

VERBAL AND VISUAL LANGUAGE
AND THE QUESTION OF FAITH
IN THE FICTION OF A. S. BYATT

by

SUSAN D. SORENSEN

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Susan D. Sorensen

Department of English

The University of British Columbia
Vancouver, Canada

Date 12 October 1999

Abstract

This study investigates the relation between faith in a transcendent reality and faith in language, both verbal and visual, in the work of English novelist and critic Antonia Byatt. Her ideal conception of communication combines the immediacy and primal vigour of the visual with the methodical pragmatism of words. However, Byatt's characters who exemplify this effort at double vision – in particular Stephanie Potter Orton in the 1985 novel Still Life – find in their quests frustration and even death rather than fulfillment.

My investigation focuses on A. S. Byatt's presentation of the way language attempts to represent and interact with three particular areas: fundamental personal experiences (childbirth, death, love), perceptual and aesthetic experiences (colour and form, painting), and transcendent experiences (supernaturalism and Christian religion). I consider all stages of her career to date – from her first novel The Shadow of the Sun (1964) to Babel Tower (1996). Although Possession: A Romance (1990) has garnered most of the critical attention accorded to Byatt, I argue that this novel is not generally representative of her principles or style. A neo-Victorian romance, part parodic and part nostalgic, combined with an academic comedy, Possession shares neither the sombre mythological and psychological fatalism of her 1960s fiction nor the modified realism of her middle-period fiction. Still Life and The Matisse Stories (1993) are the works that best elucidate Byatt's major preoccupations; they intently strive to combine the most powerful aspects of verbal and visual knowledge.

The methodological basis for this study is pluralist; it emphasizes close reading, combined with phenomenological, biographical, and thematic criticism. As Byatt does, I rely principally on the ideas of writers and artists rather than theorists; she cannot be understood without specific reference to George Eliot, Donne, Forster, Murdoch, Van Gogh, and Matisse (among others).

Byatt's quest for truth and transcendent meaning and her investigation of the trustworthiness of words have undergone recent changes; she seems more sharply aware of the limitations of language and the unattainability of absolute truth. Her writings in the 1990s about paintings and colour emphasize their intrinsic value rather than their ability either to revitalize the word or suggest the numinous.

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I did not consider advanced academic study until my son Peter Sorensen was born. His presence in the world galvanized me to try harder. I have learned much from him, and daily he reveals to me the wonders of the mind and the capabilities of the human spirit. Thank you.

Dedication

For my son Peter, who teaches me how to live, and for my husband Michael, who is written on my heart. With love.

Introduction

I want to paint men and women with that something of the eternal which the halo used to symbolize, and which we seek to convey by the actual radiance and vibration of our coloring.

Vincent Van Gogh, letter 531 (September 1888)

AN OVERVIEW

A. S. Byatt has always had a tenacious and increasingly unfashionable interest in truth. The first three chapters of this thesis study her quest to capture the reality of what I have designated as the three fundamental human experiences (birth, death, and love). Chapters 4 and 5 comprise some observations on Byatt's presentation of perceptual and aesthetic experiences, especially visual ones (colour, geometric form, painting), experiences which hold great significance for her. Finally, the last chapters canvass her writings on supernatural and religious experience. In all of these areas, Byatt's respectful insistence on finding precise means to capture these experiences has led her to experiment with a mixture of verbal and visual modes of language. She has an ideal conception of communication that combines the immediacy and primal vigour of the visual with the methodical pragmatism of words. But her professed lack of religious faith has meant that some of the seemingly transcendent revelations her characters encounter are short-lived and, indeed, have tragic conclusions.

By "verbal language" I mean both the written and spoken word, although Byatt always emphasizes reading and writing over speech. "Visual language" includes graphic communications and visual art, in addition to internal imagery. I take internal visual

imagery to mean the use of mental pictures to understand and communicate, even though the origin or independence of these images may be in question.

In chapters 1 and 2, Byatt's treatment of childbirth (from the woman's point of view) and death (from the viewpoint of the dying consciousness) emphasizes the importance of the individual experience. For Byatt, the conventions of represented birth and death (in everyday parlance and in literature) are inadequate to the power of the event. She searches for original formulations and for ways of demonstrating that the unique personality of the character undergoing the event can be conveyed without resorting to stereotypical ways of classification. For example, Byatt disputes the expectation that women in childbirth are undergoing a primitive or animalistic event, or that words and memory necessarily fail in the extremities of childbirth. In chapter 3, Byatt's view of love (mainly erotic) is similar: she rejects many of the classic notions of love (its fusion with death, its links to spiritual fulfillment). But about love she is especially wary; instead of seeing in it a potential realization of individuality, she concentrates on the sacrifice of individuality entailed in being part of a couple.

In chapter 4, I discuss a very individual part of Byatt's thinking – her determination that visual phenomena such as colour and geometric form can provide a kind of order that allows for the possibility of expressing essential truths. The visionary experiences involving geometry that several of her characters achieve are startlingly successful; however, as in love, they risk losing what is, for Byatt, the all-important sense of self. They are also, usually, unable to transfer their visions into the verbal language that most people use to communicate. In chapter 5, Byatt's aesthetic explorations continue as she immerses herself in the creative processes of Vincent Van Gogh and

Henri Matisse. In each case, Byatt inverts the expected views of the painters: she emphasizes the realist, not the expressionist in Van Gogh, and the potency and profundity, rather than the decorative quality of Matisse. Overall, Byatt's portrayal of their contributions concedes the mastery of the visual sphere; she attempts to find ways of fusing the power of their visual art with written language, but her successes are intermittent and transient.

Byatt has written frequently of supernatural experiences, as a way of coming at transcendence or religion in a circuitous way. Byatt's ghosts, described in chapter 6, have a visual and linguistic solidity which makes them very believable; the ghost of Hallam in "The Conjugal Angel" is a significant person, not merely an idea. However, the individualistic nature of the quasi-religious exploration of the afterlife which her characters undertake severely limits the possibilities of comfort and illumination. Isolated spirituality seems doomed to misinterpretation and malnourishment. The conventional religious ideas explored in chapter 7 are again coloured by the stubborn individualism of her characters. Byatt and her characters are suspicious of religious institutions, but are clearly fascinated by religious ideas; several of her people are sincere Christians, and even Christian ministers. (It is religion, and not ethics, by the way, which appears in her fiction. Her mentor, Iris Murdoch, explicitly concerned herself with ethical problems, but for Byatt these do not loom so large.) Byatt experiments with ways in which language and art can take over incarnational ideas from Christianity, but the goal is overly ambitious and, perhaps – although her intentions are earnest – ultimately irreverent.

My methods of discussing these various aspects of Byatt's work result in some overlap between chapters. For example, in chapter 4 on form and colour there is a good

deal of discussion of transcendence and the numinous, which will return in chapter 7. Chapter 1 includes a certain amount of analysis of colour imagery in birth accounts, although the main portion of the discussion of colour is found in chapter 4. Each of these experiences described by Byatt emphasizes a different balance of the potential fusion of verbal and visual ways of knowing (and a shifting confidence in what possibilities of transcendence this balance exemplifies) and so certain chapters feature visual explorations or verbal or religious ones more emphatically. The visual representation of love, for example, is not prominent in Byatt's fiction, and the religious questions permeating most of her thinking about reality and language are less obvious in her portrayal of childbirth.

A. S. BYATT: LIFE, WORKS, AND RECEPTION

Antonia Susan Byatt was born in Yorkshire in 1936, the eldest daughter of the intellectually formidable Drabble family, which includes the novelist Margaret Drabble among the four children. Byatt's mother studied literature at Cambridge and her father was a judge. Byatt in childhood attended a Quaker school, although she has sometimes downplayed the family's Quakerism. She received a first class BA in English from Newnham College, Cambridge in 1957 and later began doctoral research at Oxford on religious metaphor in Renaissance poetry. Her studies ended when she married economist Ian Byatt in 1959.

With Byatt she had two children, daughter Antonia (born 1960) and son Charles (born 1961). During the 1950s and 1960s, she began to write fiction, and in 1964, Shadow of a Sun, her first novel, was published. (When it was re-issued in 1991, Byatt

restored her preferred title, The Shadow of the Sun.) During this time, she also taught English at the University of London and the Central School of Art and Design, and wrote book reviews and critical essays. Her second novel, The Game, appeared in 1967.

In 1969, the Byatts were amicably divorced, and Antonia married Peter Duffy, variously described in different news articles as a stockbroker and the manager of a property investment trust. Their first daughter, Isabel, was born in 1970. In 1972, the central tragedy of Byatt's life occurred. Pregnant with another child, she received the news that her 11-year-old son Charles had been killed by a drunk driver. The Duffys' daughter Miranda was born in 1973.

A. S. Byatt did not publish another novel until 1978, when The Virgin in the Garden was released. It is the first of a projected tetralogy about the members of the Potter family, with a major focus on the sisters Stephanie and Frederica. Kathleen Coyne Kelly calls these novels the "Powerhouse Quartet," apparently following the lead of Byatt herself (A. S. Byatt: Twayne's English Authors 63). Kelly cites a section of Still Life describing the "powerhouse" family structure in psychoanalysis as one "in which the principles and even practice of the parents are so liberal, so rational, so acceptable that any necessary rebellion against their authority must take the form of absurd gestures, petulant or violent" (122). In this study, however, I simply call these the Potter books. The second volume of the series, Still Life, was published in 1985. In 1987, Byatt published her first collection of short fiction, Sugar, which included a number of semi-autobiographical stories.

The major event of Byatt's career to date was the success of her 1990 novel, Possession: A Romance, which won the Booker Prize. It was an international bestseller

and the first of Byatt's novels to make an impact outside Britain. The film rights of this novel were reputedly sold for a large sum, although no film has been released. However, a film was made of one of the two novellas in Byatt's 1991 book Angels and Insects. American director Philip Haas adapted the novella "Morpho Eugenia"; the film was called Angels and Insects and appeared in 1995, enjoying moderate success. Byatt was closely involved in the adaptation and casting process. Two short fiction collections followed: The Matisse Stories (1993) and The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye: Five Fairy Stories (1994). The third novel in the Potter series was released in 1996, entitled Babel Tower. Another collection of short fiction, Elementals: Stories of Fire and Ice, appeared in 1998.

Byatt has also written several works of criticism: Degrees of Freedom: The Novels of Iris Murdoch (1965; re-issued 1994), Unruly Times: Wordsworth and Coleridge in Their Time (1970; re-issued 1989), Iris Murdoch (British Council Writers and their Work series, 1976), Passions of the Mind (selected critical writings, 1991), and Imagining Characters: Six Conversations about Women Writers, with Ignês Sodré (1995).

No major study of A. S. Byatt's work has yet appeared. Two short critical studies in book form have been published, Kathleen Coyne Kelly's A. S. Byatt in the Twayne's English Authors Series (1996) and Richard Todd's A. S. Byatt in the British Council Writers and their Work series (1997). Of the two, Todd's is slightly more ambitious, although his emphases are sometimes decidedly odd. One of his preoccupations is the "retrieval of unheard voices" in Byatt's fiction (particularly Possession); he details this in a 1994 article about Byatt and Marina Warner and again in his study Consuming Fictions:

The Booker Prize and Fiction in Britain Today (1996). The twentieth-century characters in Possession “can be said to owe their existence to their attempts to reconstruct their various nineteenth-century counterparts,” he writes in the latter book (49), and he connects the minor characters Blanche and Val in a dubious design which has Blanche’s unhappiness functioning as part of an “enabling” scheme for Val. Todd also attempts to get at Byatt’s interest in language and reality in his version of

her *poetics* of fiction: that is, her conviction that forms, patterns, and connections exist at such profound levels in strong yet fragile and finely drawn work that the writer may not even realize she has ‘put’ those elements into that work. (A. S. Byatt: Writers and their Work 5)

Here, as elsewhere, Todd’s analysis is muddled. His decision to include a chapter on menopausal characters in Byatt is puzzling, as is his insistence in bringing in new texts to explicate Byatt rather than using the hundreds of texts she mentions herself. Why use Charles Davy rather than Mallarmé, for example? Why focus on Greek myths and ignore the Norse myths prevalent in Possession? More importantly, Todd makes too much of “opacity” in Byatt’s aesthetic; while she certainly has allied herself with Iris Murdoch in calling for fiction which honours the opacity and complexity of persons (see my discussion in chapters 1, 4, and 7), Todd sees a principle of “inscrutability” (22, 75) at work which does not bear up under examination. He believes, for example, that it is impossible to say whether Byatt makes claims for the “authenticity” of the experience of love described in The Virgin in the Garden; in my reading, Byatt’s intentions are not so mysterious.

Kathleen Coyne Kelly’s study of A. S. Byatt resembles Richard Todd’s in its lack of attention to irony, to religion, and to the field of visual art. Like Todd, she emphasizes Byatt’s use of myth, going further by offering lengthy excurses on Byatt’s character

names and book titles. (As a medievalist, Kelly's analysis of The Game – a story steeped in medieval influences – is perhaps the most useful chapter.) Her generally satisfactory readings of Byatt's plots are less contentious than Todd's and often lean toward the biographical, although she admits that "Byatt is doing more than simply working the stuff of autobiography into fiction" (9). One of Kelly's major objectives is to offer a feminist analysis of Byatt's work, but many of her conclusions are strident and overstated. Does Randolph Henry Ash truly "steal" Christabel LaMotte's virginity in Possession (94) and is Bill Potter in The Virgin in the Garden and its sequels really just a "despot" whose wife Winifred has been "beaten down by life" with him (69, 125)? Male characters for whom Byatt has affection are demonized in Kelly's readings, while female characters are accorded complementary oversimplifications as victims. Kelly does not notice, for example, that Stephanie Potter Orton in Still Life (one of Byatt's most important characters) valiantly attempts to combine intellectual work with her work as a wife and mother. And Kelly chooses, among the multiple themes of Possession, to emphasize the myth of the "chained, imprisoned, or entowered woman" (89), never mentioning Byatt's ironic uses of the myth and the fact that many of the women in the novel are responsible for their own "imprisonment." This misapplication of feminist energy is a frequent occurrence in Byatt criticism; in 1996 Byatt reacted strongly against a particular feminist reading of The Matisse Stories by Michèle Roberts, saying in an interview that Roberts "was looking for a particular feminist message and missed the feminist message which was there" (Miller).

Much of the information available about Byatt has appeared in journalistic accounts, of which some of the best are by Valerie Grove, Kate Kellaway, Mira Stout,

Sally Vincent, Richard Rosenfeld, D. J. Taylor, and Marianne Brace, all written since 1990. Several interviews with Byatt are helpful, especially Juliet Dusinberre's in Janet Todd's Women Writers Talking, Olga Kenyon's in The Writer's Imagination, and Eleanor Wachtel's two excellent interviews on CBC Radio's Writers & Company, one published in book form in 1993 and the other broadcast in 1996. The best interview by far was conducted by Nicolas Tredell and collected in his book Conversations With Critics. Another valuable resource is a series of films in the Writers Talk: Ideas of Our Time collection. In 1984, Byatt was interviewed by Iris Murdoch for this series; in 1989 she interviewed Anthony Burgess and Toni Morrison for the same series.

The majority of the critical discussions about A. S. Byatt's fiction concern Possession, and particularly focus on Byatt's use of postmodernism, ventriloquism, Romance, fairy-tale, and Victorian history. The apparent need of critics to ally her with particular genres or techniques has not resulted in analysis of much insight, particularly as Byatt's fiction traverses a number of styles. Prior to 1990, there are, I believe, fewer than ten scholarly articles devoted to Byatt's fiction, and reference to her can be found within only a few general studies. Typical of this early analysis are the conclusions of Allan Massie (The Novel Today) and Elaine Showalter (A Literature of Their Own) who categorize Byatt, briefly, as a moral novelist. Massie additionally sees her as having "little sense of structure and no elegance" (19). D. J. Taylor has written more extensively and appreciatively about Byatt, but his contribution is strictly bounded by his belief that she is plainly a social realist, in line with E. M. Forster and George Eliot. Those who delve into the matter of Byatt's realism more rigorously present her as a realist exploring the limits of imagination and language (Dusinberre), or as a writer fusing realism with

modernism (Kenyon, Women Novelists Today). In the field of thematic criticism, Tess Cosslett has analysed Byatt's depiction of childbirth, and Joanne Creighton and others have studied Byatt's and Drabble's use of sisters.

Some of the scholarly writing about Byatt is misleading, especially that which has appeared in the wake of Possession. Louise Yelin and Olga Kenyon take Byatt to task for her supposed anti-feminism, while Janice Rossen (The University in Modern Fiction) and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (No Man's Land) focus almost exclusively on Byatt's feminist convictions. The latter study claims that Possession, in its portrayal of Christabel LaMotte, presents "a fully creative mother and a fully empowering literary matrilineage" (386), a conclusion that is surely overstated. Caroline Webb describes Byatt's "distrust of the metaphoric" (183), a decidedly problematic judgement. The sources of Possession are worked over incessantly. No clear picture of Byatt emerges from the majority of the critical work to date, except that Byatt is, supposedly, a postmodern game-player, an ironic neo-Victorian with a penchant for heavy use of allusion and intertext. Kathleen Coyne Kelly borrows the term "ficticism" from Marilyn Butler's review of Possession in the Times Literary Supplement and proposes that its combination of fiction and criticism is a neat summation of Byatt. Nearly all the graduate theses that have been written about Byatt in the past few years have been by women and have concerned feminist issues; the rest engage with various matters of postmodern style and form; nearly all of them are MA theses.

There are, however, recent signs of improvement. Jean-Louis Chevalier is a lively and intelligent reader with a real understanding of Possession's provocative ending(s); he considers both the "ethics of conclusion" and the "aesthetics of conclusion" (110). Jane

Campbell has written several good articles on Byatt, including a piece on The Game which rightly underlines the irreducibility of Byatt's symbols and the devouring power of failed imagination in her world. She makes a convincing case for "Precipice-Encurled" as a story about the inadequacy of language and truth. Julian Gitzen has recognized that Byatt and her characters are "tirelessly alive to both the bond and the gap between words and their referents and between art and its subject" (84). Michael Westlake correctly sees that Still Life is not only "about truth but it is about looking; or rather looking, in its various and complex modalities, is the chosen metaphor for the articulation of truth" (33); he additionally notes that "an abandonment of correspondence between language and reality doesn't rule out the possibility of truth" (35), which I agree is key to an understanding of Byatt.

Flora Alexander, in Contemporary Women Novelists, corrects some of the misguided attempts to place Byatt within particular feminist categories. She writes that Byatt has a "gender-neutral approach to the life of the mind" combined with "a breathtaking ability to conceptualize things about the life of the female body that have been almost inexpressible" (13). Alexander also observes clearly Byatt's obsession with perception and expression.

She subjects realist writing to careful critical enquiry, thus developing it for her own artistic purpose. A foundation in realist procedures allows her to exercise remarkable powers of perception, in creating a verbal version of the material world. A complex discussion of the limitations of words, and a penetrating analysis of the emotional and the moral life, are placed within this setting, producing fiction characterized by a combination of intellectual rigour and a passionate interest in the depth and richness of human experience. (41)

Like most Byatt commentary, Alexander's is limited to a few hundred words; this promising beginning is actually the conclusion of her short section about Byatt.

MAJOR THEMES

The aspects I have chosen to emphasize in my study of A. S. Byatt are not the usual ones. Much of the work being done on her emphasizes her attitudes toward feminism, or treats her as an erudite postmodern Romantic of the “maximalist” type; there are critics who are studying her *via* genre, attempting to establish whether she is a realist, an ironist, an authority on nostalgic pastiche. Is she a fabulist? A psychological, historical, symbolic, or mythological writer? These are valid questions. There are several other fields of inquiry that would also be rewarding, and which have so far been neglected: her enthusiastic contemplation of themes from biology, physics, and mathematics; her presentation of illness, especially autism and asthma; her dialectical models of reality; and her status as a moral writer. On this last she says, “My early novels are in one aspect a sort of questioning quarrel with [F. R.] Leavis’s vision and values [of moral seriousness], which nevertheless I inherit and share” (Passions of the Mind 2). Additionally, it should not be forgotten that Byatt is in mid-career, and that any analysis of her themes, ideology, or style must be provisional – indeed in the past decade her style has shown great variety and unpredictability.

My interest is language and faith. Byatt is fascinated by language, both verbal and visual, and is always pushing at the boundaries of possibility to ascertain what words and pictures are capable of expressing, and whether they might not be fused in order that a superior mode of communication be created. This conception makes her sound perhaps like an idealist or a utopian fantasist, but she is far from that. She is an empiricist and

emphasizes the importance of physical experience, of sensory data, of the concrete, individual response to the world.

As I studied her reflections on this theme, I noticed that religious faith seemed to hover nearby. This is nothing new, of course. Christianity (my main framework of religious reference, and Byatt's) has been deeply involved in debates about language, truth, and authority for centuries, since the writer of the Gospel of John said, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1.1)¹ and reported Christ as saying, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life" (John 14.6). And long before that, it was written that God created the world just by *saying* it, in Genesis. Furthermore, it is not accidental that *vision* has come to have two meanings: the faculty of sight and that which is apprehended in a supernatural trance. But what did, initially, seem odd was that A. S. Byatt should be so involved in questions of religious faith, since she declares herself to be an agnostic.

It seemed appropriate to me that an investigation of Byatt's religious faith (or lack of it) should be yoked to a study of her faith in language and her faith in art. It is there in her books, although few critics have commented on it. It is a familiar theme; Matthew Arnold is only one of the most obvious examples of a secular writer who attempted to transfer allegiance from God to art. Byatt, as it happens, has little patience for Arnold; many Victorian writers claim her sympathetic attention (Browning, Tennyson, George Eliot) but Arnold is not among them. A clue to Byatt's dismissal of Arnold is found in the contemptuous remarks about him made by her supervisor at Oxford, Helen Gardner, who saw Arnold's misapplication of scriptural attributes as "grotesque" and "fantastic" (The

¹ Biblical quotations are from the Revised Standard Version, unless otherwise noted.

Limits of Literary Criticism 7). As I investigated Byatt further, I discovered in her writing a surprising and sometimes unsettling passion when considering Christianity. She has said that, for her, God is “an omni-present absentee whose linguistic essence is reduced to traces of moral and cultural nostalgia, touched with savagery” (Passions of the Mind 5) and that she has “absolutely no religious beliefs although I think I have a religious temperament” (Byatt/Murdoch video interview)² – statements that yoke paradoxical sentiments. In an argumentative essay about Van Gogh and religion, she reports: “I baulk at the words, ‘religious,’ ‘spiritual,’ even ‘contemplative,’ so what is left?” (Passions of the Mind 321). Yet she clearly wants to find the right word for her kind of “religious temperament.”

Byatt’s education as a Quaker is particularly illuminating when we turn our attention to the question of why both written/oral language *and* visual language are important for her. For the Quakers, an “Inner Light” ideally reveals God’s message; Meetings of the Society of Friends stress silence and simplicity. There is no emphasis on sacrament, priestly authority, creeds, or sermons. Instead, Quakers wait for individuals to spontaneously recognize the Spirit. The Word is important, but so is the *recognition* or *perception* (I emphasize the visual origin of the terms) of another form of message, one heralded by “light.” The fact that Byatt is no longer a Quaker, however, is equally revealing; the bare, icon-free space of the Meeting House must have been stark to a person with such strong feelings about colour and paintings, the confidence placed in the Word inadequate, placed next to the complexities of the world.

² Interviews are cited by the interviewer’s name, not Byatt’s. Audio and video interviews are, of course, unpaginated. The conversations in the Writers Talk: Ideas of our Time video series are cited by Byatt and the writer she is in conversation with, as in “Byatt/Burgess.”

Byatt's expectation that language and truth are compatible is tempered, then, by her empiricism and by a strain of scepticism. The cautiously hopeful aspect of her philosophy allies her with the metaphysical poets and the Romantics; she has said that her "lost paradise was [T. S.] Eliot's elegant fiction of [Donne's] undissociated sensibility" (Passions of the Mind 2). She is a fervent admirer of Coleridge who, like Byatt, could *see* his thoughts and metaphors. On the composition of "Kubla Khan" Coleridge wrote that "all the images rose up before [the Author] as *things*, with a parallel production of the correspondent expressions, without any sensation or consciousness of effort" (Selected Poetry and Prose 114). For herself, Byatt says, "I see any projected piece of writing or work as a geometric structure: various colours and patterns. I *see* other people's metaphors" (Passions of the Mind 14).

She is also a professed follower of William Carlos Williams, attempting to describe the "thing itself" in plain and exact language (Passions of the Mind 11). She acknowledges the importance of other modernists:

I derive my sense of an order behind things from T. S. Eliot and Pound. I write the way I do from [Henry] James *via* T. S. Eliot rather than from a line of women writers. (Dusinberre interview 183)

Postmodernists can claim her as well, because of her use of the term "self-conscious realism" (Passions of the Mind 4) to describe the style of some of her fiction. (I see this self-consciousness as exceeding even the considerable self-consciousness of modernism.) This last classification is accurate for her middle-period fiction (The Virgin in the Garden, Still Life, and Sugar) but less so for her first two novels. It can be used, but in a different way, for her fiction since Possession (1990), which has become more ironic and parodic.

There is an embarrassment of riches in any consideration of Byatt's literary lineage and her generic and stylistic transformations. These play a part in my study, because no one can properly interpret Byatt without grasping at least some of the complex network of allusions and deeply-felt loyalties she feels to other writers, past and present. But my primary interest is thematic: I want to know what she believes about the words and pictures we use to represent existence and knowledge.

There is more than enough material to do a study solely of Byatt's philosophy of verbal language. The power of words is at the heart of Possession, where it is possible to find love through reading, and reading can actually change one's personality and entire life. Her excitement about words is palpable in the detailed interview Nicolas Tredell conducted with her in 1990:

Well, Coleridge wonderfully said that he was sure that words were things like other things in the world. And the truth is that if you're standing on Jagger Howe or you're at the Boggle Hole [places in North Yorkshire she loves], all those things are there together, the spiders and the stones and the sea and the words Boggle and Hole, and you're there and they're there and they're not separate systems. I know that Iris Murdoch is right and that Wittgenstein is right, to say that, however much we may try to get at what is under the net, we're only ever describing the net. But if you make the meshes fine enough, the net is so beautiful that all the bumps and humps of things under it are so, yes, so accessible, you can actually sort of *see* them under the net. (Conversations with Critics 66, emphasis mine)

If Still Life did not exist, it probably would not have occurred to me that there was a rival for Byatt's intense affection for words. But in that novel she dedicates herself to using seeing, rather than writing or reading or speaking, as her main epistemological approach. And furthermore, one notices, she has used the verb *to see* even when describing the power of verbal language, above. Using Van Gogh's paintings and Williams's creed "No ideas but in things," Byatt attempted a "bare book, my still life" (Passions of the Mind

12). Trying to write without metaphor, she soon concedes her failure, but the resulting meditation on writing like a painter is moving and profoundly original.

At this point, I would like to clarify several concepts. One is the manner I use the terms “language” and “knowledge”; another is the way I separate internal and external visual imagery; the last is an attempt at explaining Byatt’s particular use of the term “metaphor.”

First, my use of “language” and “knowledge” may seem, occasionally, blurred. Clearly these are quite different things: why do I appear to use them almost interchangeably? As with many of my approaches, I do this because it is appropriate for a study of Byatt. She herself assumes an intimate connection between knowledge and language, although it may be troubled; she is not an advocate of the gap between them. She has little enthusiasm for sceptical theories that signification is arbitrary and that there is no possibility of capturing our knowledge of reality (if such exists) in accurate language (if such exists). Byatt is well aware of the currency of such theories, and to some extent has modified, as a result, her initial faith in realism. But overall, it is clear from her essays and interviews that she believes in the strong possibility that knowledge and language can fruitfully coincide, and, more importantly, that abandoning the quest to find and articulate Meaning is an unjustifiable capitulation to the forces of pessimism.

Next, I do not always separate internal imaging from the concrete representations that result from it. My pursuit of information about visual knowledge has been general, rather than narrowing the field only to the creation of mental images, sometimes called eidetic images, the kind that Byatt says she experiences. To stop there seemed foolish, although many studies do – there is a clear line of demarcation between the philosophers,

neurologists and New Age practitioners considering internal imaging, and the aestheticians and art analysts whose field is (actual) visual representation. For Byatt these are connected: her imaginative ability to “see” metaphors in her mind and her fascination with colour and geometric form, with Van Gogh and Matisse, are clearly of a piece. Despite the fact that how we see has been researched and debated for thousands of years, I found that the conclusions in this area are still tentative. There is still no definite model of precisely how, for example, colours are perceived by the eye and brain. For my purposes, it was best to use a generous definition of visual language – encompassing both what Byatt’s characters see in their minds and what they think about concrete visual representations and phenomena.

Earlier, I quoted Byatt’s remarks about her determination in Still Life to write without metaphor. An entire study could be done on Byatt’s treatment of metaphor and, although metaphor, with its close ties both to visual knowledge and written language, often appears in my remarks, I have decided not to delve extensively into its nature. Again, this is an investigation with a long history, but I restrict my remarks here to the following explanation of Byatt’s particular attitude to metaphor. Although metaphor in literary scholarship is usually assumed to be a linguistic designation with visual (and other sensory) aspects, Byatt sometimes (though not always) uses metaphor as if it were wholly visual. When she says she wanted to write Still Life without metaphor, she was using the word in its conventional sense. But when she says, in a consideration of Van Gogh’s paintings, “Both metaphor and naming in paint were different from these things [plums] in language” (Still Life 165), she hints that *this* metaphor is not really a word at all, but is closely related to picture, to thing. Anyone who would follow up on these

initial remarks of mine would do a valuable service; I, on the other hand, have decided to steer clear of the thorny history of metaphor theory and have concentrated instead on creating a broader model of Byatt's verbal/visual analysis.

§ § §

Byatt puts her visual tendencies to various uses: she revitalizes written language, she explores whether the visual can make a more substantial attempt at achieving meaning (which I designate as "Meaning" if it is meant in an ultimate sense), she wonders whether these ways of knowing and articulating can be combined to make a truly superior, and even transcendent, kind of communication. These last two goals, one immediately notices, court danger and irreverence: if the searcher refuses to believe in a higher power, what does a quest for transcendent knowledge really mean? In using words like "transcendence," "numinous," and "faith," I intend for them to be invested with their full power; although it may be common to assign "epiphanies" to all sorts of minor experiences in literary criticism, I use religious terms conservatively and with sincerity. My "transcendence" draws on William James's "the reality of the unseen" (The Varieties of Religious Experience 53), but transcendence as I use it not only refers to that which is beyond the material world. Transcendent reality is vastly superior to physical reality and by my definition is so much more than what we are that we will never be capable of grasping it fully. It is holy. Similarly God is not a concept or an abstraction in this study, but is presented as a full and meaningful holy presence, powerful and actual.

There is currently an absence of literary criticism that takes religion seriously. I find disturbing the assumptions that nearly everyone believes that God is dead, and that religion is an inappropriate element in intellectual work. Although statistics on religious

adherence must be considered with care, and a statistical snapshot can only be a first step in a much-needed analysis of world faith as we enter the twenty-first century, it is worthwhile noting that fewer than four percent of the world's people actually call themselves "atheists." Another 15 percent are "non-religious," a term that I assume is more-or-less equivalent to "agnostic." One-third of the world's population is termed Christian, with Muslims at 20 percent and experiencing rapid growth. Even taking into consideration the possibility that the statistical apparatus may have flaws, and the likelihood that sizeable portions of the Christian group are believers in name only, even the remaining adherents of the Christian tradition (which is only one creed) are still likely to constitute a larger group than atheists and agnostics combined ("Worldwide Adherents of All Religions," 1997 Britannica Book of the Year).

I have been seeking a way to broaden literary study in a way that reflects religious faith as it still exists. Religion itself is the recognition that there is a higher power, usually a deity, who is the source of existence, and reading a literary text in the light of that recognition – or even reading out of profound curiosity about that recognition – is a very different act from the one which most literary scholars practice. Assuredly religious institutions crumble, and deceitful and hypocritical church leaders contaminate perceptions of faith itself. A. S. Byatt does not believe in God, and yet her desire for something very like God reverberates through her works. This situation recurs again and again in twentieth-century letters, but our intellectual scrutiny of this manifestation is inadequate and timorous. One of the basic problems is that people confuse faith, belief, and institutional practices. I find it helpful to employ Wilfred Cantwell Smith's definition of "faith" as characterized by a very personal recognition of and response to a

transcendent reality, while “beliefs” are the intellectual and verbal doctrines and propositions that build upon and ideally buttress that individual’s faith (Faith and Belief *passim*). The sometimes hollow institutional practices which are the reason that so many people in the twentieth century have abandoned religion must be seen as distinct from religious faith itself.

A. S. Byatt is searching for systems of orderly belief that can replace a reliance on Christianity: she examines written language (rarely oral – she seems to have no interest in the discussion, taken up by Jacques Derrida in Of Grammatology, for example, about which mode has primacy), visual art, colour, and geometry for evidence of certainty, purity, even holiness. She also has thought fiercely about science, a topic beyond the scope of my study. She has written extensively on subjects which can be termed religious but (in her treatment) remain on the outskirts of a fully-committed discussion of faith: ghosts and other supernatural phenomena, ministers, myth. And she has wrestled with incarnational ideas of character development and language theory borrowed from Christianity. One of the few articles on Byatt which deals with her religious character is “The Religion of Fiction” by Michael Levenson, which states, in part, that

her point is not to confirm religious truth, but to enlarge the religious sense, which locates value not in the infinite but in the yearning for the infinite, not in God but in the search for God. (43)

These searches encompass the occasional ecstatic success (in Marcus Potter’s visions, in Stephanie Potter’s experience of giving birth) but often end in frustration. It is particularly this conjunction of glimpsed Meaning and painful disappointment in her fiction that I explore in this thesis. Sometimes the glimmer of faith I see in Byatt reminds me of James Blackadder’s PhD thesis topic in Possession: “Conscious Argument and

Unconscious Bias: A Source of Tension in the Dramatic Poems of Randolph Henry Ash.” Byatt, like Ash, is disappointed with the trappings of conventional religion; in Possession Ash says that truth has been obscured by “palimpsest upon palimpsest” (181) until it may no longer be within our grasp. Intriguingly, the concept of the palimpsest so often seen as felicitous and creative in postmodern literature here is used with negative and destructive force. The palimpsests are the mistakes, false turnings, and obsolescences of religious traditions.

Yet the moral centre of Byatt’s Potter novels is an Anglican priest. Daniel Orton, in the Potter novels, has a sincere faith, even if his attitude to the church and some of its doctrines is uncertain. Daniel saves lives; he changes people. He is also, significantly, adept neither with words nor images. Daniel just “is.” He represents being and doing at its most solid, and is almost completely unrelated to the quests for accurate ways of seeing and saying that other characters embark upon. Along with Vincent Van Gogh and Randolph Henry Ash (exemplary characters who for Byatt represent fulfillment in, respectively, visual and linguistic terms), Daniel (silently representing existence, love, and service) provides a model for the fully inhabited life. Unlike the other two, Daniel has no profound interest in or ability with language – and he provides an impressive notion of what can be gained by faith alone – which causes considerable trouble for Byatt’s linguistic quest for truth.

METHODOLOGY

I am a pluralist and synthesist in methodology, but not in ideology (I am a Christian, a socialist, and a feminist). Whenever possible I work from the “text up” to

find my method, rather than from the “theory down.” I noticed recently that the entry for Walter Benjamin in The Oxford Companion to Philosophy defined him as

a practitioner of “immanent criticism”: theoretical principles are to emerge from the work studied, not brought to it from the outside.

I like this idea, and would not be displeased to be described in such a manner. I am always on the lookout for practical working models of literary criticism, with an emphasis on *working*.

By nature I am a close reader and a concrete thinker. It is difficult, however, to do close reading on nearly 3000 pages of fiction, so I combine this tendency with several other approaches. I am a thematic critic; in this study of Byatt my thematic interests are, obviously, religion, visual art, and the primary human experiences of birth, love, and death. I have found phenomenology, as scholars of religion like Huston Smith formulate it, useful as a critical tool. Smith’s phenomenology is an attempt to understand another’s experience *from the inside*. In my chapters about Byatt’s presentation of birth, death, and love I have made particular use of a phenomenological approach, as, I think, does Byatt. The thoughts and feelings of Daniel, Stephanie, Marcus, Ash, and even the narrators (the narrator of Still Life has an imposing personality, for example) are presented by Byatt in all their variety, abundance, and self-conscious complexity for a reason. I take her characters seriously as indicators of meaning. There are exceptions: some of the fairy stories in The Djinn in the Nightingale’s Eye use stock characters, and some aspects of Angels and Insects and Possession are too ironic to be trusted in this way. In addition to trusting Byatt’s characters and narrators as phenomenological guides, I have found it beneficial not to use technical or dictionary definitions of my subjects (“love” in my Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English starts out unpromisingly with “warm

affection, attachment, liking, or fondness”) but, for comparative purposes, to use literary descriptions of the events under scrutiny, accounts by Donne, Julian Barnes, and Wordsworth, for example.

I respect the author’s intentions and feel particularly strongly that an investigation of authorial intention is overdue for Byatt, who has been somewhat mauled by inaccurate critics and about whose writing there is little agreement and much misplaced emphasis. Thus, I have looked closely at her critical and autobiographical writings and at interviews (many which have never, to my knowledge, been considered by critics). I have found these to be revealing; they clarify important aspects of her thinking that critics have mishandled or ignored. In a 1987 article about Willa Cather, Byatt writes:

Criticism used to look for “influences” and now seeks to place author and text in one theoretical framework or another. Either way, the critics are looking for similarities, rather than the qualities which might be thought to make a work individual or even unique. (“Hearths in the Wilderness” 508)

She is somewhat cranky about critics who obsessively sexualize or anthropomorphize or who collapse categories. She herself is precise. In a televised interview with Michael Ignatieff in 1996 she said:

Part of my subject matter as a novelist is the danger of endlessly arguing by analogy. I know an awful lot of people who are making paintings and writing poems because they think they understand chaos theory. They’re addicted to the word ‘chaos,’ they think it’s beautiful, a religious word. But if you’re a really good writer, you can take both the way the word has been and some understanding of the way the word is now newly used and make a modern vision.

Byatt’s belief in the unique individual and in the possibility of original and independent thought has been a contributing factor in her difficult relations with feminist movements.

What I don't like is people with very strong beliefs that cause them not to *look*. I'm a political feminist. I think women's lives need quite a lot of improving, some of which has now happened. I'm interested in women's themes, women's freedom. Literary feminism is a much more dubious thing. . . . It's because I'm a feminist that I can't stand women limiting other women's imaginations. (Miller interview)

The importance of personality and the subjective outlook and her keenness to combine these with principles of realism, her insistence that signification is not arbitrary but meaningful – these are elements that have made her an object of suspicion for certain feminist critics who have been strongly influenced by the sceptical mainstream of post-structural thought. I read Byatt as a feminist reading a feminist, noting the salient feminist themes in her work. (My own definition of feminism is simple: I believe in the equal worth of women and men.) But these themes are not the mainspring of her fiction. Women in Byatt's work make choices, just as the men do, and some choices are better than others. Anna in *The Shadow of the Sun* appears trapped, but she has refused to learn the intellectual discipline that might have liberated her; Frederica Potter is a free and independent woman, and makes a number of bad choices, as do Maud Bailey and Christabel LaMotte in *Possession*. Byatt's women are individuals who must live (and die) by the decisions they make for themselves. They are not products of a system, or symbols of repression.

I take into account when I write whether other methods are appropriate to the subject. For example, Catherine Belsey claims that *Possession* is a “profoundly Lacanian novel” (*Desire: Love Stories in Western Culture* 87), which I think is an irresponsible misreading. There is little convincing textual evidence for such an interpretation and Byatt displays little sympathy for Lacan's ideas. She certainly is not craven in her approach to difficult psychological or cultural theories (see her readings of Foucault,

Derrida, and Wittgenstein in Passions of the Mind), so it is doubtful that she can be accused of avoiding Lacan. It is, more likely, that his thinking is not pertinent for her world view. Byatt knows the work of various post-structuralist and feminist theorists well, but is often critical of it, especially when it overutilizes abstraction and intimidating jargon. I myself have no patience for vocabulary that erects barriers between the academic and general reader, and am drawn to thinkers who invite comprehension (Iris Murdoch, Edward Said, Oliver Sacks, Roland Barthes, and William James are variously placed along the critical spectrum but are all excellent stylists).

In allowing my methods to arise from the text, I have been able to discover some surprising and gratifying particulars. For example, although I usually use biographical explanations sparingly, several aspects of Byatt's life demand attention and provide powerful explanations of, for example, the prominence of Stephanie Potter's death in Still Life. Byatt herself underwent a partial accidental electrocution by an ungrounded refrigerator in the 1960s, which explains the viscerality of that scene. Additionally, one cannot underestimate the importance of the accidental death of her son Charles in 1972. Byatt's writing stopped almost entirely for a number of years; after she was finally able to confront that death in fiction by transforming it into Stephanie Potter's death in 1985, her writing changed profoundly, in style, theme, and tone. Charles Byatt's death is, in large part, responsible for his mother's lack of faith and her obsession with accident. She has said, "Chance operates in the world in this terrifying way and can change things overnight. All our best endeavours are subject to it" (Byatt/Murdoch video interview).

In using a synthesis of analytical methods, but especially close reading, I also came to realize how important is Byatt's insistence on the experience of the individual,

something I have already touched on briefly. A recognition of the place of individualism in her philosophy allows one to formulate theories of Byatt's political ideas, which are at first glance difficult to establish and contradictory. If I had not been open to a number of ways of reading, I doubt that I would have noticed her stance on individualism. Reading Byatt is a daunting task. As The New Yorker review of Possession said, somewhat caustically, in 1990:

Possession is so enormous that it can't be maneuvered into the studio apartment of a review without a great deal of grunting and swearing – and of metaphor. It's a Niagara of allusions. It's a rope of pearls grossly disparate in lustre and value. It's a one-woman variety show of literary styles and types. It's a high-tech handbook of professional thought tools adapted for the consumer. (Thurman 153)

The sheer abundance of Byatt makes a nimble and varied theoretical outlook advisable: those who assume that the postmodern literary detective story of Possession classes her with Eco and Borges find themselves perplexed when faced with the “self-conscious realism” of the Potter novels or the slightly morose fatalism of the 1960s fiction. In 1967, a journalist in the Guardian had the foresight to see this:

For whereas Margaret Drabble writes (and talks) on double levels – offering soft options to the lazy and the dim – her sister has less patience. Her style is rarefied. She assumes complete attention, enormous breadth of reading, and an acrobatic mind. (MacCarthy 8)

Another way of describing my methods would be to give them a contrapuntal designation. In his book Musical Elaborations, Edward Said has noted that certain composers and musicians overcome some of classical music's authoritative tendencies by using strategies of counterpoint – empowering several voices to sing at once – and variation – allowing melodic themes to be open-endedly elaborative and diverse. I find Said's musicological idea happily adaptable to other disciplines.

§ § §

Part of my goal has been to place Byatt in an accurate context for fruitful discussion, because so many of the comparisons being made are not useful. For example, consider the common procedure of contrasting Byatt's writing with that of her sister, Margaret Drabble, or her mentor, Iris Murdoch. I do find that Drabble's and Byatt's portrayals of childbirth are worth comparing (with Byatt offering a sharply dissenting point of view to her sister's apparently effortless fictional deliveries), but otherwise the connections are dubious. Byatt's first two novels bear certain resemblances to Murdoch's fiction, in their use of character to represent idea and their often heavily fatalistic plot structures. Since the 1970s, however, Byatt has experimented with a much wider variety of forms than she previously used.

Byatt has written profusely on the writers she admires, and these antecedents and loyalties are a tremendous help in explicating her work. Although she claims Proust and Mann among her favourite writers, their influence is less visible than that of other favourites: Wordsworth, Coleridge, Browning, Tennyson, George Eliot, and Henry James. She has admiring quarrels with E. M. Forster and D. H. Lawrence. These are the writers who have shaped her thinking, more than any theorists of literature or culture (Bakhtin, Lukács, Derrida), and so I have used the words of literary writers extensively, as part of the structure of my argument. I have done the same with a few contemporary writers who can profitably be set side by side with her: Julian Barnes, Peter Ackroyd, Toni Morrison, Margaret Atwood. Byatt has noticed some of these texts, but others are accidents of my own reading.

My mixture of poetry, fiction, philosophy, painting (and so on) may strike the reader as arbitrary, but I find this a useful way to approach Byatt, whose methods are much the same. I must also acknowledge the sometimes casual manner I have quoted from complex texts, for example when I have mentioned the work of Donne, Wordsworth, and Lawrence. My readings of specific and limited elements in their work should not be mistaken for full interpretations. I also think that, while this work on Byatt's sources, biography, and literary antecedents is necessary now – to situate Byatt accurately – in the coming years it will be more meaningful to employ historical and cultural analysis and more rigorous linguistic methods.

The themes and forms I perceive in Byatt's work are functional, not decorative. My work on love, for instance, does not present that experience in Byatt's fiction as prettifying gloss, window-dressing, or some hazy change-of-pace stratagem in an otherwise cerebral undertaking. Love is a fundamental human experience to which Byatt gives her full attention. Similarly, death in Byatt is not meant to "stand for" something else, or to be a mere plot element, but takes centre stage and is resolutely itself. Nor is her investigation of Matisse intended just to brighten things up.

A related point about my own method is that my work is rooted in experience and not abstraction: when I discuss Byatt's use of triangles or spirals or birth, I mean just *that*. The triangle that Marcus Potter sees as a mental image is not a diagram, but is real and literal. It naturally has symbolic and psychological (and sometimes religious) significance, but it also is, actually, a triangle. I also discuss Byatt's characters as if, in a way, they were *real*, and I do not always emphasize divisions between the novels (treating the characters as if they were, perhaps, members of one family): again this is a

helpful method Byatt has used herself, in her semi-psychoanalytical book Imagining Characters.

§ § §

Theorizing the visual is currently experiencing one of its periods in vogue. Following Michel Foucault's analysis of the Panopticon in Discipline and Punish (1975) – “Visibility is a trap” (200) – some theorists are labouring at models of repressive visual technologies. As interdisciplinary study and popular culture analysis gain status, scholars are turning their attention to such things as the comic strip form and to Victorian illustrated novels. And the influence of computers in conceptual thinking has led to a lively growth in studies of visual communication theories of the utilitarian sort: the importance of iconic information on the Internet, of graphic presentation of data in business. Edward R. Tufte's Visual Explanations (1997) is indicative of this trend:

This book describes design strategies – the proper arrangement of space and time of images, words, and numbers – for presenting information about motion, process, mechanism, cause and effect. (9)

None of these current uses of visual thinking contributes much to an understanding of Byatt's fiction. These theorists usually emphasize *how*, not *what*. It is not the content of the information conveyed by way of the eye that is being theorized, but the form, as well as the ramifications (pedagogical, neurological, political, economic) of that transfer from brain to eye, from eye to brain. Foucault's discourse analysis as it touches on sight is pessimistic; it has no useful point of contact with Byatt's trust in visual reality. I have used instead the writings of aesthetic theorists and art critics like E.H. Gombrich and Lawrence Gowing to guide me and, especially, the writings of artists themselves.

If one can say that a study of an author is “needed” (and I am not sure that this is ever really the case), a thorough investigation of A. S. Byatt’s writing is due. Possession: A Romance is the only Byatt novel which many readers know, and I cannot emphasize enough that Possession is not typical, but only one phase of her work. As one of the first to do a full-length analysis of Byatt’s fiction, I am aware that I may have emphasized too strongly her quest for truth and transcendent Meaning, as well as her faith in the power of language to represent reality. Byatt is, after all, not an idealist, but an empiricist: she is aware of the limitations of language and the unattainability of absolute truth. In my conclusion, I will return to Byatt’s failures of faith and hope and attempt some provisional summaries. The collapse of several of her investigations has not made her a cynic, although it has noticeably changed the scope of her ambitions.

Part I: The Language of Fundamental Personal Experience

Chapter 1: Childbirth

Suddenly she [Orlando] started – and here we could only wish that, as on a former occasion, Purity, Chastity, and Modesty would push the door ajar and provide, at least, a breathing space in which we could think how to wrap up what now has to be told delicately, as a biographer should. But no! . . . Is nothing then, going to happen this pale March morning to mitigate, to veil, to cover, to conceal, to shroud this undeniable event whatever it may be?

Virginia Woolf, Orlando (1928)

I played the lead, and it was big stuff; supporting roles are less rewarding.

Rosamond Lehmann, The Echoing Grove (1953)

Scenes of childbirth in literature are rare, and told from the perspective of the woman giving birth they are even rarer. Children are frequently represented in poetry and fiction, both as individuals and as metaphors, but birth itself is common only in metaphoric use, where it has even become banal. The Bible is replete with such references: Zion is often in labour, bringing forth her sons (see, for example, Isaiah 66.8), and Paul appeals to the Galatians as if he were their mother: “My little children, with whom I am again in travail until Christ be formed in you!” (4.19). Shelley’s “Ode to the West Wind” (1820) associates birth with his own poetic inventiveness. Childbirth as metaphor, however, is not the subject of this discussion; there is a good deal of criticism on this topic to which the reader can be referred.¹ But the actual story of the woman giving birth is uncommon, and if written at all – especially before this century – it has

¹ See Ellmann, Curtius, Ghiselin, Nelson, E. Sacks. For feminist views, see Friedman, Stone, and Gubar. Tess Cosslett in “Childbirth from the Woman’s Point of View” criticizes these latter studies as privileging “childbirth as metaphor for other kinds of female creativity” (283 n. 3), as opposed to dealing with childbirth *per se*.

usually been told from an external point of view, often male.² To underscore the strangeness of this situation, critic Carol H. Poston says that it is “as if a kiss were constantly described from the viewpoint of someone watching rather than from the perspective of those kissing” (25).

One of the most famous descriptions of childbirth in fiction is found in Anna Karenin (1878). Levin looks on, horrified as “what had once been Kitty” utters in labour “terrible screams . . . [that] seemed to reach the utmost limit of horror” (748). Tolstoy captures powerfully the long hours of childbirth and the helplessness of a 19th century father, who finds, after the fact, that “the significance of a woman’s life . . . now rose so high in his estimation that his imagination could not grasp it” (750). Despite this apparent reverence for female fortitude, however, the majority of the extended birth scene in Anna Karenin concerns the impact on the man:

But after that hour another passed, a second, a third, and the full five hours he had fixed upon as the longest possible term of endurance, and still the situation was unchanged; and he went on enduring because there was nothing else to do but endure, every moment feeling that he had reached the utmost limits of endurance and that his heart would burst with compassion and pain. (745)

This particular male viewpoint – glorifying and awestruck, apprehensive and alienated – is found again in D. H. Lawrence’s The Rainbow (1915): “She knew she was winning, winning, she was always winning, with each onset of pain she was nearer to victory. . . . But he was screwed very tight in the vice of suffering” (192).

It is not at all unusual for the observer in fiction to be just plain horrified, even when she is a woman. Kate Chopin, herself the mother of six children, ascribes this view to Edna, the protagonist of The Awakening (1899), who witnesses the “scene of torture” at the birthbed of her friend Adele “with an inward agony, with a flaming, outspoken revolt against the ways of Nature” (146). Chopin is aligned with the traditional opinion

² See Poston for her discussion of childbirth in the fiction of Sinclair Lewis, Ernest Hemingway, and Emile Zola; Kreppel for Laurence Sterne, James Joyce, and William Carlos Williams.

that childbirth involves unbearable pain, a view going back to Genesis and a view which has shown surprising, even alarming, resilience in the work of contemporary writers.

I wish to examine some of the common methods, usually metaphorical, used by literary writers to describe childbirth, and compare these to the descriptions of birth used by A. S. Byatt, whose 1985 novel Still Life contains some of the most moving birth writing I have ever encountered. Critic Flora Alexander has written that this novel presents the “momentous experience of childbirth” with “insight and power” (38). The reader will note that, in my analysis, I have deliberately scattered the positive and negative metaphors used by Byatt and other writers. This is my small attempt to break the hero/victim dichotomy which characterizes so much of this literature. In addition to metaphor, Antonia Byatt’s birth stories make use of language that she calls, in Passions of the Mind, “plain and exact” (11). Here the grounds for comparison, at least in literary terms, are relatively unpopulated, with the limited exception of the novels of Byatt’s sister, Margaret Drabble. The obvious means for comparison in this case might have been medical texts, anthropological studies, or natural childbirth manuals, but I leave that work to other scholars.

Before I go further, I offer a note on my terminology. I have attempted to steer clear of the usual rhetoric of pain in this chapter, and also particularly wish to avoid passive or past-tense formulations about birth: “was born,” “confined,” “with child.” The ideas of “bearing children” and even of “delivery” are dangerous ones, depicting childbirth as punishment or imprisonment. See, for example, Kate Chopin’s “hour of trial” (127) and the fact that she never mentions pregnancy in a straightforward, specific way. Even Carol Poston, a feminist critic, uses the Gothic-flavoured phrase “stricken with labour” (21). A. S. Byatt would not agree with my avoidance of the word “pain”; in the major birth chapter of Still Life (chapter 7) she uses the word at least 20 times. In Possession (1990) Christabel LaMotte states that “the greater part of suffering in this world is ours” (543) and is obsessed, before giving birth, with the pains of the Little

Mermaid in Hans Andersen's story (404). The knowledge is implicit that LaMotte is discussing childbirth pain. However, in most instances I find in Byatt an earnest attempt to capture the subtlety and intricacy of the event; where most writers might stop at the word "pain," Byatt goes beyond it to analyse the fuller ramifications of the experience.

Questionable but influential translations from the Hebrew of Genesis 3.16-17 (c. 10th century BC) may be the origin of the rhetoric of childbirth pain. The original Hebrew punishment applied to Eve for her disobedience, roughly transliterated as "be^cetsev," may mean *either* pain or toil, and the word for Adam's punishment is closely related to the root of Eve's word.³ The King James Version (1611) proffers the term "sorrow" for both Adam and Eve; the tone is pessimistic but more equitable than it becomes in later translations. According to the most commonly used translations of this century, the American Standard Version (1901), the Revised Standard Version (1952), and the New Revised Standard Version (1989), Eve is cursed with "pain in childbearing" while Adam is sentenced to "toil" on the land. Some recent translations, such as the Revised English Bible (1989), return to the emphasis on the similarity in Adam's and Eve's situations, and now cast them both in terms of the more neutral "labour." However, the RSV has been the most influential translation of this century, and it makes Eve's punishment the harsher.

I prefer the term "labour." For me, labour is an excellent description of childbirth. The idea of hard work has often lost out to exaggerated descriptions of agony used, by men and by women, to terrify and to valorize. I have also attempted to describe childbirth in terms of "event" and "experience," an act in which a woman, a baby, and others are present and creative. The degrees of pain and risk involved are widely variable.

³ I am grateful to Michael Kurtz for his advice on Biblical translation.

§ § §

Critic Tess Cosslett reports that the mother's version of the birth event was more or less absent from literature until Enid Bagnold's The Squire in 1938 and Doris Lessing's A Proper Marriage in 1956 (Women Writing Childbirth 1). There are many reasons for this absence in literary practice. As Virginia Woolf ironically points out in the passage from Orlando which introduces this chapter, birth scenes are not matters to be discussed in polite society. Furthermore it is, plainly, difficult for women to remember something as strenuous and complex as childbirth; this amnesia is frequently iterated in discussions of childbirth. One important dissenting voice, however, is Sheila Kitzinger, who says, "Years after the baby has been born [the mother] remembers acutely the details of her labour and her feelings as the child was delivered" (18). (Perhaps women do lean too heavily on birth amnesia; surely the ability to remember childbirth could be developed.) American poet and novelist Louise Erdrich speaks of her fear before childbirth and the feeling of being displaced from her own body, and is ambivalently grateful about "the merciful wash of endorphins that precludes any thought from occupying [my brain] too long" (Blue Jay's Dance 9). There are few literary models to follow; childbirth anecdotes are usually oral, and attempts to collect them have been rare. Additionally, the oral tradition has often been mistrusted for its exaggerated and negative qualities, and Cosslett notes that the "unstructured, ghoulish horror stories [which] challenge the simple, optimistic structures of our modern myths of birth" (Women Writing Childbirth 4) are reviled by both the medical establishment and by natural childbirth proponents.

The consequence is a paradigmatic gap, a blank space where representations of birth ought to be. Erdrich, writing in 1995 of the births of her own children, wondered:

Why is no woman's labor as famous as the death of Socrates? Over all of the millennia that women have endured and suffered and died during childbirth, we have no one story that comes down to us with attendant

reverence, or that exists in pictures – a cultural icon, like that of Socrates holding forth to his companions as he raises the cup of hemlock. (Blue Jay's Dance 35)

We might, initially, think to point to the most famous birth, that of Christ in the New Testament, to refute Erdrich's argument. But we remember that Mary's personal experience is not recounted in the gospels. The exception is the Magnificat which she utters, after conception, in Luke 1.46-55, rejoicing in the blessings the Lord has conferred on her and on others "of low degree."

Significantly, there is a feeling among most of the writers under scrutiny in this chapter that, in any case, birth is indescribable, that language is inadequate, or that a new language, a wordless or intuitive one perhaps, should be developed to communicate the truths of birth. In Margaret Drabble's 1965 novel The Millstone, the new mother says "what I felt it is pointless to try to describe" (114). Margaret Atwood, in her 1977 story "Giving Birth," puzzles over the meaning of the title phrase. "But who gives it? And to whom is it given?" she asks (225). Jeanie, Atwood's protagonist, examines and rejects other terms she has been given. The words don't match the experience.

Atwood's narrator, unlike Drabble's, is critical of language and imagery contaminated by male conventions. But Atwood and Erdrich are cautious about diverting creative energies away from the physical and spiritual contemplation of birth itself toward linguistic issues they see as less primary. Atwood's Jeanie writes of "language, muttering in its archaic tongues of something, yet one more thing that needs to be re-named" and then retorts: "It won't be by me, though. These are the only words I have, I'm stuck with them, stuck in them. . . . So we will go ahead as if there were no problem about language" (225-6).

A. S. Byatt, in Still Life, approaches the problem of childbirth and language in a similar way. Clearly the available words are inadequate, but there are issues immediately, and even perhaps ultimately (although this is less certain) more demanding than linguistic

ones. Her protagonist, Stephanie Potter Orton, is absorbed with her responsibility for producing a healthy child; she blocks out the stories of other women and the advice of nurses, rejecting the prescribed relaxation exercises in childbirth books. The novel is set in 1950s England, and Stephanie is constantly frustrated in her attempt to find models for living which adequately take into account both her remarkable intellectual abilities and her position as wife and mother. Although loved and supported by her charitable husband Daniel, an Anglican curate, Stephanie has to face birth (and later, death) depending solely on her own (considerable) resources. "She imagined that women were not so civilized that they had no natural sense of what to do with things that happened to everyone as imperatively as eating and excreting" (Still Life 85). Byatt and Stephanie are clearly, at times, conflated; see the 1991 interview with Jeffrey Canton, when Byatt says, "I don't know what I shall do without her" (6). I assume in this discussion that Stephanie's childbirth events resemble Byatt's own experiences, and that Stephanie's reflections on language and birth are, at least in part, Byatt's.

Erdrich likewise says: "I take her [the baby's] instructions without translating her meaning into words, but simply bypass straight to action" (Blue Jay's Dance 56). These authors have decided, under the pressure of the task at hand, that they must get on with the crucial work of having children, and they trust their bodies will perform adequately outside the scope of language. The reader must ask, however, to what extent these writers claim that a woman can naturally and permanently cope without accurate language or historical models. Or is their apparent trust in the female body's unspeaking and essential knowledge only a preliminary step toward the development of a fuller, more exacting narrative of birth?

I would argue that Byatt, like Atwood and Erdrich, does assert that the birth event has not been adequately examined from a woman's point of view, and further that, of necessity, this story must be told using the faulty but by no means contemptible tools at hand. What does *not* seem to concern Byatt is the surveying and plotting of revolutionary

inroads into an eventual liberated, wholly feminized expression of the childbirth experience. For Byatt, the arrival of this event into our literature is too long overdue for the writer to be warmly exercised about the bias now evidenced in our language. One model for Byatt may be Virginia Woolf, who accepts, in A Room of One's Own (1927) that women write differently than men, but praises style that can "absorb the new into the old" (81) and pleads for a future androgynous consciousness. In 1974, in discussing the feminist linguistics of Monique Wittig, Byatt declared her own allegiance to "subtle distinctions within a continuing language, not doctrinaire violations" (Passions of the Mind 276). Cosslett speaks of Byatt and others as "women writers negotiating with and within dominant ideologies" ("Childbirth from the Woman's Point of View" 284), emphasizing the compromises these writers feel they are either forced or willing to make.

Byatt, however, stresses not the woeful inadequacy of male-dominated discourse but instead the multifold possibilities by which our existing language can be made to connect more closely with the birth experience; these opportunities, she implies, have not been fully utilized. Her contribution to this nascent literary field has been diverse. Stephanie Potter gives birth twice in Still Life, and each birth is a very different experience. The birth of her son Will, described in fuller detail than any birth in fiction I can bring to mind, is painful but mostly triumphant, while the subsequent birth of Mary is marked by frustration. In each case Stephanie depends, with mixed success, upon literature to help her through labour (Wordsworth in her first pregnancy, Dickens in her second), a difficult conjunction of books and motherhood with which Stephanie will struggle through the rest of the life remaining to her. In Possession, Christabel LaMotte refuses to acknowledge publicly her pregnancy, and secretly gives the baby to her sister to raise. LaMotte believes that her vocation as a poet is incompatible with motherhood and is unwilling to try to connect the two roles. In the parodic, semi-allegorical novella "Morpho Eugenia" (1992), the women of Bredely Hall are either queen ants or worker ants, and again it is clear that, in the nineteenth century at any rate, a life of the mind and

motherhood are nearly impossible to combine, and additionally that women's reproductive capabilities are a precarious source of power. In Byatt's first novel, The Shadow of the Sun (1964), Anna (who may or may not be a latent artist) discovers her pregnancy with a feeling of passive foreboding, acting not unlike the acquiescent Jane in Drabble's The Waterfall (1969).

Childbirth prompts and demands a much wider range of responses than are typically recorded, and Byatt's fiction provides an unusually full sampling of them. "Morpho Eugenia" presents Byatt's criticisms of cultural productions of gendered identity, while Possession and The Shadow of the Sun demonstrate some of the social and artistic consequences for the woman facing childbirth. But Byatt's fullest exploration of the subject, the story of Stephanie Potter, declares the author's central intention: to emphasize the unique and individual aspects of the event, the singular ways, depending on intellectual and imaginative characteristics, that each woman will experience childbirth. In an interview Byatt underscores the individual, personal experience which informed the writing of Still Life:

I read a very good article [probably Cosslett's] about descriptions of childbirth by women which assumes that my accounts of childbirth in the 1950s and 60s are informed by feminist perspectives, whereas in fact they are simply accurate memories of, for instance, the rage I felt at not being allowed to walk up and down when I was in labour. It's nothing to do with feminist theory having told me that, I observed it. (Tredell 61)

This elevation of individualism, memory, and imagination testifies to the ways in which Byatt allies herself with the Romantic poets, and it is no accident that Stephanie is so adamant about having her Wordsworth with her when giving birth to her first child, whom she appropriately names William. Throughout her works, Byatt repeats a line from Wordsworth's "Immortality Ode" that is, for her, a touchstone: "But there's a Tree, of

many, one” (line 51).⁴ Wordsworth’s Tree, like Van Gogh’s yellow chair, is deceptively simple, stark, seemingly general; yet it is also capable of communicating precision and particularity. (I return to the importance of this tree in chapter 4, and to the chair in chapter 5.) Byatt also raises the possibility that Wordsworth’s idealistic faith in “that immortal sea / Which brought us hither” (lines 164-165) can be seen as a way for a woman to visualize a positive and creative childbirth, transforming it, perhaps, from pain to “splendour in the grass [and] glory in the flower” (line 179). Wordsworth’s language of birth and childhood may be exceptionally innocent, but his metaphors are refreshing and authoritative for Byatt’s characters.

§ § §

Even though direct and active depictions of childbirth in literature are rare, we should, nevertheless, look at some of the literary conventions which do exist (concentrating on fiction and poetry), and determine how Byatt’s treatment of this theme differs. As we do so, keep in mind feminist scholarship which asserts that male ideas have contaminated childbirth narratives. Carol H. Poston has said that

the most startling perception to emerge from a study of [childbirth in literature] is that although the experience has been woman’s, the language has been men’s; and so great has the tyranny of language been that women begin experiencing birth from a male point of view. (20)

The usual discussion of literary childbirth is dominated by metaphor. Metaphor has always been especially useful here, as writers – old and new – wish to sum up childbirth as quickly as possible, in some generic way. Thus, individuals are reduced to “the woman” and “the baby” and the event abstracted from the personal. Images of mouths,

⁴ This line occurs in *Still Life* (chapter 21), “On the Day That E. M. Forster Died” (*Sugar* 134), and “*Still Life / Nature morte*” (*Passions of the Mind* 19). Anna writes a similar line of poetry in *The Shadow of the Sun* (9).

doors, caves, and evacuation, for example, may be used, as they are by Louise Erdrich in her 1989 poem "Hydra":

The hinged mouth swings wide at birth, the dark
peristalsis, the great swallowing begins.
The child's first lesson is the iron knocker,
the hasp of hunger opening.

Erdrich, although usually alert to gendered power relations operating within language, does not seem uncomfortable with at least some of the customary generalizations about "the child," "the body," and "the pain."

At the other extreme, Margaret Drabble insists on generalizing about the *lack* of difficulty in labour. Rosamund Stacey, the unwed mother in The Millstone, reports that after giving birth to her daughter, "I felt remarkably well, a usual reaction I believe on such occasions, and I could have got up and walked away" (114). In a 1967 interview, Drabble confirmed that this was her own experience.

Margaret Drabble recalled how she had managed to write a book about Wordsworth⁵: "I wrote the whole thing – the re-write, that is – in the ten days when I was in hospital when my youngest child was born. I took my typewriter into hospital – I sat in the ambulance clutching it saying, 'Don't take that away.' My baby was born ten minutes after I got to hospital. And the minute I got into bed I got my typewriter and was able to get on. I had some lovely fish and chips and a nice evening's work." (Williams 15)

Drabble's insouciance sounds odd to us, as does her refusal to couch the experience in metaphor. We are more familiar with the figurative language of conquest, sacrifice, and blood in Anne Stevenson's "Victory" (1969):

I thought you were my victory
though you cut me like a knife
when I brought you out of my body
into your life.

⁵ It is intriguing that Wordsworth is associated with ease in childbirth for both Byatt and Drabble.

A prevalent comparison, between giving birth and engaging in combat, surfaces as recently as the films Courage Under Fire (1995) and Robin Hood, Prince of Thieves (1991), in which women declare their fitness for battle precisely because they have given birth.

