud. In Ash's poem *Ragnarök*, Nordic and not Semitic, man and woman are formed from two trees, the ash and the elder, and named Ask and Embla (pp. 240-1). Tree myths will be examined later; here, suffice it to say that R. H. Ash, the man and the name, are central to the association of Creation, trees and names. He writes letters to his godchild Sophia with tree drawings and explains:

> [H]ere is a lop-sided version of my namesake,
> the mighty Ash. It is a common and magical
> tree --not as the mountain ash is magical,
> but because our Norse forefathers once
> believed it held the world together, rooted
> in the Underworld and touching Heaven.
> (p. 95)

Ask and Embla have the responsibility of naming things in their pristine newness: "We two remake our world by naming it" (p. 114). The fictional Ash is like his near contemporary Whitman, feeling the nineteenth-century urge to name and remake in a new world, yet it is the same impulse as that felt on a lower scale by parents through their children in *Still Life*. Roland and Maud discuss how Ash and Christabel meditated on names (*Possession* p. 252). The fire and ash imagery in *Ragnarök* emphasize the other meaning of Ash's name and tie it in with the motifs of the four elements running through not only *Possession*, but also the tetralogy.

Ash's wife, Ellen Best, probably has an ironic name, as according to Victorian respectability, she was the "best" wife for Ash, but in fact proved to be no wife at all, though with due respect to her, or rather to Byatt, some explanation of this is attempted in providing mitigating circumstances. However, although the name Ellen is associated with light and the sun, her inner life cannot face up to the light of scrutiny. Christabel, in bearing Ash a daughter, is his true life and "best" love, demonstrating that Victorian respectability was a cover for a different reality underneath. Christabel is named after the heroine of Coleridge's unfinished poem of that title, as Ash enquires (p. 175), calling the poet "inconsequential", reflecting the fact that Coleridge's reputation was at that time at a low point. There is a connection between Christabel's interest in Melusina, her friendship with Blanche Glover, and Geraldine the snakewoman of the poem "Christabel". Christabel's father, Isidore

LaMotte, is well-named as a mythographer, after St Isidore, the early medieval Spanish encyclopaedist, even if there is something of the Sir James Frazer about his conception. The surname obviously comes from Motte Fouqué, who wrote *Undine* in 1811. The theme of this work, that of the mermaid, fascinated Christabel in its overtones of denied sexuality. The surname LaMotte is apt for Christabel, who is like the real-life nineteenth-century American feminist and reformer Lucretia Mott. But in literary terms, like Maud later, she is compared to princesses locked in towers, or the Lady of Shalott, though she has had more freedom:

> Could the Lady of Shalott have written
> *Melusina* in her barred and moated Tower?
> (p. 188)

Christabel's letter to the dying Ash, undelivered by the dying Ellen, brings together this motif of defence and crossing the threshold, and that of the dragon (this time Ash), the flame, ashes, and rebirth like the phoenix, through poetry:

> I wonder --if I had kept to my closed
> castle, behind my motte-and-bailey
> defences-- should I have been a great
> poet --as you are? [...] Did we not
> --did *you* not flame, and I catch fire?
> Shall we survive and rise from our
> ashes? Like Milton's Phoenix? (p. 502)

In the romance, their fame survives through their poetry, and their lineage, though far less well-known, through Maia and Maud. The suggestion for the future is that Maud will marry Roland, or at least have children by him, and that he may become

a poet. Maud is a sort of reincarnation of her great-great-great grandmother Christabel, and suitably has a name from Tennyson and appears "icily regular" like her namesake (p. 505). She also lives at the top of Tennyson Tower in the "new Lincoln University" (p. 39), Tennyson being a Lincolnshireman. The surname Bailey, though of a family related by marriage to Christabel and not blood kin, is part of the defences, and goes with moat or LaMotte. If we look up the name Maud, we find it means "mighty in battle". This is apt, since she defends herself well and conquers at the end. Roland is a Teutonic name like Maud, and whereas it means "fame of the land", and is suitable for the hero of a romance or epic who follows a quest and fulfills tasks, not without some danger, reminding one of the hero of the *Chanson de Roland*, the name is sufficiently rare and effeminate to make it fitting for the apparently meek ("dull but honourable", p. 138) Roland Michell.

3.5 English Literature

As Patricia Waugh says (Waugh 1984, p. 11), metafiction sets up an opposition, not to ostensibly "objective" facts in the "real" world, but to the language of the realistic novel which has sustained and endorsed such a view of reality. Metafiction thus converts what it sees as negative values of outworn literary conventions into the basis of a potentially constructive social criticism. It suggests that there may be as much to be learnt from setting the mirror of art up to its own linguistic or representational structures as from directly setting it up to a

hypothetical "human nature" that somehow exists as an essence outside historical systems of articulation.

Metafictional writers discuss, both overtly and covertly, the linguistic and representational structures of novelists and poets. But in Byatt's work, perhaps more than in that of any other metafictional writer, we find discussion of the approaches to representation of all the major English authors. Milton, Coleridge, Tennyson, "The Lady of Shalott": it is already obvious that references to English literature are a constant in A. S. Byatt's fiction, and that certain significant figures recur. She has created in all her novels and short stories characters who, like her, live by their study and teaching of literature. While we consider them as creative writers in the next section, here, we list them and their particular interests:

> Henry Severell (*The Shadow of the Sun*): in later life he worked on Coleridge's Notebooks and Dorothy Wordsworth's *Journal*.
>
> Cassandra (*The Game*): she thought a lot about Charlotte Brontë and the 'web of childhood', 'The Lady of Shalott' and worked on an edition of Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*.
>
> Frederica (the tetralogy): as a schoolgirl and student, she read her set books,

among other things, and later taught English literature.

Stephanie: she taught "Ode on a Grecian Urn" and contemplated with frustration the possibilities of doing research on Wordsworth.

Bill Potter: taught literature at school and at highly enthusiastic evening classes (like Byatt herself).

Alexander Wedderburn: taught English literature in school to finance his creative life.

Raphael Faber: poet and teacher, who brings a European, if not Semitic perspective, to English literature.

Ash & Christabel and Maud & Roland (*Possession*): poets, but also students and teachers of English poetry.

Literature is therefore the profession of the major characters, but literature also serves other purposes in Byatt's fiction. We can detect the exploitation of fiction in at least half a dozen different ways in the novels:

1. Certain poets are obviously Byatt's favourites, and she has the characters whom we regard highly refer to these from time to time. In her Introduction to the new edition of *Shadow*, Byatt writes: "the one person I was sure I admired and loved at that time was Coleridge" (4). Coleridge is referred to especially with reference to ontological meditations upon words and meanings. Other constants are Donne, Shakespeare and Milton.

2. Certain characters live in fictional worlds more than the real world of their fictional medium. Frederica, and especially Cassandra, tend to think in terms of the literature they revere.

3. Fictional characters refer to pre-extisting fictional texts, sometimes involving real, historical characters, thus creating a thick and complex intertextuality which contributes considerable richness to the Byatt text. This metafictional device will be considered in greater detail in a later chapter.

4. As an extension of this, most novels contain the representation of a play or excerpts of novels or verses of poetry. So we have fictional characters of the Byatt text, who seem real to the reader, recreating pre-existing fictional characters and worlds which also seem real, but in a different way and at a further remove. This can create a Chinese-box effect, which Waugh suggested was a

metafictional device. The layers of "existence" and of language, impel us to question "reality" and our access to it.

5. Again as an extension of this, Byatt characters come into contact with real famous writers, giving an air of authenticity to the former.

6. Byatt's narrator and some of her characters discuss the changing fashions in literature and critical theory, and meditate upon how great works are reinterpreted in different centuries or decades.

7. Byatt writes parody as well as pastiche, in order to ask the reader to question a genre or the work of a particular writer. According to Lodge (1977, pp. 88-92), parody takes as its starting-point a previous work or genre, inserts a metaphoric version of this into the ongoing (metonymic) literary tradition. This dislocates both past and present texts, as the rearrangment of the original text or genre reveals the potential rearrangements of the present one.

8. Finally, Byatt's multiplicity of vision is applied to English literature.

Because all of these factors will be discussed later, here a brief illustration of each will suffice to demonstrate how certain ideas and motifs recur. Byatt has been an expert on Coleridge and Wordsworth at least since writing *Unruly Times*, if not before. In *The Game*, with its quotation from Coleridge at the head, we have seen how Cassandra's teenage love of Coleridge is remembered by Simon years later, making him wax philosophical on topics of natural history and anthropology. Julia draws a parallel between herself and her sister and Wordsworth and Coleridge respectively, as she recalls the quotation about "willing suspension of disbelief":

> I don't, she thought, use my imagination enough, and she uses hers too much. Like Wordsworth and Coleridge, one trying to 'give the charm of novelty to things of every day', whilst the other [...] likes 'persons and characters supernatural, or at least romantic'. (p. 122)

In *Virgin*, the deeply Wordsworthian Frederica does not yet know "Coleridge's ideas of the origin of metre" (p. 210), but in *Still Life*, Byatt uses the "suspension" tenet to show how Frederica, the inveterate analyser, can be carried away by a great story and have her heart take over from her head. She feels a sort of "passion of the mind" which is the power of great literature:

> He took her to see the *Seven Samurai* [...] Frederica began watching this in a Cambridge mood, looking for structure, recurring motifs, moral form. [...] She began to believe the film, to suffer with its people, to feel fear,

> hope, love and hatred as she had not simply done since childhood, since *Robin Hood* and *David Copperfield*, *Redgauntlet* and *Ivanhoe*. It was perhaps for a perpetuation of this willing suspension of disbelief for the moment that those like herself committed themselves to the study of literature. (*Still Life* p. 269)

Frederica, Cassandra and even Alexander feel themselves somehow outside real life because of their dedication to literature, like Vincent Van Gogh in his total dedication to art as expressed in one of his letters:

> Oh it seems to me more and more that *people* are the root of everything, and though it will always be a melancholy thought that you yourself are not in real life, I mean, that it's more worthwhile to work in flesh and blood itself than in paint or plaster, more worthwhile to make children than pictures or to carry on business, all the same you feel that you're alive when you remember that you have friends who are outside real life as much as you [...] (*Still Life* p. 170)

Stephanie is half in and half out of "real life". She is a great admirer of Keats and also Wordsworth, whose works she takes to hospital for her first childbirth. For her second, among other works, she chooses *Our Mutual Friend*. She is used, as are Frederica and their father, as a medium for discussing novels. Through Frederica, we appreciate Byatt's great admiration for the French masters, Proust and Flaubert, also the poet Mallarmé (taught by Raphael Faber). The art of these is not questioned, whereas certain British authors are subjected to scrutiny under points six and eight above, that is, the changing fashions in

literature and the multiple viewpoint. The latter can be multiple or dual, it can include two opposing views, as the different characters take up positions, or even the same character holds an ambivalent attitude towards a particular writer, like Byatt herself towards Lawrence, approving certain aspects and disapproving of others:

Milton ("He had been cast as the villain in this century, but before that, he was the Master." *Still Life* pp. 284-5 & 287)

Donne (*SL* pp. 284-5)

Jane Austen (*SL* pp. 123 & 215)

Coleridge (*Possession* p. 176)

Hardy (*SL* p. 354)

George Eliot (*SL* p. 215)

D. H. Lawrence (*SL* pp. 59-60 & 215)

T. S. Eliot (*SL* p. 265)

Evelyn Waugh (*SL* pp. 123 & 183)

Tolkien (*SL* p. 295)

Kingsley Amis (*Virgin* p. 242 & *SL* pp. 183 & 281-2 etc.)

Shakespeare (the great bard himself does not escape criticism of *The Winter's Tale* in *SL* at p. 356)

This questioning makes Frederica and the reader meditate upon literature, literature and art, literature and morality, the creators and consumers of literature and such issues. Certain particular artefacts --literary texts or paintings-- flash through Frederica's mind, prompting her to make cultural

connections. To herself, she is real, but to the reader, she is a fictional character connecting up samples of real materials like texts and paintings along with both pre-existing and new fictional ones. To use a Byatt metaphor which we will examine later, like Chaucer in the General Prologue to *The Canterbury Tales*, she weaves a tapestry with them, or mounts a collage of related motifs. For example, in the fictional world of *Still Life* we see into the fictional world of *Brideshead Revisited*, (a book which is a real artefact both for Frederica and for us the reader) where Van Gogh and his sunflowers (a real man and real paintings) had been significant for the fictional Charles Ryder:

> In Cambridge Frederica was reading in *Brideshead Revisited* how Charles Ryder shamefacedly took down his sunflowers and turned them to the wall. (p. 160)

In the South of France, before going up to Cambridge, her experiences and meditations bring together history, art, performance, sport and literature: the history of Nîmes, Picasso past and present (through specific artefacts such as bullfighting pictures, trashy dove ashtrays etc.), Vincent Van Gogh, *Mireille*, the bullfight and the English football crowd, also Hemingway and his bullfighting and his suicide, coming to a dramatic and possibly comic culmination in the theory discovered by Frederica of Van Gogh's self-mutilation in Arles being an aspect of a form of bull ritual (*Still Life* pp. 56-8).

In point five above, we said Byatt has some of her

characters meet real writers. Frederica is usually, but not always, the privileged character. Back in Cambridge, she meets E. M. Forster, though the transcendence of this meeting is subverted by having the great writer falling asleep, "padding about" or eating cherry cake and scones. However, his very presence makes her (hence the reader) think about her relationship as a reader with writers and the different worlds they create and inhabit:

> Frederica puzzled over the relation between the Marabar Caves, her dark brain's image of moving flame, curling worms, nothing and exact language and a man's life in Cambridge with its restrictions, its scones and irresistible afternoon sleep [...] She thought of Lawrence rootlessly quarrelling with women in New Mexico. (*Still Life* p. 122)

Frederica's meeting Forster and Kingsley Amis, and in *Babel Tower*, in the 1960s, Anthony Burgess, makes us wonder if in the final novel of the tetralogy she will meet A. S. Byatt. The fictional character meeting real authors is repeated in *Possession*, where Ash and Christabel first meet at one of Crabb Robinson's breakfasts. (5) Also in the short fiction, as we shall see later, real writers mingle with fictional ones, notably Tennyson and Browning, and in a cameo appearance, Genette and Todorov.

Similarly, when Frederica performs in Milton's *Comus* at Cambridge in *Still Life*, or watches *Macbeth* in Avignon, it makes Alexander Wedderburn's play *Astraea* in which she takes part in *Virgin* appear to be a real play. We know a lot about it and its

conceptualisation, but it is not an authentic, existing text like Frances Yates's *Astraeia*. Only in the third volume, *Babel Tower*, and of course in *Possession*, does Byatt actually create bits of non-real texts for her fictional authors. She creates pastiche and parody as some of these texts are supposed to be examples of good writing, some of mediocre and some of positively bad writing.

Perhaps *Babel Tower* is the novel where most writers are discussed, and that is because Frederica has now started to earn her living by teaching English literature. She reminds her extra-mural students (and hence us, the reader) of the ficionality of fictional characters, they are "actually made of words [...] capering word-puppets, not flesh and blood." (p. 329) Because Frederica is by now in the 1960s, the discussion can include Byatt's favourite contemporary authors. We are told that for her lecture on the novel:

> She takes her texts from Iris Murdoch and Doris Lessing, both of whom express a sharp dissatisfaction with fragmentary modern forms, and consequent moral simplicities and simplifications. (p. 223)

The list of English authors mentioned, alluded to or discussed is now considerably longer (6):

Wordsworth

Keats

Shakespeare

Dylan Thomas

E. M. Forster's *Howards End*

Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience*

Donne

D. H. Lawrence's *Women in Love, The Rainbow, Lady Chatterley's Lover*

Dickens's *Dombey and Son*

George Eliot

Tennyson

Auden

T. S. Eliot

Golding's *Lord of the Flies*

Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*

Charlotte Brontë

Lawrence Durrell

Milton

Swinburne

Kingsley Amis

Murdoch

Lessing

Spark

Storey

Snow

William Burroughs

Leavis is also mentioned, it being pointed out that he refused to appear in court for the defence of *Lady Chatterley*. Because *Babel Tower* has extended its age range further down the

age scale to take in children, we also have references to children's writers:

Beatrix Potter

Tolkien's *The Hobbit*

Thomas the Tank Engine (7)

Roald Dahl (8)

Cinderella

Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*

Ballantine's *Coral Island*

Real authors and their works mix in with Byatt's fictional ones, giving credibility to the latter and setting up comparisons. At the beginning of *Virgin*, in the Prologue which, as we said before, takes place sixteen years after the events of the main narrative, Frederica says to Alexander Wedderburn:

> 'Did you know you are now an established O level set text?' (p. 12)

3.6 Creativity

Alexander Wedderburn is one of the Byatt characters who create fictional works in the course of the novel they are in and become famous. In chronological order, the major writer figures are Henry Severell, whose reputation is already held in high regard at the beginning of *Shadow*; Julia, who becomes a best-selling novelist in the course of *The Game*; in the tetralogy, the writer figures are principally Alexander, the playwright, and several secondary characters like Jude Mason, author of

Babbletower and Phyllis Pratt, author of *Daily Bread*; in *Possession*, Ash and Christabel are well-known poets at the outset. Thus we have the "novel within the novel", the "play within the novel" and lots of pastiche Victorian poetry. Through these characters, particularly Alexander, Byatt indicates to the reader certain ideas on how a writer can approach his work and carry it out. The characters frequently resort to metaphor to try to describe the creative process; these cases will be discussed in the next chapter. Suffice it here to indicate how certain concepts and motifs recur.

Firstly, the problems of composition common to all writers are constantly confronted:

- the problem of language itself as a medium for expressing ideas

- the problem of our not understanding well how things like metaphor or rhythm function

- the problem of one's writing being mediocre

- the problem of writer control, that the text may produce a different impression in reader/audience than the author expected or intended

- the special problems of the woman writer.

Secondly, many other characters in the novels are also struggling creative writers or critics. In the more or less frustrated attempts of Anna Severell and even Oliver Canning, of Cassandra, Frederica and Stephanie, Agatha Mond trying her hand at children's stories, then Sabine de Kercoz, Christabel's cousin in *Possession*, and the twentieth-century characters Roland and Maud, and even Mortimer Cropper, Blackadder and Beatrice Nest, we have examples of a wide spectrum of writers and potential writers covering all the genres imaginable. Byatt gives us pastiche, sometimes parody, of all of the following types of discourse:

- academic articles
- journals and diaries
- letters
- biography
- the folktale
- the Victorian children's story
- the contemporary children's story
- journalese
- scientific writing

In Byatt's interest in reproduction of different discourse types, we may detect her admiration for Proust as one of the motivating forces. Finally, in all the novels, some characters claim to feel the sensation that while they are busily creating fictional worlds and creating new characters, or recreating old or real ones, someone else is busily creating or using *them*. This

is an added dimension of the concept of self-reflexive fiction, containing in itself the process of its own writing.

We will look at all these factors in turn. First, the problem of language: "Language is against us" says the narrator of *Still Life* (p. 236). Through Wijnnobel, the narrator meditates on the problem:

> Symbolisation. The forms of thought. As a grammarian, Wijnnobel said, warming to his subject, he was himself a student of one of man's most powerful systems of symbols. There was research being done into the relations of natural languages and man-made languages, on the one hand, and on the other, into the forms of brain activity and perceptual development. [...] Wijnnobel himself would instance our apparent incapacity to discover a scientific theory to account for normal use of language or acquisition of linguistic forms. (*SL* pp. 275-6)

Immediately before the statement "Language is against us", Byatt's narrator had written "I have just used 'choose' in order not to write 'select'" and continues "We now go beyond and beyond, novelists and moralists both. But where do we stop thinking, about chance and choice, force and freedom?" So choice, as far as one thinks one has it, is the first problem --which word or expression to choose in order to try to convey an idea, and which to reject. In *Babel Tower*, as Frederica is composing her account of her husband's maltreatment of her, she rejects the word "struck" in favour of "hit", on the grounds that it is more neutral, though the reader notices that the lawyer later uses the more emotive "struck". For the discourse of the trial she is told

to write something "bare, unemotive, scrupulously neutral" (p. 306). The language she chooses may be appropriate in the context, but she knows that it does not represent the truth:

> The document is nauseating because it is the skeleton of a document that could truly plead, that could make its reader weep for pity and laugh grimly at human folly.
> The document is nauseating because it is a lie. It recounts true facts, for a valid purpose --to get Frederica out of a marriage that has become a trap --but it recounts these things one-sidedly, in innapropriate (inappropriate? lying? inadequate?) language. (p. 307)

Byatt, of course, has given us the account that Frederica would rather have written, the one that makes you weep or laugh through language. Another problem is that of a true lack of the right word. Byatt's narrator meditates through Alexander:

> There was a problem of accurate notation, which was partly a problem of sufficiency of adjectives. Do we have enough words, synonyms, near synonyms for purple? muses Alexander as he needs to describe a plum. (*Still Life* p. 164)

Again, Alexander is used by the narrator to discuss the ontological problems of language:

> It is not at all impossible, it is even common, not to think about the distance between words and things, between words and life, between words and reality [...] Language runs up and down, through and round things known and things imitated [...] (p. 165) (9)

Having chosen the word, the writer is then condemned by his choice, and the choice itself limits as much as the word does. Byatt voices here the problem of the pre-existence of language:

> But words, acquired slowly over a lifetime, are part of a different set of perceptions of the world, they have grown with us, they restrict what we see and how we see it. I am trying to account for the paradox of the *sameness* of so many accounts, in language, of the strange, the exotic, the new. Frederica will do as an example to illustrate the difficulties of writing about strangeness. (*Still Life* p. 59)

Indeed, Frederica in the sequel says that if she writes "what she feels truly" then it turns out to be "false because it is *banal*, a cliché" (*Babel Tower* p. 463). Words, however satisfied the writer may be about their choice, close off ideas, as Byatt says metaphorically through Alexander:

> The bringing to life of a theatrical idea is also always the small death of a larger idea, Alexander had already discovered. (*SL* p.309)

Byatt's writer figures, like herself, come to the conclusion that metaphor and myth, with their potential for opening up the subject to new meanings, are the only solution to such limitations. Alexander pursues metaphors until he is sick and tired of metaphor, and the bewildered Cassandra also gets carried away: "I keep chasing metaphors. Out of a desire for an impossible unity." (*The Game* p. 228) Unity of sense, whatever exactly is meant by that ideal, and more meaning are achieved

through use of symbol. In the television discussion in *The Game*, the participants show how certain subjects, like the snake, are redolent of possibility: "It's more than the sum of the meanings [...] since it has had these mythical meanings through the ages." (p. 161) In *Babel Tower*, Frederica recommends Phyllis Pratt's book *Daily Bread* because of what Pratt has managed to make language do:

> The book turns on the image of bread [...] communion wafer [...] as though the yeast cells were the true God [...] The metaphor threads its way through the text, bobbing up in cucumber sandwiches, brioches at the bishop's palace, mould and penicillin.
>
> I think you should read this book and consider it carefully. It made me laugh and it made my hair stand on end. Also, it made me feel that the English language can *say* things, deep, funny, difficult things -- [...] (pp. 154-5)

Though we do not have an example from this fictitious novel, as we do from *Babbletower*, we recognise from the description that it is a "Byatt book".

Another path to a distant solution, as we have seen before, is through lists. Frederica had found herself mentally listing words, and then drew them up into her list of "Hurrahs" and "Boos" for 1956 (which we shall look at in a later chapter):

> I feel [...] as though I'm writing lists like Eliot's *Notes Towards a Definition of Culture*, beetroots and greyhounds, Elgar and sliced cabbage. What is it about lists that is so compulsive? (*Still Life* p. 284)

An outgrowth of this is her incipient novel in *Babel Tower, Laminations*. "Words are ghosts", says her sister Stephanie, struggling with constructing vocabulary into text (*SL* pp. 306-7). The same words come back over and over again to the writer, calling to him or her until they are exorcised by writing. Concepts and motifs pullulate in a writer's brain, and the musical metaphor "counterpoint" used by Byatt in combination with the discordant "wailed" well portrays the thick intertextuality into which she sometimes places her thinking characters:

> A writer is a man haunted by voices. Alexander [...] was amused sometimes by the counterpoint that wailed in his mind: Cabestan's heart, Vincent's ear, gassed soldiers' throats, Brooke's poppies, the troubadour's lady like rose and gillyflower, Vincent's irises, jealousy rage and fear, fear jealousy and rage, fear and indignation and pity. (*Still Life* p. 70)

In *Possession*, Roland pursues his research, writing neat cross-references, which later grow into lists of connected motifs. As he rereads Ash's poetry, he seems to hear voices, Ash's voice and Vico's, telling him how poetry works:

> Roland read, or reread, *The Golden Apples*, as though the words were living creatures or stones of fire. He saw the tree, the fruit, the fountain, the woman, the grass, the serpent, single and multifarious in form. He heard Ash's voice, certainly his voice, his own unmistakable voice, and he heard the language moving around, weaving its own patterns, beyond the reach of any single human, writer or reader. He heard Vico saying that the first men were poets and the first words

> were names that were also things, and he heard his own strange, necessary meaningless *lists*, made in Lincoln, and saw what they were. He saw too that Christabel was the Muse and Proserpina and that she was not, and this seemed to be so interesting and *apt*, once he had understood it, that he laughed aloud. Ash had started him on this quest and he had found the clue he had started with, and all was cast off, the letter, the letters, Vico, the apples, his list. [...] What Ash said --not to him specifically, there was no privileged communication, though it was he who happened to be there, at that time, to understand it-- was that the lists were the important thing, the words that named things, the language of poetry.
>
> He had been taught that language was essentially inadequate, that it could never speak what was there, that it only spoke itself.
>
> He thought about the death mask. He could and could not say that the mask and the man were dead. What had happened to him was that the ways in which it *could* be said had become more interesting than the idea that it could not. (pp. 472-3)

This important passage demonstrates the inherently positive and negative views of the success of communication through words, the positive and negative approaches to the significance of a given factor, and the encouraging plurality of possibilities for expression at any time. Lists were necessary in order to try to encompass all the possibilities. Roland's epic faith and patience are rewarded with this illuminating insight, but if he is to become a poet, he is only just starting out on the thorny path Alexander and Frederica, and Byatt herself before them, have trodden. Within the space of two pages in *Still Life*, Frederica decided to become a writer and changed her mind, she "decided

briskly and miserably that writing was not her métier" (pp. 58 & 60). However, given the Potter tenacity, we are not surprised to see her trying again in *Babel Tower*. She feels that she has inherited from her parents certain talents which enable her to appreciate literature, and which have been cultivated under her father's care (as with Christabel in *Possession*). But her innate strengths and weaknesses are still not clear, and certain capacities, such as the ability to appreciate poetic rhythm, have a large question-mark hovering over them:

> The life of English literature lived in her like genes for red hair and irritable movements of the hands and mouth. From Bill she had learnt to learn poetry, to shape an argument, to recognise forms of thought. Where is the borderline between nature and culture? [...] Was it possible to inherit an ear for language as one might inherit perfect pitch or mathematical intuition? And did this bear any relation to inheriting Shakespeare's vocabulary and rhythms, Lawrence's pugnacity, Milton's artifice and self-assurance? (*SL* p. 265, see also p. 204)

To move on to more banal problems of creativity, Frederica is fighting a losing "battle" (*SL* p. 210) in her social life to have herself considered an intelligent woman and not just a sexual object, and she is not backed up by the other women at Cambridge in this: "Surely, surely, it was possible, she said to herself in a kind of panic, to make something of one's life *and* be a woman. Surely." (p. 184) She ends up in a marriage where precisely this is denied her. In *Possession*, Blanche Glover committed suicide over this very issue. In the late nineteenth

century it was virtually impossible for a woman to assert her intelligence and independence without money. It was still difficult for the Frederica of the 1950s. Things began to change under her own hard-earned initiative in the 1960s. The forty-five year-old Frederica we glimpse in the 1980 Prologue to *Still Life* does not appear to have these problems any longer. She appears to have reached her goal to become a writer, and we expect to see how this came about in the final volume of the tetralogy, when it comes out. The liberated woman of the last three decades or so has problems of a different order, not of acceptance, because what she has to say now, however domestic, has a readership --the reading woman, and man.

Julia of *The Game* is the novelist of "domestic claustrophobia", she is one of the growing number of "women writers who explore in loving detail the lives of those trapped in comfort by washing-machines and small children" (p. 47). Her problem, like Stephanie's, is one of time; Stephanie decides: "She must be cunning. She must learn to *think* on bus queues, in buses, in lavatories, between table and sink. It was hard." (*Still Life* p. 152) That it can be done is testified to by Byatt's own large, varied and deeply thoughtful corpus. She makes the problem appear comic with the juxtaposition of the sublime and the ridiculous in Julia's list of commitments: "They juggled with charity, writing, pot-training, telephone calls, teeth, tight schedules, occasional conversation." (*The Game* p. 61) But Stephanie, because her children are younger, does not have the time or opportunity to do sufficient sustained thinking to come

up with anything highly original or deep. She is disappointed that a thought that had occurred to her as a "vision of truth" was nothing but a "banal, easy insight" (*SL* p. 155).

Here, and in other Byatt novels, there are women with fewer commitments and more spare time: Julia's sister Cassandra and Christabel's cousin Sabine. Both use their journals as a testing-ground for practising their writing. Cassandra also depends upon her journal as a psychological necessity for holding her personality together and forging an identity through thought and communication in writing:

> It seemed, lately, that the journal was becoming an increasingly necessary means of distinguishing between what was real and what was imagined [...]
> And once the journal had been only raw material for some large imaginative work --something finished and formed, which would, like a magnet, polarize all these unrelated scraps so that they lay in concentric circles or stood and pointed all one way like fur. It was still a guarantee of possible significant communication: it existed and was fluent. (*The Game* p. 24)

The "raw material" idea is one of the motives for Antonia Byatt's own keeping of a notebook we mentioned earlier. Another, that of disciplining oneself to write daily, even on apparently insignificant topics, so that through all this practice one grows in skill and power over the medium is the core of the advice given by the poetess Christabel to her cousin Sabine, who accordingly starts her diary during Christabel's visit in 1859 (*Possession* pp. 335-6). From the point of view of the narrative,

these journals, like that of Blanche Glover, serve the purpose of telling the reader things he or she would not otherwise know except through the voice of the omniscient narrator. Since Byatt likes to keep this for philosophising about language and art, the journal is used to tell us about Cassandra's inner turmoil, about the domestic life of Christabel and Blanche and its disruption through Ash's letters and visits, and to fill out a little more the pale figure of Blanche with her pride and jealousy (p. 43). Through Sabine's following in the journalistic tradition of Georges Sand, not only do we learn of Christabel's secret movements and activities in France, but we have pastiche of Breton folk tales and meditation upon the craft of writing.

Earlier in the romance, Byatt had included a pastiche of a Crabb Robinson diary to "confirm" the circumstances of the meeting of Ash and Christabel (p. 24). The poet and poetess feel they are being manipulated, as Ash explains in a letter to his love:

> And the *plot* which holds us, the conventions which bind us, declare that I must, as a *gentleman*, acquiesce in that requirement, at least for a time, and hope that Fate, or the plotter who watches over our steps will decree some further meeting, some accidental re-opening [...] (p. 193)

Roland and Maud, on the trip to Yorkshire retracing the steps of Ash and Christabel, go to the Boggle Hole to "take a day off from *them*, get out of their story" (p. 268), and the reader (not them) finds out later (p. 286) through the tricks of

narrative time sequencing, that Ash and Christabel had been to the Boggle Hole before them. They cannot escape being manipulated by the "plotter", the "author" of the romance, just as Frederica and Alexander had brought up the hypothesis that they were only characters in a novel (*Virgin* p. 349).

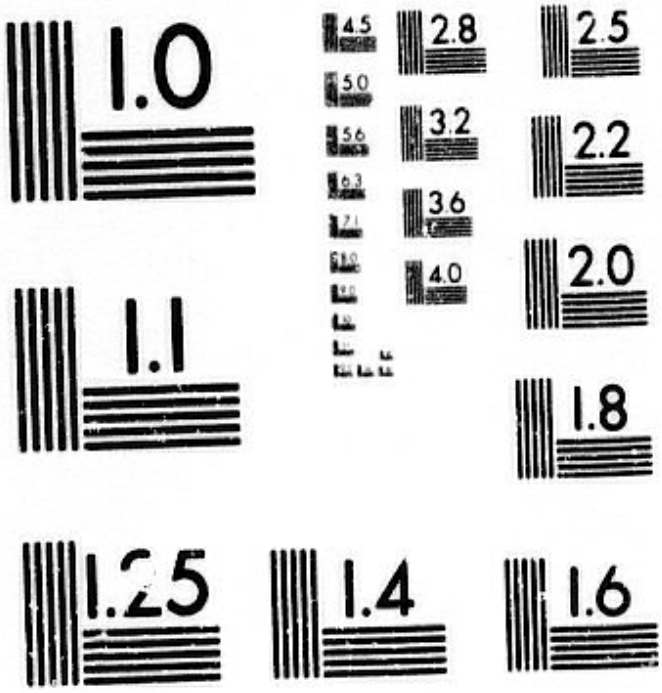
But there are different levels of exploitation here --the feeling is that these characters do not really believe they are not real but merely fictional characters-- their suggestion is a pseudo-hypothesis. Byatt creates a narrator who creates a framework with an invented character (Roland) who is doing research on some real but mostly one invented poet (Ash), who did work on some real and some invented topics. All the characters are self-conscious. One of the most striking passages of intertextuality, of levels or layers of distancing between subject and object of study or creation is this one where Maud is reading Cropper on Ash:

> 'And what might a stringent modern psychoanalytic criticism make of all this feverish activity? [...]
>
> It is my belief that at this point in time Randolph had reached what we crudely call a "mid-life crisis", as had his century. [...]'
>
> Maud decided she intuited something terrible about Cropper's imagination from all this. He had a peculiarly vicious version of reverse hagiography; the desire to cut his subject down to size. She indulged herself in a pleasant thought about the general ambiguity of the word 'subject' in this connection. Was Ash subject to Cropper's research methods and laws of thought? Whose subjectivity was being studied? Who was the subject of the sentence of the text, and how did Cropper and Ash fit into

> Lacan's perception that the grammatical subject of a statement differs from the subject, the 'I', who is the object discussed by that statement? Were these thoughts original, Maud wondered, and decided almost inevitably not, all the possible thoughts about literary subjectivity had recently and strenuously been explored.
>
> Elsewhere in his chapter, almost inevitably, Cropper had quoted *Moby Dick*.
>
> 'Still deeper the meaning of that story of Narcissus who because he could not grasp the tormenting, mild image he saw in the fountain, plunged into it and was drowned. But that same image, we ourselves see in all rivers and oceans. It is the image of the ungraspable phantom of life; and this is the key to it all.'
>
> Narcissism, the unstable self, the fractured ego, Maud thought, who am I? 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. There was the question of the awkward body. The skin, the breath, the eyes, the hair, their history, which did seem to exist. (*Possession* pp. 250-1)

Maud is, as she suspects, "a matrix for a susurration of texts and codes", as indeed, we all are. But the creator of a fictional character is the one who chooses and places these texts. The word "inevitably" in Cropper's use of *Moby Dick*, with its reference to Narcissism and fountains, is there because Melville, of all writers, is typically involved in the art of making connections. Byatt feels, however, that Melville is not always in control of his connections (10). She felt Melville had written *Pierre* almost out of control, and *Moby Dick* too, and you could only follow him if you had read everything he had written before. So control of material is a very serious problem for the

writer, and Byatt has her writer characters struggle with this. She herself imposes order, as we have already suggested, by beginning from one or more large, complex metaphors which give a structure to the novel and spread outwards in all directions making connections and giving cohesion and coherence to the work as a whole. Having studied in this chapter the major concerns of Byatt in her long fiction, we will now examine her invention and use of metaphor.



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NOTES TO CHAPTER 3

1. Byatt does not mention Harold Bloom as a specific influence as she does certain other writers we have seen, but she cannot have been unaware of his early writings, which go back to the 1970s, for example: Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence. A Theory of Poetry*, (1973) ; *A Map of Misreading*, (1975) and *Agon: Towards a Theory of Revisionism*, (1982).

2. In, for example, Gabriel Josopovici, *The World and the Book: A Study of Modern Fiction*, (1971).

3. Michael Ragussin, (Ragussin 1986), "Naming as Ordinary Magic", pp. 215-229. He quotes Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, (trans. G. E. Auscombe), (New York: Macmillan, 1973), p. 19e.

4. Introduction to *The Shadow of the Sun*, p. xi.

5. Crabb Robinson had been mentioned in *Still Life*.

6. The writers and their works are listed in the order in which they are mentioned in *Babel Tower*, and we have listed only the ones in English, though Frederica talks about European writers as well, Kafka being especially relevant.

7. *Thomas the Tank Engine*'s author is not mentioned, as he is not so famous as the other writers. The copyright is held by Britt Allcroft (Thomas) Limited 1991, and the stories are based on *The Railway Series* by The Reverend W. Awdry.

8. Roald Dahl is not mentioned by name, but the poems "for *bad* children" by the fictional poet Mickey Impey sound familiar. It is also of anecdotal interest to point out that Byatt creates a poet called Roger Magog for her "Steerforth Committee", which makes us recall that she coincided with the poet Roger McGough on her 1988 Granada visit.

9. The idea of language and the imagination circling around the target will be developed not much later by Byatt in her story "Precipice Encurled" in *Sugar and Other Stories*.

10. Byatt said this on a radio programme "The Artist at Work", which was broadcast in Spain on the BBC World Service on August 20th 1991. The interlocutor asked her if she ever felt she might spin out of control making connections, and she replied in the affirmative, to the effect that she had to try to stop herself, or she could feel very lonely, not carrying the reader with her.

CHAPTER 4 Structure-endowing Metaphors

4.1 Introduction: existential metaphors and cohesion

> Metaphor is one of our most important tools for trying to comprehend partially what cannot be comprehended totally: our feelings, aesthetic experiences, moral practices, and spiritual awareness. (Lakoff & Johnson 1980, p. 193)

So concluded George Lakoff and Mark Johnson in their seminal work *Metaphors We Live By*. Since these are the things that excite the curiosity of A. S. Byatt, it is not surprising that she resorts to metaphor to discuss them. In her "Introduction" to the new edition of *The Shadow of the Sun*, she uses the concept of tapping rubber to illustrate both how rich metaphor can be and also how a writer can embark upon a project without knowing to what potential realisations a metaphor will lead him or her, or how much wealth of meaning can be opened up:

> I did not know, when I chose my title, just how powerful a metaphor, or myth, personal and universal, I was tapping. (*Shadow* p. xii)

Metaphor leads to myth, and although it is sometimes difficult to separate myth from metaphor, we will attempt to do so, and see how Byatt draws upon pagan and Christian mythology to extend the metaphors of her novels. We do not pretend to discuss the nature of metaphor here, or join the continuing saga of the approaches to metaphor, although Byatt is passionately interested in the subject. She has Maud in *Possession* join the

bandwagon of the metaphor conferences of the 1970s, going to a "York conference on metaphor" (p. 138) (1). Special issues of journals have been devoted exclusively to the question of metaphor (2) and pastiche of the kind of writing in these articles is found in *Possession*. Furthermore, Byatt admires the writings of Jonathan Culler (3). In his preface to *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction,* Culler points out the difficulty of writing about metaphor:

> The discourse which attempts to analyze metaphor does not itself escape metaphor. There is a metalinguistic function -- language can discuss language-- but there is no metalanguage, only more language piled upon language. Deconstruction has been particularly acute in showing the uncanny involvement of theories in the domains they claim to describe, in showing how critics become engaged in a displaced reenactment of a text's scenario. (Culler 1981, p. xi)

In our discussion of metaphor in A. S. Byatt's novels, we are going to become involved in a reenactment of their scenarios. This reenactment will be "displaced" as Culler says, as we try to examine the texts from a different viewpoint --that of critical reader-- and try to make explicit all the possible perspectives latent in the texts. In identifying and analysing metaphors, the reenactment should yield a rich potential of different meanings, displaced but not distorted.

Metaphor can be the central structural principle of the entire work, it can govern the shape of the total argument, or it can pertain to the texture of the discourse, in local colour

or details. "Argument" is a concept one should be wary of. Thomas Hardy, trying to define how he viewed the optimum approach to novel writing and reading, wrote: "Let me repeat that a novel is an impression, not an argument." (4) The metaphors in Byatt's novels are both central images and textually incidental, and they help to turn the "argument" into an "impression". As well as using language to create an impression which is complex and often visual, Byatt revels in language for its own sake and for the questions it poses through its use of figures. R. H. Ash, in *Possession*, like Adam, or the new Adam, his contemporary Walt Whitman, takes on the role of naming things and using language as a tool for the first time. In *The Pursuit of Signs*, Culler comes to a curious paradoxical conclusion, as in Vico's *Scienza Nuova*:

> [...] that language originates in metaphor and that figurative language precedes literal language. Though this argument may be coupled with claims about primitive modes of perception --that the first men were poets-- this need not be the case, since the act of grouping distinct particulars under a common heading on the basis of perceived or imagined resemblance, which is the central act in any narrative of the origin of language corresponds to the classical definition of metaphor: substitution on the basis of resemblance. If language originates in figure and is essentially metaphorical, then what we call 'literal meaning' or 'literal language' is nothing but figurative language whose figurality has been forgotten. (Culler 1981, p. 203)

This view, with its reference to Paul de Man's "substitution on the basis of resemblance", contradicts more orthodox

statements like "from a linguistic point of view, the literal meaning is always basic, and the figurative meaning derived" (Leech 1969, p. 151). But it is, in a different way, close to the position of Lakoff and Turner in *More Than Cool Reason*: "metaphor is a matter of thought" (Lakoff & Turner 1989, p. xi). In the writings of Byatt, there is an underlying element of what is contained in the first suggestion by Culler --that the first men were poets, and Byatt is trying to take the reader back to a primitive mode of perception. The second suggestion, that of a "perceived or imagined resemblance" is dear to Byatt's heart--like Melville, she is a writer devoted to connections and resemblances.

Metaphor, therefore, works in her novels on several planes. First, it can give a charge of emotion, in much the same way as it does in poetry. Then, the metaphor as verbal icon can cast a visual image upon the mind's eye that is, of course, conceptual as well as pictorial. The immediate impact of the visual image, like the immediacy of television, (discussed in *Virgin*, the book which also provides us with the most obvious example, the portrait of Queen Elizabeth I) starts up a process whereby the external visual world is concentrated into one elaborated image. This image will then be inclined through several planes, deepening its nuances to reveal further aspects and dimensions, and it will be added to throughout the text, in terms not only of the visual, but also the historical, social, literary and even formal.

In some ways, the metaphor can be more precise than the literal, it can express the ineffable, as suggested in the Lakoff quotation, or in its ellipsis, be immensely economical of words. Through the metaphor's resemblances, more connections can be suggested, thus Byatt allows her readers to bring whole cultural worlds to her novels, making the experience of reading a book like *Still Life*, to a reader carrying the cultural baggage of nineteenth- and twentieth-century French painting, thought and literature, a much fuller and richer one. The connections serve to open up a world to the reader with his knowledge, experience and imagination, but they also serve to control the material artistically. The central image of a Byatt novel, worked out on a large scale, then echoed right down to the tiniest detail, gives cohesion and structure to the text. In a work like *Possession*, it also gives an almost mind-boggling complexity.

Various approaches to the functioning of metaphor have been suggested in recent years that may aid us in determining how to tackle Byatt's metaphors. Some examples are those of Umberto Eco (Eco 1981), positing a network of conventional associations to account for the production of a metaphor; or the work of Ullman and De Man on Proust's metaphors (5), examining contiguity and finding a metonymic connection in many of them; David Lodge's exploration of the distinction between metaphorical and metonymic modes of writing; or the philosopher Donald Davidson's theory (Davidson 1978), which claims that what we call metaphor is no more than a false assertion of identity, and the question of what is communicated by metaphors is a question about *parole*, about

language use, about persuasion. Although it is obvious that metaphor for Byatt is structure-endowing, and we shall be studying it as such, basically, taking each metaphor individually, it is not only a question of structure, but of effect and impression, so our study of her metaphors will also entail a study of our responses to them in each individual case and then collectively. Culler tries to pin down responses to metaphors in terms of the conventions in which they are set, and these conventions are structured or organised rather than random:

> Since we do not believe that responses to metaphors are purely random or idiosyncratic phenomena, we will attempt to account for responses by positing norms, conventions, codes, structures. Considerable emphasis will fall on cultural codes and clichés [...] (Culler 1981, p. 209)

George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, in their *Metaphors We Live By*, studied the linguistic and cultural codes we use to convey the concepts through which we try to understand and visualise our lives. They demonstrate how deeply rooted our conceptualising is in our spacial experience through contact with the environment. This has given us metaphorical ways of expressing concepts in terms of substances, containers, positions and movements, for example:

TIME IS MONEY

IDEAS ARE FOOD

HAPPY IS UP

LIFE IS A CONTAINER

LIFE IS A JOURNEY

LOVE IS A JOURNEY.

They show how productive the CONDUIT metaphor is: ideas or meanings are objects, linguistic expressions are containers, or communication is sending. In Chapter Twelve, "How is our Conceptual System Grounded?", they demonstrate that we typically conceptualise the non-physical in terms of the physical, and make it more delineated and manageable.

Lakoff and Johnson also show how metaphorical concepts are systematic and structured, quite often whole paradigms can be listed for a code. But in their previous chapter, Chapter Eleven, they demonstrate how metaphor highlights and hides, so the nature of metaphorical structuring is essentially partial. There are used and unused parts of a paradigm and the latter can be productive in the creation of new metaphors. It is new metaphor and loss of old that contributes to cultural change. Their conclusion is that:

> The metaphors we live by, whether cultural or personal, are partially preserved in ritual [...] Cultural metaphors, and the values entailed by them, are propagated by ritual. Ritual forms an indispensable part of the experiential basis for our cultural metaphorical systems. There can be no culture without ritual.
> (Lakoff & Johnson 1980, p. 234)

One could say that A. S. Byatt is a chronicler of ritual, and the next chapter will be dedicated to showing how she

examines life in the second half of the twentieth century by focusing upon its rituals. This present chapter will attempt to analyse Byatt's metaphors in the light of Lakoff's findings, showing how her basic metaphors are not original in concept, but are ones that already exist in British culture, and that her originality lies in the elaboration of them, exploiting the underlying systems available to her.

As we undertake this detailed study of each novel in chronological order, we shall see how, as we suggested at the outset, the title of each book contains or points to the central image around which the whole work revolves. Firstly, it may be a gross oversimplification, but it is a revealing view, to suggest that in all her novels to date, the target domain --to use Lakoff and Turner's term for the tenor or concept to be elucidated-- is always the same. The target domain of an A. S. Byatt novel is always Life and Creativity, and it is the source domains or vehicles that vary from novel to novel.

4.2 Structure-endowing metaphors in Byatt's early fiction and the tetralogy

In Byatt's first novel, a creative writer, Henry Severell, is conceived of as a sun. What we know of a sun is "mapped onto" this man. In his creative energy, he is the centre of attention and he emits light, so any other body will cast a shadow as a result of that light. Creative writing, therefore, is equated to

light, and Henry Severell's famous works will always overshadow anything his daughter Anna may produce. Light thus also represents male creativity and dark represents female creativity. If creativity is the target domain and the sun the source domain, the grounding of the metaphor is energy and importance. The sun/shadow dichotomy, with its concomitant light/dark, sun/moon, even life/death associations, shows how productive the binary opposition approach is for metaphor. Culler also maintains the binary opposition is "a powerful mythological operator with great semantic potential" (Culler 1981, p. 52).

Lakoff establishes the metaphors

UNDERSTANDING IS SEEING

IDEAS ARE LIGHT-SOURCES

DISCOURSE IS A LIGHT-MEDIUM

which we detect as being at the base of Byatt's idea. Lakoff reminds us of the "fixed form expressions": "I see", "it looks", "brilliant", "clear", etc. (Lakoff 1980, pp. 48 & 156). Lakoff and Turner, after their discussion of image-metaphors and image-schemas, move on to define their conception of image as icon, and they say the functioning of iconicity in writing as well as art is:

> a metaphorical image-mapping in which the structure of the meaning is understood in terms of the structure of the form of the language presenting that meaning.
> (Lakoff 1980, p. 51)

Thanks to the existence of image-schemas which structure abstract domains both physically and spatially, giving them relationships of wholes with their parts, symmetry, balance, proximity, subordination, sequence, etc., image-metaphors are mapped onto them, evoking these paradigms. Iconicity provides an extra layer of metaphorical structure in a work, for the iconic layer is the mapping from the structure of the language to the structure of the image presented and to the overall meaning of the work. From what we have seen of the complexity of Byatt's images, it is evident that in them there is a basic iconicity that unites source domain, target domain and the form of the language used.

Our intuition about the degree of organic unity of a novel comes from our unconscious recognition of correspondences and coherences of this type between the formal and conceptual aspects. If we look a little deeper, we see evidence of iconicity in *The Shadow of the Sun*. The physical pattern of the heavens is roughly mapped onto the family and professional life of Henry Severell. He is a physically large man, and like the sun, is self-sufficient and immobile at the centre of his family. LIFE IS FIRE, IMPORTANT IS CENTRAL and IMPORTANT IS BIG are relevant metaphors. His study is the centre of the house (p. 5), and his wife Caroline protects the sanctity of this place where he must be left, alone and immobile, to write. His random forays out into the sunlight or moonlight, quite often into cornfields, and his sporadic bursts of energy, activity and creativeness are like the flares of sunspots. He leaves his central position but once, to

go in search of Oliver Canning and his daughter Anna. Oliver, the literally down-to-earth character, is subordinate rather like the planet Earth, with his wife Margaret, as the "dead" moon --dead in terms of lack of autonomous life or energy or creativity-- in tow. In his professional life, Oliver has revolved around Henry, held in orbit by Henry's magnetic field, and drawing from him his living and his sustenance, his *raison d'être*, and like the Earth tracing its elliptical path, has on occasions passed close to him. Or, possibly, Anna is the Earth, Oliver the moon, and Margaret nothing. Anna, neglected by her father, and making undisciplined efforts to write what she feels through her gift of visual intensity inherited from him, is always in the shadow of the great man. As Byatt says in her "Introduction," the whole point is that the sun has no shadow, and "You have to be the sun or nothing" (p. xiv).

There is an interplay of three overlapping images here: first there is the contradiction-in-terms or nothingness of the image from the Ralegh poem "False Love" at the head of the novel:

A substance like the shadow of the sun

which introduces the binary opposition sun/darkness or all/nothing in terms of art, so if Anna is not as good as her father, she might as well not bother. Secondly, the image of the sun casting a shadow through the intervention of another body, whether that body is oneself, as in Queen Elizabeth I's poem "My Care is like my Shadow in the Sunne" ("Introduction" p. xv), and

therefore, one never escapes it, or another body, in which case, one will always be on the dark side or in shade. This draws its power from the basic metaphors

BAD IS BLACK
DEATH IS DARKNESS
DISPASSIONATE IS COLD.

Thirdly, there is the image of eclipse, where the light from the sun is blocked out, so the sun itself appears to be in shadow. Another related image is that of the shadow of the Earth falling on the moon. This is contained in the Samuel Palmer painting "Cornfield by Moonlight, with the Evening Star", which Byatt acknowledges ("Introduction" p. xv) always figured in her vision and was used on the front cover of the 1991 edition. This is the central icon of the novel, and as with all her novels, she had the publisher put it on the cover to guide the reader in his presuppositions. "Cornfield" brings us to the mythical layer of *Shadow*, which we shall discuss in a subsequent section.

The Game

Lakoff's LIFE IS A GAMBLING GAME metaphor is the one exploited by Byatt in her second novel *The Game*. "Phrasal lexical items" such as "take one's chances", "a loser", "odds against", show how accepted in everyday life this metaphor has become (Lakoff 1980, p. 156). The particular game chosen by Byatt for the novel is at once an original one invented by her character Cassandra, with the help of her sister Julia, and at the same time, it is also essentially Snakes and Ladders. This latter game

is also based on an accepted spacial metaphor defined by Lakoff in the pair GOOD IS UP / BAD IS DOWN, with the related ones

STAYING ALIVE IS A CONTEST
VIRTUE IS UP / DEPRAVITY IS DOWN
MORE IS UP / LESS IS DOWN
HAPPY IS UP / SAD IS DOWN
HEALTH AND LIFE ARE UP / SICKNESS AND DEATH ARE DOWN (6).

So the sad and mentally sick Cassandra metaphorically slides down a snake, related to Simon Moffitt's snakes, to her death. Her literary creativity, confined to her journals and notes, does not "rise" to form and shape, whereas Julia's best-selling novels ("best" related to GOOD IS UP) take her "up the ladder" to fame. Cassandra is a "loser" and Julia a "winner" in the eyes of the world, or some parts of it. The image of the game being played by the principal characters, Cassandra, Julia, Simon and Thor, with the secondary characters also taking part, is the image-metaphor mapped onto the target domain of Life and Creativity in all its aspects. Again, the front cover is used to depict this game and the picture functions as an icon. Not only is the game and its trappings sacred, with symbolic objects of reverence, but also, the form and development of the narrative present the vicissitudes of the characters in life as they have "goes" at living and succeeding. Julia climbs ladders with her books and television appearances, but occasionally slides down a snake, as in the failure of her marriage, poor relationship with her daughter, and her general entrapment by Cassandra. The

intermittent success suggests the chance of the dice. Simon gets into difficulties with his snakes, as for example, when his cameraman is eaten by piranhas, a sort of mythic horror made real, with overtones of punishment for rashness and overstepping one's limit. Cassandra is isolated early on in the game, which also combines with the LIFE IS A JOURNEY metaphor. Though she goes up ladders and becomes a Cambridge don, she has no help to give her a second chance, and she is dogged by the bad luck of the loser at dice. Again, the mythical and typological character of snakes will be viewed later.

If we leave this analysis here, it will appear rather simplistic, and reduce the rich texture to cardboard thickness. For Byatt complicates her metaphors by mixing them with others. In addition to these life, experiential or spacial metaphors, there are always literary metaphors. In *The Game*, the figure of the Lady of Shalott is privileged above all other literary figures. Jane Campbell has analysed in detail Byatt's use of this figure in both the plot and the characterisation of Cassandra:

> In *The Game*, the dominant myth is the story of the Lady of Shalott, but it does not function alone, and it does not become a straightforward parallel to the action. Like the Lady, Cassandra has woven a web of reflected images that has become her world. In a note in her journal that is at once a self-revealing description of her own activities and a gentle parody by Byatt of academic language, Cassandra says that Tennyson's poem, with its images of 'the mirror, the knight with the sun on him, reflected in the mirror and woven into the web,' is 'a great deal more intelligent than we give it credit for. Tennyson has here both indulged, and provided a commentary

> on, his mediaevalist romanticism cf. the *Palace of Art*. Solitude concerned with reflections' (171). This entry follows Cassandra's realization that through her sympathy with Simon's presentation of his snake she has reached a point where 'the Church seems to me (to its discredit) to diminish him and his serpents' --a point that recalls the crisis of the Lady's story. 'The threads of story I had believed securely fastened to seem suddenly loose, floating wild and unattached' (170). Later, watching her Sir Lancelot, the sleeping Simon, and recognizing that 'nothing will be the same' now, she again remembers Tennyson's poem. 'When the Lady looked out of the tower --seeing, simply, a lump of flesh and blood and a patch of sunshine-- the mirror cracked and the web flew out' (244). [...] Like the Lady, Cassandra has seen the real world, left her weaving and her mirror, and died. Byatt gives the story a revealing twist, however. What killed Tennyson's Lady was entering so belatedly into the real world, leaving behind her shadow-world or art; what kills Cassandra, who has safely completed that task, is her sister's world of art. The problem of perception is basic to both Tennyson's work and Byatt's. As Simon tries to show Cassandra, she is trapped by Julia's book only if she lets herself be --only if she creates her own version of its power, weaving it into her web. [...] If the myth of the Lady charts the course of Cassandra's entrapment by Julia, it also represents Julia's imprisonment by Cassandra. [...] By using the myth in this twofold way, Byatt has made it suggest, in a more complex usage than Tennyson's short poem could do, the limiting patterns formed by the imagination.
>
> Byatt also extends the myth's main symbols, web and mirror, and in doing so demonstrates the incompleteness of all structures. (7)

Jane Campbell has taken for the title of her article a quotation from Dr. Johnson used by Julia. Julia, in her turn, had taken a phrase of Cassandra's for the title of her novel *A Sense of Glory*. Julia says the theme of the novel (whose subject is Cassandra's relationship with Simon), is "what Dr. Johnson called

'the hunger of the imagination that preys incessantly on life'" (Campbell 1988, p. 149). Depredation is part of the Game, and we can see how the metaphor extends into a comment on creativity. Moreover, Patricia Waugh refers to *The Game* in her book on metafiction, comparing it to many of Iris Murdoch's novels, Fowles's *The Collector* (1963) and Martin Amis's *Success* (1978) in that it involves characters who "manipulate others explicitly as though they were playwrights or theatrical directors" (Waugh 1984, p. 117). Jane Campbell quotes Malcolm Bradbury's review of *The Game*, in which he observes that whereas Julia's triumph is the triumph of this world, it is open to question, because, as we pointed out before, both sisters are trapped by the Game. (Campbell 1988, p. 149). Campbell goes on to assert that *The Game* "is also an exploration of the imagination and of the activity of perception, and it reaches the conclusion that reality can never be contained within any of our linguistic forms." She considers Byatt's novel sets out to ponder Iris Murdoch's comment about reality being "more and other than our descriptions of it" (Campbell 1988, p. 150). In her article, Jane Campbell talks of the Lady of Shalott story as a myth, and it is evident that in *The Game* Byatt is also pondering Murdoch's belief that people create myths about themselves and then become dominated by them. In our section on creation myths, we will look again at myth in *The Game*.