And of course, there is the required analogy between women and animals, a tradition used by Zola and many others. This view is, at least, mingled with some compassion and admiration in the 1930s doctor stories of William Carlos Williams: “Now, poor soul, I see her to be clean as a cow that calves. The flesh of my arm lay against the flesh of her knee gratefully. It was I who was being comforted and soothed” (“A Night in June,” Collected Stories 142).

Sylvia Plath, in the 1961 poem “Morning Song,” also sees herself as “cow-heavy.” A related “natural” comparison is that of birth as a splitting, like a germinating seed. This process may be difficult (in Byatt), indifferent (Plath), or casual (Erdrich). “By June I’ll push the baby out/as easily as seed wings fold back from the cotyledon,” writes Erdrich in the poem “The Fence.”

Although Byatt shares in some of the common images used by other women writers, whenever possible she seems determined to avoid or interrogate the universalist assumptions associated with childbirth. Some critics, not inappropriately, see Byatt as a “traditional” writer. The review of Still Life in The Spectator said, “Her tetralogy [the Potter novels] . . . looks as if it will be an ornament to the Great Tradition” (Jones 31). But Byatt can be also impatient with “radical” writers for not going far enough in search of innovation. For example, she has taken Monique Wittig’s The Lesbian Body to task for “the limpness with which it adheres to traditional myths” (Passions of the Mind 275). In Still Life Byatt attempts to go beyond hackneyed and limited representations, and simultaneously wants to return to an examination of the possibility of making intellectual and physical knowledge adhere to words, with accuracy and originality. Hers is a strangely old-fashioned radical task.

She uses a number of common metaphors, but prods them for multiple meanings. There is, for example, the recurring notion of possession: "I am used. I am drummed into use," writes Plath in her 1962 poem "Three Women." In Still Life Stephanie complains she has "lost her autonomy. Something was living her life; she was not living" (84). This is a particularly frightening notion for the female artist, and it is this sense of the inability to escape from the inexorable claims of motherhood which drives Edna Pontellier to her death in Kate Chopin's The Awakening. In Plath's "Three Women" a baby's cries are "hooks that catch and grate like cats." In Still Life, Byatt pushes beyond the obvious meanings of possession (as she does in her novel Possession), teasing out ambivalence and multiple interpretations. Stephanie finds a rather grim satisfaction in describing her pregnant self as "sunk in biology" (Still Life 20). This phrase echoes one from Iris Murdoch's "Against Dryness," the 1961 essay which attempts to correct existentialist notions that we are "isolated free choosers"; instead, says Murdoch, we are "benighted creatures *sunk in a reality* whose nature we are constantly and overwhelmingly tempted to deform by fantasy" (20, emphasis mine). Byatt, following Murdoch, insists it is crucial *to accurately name*; accuracy in this case means not giving in to the temptation to oversimplify pregnancy as either complete fulfillment or entrapment. Still Life, she says in a recent interview, is her book about "biology described from very close up" (Wachtel 1996); if Stephanie feels possessed by the imperatives of her body, she also realizes this has positive and negative ramifications.

A common method of coping with birth pain, a kind of visual aid not unlike, but not precisely, a metaphor is to move into the pain, using darkened ideas of welcome or embrace. Byatt writes that Stephanie "found the desperate energy to end the pain by increasing it" (Still Life 93); Erdrich says that "very often in labor one must fight the instinct to resist pain and instead embrace it, move toward it, work with what hurts the most" (Blue Jay's Dance 45). In The Millstone Drabble's character reports "sensations which though unbelievably violent were now no longer painful but indeed almost a

promise of pleasure" (113). It is no great distance from here to masochism, and it is possible in Plath's work to read a perverse pride in being the "center of an atrocity"; she writes that "there is no miracle more cruel than this. / I am dragged by the horses, the iron hooves. / I last. I last it out. I accomplish a work" ("Three Women").

A related matter is the way in which the protagonists of Byatt, Atwood and Plath alike describe the emotions of rage they feel in near-murderous terms. In Still Life Stephanie "was amazed at the rage she felt. She wished the women dead for holding her so uncomfortably in an unnatural position" (92). A woman who will give away her newborn child in Plath's "Three Women" decides "I should have murdered this, that murders me." Atwood's Jeanie is less violent, but she is "outraged" at the lack of understanding her doctor demonstrates and is "vicious" to her husband (237).

Several of these writers bring forth battering ram images of the final stages of labour. In "Three Women" Plath writes: "I am breaking apart like the world. There is this blackness / This ram of blackness. I fold my hands on a mountain." In Still Life Stephanie also describes this, in more detail, giving the battering ram personality, an animal intensity. It is a "furious blunt block," and a "thing [which] launched itself again against its prison walls" (92), echoing and inverting Wordsworth's "prison-house" from the "Immortality Ode."

One of the most common comparisons involves labour as powerful waves. Stephanie is described as "pulled almost off her feet" by the waves (87); Erdrich similarly says, "I feel myself slip beneath the waves as they roar over" and eventually "the undertow grabs me" (Blue Jay's Dance 45). And finally, there is birth as art. Atwood and Plath each describe the creation of a child as the crafting of a well-made watch. Babies are frequently compared to statues, paintings, poems, especially in Plath. Byatt tends not to set up this semi-antagonistic comparison between children and works of art, but she does make frequent use of water and tidal imagery, often considered to be stereotypically female.

Each writer also taps into an idiosyncratic store of more original images:

Atwood's narrator compares herself to a birdcage opening inside out; Erdrich sees herself as a boat and as an armoured figure, her baby as a rocket. I could continue to enumerate birth metaphors, but this list will serve as an introduction. As previously noted, I refuse to divide this list into "light" and "dark" groups. The dualism set up between the Old Testament emphasis on the punishing pain of childbirth and the modern pretense of ease, as evidenced in Drabble and in some of the sterile myth-making which surrounds the modern hospital birth, is an overly simplistic and not very useful one.

I have also hesitated to assign typically "male" or "female" meanings. I was surprised at how most of these common images resisted male labelling, with the obvious exceptions of images of warfare and of Erdrich's "rocket" mentioned above. And while the equation between women and animals can be queried, I believe for a feminist to prolong that argument (the one that goes – are animals, or women, "lower" forms of life than men?) is to play into the wrong hands. The use that many of these writers make of natural or animalistic examples is simply to underline our connection to other forms of life; a heavily gendered interpretation is a mistaken one, I believe. My point is that I have not found in my research the preponderance of patriarchal images which feminist childbirth scholars led me to believe I should.

It is true that some of the writing I am discussing is of fairly recent vintage, but I have also found that Sylvia Plath's metaphors, 35 years ago, do not always, or even often, fall in with Carol Poston's judgement that male language has tyrannized this female experience. Perhaps the complaint of feminist critics is valid when applied to birth as written by Sterne, Hemingway, Joyce, and Lawrence, as Maria Curro Kreppel claims. But Virginia Woolf, in Orlando, uses the flight of a kingfisher and the music of an organ grinder to sketch the birth of Orlando's child; neither of these ideas, it seems to me, is poisoned by the patriarchy.

Contrary to what Kreppel and Poston argue – and to a lesser extent Cosslett, who claims that Stephanie’s use of Wordsworth does not work and that the poet’s masculinity limits the applicability of his model – the birth scene as practised by A. S. Byatt in Still Life attempts to use language which has neither a male nor a female bias. The obvious exception is the use of water imagery often considered to be stereotypically female. However, there is a precedent for Byatt challenging or disregarding the established hierarchies of symbols; in The Virgin in the Garden (1978) she deliberately attempted to reverse the usual association of men with the sun and women with the moon, by emphasizing the identification of Elizabeth I (and, by extension, Frederica Potter, who is acting the part of Elizabeth in Alexander Wedderburn’s play) with sun iconography (see her introduction to the 1991 reprint of The Shadow of the Sun). Byatt’s intention is, I believe, not to take command of a point of male privilege – or at any rate that is only part of her intention – but more importantly to strip imagery of its gendered associations. In an interview with Olga Kenyon, Byatt politely says she “doesn’t wholly agree” with critics like Ellen Moers, who think “there are specifically female metaphors” (18). But most importantly, Byatt retains the sensory power that such imagery confers, the instantaneous communicative energy of imagining a wave or a battering ram.

§ § §

With this background in mind, I turn to Byatt’s most detailed treatment of childbirth: the experience of Stephanie Potter in Still Life. The tentative method for giving expression to the birth experience at which Stephanie Potter arrives is a combination of metaphor and “direct treatment of the thing,” some form of Imagism⁶. Byatt has said that William Carlos Williams’s famous dictum “no ideas but in things”

⁶ I do not attempt a full discussion of Imagism and its changing manifestations here, but find the following definition, by Natan Zach, who quotes Ezra Pound, useful for this discussion of Byatt’s Imagistic tendencies: “The poem projected by Imagism is a laconic complex in which ‘painting or sculpture seems as if it were just coming over into speech’ ” (A Dictionary of Modern Critical Terms, ed. Roger Fowler). I am also aware, as Zach is, that Imagism “may comprise traditional metaphor.” I am separating, for the sake of simplicity, two tendencies which do, in fact, overlap.

was the starting point of the writing of *Still Life* (*Passions of the Mind* 11). But she soon realized that for her to write a novel “eschewing myths and cultural resonances [and] which would try to forgo metaphor” would be “doing violence to something in my own mental constitution” (9, 14). This struggle – between condensed, concrete plainness and verbal elaboration – is explicitly played out in the pages of *Still Life*. Both the narrator and Stephanie engage in this struggle. The narrator vacillates between lovingly piling up verbal comparisons and celebrating the wordless communication of Van Gogh’s paintings. Stephanie works through birth by alternately imagining her body in, for example, the grip of tides and animals (“the pain, like an incoming tide, abated a little, rippled back, gathered itself and sprang, *heavy*”, [92]) and by expressing herself as flatly as possible (as when she names her child “You” [94]).

Let us first consider imagery. The most important images used to describe Stephanie’s sensations in childbirth are those involving music and colour. It is unusual for Byatt to refer to music; it is one of the few fields with which she is not comfortably conversant. I think it is for this reason that Byatt *does* use music to describe the unique feelings of labour; for her, it is something beyond the ordinary realm of understanding. Her use of music also, again, declares her allegiance to the Romantics; Stephanie creates music metaphors because she is a reader of Wordsworth, who writes, in Book I of *The Prelude*:

Thus far, O Friend! did I, not used to make
A present joy the matter of my Song,
Pour out, that day, my soul in measured strains. (Lines 55-57)

Stephanie has internalized Wordsworth’s images of song, and she is able to put them to work for her: “She brushed a floury hand across her brow, and pain hit her, pure and clear like a note in music, spreading up and out from the disturbance in the spine, singing, diminishing” (*Still Life* 86). If anything interferes with Stephanie’s natural rhythms, as

when she is not allowed to move or is administered an enema, then the singing is “hurt and twisted” (87). It is the pain itself which sings, not Stephanie or the baby; the pain has its own voice which “sing[s] severely” (88).

The use of colour to describe birth is not unique to Byatt, but Byatt’s intense interest in colour extends throughout the lives of her fictional characters and through her narrative discourse in a characteristic way. Louise Erdrich also captures labour pains in colour in Blue Jay’s Dance:

During transition, as the baby is ready to be pushed out into life, the waves are no longer made of water, but neons so brilliant I gasp in shock and flourish my arms, letting the colors explode from my fingertips in banners, in ribbons, in iridescent trails – of pain, it is true, unendurable sometimes, and yet we do endure. (46)

And even Drabble in The Waterfall cuts through the languor to report that the “colors of the scene affected Jane profoundly: they were the violent colors of birth, but they were resolved into silence, into a kind of harmony” (6-7).

Byatt goes into more detail. The lines from the “Immortality Ode” which Stephanie chants to herself are simply- but absolutely-hued ones: “The Rainbow comes and goes. And lovely is the Rose” (Still Life 91). Later, “her vision filled with nasturtium pale-scarlet, and then with a curtain of blood” (92). When Will is a few days old, she looks at him through tears, “rainbow-hazed” (107) and Will himself is described as experiencing light and colour simultaneously, and is able to distinguish the golden colours of his mother’s face and hair, as well as the lamp and the flowers.

The meaning of Byatt’s colour imagery is more difficult to interpret than the bulk of the imagery under discussion here. On the one hand, colour is associated with the primal, the “imperative” (Still Life 85) that Stephanie identifies as the way in which she must meet birth. This is especially true in the section where Byatt imagines Will’s viewpoint soon after birth. According to her, colour is one of the basic and powerful

components of Will's first contact with the world, reminding us of the Babe's "quick" and "tenacious" faculties in Book II of Wordsworth's Prelude (see lines 237-280).

But colour also seems indeterminate, so widespread in use and relatively uncontaminated by cultural affiliations (as compared to war or animal metaphors) as to be opaque. This is Byatt's goal; she has frequently congratulated Iris Murdoch on the concept of "opacity of persons" which Murdoch outlines in "Against Dryness" (20). For Byatt and Murdoch, opacity is an essential human characteristic, difficult but vital to describe. (Murdoch's theorizing of opacity of persons has not necessarily meant that her novels successfully captured it; many of her characters all too clearly "stand for" a problem or an abstraction.) It is impossible to know fully what compels people to act as they do, just as it is impossible to understand and articulate how a woman's body gives birth. This is an experience Byatt and Murdoch might say is "unutterably particular," a phrase each often uses in this discussion (see Byatt's study of Murdoch Degrees of Freedom 95; see Murdoch's essay "The Sublime and the Good" in Existentialists and Mystics 215). Stephanie recognizes that birth is an imperative and that she must somehow attempt to join her compulsion for words and books with this other compulsion. But if language and birth are equally imperative, they are also, in a way, equally ineluctable, and any attempt to encompass them must take into account this impenetrability. Thus, Byatt's depictions of music, a subject she does not understand, and colour, which is primal and impervious to definition (as she knows from her readings of Wittgenstein),⁷ represent themes that exist permanently beyond the experience under scrutiny and simultaneously and paradoxically capture its qualities of beauty, primacy, and inhumanity.

⁷ In Remarks on Colour Wittgenstein preserves 458 observations and questions about colour and perception. Buried in the midst of these is the crystalline and unusually decisive admission: "There is no such thing as the pure colour concept" (III.73). I discuss colour theory in more detail in chapter 4.

Stephanie's most difficult task in creating a personal language of childbirth lies in combining these metaphors with examples of the "hard idea of truth," a phrase of Murdoch's which Byatt often cites approvingly ("Against Dryness" 18). Byatt's intriguing contribution to the literary depiction of childbirth is her use of (and commentary on) these "hard" ideas – to describe childbirth in flat, unadorned, non-metaphorical terms. Drabble had attempted this in The Millstone, completely eschewing metaphorical language in the birth account, but Drabble's birth scenes in that novel and in The Waterfall lack detail and are, respectively, unhelpfully breezy and torpid, as if there were a tacit and natural agreement between mother and baby which cannot be communicated outside the relationship. (Elaine Showalter feels more positively than I do that Drabble has some success with presenting pregnancy as "a way of knowing" [A Literature of Their Own 306].)

Where Byatt differs from Drabble is that her effort to bring the "thing itself" (Passions of the Mind 11), the detailed and unmediated realities of the birthing body, onto the page is much more strenuous. She also avoids generalizing about "women." Thus Byatt attempts to use active description, as opposed to passive ("being delivered of"), for Stephanie's sensations: "She felt things grind, pull and tear inside her" (Still Life 88). Stephanie feels that "beneath the helpless trunk a whole wall, a box-side of flesh and cracking bone seemed to rear and expand between the bursting thing and the air" (92). It is an effort for the well-educated Stephanie to think in the "bare" and "down-to-earth" terms which Byatt wants to use (Passions of the Mind 11), and thus metaphor constantly obtrudes, as with "box-side" above. But the attempt is made to see from an unimpeded viewpoint, ideally, like a newborn; the baby Will, says Byatt, perhaps enviously, is not "capable of simile" (Still Life 107). Stephanie does realize that kind of plainness, as when she thinks, simply, "someone had to get out" (89), and when she encounters the unadorned and unexpected words "ecstasy" and "bliss" (93, 94) when she sees Will for the first time.

In Stephanie's second labour, plain speech is just as difficult as metaphorical had been, because "every contraction had its cross-currents of negation." She merely feels herself "a numb sack of knotted and ripped and sagging muscles that would revive to hurt" (249), and can go no further in articulating the experience.

The combination of Byatt's version of Imagism, writing which she initially calls "innocent" (108), with more traditional metaphorical writing, quickly shows itself as vulnerable, both for the narrator and for Stephanie. The "recovery of the innocent eye" is impossible, whether describing a woman's sensations of birth or the way the newborn child sees the world. "We cannot think at all without a recognition and realignment of ways of thinking and seeing we have learned over time" (108) reports the narrative voice in Still Life. But neither the effective use of established forms nor the recognition of the anxiety of influence guarantees the thinker freedom from banality. The writer must additionally aim for the very highest standards of precision and accuracy, and this is one of the points at which Byatt's faith in language begins to fissure.

"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. (108)

In the search for precision, her demands are so exacting that, ultimately, she turns away from words and more definitely toward the visual, in this case the paintings of Van Gogh. The brushstrokes of what might be called Van Gogh's version of a birth story, "The Sower," are cited approvingly as "thick and solid: they are the movement of light over things, of the eye over things" (109). Chapter 7, "A Birth," concludes, not with Stephanie and baby William, but with Van Gogh, whose visual articulation of experience, according to Byatt, is finally more sustaining than the verbal element in which Stephanie and Byatt both sink and swim. Van Gogh's brushstrokes, imposed on the world of the sower, simultaneously capture it with accuracy and translate it into his own terms.

In Still Life Stephanie and Byatt work toward this “thick and solid” representation, mixing it with the linguistic metaphor intellectually more familiar to them. They are simultaneously verbal and visual people and have no choice but to attempt this fusion. Byatt has said that she personally can “*see* other people’s metaphors – if there is any iconic content to a metaphor I will ‘see’ a visual image on some inner mental screen” (Passions of the Mind 13-14, emphasis in original). Stephanie “always won Kim’s game, the objects on a tray . . . she remembered them for their quiddity, naming and denoting them in language in her mind” (Still Life 33).

But in attempting to expand on this fusion of visual and verbal knowledge, Stephanie, less fortunate than her author (and unwilling to live outside society like Van Gogh), is constantly checked and thwarted by a social arena which values neither metaphor nor the “thick and solid” precision of things. The hospital practices of the 1950s do not even allow her to have books, her first and most primitive strategy for coping with birth. (Kathleen Coyne Kelly in her study of Byatt believes that the descriptions of hospital practices are among “the most harrowing sections” of Still Life [A. S. Byatt: *Twayne’s English Authors* 65] and makes no mention of Stephanie’s considerable triumphs.) Stephanie tries not to succumb to the belittling routines of the maternity ward, “a female world of endurance, diminished vocabulary, chattered conventional confidences,” where everyone is addressed as “mother” or (ominously) “mum” (Still Life 95, 101). During labour she demands, unsuccessfully, to be given her copy of Wordsworth’s poems, and when it is not forthcoming, she marches up and down her hospital room, chanting memorized sections of the “Immortality Ode” to herself. “The next pain, when it came, was possible to weave into the rhythm of this tramping” (90), but when the nurses order Stephanie to stop, “the pain choked again like a suffocating net, as it did when they interfered with its liveliness” (91). It is, partly, the musicality of poetry which Stephanie finds attractive as an aid in labour; if labour pains are met correctly she finds they are “pure and clear like a note in music” (86).

Because Stephanie is not allowed to work out fully her own methods for coping with labour, it is unclear how helpful the books that she wanted to keep with her would have been, but her small bit of success with what Wordsworth she could remember is provocative. Given time, could Stephanie have moved beyond rhythm and worked the themes and metaphors of Wordsworth or other authors into her labour? Perhaps, but it appears that the other, non-metaphorical, route would have been even more successful, as exemplified in this remarkable passage – Stephanie’s plain and lucid recognition and naming of her son Will:

“There,” she said to him, and he looked, and the light poured through the window, brighter and brighter, and his eyes saw it, and hers, and she was aware of bliss, a word she didn’t like, but the only one. There was her body, quiet, used, resting: there was her mind, free, clear, shining: there was the boy and his eyes, seeing what? And ecstasy. Things would hurt when this light dimmed. The boy would change. But now in the sun she recognised him, and recognised that she did not know, and had never seen him, and loved him, in the bright new air with a simplicity she had never expected to know. “You,” she said to him, skin for the first time on skin in the outside air, which was warm and shining, “you.” (94)

D. J. Taylor has called these scenes “epiphanic” (*After the War* 255). The beauty and ecstasy of this moment, approaching the Renaissance “undissociated sensibility” for which Byatt has said she is nostalgic (*Passions of the Mind* 9), echoes Stephanie’s courtship in *The Virgin in the Garden*. In that book “[d]esire lunged at them” and she and Daniel Orton turn to each other and say, simply, “I want, I want, I want” (183). In each case, the prevalence of monosyllabic words encourages in our reading starkness, breathlessness, and sharpness of focus which are particularly striking. But even this method can lose its lustre. These moments of bliss are, of course, simultaneously moments of extremity, and their rarity and danger is part of the defining quality of their worth. Ordinary living erodes and dissipates the high notes of recognition and meaning momentarily revealed for Stephanie and Daniel and the baby. The plain language of these

scenes, if used too often, would become clichéd or inadequate; it is the surprise of calling a baby “You” that is so effective.

Stephanie’s latent visual abilities would need to be developed, and there is little possibility for such education in the strictly-bounded world of a Yorkshire minister’s wife. She has only advanced as far as seeing the unborn baby as a “furious blunt block” (92). This sketch is original but lacks detail, shading. Even this tentative success has been eroded and dissipated by the time Stephanie enters the hospital to have her second child. This is demonstrated by the fact that she does not take poetry with her but instead Dickens’s Our Mutual Friend. In the two years since the birth of Will, her marriage and her intellectual life have become more troubled, due to the demands of the baby and to the inarticulate and irritating presences in the Orton home of Stephanie’s brother Marcus and Daniel’s mother, Mrs. Orton. Stephanie will later explain to Daniel that she feels thwarted by the lack of opportunity to use what Daniel recognizes as her “great unopened volumes of vocabulary” (306). Right until her death, Stephanie’s words “wandered loose and unused” (307); she is numbed by convention and loses touch, not only with her intellectual vocabulary, but with that which her vocabulary helps her to encompass, “her unregarded self” (306). Losing the ability to connect either with words or with basic things, Stephanie does not encounter an epiphany of recognition, as she had with Will, but feels for her second child “not wonder, but protective pity.” There is no bliss, beyond “a shot of pethidine” (250).

Stephanie has not built on the successful experience of her first labour, but, confused, attempts to use a different book during her second labour. The combination of a physically difficult labour (an accident) and the wrong book (a defective intellectual choice) adds up to fused images of the “slowly developing nightmare of a blocked labour . . . with the sluggish Thames and its cargo of dead bodies” (249). Mary is ominously marked with a birthmark on her face and the prints of forceps on her skull.

The knowledge that Stephanie has gained is summed up in an inaccurate line from The Faerie Queene, which comes to her as she drifts off into a drug-induced sleep: "Ease after pain . . . doth greatly please" (Still Life 250). Thematically, there is gloom here; there is also the mechanical failure of Stephanie's fine mind, no longer able to quote poetry accurately. The line should be "ease after war," not "after pain." But if we turn to the entire stanza, we find, even more disturbingly, that what Stephanie is inadvertently remembering of Spenser is not rest, but death.

He there does now enjoy eternall rest
 And happie ease, which thou doest want and crave,
 And further from it daily wanderest:
 What if some litle paine the passage have,
 That makes fraile flesh to feare the bitter wave?
 Is not short paine well borne, that brings long ease,
 And layes the soule to sleepe in quiet grave?
 Sleepe after toyle, port after stormie seas,
 Ease after warre, death after life does greatly please. (Book 1, Canto 9,
 Stanza 40)

The reader perhaps suspects that, since this prophecy of doom occurs during a birth scene, death is waiting for one of the children. This is reinforced by the presence in the novel of the character Gerry Burtt, who comes to the Ortons for help after his wife is found guilty of the death of their baby. But it is Stephanie's own death which is anticipated. At the end of Still Life she will die of an accidental household electrocution, reaching under an ungrounded refrigerator to rescue a sparrow.

Does Stephanie's failure to accurately name her experiences, and finally her failure to survive at all, occur because she is, at the simplest level, reading the wrong book, and, at another level, seeking the wrong words and the wrong images? Is this lack of success an accident, or is it symbolic of something inherently wrong in the way Stephanie has used (or not used) language and imagination? Byatt has explicitly made a case for accident and chance as important driving forces in Still Life; in the 1984 video interview with Murdoch, Byatt emphasized that the novel was about how "chance

operates in the world in this terrifying way and can change things overnight. All our best endeavours are subject to it.” Yet it seems clear to me that Stephanie’s failure is not merely accidental, but is also directly connected to her losing battle with language.

At each decisive and elemental moment of Stephanie’s life, one word is offered, as a signature, to convey the integral experience of that moment. The high points of her existence, the passionate courtship scene with Daniel in chapter 18 of The Virgin in the Garden and the birth of her first child in chapter 7 of Still Life, are imprinted with the words “want” and “you.” The vibrancy and simplicity of these signatures give way to the grim determination evidenced by the words she says to her second child, “I’ll protect you . . . I will” (Still Life 251). Stephanie’s use of “will” here is merely a pale echo of the name of her first child. “Will” in the first instance symbolized a connection with poetry which held great meaning for Stephanie; in the second instance, the word’s connotations of self-discipline and of a document concerning death can be heard. Furthermore, in each case, Stephanie’s application of “will” to her two children hints at the degree to which her own will is being sacrificed to theirs. The last word of Stephanie’s life, “altruism,” to be discussed in the next chapter, halts the linguistic descent evident in Stephanie’s decisive experiences – but the hope and self-awareness inherent in her use of “altruism” come too late for her.

One of Byatt’s purposes in Still Life was to explore the possibility of rescuing the debased or abandoned idea of the “undissociated sensibility.” Writing several years later about the composition of the novel, in an essay called “Still Life / Nature morte,” she discusses T. S. Eliot’s analysis of Donne. Donne “felt his thought as immediately as the odour of a rose: this in practice we took to mean that he *thought* with, in, sensuous images” (Passions of the Mind 9). Byatt personally identifies with this immediacy of thought and image; although she makes no claims for the rest of humanity, she hints that she herself can, at times, achieve something of this sort.

Her fictional characters, however, undergo more profound testing. Stephanie Potter struggles to fuse mental images with words, as do Stephanie's brother Marcus and her friend Alexander Wedderburn; only Stephanie has provisional success, and that success is stunningly undermined by her accidental death. Yet Byatt clings to an idealistic hope that word and image can be combined into something immediate and imperative; she is excited about linguistic theories, discussed in "Still Life / Nature morte," which she interprets as saying that metaphor is both experience and act (Passions of the Mind 15), or, to put it another way, is the thing itself and the understanding of it. As evidenced in Stephanie's childbirth stories, however, this return to Donne's immediacy remains an untenable ideal (or an incomplete manifestation of that ideal), and Byatt's significant breakthroughs in the depiction of childbirth, using "exacting" language to denote an "exacting" event, are, in the end, limited by her own epistemological ambitiousness.

Chapter 2: Death

So live, that when thy summons comes to join
 The innumerable caravan, that moves
 To the pale realms of shade, where each shall take
 His chamber in the silent halls of death,
 Thou go not, like the quarry-slave at night,
 Scourged to his dungeon, but sustain'd and sooth'd
 By an unfaltering trust, approach thy grave,
 Like one who wraps the drapery of his couch
 About him, and lies down to pleasant dreams.

William Cullen Bryant, "Thanatopsis" (1821)

Dying was once a public process in the life of the individual and a most exemplary one. . . . Today people live in rooms that have never been touched by death, dry dwellers of eternity. . . .

Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller" (1936)

Among Antonia Byatt's greatest written achievements is the narrative of the death of Stephanie Potter Orton in the 1985 novel Still Life. The death is a shock, and is meant to be: the reader is bound to feel affection for Stephanie, an endearing woman of exceptional compassion and intelligence. Iris Murdoch, in a filmed interview with Byatt at the time of the novel's release, said that Still Life "contains one of the most wonderful surprises which I've seen for a long time in a novel -- an accident which is very unforeseen, and is like a real accident. Accidents in novels don't always feel like real accidents." The novel's title, however, does provide clues about the coming death in chapter 30. "Still life" first reminds us of painting, and the book's presiding genius is Van Gogh, whose death seems prefigured in so many of his pictures. In French, "still life" translates, more bleakly, as "*nature morte*." On the other hand, the phrase hints at life's continuity – ordinary life *still* goes on – and Byatt's readers, aware that Still Life is only the second of a proposed four volume series about the Potter family, will not expect a

major character to die. Or does the “still” refer to immortality – a *different* life still goes on? The mixed signals the title emits are an apt prelude for the complexity of responses about death that the book provides.

Still Life seeks to remedy the absence of honest death in recent literature. We are an immense distance from Montaigne, who (following Cicero) said, in the 16th century:

It is uncertain where death awaits us; let us await it everywhere. Premeditation of death is premeditation of freedom. He who has learned how to die has unlearned how to be a slave. Knowing how to die frees us from all subjection and constraint. There is nothing evil in life for the man who has thoroughly grasped the fact that to be deprived of life is not an evil. (Essays I. 20)

Virginia Woolf was critical of modern literature’s refusal to deal directly with death and introduced Septimus Warren Smith in Mrs. Dalloway to rectify the situation, a hero to become “the new psychotic bard of death,” as one critic puts it (Stewart 255). Jacques Choron believes that recent investigations “show that the average person thinks of death much more frequently than has been generally assumed” (272) but Ernest Becker and Elisabeth Kübler-Ross disagree. As Rilke writes: “We lack all knowledge of this parting. Death / does not deal with us” (“On Hearing of a Death”).

Death’s face is obscured in our society, but what representations we do find are aberrant and violent. Our understanding in this century of the experience of an ordinary person dying is no more accurate than it ever was, and is probably inferior. We are not any closer to a definition of death’s essential qualities. Paul de Man has called death “a displaced name for a linguistic predicament” (qtd. in Steiner, Real Presences 140). Such a definition demonstrates the debased state of our thinking about death’s reality.

The failure of faith in God and in language – two key components of an inquiry such as this – hampers the postmodern intellectual who seeks knowledge about death. Wittgenstein counsels us, in Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus (1922), that “Whereof one

cannot speak, thereof one must be silent" (189).¹ St. Paul's exaltation that "Death is swallowed up in victory" (1 Corinthians 15.54) will not satisfy the unbeliever. No atheist has written anything like John Donne's meditations on death, born of his dynamic belief in the Christian resurrection. He can pity death, the "slave to Fate, Chance, kings, and desperate men" ("Death be not proud"). Donne's faith in God and the resurrection gives him the upper hand over death, contentedly containing and explaining it, as no secular interpretation can. "Why swellst thou then?" he asks death.

As moving and as real as Stephanie Potter's death is for us, there is a residual force, an interfering static, in the scene which confounds explication or acceptance, and which comparison to Donne clarifies. The most concerted effort to describe a secular death leaves something undone. A large space in Still Life hums with undispersed power. It is faith, abandoned and made quarrelsome.

§ § §

Death has been treated more fully, even more enthusiastically, in modern literature and philosophy than has birth, but the formulations are nearly always in the abstract. Death interests Schopenhauer as the inspiration of philosophy (a belief which recurs from Plato to Heidegger to Derrida). It is the "origin and aim of life" (Freud), the "mother of beauty" (Wallace Stevens), and the "most poetical topic in the world" – if it involves a beautiful woman (Poe).² Henry James delineates death's sombre, but still abstract, mien in "The Beast in the Jungle" when death, or some other destiny which has become conflated with it, looms "huge and hideous" (Collected Stories 1898-1910 541).

These methods of treating death do not elucidate the work of A. S. Byatt. When Kenneth Burke wrote "Thanatopsis for Critics: A Brief Thesaurus of Deaths and Dyings" in 1952, he itemized 15 possible "deflected" themes which discussions of death actually

¹In the consideration of death, language does seem inadequate compared to music. Just one composition by Schubert, the Death and the Maiden quartet for example, delineates more of death's actuality than the listener can take in.

²Freud, Beyond the Pleasure Principle 39; Stevens, "Sunday Morning"; Poe, "Philosophy of Composition" 19.

conceal, because “death can only be an idea” and “the ubiquitous talk of death can very readily be talk of something else” (369). One cannot avoid the fact that death in literature often unites or exchanges figurative places with other forces, most famously erotic love. Wordsworth’s Lucy, for example, is wedded by Death to Nature, who promises her “vital feelings of delight.” Byatt, however, once termed herself a practitioner of self-conscious realism (Hass interview) and more recently, elegant empiricism (Gussow C11). A more direct approach to death is demanded.

The reader will note the absence, in this chapter, of encyclopedic overviews of literary deaths by genre, period, or type; neither is there sustained discussion of psychoanalytic, philosophic, or religious views of death.³ I will briefly touch on some of these subjects, because their various elements do inform Byatt’s particular view of death. But her twofold purpose in depicting death can be discovered without draping the weeds of thanatological history and theory completely about us.⁴ First, Byatt aims to strip the literary experience of dying of its attendant myths, superstitions, and conventions as much as possible, and to tell it plainly. Second, she focuses our attention on a kind of death not easily assimilated into the conventional view: sudden, premature, accidental death, a kind of death for which reading Kübler-Ross or Keats may not prepare us. An essential aspect of this latter purpose is her attempt to describe death from the point of view of the dying consciousness. This is uncommon, although not as uncommon as we found it to be in our study of birth.

Byatt’s determination to tell death plainly is similar to the way she handles birth, and she employs many of the same strategies. She removes much of the figurative

³ Death studies are not difficult to locate. See Freud’s influential discussions in Totem and Taboo and Beyond the Pleasure Principle. For an overview of philosophical and psychological issues see Choron, Brown, and Becker. Stewart is dense but occasionally illuminating on British fiction. Wheeler is important for 19th century studies. Fiedler and Kermode are influential but unhelpful with actual death. For suicide see Alvarez. Post-structuralist accounts are given in Death and Representation (ed. Goodwin and Bronfen). Feminist studies include those by Loraux, J. Todd, and Bronfen. A helpful anthology is The Oxford Book of Death, edited by D. J. Enright.

⁴The subject of grief is an important one in Byatt, but it concerns the living rather than the dying, and I do not treat it here, hoping that another reader will take it up.

language from the scene, is careful to avoid stereotypical and gendered formulations, and attempts a direct relation of body and mind experience, in defiance of traditions which construct death as a spiritual event.⁵ She rejects in turn most of the sentimental and mystic tendencies of the Romantics and Victorians and the black, absurdist comedy of late modern or postmodern works by Beckett or Robbe-Grillet. She seems, at first, akin to early modernists like E. M. Forster, who attempted to demystify the act of dying, while rendering it honestly. But Byatt then attempts to reinscribe the event with meaning, which complicates things considerably.

§ § §

Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, in her influential book On Death and Dying, says that “in our unconscious, death is never possible in regard to ourselves” (2). (I am putting aside Kübler-Ross’s recent mystical revisions of earlier statements about the necessity of accepting death.) This begins to explain the diverse ways writers have treated death; although we all must nominally accept our mortality, none of us have any data from our lived (as opposed to observed) experiences concretely demonstrating that end. So we furnish the subject with religious beliefs, or with fantasies and theories. Death is “always only represented. There is no knowing death, no experiencing it and then returning to write about it” (Goodwin and Bronfen 20).

As with the treatment of birth, there is a marked shift in the literary depiction of death with the onset of modernism. Before this century, death scenes in literature were sites where meaning is housed, events in which fulfillment, beauty, or even ecstasy are revealed. Of course there are exceptions. Death in Dreiser’s Sister Carrie (1899) is a drab thing. But in pre-modern literature it is rare to find the emphasis on the cruelty and homeliness of death that is found, for example, in the paintings of Bosch, Brueghel, and

⁵I separate Byatt’s death scenes from her ghost scenes, treated in chapter 6. The apparently revenant Arthur Hallam in “The Conjugal Angel” and the boy in “The July Ghost” must be closely examined to determine what kind of reality they possess. Byatt allows for the possibility that they are not ghosts, but memories.

Goya. Jane Eyre, for example, learns who she is and acquires a fortune at the deathbed of the guilt-ridden Mrs. Reed (1847). Wagner's Tristan and (especially) Isolde die in a swoon of gorgeous melody and sexual bliss (1865). Shelley emphasizes the heroism of the dead Keats in "Adonais" (1821). Garrett Stewart, in Death Sentences: Styles of Dying in British Fiction, writes that the nineteenth-century death scene has an "often frustrated impulse toward a revelation not necessarily numinous, as in the high Romantic poem, but retrospectively illuminating" (21). So even an ambiguous suicide, like the one in Kate Chopin's The Awakening (1899), resonates with freedom.

But Dostoyevsky, writing in 1880, begins to subvert the conventions when he describes Father Zossima's death in The Brothers Karamazov. Father Zossima dies "in joyful ecstasy" (389) and crowds gather in excited expectation of miracles; instead the priest's body emits an astonishing stench. This loss of sanctity expands in the black comedy of Faulkner's As I Lay Dying (1930), and is examined with terrifying frankness in L'Etranger (1942). Camus opens the novel with Meursault's less than soulful thoughts on his mother's death:

Mother died today. Or, maybe, yesterday; I can't be sure. The telegram from the Home says: YOUR MOTHER PASSED AWAY. FUNERAL TOMORROW. DEEP SYMPATHY. Which leaves the matter doubtful; it could have been yesterday. (1)

Later, after he kills the Arab on the beach, Meursault has trouble remembering the murder and feels "less regret than a kind of vexation" (87). Death no longer automatically earns respect and fear; increasingly it ceases to be a matter of consequence.

As the twentieth century has advanced, the idea that one can make a "good death" has become drastically undermined; Cardinal Newman's ecstatic and elaborate death drama "The Dream of Gerontius" (1865) has no recent imitator. The deathbed confessions in Dickens and the dramas of unity-through-death in The Mill on the Floss (1860) or "The Blessed Damozel" (1850) have given way to unexpected and seemingly

pointless deaths in Forster and Beckett, ironic moments without a witness to hear the last thoughts – or even worse, moments with banal or nonsensical last words.

Lawrence Langer, who in The Age of Atrocity examines mass death, concludes that the staggering numbers of “inappropriate deaths” in our time have had devastating effects on our expectation of what he calls “purposeful death.” Langer writes: “The human imagination seems unable to exist without hope for a purposeful death” (15). We begin to sense this helplessness in D. H. Lawrence’s The Rainbow (1915) when Tom Brangwen drowns. As Brangwen is pulled down by the water, “a great wonder of anguish [goes] over him” and then his “unconscious, drowning body” (this phrase is used repeatedly) sweeps around and around the farm (246-248). However, Tom’s dead body is still “impressive, inviolable” for his wife Lydia (251). This significance will fall away by the time we encounter the dead body as joke in Robert Coover’s Gerald’s Party (1985). This is not the nihilism of Macbeth: “I have supped full with horrors” (V, v, 14). We enter a flattened space where death is equated with the squalid and the petty.

Consider the lines of William Cullen Bryant, typical of their time, quoted at the beginning of this chapter; a mortal is enjoined to “approach thy grave / Like one who wraps the drapery of his couch / About him, and lies down to pleasant dreams.” What has occasioned the shift from this calmer acceptance, this certainty or fervent hope that the unique personality continues to exist throughout the death experience? I cannot agree, with Langer, that our century is unique in atrocity. It is also too easy to ascribe this remarkable shift to the decline of religious faith; after all, God has been in question for hundreds of years, and recent generations hold no monopoly on doubt.

Other factors are in evidence here. Personal identity has become a vexed question. Cardinal Newman is one of the last to write confidently of “the mansion of my soul” (“The Dream of Gerontius” 453); other Victorians, reading Darwin and, later, Freud, began to entertain serious doubts as to the provenance and substance of humanity. And in the wake of the theory of relativity, the postmodern era is marked by confusion about the

real nature of time. We no longer identify easily with Hugo von Hofmannsthal's Marschallin in Der Rosenkavalier (1910):

Often I hear [time] flowing – staunchlessly.
Often I rise in the middle of the night and stop all, all the clocks.
And yet one need not be afraid of it. (Act I)

But the most pressing problem is language. We have been encouraged by language-based theorists to think that the arbitrary nature of language exposes death as a void, that “the radical abstraction death is pure construct, pure language” (Stewart 4). While Walter Benjamin could say in 1936 that authority was bestowed on “even the poorest wretch in dying” (333), now authoritative meanings of all kinds are suspect. Even death has lost authority and is primarily associated with absence. Freud, writing in 1913 of the deaths of Cordelia and Lear, says, “eternal wisdom, clothed in the primaevial myth, bids the old man renounce love, choose death and make friends with the necessity of dying” (“The Theme of the Three Caskets” 301). By 1972 Jacques Derrida will promote interpretation which “tries to pass *beyond* man and humanism, the name man being the name of that being who . . . has dreamed of full presence, the reassuring foundation, the origin and the end of the game” (“Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences” 264-65, emphasis mine). “The end” for Derrida appears transparent; death is a lack, not a necessity we need to befriend. The words “that teach the rustic moralist to die” in Gray’s “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard” (1751) have no sacred status. Neither language nor death retains the distinction it once had. (In 1992, however, Derrida published The Gift of Death, a thoughtful and humane meditation on the complex interrelations of history, secrecy, responsibility, religion, and death, with less emphasis on the arbitrary power of language.)

Of these injuries to meaning that stain the postmodern representation of death, it is this last – language – that affects A. S. Byatt, who carefully takes up the challenge of representing meaningful death. It is significant that one of the tales embedded in

Possession, “The Threshold,” is a reiteration of the three casket theme. In this story, the Childe freely chooses the third casket, which for Freud symbolizes death.

§ § §

One way of evaluating the effectiveness of language to inscribe death’s meaning is to consider the last words of the dying. The conventions tell us that the character of the dying person is solidified, that last words are trustworthy and significant. The dying heroes and villains of Shakespeare’s tragedies are not untroubled by questions, but there is a strong sense of “poetic justice” (Stewart 23) present at their deaths. (Cordelia is, for Byatt, a painful exception.) Old rascal Peter Featherstone in Middlemarch (1871-72) dies trying to make good, wanting the deserving to inherit his money, while the unredeemable Casaubon makes certain Dorothea’s lovelessness and lack of fulfillment are made permanent in his will. The defining qualities of these characters are asserted at death.

This happens more rarely in twentieth-century fiction. Like Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy anticipates this shift in the late 19th century, demonstrating in Anna Karenin the expectation of revelation in death scenes, and then undermining such hope. Levin, for example, is envious of his dying brother Nikolai, certain that “something was becoming clearer and clearer to the dying man which for Levin remained as obscure as ever” (528). But finally Nikolai’s slowness in dying just creates irritation and exhaustion in those around him. Anna’s own death is petty, grisly, and unrevelatory; at the last moment she wonders, “Where am I? What am I doing? Why?” (802). Tolstoy sets the tone for the fiction that follows. The two most surprising deaths in Forster’s The Longest Journey (1907), a book Byatt cites as exemplary in its technical achievement of accidental death (Byatt/Murdoch video interview), are each marked by banality. Gerald, unexpectedly smashed on the football field, dies petulantly and without insight: “I want – I don’t want to talk. I can’t see you. Shut that door” (56). In the same novel, Rickie dies wearily and blandly in a paragraph which starts off so innocuously that the unobservant reader might miss the nearly-buried sentence, “The train went over his knees” (303). Both men end in

failure, as does Leonard Bast in Howards End (1910), dying, baffled, in a shower of books. Leonard's last words, or the narrator's (in either case, a damning conclusion), are "Nothing had sense" (256).

In Conrad's Lord Jim (1900), Jim dies "with his hand over his lips" (416), blocking the illuminating last words we are led by convention to expect. Death here is the "stupid physiological fact" Nietzsche said it was in The Will to Power (section 916). Modern death brings the buzzing of the fly to Emily Dickinson; it prompts Vladimir and Estragon in Waiting for Godot (1954) to think of erections.

Thomas Mann and Henry James work at finding meaning in death, but their resolutions are ambivalent. For Aschenbach, at the conclusion of Death in Venice (1911), "it *seemed* to him, though, as if the pale and charming psychagogue out there were smiling at him, beckoning to him; as if, lifting his hand from his hip, he were pointing outwards, hovering before him in an immensity of promise" (63, emphasis mine). If not for that "seemed," which undermines Aschenbach's grasp of the truth, his death can be read as fulfillment.

Death in the tales of Henry James is a powerful force informing and shaping lives, but often in a negative way. Death obsessions in "Maud-Evelyn" and "The Altar of the Dead" prevent the living characters from being truly alive. In "The Middle Years" death reveals small truths, but also disappointments. In James and Mann, death retains its ability to bring knowledge but its true identity is seldom fully recognized. The point is, however, that for James and Mann death does have an identity, almost a personality, which is theoretically recognizable.

A recent restatement of faith that death has a powerful identity occurs in Peter Ackroyd's Chatterton (1987), in the description of the death of Charles Wychwood:

He could see her outline as she bent over him, and she was encircled by light; the boy burned brightly also and, as Charles's soul left the world, their souls were shining in farewell. At that instant of recognition he

smiled: nothing was really lost and yet this was the last time he would ever see them, the last time, the last time, the last time, the last time. Vivien. Edward. I met them on a journey somewhere. We were travelling together. (169)⁶

This positive death is told from the point of view of the dying person, as is the death of Stephanie. But Ackroyd's account is marked by a Dickensian sentimentality which Byatt rejects.

Closer in spirit to Byatt is Julian Barnes, who meditates on death more pragmatically in Flaubert's Parrot (1984): "When she dies, you are not at first surprised. Part of love is preparing for death. You feel confirmed in your love when she dies. You got it right. This is part of it all" (160). Barnes, like Byatt, presents the effects of death flatly, trying to find the importance of the experience using a stripped-down vocabulary.

You talk, and you find the language of bereavement foolishly inadequate. You seem to be talking about other people's griefs. I loved her; we were happy; I miss her. She didn't love me; we were unhappy; I miss her. There is a limited choice of prayers on offer: gabble the syllables. (161)

Barnes does not, however, attempt to represent death directly, as Byatt does. He feels too formidably the limits of language, and gives no vigorous indication that he argues with the construction of death as a void. In Barnes's first novel, Metroland (1980), his protagonist experiences feelings of unmitigated terror when, shortly after rejecting belief in God, he faces up to the idea of non-existence after death. The adolescent Chris describes being kept awake at night by "a sensation of total aloneness within your pyjamaed, shaking body; a realisation of Time (always capitalised) going on without you for ever and ever" (54). Barnes and Byatt alike refuse to retreat into religion for comfort, but for Byatt panic is never the issue.

⁶Compare Wychwood's five uses of "the last time" with Lear's five instances of "never." Is Ackroyd offering a slight corrective to the atheist Shakespeare? Ackroyd seems to propose a vague afterlife which, while ruling out the possibility of "seeing" the beloved again, promises some sort of unspecified eternal union.

§ § §

In A. S. Byatt's most arresting death scene, Stephanie is electrocuted by an ungrounded refrigerator at the conclusion of Still Life. She has reached under the appliance to retrieve a sparrow, brought alive to her kitchen by a cat. This shattering accident has hit Byatt's readers hard.

Every three weeks or so – I get an accusing letter from somebody, saying “How could you do that? How could you put me through that? Why did you just suddenly do that in that chapter? It wasn't prepared, you had no right, the novel wasn't going there.” (Hass interview)

Byatt's achievement in the remarkable portrayal of Stephanie's sudden death is made clearer by comparison with other deaths she has written. In her fiction, which straddles the Romantic/Victorian and modern/postmodern sensibilities, the reader encounters a range of deaths – accidental, suicidal, natural, symbolic – which group themselves in various positions on either side of a dividing line between purposeful and purposeless death. These deaths represent, variously, a conviction that death holds meaning and resolution (either potential or actual), and an ironic modern or postmodern refutation of this.

Perhaps the simplest kind of death which Byatt treats in her fiction is death by nature. Simon Moffitt in The Game (1967) is haunted by the memory of his friend Antony Miller being devoured by piranhas in the Amazon. For Joshua Riddell in the short story “Precipice-Encurled,” nature is likewise fatal; he is killed by a sudden, vicious storm while painting in the Apennines. Byatt hesitates between presenting these deaths as untroubled by higher meaning and desiring to make nature correspond to a human or moral sphere.

Like her characters Marcus and Stephanie Potter, she distrusts “argument by analogy” (Babel Tower 251, The Virgin in the Garden 261); she has said, in a television interview with Michael Ignatieff, that “part of my subject matter as a novelist is the danger of endlessly arguing by analogy.” Nevertheless, Byatt and her characters do not

stop creating analogies. They recognize the danger of seeing human behavior reflected in or punished by the natural world, but they are nevertheless fascinated by the parallels. Byatt strives but fails to provide convincing non-moral conclusions for these deaths. Plainly, piranhas do what piranhas do; yet the ensuing nightmares for Simon resonate with moral significance.

Motivated death occurs more obviously in Byatt's fairy stories. In "Gode's Story" the madness and death of the miller's daughter is retribution for her capricious rejection of the sailor who loves her. The scapegoated woman cast out of her primitive village to die in the story "The Dried Witch" seems to accept her role as part of the design for her community. Similar acquiescence to death's power is remarked in "Dragon's Breath." A more optimistic expression of this theme occurs in "The Glass Coffin," in which a tailor is tested for bravery and individuality by facing symbolic death. This tale, influenced by the Grimms, upholds a traditional view that death is infused with meaning and that a clear understanding of death undeniably contributes to the value of living. Although postmodern irony is a feature of these tales, and the consciousness of the dying is not examined in any detail, they provide a useful indicator of Byatt's fundamental attitudes toward death. While some of the fairy-tales were written for characters in Possession, they have subsequently been published separately, under Byatt's name, which elevates their status beyond legerdemain.

"On the Day that E. M. Forster Died" has a contemporary setting, but here death is, for the most part, likewise part of a structure of meaning to which the characters adjust themselves. Forster's death allows Mrs. Smith, a novelist, a place of her own in the pattern of English literature. In "The Changeling" the suicide of a disturbed boy actually allows another novelist, Josephine Piper, to overcome writing-block, proof of death's authoritative power.

But "On the Day that E. M. Forster Died" also contains ironic retorts to the assumption that meaning is lodged in death. Mrs. Smith's dealings with the disturbed

Conrad, a man shadowed by mortality and madness, end in farce; and finally Mrs. Smith's exalted plans to write important fiction are quashed by the news of her own terminal illness. This ironic view of death is continued in "The Next Room." Here a protagonist is relieved by the deaths of those who have been burdens to her, but then finds that the bickering of the dead carries on just as it did in life. In this case, death has resolved nothing.

Despite the current of doubt running under the surface of several stories, in Byatt's minor works significance in death is present more often than not. Her most popular work, the comic Romance Possession, continues the trend of affirmation. The last paragraph of Possession (before the Postscript) reads rather like the last act of Wagner's Götterdämmerung: the music of a world dying is mingled with the music of a world reborn. I have noticed that Byatt's conclusion is also a commentary on, and expansion of, a similar passage in Iris Murdoch's Under the Net (1954): "It was the first day of the world. I was full of that strength which is better than happiness, better than the weak wish for happiness which women can awaken in a man to rot his fibres. It was the morning of the first day" (283).

In the morning, the whole world had a strange new smell. It was the smell of the aftermath, a green smell, a smell of shredded leaves and oozing resin, of crushed wood and splashed sap, a tart smell, which bore some relation to the smell of bitten apples. It was the smell of death and destruction and it smelled fresh and lively and hopeful. (Possession 551)

The deaths of the poets Ash and LaMotte in Possession are integral elements of the literary detective story which Maud and Roland unravel. Death provides the impetus for Ash and LaMotte to seek reconciliation, creating satisfaction at the story's personal level; their hidden papers, preserved by the grave, allow the biographers comprehension at the textual level. The fullest comprehension is granted to the reader, who alone garners the advantages of both spheres. In Possession, the living learn from the dead – how to interpret accurately, how to write, how to live with passion. The dead are rewarded with

continuing existence through their written work. "Nor shall Death brag thou wander'st in his shade, / When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st," was Shakespeare's formulation of this conviction (Sonnet 18). But the optimism of Possession is, as I will argue elsewhere, deceptive; it is wise to remember that the novel is at least partly parodic.

The celebratory view of the interaction of life and death does, however, find an echo in "Sugar." In this autobiographical story the narrator's dying father finds the time to construct a satisfying explanatory narrative of his life and tells his novelist daughter, "You mustn't think I mind" about dying (Sugar 232), just the sort of deathbed resolution we like to hear. A further hint of this positive attitude toward death occurs in Still Life. The paragraph is an isolated one, and obviously autobiographical, in a chapter called "Growing Things":

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. (237)

The death of at least some of the seedlings is necessary, and contributes to the health of the other flowers. But the fact that "a young woman, with a child" is faced with this incident is ominous; when death comes to youthful human beings, platitudes about the naturalness of death arrive unwanted.

Byatt's treatment, then, of conventional death, death-by-nature, and symbolic or fairy-tale death usually contains large portions of reassurance, along with some ambivalence. But illumination and value is more often granted to survivors, those who find in death a puzzle solved or a pattern completed. The dying consciousness itself is not considered; its given formulations are distant, their integrity uncertain. For example, in "Sugar" we have no way of determining with confidence whether the father's deathbed version of events is truly more trustworthy than the mother's.

The encounter with suicide and violent accidental death in Byatt's fiction, to which I now turn, is far less reassuring. Suicide is pervasive in *The Game*, which is about two sisters, a novelist and an Oxford don, who have shared an elaborate childhood fantasy. It contains three important suicides: Simon Moffitt's father, the needy woman to whom Thor Eklund is providing pastoral care, and Cassandra Corbett after she reads about her "self" in Julia Corbett's *roman à cléf*, *A Sense of Glory*. All three suicides defy comfortable or even ambivalent readings.

The suicide of Simon's father is disturbing on two levels. First, there is the macabre act itself, which the father means to be a murder-suicide (of Simon and himself) to take revenge on Simon's mother, discovered in adultery. Secondly, the teenaged Simon unburdens himself of his horror to the unsympathetic Julia, who views the situation as an absurd joke. Julia demonstrates here, as throughout the book, her inability to imaginatively place herself in the position of others, an inability that will lead directly to Cassandra's suicide. Julia Corbett is also the sort of contemporary novelist, adept with empty death, whom Byatt tacitly criticizes. Simon's tale of his father's death is marked by stammering and hesitation:

"Then he took me and the dog into the conservatory one day. Things were pretty bad by then. He said to the dog, 'Come here, you,' and he – dragged her a bit – she didn't want – and then he, he shot the dog. So then he, he said to me, 'Come here,' so I – I hid behind the water-butt, and he stood – looking stupid – for a bit, and then he gave a sort of snort and said, 'Oh, well, never mind,' in a sort of puzzled voice and he – he shot himself. And then planes of glass fell in, and potted plants dropped off the edges of shelves. One hit me. On the shoulder."

Julia spread one hand across her face to choke another involuntary burst of laughter. (84)

The idea of a fulfilling or peaceful death is shattered, as it is in the suicide of the woman Thor has been counselling.

Cassandra kills herself in an attempt to retain dignity, after her usual strategies of retreat and emotional self-amputation fail. She wishes to stop the "overlap" not only

between herself and Julia, whose latest novel has turned one facet of Cassandra into a “weird heroine . . . with a steady lunatic clarity” (220), but also between herself and Simon, with whom a satisfying relationship seems impossible. In addition, Cassandra’s death is the result of interference by people who force choices on her that she does not believe are tenable. The novel concludes on this note, that the characters are locked into limited roles and have few viable choices available. (This is a more complete rejection of existentialist assessments of choice than Iris Murdoch presents in her novels of the time, although many critics see Byatt and Murdoch, in the 1960s at least, as closely linked.) Cassandra’s death is fulfilling only insofar as she has escaped pain. Unlike the survivors in Possession, Julia and Simon appear to garner very little insight from their brush with death.

The most recent developments of the suicide motif are contained in “The Chinese Lobster,” first published in 1992, and in the 1998 story “Crocodile Tears.” Here, suicide is a vital option that several of the characters reserve for themselves as an escape from pain. Patricia Nimmo in the latter story is a widow who is unable to articulate her grief and instead lurks in dangerous situations, near lorries and on high rooftops, which seem to give voice to her fear and loneliness. She is finally able to tell another unhappy character, Nils Isaksen, also fleeing the realities of decay and death, of her feelings about her late husband. “When I first knew I loved him, I was terrified he would die,” she says (Elementals 76); this truth-telling releases them into the future. In “The Chinese Lobster” the characters “flirt” even more obsessively with suicide, giving it optimistic colouring and positive form; Gerda Himmelblau, whose name means “blue heaven,” sees death as “white, and clear, and simple” (The Matisse Stories 129). This connects, surprisingly, to the view of contentment (a white bed in an empty room) shared by Roland and Maud in Possession (291). In “The Chinese Lobster” suicidal tendencies bind the characters together in knowledge, and the kiss between Himmelblau and Perry Diss (“Hades” — the counterpart to heaven) at the story’s end is a sign that they have gained strength from

their shared suffering. Himmelblau and Diss identify with the dying lobsters and crabs in the Chinese restaurant tank, but can also see them purely as objects. Somehow this double vision provides them with insight which they can either turn toward life or toward death.

“I find that *absolutely appalling*, you know,” says Perry Diss. “And at the same time, exactly at the same time, I don’t give a damn? D’you know?”

“I know,” says Gerda Himmelblau. She does know. Cruelly, imperfectly, voluptuously, clearly. (The Matisse Stories 134)

Choice is a more liberating conception than it is in The Game. Freud reminds us “that every organism wishes to die only in its own fashion” (Beyond the Pleasure Principle 39). The death wish, as long as it can be contained, amplifies the characters’ compassion and comprehension.

§ § §

Finally we approach the most difficult of Byatt’s kinds of death, sudden accidental death.⁷ Byatt’s attempt to capture this experience in Still Life is phenomenological, and clearly draws on the death of her son Charles in a traffic accident in 1972, and additionally on the accidental domestic electrocution she survived in the early 1960s. Writing Stephanie Potter’s death by electrocution “very nearly finished me off,” says Byatt (Hass interview). Not only did she force herself to face the possible feelings of her son as he died, but she re-entered her own partial electrocution.

Stephanie’s death is not the first of this kind. Her death is prefigured by the death of Mrs. Thone’s son, briefly and poignantly mentioned in The Virgin in the Garden:

Once she had understood exactly that between a good breakfast and an end of break bell a boy could run, fall, smash, twitch, stop moving forever, and

⁷I have not included murder in this discussion. The murder of Gerry Burtt’s baby by his wife Barbara is peripheral to the action of Still Life, as are the sadistic murders in the novel-within-a-novel of Babel Tower. In Still Life Daniel Orton is helping a woman whose children were the victims of IRA violence, but details are few. These murders are not unimportant, but neither are they given sustained treatment. Fuller attention is given to the Moors Murders in Babel Tower, but the case is handled primarily as one of Frederica’s “laminations” and the connection to the main narrative is tenuous.

begin to decay, she understood also that nothing could be undone, no air raid, no death camp, no monstrous genesis, and that the important thing about herself was that she had not much time and it did not matter greatly what she did with it. (243)

Mrs. Thone's grief lurks in the background of the comic narrative of The Virgin in the Garden, hinting of the bleaker sequel. The fact of her son's death is overwhelming to Mrs. Thone, but in Byatt's mostly agnostic world this insistent fact encounters no religious presence sufficient to explain or sustain it. And so it hangs suspended, an unfinished story. Stephanie Potter's death, although recounted in more detail, has the same effect. It remains, unrelenting in its presence, even in Babel Tower (1996), the third Potter novel, which shows Daniel and all the Potters still struggling unsuccessfully with its meaning, more than six years later.

Stephanie's death occurs on an ordinary day, when various people come to her, as they always have, for help. A social worker is looking for the disturbing Gerry Burt, Clemency Farrar asks for advice about her philandering husband (Gideon, the vicar), Marcus Potter needs to talk about love. Stephanie is frustrated, helping automatically but with compassion. The sparrow brought in by the cat becomes the distillate of this semi-unwilling compassion. Stephanie wants to free the sparrow, but is aggravated by its willfulness. The entire chapter reverberates with the heightened presence of the vulnerable and unreliable human body, evidenced by Daniel's anger, Gideon's lust, Marcus's desire, and Clemency's disgust; additionally, the Orton children crave the basic physical comforts of food and parental love.

Stephanie is located, or even trapped, at the center of these whirling and conflicting physical forces, which are unresolvable. In the form of a sparrow and cat, primitive or animal nature makes a deceptively mild appearance, a further concentration of unconscious physicality. This is enough to tip the balance toward destruction. Stephanie tells her son Will that it is a cat's "nature" to hurt birds, but adds that such violence won't happen "in our house . . . if we can help it" (332).

The access of electricity which kills Stephanie is, in one sense, the overload of physical forces within the human characters that they ask Stephanie to bear on their behalf. Her death is far more than “death by domesticity,” the description of one reviewer (Barber 21). Like Cordelia, Stephanie is the one on whom others place their burdens, a casualty of a post-Christian world teeming with demanding, unacknowledged, unarticulated forces. Once a scholar and teacher of literature, Stephanie has become a mother and curate’s wife, and is frustrated by her inability to use her intellectual gifts. The community uses her as a healer, needs her as the repository of their stories. But not only is she agnostic, she is out of touch with her linguistic side; her “words [wander] loose and unused” (*Still Life* 307). Does this absence of language, combined with lack of faith, kill her?

Despite Byatt’s criticism of Lawrence for placing the blame on the victims of accident, Stephanie’s death does seem to be compelled, at least on a public level:

I was very angry again with poor D. H. Lawrence, who said in *Women in Love* there are no accidents, every man makes his own fate, people get killed for reasons in themselves. And I thought this is an appalling thing to say, and simply not true. (Hass interview)

This declaration notwithstanding, Stephanie is, at least partly, the victim of her community’s inability to arrive at an equilibrium of body, mind, and spirit, and of its failure to articulate that quest. *Still Life* at this point establishes the authentic human need for religious solutions to insoluble problems. I will return to this matter in a later chapter. But Stephanie, on a personal rather than public level, does achieve some kind of resolution as she is dying, and it is that moment to which I now turn.

Stephanie dies in one short, stark paragraph. She has no audience but the reader.

And then the refrigerator struck. She thought, as the pain ran through her, as her arm, fused to the metal, burned and banged, as her head filled, “This is it” and then, with a flashing vision of heads on pillows, “Oh, what will happen to the children?” And the word, altruism, and surprise at it. And then dark pain, and more pain. (*Still Life* 334)

In an interview Byatt described the refrigerator which nearly electrocuted her in more murderous terms than the ones she uses for Stephanie's death.

I had a bird which went under a refrigerator and the refrigerator took hold of me and started to kill me. But my first husband, who is a pragmatic sort of man, turned it off at source. Which is not what happens in the novel.
(Hass interview)

In the novel Byatt tries to downplay causality. She avoids metaphorical language; there is only the suggestion of the refrigerator's malevolence in the active verb "struck" and the symbolic role of the sparrow itself. Other than this, Stephanie faces her death directly when she says "This is it," much as she welcomed Will at birth by naming him "You" (Still Life 94). "Altruism" is the culmination of the moment. It is a powerful word, deliberately cited to indicate that Stephanie has "lived for others," that she knows what her life has signified, and that she has chosen this life. The word evokes Stephanie's life more positively and explicitly than "charity" or "benevolence" or even "goodness" would have.

Stephanie's husband, Daniel, feels guilt after her death because she had previously complained to him of her estrangement from the intellectual vocabulary once hers:

"Like what?"
"Oh," she said, frivolously, desperately. "Discourse. Discourse of reason. Sophistical. Ideal – in a Platonic sense. Catalyst. Anacoluthon. Mendacious. Realism. The worst things are the words that do have meaning in the tiny vocabulary I do use, like real and ideal, words that lose half their associations . . . Don't you understand, Daniel?"
"I do," he said. (306)

But they never resolve the problem. Her last word, altruism, is partly a remnant of her "great unopened volumes of vocabulary" (306). It might be meant as a critical comment on the waste of Stephanie's intellectual gifts (she could have been so much

more than a good wife and mother), but I believe it is, instead, approbation of that very goodness.

“Altruism” is an example of an influential word coined by one person, demonstrating the power of the individual to effect change and make language more precise. (It was formed, according to the OED, by Auguste Comte in the nineteenth century from various Latin and French roots.) Stephanie’s last word is, in its simplicity and accuracy, an affirmation that her personal life (as opposed to her public function) has meaning which death, despite its imperative power, cannot efface. Indeed Stephanie’s ability to recognize and name death in an instant (“this is it”) forms an essential part of that affirmation. She does still command the vocabulary that matters. Most of the words that Stephanie claims she longs for in her speech to Daniel are much less vital than “altruism” and the altruistic acts of her everyday life which have benefited, even saved, people like Malcolm Haydock, Lucas Simmonds, Gerry Burt, her children, and Daniel himself. After her speech in chapter 27, Daniel makes love to her, and a few more words occur to her before sleep: “Peripeteia. Anguish. Morphology” (307). These words are more urgent, and if Stephanie could have combined her altruistic life with intellectual consideration of words such as these, she would have made a contribution even greater than the considerable one she does make.

Stephanie’s vocabulary is an indicator of at least partial fulfillment, but it is not everything. Byatt’s narrator says, somewhat sardonically, that “men have died and worms have eaten them, but not for love, nor yet for constriction of vocabulary” (307). We will be reminded, when we visit in the next chapter the love scenes between Stephanie and Daniel, of how much can be gained in abandoning language.

§ § §

For those who seek clues about the accident to come, the novel’s epigraph from the Venerable Bede is about a swallow, symbolic of a fleeting human life, and the chapter title heralding Stephanie’s death repeats Bede’s Latin phrase for one swallow, “*unus*

passerum.” It is deeply ironic that a sparrow is the cause of Stephanie’s death. In several key Biblical verses, the sparrow is the means of comparison demonstrating the greater worth of human life.

Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground without your Father’s will. But even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows. (Matthew 10.29-31)

Unsurprisingly, Daniel does not choose this text for Stephanie’s funeral. He focuses instead on scripture emphasizing the power of death.

The words were a thin defence between him and the pit. They were an action, customary and saving, not because he any longer believed any of the more comfortable ones, but because the terrible ones spoke some of the truth of things. (*Still Life* 341)

Daniel stops short of blaming God for electrocuting Stephanie, although that suspicion runs very close to the surface of the text when Daniel imagines a God “who held together the stones of that place, who lived like electricity in its heavier air, whose presence he sensed only rarely but who had driven him” (350). Daniel, who is not conventionally devout, has chosen the church as the most appropriate place to do good. Through the sparrow that ironically brings his wife’s death instead of demonstrating her value, Daniel comes to realize the limits of his earth-bound view of life, the practical basis of his ministry. He tentatively creates a metaphor for God out of the electricity which brings death, but he creates only confusion for himself.