The Virgin in the Garden

The opening of *The Virgin in the Garden*, the 1968 Prologue, focuses on a verbal description of a real icon, that is, the Darnley portrait of Queen Elizabeth I in the National Gallery.

In an icon there is an actual resemblance between the signified and the signifier, thus portraits, like this one, are, as Pierce has shown, fundamentally a sign which relates inherently a form to a meaning (Culler 1981, p. 16). The function is metonymic, but as we shall see later, Byatt uses the metonymic example as a metaphor. Whereas metaphor, a way of conceiving one thing in terms of another, has understanding as a primary function, metonymy, by using one entity to stand for another, is mostly referential. Also in the selection of the part for the whole, it enables us to focus on specific aspects of what is being referred to. Lakoff shows how in portraits, the FACE STANDS FOR THE PERSON (not the headless body), though in the case of Elizabeth I, the dressed body and the objects held in the hand or pointed to were also important. Through other metonymic aspects such as CONTROLLER FOR CONTROLLED, or the PLACE FOR THE EVENT (Lakoff 1980, pp. 37-9), reference is made, through Elizabeth's portrait, to the whole of Elizabethan England and its position in the world. In the concept "The Virgin in the Garden", because the garden is England, the place can refer to the events of the time.

Reference to another portrait, that of Elizabeth II and her family at Windsor (*Virgin* p. 11), draws the two times together and enables Byatt to set up comparisons between that "Golden Age" and the present age, and hence to generalise and universalise. Juliet Dusinberre, in her article "Forms of Reality in A. S. Byatt's *The Virgin in the Garden*", shows how the book has a complicated time scale, as not only do we have the main time points of 1968 and the Coronation of 1953, but the looking back

to pre-war attitudes and the referring to a present outside the book's fictional terms, of 1973 or even 1977. Moreover, Dusinberre shows how, in addition, "The shadow of Eliot's *Four Quartets* slants across the surface of a work which will exist in four movements of time" (Dusinberre 1983, p. 56).

Symbolic portraits had been used by Iris Murdoch. As Byatt herself puts it, in *The Bell* (1958), there is a moment of truth where a Gainsborough painting --the portrait of the artist's children-- "is an image of Iris Murdoch's idea of the recognizable authority of the Good". Again, in *An Unofficial Rose* (1962), the Tintoretto portrait of Susannah is "golden, serene, authoritative, a source of power and value, both moral, aesthetic and social" (Byatt 1976, p. 22).

The concepts "virgin" and "garden" may be viewed as "ontological metaphors". Lakoff shows how through entity and substance metaphors (Lakoff 1980, chapter 6), we metaphorically view non-physical things, or experiences or things without boundaries, as things with boundaries, or as entities, in order to refer to them concretely. Thus we refer to virginity as if it were an entity contained by the body, and thence a possession that can be kept or lost. The garden walls are the protective mechanism, and the loss of the discrete entity, virginity, is envisioned as an event. Here it is associated with the basic metaphor LIFE IS A PLAY. The formal and dramatic iconicity lies in the culmination of the narrative, which is the performance in Yorkshire of Alexander Wedderburn's play *Astraea*, with Frederica

as the young Queen Elizabeth I. The "Tower Speech" is said by Alexander to be "the metaphorical centre of the whole play" (p. 102). Elizabeth is imprisoned in the Tower of London, and Alexander the writer is locked in a "glassy cage" (p. 17), struggling to get out, hence creativity is envisaged by Byatt as ideas shut up in a brain and emerging under great strain, taking form and coming out into the world to be autonomous. Hence creation is in a box, the play is framed by the history of the performance, there is therefore a parallel between the concepts and figures Virgin/ Elizabeth I/ Frederica/ Alexander/ creativity. Dusinberre is right is noting that Byatt has involved Alexander, Stephanie and Frederica in "versions of her own quest as writer for a sense of the real and for forms to embody reality." (Dusinberre 1983, p. 57)

The performance takes place within the walls of Crowe's stately home in Yorkshire, and this is surrounded by England, and England by the sea. Another central icon is therefore Crowe's portrait of Elizabeth as England and Cornucopia, as Yorkshire is more or less the centre of England (it is also central to most of Byatt's novels), the wealth of England flowing out as if it were Cornwall. This central icon invites the reader to make comparisons with the second Elizabethan age, for *Four Quartets* provides a "recurrent image of the circularity of time" (Dusinberre 1983, p. 58). At the beginning of her article, Dusinberre refers to Lodge's distinction between the "great tradition" realist novel and the experimental "novel-about-itself" which offers a paradox about the relation of art to life,

as the two choices available to the contemporary novelist. She shows how *The Virgin in the Garden* is both realist and experimental, for it "functions as naturalistic fiction in the George Eliot mode and as the Proustian self-reflecting text". She concludes that "If George Eliot is a model for one plane of reality, Proust and T. S. Eliot provide Byatt with another way of seeing, in which time and art are twin architects of the forms which human beings use to define and thereby create what is real. The battle between images and real impenetrable men and women which Murdoch demanded from the modern novel is the central point of tension and creative energy in *The Virgin in the Garden.*" (Dusinberre 1983, pp. 55-6). The image of Queen Elizabeth I is used by Byatt in several ways. It is both art and time, and through Elizabeth II, sets up a subtle interplay of times and circles of time. In the image of the Queen, Frederica sees an aspect of herself as she struggles to establish and fix an identity for herself. Alexander sees in Queen Elizabeth both Frederica and his play image, so in both these cases, the icon is involved with new creation, that of "real" character and that of art.

Still Life

Still Life is a novel that uses paintings as symbols and even icons, from the Van Gogh on the front cover, *Still Life with Books*, which emphasises that writing and painting are sister arts, to *The Yellow Chair*, which becomes the icon for Alexander's new play, and *The Sunflowers*, which is central to A. S. Byatt's personal and artistic mythology. The iconicity of *The Yellow Chair* in Alexander's play is that perhaps as a result of the

mythical chair being the focal point on stage, the play turns out to be too static, and fails artistically and dramatically on those grounds. Just as Byatt makes Wedderburn ask his audience to contemplate a chair in order to penetrate to the essence of Van Gogh and his art, so she invites her readers to contemplate an example of art --Van Gogh's painting-- and the life of the artist to penetrate to the essence of creativity. The narrative continues the lives of Frederica and Stephanie begun in *Virgin*, but as Byatt points out in the "Introduction" to *The Shadow of the Sun*:

> In *Still Life* the central figure turned out to be Vincent Van Gogh, rather to my surprise, a whole-hearted sun-driven, light-driven maker (but who also had problems about sexuality and work.) (p. xv)

The solar and visionary aspects will be considered later as we discuss Byatt's use of creation myths. But it is painting that unites the narrative and the life of the characters with the concept of creativity, and this is done through the motif of "still life". A still life, according to a dictionary definition, invokes inanimate objects such as dead animals, furniture, drapery, fruit, etc., represented by the painter's art. In French, of course, it is *nature morte*, and this paradox, where life is "still", that is, non-life, prefigures the dramatic culmination of Stephanie's death. Van Gogh's death is also subtly invoked for its violence and its termination of creativity.

If we are to accept that the narrator of the focal story

"Sugar" of *Sugar and Other Stories* is truly based on Byatt herself, the apparently autobiographical material sheds much light on the long-standing significance of Van Gogh for the writer. The narrator tells of:

> [...] certain myths of origin which I had pieced together in childhood, to explain things that were important, my sense of northernness, my fear of art, the promised end. By a series of elaborate coincidences two of these had become inextricably involved in what was happening. The first was the Norse Ragnarök, and the second was Vincent Van Gogh.
> (*Sugar and Other Stories*, p. 232)

The narrator says they had various reproductions of Van Gogh paintings around their sitting-room wall in Sheffield after the war, chosen, not, as she had been led to believe, by her mother, but by her father: "There were the boats on the beaches at Saintes-Maries de la Mer, which I recognised with shock when I went there eight years later" (p. 234). This becomes the setting for a "scene" of *Still Life*. Byatt's narrator of "Sugar" looks back to the moment when she realised the Van Gogh reproductions were not merely an aesthetic part of the furnishings:

> When did I discover differently? Certainly before I myself went to Arles, before Cambridge, in the 1950s, and saw that tortured and aspiring cypresses were exact truths, of their kind. When my father collapsed at Schipol I was writing a novel in which the idea of Van Gogh stalked in and out of a text about puritanical northern domesticity. There was nowhere I would rather have found myself than the Van Gogh museum in Amsterdam. I was reading and rereading his letters.
> (p. 236)

Through the narrator, Byatt uses a metaphor to describe the use of Van Gogh material in what we take to be A. S. Byatt's *Still Life*: the "real" figure of Van Gogh is evoked and given autonomous life "stalking in and out of" the text as if he were resuscitated, proud but stealthy, to reenact his perpetual quest and thus suggest a parallel with writing. Byatt maps the target domain, verbal art, onto the source domain, visual art, for us to contemplate the two together and appreciate their grounding in such common elements as focalising and foregrounding, referentiality, vision and imagination, precision and expressiveness. Indeed, Byatt herself appears to stare out of the back cover of the novel as if contemplating a "still life".

The narrator of "Sugar" had a very positive response to the most famous Van Gogh paintings:

> But the great paintings of Arles and St Rémy shone. The purple irises on gold. The perturbed bedroom. The solitary chair. (p. 240)

In the story, certain apparently stable myths are exploded, but an image is set out --the bare noun phrase of this last sentence, which is the visual focus for Alexander's play and an icon for *Still Life*. This novel, which we can also describe by the "Sugar" phrase, a "text about puritanical northern domesticity", is immobile, static in its northern aspect, while Frederica, the mobile element, goes south in search of the sun, identity and inspiration, in much the same way as Van Gogh had,

and Byatt herself does.

Babel Tower

Although *Babel Tower* is posterior to *Possession*, we will deal with it here as part of the tetralogy. Not surprisingly, the central image-metaphor of *Babel Tower* is the Biblical Tower of Babel. It functions by mapping the myth of the Tower of Babel, man's concerted attempt, in a unified language, to reach God, which, because of its audacity was confounded with the division of tongues, onto the target domain of the use of a recalcitrant language to create art. Byatt then complicates the picture by connecting the tower to other towers and to other images like snails and genes.

Firstly, we must not forget that the image of the tower is not new: Frederica played the young Queen Elizabeth I in the Tower of London. Professor Wijnnobel, when he is not on the Steerforth Committee, is in his tower as Vice-Chancellor of the "University of North Yorkshire". It is through his meditations on the Babel myth, in which the tower is conceived of as *spiralling upwards,* that it is connected to the spirals of ammonites, snails and the neurons of the brain. Wijnnobel, like Chomsky, thinks that an innate knowledge of the deep structure of language is genetically held there to be passed on:

> In the days before Babel, before God punished the human race for its presumption in raising its winding structure towards Heaven by dividing its tongues, by setting confusion amongst its speech --in 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 unpierceable skin of idiosyncracies. [...] He worked on the Fibonacci numbers, which describe, among other things, the spiral of the cochlea in the inner ear and the principle that curls the ramshorn, the ammonites, certain snails [...]
>
> He believes too, that in some distant future the neuroscientists, the geneticists, the students of the matter of the mind, may find out the forms of language in the forest of the dendrites, in the links of the synapses. (pp. 190-3)

Wijnnobel is the character used by Byatt to theorise on the question of language, but it is in the vicissitudes of the life of Frederica that these ideas are actually worked out dramatically in the plot. Firstly, she feels a nostalgia for the pre-Babelic oneness. Margaret Schlegel of *Howards End* provides a leitmotiv with her "Only connect" (p. 18). As Frederica's marriage fails, she feels the pre-Babelic oneness she aspired to has been smashed to smithereens. She gives up on the "Romantic desire for everything to be *One*" (p. 360) and feels her way towards a new art-form, more appropriate to the multifarious 1960s:

> She thinks of Forster and Lawrence, only connect, the mystic Oneness, and her word comes back to her again, more insistently: laminations. Laminations. Keeping things separate. Not linked by metaphor or sex or desire, but separate objects of knowledge, systems of work, or discovery. She has the first vague premonition of an art-form of fragments, juxtaposed, not interwoven, not 'organically' spiralling up like a tree or a shell, but constructed brick by brick, layer by layer, like the Post Office Tower. (p. 359)

Hence Frederica begins her novel by juxtaposing bits of discourse from a variety of sources: the *Instructions* on a Pill packet, a piece by Elizabeth I on blood and stone, an extract from an account of Day 11 of the Moors Trial, part of an *Observer* account (May 8 1966) on Brady and Hindley, "The Story of Stone", her own dramatised adaptation from another text, etc., etc. The paper involved here, the scissors to cut it up, and the stone, are an extension of the imagery begun in *Virgin*, and the children's game "Scissors-paper-stone" is a significant motif (8).

The whole/separate dichotomy evoked by the Tower of Babel myth is extended to contemporary art. A colleague of Frederica's, Desmond Bull, is interested in collage as a modern manifestation of sensibility, after having been impressed by William Burroughs and his cut-ups:

> All writing is in fact cut-ups. A collage of words read overheard. What else? Use of scissors renders the process explicit and subject to extension and variation. (p. 379)

Through the narrator, Byatt gives the reader a long description of the process of fragmentation Frederica is suffering, and her life is seen as paralleling the agonic process of the inheritance and reworking of art:

> Frederica is an intellectual at large in a world where most intellectuals are proclaiming the death of coherence, the illusory nature of orders, which are

> perceived to be man-made, provisional and unstable. Frederica is a woman whose life appears to be flying apart into unrelated fragments [...] a mind coming to grips with the fact that English literature is a structure half connected to and half cut off from a European literature which was transfigured by Nietzche and Freud; a person in a basement with not enough money; a memory containing most of Shakespeare, much of seventeenth-century poetry, much too of Forster, Lawrence, T. S. Eliot and the Romantics, a chancy baggage which once seemed a universal, reasonable necessity; a Petitioner in a Divorce Court; a wanderer in studios; a judge of the works of such as Phyllis Pratt and Richmond Bly. Frederica is a woman who sits at her desk and rearranges unrelated scraps of languages from apparently wholly discrete vocabularies: legal letters, letters about the Initial Teaching Alphabet from Leo's school; Leo's first written words, which are BUS and MAN; the literary texts and the quite other texts that dissect these texts; her reviews, her reader's reports, which do not use the critical vocabulary she has acquired, for this is useless in 300 word segments. She is a being capable of turning her attention from a recipe for an *omelette aux fines herbes* to the *Tractatus*, from Dr. Spock to the Bible to *Justine*. Language rustles around her with many voices, none of them hers, all of them hers.
> (pp. 379-80)

Neither Frederica nor Byatt through the narrator mention Bakhtin, though he was starting to become known in the 1960s. The fragmentation described in this passage is similar to Bakhtin's idea of the centrifugal impulse in some literary genres. Both centripetal and centrifugal forces are to be found in language, according to Bakhtin, as there is the impulse and pressure towards a standardization imposed and maintained by a central authority, and at the same time the urge towards diversity and polyphony. Every language, he claims in his essay "Discourse in the Novel",

> participates in the 'unitary language' (in its centripetal forces and tendencies) and at the same time partakes of social and historical heteroglossia (the centrifugal, stratifying forces.) (Bakhtin 1981, p. 272)

For Bakhtin, certain literary genres have a centripetal force, driving readers towards a centre of conformity and uniformity, whereas others have the opposite effect, urging people away from conformity and towards diversity and heterogeneity. He accords poetry an essentially centripetal tendency, while the novel is granted the opposite, a centrifugal force. Not surprisingly, he argues that the novel flourishes during times of diversity and the slackening of central control. Byatt sees the 1960s as the epitome of such times, and writes a work which allows Bakhtin's polyphonic voices to be heard individually and in unison. As we read the extract from the Pill packet, the anonymous voice of the doctor or chemist who wrote the *Instructions* can be heard. Through Frederica's *Laminations*, she provides a site for these to speak in all their heterogeneity.

The Tower of Babel image has a similar complexity and initiates the process of polyphony. Wijnnobel refers to the tower having a "winding structure" (p. 190). Through this it is related in its very form to the question of the deep structure of language which may be single, whole and unique after all:

> Language fails man and woman trying to transcend it and themselves. But the genes go coiling, spiralling, joining, building sentences and phrases of life

with their primeval alphabet. (p. 313)

The spiralling of the DNA is an aspect that relates language to snails, as Dr. Luk Lysgaard-Peacock quotes Bacon on the thousands of words composed from the twenty-four letters. He adds that "the alphabet of the DNA has only four letters, but they can produce an apparently infinite variety. Even in snails." (p. 358) The voice of Bacon has spoken in a work about the 1960s, and language is connected to snails. Other towers are evoked, which allows more voices to be heard: that of Kafka, as John Ottokar, Frederica's student, gives a talk on Kafka's *Castle*, and its "*mad* tower" (p. 287). To mention just another tower, in the novel-within-the-novel, *Babbletower*, where snails wander between the living and the dead (p. 262), Lady Mavis's suicide is performed by her jumping from the tower of La Tour Bruyarde, hitting her head against a stone "like a snail dropped by a thrush" (p. 275), an image which in fact opened the frame novel, *Babel Tower* itself.

If we look at the illustration on the front cover, we see it is basically a Tower of Babel, composed by Liz Cooke, with added montage of pixies and goats by other artists. It appears to go up from under the sea to reach the heavens. The bottom part is symmetrical, with wings, owls, coiling ammonites, also coiling shells, and cyclically metamorphosing butterflies or moths. In brightest colours against the dark background is a pink version of Blake's sunflower, and higher up a marijuana plant. The pixie looks mischievous, suggesting the fallacy of the innocence of

children, discussed in the novel, and the goats with their spiralling horns suggest permissiveness. The recognisable faces appear to be the Marquis de Sade and Mick Jagger. The top part is more like Brueghel's Tower of Babel; it spirals more, and is not without a snake. The back jacket painting, where the tower in the background (the Bastille?) is on fire, is a reproduction of Man Ray's 1938 oil painting "Imaginary Portrait of D. A. F. de Sade".

4.3 *Possession* and large-scale metaphor

The metaphorical envisioning of *Possession* essentially concerns love. Not surprisingly, Byatt called it "A Romance", exploiting all the senses of this word. We saw in the apparently autobiographically grounded "Sugar" that just as Vincent Van Gogh was an early influence in Byatt's aesthetic and cultural formation, so was the story *Ragnarök*. The Scandinavian apocalyptic myth which fascinated the character R. H. Ash of *Possession* is used as an example of the way in which the post-Darwinian Victorians were preoccupied with origins. The pre-Raphaelites took up Celtic mythology and medieval themes, and Byatt has chosen for the dust jacket of *Possession* a striking part of the Sir Edward Burne-Jones painting "The Beguiling of Merlin". She probably came upon Merlin and Vivien via Keats, the last line of verse 19 of *The Eve of Saint Agnes* being "Since Merlin paid his Demon all the monstruous debt". According to a version of the Arthurian legends, Merlin lost his life when the wily Vivien turned one of his own spells against him. In the

painting, we see how Merlin languishes for love and Vivien has him completely in her possession. Merlin is "possessed" by her, for the bonds of possession work both ways. One wonders if this two-way exertion of the force is suggested by having the back cover mirror the front cover. This painting becomes an iconic image for the whole novel *Possession*, the image-schema being based on the metaphor LOVE IS AN ENTITY.

Lakoff has shown (Lakoff 1980, pp. 49-50), how physical and emotional states are entities, thus love is viewed as an entity which can therefore be possessed. With Merlin in mind, it is appropriate to recall further metaphors:

LOVE IS MAGIC
LOVE IS WAR
LOVE IS MADNESS
LOVE IS A PATIENT.

In the novel, Ash falls in love with Christabel, so comes to be "possessed" by her, in the MADNESS sense. He "possesses" love for her and then comes to "possess" her in the WAR-CONQUEST (Biblical) sense of love. Lakoff's LOVE IS AN ELECTRO-MAGNETIC FORCE (Lakoff 1980, p. 49) also comes into play here with Ash's "kick galvanic" (*Possession* p. 273). The same pattern is repeated by Roland and Maud, even down to the electric shocks (in the bathroom and at the pool, p. 142). More developed in Roland's case is the LOVE IS A JOURNEY metaphor (Lakoff 1980, p.45), where

the prize or the destination is Maud, with lots of epic peripatetics along the route. Other attempts at possession are the wolf-like pursuing of Maud by Fergus Wolff, the lesbian overtures of Leonora to Maud, and Blanche Glover's glove-like relationship with or attachment to Christabel.

Closely related to this conversion of the loved one into a possession that can be pursued and obtained, is the IDEAS ARE COMMODITIES metaphor (Lakoff 1980, p.47). So the narrative is a quest on the part of Roland to follow the path of life (LIFE IS A JOURNEY metaphor) and come to possess knowledge about Ash and Christabel. He is competing with the Americans for this knowledge, which does in fact become a valuable commodity. From the initial material possession of the love letters in Ash's copy of Vico, Roland comes to "possess" the secret of Ash in the same way as in the painting, where Vivien has in her possession, in her hands, what one supposes is Merlin's book of spells, indicating the power of the written word. This brings us to the target domain of the metaphor, as it reminds us of the creative artist, who makes himself vulnerable when putting down his thoughts in black and white. The overt side of the secret, to put it paradoxically, is that Ash's great love poetry was inspired, not by his wife, but by a mistress, and this knowledge Roland can convert into the passport to his professional and material success in terms of employment (Hong Kong, Amsterdam or Barcelona!) and an assured respectable academic future. But a question haunts us: "Are all we middle-class Europeans and Americans possessed by this urge to possess professional success

as well as material?" The intellectual and material possessiveness of the 1980s is seen to be only a contemporary form of the acquisitiveness of the Victorian collectors.

The Americans are seen as the inheritors of the Victorians, and Byatt insinuates this cliché in a scene at the beginning of Chapter Six, where after an extract from Ash's "poem" *The Great Collector* (with the mention of the "twenty ancient Damascene glazed tiles" reminiscent of Byron, p. 92), we have Mortimer Cropper stealing artefacts, photocopying in Daisy Wapshott's bathroom in the middle of the night, the "tree-letters" from Ash to his godchild, acquiring them, not for their merit, but for their "rarity value" (p. 95). Mª Aida Díaz Bild (Díaz Bild 1993) has pointed out the more insidious predatory aspects of the biographer, and has shown that Byatt allows her hero and heroine, Roland and Maud, to fall into the trap and become interested in the person of the poet, because this is very human, and necessary for a modern Quest narrative. The American urge to acquire literary or artistic objects for their material value is seen as immoral, and the light-hearted caricature veils the more serious nature of the matter. Contrasting with this are Roland's noble motives, and for his love of beauty for its own sake, he is rewarded in a less material but more important way.

The covert side of the secret is that the quest story has been a metaphor for the discovery of "the real Ash", not his sex life, or the so-called double life of the Victorian male, but a

heightened understanding of his poems and how they came into being. Roland experiences vividly through his senses an intuition of truth about creativity and comes to grasp his Holy Grail which loses form and becomes a new understanding of Ash (UNDERSTANDING IS SEEING, UNDERSTANDING IS GRASPING, Lakoff 1989, p. 94 and p. 129 respectively):

> Roland read, or reread, *The Golden Apples*, as though the words were living creatures or stones of fire. He saw the tree, the fruit, the fountain, the woman, the grass, the serpent, single and multifarious in form. He heard Ash's voice, certainly his voice, his own unmistakable voice, and he heard the language moving around, weaving its own patterns, beyond the reach of any single human, writer or reader. He heard Vico saying that the first men were poets and the first words were names that were also things, and he heard his own strange, necessary meaningless *lists*, made in Lincoln, and saw what they were. He saw too that Christabel was the Muse and Proserpina and that she was not, and this seemed to be so interesting and *apt*, once he had understood it, that he laughed aloud. Ash had started him on this quest and he had found the clue he had started with, and all was cast off, the letter, the letters, Vico, the apples, his list. (p. 472)

Roland's intuitions about language and image come through familiarity with both the object of his studies and the medium used in it. He has explored so many aspects of Ash and his poetry that he sees how words --single words in his lists-- are a medium which is sometimes controlled by the writer, in symmetrical and assymetrical patterns, and sometimes gets out of control, so makes up an uneven woven tapestry. He realises that the process of making and the infinite varieties of ways of creating are

interesting in themselves, and he upholds his right to find subjective meaning:

> [...] and the words too were one, the tree, the woman, the water, the grass, the snake and the golden apples. He had always seen these aspects as part of himself, of Roland Michell, he had lived with them. He remembered talking to Maud about modern theories of the incoherent self, which was made up of conflicting systems of beliefs, desires, languages and molecules. All and none of these were Ash and yet he knew, if he did not encompass, Ash [...] What Ash said [...] was that the lists were the important thing, the words that named things, the language of poetry.
>
> He had been taught that language was essentially inadequate, that it could never speak what was there, that it only spoke itself [...] What had happened to him was that the ways in which it *could* be said had become more interesting than the idea that it could not. (pp. 472-3)

The categorical, authoritative tone of this Biblical-style language (the simple subject + verb + object, sentences with heavy use of the verb *to be* and the conjunction *and*) reminds one that while the main metaphor of *Possession* is possession both of love and knowledge on how to create literature, Roland has come to possess the powers Vivien had appropriated, and such powers are related to those involved in the creation of the cosmos. Finally, since lists are "approved of", we have listed the most important usages of lexemes expressing "possession" in the table as follows:

Table 1 Possessing and dispossessing of material things

"clutching his booty" - Roland takes possession of the letters

(p. 8)

"'I don't know why I feel so possessive about the damned things'" - Roland on the letters (p. 91)

"mere possession of the relics of the past" - in museums (p. 386)

"a pang of pure hunting pleasure" - Cropper, harvesting the past (p. 389)

"'I'm not acquisitive'" - Leonora (p. 404)

"ownership" - of letters (p. 415)

"'He wants the letters. He wants to *have* the story'" (p. 420)

"possessed of the journal" - Roland and Maud and Sabine's journal (p. 425)

"'There are some letters in America in my possession'" - Cropper (p. 428)

"possession" - of letters, Maud (p. 436)

Ash's "possessions" (p. 442)

"dispossession" - Hercules steals the golden apples in Ash's *Garden of Proserpina* (p. 463)

"greed", desire for "more" - Ash's poem (p. 476)

"owner of the letters", "ownership of the copyright", "property of the heirs", "*de facto possession* of the letters", "in possession of the manuscripts", "the letters aren't mine", "the moment of dispossession, or perhaps the word was exorcism" (pp. 479-80)

This last quotation, which equates possession with being possessed by the devil, brings us to the extended meaning:

Possessing and being possessed metaphorically

Mummy Possesst - Ash's spiritualist poem (p. 103); and from John Donne (p. 299)

"What is read and understood and contemplated and intellectually *grasped* is our own, madam, to live and work with" - Ash letter to Christabel, on the poet as ventriloquist, possessing and passing on (p. 104) (cf. Lakoff's metaphor UNDERSTANDING IS GRASPING)

"possession" - Ash of wife on honeymoon (p. 109)

"possessed of" - Ash's characteristic habits of syntax and stress, Roland (p. 130)

"possession of truth as of a city" (p. 163)

"set of ideas, perceptions, half-truths, useful fictions, struggled for and not possessed" - Ash (p. 164)

"those who most possess my thoughts - to Shakespeare, to Thomas Browne, to John Donne, to John Keats" - Ash (p. 177)

"possessed" by the spell of things - Swammerdam in his father's apothecary's shop as a child (p. 206)

"possessed himself of one of the little gloved hands" - Ash and Christabel (p. 275)

"possessed by the imagination of her" - Ash (p. 277)

"she was not his possession" - Ash (p. 279)

"Après la possession, l'amour..." - Balzac (p. 282)

"hatred ... take possession of me" - Sabine and Christabel's intrusion (p. 366)

"chattels, property" - women in Ash's poem (p. 410)

"he had no claim to possess" - Roland on Maud (p. 424)

"A possession, as by daemons. A kind of blinding" - Ash on

Christabel (p. 453)

"*possessed entirely*" - Ash wishing he could love Ellen (p. 502)

"self-possession" - Christabel's, threatened by Ash (p. 502)

"Her self-possession, her autonomy" - Maud's, *not* threatened by Roland (p. 507)

"we have one" - Maud and the photograph of Maia on her wedding day, as she possesses the truth of her origins, descended from both Christabel and Ash (p. 503)

"took possession" - Roland of Maud at the end (p. 507)

4.4 Creation myths as metaphor for literary and artistic creation

At the end of *Possession*, Roland has escaped possible contamination by the desire to possess material things, except in so far as the loved one, Maud, is seen as a material object. However, he has become possessed by an equally insidious urge, the urge to write, to create. All A. S. Byatt's novels are about people consumed by this urge. To describe them and their activities, she resorts to ready-made, age-old models of creation, the creation myths of the different civilizations, not only the Judeo-Christian, upon which Western Christian society is based, but also Greek and Scandinavian, which also contributed

concepts. There are apparently three reasons for this: first, the recourse of metafiction to the familiar in order to establish a firm grounding from which to innovate; secondly, if we are to believe "Sugar", Byatt's childhood fascination with *Ragnarök*; and thirdly, the identification, based on personal experience and reading of Lawrence, of creative energy with the sun. To quote Byatt's "Introduction" to *The Shadow of the Sun* again:

> Henry Severell is partly simply my secret self [...] Someone who saw everything too bright [...] This vision of too much makes the visionary want to write - in my case - or paint, or compose, or dance or sing [...]
>
> What I write is heliotropic. I don't think I knew that when I chose my title, despite being already involved with Cassandra and her inability to contain or transmit molten light. My unfinished Ph. D. thesis was partly about the neoplatonic creation myths, where the Sun is the male Logos, or Nous, or Mind, that penetrated inert Hyle, or Matter, or female Earth, and brought it to life and form (pp. x-xiv)

Myths convey a sense of the continuity of human life and its traditions. The perennial character of human interests is manifested in universals and the challenge to the poet or writer is to take up these universals and to do something different with them without changing their essential nature. He or she must tell the old story in a novel way relevant to his society.

We shall not leave Lakoff and his experiential metaphors behind because myths are basically metaphors, stories by which primitive man has given form to his metaphorical viewing of the heavens and his explanations of his place in the cosmos. Chapter

14 of Lakoff's (1980) *Metaphors We Live By* concerns Causation, or making. With the basic metaphors

THE OBJECT COMES OUT OF THE SUBSTANCE and
THE SUBSTANCE IS A CONTAINER,

he shows how causation is seen partly as emergent and partly as metaphorical. Metaphors for MAKING emerge naturally from human experience like birth, where the object (the baby) comes out of a container (the mother) and the mother's substance (container object) is in the baby. The experience of birth, and also agricultural growth, provides a grounding for the general concept of CREATION, which has as its core the concept of MAKING a physical object, but which extends to entities as well.

The general metaphor CREATION IS BIRTH is very productive in lexical items or groups concerning composing and writing -- things like "conceive", "first see the light of day", "birthplace", "father" etc. It combines with the metaphorical viewing of a STATE (i.e. feeling the desire to write) as a container or an entity in a container, so CAUSATION is viewed as the EMERGENCE of the EVENT from the STATE. This entails the coherent structuring of experience (Lakoff 1980, chapter 15) and categorisation on an experiential basis, with participants, parts, stages, linear sequences and purposes.

As Lakoff shows (Lakoff 1980, chapter 9), time in English is structured in terms of the TIME IS A MOVING OBJECT metaphor,

or TIME PASSES US, receiving a front - back orientation: we are facing in the direction of motion, towards the future. It has a variant: TIME IS STATIONARY AND WE MOVE THROUGH IT. Another relevant metaphor (Lakoff 1980, chapter 20) concerns giving meaning to form, it says MORE OF FORM IS MORE OF CONTENT. Hence, as primitive man gave more linguistic and artistic form to his ideas about the universe, the more complex the concepts became. All of these basic metaphors can be detected in the ways in which man over the ages has apprehended the cosmos and his part in it and has tried to express them.

It was Lévi-Strauss (9) who showed us that at the conscious, but especially at the unconscious level, the mind is a structuring mechanism which imposes form on whatever material it finds to hand, so the investigation of myth can help us to study the fundamental operations of the human mind. At the same time, because myths are the *parole* of the symbolic system, this can allow us to discover the units and rules of combination of this system.

Giambattista Vico, Ash's master, was, in the early eighteenth century, the first to see literature as a product of social forces explainable in part by the social and political features of a given society. He was also one of the first to see history as cyclical. In the nineteenth century, Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (1890) and Edward B. Tylor's *Primitive Culture* (1871), also Pater's *Greek Studies* (c. 1875) and Ruskin's *The Queen of the Air* (1869) laid the foundations for our modern

views of myth. Pater, in *Greek Studies*, had conceived of mythopoeia as an evolutionary process made up of three stages: first an unconscious reaction to unexplained natural phenomena; second, a personification and conscious elaboration into a story by a poet; and finally, the use of myth as representative of feelings. He terms these three phases as "instinctive", "poetical" and "ethical". Tylor agreed that myths personify natural forces, he reasoned that animism reached its highest pitch when this belief in the spirit of nature became personified by analogy of human beings. Thus, for instance, the sun became a god "Helios", the moon a goddess "Selene", and the earth also a goddess "Demeter". Pater and Ruskin used the Demeter and Persephone story to illustrate their theory. In *Possession*, Roland was studying Proserpina (the Latin form) in Vico when he came across Ash's letter to Christabel.

Tylor acknowledged the influence of language in the creation of myths. As seen in the examples, whether deities are male or female depends completely upon what he felt were arbitrary grammatical genders given by the formation of words. Byatt continues in her "Introduction" to *Shadow*:

> This is both exciting, because in a way physically true --life does depend absolutely on light-- and depressing because false in its analogies --there is nothing intrinsically male about the sun, or female about the earth. (p. xiv)

In many cultures, the sun-moon combination has been seen as man and wife because of the way they affect seasonal renewal on

earth, the sun being the initial procreator, but because this is not universal, as Byatt points out in this "Introduction" (p. xv), she is able to throw off the cold moon as image of women's creativity and use a female sun in *Possession*:

> I wanted my harvest, both in my life and in my work, and I was afraid that my light was a lesser one, a cold one, that could only mildly illuminate, however hauntingly. But I did go on from there, to Queen Elizabeth as Corn Goddess, to Van Gogh's Death the Reaper working happily, to a poem in *Possession* by Randolph Henry Ash about the Norse Creation myth, in which the light that gives life to the first man and woman, Ask and Embla, is a *female* sun. (p. xvi)

In some cultures, the sex of sun and moon may depend upon language, though one might have expected early man to have had a sexual categorising feeling towards the sun before a word was coined to refer to the source of light and warmth. Lakoff 1987 (10) includes a study of an Australian aboriginal language, Djerbel, which shows how in this language all beings and things are categorised experientially as either male or female. So here is one instance of how the gender of the sun and moon has *not* been determined by language itself, but by categories of the mind based on other criteria.

Lakoff shows how modern man has recently overcome his slavish belief in the myths (in a general sense) in which he separated himself from his environment in order to see himself more clearly. In the creation of myths, an important role is played by the belief in the existence of the human soul as

separate from the body. This aspect is metaphorically represented in the characterisation and themes of pagan and Christian myths. The personification of nature into deities is a metaphorical process. Helios, Selene and Demeter are not depicted in myths as being *like* the sun, moon or earth, respectively, but are actually identified with these heavenly bodies, whose main attributes are embodied within them. These mythic beings metaphorically represent the changeable aspect of nature --not only natural renewal and the cyclical process of the seasons, but those of day and night, dawn and dusk. The characters themselves have changing shapes: Demeter represents earth both in winter and in summer. This metamorphosis finds expression in the characters and also determines the structures of the mythic stories. The various metaphors involve transformation, descent into the underworld and emergence into light, with death followed by rebirth. The rape of Persephone and the death of Adonis to explain the seasons and the fruits, the story of Perseus and Andromeda, the sacrificial virgin, and Heracles and Hesione, where the hero, freeing the maiden by killing the monster, interpreted as Day slaying Night, are all based upon the pattern darkness versus light.

First the myths appear as metaphors, then they become archetypes which apply to both pagan and Christian myths. In most cultures, the individual human being is separable, at least spiritually, if not physically, from this pattern of life and death, but through the archetypes, the human race is seemingly traditionally subject to these conditions. Through his and Mark Johnson's study of body-based theorising on ourselves and our

environment, George Lakoff sees how modern man can now be free of the necessity for a myth which separates us from the physical cosmos:

> The old myths share a common perspective: man as separate from his environment. Within the myth of objectivism, the concern for truth grows out of a concern for successful functioning [...] *mastery over* the environment.
>
> The principal theme of the myth of subjectivism is the attempt to overcome the alienation that results from viewing man as separate from his environment and from other men. This involves an embracing of the self --of individuality and reliance upon personal feelings, intuition and values. The Romanticist version involves reveling in the senses and the feelings and attempting to gain union with nature through passive appreciation of it. (Lakoff 1980, p. 229)

Lakoff shows how the experiential myth takes the perspective of man as part of his environment, not as separate from it. Hence not only is the creation of new myths today different from the old, they tend to relate to social expectations and stereotypes rather than to man's origins and purpose --but the use of the old mythical stories is also directed not at origins and purpose but at formal and aesthetic aspects of creativity. As John Vickery suggests, the use of myth in structure and theme can serve as

> a kind of subterranean paradigm of narrative and imagistic sequences, as a sustained analogy of a hypothetical order, or as a reflexive commentary, ultimately ironic in nature, on itself. (Vickery 1983, p. 102)

By envisaging literary creativity from the beginning as driven by the energetic impulse associated with the light and

heat of the sun, A. S. Byatt has chosen an image-schema which is particularly apt and rich for her exploration of what literary creativity is and how it works. Vickery had also pointed out the similarities in potential for literature between metaphor and myth. Bearing in mind how Lakoff said (and we quoted at the beginning of this chapter) that metaphor was a powerful tool for comprehending partially what could not be comprehended totally, Vickery shows how a way of critically organising literary structure is in creating in the work "a progression from the obvious, apparent and explicit, to the subtle, hidden and implicit presence of mythico-ritualistic elements and patterns". (Vickery 1983, p. 53) Myth can therefore be used to discuss essential universal truths, it can be covert or overt in a work, and it can be part of a pattern or plan that can give structure to it.

One branch of Judaeo-Christian myth is Biblical typology, a literary device or approach which was particularly popular in the first half of the nineteenth century, and which proceeded on the assumption that God had placed random anticipations of Christ in the people and events of the Old Testament. George P. Landow (Landow 1980) has shown how in the great novels of the period, the Victorians used Biblical typography to suggest historical parallels and cycles, and set up a double time level, for typology connects two times, the second of which is said to "complete" or "fulfill" the first. This can give a meaningful structure to human history. Landow showed how Charlotte Brontë used Biblical typography in *Jane Eyre* in the characterisation of

Jane and Rochester to discuss the very popular Victorian theme of self-deceit. Rochester, in drawing a Biblical parallel with himself is sadly deceived, whereas Jane's perception is clearer, perhaps because of her humility (Landow 1980, p. 97). Humility, a broad perspective, and a capacity for self-ridicule are some of the recommendations written into their novels by such as Dickens, for characters to overcome their propensity to self-deception, not only over their own characters, but over the great issues of the day. In a work such as *Possession*, where half is pseudo-Victorian, there is a distinct probability of finding typological references, but Landow's list of individual types at the end of his book, including items like Adam, serpent, Eden, Eve, Gideon, rainbow, scapegoat, Tree of Life etc., because they cover Creation and sacrifice, are in fact relevant to almost all Byatt's novels.

This rather lengthy preamble has been necessary to show the areas and types of application of myth we might expect to find in a late twentieth-century writer like A. S. Byatt. We will now proceed to examine the six novels in turn to see just how myth functions in them and for what purpose. We shall be especially bearing in mind myth in relation to Lakoff's metaphors of creativity and Vickery's three models: the "subterranean paradigm of narrative and imagistic sequences", the "sustained analogy of a hypothetical order", and the ironical "reflexive commentary", to see if there is any evidence of these approaches in the novels.

4.5 Metaphorical Creation myths in the early fiction and the tetralogy

The Shadow of the Sun

Firstly, we cannot discuss *The Shadow of the Sun* without making reference to D. H. Lawrence and solar mythology. Turner's famous dying words were apparently "The Sun is God". Since the eclipsing of the Judaeo-Christian God for some post-Darwinians, the sun took on a new significance. Ruskin put into words Turner's fascination for our light source and some of this thinking was transmitted to Hardy and to Lawrence. Vickery argues Lawrence had "a delicately balanced sense of the realities of matter and the potentialities of myth" (Vickery 1983, p. 9), and that he located myth at "the core of the physical world and at the centre of the self's focal acts of construction" (p. 27). Since these basic human rituals were for Lawrence sex and death, it is not surprising that short stories like *England, My England* include the main myths isolated by Frazer: the dying god, the sacred marriage and the scapegoat. The sun is traditionally, in most cultures, as we have said, the fecundating male source, a principle of life, but also a dangerous energy able to pierce and destroy. Byatt quite naturally reacts against Lawrence's particularly male exploitation of this:

> There is a Lawrentian version of this in *Sun*, where a city woman bathes naked in Mediterranean sunlight and feels power pouring into her, removing her from the scope of her grey, timid, city husband. This is powerfully moving at one level, at least to a sun-worshipping, winter-light deprived depressive like me. Lawrence's sun shines out with gold and blue and white fire. But "he" is also "like a

> big shy creature" and the woman is convinced that he "*knew* her in the cosmic carnal sense of the word." Her desiderated state is blind wholesome passivity. There is also something powerfully repellent about Lawrence's sexual imagery for what the sun is doing to the woman. ("Introduction" to *Shadow*, p. xiv)

Henry Severell, the writer and sun god, is repellent in a similar way. He is egoistic and dominates the family, he is able to dedicate himself to writing only because he is completely supported by his wife Caroline. Oliver finds him socially "an injustice" (p. 227). But he is apparently a great writer and his energy is related in a series of images throughout the book with the sun.

The book opens with Henry's house and the grass in the sun. So Henry, in retrospect, is immediately associated with sun and vegetation:

> it thrust itself into the sun in neat metallic ranks, its blades shorn away and the fine planes of it catching the light, throwing it about on the lawn like crossed threads of spun glass, silver, green and white. (p. 3)

Everything is pristine, the geometric and glass imagery being developed into a mirage-mirror image:

> The brilliance of the sun gave an extra sharpness, an extra clarity to everything, made it all so definite that it had the brittle quality of a mirage, and it was somehow only too easy to feel, given the transitory lucidity of English sunshine,

> that it might shatter like a mirage, might
> flake away and dissolve under pressure,
> into something grey and ordinary and
> dispersed. (pp. 3-4)

The extraordinary, gold, visionary, versus the ordinary and grey reaches highest pitch when Henry, on one of his periodic escapes, enters the cornfield:

> And still the light poured, heavy,
> and white, and hot, into the valley
> before him and collected, molten and
> seething, on the corn beneath him;
> he could hear it thundering into the
> silence; and still he had to see, so
> that his cone was now an hourglass
> funnel, opening both ways, and the wide
> light all pressed and weighed in the
> point of intersection which was himself,
> and the gold figures, hieratic, with gold
> faces and swords of flame, walked in the
> sea of corn in ordered patterns, like
> reapers; he recognised them from before,
> and he knew that he had come to the end.
> They burst like dragon's teeth men, one
> by one, from the bright land; he knew that
> they were not tangible, nor presences, nor
> differentiated one from the other; they were
> a way of seeing, when too much light was
> accumulated to see unshaped, without being
> struck blind. To see like this was to be alive,
> he knew, before everything was conflagration,
> and he crumpled and rolled on to the edge of
> the fields, whilst, very slow, very still, his
> inner eye opened on cool, wide, white plains,
> in which he rested. (p. 80)

The white plains is a prototype of a recurring image in Byatt, later it becomes a white or empty room, and it stands for a desire for an absence of desire. The sun's energy forces him to desire to be creative, and though it is the source of his creativity, it momentarily saps his strength and impels him to make the supreme effort of writing. Even when he is dirty and

scratched from his escapade, he still looks like the sun, with his hair "twisted, damply, into horns and spikes, like the corkscrew rays of the conventional, pictorial sun." (p. 87) His daughter Anna likes the sun and the heat, but she does not know how to harness its power as her father does. As a teenager trying to write, she is put off by the impossibly high standard set by her father. Her writing is limited to odd phrases, one of them curiously intuiting this destructive, piercing aspect of the sun: "light like knives" (p. 16). Henry, then, casts a "large shadow" (p. 281) over his daughter's possible literary career. She is "a plant in a cellar" (p. 211) (like Stephanie's etiolated seedlings later), whereas he is always in the light: "He was contained now by the light only, he was abandoned to what he knew was not human, to where he was alive." (p. 280)

Oliver Canning tries to help Anna, but he is a black hole, according to Henry. The image is apt, because not only is it the inverse of the sun, but it is destructive rather than creative; rather than emitting light and heat, it sucks everything in then "churns" it out again: "'dead and masticated and labelled for future reference, my books and Margaret's sexual energy --and love.'" (p. 203) Anna will in the end get sucked in, because in her depression "the imaged sun was shrunk and dead and powerless" (p. 206). In any case, she cannot rise to the terrible challenge of creativity, she cannot come out of the shadows and face the "search for the sun" (p. 208). Her moment of vision comes in the cold and cruel, moon-like artificial neon light of Cambridge and in the cold lightning (pp. 235-7). She sees no personal vision,

only in a secondary manner sees how her father had direct vision and thence creativity:

> he saw all the time, and this was where what he wrote had a power, a savagery, that Forster and Virginia Woolf were unaware of or could not communicate; he saw what was overwhelming, he was with Wordsworth and Coleridge, he had found a way of being alive, alone. She was looking into this leaping light, for what he would have seen. (p. 238)

Lakoff's UNDERSTANDING IS SEEING metaphor (Lakoff 1989, p. 94) is involved in Henry's vision, and with the accent on "alive", possibly also LIFE IS A FIRE and CREATION IS BIRTH (pp. 30-33 etc.).

As Anna casts about for a possible sexual partner, she looks, in the men around her, for these sun-related characteristics of her father. In Michael, the young man at the stables, she sees a sort of equestrian sun god, but rather than pagan like her father, he is Christianised, as if he could mean salvation for her:

> In the saddle, he had regained all his beauty and strength; he sat easily, whilst the horse shifted and snorted, like a gold St. George. Anna, looking up at him, was dazzled by the sun behind him, so that it seemed concentrated into flames around his head, and his face danced against it, a shifting, empty circle, framed with light. He said, through his halo [...] (p. 78)

But since she is afraid of the sun ("he was part of the sun"

(p. 83)), Anna rejects him in favour of his opposite, the dark "field vole" (p. 24), Oliver. (Roland also begins as a dark little animal, a mole.) Lakoff's DISPASSIONATE IS COLD (1989, pp. 190-1) and BAD IS BLACK (p. 185) are latent here. The irony is that it is Oliver who fecundates Anna. Henry, in his creativity, has always been associated with fruitfulness and harvest, as we saw in the image of him in the cornfield. However, because the cereal god is close to the autumn harvest, he must be middle-aged to old (c.f. Lakoff's A LIFETIME IS A YEAR metaphor, 1989, pp. 18, 27-8, 30, 52, 83, 86 & 88). As Vickery explains:

> Frazer suggests at one point in *The Golden Bough* that the wind ruffling the cornfields might well have been taken by primitive tribes as a sign of the presence of the spirit or god of the corn. He also copiously illustrates the custom of actually or in mimicry killing the human or animal embodiment of the corn spirit. In particular he mentions the custom of representing the corn spirit as a dead old man. (Vickery 1983, p. 78)

Just before Frazer, in the 1850s, Max Müller had written of the primitive deities as solar gods, whereas Mannhardt had presented them as vegetative spirits. As Henry lies bloody and inert in the cornfield, one thinks of Osiris, with corn sprouting from his dead body. Henry had thought that he was a sort of fertility god, who would go on writing novels for ever, but he takes on the role of old man-corn spirit, whose creativity is flagging. As we see, he is now having difficulty in completing a novel. He is turning to hack work on the Romantics: "He imagined his death as a progress into a more and more lucent

inactivity" (p. 85), like the sun growing old and cooler. As Byatt puts it at the end of her "Introduction":

> I see suddenly that images of harvest are also an intricate part of my private-universal imagery. When I was writing *The Shadow of the Sun* I read a wonderful article in the *Manchester Guardian* about the turbulences in ripe corn, and incorporated it into Henry Severell's vision of harvest fields [...] (p. xvi)

That creativity is coming to an end for Henry and that Anna's work will be meagre or at least less powerful by comparison, is confirmed as Byatt continues:

> I think I was also partially remembering the magical scene in *The Rainbow* where Will and Anna meet in moonlit cornfields, which are a kind of creative paradox. For the ripeness and the growth of the corn, the harvest, are brought about by the heat and light of the sun, and yet here they are seen in this milder, darker, colder light, which I think I did take at that time for an image of women's creativity. (p. xvi)

It is evident that in this, Byatt's first, but very sophisticated novel, there is a trace of Vickery's "subterranean paradigm of narrative and imagistic sequences". The metaphor sun god/writer throughout the book exemplifies the "sustained analogy of a hypothetical order." The third use of myth Vickery suggests, the ironic "reflexive commentary" is made explicit through Henry lying in the cornfield and thinking about literary creativity and the problem of its medium, language, and focusing on the Phaethon myth and metaphor:

> He was extremely happy, he thought --and added, being capable again of deliberation, how we have murdered our superlatives [...] One must find a language new and washed clean, and the things it is necessary to say require these superlatives. He was becoming a craftsman again, and took pleasure in that too; he thought of his desk and the novel he had been writing, and the thought of the words on the paper warmed him, and excited him so that he smiled involuntarily.
>
> But he was in no hurry. He sat for some time, still considering the sun, remarking how earlier it had drawn everything into its own Phaethon career across the heavens and was now still and solitary; mildly, distantly alight, but nothing to do with anything else. More than anything, quite basically, he was surprised at the human capacity for reflecting --a nice metaphorical, Platonic touch, he thought, still considering the sun, if I were sure that the metaphor didn't distort a little what I mean, didn't draw too close a connection between myself and that, which is far too much a fact to be for me any symbol of consciousness, or intelligence, or power, in myself, without losing something of its own certain solidity, there deep in the sky. Metaphysics fascinated him, religious symbolism even more --his visionary times gained a tremendous life from his knowledge of Platonic ideas of the intellectual meanings of sun, and light, or Coleridge's complex ideas of the reflective nature of the moon's light and minds like the moon. (pp. 84-5)

To end with a typological image, Henry Severell has also become a Samson:

> He had taken, as Samson must have done, a certain pleasure in offering up his strength to human relations, in lying down and allowing it to be shorn away from him for love. (p. 279)

His punishment is to become "more human", more grey, like Anna and Oliver, he is a has-been, perhaps the "dying god", but

at least he has been something, as they have not and never will be. They have been only the "reflective natures" with "minds like the moon".

The Game

This very productive idea of the binary opposition sun/moon in relation to literary creativity is carried over by A. S. Byatt into her second novel *The Game*. As she says in her "Introduction" to *Shadow*: "In *The Game* I called the character who had taken Helen Gardner's monastic advice Cassandra, and she, like Anna, saw moons through glass." (p. xiv)

Cassandra is at once a metaphor for the human being trying to live out his or her life in a universe he does not understand, least of all control, and for the person who tries to create something through words. Man throughout the ages has sought ways of understanding the cosmos: Frazer showed how early man, the huntsman, invented magic, pastoral man ritualised this into religion and agricultural-technical man has to some extent replaced religion with science. These are all ways of trying to impose order on disorder. Cassandra's life is dedicated to trying to create order within what she sees as chaos: "Cassandra engaged battle with the objects that oppressed her." (p. 142) Most of Cassandra's inner life is seen through her very revealing journal, but in chapter twelve, after most of the chapter has been dedicated to her journal, the narrator ends with a paragraph where the word "pattern" is foregrounded:

> patterns of broken things and mud and leaves
> [...] hint at a pattern in the faint emphasis of

a line here or there [...]
jungles, patterns of chair-legs [...]

"Pattern" contrasts with uncontrolled primordial things like "mud" and "jungle".

Like man up to the present late twentieth century, she separates herself from her environment in order to apprehend it more clearly. Not only does she live in two worlds, but she also invented "the Game" in order to observe herself "objectively" acting out her own life (c.f. Lakoff's LIFE IS A PLAY metaphor, Lakoff 1989, pp. 20-3 etc.) So Cassandra has lived in the "real" everyday world of objects and facts, but increasingly so in the world of her imagination and her own creation. There is a third, in-between world, that of her dreams and nightmares, which is affected by both, and which, in its turn, affects them. She suffers the "tyranny of objects", especially glass objects like the glass serpent given to her by Julia, and mirrors, whether in the form of the television screen or what she sees as the Lady of Shalott's mirrors, reminiscent of Lacan or Irigaray, or Alice in Wonderland's Looking Glass which gives access to another world:

> I live in two worlds. One is hard, inimical, brutal, threatening, the tyranny of objects where all things are objects and thus tyrannical. The other is infinite: heaven, through the power of glass, the Looking Glass world. One dreams of a release into that world of pure vision and knows that what would be gained would be madness; a single world, and intolerable. (p. 141)

She knows that vision can lead to madness, as in the case of Van Gogh, but without it there is no true art. Together, she and Julia represent female creativity, divided according to the objectivist myth and the subjectivist myth. The latter, taken to extremes, leads to madness, the former is sterile, for Julia, without Henry Severell's vision, can only record cold, hard details of the objective world, which are what they seem to be and nothing more. Cassandra, on the other hand, in her fantasy world seeks the metaphor which will not only impose order on chaos, but give form and meaning:

> All facts, all facts, all solid facts
> and objects of our life are always
> themselves and more than themselves.
> And so I pursue, professionally, self-
> indulgently, any metaphor to the death,
> fanatical or truth-revealing, who knows
> which. (p. 141)

Byatt has Cassandra find metaphors for herself for her secret journal, and each one brings with it a paradigm of correlated associations. First, the name Cassandra, from Greek mythology:

> Cassandra who was Appollo's priestess
> and --since she refused intercourse with
> the Lord of the Muses, and was thus no
> artist-- incapable of communication.
> Unrelated to the world of objects around
> her [...] Cassandra, like myself, like
> myself, a specialist in useless knowledge.
> (p. 141)

Debra Moddelmog (Moddelmog 1993) has shown that we recognise reference to a myth in a text if we come across either or both

of one "weighted" implicit mytheme, or a significant number of implicit mythemes. A name like Cassandra would be a "weighted" mytheme and we recognise immediately a possible reference to the myth. However, the practice of modern fiction writers is not to drop it intact into their story, but to borrow and integrate parts of it to illuminate the narrative. As Moddelmog says:

> A segment of a myth introduced into a narrative asks readers to compare part of the modern story to an incident in the ancient one, thus opening up potentialities for the rest of the narrative, the most obvious being that the story will follow the sequential patterning of the myth. White (1971) calls this coexisting mythic construct a *prefiguration*, because the initial appearance of a myth in a novel 'anticipates' the plot. Mythic characters and scenes inhabit our imagination as part of their mythic milieu, so we have the habit of calling forth the whole myth when we meet with any of its parts. This has important consequences for the myth as well as the narrative; for if it is true that the myth tells us something about the modern story, it is equally true that the narrative's appropriation of the myth causes us to reinterpret the myth. (11)

The equation of Cassandra with her mythic forebear therefore prepares the reader for her undergoing of any of the vicissitudes which were the fate of her more famous namesake. Indeed, Cassandra rejects a possible identification with the more homely Cassandra, sister of Jane Austen, as that would consign her to oblivion, while her sister Julia, equivalent to Jane Austen, would enjoy fame and respect as a writer for centuries after.

The second, unhappy identity she does accept is that of the

Lady of Shalott, as we saw before, and also to some extent, that of the lost, enchanted and entrapped Alice in Wonderland. Still related to glass and entrapment, is that of a sort of animal trapped in a glass cage or beneath the earth:

> Enclosed by light in a glass cage, outside a glass box containing light. An image for myself? An animal formed probably by burrowing, without ears, limbs, or eyelids, deaf, unable to gesture, with acute, unvaried vision? (p. 141)

The burrowing animal reminds us of Roland the mole and Oliver the vole. The aspect of being trapped recurs in Cassandra's seeing herself as Charlotte Brontë or Emily Brontë (pp. 101-2, 118 & 219), as constructed by a net or a cage with iron bars (p. 208).

Cassandra is a victim, trapped in both her physical life and her spiritual and creative life. She comes to see what she calls the imaginative necessity of the death of Christ (p. 76). This appears to be in the scapegoat sense. The scapegoat is probably the supreme typological image for Christ, and Cassandra in her death is a sort of scapegoat. Even in the Classical world, human beings were put to death to propitiate the gods. The pharmakos or scapegoat at the festival of Thargelia was two men or one man and one woman, who, on being put to death, honoured the gods and caused a psychic release which contributed towards the preservation of society. In this second sense, one may see Cassandra's death as the suppression on the part of male-dominated society of a subversive element, an unmarried, self-

sufficient, writing woman.

The snake, of course, not only Biblically typological, played an important part in initiation, purification and fertility rituals. "He" was prominent in the worship of Demeter. In this novel, snakes are central and in the television discussion, the different associations are brought up:

> Snakes are absolutely *weighed down* with meanings for the average man --you kept referring to them quite naturally on your programmes-- death and rebirth, evil and healing, water and light, oh, you know, and sex, look at your Freud. (p. 161)

The panel decide that the significance of a symbol is not just the sum of its meanings, but something more. Metaphor brings an authority and a power and a unifying force, as Cassandra's last words indicate in reflexive commentary: "I keep chasing metaphors. Out of a desire for an impossible unity." (p. 228) Her lack of successful creativity is lamented in the final entry in her journal, where she speaks in terms of darkness: "this grotesque shadow" and moon-like effects:"I want no more reflections" (p. 230).