There was more in the world, and more outside the world, than men and their small concerns; Daniel could hear it, life, beyond the thud of his own heart, the snuff of his own breath. (350)

There is a text that does illuminate the circumstances of Stephanie’s death for Daniel: it is not the Bible, but King Lear.

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. Thould come no more. (344)

Lear leads Daniel to the realization that the crisis he faces is not the death of God or the loss of meaning: Daniel finds there is too much meaning, too much presence. The pain is larger, the end more immense than we have been led to expect. The grave fact of death, looming large in Lear and Still Life, demands to be comprehended. But how? Stephanie's small but crucial word worked for her, but Daniel did not hear it. In 1980, Daniel still seeks understanding; he metaphorically shakes his fist at death, "some looming energy-field" (Still Life 9).

The death of Cordelia provides the structure for one of Byatt's rare poems, "A Dog, a Horse, a Rat," published in 1991 but detailing the death of Charles Byatt 20 years before. I reproduce the poem here in its entirety, because it is little known and contributes greatly to an understanding of death in Byatt's work.

A dog, a horse, a rat
 All those red-troubled days
 Heraldic in my head
 Danced in their lively ways.
 The bright-eyed rat, so sleek,
 The dog with plume and claw
 The horse's hot bright neck
 And thou wilt come no more
 The terror of their life
 Their moving flesh, their air
 In nostril, lung and heart
 He cried, look there, look there,
 Fooled by a flutter, Lear –
 But I heard what they said
 As they remade my life
 With their plain "he is dead".
 None of my breaths since then
 Is easy or is sure
 Nothing I think or hear
 Without, thou'lt come no more,
 A dog, a horse, a rat
 I see in bliss and fear
 Live fur and bone delight

Wet eye and curling ear
 But every breath I draw
 In pleasure or in pain
 Sings in my flesh and blood
 He will not come again
 And still, when I live most
 And walk in the warm air
 My nostrils breathe the ghost
 Of your warm yellow hair
 My skull contains the lost
 Breath of your yellow hair
 Of your burned yellow hair.

There are many echoes of the death of Stephanie in the death of Charles: the yellow hair, the burning, and, particularly, the author's insistence on immediately grasping and telling the reality that "he will not come again." Byatt and Daniel desperately need to apprehend the commanding power of death, to acknowledge the presence it has.

A continued presence is exactly what Byatt describes in her other poem about her dead son, "Dead Boys," published in 1994. Here she writes surrounded by unspeaking apparitions of her dead son who are "more alive than I." These are not poems about memory or (merely) about grief. The vitality of the dead boys relates to the "singing" of "he will not come again" in the previous poem. These are strenuously worked out formulations (twenty years in the making) of death's vitality, that remind us also of the electricity which kills Stephanie: what is electricity but raw power, energy that we think we have harnessed but can easily overmaster us?

It is difficult to decide what to do with Stephanie's death, which occupies the heart of Byatt's fiction, and emits painful vibrations whenever one returns to it. Byatt herself has said, "I don't know what I shall do without her" (Canton 6). Stephanie's private death has a simple and distinct coda, but the swirling forces that filled the stage of her public death remain unresolved. Why is Stephanie, like Cordelia, offered as a sacrifice? If death is the end, why does so much energy from this experience still remain? The remainder demands a religious explanation: God gives death its presence, and names and contains its power.

Byatt has declared her agnosticism. God is “an omni-present absentee” she says in Passions of the Mind (5), yet Still Life questions that agnosticism. In her powerful depiction of Stephanie’s accident, Byatt achieves partial restoration of faith in language and in death as a fundamental and meaningful element, but given the unspeaking and ongoing vitality of the “Dead Boys” and the dead Stephanie, this is not enough. Stephanie is unquestionably constructed as a religious sacrifice of some sort; if the world view presented here is truly agnostic or atheistic, why the need for a character to bear the sins of others? The full double vision achieved by the suicidal characters in “The Chinese Lobster” comes closer to a satisfactory conclusion; it combines the emotional and intellectual insight which Stephanie would have reached if she’d been given the time to analyse “Peripeteia. Anguish. Morphology.” A triple vision, one incorporating the transcendent, would bring even greater accuracy.

Chapter 3: Love

And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.

The First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians 13.2

Love is unenglish and sloppy and soft
 So be English and stringy and tough.
 If you keep yourself fit you will never want It,
 So give up Love.

W. H. Auden, from "Give Up Love" (1937)

When critics consider the work of Antonia Byatt, they usually comment on her erudition, her intertextual command of an astonishing variety of styles and subjects, and the way she combines Victorian amplitude with postmodern questioning. Less frequently do commentators note that Byatt's fiction is firmly based in realism, and that hers is a profoundly personal realism. As I have already noted, throughout her fiction Byatt determinedly and precisely examines fundamental personal events – those basic and essential human experiences which seem, in their primal enormity, to defy accurate and detailed expression. These events, as I formulate them, are birth, death, and love, and Byatt treats them with the utmost respect. She probes the apparent inexpressibility of these situations and additionally (and, in some minds, astonishingly) plumbs their depths for clues about ultimate meaning.

Of these three fundamental human experiences Byatt is, rather surprisingly perhaps, most sceptical about love. Another way of expressing this might be to say that love prompts the least portion of her idealism while provoking the maximum amount of realism. In Still Life Byatt's excitement about the possibilities of extending the capabilities of language to encompass the feelings and importance of Stephanie Potter

Orton's birthing moment is palpable; even more powerful and moving is the section on death in that same novel, where Stephanie, while dying, grasps at meaningful words, entities she loves nearly as much as she loves her children. But when Byatt writes of romantic and erotic love, that other famous experience which apparently no one can do without, her optimism falters. Her lovers often lapse into silence; her narrators are ambivalent about the value of love. Whether Byatt's reservations are about the experience itself, or about our ability to cast its essence in language, she approaches love rarely and cautiously.

For readers who are familiar only with Possession: A Romance, my assertion that Byatt is hesitant about romance will seem odd, since the appeal of that popular novel for many was its "old-fashioned" love story. But Possession is an anomaly; nearly all the rest of Byatt's fiction is deeply suspicious about romantic love. Francis Spufford, in her review of Byatt's short story collection Sugar, noted that the stories were all about "losses," including the loss of love, and even of hope (23). Love of art and literature, love of children, even love of science – these figure more prominently than erotic or romantic love. Byatt has written frequently and astutely about sex, associated in the Potter novels particularly with Frederica, but her depiction of fulfilled romantic love is confined, in over 30 years of fiction, to two couples: Christabel LaMotte and Randolph Henry Ash in Possession and Stephanie Potter and Daniel Orton in The Virgin in the Garden and Still Life.

At a secondary level of significance, I include two couples in Angels and Insects (1992): Liliás and Arturo Papagay in "The Conjugal Angel" seem genuinely in love, and Matty Crompton and William Adamson embark on love at the conclusion of "Morpho Eugenia." But these romances linger on the margins of each novella, and each bears strong traces of fairy-tale. To this secondary category I also consign Roland Michell and Maud Bailey of Possession, about whose relations we do know a great deal. But throughout Possession what impresses is not their love but their avoidance of it. Their

situation coyly, somewhat mockingly, conforms to traditional conceptions, from the courtly love tradition to Freud, which insist that separations and obstacles are necessary components of love. Roland and Maud's¹ reluctance to fall in love also provides a tart commentary on the distrustful nature of postmodern love. Maud and Roland, therefore, despite their status as the couple whose relations are given the closest attention in Byatt's fiction, do not explicate Byatt's ideas about fulfilled love as clearly as do the Ash-LaMotte affair or the Orton marriage.

The Ortons have a marriage that works but is largely wordless. The affair of the poets in Possession is far more articulate; Christabel LaMotte provides the inspiration for some of Ash's most emotional poetry and he is able to tell LaMotte that she is "the life of things" (310). This is not unlike one of John Donne's definitions of love in "The Sun Rising": "Nothing else is." But the consequences of the LaMotte-Ash affair are tragic, and their separation acrimonious. Clearly, at its best, love is going to be a problem or a riddle rather than a solution in Byatt's world.

I pause for a brief comment on sexual orientation in Byatt. Heterosexual desire dominates this fiction, although lesbian love surfaces in Possession and in the short story "The Chinese Lobster." Byatt has been faulted for her portrayal of lesbians in Possession (in Lorena Love Russell's thesis "Lesbian Representation in Recent Historical Fiction" and Louise Yelin's essay "Cultural Cartography"). While the jolly and energetic Leonora Stern may be vulgar, and "poor" Blanche Glover pathetic, neither lesbian is unsympathetic (more accurately, Leonora is bisexual). By way of contrast, the depiction of the ultra-hetero Fergus Wolff is much more negative. The love of Gerda Himmelblau for her female friend Kay in "The Chinese Lobster" is sincere and moving. Certainly

¹ I notice, on re-reading this, that I use Ash's and LaMotte's last names and Roland's and Maud's first, as if the latter were children. I am, in part, following Byatt's example, although she usually writes of "Roland," "Maud," and "Christabel," giving "Ash" alone the honour of respectful address. I use "LaMotte" and "Ash" because they display a greater maturity than the twentieth-century characters.

heterosexual love is the norm in Byatt's fiction, for the obvious reason that this is where her experience lies.

In 1991, writing about the composition of The Shadow of the Sun in the 1950s, Byatt said she believed at the time that "men could have both, work and love, but it seemed that women couldn't" (Shadow ix). Byatt's first two novels, The Shadow of the Sun and The Game, evince the darkest suspicions about love, and those suspicions are forcefully resurrected in her most recent works, The Matisse Stories and Babel Tower. (It is possible that Frederica Potter and John Ottokar are falling in love at the conclusion of Babel Tower, but the evidence is meagre.) Characters who attempt to love are met by hopelessness and failure. Margaret Canning, in Shadow, believes first in the power of love "to invigorate and transform and illuminate," and then in love "as a last resort from dullness." She finally discovers that "both love and dullness wore forms so alien and complicated that she could not always distinguish one from the other" (22). More commonly Byatt's characters are zealous in their avoidance of love; the relationship between Roland and Maud in Possession is typical. Casualties of postmodern doubt, they are unwilling to entertain even the idea of being in love.

"Sometimes I feel," said Roland carefully, "that the best state is to be without desire. When I really look at myself –"
 "If you have a self –"
 "At my life, at the way it is – what I really want is to – to have nothing." (290)

When love in Byatt is not depicted in this negative manner, it is shown as descending onto an inappropriate object. It is frequently channeled into overwhelming, and often destructive, love for children. This is glimpsed within the damaging attachment between Winifred and Marcus Potter. In Babel Tower, Frederica experiences this sort of consuming love for her son Leo, demonstrated in this breathless and magnificent Jamesian sentence:

She is obsessed by the fear of losing Leo, a person who makes her life difficult at every turn, who appears sometimes to be eating her life and drinking her life-blood, a person who fits into no pattern of social behaviour or ordering of thought that she would ever have chosen for herself freely – and yet, the one creature to whose movements of body and emotions all her own nerves, all her own antennae, are fine-tuned, the person whose approach along a pavement, stamping angrily, running eagerly, lifts her heart, the person whose smile fills her with warmth like a solid and gleaming fire, the person whose sleeping face moves her to tears, to catch the imperceptible air of whose sleeping breath she will crouch, breathless herself, for timeless moments in the half-dark. (Babel Tower 476)

Thwarted love is also sublimated, its energy transferred to religion (see Cassandra Corbett in The Game and Christabel LaMotte in Possession) and art (see “The Story of the Eldest Princess,” “Art Work,” and “The Chinese Lobster”). This achieves partial success; Byatt seems complacent about Freud’s tenet that sublimated Eros is necessary for cultural advancement.²

Her description of the courtship and marriage of Stephanie and Daniel is atypical, and is the only sustained portrait Byatt provides of love that succeeds even partially. The Ash-LaMotte affair, while more intense, is swiftly terminated; LaMotte’s refusal to commit to a relationship with Ash blocks our attempts to plot that love’s trajectory. The Orton marriage is also open to sceptical readings; Stephanie is more reluctant than the taciturn Daniel to verbalize her love, and we are forced to read her fidelity and affection in her actions. Judging by one of C. S. Lewis’s definitions of love, that “one of the first things Eros does is to obliterate the distinction between giving and receiving” (The Four Loves 137), Stephanie does seem to find a good deal of satisfaction in using generosity to express her feelings. But there is no doubt that Stephanie also experiences great frustration in love, as does Daniel.

² Byatt reported in a New York Times interview in 1996 that one of the three new novels she is planning concerns female psychoanalysts in the time of Freud (Gussow C12). Byatt’s sympathy with Freud is apparent in her 1979 book review “Charles Rycroft: The Innocence of Dreams.” She says that she prefers “Freud’s fleshly pessimism” and “liberating” biological thinking to the passivity inherent in Jungian archetypal theory (Passions of the Mind 289).

Byatt is less certain that language can encompass love, compared to the other two fundamental personal experiences (death and birth) I have been examining. She is less willing even to explore the possibilities of articulated romance. One of T. S. Eliot's rare love poems expresses the same hesitation; he writes "of lovers whose bodies smell of each other / Who think the same thoughts without need of speech / And babble the same speech without need of meaning" ("A Dedication to my Wife"). This is a poem that Byatt admires ("Amatory Acts" 913). Byatt has said, of her characters Frederica and Alexander, that "they were both in love with words and wanted to prove that you could love with words. But of course there are passions which are too powerful to be expressed with words" (Dusinberre interview 192).

We have already encountered this preliminary capitulation to wordlessness in the matter of birth. But Byatt was eventually convinced that language can strongly suggest, if not contain, birth and death. The subject of love, on the other hand, surely the most extolled in the history of art, and one, at first glance, "easier" to grasp than birth or death, prompts in her an unexpected reticence. It is as if here, at last, she *does* ally herself with a post-structuralist view that language constructs reality; she seems to suspect that love is created by the act of naming, rather than having an independent existence. She finds this thought disturbing, and so retreats into silence.

Perhaps silence is a haven from deconstructive forces. Is silence the only way to protect essence? If we accept, for the sake of argument, that silence may offer accommodation to love, we must also recognize that the opacity of silence makes love vulnerable. In silence love is difficult to locate, easily mislaid or misinterpreted. "No more speech," thinks Randolph Henry Ash to himself when he makes love with Christabel LaMotte (Possession 308). Language is not working as well for them in Eros as it did in friendship; Ash hopes that a retreat into a meaningful silence will preserve and sustain their romance. It does not work.

Or is language indeed the problem? Does Byatt truly believe in love at all? She hesitates to name love as one of the primary forces of life. My formulation of the “basic themes” followed in these first three chapters is not as Byatt would have it. Instead of birth, death, and love, she has said that Still Life, in particular, is an exploration of “how far one can denude language of allusion and metaphor and keep to the basic themes of birth, *sex*, and death. ‘The thing itself, unaccommodated man’ ” (Kenyon 16, emphasis mine).

When Byatt does write of sex, her interest is often general rather than personal. On the subject of her sex scenes, she has said, “I see [Stephanie’s] sexual encounters mythologically. . . . I’m not so much interested in one relationship when I describe love-making as in the genetic order of what goes on” (Kenyon 13). In abstracting and theorizing erotic love, Byatt insists on its physical and social aspects, while ignoring the emotional. This contrasts sharply with her accomplishments in describing death and birth, which strenuously attempt to combine the physical, intellectual, and emotional meanings of an experience specifically located within a character’s individuality. One does not expect the atmosphere to grow chillier in the vicinity of love, and yet that is what happens. In reviewing some anthologies of love poetry for the Times Literary Supplement in 1990, Byatt had some revealing remarks about readers who might be in love “and looking for that sense of unearthly clarity and absolute rhythm that one seems to need, however briefly, in that deluded, illuded, or disestablished state” (“Amatory Acts” 913). Kathleen Coyne Kelly, in her study of Byatt, believes that the constants in Byatt’s writing are “her preoccupation with the artist, the imagination, the impossibility of love and the inevitability of loss” (14).

Auden’s acerbic prescription to “give up love” has found a ready response. Byatt almost seems to agree with Catherine Belsey, whose deconstructive project in Desire: Love Stories in Western Culture is

to interrogate the metaphysics of desire, to call into question the widespread notion that desire, however differently conceptualized by fiction, sexology or psychoanalysis, remains a fundamental and constitutive category of human experience. (8)

§ § §

At this point, I will make an attempt at a working definition of love appropriate to a study of Byatt, aware that any definition of love which did not immediately become elusive and contradictory would be no definition worth having. As I proceed, examples from poetry begin to dominate the discussion. This is partly an accident of my own reading, but because love in Possession is so closely entwined with poetry, I think this is fitting.

For Plato, earthly love at its best allows the lover to gain access to the ideal, to Beauty itself in its abstract perfection. This ideal love can encompass the physical, but will surpass it. Augustine's Christian writings in the fourth and fifth centuries widen the Platonic division between physical and spiritual love. Stendhal, in 1822, itemizes four kinds of love: passionate, mannered, physical, and vanity-love (43). Freud combined affection and sensuality in his definition of love (Belsey 43). Many contemporary thinkers ask us to discard any notions we might have that love is universal or eternal. C.S. Lewis in The Allegory of Love makes a convincing case for the theory that much of what we still take to be model romance was artificially constructed in the Middle Ages for particular historical reasons. "[Chivalry] always was [dead]: let no one think the worse of it on that account," he says (24). In The Four Loves, Lewis expands classical categories of love for contemporary Christian use; they are Affection, Friendship, Eros, and Charity, ascending in order of excellence.

Nearly all the commentators on love as it was perceived before this century make claims for erotic love as the most powerful human force; most idealists, Christian or otherwise, have additionally suggested that one ought to attempt to transcend Eros, or use it as a stepping-stone to divine love. The metaphysical poets in the seventeenth century

provide a welcome, but brief, deviation from this pattern. John Donne's view, similar to that found in the Song of Songs, is that erotic and divine love intermingle. "Take me to you, imprison me, for I / Except you enthrall me, never shall be free, / Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me," is his address to God in Holy Sonnet 14. But after the era of the metaphysical poets, love's theorists return obsessively to division. Denis de Rougemont, in Love in the Western World, takes as his thesis "the inescapable conflict in the West between passion and marriage" (8). Like Lewis and the other scholars of courtly love, de Rougemont notes the continuing attraction, over the centuries, of transgressive or forbidden love; he claims that "the community still drives passionate love in nine cases out of ten to take the form of adultery" (16). Then, of course, there is the question of death, which rationally might seem to oppose love, but has become, poetically or perversely, fused with it. We see this in the stories of Tristan and Isolde and Romeo and Juliet, and more recently in the adulterous lovers of Michael Ondaatje's The English Patient (1992). Old patterns hold fast; as C. S. Lewis says, "whatever we have been, in some sort we are still" (Allegory 1). De Rougemont says:

Love and death, a fatal love – in these phrases is summed up, if not the whole of poetry, at least whatever is popular, whatever is universally moving in European literature, alike as regards the oldest legends and the sweetest songs. Happy love has no history. (15)

These classic ideas about love – its pre-eminence, its fusion with death, its links with or opposition to spiritual fulfillment – are all rejected by Byatt.

In our century, modern and postmodern thought have wended their sceptical ways into the province of love. The result, especially in the concourse of scholarship, is love brought low by materialism and shot through with doubts, like other verities formerly deemed eternal.³ In a recent novel like Julian Barnes's Metroland, postmodern characters

³ That romance has a robust and relatively unchanged existence in "everyday" life is obvious. Neither have the tropes of popular romance books altered much in several hundred years. I must decline further comment on this genre, other than to say that I recognize the serious gaps between academic constructions of contemporary discourse and what is actually being desired and read.

obsess about the linguistic and behavioural requisites of love at the expense, of course, of the experience itself:

Well, what about the simple question, again, do I love her?

Depends what you mean by love. When do you cross the dividing line? When does *je t'aime bien* become *je t'aime*? The easy answer is, you know when you're in love, because there's no way you can doubt it, any more than you can doubt when your house is on fire. That's the trouble, though: try to describe the phenomenon and you get either a tautology or a metaphor. Does anyone feel any more that they are walking on air? Or do they merely feel as they think they would feel if they were walking on air? Or do they merely think they ought to feel as if they are walking on air?
(125)

There are portents of this anxiety and denial in Victorian literature. Long before W. H. Auden wrote in 1937, "Lay your sleeping head, my love, / Human on my faithless arm," Matthew Arnold was mourning love's waning power in "The Buried Life" ("Alas, is even Love too weak / To unlock the heart and let it speak?"). In 1862, George Meredith asks, in Modern Love, "What are we first? First, animals; and next / Intelligences at a leap" (Sonnet 30). For Meredith, love trails behind our physical and intellectual natures, and is transitory.

Contemporary theory and "serious" literature have concentrated on sex, at love's expense. Many, if not most, of Anne Sexton's and Robert Graves's love poems are actually about sex (yet Byatt counts Graves as one of the three greatest love poets, with Browning and Donne [Passions of the Mind 29]). Catherine Belsey's book Desire: Love Stories in Western Culture foregrounds sex and dismisses love. Love stories have long since been relegated to the lower echelons of literature; love's supporters are lonely voices in intellectual discourse. John Bayley's voice, in 1960, echoes as in an empty room:

[Sex] is the part of desire which is concerned not with the individual but with the attribute and the gender, while love is preoccupied with the uniqueness of the individual. Besides, sex is ridiculous – lyrically, touchingly, or gruesomely so, but always and inescapably ridiculous. Love is not. (The Characters of Love 4-5)

Bayley continues: “But surely if the realization of love means anything it must mean precisely . . . our delight in the existence of another person?” (27). There is not much delight left in contemporary discourse. One exception is the work of Roland Barthes, where love’s fragments do glitter with a remainder of delight, providing the lover with mystical hope and self-knowledge:

I love the other, not according to his (accountable) qualities, but according to his existence; by a movement one might well call mystical, I love, not what he is, but that he is. . . .

I know more about myself than all those who simply do not know this about me: that I am in love. (A Lover’s Discourse 222, 229)

John Bayley’s speculative “*if* the realization of love means anything” is telling. So too is the definition of love offered by his wife, Iris Murdoch. Love plays an important idealistic role in Murdoch’s mostly-Platonic metaphysical system, but neither her philosophical nor fictional writings demonstrate a convincing *vigorous* faith that love can advance beyond abstraction. In “The Fire and the Sun” (based on lectures she gave in 1976), Murdoch says:

“Falling in love,” a violent process which Plato more than once vividly describes (love is abnegation, abjection, slavery) is for many people the most extraordinary and most revealing experience of their lives, whereby the centre of significance is suddenly ripped out of the self, and the dreamy ego is shocked into awareness of an entirely separate reality. . . . [A] love which, still loving, comes to respect the beloved and (in Kantian language again) treat him as an end not as a means, may be the most enlightening love of all. (Existentialists and Mystics 417)

Murdoch’s writings have been influential for Byatt, and it is intriguing to note the (not inappropriate) violence of this description (“ripped,” “shocked”) and the built-in

hesitations (“*may be* the most enlightening love of all”). In 1967, Murdoch offered an even more qualified definition, putting her pessimism up front. Love is

capable of infinite degradation and is the source of our greatest errors; but when it is even partially refined it is the energy and passion of the soul in its search for Good, the force that joins us to Good and joins us to the world through Good. (The Sovereignty of Good 103)

Murdoch does not dwell on joy or communion, but on the importance of laying aside the gratification of self, finding Good, and simply recognizing the other – in a discussion of Tolstoy (“The Sublime and the Good”) she describes love rather severely as “the non-violent apprehension of difference” (Existentialists and Mystics 218).

The theorists of love in the past, the metaphysical poets excepted, emphasize division, failure, impermanence. The theorists of love in the present discount its existence almost completely, or offer carefully limited definitions. As previously noted, T. S. Eliot believes that lovers “babble” and their words have no meaning. Maud Bailey, in Possession, holds a characteristic postmodern view: “We never say the word Love, do we – we know it’s a suspect ideological construct – especially Romantic Love” (290). A. S. Byatt shares many of Maud’s misgivings.

§ § §

If we rely on poetry rather than criticism, as Byatt does in Possession, we can recover some part of an active and optimistic belief in love. Over the centuries poetry has been the site where most frequently we can encounter these descriptions of being in love: a sense of firstness, oneness, and comprehensiveness. “No one has ever loved but you and I,” says Yeats in “The Ragged Wood.” Anne Bradstreet, in the seventeenth century, writes, “If ever two were one, then surely we.” Donne’s memorably unified lovers, compared to a compass in “A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning,” are “inter-assured of

the mind.” In “The Sun Rising” the lovers famously become the entire world. They apostrophize the sun:

and since thy duties be
To warm the world, that’s done in warming us.
Shine here to us, and thou art everywhere;
This bed thy center is, these walls, thy sphere.

Paradox is triumphant in Donne’s definitions of love, as it is in “Moods of Love” (1957) by C. Day Lewis.

Lose and possess yourself therein: adore
The ideal clay, the carnal innocence.
Where all’s miraculous, all is most real.

Early in this century, Tagore captures the common notion that love transcends time and becomes eternal: “I seem to have loved you in numberless forms, numberless times, / In life after life, in age after age forever” (“Unending Love”). And of course love is transformative. This is a common theme in Shakespeare’s sonnets: “But if the while I think on thee, dear friend, / All losses are restor’d, and sorrows end” (Sonnet 30).

Love at its most powerful becomes synonymous with life itself. We can define love backwards, as it were, by looking at C. S. Lewis’s grief after the death of his wife Joy: “Her absence is like the sky, spread over everything” (A Grief Observed 11). Daniel’s grief years after the loss of Stephanie matches this, defining the all-encompassing qualities of his love for her: “He feels – it is no exaggeration – his heart willing itself to stop beating, juddering in his body like an engine in trouble” (Babel Tower 46). His love for Stephanie was, seemingly, what made his heart beat, since the lack of it is powerful enough to make him “will” himself dead.

The primal quality of Daniel’s love for Stephanie is exceptional in Byatt. She is silent about most of the qualities poets and theorists have found in love. Part of this is, I

believe, accounted for by her feminism; the canon of love poetry (where most of the definitions abide) abundantly describes the experiences of men and the “universal” truths which men have drawn from their experiences. The work of Christina Rossetti, Emily Dickinson, and Edna St. Vincent Millay, which has more recently entered the canon, is grimmer, differing from the norm much as Christabel LaMotte’s pessimistic poems differ radically from those of Randolph Henry Ash. Rossetti’s love poems, for example, rarely idealize or praise, but rather mourn or blame. Millay’s sonnets ache with sarcasm. For women, it seems, the cost of love is high.

Byatt’s reluctance to be optimistic about love does not, however, align her with postmodern strategists, feminist or otherwise. It is clear that she is impatient with Maud’s and Roland’s inability to define themselves as other than “[matrices] for a susurrations of texts and codes” (*Possession* 273). What Byatt rejects is becoming clear, but what she accepts is more problematic.

A more complex model is needed, and D. H. Lawrence provides help. Byatt responds keenly to Lawrence’s determination to yoke oppositions and create a radical new type of romance. Unlike Donne, Lawrence refuses to use spirituality (in any conventional way) to equalize opposition and paradox in his representation of love.

Women in Love (1916) supplies one of the originating points for Byatt’s Potter tetralogy.

She has said:

I did want to rewrite it, in a sense, with the women at the centre. Though nobody can say that Ursula and Gudrun are not very powerful images of women. It wasn’t corrective in that sense, it was really taking it on. (Hass interview)

Women in Love overflows with potential definitions of love, although on examination many of them define sexual union rather than love. Some are negative, like Gudrun’s and

Gerald's "mutual hellish recognition" (272). Others are playful or bombastic. The most optimistic ones (not necessarily in the majority) are those which combine a perception of newness, unity, and speechlessness with an abandonment of selfishness (this latter the hardest for Lawrence's characters to attain). Birkin best describes these states: "He seemed to be conscious all over, all his body awake with a simple, glimmering awareness" (351). And: "we are both caught up and transcended into a new oneness where everything is silent, because there is nothing to answer, all is perfect and at one" (417).

Lawrence's ideals in Women in Love have more vital existence in theory than in the reality of his characters. His poem "Fronleichnam" provides a more convincing description of love in actuality.

Shameless and callous I love you;
 Out of indifference I love you;
 Out of mockery we dance together,
 Out of the sunshine into the shadow,
 Passing across the shadow into the sunlight,
 Out of sunlight to shadow.

This "sunlight and shadow" formulation of love is helpful in reading Byatt. For Lawrence and Byatt, love is an uneasy and ultimately impossible dance, combining physical desire and emotional interdependence. The effort to sustain this state is more compelling for Lawrence than Byatt, and he also wants to believe in an ideal love more clearly than she does. She is wary about the sacrifice of individuality she believes is entailed in being part of a couple. Marriage, she has said in an interview, involves "a problem that [has] always bothered me – the problem of separate identity" (Kenyon 13). Lawrence was wary too, but unlike him, Byatt is unwilling finally to accept that the rewards of sexual love, at their best, might be adequate compensation.

Byatt gives her full attention to the "sunlight and shadow" demands of love at their destructive worst. In "A Farewell to False Love" Walter Raleigh wrote of

A fortress foil'd which reason did defend,
 A siren song, a fever of the mind,
 A maze wherein affection finds no end,
 A ranging cloud that runs before the wind,
 A substance like the shadow of the sun,
 A goal of grief for which the wisest run.

Byatt used this stanza as the epigraph to her first novel, The Shadow of the Sun. It also provided her title. The sun, of course, has no shadow, so therefore love, in this “false” case at least, has no substance. Raleigh and Byatt take as their subject affection which is illusory, damaging. “You have to be the sun or nothing,” she comments in her introduction to Shadow (xiv). There is no place here for two lovers to give the sun whimsical commands *à la* Donne.

But, as Raleigh hints in the next stanza of “False Love,” which Byatt does not quote, the negativity of this conviction can lead the cynic to doubt even what may be trustworthy: false love prompts “a deep mistrust of that which certain seems.” The habit of pessimism creeps early on into nearly all of Byatt’s thinking about love. (Even Salman Rushdie is more positive; in February 1999, he wrote, “love feels more and more like the only subject” [29].) For Byatt, rosy definitions of love, like Shakespeare’s “ever-fixed mark / That looks on tempests and is never shaken” (Sonnet 116), have little applicability. She does not completely refute its existence or power, but most often, she is uncharacteristically quiet about it, ambivalent.

§ § §

When love does work in Byatt’s fiction, place is an important constituent, as it is in Lawrence. A primal natural setting, something stark and ultimate, speaks for the characters, who feel that reticence is necessary. In Women in Love, Birkin and Ursula’s union in a darkened Sherwood Forest is, finally, a silent one, arrived at after they have exhausted long emotional, social, and intellectual arguments about love and marriage. Their flight to unspoiled nature allows them to abandon language and achieve equilibrium. Peace for Ash and LaMotte in Possession is found in a wild setting on the

Yorkshire coast; away from London, they can tacitly acknowledge the centrality of their relationship. They arrive at being “quiet together” as their solution for a troubled future; Ash is puzzled by many things about LaMotte but he “could never ask” (309).

In chapter 18 of *The Virgin in the Garden*, Stephanie and Daniel adopt Ursula and Birkin’s strategy of wordlessness on the same beach that Ash and LaMotte walk. At Filey Beach Stephanie tries to speak and Daniel “could not hear; the air took her words and mixed them with its own noise” (179). Words are of necessity replaced with looks, movement, and intuition. They become “obsessed by seeing” the ocean and sun (180). “I know what you want,” says Daniel (182). Although Stephanie and the narrator have doubts about this, it does seem true that Daniel sees Stephanie, who has repressed nearly all personal desires, more accurately than she sees herself.

On Filey Beach, buffeted by the elements, they learn to limit their conversation to essentials. When they reach the Marine Cafe, Stephanie’s thoughts are basic and optimistic: “It was open. Life was good” (177). Daniel’s courtship arguments are similarly terse: “You will have to marry me,” he says (181), and “I want, I want, I want” (183). While Stephanie thinks to herself “that such things slipped away whilst you tried to recognise them, died whilst you tried to find out how to keep them alive” (181), Daniel convinces her otherwise. After they make love for the first time, “she felt the limits of their bodies were not quite clear” (186), as large a concession to ideals of “oneness” as Byatt will make.

Richard Todd in his *Writers and their Work* study of Byatt also identifies the importance of the Filey beach episodes, but he sees the presence of Eros there in mythical terms: “Whatever is it that happens to Daniel and Stephanie at Filey, they are shown undergoing a mystical experience that apparently changes their lives forever.” This is “the entry of the dark god Eros into their lives” (21). According to Todd, no real claim for the “authenticity” of this experience is made by Byatt; the question as to whether these characters really experience love seems, he says (in an oddly-worded phrase), “to

resist any answer more direct than citation from Possession" (22). On the contrary, I see the Filey beach scenes as among the most intimate that Byatt has ever written, places where she strives to eschew allusion and write plainly and personally. The potential destructive power of Eros is not entirely absent from the beach episodes, but it does not warrant the emphasis that Todd places on it.

The best natural setting allows characters who are mature to strip away social appurtenances and approach their elemental selves.⁴ The paradigm of this is contained within Ash's "Ask to Embla" poetry. In his Norse epic Ragnarök the first man and woman are created by Odin, Honir, and Loki on a beach, and Ask sees that Embla "was like himself, yet other; then she saw / His smiling face, and by it, knew her own —" (Possession 263). At first Ask and Embla are speechless, but later they share the naming of the world, claiming it as theirs and finding creative power in the act.

We two remake our world by naming it
 Together, knowing what words mean for us
 And for the others for whom current coin
 Is cold speech – but we say, the tree, the pool,
 And see the fire in air, the sun, our sun,
 Anybody's sun, the world's sun, but here, now
 Particularly our sun. . . . (127)

This is key. Ask and Embla move from silence to definitive and creative language – but outside the confines of Ash's poetry, "real" characters have difficulty achieving Ask and Embla's fulfillment. Ash and LaMotte in Yorkshire come nearest, but LaMotte's recalcitrance limits their success. She insists on reminding Ash of the obstacles which face them, and at Filey beach she, rather ominously, "sang like Goethe's sirens and Homer's" (310). Sirens in LaMotte's mythology are sympathetic rather than evil, but the unhappiness of siren figures in her writing reveals that she has no confidence, as Ash does, that women and men can overcome their separateness. Ash has deliberately chosen

⁴ The criterion of maturity disqualifies Simon and Julia in The Game, who undergo the beach walk but find only the corruption of dead fish, not love. Similarly nature can only bring out the worst in Gudrun and Gerald in Women in Love, showing the hypertrophic development of animalistic aspects of their characters.

a creation myth which he sees as untainted by gender inequality; LaMotte continues to work with myths which emphasize sexual difference.

Roland and Maud achieve the important moments of silence that Ash prescribes in Ragnarök, but they remain stalled at this stage through most of Possession.

On days when the sea-mist closed them in a sudden milk-white cocoon with no perspectives they lay lazily together all day behind heavy white lace curtains on the white bed, not stirring, not speaking. (459)

Stephanie and Daniel, in The Virgin in the Garden, also negotiate this stage, but they quickly move on to consummating their relationship, acknowledging their love, and launching their life together. More so even than Ash and LaMotte, Stephanie and Daniel achieve a unity of purpose and personality, and they do it largely without words. However, they are unable to proceed to the joint naming of their world which Ask and Embla experience.

In contrast with Stephanie, Frederica Potter strives to keep separate from any man, and through a dizzying number of sexual exploits remains stubbornly immune to romance. (Frederica dallies with four men in Virgin, and with eight more in Still Life. In Babel Tower she limits her lovers to three.) She uses language to maintain separateness, never successfully negotiating the space of silence which allows Ask and Embla to emerge into a new vitality of unified language. Frederica believes that being in love makes people “more banal, more ordinary” (Babel Tower 464), and instead of seeking wholeness, she preserves the intellectual model of “laminated” experience she first developed in The Virgin in the Garden. “Things were best cool, and clear, and fragmented” (Babel Tower 315); she thinks that “she is many women in one – a mother, a wife, a lover, a watcher, and that it might be possible to construct a kind of plait of voices, with different rhythms and vocabularies” (463-4). It is significant that in Babel Tower the sceptical Frederica comes to dominate the Potter saga. Byatt has said that she herself thought of lamination “as a strategy for survival when I was Frederica’s age” but

“I think I also have this desire to connect everything I see to everything else I see” (Tredell 69). Frederica is not capable of this sort of simultaneity; “her consciousness is too powerful and she tries to keep down her unconscious,” says Byatt. “She’s due for her comeuppance” (Tredell 71).

For Frederica, only independence is reliable and honourable. This is amplified by her adverse experience with marriage; in Babel Tower Frederica is married to Nigel Reiver (“robber”) and their mutual physical passion takes her “beyond words” (42). After her marriage to Nigel ends in violence, Frederica learns to equate oppression with the silence she has shared with him. Nigel’s is a negating silence, one which wants to change and deny aspects of Frederica’s personality. And when Nigel does use words, it is falsely. He says “I love you” in order to gain power over Frederica: “He has learned what a surprising number of men never learn, the strategic importance of those words” (40).

In Babel Tower, Frederica comes to believe that “language fails man and woman trying to transcend it and themselves” (315). Frederica’s identity is so bound up within language that she is only able to see a glimmer of love’s possibilities which may be beyond language. Frederica’s “chatty linguistic self” (361) always talks in her head during lovemaking, and there is no hope for change until, near the end of Babel Tower, she and John Ottokar finally “make love in deepening silence” (433). John Ottokar has learned the power of silent communication with his twin Paul, with whom he had a private language of “signs and gestures” (291).

There are two kinds of silence under discussion here. For Frederica, silence in love usually signifies emptiness, denial, constriction. It is true that Nigel’s silence conceals deception and brutality, and that the Ottokar twins’ silence also contains something destructive. But for Ash, and for Daniel and Stephanie, love’s silences are inhabited, productive, generous. Byatt has special affection for Henri Matisse’s painting Le Silence habité des Maisons, with its mysterious portrayal of (probably) familial love; she analyses it in her story “Art Work,” finding its enigmatic silence vivid and appealing.

Ash writes to LaMotte that to hide his love for her in “complete silence [is] out of my power” (Possession 211); eventually his silence will evolve into eloquent language. The kind of silence he experiences is full of her presence: “I have dreamed nightly of your face and walked the streets of my daily life with the rhythms of your writing singing in my silent brain.” Only the latter kind of silence leads somewhere positive, at least potentially.

A phrase Byatt repeatedly uses to describe love is the one Roland and Maud agree upon at the conclusion of Possession: “Oh, love is terrible, it is a *wrecker*” (550). They would rather not love each other; “it isn’t convenient,” they say. “Terrible” love is used to describe Winifred’s futile affection for Marcus (The Virgin in the Garden 88), and also Frederica’s feelings for the chilly Raphael Faber in Still Life (217). Characters like Cassandra, Julia, and Simon in The Game cannot surmount their fear of love’s destructive qualities; that the terror is justified is borne out in the characterization of Margaret and Anna in The Shadow of the Sun, women who are pulled under by love, who lose their individuality to men. What happens after the smash-up of love is, in a sense, the stuff of Babel Tower, although discourses of liberty command more space on the playing field of that massive novel.

Love as “wrecker” has this in common with the forces which kill Stephanie Potter; both are construed in terms of electricity. Ash uses the phrase “the kick galvanic” (Possession 297) to describe romantic passion, and Roland picks up this formulation from him (162). In one of Ash’s poems, Ask compares Embla to powerful falling water: “And you – I love you for it – are the force / That moves and holds the form” (285). The galvanic force of love is the only agency with the potential to answer or equal the electricity which causes Stephanie Potter’s death. But this powerful force only answers if it is properly recognized. None of the twentieth-century characters, even strong-willed Daniel, are any better equipped to comprehend the authority of love than they were able to interpret death’s authoritative message. Indeed, the situation is worse. For a repressed

character like Maud, love's "kick galvanic" is terrifying. Here is Roland's approach in a wintry garden: "A figure loomed black on the white, a hand touched her arm with a huge banging, an unexpected electric shock" (Possession 157).

"Love, strong as Death, is dead," says Christina Rossetti in the poem "An End." Rossetti's vital Christianity provides her with a structure through which she can argue life's fundamental questions. But in Byatt's agnostic world, hardly anyone is willing to admit and work out, in either divine or human form, the implications of love, so powerful and dangerous. Randolph Henry Ash and Daniel Orton attempt to contain love's imperative force in a positive framework, but the task is too weighty for them. Daniel exists largely outside the realm of language. Ash should fare better; in his poetry, ideal lovers, given "the spark of vital heat" by the god Loki (Possession 262), gain knowledge of self through other, and preserve their difference within their union – "like himself, yet other" (263). But the conceptions of Ragnarök are simple and child-like, lacking in detail or nuance: this is a myth, after all, and the complexities of real life do not correspond to the poetry. As Ask and Embla walk down the beach on the day of their creation, their footprints are the "first traces in the world, of life and time / And love, and mortal hope, and vanishing" (263). "Love" comes in the middle of a stark list of terms which begins with "life" and ends with "vanishing," big ideas barely held together by small conjunctions. Frederica Potter is dismissive of such "connecting" with others; she finds the obsession with "oneness" in Lawrence and Forster, for example, fanciful and delusive (Babel Tower 312).

Randolph Henry Ash would not agree with Frederica. The beloved becomes all things loved and lovely, he says (Possession 310), and he sees Christabel LaMotte as representing or containing all of Time. He notices her waist, thinks of her as an hour-glass, and remembers that the word for waist in Italian is "vita." His ruminations on her waist hint at an intricacy of thought which is more satisfactory than the Ask to Embla poem.

She held his time, she contained his past and his future, both now cramped together, with such ferocity and such gentleness, into this small circumference. . . . This is my centre, he thought, here, at this place, at this time, in her, in that narrow place, where my desire has its end. (312)

Like Donne's lovers in "The Sun Rising," asking the sun to warm the world in warming them, Ash sees LaMotte as his beginning and his end. Alone among Byatt's characters he actively struggles with paradox, striving to yoke disparate elements, while others, with Frederica at their head, are content with fragmentation. Eventually, we must see Ash as an appealing but lonely nostalgic figure. Those who carry on his legacy, like James Blackadder and Roland Michell, are comparatively hapless. In failing to convert anyone to his idealism, Ash loses to the forces of doubt. Female characters, lacking Ash's freedom and confidence, have already been claimed by these forces.

That much of Byatt's discussion of romantic love occurs in the semi-parodic Possession should give the reader pause. Her particular intentions in writing this comic Romance must be considered, for any understanding of this enigmatic portrayal of love to be possible.

Byatt quotes Hawthorne's preface to The House of the Seven Gables as an epigraph for Possession. Her purpose, like his, is "to claim a certain latitude" for her material, "to present [the truth of the human heart] under circumstances, to a great extent, of the writer's own choosing or creation." Byatt expects of the reader a reasonable amount of suspension of belief and some tolerance for nostalgia. In other words, she abandons the project of modified realism which characterized her first four novels. In 1993, she spoke of the writing of the first two Potter novels:

I also had the idea at that time that I was very much defending realism against the rather trivial kinds of experimental novel that were then going on in England. . . . I don't *now* feel in quite the same way, that I want to go on doing what I used to call self-conscious realism. I don't feel – I mean, I've done that. (Hass interview)

Possession, her post-realistic novel, is where we locate most of the evidence of the sort of love which John Donne might recognize: the lover is all, being in love changes everything, lovers feel as if they have invented the world.

The other novels provide sombre alternative views, and clarify the differentiation. In The Shadow of the Sun Anna drops into love with Michael “like a stone into water, [submerging] tracelessly and altogether” (20); later, when Anna talks with her manipulative lover Oliver, they reduce “the world of art and the world of love and the sun to manageable proportions” (210). In The Game, Julia Corbett believes that love is a prison (63). Her sister Cassandra shouts at a Quaker meeting that “love will not overcome, it will not” (38), and later kills herself.

In the fiction which precedes and follows Possession, the positive images of love are much weaker than the negative descriptions of suppression, reduction, and failure. And although Angels and Insects features several love affairs with happy endings, the resolutions are qualified by the fabulist nature of the book. There are, for example, hopeful aspects to the courtship scene in “The Conjugal Angel” between Emily and Richard Jesse, but there is also a deliberately clichéd and arch quality about it: “His hands and skin spoke to her, he pulled like a magnet, he was strong as a tree” (242). When the Papagays are happily reunited, Liliás, once described as “of imagination all compact” (163), can only say “Arturo, Arturo” (289). There is not much evidence here of a profound philosophy of love.

In The Virgin in the Garden, when Daniel marries Stephanie, he smiles with “unabated delight” (266), but she looks at him “briefly, vaguely” (259). Both Daniel and Captain Jesse see and speak plainly, bodily, and optimistically, but their language often doesn’t reach their wives, whose expectations are sophisticated, their outlooks cynical. Daniel feels affection for everyone on his wedding day: “They were all right, they were in the right place” (266) is how he puts it. This formulation of love, pleasing in its small plainness, like William Adamson’s erotic attraction to Matty Crompton, which is based

on her wrists (Angels and Insects 96, 157), doesn't seem substantial enough to combat the plethora of negative opinions about love that crowd into the fiction. In "Medusa's Ankles" a woman's husband is newly attracted to her as a result of a hairstyle she detests.

§ § §

Critics are divided about Byatt's portrayal of romantic love in Possession. Many reviews celebrated the sunniness of the book; the Times Literary Supplement is typical in its assertion that the reader can "revel in the delights of a boldly romantic narrative" (Jenkyns 213). The New York Review of Books noted that the novel is "both a mystery and a love story, and is also reassuringly complex and allusive" (Johnson 35). But Catherine Belsey sees Byatt as portraying frustrated love constructed – and constricted – by some mixture of fate and patriarchy. According to Belsey, the women of Possession are silenced, the men control point of view, and LaMotte "has *lost* her lover and her child" (87, emphasis mine). This is willful misreading; as I interpret the events, LaMotte has chosen to be alone, and the men of the story go out of their way to respect the freedom of the women they love. Belsey continues:

Possession is a profoundly Lacanian novel, not only in its explicit invocations of Lacan's texts, and not only in its figuration of a desire which is heroic to the degree that it cannot be fulfilled, but above all in its indications to the extent to which desire is inevitable . . . [and] dangerous. (87)

I disagree that the characters in Possession are ever in the grip of the "inevitable"; instead they are highly cerebral creatures who are all too conscious of their choices. For example, the potential reconciliation scene at the end of Ash's life (when various letters and explanations never reach their intended recipients) is not a drama of accident or fate, but instead is one of choice. All of the three Victorian protagonists (Randolph Henry Ash, Ellen Ash, and Christabel LaMotte) have thought through the situation carefully and know that they are responsible for their actions.

With Derrida, Belsey decides that “it is not possible to tell the truth of desire, or about desire” (71) or indeed about anything: “The possession of truth is not an option” (73). Belsey’s reading of the unfulfilled desires lingering in Possession is not completely inaccurate, but she misses Byatt’s ironic uses of contemporary theory. Jackie Buxton, more accurately, sees that Byatt is “using post-modernism – or, at least, post-structuralism” against itself (213), but what escapes both these critics is the way in which Byatt’s use (or abuse) of post-structuralism builds multiple layers within the text, creating an atmosphere so archly redolent with knowingness that the excessive ironies become almost burdensome.

For example, consider the concentric circles of knowledge around the existence of LaMotte’s and Ash’s child, Maia. The first level of Romance presents Ash, searching for his child. The postmodern irony hovering above this story is that twentieth-century scholars discover the child’s existence, and they believe they hold knowledge that Ash did not. On another level is the Romance of the Postscript, in which the reader alone shares the successful conclusion of Ash’s quest for his daughter. The irony here – the joke on the postmodernists – is that the scholars do not know that the golden hair Ash kept in his watch belonged to Maia, not to Ellen or Christabel. This time the Romance is apparently embellished with Realism; “this is how it was,” the narrator says crisply (552). But a further irony exists in that the postmodern reader is likely to reject the closure of the Postscript. A sentence like “this is how it was” raises hackles and creates suspicions. All this, and more, is part of Byatt’s deliberate structuring, and indeed my model is probably not convoluted enough.

The review of Possession in the London Review of Books criticized Byatt for the “denial of human contingency” complicit in her “sweeping exercise of the novelist’s providential powers” (Karlin 18). But Byatt expects her readers to exercise their own rational powers while engaging with this ironic Romance. Recognition of irony is missing from nearly all the analysis of Possession. Jackie Buxton claims that

Possession does reflect the ideology of the conventional romance narrative: Roland meets Maud, they court, kiss, make love, and presumably live happily ever after. But is Love the “suspect ideological construct” Maud perceives it to be? Obviously not for Byatt, who makes it clear that Roland and Maud’s romance is a productive, liberating affair. (216)

This is not “obvious” or “clear” at all. Buxton sees too much affirmation in Byatt, where Belsey doesn’t see enough. Byatt hints that Maud and Roland may have a future, but equally they may not.⁵ Byatt expects the reader to recognize at least one important aspect of the conclusion for what it is — a fairy-tale ending. She has said that adults must learn that fairy-tale predictability is a childish belief to be put aside (Byatt/Murdoch video interview).

Christabel LaMotte’s cousin Sabine says of critics: “I do not believe all these explanations. They diminish” (384). Byatt, with Sabine, emphasizes that meanings are more complex, contradictory, and ironic than our models allow.

§ § §

Consider that Byatt creates, at most, two couples who are really in love. Then consider what she does, additionally, to undermine those two. The portents for Ash and LaMotte are not good from the start. In part, they are mythological creatures who are playing out a timeless scenario: the god who falls in love with a mortal woman. What good has ever come of that? Ash is identified with Wotan, the Norse god who made sacrifices so that he might have knowledge of magic runes and drink the mead of poetry. Ash re-creates, in his poetry, the first people, Ask and Embla, and the great world-Ash tree, symbol of everlasting life. The last scene in Possession clearly sketches Ash as Wotan in Wanderer guise:

⁵ However, in the Spring 1995 issue of Victorian Poetry, a letter appeared from “Maud Michell-Bailey” about some newly discovered fragments of LaMotte poetry. Byatt coyly provides a happy ending which is external to the novel by writing that Maud, still a scholar, is also the mother of a daughter named Rowan – and “rowan” is a kind of ash-tree.

There was a man, tall, bearded, his face in shadow under a wide-brimmed hat, a wanderer coming up the lane, between high hedges, with an ashplant in his hand and the look of a walker. (553)

Christabel LaMotte is determinedly, even stubbornly mortal. We might say that Ash, in loving her, offers her immortality, which she refuses. "I cannot let you burn me up. I cannot," she says (213), fearing the usual fate of mortals loved by gods. Her name, like Maud's, is unalterably earthly; "motte" and "bailey" are parts of a fortification or castle. "I am a chilly mortal," she says when Ash names her "the life of things" (310). Given a designation of divinity, LaMotte refuses. Being a god, or being in love, is not rational.

My mythological reading has limits. Ironically, it is the earthly LaMotte who has religious faith, while Ash is agnostic. And the negative qualities of ash (that is, the remains of a dying or dead fire) are also attached to him. But both the myth and the ironic reading which undermines it share a view of love that has failure built in.

Similarly, Stephanie and Daniel offer a mixed portrayal of mythic and ironic signs. Byatt has said that Stephanie's marriage can be read as "Persephone carried off by gloomy Dis" (Kenyon 13). Like the marriage of the daughter of Ceres to Dis (or Hades), the Orton marriage is both passionate and doomed. Unlike Persephone, Stephanie is not allowed even a half-life after her accident. The love of the Ortons is not eternal, but is ended, abruptly, by a distorted, terrifying version of the "kick galvanic." It does not matter that Ash and Daniel, scaled-down versions of Wotan and Hades, have the strong wills of gods. They cannot convince LaMotte and Stephanie that love is stronger than death. Without mutual confidence, marriage does not work; this is especially true for mixed marriages between gods and mortals.

§ § §

For all Byatt's layers of postmodern knowingness, her attitude toward love is also a very ancient one. C. S. Lewis quotes Dante as saying that "love has not, like a

substance, an existence of its own, but is only an accident occurring in a substance” (Allegory of Love 47). Lewis also describes Thomas Aquinas’s view of erotic love as follows: “The evil in the sexual act is neither the desire nor the pleasure, but the submergence of the rational faculty which accompanies them” (16). Dante’s “accident” and Aquinas’s glorification of the “rational” are helpful in understanding Byatt. She is not willing to defend love as an essence with the energy she defends the fundamentals of birth and death. Like Evelyn Waugh, who in Brideshead Revisited worries about human love which sets up a “rival good to God’s” (340), Byatt wonders if love impedes higher thought. Like C. S. Lewis, who apparently champions Eros and Agape in The Four Loves but is actually more convincingly attached to Philia, Byatt is more comfortable with relationships based on intellectual friendship than on romantic ties. This is evident in Frederica Potter’s relationships with men, which only succeed if erotic love is left out of the equation.

What is certain is Byatt’s advocacy of a love of books. Like Barthes, Jackie Buxton notes, Byatt presents an “erotics of reading” (217). The novel “knows how to elicit the desire of the reader,” says Catherine Belsey (86), and Caroline Webb agrees, stating that in Possession language “is both the means and the object of desire” (183). The latter eventually takes precedence over the former.

C. S. Lewis learned late in life that “to love at all is to be vulnerable” (The Four Loves 169). Few of Byatt’s characters are willing to embrace that perilous fact. “Love is a destroyer of cities” says Auden (“Love Letter”) but he still wants it; “love is a wrecker” says Maud Bailey, and she barely seems to want it at all. The overly intellectual attitude toward love demonstrated by Julia and Cassandra in The Game is one of Byatt’s most distinctive descriptions of characters inextricably tangled up in both longing and avoidance – the sisters are so involved with their own responses that the figure of a beloved is not even taken into account. The strategies of their complicated childhood game foreshadow their adult existences:

They had worked out already attitudes to all sorts of adult problems which [Julia] for one had found alternately percipient and fantastically thwarting – how did one ever rid oneself of a longing for a devouring love which one saw, wisely, to be impossible, but had enjoyed in such verisimilitude and detail when nothing else was happening to one at all? (46-47)

Loving books, for all these characters, is less dangerous and frustrating, since the emotional movement is safely in one direction.

Possession's status as the most popular Byatt novel testifies that her readers have responded, among other things, to the story's greater stress on love, even though this emphasis is sometimes deceptive. This situation is, a little, reminiscent of the majority of Schoenberg's listeners who prefer his romantic, Wagnerian compositions to his cerebral, atonal ones (which constitute his most original contribution to music). Ironically, it is Byatt's ironic book on love that her audience desires, and it is the love story rather than the suspicious apparatus encasing it that they respond to most warmly.

Ash's idea that "we two remake our world by naming it / Together" (Possession 127) is a comforting romantic trope, but Byatt is not Ash. His faith is too solid. His confidence, like Donne's confidence that "Nothing else is" but love, is ineffectual in the face of a death such as Stephanie Potter's, which looms large in Byatt's fiction. Byatt's implicit conviction is that Stephanie and Daniel's love is defeated by death's superior power. One of Byatt's recurrent motifs is the image of a white bed in an empty white room, which for Roland and Maud in Possession represents contentment, ostensibly erotic but strangely static. In the more recent story "The Chinese Lobster" the same image betokens death. Discussing suicide, one character says, "You are in a white box, a white room, with no doors or windows. . . . There is only one thing possible. It is all perfectly clear and simple and plain" (The Matisse Stories 125). Death replaces love at the heart of Byatt's knowledge of living. It speaks louder than love.

Part II: The Language of Perceptual and Aesthetic Experience

Chapter 4: Form and Colour

All art, therefore, appeals primarily to the senses. . . . And it is only through complete, unswerving devotion to the perfect blending of form and substance; it is only through an unremitting never-discouraged care for the shape and ring of sentences that an approach can be made to plasticity, to colour, and that the light of magic suggestiveness may be brought to play for an evanescent instant over the commonplace surface of words: of the old, old words, worn thin, defaced by ages of careless usage.

Joseph Conrad, Preface to The Nigger of the 'Narcissus' (1897)

Pourquoi après avoir écrit: "qui veut se donner à la peinture doit commencer par se faire couper la langue," ai-je besoin d'employer d'autres moyens que ceux qui me sont propres?

[After having written "he who wants to devote himself to painting must begin by cutting out his tongue," why do I feel the need to use other media than my usual ones?]

Henri Matisse, text notes for Jazz (1947)

Do we need words to think? Are there other reliable ways for humans to attain and contain knowledge? Does verbal language deserve its privileged position, or has it been used because it is conducive to systemization, even coercion? Is its power authoritarian? ("In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." – John 1.1.) Might pictures or music be a more egalitarian route to creativity or truth? Does the authority of the word unfairly empower certain categories of persons? Some of these questions have been asked for centuries, in subtle and intricate ways which my simplified queries resemble very little. None of them has been conclusively answered. A. S. Byatt's engagement with these debates is the subject of this chapter.

It is widely assumed that verbal discourse has long held a position of mastery in western culture. Jacques Derrida writes, in "The End of the Book and the Beginning of Writing":

if for Aristotle, for example, "spoken words . . . are the symbols of mental experience . . . and written words are the symbols of spoken words" . . . it is because the voice, producer of *the first symbols*, has a relationship of essential and immediate proximity with the mind. (Of Grammatology 11)

For Derrida, logocentrism, the power of the (spoken) word, has long exercised rigid control over the intellectual world and is indissolubly associated with paternalistic Judaeo-Christian dogma, among many other things. (Derrida has written of the opposition between speech and writing throughout the history of language, but, because A. S. Byatt does not emphasize this difference, I will collapse these two categories into the one entity of verbal language. This is not to say that the opposition between oral and written language is unimportant, but only that I will not debate it here.) Claude Lévi-Strauss, in "A Writing Lesson" is unequivocal about his opinion of the role of words: "The primary function of written communication is to facilitate slavery" (Tristes Tropiques 299). For Roland Barthes, this purpose is inherent in syntax. He says, "The Sentence is hierarchical: it implies subjections, subordinations, internal reactions" (The Pleasure of the Text 50). A lonely optimistic voice is Noam Chomsky's. Chomsky does not see that signification is always arbitrary, nor that language, despite its frequent abuse by those in power, necessarily constitutes a restriction or imprisonment of original thought. In "Language and Freedom" he says that

the study of language can provide some glimmerings of understanding of rule-governed behavior and the possibilities for free and creative action within the framework of a system of rules that in part, at least, reflect intrinsic properties of human mental organization. (154)

These theoretical writings from the 1950s through the 1970s (which I have summarized rather briskly) underpin the complicated semiotic, feminist, and post-structuralist debates about language occurring at present. Most participants in this debate

would agree that *logos* is domineering and suspect, that it no longer can be trusted to lead the reader to Truth (just another suspect category), that almost any accumulation of signs (gestures, advertisements, jokes) may be read as texts which should be as valid as the verbal texts formally revered as canonical. It is ironic that those who champion the theoretic possibilities of other semiotic systems continue to rely heavily on words and – less ironic but more frustrating – that their language becomes less lucid (sometimes deliberately so) as these debates lengthen. Hardly anyone, for example, has satisfactorily built on the groundwork of John Berger who, in Ways of Seeing (1972), provided “pictorial essays” which, in all their ambiguity and plenitude, the reader could interpret without the mediation of words.

Much of the discussion in the field of visual theory is divided: philosophers and psychologists discuss internal or mental imaging, while visual modes of external communication are the province of art critics and communications specialists. The division between these aspects is surprisingly wide; most commentary centres on one, ignores the other, and is also remarkably rudimentary. Serious methods that utilize our visual capacities in quotidian life cannot be fully developed until philosophers and psychologists decide just what reality our mental images have. Meanwhile, visual art itself continues – obviously – to flourish, often (but not always) ignoring these theoretical skirmishes.

My inclination is to treat visual imaging as an independent way of knowing and communicating, to accept the visual as a language in and of itself – despite the official lack of agreement on the fine points of the “reality” of visual language. For A.S. Byatt, these two domains – mental imagery and concrete visual representations – are indissolubly linked and equally important, and my discussion treats them as interrelated, although the major discussion of visual representation as art occurs in chapter 5. Hardly any of the work on visual imagery currently being published allows images to stand alone: most of the arguments end up being about words. A. S. Byatt’s skill with and

affection for words has been much commented upon (she has also been accused of prolixity). But her interest in visual language, while it may not be equal in importance, requires critical attention, as does the way that verbal and visual work together – and pull apart – in Byatt’s writing.

In a 1982 article, “Forms of Reality in A. S. Byatt’s The Virgin in the Garden,” Juliet Dusinberre collapses verbal and visual tendencies in a discussion of the characters’ “image-making faculty” (59), and she accedes automatically to the idea that words have the upper hand. According to Dusinberre, Byatt’s third novel is about a battle between reality and the knotted human desire to make images of it. Says Dusinberre, “Her novel demands whether any form can define reality, or whether the real is a dark chaos which even the Word – and the Christian *Logos* is part of Byatt’s reference – cannot record or control” (58). Here, the lack of sustained examination of visual language and the assumed superiority of verbal is typical.

Dusinberre’s pessimistic reading of The Virgin in the Garden is both inaccurate and oddly prescient. The novel’s comic exploration of words and pictures is, in the main, optimistic and joyful – but Byatt’s later forays into this field will illustrate more definitely the battle that Dusinberre posits, one where “the reader is harried between opposing perceptions of the power of the imagination and its impotence” (58). I disagree with Dusinberre’s conclusion that the 1978 novel “seems to declare that the real is beyond form” (61) of any kind – either verbal or visual. Byatt’s overall confidence in words, while occasionally held up for interrogation, is never in critical danger, and that is amply demonstrated by the many thousands of rigorously-articulated pages she has published in the last 20 years. But her reliance on visual knowledge is more vague and, eventually, less certain, although at times she champions it more enthusiastically than she does its verbal counterpart.

§ § §

Describing visual knowledge and assigning its intellectual importance is an old problem. As Michael Tye demonstrates in The Imagery Debate, the quarrels about definition go back to Plato and Aristotle. Descartes, Locke, Berkeley, Hume, and Kant also wrote volubly on the subject, variously gauging the significance and independence of the mental image. The latest writings by W. J. T. Mitchell, Steven Pinker, and Daniel Dennett still feature these familiar contentious issues. How can one verify inner visions that are only available through introspection and evade empirical proof? Can inner visions be original, or are they only copies? Can one make some basic generalizations about the connections between inner imagery and the way imagery manifests itself in religion, poetry, film, and the other arts?

But the primary issue, debated for centuries and still at the centre of a storm of opinion, is the supposed antagonism between word and image. It seems that nearly every article on visual and verbal languages contains a sentence like this one, from W. J. T. Mitchell's Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology: "The history of culture is in part the story of a protracted struggle for dominance between pictorial and linguistic signs" (43). In "Ekphrasis and Representation" James Heffernan sees verbal language as desperate to keep its position of prominence; Jay David Bolter in "Ekphrasis, Virtual Reality, and the Future of Writing" requires an almost hysterical rhetoric of battle to describe the tension between word and image. Mary Ann Caws attempts a playful approach to the rivalry between visual and verbal texts, promoting a healthy and positive intertextuality, but even she notes that ekphrastic texts (usually, the verbal representation of visual art, although the term is used in different ways) demand "to control the angle from which the observer/reader [is] to read" (The Art of Interference: Stressed Readings in Verbal and Visual Texts 8). Robert P. Fletcher, in a recent PMLA article on "visual thinking" in Thackeray's Henry Esmond, posits that artists who attempt to combine visual and verbal

language necessarily emphasize fractured and multiple meanings, destroying illusions of unity.

Visual language is almost always seen as the underdog in this conflict. Susan Sontag is unusual in that she enters the visual side of the combat zone, but her conclusions are equally pessimistic. In On Photography (which Mitchell thinks should be called Against Photography), she proposes that visual images (particularly photographs) are no less aggressive than words. Employing a rhetoric of invasion, alienation, consumption, and objectification, Sontag claims we are “image-junkies” (24), obsessively “collecting” experience – and finding that the images we consume actually distance us from experience. Likewise Roland Barthes in “Rhetoric of the Image” notes that our dependence on writing is based on fear of the visual, on “the terror of uncertain signs” (Image, Music, Text 39). Both Barthes and Sontag attempt to codify visual imagery in order to counteract this fear of the unknown other.

W. J. T. Mitchell attempts balance, insisting that neither word nor image is more natural or anterior. In Iconology, he works to historicize and politicize both strands, pointing out how they are both caught up in various traditions of artificiality and construction. But even Mitchell expresses a strange fear of things visual: “If we can understand how images have come to possess their present power over us, we may be in a position to repossess the imagination that produces them” (31).

In these discussions, nearly all the critics are making the image/text debate more explosive than it is. Is the history of culture really the story of the struggle for dominance between word and image (rather than the struggle between capitalist and worker, imperialist and colonized, masculine and feminine)? Perhaps we are dealing here with mere cases of overstatement, but there is a further issue that presses. To my knowledge, an essential component of this debate is not being satisfactorily addressed. Hardly any visual theorists confront the basic problem of variability. Individuals vary widely in their ability to use visual knowledge. Partly this is a result of the lack of emphasis on visual

training in our educational system, but equally it is difficult to make general assumptions about inherent visual attributes. (Verbal ability varies too, of course, but our ability to test and measure verbal indicators is more advanced.) It follows, in literary criticism, that analysis of, for example, a work of fiction's visual qualities ought to take into account the varying individual propensities of readers. But little is known of this. (Michael Irwin poses part of this particular reader-response problem in Picturing: Description and Illustration in the Nineteenth-Century Novel.) In the current instance, next to nothing can be said for certain about the relationship between A. S. Byatt's visual abilities and the reader's. What aspects are working? What vocabulary can be used to describe them? In writing about English painter Patrick Heron in 1998, Byatt says that her words "are completely inadequate" and declares her response a "non-verbal experience"—yet she carries on cheerfully with the essay ("A Riddle Around the Edges of Vision" 13, 15). Perhaps the dearth of commentary on visual language in Byatt's work is an indication that readers are *not* responding to her investigations of visual knowledge. Aside from a few comments in reviews about her "painterly" qualities, there is not much to go on. Of all the aspects of Byatt's work under discussion in this study, only love also demonstrates the sort of intense subjectivity and definitional resistance that visual language presents.