The Virgin in the Garden

The introduction of examples from Classical mythology, not only decoratively but structurally in *The Game,* is justified and given verisimilitude by the use of a protagonist whose chosen career is literature, and whose life-work is a study of an aspect of Celtic mythology. Also in *The Virgin in the Garden,* the main characters are dedicated to literature, and the focus of the

novel is a play about Elizabeth I, a performance designed to usher in the new Elizabethan age of Elizabeth II in 1953. Alexander Wedderburn's play *Astraea*, with Frederica as the young Elizabeth, is an excuse to juxtapose the second half of the twentieth century with the second half of the sixteenth century, contemporary England with Renaissance England. The world view which was still held in the days of Elizabeth I was little changed from that of medieval Western Christianity, imbued with the neoplatonic conception of the universe as the Great Chain of Being, although the medieval world view was no longer accepted unchallenged (c.f. Tillyard, *The Elizabethan World Picture*). In the novel, this mythical structuring of the universe, in which we can no longer believe, is compared to a new cosmogony which we cannot believe in either, as we shall see later.

The Great Chain of Being concept is evoked by the Renaissance play, and all significant social roles like Queen, Duke, etc., socially significant places like palaces and towers, even symbolic objects and substances like stones or blood, carry with them a spatial extension which ties them to a place in the hierarchical order. The Great Chain of Being is not exactly a myth, as it has no narrative structure, but it is a metaphorical way of explaining the universe, with added dynamics like the Music of the Spheres and the Cosmic Dance, and since we no longer accept it as true, it functions in much the same way as does, for example, the Greek world view with its gods and goddesses. The Great Chain of Being is not a single metaphor, but is a complex system, as Lakoff has shown. The combination of basic metaphors

with knowledge creates a power to extend these metaphors into a global concept. Thus the interpretation of the entire metaphor complex is a statement about the nature of an intricate or multi-dimensional target domain. Hence metaphor has the power of revelation on a large scale:

> This is the power that metaphor has to reveal comprehensive hidden meanings to us, to allow us to find meanings beyond the surface, to interpret texts as wholes, and to make sense of patterns of events. (Lakoff 1989, p. 159)

The Great Chain of Being is a cultural model that categorises kinds of beings and their properties, and places them on a vertical scale. It endows the universe with three general features: plenitude --the universe is "full", it has maximal diversity of kinds of existences, whether for good or evil; continuity --there is a connected series of forms, for each shares with its neighbour at least one attribute; gradation --in linear, vertical gradation, the series ranges in hierarchical order from the barest or lowest type of existence to the *ens perfectissimum*, which is God the Creator.

Because the Great Chain is a scale of forms of being -- human, animal, plant, inanimate object-- it is consequently a scale of the properties that characterise these forms of being: reason, instinctual behaviour, biological function, physical attributes etc. The basic Great Chain relates human beings to "lower" forms of existence and the extended Great Chain relates human beings to society, the universe and God. Lakoff explains

how the Great Chain metaphor functions:

> The GREAT CHAIN METAPHOR is not, strictly speaking, a metaphor alone. It is an ensemble consisting of the common-sense theory of the Nature of Things + the Great Chain + the GENERIC IS SPECIFIC metaphor + the Maxim of Quantity. What makes it metaphoric in character is the GENERIC IS SPECIFIC metaphor. The Nature of Things + the Great Chain give it the character of a commonsense theory. And the Maxim of Quantity builds into it a pragmatic principle of communication. In this sense, the GREAT CHAIN METAPHOR is more than just a metaphor: it is a recurring conceptual complex made up of a metaphor, a commonsense theory and a communication principle. (Lakoff 1989, p. 172)

E. M. W. Tillyard (Tillyard 1963), who continued A. O. Lovejoy's investigations (Lovejoy 1936), has shown that the Elizabethans saw the single order in their world view under three aspects: first the chain, then a set of correspondences, and finally, the dance. The earthly forms in the chain are not exactly discrete as they are in a constant flux of transmutation worked by the sun and the moon. (Ovid's *Metamorphoses* was most popular in the last decade of the sixteenth century.) Man is the nodal point where matter and spirit meet, and the four elements, which do not fit directly into the Great Chain, link the doings of men with the business of the cosmos. Earth, Water, Air and Fire, with their corresponding humours and common qualities explained both man's physical life and his mental character. It was believed that although the four elements were the material for the whole universe, they were differently mixed according to whether they were beneath the sphere of the moon or in the rest of the universe. All was perfect, constant, harmonious and

eternal in the latter, but mutable, dirty, decayed and transitory in the former. The Stars and Fortune, the Wheel of Fortune, were the moving forces, not only for the individual worldling, but for history on earth in general. In addition to stellar influence, there was the effect of the varied mixing of the elements founded on notions of hot and cold, dry and moist. Fire and water are opposed, but God put air in between to keep the peace. The finest results come from a proper balance.

Byatt draws upon these oppositions in characterising the Potter family --Bill Potter and his red-haired daughter Frederica are "fiery Potters", associated with fire, whereas the mother Winifred, and Stephanie and Marcus are "pale Potters", associated more with water. Stephanie's Filey experience, followed by Freudian dreams of bladderwrack mixed in with literary symbols (p. 250) is an example of this. Her husband Daniel and his mother are like the earth, heavy with flesh and blood (*Still Life* p. 47).

According to the theory of correspondences, the celestial powers were related to the rest of creation, hence a parallel was drawn between the macrocosm and the Body Politic. Order in the state duplicated the order of the macrocosm. Queen Elizabeth and her Council were compared to the *primum mobile* or controlling sphere. The king, the ruler of the state, was equated with the sun, the ruler of the heavens, and the Queen with the moon, like Cynthia or the goddess Diana, as in the case of Elizabeth I, the Virgin Queen. The city or state was likened to the human body,

and the different functions in the state corresponded to the different functions in the body. The rulers were the soul, and the citizens the parts of the body (cf. Lakoff's IMPORTANT IS CENTRAL/ LESS IMPORTANT IS PERIPHERAL metaphors. The Sun-king correspondence evokes the great pattern of order against which to set the bewilderment of real life, d is also a poetic metaphor. This is reflected in Crowe's house (p. 140) where also the Greek gods and goddesses are depicted in the mythic sequences. Elizabeth's many names --Cynthia, Belphoebe, Virgo-Astraea, Britomart, Gloriana etc., indicate that she was not only seen in her secondary Cynthia-moon-queen role, but also as the harvest goddess and arbiter of justice as well as the head of the Body Politic. The iconic Yorkshire portrait of her body literally mapped onto the map of England in *Virgin* is suggestive of this concept of the Body Politic, and her body was identified, ship-like, with the land mass of Britain, surrounded by the sea, as Byatt explains in her "Introduction" to *Shadow*:

> But she was mythologised by her poets and courtiers as a complex virgin *moon goddess*, not only, as Frances Yates pointed out in *Astraea*, the queen and huntress chaste and fair, Diana, but the Eastern goddesses of earth and harvest, turret-crowned Cybele, Astarte. Because she was born under Virgo, and because Virgo is a high summer sign, she goes with harvest and plenty, she carries sun-ripened corn, she brings in the Golden, not the Silver Age. Ralegh apostrophised her in *The Ocean to Cynthia* as the goddess drawing all to her, like the tides. (p. xv)

This mythical view of Elizabeth I with all her facets, built

up throughout the novel from the initial viewing of the portrait, invites comparison with Elizabeth II, confirming the diminishing of the power of the latter.

In the theory of the Cosmic Dance, ever since the early Greek philosophers, creation has been figured as a musical performance. Elizabethan lute-playing was likened to the Platonic music of the spheres. The Bottle Chorus (p. 312) with the juxtaposition of the sublime and the ridiculous in the *Practica Musica* of 1492 played on lemonade bottles, is an example of a parody of the music of the spheres. There was not only music, but the created universe was believed to be one perpetual dance. Hence the added significance of the dance at Elizabeth's court, as seen in Alexander's play. Frederica's involvement in this idea of the dance, with its sexual connotations, is carried over into the sequel *Still Life*, where she takes part in another significant play, this time at Cambridge --Milton's *Comus*. As Tillyard puts it:

> Milton in *Comus*, which as a masque would turn its author's thoughts to dancing, not only expresses his sense of the world's fulness, of the vastness of the chain of being, but passes from immobility to motion. He pictures all the seas dancing in obedience to the moon and allows Comus himself to make the impudent claim that he and his crew are duplicating the dance of the planets. (Tillyard 1963, p. 111)

The masculine sun courts the earth in a dance and Elizabeth as mortal moon is surrounded by her court, the cosmic dance being reproduced in the Body Politic. In Alexander's *Astraea*, Frederica

is the young queen, in *Comus*, she is the Attendant Spirit, a sort of guardian angel placed in a pastoral setting, an intellectual being living around the sublunary realm. In the same way as the Bottle Chorus is a send-up of the Music of the Spheres, *Comus* at Cambridge is subverted and turned into a farce through the beautiful male actor not knowing his lines. Frederica saves face to some extent by her moral responsibility to the beauty of the recited poetry.

Similarly, while Lucas Simmonds's "Cosmogony" (chapter 14), with its "hypothetical Scale of Matter" (p. 146) is a ridiculous version of the Great Chain of Being, a hotch-potch of science, myth and superstition, its juxtaposition to the Elizabethan world view only does harm to itself. The "ordinary" Lucas Simmonds is a sad character, whose vision drives him mad, without his being in any way creative. Cosmogony involves myths concerning the foundation of the world, and all cosmogonic accounts speak of irreconcilable opposites like heaven and earth, light and darkness, and things totally outside the common range of perception and reason. The pseudo-logic Simmonds used was very compelling to Marcus the visionary.

Marcus is eidetic, he periodically has trouble with too much light: "He was visited by brief visions. Light. The glassy hyaline rising like a sea and drowning him." (p. 145, also p. 120). Marcus, as he matures, does not turn his visionary power into literary creation, as does Henry Severell, but he continues with his mathematics. Light (or air, in elemental terms) and

geometry are connected (as are language and geometry for Stephanie, p. 251), also geometry and earth, in the form of flesh and blood. Marcus's ordeal in a meat shop (pp. 92-5) is a linguistic tour-de-force linking vision, art, geometry, the flesh-grass connection, language and terms from the semantic field of butchery: "Through his own eyes, half-a-pig's head was a meaningful and bearable unit." (p. 94)

This aversion to meat is linked to the figure of the mythical Marsyas, a picture of which is kept by Crowe in his study. Ovid's flayed satyr is another example of metamorphosis. His flesh is connected with life, death and rebirth to creativity. Though in *Babel Tower* he is referred to as "a minor artist" (p. 575). Another minor artist, Alexander, thinks of the creation of his play as "solid incarnation". Writing is also blood out of a stone, self-consciously called by Alexander "a laboured metaphor" in his play, a metaphor Frederica will come across later in *Babel Tower* with the sculpture student Peter Stone. The metaphor may be laboured, but it is apt, as the writer is portrayed as trapped (here also in "a glassy cage", p. 17), and the urge to write must cause emergence; the emerging is a very difficult and painful process like the idea of getting blood out of a stone. Similarly, Daniel is typologically cast as Daniel in the Lion's Den (chapter 2), the lion being Stephanie's father, but the prison is also his flesh, his fat. In the reference to the Song of Songs (p. 102), the fountain is sealed, and the garden is enclosed.

In this image, virginity is seen as an entity, enclosed in boundaries, the garden walls. Frederica, in her impulse to "lose" her virginity, is seen to be at once a sort of willing sacrificial virgin, as in Lawrence's *The Virgin and the Gypsy*, and a young adult going through the rites of passage associated with myth. These processes accompanying things like birth, maturation, marriage and death indicate that man's mode of being is to suffer transformations. As Frederica ceremonially throws her school uniform into the canal (*Still Life* p. 25) and suffers the bloodbath of her sexual initiation, she emerges as an adult to face new challenges.

Still Life

In this novel, Frederica is serving her apprenticeship to writing, Alexander continues to write, both have problems with sexuality and social expectations, and Stephanie is completely frustrated in her work by her social role. Perhaps because of this, the one creator who is seen in all his magnificent success by comparison, is Van Gogh. Byatt acknowledges this in the "Introduction" to *Shadow*, indicating at the same time how certain characters come to have a sort of autonomy, or at least develop beyond the expectations of their creator in the course of the writing of the novel:

> In *Still Life* the central figure turned out to be Vincent Van Gogh, rather to my surprise, a whole-hearted sun-driven, light-driven maker (but who also had problems about sexuality and work.) Like Cassandra he was mad with too much light, but he got something done, he made something. (p. xv)

As we saw earlier, the main visual images of *Still Life*, functioning metaphorically, were the Van Goghs, *The Yellow Chair* and *Still Life with Books*. As we see now, these paintings, in their comments on life and death, also function on a mythical level. Myth, in its authoritative role, is a model for man's behaviour. The world of myth is a continuous source for the knowledge required to face the crucial problems in man's existence --life and death, truth and falsehood, good and evil, war and peace. Byatt discusses these depths of the painting through research attributed to Alexander: we are informed that the painting *The Yellow Chair* was a sort of response to Gauguin's empty chair in *Effect of Night*, where two modern novels had:

> for Van Gogh, as for Henry James, connotations of French naughtiness. They also, for Van Gogh, represented life. After his pastor-father's death he painted his heavy Bible, in dark light near two snuffed candles, looming over one small yellow novel, Zola's *La Joie de Vivre*. In Paris, learning colour, with Theo, he painted the beautiful 'Still Life with Books', a profusion of yellow novels on a clear, brilliant pink ground. (And behind these in the imagination the heavy tomes, eaten away and dusty, of the Dutch still-life masters' reminders of the vanity of human wishes, of death.) (p. 69)

Myths, in their presentation of heroes in the culture, are messianic, they involve dimensions therefore of time and eternity, providence and destiny, rebirth and renewal. The cyclical pattern of the seasons is consonant with the linear idea of time running through the historic religions, Judaic, Christian, Islamic. Sun worship takes us back to a pre-historic

time, but with renewal of interest in the sun as life-force in such as Turner, it comes to have a permanence which makes the great religions appear transitory. As Turner and Van Gogh had done in paint, Wordsworth, through the medium of words, reached back to a "mythic sense" which is the ultimate dimension of his visions of the world:

> The same Wordsworth, much-mocked, thought himself back to an innocent vision, told us that grass is green and water wet because he had reached beyond familiarity to some primal wonder that these things were so and not otherwise, to some mythic sense that he was giving or finding the words for the things, not merely repeating. (p. 59)

Still Life with Books is not the only visual, metaphorical focus in the novel. Other paintings by Van Gogh are important as mythically-structuring comments on life and death and human creativity and aesthetics. His paintings *The Sunflowers* (Alexander has prints on his wall) and *The Reaper* are equally significant. Through the sunflowers, Van Gogh relates man to his primaeval origins and at the same time creates a "mythic" Provence made up of the simple elements and the light:

> And Vincent Van Gogh? Provence is as he painted it, we use his images as icons by which to recognise certain things, the cypresses above all, the olives, some configurations of rock and vegetation [...] the light itself. He came, as Frederica did not, with precise aesthetic expectations. He expected to see 'Japanese' subjects, the colours of Monticelli, the forms of Cézanne and Renoir, the southern light lauded by Gauguin as a mystic necessity. He saw all these things, as he expected them [...] Also, and simultaneously, he saw what no

one had yet seen, what was his to see.
Sunflowers, cypresses, olives.
My dear Theo ... (pp. 60-1)

In the North, only a visionary such as Blake (who was to figure more prominently in the sequel *Babel Tower*), had "seen" the relationship between man and cosmos summed up in the at once "innocent" and "experience"-laden concept of the sunflower. Though Lawrence also saw it:

> When Van Gogh paints sunflowers, he reveals, or achieves, the vivid relation between himself, as man, and the sunflower, as sunflower, at that quick moment of time [...] The vision on the canvas is the third thing [...] It is neither man-in-the-mirror nor flower-in-the-mirror, neither is it above or below or across anything. It is in between everything. (Lawrence 1936, p. 527)

In *Still Life*, Marcus, the visionary sun-child, has his head mapped onto the head of a sunflower. His face is in its face and his hair "with staring rays of pale gold hair" (p. 32) is at once the rays of the sun and the dynamic petals of a Van Gogh sunflower. He is not fiery red like his father and sister, but "pale gold". Lakoff has described how seemingly static images and models can be made kinaesthetic and therefore be used as source domains to describe a target domain that has a dynamic: "Image-mapping can involve more than mapping physical part-whole relationships --other attributes can be mapped, i.e. colour, movement." (Lakoff, 1989, p. 91)

Such an image is a "dynamic image" and if, in addition, there is a dimension of time attached to the image, it can be

very complex and even mythical. Lakoff analyses (*op. cit.*, p. 91 etc.) the dynamic images in Blake's poem "The Sunflower" and shows how they function. This adds another mythical layer to our idea of the sunflower as we contemplate Alexander or Charles Ryder contemplating *The Sunflowers*. First, Lakoff identifies the processes of personification:

> the sun's crossing the sky is a natural event, and the sunflower's phototropic tracking of the sun is also a natural event. Through EVENTS ARE ACTIONS, these are conceived of metaphorically as actions with agents. The sun is an agent whose action is walking. The sunflower is an agent whose action is to count, and hence to follow, the steps of the sun. The sunflower further acts by seeking the west. Through the metaphor A LIFETIME IS A DAY, the west is metaphorically conceived of as associated with death. And therefore the sunflower is seeking, metaphorically, death and its afterlife. (Lakoff 1989, pp. 95-6)

As Lakoff says, this involves a highly elaborate complex of metaphorical processes, because after this personification, there is the image mapping of the heads:

> because the sunflower is a concrete physical entity, we have an image of it. Therefore, personifying the sunflower composes with mapping the image of a person onto the image of the sunflower. The face of the person corresponds to the 'face' of the sunflower [...]
>
> Similarly, because we have an image of the sun, the personification of the sun composes with mapping the image of a person onto the image of the sun. The face of the person corresponds to the circle of the sun. One might extend this image-mapping, to give the sun legs to walk along the path of his elliptic. (Lakoff 1989, pp. 95-6)

Lakoff has demonstrated the very imaginative, but logical, conceptual connections, extensions and compositions in such an image. The sun functions mythically in two ways via the sunflower. There is the sun-god sense, with human beings and plants as sun-worshippers and the sunflower as indicative of man in time, man's cycles, his mortality, the survival of the species in a seeming immortality, then the question of the truth of his possible spiritual immortality, the aspiration of Blake's sunflower. In the South, sunflowers are harvested like corn, for their seeds and oil, and the corn connection brings us back to Van Gogh's *The Reaper* and the sun-corn-death paradigm.

Byatt interpolates in her novel a discussion of Van Gogh's vision, technique and personal revelations in his letters to Theo, which shows how the artist was aiming at the primordial:

> The brushstrokes in 'The Sower' are almost tesellations, the sky flows with them, the furrows of purple earth run away from the central heavy gold sun, the sower scatters seeds of gold light which are brushstrokes in the pattern on to the dark morning clods. They are thick and solid: they are the movement of light over things, of the eye over things. In 'The Reaper' Vincent's later spiralling forms are everywhere, curling and linking the white-hot furnace of the cornfield, the blue figure of the man, the purple mountains, the green air, into one substance, his vision. He radiated brushstrokes in a self-portrait from his own eyes like twin suns. It is new and the opposite of innocent: it is seen, and thought, and made. (*Still Life* p. 109)

Lakoff (1989, pp. 26, 41, 73-6, 78-9) has documented the metaphor DEATH IS A REAPER and the metaphor from which it is

derived: A LIFETIME IS A YEAR (pp. 18, 27-8, 30, 52, 83, 86, 88). With these metaphors in his subconscious, Van Gogh actually saw a reaper from the barred window of his asylum and "saw" in a visionary way, that that reaper was Death:

> 'I saw then in this reaper --a vague figure struggling like a devil in great heat to come to the end of his task-- I saw then in it the image of death, in the sense that humanity would be the wheat one reaps. (p. 310)

This vision, Van Gogh says to his brother, was not sad, it happened in broad daylight, and in that it differs from the Palmer painting of the *Cornfield by Moonlight with the Evening Star*, which is more macabre. Perhaps death was not feared by Van Gogh, but when it comes unexpectedly to someone who has not yet reached the "harvest" of their life, it is usually terribly sad. Ans so it is with Stephanie. Just as Van Gogh was a replacement child for his elder brother who died exactly a year to the day before his birth, and a local family had tried three times to have a son of the same name and he always died, just a hundred years later, there is Ann Maguire's fortuitous tragedy. The tragedy of Stephanie is prefigured in the typological "slaughter of the innocents" (p. 7), and in the quarry tragedy where a mother lost her children in a sudden, unwarranted (not as in *Silas Marner*) blow of unexpected misfortune. Daniel remembers Stephanie in a series of fragmented aspects, especially the last view of her: "All these images were contaminated, superimposed on that other, the curled black lip [...]" (p. 345) But there is one dominant image of her, static, Madonna-like, which is not a

real oil painting, it is evoked by Byatt on the mind's eye, not in paint, only in words, but we see it almost as clearly as *The Sunflowers*. It functions more like Wordsworth's daffodils, on the "inner eye". It is an image related to birth and growth, as in the scene, captured in a sort of still, Stephanie is holding her first-born son Will and contemplating her nasturtium seedlings:

> He sat regally on Stephanie's knee and named farmyards and jungles [...] These things are banal enough and it is hard to write the wonder with which, in a mood of distance from the everyday and the solid, a woman can hear a voice speak where there has only been a wail [...] (p. 227)

The nasturtiums remind us of the sunflowers and Byatt uses lexical phrases as brushstrokes, indicating shape, colour, texture, movement and even personification (as Wordsworth does): "fringed silk trumpets of scarlet and orange", "with stamens quivering dark and powdered in their throats" (p. 228). The relation to literary or artistic creativity is the following: Stephanie cannot bring herself to select, and without selection and deliberate choice, there is no art. Art is inevitably metonymic, and great art, in its mythic dimension, selects the essence and the transcendental:

> Stephanie found it hard to be ruthless. She found it hard to kill things that coiled and ran in the earth, and harder still to thin out her seedlings properly, to pluck out some so that others might live. (p. 227)

Stephanie in her altruism (her last word), has been chosen

by the "gods" to be plucked out. She is the mythic scapegoat, the sacrificial victim of fertility rite. The word "germ" is significant here, as in the usual self-conscious way, Byatt tells us that the image of Stephanie with the packet of nasturtium seeds in her hand was the "germ" of the novel (as was the image of Sarah Woodruff staring out to sea for Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, although he says so elsewhere (12), not in the novel itself). Germination functions organically, therefore, in relating the events of these individuals' lives to the mythic conglomeration of the history of all human life and its basis in vegetative life; it relates writing to art, and along Coleridgean lines, makes a statement about literary creativity.

Babel Tower

The Babel myth is an extension of the Biblical Creation myth, for according to the Bible, after the Fall, although the perfection of Eden was lost for ever, Adam and Eve's descendents did at least have one language, and communication was no problem for them. According to the myth, the same sin as Satan's original sin of pride in wishing to equal God was repeated, though with different consequences, because of man's imperfect understanding and will. The men on earth built a tower, thinking that under their own efforts they could reach Him, and thus were punished by the division of tongues. The emphasis on the division of tongues at the beginning of the novel points to Byatt's thesis that the 1960s were characterised by total lack of consensus in all spheres, ideological, political, social, etc. A sort of new version of the Babel myth is presented through Daniel Orton, Stephanie's widower, who at the narrative's outset, about ten

years after Stephanie's death at the end of *Still Life*, is working at a counselling centre in London. He mans a telephone for the desperate in the crypt of a church, and the text from Corinthians over his telephone suggests that all human problems stem from a lack of understanding based on a breakdown in communication:

> *So likewise ye, except ye utter by the tongue words easy to be understood, how shall it be known what is spoken? For ye shall speak into the air.*
> *There are, it may be, so many kinds of voices in the world, and none of them is without signification. Therefore, if I know not the meaning of the voice, I shall be unto him that speaketh a barbarian, and he that speaketh shall be a barbarian unto me. I Corinthians 14: 9-11.* (p. 5)

The ramifications from this concept spread out and encompass all the other symbols of the novel. Daniel's phone is a "shell" (p. 4), like a snail shell, also the telephone "babbles" (p. 20). An assiduous caller is "Steelwire", an anonymous proponent of "Death of God" theology, who turns out to be Jude Mason. Mason unites the main plot of Frederica, who previews his novel *Babbletower*, with the subplot of Daniel, her brother-in-law and a pivot in the story of the family saga.

Babbletower is connected to the Eden myth, as its narrative concerns the founding of a Utopian society during the Reign of Terror in eighteenth-century France. The leader, Culvert, wants to set up "an earthly Paradise" (p. 11), "a community of entire freedom" (p. 13). But of course, entire freedom is short-lived,

and with the usual conflict over who makes the rules and what the rules are to be, the harmony dissolves into tyranny and chaos. Culvert's "blood-lust" (p. 274) ties in with Nigel Reiver's blood-lust, and the story of Culvert's sadistic treatment of the Lady Mavis and the Lady Roseace parallels Nigel's treatment of his wife Frederica. There is even a scapegoat in *Babbletower*, as the Krebs have a "King of the Day" (p. 265), a sort of sacrificial king who is put to death after being King for a day.

The idea of attempts at Utopias is connected to artistic and verbal creativity in two ways. Firstly, in the trial for obscenity of *Babbletower*, there is discussion of the theories of Sade and Charles Fourier. An eminent and bi-lingual "Professor Marie-France Smith" explains about Charles Fourier's *Nouveau Monde Amoureux*, his idea of an age of Harmony with total erotic freedom. Jude Mason suggests that Utopianism is a basic impulse in all art:

> Who was it said there are only five or six good plots? Anyway, I was always writing the same story. The story about the *group of friends* who *run away* to a *better place* and make a better life, a more beautiful life, a freer life, where they can do what they want. It's the story of Cinderella and the story of *Pilgrim's Progress* and the story of *Coral Island*, I suppose. (p. 565)

Cinderella is fairy tale so has a happy ending, but most Utopian stories lay bare the problems, and like *Babbletower* or Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, a new version of *Coral Island*, the Utopia is turned into Dystopia. As Frederica thinks of Eden, she

necessarily thinks of it as lost, and thinks of it in literary terms, the characters of Adam and Eve, Satan and Beelzebub being formed for her by *Paradise Lost*: "such mythic beings made of language and light" (p. 337).

The second way in which the concept of Utopia is connected with art and literature is through the English version of Eden. This is more a sense of nostalgia than the concrete creation in literature of specific locations and examples. And yet it is definitely connected to a certain sort of location. This location, both in reality and in the work of certain English writers, inspires an overwhelming desire for living and for unity with creation. Byatt speaks of this myth of desire in "the desire and pursuit of the Whole" (p. 312). Hugh Pink, the poet, is the character used, together with Frederica, to contemplate the relation between three dimensions: life itself, the life force, the Keatsian combination of opposites like a sense of death within the very ecstasy of living; the effect in terms of pleasure upon one when one reads or hears great poetry inspired by these; and the genetic implications of this, whereby one has a capacity to appreciate, one remembers, yet also one is transitory in this world, here to pass on the genes and disappear:

> You cannot have this particular pleasure
> in living, Hugh tells himself, before
> you have begun to know you are dying.
> He thinks it tends to come in this sort
> of landscape --bitten grass, exposed
> stones. bush, tree, hill, horizon--
> because generations of his ancestors,
> thousands and millions of years before

> towns and cities, and still after, have had this sense in this sort of place. The cells remember it, Hugh thinks. [...] The thing which can flash into the brain a memory of *this* thing, is the repeated reading of words which like turf and stones are part of the matter of the mind: the Immortality Ode, say, the Nightingale, Shakespeare's sonnets. There again the pleasure of the sense of one's own vanishing briefness, Hugh stumbles-- is part of the pleasure in the durable words. (p. 17)

Hugh's meditations on death and thoughts about Wordsworth and Keats continue the discussion begun with Stephanie at the beginning of the tetralogy on the power of great art and its place in our lives. Dissatisfaction with this life and the power of the imagination to create a more perfect one are seen as leading impulses in literary and artistic creativity.