§ § §

There is another possible challenger to the position of authority held by verbal language. This is music.¹ Susanne Langer has written that music "can be 'true' to the life of feeling in a way that language cannot; for its significant forms have that *ambivalence* of content which words cannot have" (243). George Steiner agrees; he says in "Retreat from the Word" that "only music can achieve that total fusion of form and content, of means and meaning, which all art strives for" (299). However, the idea that music is an

¹Another possible independent language category is mathematics. George Steiner says that numbers are becoming dominant in our society; indeed in 1961 he said that mathematics and music had already overtaken verbal language ("Retreat from the Word" 285). This interesting possibility is not, however, directly relevant to an analysis of Byatt's works; neither music nor mathematics is discussed by her in any detail.

independent language has not been given much attention in philosophy or linguistics; this hypothesis rarely appears outside the confines of aesthetics. Most proponents of music's superiority have, understandably, worked primarily in that medium. That music is commonly seen to have superior access to emotional, rather than intellectual life, is another impediment to its acceptance in the philosophical realm. What music does have in its favour is the positive ambiguity which Langer notes; music's proponents would argue that, compared to verbal texts, and even to visual ones, the interpretative possibilities of musical texts are relatively limitless. Also, the flexible but real rules of composition and harmony provide a structure for meaning that counters the fear of uncertainty and excessive freedom demonstrated by critics of the visual mode.

A. S. Byatt, however, admits her lack of ability and interest in music (Grove 3.3) and her participation in this debate is confined to the rivalry between word and image. Visual language increasingly attracts supporters who see logocentrism as hopelessly contaminated, and music, perhaps, as too demanding and inaccessible without special training or skill.

§ § §

John Berger promotes visual imagery as the most accessible means of communication for the masses. "Seeing comes before words. The child looks and recognizes before it can speak," Berger says (7). He continues, "If the new language of images were used differently, it would, through its use, confer a new kind of power" (33). Rudolf Arnheim in Visual Thinking (1969) also stresses the superiority of the visual image. Sight, he says, is "the most efficient organ of human cognition" (vi); he emphasizes the seemingly endless fluidity, adaptability, and creativity of human visual actions and reactions. "Purely verbal thinking is the prototype of thoughtless thinking, the automatic recourse to connections retrieved from storage. It is useful but sterile," writes Arnheim (231). Frances Yates agrees that sight is our strongest sense, and her book The

Art of Memory (1966) outlines the ingenious ways in which classical theories of rhetoric utilized visual images to support memorization.

“The essentially verbal character” of western civilization, says George Steiner, is

the root and bark of our experience and we cannot readily transpose our imaginings outside it. We live inside the act of discourse. But we should not assume that a verbal matrix is the only one in which the articulations and conduct of the mind are conceivable. (“Retreat from the Word” 283)

Although Steiner wrote this over 35 years ago, cogent studies of these other matrices are hard to come by. Visualization, for example, is often thought of merely as a New Age ritual (see Shakti Gawain’s Creative Visualization, for example). This subject is fraught with difficulty, because the investigation is expected to take place within the realm of verbal language and played by rules and conventions defined by word-based thinkers. Even those who champion alternative epistemological theories admit that our knowledge of these other modes of thought is rudimentary and disputable, while our acquaintance with words is intimate and long-standing. Temple Grandin, an autistic woman who calls for a redefinition of thinking in her 1995 book Thinking in Pictures, challenges the prevailing notion that verbal language is necessary for true thought. Grandin’s book is one of the first of its kind; there are few dependable studies of the sort of visual thought she ascribes to the autistic.

In the 1930s, psychological research on a phenomenon called “eidetic imagery” was popular. Researchers hypothesized that the ability to see forms (*eidōs*) in the mind is intrinsic to certain people, and is relatively common in children, pregnant women, and less certainly, in poets and artists. A 1934 monograph provides this definition of what was being studied:

The eidetic image is a subjective perceptual phenomenon which becomes objective in perceptual character. It is found in all sensory fields but is particularly demonstrable in the visual field where it takes the form of the projection of an image after the stimulus has been removed or even when there has been no visual stimulus. (O'Neill and Rauth 3)

The Russian physician A. R. Luria provided one of the most startling studies of this phenomenon in The Mind of a Mnemonist. Luria's subject was a man with a seemingly inexhaustible memory, which was primarily graphic. The man was baffled by poetry, for every word and phrase prompted an intense visual image, and the accumulated impressions were contradictory and chaotic. Like the composer Scriabin, Luria's subject also experienced synesthesia; all his sensory data ran together, there being no dividing line between sensory experiences. This field of research fell out of favour, partly no doubt because of the difficulty in drawing boundaries between verifiable physiological experience and either psychosis or mysticism. How does one define photographic memory, hallucination, dream? Scriabin, for example, is notorious for his belief that his compositions would synthesize all art forms and herald a religious cataclysm.

The subject of how the brain creates pictures was taken up again in earnest in the 1980s, but a look at the speculations of researcher Daniel C. Dennett shows that little progress has been made even defining the issues at stake. His ironically titled 1991 book, Consciousness Explained, proposes multiple models of the brain's activities but is unable to settle any of the basic arguments. In 1981, Imagery, edited by Ned Block, assembled opinions on mental images to that point. Block summarizes the debate as being between "pictorialists" who insist "that our mental images represent in roughly the way that pictures represent" and "descriptionists" who believe that mental images represent "in the manner of some non-imagistic representations – namely, in the manner of language rather than pictures" (2-3). The researchers do not get much further than this. They cannot decide if images are just after-images or memories, are hesitant to assign them an independent existence, disagree about whether the ability to manipulate or turn an image in the mind is indicative of anything, and so on. Block prefaces the book with doubt:

No one writing in this book (nor any of the other serious participants in the debate) thinks that people can literally see and manipulate real internal pictures. (2)

More encouragingly, Steven Pinker has recently said that a mental image is “simply” a pattern “loaded from long-term memory rather than from the eyes” (How the Mind Works 286), although research has shown that mental imaging does stimulate the visual cortex of the brain (289). But Pinker also admits that such images seem to be fragmentary and limited in their ability to represent complex figures or abstract concepts (294-296). Given the difficulties of definition, it is doubly difficult to go on and determine, for example, the boundary between the aesthetic and linguistic properties of visual language. In other words, when colour, for example, is invoked in discussions of communication, is it merely being suggested as a model for better *verbal* communication? Does a fuller awareness of music or painting or sculpture revitalize writing? This seems to be the way Joseph Conrad, for example (see epigraph), uses this notion. Rarer are those who wish to approach the visual as a completely independent and alternative way of communicating. Wittgenstein, who struggled with an approach to pure concepts of colour, and with the appropriateness of finding verbal language in which to couch these concepts, is indicative of this smaller, second group. “The question is clearly: How do we compare physical objects – how do we compare experiences?” he writes in Remarks on Colour (proposition 315). For Wittgenstein, it is remarkable that one person’s use of “blue” manages to convey to another a sense of “blueness” at all. Although the aesthetic qualities of visual writing are important in considering A. S. Byatt’s work – there is no doubt that she uses “verbal pictures” to create beauty and vividness for the reader – it is the more complex matter of the independence of visual language that is of greater moment.

E. H. Gombrich is one of the few researchers of visual knowledge who stresses a necessary continuum between the realm of speech and writing on the one hand and the

visual on the other. Neither, he says, is sufficient. Our visual responses to the world, suggests Gombrich in The Image and the Eye, are no more natural or primary than our linguistic ones, and must be conditioned, shaped, and educated in much the same way (159). Gombrich recognizes the ambiguity or ambivalence which visual images often contain, but he makes no great moral or aesthetic claims for this ambivalence, as Langer or Berger do. The verbal mode, according to Rudolf Arnheim, is comparatively one-dimensional and static, inherently conservative, all too ready to stabilize and discipline ideas (Visual Thinking 230-32). Gombrich suggests caution; image is still an “imitation of reality” (The Image and the Eye 278), just as word is, and we do not yet understand how the eye and brain convert light or memory into these representations. Gombrich’s detailed knowledge and appreciation of visual language and his refusal to subscribe to antagonistic binary word/image formations make him one of the few really helpful theorists in approaching Byatt. In a 1990 interview, Byatt said:

One of my great heroes is Gombrich, and one of the great moments in Gombrich is when he says Giotto never drew a sheep, he saw other sheep that people had drawn and corrected them against reality. (Tredell 68)

Byatt’s acknowledgement of these combined forces of culture and nature (or reality) in visual representation is one of the keys to understanding the mixed currents of idealism, empiricism, and skepticism in her writing about visual language.

A. S. Byatt delights in words. But, especially in her early fiction, she investigates visual phenomena with great seriousness. In 1986 she wrote that she herself thinks “with mental imagery.” She adds: “I see any projected piece of writing or work as a geometric structure: various colours and patterns. I *see* other people’s metaphors” (Passions of the Mind 13, 14, emphasis in original). Throughout her writings, we encounter characters whose natural medium is not words, but pictures, and through whom Byatt tests the limits of representation and communication. Byatt has never promoted visual thinking naïvely,

as, perhaps, John Berger or Rudolf Arnheim have. Like Gombrich, she seeks to know the strengths and shortcomings of both verbal and visual systems, and how they interact.

However, in the 1980s and 90s, her treatment of the visual has become lighter, less intellectual and more aesthetic. Recent interviews and essays have playfully outlined the colour palettes of her novels – Still Life was primarily aubergine, she told reporter Val Ross in 1991, and “then I needed a yellow to balance the purple” (“Booker Fuss Keeps Byatt Busy” C5).² In the following pages, I will focus on Byatt’s investigations of two particular aspects of the visual: geometric form and colour, and their roles in human knowledge and communication. One of the most striking things I have observed in analysing Byatt’s writing on these subjects is how important order is to her; for example, Juliet Dusinberre’s interview in the early 1980s is full of Byatt’s comments on the imperative – for her – of ordering reality. The inadequacy of laws to systematize visual thinking eventually results in her disenchantment with the field.

§ § §

In A. S. Byatt’s early fiction, there are several characters who experience the world primarily through the visual; shapes, light, and colour are their means of understanding. Such is Henry Severell in The Shadow of the Sun, a visionary writer in the lineage of Coleridge and Blake. Marcus Potter in The Virgin in the Garden (and the Potter novels that follow) also lives almost entirely in a visual realm; unlike Henry, Marcus is unsuccessful in translating his experiences into verbal language, and his experiences cause him great anguish. Here is a typical passage about Marcus. He sees “empty patches of bright light on the inner eye, ringed by a prismatic flaring of colour and danger” (Still Life 239).

Both Henry and Marcus have mystical visions of, for example, spirals and cones and spheres – this is “projective geometry,” which is imaginative and perspectival, rather

² See also Byatt’s Independent article “In the Grip of Possession” and her interviews with Lewis Burke Frumkes and Nicolas Tredell for similar comments.

than traditional Euclidean geometry, which “deals with rigid forms,” as Charles Davy says (Towards a Third Culture 128) – and both characters experience sunlight as a transcendent medium. Although they are hesitant to couch their beliefs in conventional religious terms, the extraordinary sensory abilities of Marcus and Henry, which I will call geometric sight, do lead each of them (however temporarily) to a belief in something numinous, something that might be called God.

In Byatt’s later fiction, characters who experience the world in this unusual geometric way are rare; instead colour comes to dominate the field of non-verbal communication. Colour plays a prominent role in The Matisse Stories and in the life of Alexander Wedderburn in Still Life. Colour is less closely tied to transcendence or the visionary, and Byatt’s use of it in these middle period and recent works is more conventional. Colour is occasionally used to code characters, to bind them together. Kathleen Coyne Kelly says that Byatt’s “colors often serve as objective correlatives to both theme and character” (A. S. Byatt: Twayne’s English Authors 55), but “often” is an overstatement. It is true that, for example, Maud Bailey and Christabel LaMotte in Possession are both associated with the colour green; Maud often wears green and drives a green Beetle, and LaMotte’s blonde hair has tints of green. We are not terribly surprised to discover at the end of the novel that LaMotte is Maud’s great-great-great-great-grandmother. But Byatt insists, in her essay on Patrick Heron, that “associations we make to colours are a mystery, and not constant, either within or beyond cultures” (“A Riddle Around the Edges of Vision” 15). If one expects that Byatt might use colour symbolically, it turns out that she rarely does; her characters distrust conventional colour symbolism. Colour is more often used, especially in The Matisse Stories, for its own sake: to paint a scene as vividly as possible; to communicate as basically and primally as Matisse does in his paintings; to describe pleasure.

In Byatt’s most recent novel, Babel Tower, both colour and form take a decided back seat to verbal communication. This solidifies a trend noticeable in Possession and

Angels and Insects, where Byatt begins to favour and trust words more enthusiastically, uses visual communication more decoratively, and expects less profundity from form and colour. In Babel Tower, John and Paul Ottokar share a private language based on mathematics and shapes, “of signs and gestures” (291-2). Their idiolect is portrayed as dangerous and too personal, and John is shown as the healthier twin when he displays the desire to learn a more “detached” verbal language (292). Although Babel Tower’s style seems deliberately chosen to reflect its themes of “fragments jerking apart” and “language breaking loose from the world,” as Byatt has said, the “papery” quality of its expression (Wachtel 1996) is not unique and can be traced in other Byatt writings of the 1990s.

Byatt’s explorations of visual language once held out serious hope that a new and better kind of communication was possible. An important group of characters, in addition to some of her narrators, were willing to believe that if there are universal or essential Meanings, one is more likely to meet them in a field of sunlight, in a perfect geometrical form, or in a band of colour than within a novel or a poem. Words, to Marcus and Stephanie Potter and to Henry Severell, dilute and distort meaning; especially for Marcus, words do not even begin to approximate the way he sees the world. The visionary experiences Henry and Marcus have are powerful; unless we wish to read their visions as delusions, we must seriously consider that Henry and Marcus are in contact with transcendent power and knowledge. Unfortunately just what this transcendence entails is difficult to apprehend or clearly define, either in visual or verbal terms.

And why has Byatt’s more recent fiction, for the most part, abandoned this exploration of the connection between visual knowledge and transcendence? The highly verbal characters, such as Frederica Potter, tend towards agnosticism and even cynicism; they increasingly take centre stage in the fiction. The 1994 story “The Djinn in the Nightingale’s Eye” is a case in point. The main character, Gillian Perholt, identifies herself as a narratologist. She has developed her academic interest in stories (rather

tedious ones) at the expense of her affinity for the visual. In the story, the flask which contains the djinn has a striking spiral pattern, but it is seen merely as a lovely decoration (183), and several characters agree that geometric flowers within glass spheres are more attractive than real flowers just because “the whole effect is better with the patterning” (275). Whereas in The Virgin in the Garden spirals are a component of an ideal “garden of mathematical forms” that Marcus views as an essential “order and a source of order” (337), in “Djinn” spirals and other shapes lack such significance. Or if they are significant (after all, the spiral is found on the flask which contains a magical djinn), the telling of the tale is decidedly arch. Byatt’s interest in searching out serious connections between visual experience and transcendence has diminished, and she is now untroubled about affirming her commitment to words and stories that principally serve human needs and hesitate to strive beyond.

§ § §

Marcus had what he recognised from earlier experience as a dangerous sense of physical well-being, which simultaneously induced and fought against an increased sensitivity of his nasal passages, throat and lungs to the flying pollen. There was the accustomed visual clarity: he took in the balancing patterns of the dry stones in the long grey wall: he saw threads connecting red and red poppy and poppy, in triangles and loops among the haze of blue and white and green. (Still Life 240)

There is another aspect to this discussion which should be explored, although it cannot be done here in any detail, and that is the connection between disease and visionary experience. Kathleen Coyne Kelly believes Marcus to be “clearly” schizophrenic and probably epileptic; she also believes that Byatt “grafts” Van Gogh’s personality and medical problems on to Marcus (A. S. Byatt: Twayne’s English Authors 64, 69). I disagree. Marcus Potter is definitely asthmatic (one of his attacks is described above) and it is possible he also suffers from a degree of autism. Unlike Van Gogh, Marcus has no interest in expressing his visions, and his have very different qualities; it is Alexander Wedderburn who overtly identifies with Van Gogh, although Marcus certainly shares

some of Van Gogh's tortured sensitivities. There is insufficient evidence for the diagnosis of schizophrenia – and where does the condition “go” in the third Potter novel, Babel Tower, where Marcus has normalized?

Asthma and migraine headaches have been shown to prompt states of mind like Marcus's visions³, and those of Henry Severell are similar. (In writing of asthma and migraine, Byatt is detailing some of her own experience with the conditions – see Sarah Booth Conroy's 1991 profile of her.) There is very little research on the connection between these physical conditions and aesthetic or spiritual matters. Any speculations I can make are necessarily rudimentary. But it is intriguing to note that asthmatics Marcel Proust and John Updike write with heightened visual sensibility and sometimes assign a dizzying sense of significance to asthmatic episodes. Updike says in his memoirs that his own prose style “seemed to me a groping and elemental attempt to approximate the complexity of envisioned phenomena and it surprised me to have it called luxuriant and self-indulgent” (Self-Consciousness 103-4).

Byatt herself does not stress this connection between disease and visual knowledge; she offers little in the way of diagnosis for Marcus. But a number of questions are insistent. If visionary attacks are brought on by autism, asthma, or migraine, should we ignore their spiritual impact? Is Henry's sense of being at one with the earth and the sun merely an accidental side effect of a physical condition and therefore to be discounted? Is it merely a splendid accident that Samuel Palmer, the English painter whose work Cornfield by Moonlight, with the Evening Star graces the covers of some editions of The Shadow of the Sun, was also asthmatic (Lister 24)? Byatt says that Palmer's painting was one of the points of origin for her portrait of a visionary (Introduction to Shadow xv). I cannot expand on this here, but note the interesting possibilities for further study.

³ See Oliver Sacks's studies in Migraine, The Man Who Mistook His Wife For A Hat, and An Anthropologist from Mars.

§ § §

The first aspect of Byatt's visual investigation I will consider is geometric form, in its Platonic ideality. In The Shadow of the Sun, the writer Henry Severell has "attacks of vision" (58) that drive him out into the countryside. There he walks for miles, with only a tenuous hold on reality, courting considerable physical danger. These sessions feed his novels, "studies of crises, not of conscience, but of consciousness" (60), which are closely allied to the work of the Romantic poets Coleridge and Blake.

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. (58)

Sunlight is the key to Henry's experience; he gains power from facing it.

He would never, he thought, get over looking up there at the light and knowing that he was looking up there. He was so constantly, so consistently surprised to think, here is a man seeing and knowing – if not precisely what – that he is seeing. (85)

Henry searches for words to contain this seeing and knowing. "One must find a language new and washed clean" (84), he thinks, and he mourns that "we have murdered our superlatives," the kind of words he needs in order to share his special knowledge.

Henry is able to expose himself completely to the light of the sun and of fire by using his "curious, geometrical visual memory, whole areas of things seen fined down to one visual symbol" (60). During one attack, he imagines the circle of the sun superimposed with another "angrier copper circle . . . and saw both as the orifice of a cone, in the centre of which he walked. . . . He walked more and more quickly, using all his body. If he kept still at this time, or tried to look, it would all be too much for him" (61). Later in the novel Henry enters his heightened state of awareness by looking at a fire.

Light welled into the room from somewhere undefined, a new unearthly, wild light, drawing live, singing triangles between the cool sea-green plane of the window, the still white circle of his desk lamp, and the rising flames in the chimney. (279)

He sees the flames as rising “cone within cone” (280) and then notices that his room is transfigured, “patterned in an instant brilliant geometric clarity” (280).

There are several consequences of Henry’s attacks of vision. One is that he is able to use geometric patterns to plan his writing.

Something slid into place, the pattern of the part of the chapter he had been looking for. He knew no more about precisely what he would write than he had known, but a shape, a pattern of relations had come to him – his imagination carried a diagram, a squat triangle, a long one on the same base reaching out, and when he sat down to write, the pattern would be available now, he could draw on it, spin from it. (121)

Another is that he is able to see the other characters and their relationships in perspective. Henry is able to judge with accuracy the problems Margaret, Oliver, and Anna have, although he keeps his distance from them. Margaret and Anna share some of Henry’s ability to achieve special visual insight, but they fail to achieve Henry’s feeling of power because they “see” with too much relation to self. Henry channels his visions through geometry and relates his experiences to essential or universal objects beyond himself: sun, earth, moon, trees.

Finally, Henry’s visions seem to allow him a glimpse into the eternal, into ultimate Meaning. During one episode, “the window split and opened finally, an infinite tunnel of bright glass into a live and turning sky” (280). He looks outdoors and finds he is drawn “to whatever it was that was incandescent in the orchard, crackling and powerful in the shrubbery, flames in the bushes, light climbing in nooses over the trees” (280). If Henry reads Blake or Coleridge during these times, he finds that “everything connected, all meanings were a network, and his coming experience the master-knot” (59). Byatt stops short of examining the full spiritual impact of what Henry sees, but vocabulary like “infinite” and “incandescent” is more than suggestive.

Henry's daughter Anna struggles to achieve the full intensity of her nascent visions. Like Henry, she believes that "to see clearly was the deepest and most violent kind of action" (237). In the course of the novel, she has three visionary experiences she calls "events." The first is the most profound: on a stormy night she watches moonlight shining through glass and sees "shadows of light . . . thickness on thickness, all these textures of light, caught and held in glass, spirals and cones and pencil trellises" (133).

Nothing she had ever seen had been more exquisite, or more unreal. She felt balanced and complete, between all this trapped, plotted light and the approaching storm; she said to herself, turning the glass round and round, over and over again, not knowing herself quite what she meant, "I can do something with this. Oh, I can do something with this, that matters." It was all so extremely important and she would, any moment now, know clearly why. (134)

At this point Anna's event is interrupted by Oliver, a critic of her father's work, who strives to bring her back to "reality." Anna's ensuing relationship with Oliver, and her eventual pregnancy, dilute the intensity of the two "events" that follow, and at the end of the third one, in which she sees the lights of Cambridge at night as the lights of hell, she realizes that "there would be no event, no transforming knowledge" (239). As an adolescent woman, Anna's passions are easily diverted from art to sexual and domestic matters. Her "events" are always lighted by the moon, a pale reflection of the sun which empowers her father. The novel's title underlines the dilemma Anna faces; her existence and knowledge are merely the shadow of Henry's. Within the novel, Anna appears to be a failure, although it is not out of the question that with future maturity she may achieve fulfillment of some sort.

The identification of woman with moon and weakness, and man with sun and power is not necessarily inherent. Byatt makes it clear that Anna refuses to learn the discipline, the geometry, which Henry must carefully use to negotiate his attacks of vision, channel them away from self, and ground them in the external world. The geometrical figures Anna sees on the night of the storm occur accidentally; she does not

seek a way of further developing an inner sense of order, and she attempts to keep her insights internal ones, wondering merely how they affect her and her future. Where Henry writes and rewrites novels after his attacks of vision, painstakingly revising and sculpting his findings, Anna's desultory attempts at writing poetry are quickly abandoned and she falls into lassitude: "From time to time she took intense pleasure in writing, in the act of putting pen to paper, but this never lasted for more than a sentence or at most a paragraph at a time" (15).

But there is no doubt that Anna is in a difficult position, as the daughter of a famous and imposing man, living in an era when marriage and child-rearing were the assumed future for most women. What is clearly stated here is the difficulty for a woman of balancing domestic life with a life of the mind, a recurring theme with Byatt. But it is a mistake to pin the blame solely on male dominance, which some critics have done. Anna's mother is a self-sacrificing wife who provides Anna with only one model of femininity. One impetus in the writing of *Shadow*, as Byatt makes clear in her 1991 introduction to the Vintage reprint, was the crushing influence on her not only of F. R. Leavis at Cambridge, but also of Helen Gardner at Oxford. Both scholars discouraged attempts by their students to write fiction and poetry. In a 1990 interview with Nicolas Tredell, Byatt makes it clear that Gardner also tried to imprint upon her more fundamental rules about how to think, and that Byatt vigorously resisted such confining notions:

Helen Gardner had told me that if you haven't thought a thing out in words, you haven't thought it. I said to Charles Rycroft, it isn't true, I know that I know certain things and I know them in visual shapes, and the word may or may not come to be fitted to the pattern that I already know is there. (Tredell 67)

Anna's floundering attempts to find her footing as an artist and a woman are not, as Richard Todd has claimed, "an early contemporary assertion of a feminist programme" (A. S. Byatt: *Writers and their Work* 8). *The Shadow of the Sun* is, ultimately, more

sympathetic to Henry than to Anna; his determination and necessary ruthlessness are presented as preferable to her weakness, indecision, and passivity. Todd, who describes Byatt's passages about Henry's visions as "purple," says that Anna's inability to achieve Henry's insight "is to be understood in terms of Anna's beginning to exercise her own autonomy" (9). But an autonomy that consists of welcoming a formerly unwelcome pregnancy is viciously limited. Anna is, primarily, lazy.

The power of Henry's achievement is further emphasized by comparing his use of precise perspective or "scale" (Shadow 116) with the average or ordinary "proportion" which his wife Caroline and the critic Oliver practise. "Neither of you has any sense of proportion," says Caroline to Anna and Henry (95); later Oliver will teach Anna to be as reductive as he is, diminishing "the world of art and the world of love and the sun to manageable proportions" (210). The other characters, with their "proportion," have a cheapened version of Henry's accurate "perspective," and it allows them to live less dangerously and, concomitantly, less creatively. At the other extreme, Oliver's wife Margaret, who lacks either proportion or perspective, has visionary moments which she grossly misapplies, resulting in near madness. Instead of using her insight in the service of art, Margaret stares at the images in fashion magazines, frightening herself.

They had the mystery, the exhilaration as Henry had seen it in [high-speed photography of flowers opening], of colours brighter than they are usually seen, the jewelled glitter of the mediaeval heaven. But Margaret looked too long . . . and saw too much, in too much detail. (181)

Margaret arrives at the sensation that she is "falling apart, that bits of her were separate and falling irretrievably away" (182). This danger is always present in Henry's visions and acknowledged by him; the "nooses" of light which he sees near the novel's conclusion are an indicator of this risk (280).

The Times Literary Supplement, reviewing The Shadow of the Sun (or, as it was then called, by the ill-considered decision of C. Day Lewis at Chatto & Windus, Shadow of a Sun) in 1964, said that "Henry is not, despite his eccentricities, a convincing literary

genius" (21). The reader's belief in Henry's worth as an artist is crucial; if Henry's creativity is not convincing, then his visions are better called delusions or attacks of mental illness. In her retrospective introduction to the novel, Byatt writes that

Henry Severell is partly simply my secret self. . . . Someone who saw everything too bright, too fierce, too much. . . . This vision of too much makes the visionary want to write – in my case – or paint, or compose, or dance or sing. (Shadow x)

In contrast to Possession, where Byatt produces the poetry of Randolph Henry Ash for our perusal, in Shadow she does not provide many examples of Henry's writing in order that its aesthetic value might be weighed.⁴ The narrative voice provides little help; whereas Byatt's narrators will provide sharp commentary and leading suggestions in later novels, in this first novel, the narrator is distant. The narrator does, however, take Henry Severell seriously: his attacks are rendered in vivid and believable detail and his judgements of people or situations are not shown to be faulty. His absorption in his work and the distance he places between himself and other people make him a less than admirable husband and father, but there are no major shadows cast on his ability to see accurately.

§ § §

With Cassandra Corbett in The Game, the figure of the visionary is bent to a considerably less auspicious angle. Cassandra and her sister Julia, a sociological novelist, together make up one artist, and alone each is incomplete. Cassandra has submerged her aesthetic tendencies in academe, and is increasingly able to think only in abstractions (199). Like Henry, Cassandra strives to find order and structure in the natural world (75), but unlike Henry she has retreated for comfort into conventional and conservative Christianity.

⁴ The critical reaction to the poetry of Ash and LaMotte has been mixed; most critics found it convincing, but not brilliant. Ash can be seen as a gentler, more rational version of Henry Severell. One passage of Henry's non-fiction prose is quoted on page 238 of Shadow; while it is intelligent, the sample is not long enough to judge its profundity.

Both Julia and Cassandra are good observers; Julia collects “tones of voice” (114) and is able to capture in her fiction the personalities of Oxford dons with devastating results. But like many of the characters in Shadow, Julia lacks either perspective or proportion. “What do you know about proportion? . . . What do you know about anything?” says her idealistic husband Thor, in the midst of a violent tirade just before he leaves her (185). Julia has commodified her artistic gifts. Cassandra, on the other hand, is unable to apply her insights to the mundane world at all. She takes to painting and, in painting a fish, “decided to paint it from underneath, distorting it carefully” (190). Just before she commits suicide, she expresses a longing to see less clearly, to “let everything run into everything else” (228).

The danger in vivid and hypersensitive insight which Cassandra exemplifies is not merely, as her name might suggest, that she, as a woman cursed by a male god, is not to be believed. More importantly, the danger is inherent in visionary experience itself. This is made clearer when Byatt turns her attention to the character of Marcus Potter in the set of novels about his family which begins with The Virgin of the Garden. Like Anna and Cassandra, Marcus struggles to find a way to survive his visionary experiences, and like the two women, his experiences are marked by failure and devastation. Unlike Henry, these other characters are unable to turn their visions into words.

§ § §

In The Virgin in the Garden the discussion of visual knowledge reaches its peak. (Still Life actually presents visual scenes more vividly, but there are more and varied references in the earlier novel.) A number of characters in Virgin are highly attuned to visual experiences; Edmund Wilkie is actually researching this at university and is able to offer the reader an overview of the subject. He is studying, he says,

the relations between visual images and languages. The way we form concepts, ultimately. Whether, as some psychologists think, visual images are more primitive, more fundamental than words, or whether you can't think without some sort of precise symbolic language. I want to work with

eidetic phenomena – people who think by simply visualising. . . . One could study interesting relations between visual memory and conceptual memory and analytic thought. . . . (134-135)

Alexander Wedderburn has embryonic visual skills which he abandons in favour of words as the Potter novels progress. In this first volume, he feels an equal “giddiness of words and things” when he is writing Astraea, his verse play about Elizabeth I. He is able to see his ideas “sharp as he wrote, in some stereopticon or inner camera obscura, bright with colour and feature” (315). But in trying to develop ideas from this crystalline conception, Alexander usually falls back upon lists (Elizabeth’s iconography: “the phoenix, the rose, the ermine, the Golden Age, the harvest-queen, Virgo-Astraea, virgin patroness of justice and foison” [103]) and upon laboured metaphors. His struggles to encompass vision within language end in frustration.

Stephanie Potter experiences less frustration. She has an “unselectively retentive memory” (109) in which “remembered objects clogged her thoughts, floated, vivid spectra, before her closed eyes” (110). In her observation of the richly coloured fabrics for the Astraea costumes, “Stephanie saw it all double, with wide clarity and narrow sharpness. She saw what things meant to be, and missed no detail of how they, in fact, presented themselves” (110). Where Stephanie’s friend Felicity Wells is caught up in the colour symbolism of the fabrics, Stephanie “saw and did not share.” She believes “it was not her business to fuse any of these into new wholes. She just saw” (111).

Both Stephanie and Daniel, who will soon be her husband, are skeptical of colour allegories, but Stephanie does have a vivid knowledge of colour. The description of her body’s imagined inner spaces when she makes love with Daniel explodes with light, water imagery, movement, and natural colours.

This inner world had its own clear landscape. It grew with precise assurance, light out of dark, sapphire rising in the black-red, wandering in rooted caverns, glassy blue running water between carved channels of basalt, and coming out into fields of flowers, light green stalks, airy

leaves, bright flowers moving and dancing in wavering tossing lines to the blown grass of a cliff over a pale bright strand beyond which shone the pale bright sea. (282)

It is clear from this description and others that Stephanie has exceptionally clear visualization skills but that the properties of her vision are not strictly ordered. (In chapter 2 of Babel Tower, her daughter Mary shows similar tendencies.) Stephanie's inner vision makes use of natural objects, where other characters use geometry. Usually Stephanie feels no urgent need to cast her vision into words. When she does, the result is a conventional attempt to "appropriate," to "come to terms with" bathroom tiles she dislikes by using "words like cucumber and avocado" (Virgin 280). But it is far more common for Stephanie to "just see" and to allow her knowledge to remain untouched by verbal language.

Marcus Potter's visual experiences are the most extreme. In contrast with Alexander, who gives up visions for words, and with Stephanie, whose visions are natural and rooted in reality and memory and who does not attempt to match them with words, Marcus is flung into hallucinatory experiences which threaten his grasp of reality and which he is completely unequipped to communicate to others. Marcus first plays a game called "spreading himself," involving an "impossible simultaneity" of vision (27) over a large field. But he soon loses control of the game and leaves his body. He discovers that only geometry can save him: "circles, parallel tramlines, fixed points [form] a network of salvation" (28). Geometry is "immutable, orderly, and connected with extremity" (92); it is not an escape from the situation, but a solution to be found within it. Marcus can feel at times "tormented by geometry" (229); this is partly a result of the danger always inherent in his visions. But more importantly, geometry loses its defining efficacy as a safety net because the biology master, Lucas Simmonds, in an attempt to understand the spiritual implications of Marcus's gift, pushes Marcus beyond the limits of what his body can endure.

There is no doubt, however, that even without Lucas's interference, Marcus is in serious trouble. He is gripped by fear of the funnel of water in the toilet, and when he reads he finds that "print reared off the pages like snakes striking" (118). Finally, light, which formerly "spread," begins to "shift" (120) and move wildly, terrifying him. The language of the novel at this point reflects the anxiety and inexpressibility inherent in Marcus's visions.

It had other motions not measured by measurements available to man, or separable in the experience of man, yet there, so that he had to know he could not know more than that they were there. (120)

The light, which "had been a condition of vision" became "an object of vision" (120). This is the sort of "staring at the sun" that Henry Severell is able to do only with the help of geometric forms to anchor him. Finally, geometry does return to Marcus's aid, but he finds he is at the meeting point of "intersecting cones, stretching to infinity, containing the pouring and rushing" (120). Marcus feels that he will shatter.

More explicitly than Henry Severell names it, Marcus identifies the tormenting and powerful light as "a presence with a purpose." It is "blinding" and "annihilating," a presence "wholly outside his scale, conducting its work with a magnitude and a minuteness at once too grand and too precisely delicate for him to map" (120). He produces a drawing of his vision for Lucas Simmonds that Lucas identifies as a symbol of infinity (126). When Lucas labels the experiences as photisms, "experiences of floods of light and glory which frequently accompany moments of revelation" (125), Marcus is dubious. He finds that Lucas's naming of his vision makes it "safe to handle," but he also finds that words make the experience "recede," and finally, vanish (126, 127).

Lucas wants to use science to prove the spiritual significance of the visions. As Lucas forces the experiences into the straitjackets of experiment and notation, trying to fit what Marcus sees into "The Pattern and the Plan" (the title of Lucas's manuscript about cosmogony), Marcus loses the certainty he once had that he had viewed an eternal

presence. There is a tremendous amount of detail, in chapters 26 and 34 of The Virgin in the Garden, of the vision experiments which Lucas forces on Marcus and which go terribly awry, pushing both of them to the edge of madness. It is nearly impossible to wade through the choking detail and determine what is significant in these scenes, so thoroughly does Lucas's mad hybrid of religion and science confuse the subject. I will not attempt it. What is important about these chapters is that Lucas "confirmed [Marcus's] mistrust of words" (298). In trying so desperately to comprehend and document Marcus's visions and bend them to his own purposes, Lucas leads Marcus only to the certainty that words force a reductive "coincidence and coherence" (298). Marcus comes to the realization that there are connections between him, light, form, and a higher intelligence, but that the connections are complex, random, not "so seamlessly interrelated as all this pretty but reductive word-work made it" (299). In other words, his visions are beyond human understanding. They may have tremendous Meaning, but to capture it and cast it in words is impossible.

As Lucas's influence over Marcus lessens, Marcus is able to return to geometry as an ordering system which saves him from the terror of his visions. In chapter 36, Marcus has a vision of a glowing sphere of light that is "immensely sensually pleasing" (337). Marcus decides, as his sister Stephanie does, that "the thing was as it was." He also returns to having a recurrent dream of living "timelessly, in the garden of mathematical forms which he had lost by attempting to describe them to his father." One of the models for this ideal garden is Book I of The Prelude, where Wordsworth describes a similar inner place of "huge and mighty Forms" (line 425). Bill Potter had been intensely proud of Marcus's ability to do "instant mathematics" (135) and had, like Lucas, forced Marcus to perform and explain beyond his physical and linguistic limits. This had resulted in "Marcus's mathematical Fall." By the conclusion of The Virgin of the Garden, Marcus has retreated from the influence of family and tutor and from the snares of language, with mixed results.

Although Marcus is an important character in Still Life, where his inability to be decisive in a crisis is an indirect cause of his sister Stephanie's accidental electrocution, in this second Potter novel and in Babel Tower, the third, there is little further elaboration on his extraordinary powers of visualization. Do his experiences diminish as he gets older? Does he learn to control them more stringently by further use of geometry, or does he dilute them with language? Was it all due to asthma? At one point in Virgin Marcus says that what asthma did to him "was stretch time and perception so that everything was slow and sharp and clear" (91), but the comment is an aside, and undeveloped.

The portrait of a visionary we have in the character of Marcus Potter is more complex and more frightening than the one provided in Henry Severell. Partly what is at issue here are the different manifestations that a phenomenon will undergo depending on the personality involved. Those characters who have less success than Henry in handling their visions (Anna, Margaret, Alexander, Marcus) lack maturity, selflessness, discipline, and courage. The character who seems most at ease with her ability to visualize is Stephanie, whose visions are admittedly less arduous, but who is also mature, an admirable balance of intellect and emotion, and is able, like Henry, to channel her visions away from herself into the outside world. Henry pours his visual knowledge into art, while Stephanie dedicates hers to her children and husband, insofar as she does anything with her visions – their value is largely potential because of her early death.

But it is also apparent that as Byatt's thinking about visual knowledge develops over the decades, she is much less sanguine about its capabilities, about its links to the transcendent, and about its ability to provide a much-needed balance to the power of verbal knowledge. The topic has nearly disappeared from recent books. Marcus has a very small role in Babel Tower, and discussion of his visions is almost entirely absent. Richard Todd in his Writers and their Work study of A. S. Byatt offers an explanation for this shift of emphasis. He constructs a model of Babel Tower's structure made of three braided strands; these represent Frederica's story, Daniel's story, and Jude Mason's

dystopic Babbletower, the story-within-the-story. A fourth section, which Todd terms an “intermittent continuo,” is identified with thrushes, snails, and Marcus Potter, or

the theme of sounds and visual characters, pertaining to a natural world under threat or to past civilizations now vanished, that are devoid of meaning – or at least of anything we could give significance to. Residual crackle or babble, they may be analogous to what Big Bang theorists would term “black-body background radiation,” but this is in no way to suggest they do not have their own beauty (63)

I believe that the space accorded to this “continuo” is not sufficient to grant it the importance Todd gives it, although the idea is intriguing – certainly it helps to make sense of the puzzling snail and thrush sections. But Marcus is so marginal in Babel Tower that the visual theme is nearly forgotten, submerged in an ocean of words. If Byatt intended something of the sort that Todd postulates (she apparently did not disagree when she read his study in manuscript, although he says she did so “only with an eye to correcting any errors of fact” [ix]), it has had limited success.

In Babel Tower, the snail is one of the few remaining vestiges of Byatt’s interest in geometric form, and the very smallness of the snail and the lack of space accorded to it is significant. (I return to the snail and thrush issue in chapter 7 and discuss their possible spiritual attributes.) A graphic of a snail opens and closes the novel, and the spiral of the snail’s shell recurs as a theme in several conversations. One of the characters who thinks about snails and spirals is Gerard Wijnobel, “Vice-Chancellor of the University of North Yorkshire, grammarian and polymath” (167), who occasionally appears in the Potter novels to muse on matters of language, form, and order, and is then dismissed from the action.

He became a mathematician in order to contemplate order and to renounce the mess of language. 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, certain arrangements of branches around tree trunks. (Babel Tower 192-193)

In Still Life Wijnobel, some of whose linguistic views bear a resemblance to Noam Chomsky's, gives an important address at his inauguration as Vice-Chancellor. He speaks of vision and order and truth, and his monologue fades into the narration so that his voice, for a moment, becomes the narrator's. Byatt treats Wijnobel's opinions with absolute seriousness; they are based on physicist Max Planck's insistence that concrete experience and sensory data must form the foundation of scientific hypothesis (The Philosophy of Physics *passim*). Wijnobel's version of this is his assertion that "picture-forming seems crucial" (Still Life 276). What follows is, I believe, one of Byatt's most profound statements of faith in visual knowledge.

We cannot perhaps picture our picture-making. Even with all our windows we shall only catch glimpses of the real world. I believe, with Planck, said Wijnobel, that it is real, it is there, that it is our need and our duty and our delight to picture it. 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. (276)

Despite the conditions Wijnobel attaches to vision, the spirit of this speech is almost joyously optimistic; he is confident in his concepts of reality and implies that the amount of information we can gather from the world is, in any case, as much as we can humanly handle.

In Babel Tower a change has taken place; the windows have closed. Wijnobel's interest in order is seen, at least partly, as escapist, as distant from more pressing modern issues. Byatt distances herself from him and says:

He *withdrew* into pure form, as though he saw only the relations of quadrilaterals, lengths, and primary colours in Mondrian, when once he had seen the forms of light made and recorded by Vermeer with an image of a rectangular coloured window and the enlightened solid body of a reading, or thinking, or pouring woman. (193, emphasis mine)

Babel Tower's reductive view of Wijnobel, who in Still Life seemed a candidate for a Byatt *alter ego* ("win Nobel" is a very positive name), demonstrates Byatt's shift of attention from what Kathleen Coyne Kelly calls "the underlying geometry of the universe" (A. S. Byatt: Twayne's English Authors 69) toward a more pronounced interest in colour and form as they are related to ordinary human life and to actual artworks; the latter will be discussed more fully in the next chapter. But the major shift in allegiance in Babel Tower is, as I have said before, toward words. Although the minor character Elvet Gander is chided for his "logorrhea" (438) and Alexander complains about the resistance of language in his work on the Steerforth Committee on the Teaching of English – "We're writing about teaching language and the language we write about teaching language won't stick to the thing we're writing about" (477) – the author, the narrator, and nearly all of the characters are happy in their verbosity.

§ § §

As we will note again and again, the composition of Still Life in the early 1980s marks an indisputable turn in Byatt's fiction. The pure forms of geometry which acted as perceptual and indeed moral guides for characters in the fiction of the 1960s and 1970s are reduced in Still Life to "patterns" serving merely as guides to normality for Marcus (30, 33) in the second book in the Potter series. Marcus adapts and dilutes his visionary propensities; as he recovers his strength throughout the novel, he increasingly turns for solace to the more complex and often irregular geometric forms found in nature. Still later he will apply this knowledge to human physiology: in Babel Tower he will do research "mapping algorithms in the brain" (364).

In chapter 21 of Still Life, "A Tree, of Many, One,"⁵ we find the most striking passage about Marcus's newfound awareness of what he calls "outer geometry" (240) or "solid geometry" (241), but that I will call "natural geometry" in order to differentiate it more clearly from the "pure" or theoretical geometry on which Marcus formerly

⁵ The title of this chapter in many editions is incorrectly called "A Tree, of Mary, One."

depended. Marcus, in the midst of an asthma attack, sits beneath an elm tree and is able to “map” it: “Marcus stared and mapped, stared and mapped, learning the tree” (240). He finds pleasure in the act, and loses his feelings of panic. While Marcus still sees, with precision, the regularity of leaf patterns, the trunk as a cylinder of water, and the intensity of sunlight, he also discovers the living presence, the “real” situatedness of the forms of natural geometry. Not only does Marcus recognize “the drama of the tree” (241), he also realizes the vital importance he and his vision have in making this drama possible. “He himself was not there for nothing,” he thinks. “It was his eyes that perceived.” This tree becomes, for Marcus, a healing tree, and it is noteworthy that he feels “earthed” or grounded in its presence; it is precisely and literally the lack of groundedness that will later kill Stephanie.

Marcus’s elm tree is related to a number of other literary trees that contribute to a breakthrough in vision and understanding for a poet or philosopher. (Another key tree discussion takes place in The Shadow of the Sun, but as that episode is not related to geometry or colour, I defer my examination of it until chapter 8.) The elemental qualities of Marcus’s tree (it is “a kind of peculiarly happy tree, a self-sufficient tree, a kind of single eternity” [242]) link it to Goethe’s ideal *Urpflanze*, the primal plant which he visualized in his botanical speculations of the 1780s. Even more important for Byatt and equally utopian, although not quite so categorically positive, is Wordsworth’s “Tree, of many, one” (line 51) from the “Ode: Intimations of Immortality” (1807), which Byatt uses as the title of the chapter about Marcus’s elm and quotes repeatedly throughout her work. This tree is representative of perfection, of a time when every sight was “apparelled in celestial light” (line 4). Both Wordsworth and Byatt celebrate gifts of vision and expression in writing about their trees; while Marcus does not talk about the tree, he does sketch it and formulate linguistic ideas about it in his mind.

Where Byatt parts company with Wordsworth is on religious issues. There is a tempered sense of loss and longing in Wordsworth’s ode that is not picked up by Byatt.

Wordsworth's tree "speak[s] of something that is gone" (line 54); significantly, the full line about the tree is "*But* there's a Tree, of many, one" (emphasis mine). Byatt neglects to mention this negative formulation; she omits the "but" in her quotation. (Neither does she take up the idea that the Tree is associated with the Christian cross, a possibility that the Immortality Ode hints at.) The nostalgia for pre-birth perfection and belief in immortality found in Wordsworth is missing in Byatt; what she adopts is the prevailing optimism of the poem, its insistence on the importance of the "vision splendid" (line 73) of which humans are capable and the "timely utterance" (line 23) which gives the poet relief and strength.

Marcus's experience with the elm tree is also a response to something quite different, Roquentin's apprehension of the chestnut tree in Jean-Paul Sartre's Nausea (1938). Where Roquentin finds disorder, superfluity, and absurdity in his vision of the tree's existence, Marcus intensely realizes his tree's history and patterning, its intelligent inter-connectedness with the rest of nature. Marcus encounters ordinary contingency – the dependence of living forms upon each other and the mixed natural conditions of chance and order – while Roquentin sees radical contingency and a terrifying freedom. Marcus "felt that he had his place, he was part of something" (Still Life 242) and Roquentin too is "entirely conscious of [the tree's] existence" (Nausea 131) – but the difference is that the revelation for Sartre's character doesn't prevent him from feeling simultaneously estranged from the tree and hating the "ignoble mess" of life (134). Roquentin also dismisses the important potential verities that Byatt's characters have been struggling with – colour and geometry. He thinks hopefully of a circle and of the colour black – might they have escaped absurdity? – but then rejects them for their lack of real existence (as compared to himself and the tree). "In another world, circles, bars of music keep their pure and rigid lines" (128), but in an existentialist scheme they are illusory, too abstract to be important. Colour is also tainted by its association with words (this seems less true of geometry and music for Sartre). Sartre's character is deeply

suspicious about words and ridicules their applicability, only to rush back to his hotel after the tree episode and write it all down. On the contrary, Marcus's tree truly and slowly helps him to articulation: "he must learn more," he thinks (Still Life 242). (In Byatt's world, curiosity is always an excellent remedy for anxiety.) The tree also potentially can lead Marcus to an understanding of living in community. The narrator points out that an "English elm grove is one individual" propagating itself in its underground root system.

In chapter 21 of Still Life Byatt reprises these different voices – of Goethe, Wordsworth, and Sartre – and answers them. Goethe and Wordsworth are nostalgically obsessed with origin and immortality in a way that Byatt is not, while Sartre is oppressed and excited by different but not unrelated notions of eternity. Byatt is concerned with representing the present; Marcus, in contemplating the tree, remains bounded by the empirical situation at hand and his own sensory responses – while Roquentin spins off to examine all the chaos of creation. Unlike the others, Byatt draws no moral conclusions from her study of the tree's existence beyond the necessity for seeing the interdependence of living things (an important refutation of Nausea's emphasis on isolation). And on the question of the ability to articulate such a primal experience, she positions herself neatly between Wordsworth and Sartre. The Romantic poet betrays few signs of struggle with language and takes his ability to see and say for granted; Roquentin both distrusts and craves expression and his dilemma contributes to his overall feeling of disgust. Marcus is nearly silent, but he has within him the potential for precise articulation; whatever conclusions he comes to in his communion with the tree, they are comforting and stimulating for him. From Goethe, Byatt's most important borrowing is the notion of order, that there can be an ideal plant to add to Marcus's Platonic Garden of Forms. The tree episode is, overall, an unusually happy one for Marcus.

Marcus has earlier told his mother and Stephanie that his first infant memory is of an ash under which his pram was placed (Still Life 105). The ash as a vigorous

mythological symbol will be used frequently in Possession, and this glimpse of the power of the Norse World-Ash is significant. While Marcus is able to find a new, healing order in nature, it is important to remember that nature's geometry is necessarily much more contingent and quixotic than the realm of triangles and spheres. Marcus's movement toward nature signals a lessening of the visionary power and a strengthening of his emotional adaptability.

This awareness of knowledge as something more provisional, more heavily qualified is echoed in the syntax of the narrator's sections of Still Life. The narrator has a more pronounced presence here than in most Byatt books; the narrative role, partly, is to set limits, ask questions, challenge certainty. For example, the infant Will Orton communicates, but from a distance; the narrator suggests what Will "could have said" his vision was like, but clearly the baby lacks the verbal skill to be a trustworthy conveyor of data (107). The description of a session between Marcus and his psychiatrist is peppered with "might or might not" constructions (33, 34); it is uncertain how well they are able to understand each other. Mr. Rose, says the narrator, "might, or might not, have felt able to offer help or advice" (34). This provisional style of narration appears prominently again at the beginning of Babel Tower, where several points of origin for the novel are suggested ("It might begin").⁶

The key event of Byatt's life in the 1970s was the accidental death of her son Charles, and the irregular and more provisional kind of order to which she begins to subscribe in the 1980s stems, at least partly, from her reaction to that death. It must be said, however, that she remains a thinker highly sympathetic to order, and experiments like Frederica's chaotic collages of text in Babel Tower are whimsical and not very convincing. The most positive result of Byatt's changing thought about order is the more central position she assigns to human agency. Whereas early characters like Henry, Anna,

⁶This style of qualified narration also appears frequently in Byatt's sister Margaret Drabble's The Witch of Exmoor (1997).

and Cassandra seem to be passively held in the grip of universal forces (like many of Iris Murdoch's characters), recent characters like Frederica, Ash, and LaMotte demonstrate a rootedness in and an intense curiosity about a world which, although by no means completely haphazard, is unpredictable and susceptible to human interference and interpretation.

§ § §

Whatever confidence Byatt's characters have in the visual world is increasingly focused on colour, but the depth of this certainty and the moral consequences of it are much less remarkable than the former trust in form. Whereas the geometric figures which give comfort and stability in The Shadow of the Sun and The Virgin in the Garden can suggest symbolic readings, colours in Byatt are usually resistant to such interpretation. Spirals, for instance, often are seen to indicate mystery and immortality; circles are perfection; triangles are associated with harmony and stability (Olderr *passim*). These common symbolic meanings, although not explicitly cited by Byatt, do fit the novel's situations – as, for example, when Henry sees triangles as stabilizing the book he is writing. When Byatt uses colour, however, she turns agnostic, frequently challenging the typical significance assigned to a particular hue, or instead insisting that colour is significant in and of itself, needing no outside referent. But this independent significance founders on the fact that Byatt, as a writer, cannot avoid the dependence of colour on verbal language. Finally, colour rarely, if ever, points the way to possible transcendence, as geometry did.

Colour is much more a sensory experience than geometry is. Marcus's experiences with forms are cerebral, perhaps spiritual, and sensory stimuli are not necessarily needed to set his speculations in motion. But characters cannot meditate upon colour independently, intellectually – they must actually *see* yellow or green in a painting or a bowl of fruit. And it is comparatively chaotic. Anna's experience in The Shadow of the Sun is representative:

Things became suddenly beautiful, intolerably beautiful, and she intolerably aware of them: she found herself, despite herself, driven to tears by the intense green she saw, looking up through the apple trees at the summer sky, unable to reduce the profusion of the gold-edged crossing twigs and the overlapping, deepening, glittering rounds of the leaves against that uncomprehending midsummer blue to any order that she could comprehend. (19)

Part of Anna's agonizing impression of excess is attributable to adolescence. But the peculiar pain caused by the beauty and intensity of colour is primarily a problem of order – there are no set rules to help her comprehend and assimilate colour, and the highly individual nature of the colour-viewing experience is so trying for an adolescent that she eventually does her best to abandon her visionary tendencies.

Chapter 14 of Still Life, "Figures of Speech," is a long meditation on colour-words and on the difficulty Alexander Wedderburn experiences while writing a play about Vincent Van Gogh. Alexander is used as a springboard, and Byatt's narrative voice controls the chapter; Alexander is her puppet, a thinker not unlike her who is nevertheless deliberately made inadequate. The problem of the plum-skins is characteristic. For several pages, Alexander and the narrator wonder "How would one find the exact word for the colour of the plum-skins?" (164).

There was a further question of why one might want to do so, why it was not enough to look at, or to eat and savour the plum, but Alexander did not wish to address himself to that, not just now. It was a fact that the lemons and the plums, together, made a pattern that he recognised with pleasure, and the pleasure was so fundamentally human it asked to be noted and understood.

Alexander and the narrator come to the conclusion that it is impossible, or nearly so, to use words to find a precise and plain name for the plum colour, but that paint and metaphor come closer to the ideal (165). (Byatt here places metaphor outside the realm of verbal language.) Both Byatt and Alexander have tried to find exact and plain words and have found that "analogy was a way of thought and without it thought was impossible."

The relation between language, reality, and perception is treated with great seriousness in this section of Still Life, but nowhere is there the sense that Alexander's quest is as profound as Marcus's. The search for an exact colour word has significance in epistemological terms, but a glimpse into eternity is not a possibility. Colour is not allowed to resonate beyond itself, to hint at transcendence or even (much) to illuminate human life. Alexander finally decides that plums most closely resemble human bruises, and then dodges the disturbing resonance this comparison evokes. "But the plum was neither bruised nor a bruise nor human. So he eschewed, or tried to eschew human words for it" (164).

Van Gogh's paintings of yellow chairs are a kind of perfection of knowledge for Alexander, and he becomes obsessed with them (69). It is clear to Alexander that the yellow chair "was the opposite of the insane messianic visions and voices" (70) with which Van Gogh struggled, that the yellow chair represents sanity, certainty. But more important than its human and psychological associations is the fact that, for Alexander, the painting of the yellow chair has authority. It is, precisely and absolutely, what it is. Alexander eventually realizes that his own quest for such certainty is hopeless, and in Babel Tower he seems to have stopped writing.

In Babel Tower, Stephanie's daughter Mary sees vivid colours after she suffers a mysterious accident (47), but her "grape-dark world, her gentian caverns" (49) are not investigated. Mary, like Stephanie and Marcus, has latent visionary qualities, but Byatt gives them little attention. In the short fairy story "The Story of the Eldest Princess" (1992), a quest to reverse an enchantment which changed the sky from blue to green is actually abandoned by the princess, who instead finds her vocation in storytelling. Whether the sky is green or blue turns out to be immaterial, and the tone of the story is wry. Less sardonic is "A Lamia in the Cévennes" (1995), in which a painter struggles to capture colours precisely and, for knowledge of colour, is willing to forego the pleasures of love with a lamia, an enchanted monster who is half woman, half snake. The colour of

Bernard's pool is "a blue he needed to know and fight" (Elementals 83), and painting it accurately is a consuming passion "firing the neurons in Bernard's brain to greater and greater activity" (102).

Like Robin in "Art Work" (1991), another story about an obsessed artist, Bernard has a colour fixation which is a closed endeavour estranging him from others. Robin's studio displays an array of colourful fetishes, "the small icons of a cult of colour" (The Matisse Stories 62). Investigating colours makes Robin and Bernard happy "in one of those ways human beings have found in which to be happy" ("Lamia," Elementals 88). Colour is an unquestioned imperative for these painters, but it does not extend beyond the edge of a canvas. Neither painter relates colour to his human life, but gives himself over to it. "He didn't want a woman. He wanted another visual idea," says Byatt of Bernard. "All those blues, all those curious questions, all those almost answers" (110, 109). To arrive, alone, at "almost answers" is sufficient; Bernard doesn't share them or wax metaphysical about them. Byatt agrees that this intellectual and aesthetic questing after colour has importance; Bernard's happiness is real and, more importantly, he has no choice.

Why bother to render the transparency in solid paint or air on a bit of board? I could just stop.

He could not. (87)

Unlike other recent literary questers after colour's meaning, Byatt's characters remain rooted in aesthetic dilemmas: how to get blue on canvas and what to call it. Penelope Fitzgerald in The Blue Flower (1993) writes about the eighteenth-century philosopher Novalis and his use of the blue flower as an interpretative test for those who love him. As Fitzgerald re-tells the story, the blue flower quest has many possible meanings. Fitzgerald gives none of these meanings priority, but the significance of the quest is left at least partly intact. In Margaret Atwood's The Robber Bride (1993), the ability of a character to read colour "auras" in people and situations is presented at face

value. Charis associates blue with her grandmother, who has powerful healing skills. Atwood does not undermine this ability, although it is true that the novel has elements of fable. Filmmakers Derek Jarman and Krystof Kieslowski have no problem with assigning meaning to colour.

Blue an open door to soul
An infinite possibility
Becoming tangible

writes Jarman shortly before his death (11). Jarman's Blue is a meditation on AIDS and the profound impact of the visual on his life. For Kieslowski, Blue in his Three Colours trilogy is about the tangled and various meanings of liberty. "The colour is not decorative; it plays a dramaturgic role" (222).

Byatt, on the other hand, actually parodies those who seek meaning in colour in "The Names of the Rose," a 1991 New York Times piece which pretends to unlock the manifold secrets of the nursery rhyme "Roses are red / Violets are blue." Here, colour is entertainment. And in a 1997 interview, she praises the simple and pleasing qualities of her favourite words, that "tend to be colour words. At the moment, I'm very keen on vermilion and emerald, which I think are very beautiful words" (Frumkes 15).

Only occasionally in the 1990s does she accord colour more serious status. A 1992 profile of painter David Royle offers this about Royle's depiction of flames:

What he has made of those flames is a prolonged meditation on how things hold their form, are eaten up by light and energy, and re-form into other elements of matter and colour. ("The Ambition of Art" 42)

Although she says that Royle "wants to get everything in, life and death, brightness and darkness, destruction and human warmth," she follows with praise for his certainty that "making works of art is so important that [he] can live on almost nothing, and go on working out relations of colour and form" (43). She hints here at an elevated status for colour not unlike her use of geometric form in the 1960s and 1970s; Royle's paintings confirm that form and colour are linked to something eternal. But she steps back from

this idea and underlines finally his aesthetic commitment to colour and form in themselves. (Royle, interestingly, is the dedicatee of the rather un-spiritual Babel Tower.) The purity and transcendence which she at least momentarily ascribes to Royle's use of colour are, however, generally absent from her own fiction of this decade. In Possession, for instance, her use of colour is decidedly conventional; a typical passage is the one where Maud's vividly coloured flat provides the reader with a clue to her hidden passionate nature (58).

What colour lacks for Byatt is a sense of well-understood order which she can apply to human and intellectual situations with authority. As Charles Riley notes in Color Codes, a study which is unusual in its notice of Byatt's work on colour in Still Life, she "continually sets up color as the benchmark of artistic energy and purity" (271), especially as exemplified in the works of Van Gogh. But she finds that "to harness color is not a simple task" (272). Riley describes her ambitious efforts to circumscribe and systematize colour as "anxious" and "chafing" (271). Geometry has an ancient set of formulae which are dependable, provable; colour's laws are still being debated. And colour's human associations are far more disputable. Green, for example, commonly signals growth and optimism, but in the Franz Schubert/Wilhelm Müller song "Die Liebe Farbe" ("The Beloved Colour"), green is death.

Byatt and David Royle are intrigued and pleased by chaos theory, the study of "amazingly rich, even bizarre patterns" in nature, "clouds, waves, flames, weather — which at first [appear] to be totally random" ("The Ambition of Art" 43, 42). Colour is more resistant to this solidification into law. Locke's belief in our passive reception of colour and Newton's in the intrinsic colour properties of objects have been proven inadequate. Goethe and others speculated on the way the brain creates colours — and, strikingly, illusions. As Oliver Sacks says, colour theorists now know "that colors are not 'out there' in the world, nor (as classical theory held) an automatic correlate of

wavelength, but, rather are *constructed by the brain*" (An Anthropologist on Mars 24). Exactly how this is accomplished is still unknown.

Byatt's need for colour to contain order – hinted at in Possession, where Maud's allegiance to the colour green confers coherence on her personality (44) – is ultimately not satisfied. Like Smilla, a woman who loves mathematics because it is more trustworthy and permanent than human relations in Peter Høeg's 1993 novel Smilla's Sense of Snow, Byatt and her characters crave stability, certainty, and, if possible, purity. Mathematics for Høeg and geometric forms for the early Byatt provide this sort of completion and balance, an order which ultimately allows for the possibility of limitlessness and essential truths. Colour has the advantage of being more closely allied to people (since it is constructed in the brain) and Byatt's colour fiction (from Still Life on) is more character-driven, more emotional. But this closer link with the human realm yokes colour more closely to words, the realm Byatt was attempting to counter. The wordy Babel Tower attests to our ancient dependence on words as being profound and unavoidable.

The shifting allegiance from geometry to colour in Still Life is temporary, and ultimately misleading. In most of her recent fiction, Byatt's primary allegiance rests with words. Two of the epigraphs to Still Life are from Proust, who, with Joyce, is surely the most word-obsessed writer of the twentieth century. The first of these declares confidence in the ability of words to present a small clear and common image of things ("*Les mots nous presentent des choses une petite image claire et usuelle*"). In Possession bright colours merely communicate "primitive childhood expectations" for Roland Michell (291); colours, supposedly, remind us of comforting, basic objects, of fairy-tale images. For Roland to gain maturity and happiness, he must learn to strip himself of abstraction and the anxiety of influence, make lists of words untainted by theory, and write poems using those words. This actually works; Roland instantly wins romantic fulfillment and career advancement because of his commitment to plain, pure words.

Increasingly, Byatt's use of colour is as an object of aesthetic contemplation. In The Matisse Stories, colours are allowed to just *be* in ways they formerly were not. Byatt's intention here is to attempt a mimicry of painting, to contemplate colours and forms as elements in and of themselves. The paintings of the Impressionists are frequently mentioned in Byatt's recent works; impressionism emphasizes the act of vision itself. But what happens when vision itself becomes the object of attention? Does it mean that the goal of transcendence has been rejected, or is concentration on the act of seeing capable of leading beyond, to a higher level? Derek Jarman writes of the excruciating power of the visual symbol: "From the bottom of your heart, pray to be released from image" (15). Matisse claimed that he believed in God when he was painting (Jazz 102). But for Byatt, attempting to work the power of the visual into *fiction*, transcendence is more doubtful. Transcendence for her is a possibility only when shapes or colours are pure and exact; since colours are not yet understood and additionally must be swallowed up in language in order to appear in fiction, they fail.

Byatt's reason for abandoning form is less clear. Capturing geometry in words is problematic, although less so than with colour, and Byatt's attempts are confident and ambitious. The shapes that Marcus Potter and Henry Severell see as projections on their inner landscapes are communicated with some success to the reader – yet it must be noted that surely this varies from reader to reader, depending on one's own ability to create mental images. One can only speculate that the death of Byatt's son in 1972 prompted a rejection of whatever faith she formerly had, and a need to develop new systems. (She wrote very little in the decade following Charles Byatt's death.) Additionally, however extraordinary Marcus's and Henry's visions are, the danger they court is equally remarkable. Their search for knowledge pushes them to the limits of human endurance; the extremity of their experiences places them beyond human companionship, nearly in the realm of madness.

Finally, fiction demands the presence of characters, and one of Byatt's firmest convictions is that character is opaque; she agrees with Iris Murdoch's insistence in "Against Dryness" that "what we require is a renewed sense of the difficulty and complexity of the moral life and the opacity of persons." Opacity, ironically, is by definition a visual quality – or, more accurately, a description of the impossibility of clear vision. Murdoch's "respect for the contingent" and for "the real impenetrable human person" (20) is evidenced in most of Byatt's fiction since Still Life, where the search for order and transcendence was laid to rest with Stephanie Potter. But Byatt's fascination with the rules and possibilities of visual language resurfaces from time to time, signs of a search for order without meaning which seems both foolhardy and courageous. Like the characters in Julian Barnes's Staring at the Sun, who seek revelation in doing what the title suggests, but probably find only death, Byatt's characters continue to seek out the significance of vision, even amidst their loss of faith in the enterprise.

Chapter 5: Visual Art: Van Gogh and Matisse

For good painting is nothing but a copy of the perfections of God and a recollection of His painting. . . .

Michelangelo (1475-1564)

You don't understand
 Nor care to understand about my art,
 But you can hear at least when people speak:
 And that cartoon, the second from the door
 – It is the thing, Love! so such things should be –
 Behold Madonna! I am bold to say.
 I can do with my pencil what I know,
 What I see, what at bottom of my heart
 I wish for, if I ever wish so deep –

Robert Browning, “Andrea del Sarto” (1855)

Like the characters in Henry James's The Spoils of Poynton (1897), the people of A. S. Byatt's fiction are judged by their responses to visual art. The reader is expected to discern personality based on works and artists associated with certain characters; additionally, Byatt uses paintings and, less frequently, sculptures to further her thematic exploration of the articulation of imagination and knowledge. Is there a way paintings appeal to the spectator that is superior to speech or writing? For Byatt, the answer is a qualified yes, especially in her work of the 1980s. Can the attributes of painted or mentally visualized knowledge be successfully introduced into or fused with aspects of the verbal realm? Here, the response is more troubled. In Still Life, Byatt's novel most intimately concerned with visual art, Vincent Van Gogh and Stephanie Potter Orton are adept in both fields – they have highly developed visual imaginations and are verbally articulate as well. (Stephanie's skill with language is jeopardized by family life, but when she is introduced in The Virgin in the Garden she is a successful literature teacher and an

insightful analyst of Keats and Wordsworth.) Both suffer shocking, violent deaths at young ages, when the potential of their dual ways of knowing is just being explored.

In recent years, Byatt's expectations of visual knowledge, or of verbal/visual fusion, have been reduced. Her book The Matisse Stories uses the bold simplification of Matisse as a model for a minimal and vivid style of representation (and to explore the ramifications of Matisse's depictions of women). But the ambitious goal of formulating something akin to a poetics of vision and word has been, apparently, abandoned. Intriguingly, both Matisse and Van Gogh were artists who engaged with religion in unconventional and curious ways, and their ambivalent spirituality suits Byatt's own ambivalence admirably. Matisse's reflection on God in Jazz illuminates the faith of Van Gogh and Byatt as well: "*Si je crois en Dieu? Oui, quand je travaille*" (102). When Byatt quotes this in the story "The Chinese Lobster," she problematizes it immediately, by having a character recall, "I think he also said, 'I am God when I work' " (The Matisse Stories 132). Byatt's contemplation of vision, language, and religion, as filtered through her exploration of specific painters and paintings, has resulted in some of her most engaging and colourful fiction. What she has accomplished of her larger goal – a meditation on or a striving after a "*paradis perdu* in which thought and language and things were naturally and indissolubly linked" (Passions of the Mind 9) – remains to be seen.

§ § §

In Babel Tower, Frederica Potter, A. S. Byatt's most word-driven character, takes a job in the 1960s teaching literature in London at the "Samuel Palmer School of Art and Craft." (Byatt taught at the Central School of Art and Design in the same era.) The

students and some of the teachers are in revolt against the art of the past. Frederica is unusual among Byatt characters in that she has no particular affinity for visual art, but in the course of the three Potter novels written to date she is given a series of art history and appreciation lessons, which are revealing about the author's aesthetic biases.

In Babel Tower, Frederica visits the studio of one of the painting teachers, Desmond Bull, and attempts to interpret his work. Bull shows her rows of coloured pebbles, which he tells her are representative of houses on his mother's street. Frederica says, "It's a row of *stones*. . . . Can it mean anything to me without your talking?" (231). While looking at Bull's erasure canvases, abstract colours covering figurative and cubist underpaintings, Frederica remarks that they are "very *theoretical*" (232). Finally, viewing Bull's mask paintings, which combine flat patterns of colour and bits of masks, feet, and hands, Frederica has a breakthrough.

She has been in the Art School long enough not to try to convert it into narrative, although the masked figures half-invite this. . . .

"It's about the impossibility of figurative painting," says Bull.

"About what it feels like to *be* a human body in an abstract world," says Frederica, cleverly, catching his thought. (233)

Frederica's foray into the world of postmodern art reveals Byatt's intense curiosity about all kinds of art, but the slightly mocking tone she adopts when discussing the 1960s indicates that her sympathies lie with representation and order.

Notwithstanding her halfhearted attempts at Burroughs-inspired literary collages in the course of the novel, Frederica respects tradition, and allies herself with the few in the pop-art era who still admire the beauty and precision of Vermeer and Brueghel (228, 441). But she is also intrigued by experimentation, especially with colour; "It's alive, here," she says on first entering the Palmer School (166). Eventually, she will reject the

excesses of 1960s art, leaving a performance-art-type “Happening” in disgust at the novel’s end (616). As Frederica says of an earlier performance piece, “There is *not enough point* to all this, or else I am missing something” (443).

Byatt’s loyalty is to earlier styles of art – impressionism, post-impressionism, and early modernism in particular – and she believes that the epistemological and optical questions raised in the time of Monet, Seurat, Gauguin, Van Gogh, Picasso, and Matisse are still compelling and apposite. If we compare the Desmond Bull episode in Babel Tower with a similar and less satirical scene featuring a younger Frederica, this can be readily understood. In The Virgin in the Garden, the first of the projected four novels featuring her family, she is instructed by Alexander Wedderburn to appreciate Rodin and Rose Period Picasso.¹ In this earlier novel, turn-of-the-century art earns a respectful tone (104-106). For Alexander, sharing views of his favourite art works is “next to giving gifts.” He actually achieves self-knowledge through his knowledge of Picasso’s Boy With A Pipe. The art lesson is so enlightening for Frederica that it makes her behave, unusually, with “grace” (105).

Usually, there is a linguistic agenda for the study of visual art. Byatt and her characters read paintings in an attempt to learn the language of art, in order that they may adopt its most vivid qualities for written and spoken language, as when Alexander in Still Life describes his lover Elinor as “lovely repeated ovals and rounds” (167), comparing her to a Matisse or Picasso nude. But occasionally, there is more at stake, and the characters strive to go beyond the superficial forms and colours of paintings. Alexander

¹ In Still Life, Byatt writes that Family of Saltimbanques and Boy With a Pipe, Alexander’s reproductions, are works of Picasso’s Blue Period (1900-1904), but in fact both paintings were painted in the more optimistic Rose Period, in 1905. See Still Life, page 57.

Wedderburn in Still Life will immerse himself in a study of Van Gogh in an attempt to find meanings for his own life, as will the novel's zealous and imposing narrator, who pursues the Van Gogh inquiry to greater lengths than Alexander does. Several characters in The Matisse Stories approach the paintings of Matisse with something of the same seriousness, but the results are very different, in proportion with the minimalist means used to achieve them and with the less anguished painter who inspired the stories.

When Byatt uses visual art to delineate the personalities of her characters, the results are, at the most basic level, similar to the way she sometimes uses colour: paintings provide shorthand for character analysis. For example, Frederica notes that an actress in The Virgin in the Garden reminds her of the "Tenniel illustration of Alice as serpent" (132), and an embrace between two characters is seen as "a straining parody of Rodin's Baiser" (329). In Still Life Frederica and her sister Stephanie, as feminists struggling to lead independent lives, react negatively to a Henry Moore sculpture of a woman with a small head, "like a powerful staring doll," while her erect male partner stands with head "raised to the sky" (277). Frederica, whose visual acuity is strangely variable,² notices as a teenager that "Alexander was leaning classically against the proscenium arch, one leg across the other at an elegant angle she was later to note in Hilliard's decorous lover behind the delicate pale roses" (Virgin 72). Visual art is accorded a place of privilege; it is treated as being relatively stable and reliable in its explanations of the world, as books also are, and as human beings are not. As she does in

² Byatt has said that most of her characters are based to varying degrees on herself (Dusinberre interview 190, Kenyon 14, Wachtel 1993: 87), and she has explained the highly visual nature of her own imagination in her essay "Still Life/Nature morte" (Passions of the Mind 14). Thus, although Frederica Potter is supposed to have a predominantly verbal sensibility, occasionally she has a keen visual insight, which seems out of keeping. See Still Life, page 317, for another such example, when she is perceptive about Van Gogh.

Possession, Byatt is refuting “The Death of the Author” (and artist) in her fiction about painting and painters; she defends the belief that painting, like writing, reveals and illuminates the personality of both artist and reader/viewer. Art is not “that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost,” as Roland Barthes would have it (Image, Music, Text 142).

Even so, the implications of knowing a person or an idea through paintings has troubling aspects. Consider that Byatt’s people often achieve insights about themselves and others through contemplation of two-dimensional, static works of art which necessarily abstract elements of human personality. The relationship between viewer and art is unidirectional – it can teach us, but we have nothing to offer in return. The distance and separation are unbreachable. A great love and knowledge of art does not bring happiness to James’s characters in The Spoils of Poynton; neither does a veneration of English painters in Peter Ackroyd’s English Music (1992) ameliorate the miserable lives of his impoverished mountebanks, one of whom can actually enter paintings. For the most part, Byatt does not offer explicit commentary on the folly of such a trusting dependence on art: her characters generally retain their ties to art and it is left to the reader to judge the worth of the relationship. But Byatt’s awareness of the dangers of this relation is shown in the 1995 story “A Lamia in the Cévennes,” in which a painter is given a choice between sensual pleasure and perfection in art; his choice of the latter is both idealistic and more than faintly inhuman.

Art works are also used by Byatt as ancillary, if not fundamental, plot elements. The Virgin in the Garden is the most heavily allusive and symbolic of Byatt’s novels, delving into the realms of history, literature, and cosmogony, and its art references have a

corresponding breadth. The action of the novel revolves about Alexander Wedderburn's verse play about Elizabeth I. Alexander's struggle to balance realism and allegory in his drama, *Astraea*, is mirrored in the presentation of allegorical paintings throughout the novel. Matthew Crowe's houseful of valuable Renaissance paintings – depictions of seduction and murder, Diana and Actaeon, Hyacinth and Apollo – leave Frederica “oppressed” but “interested” (144). When Crowe expounds upon the lines and curves of the paintings' compositions and offers symbolic readings of them – the flaying of Marsyas is “the moment of the birth of the new consciousness” (*Virgin* 143) – Frederica argues that she just sees death and cruelty (141, 142). However, allegory is not entirely derided in the novel. Alexander responds warmly to certain allegorical paintings of Elizabeth I, particularly the Darnley portrait in the National Portrait Gallery, which he reads doubly, as a simultaneous portrait of a real woman and of a state.

It was so clear, thought Alexander, that there had been someone real there to be portrayed. But she was like Shakespeare, a figure whose over-abundant energy attracts dubiously mixed emotions, idolatry and iconoclasm, love and fear, and the accompanying need to diminish and reduce their strangeness and ordinariness by reductive myths and pointless “explanations.” (*Virgin* 13)

The portrait which Alexander admires is one of the least iconographical of the Elizabethan pictures. Frederica is shown another Elizabeth, which she dislikes, at Crowe's house, in which the queen's dress is the map of England and she “seem[s] to be squatting,” a cornucopia ridiculously obtruding from between her knees (*Virgin* 139). Byatt's characters are fascinated by iconography, although it is nearly always found to be wanting. Alexander's play, which initially aimed “at a vigorous realism” (17), eventually is described as “nervous and glittering, adjectival and highly metaphorical” (101). It is mounted as a Pageant and, in later years, Alexander is embarrassed by it. In the short

story “Art Work,” an artist whose neo-realist paintings are “about the infinite terror of the brilliance of colour” (The Matisse Stories 72) is distressed by a gallery owner who attempts to read them allegorically. The artifice of allegory is never entirely dismissed, however. The arch style of Angels and Insects owes much to allegory. The passive, pale Alabasters (doomed, bloodless aristocrats) and William Adamson (“everyman”) assist Byatt’s investigation of the relation between human and animal civilizations.

§ § §

In the Potter novels, the characters who are the most visually inclined are closely associated with specific paintings. Not surprisingly, Marcus Potter, whose visual language is that of geometry, is not associated with art at all, as his way of seeing the world is presented as being elemental, not aesthetic. But Stephanie Potter is associated with several images, real and imagined, all of them depictions of ideals, albeit troubled ones. In chapter 8 of The Virgin in the Garden she is observed teaching Keats’s poem “Ode on a Grecian Urn.” Stephanie tells her students that this is the poem “she most care[s] for” (78). She not only values the language, but savours the visual landscape of the poem, and wants her students to attempt to “see” a real Urn and to reflect on the appealing impossibility of picturing the unseen artifact. “They talked, as Stephanie had meant them to, about a verbal *thing*, made of words so sensual and words not sensual at all, like beauty and truth” (78). More concretely, Stephanie, upon learning of her first pregnancy, is discovered by Daniel to resemble a painting of the Annunciation. “You look like all those pictures of the Virgin at her desk, and just as stunned as if you’d seen an angel” (297).

Stephanie is also associated with the pagan goddess of beauty and love, Venus. Chapter 18 of The Virgin in the Garden, narrating the courtship of Daniel and Stephanie, is entitled “Anadyomene,” and although no specific painting is explicitly invoked, there are paintings by Titian and Ingres, both called Venus Anadyomene, which come to mind. The birth of Aphrodite/Venus in the waves, springing forth from the semen and castrated genitals of the god Uranus, is a powerful image well-known to Stephanie.³ (By using the less familiar “Anadyomene” appellation, Byatt is, I think, asking us not to recall the more famous Birth of Venus by Botticelli, a more innocent version of the myth.) While attempting to visualize Keats’s Grecian Urn, the image of the “foam-born” Venus “involuntarily” comes to Stephanie’s mind instead. “Not relevant, her judgment said” (77-78), yet the image recurs in the title of the novel’s most important chapter, “Anadyomene,” when Daniel and Stephanie walk on a stormy beach at Filey and make the decision to marry.

The associations are complex and contradictory. Stephanie is compared with a goddess, but one born, un-mothered, out of wholly male sexuality, and one whose identity is completely erotic. The identification of her with the Virgin Mary and with the unseen Urn underscores the limited, unreal rôle Stephanie is being fitted for. Her introduction to passion on Filey beach, by way of Daniel’s forceful declaration, is a revelation to her, but it is also a partial rejection of the intellectual path she had been leading, as a scholar. Although Stephanie is not as radical as the postmodern feminists in Possession, who write contemptuously of Venus Anadyomene, “put together out of the

³Byatt says that Aphrodite was born from the dismembered body of Kronos/Saturn (Time), who was killed by his son, Zeus. She repeats this in Possession (266) and in her essay “Van Gogh, Death and Summer” (Passions of the Mind 327). Most collections of myths, however, say that Venus was born as a

crud of male semen scattered on the deep" (266), we are still surprised that she is so willing to adopt the traditional "Venus" role of lover/wife/mother. So is her father Bill, who throws books at her on the announcement of her engagement (Virgin 199). Stephanie's earlier rejection of the Venus image and that "not very nice foam" (79), in favour of the cerebral and aesthetic perfection of the Urn, had been her attempt to stake out high intellectual ground. In sum, the visual ideas clustered around Stephanie are a mixed blessing, particularly the Venus images. The blonde Venus of the Ingres painting, who more closely resembles Byatt's description of Stephanie, is lovely, calm, but slightly vacuous. In another allusion to a Venus work, Stephanie deplores the Venus de Milo for its "blind and horrible empty eyes" (69). A woman associated with such impossible immortality and bland perfection would not seem to be long for this world, especially in the work of a realist like Byatt (however tempered her realism is). This suspicion is, of course, borne out.

A number of art works also gather around Alexander Wedderburn in The Virgin in the Garden. In his rooms, we are told, Alexander has several prints displayed, including two Picassos, the Family of Saltimbanques and Boy With a Pipe. He also has a large photograph of Rodin's sculpture Danaide. Picasso's circus figures are not given much consideration in the text, but the other two works are offered up as evidence of Alexander's sensual but isolated personality.

It was, he said, Rodin's Danaide. He went and stood under it, studying minutely what her distracted gaze had skated over the gloss of.

"Look what a line. Look."

He ran his index finger along the indicated line of recumbent marble spine, under the marble-silky skin, a half-moon from abased nape

result of the murder committed by Kronos himself, of his father Uranus (see Morford and Lenardon, Graves).

to rounded buttocks vanishing and shining into the black. An ambiguous gesture, purely instructive, purely sensual. Frederica watched the moving finger and saw the statue. (104)

Alexander's admiration for Rodin's nude woman is aesthetic, erotic in a detached way, and intellectual. Unlike his lover Jenny, who sees in the sculpture only a "woman's white despair," Alexander reads his favourite art works on several levels, none of them emotional. He sees Picasso's Boy as sexually ambiguous; it is described as Alexander's "private joke" and "a mode of knowledge" that he keeps to himself and does not share. The Boy fills Alexander with "vicious envy" because he "could be anything, or more probably everything" (105-106). Alexander's eroticism is almost entirely played out in his relationship with works of art; with Jenny he is impotent, with Frederica titillated and frustrated, with Stephanie only intellectually engaged. Alexander's private thoughts and feelings about his Rodin and Picasso reproductions – images of isolation and enigmatic personality – are never completely revealed to other characters in The Virgin in the Garden, but only, via the narrator, to the reader. Later, Alexander will become wholly obsessed with Vincent Van Gogh, will have a son named after the painter with a woman he does not love, and will neither acknowledge the child nor pursue a relationship with him. Similarly his insights about Van Gogh are revealed only to the reader. Paintings underscore both what is appealing about Alexander and what is lacking in him.

§ § §

Byatt has created several fictional painters, and two of them – Robin in "Art Work" and Bernard in "A Lamia in the Cévennes" – were discussed in the previous chapter. A third is Joshua Riddell in "Precipice-Encurled." Unlike Robin and Bernard, who sacrifice personal life to the demands of art, Joshua is balanced. Devoted to the

problems of painting and drawing – “How to draw softness, and youth, and sheer *pleasantness*?” (Sugar 197) – he nevertheless has time to fall in love with Juliana Fishwick, the daughter of the family he is visiting in the Italian Apennines. The year is 1882; Joshua has just seen Monet’s Vétheuil in the Fog in Paris and his ideas about “the steady, the definite, the luminous” (206) are changing.

Joshua shares with Byatt’s most astute characters the quality of being able to *see* thoroughly. He is perceptive about Juliana, “seeing her intrigue and anxiety both clearly” (200). He is able to extend this vision, as a gift, to her: “She had looked at the chestnut trees, suddenly seeing them, because he asked her to” (199). Joshua is both an artist of his time, and of the future. A reader of Ruskin, he has absorbed Ruskin’s contention that “clarity of vision was the essence of truth, virtue, and good art, which were, in this, one” (205). He believes that reality and personality can be captured on the page, and still believes in the soul:

What a complicated thing is this meeting of eyes, which disturbs the air between two still faces, which has its effects on the heartbeat, the hair on the wrists, the flow of blood. You can understand, Joshua thought, why poets talk of arrows, or of hooks thrown. He said, “How odd it is to look at someone, after all, and to see their soul looking back again. How can a pencil catch that? How do we know we see each other?” (201-202)

But Joshua also sees that new perceptions of reality and the self are possible, and this possibility excites him. He sees some aspects of visual art as ends in themselves: “The shadow cast on the flesh by the circumference of the hat was another pleasant problem in tone and shading” (200). Uncertain about his future relations with Juliana, he sets off alone on a sketching journey in the mountains, to contemplate his next action. There he “would look at the land beyond habitation” (204), the future of painting. Once he begins to sketch, his personality is subsumed in the task of “recording the effects of

these ashy whitenesses, of the reddish iron-stains in the stone” (208). Portentously, “the notation of things seen [became] no more than the flow of his blood” (209), simultaneously elevating the status of painted objects and diminishing the human element, in a complex reciprocity.

Joshua ignores the danger of an approaching storm, choosing instead to see it as an artistic challenge: “the speed of its approach was beautiful” (210). He is consumed by the problem of light; one of his last thoughts relates to how Monet “trapped light in his surface” (210). When Joshua dies, he is attacked by the “impenetrable white darkness” of the storm (211); he falls “still thinking of Ruskin and Monet” (211).

His death is a result of his devotion to the act of representation and his (momentary) disregard for nature and human fragility. Like Stephanie Potter, Joshua Riddell stands for abundant possibility: he respects the past and the future, he is open to art and love. It is admirable, indeed necessary, to seek *more*, the story declares; it is also, both for Stephanie and Joshua, fatal. The punishment is disproportionate, cruel. Is the ambition to see with precise clarity and originality so insupportable that “the vanishing between instants of all that warmth and intelligence and aspiration” (211) is warranted?

§ § §

In The Shadow of the Sun, Byatt’s first novel, paintings are not specifically invoked as they are in the Potter novels. But the influence of painting is evident. Romantic poets and painters are invoked in the character of Henry Severell, the visionary writer. We know that Henry reads and admires Blake (59), and the physical description of Henry could be of a muscular Old Testament figure drawn by Blake:

He had his head down like the bull, and, with the curling mass of his beard and hair obscuring his face from this angle altogether, presented something of the same solid, blind, purposeful front. His speed, or some earlier gesture, had whipped up his hair into two great curved peaks, not unlike horns, which added to the illusion, and the whole of him, silver hair and white garment – his shirt was outside his trousers now, like a tabard – shone in some strange way, with a white glitter, as though he was giving off a concentrated light of his own and not merely the refracted light of the still sun over the hill. (57)

Henry, like Blake but with less faith, has converted Judaeo-Christian beliefs to suit his idiosyncratic purposes. He is given to shouting out old hymns (120), contemplates his own versions of the Fall of humanity (125, 279), and is compared to Samson (214, 279). Byatt uses Blake for his memorable pictorial and dramatic qualities, and has limited interest in him as a thinker. Blake is mocked in Babel Tower as one of the heroes of the chaotic art school where Frederica teaches. His Romantic excesses are seen by Frederica and the narrator as foolish and “unintentionally comic”; but it is true that Frederica’s objections refer primarily to Blake’s “ugly” Prophetic poetry (162-163). Byatt’s use of Blake in her first novel serves to show that Henry Severell is a man out of time, a formidable anachronism, a prophet with a lost message. Unlike Van Gogh and Matisse, whose paintings Byatt considers to be permanently relevant, Romantic painters are usually used by Byatt to demonstrate incomplete aesthetic growth or inordinate passion.

One painter is given respectful treatment as an influence in The Shadow of the Sun, and that is Blake’s disciple, Samuel Palmer. Although Palmer was also eccentric and visionary, his minutely-observed, spiritually charged landscapes of the English countryside meet Byatt’s approval more than Blake’s fantastic Biblical figures. Palmer is not directly referred to in the main text of The Shadow of the Sun, although he is in the retrospective introduction; he *is* mentioned in both Babel Tower, where he has a school

named after him, and in Still Life. The reference in the latter is worth careful consideration:

Samuel Palmer, an asthmatic, managed both to contain a visionary stook of straw, a tree full of fruit, a bright moon and a white cloud in a cage or net of dark outlines and to suggest that these things consist only of differing brilliances of pure light, defined by the eye in the linear mapping of their periphery. (197)

The Palmer passage in Still Life occurs in a chapter about Marcus, a different kind of visionary asthmatic. Byatt cites Palmer as an artist who captures both spirituality and plain ocular phenomena, a painter whose works seem to be contradictory – or to combine antitheses. Are they about the deeper meanings within seen objects, or about the material qualities of light and the bare act of seeing – or both? The Still Life passage also helps us locate Palmer’s influence in The Shadow of the Sun, written over 20 years previously. Henry’s visions in the fields are Palmeresque: “He thought, amongst the sheaves, which in some lights were almost bodiless, cages for light, of Joseph; the stars were up now, like lights off metal” (63). The cages of light and darkness, the sheaves, the moon and stars recur in each novel in a way that can be read as otherworldly, but is never definitely so. Like Marcus Potter, Henry Severell struggles to reconcile the jarring meanings of what he sees and what he feels the unseen spiritual worth of such vision to be.

In her introduction, written in 1991, to the reprint of The Shadow of the Sun, Byatt named Samuel Palmer as a guiding influence on the book: “The visual image that always went with the idea of ‘The Shadow of the Sun’ was that of Samuel Palmer’s Cornfield with the Evening Star” (xv). In some editions of the novel, Palmer’s painting is on the cover. It is remarkably like Van Gogh landscapes such as Starry Night and, especially, Road with Cypress and Star, anticipating their style by nearly 60 years. In

Palmer and in Van Gogh, Byatt treasures the treatment of light and the otherworldly quality of representations which are nevertheless rooted in reality. Her tentative steps toward incorporating Palmer into her writing in the early 1960s will eventually become the massive undertaking of making Van Gogh an integral part of the fabric of Still Life in 1985.

The Game, published in 1967, is dominated by the spirit of the Pre-Raphaelites, painters whom Byatt does not seem to admire any more than she does the Romantics, but who are usefully suggestive of the jewel-coloured, mythic world of the doomed protagonist, Cassandra Corbett. The Corbett family actually owns “a huge Burne-Jones painting of knights, ladies, hounds and horses” (34); Cassandra and her sister Julia, the narrator reports, resemble models for Burne-Jones or Rossetti (45). Cassandra is immersed in Arthurian studies; she reads “Scott, Tennyson, Morris and Malory” because they are “brightly-coloured” (18); she is frequently compared to the Lady of Shalott and associated with weaving motifs (141, 225, 230). Cassandra’s neurotic fellow-sufferer, Simon Moffitt, lives as a child with a painting that is a “huge Märtyrdom of St. Sebastian; the saint’s limbs were elongated and female, his mouth somewhere between pouting and secretively smiling, his flesh precisely punctured by the arrows so that the wounds recalled the raised red mouths of rubber suckers” (92). While not Pre-Raphaelite, Sebastian’s painting is certainly histrionic. The impression arising from the art mentioned in The Game is that it is sensual but unhealthy.

This kind of moralizing about art influences is absent from later use of Pre-Raphaelite painters. The use of Pre-Raphaelite art in Possession is scenic and sensual. Possession effectively uses an image by Burne-Jones on the American Vintage paperback

cover. The Pre-Raphaelite circle is treated with more respect in Possession; Christina Rossetti serves as one of the models for Christabel LaMotte.

In Possession, Roland watches Maud unbind her hair while they are on a picnic.

And then she put down her head and shook it from side to side, and the heavy hair flew up, and the air got into it. Her long neck bowed, she shook her head faster and faster, and Roland saw the light rush towards it and glitter on it, the whirling mass, and Maud inside it saw a moving sea of gold lines, waving, and closed her eyes and saw scarlet blood. (296)

To me, this scene reads like an enactment of William Holman Hunt's painting The Lady of Shalott, in which the Lady's hair swirls madly about her head as she stands, partly in shadow, partly in light, trapped within the frame of the tapestry she is weaving. However, Maud's situation is not nearly so dire as the Lady's. A more dramatically apposite use of a Pre-Raphaelite image of doom is the mad scene at the conclusion of The Virgin in the Garden. Lucas Simmonds in a pond, singing, his hair "very carefully dressed with flowers" (398), is an Ophelia painting with gender reversal. (Richard Todd disagrees with me, seeing Lucas as Lear [A. S. Byatt: Writers and their Work 21].) There are versions of Ophelia by John Millais and Arthur Hughes which could have served as models.

Possession also features a number of vivid still lifes in words: a picnic is lovingly rendered in primary colours (291-92); Maud's living room is sketched in bright white and jewel tones (58). In Possession, the book written to please – "I wanted to write a comedy and I wanted to keep it light" (Wachtel 1993: 80) – these word-paintings are minimalist, solid, and devoid of the complex significations belonging to, for example, the allegories of The Virgin in the Garden. In Virgin, there are verbal still lifes, but they are more florid, as in a series of manic department store tableaux (190-194) and Marcus's hallucinatory, Bosch-like view of a butcher shop, running to nearly 1000 words (92-95).

The still lifes and portraits of Still Life are more restrained, as in a paragraph describing three characters grouped before a mirror as if sitting for a group portrait called “the quintessence of Cambridge” (263). Like D. H. Lawrence in The Rainbow, Byatt uses pictorial strategies to “retard the movement of our reading,” as Keith Alldritt says, to experience “the heightened consciousness that life does not ordinarily allow” (129, 86). Still Life, however, goes beyond the use of paintings to revitalize our imaginative strategies and to animate the prose. This novel takes on the nature of visual language itself, what it relates about the nature of representation and faith in God, and its connection to the verbal language which dominates Byatt’s fiction of the 1960s and 1970s and will reign again in the “papery” world that Byatt has described as the setting of Babel Tower (Wachtel 1996).

§ § §

In an interview when the second Potter novel was published, A. S. Byatt said:

I found that Vincent Van Gogh had rather replaced Queen Elizabeth as the sort of guiding presence in the centre of my thinking. Well, they’re not so different. They’re both rather fierce. They’re both terribly solitary. They’re both unmarried and unmarriageable and carry slightly difficult areas of prickly power with them. (Byatt/Murdoch video interview)

Van Gogh had not been a presence in the previous 20 years of Byatt’s writing, nor had Byatt written at all of impressionism or post-impressionism. But with the markedly different intentions Byatt stated for Still Life, there was a need for a change from the often florid and cerebral influences found in The Virgin in the Garden, from the Renaissance and Romantic artists whose shadows fall on the books of the 1960s and 1970s. Byatt planned a plain and vivid book, a “biological” book (Wachtel 1996) about pure events: life, birth, death – and colour. After three highly intellectual novels, powered

by words and metaphors, Byatt had become “frightened of the involuntary way language took over” (Dusinberre interview 183). With the human body, in birth, sex and death, the focus of the novel, Byatt developed an interest in late nineteenth-century painters who were exploring the way that body sees, instead of only the material objects seen.

She decided that the second Potter novel would be written “in a very spare language without any metaphor at all” (Dusinberre interview 194). She uses Vincent Van Gogh as a way of exploring the possibility of pure sight and direct expression. Van Gogh emerges, nearly, as a character in the book, although he is somewhat disembodied: the playwright Alexander Wedderburn and the narrator engage with Van Gogh’s ideas and contemplate his letters and paintings. They are much less involved with his psychological problems and biography. It is Van Gogh’s world view and aesthetics that Byatt explores. Two chapters of the novel, “Figures of Speech,” chapter 14, and “The Yellow Chair,” chapter 28, are almost wholly about Van Gogh, and throughout Still Life Byatt discusses in some detail over 25 of his paintings.

In Vincent’s letters, he is constantly exhorting his brother Theo to “look” and to “see.” “*You ought to have seen it this week when it rained,*” he writes in 1876 (letter 67, emphasis in original), and he imperiously and enthusiastically tells Theo to seek out, *look at* certain lithographs and books.⁴ Van Gogh also uses forms of “to see” in an attempt to enforce understanding of his thoughts and feelings.⁵ In early 1890, he writes: “What was

⁴ I use the standard system of numbering Van Gogh’s letters begun by his sister-in-law Jo: letters to Theo are just given numbers, while letters to Emile Bernard are prefaced with “B” and to Vincent’s sister Wilhemina, “W.”

⁵ English translations of Van Gogh’s letters have, however, overemphasized the language of “seeing” which he uses. For example, in Mark Roskill’s 1963 selection Van Gogh appears to use phrases like “look here” which often turn out to be, in the original French letters, phrases like “*eh bien,*” “*voilà,*” and “*écoutez*” (letters 418 and 573). The visual imperatives of Van Gogh’s letters are nevertheless worth remarking, since a large number of readers know them in translation.

to be done – *you see*, I generally try to be fairly cheerful, but my life is also threatened at the very root, and my steps are also wavering” (letter 649, emphasis mine).⁶

For Byatt, despite her erudition, the importance of *just looking* cannot be underestimated, and she treats Van Gogh as the exemplar of this theme, which recurs throughout her work. Matty in “Morpho Eugenia” demands of William Adamson: “*Look at me. . . . I only wanted you to see me*” (Angels and Insects 157, emphasis in original). In Still Life Frederica Potter stops loving her teacher Raphael Faber because of his failure to see: “He had judged Alexander without *seeing* Alexander, and Frederica . . . withdrew [her] tolerance” (318, emphasis in original). In a 1983 interview Byatt was asked if she was “conscious of a battle between real people and images” in The Virgin in the Garden. Byatt answers,

Yes, but there is a third element, which is the rest of creation, neither people nor images, just what is there. Painters know naturally that the artist is concerned with that third element, but writers don’t always. I think it is very important to see what is there before any of it becomes related. (Dusinberre interview 182)

Van Gogh is a talisman, a symbol of plain seeing in a book which purports to do without symbols. This plan works, and it doesn’t, as Byatt admits by the early stages of the novel: “Even the innocent eye does not simply receive light: it acts and orders” (Still Life 108). But Daniel Orton, for example, *is* solid and plain, seeing and naming things clearly. “He never now made a sermon from a metaphor, nor drew analogies: he preached examples, cases, lessons” (10). He comments that he names his daughter Mary “not for anyone. It just seemed the right name for a woman” (252). Other characters, however, are less successful.

⁶ “*Qu’y faire – voyez-vous, je cherche d’habitude à être de bonne humeur assez, mais ma vie à moi aussi est attaquée à la racine même, mon pas aussi est chancelant.*”

The authoritative simplicity of Van Gogh's images and letters, Alexander finds, cannot be facilely duplicated. Alexander sees Vincent's letters about his paintings as reaching a height of accuracy Alexander cannot achieve. For example, the painting Still Life: Blue Enamel Coffeepot, Earthenware and Fruit (which Byatt calls Breakfast Table), a key painting in the novel, is described by Vincent in an 1888 letter, and quoted by Byatt:

A coffee pot in blue enamel, a cup (on the left) royal blue and gold, a milk jug checkered light blue and white, a cup (on the right) white with blue and orange patterns on a plate of earthenware yellow-grey, a pot of barbotine or majolica blue with red, green, brown patterns, finally two oranges and three lemons; the table is covered with a blue cloth, the background yellow-green, thus six different blues and four or five yellows and oranges. (Still Life 167, letter 489)

She continues: "In Alexander's mind these colour-words sang like a poem, though not like any poem he could have written, in or out of his play" (167). Alexander is obsessed with the success of Van Gogh's painting of his simple yellow chair. "The man could both paint and name a chair," Alexander realizes (70), and he himself does not have the same authority in naming and painting. Antonin Artaud says, of Van Gogh's lucid descriptions of his paintings:

It seems so easy to write like that.
Well! Go ahead and try. And tell me, since you are not the author of a Van Gogh picture, whether you could describe it so simply, so succinctly, objectively, durably, validly, solidly, opaquely, massively, authentically and miraculously as in this little letter of his. (150)

Despite her initial declaration that Still Life aimed for the plainness and directness of sight, Byatt does not distrust words, as D. H. Lawrence does, for instance. In Women in Love Ursula and Birkin can only achieve happiness when words stop, when they touch each other with "fingers of silence upon silence" (361). Byatt has said that her stories of

Stephanie and Frederica Potter were meant as answers to Lawrence's Ursula and Gudrun (Hass interview). Like Lawrence, she does want to add a "moral and visual quality" to writing, the quality Keith Alldritt identifies with Lawrence (154); she also wants, as he did, to experiment with realism. But his need to break free from a dependence on words is less acute for Byatt; she wants it all, and in Vincent Van Gogh she sees an artist who seems to have it all.

§ § §

The fictional uses Byatt has for Van Gogh are unusual. She emphasizes the realist, not the expressionist, in Van Gogh, unlike Artaud, whose comprehension of Van Gogh's solidity, as above, is not typical and who more usually emphasizes the emotional, violent Vincent. Although she does not dwell on his psychology, she refuses to lose sight of Vincent as a person, the flesh-and-blood author of his works, in contrast with Heidegger and Derrida, who employ him (or, rather, his paintings of shoes) as an abstraction for their reflections on being and presence. However, if she had wanted an even plainer exemplar of the impressionist view of the physical world, she might have chosen Cézanne, who painted, as Rilke said approvingly (and Byatt's character Raphael Faber echoes), "Here it is," instead of "I love this here" (Rilke, Letters 311, Still Life 316, also quoted in Passions of the Mind 310). Later, as we will see, she does move in the direction of a simpler, saner representation when she turns her attention to Matisse. In Still Life, Byatt takes Vincent at his word, that he wanted to get at the truth of objects, of light, of colour, and she makes his electric personality of secondary importance. But she knows that, despite his stated intentions, metaphor and personality presents itself, subtly or obtrusively, in Vincent's work. The tangled matter of symbolism thwarts her desire to

find transparency in his images, and, she knows, goes a long way to explaining our attachment to him.

Van Gogh was uncomfortable with symbolic readings of his paintings (especially if they came from others), although he did not, entirely, deny them: he wrote to Émile Bernard in 1889 about painting a pine tree struck by lightning, as a “defeated proud man” (B21). But legions of critics have gone much further, seeing Vincent’s paintings and letters as the deeply symbolic productions of a hypersensitive, if not insane, personality. Vincent is seen as a messianic figure in the first article written about him, by Albert Aurier in 1890: “How would one explain him apart from this *idée fixe* that haunts his brain: the need for a man to arrive now, a messiah, a sower of truth, to regenerate our decrepit art and perhaps also our imbecile industrialist society?” (223). Theo Van Gogh and Émile Bernard helped spread the myth of the misunderstood martyr after Vincent’s suicide in July 1890 (Walther/Metzger 676). Among the famous declarations of Van Gogh’s status as martyr is Antonin Artaud’s: “we are all, like poor Van Gogh, suicides by society!” (155). Starry Night, says art critic Helen Gardner, is not a nightscape of sky and village but an “anticipation of cosmic disaster” (Art Through the Ages 787).

Van Gogh has been a popular subject for novels, poetry, and films, his famous self-portraits re-interpreted by other artists like Joe Fafard. In 1978, Robert Fagles published I, Vincent, an entire collection of poems based on Van Gogh’s paintings and life. In 1934, Irving Stone’s novel Lust for Life emphasized Vincent as a labourer, intent on forming links of solidarity with workers. Stone’s melodramatic version of Vincent’s mental illness has been influential; it inspired Vincente Minnelli’s highly-coloured film in 1956, and Kirk Douglas’s crazed intensity has been the benchmark for portrayals of

Vincent ever since. In 1944, Paul Eisler had taken a similar approach in his play Vincent, which bears some structural similarities to Alexander Wedderburn's play The Yellow Chair, especially in its use of scrims for projecting paintings and dividing the action on the stage. Eisler, like Stone – and unlike the fictional Alexander, whose play is criticized for *not* being about “social ferment” (Still Life 318) – sketches Vincent as a genuine friend of the common people, perhaps even as a political revolutionary. Again, in Eisler, the artist's mania is simplified, exaggerated. “Every picture was painted with the red of his heart's blood,” says Eisler in his preface (7). Vincent long ago ceased to be a personality and became an icon.

The histrionic Vincent who has entered the popular imagination is not the Vincent which A. S. Byatt uses. Vincent as political revolutionary is ignored. She does not unduly emphasize the severed ear, the religious fanaticism, the incarceration in an asylum, the suicide. Instead, she pays close attention to his paintings, particularly his less pretty still lifes, interiors, and landscapes (rather than his portraits and famous flower arrangements), and to his intentions as outlined in the famous letters to Theo, to Émile Bernard, and others. “What I should like to find out is the effect of an intenser blue in the sky,” Van Gogh writes in 1888; Byatt quotes this admiringly in Still Life (84). She treats him seriously as a thinker of subtlety and intellectual depth. Vincent is, for Byatt, one of the few people who can successfully speak two distinct kinds of language, the visual and the verbal. The dual creation of the letters and the paintings is Van Gogh's unique achievement. He has, Alexander Wedderburn realizes in Still Life, “two voices” (70). In his poem “Harvest,” Robert Fagles writes, as Van Gogh: “there are times when I cannot tell if I am writing drawing / or doing both.”

It is ironic that Van Gogh has been one of the most influential figures in modern and postmodern art, when conventional representation and narrative have disappeared from most canvases. Although Van Gogh rarely painted overt narratives, he had great respect for narrative painters (Delacroix, Millet, Daumier) and a profound reverence for books. "Admit also that the love of books is as sacred as the love of Rembrandt – I even think the two complement each other," he wrote in 1880 (letter 133). His lists of favourite books are startling: Harriet Beecher Stowe and Charles Dickens were read over and over. More predictably, he loved Zola, Balzac, Maupassant, Michelet, Hugo, and Shakespeare. He quoted profusely from poems in his letters, being a voracious reader of Christina Rossetti, Whitman, and Longfellow, although most editions of his letters have omitted the lengthy quotations as being irrelevant. The fiction of George Eliot, which he read in English, having taught himself several modern languages, was a great influence, as it has been for Byatt. In Van Gogh's "great, wise, intelligent letters," as Byatt calls them in her long essay "Van Gogh, Death and Summer" (*Passions of the Mind* 292), he commonly equates writers and painters, blurring the distinctions between their disciplines. He finds Rembrandt and Shakespeare complementary, for example, and similarly pairs Correggio with Michelet, Delacroix with Hugo (letter 133). For his own paintings, George Eliot was sometimes a correlate. He wrote to his sister Wil in 1889 about the painting of his bedroom at Arles: "I wanted to achieve an effect of simplicity of the sort one finds described in *Felix Holt*. . . . Doing a simple thing with bright colors is not at all easy. . . ." (W15). As is well known, complements in colour theory were vitally important to Van Gogh, and he seems to have reached outside the palette to see and create complementary patterns in literature as well.

Van Gogh's intentions, even near the end of his life, were remarkably realist, a point verified by Albert Boime's painstaking research on the accurate astronomical phenomena shown in Starry Night, seen from the asylum at Saint-Rémy in 1889. Van Gogh's lucidity, his method of painting nearly always from life and rarely from idea or memory (as Gauguin disastrously urged him), his admiration for realism in literature – these factors have been underestimated in Van Gogh studies which, Byatt says in her essay “Van Gogh, Death and Summer,” have become “a hagiography [of] the uncomprehended sufferer, or the flaming and bloody visionary” (Passions of the Mind 292). That “this dear zealot,” as Rilke called him (Letters 299), was a thinker, an artist intent on joining word and image in a new, meaningful form, is anathema to many. For Rilke,

that one can read Van Gogh's letters so well, that they contain so much speaks in fact against him, as it also speaks against him as a painter (when set beside Cézanne) that he intended this and that, knew it, had found it out; that blue summoned orange and green, red: that he, the inquisitive, secretly listening at his eye's interior, had heard such news in there. (317)

Among Byatt's several intentions in Still Life is to redirect us toward a respect for Van Gogh's realistic inclinations, to question the mainstream of Van Gogh criticism, and to accept him as a fellow literary artist. In emphasizing Van Gogh's realism, Byatt is also declaring her own allegiance.

It is important to understand the manner in which Van Gogh's paintings were literary. Although he admired the anecdotal paintings of Millet and Delacroix and periodical illustrators of the day like Thomas Nast, he believed the time for such obvious representations was past. He put it this way to Theo: “I am trying now to exaggerate the essential, and purposely leave the obvious things vague” (letter 490). He admired the

work of painters who were striving for reality which was simultaneously symbolic (letter 425). He did make copies of a few anecdotal paintings, First Steps (after Millet) and The Good Samaritan (after Delacroix), for example, but these are uncharacteristic, undertaken in the stressful conditions of life in the asylum at Saint-Rémy. More usually he deemed it sufficient to depend upon colour to tell a story, as in the famous Night Café, in which he “tried to express the terrible passions of humanity by means of red and green” (letter 533). Byatt reaches for similar effects in The Matisse Stories, which owe something to Van Gogh as well as Matisse. She downplays action in favour of a scenic method which lingers on colours and objects.

§ § §

Van Gogh was particularly determined not to paint Biblical stories, even though religious themes continued to be present in his work long after his break with the church occurred in 1880, as Tsukasa Ködera has demonstrated. The fact that his friends Gauguin and Bernard were painting scenes from the life of Christ disturbed Vincent’s northern Calvinist sensibilities and his distaste for obvious iconography. He chastised them roundly:

One can try to give an impression of anguish without aiming straight at the historic Garden of Gethsemane; . . . it is not necessary to portray the characters of the Sermon on the Mount in order to produce a consoling and gentle motif.

Oh! undoubtedly it is wise and proper to be moved by the Bible, but modern reality has got such a hold on us that, even when we attempt to reconstruct the ancient days in our thoughts abstractly, the minor events of our lives tear us away from our meditations. . . .

Sometimes by erring one finds the right road. Go make up for it by painting your garden just as it is. . . . (B21)

Van Gogh’s ideal realistic religious painter was Millet, who painted “the doctrine of Christ” (B8) but “never, or hardly ever, painted Biblical pictures” (B21). Vincent’s many

paintings of olive trees were meant in the same spirit: "I shall not try to paint 'Christ in the Garden of Olives,' but the glowing of the olives as you still see it, giving nevertheless the exact proportions of the human figure in it, perhaps that would make people think" (letter 614).

On the subject of religion Byatt agrees with the conventional reading of Vincent as an atheist or agnostic, despite her rejection of prevailing views on his sanity, aesthetics, intellectual ability, and politics. Her acceptance of his supposed loss of faith is, I think, a deliberate misreading of the evidence which she has considered so carefully in other respects. The influential account of his loss of faith came from Vincent's sister-in-law, Jo Van Gogh-Bonger, who wrote in 1913:

His illusion of bringing through the Gospel comfort and cheer into the miserable lives of the miners [in the Borinage in 1879] had gradually been lost in the bitter strife between doubt and religion, which he had to fight at that time, and which made him lose his former faith in God. (The Bible texts and religious reflections which became more and more rare in his last letters now stop entirely.) (Qtd. in Roskill 50)

In her memoir, Jo Van Gogh-Bonger approvingly quotes Vincent's last doctor, Dr. Gachet, who wrote: "The word love of art is not exact, one must call it *faith*, a faith to which Vincent fell a martyr!" (qtd. in Roskill 82-83). Van Gogh-Bonger and Gachet were among the first to encourage the overly simplistic idea which still has currency in Van Gogh studies, that Vincent made art his new God.

Anyone with access to the complete letters knows that the artist's religious reflections did not cease but continued until the end of his life, as did his Biblical allusions. Vincent did not reject God, although he rejected Christian institutions. His faith became ambivalent: "For me that God of the clergyman is as dead as a doornail. But am I an atheist for all that?" (letter 164). Although it is commonly accepted that art replaced

God at the spiritual centre of his life, it is more accurate to say that the two became fused. He became as fanatical in his commitment to painting as he had once been in his commitment to the church, adapting his Biblical metaphors and rhetoric to his new faith:

I have a firm *faith* in art, a firm confidence in its being a powerful stream which carries a man to a harbor, though he himself must do his bit too; at all events, I think it such a great blessing when a man has found his work that I cannot count myself among the unfortunate. (Letter 274)

Painting alone was not enough for Vincent. He had some hope of immortality through art, but he also pondered the immortality of his soul. "There is nothing to be said against the unlimited possibility of future existence," he wrote hopefully to Theo in 1888, offering several instances of proofs "of a life beyond the grave" (letter 518). Whether Vincent, in the last decade of his life, began to create his own theology of a fallible artist God who would encompass the "positive value of imperfections," as Clifford Edwards contends (255), or whether Vincent continued to emulate Christ through his rejection of personal materialism and his hope in a community of believers, merely abandoning the trappings of orthodox Christianity, as I believe, there is no mistaking the continued influence of religion.

In her 1990 essay on Van Gogh, "Van Gogh, Death and Summer," A. S. Byatt circles around the question of Vincent's religion and her own beliefs, declaring, on one hand, their common agnosticism, and then returning, fascinated, to the elements of faith which remain. She first describes his "rejection of religion" as tough and uncompromising (Passions of the Mind 298). For herself, she says, "I baulk at the words, 'religious,' 'spiritual,' even 'contemplative,' so what is left?" (321). They both want to explore, she claims, "representation without a system" (301).

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

As Van Gogh's religious qualities have only recently been seriously considered by scholars, for the action of Still Life, set in the 1950s, a secular Van Gogh is very much in keeping with the times. However, Byatt's essay about the painter was written in 1990, and here she misrepresents Van Gogh's agnosticism to suit her own purposes. Although it is true that Van Gogh struggled to paint "natural objects, including the sun, the savage source of light, as images of themselves, meaning themselves," as Byatt says (Passions of the Mind 320), it is at the same time true that Van Gogh could not help continuing to muse, hopefully, on Christ's example, on belief in some kind of deity, and on eternal life. "Christ lived serenely, *as a greater artist than all other artists*," Vincent wrote in 1888 to Émile Bernard (B8, emphasis in original) and, in 1889, to Theo, said "even when suffering, religious thoughts sometimes bring me great consolation" (letter 605). Byatt prefers Vincent as a strictly secular figure. In this she follows a familiar line: most selections from his letters to Theo omit many important ones about faith.⁷ The intellectual currents of the twentieth century nervously eddy around and away from God, and studies of faith and art which might have been profitable have been prematurely abandoned. Byatt touches on this in "Van Gogh, Death and Summer":

We all make meanings by using the myths and fictions of our ancestors as a way of making sense, or excitement, out of our experience on the earth. We believe and half believe and reject, we respond to certain powerful symbols and feel repelled by others whose death we sense. (Passions of the Mind 312)

⁷Selections of the letters edited by Roskill, de Leeuw, Auden, and Hulsker all omit letter 242, an important letter to Theo concerning religion. Only Hulsker uses letter 490, another important religious letter. De Leeuw alone uses letter 518. Hulsker and Roskill omit letter 506.

The struggle to articulate faith or atheism here is sketched or outlined only; the elaboration is missing. To “sense” a death is surely inadequate: Van Gogh did not reject all of religion so precipitately.

Despite herself, Byatt is drawn to Van Gogh’s paintings of sower and reaper, images which confirm his continuing interaction with Christian metaphors. They are used prominently in Alexander Wedderburn’s play, and are found on the wall of Alexander’s home when Daniel, in a crisis of faith, visits him in the final pages of Still Life.

“Alexander lived with them to live with the idea of extremities he didn’t, perhaps couldn’t, know” (358). She also considers them at length in “Van Gogh, Death and Summer.” Van Gogh wrote to Émile Bernard in 1888 on the power of Christ’s parables: “What a sower, what a harvest, what a fig tree!” (B8). The seed and grain so central to these paintings is explicitly identified by Vincent with Christ. “The consolation which is contained in [the Bible], like a kernel in a hard shell, a bitter pulp, is Christ” (B8). (The sower symbol adapted from Millet, as are Van Gogh’s versions, continues to be identified with the Canadian Bible Society.) The reaper is a positive image of death also allied to Christ; “there’s nothing sad in this death, it goes its way in broad daylight with a sun flooding everything with a light of pure gold” (letter 604).

Byatt believes that these mostly optimistic figures, surrounded by a blaze of gold, have achieved a balance between the earth, standing in for realism and the human condition, and the sun, which Tsukasa Kōdera identifies as a replacement for church in Vincent’s theology (238), and which Byatt cites as a return to ancient mythic worship (Passions of the Mind 331). Although Byatt prefers to read Van Gogh as an agnostic, her keen interest in these particular paintings demonstrates a continued concern with matters

of religious faith. Byatt chooses not to read the happy death of The Reaper as an explicit affirmation of Christian hope. But unlike those who see in it merely Vincent's acute death wish, Byatt sees in it an acceptance of the interrelation of life and death, a kind of immortality without attached belief systems.

§ § §

Most of the Van Gogh canvases Byatt mentions in Still Life were done in the prolific final two years of Van Gogh's life, when his mature style took hold. They are characterized by boldly-scored impasto, insistent brushstrokes, and vibrant colours, often complementary. They are Van Gogh at a moderate boil. Of the 25 or more canvases that Byatt discusses in Still Life, she does not include the famous madly whirling or louring skies of Starry Night, Wheat Field with Crows,⁸ or the paintings of flame-like cypresses, such definite death symbols. She refuses to emphasize the famous images of mental anguish. John Berger has pointed out that the spectator's reaction to Wheat Field with Crows changes utterly when one is told that it is the last painting Van Gogh painted before his suicide (Ways of Seeing 27-28), but this chronology has recently been proven to be false (Hulsker, New Complete Van Gogh 478). In any case, to dwell on mad Van Gogh is not Byatt's interest; neither are the more decorative and cheerful works unduly stressed (the famous Sunflowers are less important to her than other works such as Vincent's empty chair and The Breakfast Table). She is drawn by the paintings which mediate between extremes, and writes in the 1987 story "Sugar" of her dislike of the overwrought paintings.

⁸ Byatt repeatedly describes Van Gogh's final paintings as being of corn fields (see Sugar 240, Still Life 165, Passions of the Mind 306), although all the catalogues I have consulted clearly label them as wheat fields. John Berger does the same. They seem to be following an English practice of using corn as a generic category for all kinds of grain.

I could not like, I could not respond to the very last paintings, the tortured and incompetent cornfield, with the black despairing birds crowding over the paths which lead nowhere. But the great paintings of Arles and St Rémy shone. The purple irises on gold. The perturbed bedroom. The solitary chair. The reaper, making his deathly way through white light in fields of shining corn. (Sugar 240)

The images which attract Byatt are redolent with what Alexander calls “quiddity” (Still Life 179). Using William Carlos Williams’s dictum “no ideas but in things,” which she quotes in Still Life (301), she initially approaches the pictures of the yellow chair, piles of yellow novels, and boats at Saintes-Maries with admiration for their independent status as *things*. Frederica Potter, as met in the Prologue in 1980, has partly overcome her lack of visual perspicacity, and, studying Van Gogh, realizes that “one should never . . . ignore surface meanings in favour of implications” (Still Life 11). Van Gogh teaches Alexander that “you could see things before saying them, indeed without saying them” (163). Even in a section about Marcus Potter and his geometric vision, Van Gogh obtrudes, although Marcus shows no interest in painting. The narrator interrupts Marcus’s story to report: “As Vincent Van Gogh said, in our world, olive trees may stand for themselves, maybe must stand for themselves, and so with cypresses, sunflowers, corn, human flesh” (302).

The narrator and characters of Still Life return obsessively to this ideal, of an Adamic state where things can be seen and named (or painted) for what they are, and nothing more nor less need interfere. Because Van Gogh has so often been used as an example of a painter whose personal vision manipulated reality, Byatt takes pleasure in pointing out the contrary, just how precise and true his vision was. Alexander, visiting Arles, finds that the site of Vincent’s Yellow House is instantly recognizable (67); Frederica sees with a shock that the boats at Saintes-Maries are exactly as Vincent

painted them, even to the point of seeing that one of them has the same name, *Amitié*, recorded in Vincent's 1888 painting (73). In 1882, Vincent wrote to Theo that "the surest way, which *cannot* fail, is to work from nature faithfully and energetically" (letter 221). The narrator of Still Life believes that the Sunflowers "were exact records of particular dying flowerheads in 1888" (174).

Byatt does give credence to the idea that artists and others involved in representation re-make the world, and that the south of France looks as it does to Frederica and Alexander because of Vincent's powerful mediation of the landscape. Thus, a certain colour of yellow is "Van Gogh chrome, not Renaissance gilt" (Still Life 75), just as Van Gogh himself classified colours using other painters, as in his term "Velasquez gray" (letter 521). A. S. Byatt's ideas about Vincent are an amalgam of Romantic idealization of the artist, a modernist version of realism, and postmodern doubt about the reliability of art or artist. This last is recognized by her rather than ascribable to her. The importance of Van Gogh as a mediator of vision for those who come after is not, for Byatt, to be underestimated. But, says Byatt, the status of the author/artist is less important than trying to see, name, and paint the thing itself, and Van Gogh, thinks Alexander, could "get nearer to the life of the plums than he ever could" (Still Life 165). In this way, Byatt refutes thinkers like Derrida who suggest, as David Joel Shapiro says, that Van Gogh and others "are hallucinating presence" if they believe in the solidity of a colour or a pair of shoes, or in the significance of the artist who represents them (282).

These ideals constantly slip out of reach, however. Alexander finds that his attempt to create a "plain" drama about Vincent fails: The Yellow Chair becomes a battle of personalities (Gauguin versus Van Gogh) rather than a battle of colours and

forms (Still Life 83), is given a Freudian interpretation by the director, and is considered to have captured the mystical rather than the essential in Vincent's story (313, 316). Byatt and her characters are forced to realize that we "use his images as icons by which to recognise certain things" (60), which militates against their independence as *things*. And his personality must be admitted as a powerful factor in the way we read the paintings: Alexander lives, for a time, almost in a trance, steeped in the "yellow light" of Vincent's world, which suffuses his own bedroom (167-68); Alexander admits that Gauguin's equally "rich and strange" colours, on the other hand, leave him "unmoved" (6). Alexander, making love to Elinor Poole in his yellow bedroom, enjoys the "surface" and "form" of the woman rather than knowing the woman herself (174), aestheticizing his life as a result of his Van Gogh studies. Van Gogh's power as a writer is explained, in Still Life, partly by his original use of colour adjectives, which rarely "agree with the nouns they qualified. The result was that they could almost be read as *things* more real than the things they qualified" (79).

Alexander, our chief translator of Van Gogh, begins to see things *too much* as things. He sees his own "breakfast table [as] a still life, with the easy life of vegetables and culture" (164). But the human life he is avoiding should not be so easy. Frederica, under Alexander's tutelage, studies visual objects intently, and contemplates a primeval preserved body in the British Museum as Death, "the thing itself." Frederica, to her credit, rejects the inhumanity of this approach; of course mummified museum artifact is not Death itself. "Let's get out into the sun, said Frederica, let's go" (82). Alexander eventually realizes that he is in danger of elevating things too highly, and has "a dim sense that it was possible to conceive of a state of affairs where this busy naming and

comparing might not seem as much of a biological imperative as an unreflecting man might suppose" (163). Although Byatt makes no statements about genius, none of the characters in Still Life can even approach Vincent's success. Alexander's play is compared unfavourably not only to Vincent's work, but also to Stephanie Potter's triumphant creation of a child, something whole, natural, and essential.

He had got the language as right as he could. As he levelled and counted the pages he thought that a play neither came together nor achieved its own life in any way to which the comparison of childbirth was helpful. This had been put together as jigsaws are, as patchwork is, with a templet, not a germ-cell, to guide its formation. Its scales were stuck on like the panoply of the Pearly King, not grown like fish scales or fowl feathers. It was made of language, which could still be jigged, adapted, re-ordered. It was *made*, that was the point, its 'growth' was metaphorical. Wasn't it?

Anyway, it was finished. (253)

The minor character Gerard Wijnobel, who often acts as a mouthpiece for Byatt, reminds Alexander that a Van Gogh still life – "*nature morte*" – can be read as a Freudian death wish, "the kind of lifeless life of *things* bathed in light . . . another version of the golden age – an impossible stasis, a world without desire and division" (179). And for A. S. Byatt, the painting represents yet another Golden Age, a time of innocent knowledge no longer attainable.

Retreating from the possibility that the essential quality of an object can be seen and named, Byatt then contemplates the material elements of expression, the methods of art. First she considers form, the necessary ordering of reality which artists and writers provide for "the thing itself." Van Gogh's uniquely heavy brushstrokes, she believes, "ordered his world of raw and sophisticated vision," creating maps and patterns which were part of his attempt to remain sane (Still Life 109). "The brushstrokes in 'The Sower' are almost tessellations," she says (109), that is, parts of a mosaic, a regular and orderly

design. Colour theory, adapted from Delacroix, was another method of ordering Vincent's vision of a chaotic world, and through the 1880s he struggled toward a theory of colour which was independent of the world but strongly suggestive of it. In 1885, Vincent declared that "*colour expresses something by itself*" (letter 429, emphasis in original), and in 1888 he proclaimed, "I am now going to be the arbitrary colorist" (letter 520). For W. H. Auden,

what Van Gogh is trying to do is to substitute for a historic iconography, which has to be learned before it can be recognized, an iconography of color and form relations which reveals itself instantaneously to the senses, and is therefore impossible to misinterpret. ("Calm Even in the Catastrophe" 300)

Order, suggests Byatt's Gerard Wijnobel, is possible in picture-making, mathematics, and geometry, in a way that it cannot be in verbal language. He adds that it is, however, "human nature" to strive for order in all our representational systems (Still Life 275-77). One of Van Gogh's methods of maintaining order was to use complementary colours (red/green, yellow/purple, orange/ blue) to outline his ideas, sometimes literally outlining his subjects with haloes of their complement. The compound meanings of The Reaper, described by Vincent as "almost smiling," are captured in paint which is "all yellow, except a line of violet hills, a pale fair yellow" (letter 604). He also painted subjects as complements of each other: he identified his sower and reaper in this way. Byatt and her characters try similar strategies. The "I love this here" and "Here it is" ideas which Rilke proposes when discussing Cézanne are seized upon by Frederica as necessary complements to explain Van Gogh (317). Nigel Reiver, the unabashedly physical man whom Frederica will marry, is a complement to Raphael, the intellectual she has previously been in love with. Even the ideas which

shimmer throughout the book can be seen as complements of each other: plain speech and metaphor, making things and giving birth to them, being and saying. It is tempting to find comfort in these complements, but the comfort does not last. Stephanie hopes for a balance of motherhood and scholarship and finds death. Frederica rejects the “only connect” ideal she reads in Forster and Lawrence. Alexander abandons visual art and poetry, while Marcus abandons visions. Each of them settles for an intellectual life which is less dangerous and less stimulating, leaving off the attempt to find equilibrium between complements.

§ § §

Ultimately, Byatt finds that her identification with the artistry of Van Gogh is untenable and dangerous. His personality is too conspicuous; his subjects have been adapted as icons and can no longer be identified as plain “realism.” Although she believes that she and her characters share with Van Gogh a northern sensibility, “northern brains [which] responded biologically and spiritually to tones of black, donkey-brown, varied greys, touches of white in dark” (*Still Life* 9), and which reject institutionalized and ritualized religion, his willingness to explore the outer reaches of what is sanely knowable is frightening. Van Gogh also was a shockingly frank observer of himself, making dozens of direct and often unflattering self-portraits. His relationship with his self, as graphically demonstrated in his self-portraits, is boldly investigative in a way that Byatt never is. She has written only one clearly autobiographical story, “Sugar,” and declared that it would likely be her only story written in the first person (Wachtel 1993: 88). (This has turned out not to be true; her recent story “Jael” [1997] is also in the first person.) She abstracts in a way which Van Gogh, usually, does not. What she wants from

Vincent is pure colour and pure form, and the complex religious and psychological issues which come with his methods are, in the end, too much. Once or twice, in Still Life, she records a scene with painstaking accuracy, using Vincent as a model:

They rested on elbows, or lay stretched like stars, stomachs in sand, smooth heads together, a brown hand lifting a white cigarette to a rose-painted mouth, and a line of malachite green smoke going up into the air, which was not here the intense cobalt of the plain of Orange, but pearl-cream-gold, a heavy air, soft and undulating like the pale sand and beyond it the warm, hazed, sand-green sea. The figures were not hard-edged, like the high boats, but soft patches of bright colour, impinged on by soft sand.
(73)

Byatt's scene, on the beach at Saintes-Maries, draws us back to Van Gogh's letter from the same place:

One night I went for a walk by the sea along the empty shore. It was not gay, but neither was it sad – it was – beautiful. The deep blue sky was flecked with clouds of a blue deeper than the fundamental blue of intense cobalt, and others of a clearer blue, like the blue whiteness of the Milky Way. In the blue depth the stars were sparkling, greenish, yellow, white, pink, more brilliant, more sparkingly gemlike than at home – even in Paris: opals you might call them, emeralds, lapis lazuli, rubies, sapphires.
(Letter 499)

The differences, I think, are plain. Van Gogh has more ease with fundamentals; he makes no effort to strain after synonyms for blue or for unusual metaphors. He also attaches an ambivalent emotion to the scene (neither gay nor sad) simultaneous with the appellation of its beauty. Byatt's lovely set-piece, by comparison, contains no emotional investment.

§ § §

From Byatt's descriptions of the Van Gogh paintings she admires, one can enumerate the characteristics of his work she aspires to duplicate in writing. Clearly one of the things she admires the most is the simultaneity of contrasted thoughts and emotions which can be represented in a painting. The first painting mentioned in Still Life, one of

Vincent's Arlesian Poet's Garden paintings of 1888, arrives early, in the third paragraph. The painting is described as "serenely impassioned" (2), a mixture of modifiers not unrelated to the title of Byatt's 1991 essay collection, Passions of the Mind. Later in Still Life, Byatt discusses Vincent's painting of his bedroom, which he claimed to be expressive of "absolute restfulness" (B22). Byatt, like many other viewers, finds the opposite. "He wrote also that the broad lines of the furniture must express inviolable rest but the deliberate distortions of perspective make the walls and ceiling, the very paintings on the wall, seem luring and crushing" (Still Life 169-170). Meyer Schapiro has speculated that Van Gogh found rest in such a painting because he had painted through his anxiety to a catharsis: "the final effect upon him is one of order and serenity after the whirlwind of feeling" (92). The effect upon others is quite different. Daniel Orton speculates on the strangeness of hanging Vincent's Harvest at La Crau in hospitals and mental wards; while Vincent's ordering of nature signifies harmony for himself, Daniel thinks that for others it is "not serene, overexcited" (Still Life 4).

This simultaneous experience of pain and order for the painter, of disorientation and recognition for the observer, fascinates Byatt. There is a fullness to Van Gogh's works, both written and painted, which she strives to emulate. His earliest success, The Potato-Eaters (1885), manages to be, she says in Still Life, an entire "sermon in paint about the basic necessities of life" (166). Alexander studies a Sunflowers print which makes him "daily more puzzled and delighted" (160). Although the reapers, sowers, olive trees, and sunflowers which Vincent painted over and over do stand for themselves, as he insisted they must, they unavoidably stand also for something else, as he also knew. "Metaphor lay coiled in the name sunflower," Byatt observes (2).

Vincent's writings share the simultaneity and near-impossible plenitude observable in paintings like Harvest at La Crau, in which the perspective remains almost absurdly clear to the horizon. Here is a typical passage from a letter of 1889:

I beg you, send me the canvas soon if it is possible, and then I think that I shall need another ten tubes of zinc white. All the same, I know well that healing comes – if one is brave – from within through profound resignation to suffering and death, through the surrender of your own will and of your self-love. But that is no use to me, I love to paint, to see people and things and everything that makes our life – artificial – if you like. Yes, real life would be a different thing, but I do not think I belong to that category of souls who are ready to live and also at any moment ready to suffer.

What a queer thing the *touch* is, the stroke of the brush. (Letter 605)

Although Byatt rarely strives to emulate Vincent's perilous abundance, but instead stays on the rational or minimal side of the equation, she nevertheless occasionally achieves in print an equivalent to what Meyer Schapiro calls "the loading of the pigment" in Van Gogh's paintings (93).

On his daily walks to the BBC [Alexander] discovered the glories of Goodge Street and Charlotte Street, Italian grocers smelling of cheese, winecasks, salami, Jewish bakers smelling of cinnamon, and poppyseed, Cypriot greengrocers overflowing with vegetables unobtainable in the North, aubergines, fennel, globe artichokes, courgettes, glistening, brilliant, green, purple, sunshine-glossed. (Still Life 161)

Here, modifiers and colours have, nearly, the same status as the nouns, "brilliant" and "purple" becoming as solid as the aubergines. This is precisely what Alexander has observed about Van Gogh's own prose, that his colour adjectives "could almost be read as *things* more real than the things they qualified" (79).

As indicated by the title of the novel "in which the idea of Van Gogh stalk[s] in and out" (Sugar 236), the painter's still lifes are particularly important to Byatt. She returns frequently to a painting which she calls Breakfast Table: "a clean, bright paradox,

still and very much alive, held together by the contrast and coherence of blue and yellow” (Still Life 166-67). This painting has been featured as the cover of some editions of Still Life. Alexander, who is said to be “obsessed” with the painting, values its quality of “stillness” and knows that he cannot duplicate it in his play about Vincent. “How could one dramatise stillness?” (178). The surface of Breakfast Table is calmer than most Van Goghs are; the complements of orange and blue provide focus. Yet the shapes of the objects are slightly disturbed and one cannot honestly call the spatial arrangement restful.

Van Gogh’s still lifes exemplify the painter’s stubbornly individual commitment to truthfulness, what Meyer Schapiro calls his “personal realism” (93). If Byatt is tempted by the authority of such paintings to think that the stillness and simplicity of the painted image might be replicated in words, she recognizes that life, lived by humans, messily, disastrously, is not static or still – a human being is not a blue enamel coffee pot. On the final page of Still Life, Byatt brings the “breakfast table” image to life, and has Alexander pour the grief-stricken Daniel coffee from a blue pot very similar to the one Van Gogh painted, offering him sustenance and fellowship in a way that a painting cannot. Here is “still life” (or “life still”) – beyond Stephanie’s death, which Daniel must will himself to survive, beyond a painting which cannot, after all, show any of the characters how to live. Alexander has hung copies of Sower and Reaper on his walls and knows that, although he lives with them “to live with the idea of extremities,” the extremities of birth and death the paintings represent he “didn’t, perhaps couldn’t, know”; he is also aware that most visitors “might see in them the usual bourgeois brightening-up” (Still Life 358).