4.6 Creation myths in *Possession*

The primaeval myths which inform *Possession* are also both Edenic and pagan, related to origins, vegetal life and fertility cults. The first are cosmogonic creation stories --the Judaic *Genesis* and the Garden of Eden, and the Nordic *Ragnarök* with the two trees. As J. Stephen Fountain has confirmed:

> Each of the two primarily linear narratives (nineteenth and twentieth century) is informed by a mythical, and therefore primarily cyclical, narrative, implicitly animating the roles of the 'real life' characters and their respective societies, and explicitly illuminating the text as a whole. (Fountain 1994, p. 204)

Fountain maintains that the *Ragnarök*, the recurrent mythical narrative which pervades the poetry of Ash and LaMotte, in its inclusion of the apocalyptic suffering and collapse of the world tree, is related to the "Dream of the Rood". Brittany, with its "mysticism of the centre" (p. 364), has neither linear nor cyclical time, only central and peripheral relevance. The end of the book, in the events concerning Roland and Maud, sees a sort of combination of both genesis and apocalypse, what Fountain calls "the site of recurrent displacement and re-establishment" (Fountain 1994, p. 205). Brittany is the site for a corpus of myth representing the European fairy tale, with its Celtic origins. It also concerns life and death, good versus evil, heaven and hell, light and dark, and the cult of beauty in the hero and heroine.

Also cyclical is the classical Greek dimension. The story of Persephone or Proserpina, the Greek explanation of the cycles of nature as sacrifice, resurrection and redemption, is a leitmotif running through Ash's poetry and the whole book.

Basic to all of these is the composition of matter, hence the four elements are as important here as in the tetralogy, the usual binary oppositions, particularly the man/woman dichotomy, both biological and cultural, and the concept of flux, transformation, metamorphosis. Discussion of these issues is interwoven into the text in an apparently random way, but everything connects, as in the Great Chain. There is also an

overall sense of history from the primitive, Druidical, Greek, Semitic, and the medieval Christian, brought together in the nineteenth-century attempt to view the history of man the species. Ash and Christabel are used in this exploration, as are Roland and Maud for the added twentieth-century view. The ultimate dimension is the problem of language, the putting of all this into words. In this, the genre of the novel is vital, for as Mª Aída Díaz Bild has shown, in applying Bakhtin's polyphonic voices theory to *Possession*, (Díaz Bild 1993), the past becomes more accessible through the novel. The present can become a continuation of the past, and is not closed off from it as in the hermetic world of the epic and its "absolute past".

Vickery, in his analysis of the three twentieth-century versions of the story of "Leda and the Swan" (Vickery 1983), has shown how contemporary writers use myth for different purposes. The "strategies of displacement" can be for structural purposes, for example, Aldous Huxley in his poem uses the myth as a story or report, so it gives structure to his poem; for rhetorical purposes --Yeats uses the myth as symbol; or the adaptation can be attitudinal, as in Robert Graves's version, where the myth functions as explanation or mirror. A. S. Byatt uses myth for all these purposes. *Possession* is structured by the "Quest" myths, whether it is the Holy Grail or the Rapunzel story, and they function iconically. In the case of the Holy Grail, like the Babel story, it is an extension of the story of Eden, as the attempt is to make an effort to restore past times which were better than the present. A myth such as the rape of Persephone

by the god of the Underworld is evoked with an endless paradigm of interrelated items such as corn, apples, light, dark, etc., all of which function symbolically and rhetorically. In the meditation upon nineteenth-century versus twentieth-century thought systems and values prompted in the reader by the novel, we have the use of myth for an attitudinal purpose, not to impose a world view, but to invite the reader to consider different views throughout history and throughout the world in order to perceive more clearly what his or her own twentieth-century perspective might be.

At the beginning of the novel Roland is drawing up his lists and writing his cross-references: "Roland wrote neat cross-references under the headings of grain, apples, chain, treasure" (p. 4). It is not yet obvious whether these lists are absurd, and therefore a sort of send-up of the use of absurd lists by some writers of metafiction. He is investigating Ash's study of the myth of Proserpina as a link in the chain of man's evolution: "Is Proserpina the Species? A very C19 idea. Or is she the individual? When did he put these papers in here? Are they pre- or post- *The Origin of Species*?" (p. 4)

Maud and Leonora Stern are studying the Melusina myth and its man/woman opposition in the poetry of Christabel LaMotte. One imagines Roland has lists of words which extend in vertical paradigms, as in the Great Chain, with or without connections to the item above or below, but certainly with horizontal connections between the lists. He has seen, for example, the

connections between the apple/apricot of the Garden of Eden, the apricots in the walled garden of his house which once belonged to Marvell, Proserpina's apples, corn, Melusina, Adonis, etc. He is also beginning to see, as the reader sees, how elements like water (and different fluids), air (light) and its effects (like the rainbow), the fruitful earth (also rocks, hills and hollows), and fire (electricity), permeate all the myths and all the stories. They make horizontal syntagmatic connections between the paradigmatic lists, as in a structuralist matching-up exercise. In the "Introduction" to *Shadow*, Byatt explains her own discovery of the connections:

> And in his poetry too Ash accepts that the 'golden apples' of the underworld dark goddess Persephone, are, according to Vico, the corn that springs from the furrow. It is interesting to reflect, looking back at those first suns, moons and corn how instinctively they were found, how long, although I had all the material for doing so, they took to understand and work out. (p. xvi)

Leonora, in her feminist study, has isolated her base-terms or her archetypes and has organised the motifs or lexical entries under the matrixes: "Maud had lent him Leonora Stern's book on *Motif and Matrix in the Poems of LaMotte*" (p. 243). Byatt creates here a pastiche of feminist academic writing with its "authoritative" references to Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray (p. 244). The chapter headings: "From Venus Mount to the Barren Heath", "Female Landscapes and Unbroken Waters, Impenetrable Surfaces", "From the Fountain of Thirst to the Armorican Ocean-skin" (p. 243) reveal that Leonora finds that Christabel's

symbols, like the various strategies of self-displacement employed by the best of the Victorians like Elizabeth Barrett Browning or Christina Rossetti, cover a wide sweep of female history. She traces the significance of water and fluids from the birth of Venus, with all the sexual connotations involved, through George Eliot, Charlotte Brontë up to the meaning of waves in Virginia Woolf. Leonora's method is to establish a matrix, say fluid, then she traces the historical overview. At the same time she draws up the paradigms of motifs for each matrix, which she writes out horizontally. So in the matrix "Fluids --female language" she has a Roland-style list:

> Melusine's fountain has a *female* wetness, trickling out from its pool rather than rising confidently, thus mirroring those female secretions which are not inscribed in our daily use of the language (*langue*, tongue) --the sputum, mucus, milk and bodily fluids of women who are silent for dryness. (p. 245)

Byatt's sense of humour urges her to make gentle fun while basically agreeing at the same time. She has Leonora give the same treatment to every possible concavity that might be interpreted as a female sexual orifice, and if there is hair present, so much the better, as she collects her lexical items: "a 'pelt' of 'mosses', 'worts', 'mints' and 'maidenhair' ferns" (p. 245). This is viewed ironically, because we see the possible ambivalent attitude to this kind of writing. Roland is at once convinced by it: "He did not like this vision, and yet, a child of his time, found it compelling, somehow guaranteed to be significant" and repelled: "Roland laid aside Leonora Stern with

a small sigh. He had a vision of the land they were to explore, covered with sucking human orifices and knotted human body-hair." (p. 246)

Byatt has created pseudo-subterranean paradigms and pseudo-analogies based on ancient myths and recently-identified male-female myths. They all give structure and function rhetorically and suggest possible attitudinal models. Byatt might have taken the mocking parody further and had Leonora, with her up-to-date approach, categorize the phallic symbols in the traditional vertical paradigm, and the female domains in circular patterns. Lakoff (1987) has shown that the traditional neo-Platonic approach to categorization of a paradigm, with its prototype and accompanying equal partners in the group, or matrix and equally important motifs, is probably fallacious and certainly not common to all cultures.

In a classical taxonomic approach, each taxonomy is an idealised cognitive model --a hierarchical structure of classical categories-- and each category is represented structurally by a CONTAINER schema. The hierarchy is represented structurally, like the Great Chain of Being, by UP-DOWN schemas, also PART-WHOLE schemas. Each higher-order category is a whole, with the immediately lower categories being its parts. A classical taxonomy is intended to be exhaustive, categorizing all the items in some domain in terms of their properties. The highest category in the taxonomy encompasses the entire domain. Such a model is really invented by us, it does not correspond to, or mirror,

nature. In a domain, there may be more than one matrix or important entity, and relations exist which cannot be reflected in a simple UP-DOWN or PART-WHOLE schema. Lakoff (1987, p. 371) shows that objectivist classical theory cannot account for conceptual categories, categories in the world and the hypothesised relationship between these. This is because human conceptual categories have properties partly created and affected by the fact that those doing the categorizing are determined by their bodily natures. Also, the opposite happens, for human conceptual categories have properties that are the result of imaginative processes such as metaphor and metonymy. He suggests replacing the classical method of categorization with a more relative experiential view based on prototypes. For him, basic-level category structuring reflecting our bodily-based point of view is more accurate, as it also is in our human imaginative processing in the act of categorizing --our capacity to form mental images, to store knowledge at a particular level of categorization, and to communicate. Lakoff explains the types of imaginative processes prototype structure can show up. They are concepts such as metonymy (the capacity to let one thing stand for another for some purpose), the ability to construct and use idealized models, and the ability to extend categories from central to non-central members using imaginative capacities such as metaphor, metonymy, mythological associations, and image relationships.

Lakoff's explanations enable us to see more clearly the true relationships between items or entities belonging to different

domains. As R. H. Ash in *Possession* tries to understand human life and classify it, we, the readers, have to try to follow the paths of his research down which Byatt leads us. As he studies creation myths, we see that there is not one prototype or matrix with all the members in the category being of equal importance, nor do they come in descending order as in the Great Chain. Lakoff's discussion of central and non-central members (based on his IMPORTANT IS CENTRAL/ LESS IMPORTANT IS PERIPHERAL concept) brings us back to his advocation of a relative approach, of items being closer to or further from the prototype or prototypes, and to the idea of Leonora and her phallus/orifice dichotomy. A circular container rather than a vertical rectangular one might be a better instrument with which to approach the classification of all the entities and correspondences in the different concept domains of *Possession*. For example, Radial Category Structure (Lakoff 1987, p. 287) would enable us to structure examples by the CENTRE-PERIPHERY schema. The overall category is represented as a circular container, with container sub-categories inside. One of these is central and the others radiate outwards from it, linked in different ways. Non-central categories can be accounted for in all their importance and complexity, for they in their turn may be sub-centres, also having a centre-periphery structure.

The CREATION paradigm

In an attempt to demonstrate how this can function, let us take as an example the central concept in the novel of CREATION

and the PARADISE/ HELL dichotomy according to Western myths. The radial structure would be as in Figure 1, and each subcategory, the Judaic, Greek, Nordic and Celtic, brings with it a whole paradigm of related entities. As is inevitable, Byatt evokes these paradigms metonymically. The items could be mapped out radially again, linking up all the correspondences, but this would be a mind-boggling, also artificial task. In any case, the reader who is more or less aware of these connections is free to a certain extent to give them importance in his or her own appreciation of the work. Some of these linked entities as as follows:

Subcategory Greek Garden of Proserpina

The doubly fictitious R. H. Ash's *The Garden of Proserpina* with its mythical symbols: garden, the Hesperidean grove, tree, eternal boughs, fruit of gold, grassy space, running water, woman, the hero Herakles, serpent, the dragon Ladon (p. 1), Mother Earth (p. 405)

The book (Vico) has the authority of the Bible (p. 1)

"Vico had looked for historical fact in the poetic metaphors of myth and legend [...] His Proserpine was the corn, the origin of commerce and community [...] a Victorian reflection of religious doubt, a meditation on the myths of resurrection." (p. 3)

"Lord Leighton had painted her" (p. 3) --print on Christabel's

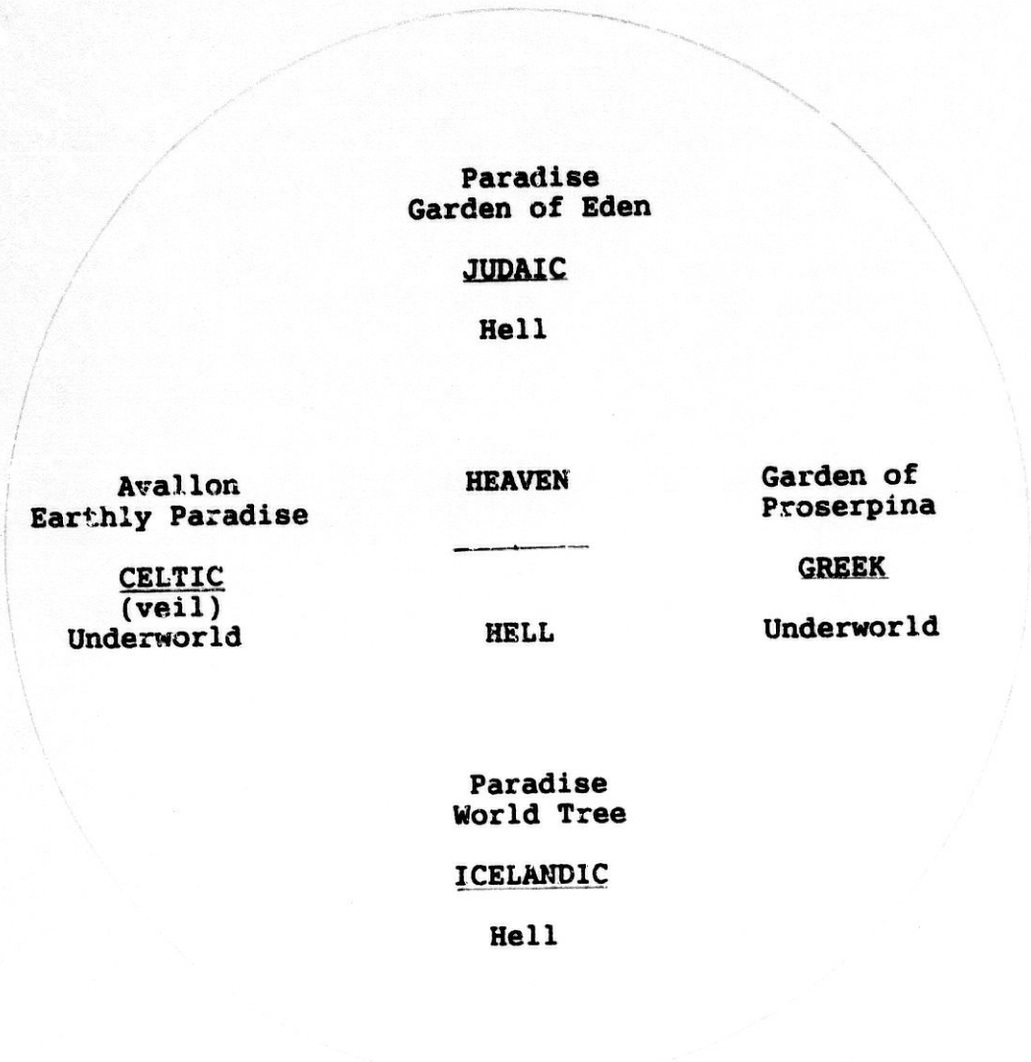

FIGURE 1. The Creation Paradigm in *Possession*

wall at Seal Court (p. 85)

"a personification of history" (p. 3)

"ears of grain were called apples of gold" (p. 4) "chains", "treasures" (p. 4)

"Proserpine (another name for Ceres or grain) (p. 4)

"It was of this golden apple that Virgil (...) made the golden bough Aneas carries into the Inferno or Underworld" (p. 4)

The British Museum Reading Room is Dante's *Paradiso* to Roland, so the Inferno in the novel is "the Ash Factory" in the basement of the Museum: "the Ash Factory, hutched in the bowels of the building was the Inferno" (p. 26)

Subcategory Judaic Garden of Eden

"God's Garden" (p. 406), "God's unearthly Orchard of Desire" (p. 405) (though ironic)

References to Creation in Christabel's poem (pp. 290-1)

The Garden of Eden is the garden of the Putney basement flat where Roland the Mole lives with Val; but the flat itself, its ceiling dripping with cats' urine, is Hell. They were tempted in by the owner "an old witch", who seduced them with the apricots

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on the wall which centuries before had belonged to Andrew Marvell's patron (p. 17). The apricot is the apple of Eve, so the owner is both the serpent and the wicked stepmother as in Snow White. The flat therefore represents the life of penury before the finding of the letter and the start of the Quest which can lead to Heaven.

Subcategory Nordic *Ragnarök*

Ragnarök, like the *Götterdämmerung*, means the "Doom of the Gods", the end of the world of gods and men. Its description in the late tenth-century Icelandic poem shows it is preceded by cruel winters (the snow in Lincolnshire in *Possession*) and moral chaos. Giants and demons (Cropper and Wolff?) hold sway and the innocent hero Balder, the dying god, (Roland) is slain, but later will rise from the dead and come into his glory. Influenced by the Christian and Oriental conceptions of the Day of Doom, according to one version, two human beings, Lif and Lifthrasir (Life and Vitality) will emerge from the world tree (which was not destroyed) and will repeople the Earth. Frazer had stressed the vegetative basis of primitive religion and found one of its earliest expressions in the tree worship he traced throughout Europe:

> [I]t is necessary to examine in some detail the notions on which the worship of trees and plants is based. To the savage the world in general is animate, and trees and plants are no exception to the rule. He thinks that they have souls like his own, and he treats them accordingly. (Frazer 1890 & 1926, I, ii, p. 12)

As examples, we have:

All the references to R. H. Ash being a tree: "my namesake, the mighty Ash [...] our Norse forefathers once believed it held the world together, rooted in the underworld and touching Heaven" (p. 95)

Wordsworth and trees (p. 95)

"the world Ash" (p. 464)

Ask and Embla (man and woman) (p. 241)

"the creeping Nidhogg" (p. 22)

Ash and Christabel are Ask and Embla and people the earth through their daughter Maia (may or hawthorn) and her descendents such as Maud.

Celtic subcategory

"The Druid religion [...] had a mysticism of *the centre* --there was no linear time, no before and after-- but a still centre -- and the Happy Land of Sid [...]" (p. 364)

"a summer land of apples" (p. 364)

"messengers" (p. 364)

"veil" (p. 364)

"threshold of death" (p. 364)

"Mélusine --the French Ceres with her golden apples" (p. 174)

All the references to an idyllic garden of England:

English flowers - Titania - "Charles Darwin's tangled bank" (p. 148)

flowers - may/hawthorn - are alive (p. 178) (The may-Maia connection suggests that the cosmogonies are related chronologically with the different ages or generations in the novel: thus Vico is associated with the Greco-Roman, Ash and Christobel, the older generation, represent the Nordic cosmogony, their daughter Maia is associated with the later Celtic, and Roland and Maud, like it or not, belong to the Western culture where the dominant religion is the Christian, growing from the Judaic.)

Shakespeare's thickets and Morris's paintings (p. 268)

"Paradise Garden" (p. 286)

Victorian "language of flowers" (p. 259)

Tennyson - Camelot - Ash's "The Incarcerated Sorceress" -

ploughed fields of Lincolnshire (Maud's working area) (pp. 68 & 103)

The Pre-Raphaelites (their 1850 magazine called *The Germ*) - one thinks of the poem-painting combinations, *The Lady of Shalott* Tennyson/Holman Hunt work being a model for the use of the Merlin and Vivien painting, with the may-hawthorn prominent, or Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *Proserpine* or *Mnemosyne* (Christabel's poem, p. 293) and the Lord Leighton *Proserpina* already mentioned, which seems more Arthurian than Greek.

The Arthurian world contrasts with the contemporary hell of Victorian Industrial England, especially London (Blake and Dickens)

Trees are alive with spirits, whether Greek or Celtic, or even Christianised, at "Bethany", Christabel and Blanche's house, the trees Roland and Maud see are the ones Christabel knew, though they are dying of acid rain (another apocalypse?). At the end of the Quest, the real-life great storm of 1987, so disastrously underpredicted by the weather forecast, is incorporated. As if protesting at the desecration of Ash's grave by the wicked harvester Cropper, the great churchyard trees fall, and one takes vengeance by falling on his Mercedes (p. 495).

Further subcategories of the CREATION concept: metamorphosis, the

four elements, the man/woman dichotomy

Metamorphosis

Common to all these creation-apocalypse stories is the concept of knowledge and the concomitant idea of flux or metamorphosis. At the beginning of the novel, ignorance is "a grey mist" (p. 7), but man is impelled to seek knowledge: "our tireless quest to know" (p. 209). According to the Genesis myth, Satan changed his form from that of angel to that of serpent to tempt Adam and Eve. Eating of the fruit of the Tree of Good and Evil brought them drastic and permanent change. Change in the Proserpina and Melusina myths is cyclical. We can draw up a list of examples of metamorphosis in the novel, and most of them are related to the snake/serpent/dragon paradigm or the water-based equivalents:

the serpent (p. 1)

the dragon Ladon (p. 1)

the creeping Nidhogg (p. 22)

"stinking five-mile worm of traffic" (p. 22)

Melusina, half fish or serpent becomes a dragon (p. 33)

Christabel's insect poems, spiders (p. 134)

Lacan on flying fish and vesicle persecution (pp. 138-40)

fish in Christabel's poem and in the pool at Seal Court (p. 141)

Moray eel (p. 147)

Christabel's poems in the series on Psyche --in love with a serpent (p. 161)

Her poems *Metamorphosis* and *Psyche* (p. 161) and Ash's letters (p. 165)

spiders again (pp. 182 & 287)

Swammerdam studying metamorphosis of insects --Ash's poem (pp. 202 & 206)

mother - Queen - Bee - Ant (p. 208)

amoeba - whale - Moby Dick (pp. 250 & 290)

"shape-changers" - Melusina (p. 292)

"shape-shifting" (pp. 255-6)

jet, once alive (pp. 255-6)

Little Mermaid, "hair [...] snaked" (p. 260)

tunnel spiders (p. 265)

seal/woman "Metamorphoses interest me" - Ash (p. 280)

seal-wives, selkies, white ladies (Seal Court?) (pp. 280-3)

medusas (p. 247) (Freud and Medusa-head castration fantasy, p. 315)

"Millenarial Crawling" - Leonora's ex-boyfriend on serpents: Blake, Whitman and Ezekiel (p. 311)

waves "shape-shifting monsters" (p. 331)

Sabine de Kercoz on insects (p. 339)

church spire "metamorphic form" of an ancient Druidic stone (p. 351)

mermaids and whales (p. 357)

Christabel - serpent (p. 366)

Aesop's frozen serpent (p. 370)

sea anemones (p. 406)

sea-spiders, "serpent-tongued pick" (p. 428)

sleep - a different state (p. 452)

Goethe and metamorphosis of plants (p. 451)

Swedenborg and the successive states of being of the Celtic world (p. 364)

The Celtic idea of successive states of being or of cyclical repetition is exploited by Byatt structurally and rhetorically in the novel. Roland and Maud are a repetition of Ash and Christabel: they admire each other professionally and come to love each other, they walk in harmony, visit Yorkshire and the Boggle Hole together (p. 286) as a sort of pilgrimage to Eden, with its repetition of the lovely flowers. Byatt adds an ironic dimension through inversion, for Roland and Maud's visit is described in the novel before Ash and Christabel's, and they go there because they think that Ash and Christabel had *not* been there. "Life is One" (p. 205), it is circular in Ash's poem *Swammerdam*. Christabel is the centre of Ash's desire, she holds his past and future and is "an hour-glass containing time" (p. 287). Memory, Mnemosyne, holds the thread, as in Christabel's poem (p. 293), that links her "modern mind to those of ancient days", and similarly links Roland and Maud and the modern reader to the past. Byatt thus reworks in a post-modern, metafictional way the Modernist concern about time, identity and memory.

The importance of metamorphosis to literary creativity is that basic entities may have different forms, there may be no

single viewpoint, and material must be transformed to produce art. Roland at the end of the book has his lists and his connections, now he needs the alchemist's touch to transform this material into the gold of great poetry, as his master Ash had done before him.

The FOUR ELEMENTS paradigm

Just as there are binary opposites in the concept of CREATION or LIFE/DEATH, but also nothing is fixed or static, but metamorphosis is common to all concepts of creation, suggesting a possibility of stages in between, in the concept of COMPOSITION OF MATTER, we have the opposites of male FIRE and female WATER, HOT and COLD and WET and DRY, but the elements of AIR and EARTH (INSUBSTANTIAL and SOLID) intervene to separate the two, as in figure 2.

Parallel to metamorphosis, there was the idea of TRANSMUTATION, whereby different mixes of the base elements gave different results and ultimately thereby, the alchemists believed any metal could be transformed into gold.

Just as in *Virgin*, where there were fiery Potters and pale, watery or light-sensitive Potters, in *Possession*, we have the binary-opposite combination of the poet R. H. Ash representing fire and Christabel water. Their names point to this, for Ash is not only the tree, but the ash from a fire, as of burnt wood, and Christabel LaMotte, is the Lady in her tower, protected by water

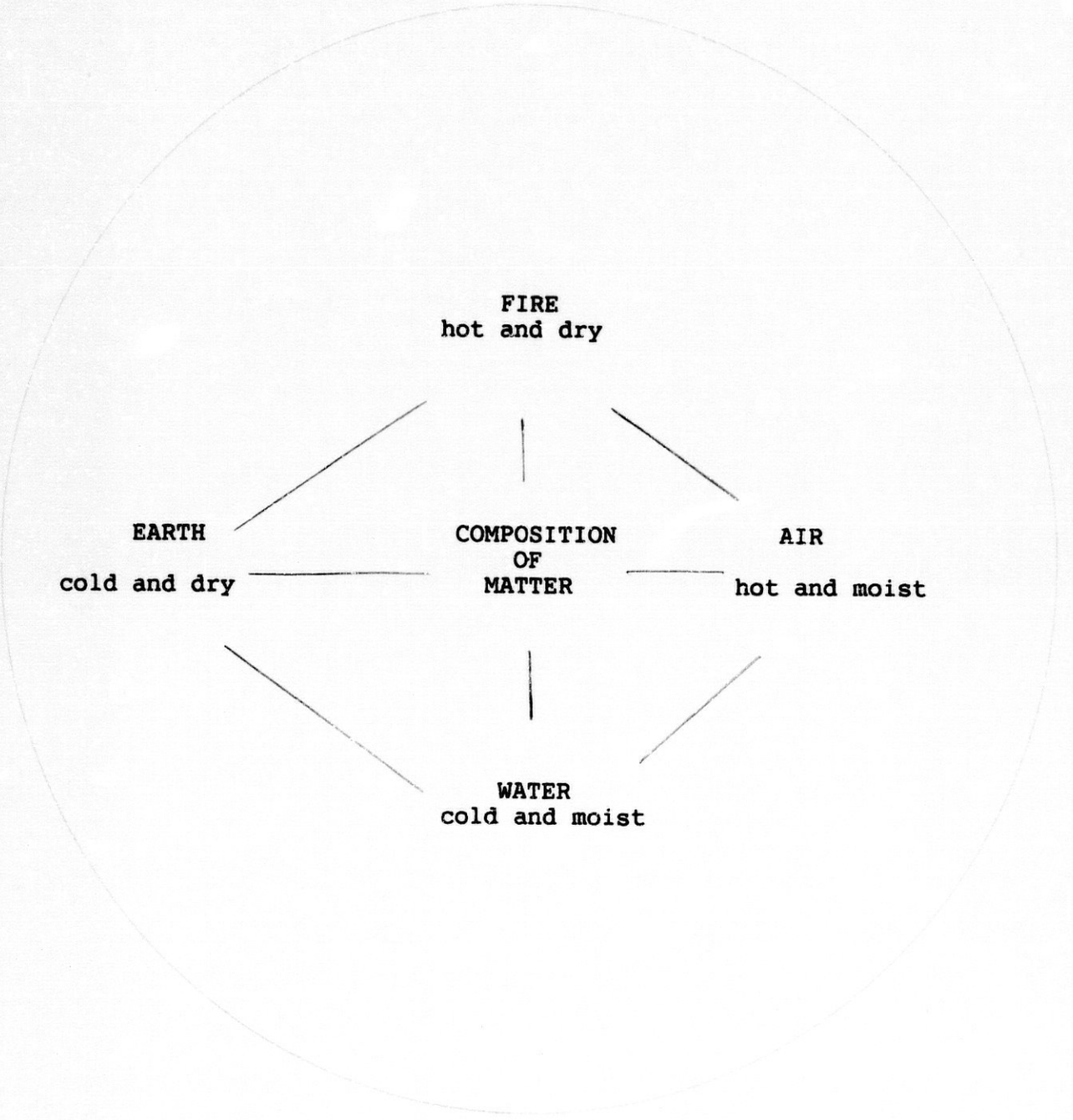

FIGURE 2. The Four Elements Paradigm in *Possession*

all around. One could say that poetry is the phoenix --literary activity will always be carried on, and from Ash's ashes is reborn the poetry Roland is going to compose. Ash predicts this in a letter to Christabel (p. 195).

Water

The water paradigm is set out in figure 3. It is much larger than any other, partly through the female fluids extension and Christabel's interest in Melusina. It asks to be set out radially, as certain examples are obviously more central. But it is difficult not to be arbitrary at times, and given the sheer extent, we revert to the vertical paradigm for the full list:

Maud associated with green water - clothes, car, bathroom (pp. 38-9)

The Fontaine de Vaucluse in Aix-en-Provence (p. 108), also the Fountain in Ash's *The Great Ventriloquist*, which Cropper relates to Coleridge's Sacred River and the Fountain of the Muses.