§ § §

In Byatt's autobiographical story "Sugar" she enumerates the Van Gogh reproductions which hung in her family home in Yorkshire when she grew up in the 1940s. Her parents' choices are surprising: "a Zouave in full oriental trousers and red fez, sitting on a bench on a floor whose perspective rose dizzily and improperly towards him"; a portrait of the son of Roulin, the postman who befriended Van Gogh in Arles; the boats on the beach at Saintes-Maries; and, more conventionally, one of the bridges at Arles (Sugar 234-35). With the exception of the boats, which Frederica recognizes on her trip to France in Still Life, just as Byatt recognized them "with shock" on her own first trip to France, the Drabble family's Van Gogh collection does not appear among the many paintings Byatt analyses in Still Life. In "Sugar," the choice of the paintings has been, for Byatt's father, Judge Drabble, an important personal statement; his daughter makes a new set of choices for herself when writing her own version of Van Gogh. The Zouave, he tells his daughter when he is dying, was his favourite, because it was "a very powerful image of pure male sexuality. Absolutely straightforward and simple" (237). One could say the same about the Portrait of Armand Roulin. He is an unusual subject for Van Gogh, this suave young man, with a saucily-worn hat and a handsome moustache. The paintings do indicate a good deal about the people who admire them. Since Antonia can remember these so clearly – and reject them decisively – and since her father, on his deathbed, is pleased to recall the aspects of his personality the paintings represented for him, the potency of the art works is not inconsiderable.

Byatt still holds to theories of painting as an index of personality (for artist and spectator) in a way which some of the more abstract theorizing in the discursive sections of the Potter novels can obscure. And her identification with Van Gogh, whom W. H. Auden calls a "religious realist" ("Calm Even in the Catastrophe" 299), despite Vincent's rejection of the church, signals that Byatt, at least in the 1980s, was not as ready to let go of religion as she claimed to be. Van Gogh's effort to paint internal and external reality with colourful intensity appealed to Byatt's ambitions at the time. *Still Life* explores whether it really might not be possible to have it all: simplicity and fullness, faith and doubt, anguish and relief, sight and word. When this hypothesis fails, Van Gogh drops out of Byatt's work and is replaced by a less heated painter, one who "was born to simplify painting," as Gustave Moreau said (qtd. in Aragon 298). This painter, who becomes the basis of several stories by Byatt in the 1990s, is Henri Matisse.

§ § §

For many people, Henri Matisse's art expresses sensuality and pleasure, and is primarily decorative. He is the wizard of colour, creating, as Louis Aragon says,

a great calm, dazzling fiesta, a sort of challenge to things as they are, flinging them into the brazier of colour, into those vast flaming canvases, sometimes quite small but always vast, where nothing is of its own colour but always of Matisse's colour, seen with his eye. (276)

In one of his rare public statements, written early in his career, Matisse seemed to confirm this view of himself as a partisan of voluptuousness, but revising it in a more placid direction.

What I dream of is an art of balance, of purity and serenity, devoid of troubling or depressing subject matter, an art that could be for every mental worker, for the businessman as well as the man of letters, for example, a soothing, calming influence on the mind, something like a

good armchair that provides relaxation from fatigue. (“Notes of a Painter,”
qtd. in Flam 42)

One of his most famous paintings, Luxe, calme et volupté (1904-1905), is based on these lines from Baudelaire’s L’Invitation au voyage:

*Là, tout n’est qu’ordre et beauté
Luxe, calme et volupté*
[There, all is order and beauty,
Luxury, calm and sensuous delight] (Qtd. in Aragon 282)

Matisse admits that this becomes a motto for him. According to Lawrence Gowing, Matisse’s pursuit of such beauty exploits a “Post-Impressionist apparatus, which had been devised to deal directly with the world [for] quite a different and opposite purpose.” Says Gowing, for Matisse the “pictorial means themselves,” rather than the material world, “offered an escape” (49). His paintings of tranquil female nudes have especially contributed to this idea of escapism into a “secret seraglio world made carefully benevolent” (Elderfield 49).

Matisse, at first glance, is as unlike Van Gogh as a painter can be, and one wonders at A. S. Byatt’s intense interest in both of them. There is no doubt that she uses Matisse to explore themes of beauty, order, and harmony in The Matisse Stories, and that she could make little similar use of Van Gogh. Matisse’s world, she wrote in a review of Hilary Spurling’s biography of the painter in 1998, “is a world of Platonic forms, of the perfected exploration of the relations of colours and spaces, frames and shapes” and our experience of him “is of a timeless and abstracted ordering” (“A Very Ordinary Genius” 28). The three stories in The Matisse Stories are carefully-wrought, exquisitely-detailed studies of women and of their domestic situations for which Matisse, that painter of

charming interiors, enigmatic windows, and silent families, serves as an admirable model.

However, just as Byatt inverted the conventional view of Van Gogh, insisting on his realism, desire for human connection, and intellectual capability instead of his erratic behaviour and mental isolation, her rendering of Matisse is equally individual. Two of the Matisse stories designate “power” as the attractive element in his paintings. “Not softness, he said to Debbie, *power, calm power*” is the description of Matisse in “Art Work” (The Matisse Stories 56), while a near-identical conversation takes place in “The Chinese Lobster”: “Not *consolation, Dr Himmelblau, life and power*” (121). In the latter story, the Matisse scholar and painter Perry Diss (based perhaps on Lawrence Gowing, whose prose also seems to have influenced Byatt’s descriptions of Matisse) provides this unexpected summary:

Matisse was cunning and complex and violent and controlled and *he knew he had to know exactly what he was doing*. He knew the most shocking thing he could tell people about the purpose of his art was that it was designed *to please and to be comfortable*. That sentence of his about the armchair is one of the most wickedly provocative things that has ever been said about painting. You can daub the whole of the Centre Pompidou with manure from top to bottom and you will *never* shock as many people as Matisse did by saying art was like an armchair. (122-23, emphasis in original)

On the subject of Matisse’s depiction of pleasure, Diss has this to say:

Who is it that understands *pleasure, Dr Himmelblau? . . . Pleasure is life, Dr Himmelblau, and most of us don’t have it, or not much, or mess it up, and when we see it in those blues, those roses, those oranges, that vermilion, we should fall down and worship – for it is the thing itself.* (123-24)

Byatt’s view of Matisse joins these two surprising elements – profound, indeed holy pleasure, and subtle violence – in a way which few commentators have done. To

provide pictorial references for these elements, I would choose the Dance murals done for the Barnes Foundation in the 1930s, exercises in soaring vivacity, and the 1914 image Open Window, Collioure, a bleak expression of anxiety about World War I, dominated by a huge black vertical. The three most notable paintings mentioned in Byatt's three Matisse stories amalgamate these underrated aspects of the artist. Pink Nude, described lovingly in "Medusa's Ankles" as "so calm, so damn sure of herself" (The Matisse Stories 4) is actually a monochrome abstraction of woman on a disorienting background; The Silence Living in Houses and The Black Door manage to encompass both composure and menace.

Matisse saw no great distance between himself and Van Gogh. In "The Role and Modalities of Colour" Matisse wrote:

From Delacroix to Van Gogh and especially Gauguin, through the Impressionists, who cleared the way, and Cézanne, who gives the definitive impulse and introduces coloured volumes, one can follow this rehabilitation of the role of colour, and the restitution of its emotive power. (Qtd. in Flam 155)

Both Matisse and Van Gogh are realists experimenting with abstraction and with a use of colour and form which Matisse called a "return to the purity of the means" (qtd. in Flam 123). Neither painter would countenance a slavish attitude toward material reality nor a carelessly arbitrary and wholly personal manner. This balance between realism and an expressive sort of abstraction makes them attractive to Byatt, who is always intrigued by dialectical movements between extremes and the resultant creation of new forms and ideas. Matisse's few statements about art are carefully-honed condensations of a lifetime of aesthetic thought, and often apply equally well to Van Gogh: "Colors and lines are forces, and the secret of creation lies in the play and balance of those forces" (qtd. in

Flam 219). While Matisse never sounds as ethereal as Wassily Kandinsky, who said “art is not vague production, transitory and isolated, but a power which must be directed to the improvement and refinement of the human soul” (54), Matisse, like Van Gogh, felt called to painting as a vocation and believed in the power of art to attain a purity of expression which would express essential truths.

Henri Matisse said, “You want to be a painter? First of all you must cut out your tongue because your decision has taken away from you the right to express yourself with anything but your brush” (qtd. in Flam 145). Given this sentiment, one which has become infamous for Matisse, why would A. S. Byatt choose his paintings to further her exploration of verbal/visual fusion? First, the painter was exaggerating his estrangement from words, much as he told his students that in drawing “One can always exaggerate in the direction of truth” (qtd. in Flam 152). Second, as Louis Aragon writes in Henri Matisse: a Novel, Matisse had a profound love and respect for the written and spoken word. He read Baudelaire and Mallarmé, wrote poetry, was a keen conversationalist, encouraged Aragon in writing texts to accompany Matisse’s drawings, and took pleasure in accepting commissions to illustrate volumes of poetry and prose (Aragon and Flam *passim*).

Byatt is even less interested in Matisse’s personality than she was in Van Gogh’s. Matisse’s life was considerably less fiery than Vincent’s; he has inspired far less fiction, film, and postmodern commentary. Aside from Aragon’s “novel” – a mixture of memoir, tribute, and analysis – only Byatt’s Matisse Stories and Peter Everett’s Matisse’s War (1996) use Matisse as an interpretive device for fiction. Gertrude Stein’s “portraits” of

Picasso and Matisse in “G. M. P.” are in an entirely different province, and offer no useful point of comparison.

Everett’s treatment of Matisse could not be more different than Byatt’s, yet Byatt had high praise for Matisse’s War when it was published (see her choices for “International Books of the Year” in the Times Literary Supplement in 1996). Everett’s novel is a confusing evocation of the often horrific political and cultural scene in France in the 1940s which disconcertingly uses many of the techniques of the surrealist writers who populate the novel. Matisse’s passive presence, painting while apparently oblivious to the war, comes in for sharp criticism from most of the characters, and is made to seem foolish by the narrator. Everett puts unlikely dialogue in Matisse’s mouth: “My work could be no more than a jaded parody of past ideas; the slapdash shorthand of an old man trying to immobilise his serenity” (264). The friendship between Aragon, the Communist Resistance hero, and Matisse, the aging post-impressionist devoted to colour, seems inexplicable. And while Everett attempts to cast some of the paintings into words, as Byatt does, his efforts are dispirited. The depressing experience of Matisse’s War contrasts sharply with Byatt’s writing about Matisse, which is firmly located in her belief that Matisse’s achievement in the capturing of pure colour and joyous vitality is unparalleled.

Matisse is important to Byatt for a number of reasons. Her primary use of him is to emphasize, even more than Van Gogh could, the importance of *just looking*. A character in “Art Work” discusses her husband’s imaginatively realist paintings in a manner learned from approaching Matisse:

They are miraculous, they are like those times when time seems to stop, and you just *look* at something, and *see* it, out of time, and you feel

surprised that you can see at all, you are *so surprised*, and the seeing goes on and on, and gets better and better. . . . (The Matisse Stories 53)

Also of importance is the fact that Matisse uses no single method: his styles, extraordinarily broad through his entire career, range through pointillism, impressionism, fauvism, varying degrees of abstraction, and the careful realism of some of the drawings. Further, Matisse's paintings often have no single focal point on which the eye may rest: this can make viewing troubling and confusing, but it contributes to a democratization of the viewing experience, wherein the viewer has a number of choices in making sense of a painting. (See Red Studio for a good example.) His paintings are not, however, irrational, as is made clear by Susannah in "Medusa's Ankles," who values coherence and precision (The Matisse Stories 9, 19) and cares deeply for Matisse. In addition, Matisse (more than Van Gogh) is a "painter of perpetual hope" who hardly ever paints explicit pain (Aragon 240, 184). Aragon reports that Matisse said that he painted optimistic scenes in "self-defence," and Aragon carefully qualified that optimism on his friend's behalf: "Let it be understood what despair is implicit in my use of the word *optimism*" (285). That Byatt values this heavily freighted optimism is clear in her story "The Chinese Lobster," in which suicidal characters find in Matisse not only a reason to embrace life but a recognition of their despair.

What Matisse cannot provide is the sort of complex interaction with the written word which Van Gogh represents for Byatt. Matisse was not a literary artist, and Byatt, in these stories, relaxes her quest for verbal/visual consolidation. Instead, in her own medium, she simply mimics Matisse's visual strategies. Matisse's emphasis on the "purity of means," especially on the vitality of colour, is adopted by Byatt in purposefully pleasurable sections of The Matisse Stories describing colours, domestic objects, and art

works. In trying to write like Matisse paints, Byatt has more success than the narrator or Alexander did in Still Life, where the prose and painting style of Van Gogh proved unattainable for others. The Matisse Stories dispenses with the self-conscious strategies deployed by the narrator of Still Life and with the use of Alexander as a surrogate author to try out various representational theories. The narrator of The Matisse Stories makes a straightforward attempt to write like a painter, without convolution or irony. The domestic setting of most of Matisse's canvases has a nice fit with the feminine sphere Byatt is examining; when Susannah, in a fit of wrath, destroys the interior of a hair salon in "Medusa's Ankles," the Matisse colouration of the scene is entirely appropriate.

It was a strange empty battlefield, full of glittering fragments and sweet-smelling rivulets and puddles of venous-blue and fuchsia-red unguents, patches of crimson-streaked foam and odd intense spills of orange henna or cobalt and copper. (The Matisse Stories 26)

Matisse scholar Jack Flam writes that "what Matisse sought in his paintings was a pre-verbal means of expression, innocent of and resistant to analytical thought" (7). Although this is perhaps stated too strongly, it is basically correct. Byatt confirms this in the opening pages of the story "Art Work," in which she analyses the enigmatic The Silence Living in Houses and is unable to come to a definitive conclusion about its meaning. The critique is marked by uncertainty – "The mother, it may be, has a reflective chin propped on a hand propped on the table" (The Matisse Stories 31) – and ends with an unresolved question. "Who is the watching totem under the ceiling?" (32). (Critic Kathleen Coyne Kelly in her Twayne study of Byatt does an astonishingly reductive analysis of the painting, arriving effortlessly at the conclusion that the painting is of a mother and child and the totem in the painting is equated with the cleaning lady in the story, Sheba Brown.) The power of the painting is undeniable, however, and Byatt

emulates whatever she can of this power, scaling down her expectations of the Van Gogh years.

Overall, The Matisse Stories concede the mastery of the visual sphere. Susannah, the aging academic about to go on television in “Medusa’s Ankles,” knows that her appearance is primary, and her words secondary. “So interesting are [the] revelations [of the cameras] that words, mere words, go for nothing, fly by whilst the memory of a chipped tooth, a strayed red dot, an inappropriate hair, persists and persists” (20). The elegant scholar Perry Diss, when explaining his love of Matisse (and his distress at a feminist project to “revise” Matisse) becomes inarticulate in “The Chinese Lobster”:

*It seems to me – forgive me, Dr Himmelblau – but this – this *caca* offends something I do hold sacred, a word that would make that little bitch *snigger*, no doubt, but sacred, yes – it seems to me, that if she could have produced *worked copies* of those – those masterpieces – those shining – never mind – if she could have *done some work* – understood the blues, and the pinks, and the whites, and the oranges, yes, and the blacks too – and if she could still have brought herself to feel she must – must *savage* them – then I would have had to feel some respect. (112-13)*

A catalogue of colours is, finally, the best that Matisse admirers can hope to produce in words. But it is a considerable achievement. For the protagonists of “The Chinese Lobster,” a stark comparison of the “white” realm of suicide with the blacks and oranges of Matisse, which represent life, is all they need to communicate with each other (129-132).

The stuttering identification of Matisse with the sacred, above, demonstrates that Byatt has not abandoned all of the investigative goals of her work on Van Gogh. Like Van Gogh, Matisse believed he was serving something higher and purer in his painting; Jack Flam says that “unlike the Impressionists . . . Matisse emphasized the *imaginative* and even the *ethical* aspects of seeing, rather than simply the physical process” (7). His

design for the Vence chapel near the end of his life has been the focus for most discussions of Matisse and God. Matisse very rarely introduces God into explanations of his art; the statement “God guides my hand” in a 1945 interview (qtd. in Flam 163) is exceptional. The importance of the artist takes precedence in a 1951 discussion of Vence: “The artist is revealed with complete freedom. . . . This marks the encounter of the artist with the great tragedy of Christ” (198-99). In 1952 he removed himself still further from Christianity: “My only religion is the love of the work to be created, the love of creation, and great sincerity. I did the chapel with the sole intention of expressing myself *totally*” (212).

Like Matisse, Byatt wavers gingerly on the question of a faith in higher things: it is there, and it is not. Van Gogh, who, says Byatt, “both represented and understood the knotted religious and artistic tensions of his time” and “was driven by a desire to make an art that would contain and express the spiritual meanings he had once seen in his religion” (Passions of the Mind 293, 296), represents a struggle with faith too intense and troubled. Van Gogh invested his whole being in this struggle; Matisse was able to displace such questions onto an investigation of line, colour and the relationships between objects and personalities, but the struggle is nonetheless important. Matisse wrote in 1953 that the artist “has to look at life as he did when he was a child. . . . Great love is needed to inspire and sustain this continuous striving toward truth” (qtd. in Flam 218-19).

For Byatt, Matisse’s portrayal of human personality is a final point of kinship. Refuting the commentators who see his paintings of women as ornamental objectifications which lack compassion and individuality – Matisse’s paintings of chairs

seem to have more individuality than some of his women, says Louis Aragon (238, see also Kennedy Fraser 93) – Byatt, following Lawrence Gowing, emphasizes their idyllic, thoughtful, and sensual qualities in a positive way. Pink Nude is presented in “Medusa’s Ankles” as a powerful Amazon figure representing the strength of women. When the image is removed from the hair salon where the middle-aged Susannah goes to trust Lucian the hairdresser “with her disintegration” (The Matisse Stories 7), the betrayal Susannah feels is an important factor in her destruction of Lucian’s salon. The fact that Matisse’s figures often feature blank ovals for faces does not deter Byatt from seeing power and beauty in them; indeed it heightens her recognition of them as a higher state of womanhood, a paradisaal feminine archetype which should be esteemed rather than ridiculed. Matisse’s women, Gowing and Byatt point out, are *thinkers*. They are at contemplative ease in the world. They take both pleasure and thought seriously. This is at odds with the way Peter Everett presents the female form in Matisse in his novel Matisse’s War: “He paints the girl into his harem of idle women who have nothing to do except pamper themselves all day” (246).

Byatt’s opinions of Matisse’s women, and her particular version of feminism, need to be investigated more fully in a more appropriate forum, but they are relevant here insofar as they underscore her endorsement of the painter’s integrity. Matisse, like Byatt’s fictional painter Robin Dennison in “Art Work,” refuses to succumb to prevalent theories of abstraction and arbitrariness, making “a serious attempt to answer the question every artist must ask him or herself, at some time, why bother, why make representations of anything at all?” (The Matisse Stories 52). The dedication to “sensuous delight” (55), which should not be belittled, and to truthfulness, is as close an approach to religious

faith as Robin, Matisse, and Byatt can make. Matisse's images have lasting stability for Byatt. The portraits affirm what Nicholas Watkins calls "the permanence of personality" (5). All the paintings are a source of energy and hope. For Wassily Kandinsky, Matisse pursued the means of colour to the "supreme end" (18).

In Byatt's determination to show that Matisse was not merely a master of decoration and colour, but also an interpreter of complex emotions and ideas, she has not entirely abandoned the investigative program of Still Life. Her confidence that words and images can be fused, however, has diminished. Throughout The Matisse Stories, as is apparent from the sections quoted in this study, she resorts to abundant use of italics to contend with the impossibility of writing like Matisse paints. Her admiration of the elemental clarity of his colours and her determination to create something comparably minimalist results in characters who express themselves by exhorting others to understand "the blues, and the pinks, and the whites, and the oranges, yes, and the blacks too" (112-13). The uncertain conclusions of the three Matisse stories, which record small victories, large compromises, and hints that truth will not always prevail, indicate the overall failure of her project.

Byatt's intense admiration of painters does not prevent her from concluding, in "Precipice-Encurled," as in Still Life and The Matisse Stories, that art finally cannot, in any profound or spiritual way, make life better. Art does provide insight and moral and sensual sustenance of a sort. But ultimately her characters are left, more or less, as they began. They have not learned the language of art beyond a rudimentary level. They are drawn to emotionally expressive painters but are rarely able to participate in or duplicate such uninhibited feeling. Some – Stephanie Potter and Joshua Riddell – die in spite of (or

because of) their knowledge of the visual idiom. They have not been able to find in art a replacement for religious faith, and this need of something in which to place absolute faith will not go away.

Part III: The Language of Spiritual Experience

Chapter 6: The Supernatural

Why place an angel on a different basis from a stockbroker? Once in the realm of the fictitious, what difference is there between an apparition and a mortgage? I see the soundness of this argument, but my heart refuses to assent.

E. M. Forster, Aspects of the Novel (1927)

I need to find a place to be the air is heavy I am not dead I am
not there is a house there is what she whispered to me I am where
she told me I am not dead I sit the sun closes my eyes when I
open them I see the face I lost

Toni Morrison, Beloved (1987)

you want to know / whether i believe in ghosts / of course i do not believe
in them / if you had known / as many of them as i have / you would not /
believe in them either

Don Marquis, archy and mehitabel (1936)

The Hebrew scriptures contain one of the earliest references to a medium calling up the spirit of a dead person. In 1 Samuel, the Woman of Endor¹ is entreated by Saul, who is in disguise, to summon the ghost of Samuel.

The woman said to him, "Surely you know what Saul has done, how he has cut off the mediums and the wizards from the land. Why then are you laying a snare for my life to bring about my death?" But Saul swore to her by the Lord, "As the Lord lives, no punishment shall come upon you for this thing." Then the woman said, "Whom shall I bring up for you?" He said, "Bring Samuel for me." When the woman saw Samuel, she cried out with a loud voice; and the woman said to Saul, "Why have you deceived me? You are Saul." (1 Samuel 28. 9-12)

¹ Over time, this medium has become known as the "Witch of Endor" and her characteristics distorted, suggesting evil in a way the original text does not support. Margaret Drabble's 1996 novel The Witch of Exmoor is a (sly) recent example of this way of seeing the Woman of Endor.

The Woman of Endor and her ability to communicate with the dead are treated respectfully in this Biblical story. The passage leaves no doubt that she does in fact raise the spirit of Samuel; later she shows compassion for Saul, feeding and caring for him. In a reversal of most later stories about mediums, it is Saul who is unmasked and accused of dishonesty, while the Woman of Endor is shown to be sensible and truthful. In the centuries to come, mediums will become even more distrusted and marginalized than the Woman of Endor is – the king of Israel has made her profession illegal, but he also trusts her. By the nineteenth century, Robert Browning's famous Mr. Sludge, who claims to "somehow vomit truth," and who begs "Now, don't, sir! Don't expose me!" in the poem's opening line, will exemplify spiritualist trickery.

A. S. Byatt has written several stories and a novella about mediums and ghosts; in addition, a séance is integral to the plot of Possession. Her major treatments of the subject are set in the Victorian era, but she has also tackled contemporary spirits. In The Virgin in the Garden Marcus Potter has otherworldly visions, their origins variously given scientific, psychic, and religious explanations. Byatt's attitude toward the supernatural² is respectful, curious, and temperate, and the introduction of spiritual concerns into her customary "self-conscious realism," as she herself calls her style (Passions of the Mind 4), makes for an unusual and ambivalent atmosphere reminiscent of the ghost tales of Henry James. Like James, Byatt writes of occult matters which admit of either psychological or spiritual interpretation. But another influence on her occult tales is E. M. Forster, whose depictions of otherworldly matters are more resolutely spiritual. Like many twentieth-century writers of ghostly tales, A. S. Byatt delineates the

² Byatt's fairy tales might be included in this discussion, but generally they are less weighty and more fanciful, indicative of her interests in myth rather than in religious faith.

dire consequences for those who have lost faith in the transcendent. Additionally, her fiction seems to refute the starkly human explanations that critics like Leon Edel provide for supernatural stories. Again like E. M. Forster, her autobiographical and critical pronouncements of agnosticism sometimes come into conflict with the evidence of her fiction.

In 1989 Byatt wrote an admiring review of a book about Victorian mediums by Alex Owen, The Darkened Room. The Times Literary Supplement entitled Byatt's review "Chosen Vessels of a Fraud," a typically negative summary of spiritualism, but this title was at odds with Byatt's text. She writes: "[Owen] describes frauds; she also cites very frightening and convincing descriptions of the dividing and splitting self in trance" (605). Owen is reluctant to ascribe "genuine" medium activity (that which remains after obvious frauds are discounted) wholly either to the spiritual or mental sphere, choosing instead to focus on spiritualism as a "discourse" (Owen xviii). Byatt, in her turn, shies away from the spiritual explanation, but is clearly fascinated by it. (Witness her willingness to delve into Swedenborg's well-nigh-unreadable Arcana Caelestia when researching "The Conjugal Angel," her novella about a Swedenborgian séance circle involving Alfred Lord Tennyson's sister Emily.) Byatt's and Owen's ambivalence mirrors that of many nineteenth-century figures who studied occult activity. The popularity of mediums at that time is helpful to Byatt in her writing about the era; the use of a mediating personality between her and the supernatural is a distancing strategy, allowing her to explore the otherworld without committing herself to belief.

From the 1840s, when the Fox sisters in the United States were credited with supernatural gifts and prompted a resurgence of the ancient preoccupation with spirit life,

thousands of people in North America and Great Britain struggled with the origin of supernatural activity: was it divine or human? By 1882, when the Society for Psychical Research was founded, the divisions in the field became marked. The SPR, determined to use scientific methods to test occult phenomena, leaned toward psychological explanations, while the Spiritualist movement presented the quasi-religious point of view – for example, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, in his History of Spiritualism (1926), frequently compares the movement to early Christianity. However, these distinctions are not always clear. Carl Jung, whose 1902 doctoral dissertation was on occult phenomena, was a corresponding member of the SPR. But Jung was willing to entertain belief in the numinous, although in his theories it is most usually associated with the “collective unconscious.” William James, one of the most famous participants in SPR activities, reserved judgement on the origin of otherworldly messages and visitations. A more recent SPR book, Apparitions, written by G. N. M. Tyrrell in 1953, declares that the SPR must be dissociated from the “cult of popular spiritualism, which is our worst enemy,” and that occurrences like crisis apparitions (the appearance of a person in distress, usually at the moment of death, to another at some distance) are telepathic in origin. Tyrrell puts the emphasis on hallucination and on communication between unknown levels of human consciousness (40, 9).

The Society for Psychical Research continues today, although few people seem aware of this. Its heyday, when prominent members of society partook of the spiritualist debate, is long over; however, it is intriguing to note that the October 1998 issue of the Journal of the Society for Psychical Research features a continuing debate on Eusapia Palladino, a nineteenth-century medium I believe to be a model for Byatt’s character

Lilias Papagay in "The Conjugal Angel." In 1957, Carl Jung noted that supernatural experiences are as common as ever, but today "one doesn't speak of these things. . . . They simply happen and the intellectuals know nothing of them – for intellectuals know neither themselves nor people as they really are" (Jaffé vi). In 1989, Alex Owen wrote that even acknowledging the reality of the human unconscious was a big step for her, a historian steeped in materialism. Scientific investigation of the occult has lost credibility. But popular interest in the subject has not waned, nor have religious interpretations been abandoned. As I write this, in spring 1998, the number one bestseller on the New York Times bestseller list is Talking to Heaven: A Medium's Message of Life after Death by James van Praagh.

I should clarify what ghosts have to do with my overall investigation of faith (religious, linguistic, aesthetic) in Byatt's work. It is not necessary to believe in ghosts in order to write or enjoy a ghost story. Even if one does believe in ghosts, it does not necessarily follow that one has any interest in the numinous. And those who have religious faith may have no corresponding belief in ghosts. Having stated all these provisos, however, I believe that ghost stories, based as they are on a concept of immortality, do relate, however strangely, to religious traditions which also hypothesize some sort of continued existence after death, although religious orthodoxies have often been unsettled about ghosts and spirits. (I do not refer to comic treatments of the supernatural such as Oscar Wilde's The Canterville Ghost. Byatt's treatment of this theme is far more serious.)

The ghost story is a way in which the agnostic can discreetly explore the question of the afterlife. Byatt also has an aesthetic or cultural goal. Most ghostly tales have

returned to their lowbrow sources, experiencing a long downward slide from the high point of "The Turn of the Screw" in 1898. Byatt aims to reclaim, for supernatural tales, some higher intellectual ground. An additional motive may be a wish to counteract, by way of spectral atmospherics, the dryness (as explicitly decried by Byatt's mentor, Iris Murdoch) of late twentieth-century art. Byatt's presentation of verbal and visual knowledge is also relevant here, although her treatment of the linguistic aspects of spiritual activity is not thorough.

What Byatt does *not* do in her supernatural stories is revealing: she neither sets out to offer blood-curdling entertainment nor uses horror to expose the violence and alienation peculiar to present-day society (surely the purposes of many contemporary writers of supernatural fiction). Unlike her fairy-tales, which ironically and comically present classic human dilemmas revolving around maturation, independence, and sexuality, her ghost stories lack humour and archness. The highly-coloured "Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye" and "The Tale of the Eldest Princess" bear little resemblance to the sombre atmosphere of "The Next Room" and "The July Ghost." The unironized subject of these ghost tales, like "The Conjugal Angel," is simply this: what happens to those who die, to those who remain alive, and to the bonds of love and responsibility which they felt? Psychological explanations for her ghosts are feasible, but there is no explicit place in these stories where you can locate the author's assertion that "it's all in your head." As Kathleen Coyne Kelly has noted, Byatt strongly hints "that the border between the living and the dead is more permeable than we think" (49).

Although I maintain a connection between ghost stories and religion, there is by no means easy agreement on this point. Andrew Lang, in his 1909 study The Making of

Religion, outlines his argument that belief in ghosts and belief in God need not be related. Lang believes that the earliest forms of worship involved belief in a Deity, but that as people rose “in the scale of material culture” they became obsessed with tangible things. This materialism led them to privilege manifestations of the immaterial, including ghostly visions and rites of all kinds. Therefore, according to Lang, spiritual life becomes debased and the connection between God and worshipper more tenuous. Reverence for a Supreme Being, he says, “*must degenerate, under social conditions, as civilisation advanced*” (299).

For William James, religion and the supernatural are more closely connected, but again, not necessarily. His exposition of faith in The Varieties of Religious Experience (1902) deliberately neglects the question of immortality, which he feels we cannot sensibly know or analyse with any acuity (although he was profoundly involved with gathering spiritualist data). For James, religion is defined by an apprehension of the divine, the feeling of solemnity that such an apprehension prompts, happiness and enthusiasm in faith, confidence in an unseen order of reality, and certainty that deliverance from this world is at hand (31-53). James feels that while it is possible to examine the personal experience of religious ecstasy and awe, it is less possible to draw precise conclusions about deliverance after death. James’s theories about religion also involved speculations about consciousness which are appealing to partisans of the ghost story. As his brother Henry James famously demonstrated in his ghost tales, it is possible to view supernatural happenings either as manifestations of life-after-death or as psychological phenomena – or both. As William James said, in The Varieties of Religious Experience:

Whatever it may be on its *farther* side, the “more” with which in religious experience we feel ourselves connected is on its *hither* side the subconscious continuation of our conscious life (502).

Famous skeptics include David Hume, who wrote in 1748 in “Of Miracles” that “the gazing populace receive greedily, without examination, whatever soothes [*sic*] superstition and promotes wonder” (132). For Sigmund Freud, “the uncanny is in reality nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression” (“The ‘Uncanny’ ” 241) – thus the German words for familiar and uncanny are intimately related (*heimlich* and *unheimlich*). In other words, the uncanny is all in your head. Elizabeth Bowen echoes this when she says that “the advance of psychology” has benefited ghost stories: “the guilt-complex is their especial friend” (*A Book of Modern Ghosts* vii).

It is quite possible, of course, that ghost stories are written merely to entertain and that none of these questions of faith, cosmic consciousness, or psychology need obtain. However, Byatt’s ghost tales are written, for the most part, with apparent seriousness, and one work in particular, her ambitious novella “The Conjugal Angel,” delves into the conflict of matter and spirit with tremendous intellectual energy. Her nineteenth-century characters who believe equally in God and in ghosts (Christabel LaMotte in *Possession* and the Swedenborgians in “The Conjugal Angel”) have apparently authentic and enlightening supernatural experiences, while the twentieth-century characters who have abandoned the worship of God and have sudden encounters with ghosts find the experience disquieting and confusing.

What commentary there is about ghostly tales reveals the same division between nineteenth-century sincerity and awe and twentieth-century confusion, doubt, and alienation. Montague Summers, a collector of Victorian occult tales, believed that the writers of the time were “at least bound to admit the possibility of such happenings” (8); personally, he was “convinced of the sensible reality of ‘apparitions’ ” (9). According to Robertson Davies, the distinguished ghost tale author M. R. James “regarded the dangerous and terrifying side of the supernatural as the shadow of its redemptive side” (“Gleams and Glooms” 236). But, by the late nineteenth century, says critic Jack Sullivan, ghosts come to be firmly located in the Self and tales about them become overwhelmingly psychological (*Lost Souls passim*). Gary Crawford agrees: “modern fiction of supernatural horror is a literature of consciousness. . . . [T]he human [is] an isolated being in an indifferent cosmos who has only this: consciousness of self” (276). Influential in this line has been Leon Edel, who wrote of Henry James’s “Turn of the Screw” as a fantasy “in the sense in which psychoanalysis uses the term.” The governess who sees malevolent ghosts and does battle with them for the souls of living children “imagines all sorts of things” and is “hysterical” (*Henry James: Stories of the Supernatural* 432). “The evil,” Edel states unequivocally, “is in her own mind” (xi).

That such a rationale is applicable to most ghost tales – fictional or anecdotal – is the consensus of the criticism on the subject, although Jack Sullivan sounds a note of confusion when he says that “the gradual decay of belief in an afterlife has been an enormous boon to ghosts, who are able to terrify us precisely to the extent that their existence is denied” (*Lost Souls* 11). In that case, it seems to me, if the fear continues,

then unbelief is not the reigning mode, but rather uncertainty. Robertson Davies is one of the few contemporary writers on this topic who will face this religious aspect straight on:

Revengeful ghosts arouse that sneaking belief in the supernatural that lingers among people who have no use for religion. Religion may include the uncanny and the evil, but its emphasis is on the redemptive and doctrinal aspect of belief. The people who have lost religion, or who have simply grown up as religious illiterates – a very common class today – have lost their sense of the beneficent part religion plays in life, but they have not shaken off their primitive fears. They dimly guess at an area of being which is not readily approached, and which is certainly not good; this is the haunt of Evil, the Devil's Kingdom. ("Gleams and Glooms" 227)

Davies also believes, with many others, that the ghost story satisfies because it feeds the repressed, irrational part of our personalities (High Spirits 4). Ultimately, however, Davies has this to say about the choice between "Hell" and the "Psyche" as origins for uncanny tales: "the difference seems often to be one merely of terminology" ("Gleams and Glooms" 241).

Byatt's ghost tales feature the presence of fear, but they do not inspire fear, in the flesh-crawling sense. Are ghost stories written to frighten? That simple question has not been definitively answered in the nascent critical work in this genre. Julia Briggs believes that the main aim of a ghost story is simply to frighten (11) and to reassert a connection with an older, more spiritual time (17). Other critics downplay the creation of fear. Jack Sullivan, in Elegant Nightmares, states that such tales necessarily evoke chaos and the unknowable for an overly materialist society (5, 10). The modern ghost story, says Briggs, insists upon a "careful exploitation of realism" (17), but Michael Cox writes that the leading characteristic of the twentieth-century ghost story is "the exploitation of [the] principle of obliquity" (xvii). The Prentice-Hall Guide to English Literature, in its entry on "Ghosts," claims that they "have rarely been used in serious literature of the last two

hundred years,” with the exception of Wuthering Heights and “The Turn of the Screw.” Michael Cox speculates that twentieth-century writers still return to the ghost story form (although more frequently to science fiction) because our “need to submit to the unknown has been culturally denied” (xviii). For Sara Maitland, they are about doubleness, about “trying to deal with two discourses, two ways of speaking, at the same time” (xi).

Byatt’s use of the supernatural is not, for the most part, outlandish or fantastic. She neither asks us to “pay something extra,” as E. M. Forster puts it in his discussion of fantasy (Aspects of the Novel 101), nor insists that we make an additional adjustment for the outrageous. Or at any rate, she does not call attention to the necessary adjustment. Ghosts enter her fiction without much fanfare, with the exception of the glass creature with the proboscis who colours the rather more extravagant atmosphere of “The Conjugal Angel.” But even this being is accepted quite matter-of-factly. Do her ghost stories employ irony or satire, then? Certainly Possession, in its postmodern revamping of the Romance, contains a portion of gentle irony. While the novellas in Angels and Insects contain no postmodern framing devices, as Possession does, there *is* an element of satire in the portrayal of Swedenborgian convictions in “The Conjugal Angel.” For example, when the members of the spiritualist circle attempt to catch the scent of spectral roses, what they actually smell are the farts of Emily Jesse’s dog Pug (195). The young medium Sophie Sheekhy has a clairvoyant vision of Tennyson ruminating on In Memoriam while attempting to do up the buttons on his nightshirt; this passage occupies 20 pages, surely a wry comment on the fact that Tennyson’s sisters said that he couldn’t button his own clothes without help. For the most part, however, supernatural scenes in Byatt’s fiction

are written with sincerity. Witness the following passage about the return of Arthur Henry Hallam to Sophy Sheekhy:

She thought she had been afraid in trances before, but that that fear had been nothing compared to this, pity and fear, fear and pity, each making the other harder to bear. He wanted to feed off her life, and was invading the very fibre of her nerves with his death. The surface of her thought was that she would never again, never again try to come into the presence of the terrible dead, and this time too the depths of the still dark places of her were stirred with terror too, his terror, her terror, the terror of the tearing-out of life from flesh and of the energy of love for whatever remained when that was gone. (Angels and Insects 274)

In Sugar Byatt's short stories about ghosts contain very little comedy. Irony, outside of Possession, is in short supply, and it is not much used in Possession's séance scene, the atmosphere instead being bitter, sad, and violent.

§ § §

Byatt's view of life-after-death is enigmatic; it is necessary to consider a number of functions which her use of ghosts suggests. First, Byatt's interest in spiritualism is, in part, driven by the same feminist social historical concerns which Alex Owen's book The Darkened Room demonstrates. Byatt acknowledges the importance of the book in her research for the 1992 novella "The Conjugal Angel," and in that story spiritualism is shown to be one of the few opportunities for a woman to grasp economic and social power in 1875. (Significantly, fraudulent spiritualist activity plays no part in "The Conjugal Angel.") However, the economic factor is less consequential for Byatt than the fact that suffering and grieving women turn to spiritualism. In "The July Ghost" and in Possession (when Christabel LaMotte desires to communicate with her dead friend, or lover, Blanche Glover), we observe women who are suffering and lost; their desire to speak with spirits is an indication of the failure of the material world to satisfy all their

needs. The feminist perspective in “The Conjugal Angel” was much noted in reviews, out of proportion, I think, to the attention Byatt actually accorded it. The presence of female characters who commune with the dead is explained primarily by the fact of Byatt’s grief for her young son Charles, after his death in 1972.

Another aspect of Byatt’s treatment of the supernatural which must be considered is to what extent her supernaturalism and ghosts stand figuratively for art and artists. Michael Levenson puts forward this idea in his review of Angels and Insects: “we novel readers are always seeing ghosts. Every character is an apparition. Whenever we lend solidity to the stories we follow, we are living proof of a visionary capacity almost always undervalued” (44). This, in part, is applicable for Possession, as is evident from the passage chosen from “Mr. Sludge, ‘the Medium’ ” which stands as one of the novel’s epigraphs: in it Mr. Sludge declares that poets and prose writers alike participate in “Sludgehood.” Just as the participants in a séance must interpret the clues given in automatic writing or spirit rapping, so the scholars in Possession (and the readers) must scrutinize the various intertexts from the lives of Ash and LaMotte which Byatt provides. A similar plot is used by Tom Stoppard in Arcadia,³ and Stoppard goes so far as to allow the two groups of characters from different centuries to coexist on the stage. However, as they don’t interact with each other, Stoppard manages to dodge the question of whether the nineteenth-century characters are ghosts. The utility of Stoppard’s “ghosts” is principally aesthetic and narrative, contained in their ability to advance and explicate the story.

³ A number of similarities between Possession and Arcadia can be remarked (mysterious letters are inserted in books, new knowledge is acquired about famous literary figures – Byron in the case of Arcadia). The character of Stoppard’s Hannah Jarvis might even be loosely based on Byatt herself; Hannah

In Byatt's "The Conjugal Angel" Mrs. Papagay has tried to support herself by writing before taking up séances "but her skills in language were unequal to it" (Angels and Insects 168); she does, however, recognize the close relation between the two arts. The Tennyson family's obsessive dealings with the dead Hallam are shown to be parallel: Emily Tennyson Jesse, his former fiancée, waits at the séance table for messages, while Emily's brother Alfred, even in old age, is working through the grief of Hallam's loss and hoping for spiritual guidance as he reconsiders In Memoriam. There is an element of spiritualist activity in Byatt which is metaphorically aesthetic; this is also the case in, for example, James's The Bostonians and Peter Ackroyd's English Music. Artistic talents denied development because of gender or poverty break out instead in the supernatural. But again, this explains the merest portion of Byatt's entire concern with supernaturalism. There is much more going on here; as one critic noted in a review of Angels and Insects, that book contains "an overplus of effects, intellectual and sensual" (Wallace-Crabbe 194).

The extent to which Byatt pursues psychological explanations for occult matters is more promising. It is evident from her review of Alex Owen's book, quoted above, that Byatt gives serious consideration to the apparent coexistence of the material and the supernatural as evidence of a radical split within the human psyche. In the review, "Chosen Vessels of a Fraud," Byatt briefly mentions Lacan, "who sees the unitary self as an illusion, and whose idea of a divided Subject has obvious possible connections to the split selves of the mediums" (605). Byatt reports that Owen is cautious about Lacan, as, apparently, is Byatt herself. Lacanian speculation is not pursued, in the review or

has had an unexpected popular success with a book rehabilitating past literary personalities, in this case the Romantics.

elsewhere. (Lacan does not appear at all in Byatt's book of collected essays and reviews, Passions of the Mind. Freud, Foucault, Derrida, Jung, Sartre, and Wittgenstein are the psychologists and philosophers she cites.) Lacan's insistence on subjectivity as a construct continually in the making would not appear to be a theory with which Byatt is in sympathy. The divided self is identified by many critics as being the interpretative key to the ghost stories of Henry James; as Northrop Frye says, in James's later works "the ghost begins to come back as a fragment of a disintegrating personality" (Anatomy of Criticism 50). Similarly, in Virginia Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway, the ability of Septimus Warren Smith to see his dead friend Evans is a function of Smith's mental disintegration.

Many of Henry James's ghostly tales clearly are about the divided self, the ubiquity of the past, and the pressure of the un-lived life. Some stories involve ambiguous spirits, some merely evoke what Leon Edel calls a "vague, crepuscular world" (Henry James: Stories of the Supernatural xi). Spencer Brydon in "The Jolly Corner" becomes possessed by the idea of who he might have been, to the point of seeing a spectre of that being, while John Marcher in "The Beast in the Jungle" is haunted by the expectation that something remarkable will occur in his life. George Stransom in "The Altar of the Dead" and Marmaduke in "Maud-Evelyn" literally devote themselves to commemorating the dead. In all these stories, men neglect the love and superior knowledge of the women in their lives, obtusely refusing to see that fulfillment and illumination lie with the present and the living. The phantoms of "Maud-Evelyn," "The Jolly Corner," and the simpler tale "The Private Life" (in which a Browningsque writer is discovered to have two selves – one banal and public, one creative and private) are not very ghostly and lend themselves easily to psychological interpretation. Leon Edel emphasizes the strange power of the

imagination in his explications of James's stories, and many critics have followed him.

Martha Banta, in her 1972 book Henry James and the Occult, begins her study with the following disavowal:

Four words are used recurrently in this book: supernatural, occult, psychical, and transcendent. They do not refer to outside influences such as demons, nature spirits, gods, the stars or the planets. They apply solely to hidden powers of the human mind that go sufficiently beyond the "ordinary" to grant it that metaphoric stature of the "exceptional" that Henry James often sought for his privileged characters. (3)

For Banta, James's "faith in the powers of the human consciousness sufficed as the only religion he knew or needed" (4). This remark is typical of the stubborn secular bias evidenced even by those who purport to be studying the transcendent in literature.

"The Turn of the Screw," however, presents a more difficult riddle than stories like "The Private Life"; the former has been designed so that it is impossible to pronounce a definite psychic or a spiritual judgement. Rather than dwell on that familiar debate, I suggest that James's lesser known story "The Great Good Place" makes for a similarly convoluted interpretive problem, and one which reveals authorial ambivalences which may well have influenced the manner that A. S. Byatt writes of these quasi-supernatural matters. "I write the way I do from James *via* T. S. Eliot," Byatt said to Juliet Dusinberre in 1983 (183).

"The Great Good Place" is a kind of heavenly vision (or dream) that the writer George Dane experiences. There are three striking points about this heaven. Dane states that this heaven is the conception of a great and wise "consciousness" very "like his own." He also feels that in this Place the "real exquisite was to be without the complication of an identity," and he recognizes that his happiness – indeed "rapture" – is composed of "absences" (Collected Stories 1898-1910 168-69). The religiously-inclined

reader can use these remarks to read the Place as an intimation of transcendent reality, created by a greater entity, who is wiser but still deeply involved with the human; a site where human personality is immersed in something larger; and proof that, ultimately, the material world fails as an influence and entirely fades from view. Or, for the skeptic, the “great consciousness” that Dane infers may be only a reflection and concoction of his own; the loss of an identity merely signals pressure and anxiety in his waking life; and the absence he enjoys indicates that there is no deity or life-after-death (for isn’t God usually identified with *presence*?).

The fact that George Dane wakes up from this vision supports the view that the whole experience has been a kind of wish-fulfillment in a time of mental stress. But clearly Dane longs for heaven – as does, perhaps, Henry James, whom Dane resembles – and the fact that Dane conceives of heaven as a place where identity is lost (rather than fulfilled) and absence reigns (rather than holy presence) demonstrates just the lack of real religious feeling which guarantees that Dane’s dream will never come true. James means us to take careful note of this.

In “The Altar of the Dead” James provides us with this illuminating comment on Stransom’s strange reverence for the dead:

He had wondered of old, in some embarrassment, whether he had a religion; being very sure, and not a little content, that he had not at all events the religion some of the people he had known wanted him to have. Gradually this question was straightened out for him: it became clear to him that the religion instilled by his earliest consciousness had been simply the religion of the Dead. It suited his inclination, it satisfied his spirit, it gave employment to his piety. (Collected Stories 1892-1898 451-52)

Stransom’s devotion is less ambiguous than Dane’s visions in “The Great Good Place” or the governess’s in “The Turn of the Screw.” Stransom is pitiful and deluded; his smug

homage, without religious faith, is actually a sort of affliction, and it kills him. That a punishment or sinister afterlife may be in store is hinted in the “great dread of what might still happen” that descends on Stransom’s friend as she gazes on “the whiteness of death” in his face (485).

A. S. Byatt’s characters – the mother in “The July Ghost,” the séance circle in “The Conjugal Angel” – are likewise devoting themselves to the dead without giving sufficient consideration to the possibility that forces beyond human comprehension and origin may be at work. Like James, she presents ambiguous situations and, as has transpired in James criticism, the numinous qualities of the experiences have been neglected by critics.

It is certainly possible to read James’s “The Turn of the Screw” and “The Jolly Corner” in a wholly psychological manner, but we need to be reminded that it is still possible to decide in favour of the spiritual, or to create some alloy of the two theories. In The Bostonians, Verena Tarrant is a dupe at the same time as she seems to have some genuine power of trance-speaking. Isabel Archer in The Portrait of a Lady is visited by a spectre of Ralph Touchett at the moment of his death; perhaps she is merely overwrought, but James presents the strong possibility that it really is Ralph’s spirit. In Byatt’s Possession we are invited to join in such a double reading of the 1861 séance which makes such a decisive rupture in the relationship between Christabel LaMotte and Randolph Henry Ash. From Ash’s point of view, the supernatural emanations are all connected to the medium by strings, and the highly emotional atmosphere of the séance exploits “an infinite capacity to be deceived by desire, to hear what we long to hear, to see what we incessantly form to our own eye or ear as gone and lost,” as he writes in a

letter to John Ruskin (421-22). However, LaMotte is seeking knowledge about the soul of Blanche Glover, and the messages received about the rocks which weighed down Blanche's clothes when she committed suicide seem to confirm the veracity of some of the séance's findings. The rocks were mementos of the Yorkshire tryst between Ash and LaMotte and no one but Blanche could have guessed at their significance.

In "The July Ghost," a rather unpleasant woman and man – the grieving mother of a dead son and her new lodger, a literary scholar – struggle intellectually with the reality of the apparition of the son. They make all sorts of hazards at the meaning of the lodger's visitation by the son and the mother's inability to see the child. The living aren't sure what they believe or what they care for; both are emotionally inept people. The woman fervently wishes she could be visited by the ghost of the boy, yet declares "No illusions are pleasant" (Sugar 43); the two adults decide, on dubious evidence, that what the boy wants is for them to engender another baby. The boy himself is more trustworthy; it is significant that he wears a shirt "striped in the colours of the spectrum, arranged in the right order" (44) and that in his presence, the man is calmed and able to do "quite a lot of work – wrote about three reasonable pages on Hardy's original air-blue gown" (49). This indicates that the man is studying Hardy's poem for his dead wife, "The Voice" (1914). The first two lines of "The Voice" are

Woman much missed, how you call to me, call to me,
Saying that now you are not as you were

It is the boy who is reliable and good in this story. He has a coherent, optimistic, and happy presence; he represents visual fact (his spectrum t-shirt) and instills verbal insight (the scholar's breakthrough on the Hardy poem, which emphasizes the altered-but-genuine reality of the "voice" of the dead loved one).

The ghosts in "The Next Room" are less cheerful, but they are no less dependable. The voices of Joanna's parents bicker after death, just as they had in life. There is a stronger indication here that Joanna's imagination produces the ghosts: "As if in answer to her thoughts on disappointment and anger the voices started up" (Sugar 83). Joanna is a Barbara Pym woman, brow-beaten by stronger characters, lacking ambition or the willingness to grab hold of life. It is entirely appropriate that the dead have more tenacity than she does. But it is Joanna's entire lack of vivacity that makes the ghosts of her parents so convincing; they follow her from town to town, demonstrating an energy she herself does not have. Again, these ghosts tell the truth, although the truth is less appealing in this story – it is the ugly truth of loveless familial bonds, of interdependence from which liberation is impossible. Joanna makes the mistaken assumption that death separates her from her unhappy parents, but no such simple relief is possible. In both of these stories from Sugar, the situation for the living is irremediable. No matter what efforts they make either to escape from or make contact with the dead, it is the dead who are more powerful and more knowledgeable.

While psychological explanations are proffered for the supernatural activities in "The Next Room" and "The July Ghost," Byatt does not invest James's subtle energy in developing these, and the reader is left with the strangely solid reality of the living dead. If anything, Byatt's spirits are more old-fashioned than James's. The return from the grave of Arthur Henry Hallam in "The Conjugal Angel" is rendered with gruesome vividness; Byatt goes to great lengths to make this visitation palpable.

Her hand shook, the face behind her bulged and tightened, sagged and reassembled, not pale, but purple-veined, with staring blue eyes and

parched thin lips, above a tremulous chin. There was a sudden gust of odour, not rose, not violet, but earth-mould and corruption. (Angels and Insects 249)

Compare Byatt's literary séance, where lost souls obsessively quote Tennyson's poetry through a medium, with a similar episode in Yeats's "The Words Upon the Window-Pane," where the spirit of Swift constantly interrupts a séance. In Yeats's play, Swift remains an unhappy shadow; in Byatt, Hallam acquires a fearfully material substance, energetically reciting his own letters and the poetry of Dante and Tennyson, demanding that his fiancée Emily join him. The spirit of Hallam is, says Byatt, "larger than life" and powerful enough that it almost kills the medium, Sophy Sheekhy (282, 284).

§ § §

In addition to allowing her to pursue oblique investigations of life-after-death and psychic phenomena, ghost tales provide Byatt with a forum for an exploration of fear. Fear is the dominant quality of the stories in Sugar – not terror for the reader, but the effects of fear on characters. (When Byatt edited The Oxford Book of English Short Stories in 1998, the reviewer from The Times noticed that the most common theme of the stories she had chosen was fear.) Of the 11 stories in Sugar, five have supernatural elements. "The July Ghost" and "The Next Room" have already been mentioned. In "Rose-Coloured Teacups" and "The Changeling" a vision of the past and an eerie child hint at a milder ghostly atmosphere; "The Dried Witch" is an anthropological tale of a woman found (justly) by her primitive tribe to be a jinx. The remainder of the stories do not feature spirits, but the tone remains fearful: children are bullied by adults, old women are menaced by young men with knives, a young painter falls off a mountain, scholars and writers face humiliation and death. For the predominantly rational Byatt, who

assumes that “order is more interesting than the idea of the random” (Passions of the Mind 11), and who has been accused by reviewers of idealizing the orderliness and rationality of the nineteenth century (Hawthorne, Diamond), ghost stories help in the presentation of disorder, the inexplicable. As Virginia Woolf says about Henry James’s ghost tales, “they have their origin within us. . . . We are afraid of something unnamed, of something, perhaps, in ourselves” (“Henry James’s Ghost Stories” 52, 54). Byatt’s characters are afraid, of course, of the unknown. They are also afraid of loneliness and madness and, most significantly, afraid equally of religious belief and unbelief.

§ § §

Although Byatt’s ghosts do illustrate other interests – feminist concerns, art allegories, neurosis, fear – primarily they stand for themselves, for the spirits of the dead. All of Byatt’s writing about ghosts has appeared since the death of her young son Charles in 1972, most of it long after. The plainest expression of this death appears in the poem “Dead Boys,” published in 1994, and in the much-anthologized story “The July Ghost,” broadcast on BBC Radio 3 in 1981 and first published in 1982. In each work, silent, blonde boys inhabit the memories of their mothers in ways which are disturbingly palpable.

They are more alive than I.
It is hard for me to know
If I love or fear them most. (“Dead Boys”)

To interpret the ghost in this poem as the manifestation of a grieving mother’s memory is surely correct: the living will not or cannot let the dead go. But the ghost in “The July Ghost” is more difficult to read. He does not appear to the mother at all, but to a lodger in her house. The woman and her lodger speculate “that what he had seen was what she

desired to see, a kind of mix-up of radio waves" (Sugar 48). Because the mother is adamant that she is "too rational to see ghosts" (46), her desire to see her son is channeled through the lodger, who, in a James-like framing device, turns to another listener to tell his tale. The sharing of this desire for another plane of existence has erotic ramifications, as it does in James's "Maud-Evelyn" and "The Jolly Corner." (Men and women speaking of the ineffable are also voicing their buried sexual desires.)

But the power which the dead exercise in Byatt's stories implies that it is not merely that the living will not let the dead go, but that the reverse is true as well. In "Gode's Story" this power is malevolent, luring the living to their destruction; in "The Next Room" the ghostly voices are demanding and cruel, but in a petty way. Hallam in "The Conjugal Angel" is half dark angel, half unhappy, impotent mortal – an ambivalent visitant. The boy in "The July Ghost" is a sunny ghost, but he wants something, and the living cannot decipher what it is. This range of needs and personality types among the dead, and, especially, the difficulty of deciphering what they want, gives them a fleshly reality which cannot be explained completely by the psychological disorder of those who see them. This is plainest in "The Conjugal Angel." Sophie Sheekhy is the least likely of all the characters to desire communion with the spirit of Hallam; she is still, quiet, unagonized. Like Daniel in the Potter books, Sophie just "is," and demonstrates herself as a trustworthy witness. The other characters feel "a pressing and threatened desire to know that the individual soul was immortal" (Angels and Insects 184). Sophie just knows.

In The Virgin in the Garden Marcus Potter and the biology master Lucas Simmonds perform a number of occult or psychic experiments, with startling success. Although Marcus refuses to take part in any rite which might call up the dead, he allows

Lucas to identify “Places of Power” in the area around Calverley, the “minor Minster town” (21) close to their Yorkshire village, Blesford. Marcus has a number of visions while they perform these experiments, primarily of geometric and biological forms. When Marcus sees flowers with “sap rising in transparent reeded stems, clear green flowing light up to gold cups,” Lucas excitedly speculates that Marcus is “seeing the inner Forms of the Biosphere, flowers as they had been, or would be, or innerly meant to be” (228).

At Owger’s Howe, a place that Lucas believes to constitute “a way in, a way through, to another dimension” (235), they have an experience which Byatt terms “occult.” They make offerings and spin over a “power point”: “Marcus opened his eyes to blackness. . . . He stared into the black, which took on the aspect of a tunnel” (236). Later, Lucas and Marcus have further occult experiences when they successfully transmit random mental images to each other.

Marcus is uninterested in naming the phenomena he and Lucas experience. Lucas offers a blend of scientific and religious explanations. The “Places of Power” are possibly connected with “the motions of the earth’s magnetic fields” (230). Marcus is more inclined to this view than to the alternative – Lucas’s proposal that these “umbilici of the earth” are “meeting places between the earthly and the unearthly” (228). Daniel Potter’s Anglican Church is another such umbilical spot and Byatt chooses the church as the site of the most detailed telepathic scene of The Virgin in the Garden, in chapter 29. Marcus sends Lucas a communication of a vivid painting in the church, a depiction of the mouth of Hell; later, in chapter 38, as Lucas becomes increasingly unhinged, he returns to the painting and is found crouched “in an attitude of rebarbative prayer” (376).

For Marcus, Lucas's attempts to explain

were somehow wrong-headed descriptions of actual forces. No doubt all would be made clearer, in so far as Marcus chose to seek clarity. He preferred, in fact, a certain area of cloudiness, as to the naming and categorising of things. (234)

There does not seem to be any doubt that in The Virgin in the Garden Marcus and Lucas are indeed located at an "intersection of two realms" (236) and that they do experience otherworldly visions. (I disagree with Olga Kenyon, who says that Marcus's visions are given "no authorial endorsement" ["A. S. Byatt: Fusing Tradition with Twentieth-Century Experimentation" 70].) Byatt's presentation of these events is darkly serious, unironic, and packed with specific detail. The details are overwhelmingly visual; the two characters have no success in transmitting words or ideas to each other, nor are they able to successfully describe their experiences in words. As long as the visions are strictly bounded, Marcus is unalarmed.

The things received were to him, in their limitations, manageable and pleasant. They were without the endless extension which so terrified him in the geometry which in its inhuman clarity also so consoled him. (262)

Marcus identifies perfection and eternity with his geometric visions, but this idea of a simultaneously terrifying and consoling infinity is more than that – it is also identifiable as spiritual transcendence.

Marcus and Lucas, whose experiments blend scientific, religious, and psychological elements in an idiosyncratic way, somehow tap real and dangerous energies and knowledge. The limits of what they can achieve, using Marcus "as a kind of human dowsing twig, or divining rod" (234), are unknown. Although Lucas inclines to some hazy spiritual beliefs, his speculations are mixed erratically with science and superstition, while Marcus has little religious feeling at all, having been brought up in the

aggressively secular Potter household. As a result, their penetration into sacred areas takes on sinister aspects, and the painting of the mouth of Hell stands as an unheeded warning of the risks they court. Their quest is, for the most part, selfish, haphazard, and irreverent. By the end of The Virgin in the Garden they are nearly shattered by their willful exposure to powers beyond their understanding. Marcus is incapacitated throughout the next novel, Still Life, and only manages to recover by the third book in the Potter series, Babel Tower; Lucas, as far as we know, does not recover. (Lucas's shame about his homosexuality is an additional complicating factor in his mental breakdown.) At the conclusion of Still Life, Marcus will be, in part, responsible for the death of his sister Stephanie because of his inability to act in the right manner in the face of something more forceful than human power.

Although magnetic and psychic explanations of Marcus's abilities are proposed in the novel, it is also true that the Christian Church is a powerful factor in his experiences. In chapter 38 of The Virgin in the Garden, Lucas uses his mind to call Marcus to the church and tells him that they are "safe" there. "I did tell you prayer and preparation would be required," he says (378). Most significant of all is the fact that Daniel Orton, as a clergyman, has the force to check and control Marcus's disturbed visions. Twice in the novel Daniel, when within Marcus's line of vision, manages to "absorb" the manic energy which torments Marcus, and to calm him: "The lines of energy, the fuzz of forces went into that solid flesh and ceased, coiled and rested, or so it seemed" (264). This functions as an exorcism; Stephanie, perhaps learning from Daniel or perhaps tapping spiritual sources of her own, also unconsciously performs a kind of exorcism for the

autistic boy Malcolm Haydock, and for Lucas Simmonds, in his mad scene at the end of The Virgin in the Garden.

Olga Kenyon, writing about Marcus in 1988, emphasizes his separation from religion. "He has elements of the child-seer, but bereft of religious blessing. . . . His visions, unlike Saint Paul's (or Wordsworth's), cannot be used" (70). In a "world without religion," Kenyon writes, Marcus suffers in isolation, his visions devoid of illumination. This analysis willfully ignores the importance of Lucas and Daniel to Marcus, both of whom represent different aspects of religious belief. And Marcus occasionally does experience feelings of revelation – it is just that he is incapable of casting his revelations into conventional language. Part of the fascination of Marcus's character for the reader is that we can only approximate what his life is like; in providing us with the elaborate details of his visions and the spiritual experiments, the narrator attempts to compensate with volume. This anxious offering of quantity is really a narrative admission that Marcus's mind, working outside of verbal language, is partly closed to us until other kinds of language can be more fully developed.

All of this is not to say that Byatt believes in ghosts, occult activity, or an afterlife. But her presentation of ghosts and visionary experience has a solidity which indicates a veiled need to believe in something like them. What if the transcendence hinted at in the stories is not merely symbolic, as most critics assume it is, but is instead an actual manifestation of an afterlife? This is where A. S. Byatt's writing about spirits leads us – doubtless some of her apparitions are symbolic of feminist, aesthetic, and psychological issues, but some of them won't be reduced in such a way. Byatt gives what she calls the "presence of absence" ("The Conjugal Angel," Angels and Insects 284) a

bodily existence which, she suggests, must be faced *as if it were real*. Although most critics prefer not to make a connection between ghost stories and religion, and indeed Jack Sullivan bluntly states that ghost stories are not substitutes for religion (Elegant Nightmares 130), I believe that writing ghost stories is one of Byatt's ways of backing into religious territory, as it were. This is evident in her admiration and analysis of Toni Morrison's 1987 novel Beloved, one of the six novels discussed with Ignês Sodré in their book of "conversations about women writers," Imagining Characters (1995). After mentioning the powerful African heritage of animism, as it exists in tense relation with western religion, Byatt says:

I feel that Toni Morrison, with her intensely Christian background, has played with this idea: that there is a spirit world and you might treat it as real as opposed to treating it simply as a literary prop. . . . [This is] purely practically a world in which spirits do rise up and can be accepted as being part of the normal run of things, so that when you read that wonderful first paragraph you think right, we're in a world in which babies haunt houses, this is this world, this is not a world in which you ask 'was there a baby, wasn't there a baby?' There is a baby and it is haunting the house. . . . She is what she is, she is Beloved in a terrible rage. And that is why the book is so powerful. It's the concreteness. . . . [I]t isn't psychological, it is a story of things. (217)

Byatt's admiration for Beloved may have been a factor in the concreteness of the living dead in "The Conjugal Angel." Although the ghost of Beloved does represent painful, repressed memories, belonging equally to her family and to the collective African-American community, Beloved is also a real individual: "she is what she is." But what does it truly mean to be in the presence of a dead individual who refuses to be absent? And what does it mean for Byatt, who professes not to have religious faith?

§ § §

Byatt's longer works featuring spiritualism – Possession and “The Conjugal Angel” – are set in the late nineteenth century, an era when many intellectuals insisted that spiritualism was, as Russell and Clare Goldfarb state in their study Spiritualism and Nineteenth-Century Letters, “the new religion, a religion based on fact, supported by history, and proved by science” (11). Victorian thinkers were obsessively trying to combine art, faith, and science, and Byatt's characters take part in this composite research; for proof we can read the notes and compositions of Randolph Henry Ash in Possession and of Harald Alabaster and Matty Crompton in “Morpho Eugenia.” Science raised troubling questions for what had been, primarily, a God-fearing society. The theories of geologist Charles Lyell are significant for the characters in Possession; in “Morpho Eugenia” Charles Darwin is often cited. Their books, respectively The Principles of Geology (1830-33) and The Origin of Species (1859), were among the most influential studies of the period, challenging commonly-held assumptions about creation and the age of the earth. Byatt's use of Emmanuel Swedenborg in “The Conjugal Angel” further indicates a fierce interest in the conjunction of material and spiritual. Swedenborg's works are little read today, but his teachings are known intimately by the characters of “The Conjugal Angel” (as they were by Henry James's father, Henry James Senior, an energetic proponent of Swedenborgianism). In addition to being a mystic, Swedenborg was a leading scientific thinker of the eighteenth century, a mining engineer, inventor, and geologist who also anticipated later findings in brain physiology. His very bodily views of heavenly marriage result in the title of the novella (complete with Swedenborgian spelling). His idiosyncratic blend of materialism and spiritualism helps to

explain Swedenborg's appeal to the Victorians, with their conflicted desires. As Alex Owen notes, the spiritualists' use of the phrase "spirit matter" to describe the emanations at séances indicates the peculiar determination at the time to yoke opposites which may be irreconcilable (The Darkened Room xvi). In a 1968 book review about the Victorians, Byatt describes their "precarious balancing between public and private, conscious and unconscious, social and selfish" ("The Victorian Balancing Act" 112). She could add the tension existing between science and religion. Byatt respects, even admires, the tangled motives of the age, and believes, to some extent, "we are still in it" (111).

It is strange, from our present vantage point, to consider the sincere involvement in spiritualism by some of the leading literary and political figures of the era. Reformer Robert Dale Owen, poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and novelist Harriet Beecher Stowe were confirmed supporters of mediums and their activities. Stowe's belief did not prevent her from the realization that "spiritualism is a reaction from the intense materialism of the present age" (qtd. in Goldfarb 60). Arthur Conan Doyle, a doctor and another unlikely believer, had this to say in his History of Spiritualism about the odd intersection of materialism and spiritualism:

In such an age of materialism as Swedenborg can never have imagined, we are endeavouring to prove the existence and supremacy of spirit in so objective a way that it will meet and beat the materialists on their own ground. (1: 22)

He went on, in Volume 2 of his History, to expand on this idea.

Special material signs have been granted by the Invisible rulers of earth to satisfy the demand for material proofs which come from the increasing mentality of man. (277)

Several members of the Tennyson family were indeed confirmed Swedenborgians, and Byatt makes use of this history for the plot of "The Conjugal Angel." (Alfred was less

committed, but apparently he could put himself into a trance and had the ability to mesmerize [Thwaite 246]). Thinkers of the calibre of William James and F. H. Bradley argued otherworldly phenomena in the journals of the day: Bradley devoted tremendous energy to identifying inadmissible proofs of spiritualist activity, while James kept an open mind (with an apparent desire to believe). He wrote, in 1909: "I personally am as yet neither a convinced believer in parasitic demons, nor a spiritist, nor a scientist, but still remain a psychical researcher waiting for more facts before concluding" ("Final Impressions of a Psychical Researcher" 203).

Those who doubted included George Henry Lewes, George Eliot, and Robert Browning. In an incident reminiscent of Ash's 1861 "Gaza Exploit"⁴ in Possession, Lewes (described as a "cynical investigator" by Arthur Conan Doyle) rudely questioned the American medium Mrs. Hayden at a séance in 1852 or 1853 (Doyle 1: 162). Eliot and Lewes attended another séance in 1874, leaving in disgust when they believed they discovered the medium's trickery. Lewes did not mind making public his sentiments about what he believed was "monstrous folly" (Goldfarb 111-12). The Brownings were divided on the subject of automatic writing and table-tipping. In 1853 Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote to her friend Mary Russell Mitford, "I always believed in a spirit-world and in the possibility of communications" (Women of Letters 257). Robert Browning participated in spiritualist evenings to indulge his wife, but his poem "Mr. Sludge, 'the Medium'" (the model for Ash's poem "Mummy Possesst" in Possession) amply displays his misgivings, which are, however, not as brutal and accusatory as Ash's. A close friend

⁴ This medium denunciation by Ash is so called, one assumes, because Ash brings the séance down around himself, destroying not only the hopes of others, but also destroying any chance for his own happiness with LaMotte. At Gaza Samson pulls down the pillars of the house he is in, killing himself along with the enemy Philistines (Judges 16).

of Mrs. Browning, a woman named Sophia Eckley, claimed to be a medium and was later detected in fraud. The incident was reported to have hurt the Brownings deeply (Goldfarb 105).

That Byatt named one of her mediums Sophie Sheekhy demonstrates Byatt's intense interest in this history. Sophie, however, is quite different in character from Sophia Eckley – Byatt's medium shows no signs of fraudulent behavior. The name of her other medium in "The Conjugal Angel," Lilius Papagay, bears a resemblance to that of the Italian medium, Eusapia Palladino, chronicled by Doyle (1:11-29) and other writers of the era. Andrew Lang claims that Palladino was discovered to be a fraud (325), but Mrs. Papagay, a charming and sympathetic figure in the novella, is never accused of dishonesty.

Her respectable fingers wrote out imprecations in various languages she knew nothing of. . . . Mrs. Papagay was an intelligent, questioning kind of woman, the kind who, in an earlier age, would have been a theologically minded nun, and in a later one would have had a university training in philosophy or psychology or medicine. (Angels and Insects 169, 170)

Incidents from the life of the Tennyson family are reported with historical exactitude in "The Conjugal Angel." Emily Tennyson Jesse did indeed have a "stout lap dog and raven, always fed on raw meat" (Tennyson and Dyson 165); the scene which Byatt recounts about Emily's re-emergence into society after Hallam's death, with a white rose in her black hair "as her Arthur loved to see her" (Angels and Insects 174) is a precise echo from several biographical accounts (Thwaite 36, Kolb 795). Various elements of Emily's conversation are actual quotations from these biographies. The most important repetition which Byatt uses is Emily's declaration to her husband Richard

Jesse, after she receives a spirit communication from Hallam, bidding her to join him in “conjugal” bliss:

Richard, we may not always have got on together and our marriage may not have been a success, but I consider that an extremely unfair arrangement and shall have nothing to do with it. We have been through bad times together in this world and I consider it only decent to share our good times, presuming we have them, in the next. (Thwaite 574-75, Kolb 802)

Readers will likely be unaware that this statement, which occurs at the climax of “The Conjugal Angel” (Angels and Insects 283), has not been written by Byatt, but they probably will notice the genuine historical items inserted in the spiritualism scenes in Possession. Nearly all the names mentioned in an autobiographical account by Byatt’s medium Hella Lees as being at séances in the 1860s were actual participants at séances of the time, and several are famous: “Lord Lytton, Mr. Trollope, Lord and Lady Cotterell, Miss Christabel LaMotte, Dr. Carpenter, Mrs. de Morgan, Mrs. Nassau Senior” (Possession 427). With the obvious exception of the fictional LaMotte, only the Cotterells are not mentioned by Arthur Conan Doyle in his History of Spiritualism. Byatt has taken the name for her medium Hella Lees from Victorian medium R. J. Lees, mistakenly named H. J. Lees by Doyle (1: 172). Robert Lees was rumoured to have acted as medium for Queen Victoria, eager to commune with the spirit of Prince Albert, although reliable biographies of the queen reject this claim for lack of proof (Longford 334, Cullen 88).

A. S. Byatt, famous for her parodic intertexts in Possession, uses real intertexts in “The Conjugal Angel,” a gesture criticized by reviewers in The New York Times Book Review and The New Yorker, while the National Review went so far as to call the novella “parasitic” (Tate 61). Mary Hawthorne in The New Yorker speculated on the reasons for this almost suffocating immersion in Victorian experience:

In conjuring up a time that engages her so intimately, Byatt herself becomes a kind of medium – our conduit to a lost world. And by inserting “real” people and texts in her narrative she further underscores her theme of transfiguration: the dead live again – or a version of them, at any rate. (100)

For Hawthorne, as for many who reviewed Possession, Byatt’s use of the nineteenth century is, then, primarily nostalgic. The living dead stand as metaphors for ideas which should still be current, for writers whose works can speak to our present age. Hawthorne is uneasy when discussing the surface reality of the occult experiences under discussion. She writes: “Byatt *hints* here at something like cosmic connection” between the dead and the living, and then she backs away from the topic (100, emphasis mine). A more positive evaluation of “The Conjugal Angel” came from the Village Voice:

The occult visions of Byatt’s characters . . . [are] a well-informed portrayal of a Victorian state of mind. By allowing those apparitions legitimacy and substance, Byatt refuses to patronize the past. . . . *Byatt’s ghosts, though real, are dead*, but when men and women won’t let go of them they start to take over. The way to exorcise them is to understand them, acknowledge their death, and redirect attention toward the living. This scheme could be a script for psychological healing, or incorporating political change. And it might also be a wise way for fiction writers to handle the literary past. (Shulman 15, emphasis mine)

Again, this reviewer believes that the ghosts signify a literary, rather than a religious or spiritual engagement with the dead. But, as my italicized sections indicate, both Hawthorne and Shulman acknowledge that Byatt’s treatment of ghosts “hints” at something beyond metaphor. The ghosts “though real, are dead.” Why need Byatt’s ghosts be so palpably real? Lawrence Norfolk verifies the substance of the most visceral spirit in “The Conjugal Angel”; “Hallam dead is a far more potent presence than Hallam alive,” he writes in his review (10). And – an important question – why Hallam? If Byatt’s main purpose in raising the spirits of dead Victorians is to remind us of their

greatness and to emphasize their affinity with us, the appearance of Hallam's ghost is odd. Hallam died at such a young age that his talent was known largely in potential; without In Memoriam, he would probably be little known today. By raising Hallam's ghost, Byatt dilutes the possibility that the afterlife being presented is symbolic of the power of past artists. Hallam is significant as a person, someone who was loved and missed – and not as an idea or literary icon.

Byatt's defence of the Victorians is also based on her stated longing for a fusion of an age of faith and an age of criticism. This is declared in a review of books about realism which she did for the Times Literary Supplement in 1987. Citing J. P. Stern's On Realism as a "wise book, precise and liberating," she continues: Stern is "a critic for a possible Age of Faith or a perennial realism" ("The Real Made Sense" 65). Part of the faith cited in her discussion of Stern is faith in things, rather than faith in abstractions, but she cautiously goes beyond this. Paraphrasing Stern, she writes approvingly that realism can represent "something abiding, morally and spiritually necessary to our life in the world and in our own communities" (65). Stern himself is bolder; he writes that while works of realism must "bear witness . . . directly to life in the world," they are also "like the stars that form the night sky, all equidistant from us, timeless, transfixed images of the possibility of human existence" (On Realism 179). The Victorians represent for Byatt this kind of mixed idealism – loyalty to transcendence combined with intellectual rigour – as Hallam represented this for Tennyson.

. . . one indeed I knew
 In many a subtle question versed,
 Who touch'd a jarring lyre at first,
 But ever strove to make it true;

Perplexed in faith, but pure in deeds,
 At last he beat his music out.
 There lives more faith in honest doubt,
 Believe me, than in half the creeds. (In Memoriam section 96)

One of the outcomes of Byatt's heavy use of intertexts in the supernatural scenes in Possession and throughout "The Conjugal Angel" is that it allows her to express faith at second hand. Her personal uneasiness about religion and immortality prompts her to explore faith issues obliquely. "I have absolutely no religious beliefs although I think I have a religious temperament. Indeed I have a slight hostility to Christianity because I think it to be in the way of Truth," is how she expresses it during her 1984 video interview with Iris Murdoch. Glimmers of the religious temperament show themselves from time to time. "The human need for the cosmos to be human does not make it so," she says, rather plaintively, in another book review in 1988 ("Control of the Life-Sources" 890). But it is rare to get more than a glimmer of this side of Byatt. More typical is her treatment of religious themes in Possession. The Ash-LaMotte correspondence allows Byatt to investigate religion at one remove. LaMotte's letters to Ash plead the case for Christian belief; Ash counters with regretful but firm agnostic responses. The disastrous séance at which Ash confronts LaMotte about the existence of their child is worked over in no less than six scattered intertextual documents – LaMotte's letter to American spiritualist Priscilla Penn Cropper, Ash's letter to Ruskin, an excerpt from medium Hella Lees's book The Shadowy Portal, Ash's dramatic monologue "Mummy Possesst," an unsent and later burned draft of a letter from Ash to LaMotte, and an unreceived and later buried letter from LaMotte to Ash. We, as readers, work through the strata of this investigation, acquiring important additional knowledge in a manner more active than is usual in reading fiction. Simultaneously we are made aware

of the wariness of the author, who can distance herself from the subject by way of these accreted layers. In “The Conjugal Angel” Byatt’s reliance on the actual words Emily Tennyson Jesse spoke to her husband after receiving a séance message from Hallam signals Byatt’s reluctance to engage personally with the issues, and an equal reluctance to declare, unequivocally, her unbelief.

Byatt’s other treatment of nineteenth-century ghosts is the short tale “Gode’s Story,” found within Possession and later published separately in the collection The Djinn in the Nightingale’s Eye. “Gode’s Story,” the relatively straightforward tale of a haunting, lacks mediums or any such mediating device. But as its title suggests, the spectres of “Gode’s Story” are offered at another sort of remove. Originally, the story is one of the many intertexts in Possession. When the story was republished, it retained the name of its teller, an old Breton woman, although outside the context of the 1990 novel, the name holds no meaning – except as a distancing strategy for Byatt. In the story, a young woman is punished for her haughtiness toward the sailor she loves. She is haunted by the vision of a tiny, dancing child, which eventually leads her over a cliff to her death. The young man in turn is haunted by the spirit-child, and wastes away. On his death, Byatt writes that “the room smelled of apple blossom and ripe apples together” (The Djinn in the Nightingale’s Eye 38). This odd description is closely related to the “smell of the aftermath” recorded in the final paragraph of Possession (before the Postscript): “a tart smell, which bore some relation to the smell of bitten apples. It was the smell of death and destruction and it smelled fresh and lively and hopeful” (551). This optimistic view of death, appropriate in the comic Romance of Possession, is affixed rather

whimsically to the much darker "Gode's Story." Byatt apparently desires to offer a positive view of death, one that hints at rebirth – a curious thing for an agnostic to do.

The writing of E. M. Forster provides a precedent for this kind of effect, what Virginia Woolf calls "contrary currents that run counter to each other" in her 1927 study of him ("The Novels of E. M. Forster" 322). Woolf describes a "double vision" (328) of realism and mysticism permeating Forster's writings, which fails to combine into the single masterful vision that Woolf believes would serve Forster better; as a result she finds in his fiction a lack of "force" and "fusion" (325). Despite Woolf's misgivings about the overabundance of ambiguity in his work, she does identify Forster as "the most persistent devotee of the soul" (320). As we have noted regarding Henry James criticism, few critics of Forster will admit to his spiritual tendencies, or know what to do with them. Denis Godfrey, in his singular 1968 study E. M. Forster's Other Kingdom, deplores this skittishness, and points out that the short stories, in particular, are nearly all concerned with the transcendent. "The Celestial Omnibus," in which a boy beleaguered with an insensitive family comes upon a bus to take him to a heaven populated by writers and literary characters, and "The Other Kingdom," the story of a girl, hemmed in by vulgar materialism, turning into a tree, can be seen as Forster's insistence on an idealism that he proposes as a necessary corrective to pragmatism. In other Forster stories, however, the otherworldly stands more definitely for itself, and not merely as an indicator of intuition, nature, creativity, tradition, or any of the other Romantic values that Forster uses to temper his realism. "The Other Side of the Hedge," a portrayal of heaven not unlike James's "The Great Good Place," is one such story, an ironic but simultaneously sincere investigation of the notion of paradise.

Denis Godfrey writes that Forster's fiction and critical writings are at odds with each other on the subject of the transcendent. In his essays, Forster is more pessimistic, displaying a "spiritual evasiveness" (207), while his fiction promotes "the existence of an unseen world, a transcendent spiritual reality" (205). This is clearest in A Passage to India (1924), which examines the varying potencies of Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism, with Forster presenting the latter as the most exciting possibility for spiritual progress (as evidenced by Professor Godbole's visions). Most significant is the way in which Mrs. Moore – like Mrs. Wilcox in Howards End (1910) – exercises more influence after her death than she did when alive. Both women, when dead, enter an even more complex existence and play a more vital role in the lives of those still living than they ever had before.

The persistent presence of the dead in Forster's fiction need not be seen only as expressive of his interest in eternal life; Mrs. Wilcox and Mrs. Moore can, more simply, be identified as representatives of Forster's idealism – his advocates of tradition, intuition, and the like. A. S. Byatt's characters do not fulfill functions in this way. But other points of connection between Forster and Byatt, particularly in the short fiction, are striking. The stories of each are less realistic than the longer fiction, more bold in the portrayal of transcendent reality. And a similar problem for the characters of each author is that access to transcendence is limited, choked off, because of the private and individual nature of the religious feeling involved. Isolated spirituality is doomed to failure – to misinterpretation, neglect, and malnourishment – because characters like Professor Godbole, Mrs. Wilcox, and Mrs. Moore make no concerted attempt to communicate their spiritual beliefs to others or to share their insights. Similarly, the

repressed and doubting characters in Byatt's "The July Ghost" are frustrated in their attempts to see and understand the dead boy in their midst, and the passive Joanna in "The Next Room" has developed neither strength of character nor loving bonds with others that might help her work through the haunting she endures. Both Forster and Byatt are unable to imagine a convincing community of believers, with coherent theological beliefs and the support of a like-minded fellowship. The result is that characters who experience transcendence, through visions of heaven or the visitation of the living dead, are unable to comprehend or positively act on this knowledge.

In 1988, Byatt wrote an appreciative introduction to Rachel Ferguson's eccentric 1931 novel The Brontës Go To Woolworths. In that book, a family of women have created an elaborate fantasy life for themselves called the Saga. The Saga extends to sightings of the Brontë sisters and the dead father of the family. Ostensibly living an upper middle class existence in the London of the 1920s, some members of the Carne family eventually are unable to distinguish between that reality and their fairy-tale world. In her introduction, Byatt astutely notes the danger and fear that Rachel Ferguson courts in this novel. The line between what is real and what is not is hazy, an unsettling state of affairs for the characters and for the reader.

Byatt's own twentieth-century ghost stories, "The July Ghost" and "The Next Room," influenced as we have seen by James and Forster, additionally feature versions of this homely dilemma, suggested by Ferguson: what if ghosts turn up, casually, in very ordinary circumstances, doing nothing in particular? In these two stories the possibility that the observers are, if not mad, then somehow mentally unstable, is given some credence, as it is not in the nineteenth-century story told in "The Conjugal Angel." The

twentieth century carries with it a weight of doubt and alienation, even psychosis. But the very banality of the twentieth-century spirits' activities complicates any easy diagnosis of mental illness. The mundane character of most spirit communications can be seen to be a proof of their reality: doesn't banality colour most of our everyday communications? The dead son of the grieving woman who so longs to see him in "The July Ghost" and the dead parents of the disappointed woman in "The Next Room" engage in behaviour no more malevolent than running across a landing in pyjamas and bickering behind the wall. The ordinariness of these events, and the lack of fear invoked by them, creates for the witnesses a particularly acute anguish. Banality makes these preternatural occurrences more genuine.

The women who are visited by ghosts in these two Byatt stories are both resolutely rational and pragmatic. Says the mother in "The July Ghost:

"I got it wrong, you see, I was so *sensible*, and I was so shocked because I couldn't get to want anything – I couldn't *talk* to Noel – I – I – made Noel take away, destroy, all the photos, I – didn't dream, you can will not to dream, I didn't . . . visit a grave, flowers, there isn't any point. I was so sensible. Only my body wouldn't stop waiting and all it wants is to – to see that boy. *That* boy. That boy you – saw." (Sugar 47)

Joanna in "The Next Room" is "absolutely sure that there was no *better* place, that the end was the end" (Sugar 58). She is a "development economist," a believer in "human ingenuity" (81). When she meets a woman keen on spiritualism who has had a Near Death Experience, Joanna tries to tell her "I don't want heaven" (71). These women are punished for their unbelief. And they have been dishonest about their feelings about the dead: the mother has tried to forget her son; Joanna has pretended to love her parents. The dead return to remind them of their responsibilities, to truth and to the living.

We can look upon the spirits who visit Joanna and the dead boy's mother as vestiges of sexual loneliness and emotional isolation, but the inconclusive endings of both stories mitigate against a strictly psychological reading. Like "The Turn of the Screw," "The July Ghost" features a frame tale with a beginning but no end; at the story's conclusion, we are, significantly, *still in the ghost's presence*. "The Next Room" lacks the framing device, but similarly, ends with the ghosts in possession. The open-endedness of these tales is an element of their realism; the narratives are not closed off, as Gothic tales often are, with dénouements full of reasonable explanations. A dual reading of such tales, much the best way to read James's ghost stories, entertains simultaneous psychological and supernatural interpretations. But when the ghosts are still in power at the conclusion, as they are in "The Turn of the Screw" and in Byatt's "The Next Room" and "The July Ghost," the balance is tipped, however slightly, in favour of the supernatural. Nothing has exposed them as illusory or fraudulent, and the very pragmatism of the women who learn to believe in them is another point in the ghosts' favour. The theory of sexual hysteria so often applied to "The Turn of the Screw" might be used in interpretation of Byatt's ghost tales. But such a strategy suggests itself in the main merely because "The Turn of the Screw" inevitably dominates any discussion of tales of this sort; on examination, Byatt's phlegmatic female characters in these stories bear little resemblance to James's imaginative governess.

If a realist or empiricist (even an ironic or postmodern one, like Byatt) offers a psychological aberration in the form of a returned spirit, this is hardly less strange than the appearance of the ghost itself. Like Robertson Davies, I believe that arguments about whether such phenomena are supernatural or psychological are slightly beside the point.

In either case, we have gone beyond the material. The physical world has failed Joanna, the mother in "The July Ghost," and the governess in "The Turn of the Screw," and, by extension, the authors themselves. Whether Byatt's characters turn toward the intangible or whether it comes to claim them, the incorporeal has definite moments of triumph. Is it less bizarre to see another person's memory (the primary explanation offered by the characters in "The July Ghost") than to see the ghost itself? Byatt's ghost stories are the acknowledgment, by a literary realist, that rational life, earthly existence, and scientific explanations are inadequate.

§ § §

The competition between word and vision noted elsewhere in Byatt is less strained in her ghost stories. In "The Conjugal Angel," Byatt's major treatment of this topic, both language and sight verify the existence of ghosts for the living characters. Indeed, it is the combination of this evidence which makes the living dead so peculiarly solid in this work. As we have seen, Byatt's ideal of communication combines the immediacy and primal vigour of the visual with the methodical pragmatism of words. Hallam's ghost in "The Conjugal Angel" is present in speech, written word, and sight. He satisfies a full range of criteria; Sophie Sheekhy even suffers his touch, as they lie together in her bed. Doubt about Hallam's spirit is not even entertained within the confines of the novella. Byatt allows here, and encourages in the reader, the confidence in the ghostly supernatural that she does not allow in her presentation of conventional religious topics, such as Christian faith. If we doubt Hallam's ghost, it is our own doubt, brought from outside the text, which is at work, and Byatt has not overtly courted or acknowledged it.

In Possession, the primary evidence for the afterlife comes through words, from the spirit of Blanche Glover, or so Christabel LaMotte believes. The optical phenomena that are offered – wreaths and lights – are rejected by Randolph Henry Ash. The evidence is, overall, weaker in Possession, although the two day coma into which LaMotte falls is indicative of something extraordinary. The overwhelming visual and verbal evidence offered in such profusion in “The Conjugal Angel” is missing. The idea that the spirits of the dead poets “possess” the living scholars is mostly symbolic in Possession, but worth noting in passing.

The contemporary stories each offer one half of Byatt’s ideal fusion of communication modes. In “The July Ghost” the dead boy can be seen, but he does not speak. The dead parents of Joanna in “The Next Room” are voluble, but invisible. As a result, these ghosts are less substantial than the ghost of Hallam. As in Possession, there is room for doubt, for alternative interpretations of the ghosts’ existence. Both words and sight are needed for sound proof of a supernatural emanation. This is also one of the reasons for the lack of spiritual coherence in E. M. Forster’s fiction – only vision is employed. Mrs. Wilcox, Mrs. Moore, and Professor Godbole see beyond the material world, but they do not put their mystical visions into words, and the transmission of knowledge is interrupted or lost. In A Passage to India, Adela Quested is able to ascertain the truth of the events at the Marabar Caves in a courtroom “vision,” but is unable to explain the events (290-98); Godbole, whose verbal utterances are utterly enigmatic, is able to reach a state of “completeness” while having visions of, among other things, Mrs. Moore, a wasp, and a stone (373). In Still Life, Frederica Potter values Forster because

she believes that she too “had suffered, and recognised” the “vision of nothing” in the Marabar Caves (120).

Verbal language is associated with materialism, and therefore with the realism which marks so much of Byatt’s fiction. The visual is suited to idealism, transcendence, and the supernatural – and is attached to the Romantic or mystical qualities in her work, elements which usually knuckle under to the materialistic. Unwilling to allow vision to monopolize the entire province of the mystical, like Forster, or, like James, to present words and visions in insolubly ambiguous supernatural puzzles, Byatt attempts, in her ghostly tales as elsewhere in her fiction, a combination of visual and verbal. But material reality, pragmatic and powerful, often disrupts the attempted connection. Like J. P. Stern, who suggests a new form of realism in literature which would build “bridges between the visible and the invisible” (47), Byatt (more hesitantly) introduces the unseen into her realistic fiction in an attempt to expand the limits of the form and to enable a more accurate reflection of the full range of ambiguous human experiences and beliefs. Stern, whom Byatt admires, does not see that realism need be “implacably hostile to any form of transcendence” (45). But, in practice, it often is.

Much of the long excursus on Tennyson at the heart of “The Conjugal Angel” discusses Tennyson’s, and Byatt’s, fascination with materialism. “He nodded sagely when his friends castigated the crass materialism of the Age, but his imagination was stirred by matter” (Angels and Insects 264). Here is where many of Byatt’s characters locate presence. Roland in Possession finds happiness in listing concrete words which resist abstraction. The lists were “compulsively readable and desperately important” (467). In “The Conjugal Angel” the beauty and power of the material is evoked in a long

graceful paragraph near the conclusion of the novella. In it, Sophie Sheekhy watches Emily Tennyson Jesse pouring out tea, and the cups and biscuits, in their resolute solidity, seem to Sophy to represent a miracle: "their tongues tasted goodness" (Angels and Insects 287). In "The Next Room," "The Conjugal Angel," and Possession, those who are investigating spiritualist matters are simultaneously immersed in scientific study: the concrete world exerts an attraction for the nineteenth century characters, who study geology and biology, as it does for Joanna, who studies economic development in our own century. The power and importance of science and verbal language are never doubted by Byatt's people; if they are given visions of ghosts, the intent is not that the earthly be usurped but that it be augmented.

The supernatural quest is a hopeful complement to the materialistic one: in Byatt's ghost stories reside faith in ideals, desires and fears about the afterlife. In the supernatural quest, the power of absence, the allure of the unknowable, is felt. Vision – both actual seeing and inner vision – is the idiom of possible immortality, the language of infinity. (This world is often called "the unseen" world – which the hopeful strive to see in "visions" – a paradoxical state of affairs recalling Freud's *heimlich/unheimlich* alliance.) The visual world has, of course, claims on universality and accessibility that verbal language cannot make, even if that universality is sometimes stalled at the level of potential. A picture of a cup will have more immediacy than the word "cup." Ruth Wilcox knows this: she does not want to explain *Howards End* to Margaret Schlegel but to show it to her. Rupert Brooke gives sight the primary place of importance in his (apparently sincere) "Sonnet (Suggested by some of the Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research)." In the afterlife, says Brooke, we will –

Spend in pure converse our eternal day;
 Think each in each, immediately wise;
 Learn all we lacked before; hear, know, and say
 What this tumultuous body now denies;
 And feel, who have laid our groping hands away;
 And see, no longer blinded by our eyes.

Speech and the other senses are subordinate, in Brooke's scheme, to sight, which serves as the culmination of a description of spiritual perfection. This is commonly encountered in conventional religions, especially its mystical branches. Here we have the Word, or the Name; there we will finally see face to face. As Paul says, "Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood" (1 Corinthians 13.12).

Unlike Brooke and Forster, Byatt investigates *both* speech and vision in her supernatural stories. But Byatt's analysis of this dual quest for the material and spiritual is found, primarily, within one of her most difficult and least admired works, "The Conjugal Angel." (It is not surprising that Philip Haas, in adapting Angels and Insects for the screen, used only the first novella, "Morpho Eugenia," and scrapped "The Conjugal Angel.") The density of the prose and the distancing strategy of using Tennyson as a conduit for the discussion can be off-putting. For Byatt's Tennyson, these two halves – the verbal material and the visual otherworldly – come together in the poetry of In Memoriam, the best sections of which he sees as "animal and abstract at once, matter-moulded and shadowy" (Angels and Insects 271). Tennyson is able to put himself into a trance by staring at his mirror image and chanting his own name, "unmaking both of them with every naming of this nothing" (272). Tennyson is caught between these two worlds, attempting to name things which resist language, trying to scrutinize personality by losing it. His poetry, or so Byatt would have us believe, represents an amalgam of word and vision, concrete and abstract, matter and spirit.

However, the sheer wordiness of "The Conjugal Angel" weighs it down, establishing its worldliness. Byatt's reluctance to engage personally and directly with the question of the afterlife results in a book which, strangely enough, lacks the necessary imaginative space and visual stimulation which can be found in her books not devoted to spiritualism (Still Life, The Matisse Stories). Using the occult as an indirect method of confronting religious questions to which Byatt has (officially) declared herself antipathetic is a plan that miscarries. If one believes in, for example, Christian teachings, then the afterlife is a viable way to examine the intersection of material and spiritual existence. But in presenting an afterlife cut loose from religion Byatt frustrates the analysis of faith and language, of matter and spirit which she has attempted.

The fusion of visual and verbal knowledge which Byatt pursues – and occasionally sees glimmers of – in her examination of birth and love, geometric forms and colours, and visual art, is sought in her supernatural stories as well. Byatt's description of death-as-the end, discussed in chapter 3, suggests that the mortal, finite thing which human death must be for atheists can neither provide the aggregate knowledge Byatt seeks nor help find the language in which to couch that knowledge. Byatt's distrust of organized religion leads her to experiment with death and possible immortality through this middle way – the more vaguely supernatural way – where she hopes to find traces of her ideal fused knowledge. She tries to reclaim some aspects of spiritual life to invigorate the intellectual novel (as Iris Murdoch does in The Bell, a comparison I will pursue in the next chapter) and to explore the possibility that otherworldly visions explained solely by psychological means are robbed of their vitality and significance. The visions that Marcus and Sophy see have a disturbing reality; the

dead are powerful, and so is some source of power beyond material life which goes unnamed. The distress from which Marcus and Sophy barely recover indicates the hazard of such visions when one has not truly invested in religious faith. Marcus in particular has access only to visions, not words, and the imbalance (and the irreverence of the quest) nearly destroys him. The simultaneous presence and absence which is life-after-death is too powerful an idea to be grasped by an agnostic.

Chapter 7: Religion

He had breathed on them
 the breath of a living man –
 even then
 when hope tried with a flutter of wings
 to lift me –
 still, alone with myself,
 my heavy cry was the same: *Lord,*
I believe,
help thou mine unbelief.

Denise Levertov, “St. Thomas Didymus” (1989)

We can act *as if* there were a God; feel *as if* we were free; consider Nature
as if she were full of special designs; lay plans *as if* we were to be
 immortal; and we find then that these words do make a genuine difference
 in our moral life.

William James, The Varieties of Religious Experience (1902)

My discussion of A. S. Byatt and religion will naturally have much in common
 with my chapter on ghosts and the supernatural. Assuming that my reader will forgive
 small repetitions and understand overlapping concerns, I hope nevertheless in this chapter
 to focus more particularly on Byatt’s attitude to deity, to institutional religion, to
 morality, and to ultimate meaning. I will not treat the immortality of the soul, as that
 aspect of metaphysical speculation belongs to the previous chapter. There is less
 emphasis on the intersection of visual and verbal language in this part of my analysis,
 possibly because in her writing about conventional religious traditions Byatt has been
 unwilling to invest the intellectual and creative enthusiasm she brings to her rather more
 oblique approaches to semi-religious events, like Henry Severell’s geometric visions. But
 as I have been writing “around” Byatt’s religious views for so much of this study, I think

it is important to consider what she has indeed written and said about traditional religious faith.

It is not an easy matter to characterize Byatt's relationship to religion. I have called her, throughout this study, an agnostic. Most of her comments on faith, in essays and interviews, support this, and some readers might even be tempted to call her an atheist. For a number of reasons, I think atheism is not part of Byatt's disposition. In 1990 she described her view of God as "an omni-present absentee whose linguistic essence is reduced to traces of moral and cultural nostalgia, touched with savagery" (Passions of the Mind 5). This carefully worded credo would strike one as almost wholly pessimistic but for "omni-present," a powerful modifier ruling over the quiet noun "absentee." In the afterword to New Writing 4, edited with Alan Hollinghurst in 1995, she noted that, after the nineteenth-century struggle with faith and after a burst of religious literary activity in the 1960s, today's novelists "are thinking about what it is to be a naked animal, evolved over unimaginable centuries, with a history constructed by beliefs which have lost their power" ("A New Body of Writing: Darwin and Recent British Fiction" 443). In a television interview conducted by Michael Ignatieff in 1996, she elaborated on this "naked animal": "I think this generation of novelists has come to terms with the fact that we are complicated and beautiful animals." She goes on to describe her search for a scientific model of human meaning and determinism:

If you read someone like Richard Dawkins, he gives you a way into thinking about ethics. The loss of religion, or *what I think of as the loss of religion*, has taken away all the reasons we used to think of for why we should behave well or badly. Dawkins, with his Selfish Gene, with his explanations for things like the use of the maternal instinct, gives you a vision of yourself you can work with, gives you a model of human behavior which you could put into a novel and look at." (Ignatieff interview, emphasis mine)

In 1984, in her filmed conversation with Iris Murdoch, Byatt provided one of the pivotal remarks for a discussion of her (lack of) faith: “I have absolutely no religious beliefs although I think I have a religious temperament.” She followed that with: “Indeed I have a slight hostility to Christianity because I think it to be in the way of truth.” The necessity of the search for truth is an indisputable component of Byatt’s philosophy, even though the outcome is constantly problematized. Most biographies describe her parents as Quakers, and Byatt was sent to a Quaker boarding school in 1949, but she denies that she was a believing Quaker, and sometimes extends this to her family. She has said that “my family were sympathetic to the Quakers, but unlike the Corbett family in The Game, which was taken from the family of a friend of mine, we were not ourselves Quakers” (Dusinberre interview 188). However, in her sole first-person autobiographical story, “Sugar,” she describes her father as a “late-convinced Quaker” and adds “I respected his moral opinions, I share most of them, I am his child” (Sugar 217).¹

Already a number of complicating factors arise in describing Byatt’s views of religion. Her interest in Darwinism and her comments on the human as a “naked animal” are stated within discussions of fiction-writing, not within personal discussions: she is intrigued by the recent writings of Richard Dawkins because they give *the writer* something to “work with,” something “you could put into a novel and look at.” For herself, she admits a religious temperament, but clearly has many quarrels with institutional religion, both mainstream Christian and dissenting Quaker traditions. I emphasized the phrase “*what I think of as the loss of religion*” above because it seems to

¹Although “Sugar” is fiction and cannot be equated with an interview, the story is accurately autobiographical throughout, giving a detailed account of Byatt’s family history which tallies with most of the personal information available about her, particularly as it involves her parents.

me to be typical of Byatt's comments on faith: she qualifies, ponders, and adapts her terms and phrases. She does not make absolute statements about her personal certainty of the absence of God, although organized religion certainly falls short of her truth-seeking ideals.

If we turn to her essays, we find discussions of God and faith everywhere: in extended studies of Robert Browning, George Eliot, and Vincent Van Gogh, and in shorter reviews of D. J. Enright and William Golding, all collected in Passions of the Mind (1991). In a 1989 video interview with Anthony Burgess (where Byatt acts as interviewer), she immediately asks Burgess about his "quarrel with God," and they proceed to a detailed discussion about his religious beliefs, good and evil, and Catholicism, with Byatt apparently in respectful sympathy with many of Burgess's remarks, particularly those about evil as a crucial force to be reckoned with but instead ignored by secular writers.

Byatt has also been shaped by Iris Murdoch's discussions of good and evil. The Bell (1958) is one of Murdoch's most extended treatments of religion, and Byatt has written appreciatively about it in her study of Murdoch's fiction, first published in 1965, where she notes that The Bell has "the solid life that Miss Murdoch praises in the great nineteenth-century novels" and that its characters "have a life of their own" existing beyond the allegorical framework in which Murdoch places them (Degrees of Freedom 79). Murdoch's attitude toward Christianity in this novel is complex and respectful. She acknowledges the real power the Christian message still has to those who can hear it. Those who try to struggle outside the faith have an extremely difficult time, although Murdoch admires and to some extent promotes that very struggle.

The Bell concerns an idealistic community of lay-people attached to an abbey in the English countryside. Several of the characters, including Michael Meade and Catherine Fawley, waver uncertainly on the edge of the monastic life (which also represents Christianity more generally). Dora Greenfield, the unbeliever, assumes that the abbey is a prison, yet the nuns we encounter are healthier and wiser than the people outside. The sexuality of the outside world is threatening and a cause of great anguish, at the same time as it is the best reason to stay in the outside world.

The bell itself, an ambitious symbol with many facets, is profoundly associated with guilt. In legend, a 14th century curse on an amorous nun and her lover made the abbey bell fly into the lake. When a new bell is about to be placed in the abbey, Dora and the boy Toby find the old one and plot a fake miracle to have it raised in the tower in the place of the old one. But the corruption of innocence which occurs in various subplots causes the bell's function – declaring guilt – to be resurrected. It rings out, and later falls back into the lake, in repudiation of the irreligious intentions of Dora and Toby. Simultaneously, Catherine's sudden descent into madness and her twin brother Nick's suicide shake the community to its foundations.

There are no easy answers to the religious and sexual questions Murdoch proposes. The bell, associated both with Christian faith and with eroticism, is “a truth-telling voice that must not be silenced” (The Bell 267). In sermons, both Michael Meade and his colleague James Tayper Pace use the image of the bell. James sees the bell as a voice acknowledging innocence and counselling renunciation (135). For Michael the bell communicates the importance of self-knowledge; the bell is subject to the force of gravity as we are subject to the forces of our personalities, including our sexual identities (204).

Religion at its worst is a “machine of sin and repentance” alien to human nature (303); however, we observe that the characters who don’t believe in God are not as complete or convincing as those who do. Byatt has noted in particular the sympathy and affection Murdoch has for the sincerely Christian but personally anguished Michael Meade: “She shows toward Michael, to an unusual extent in her work, the quality which, referring herself to the love the great novelist, such as Tolstoi, has for his characters, she calls ‘tolerance’ ” (Degrees of Freedom 95). Murdoch’s loving portrayal of Michael will influence Byatt’s own creation of Daniel Orton, just as Murdoch’s thoughtful agnostic reflections on religious faith are followed by Byatt’s own tentative but fascinated speculations on the subject. On CBC Radio in 1996 Byatt said, “I know Daniel. I think quite a lot about Daniel in the way you think about people you love” (Rogers interview).

One of Byatt’s unusual acts as a critic has been to include an essay by Michael Levenson, “The Religion of Fiction,” originally published in the New Republic, as an appendix to Degrees of Freedom. Levenson’s essay concerns Murdoch only tangentially; it is, in fact, a review of Byatt’s Angels and Insects. Levenson believes that Murdoch and Byatt “count as a distinct contemporary lineage” of moral writers (42). There are, of course, differences between them; for example, Byatt is critical of Murdoch’s symbolic use of the bell, which makes her “uneasy” (Degrees of Freedom 83), and in her own writing about religion she has tended to avoid Murdoch’s heavily allegorical formulations. She has also, it must be said, never attempted such a compassionate reading of faith as Murdoch does in The Bell.

Levenson says, of Byatt alone, that “she wants to be the natural historian of a post-Christian spiritual life,” and that “her point is not to confirm religious truth, but to

enlarge the religious sense, which locates value not in the infinite but in the yearning for the infinite, not in God but in the search for God” (43). Byatt, in her introduction to Degrees of Freedom, writes that Levenson’s essay “surprised and excited” her (viii). His evaluation of her aims – his recognition of Byatt’s fascination with mystery and her frustration with the limits of empirical knowledge – is more accurate than most of the criticism that sprang up in the wake of Possession, claiming her as a nostalgic postmodern Romantic and a master of pastiche and irony, and the reviews of her earlier novels, focusing on genre and allusion and on comparisons with her sister Margaret Drabble.

Aside from Levenson, there have been few discussions of religion, or even philosophy or ethics, in Byatt criticism. Michael Westlake in “The Hard Idea of Truth” takes Byatt to task for backsliding into humanism and empiricism in Still Life, instead of staying with the hard moral and epistemological questions that novel purports to ask, and J. Stephen Fountain in “Ashes to Ashes,” a humourless reading of Possession (making links with Kristeva’s use of *jouissance*, among other things), works out abstract and pessimistic deconstructive ideas of genesis and apocalypse in that novel. Neither essay directly faces the matter of religious faith. Scholars have disregarded the fact that Byatt once embarked upon a PhD dissertation on seventeenth-century religious allegory, ignoring also the author’s clarion pronouncement on her thesis, in Passions of the Mind:

It is not too much to say that this unwritten work, with its neoplatonic myths, its interest in the incarnation, in fallen and unfallen (adequate and inadequate) language to describe reality, has haunted both my novels and my reading patterns ever since. (3)

The assumption, prevalent in the academy, that religious faith is a thing of the past, has dried up much potential fruitful speculation about religion and literature in the last few

decades. Even Northrop Frye, an ordained minister, in his studies of the Bible and literature, does not write explicitly of belief but of myth. Christian apologist and scientist John Polkinghorne clings to the idea that “modern Western unbelief is an historical and geographical oddity” (60) and hopes that it will pass.² J. Hillis Miller, in The Disappearance of God (1963), gives the impression that there just aren’t any believers left. His sole concession is to suggest, not very convincingly, that perhaps “God exists, but he is out of reach” (1). Influential literary studies such as Kenneth Burke’s The Rhetoric of Religion (1970) treat language and religion like an elaborate logic puzzle; his book builds on a primary assumption that “theology is preeminently *verbal*. It is *words* about ‘God’ ” (vi). If one has problems with his first assumption (and I do – his is a limited view of theology, as it immediately interrogates the reality of “God” by setting the term off to the side), then Burke’s work on the structures of faith is not very helpful, especially as it ignores the phenomenological actuality of worshipping humans.

Studies do exist, of course, of nineteenth-century religion and literature; as Byatt remains avidly involved with nineteenth-century thinkers, insisting that our debates are continuations of theirs, these can be helpful. Robert Lee Wolff in Gains and Losses: Novels of Faith and Doubt in Victorian England (1977) reminds us that many novels in the period engaged in precise religious debates with a passion we are now incapable of grasping. “Not since the seventeenth century,” Wolff says, “had religious contention been the stuff of everyday English life” (2). Most recent studies of this period display insecurity about these religious issues, to the point of absurdity. For example, Oliver Lovesey’s 1991 study The Clerical Character in George Eliot’s Fiction insists on treating

²Compare this to C. S. Lewis’s confidence, only fifty years ago, that the majority of humanity has always believed (and continues to believe) in “some kind of God or gods” (Mere Christianity 39).

the “character” type as important, ignoring the “clerical” aspect. In Lovesey’s detailed introduction, God is not mentioned at all, and Christ makes one belated appearance on the last page. Atheism is the assumed *modus operandi* of the contemporary critic. Edward Said, in The World, the Text, and the Critic (1983), promotes literary and cultural criticism that is rigorously “secular” instead of “religious” because the latter is apparently synonymous with “unthinkability, undecidability, and paradox” and characterized by unscholarly “appeals to magic, divine ordinance, or sacred texts” (291).

Leslie Stephen, in “An Agnostic’s Apology” (1876), wrote:

We are a company of ignorant beings, feeling our way through mists and darkness, learning only by incessantly-repeated blunders, obtaining a glimmering of truth by falling into every conceivable error, dimly discerning light enough for our daily needs, but hopelessly differing whenever we attempt to describe the ultimate origin or end of our paths.
(39-40)

From Stephen, that energetic agnostic, one obtains a sense of the epic importance of the decision about faith. In our century that urgent quality has vanished from literary criticism. Agnosticism – the belief that God’s existence can neither be proven nor disproven, a position, in the Victorian era, resolutely *not* identical with spiritual apathy – no longer claims many adherents. Now atheism and faith divide up the field between them, and faith, it seems, largely resides outside the intelligentsia. But in the introduction to the anthology Shadow and Light: Literature and the Life of Faith (1997), Darryl Tippens and Stephen Weathers sketch out the preliminaries of an argument against the widely-held view that literature about the transcendent is “peculiar and anachronistic,” that “God is dead as far as significant literature is concerned” (xiii, xiv). They point for proof to the work, in our century, of Flannery O’Connor, W. H. Auden, John Updike, and Denise Levertov.

Byatt's place within this discussion is unusual: as Michael Levenson points out, her contribution is a direct continuation of the Victorian debate about faith, a debate in which very few intellectuals outside of religion or theology departments now are engaged. The controversies that occupied Leslie Stephen, John Henry Newman, Matthew Arnold, George Eliot, and Robert Browning are more vitally present in Byatt's work than are twentieth-century assumptions of unbelief. Like her mentor Iris Murdoch, whose Platonic writings unabashedly uphold moral ideas that are centuries old and ask why they cannot still be current, Byatt insists that the great debate about the reality of God is not finished. "The old shudder of Darwinism is what ["Morpho Eugenia"] wants to give. And why shouldn't we still shudder? What have we become that we have forgotten the shock of our origins?" writes Michael Levenson (42).

As Byatt does not consider herself a Christian, it may seem there is no particular reason to use Christian beliefs as the horizon against which to examine the residues and glimmers of faith in her outlook. But several factors indicate Christianity as the underlying system in Byatt's work. Most obvious is the high proportion of Christian ministers as pivotal characters in her fiction: Edwin Merton and Father Rowell in The Game, Mr. Ellersby and the Anglican priest responsible for Daniel Orton's conversion in The Virgin in the Garden, Gideon Farrar in Still Life, Harald Alabaster in "Morpho Eugenia," Canon Holly in Babel Tower, and (most importantly) the deeply sympathetic Daniel Orton, a fixture of the Potter novels. Nearly all these men are sincere Christians, whatever their failings.³ Outside the clergy, several of Byatt's major characters are also

³ Female ministers just do not appear in Byatt's fiction, although the ordination of women has become increasingly common in the past century. It is equally unusual to find them in other fiction about the clergy, from Goldsmith and Sterne to Greene and Updike. This literary absence is worth investigation,

devout Christians, in particular Cassandra Corbett and Simon Moffitt in The Game and Christabel LaMotte in Possession. Additionally, an obsession with the idea of Incarnation, heavily influenced by Christian doctrine, runs through several of her critical essays, culminating in her analyses of Robert Browning (the piece is entitled “Fact, Fiction, Lies, Incarnation and Art”) and George Eliot. And finally, there is, plainly, the absence of another creed to be of use. Byatt displays little interest in Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, or Judaism. She appears equally unenthusiastic about other quasi-divine “gods” of the past two hundred years or so – nature, the Romantic Imagination, Jungian collective unconscious, Shavian Life Force, Pelagian faith in human progress and perfectibility. About science and myth, however, she is more excited. I shall return to this later.

§ § §

Byatt’s Quaker background goes some way in explaining her ambivalent attitude toward Christianity – being outside the faith but fascinated by it. A dissenting group, founded by George Fox in the seventeenth century, the Society of Friends dispensed with ministers and sacraments, emphasizing instead an “inner light” and direct contact with the Holy Spirit. Less concerned with doctrines and public Biblical readings (although they know the scriptures well) than with spontaneous spiritual experience, the Friends also stress social justice, and are well known for their work in prison reform, the abolition of slavery, the fight for women’s rights, and pacifism. Byatt’s suspicions about mainstream Christian beliefs (which get “in the way of truth,” as she says in the Murdoch video interview) follow from this. The Friends dislike hierarchy, ceremony, and dogma,

Dinah Morris in George Eliot’s Adam Bede being an important exception. As Byatt makes no contributions to debates about women and the ministry, I do not address the issue here.

and value simplicity and charity. Byatt's most admirable Christian character, Daniel Orton, although an Anglican, embodies these Quaker principles.

The deficiencies of Quaker belief are put forward by Cassandra Corbett in The Game. In an impassioned speech at a Friends Meeting, she says:

You always talk as though passive resistance could convert violence to love. But it can't, and it doesn't, and we ought to admit it. There *will always be* people who will slash open the other cheek when it is turned to them. In this life love *will not* overcome, it *will not*, it will go to waste and it is no good to preach anything else. We need God because we are desperate and wicked and we can find Him only through Himself. The Inner Light doesn't necessarily shine, and doesn't illuminate much. (38)

Although Cassandra has psychological problems (her outburst is prompted partly by sexual loneliness and feelings of alienation, and the novel ends in her suicide), these are honestly-felt theological opinions. Cassandra's sister Julia agrees; she sees Quakerism as a failed attempt "to reduce life to its elements" (39). Cassandra moves to Anglicanism and to Catholicism, but finds no satisfaction. Their friend Simon Moffitt, once a candidate for the ministry, becomes a scientist instead. His attempt to combine, somehow, science and religion is presented by Byatt as a particularly destructive amalgam. All three characters find that religion does not answer enough of their questions; there are inexplicable and unmanageable elements loose in the world aggravating and undermining their faith. They come to see religion as escapist, as a way for people to give false meaning or structure to their existences.

The Game is one of Byatt's most explicit struggles with the problem of evil and suffering, a problem which will not return to her fiction with much intensity until Babel Tower. Cassandra says that "we have to find a way of *living in* a world that eats and destroys and pays nothing back" (The Game 38) and Quakerism is seen as inadequate to

the task. The Quakers in the book – the Corbett parents and Julia’s husband Thor – practise good works obsessively, to the detriment of their familial relationships, and with inadequate positive results. Thor is presented as an extremist, a good but conflicted man who is submerging his violent nature in religious social work; the scene where he breaks down, wrecks the apartment, and leaves his family is an exciting piece of writing. (Byatt revels in such demolition scenes; another is found at the heart of “Medusa’s Ankles”).

The Game is Byatt’s only extended treatment of Quakerism, but the influence of Quakerism colours her future examinations of religion. The simplicity of Quaker faith makes her suspicious of sacrament and creed, and accounts for her pursuit of pure vision, of fully illuminated language. But that very simplicity, combined with the fallibility of human beings, disappoints in its inability to contain or explain evil and pain.

A large portion of Byatt’s portrayal of mainstream Christianity is found in Possession. That Christian faith receives its most strenuous examination in this novel might be seen as an impediment to any serious analysis of it, since I have argued elsewhere that Possession is anomalous in Byatt’s *oeuvre*, on account of its comic purposes. (Amidst the general approbation on Possession’s release, a disappointed Punch reviewer compared it to Graham Greene’s “entertainments” and urged Byatt to return to more serious fiction.) But the nineteenth-century stratum of the novel, with the Ash-LaMotte correspondence at its heart, is not where the comedy is located; the postmodern characters are the ones who are held up for ironic probing and gentle ridicule. Byatt confirms this when she says that she meant for “the dead [to be] much more alive and vital than the living” (Wachtel 1993: 82). When interviewer Eleanor Wachtel notes that

Roland Michell and Maud Bailey are, by comparison with Ash and LaMotte, “a little anaemic,” Byatt agrees, and continues:

The Victorians, on the other hand, were quite sure that they were real people. They didn't have modern theories of there being no concrete personality, of everybody being just a kind of mixture of moments in time and voices of the language speaking through them; they really believed that they were important people, that what they did mattered in the eyes of God and in their own lives. (82-83)

The Ash-LaMotte correspondence, encompassing over forty pages in chapter 10 of Possession, contains a detailed series of arguments about religious faith. Indeed, the religious debate is the foundation of the nascent relationship between the poets Christabel LaMotte and Randolph Henry Ash; it is only after they have delved into Christianity quite thoroughly that they go on to discuss myth, spiritualism, poetry, and finally, their love for each other. Although some reviewers pinpoint the letters as a static section of the novel, and Joyce Carol Oates regrets that the correspondence requires such readerly effort and “continues at a pace more suitable to the Victorian era than to ours” (276), a close reading of the letters, which actually bristle with vitality and passion, is imperative to an understanding of the poets, their beliefs, and the failure of their romance. Religion is one of the reasons why LaMotte leaves Ash. She certainly desires her independence, as a woman and as an artist, but it is important to notice how she withdraws from the religious conversation after Ash fails to reply satisfactorily to her anguished plea, “*Tell me – He Lives – for you*” (Possession 184).⁴ This withdrawal foreshadows her ultimate departure from Ash.

LaMotte's second letter to Ash acknowledges that

your great poem Ragnarök was the occasion of quite the worst crisis in the life of my simple religious faith. . . . It seemed to me you made Holy

⁴I have retained the italics which are a feature of the correspondence in Possession.

Scripture no more than another Wonder Tale – by dint of such writing, such force of imagining. I confuse myself, I shall not go on, I ask your pardon if what I have said appears incomprehensible to you. I doubted and I admitted Doubt I have had to live with since. Enough of that. (176)

Ash responds, never with atheistic arguments, but with the statement that “*A secure faith – a true prayerfulness – is a beautiful and a true thing*” (179). He then outlines the stages of his own struggle with faith. As a young poet he had believed in

the Universal Truth of the living presence of Allfather (under whatever Name) and of the hope of Resurrection from whatever whelming disaster in whatever form. . . . But, as you perceived, this is a two-handed engine, a slicing weapon that cuts both ways And the existence of the same Truths in all Religions is a great argument both for and against the paramount Truthfulness of One. (179-80)

Ash goes on to decry their “*old world – a tired world*” where truths “*are now obscured by palimpsest on palimpsest*” (181). He wonders if God has withdrawn, and if so, what are the reasons. There is no doubt that Ash desires faith:

I am not yet become any kind of an Atheist, nor yet positivist, at least, not as to the extreme religious position of those who make a religion out of Humanity – for although I wish my fellow men well, and find them endlessly interesting, yet there are more things in Heaven and Earth than were created for their, that is our, benefit. . . . I find it hard to shift without the Creator – the more we see and understand, the more amazement there is in this strangely interrelated Heap of things – which is yet not disordered. (180)

LaMotte’s response is “*partly in accord*” with this: “*Doubt, doubt is endemic to our life in this world at this time.*” She urges Ash to recognize the importance of the “*Centre of our living faith,*” the Incarnate Christ, God as divine human, and offers this argument: “*could we have conceived that Sublime Model, that Supreme Sacrifice—if it were not so?*” (182). This is reminiscent of one of C. S. Lewis’s arguments for Christianity: “it is not the sort of thing anyone would have made up. It has just that queer twist about it that real things have” (Mere Christianity 44). The comparison with Lewis is

useful. LaMotte and Ash have, by this time, entered into the kind of rational, exquisitely-detailed debate about God that is quintessentially Victorian – and of which Lewis was one of the last great practitioners. Ash contributes the last, and most subtle, proposition in this contest. He offers his idea of Art-as-Religion (he says “*When I write I know,*” very much what Matisse says about believing in God when he paints): “*The only life I am sure of is the life of the Imagination. . . . I am saying that without the Maker’s imagination nothing can live for us*” (Possession 185). Although Ash goes on at greater length to explain this vague Romantic notion of religious imagination, LaMotte refuses to answer in kind. She writes:

He said – I am the Truth and the Life – what of that, Sir? Was that an approximate statement? Or a Poetic adumbration? Well – was it? It rings – throughout eternity – I AM – (186)

These quotations furnish just the skeleton of the passionate argument which Byatt provides on behalf of her Victorian poets. She has a profound understanding of the vexed intellectual and spiritual quandaries of the age and a sincere respect for their meditations. Although at first glance the letters appear to be offering point and counterpoint on the reality or fictiveness of Christianity, on a closer inspection they are revealed as the conversation of two people who each embody elements of faith and agnosticism, in different measure. They are not caricatures or types. Byatt has drawn on Robert Browning, Alfred Tennyson, Christina Rossetti, and Emily Dickinson as models, but Ash and LaMotte are also originals, uniquely the product of their author’s own concerns. LaMotte, the believer, does not fire conservative salvos like Cardinal Newman, who writes in Apologia Pro Vita Sua (1864) that the infallibility of the (Roman) Church is necessary

to preserve religion in the world, and to restrain that freedom of thought, which of course in itself is one of the greatest of our natural gifts, and to rescue it from its own suicidal excesses. (221)

Ash, the doubter, does not sound the elegiac note of Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach," with its "melancholy, long, withdrawing roar" of the sea of faith. Ash is actively engaged in issues of faith, but from outside Christian institutions. Ellen Ash, who has the steadiest and most conventional faith in the novel, shows no alarm at this. She writes in her journal in 1859: "If the Tale of Noah's Deluge turns out to be a fine poetic invention, shall I, the wife of a great poet, thereby cease to pay attention to its message about the universal punishment of sin?" In comparison, she does display a modest annoyance with her minister, Mr. Baulk, who is working out his questions from within the church (as Ash, lacking hypocrisy, is not):

Well, I assent. I do assent. I do know that my Redeemer liveth. But I should be grateful on earth if Herbert Baulk could respectably resolve his intellectual doubts so that our prayers could be full of honest praise and robust faith in a watchful Providence, rather than darkly *riddling*, as at present. (Possession 243)

The depth and complexity of the Victorian investigation of faith contrasts markedly with the pallid state of confused unbelief which Roland and Maud demonstrate. Although commentators always note Byatt's satiric reproof of various postmodern intellectual scepticisms in Possession, fewer remark on her attitude toward contemporary secularism. Roland and Maud are hollow characters, not only intellectually and sexually but also spiritually disconnected, from self and from other. Maud thinks of herself as "intermittent and partial" and as a "matrix for a susurrations of texts and codes" (273). Roland sees himself as "discontinuous machinery and electrical message-network of various desires, ideological beliefs and responses, language-forms and hormones and

pheronomes” (459). They do not allow themselves to believe in much except linguistic and biological codes; it is amazing Roland has such sympathy with Ash, who writes in his dramatic monologue “Swammerdam” of God

Who made us as we are, so fearfully
And wonderfully made our intellects,
Our tireless quest to *know*, but also made
Our finitude, within His Mystery,
His soft, dark, infinite space, wherein we rest
When all our questions finish and our brain
Dies into weeping . . . (228)

Equally, what does Maud, well-versed only in feminism and psychoanalysis, make of LaMotte’s profoundly believed poem “Metamorphosis”?

Does the ruffled Silken Flyer
Pause to recall how She – began –
Her soft cramped crawling Origins –
Does man
In all his puffed and sparking Glory
Cast back a Thought
To the Speck of Flesh the Story
Began with, from Naught?

But both, in their Creator’s terrible keen sight
Lay curled and known through timeless Day and Night
He Form and Life at once and always – Gave
Is still their Animator and their Grave – (177-78)

For Roland and Maud, the debate about faith, myth, science, and origins does not happen at the personal level, although it sometimes does at the intellectual. Intuitively, however, Roland and Maud are capable of greater depth. Roland hints at the incipient believer he is by his old-fashioned search for “sources for Ash’s Garden of Proserpina” on the second page of Possession. Both of them are more emotional, more vulnerable, and more open to mystery by the novel’s conclusion, under the edifying influence of the nineteenth-century poets. The dully secular cast of their spiritually inarticulate

personalities, as presented throughout the first part of the narrative, is one of the particular twentieth-century problems that Byatt exposes in Possession.

§ § §

In the Ash-LaMotte correspondence, and in their poetry, Byatt captures some of the real anguish nineteenth-century thinkers experienced about religious matters. Atheists and agnostics were not cheerful about leaving the Christian church; Leslie Stephen writes in 1876 of “a deep sadness in the world. . . . Optimism would be soothing if it were possible” (36). The researches of Darwin and Lyell are often cited as precipitating the era’s crisis of faith, but for George Eliot and many others it was the so-called Higher Criticism of the Bible which was influential. Eliot translated David Friedrich Strauss’s The Life of Jesus into English in 1846 and Ludwig Feuerbach’s The Essence of Christianity in 1854. These investigations of the historical context of Christian text and belief were shattering for many Victorians. Eliot had been in her youth a devout Evangelical Anglican but lost her explicitly Christian faith, although she retained what A. O. J. Cockshut calls a “reverent, moral agnosticism” (50). Cockshut notes that several key literary figures of the time (including John Stuart Mill and Matthew Arnold) “disbelieved in the truth of Orthodox Christianity, but were in some way deeply concerned with religious problems” and “[nourished] their spirit on Christian sources” (10). T. S. Eliot would later take Arnold to task for this admixture of belief and disbelief: “What had a man whose youth was so rigorously seized and purged at Rugby, to do with an abstract entity like the Soul?” (The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism 117). Robert Lee Wolff, in his study of Victorian novels of “faith and doubt,” argues that the apparent inconsistencies among Biblical messages (and not necessarily the historical

discoveries of the Higher Criticism) were key factors in loss of faith, as were the arguments of Thomas Paine (one assumes Wolff means the anti-clerical writings rather than the political). But, he says, “more important than any book was the conviction that the Church was indifferent to the sufferings of the poor, and a force *against* social advance” (419, emphasis mine). It is this serious flaw in the human, institutional aspect of Christianity which is often overlooked in discussions of agnosticism and atheism.

The religiously-inclined agnostics of the 1800s turned to a variety of human-centered faiths to replace Christianity. They had faith in reason, historical progress, capital, science, basic human goodness. They assumed that ultimate truth and morality existed outside Christianity and that it was attainable. In an 1851 review of R. W. Mackay’s The Progress of the Intellect, George Eliot writes: “he who believes, whatever else he may deny, that the true and good are synonymous, bears in his soul the essential element of religion” (Selected Essays, Poems and Other Writings 281-82). Her doctrine of sympathy enables her to test for religious essence by judging simply the ethical and generous behaviour of individuals. Jesus was respected as a teacher, as a superlatively good man. F. W. H. Myers provides this famous 1881 report of the Christian tenets George Eliot rejected and retained:

Taking as her text the three words which have been used so often as the inspiring trumpet-calls of men, – the words *God, Immortality, Duty*, – [she] pronounced, with terrible earnestness, how inconceivable was the *first*, how unbelievable the *second*, and yet how peremptory and absolute the *third*. (Qtd. in Haight 464)

There are a number of misconceptions about faith in the Victorian era, and I highlight two of them important in any consideration of A. S. Byatt. One is a retrospective exaggeration and oversimplification of the faithlessness of the agnostic

movement. J. Hillis Miller, for example, in The Disappearance of God severely downplays the elements of faith retained by Emily Brontë, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Robert Browning, and Matthew Arnold and overemphasizes their doubts. He claims that all the writers in his study take as their originating point a feeling of God's absence, and then struggle on from there. The struggle is surely correct, but the assumption of absence? It cannot be proven by Hopkins's "Pied Beauty" or "The Windhover" or Brontë's "No Coward Soul is Mine." Even Browning, who exclaims in Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day (1850) "How very hard it is to be / A Christian!" also writes, of Jesus, "I cannot bid / The world admit he stooped to heal / My soul . . . / I only knew he named my name." Byatt's emphasis on Browning's incarnational strategies, for example, demonstrates her keen awareness of the importance of religion to even those Victorian authors normally considered agnostic, as does the close attention she pays to the internal religious conflict of Randolph Henry Ash. Among her favourite writers are many who struggled arduously and sometimes painfully with Christianity, from inside and outside the tradition, including Donne, Herbert, Coleridge, Dickinson, Tolstoy, and Nietzsche (Antonia Fraser 132).

My second point concerns the supposed blithe optimism about human progress that these agnostics put in place of God. George Eliot, who coined the word "meliorism" to describe a belief in gradual progress, is called to task, by critics as various as A. O. J. Cockshut and Friedrich Nietzsche, for preserving the idea of divine justice and cloaking it in humanistic robes. Byatt, in "George Eliot: A Celebration," refutes this "too general" summation. "She had a strong – stronger – sense of black comedy, black tragedy than she is now generally credited with, and a saving savagery in her vision of man's normal and

natural inhumanity to man,” says Byatt. “She offered us scope, not certainties” (Passions of the Mind 76).

The nineteenth century occasioned livelier and more unsettled skirmishes on the issue of faith than we choose to remember. Wordsworth and Tennyson were claimed as champions in both religious and secular camps. In 1864 John Henry Newman warned his readers not to put too much faith in “the wild living intellect of man” and “the raw material of human nature, so excellent, so dangerous” (Apologia Pro Vita Sua 220, 226). By the end of the century, many others were realizing the danger in elevating humanism to a religion. The Christian apologist Richard A. Armstrong writes in 1905 that his society is haunted by the “problem of the limits and trustworthiness of our intellectual powers” (185). “Of all horrible religions the most horrible is the worship of the god within,” cautions G. K. Chesterton in 1909. “Worship cats or crocodiles . . . but not the god within” (138). The family of Thomas Arnold, the famed educator, is an exemplary study in turmoil and contrasts. The elder Arnold was a Broad Churchman, a liberal Anglican with a keen interest in social justice. His son Matthew famously elevated a vague doctrine of “the best that has been thought and said” in place of his father’s religious faith and salvaged from the Gospels a strange sense of Christ’s “sweet reasonableness” (Literature and Dogma 199). Another son, Thomas, converted from Anglicanism to Catholicism not once but twice (in 1856 and 1876), rending his family and causing much distress. His daughter, Mary Augusta Ward (Mrs. Humphry Ward), wrote many novels on the subject of religion, and frequently relocated herself along the spectrum of agnosticism. The religious upheaval in families like the Arnolds was not

unusual; the debates were passionately felt and the ruptures highly visible in all layers of society, but especially in the middle and upper classes.

In essays on Browning and George Eliot, Byatt emphasizes their strenuous engagement with these religious issues. She offers a careful definition of Eliot's celebrated realism: it is "partly a moral realism, rejecting 'compensation' and other consoling doctrines, and partly a related technical realism, a desire for accuracy" (Introduction to Eliot's Selected Essays, Poems and Other Writings xvi). Eliot honoured questions, sought precision and detailed knowledge, defied easy answers. Christianity as it stood could not be reconciled with her intense desire for truth, although she retained admiration for many Christian principles and ministers (as we shall see when we come to my section on fictional ministers). One important principle which Eliot attempted to employ and rework in her own moral system is the idea of the Incarnation. Byatt writes, in her introduction to Eliot's Essays:

The long nineteenth-century debate about the precise meaning, or lack of meaning, of the Christian concept of the Incarnation, the meeting-point of the divine and the human, the infinite and the finite, is inextricably connected, consciously and unconsciously, to the development of the form of the novel. As the biblical narrative ceased to be privileged as unique truth, and became associated with partial histories of other kinds, or what Froude in The Nemesis of Faith calls "Wonder Tales," so there arose, for certain kinds of speculative minds, an interest in the nature of the individuals and the values they represented, as portrayed in secular narrative. . . . Lydgate and Dorothea, Maggie and Adam Bede, are invested, in their limited individuality, with the religious *value* that has been displaced from the incarnate Man to the succession of human beings. (xxv, xxvii)

Not only does George Eliot attempt to transfer sacred portions of the Incarnation to her characters, she also wanted, as she said in an 1866 letter, "to make certain ideas thoroughly incarnate" (Essays 248) in language. In her 1868 unpublished essay "Notes on

Form in Art," Eliot defines poetry in its highest Form as "the fullest expression of the human soul" and as "living words fed with the blood of relevant meaning" (235).