The Fountain Sealed, Ash's poem, related to his wife's frigidity and inspired by the *Song of Songs* (p. 111)

the women of the drowned city of Is are transparent (p. 133)

water - female - Leonora and the subterfuge of nineteenth-century erotic: blood, milk, amniotic fluid (p. 139)

electric shock at pool (p. 142)

"kick galvanic" in bathroom, Maud to Roland, related to Ash and Christabel and Moray eel (p. 147)

toilets sinister (p. 149)

optic glass of Swammerdam (p. 158)

(The Rime of) the Ancient Mariner (p. 175)

Fountain of Thirst (p. 184)

visionary water-hound of Elizabeth I "seen" by Ash in Richmond Park (p. 184) - related to Ash's vision of Christabel's dog Tray (name from *Lear*) (p. 352)

Noah's ravens (p. 188)

Christabel's "watery empire" - Thames rising, rain in Richmond Park (p. 190)

storm - the Flood - rainbow - meeting between Ash and Christabel in Richmond Park - Wordsworth (p. 194)

Chinese dragon (watery) (p. 196) - later Maud in dragon dressing-gown, then in bath like Melusina in marble tub

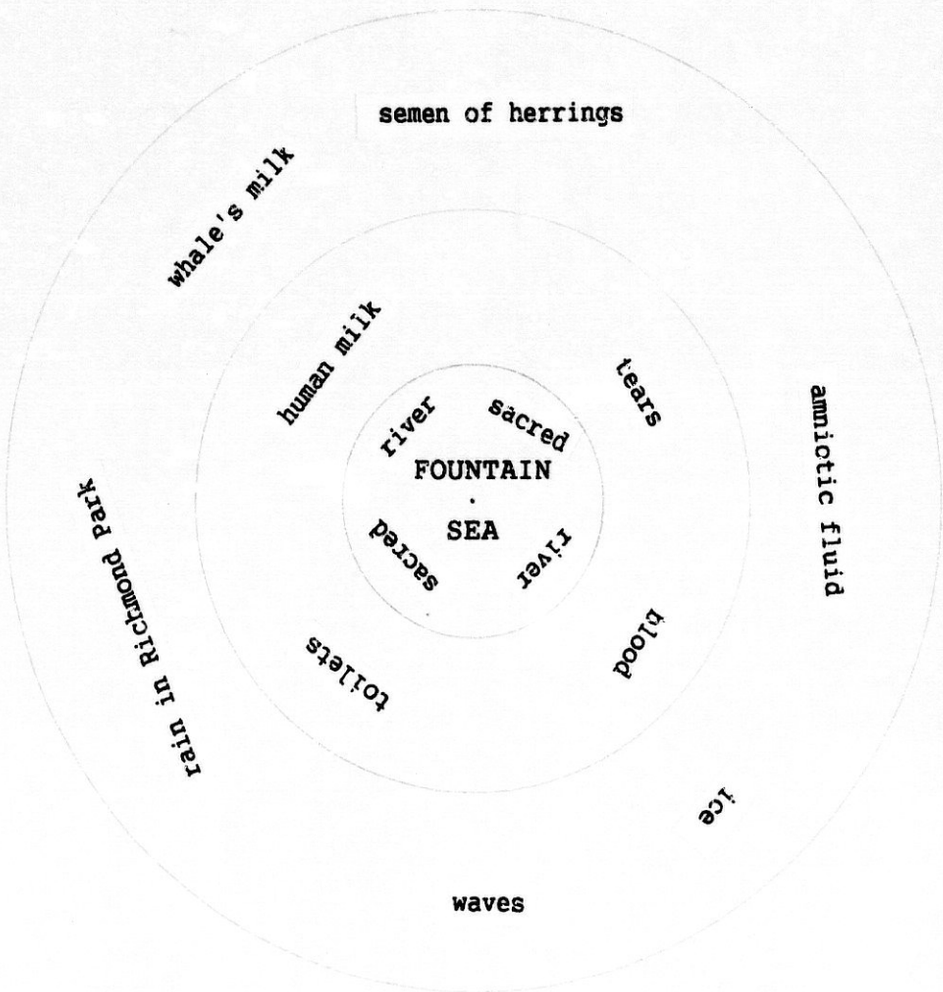

FIGURE 3. The Water Paradigm in *Possession*

the four elements in Ash's post-1860 poetry: Roland comments on "this elemental streak --water and stones and earth and air. He mixes up geysers from Lyell with Norse myth and Greek mythical fountains. And Yorkshire water-falls. And I wondered about the Fountain of Thirst in *Melusina*." (p. 237)

Christabel's heroines are "watery beings" - c.f. George Eliot's "Red Deeps", Virginia Woolf's waves, Charlotte Brontë (p. 244)

Shakespeare's *Troilus*: "wat'ry palate" (p. 282)

waves of the sea - Christabel (p. 283)

Christabel: "chilly mortal" - Ice Maiden (p. 286), c.f. Maud "icily regular" (p. 316)

blood - stone (p. 287)

water and milk in *Fairy Melusine*, sweet/salt (p. 289)

whale's milk (p. 290)

Mary Wollstonecraft and Blanche Glover's suicide in Thames (p. 308)

Christabel - trip across English Channel in storm - the City of Is (pp. 330-1)

"sea of milk" - "la mer de lait" - semen of herrings (p. 333)

local saints in fountains and trees (p. 351)

sea = Death in Gode's story (p. 361)

blood - milk - stone - bone poems by Christabel after childbirth

"Spilt Milk" - Lady Macbeth (p. 381)

"communal body fluids" - Leonora and AIDS (p. 403)

crystal ball - drowned world (p. 406)

"swampy primal creeks" (p. 464)

the pervasive rain - English (p. 490)

the great storm of October 1987 (narrative climax) (p. 493)

Fire

Ash and fire - salamander - firedrake - conflagration - Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego - incandescence - pyre - phoenix - Ash and Christabel's correspondence (p. 194)

Ash Factory - Crematorium (p. 235)

Ash and the hearth and home: "Shall our hearth's ash grow pale" -

line common to both Ash's and Christabel's poetry (p. 237)

the final Fire - Honir, the dark God of the hidden flames - Ash's *Ragnarök* (p. 240)

fire and crystals (p. 458)

Earth

stones, earth and air (p. 237)

rocks (p. 259)

ammonites (c.f. *The French Lieutenant's Woman*) - stone - braids of Christabel's hair - transmutation (p. 286)

basalt, granite, blood-stone (p. 287)

rocks and jewels in *The Fairy Melusine* (p. 296)

Christabel's Yorkshire stones make Blanche Glover's suicide attempt more successful than Mary Wollstonecraft's (p. 308) - also the name Woll*stone*craft

a stony song (p. 337)

Standing Stones - phallic symbols - pagan rituals (p. 351)

dolmens - Lady Chapel and granite image (p. 367)

stones in séance to contact Blanche Glover (pp. 396-7)

Air

stones, earth and air in Ash's post-1860 poetry (p. 237)

Yorkshire air - alive (p. 263)

effect of light (p. 266)

"hot light" of Ash (p. 286)

Leonora is a "warm front" coming across the Atlantic (p. 310)

the song of the wind (p. 337)

light - spectrum - colours (p. 394)

Rainbow

Light and its components brings us to the significance of the rainbow in the novel. Ash writes to Christabel after their meeting during a storm in Richmond Park, where they declare their love:

> Do you remember [...] how we saw the Rainbow [...] where light suffused the watery drops in the indrowned air -- and the Flood was stayed-- and we -- we stood under the arch of it, as though the whole earth were ours, by new Covenant --And from foot to distant foot of the rainbow is one bright, joined curve, though it shifts with our changing vision. (pp. 193-4)

Ruskin, as Victorian Sage --one of the facets of Ash-- had written a sermon on the typological significance of the rainbow, in *The Stones of Venice* in 1851:

> In that heavenly circle which binds the statutes of colour upon the front of the sky, when it became the sign of the covenant of peace, the pure hues of divided light were sanctified to the human heart for ever [...] (Ruskin 1851-3, X, pp. 174-5)

The rainbow was interpreted by Christian exegetes as a type of Christ, who both brought the new covenant of grace and was Himself its sign. The rainbow therefore represents peace and a new beginning, but it also represents love. This is not actually said explicitly in Byatt's novel, but we know it metaphorically, as the image of the rainbow is mapped onto the love situation, whether it be the primal model of the God-man love, or a literary example as in Lawrence. As Lakoff (1989, p. 92) explains:

> Image-metaphors can trigger and reinforce metaphors that map conceptual knowledge and inferential structure [...] The structure of a rainbow, its band of curved lines [...] we know that rainbows are beautiful, special, inspiring, larger than life, almost mystic, and that seeing them makes us happy and

awestruck. This knowledge is mapped onto what we know of (the target domain).

Thus the rainbow seals the bond between Ash and Christabel and signals a new life, though not together and happy as they might have wished. We hope the later pair will be happier, indeed, Maud appears in a rainbow halo before the stained glass of Seal Court library (p. 133) and Roland is fascinated for ever. The reader of *Possession* also enjoys the advantage of having read *Jane Eyre* where the elements are associated with the passions, and of course, Lawrence.

The MAN/WOMAN paradigm

The roles played by men and women in A. S. Byatt's novels are those found in the traditional social establishment, and we have set them out in Figure 4 according to Lakoff's idealised metaphor GOOD IS UP / BAD IS DOWN, also the general concept that youth and beauty are desirable and therefore GOOD and UP also, but that the latter are obviously usually opposed to knowledge and wisdom. We shall see how social roles are accentuated by Byatt's use of myth, and as a prelude to the next chapter, how they are approved of or disapproved of by society. Not surprisingly, men display the male qualities of free, convex and overt, while females are enclosed, concave and covert.

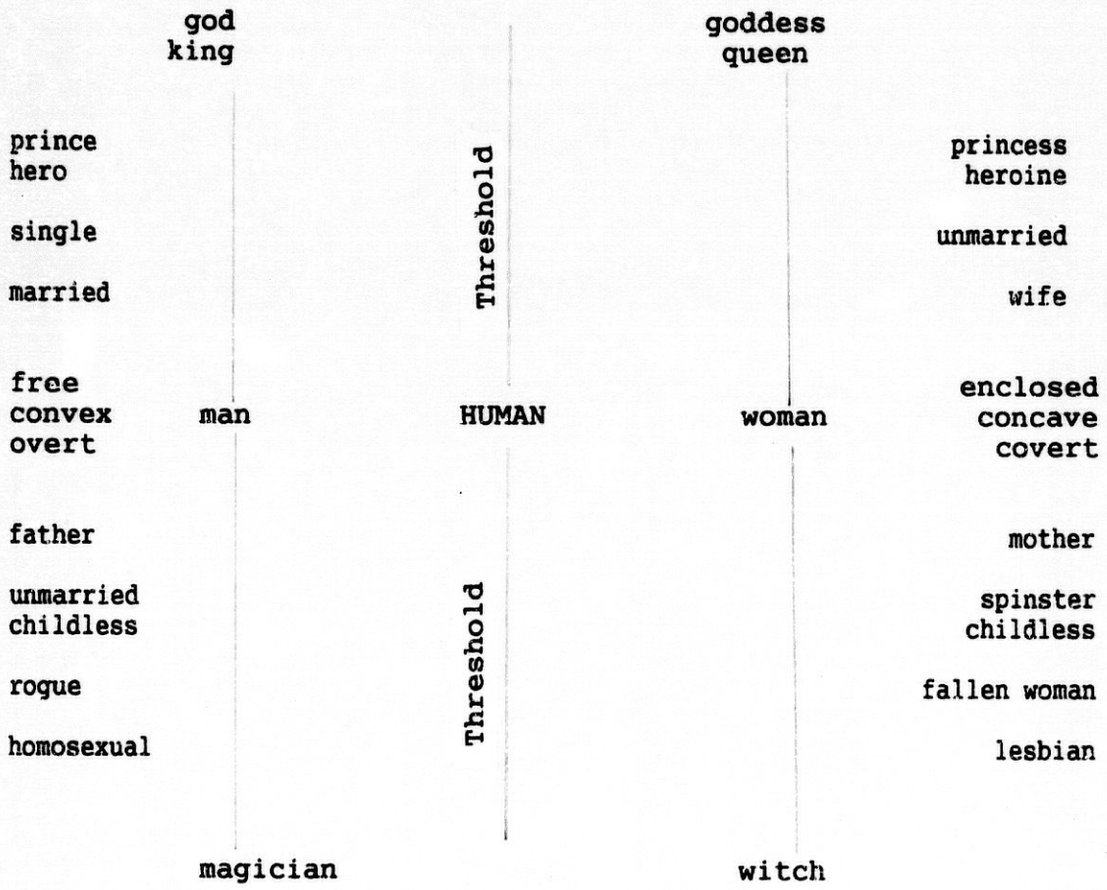

FIGURE 4. The Man/Woman Paradigm in *Possession*

Man/ woman

Like Adam and Eve in the Judaeo-Christian creation story, Adam being made from clay and Eve from one of his ribs, in the Norse cosmogony, the gods make the first man and woman from two trees. In Ash's version of *Ragnarök*, they are ash and elder, giving birth to Ask and Embler (p. 241), who are Ash and Ellen in the novel. But the truly fulfilled pair, in terms of procreation, are Ash and Christabel, to be continued by Roland and Maud.

God-king/goddess-queen

The tetralogy is a novel sequence that deals with the whole of society, including the idea of monarchy, both past and present, and in comparison, *Possession* has little to say about kingship. The only king is Balder, of the *Ragnarök*, celebrated in Ash's poem. The queens incidentally referred to are St Etheldreda, the Virgin Queen who became the Abbess of Ely, where Christabel is buried (p. 69) and Queen Elizabeth I, whom Ash sees in a vision, hunting like the virgin goddess Diana in Richmond Park. Also, Fergus Wolff calls Christabel Queen of the Castle, and Melusina "a minor Ceres" (p. 138). It is strange that Byatt does not have Ash, Ellen or Christabel make some reference to Queen Victoria, but perhaps this truly reflects her seclusion from society; compared to Elizabeth I, she was publically invisible.

Prince-hero/princess-heroine

Despite the fact that the poet R. H. Ash plays a central role in the novel, both in his person and in his poetry, *Possession* is really a book about females: Christabel, Maud, even Blanche, Ellen, Leonora and Beatrice Nest, are far more interesting as people and creators than the males. It is not surprising, therefore, that there are far more references to the female side of the paradigms. There are no princes in this romance: "meek Roland" (p. 142) is an anti-hero, "dull but honourable" (p. 138), so we laugh when Leonora, noting the effect he appears to have, thinks he must be some "kind of macho boss-man" (p. 426). But the women are princesses: Christabel is "the Princess" and "Sweetheart", albeit to Blanche (p. 58), Maud is an Ice Maiden (p. 129), but underneath the "Real Princess" (p. 144), even Ellen was a "princess" at aged eighteen (p. 460). The qualities of the medieval princess of myth and fairy tale are that she is beautiful, pale, with long, blonde hair, pure, chaste and locked in a tower. Christabel is fascinated by these latter aspects of the female, as she sees them in her own Victorian life. The sybil in the jar and Emily Dickinson with her voluntary confinement are examples. Christabel writes a poem about Rapunzel (p. 35) and a story "The Glass Coffin" (pp. 58-67), which is Byatt indulging in pastiche Victorian children's story-telling. We shall examine this story later along with the other stories in Byatt's *The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye*. Christabel's most famous work *The Fairy Melusine* explores the idea of enclosure, and in her final letter, she says she has been Melusina for

thirty years (p. 501), having had to guard the guilty secret, not of a fish-tail, but of her love-child. For Christabel came "out of her tower" (p. 197) with Ash, who crossed the threshold, and opened Pandora's Box (p. 198). Christabel is a form of divinity, she is a "manifestation of [...] secret perfection" (p. 285). The barrier is erected again as she has "no desire for marriage" (p. 64) and indeed, marriage is not open to her, so she remains like the Lady of Shalott, like Arachne "who makes perfect patterns" (p. 87), but seemingly useless to society: "I live in a turret like an old Witch, and make verses nobody wants" (p. 430). The solitude and enclosure are apparently good for literary creation. The "Riddle of the Egg" composed by her (p. 137) includes all the enigmatic enclosure symbols: casket, funerary urn ("there are as yet no Ashes"), Egg, perfect O, living Stone, doorless and windowless, the terrible tower, thickets, no [...] Nest, donjon, "my Solitude is my Treasure", gold cage. Treasure and gold jewellery attract men, but the chains entrap (p. 4).

Maud is a new version of the Princess Christabel. Leonora, if not Roland (although he thinks it), calls her Princess in a Blanche Glover-style overture (p. 317). Everything related to her is pristine: white, glassy and green, and equally clean-smelling "ferny and sharp" (p. 38). Her beauty is a "doll-mask" (p. 57) and Fergus Wolff quotes Yeats at her because of her "Ramparts [...] [of] yellow hair" (p. 57), which is a particularly apt description for a woman called Bailey. As she hides her hair in order not to be a sex-object, this has the opposite effect, female absence typically attracting curiosity (p. 271). She lives

and writes at the top of a tower, aptly named "Tennyson Tower" (p. 39). Fergus Wolff quotes Lacan this time, on the fortress-ego symbol. As Maud thinks of Fergus, she is haunted by an image of a "huge [...] bed [...] [of] egg white" (p. 57), which will crop up again later in Roland's pudding "Îles Flottantes" (p. 425). Roland going to bed at Maud's house feels like an intruder upon the Real Princess suffering the pressure of the pea, a feeling he has again at Seal Court (p. 144), and it is an image which Ash relates to Christabel when he is about to sleep with her in Scarborough (p. 282).

Magician/witch

Christabel has a story, "The Threshold" (pp. 150-6), about three beautiful ladies, one good and two bad, and correct choice means bliss or misery for the hero. The threshold denotes the entrance to sexual relations as revealed in the correspondence between Christabel and Ash. In Celtic mythology, All Saints, *Toussaint*, was a threshold where men could cross back and forth between the land of the living and that of the dead (p. 353). In Brittany, tales are told from then up to Christmas, and according to Sabine, who had written a story "Dahud the Sorceress" (from the City of Is or the Floating Isles, p. 349), her father Raoul began that night the story of Merlin and Vivien. Merlin the magician is always old and wise, and Vivien, wanting only his magic, takes revenge on him for women by enclosing him in a tower that can only be perceived by him. To return to the four elements, she "makes eternal stone of air" (p. 353).

The telling of the story prompts a nineteenth-century style discussion between Christabel, her cousin Sabine and her father on the significance of the tale. While Raoul holds that it expresses fear of Woman, "a male terror of the subjection of passion", "the sleep of reason under the rule of [...] desire, intuition, imagination" (p. 354), Christabel claims it suggests "female emulation of male power" (p. 354). She admits to owning a copy of the painting, done by the feminist Blanche, and even to it probably being "perverse" in that it delights in the moment of triumph of Woman over Man. Sabine, in her journal (itself an example of literary creativity in the making), is a link in the chain of oral tradition, she retells stories and adds to them the nineteenth-century love of explanations and rationalisations. She makes explicit some of the secret rivalries and fears between men and women:

> What I had meant was to make of the wild Dahud an *embodiment* as it were of our desire for freedom, for autonomy, for our own proper passion, which women have, and which it seems, men fear. Dahud is the sorceress whom the Ocean loves and whose excesses cause the City of Is to be engulfed [...] Paganism, woman and the Ocean, these three desires and these three great fears of man, are mingled in this strange legend and come to a tempestuous and terrible end [...]
>
> Why should desire and the senses be so terrifying in women? Who is this author, to say that these are the fears of man, by which he means the whole human race? He makes us witches, outcasts, *sorcières*, monsters [...] (p. 349)

Married or unmarried man/ married or unmarried woman

In a male-dominated world, it is man who turns woman into an outcast. In Victorian society, the frigid Ellen is a respectable wife, but not mother. She has not been able to "close her eyes and think of England", as Victorian mothers encouraged their daughters to do. She has not fulfilled her wifely duty of allowing her husband to cross the threshold, it is a "locked gateway" (p. 459). With her migraines, she is like Snow White in her glass casket (p. 232). She hides her secret and remains publically respectable but privately miserable and guilty. John Fowles, in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, created a Victorian female figure who deliberately sought the role of outcast, which technically she was not, as she knew that it could be seductive to a certain male. And he created a male figure in Charles Smithson who refused to accept the normal double life of the Victorian male, as lead by Ash. There is much of the Sarah Woodruff about Christabel in Brittany, down to the green-fringed shawl (p. 343) and Gode's story about the girl who waits in the harbour to see her sailor-lover's boat come in (p. 357). Indeed, the reader is lead to believe in a love relationship between Christabel and her uncle. Christabel is "every archetype", as Leonora and Blackadder discover: "What a turn-up. Not only a lesbian but a Fallen Woman and Unmarried Mother" (p. 426). We even see her in the role of Vestal Light (p. 394), trying to get in touch, not with her child, as Ash believes, but with Blanche.

In her life with Blanche, she had tried to live independently of men --Martha and Mary without Lazarus at "Bethany" (p. 344). Though devoted to Jesus Christ (her namesake also), she rejects the body/soul division (p. 344) in either Man and Woman or Woman and Woman. Ash himself was interested in the woman's role problem. In his satirical "Mummy Possest", he talks of a reversed world where "women sit enthroned" (p. 410), and while he and later "readers" of Christabel's poetry like Leonora and Fergus Wolff are passionately curious about the possible lesbian relationship between Christabel and Blanche, he knows there is a social taboo on the question; he compares it to Melusina's prohibition (p. 285). No such prohibition exists for modern researchers and critics, so "the feminists" have a field-day with Christabel's glove poem (pp. 37 & 306), and even Ash's "The Glove" and the passage in *Ragnarök* where Thor hides in a cave which turns out to be a finger of a giant's glove. All possible orifices and concave/convex surfaces such as fingers and sea-anemones (p. 252) are considered possible sexual images, the finger of a glove being both phallic and female orifice. Byatt places Christabel's glove poem in the narrative just before she presents Leonora. This prepares the reader for the bisexual Leonora, and the Maud-Leonora relationship in some ways repeats the Christabel-Blanche one. Maud's sexual rejection of Leonora suggests Christabel did not share Blanche's tendencies, but even these are ambiguous, and society as usual, condemns Blanche on no evidence and turns her into a scapegoat. In Blanche's suicide letter, we learn that Christabel had given Blanche the jet "friendship" brooch she had bought in Scarborough, and a century

later, Maud chose a similar brooch for Leonora, apparently without knowing it (another example of the repetition of an action the reader discovers in inverse chronological order).

Maud goes to Brittany to find the secret of Christabel. There, through Sabine's journal, we learn more about Christabel's interest in the role of woman and the concept of female literary creativity. She is interested in the Standing Stones, a pagan phallic symbol, the centre of a female fertility cult on May-Day. One is reminded of the "club-walking" at the beginning of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. In the Breton dance, the girl who falls is the Fallen Woman and is ritually beaten as a kind of sacrificial scapegoat (p. 351). At this stage of her life, Christabel is interested in guilt, but also in collecting material. In her correspondence with Ash, it was obvious to him that, seeing herself as Ariachne, she had to seduce, collect and weave to produce something creative. Ash, reading her insect poems, especially those about recently-discovered female power --on the Queen Bee, Wasp or Ant-- understood her approach: "Do you wish to extend your metaphor of entrapment or enticement to Art?" (p. 157). She calls her own work "mere fragile or glistening female productions" (p. 159) compared to Ash's male "great works".

That this is false humility is testified to by her advice to Sabine, she believes women are capable of fine writing and have only been prevented in the past from achieving it by men:

> But *how much more* for women, who are, as Christabel says, largely thought to

be unable to write well, unlikely to
try and something like changelings or
monsters when indeed they do succeed,
and achieve something. (p. 350)

Ash and Christabel are modelled on Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning in their interest in literary theory. In *Aurora Leigh* (1856), Elizabeth Barrett Browning founds a theory of the arts upon typlogy, her heroine asserts that one must emphasise both:

[...] natural things
And spiritual, --who separates those two
In art, in morals, or the social drift,
Tears up the bond of nature and brings death,
Paints futile pictures, writes unreal verse.

Browning and Tennyson found typological symbolism capable of describing and sacralising their conception of human evolution, it could provide a means of formulating a history of man the species. As Aurora Leigh continues, a good writer:

[...] --fixes still
The type with moral vision, to pierce through,
With eyes immortal, to the antetype.

To end this discussion of metaphor and myth in Byatt's work, we will look at more advice from Christabel to Sabine, for here we can hear their creator, Antonia Byatt, speaking to us, through her words, of the hope for women's writing, and the need for the old, the new and the metaphor:

'You have found, by instinct or intelligence,

a way which is not allegory nor yet *faux-naïf* to give significance and your own form of universality to this terrible tale. Your Dahud is both individual human being and symbolic truth. Other writers may see other truths in this tale. (I do.) But you do not pedantically exclude.

All old stories, my cousin, will bear telling and telling again in different ways. What is required is to keep alive, to polish, the simple clean forms of the tale which *must* be there --in this case the angry Ocean, the terrible leap of the horse, the fall of Dahud from the crupper, the engulfment etc etc. And yet to add something of yours, of the writer, which makes all these things seem new and first seen, without having been appropriated for private or personal ends. This you have done. (p. 350)

NOTES TO CHAPTER 4

1. Some examples in this proliferation of university metaphor conferences are: University of Illinois, Sept. 1977; Chicago, Feb. 1978; California at Davis, April 1978; and Geneva, June 1978.

2. For example, *New Literary History* 6, 1 (1974) and *Critical Enquiry* 5, 1 (1978).

3. She wrote an enthusiastic review in *The Times Educational Supplement* of his *Structuralist Poetics. Structuralism, Linguistics and the Study of Literature* (1975).

4. In the Preface to the Fifth Edition of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1890, 1990), 1990 reprint, p. 5.

5. Discussed by Culler in *The Pursuit of Signs.*

6. Especially Chapter Four, "Orientational Metaphors".

7. Jane Campbell, "The Hunger of the Imagination in A. S. Byatt's *The Game*", *Critique*, 29, pp. 147-162 at pp. 155-6. It must be noted that Campbell's page references are to the first (Chatto & Windus) edition.

8. See Celia M. Wallhead, "The Un-Utopian Babelic Fallenness of *Langage*: A. S. Byatt's *Babel Tower*" in M. Martínez López & A. Gomis van Heteren (eds.), *Dreams and Realities: Visions of Utopia in English Fiction from Swift to Byatt* (Almería: University of Almería Press, in press).

9. This is one of the main conclusions of Claude Lévi-Strauss's *Mythologiques. Le cru et le cuit,* (Paris: Plon, 1964).

10. George Lakoff, *Women, Fire and Dangerous Things: What Categories Tell Us about the Nature of Thought,* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), especially Dixon "Where Have All the Adjectives Gone?"

11. Debra Moddelmog, *Readers and Mythic Signs: the Oedipus Myth in Twentieth-century Fiction,* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1993) p. 8. The reference to White is John White, *Mythology in the Modern Novel: a Study of Prefigurative Techniques* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971).

12. In Bradbury 1977, p. 147. See also Pamela Faber & Celia Wallhead, "The Lexical Field of Visual Perception in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* by John Fowles", *Language and Literature*, 4, 2 (June 1995), pp. 127-144.