Byatt indicates that Robert Browning has similar ideas, and her account of them is more complex. "We can perhaps place his incarnate individuals as a series of infinites, put within finites, the proper activity of Art," she says in her 1991 essay "Robert Browning: Fact, Fiction, Lies, Incarnation and Art" (Passions of the Mind 54). This transfer of Incarnation theology to fictional characters and literary language is not, says Byatt, original to Eliot or Browning, but is derived, in part, from Strauss, Feuerbach, and Michelet (42). But Byatt is taken with a particular use Browning makes of the notion: his vivid lists, the sensuously detailed earthly things cast in language by Fra Lippo Lippi and the Bishop of St. Praxed's, somehow redeem even the most monstrous characters (57). This intersection of powerful language, finite humanity, and transcendent ideals is described by Byatt in terms which she does not bother to strip of their religious associations. Byatt interprets Browning's "Epilogue" to Dramatis Personae in this way:

What the third speaker [whom Byatt identifies as the poet] seems to say is that even the least of men, in his individuality, is one incarnation of the infinite, that the walls of the world, which confine him, are at the same time his temple – as David saw God in the star, in the stone, in the flesh, in the soul, in the clod, indifferently. The Face is not resurrected but "recomposed" out of its death and decomposition, made by the poet, or singer, or perceiver, who, in knowing his separateness, knows also the existence of everything else, with both mind and heart, with both spirit and flesh. Because he differs from his fellows utterly (as opposed to becoming one man with others in the Temple), he composes his world with an essential difference, "my universe that feels and knows." He is a witness of difference. He is a poet who writes men and women, all separately incarnate, all separately aware in their necessarily and splendidly limited ways, of infinite passion and the pain of finite hearts that yearn. (Passions of the Mind 71)

It is impossible to mistake Byatt's passionate tone in this conclusion to her very long essay on Browning. In both Browning and Eliot Byatt cites approvingly their transfer of Incarnational theology to the field of art. Eliot's Adam Bede and Dorothea Brooke are, in a sense, little Christs, as perhaps is Daniel Orton in Byatt's work; the attractively delimited infinity Byatt identifies in Browning allows her to recapture some of the splendour and mystery lost when religious faith is abandoned. The extent of the hopefulness that Byatt invests in this line of inquiry is clear when we note the weight of responsibility she places on language. Does Browning's vivid and concrete language really *redeem* his characters, as she says? (We are justified in probing the full religious sense of this word, since Byatt is encouraging a transformation of very powerful terminology.) Her eagerness to find in art and language an outlet for her "religious temperament" leads her to hope unduly that secular words can borrow some of the power of the Christian Word, the Incarnate Christ. But neither Browning's nor Eliot's work, as admirable as it is, can honestly fulfill this longing. This deeply-felt exegetical activity seems slightly out of keeping for a woman with an interest in humans as "naked animals" and who has a self-proclaimed "slight hostility to Christianity."

§ § §

Byatt's attitude to twentieth-century religion is quite different than her intense engagement with nineteenth-century religion, evidenced by her Incarnation essays and by the characterization of Christabel LaMotte and Randolph Henry Ash. Byatt expresses herself more freely on Victorian religious issues than on contemporary ones. About the latter her opinions are veiled, ironic, and circuitous. Although she acknowledges the influence of T. S. Eliot on her work, and in The Virgin in the Garden Frederica Potter

plays Eliot's recording of Four Quartets obsessively (153), Eliot's religion is nowhere explicitly mentioned by Byatt. Perhaps this is because, as Alfred Kazin has said, Eliot's love was less for God or Christ than for "the Church itself" (God and the American Writer 195) – Byatt's interest in religious institutions has never been great. When she undertakes the religious problems of the 1960s characters of The Game, we find that they are already on the way to becoming the partial caricatures that Roland and Maud will be, more expressly, in Possession. Critic D. J. Taylor suggests that religion in The Game comes off marginally better than humanism (After the War 186). But we are distanced from the people in The Game, evidence perhaps of the climate of "inconsequentiality" and "dethroned sincerity" which religion scholar Kenneth Cragg identifies as the literary hallmark of contemporary secularism (The Secular Experience of God 33).

Cassandra Corbett and Simon Moffitt, although in genuine metaphysical distress, are also, to some extent, stiff, Murdochian allegories or place-holders. Cassandra works through a number of religious crises in a cerebral way. She moves from a position of arguing with Simon that Christ's death doesn't seem necessary to her, to one where the Incarnation is "the supreme event of both factual and imaginative worlds" (The Game 74, 76). She tries to convince herself that the Church can energize metaphors and make them Truth (225). Christian faith, writes Cassandra in her journal, creates a world "where action is meaningful, love is purposeful" (76). All of this highly willed belief takes place within her sterile and unloving life. Cassandra is suspicious of human contact; her discussions of love seem bitterly ironic. Julia Corbett and her husband Thor do not share a common religious faith, and the gulf between them is eyed very coolly by Julia.

She thought: how the religious man is separated for ever from the irreligious because there is a whole set of moral problems created for him

by the assumption that there is a God whose meaningful intention placed him where he is. (63)

Christianity in The Game is an intellectual issue. Characters try to convince themselves of their faith, and the love at the heart of the Christian story is entirely absent from their actual lives. Part of the difficulty for Cassandra and Simon is the problem of evil, that classic dilemma. The simplicity of the Quaker faith, with its absence of ritual, does not provide a strong enough bulwark against evil for Cassandra's liking ("love *will not* overcome, it *will not*" [38]). Her move to Roman Catholicism provides her with a weightier set of myths and propositions, but increasingly Cassandra has problems assessing reality, and Catholicism does not save her either.

Byatt has professed an admiration for a number of Catholic writers, including Muriel Spark, Graham Greene, and Anthony Burgess. She respects the way they treat evil as an existing force of immense power being ignored in our current secular life. The theme recurs in her discussions of William Golding and D. J. Enright, who are not Catholics, but whose disquisitions on Satan and on ultimate darkness Byatt finds gripping. In 1989, Byatt comments:

Graham Greene said, I thought rather beautifully, that in the English novel since E. M. Forster characters have become unreal, which I think he associated with this kind of moral unreality, that people were betterable, and also with a sort of formal wishywashiness. There is a sense in which the Catholic novel has kept alive a sense of the importance of the human character. (Byatt/Burgess video interview)

Byatt has a good deal of confidence in human rationality, and she has inherited her family's Quaker disposition toward compassion and liberal political views, but on the subject of evil, she finds much in the Catholic view to recommend it. Although she does not, to my knowledge, overtly recommend a belief in original sin, she is respectful and

thoughtful about Catholics who do demonstrate such a belief; this is, I think, what underlies the sentence about “human character” above. It is not general character she is describing, but a character with inherent *badness*.

Byatt’s apprehension about evil is allied to her views on chance and accident. Byatt has rarely written about evil itself, as, for example, Martin Amis and Salman Rushdie have. Instead, she has chosen to focus on destructive accidents. Chance, of course, is the subject of Still Life. This is not the positive chance of Pascal, a happy embrace of the forces beyond reason, a recommendation that one might as well believe in God since the alternative is much less charming. Byatt says, to Iris Murdoch in their 1984 video interview, that “chance operates in the world in this terrifying way and can change things overnight. All our best endeavours are subject to it.” Byatt cites as an important influence E. M. Forster’s The Longest Journey, with its completely unexpected death on the rugby field near the beginning of the book. Murdoch calls Byatt’s depiction of accident – the death of Stephanie Potter – “one of the most wonderful surprises which I’ve seen for a long time in a novel” because it “is like a real accident.”

Byatt’s predisposition is towards the orderly, as she has said herself and as is evident from most of her writings. Indeed the very subject of this dissertation is her quest for systems of orderly belief (language, geometry, art) which can replace the loss of religious faith. Ironically, it is in an essay about the writing of the accident-riddled Still Life that she says: “I wanted at least to work on the assumption that order is more interesting than the idea of the random” (Passions of the Mind 11) – although the order she mentions is linguistic order rather than cosmic or human order. But her two novels preceding Still Life are certainly orderly. The Shadow of the Sun and The Game do seem

indebted to Iris Murdoch, an influence often noted in Byatt criticism, but one less appropriate as the years go on. The early plots are somewhat fatalistic, darkly hinting at the helplessness of characters trapped in systems (familial, romantic, educational) which are confining and at least potentially destructive. The characters typify ideas the author wants to probe, although both Byatt and Murdoch do allow, at least partially, for the “opacity” of personality promoted by Murdoch in her essay “Against Dryness.” (As I have said before about Murdoch, that opacity, or impenetrability, has not always played out in practice as well as it does in theory.)

Chance and accident do not play important roles in the first two novels, written in the 1960s. Characters are more inexorably driven toward their ends, although The Shadow of the Sun does end on an ambiguous note (we are not absolutely sure of Anna’s future, although it looks restrictive). But in 1972, Byatt’s son Charles was killed by a drunk driver on a London street, and Byatt’s attitude toward life’s orderliness changed drastically. Although The Virgin in the Garden (1978) precedes Still Life (1985) and is, on the whole, a comic novel, Byatt had the trajectory of the entire Potter series planned in the early- to mid-1970s (see interviews with Dusingberre and Kenyon – in the latter Byatt mentions her “six thick notebooks on the quartet” [12]). Virgin is dedicated to Charles, and a tiny hint of the ruin to come in the next novel is offered in the story of Mrs. Thone, the headmaster’s wife, whose life is shattered by the inexplicable death of her 10-year-old son, who “between a good breakfast and an end of break bell . . . could run, fall, smash, twitch, stop moving forever and begin to decay.” For Mrs. Thone, “her interest in the future, and her real interest in the outside world, had ceased with her son” (Virgin 243). Cognates of Mrs. Thone recur from this time on: in the Murdoch video interview Byatt

notes that she had been studying a newspaper item about a woman whose two children drowned by accident in a chalk pit. "Yesterday this was a woman with a life," Byatt says. In the Prologue to Still Life, Daniel Orton is brooding about the tragedy of a woman who has three children killed by a car containing an IRA gunman, "gratuitous" deaths which foreshadow the death of his wife (foreshadowing for the novel's readers, but of course not for Daniel, as the Prologue is retrospective, taking place in 1980, while Stephanie dies in 1958).

"Ever since my own son died I always bring in a violent, sudden death. It's in the background to all my thoughts," Byatt says (Kenyon interview 12). By the 1990s, however, Byatt's fiction will revert, somewhat, to the carefully patterned and controlled style of the 1960s fiction. Angels and Insects in particular is heavily allegorical, as is Babel Tower's text-within-a-text, the novel Babbletower. Possession has been characterized as "too knowing and too coercive" by Danny Karlin in the London Review of Books, who calls the book's inventions and plot twists "fatally convenient" (18). The shadow of accident is sighted occasionally in Babel Tower, as when Daniel and Stephanie's daughter Mary mysteriously falls in the playground. Then Mary recovers consciousness: "It is all a miracle, her voice, her struggling quickness, the heaving of her small stomach, the sounds of her retching, it is life, she is alive" (49).

A miracle. Despite Byatt's 1970s and 1980s pronouncements on the malevolence of chance, its destructiveness dims in the recent fiction. "A child has fairy-tale beliefs in patterns and predictability, thinks things will get better," Byatt said to Iris Murdoch in their 1984 video interview. "An adult must learn how vulnerable we are to chance and the random." But in the last decade, Byatt has actually taken to writing fairy-tales, publishing

them in The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye, and she has translated another, "The Great Green Worm" by Marie-Catherine D'Aulnoy, for Marina Warner's 1994 collection Wonder Tales. Although the moving and accidental death of Stephanie is at the heart of Byatt's fiction, it is also unique; the shock of the incident has never been repeated. The most violent action in Stephanie's sister Frederica's life, the tremendous scene in Babel Tower in which her husband Nigel attacks her with an ax, has no connection to the dark forces of randomness. Although Byatt uses chance as a reason why religious faith seems nonsensical, her recent fiction undercuts the argument. There are very clear reasons why things happen in Babel Tower and Possession: greed, dishonesty, desire, sadism. And some "accidents" in the fiction turn out to be felicitous – as in the Yorkshire tour Roland and Maud make in Possession, opportunely duplicating that of Ash and LaMotte, even though the scholars did not know all the details of the trip the poets took. A similar happy accident is the reunion of the Papagays at the end of "The Conjugal Angel."

Science is another stumbling block to faith offered up for argumentative purposes in Byatt's fiction, particularly in "Morpho Eugenia." In that novella, the clerical character Harald Alabaster is attempting to write a Christian apology incorporating the evolutionary researches of Darwin. The quest is "shot through with trouble, indeed anguish," as the story's protagonist, Charles Adamson, notes (Angels and Insects 117). Alabaster concocts arguments from beauty (58) and from love (86), and asks why Natural Selection cannot derive from the Deity (83). Even the agnostic Adamson offers Alabaster the consoling hypothesis that "Mystery may be another name for God" but Alabaster feels "all these arguments are *nothing*, the motions of minds that are not equipped to carry them through" (60). Alabaster's writings (which Byatt provides in harrowing

abundance) attempt a hybrid of incompatible creeds; the name of his estate, Bredely, warns of genetic synthesis experiments gone awry. Instead of proving Alabaster's faith, his manuscript amply demonstrates its decline. "It is not impossible that the world is the work of a Creator, a Designer," Alabaster tells Adamson, who immediately notes the negative formulation of the sentence (33). "How shall we name the Force that directs them [i.e. natural laws]? Blind Chance, or loving Providence?" Alabaster writes, but his answers do not even satisfy himself (86). Just as the minster town near which the resolutely agnostic Potters live is a corruption of Calvary (Calverley), so is Harald's name a sad echo of the kind of divine messenger, or herald, he wants to be.

It is not necessarily science, however, that is responsible for Alabaster's loss of faith. The father of many children, he is oblivious to the actuality of their lives, and does not see the morass of incest, class strife, and petty cruelty in his own huge household. Alabaster is as blind as the statue his surname makes him out to be. While Victorian intellectuals debated theories of origin and the textual history of the Bible, more people were losing their faith because of the hypocritical immorality of church adherents and leaders and the irrelevance of church creeds for combating everyday adversity.

Harald Alabaster illustrates the inconsequence of church debates in the lives of ordinary people. There are scientists today who continue the quest to reconcile science and theology, and with some success. John Polkinghorne, an English physicist turned Anglican minister, theorizes that life is based on an interplay of "chance and necessity," and he sees this as reason for confidence:

Cosmic history is not the unfolding of an inexorable plan. An evolutionary world is to be understood theologically as a world allowed by the Creator to make itself to a large degree. . . . [The world is] endowed with

fruitfulness, guided by its Creator, but allowed an ability to realize this fruitfulness in its own particular ways. Chance is a sign of freedom, not blind purposelessness. (42-43)

Byatt admires the work of Daniel C. Dennett; she recommends his book Darwin's Dangerous Idea in the 1995 Times year-end roundup of books. In that book, Dennett writes rather wistfully about elements of godhead to be found in a post-Christian creation:

The Tree of Life is neither perfect nor infinite in space or time, but it is actual . . . and sacred. . . . I could not pray to it, but I can stand in affirmation of its magnificence. This world is sacred. . . . [After Darwin] the "miracles" of life and consciousness turn out to be even better than we imagined back when we were sure they were inexplicable. (520-21)

This short discussion of the intersection of science and religion merely touches on an extensive ongoing controversy (which in many ways has not changed much in the last 150 years). My interest is in Byatt's application of it: she uses science as she uses chance, as an apparent stumbling-block to faith that is not, on reflection, necessarily a stumbling-block. Byatt's portrayals of the problems for religion raised by evolutionary theory and by randomness are not wholehearted or convincing; instead, she admires people like Dennett who attempt to salvage the sacred in evolutionary theory, and she has recently displayed an approving curiosity about chaos theory, the study of systems apparently random which turn out to be governed with a degree of order (see her 1992 Independent piece "The Ambition of Art").

§ § §

Another major factor in the religious crisis of the Victorian era was the growth of humanism, of engagement with and faith in the human being, rather than in an unprovable divinity. Human history, along with the earth's history, was an obsession of

George Eliot's, as Byatt points out in her introduction to The Mill on the Floss (11). Eliot was influenced by Auguste Comte, who saw humanity proceeding through three stages: from the theological stage to the metaphysical and finally to the positive. Byatt is at pains to point out where Eliot parts company with Comte: "she had her doubts, her caveats, her sense that immutable causality and inexorable development were only part of the tale" (23). Byatt quotes an 1857 letter of Eliot's, in which she feels "every day a greater disinclination for theories and arguments about the origins of things in the presence of all this mystery and beauty and pain and ugliness, that floods one with conflicting emotion" (23).

Another earlier proponent of a human-centered view of history is Giambattista Vico, the eighteenth-century scholar important to Randolph Henry Ash in Possession. It is serendipitous indeed that the drafts of embryo love letters from Ash to LaMotte are found in Ash's copy of Vico's Principles of the New Science discovered by Roland Michell in the London Library. LaMotte will challenge Ash on that which Vico represents – the earthly faith he has in science, history, and myth. The novel suggests that romantic love is at least one force with a more mysterious power than any human-centered theory can account for. Michael Ondaatje puts Herodotus to a similar use in The English Patient; the histories contained in the book Almásy carries everywhere can only be fully animated when he pastes in miscellanea from his own life and, most importantly, adds the evidence of the love he shares with Katharine. (Kathleen Coyne Kelly suggests another use for Vico; she emphasizes Vico's cyclical view of history and points out the appropriate parallels between the nineteenth- and twentieth-century lovers in Possession [A. S. Byatt: Twayne's English Authors 97]).

In the nineteenth century many Christian ministers, as portrayed in the fiction of the time, were actually ethical humanists, doing good works, working toward the betterment of human society. At their worst, the clergy of Victorian literature were working both against humanity and God, like Casaubon in Middlemarch or Mr. Brocklehurst in Jane Eyre. There is little that is holy about any of the clergy in Anthony Trollope's fiction, and they run the gamut from sympathetic to ineffectual to rapacious. Jane Austen's ministers display a similar variety: Mr. Collins in Pride and Prejudice (1813) is ambitious and obsequious; Mr. Elton in Emma (1816) is selfish and decidedly unspiritual; Edward Ferrars in Sense and Sensibility (1811) is a good man, although I must jog my memory to recall that he is a clergyman. One would not go to Primrose in Goldsmith's The Vicar of Wakefield (1764) with a serious spiritual crisis; the trend to humanize the ministry as depicted in fiction did not begin with the Victorians.

George Eliot's ministers are particularly important to A. S. Byatt, although the intentions of the two authors are not identical. According to G. H. Lewes, in writing Scenes of Clerical Life (1858) Eliot intended to portray "the actual life of our country clergy about a quarter of a century ago; but solely in its *human*, and *not at all* in its *theological* aspect" (qtd. in Wolff 225, emphasis in original). Thus, the "sad fortunes" of the Reverend Amos Barton are not directly related to his ministerial capacity, but are related to bad judgement, bad luck, carelessness, and gossip. In "Janet's Repentance," Janet is saved not so much by the pastoral ability of Mr. Tryan, but by his sympathetic manner, by a romantic bond between them, and by his neediness, as a fellow sinner and as a consumptive. This "human aspect" is also in play in the portrayal of Farebrother, the sympathetic clergyman in Middlemarch. Farebrother is studied as a man, with faults and

goodness intermixed; one of his most obvious qualities is not his reverence for God but his awareness of his own failures. This makes him a good counsellor and a keen and accurate observer of other people. "I am not a model clergyman – only a decent makeshift," says Farebrother (206). One of his primary tasks is to act as an intermediary – not between humans and God, as might be expected, but between human and human (often between couples, like Fred Vincy and Mary Garth). E. M. Forster's Mr. Beebe, in A Room With a View (1908) plays a similar role and displays both similar insight and absence of sanctimonious demeanour. Farebrother's opposite in Middlemarch is the self-righteous "apostolic" Tyke, of whom the narrator says, "Nobody had anything to say against Mr. Tyke, except that they could not bear him, and suspected him of cant" (210). Although critic Oliver Lovesey claims that "the exposure of the flawed individual behind the clerical façade" is one of George Eliot's prime motivations (14), Farebrother is one of Eliot's most honourable and likeable creations, and he, modestly, does much good.

Farebrother is a literary ancestor of Byatt's Daniel Orton. Daniel is a dependable and trustworthy man, at first glance a social worker rather than a spiritual leader. Although Daniel's faith falters at the death of Stephanie, through the three Potter novels he steadily plods on with his work, which is, increasingly, helping people in crisis. In Babel Tower he is no longer a curate or vicar with a congregation, but is staffing the phone at The Listeners, a crisis hotline in London loosely affiliated with the Church. He does hospital work, counsels the despairing, and cares for the unlovable Jude Mason at the conclusion of Babel Tower, taking him into his own home.

Daniel Orton is more effective a minister than most of the ministers in Eliot, Forster, or any of Byatt's other literary antecedents. He is also more genuinely religious

than his literary forebears, and is the most successful minister in Byatt's fiction. This is, perhaps, unexpected, as Daniel does not present himself as a profoundly religious man. If theology is strictly "words about God," then Daniel would not seem to have much theology at his disposal. But he does have an unarticulated theology, which is sound and unselfish, based on forgiveness and practical help. Daniel demonstrates a faith that exists outside the realm of words, and his hard work and gruff sympathy get results. In The Game, Edwin Merton and Father Rowell seem to be genuine believers, and although caring, they are ineffectual in their attempts to help the distressed Cassandra. They are adept at discussing theology, unlike Daniel, whose principles are resolutely practical. "I'm not the debating kind of churchman, nor yet the preacher," he says (The Virgin in the Garden 39). Byatt is at pains to demonstrate the importance of Daniel's philosophy of being and doing, his realism and pragmatism:

What was needed, he came to see, was someone practical, someone completely committed to *practical* solutions. He used this word to himself in a sense perhaps uniquely his own. As it became clear to him that he was neither a reflective man nor a scholarly man, that he was interested neither in his own nor anyone else's motivation, nor in early heresies and liturgical forms, he reiterated to himself that there was need for someone wholly committed to being practical. To be practical was to deal directly with pain, poverty, horror, quite directly. To drag back to a place where they were measured by human standards those forced out of human proportions of body, or understanding, or social relations, by the forces of evil. (55)

Daniel recognizes similar views and abilities in Stephanie, and although she does not call herself a Christian, he assumes that she is one for all relevant purposes, to him and to God. Stephanie recognizes that Daniel "dealt absolutely, in areas where one neither thought nor lived, normally. Where one hoped to avoid living. He saw the world *in extremis* and was right" (85).

The other clerical characters in Byatt's fiction help to delineate Daniel's particular strengths. In The Virgin in the Garden, there is the Anglican priest – a “mesmeric” orator of “imperative biological urgency” – who converts 15-year-old Daniel.

He said that it seemed odd, that when so much was clear, was admitted, so few answered. That when Christ had said how men should live, so few even considered living so. He said bleakly, his face somehow stripped, that what was required was that people should use their lives. . . . Christ came that they might have life more abundantly. Not happiness, life. (53-54)

This man is responsible for Daniel's “only experience of communal passion” (53). There is no doubt of the priest's absolute sincerity, as there is, later, no doubt of Daniel's. Each emphasizes action, not contemplation; others, not self; altruism, not theology. The other clerical character in Virgin is Daniel's superior, Mr. Ellenby, who performs the marriage of Daniel and Stephanie. Like many clerical characters in fiction, Mr. Ellenby is more perceptive than the average man. He silently recognizes the strange blend of pagan and Christian in both Daniel and Stephanie as he marries them and manages to be “solicitous, rather than clerically hooting” (260). However, neither Stephanie nor Daniel like Mr. Ellenby, and Stephanie in particular “harboured briefly savage thoughts” about his wedding homily, which is characterized by the “essential shiftiness of argument by analogy” (261).

By comparison with Daniel, Mr. Ellenby is stuffy and conventional. When he leaves, the replacement vicar, in Still Life, is the opposite – and this turns out to be more dangerous. Gideon Farrar, interested in sociology and psychology, is a modern minister of “personal relations.” Daniel recognizes in retrospect Mr. Ellenby's “profound belief” and misses it; Gideon, on the contrary, is interested in power (138). Later in the novel, Gideon is found to be sexually aggressive, “interfering” with teenage girls, and his wife

reveals that his ideals of family love are false (330). Gideon is the sole “bad” minister in all of Byatt’s fiction, representative of those who abuse clerical power for their personal gratification.

We have already discussed Harald Alabaster in “Morpho Eugenia,” a pathetic and perplexed man entangled with theories and uninvolved in real life. The final minister of note in Byatt’s fiction is Canon Holly, Daniel’s co-worker at the crisis hotline in Babel Tower. Like Gideon, Canon Holly combines an intense interest in sexuality and in religion, but in a more positive way. Holly is another Christian humanizer, not unlike liberal American bishop John Shelby Spong and his ilk; Daniel justly wonders how Holly’s position differs from atheism or pantheism (23). Holly presses people to identify the “Godwithin” (22); he is gently criticized by Ginnie Greenhill, another counsellor, who believes that God is not about human passion but about “how to live with the idea of death” (25). Daniel does not take sides in this argument; in Babel Tower he is, if anything, even less of a theologian than in previous books. He says that he is “only an instinctively religious man” (an appellation not unlike Byatt’s self-identification as a person with a “religious temperament”) who needs the structure of the church to make him patient and virtuous (23). But it works – he *is* patient and virtuous.

In Babel Tower Daniel takes a small role and Frederica Potter occupies the centre of the book. However, Daniel’s conversations with Jude Mason on the existence of God are pivotal in an understanding of Byatt’s purposes in this puzzling and massive novel. Jude takes a gleeful but anguished Nietzschean position on the death of God when he calls *The Listeners*; Daniel stolidly and almost wordlessly defends God’s presence. Jude explores the potential of lawlessness and lovelessness in his novel Babbletower, and is

tried for obscenity. Babbletower is an extreme and perverse version of Canon Holly's "Godwithin," a parable of a community obeying only its own increasingly terrible desires. Jude's atheism brings him intense spiritual pain; Daniel recognizes from the beginning of their relationship that "theological despair as a motive for suicide" (Babel Tower 11) is quite plausible, and indeed Jude is near death when rescued by Frederica and Daniel at the book's conclusion. Jude's last appearance in the novel is significant:

He closes his eyes again, and settles back into Daniel's pillow. He murmurs, "You are a man of God." There is a note of satisfaction in his voice. (611)

Daniel is not overtly holy, not obviously exceptional, and claims to have no special relationship with God. But he is the working moral centre of the Potter novels, someone who very quietly believes in God and, in his actions, actually saves lives and changes people. He is more effective as a minister and moving as a character than the more theologically-oriented ministers of The Game or the man who converts Daniel in Virgin, who never reappears. The positions which the humanist ministers take in Byatt's fiction – Alabaster's scientific musings, Farrar's and Holly's sociological and psychological leanings – are valid aspects of religious speculation and Byatt does not wholly hold these aspects up to ridicule. But the persons of Holly and Alabaster are treated satirically, and the character of Farrar is revealed as corrupt. Only Daniel succeeds, through simplicity and discipline and stern compassion. Although in some ways Daniel seems to be a social worker rather than a clergyman, he lacks the optimism about people which is the hallmark of the humanist. Daniel's faith resides in his confidence that there is a higher moral authority than the human; his behaviour, although not explicitly stated as such, is modelled on Christ's.

§ § §

There are three epigraphs in Babel Tower, Byatt's most concentrated portrayal of evil. The excerpts from W. H. Auden's "Circe" and from a letter of Mme. de Sade to the Marquis indicate that the core of the novel will be an accusatory examination of the dangers of human freedom and assumptions that we are alone in the universe. Not only the Babbletower scenario, but the presence in the novel of the Moors murders, the pornography found in Frederica's marital bedroom, and the formlessness discovered in the English school system (being analysed by Alexander Wedderburn's committee in a subplot) – all of these point to the hazards inherent in the human assumption of supremacy, or complete liberty, in the universe.

The last epigraph is the most important. It is a terse quotation from Nietzsche: "I fear we are not getting rid of God because we still believe in grammar." This riddling aphorism can be read in several ways. We cling to God, as we cling to grammar, wrongly, because we crave order. *Or*, we cling to God, a false belief, because we foolishly associate the formulae of religion with the orderliness of language, which is actual and true. *Or*, grammar and God are both true, and Nietzsche is just determined to rid himself of the overwhelming problem of God because it is something humans, in their maturity and independence, must do.

It is not possible to say for certain which interpretation Byatt promotes, although her advocacy of grammar is made clear in remarks to Eleanor Wachtel:

In Britain, in political life now, the right wing has taken up the cause of grammar in a rather repugnant way. It believes that there are orders for rugby football and there are orders for grammar. And these are good for your soul, like being whipped in public school, if you're a poor little boy in a boarding school. And of course grammar isn't good for you for that reason. Grammar is good for you because it's intensely

pleasurable and because it's actually part of your own brain. It isn't good for you if applied from outside like a punishment.

People need rules. . . . On the whole I'm a liberal, and on the whole I believe individuals should do as they please as much as possible. I do deeply believe in things like obeying traffic lights. I see rules as being like traffic lights. A city will simply clog up if you can't get everybody to stop at the red light and move on the green light. (Wachtel 1996)

Various aspects of Babel Tower also prove Byatt's defence of the order of grammar and language – Frederica's experiments with randomness in writing are unsatisfactory; the children in the novel crave structure in their stories and in their schooling. Byatt's position on God is less transparent, but the misery of Jude and the healing ability of Daniel counts for a good deal. Daniel lives out a compromise between the abstract claims of theology and the overly humanistic convictions of the sociologist Christians: he needs the structure religion gives him and he knows that a human-centered faith is dangerous; he also knows that too much dogma will destroy the good he can do on God's behalf. And Daniel, as the Potter quartet unfolds, certainly does seem to be working on God's behalf. A scripture passage associated with him is 1 Corinthians 14, reading in part (Byatt uses the King James Version): "There are, it may be, so many kinds of voices in the world, and none of them is without signification." Including the Christian voice.

§ § §

It would be irresponsible to discuss A. S. Byatt's attitude toward religion without some mention of myth. As Northrop Frye says,

Man lives, not directly or nakedly in nature like the animals, but within a mythological universe, a body of assumptions and beliefs developed from his existential concerns. (The Great Code xviii)

One can choose to see the Judaeo-Christian tradition as one strand of a system of myths used by cultures to explain the origin, meaning, and end of the universe. Many of Byatt's

citations from the Hebrew and Christian scriptures are used in this general mythological, rather than spiritual, manner. Although reference works have noted the importance of myth, symbol, and history in Byatt's fiction (see entries by Seymour-Smith, Campbell, and Griffin), very little analysis has been forthcoming on her use of myth and symbol, although several articles have been published on historical aspects of her writing (see Holmes, Janik, Webb).

Byatt's most common mythological sources are Scandinavian mythology and the Hebrew Scriptures; occasionally she uses Greek and Roman myths (Richard Todd in his study of Byatt makes much of the latter, ignoring to his detriment the Norse myths). Less frequently she uses the New Testament. My emphasis in this study is on religion as currently-held or at least actively-questioned faith, not as fodder for anthropological or psychological study. Nevertheless, her use of Norse Ragnarök stories and some Judaeo-Christian stories holds promise from a religious point of view.

Byatt's usual method is to reveal a mythological referent as symbolically significant of cultural types and patterns – and often she then demonstrates how loss of faith has diluted the mythical figure's potency. For example, an important character in the text-within-a-text in Babel Tower (Jude Mason's Babbletower) is Samson Origen, a silent witness to the horrors taking place at the Sadeian dystopia that is La Tour Bruyarde. The original Samson is the violent strongman of the Hebrew Scriptures; Origen is the 3rd century Christian scholar and ascetic. Origen attempted in his teachings to unite Christian and Platonic doctrine and was also an influential interpreter and promoter of allegory. According to Helen Gardner (A. S. Byatt's supervisor at Cambridge in the 1950s), Origen can be seen as the “founder of all Christian Biblical study, the father of all textual

criticism, and of grammatical as well as allegorical exegesis" (Limits of Literary Criticism 11). Two other "mythological" characters from Byatt's fiction are Cassandra Corbett in The Game and Fergus Wolff in Possession. Cassandra, a princess of Troy, is the famous prophet of Greek myth who, having spurned the love of Apollo, is punished by universal disbelief in her prophecies (which include the Trojan Horse and the death of Agamemnon). Fenris Wolf, in Scandinavian legend, is the child of Loki, the tempter god, and is responsible for killing the chief god, Odin, in the Last Battle, or Ragnarök.

These three examples from the Judaeo-Christian, Greek, and Scandinavian traditions are used in similar ways. Each Byatt character takes characteristics from his or her mythical forebear, but the religious power has been stripped away. Even Origen, a historically verifiable Christian, is used by Byatt as a mythological figure. Samson Origen is one of three sane and trustworthy characters in the Babbletower narrative; he makes an impressive speech about the wisdom of standing silent and desiring nothing (Babel Tower 285), but his passivity in the face of the atrocities he witnesses is nearly as appalling as the sado-masochism practised by the leaders of La Tour Bruyarde. Byatt demonstrates, *via* her use of Origen in this context, her indictment of the lack of dynamism within the Christian church when faced with human evil, and also points out (by the use of Samson) that the Judaeo-Christian tradition has itself been the source and site of destruction and violence. Cassandra Corbett in The Game retains from her namesake the fated unhappiness and lack of ability to communicate with others, but she has no gift of prophesy or deep insight. Fergus Wolff, the deconstructionist in Possession, is a successful scholar who threatens to undo the tentative steps that Roland and Maud are taking toward an unfashionable but meaningful reading of the Victorian story of Ash

and LaMotte. Fenris Wolf in myth is wholly evil, a destructive principle, born of a Satanic character. Byatt uses this myth satirically; she sets Fergus Wolff as a foil for Roland, whose more traditional humanistic scholarship is allowed to triumph over sceptical language-based criticism. Fergus is the one scholar who is not allowed to be present in the stormy cemetery for the conclusion of the Ash-LaMotte mystery. Again, the mythical figure has been stripped of his power. The evil wolf is declawed and undone.

The use of the Babel Tower image in the 1996 novel is less ironic, its moral status more earnest. In Genesis 11, after the Flood the earth's people want to "make a name for themselves" (v. 4) and attempt to build a tower to heaven, an edifice which will challenge God's sovereignty. God is alarmed at their ambition and scatters them, confusing their language so they may not understand one another, giving as His reason that "this is only the beginning of what they will do; and nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them" (v. 6). Aside from the tower's implicit relation to the portentous tower of the free-thinking Fourierist colony in Babbletower, Byatt makes few explicit comments on the Babel Tower image throughout the novel. But in an interview, Byatt commented that Babel Tower is about "fragments jerking apart," a "whispering of papery voices," and "language breaking loose from the world" (Wachtel 1996). However, it is not God who has ordered this chaos and punishment. This state of affairs has been created entirely by humans.

The overweening emphasis on human desire and power and the destructive licence which Byatt presents as the hallmark of revolutionary France (the setting for Babbletower) and the 1960s (the setting of the main narrative) cannot be laid at God's

feet. Byatt's most dangerous characters have not only rejected God, but have made gods of themselves. This is in line with traditional interpretations of the Babel Tower image. Northrop Frye goes further, and posits the Tower of Babel in Genesis as a demonic parody of Bethel, also found in Genesis; each name connects, says Frye, to an idea meaning "gate of God." Bethel is the place where Jacob dreamed of a ladder descending *from* heaven: "It was not a human construction but an image of the divine will to reach man" (Words with Power 152, 154). The Tower of Babel is the place where humans undo God's work and try to take God's place, climbing *to* heaven. The result is an unhappy chaos, both in the Hebrew Scriptures and in Byatt's novel.

An even more sincere use of a Biblical symbol is Byatt's choice of the name "Daniel." In the Hebrew Scriptures Daniel is a prophet in exile, whose faith is sturdy despite being severely tested. Daniel is able to interpret the famous "writing on the wall" for the Babylonian king Belshazzar; one of the prophecies he offers is "you have been weighed in the balances and found wanting" (Daniel 5.27). The Book of Daniel also features a strong apocalyptic strain. Daniel Orton is no prophet; but he does stand firm in his faith in trying circumstances. As a saddened religious man in the midst of agnostics and atheists, he might also be seen as a herald of the apocalypse. He may not read the writing on the wall, but he listens to it daily on the telephone at The Listeners. Less intellectually inclined than the other characters in the Potter novels, Daniel is nevertheless an efficient exegete, interpreting Christian scriptures generously, reading the needs of the people around him, and almost exclusively among the characters (especially in Babel Tower, after the loss of his partner-in-charity, Stephanie) able to translate belief into action. He does not offer reproach, although he does afford a mode of comparison.

Contrasted with Daniel, most of the characters in Babel Tower would be “weighed in the balances and found wanting.”

If one regards my identification of apocalyptic ideas in Byatt’s fiction as far-fetched, Byatt in 1996 offered this description of the projected fourth and last Potter novel. It will, she says, feature a battle between rebellious students and academics having a conference about the mind at the University of North Yorkshire – an image of apocalypse, the Last Battle, Ragnarök (Wachtel 1996). Ragnarök is also used by Byatt in Possession as the subject of an important poem by Randolph Henry Ash. Ragnarök in Scandinavian myth is the destruction of all the gods and all of creation. It follows the poisoning of creation by the evil Loki and his children, which culminated in the death of Odin’s beloved son, Baldur the Beautiful, a Christ-like figure.

Byatt’s usage of Scandinavian myth is traced to one of her favourite books as a child (Antonia Fraser 127), W. Wagner’s nineteenth-century collection Asgard and the Gods. In Wagner’s view, the flawed, human-like gods have excellent allegorical and cosmogonic uses but fail as objects of worship, except where the northern myths have been infiltrated by Christian ones (as has probably happened in the case of Baldur, for example, and in various trinitarian constellations of gods). These myths have appealed to Byatt partly, perhaps, due to the greater power given to the female gods (the sun, Sol, is female, as is Hel, the goddess of Death). Evidence of Byatt’s fascination with these myths can be found throughout her novels. It is in Wagner’s book that we discover the source of the name Gode in Possession: the old woman who tells Breton tales in that novel is named after the chief goddess of Asgard – Gode is an alternate name for Frigg,

or Freya. More important is the association of Randolph Henry Ash with the Allfather god, Odin, or Wotan.

In Asgard and the Gods Odin is divinely associated with language and interpretation; indeed he has sacrificed one of his eyes to be granted the ability to read runes, the sacred symbols. However, neither the runes nor any other power can save Odin and the other gods once they succumb to the guile of Loki the tempter. Loki's child, the Midgard-Snake, wraps around the Yggdrasil, or World-Ash tree, choking the life from it. Another of Loki's children, the Fenris Wolf, is the killer of the Allfather during the Last Battle.

Ash the poet has not lost an eye in the service of his art. But he can be identified as Odin in the Postscript of Possession by this description: "tall, bearded, his face in shadow under a wide-brimmed hat, a wanderer coming up the lane, between high hedges, with an ashplant in his hand and the look of a walker" (553). Odin often disguises himself as a Wanderer and is closely linked with the World-Ash tree; puns on the word "ash" recur frequently in Possession. Odin is also the Allfather, and in Possession Ash is not only Roland Michell's spiritual father and mentor but, it turns out, is Maud Bailey's actual great-great-great-great-grandfather. In the years after Ragnarök, according to W. Wagner, two innocent humans, Lif and Lifthrasir, emerge from hiding and are the source of a new creation. It is not out of the question that Lif and Lifthrasir are Roland and Maud, embracing a resurrected belief in the old stories, defeating the Fergus Wolff who wants to devour the old ways with his deconstructive strategies, just as the Fenris Wolf of myth destroyed Odin, the Allfather, keeper of the runes of meaning. Fergus has sat "at the feet of Barthes and Foucault" (Possession 37); Roland initially searches for a place in the

British Museum Reading Room, among the “secondary desks, stammering desks, DD GG OO” (31); Maud is stranded with ideas of margins and thresholds, writing papers on liminality (154). All three of them initially are inclined to scepticism and fragmentation, but only Roland and Maud are able to forge a new relationship to the “Allfather,” one which gives their lives and work new meaning and vitality.

Byatt in her fiction also comments on other users of myth in fiction; of particular significance is her nod to J. R. R. Tolkien in Babel Tower. An important character in the novel, if it is not impertinent to speak of a bird as such (and in this case I do not believe it is), is a thrush. The thrush opens Babel Tower, and an echo of this initial thrush scene closes Babel Tower. Byatt’s thrush is a relative of the important thrush in Tolkien’s The Hobbit, the bird who shows Bilbo and the dwarfs the way into the mountain where the dragon Smaug lives and later is instrumental in the destruction of Smaug; the thrush is able to tell the archer the location of the evil dragon’s vulnerable spot. Byatt mentions Tolkien as a particular favourite of hers in Antonia Fraser’s The Pleasure of Reading; in Babel Tower Frederica reads The Hobbit to her son Leo. Tolkien’s bird is wholly trustworthy, a harbinger of goodness and truth quite in keeping with the thrush’s traditional symbolic qualities of wisdom and heavenly aspiration (Olderr). Thomas Hardy also uses the thrush in this way. In his poem “The Darkling Thrush,” he presents the bird’s hopeful and incongruous “full-hearted evensong” on a dreary evening as expressive of a lonely Christian faith at the dawning of the troubled twentieth century.

Byatt does not mean her thrush to be an ordinary bird; its mythical qualities are apparent. Additional evidence is supplied by the character Turdus Cantor, in Babbletower. He has a thrush-like name, *Turdidae* being the Latin name of the thrush

family, while “cantor” of course is a leader of religious song. He is a friend of Samson Origen, and his role in Jude Mason’s vicious allegory is much the same as Origen’s. They are religious figures who rise above the violence – the reader clings to them for security – but their inaction is, finally, reprehensible. Byatt’s thrush is more ambiguous than Hardy’s or Tolkien’s. She emphasizes the thrush as a destroyer of snails; the bird never appears in Babel Tower without its attendant “anvil or altar” on which to smash snail shells. Although the bird’s song is lovely, made of “liquid syllables,” it is also “limited.” The narrator asks, “Why does his song give us such pleasure?” (3). The question is unanswered, but implicit is the response that a creature who seems to get such enjoyment out of smashing and eating his prey (“he extracts the bruised flesh, he sips, he juggles, he swallows”) is an uncertain source of innocence and wisdom. The altar of shells is paired with the altar of bones at the end of the novel; the fate of the libertine community at La Tour Bruyarde is to be prey for the cannibalistic Krebs, who are (incredibly) more barbaric than their victims. In each case, religious sacrifice is implied and derided; both the thrush and the characters of Babbletower are destructive in appeasing their desires and appetites.

This thrush occurs in Babbletower, not Babel Tower, so the presentation of the thrush is, ostensibly, Jude Mason’s and does not belong to the narrator of Babel Tower (one can identify the parts written by “Mason” by the snail graphics opening and closing each section). Perhaps one ought not assume too much about the complexities of this thrush, who sings so beautifully and smashes so readily. But the importance of the positioning of the scene – at the beginning of Byatt’s massive novel – outweighs the problem of whose point of view is presenting the thrush. Byatt actually offers four

potential beginnings to the book: the thrush (an excerpt from Babbletower, exact position in that novel unknown), Hugh Pink meeting Frederica, Daniel at work, and chapter one of Babbletower. The thrush comes first of these four possibilities, however, and the mixed pessimism and beauty of the little scene does much to set the tone for the entire novel.

Is it odd to emphasize one or two scenes about a bird in a novel as huge and multifarious as Babel Tower? I have taken some time over the thrush because it is indicative of some of Byatt's most ambivalent mythological tendencies. The thrush is far from being her most complex symbol: her analysis of snails in Babel Tower, with all their scientific, political, and philosophical ramifications, is more intricate. But there is little in the snail that has religious significance,⁵ and the thrush, in general symbolic discourse and as used by Hardy and Tolkien (as Byatt well knows), is directly associated with religious faith; this is the context that intrigues me. And Byatt has given the thrush pride of place at the novel's beginning.

Once again, Byatt has taken a mythological symbol of religious power and, partly, undermined it. Her thrush is not a Good Bird, but has its horrible side. Like Christianity, like Origen, it has made mistakes, some of them devastating. But Byatt has not made the thrush wholly evil either, nor has she made it inconsequential. The thrush is honoured in Babel Tower, and it is still lovely: "Why does his song give us such pleasure?" (3). There is a longing here for religious faith not unlike Hardy's. Although she has not written much about Hardy (he is mentioned in her short story "The July Ghost"), his poem "Hap" precisely expresses one of Byatt's religious anxieties – the force of chance in the universe. Hardy writes in that poem: "Crass Casualty obstructs the sun and rain, / And

⁵ According to Steven Olderr, snails do have resurrection connotations, but generally this is connected to natural, seasonal cycles rather than spiritual beliefs.

dicing Time for gladness casts a moan.” Byatt darkens Hardy’s pessimistic longing one degree further, by making his thrush a barbarous creature, but the yearning for faith does not disappear.

§ § §

In her 1995 book of “conversations” with Ignês Sodré, Imagining Characters,

Byatt ostensibly groups religion and myth together:

You can understand a lot about yourself by working out which fairytale you use to present your world to yourself in. For that matter I suspect you could do that with Christianity too, whether it's the Virgin and Son or the figure on the Cross you choose to devote yourself to. (74)

Byatt and Sodré are, however, using a psychoanalytic approach to literature and culture, not a literal or pragmatic or historical one. Byatt says,

In a sense what we are partly saying is that you can give a psychoanalytic explanation of why religious certainty makes people better, which is nothing to do with whether the religion is true or not. (42)

Much of Imagining Characters traces the use of myths and archetypes in writers such as Charlotte Brontë, Willa Cather, and Toni Morrison. These writers, says Byatt, know “how to evoke and stir up in us those ancient forms which we then clothe as one does in one's life, with flesh and blood” (142). Byatt and Sodré see this, absolutely, as a positive thing; they note repeatedly how characters discover mythical forms (including Christian) which they internalize and which aid in moral direction. In most cases, the characters under discussion find something in myth that allows them to create a saving image of Goodness. In particular, Byatt and Sodré are drawn to discuss Iris Murdoch’s Platonic ideas, her belief in an ideal Good that can function in the place of God in a post-Christian society. Byatt paraphrases Murdoch: “Our sense of Good depends upon the sanction of a God in whom we no longer believe” (174); Murdoch instructs us to get on with learning

about Good and Evil without the protection of a deity. Because Byatt is commonly seen as an heir to Murdoch, one might assume that Byatt's stance on God is the same. That assumption would be a mistake.

Of the six women writers discussed in Imagining Characters (George Eliot and Jane Austen join the four already mentioned), Byatt and Sodr  are toughest on Iris Murdoch – although temperamentally and thematically they have the most in common with her – and call her to task for unrealistic characters and false effects. Surprisingly, they reserve high praise for Willa Cather's The Professor's House (1925), which Byatt describes as having “a kind of almost buried, almost inactive Christian myth” (143). It is as if Iris Murdoch's confidence that the Sovereignty of Good can replace Christian faith does not strike Byatt as sufficient. Murdoch does not seem overly bothered, in her 1969 essay “On ‘God’ and ‘Good,’” about “the disappearance of a permanent background to human activity” (The Sovereignty of Good 53). Byatt's *overt* statements on religion and philosophy seem to be in general agreement with Murdoch, but the anxious undercurrents I have been uncovering in Byatt's writing demonstrate her own philosophy to be considerably less sanguine, less committed to a cheerful attempt at ethical living without God.

Iris Murdoch writes, in “On ‘God’ and ‘Good,’” that:

God was (or is) a single perfect transcendent non-representable and necessarily real object of attention; and I shall go on to suggest that moral philosophy should attempt to retain a central concept which has all these characteristics. (55, emphasis in original)

This definition could be a model for Byatt's definition, written in 1990, one we have noted before. God, says A. S. Byatt, is:

an omni-present absentee whose linguistic essence is reduced to traces of moral and cultural nostalgia, touched with savagery. (Passions of the Mind 5)

Ambivalence is there in each appellation; Murdoch wavers on whether God "was (or is)," while Byatt endows her God with both presence and absence. Another similarity is an obvious pressing need to keep the idea of God in circulation and under discussion, somehow, no matter how many doubts are enumerated about God's existence. After this, their definitions part company. Murdoch seems to say that we should be able to live a moral life guided by a perfect Idea which is much like God; her proposal is cerebral, unbodied, abstract.⁶ Byatt's God, however, is wrapped up in linguistic and mythological issues; we cannot simply free ourselves from the influence of thousands of years of theism, even if we want to. It is not just our minds that must grapple with God and Good, but our bodies and our intuitive inner selves, once (and sometimes still) called souls. One of the most important elements of Byatt's definition is the last phrase, "touched with savagery." If I read the sentence correctly, it is not God who is designated as savage, but either the "linguistic essence" or the "moral and cultural nostalgia" that is – most likely the latter, I hazard. In other words, the trappings of Christianity (or, more generally, the entire Judaeo-Christian heritage) are contaminated by violence and falseness, but the contamination does not necessarily extend to God or Christ. There is a sense of bodily pain, anger, restlessness, and active searching in Byatt's formulation entirely lacking in

⁶ It should be noted that Byatt identifies, in a 1986 assessment, an "increased urgency" in the religious concerns of Murdoch's late novels (Degrees of Freedom 330-31). The direction of Murdoch's future religious thoughts became impossible to chart after she acquired Alzheimer's disease in 1994.

Murdoch's. Byatt's God is allowed an uncertain certainty, and can be seen in her work as a longed-for but dubious reality; as Marcus Potter realizes, "it was almost impossible not to believe in a Designer" (Still Life 303).

Conclusion

Words strain,
Crack and sometimes break, under the burden,
Under the tension, slip, slide, perish,
Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place,
Will not stay still.

T. S. Eliot, "Burnt Norton"

Near the end of her first novel, The Shadow of the Sun, A. S. Byatt creates a conversation between novelist Henry Severell and critic Oliver Canning. They speak of individual ways of looking at a tree, and what these differing attitudes represent.

[Oliver] looked up at Henry, and then back at his hands against the fire, and said, as though treading dangerous and familiar ground where he was doomed to lose himself, "Things are solid for my wife. Here, she says, is a tree, and she walks round and round it, patting its trunk, and sniffing at its leaves, and admiring the pattern of the sun through its branches on her new silk dress, and there *is* a tree –"

Henry sat up, and said, "Yes."

"God knows what you see. God only knows. I look, I see there is something, and I see a hole."

"The tree is there."

"Oh, I know, you're so certain. A transfigured tree, an ideal and shining tree, a visible witness to the fact that you are there, and you *see* it so, and are alive. Terribly simple, but unfortunately convincing, as you put it. The holes are the same, equally simple, quite damning. I can't get out by saying what do trees matter? They do – I work – Anna works – in the same area. It's not that we've lost our faith in Margaret's solid tree, nor that we've not been fortunate or clever enough to see your eternal Tree. It's positively a lack of trees, a space for a tree, *no* tree. *No* tree. But we come back and back to it, it's an issue, all right. We stand in the same field from time to time, and scan the horizon for trees. Why d'you think I spend my time writing about your novels? I suppose you think I don't *know* what you see –" (276)

This passage is worth quoting at such length because it contains a number of the arguments recurring in my examination of Byatt. The problem of individual variability in

apprehension is here, the importance of the search for Meaning which is a substitute for religion, the gap between empiricism and idealism, the multiple readings of the object under scrutiny, even the way “sight” is used as shorthand for intellectual and moral insight. The manner in which Oliver and Henry discuss this symbolic tree is different from the way Marcus sees a tree in The Virgin in the Garden (as discussed above, in chapter 4). Marcus’s tree offers a way into a more natural, but still abstract, theorizing of the geometric thinking which is essential to his being, and stands beside Goethe’s, Wordsworth’s, and (most importantly) Sartre’s similar trees, trees emblematic of their authors’ fundamental beliefs about the world. Although for both Byatt and Sartre perception of the tree constitutes a part of the process being described, more significant is the status of the tree itself as a thing, a separate piece of existence, indicative either of order or randomness, of divine origin or accident, depending on your philosophical bent. Oliver and Henry, on the other hand, are discussing solely what the tree reveals about the character of the perceiver, the human experience of viewing the tree. Margaret just sees but cannot judge. Henry sees beyond the actual to the ideal. Oliver longs for the ideal tree, and is an accurate observer of other people’s observations, but cannot see the thing at all – he has no faith. Oliver assumes Anna is like himself, but actually she was initially closely aligned with Henry. Anna had to be taught by Oliver *not* to see the tree, taught to lose faith.

Oliver has lost touch with truth, empirical or ideal or any other kind. He is a useful signpost, because his genus does not often recur in Byatt. There is something of Oliver in Fergus Wolff and other deconstructionists in Possession, but by 1990 these character types are comic, while Oliver is anything but comic. Nearly all of Byatt’s other

characters are still struggling (with some success) to see the tree; nearly all of them have faith of some kind or another – in words, pictures, objects, the human brain, sensory experience, God. Margaret’s empiricist approach appears in a more positive light when incarnated in Daniel Orton – someone who also just *sees*, just *is* – but who is able to make intelligent judgements based on the sensory knowledge he acquires. Henry’s idealism recurs (in differing degrees) in Ash and LaMotte in Possession, and in Van Gogh and Matisse in Still Life and The Matisse Stories. But the sort of nihilism that Oliver represents, while acknowledged by Byatt as a possible approach to knowledge and existence, is not accorded much space. She stresses the positive in theories of apprehension, the importance of hope and curiosity in the face of existential despair.

Still, a portion of Oliver’s pessimism remains in all of Byatt’s books. No one is ever absolutely certain about Meaning; if Marcus and Henry occasionally glimpse the eternal order of things, that vision does not stay. It cannot be definitively captured in words. And there is something terribly familiar about Oliver’s keen ability to observe other people’s observations. Byatt’s characters and narrators are good readers of texts of all sorts, including human beings as texts – but the revelations about each other that the characters come across are rarely shared with each other or acted upon. The insights that Stephanie, Daniel, Alexander, Marcus, and the narrators of Still Life and Possession have are usually shared with the reader only. This is a process of literary illumination, one that does not comfortably expand into the world of personal relations. Frederica Potter’s excellence as a reader leads her astray; not realizing that Forster’s “only connect” may not work in her own life, she makes a disastrous marriage which ends in violence.

There are, if one wants them, even more trees. In her 1986 essay about Still Life, Byatt talks about being “haunted by trees” (Passions of the Mind 19). Trees from Milton and Darwin join the trees I’ve already mentioned from Sartre and Wordsworth. Her comments accentuate one of the issues in Byatt interpretation, the sometimes formidable abundance. This is part of the reason why analyses of Byatt, such as they exist, are so dissimilar. In addition to the idiosyncratic critical equipment interpreters bring with them, Byatt herself suggests a wide array of exegetical possibility.

“But there is a moment in all this when we, the readers, imagine the tree, vividly,” says Byatt of the tree in Nausea (Passions of the Mind 19). Despite Sartre’s emphasis on absurdity and disconnection, Byatt believes that he simultaneously demonstrates connection and meaning, rootedness and precision. She can see Roquentin’s tree and she can see him seeing it, and although she does not share his viewpoint, she can present both viewpoints to us. Language allows this connection; it is language she hopes to rescue, in pointing out to us that, ironically, Sartre’s pessimistic deconstruction of the tree allows her to build an accurate picture of it in her mind. This is one of Byatt’s fortunate moments, combining as it does the visual and the verbal, faith and scepticism in a single eddy of thought.

Pessimistic voices like Oliver’s and Sartre’s are allowed to revise Byatt’s views of reality. Through them she states, indirectly, that there is no exact correspondence between thing and word, there is no certainty about the human relation to eternity. But it is possible, she and the majority of her characters tell us over and over, *to accurately see* and *to accurately name*. The sight and the naming may not be permanent or perfect or universal, but there is powerful possibility nevertheless.

We live at a time when there are a great many theories about the untrustworthiness of language, the inadequacy of language and not many theories about the enormous power of it, the enormous accuracy of it, the enormous descriptive energy it has -- so that you can describe a flower or a hospital room and none of your readers will see the same flower in their minds but none of them if they can read at all will not see more accurately. We seem to be slightly beleaguered by theories that try and persuade us that this is not the case, that language isn't in the world. (Byatt/Murdoch video interview)

Byatt's slightly convoluted negative construction of her credo here – “but none of them if they can read at all will not see more accurately” – indicates her concession to scepticism. Still, the repetitive use of the word “enormous” (enormous power, accuracy, energy) points to her overriding belief in the still-present possibility that language can fruitfully engage with truth. Referring to her autobiographical story “Sugar,” she has written of her double intention in another way:

There is a certain amount of defiance in “Sugar.” Defiance of the moral imperative (my own, my family's, my culture's) that one should not “eat up” life with the order of art. Defiance of the aesthetic imperative that all good fiction now is overtly fictive and about fictiveness. “Sugar” is that, but it does try to be truthful. It does, also, indicate that there are truths its author chooses to omit, not to tell, to ignore. It does, indeed, also claim authorship for its author. (“ ‘Sugar’ / ‘Le Sucre’,” Passions of the Mind 25)

§ § §

I have not examined A. S. Byatt's intentions because she wanted me to, or because I wanted to return to some mythical golden age where the author had primacy. I have found that a consideration of her intentions, her sources and allusions, is genuinely helpful and that, combined with other critical methods, a recognition of the author's presence in her work is an enriching rather than a limiting way of reading. Once I discovered that Marcus's visions, Frederica's laminations, Stephanie's electrocution, and Roland's lists of words-that-defy-theory were experiences shared by Byatt herself

(Tredell 67, 69, 70), it seemed foolish to ignore these powerful personal sources. But the distancing that other critical methods provide is crucial. Byatt's commentary on her own work, the maxims of her narrators, and the declamatory monologues of her characters can lead you to a more positive place than you ought to be. Doing close and comparative reading, paying phenomenological attention to characters, reading from a religious perspective – these reveal other elements. Although the fiction makes enthusiastic claims that language and truth might fuse, one cannot forget the tragic failures of the characters who strive for this union.

The deaths of Stephanie Potter in Still Life and Joshua Riddell in "Precipice-Encurled" are accidents, and yet they are not. These characters are punished for their endeavour in joining verbal and visual, for their attempt to find revelation without religion. Like Van Gogh, whose death was not accidental, Stephanie and Joshua force the reader to wonder about the consequences of seeking purity of knowledge and articulation without an attendant faith in some transcendent power, some deity. An accurate critical analysis of Byatt has to take account of this failure, and ask why an agnostic writer allows her characters to be punished for lack of faith. It also has to be acknowledged that Byatt's openness to religious questions, the believing part of her agnosticism (as it were), is the source of much of the vitality and solidity of her fiction.

The character who provides the moral equilibrium that keeps the Potter novels from spinning into endless disquisitions on the stimulating impossibilities of making sense of language and reality is Daniel Orton, the taciturn clergyman. Daniel is a man of God, a man of bodily reality, but resolutely not a man of language. Like Randolph Henry Ash in Possession, Daniel offers hope against meaninglessness: Ash is able to bring order

to his thoughts using language, Daniel by acting on his religious faith. However, faith and language ability do not occur within the same character (in Christabel LaMotte there is possibility but she is trapped by limited Victorian notions of femininity). The shrinking size of Daniel's role in Babel Tower is striking – the issue of faith is put aside and language dilemmas predominate. There have been no more tragedies like the death of Stephanie Potter in the recent fiction – elemental events that force the characters and the reader up against the wall of belief. The death of Patricia Nimmo's husband in the 1998 short story "Crocodile Tears" happens off-stage and the story primarily concerns Patricia's avoidance of grief, rather as Possession features Roland's and Maud's avoidance of romance.

Even the matter of language, while ever-present, seems less crucial in Byatt's work in the 1990s. Linguistic debates are increasingly the stuff of comic scenes; the old debate about visual and verbal modes of knowing is gradually abandoned. The visually-oriented Prologues of The Virgin in the Garden and Still Life (set in the National Portrait Gallery and the Royal Academy of Arts respectively) have not been followed up with a similar Prologue in Babel Tower, which is in the present tense, while the other two novels are in the past tense. In the third Potter novel, verbal language takes control; characters who try to combine verbal and visual language are in short supply. And apparently the past (including its passionate debates about God) suddenly has less status than the present. Babel Tower relinquishes debates about faith and about vying epistemologies, replacing them with hollower discussion about verbal language alone. One of Byatt's most recent stories points out the diminished status of visual inquiry. "Christ in the House of Mary and Martha" (1997) – an ekphrastic tale about Velázquez's

painting of that name – counsels that to look intently at the world and be “*interested*” is enough. The painter’s claim in the story that when “I paint eggs and fishes and onions, I am painting the godhead” (Elementals 226) is not very convincing.

Byatt is becoming a separatist. She still writes about painting, but she now differentiates distinctly between saying in paint and saying in words. About English painter Patrick Heron she writes: “What I love about Heron’s work is the visual and intellectual delight of the colours and forms which are *other* than language, and cannot be reduced to it, or involved in it” (“A Riddle Around the Edges of Vision” 13). In the 1980s, Byatt was obsessed by Van Gogh, a painter who still blended his colours, however eccentrically, trying to duplicate to his personal satisfaction the complex realities of the world (think of his striated multi-coloured skies and fields, the simultaneity of blue and yellow in Starry Night). Byatt also loved the fact that Van Gogh needed to write about painting, and produced letters in the same imperative way that he produced his art works. Later, she became attracted to Matisse, who separated his colours. He used blocks of colours, distinct forms, and simplified shapes to process the world, to analyse and report on it rather than attempt to represent it as it stands. Matisse did not have the same interest in written language that Van Gogh did; he made a choice between the two modes. The new message: you can have one or the other, but not both.

§ § §

I have thought, while writing this doctoral dissertation, that I was often coming at A. S. Byatt from a negative formulation, from a conception of what she *isn't*, rather than what she *is*. Perhaps this is the experience of many academic writers, who feel they must measure their subject against a curtain of other histories or define by redefining. The

theories which worked for other writers never fit exactly, need to be refurbished and realigned, endlessly. And the experience of interpreting A. S. Byatt features these problems of redefinition acutely. She has deliberately placed herself in opposition to certain received ideas (both creative and critical) and declares herself to be against reductive thought, against facile systemization. When writing about birth, for example, Byatt rejected most of the literary models available to her, identifying in them too much hyperbole and romanticism and too little realism about the body. Critical methods of analysing death in literature focus on what death stands for, rather than what it is – see Kenneth Burke's "A Thanatopsis for Critics" for an obvious case of this. This is no help in reading Byatt. Death in Byatt is stubbornly itself: shocking, momentous, resolutely self-defined. This resistance becomes clearest in her writing about love: she is suspicious of nearly all the definitions and throws them out. Like Flaubert in writing The Dictionary of Received Ideas, she weighs clichés and worn standards of expression against the horizon of carefully-considered experience, finding the usual representations inadequate at best and, more likely, foolish. But Byatt's determination to strip superfluous and trite ideas from her work has not made her prose spare and crystalline; indeed quite the opposite seems to have happened. There is so much more to all of this – this is, overall, one of her basic messages. This "so much more" is one of the dictionary definitions of transcendence.

Even when considering Van Gogh and Matisse, two of art history's most closely-analysed painters, Byatt tells us to start over. Reject the received ideas about madness or decorativeness or sexism. Her Van Gogh is intellectually capable and articulate, carefully preserving his version of realism. Her Matisse believes that colour and form enunciate a

kind of purity of thought, that women are powerful. When I reached religious concerns, there was a new surprise: Byatt stopped throwing everything out, instead claiming for herself territory one would expect her (as an agnostic) to reject out of hand.

Another problem that presented itself was Byatt's profound ambivalence on certain key topics. At first, an uncertain Byatt seemed an impossible idea; my first experience of reading her was Possession in 1990, and in it she seemed a paragon of confidence. But reading through the rest of her works, I could not sort out with certainty her views on language, on perception, on faith. They seemed unsettled – although not undeveloped – even taking into account the alterations in a personality maturing over nearly 40 years of writing. I decided to make this uncertainty the object of my exploration, to find out what it might mean. Critics have catalogued her, with reason, as a realist, a moralist, a postmodernist, a neo-Victorian – but which strand predominates? Her love-hate relationship with allegory and metaphor is indicative: she tried to write Still Life without metaphor and found it impossible. Her characters distrust argument by analogy and allegorical readings of paintings – but what could be more allegorical than the novellas in Angels and Insects and the fairy-tales in The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye? And what about those allegorical and symbolic names – Perry Diss, Jude Mason, Harald Alabaster? When lined up against her praise of non-representational aspects of art (see not only her writings on Henri Matisse but also on David Royle and Patrick Heron), the whole effect is decidedly puzzling.

I still believe that language and religion are key in an accurate reading of A. S. Byatt's fiction, but I cannot explain their function in her work conclusively. Byatt has a circumscribed faith in language (the circumscription a legacy of this century) and a

passionate quarrel with religion (an inheritance from the last); because she recognizes the failures and risks inherent in each she can never give in to the optimism she admires in the metaphysical poets and the Romantics. One of her largest stumbling-blocks to faith in words and in God is something that I realized only gradually. This is the pressure to capture and enshrine individual experience. When this works, as it does in Stephanie Potter's encounters with childbirth and death, the result has been original writing of great intensity. But ultimately Byatt's belief in the prominence of individualism – almost to the point of isolationism – has limited the possibilities of illumination that her characters and narrators so energetically seek. Henry Severell and Stephanie and Marcus Potter have genuine revelations – about art, children, cognition itself – but are rarely able to share these. There is no community of believers in Byatt's mostly secular world. The ability to articulate and understand, to have faith, is so variable from person to person, and each is so determined to find his or her own path, that, turned inward, the revelations become explosive, shattering, harmful.

Byatt's faith arguments have been misread. In an article entitled "The Redemptive Past in the Neo-Victorian Novel" Dana Shiller attempts to transform redemption doctrines into something more hazily humanist – a commitment to learn from history and a realization of the salutary effects of intellectual curiosity. In Possession, says Shiller, "what matters more than the substance of the truth is the *process* of truth-seeking" (556). But Shiller does not address whether truth can be dismissed in this way without resultant damage to language and ethics. It is precisely this "process" of individualistic truth-seeking that causes chaos in Babel Tower, where characters at all levels of the narrative realize that others plainly do not speak the same language as they do. The outcome is

unhappiness (and death in Babbletower) because language is still tied up with moral and spiritual value, whether 1960s radicals or eighteenth century French revolutionaries like it or not. English journalist Mira Stout offers a more accurate judgement of Byatt's substitution of intellectual values for religious ones: "Her erudition isn't a store of disposable intellectual trivia, but a protective belief system, a virtual haven from humanity's anguishing frailties and banalities. This is both the strength and weakness of her work" (25). Characters are increasingly advising each other, in the fiction, to take up intellectual and linguistic curiosity as a cure for depression, grief, and metaphysical anguish. This works, to an extent. But curiosity is an inadequate alternative to transcendence, at the same time as it is indicative of a deep human need to seek transcendence.

In 1977 Iris Murdoch, in a television interview, spoke about this very secular literary pastime of carving personal systems of order out of previously religious domains: "A deep motive for making literature or art of any sort is the desire to defeat the formlessness of the world and cheer oneself up by constructing forms out of what otherwise seems a mass of senseless rubble" (Existentialists and Mystics 7). Murdoch herself created neo-Platonic systems that resembled Judaeo-Christian ones very closely. Byatt, officially, distances herself even further from institutional religions, yet her own blending of empiricism and idealism has a devotional bent. Randolph Henry Ash in *Possession* disparages their "old world – a tired world" where truths "are now obscured by palimpsest on palimpsest" (181). The palimpsests are the marks left by the frustrating and foolish history of human religious creed-peddling (among other things) – and yet Byatt's characters learn abundantly about themselves by reading those palimpsests and

marginalia. Most significantly, Byatt's fictional world hungers for the order that religious beliefs once supplied. Overall, her explorations of alternate ways of knowing, seeing, and saying have failed to reveal patterns or harmonies that can make life secure for her characters.

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Key to Abbreviations

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| NS | The New Statesman |
| NYRB | The New York Review of Books |
| NYT | The New York Times |
| NYTBR | The New York Times Book Review |
| OUP | Oxford University Press |
| TLS | The Times Literary Supplement |

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