CHAPTER 5 The Social Context: ritual

5.1 Introduction: the social context in post-war Britain and the importance of ritual

After the Second World War, the traditional sense of community became outmoded, and the English novelist of the immediate post-war years was faced with confusion in a society that offered no conclusions or resolutions. The situation was not dissimilar to that which confronted writers at the end of the nineteenth century. The responses of some of these writers produced the Modernist Movement. Over half a century later, critics were able to say, with hindsight, that the only choice facing writers was basically to withdraw from the large world into a small one and produce finely wrought but rather insignificant novels, or, with some intuition that the situation was irrevocably post-modern, intelligently presented minor fiction. Karl described the post-war English writer as "adrift, identity-less, isolated from society and even from community, cut off from viable tradition, his country constricted, its reputation limited, its advice scorned." (Karl 1963, p. 327)

Anthony Burgess suggested in the 1970s, posing the question "What is a Novel?", that basic to all fiction is contemporary everyday life and the desire to understand it:

> But I think that, if we take away plot, structure, dialogue, even characters,

> we shall be left with something that is common to the most traditional and the most *avant-garde* novelist --a concern with interpreting, through the imagination, the flux of ordinary life; an attempt to understand, though not with the cold deliberation of the scientist, the nature of the external world and the mind that surveys it. (Burgess 1971, p. 17)

So writers took contemporary life as their material, not only because that is the stuff of the novel, but also precisely because the post-war scene was bewildering and required an effort to understand it and convey it through the imagination. However, some "large-scale" writers like Waugh and Angus Wilson, did not reduce their canvases to the small world, but attempted to convey the flux and uncertainty at all levels of society. A. S. Byatt has pursued this mode of writing, for she has always been particularly interested in how different people, each with his or her own point of view, see life, and in what they make of it in their thinking and beliefs and in their imaginations. In his pamphlet on A. S. Byatt, Christopher Hope quotes her on this issue:

> But I also like the idea that novels can be, as James said, 'loose baggy monsters', a generous form that can take account of almost anything. Temperamentally, and morally, I like novels with large numbers of people and centres of consciousness, not novels that adopt a narrow single point-of-view, author's or character's.
>
> I don't like novels that preach or proselytise. (I fear people with very violent beliefs, though I admire people with thought-out principles.) The novel is an agnostic form --it explores and describes; the novelist and the reader learn more about the world along the

length of the book. (Hope 1990)

Patricia Waugh, in her work on metafictional fiction, reminds us that the everyday is the stuff of fictions, but that when considered on a large social scale, it inevitably tends towards the mythic:

> As novel readers, we look to fiction to offer us cognitive functions, to locate us within everyday as well as within philosophical paradigms, to explain the historical world as well as offer some formal comfort and certainty. [...] However, metafiction offers the recognition, not that the everyday has ceased to matter, but that its formulation through social and cultural codes brings it closer to the philosophical and mythic than was once assumed. (Waugh 1984, p. 16)

The world-view or commonly-held ideas contained in the great mythological cosmogonies are associated with ritualistic practices. It is difficult to say which came first, myth or ritual, but there is no organised, large-scale ritual without myth. Perhaps a primitive form of harvest festival was celebrated before the harvest was associated with or dedicated to a particular deity; or maybe belief in the deity was formulated and encouraged first. A ritual can be an optimum way of doing something or it can be a practice that is given importance by relating it to a belief in a world-view and by doing it with ceremony. A mythology needs ritual in order to perpetuate it and to protect it as it passes down traditionally through the generations. It imposes order on chaos and the sacred ceremonial repetition prevents disintegration. A ritual retains its power

because, as Vickery says: "One of the prime factors is that its participants feel they are performing some original act not just commemorating a deed performed in the remote past." (Vickery 1983, p. 27) Perhaps the supreme example of this is the Eucharist, a ritual founded by Christ Himself, and in which Christians believe that by Transubstantiation, the bread miraculously becomes, in that particular instant, the actual Body of Christ.

Cultures become characterised by their ritualistic practices, to this effect, the myths on which they are based are etiological. The different mythical world-views have produced different cultures. But, as Lakoff asserts: "The conceptual systems of various cultures partly depend on the physical environments they have developed in" (Lakoff 1980, p. 146) -- whether it be city, desert, jungle or whatever. The specific background also contributes to differences or similarities between cultures. Lakoff argues for the body-based starting-point of many of our views, using here the word "myth" in its widest sense:

> The experiential myth takes the perspective of man as part of his environment, not as separate from it (....) The experiential account of understanding provides a richer perspective on some of the most important areas of experience in our everyday lives. (Lakoff 1980, p. 230)

The five areas he identifies are:

1. interpersonal communication and mutual understanding

2. self-understanding

3. ritual

4. aesthetic experience

5. politics.

Regarding the first, he reminds us that you may need to negotiate meaning with someone who does not share your background. It may be difficult to find the right metaphor to convey unshared experience. In terms of self-understa ding: "We seek out personal metaphors to highlight and make coherent our own pasts, our present activities, and our dreams, hopes and goals as well." (Lakoff 1980, p. 233) Ritual is basic: "We are constantly performing rituals, like making the morning coffee by the same sequence of steps each day [...] to the most solemn prescribed religious practices." (*ibid.*, p. 233) Lakoff's reference to coffee reminds us that T. S. Eliot, whose J. Alfred Prufrock measured out his life in coffee spoons, was not unaware of the basic rituals of everyday life and of self-identification. Lakoff continues:

> In performing them we give structure and significance to our activities, minimizing chaos and disparity in our actions [...] Religious rituals are typically metaphorical kinds of activities, which usually involve metonymies --real-world objects standing for entities in the world as defined by the conceptual system of the religion. The coherent structure of the ritual is commonly taken as paralleling some aspect of reality as it is seen through the religion. (*ibid.*, p. 234)

The general conclusion to Lakoff and Johnson's book focuses

upon ritual as indicative of metaphor explaining and ordering our lives:

> We suggest that the metaphors we live by, whether cultural or personal, are partially preserved in ritual [...] Cultural metaphors, and the values entailed by them, are propagated by ritual [...] Ritual forms an indispensable part of the experiential basis for our cultural metaphorical systems. There can be no culture without ritual. (*ibid.*, p. 234)

Patricia Waugh focuses upon Samuel Beckett as a writer who, like Eliot, had perceived the fact that habit and routine form the substructure of most individual existences. She notes that while he uses both as starting-points in his fiction and that he pushes them to a logical extreme which shows their absurdity, it also shows their *"necessity* in a world that has no innate structure of its own." (Waugh 1984, p. 44) The point is that reality has increasingly come to be seen as a construct. Habit and routine, contained in specific discourses, have come to create our sense of reality, and the sensitivity of metafictional approaches to cultural change has revealed this shift in thought. Waugh draws upon the work of sociologists Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (Berger & Luckmann 1971), as one of the clearest sociological expositions of the "construction" of reality. For them, reality is manufactured:

> It is produced by the interrelationship of apparently 'objective facticities' in the world with social convention and personal or interpersonal vision. These social forms operate within particular historical structures of power and frameworks of knowledge. Continual shifts in

> the structures of knowledge and power produce continual resyntheses of the reality model. Contemporary reality, in particular, is continually being reappraised and resynthesized. It is no longer experienced as an ordered and fixed hierarchy, but as a web of inter-relating, multiple realities.
>
> Moving *through* this reality involves moving from one 'reality' to another. Most of the time, however, we are not conscious of these shifts. Habit, instrumented through social institutions and conventions, normally dinguises movement between levels and confers an apparent homogeneity upon social experience. It is only when a convention is exposed as such that the lacunae between levels are also exposed. (*ibid.*, p. 51)

Berger and Luckmann, as sociologists, confirm Beckett's belief in the necessity of convention and habit. They show that for significant action to take place, human beings need to have their choices narrowed, as Patricia Waugh puts it:

> Habit ensures that patterns can be repeated in such a way that the meaning of an action is not retained at the level of consciousness. If this were not so, the action could not be effortlessly performed. (*ibid.*, p. 52)

It is our contention that A. S. Byatt, by focusing upon a convention, brings it back to the level of consciousness, if not the consciousness of the character, at least of the observant reader. In this way, she questions reality and our perception of it. Also, by focusing upon the verbal discourse which contains it, she examines how reality has come to be a social construct.

Byatt's novels chronicle life in Britain since the war, and one of them, *Possession*, compares it to the equivalent period one hundred years before. The way this life is grounded in the Western Christian culture, and the way this culture is in crisis, is shown as Byatt describes to her readers how people take part in the important rituals of official life. These may be the rituals associated with public life, for example, the one-off ceremonies like the Coronation of Queen Elizabeth II, the inauguration of a new university, and a wedding, or the repeated weekly or otherwise church service.

But Lakoff and Johnson end their book by turning from the large scale to the small, from the public to the private:

> there can be no coherent view of the self without personal ritual [...] and the values that we live by are perhaps most strongly reflected in the little things we do over and over, that is, in the casual rituals that have emerged spontaneously in our daily lives. (Lakoff 1980, p. 235)

5.2 Social ritual in Byatt's novels: small-scale and partial metaphors

As we examine Byatt's survey of the major rituals basic to the cultural mythologies we live by, we see that Lakoff's experiential metaphors are inherent in them. Rather than examine each novel in turn, we have found it more productive to survey life according to its official stages, similar to Shakespeare's ages of man, looking at the processes and the rites of passage.

It is interesting to see how the public and social rites fit in with the global structure-endowing metaphors employed by Byatt. A further interesting point is that Byatt also uses metaphor in a different, more idiosyncratic way, in order to subvert the usual view of public rituals and show a private perspective which is often a perspective that testifies to how norms are changing. Intermingled with the ready-made basic metaphors which are recognisable by most people of the same culture and which lend themselves to large-scale developments and intricate ramifications, we find small-scale "one-off" metaphors, or highly striking but not easily sustainable metaphors of the type created by John Donne in his compasses-lovers image in the sonnet *A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning*.

Before we look at examples of such striking metaphors in Byatt's novels, a little more explanation of how they function is necessary. Eva Fedor Kittay observed accurately: "The liveliness of the metaphor is likely to be a function of the degree of the sustained difference between two fields." (Fedor Kittay 1987, p. 286). In Donne's metaphor, the disparity between the field of mathematics or geometry and that of love makes it striking, and the logical rationale of the coincidence of less important aspects in the mapping of the source domain (compasses) onto the target domain (a pair of lovers, hence love) makes it apt. Donne's metaphor is also a bawdy joke based on the point of union of compasses and lovers' legs, and it subverts the idea of love by focusing on similarities of a lower order, while at the same time insisting upon the essentiality of this aspect. Byatt

uses a similar technique when she wishes to show her readers a perspective on a hitherto sacrosanct ritual or belief, which departs from the norm or which is now becoming the norm. We have already seen an example in *The Game*, where Julia wears a red cape at her father's funeral, and instead of looking like a traditional mourner swathed in black, she is a Father Christmas figure. Failure to respect the colour black at a funeral is becoming the norm, but here it denotes lack of sympathy in filial relations and is even comic. The grounding of the two fields is the snow, and the incongruity lies in the fact that red, like white, is the opposite of black, and that Christmas is normally considered a happy social occasion while a funeral is sad.

In addition to these striking small-scale metaphors, there is another aspect of metaphor which Byatt takes advantage of, and that is the productive nature of structured metaphor. Again, Lakoff and Johnson explain this. In Chapter 11 of *Metaphors We Live By* they concern themselves with "The Partial Nature of Metaphorical Structuring". They show how there are used and unused parts of "literal" metaphors. The example they give is the metaphor THEORIES ARE BUILDINGS, the used parts being the "foundations", the "outer shell", "to construct", and the unused ones being the internal parts like "rooms" or "staircases". Figurative and imaginative language can manipulate these unused parts to make new metaphors which would not be "literal" but instances of the same general metaphor. That Byatt is aware of this potential for literary creation is obvious in what she has the narrator of *Still Life* say about Alexander:

> He was a writer of the fidgety,
> costive kind whose works are long
> in the planning, and meticulous
> in the execution --only at the very
> end of a project, when the scaffolding,
> the foundations, the walls and roof
> and even the plaster were laid down,
> did spontaneity and delight take over,
> in the actual play of, play with words
> themselves. (pp. 66-7)

Here Byatt employs equally the used and unused parts of this metaphor, but also provides a complete working through of it, from the large to the small, and although we must bear in mind the metaphor BIG IS IMPORTANT, so big things tend to be the most used, every detail is necessary to complete the whole. Another example comes in *Possession* (pp. 461-2), where Ellen Ash self-consciously uses the unusual metaphor of jelly-straining. Here she is using a stage of the metaphorical MAKING process which is not usually exploited, the part of straining a liquid to remove lumps or unwanted parts. Hence the image is both striking in its incongruity, juxtaposing jelly making with writing, unusual in that it picks a secondary aspect to foreground, and it is apt in two senses: it is coherent with her domestic nature, which she feels rather ironically and regretfully, and it accurately conveys what she is doing --editing material related to her husband's life for her journal to excise the indigestible parts.

It is also apt in a third sense which is a little more complex. Through her "straining" of the material about her husband, Ellen distorts the "facts" about him. Byatt asks the reader to focus, through this novel, on the shaded female presence in Victorian England, and she suggests that rewriting

will not only bring the female more into the foreground and do more justice to her creativity, but that the correcting of the partial view we had of the past may also reveal that women have not been entirely innocent. Louise Yelin reads *Possession* as "an instance of cultural cartography, a simultaneous mapping of Victorian culture and contemporary Victorian studies." (Yelin 1992). She finds that, like any map, Byatt's distorts, displaces, and excludes as much as it reveals. Hence Ellen Best is only repeating the actions of her creator. Though Byatt's motive differs from that of her character, for, as Yelin points out, her cultural map has feminist aspirations, it "accommodates, even privileges, the feminine" (Yelin 1992, p. 38).

Byatt recovers what Victorian maps efface, and from this we can infer that the idea we have at the end of the twentieth century of the "reality" of Victorian life, was largely created by the Victorians themselves. As we see Ellen "straining" her facts, we can see a new, false version of reality being created. Also through straining, certain parts are lost. Yelin refers to the partial truths of history and to the infinite regress of the referents (metafictional ploys) as she discusses the interplay of the different levels of historicity and access to knowledge of the novel:

> The discovery of Ash's affair with LaMotte forces critics to reread and re-evaluate both poets and to acknowledge the influence of LaMotte, and hence the feminine, on Ash --traditionally regarded as quintessentially masculine. Though Byatt does not regard Browning as masculine (Rothstein, 17).
>
> Byatt's recuperation of Victorian humanism

> is self-conscious, if not self-consciously postmodern. Byatt draws attention to both the textuality and the historical contingency of the best that has been thought and said and therefore calls into question the universalizing values of Arnold. What we know, Byatt suggests, we know from reading or misreading texts about which we are more or less ignorant --as, for example, the world is ignorant of the relationship between LaMotte and Ash and thus ignorant of the sources of his poetry until Roland finds the draft of the letter in Ash's copy of Vico. Moreover, the texts we read and the ways we read them rewrite other texts, as *Possession* itself is Byatt's reading and rewriting of "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came", *Maud*, *Modern Love*, and "Christabel", among other nineteenth-century classics.
>
> So even as Byatt seems to be inviting us to look beneath or beyond the world of appearances and to seek after secret truths like the truth about what really happened between Ash and LaMotte, and even as she plays on our desire to possess both the texts we read and their authors, she insists, in up-to-date critical fashion, that the only truths to which we can gain access are the partial truths of history and textuality and that texts, like the truths they tell and the truths they withold or distort, are ruptured readings of referents ever receding.
>
> The inexorably partial truths of textuality are ironically dramatized in the way that at Maud's urging the rather prosy and extremely English Roland learns about LaMotte by reading an American Lacanian feminist study of her poetry, while Roland gives Maud a crash course in Ash by having her read the standard biography, the work of a misogynist voyeur (265-72).
> (Yelin 1992,pp. 38-9) (1)

The jelly-straining metaphor thus turns out to be pointing in the direction of postmodern interpretations of reality and history. Furthermore, it structures part of the concept of writing. As Lakoff says: "Image-metaphors can trigger and

reinforce metaphors that map conceptual knowledge and inferential structure." (Lakoff 1989, p. 92) It is the sort of metaphor that cannot be sustained, it cannot be used for structuring on the large scale, but it is coherent with the MAKING metaphors for literary creativity, and it adds to the precise, visual and multi-faceted nature of the novel: "The proliferation of detail in the images limits the image-mapping to highly specific cases. That is why we refer to them as 'one-shot'." (*ibid.*, p. 91)

Lakoff and Turner show how these "one-off" or "one-shot" metaphors can relate to the whole work, as in Chapter 3 of *More Than Cool Reason* (pp. 140-6) they discuss the metaphoric structure of a whole poem. They demonstrate how a whole range of different conceptual metaphors can be combined to yield subtle and complex effects in a work --a poem, play or novel. So a global metaphorical reading is a variety of metaphor, for conceptual mappings and image-mappings are interesting in their own right, but all together they function in the service of a larger purpose. That is precisely how A. S. Byatt's novels work. Global metaphorical readings are open in certain ways and constrained in others. The title may indicate the target domain overtly or covertly, and in Byatt's case, bearing in mind what the target domain is --life and literary creativity-- we have seen that this is so. But the reader at the start still has a wide choice for identifying the target domain. The constraints are that the choice must "make sense" and the reading must be "justified"; it must make use of conventual conceptual metaphors independent of any particular reading; it can use commonplace

knowledge, but is therefore limited by the restrictions this implies, and finally, if there is a correspondence between form and meaning, a sort of iconic structure, then this must cohere with the overall reading.

5.3 Rites of passage I: birth, babyhood and childhood, Baptism

Byatt shows in her novels how from the very beginnings of our lives there are conventional ways of viewing experience, and that these may in fact be at variance with what one actually experiences. Birth is an excellent starting point, as it has traditionally been silenced as a taboo related to women. Through Stephanie's first delivery in *Still Life*, Byatt describes childbirth both in the conventional subdued way and at the same time as it truly is from the mother's point of view. She does this by subverting the former, laying bare the literally painful truth of the matter, and in her usual economic fashion, exploiting the event to juxtapose it to the process of literary creation. The general conventional conceptual metaphor is that of EMERGENCE, and all others, which are highly idiosyncratic, coming from different semantic fields, are justified and coherent while being striking. The commonplace knowledge is accepted but filled out with a more detailed account and the form fits the meaning and ties in with the ultimate icon of Stephanie holding her son and the packet of nasturtium seeds.

Firstly, the conventional view:

'Are you all right?'
'Oh yes.'
'Was it bad?'
'Not really.' [...]
Daniel made his conventional telephone calls. The next day Bill and Winifred came, with flowers and grapes. [...] Around them small conversations were held primly in small voices. Stephanie told Winifred about the labour in conventional words, stages and stitches. [...]
'A fine boy,' said Bill. 'A fine boy. Does he have a name?' [...]
'He has a Potter look.' (pp. 95-9)

Everything is done to silence the bad side and to reduce Stephanie to the conventional mould:

She explained about the shaving and the enema, and Stephanie, who believed in good manners, waited until she had her breath and said it was all right [...] (p.88)
[N]o instructions about when she would need to ring it and when, as the English require, she must be silent and uncomplaining. (p. 90)

The ritual is the optimum one for nurses: "Nurses both mitigated and increased that natural fear of, or perhaps for babies which comes with their birth [...] But they prickled with rules and moral terminology." (p. 100) But each birth is different, each woman has different needs, and Stephanie's story (Chapter 1 "Ante-Natal: December 1953" and Chapter 7 "A Birth") shows how women rebel against the way in which a male-dominated society tries to contain any power or inconvenience they might imply by reducing them to a silent baby-producing production line. In the ante-natal clinic, the process of the visit is juxtaposed to that of literary appreciation. In Stephanie's bag are items which belong to the appropriate paradigm --knitting and

urine sample-- but this is in "a lemonade bottle wrapped in greaseproof", the lemonade bottle coming from an inappropriate paradigm. Moreover, in the list are "two heavy books", again incongruous. But in terms of production, the rhythms of her body preparing to give birth to a child are juxtaposed to an attempt to study the rhythms of Wordsworth's verse. Another parallel is that the doctors and nurses use a patronising tone and a cold, impersonal metalanguage which scrapes the surface of conventional meanings, whereas Wordsworth does seem to communicate at a deep level:

> They spoke as one speaks to distracted children or incapable old people, who do not look or listen [...]
> He did not meet her eye: this was usual.
> 'Well, Mrs Orton, how are we?'
> She could not answer. Tears were running all over her face [...]
> 'The English. Are so damned. *Polite*. For hours and hours we stand --with no girdles-- in cold draughty places. That woman. That. Mrs Owen. Lost her baby --I know-- because. because no one would let her tell them. [...]
> This slightly unusual speech pattern seemed to enable him to address her directly [...]
> 'This place puts you in line [...] Two chairs for all those women [...] this place changes you [...]
> He had seen Stephanie before [...] no trouble, always using 'the pregnancy' as a reading-desk. He didn't think that was quite right, but hadn't formulated why [...]
> She did not feel angry with him: she could imagine how it was for him: woman after woman after woman, all the same, all different, weeping on occasion for fear, boredom, pain, frustration, humiliation. How could he take on all that, much of it irremediable, at ten-minute intervals? (pp. 15-6)

As Mrs Owen, the woman at the clinic, haemorrages and has a miscarriage, Stephanie feels guilty because she was meditating on Wordsworth. She saw how he communicates through a combination of common knowledge, metonymic selection and genial rhythms based on selection and positioning of items:

> Wordsworth was a man speaking to men. He had said so. One would need to know things --technical things-- about speech, about why and how rhythm worked, about selection of nouns and word order to explain how he could state with finality --so that the words for it were *his* words --simple truths [...]
>
> To name the whole earth with three nouns, that was authority. Rocks and stones and trees. The rhythm formed by the reiterated 'and'. Everything even if named, was part of the same thing. And the one complex word among simple verbs, diurnal. (pp. 14-5)

On Stephanie's next visit, the doctor has supplied six more chairs, which reminds us of Van Gogh's set of six chairs. In his play, Alexander uses one chair metonymically to evoke Van Gogh's house and life, and Antonia Byatt uses two chairs to demonstrate how women are reduced and manipulated, have their identity removed and are generally controlled by the system.

The description of the birth is the version of the anonymous narrator, telling the reader what Stephanie experienced. The metaphors used to describe the process, especially the pain (there is no literal language for this taboo subject, the subject of female pain) are in harmony with what we assume the character Stephanie, the English teacher, might use. Firstly, the pain is personified, it is made animate and it appears to have, or be,

instruments of war, torture or butchery. The following are phrases used from this lexical field:

- The iron band tightened
- pain hit her
- All sorts of different pains [...] tore at her
- The pain choked again like a suffocating net,
as it did when they interfered with its liveliness
- The pain rustled jagged and uncomfortably died away
- The pain resumed its clear, relentless pattern
- The pain gripped like a claw
something heavy and hard and huge inside her
opened her out like a battering ram
- The pain [...] gathered itself and sprang
- a furious blunt block
- as though by butchery the belly is severed
- a box-side of flesh and cracking bone
- The thing launched itself again against its prison walls
- It rose and drove [...] to *tear through* the flesh
wall [...] as the body split in half

The butchery of the process reminds us of Marcus's horror of cut meat as he looks in the butcher's window in *Virgin*. Despite the horror of what is being described, which is only too true to life, the description is that of a poet, with alliteration and strong rhythms. One imagines Byatt imagining her narrator imagining Stephanie imagining Wordsworth describing childbirth. Moreover, a more conventional metaphor used, which is that of waves of the sea, combines with that of music to remind us that, horrible as it is, childbirth is a natural process, and as in music, and even literary creation, something beautiful is produced at the end:

> The pain hit her, pure and clear like
> a note in music, spreading up and out from
> the disturbance in the spine, singing,
> diminishing.
> [...] All sorts of different pains, eddying
> across each other like curled-back waves

at high tide, like choppy cross-currents
in estuaries, tore at her.
[...] the pain, like an incoming tide, abated
a little, rippled back. (p. 89)

The description as a whole is a very powerful piece of writing and is an example for how women's writing since the war has contributed to a new tendency for society to know about and be able to talk about women's problems such as pregnancy and childbirth. In most cultures, the woman giving birth was taboo, and until quite recently, there has been in social discourse a veil over the true details of giving birth. In this description there is some hyperbole: "to *tear through* the flesh wall", though there is no exaggeration in the mind of the sufferer. But such a rhetorical device, in combination with metaphor, reminds us of the power of rhetoric, which Plato for this reason viewed with suspicion. He knew that rhetoric can be used to build a "false" truth, or as Lakoff says more recently (Lakoff 1989, p. 63): "conventionalized schemas and metaphors have persuasive power over us". We tend to accept their validity when used by others as well as ourselves. Byatt's use of the battering-ram is very compelling, and that is because although it belongs to a different semantic field from childbirth --indeed, the opposite, death rather than birth-- it fits into a slot in a structure which finds its place as it is mapped onto the target area. If we think of the battering-ram as being an instrument of force to get in or out of a confined space like a prison or a castle, it fits into the CHILDBIRTH IS EMERGENCE FROM A CONTAINER metaphor. Lakoff (1989, pp. 63-5) explains the persuasive power of such a metaphor: it has the power of structuring, of offering options,

reasoning, evaluating and simply being there. This is because basic metaphors have an internal structure; in a metaphorical mapping there are slots in the source domain (in this case, emergence under force) which gets mapped onto slots in the target domain (childbirth). There are also relations, properties and knowledge in the source domain which gets mapped onto the equivalents in the target domain. Childbirth, for some readers, will now always be associated with a battle.

For her second labour, Stephanie takes Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend* and in the difficult forceps birth, images of the birth canal intermingle for Stephanie with the Thames in all its most unpleasant nineteenth-century associations; the metonymic battering-ram is replaced by the grappling hook:

> The book was *Our Mutual Friend*, of which she read very little, but with that curious agonized attention of pain which fuses images so that the slowly developing nightmare of a blocked labour, a twisted cord, arhythmic gripings, suffocation, exhaustion and finally the hauling forceps, coiled and coiled in her mind with Lizzie Hexam's coal fire, with the sluggish Thames and its cargo of dead bodies, with grappling hooks, ropes, lanterns and nocturnal mutterings [...] every contraction had its cross-currents of negation whilst her spine flamed and smouldered and her intermittent mind's eye saw the choppy black water under London bridge as the tide turned. (p. 249)

Babyhood and Childhood

A similar juxtaposition of incongruous things, which is lighter, even comic, is the episode, not long after William's birth, when Stephanie tries to do some serious thinking on Wordsworth's *Immortality Ode*, in the local library, leaving her

brother Marcus at home, literally "holding the baby". Domesticity prevents sustained thinking for Stephanie, she has to, again literally, "collect her thoughts": "Threads of thought had to rise and be gathered and catch on other threads of old thought, from some unused memory store." (p. 151) The fabric of this metaphor prefigures the wet towelling of the dirty nappy Marcus has to change. The passage (p. 154), in three paragraphs of precise description of excrement, pins embedded in it or "pointing scimitar-like into the baby's spine", open sores in the buttocks and yellow trails all over everything, baby's vest, bedspread, carpet, is hilarious, and shows a male getting into distress because he cannot perform what appears to be an easy female step-by-step routine ritual. Meanwhile, Stephanie is working her way step by step through the *Immortality Ode*:

> There were two successive stanzas about the Child. The first describes him learning ceremonies and parts, from his 'dream of human life', acting wedding and funeral, the Persons of Shakespeare's seven ages of man. (p. 155)

The unfortunate thing for Stephanie is that as she makes a connection between the stanza with the "run of metaphors describing the life of the soul in terms of depth and confinement", she realises that "what had seemed a vision of truth settled into a banal, easy insight." (p. 155)

The unfortunate Stephanie does not get to see her two children grow up. The processes of child-care and education are seen more through her less maternal sister, Frederica, and her

circle of friends. At the beginning of *Babel Tower*, Alexander Wedderburn is on a government committee, the "Steerforth Committee", set up to study the teaching of English in Britain. He observes "the drama of the politics of groups" (p. 168), and sees how the group divides according to sexual and power interests (p. 188). The Committee discusses the ethics of education, and the issue of whether children are innately good or bad. The poet Mickey Impey tells the children, after a debate on the necessity for explicitly teaching and learning grammar, not to be brainwashed by society: "think freedom, think *creativity*, think vision" (p. 179). Through the work of the Committee, two opposing examples of primary schools are portrayed: the traditional "Freyasgarth" the Potter family are imvolved in, and the modern, open-plan, innovating "Star Primary School". This is paralleled on the intertextual level by having Culvert give a speech on education in *Babbletower* (p. 201). The discussion centres on both levels on the need for rules: "'human beings , like it or not, need rules [...] Rules facilitate. Rules create order, and without order is no creativity.'" (pp. 185-6) The two camps in the Steerforth Committee are summed up by the narrator in an ironic tone: "those of Eros and the *Wille zur Macht*. Those who believe in love and freedom, and those who believe in rules and authority" (p. 247). The disadvantages of both types of school are laid bare, in that in the modern schools the old authority and fear has been lost, but now the children have nowhere to hide or relax.

With typical irony, Byatt suggests that momentous decisions

taken, affecting the lives and education of millions of children, have a basis in sexual and power politics (and she should know since she was on the Kingman Committee for the teaching of the English Language, though twenty years later).

In *Babel Tower*, Frederica becomes involved in education. She is given part-time work by Thomas Poole at the "Crabb Robinson Institute for Adult Education" (Crabb Robinson having first appeared in *Possession*), and by her Cambridge friend Alan, who teaches Art History at the "Samuel Palmer School of Art" (echoes of *Shadow*). She is also involved in the education of her son Leo, and chooses a practical state primary school dedicated to William Blake as being preferable by far to sending him to his father's preparatory and public schools which, as emerges in the trial of *Babbletower*, were hotbeds of child abuse. The mothering of Leo is also considered, as Frederica, with all her faults, is preferred to the three surrogate mothers, Nigel's two sisters and the nanny Pippy Mammott.

Baptism

The narrator of *Still Life* testifies to the human need for rites: "But rites there must be" (p. 251), though the tone here is ironic, and Byatt, through her narrator, distances herself from the rites by using a matter-of-fact style and by showing examples of the private side of the rites, undermining the appearances by subversion. In the case of the christening of Stephanie's second child, Mary, the religious service celebrating the sacrament, the broderie anglaise bonnet, iced cake and dry sherry are present, but the elder boy is sick, the agnostic